Spinoza and the Election of the Hebrews (11.03.19)

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Introduction

Spinoza’s interpretation of the election of the Hebrews in the third chapter of the *Theological Political Treatise* enraged quite a few Jewish readers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The rise of nationalism, and the demand of loyalty to one’s own *genos* brought about a certain style of patriotic writing aimed at Spinoza’s “betrayal.” In a series of lectures on the eve of the Great War, Hermann Cohen portrayed Spinoza as a person of “demonic spirt” and as “the great enemy who emerged from our midst.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In a stream of words more akin to shouting than to analytic discourse, Cohen protested against what he took to be the universal complacency regarding Spinoza’s treachery: “When Spinoza, with merciless severity, makes his own nation the object of contempt – at the time that *Rembrandt* lived on the same street and immortalized the ideal type of the Jew - no voice rises in protest against this *humanly incomprehensible* betrayal.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Cohen was right in identifying in Spinoza an absence of *ethnic* patriotism.[[4]](#footnote-4) I, for one, find this absence a virtue rather than a vice, and in this chapter I will argue, inter alia, that in rejecting ethnic normativity Spinoza was consistent with a dominant strand of rabbinic thought.

What precisely was so offensive in Spinoza’s words in chapter three of the TTP? A common reading of this chapter suggests that Spinoza presents the election of the Hebrews as merely political and not spiritual in nature, thus downgrading the importance of the election.[[5]](#footnote-5) This reading is not absolutely groundless, but it is highly imprecise, for as we shall shortly see, for Spinoza, God’s (genuine) election of the Hebrews indicates the political *weakness* of their state, rather than its strength. Apart from pointing out this important corrective, I will also attempt in this essay to evaluate Spinoza’s critique of the election of the Hebrews, the result of which might lead us to some highly unexpected conclusions.

In the first section of this chapter I present an outline of Spinoza’s interpretation of the connection between the Hebrews’ belief in being chosen, and the xenophobic nature of their ancient state. In the second section, I discuss Spinoza’s interpretation of the election of the Hebrews in chapter three of the TTP, and show that on Spinoza’s sardonic reading it was nothing but luck which allowed the Hebrew state to survive for a rather long time in spite of its *poor* political constitution. The third and final part provides a defense of Spinoza’s critique of the notion of chosenness. I will argue, first, that chosenness has never been granted the status of theological doctrine or principle of faith within rabbinic Judaism. I will then point out the significant *religious* problems with the notion of chosenness, suggesting however two exceptions in which belief in chosenness might still be defensible. I will conclude this section with a discussion of rabbinic views on the conversion of minors, arguing that according to the mainstream rabbinic view, being a Jew is a merit *only* on the condition that a person is pious, a view which is not far from Spinoza’s own claims in the third chapter of the TTP.

Part I: Election and Xenophobia

In the seventeenth chapter of the TTP, Spinoza presents his reconstruction of the history of the ancient Hebrew state at the time of Bible. [[6]](#footnote-6) Spinoza’s discussion of the ancient Hebrew state serves partly as a test case for the political theory he outlines in the sixteenth chapter of the *Tractatus* and is partly intended to sway his Dutch (and more broadly, European) contemporaries from their recent fantasies about reenacting this ancient, divinely ordained polity.[[7]](#footnote-7) Indeed, at the beginning of the eighteenth chapter, Spinoza explicitly tells his readers that insofar as the Hebrew state was founded on xenophobia and isolationism, the Dutch would have to give away their wealth, resulting from international collaboration, mercantilism, and entrepreneurship, were they truly keen on reestablishing the Hebrew state.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus, Spinoza’s stress on the xenophobic nature of the Hebrew state was also conducive to a very concrete argument of the entire *Treatise*.

Spinoza’s discussion of the Hebrew state contains inherent tensions. He views this state as the true and only kingdom of God,[[9]](#footnote-9) or if you wish, a ‘divine republic [*respublica divina*]’[[10]](#footnote-10) with ostensible political and even moral virtues.

Nowhere did the citizens possess their property with a greater right than did the subjects of this state, who, with the leader, had an equal share of the lands and fields.[[11]](#footnote-11) Each one was the everlasting lord of his own share. If poverty compelled anyone to sell his estate or field, it had to be restored to him once again when the jubilee year came… Nowhere could poverty be more bearable than where the people had to cultivate, with the utmost piety, loving-kindness towards their neighbor (i.e., towards their fellow citizens), so that God, their King, would favor them…no one was subject to his equal; everyone was subject only to God, and loving-kindness and love toward one’s fellow citizen were valued as the height of piety.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The internal social cohesion and close fraternal relations among the citizens of the Hebrew state were complemented, Spinoza claims, by hatred of their external enemies, i.e., all the other nations.[[13]](#footnote-13) Remarkably, Spinoza portrays both the Hebrews’ love of their fellow citizens and their hatred of the external enemies as begetting clear political virtues.[[14]](#footnote-14) Both the love and the hatred constituted a unique political and psychological reality due to the fact that the state was God’s kingdom.

