

# Not in the Heavens: The Premodern Roots of Jewish Secularism

BY DAVID BIALE

When I was young, my father would tell a story about how his mother, my grandmother, declared her independence from Jewish custom. As the story goes, my grandmother was the first Jewish woman in Wloclawek, some 200 kilometers northwest of Warsaw, to grow her own hair, at a time when the Jewish code of female modesty required headcoverings. This small but significant act of rebellion had a ripple effect within the family; after my grandmother took off this *sheitel*, my grandfather, too, undertook his own steps toward secularity. He was followed by my father, who was followed by his brother; both ended up joining radical secular movements.

From Orthodoxy to staunch secularity: The arguments around the Shabbat table of the Bialogłowsky household must have been quite fierce. But since the parents had taken the first steps toward secularity—steps their children then completed—a complete rupture never took place.

This family anecdote—part history, part fable—has meaning for me as an historian. In a similar way—but involving ideas rather than practices—Jewish secularism emerged out of Jewish religion. Secular Jewish thinkers, including Spinoza, built their philosophies on the religious tradition they sought to replace. They took the three cardinal principles of modern



Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

Judaism—God, Torah and Israel—and transmuted them, emptying them of religious meanings and filling them with new, secular ones.

Thus,

- The God of the Bible became nature.
- The Torah became the source for a cultural and historical definition of Jewish tradition.
- Israel was redefined from a community bound by covenant with God to a political or ethnic nation.

Theirs was a revolt of sons against traditionalist fathers. But in rebelling, they turned to their uncles—Sephardic Jews whose ideas and tracts contain the first grains of secular thought.

In what follows, I'll look at the modern secular Jewish thinkers, and explore how they used, developed, and advanced ideas from "religious" thinkers who came before them. I'll point out how those "religious" thinkers included scraps of secular thought in their philosophies. And I'll argue that because of those "scraps," they can be regarded as genuine precursors to Jewish secularism—even if their ideas, in their original contexts, weren't self-consciously "secular."

I'll also try to answer a related question, perhaps unavoidable as we head down this path: *How far back do the roots of Jewish secularism go?*

Before I attempt an answer, though, I must emphasize that from a sociological point of view, Jews indeed experienced secularization as an abrupt rupture with traditional practice. It was not so much an intellectual revolution as it was the abandonment of traditional communities, rabbinic authority, and the daily routine proscribed by Jewish law.

My concern here, however, is with *ideas*, and the intellectual tradition of Jewish secularism. And a good place to begin exploring that tradition might be Isaac Deutscher's famous essay, "The Non-Jewish Jew."

It was Deutscher, the former yeshiva student and socialist revolutionary, who argued that those who rejected both their ancestral religion and people in favor of secular universalism had historical precursors. In a paradoxical formulation that captured something of his own identity, Deutscher wrote: "The Jewish heretic who transcends Jewry belongs to a Jewish tradition."<sup>1</sup> The "Jewry" that the heretic transcends is "Judaism," not only the religion, but all of the traditions built up over nearly three millennia. And yet, in transcending Judaism, the heretic finds herself in a different Jewish tradition, a tradition no less Jewish for being anti-traditional.

It is to that tradition, the secular Jewish "counter-tradition," that we now turn. Sometimes, this tradition is thought to have begun with the Dutch heretic Baruch Spinoza in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, for many Jewish thinkers Spinoza's God served as the model for an anti-traditional theology. (The story of Jewish secularism is in large part the story of Spinoza's intellectual children: Heinrich Heine, Moses Hess, Albert Einstein and Mordecai Kaplan were all Spinozists in one way or another.<sup>2</sup>)

But Spinoza, seminal as he was, did not inaugurate this secular counter-tradition. Its roots go back further. And this leads me to this paper's thesis: that the roots of Jewish secularism can be found in the *premodern era*, especially in the works of Maimonides. Indeed, aspects of premodern thought not only anticipate their modern successors, but actually furnished arguments that might be appropriated, adapted and transformed to fit a secular agenda. These ideas were not intended for such a purpose, it is true. But the social context of modernity cast them in a new light, making it possible to view them as genuine precursors.