So the love of the Hebrews for their country was not a simple love, but piety. Their daily worship so encouraged and fed this piety, *and this hatred of other nations, that [these affects] had to become a part of their nature* [*ut in naturam verti debuerint*]. For the daily worship was not only completely different from that of the other nations (which made them altogether individual and completely separated from the others), but also absolutely contrary. That daily condemnation [of foreigners][[15]](#footnote-15) had to produce a continual hatred; no other hatred could be lodged more firmly in their hearts than this. As is natural, no hatred can be greater or more stubborn than one born of great devotion *or* piety, and believed to be pious. And they did not lack the usual cause which invariably inflames hatred more and more: its reciprocation. For the other nations were bound to hate them most savagely in return.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In the second half of this excerpt Spinoza attempts to explain the emergence and amplification of anti-Semitism as a result of a cycle of hatred.[[17]](#footnote-17) Still, the clause which I find most striking in this excerpt is the claim that hatred of the other nations became part of the *psychological nature* of the Hebrews. As we shall shortly see, in other contexts Spinoza stresses that nations do *not* have different natures and that are no different kinds of people.[[18]](#footnote-18) But if the Hebrews all shared the same pious hatred of the other nations, were they not distinguished by a specific psychological nature?

For Spinoza, the xenophobic psychology of the Hebrew was closely tied to their belief that they were God’s only children, i.e., their belief in chosenness:

After they transferred their right to God, they believed that their kingdom was God’s kingdom, that they *alone* were God’s children, and that the other nations were God’s enemies. As a result, they felt the most savaged hatred toward other nations—a hatred they also believed to be pious (see Psalms 139:21-22).[[19]](#footnote-19)

At the end of the last excerpt Spinoza attempts to provide textual proof for his strong claims about the xenophobic nature of the Hebrews at the time of Bible, but the two verses he cites fall far short of supporting his claims. In these verses, the Psalmist simply states repeatedly that he would hate those who hate God [משנאיך ה׳ אשנא]. The verses contain no explicit or implicit reference to other nations. A quick survey of the main traditional Jewish commentators *ad loc* shows that hardly any of those understood the verse as referring to other nations (if anything, the most common tendency is to view them as addressing Jewish heretics and apostates[[20]](#footnote-20)). These two verses are the *only* prooftext Spinoza cites in support of his theory about the xenophobic nature of the Hebrews. Adding to our embarrassment is Spinoza’s complete silence about numerous Biblical injunctions which prohibit the Hebrews to hate or abuse foreigners, even those belonging to nations with whom the Hebrews share a hostile past, such as Egyptians and Edomites (Deut. 23:8). The Pentateuch repeatedly commands the Hebrews to love and support the foreigner (see, for example, Ex. 22:20, Lev. 19:33 and 22:24, and Deut. 14:29), and Isaiah’s messianic vision aspires for a day when God’s house “will become a house of prayer for all the nations” (Isaiah 56:7). These visions, commands, and injunctions are hardly consistent with Spinoza’s claims about the xenophobic nature of the Hebrews, and Spinoza’s knowledge of the Bible was far too good for us to believe he was not aware of these passages (which are cited abundantly in traditional Jewish liturgy).

Many scholars ascribe to Spinoza a hostile attitude toward the Jewish tradition and the Jews,[[21]](#footnote-21) and given Spinoza’s misrepresentation of the Hebrew Bible’s approach to the foreigner one might understand this judgement. The accusation that Jews are misanthropes, hating all other people, belongs to a cluster of anti-Semitic tropes that were quite common in early modern Europe.[[22]](#footnote-22) Still, this misrepresentation need not be a result of an intentional and malicious distortion, but rather, perhaps, a projection – or a distorted projection – of Spinoza’s own experience as a young member of the Portuguese Jewish community of his days. Yosef Kaplan has documented meticulously the way the Portuguese Jewish ‘Nation’ in seventeenth century west-Europe brashly asserted the superiority of the Hebrews over all other nations. These former Marranos, claims Kaplan “got out of their way to prove that the ‘Hebrew nation’ was and remained God’s chosen people. This was, in part, a response to the ethnocentric arguments raised in Hispanic sixteenth and seventeenth centuries social and political literature which affirmed in a categorical manner that the Spanish nation is the obvious inheritor of the scriptural chosen people.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Moreover, notes Kaplan, the former Marranos stressed their uniqueness and superiority over all other Jewish communities as well. This attitude was also expressed by various regulations delineating the inferiority of Jews from other ethnic origins.[[24]](#footnote-24) It is quite likely that, having grown up in a community that strongly displayed these chauvinistic elements and obviously attempted validating them with Biblical sources, Spinoza partly inherited *their* view of the ancient Hebrews.

Part II: Spinoza’s Sardonic Reading of the Hebrews’ Election

Spinoza addresses the Hebrews’ alleged belief in their superiority already in the first chapter of the TTP,[[25]](#footnote-25) but the detailed analysis of this issue is the main subject of chapter three. At the outset of the chapter, Spinoza begins building up the expectations of his readers:

[W]e wished to show that the Hebrews did not excel the other nations in 'knowledge [*scientia*] or in piety, *but in something altogether different*—*or* (to speak, with Scripture, according to their power of understanding) that, though the Hebrews were frequently warned [*monitos*], they were not chosen by God before all others for a true life and lofty speculations, *but for something entirely different*. What this is, I shall show here in an orderly fashion.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Spinoza does not rebuff the claim that the Hebrews were chosen by God, nor does he deny that “the Hebrews saw wonders whose like no other nation ever saw.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Accepting both claims as true, he attempts to show that neither fact – once properly understood – is something one should be proud of.

Spinoza’s “orderly fashion” of analyzing the election of the Hebrews begins with a set of five definitions, of *God’s guidance*, *God’s internal aid*, *God’s external aid*, *God’s choice*, and *fortune*.

By *God’s guidance* [*Dei directionem*] I understand the fixed and immutable order of nature, *or* the connection of natural things…[[28]](#footnote-28)

Whatever human nature can furnish for preserving its being from its own power alone, we can rightly call *God’s internal aid* [*Dei auxilium internum*].

Whatever in addition turns out for his advantage from the power of external causes, we can rightly call *God’s external aid* [*Dei auxilium externum*].[[29]](#footnote-29)

… [Definition of God’s Choice:] no one chooses any manner of living for himself, or does anything, except by the special calling of God [*ex singulari Dei vocatione*], who has chosen him before others for this work, or for this manner of living.[[30]](#footnote-30)

By *fortune* I understand nothing but God’s guidance, insofar as it directs human affairs through external and unforeseen causes.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The definitions of God’s guidance and choice are essentially statements of Spinoza’s determinism: all things happen in a fixed manner, and all things happen by virtue of *God’s* choice. [[32]](#footnote-32) In this sense, every rock is chosen to fall toward the ground, and the moon is chosen to circle the earth.[[33]](#footnote-33) Narrowing in on things which happen to the *advantage of human beings*, Spinoza thinks that in spite of the inevitability of all events, we should still distinguish between beneficial occurrences which are caused by virtue of our nature and power (as when we predict correctly the future of the stock market), and those which happen by virtue of causes external to us (as when a person absolutely unfamiliar to us gives us a fortune).[[34]](#footnote-34) In the *Ethics*, Spinoza will mark a similar, though not quite identical, distinction through the notion of *adequate cause* and the distinction between *action* and *passion*.[[35]](#footnote-35) Spinoza’s definition of fortune (in our chapter) covers all the things which happen to us by virtue of external causes, i.e., those which belong to God’s external aid, as well as all the disadvantageous things which happen to us.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Immediately following the five definitions, Spinoza turns to discuss the three highest goods which honorable people desire:

Whatever we can honorably [*honeste*] desire is related above all to these three things:

[i] understanding things through their first causes;

[ii] gaining control over the passions, *or* acquiring the habit of virtue; and finally,

[iii] living securely and healthily.[[37]](#footnote-37)

This list of highest goods is essentially the same as the one suggested by Maimonides in the conclusion of the *Guide of the Perplexed*.[[38]](#footnote-38) Noting that the proximate efficient cause of the first two goods is human nature alone, Spinoza argues that no nation can excel in these goods since the laws of human nature “are common to the whole human race – unless we want to dream that formerly nature produced different kinds of men.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Thus, the first two goods are determined strictly by God’s *internal* aid.

Unlike intellect and virtue, a person’s health and the security of a state are governed *both* by the nature of the individual or state, and by external causes. Thus, a state whose nature and constitution are wise is likely to endure and survive most dangers, while a state with a bad constitution is likely to crumble following minor challenges. Of course, even a state with a good constitution might last very briefly due to powerful external enemies. Conversely, a state with a bad constitution might survive for a long period of time just through good fortune and lack of foreign threat.[[40]](#footnote-40)

But to form and preserve a social order requires no small talent and vigilance. So a social order which for the most part is founded and directed by prudent and vigilant men will be more secure, more stable, *and less subject to fortune*. Conversely, if a social order is established by men of untrained intelligence, it will depend for the most part on fortune and will be less stable. *If, in spite of this, it has lasted a long time, it will owe this to the guidance of another, not to its own guidance. Indeed, if it has overcome great dangers and matters have turned out favorably for it, it will only be able to wonder at and revere the guidance of God (i.e., insofar as God acts through hidden external causes, but not insofar as he acts through human nature and the human mind). Since nothing has happened to it except what is completely unexpected and contrary to opinion, this can even be considered to be really a miracle.*[[41]](#footnote-41)