How did premodern philosophers like Mai-

monides pave the way for later secular thinkers? To find out, we must examine those philosophers' ideas about the three categories mentioned *supra*: God, Torah, and Israel.

## GOD

At first, Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) seems like an unlikely candidate for the role of proto-secularist. As the greatest codifier of Jewish law in the Middle Ages, Maimonides was anything but a rebel against tradition. And yet, the great rationalist philosopher became perhaps *the* medieval model for modern secularists.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Maimonides' philosophy contains radical ideas that were available for even more radical reinterpretation in the modern age.<sup>4</sup>

I will only discuss several aspects that seem particularly relevant<sup>5</sup> to later secular appropriation, beginning with negative theology (the others are nature, historical explanation of the commandments, and political theory). Following other philosophers, Maimonides rejected biblical anthropomorphisms. But he went further, by rejecting the attribution of any human or earthly characteristics to God: "...anything that entails corporeality ought of necessity to be negated in reference to Him and...all affections likewise should be negated in reference to Him."<sup>6</sup> Maimonides insulated God from the relative nature of our world, describing him by negations; and while the argument through which Maimonides arrives at this negative theology is complicated, what is



Moses Maimonides (1138-1204)

important for our purposes is the consequence of this theology: Maimonides' God is as far from the God of the Bible as one might imagine. He is a God who can only be worshipped by philosophers, insofar as such worship consists of meditation on negations.

Maimonides' negative theology collapsed in on itself with Spinoza. Spinoza may not have been conversant with the whole of rabbinic tradition, but, as Catherine Chalier has pointed out, Spinoza was acutely aware of Maimonides.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Maimonides' radical positions provided ammunition that his 17<sup>th</sup> century successor could adapt for his own purposes. As we have just seen, Maimonides' God was utterly transcendent in the sense that he was incomparable with anything in the created universe. All that we can know of God in a positive sense, according to Maimonides, are his "attributes of action," that is the natural world. Spinoza took over these divine attributes of action from Maimonides. He argued that they are all there is to God: There is no essence outside of them, no transcendence beyond their immanence. God *is* the universe—and nothing else. One might say that once the transcendent God became so abstract that it could not be grasped, it vanished from sight, leaving only the universe.

Thus, Maimonides' radically transcendent "God" begat Spinoza's purely immanent "God." Although Spinoza's God is quite different from Maimonides', Spinoza's arguments are squarely in the Maimonidean tradition: it is inadmissible to attribute to God any human qualities, since God and humans are literally incommensurable. One could claim that by denying biblical miracles and embracing radical necessity, Spinoza simply took Maimonides to his logical conclusion—which explains why later generations of secular rebels would embrace not only Spinoza, but Maimonides as well.

## TORAH



Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092/3-1167) played a seminal role in secularizing biblical criticism. He did so by supplying critical, historical readings of the Bible—readings that that eventually became canonical.

That they did so owed much to Ibn Ezra's focus on a literal and grammatical reading of the biblical text, which caused Ibn Ezra to flirt with heresy. Ibn Ezra identified a series of verses that he claimed were interpolations by someone other than Moses—the assumed author, according to tradition, of the whole Torah. That was one heresy; but Ibn Ezra also included in his commentary the views of Hiwi al-Balkhi,<sup>8</sup> a 9<sup>th</sup> century Persian Jew who argued that the Bible—and therefore the Jewish religion—stands at odds with everything taught by reason. Since the commandments lack reason, presumably a philosopher has no need to fulfill them.