In writing this passage, which appears in the midst of a discussion of the election of the Hebrews, Spinoza could have left unspecified the precise subject of these claims, and let the readers infer it themselves. But he doesn’t, as the following paragraph unmistakably shows:

The only thing which distinguishes one nation from one another, then, is the social order and the laws under which they live and by which they are directed. So the Hebrew nation was not chosen by God before others because of its intellect or its peace of mind, but because of its social order and the fortune by which it came to have a state, and kept it for so many years. This is also established most plainly by Scripture itself. For if you run through it even casually, you will see clearly that the Hebrews excelled the other nations only in this: they handled their security auspiciously, and overcame great dangers. *For the most part this was just by God’s external aid*. In other things, you will see that they were equal to others, and that God was equally well‑disposed to all.[[42]](#footnote-42)

The Hebrews were indeed chosen – claims Spinoza – because their state survived for a long time *in spite* of its mostly poor constitution. The survival of Jewish civilization throughout millennia has been commonly cited by Rabbinic authors as evidence of special divine providence over the people of Israel.[[43]](#footnote-43) The original traditional argument is not bad at all, and Spinoza not only accepts it, but grants his adversaries *more* than they ask. Due to the mostly poor constitution of the Hebrew state – Spinoza claims – we would expect it to last *much shorter* than other ancient polities. Instead, it lasted longer. In this sense, under Spinoza’s reading, the survival of the Hebrew state was an even *greater* aberration of the regular order of nature than what the traditionalist would claim. Therefore, Spinoza notes, “this can even be considered to be really [*revera*] a miracle.” Alas, for Spinoza, miracles and statistic aberrations prove nothing but that, very rarely, very rare things happen.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Part III: Election and Racism

The miraculous nature Spinoza ascribes to the survival of the Hebrew State lays bare his view of this polity as having a poor political constitution which under normal circumstances should have facilitated its demise in a short time. The ancient Hebrews, says Spinoza, were fortunate, or if you wish “elected,” but one should not be proud of such an election which truly discloses the intellectual feebleness of the ancient Hebrews’ political thought.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to provide an evaluation of Spinoza’s attack on the notion of chosenness. I will begin by briefly but significantly correcting a common view about the importance of the belief in chosenness in rabbinic literature. I will then outline some of the main arguments against this belief, arguments which I believe would be acceptable and cogent within the rabbinic context. Next, I will discuss two exceptions in which the belief in chosenness might be acceptable. The second of these exceptions will lead us to the mainstream rabbinic view about the value of being and becoming a Jew, and here I will argue that this mainstream rabbinic view is not far from Spinoza’s own claims in the TTP.

The view that the election of the Hebrews is “one of the tenets of Judaism” is not uncommon among current writers on the topic.[[45]](#footnote-45) It is, however, both misleading and wrong for two plain reasons. First, the very assumption that rabbinic Judaism has tenets of faith is factually inaccurate, to say the least. There were indeed some attempts to define Jewish principles of faith, but these attempts were colossal failures; almost all such attempts have belonged to a populist strata of literature and widely considered as such.[[46]](#footnote-46) The most important attempt to define Jewish principles of faith was carried out by Maimonides in his Commentary on the Mishna which he wrote in his twenties.[[47]](#footnote-47) Maimonides’ thirteen principles were accepted by some rabbinic authorities, fully rejected by others,[[48]](#footnote-48) and radically reinterpreted by still others. The extent to which Maimonides himself was truly committed to all of his thirteen principles is hotly debated by scholars. A common joke among Maimonides scholars that might still perhaps reflect the state of this scholarly debate is that “the real question is whether Maimonides believed in seven or just six of his thirteen principles...” Jesting aside, it is a simple fact that when the mature Maimonides wrote his philosophical magnum opus, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he did not find it fit to spend even half a page for even mentioning – not to say discussing – his thirteen principles of faith. While a detailed discussion of this issue cannot be carried out here, let me just briefly note that Spinoza himself was keenly aware of the fact that rabbinic Judaism is about laws regulating actions and practice rather than beliefs.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Moreover, if we look into the body of rabbinic discussions of principles of faith, the belief in the chosenness of the Jews is simply not there. Neither Maimonides, nor Crescas (in *Light of the Lord*), nor Joseph Albo (in his *Ikkarim* [Principles]) – the authors of the three main works in this literature – include this belief in their list of tenets of faith. In fact, I am not aware of any list of Jewish tenets of faith which includes the belief in chosenness.[[50]](#footnote-50)