By including al-Balkhi in his commentary, Ibn Ezra gave generations of readers a window into the surprising range of opinions in the scholarly Jewish world of his time. However, Ibn Ezra's radicalism does not only rest on his discovery of interpolations in the Bible. The interpolations were rather the product of a wider theory of literal exegesis, namely, his attempt to understand the text immanently. Ibn Ezra rejected the kind of allegorizing of the text that had become standard practice since Saadia Gaon, a practice that resulted from the desire to harmonize the Bible with the conclusions of medieval science and philosophy. In Ibn Ezra's view, such allegories often demonstrated poor knowledge of both the biblical text and medieval science. Since the Bible is filled with simple, everyday, human ways of speaking, and since it expresses them from the perspective of human beings, then it follows that the Bible does not contain any philosophical

knowledge, a specialized, scientific knowledge found in other books. It contains only pedagogy; the purpose of the book's author was pedagogical.

By limiting the knowledge provided by the Bible, Ibn Ezra made the study of nature—or, at least, the supra-lunar world—a subject independent of the Bible.<sup>9</sup> By separating science and revelation, Ibn Ezra rendered nature a realm autonomous from religion.

An equally radical interpretation of the Bible can be found in the thinking of Maimonides, whose doctrine of the “reasons for the commandments” anticipated modern, critical readings of the Bible in a different way. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides seems to hold, at least implicitly, that God designed the sacrificial system—i.e. the laws of sacrifice meant to wean Jews off of idolatry—with a built-in mechanism to destroy itself. If sacrifices became obsolete, couldn't the same happen to prayer, especially since prayer often involves conceiving of God in human terms? Maimonides himself never articulated such a conclusion, but the radical import of his argument has preoccupied generations of scholars. Moreover, Maimonides' historical explanation of the commandments—long before the rise of modern historicism—provided a medieval source for those modern secularists wishing to overthrow tradition.

Indeed, Maimonides' (and Ibn Ezra's) reading of the Bible seemed to pave the way for Spinoza, who both a) used them as a bridge and then b) surpassed them. Spinoza exaggerated Ibn Ezra's arguments to

deny Moses's authorship, awarding the honor instead to Ezra the Scribe (from the period after the return of the Jews from Babylonia—post-38 BCE). Whereas all other contemporary scholars agreed that the Bible, no matter how reinterpreted, was still the word of God, Spinoza struck out on his own, denying this belief. Echoing Maimonides (if against Maimonides' intent), Spinoza insisted that the Bible was only the history of ancient Israel and was therefore at once historically-

contingent and limited to a particular nation. As such, it had no value as a philosophical text. The Bible was not a work of philosophy or prophecy, but of history—the political history of the Jews, and the object of historical and literary scholarship.

Spinoza may have demolished the Bible's theology, but in doing so, he did not wholly consign it to permanent irrelevance. Instead, by (unwittingly) making the

Bible thoroughly modern, Spinoza laid the groundwork for its later recuperation. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, history had achieved pride of place in the human sciences. Thus, Spinoza's historical method made it possible for those, like Heinrich Heine, to salvage a non-religious message from between its lines. The door was now open to a variety of non-theological readings: as a document of prophetic social justice, nationalist aspirations and literary genius. The first Hebrew novel, Abraham Mapu's *Ahavat Zion* (1853), was set in biblical times and demonstrated how the *maskilim* (Jewish enlighteners) exploited the Bible as a cultural foil against rabbinic Judaism.

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The modern Jewish Bible includes all of these secular alternatives, alternatives that have their origin in Ibn Ezra's—and Spinoza's—claim that Scripture does not contain all Truth. Demolishing this metaphysical claim made it possible to claim instead a variety of lesser, if no less significant, truths. And the substitution of a “cultural Bible” for the Bible of traditional rabbinic literature was part and parcel of new definitions of Jewish identity based not on religion but on culture.

Those new definitions arose—evolved—thanks to signal (and secular) contributions from Maimonides and Ibn Ezra.

## ISRAEL

**B**iblical Israel, of course, had been constituted through a covenant between God and the descendants of Jacob. But with the modern dissolution of a religious identity, the meaning of Israel came unglued. In its place appeared political, cultural and historical definitions of the Jews as a national, linguistic or folk community. The idea of a secular, political definition of Israel was not pioneered by Spinoza, Maimon, or even Ibn Ezra, however. One can go back further—to Rabbinic literature—and begin to see quasi-secular theories of the Jewish *polis*.

Once again, it was Maimonides who contributed to this secular political theory, in his *Mishne Torah*. In Maimonides' era, rabbinic courts were the central legal authorities in most Jewish communities. These courts had the right to enforce their decisions by fining those against whom they ruled.<sup>10</sup> It was medieval theorists who, for the first time, extended this power to the community as a whole, by arguing that the community was the functional equivalent of a rabbinic court, and could therefore expropriate the

property of its members. Along the same lines, the rabbis also held that the community's authority came from an implied contract between all its members.<sup>11</sup>

By using the language of contract, Jewish political theory in the Middle Ages distanced itself from its biblical roots, and created the possibility of a communal government grounded in a secular language. Maimonides' contribution to this secular political theory<sup>12</sup> was to recognize the power of “secular” kings, who might enforce obedience that exceed those stated in the Torah. Maimonides also developed a doctrine of emergency decrees, literally “requirements of the hour” (*hora'at sha'ah*), that might be detached from revealed law:

Even as a physician will amputate the hand or the foot of a patient in order to save his life, so the court may advocate, when an emergency arises, the temporary disregard of some of the commandments that the commandments as a whole may be preserved.<sup>13</sup>

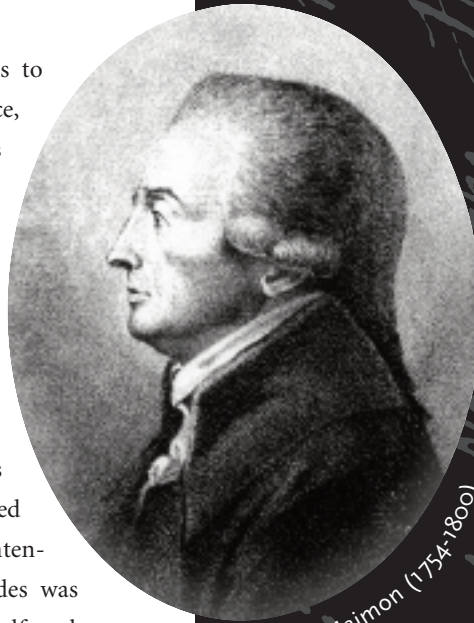
Maimonides therefore laid the groundwork for a secular politics based on exigency and power rather than divine commandment. From there, a 13<sup>th</sup> century school of Spanish thinkers, located originally in Barcelona, secularized Jewish politics much further by applying the notion of an autonomous politics to lay leaders. Solomon ibn Adret went further, allowing the use of force in order to “preserve society” (*tikkun ha-medinah*), even when it is forbidden by the Torah. Nissim Gerondi completed this process by stating that the laws to preserve society are not temporary, emergency regulations, but a legal system complementary to that of the Torah. (Torah law may be perfect, but it is perhaps too perfect for governing a state. Hence the need for a secular or political law whose sources of authority are human rather than divine.)

As *halakhic* authorities, none of these medieval Jewish writers could be called secular. All were writing within the framework of the legal system that they believed to be divinely inspired. But their recognition of a secular sphere—an autonomous realm of politics and law, separate from the religious sphere—provided a necessary source for modern secular politics. It also provided a model that could be appropriated and transformed in the modern Jewish world.

When we ascribe secular ideas to Maimonides, we are, in essence, reading Maimonides through the eyes of Spinoza. But we are hardly the first to do so. Applying a Spinozist reading to Maimonides is something of a secular Jewish tradition.