What is wrong with the belief in the Election of Israel? I will discuss here briefly four main points, though an adequate discussion will require much more space. (*i*) *Lack of Modesty*. – Rabbinic literature is a vast body of texts which spans over more than two millennia. For this reason, it is very difficult to draw exceptionless generalizations about this literature. Still, if one looks carefully at its numerous discussions of human vice and virtue, it is hard to find a vice that is considered to be worse than arrogance. The talmudists tell us that God cannot reside in the same world with the arrogant person,[[51]](#footnote-51) and that arrogant behavior is tantamount to idolatry.[[52]](#footnote-52) Maimonides argues repeatedly that unlike all other personal traits, concerning which one should follow Aristotle’s recommendation of moderation, pride and arrogance should be avoided in the extreme.[[53]](#footnote-53) *Group* arrogance – for example, when a group of people decide they *are* better than others – still qualifies very much as arrogance.[[54]](#footnote-54) To the extent that the belief in the Election of Israel involves group arrogance, it is clearly a vice. (*ii*) *Racism*. – Belief in the Election of Israel does not *have* to express a racist worldview (we will shortly discuss the dominant, non-racist rabbinic interpretation of this doctrine). Still, a common principle in rabbinic reasoning is: ״הרחק מו הכעור ומן הדומה לו״, i.e., - “stay away from the repugnant and from anything that is even similar to the repugnant.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Thus, even if the belief in chosenness is not bona fide racism, but is merely similar to racism, this should be good enough reason to shy away from it. Why should racism be considered morally repugnant from a rabbinic perspective? I am not aware of any rabbinic figure who would consider German racism toward Jews during the Holocaust as merely *harmful* to Jews but *not* morally repugnant. Moreover, the Biblical commandment of ״ועשית הישר והטוב״ [[56]](#footnote-56) is traditionally interpreted as an injunction to follow common universal morality which prohibits the abuse of any human being. Thus, at least in our days, the commandment of ״ועשית הישר והטוב״ can be pretty securely interpreted as prohibiting any form of racism.[[57]](#footnote-57)

(*iii) Misperception of Reality*. – Like other forms of arrogance, group arrogance is highly likely to make the agents at stake have a distorted perception of reality. Thus we find in *Pirkei* *Avot*, the canonical work of rabbinic ethics, Rabbi Levitas of Yavne's succinct advice for the good life: “מאוד מאוד הוי שפל רוח שתקוות אנוש רימה [Be very very lowly of spirit, for man’s greatest hope is the worm].”[[58]](#footnote-58) Even those who do not share Rabbi Levitas' humble assessment of humanity’s greatest hope would still have to admit that, for the most part, and as far as we can, we should try never to forget our vulnerabilities. Arrogance is frequently both the result and the catalyst of our false sense of invulnerability. An agent – either individual and collective – who has a false sense of its own power is likely to make crucial errors in achieving its aims. A collective that is suffering from mass arrogance is very likely to make grave errors in navigating its way in the world. (*iv*) *Anti-Semitism*. – The belief in chosenness and its associated display of arrogance are among the causes of anti-Semitism. True, there are many other causes of anti-Semitism, and the anti-Semite does not really need to base their hatred on a revulsion to putative chosenness. Still, insofar as this belief has other severe repercussions, one should wonder about its contribution to the well-being and flourishing of Jews and Jewish culture. Obviously, not promoting the chosenness view is quite different from the opposite tendency – strongly promoted over the past two centuries by the Jewish enlightenment movement[[59]](#footnote-59) – of viewing traditional Judaism as inferior, backward, and unacculturated in comparison with the European man.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Let us turn now to discuss two exceptional cases in which belief in chosenness might, perhaps, be acceptable. The first case covers historical contexts of extreme persecution and discrimination. Consider, for example, the famous story of Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam (1905-1994), also known as the Kloizenburger Rebbe. In 1944, following the German occupation of Hungary, he was deported to Auschwitz like many other Hungarian Jews. Toward the end of summer 1944, he was sent to Warsaw together with other prisoners in order to clean the land of the Warsaw Ghetto, following its demolition and the murder of its 300,000 Jewish inhabitants by the German army. By this time, Halberstam’s wife and nine children had already been murdered in Auschwitz. During one of the breaks from the forced hard labor among the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto, Halberstam was asked by one of the other prisoners whether he would still recite the verse of the prayer referring to God’s election of the Jewish people. “Of course,” Halberstam replied. “In fact, it is only now that I came to understand this verse most properly.” Pointing at the German soldiers, he added: “I would rather be in my current state than one of these.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

In periods of extreme duress and persecution, the belief in God’s love of the Jews, even in the face of bitter historical reality, could prove to be an important source of comfort and hope. To that extent, I cannot condemn the words of the Kloizenburger Rebbe. For Jews, periods of extreme persecution come and go (and will continue to come and go), but once a view that is bordering on racism is legitimized, it may well become acceptable even in normal circumstances. Indeed, the most explicit statement of the view that the Jews are somehow special was advocated by the eleventh-century philosopher and poet, Yehuda ha-Levi (1075-1141). Ha-Levi was writing in a period of extreme persecution. In fact, the subtitle of his major book, the *Kuzari*, is “an apology for a despised religion.” In this book, Ha-Levi suggests, among other things, that all Jews, men and women alike, have a special capacity to achieve prophecy (though very few actually realize this capacity).[[62]](#footnote-62) Ha-Levi's claim is much more complex than is suggested by the manner in which it is frequently presented in textbooks, since Ha-Levi held that the greatest prophet of all times – Adam – was not Jewish. Ha-Levi did not have many followers among traditional Jewish philosophers.[[63]](#footnote-63) Given the historical context in which Ha-Levi was writing, one might perhaps understand his attempt to encourage his contemporary Jewish readers. Still, the fact remains that once such ethnocentric views are legitimized they later may well be used for pernicious purposes.

The second possible exception to my general rejection of the belief in chosenness relates to the value one assigns to being Jewish. In order to spell it out we would need to interrogate the rabbinic attitude toward the conversion of minors. In its turn, this attitude itself is grounded in rabbinic understanding of agency, and the conditional value of being Jewish. Let’s begin with the issue of agency.

A general principle in rabbinic legal reasoning is that a person may act as an agent on behalf of a subject – even when no explicit appointment or request to serve as an agent has been made – *only* in cases where the act performed by the agent will benefit the subject, but not when the act is detrimental to the subject.[[64]](#footnote-64) Thus, for example, I may acquire a gift on behalf of Reuben – even without getting Reuben’s explicit permission[[65]](#footnote-65) – but obviously, I may *not* acquire a debt on behalf of Reuben without his explicit request.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Applying this principle to the case of a minor gentile whose parents wish him, or her, to be converted to Judaism, rabbinic sources debate whether the act of conversion is, or is not, beneficial to the minor. If the conversion benefits the minor, the rabbinic court that will perform the conversion could be considered as possessing agency on behalf the minor. The mainstream rabbinic view on this issue is that we may assume that conversion to Judaism is beneficial, yet the minor has a right to rescind the conversion once reaching adulthood by simply stating that she or he does not consider it beneficial.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Now comes the more interesting aspect of this policy. Some rabbinic sources discuss a scenario in which the parents of the minor wish to have the minor converted, yet it is clear the parents will not educate the minor to observe the commandments of the *Torah*. The question is then whether conversion to Judaism is still beneficial even if the convert will not observe religious law. The mainstream rabbinic view is that in such a case, conversion to Judaism would in fact be *detrimental* to the minor, since the minor would be much better off living as a righteous gentile than a sinful Jew.[[68]](#footnote-68) Being, or becoming, a Jew is thus a merit only on the condition that a person conducts a pious life. This conception of the value of Jewishness – as a willingness to take on supererogatory duties, beyond the universal moral commitments of every human being – has little to do with ethnicity. In this sense, the rabbis should have no reservation to assert with Spinoza that “with respect to blessedness, God… is equally well disposed to all. This is also sufficiently established by Scripture itself. For the Psalmist says (Ps. 145:18): *God is near to all who call him, to all who truly call him* [קרוב ה׳ לכל קוראיו, לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת].”[[69]](#footnote-69)

Conclusion

In this chapter we have studied Spinoza’s celebrated (or notorious, depending on one’s perspective) interpretation of the election of the Hebrews in chapter three of the TTP. Scrutinizing Spinoza’s claims we have seen that contrary to a common view, Spinoza’s interpretation of the election of the Hebrews exposes the political frailty, rather than strength, of the ancient Hebrew state. A state with a well-formed political constitution need not rely on God’s election, i.e., unexpected and lucky longevity that is due to causes external to the state’s constitution. Typically, Spinoza does not deny many traditional claims. Just as he would not deny (in chapter seventeen of the TTP) that the ancient Hebrew state was ‘God’s Kingdom,’ so he would not reject the notion of the Hebrew’s election. In both cases, he would affirm the traditional claim, but cast it in an unsympathetic, ironic light.

Spinoza’s critical attitude toward Jewish ethnic patriotism insulted many of his subsequent Jewish readers. In the last section of this chapter I have argued that current academic writing on the issue of the belief in election significantly misrepresents the traditional view. The belief in the election of the Hebrews has never been asserted as a principle of faith. It is part of the folklore of some Jewish communities, both religious and secular. Still, when rabbinic scholars appeal to strongly held legal and religious principles underlying their attitude toward the merit of being Jewish, their stance is quite nuanced and mostly undetermined by commitment to ethnic identity. In this sense, Spinoza’s justified critique of the belief in election is far closer to the mainstream rabbinic view than what many would normally think.