The first Jewish thinker to do so systematically was Solomon Maimon (1754-1800), a Lithuanian-born Talmudic prodigy who fled his homeland for Germany, where he joined the vanguard of the German Enlightenment. Maimon's debt to Maimonides was particularly heavy (his name was itself an homage)<sup>14</sup>. Using a classically Maimonidean argument, Maimon claimed that the statement "God exists" is no more meaningful than the statement "God does not exist." By "existence" we mean something that could or will go out of existence. Such a meaning cannot be applied to God; it is a category mistake, like saying "the wall does not see" (an example from Maimonides). Thus, the existence of God is beyond rational proof, since the very concept of existence cannot be predicated on God.

Maimon's philosophy reached backwards to Maimonides, but it also pointed forward,<sup>15</sup> anticipating



Solomon Maimon (1754-1800)

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arguments by Fichte and Hegel, as well as the later Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen. Both Maimon and Spinoza assimilated the world into God; in both cases, they freed philosophy from biblical theology, since, while retaining the language of the divine, they emptied it of its theistic meanings, turning it into a product of the human mind. Each followed in the footsteps of Maimonides.

Secularism is a modern development. Yet as I hope I've shown, it has its roots in ancient philosophical and religious soil. Maimonides, Ibn Ezra, Maimon—these seminal thinkers left behind much fruit ripe for the secular picking. They paved the way for later generations of secular Jewish thinkers who transformed contemporary notions of God, Torah and Israel.

Thus, the Jews experienced and articulated the secular in ways distinctive to their tradition. Peter Berger and Marcel Gauchet have argued that the origins of Jewish secularism are in biblical monotheism, yet secularism's origins are even more in the precise ways this theology played itself out in rabbinic and medieval literature. For it is there, especially in the works of Maimonides, that we find the intellectual roots of Jewish secularization.

<sup>1</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (Boston, 1968), 26.  
<sup>2</sup> Kaplan, the 20<sup>th</sup> century pioneer of Reconstructionist Judaism, scarcely refers to Spinoza but his identification of God with nature can hardly be read apart from the heretic of Amsterdam.  
<sup>3</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, those rebelling against rabbinic authority often surreptitiously read Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* as a subversive work.  
<sup>4</sup> See Daniel Jeremy Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180-1240* (Leiden, 1965).  
<sup>5</sup> A full account of Maimonides' thought would lie far outside the scope of this essay.  
<sup>6</sup> *Guide*, 1:55. The translation here is that of Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963).  
<sup>7</sup> Catherine Chaliel, *Spinoza, lecteur de Maimonide* (Paris, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Ezra on Exodus 14:27, 16:13, 34:29. See Nahum M. Sarna, "Ibn Ezra as an Exegete" in Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris (eds), *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 1-27 and Irene Lancaster, *Deconstructing the Bible: Abraham ibn Ezra's Introduction to the Torah* (London and New York, 2003)  
<sup>9</sup> He did not, however, separate them entirely. He points out a few verses in the Bible that do hint at the supra-lunar world. The Bible, it turns out, must be read from a dual perspective, human and divine. See my "Philosophy and Exegesis in the Writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra," *Comitatus* (UCLA Medieval and Renaissance Center), 5 (Fall, 1974): 43-62.  
<sup>10</sup> This procedure was called *hefker bet-din*—"judicial expropriation."  
<sup>11</sup> m. Baba Batra, 1.5. See also the more extensive discussion in the *Tosefta* Baba Metzia, 11. These texts and many others relevant to this discussion can be found in Michael Walzer, et al., *The Jewish Political Tradition* (New Haven, 2000), vol. 1, ch. 8.  
<sup>12</sup> In the *Mishne Torah*.  
<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, "Laws Concerning Rebels," 2.4  
<sup>14</sup> By taking the pseudonym "Maimon" as a gesture to his medieval intellectual ancestor, the Sephardic philosopher thus replaced his own Ashkenazic father.  
<sup>15</sup> In his autobiography, Maimon provides the outline for a philosophy at once grounded in medieval Jewish philosophy and pointing to a secular future.

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