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1. “And a wise person is better than a prophet.” *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Baba Batra, 12a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cohen, *Spinoza on State*, 51| Cohen, *Werke*, vol. 16, 363 andCohen, *Spinoza on State*, 58| Cohen, *Werke*, vol. 16, 371. I am indebted to Zach Gartenberg and Neta Stahl for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cohen, *Spinoza on State*, 49| Cohen, *Werke*, vol. 16, 360-1. I discuss Cohen’s disturbing text in “Hermann Cohen, Spinoza, and the Nature of Pantheism.” Cohen himself had a substantial flirtation with racist ideas. Thus, in his posthumously published *Jüdische Schriften* (p. 84), he writes: “With a healthy feeling of humanity, one answers the question of whether racial unity in a people is desirable and on a minimal scale necessary with an unhesitating yes… We must recognize that the racial instinct is by no means simple barbarism, but rather a natural, nationally justified longing” (quoted in Brumlik, “*Deutchtum und Judentum*,” 338). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Still, the requirement of loyalty toward one’s *state* is essential to Spinoza’s political philosophy. Moreover, for Spinoza, the state replaces some of the traditional roles assigned to God. See, for example, TP Ch. 8 (III/346/9). Unless otherwise marked, all references to Spinoza’s works are to Curley's translation: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2 vols. For the Latin and Dutch original text I have relied on Gebhardt’s critical edition. I cite the original texts according to the volume, page, and line numbers of this edition (for example, ‘III/17/10’ for volume three, page 17, line 10). I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza’s works: TdIE - Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*], TTP –Theological-Political Treatise [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*], TP – Political Treatise [*Tractatus Politicus*] CM – Metaphysical Thoughts [*Cogitata Metaphysica*], KV – Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being [*Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*], Ep. – Letters. Passages in the Ethics will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); ‘d’ stands for either ‘definition’ (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or ‘demonstration’ (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, Novak, *The Election of Israel*, 26-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a close analysis of this chapter, see my “Spinoza’s *Respublica divina*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an intriguing discussion of early modern European fantasies about the Hebrew state, see Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “[The ancient Hebrew’s] form of state could be useful, perhaps, only for those who are willing to live by themselves, alone, without any foreign trade, shutting themselves up within their own boundaries, and segregating themselves from the rest of the world. It couldn’t be at all useful for those to whom it’s necessary to have dealings with others” (TTP Ch. 18| III/221/25-28). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “God alone, then, had sovereignty over the Hebrews. By the force of the covenant this [state] *alone* was rightly called the Kingdom of God, and God was rightly called also the King of the Hebrews” (TTP Ch. 17| III/206/6-8. Italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Spinoza refers to the Hebrew State as *both* a kingdom and a republic because the monarch of this state was not human, and thus humans were not subject to dominion by other human beings. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Biblical priestly elite were prohibited from owning any land, while the civic leadership (heads of tribes and judges) could not accumulate lands due to the law of the Jubilee. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. TTP Ch. 17| III/216/8-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In passing, let me note that the sharp bifurcation between friend and enemy which Spinoza ascribes to the Hebrew state was actually advocated by Spinoza himself. Spinoza defines an enemy as any political body external to the state which is not an ally or a subject (TTP Ch. 16| III/197/9). Neutrality is not truly an option on this view. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Reason, I say, teaches, and experience itself has been a witness, how much all these things would strengthen the hearts of the Hebrews to bear everything *with special constancy and virtue,* for the sake of their Country” (TTP Ch. 17| III/215/19-22. Italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I am not aware of any Biblical worship that involved “daily condemnation of foreigners.” Could Spinoza have had in mind the verse in the *Aleynu* prayer which refers to the nations which engage in a cult of “vanity and nothingness [הבל וריק]”? If so, this is an obvious anachronism as the *Aleynu* was composed long after the Bible (though some traditional sources considered Joshua as its author and Menashe ben Israel believed that it was composed by the Men of the Great Assembly, i.e., roughly in 5th and 4th centuries BCE). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. TTP Ch. 17| III/215/5-16. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Spinoza discusses the catalysts of anti-Semitism also in TTP Ch. 3| III/57/22-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See also, Verbeek, *Spinoza’s* Theologico-political Treatise, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. TTP Ch. 17| III/214/23-27. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See, for example, Maimonides’ *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin, X 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See, for example, Nadler, *Book Forged in Hell*, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Other popular accusations belonging to this cluster are the claims that Jews are disloyal to their sovereigns, that they have tails, and that the male Jews menstruate. Isaac (Yshac) Cardoso, an ex-Marrano, and a contemporary of Spinoza, describes these and additional accusations in his apologetic book, *Las Excelencias de Los Hebreos* (1679). Cf. Shindelman, *Las Excelencias*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Kaplan, *From New Christians*, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Kaplan, *From New Christians*, 65-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See TTP Ch. 1 (III/27/31-34): “This is particularly true of the Hebrews, who used to boast that they are superior to all others, and who were accustomed to disdain all others, and hence, to disdain the knowledge which is common to all.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. TTP Ch. 3| III/45/25-30. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. TTP Ch. 3| III/45/21. This is a paraphrase on Exodus 34:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. TTP Ch. 13| III/45-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. TTP Ch. 3| III/46/13-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. TTP Ch. 3| III/46/20-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. TTP Ch. 3| III/46/23. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Spinoza is not only a determinist, but also a necessitarian (see E1p33). He seems to be alluding to this point by qualifying God’s guidance as “eternal” (III/46/19). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This trivial sense of chosenness is employed by Spinoza in his synopsis of chapter three in the preface to the TTP (III/9/34) where he suggests that the Hebrews were indeed elected “only because God has chosen a certain land for them.” The more sardonic element in Spinoza’s reinterpretation surfaces only in chapter three itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The definition of God’s internal aid which restricts it to things which happen by virtue of our “own power *alone*” makes all occurrences which are caused *both* by our power and by external causes belong to God’s external aid. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See E3d1 and E3d2. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For Spinoza, the nature, or essence, of anything always strives to persevere the thing’s being (see E3p6). In other words, disadvantageous things can come only from the outside. For an illuminating discussion of these issues, see Garrett, “Spinoza’s *Conatus* Argument.” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. TTP Ch. 3| III/46/27-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Maimonides, *Guide*, III 54| Pines II, 634-5. Unlike Spinoza, Maimonides also includes wealth and the ownership of property as the lowermost kind of perfection toward which humans strive. Since here Spinoza lists only the “honorable” goods, he disregards wealth. For the same reason, he does not list here honor and sensual pleasure which he discusses in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §§3-5. For the Maimonidean and Aristotelean sources of Spinoza’s discussion of the *summum bonum*, see Melamed, “Spinoza and Some of His Medieval Predecessors.” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. TTP Ch. 3| III/47/2. Spinoza’s argument here is not sufficiently clear since he clearly allows for individual humans to have diverse cognitive and moral abilities. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See TP Ch. 10| III/353/18. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. TTP Ch. 3|III/47/14-25. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. TTP Ch. 3| III/47/26-48/2. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See, for example, Cardoso’s discussion of the issue in Shindelman, *Las Excelencias de Los Hebreos*, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See TTP Ch. 6| III/84/8-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See, for example, Nadler, *Book Forged in Hell*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. As far I know, the only exception to this generalization is Hisdai Crescas’ *Light of the Lord* which is a highly sophisticated philosophical work. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Maimonides’ Commentary on Chapter *Heleq*. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Among the major rabbinic authors who explicitly rejected Maimonides’ thirteen principle are Isaac Abarbanel, David ben Zimra (RADBAZ), and the eminent Kabbalist, Isaac Luria (the ARI). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Spinoza, TTP, Ch. 17| III/206/12. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Thus, even Yehuda Ha-Lavi, the greatest partisan of the belief in chosenness, does not include it is among the tenets of Jewish faith. See *Kuzari*, III 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Sotah, 5a [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Sotah, 4b. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See, for example, Maimonides, *Mishne Torah* [Code], Hilkhot Deot, II 3. Cf. “Ga’ava,” in *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Thus, for example, rabbinic sources discuss whether a person – or a group of people – is allowed to take stricter standards for the observance of the commandments, since such behavior may well be an expression of arrogance. See “Ga’ava,” in *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, 40-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Hulin, 44b. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Deuteronomy 6:18: “And though shalt do that which is right and good.” [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. There are many rabbinic texts protesting against ethnic discrimination, but a comprehensive and nuanced discussion of this issue is obviously much beyond the limits of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *Mishna*, Avot, IV 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See “Mendelssohn, Maimon, and Spinoza,” 60 and n. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. If I *had* to choose between the German/European racism toward Jews, and Jewish racism toward gentiles, I would probably still prefer the latter for the simple reason that at least so far it has been incomparably less violent and murderous. But there is no reason why one should pick *either one* of these two diseases. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Fuks, *Ha-Shoa bi-Mekorot Rabaniyim*, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ha-Levi, *Kuzari*, I 95 and 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. He fared somewhat better among modern Jewish philosophers, with both Moses Mendelssohn and Franz Rosenzweig considering themselves as his admirers. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. ״זכין לאדם שלא בפניו ואין חבין לו שלא בפניו״ (literally: “we benefit a person not in his presence, but we do not disadvantage a person not in his presence.”). See, for example, *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Gittin, 11b, and Tractate Kidushin 23a. Various aspects of this principle are debated by the classical Talmudic commentators. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Still, if upon hearing about the gift, Reuben decides that he does not wish to receive it, he may still reject it, since one cannot be forced to accept a gift. See Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Baba Batra*, 138a. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. On whether the principle of זכין is just an instance of the general rules of agency [שליחות], or whether it constitutes a unique kind of agency that applies also to minors, see Boruch Ber Leibowitch, *Birkat Shmuel*, vol. 1, 25-26 (Kidushin, Siman 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. See Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Ketubot*, 11a, and commentators ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See Rabinowitch, *Shut Zecher Yitzhak*, Siman 2, Shmelkish, *Shut Beit Yitzhak – Even ha-Ezer*, Part 1, Siman 29/11, and Weinberg, *Shut Seridei Esh*, Part 2, Siman 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. TTP Ch. 3| III/50/3-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)