

Hope in Politics: A Jewish Perspective

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Hope is ubiquitous in human affairs, especially in regard to politics. Throughout history, politics has been the locus of many of our noblest aspirations, as well as of our darkest ambitions. Hope has driven us into wars and revolutions, but also inspired us to create better, more prosperous societies. Without it, benign expressions of politics such as constitutional democracy could never have been launched or sustained—but neither, too, could malignant forms such as totalitarianism or theocracy. Indeed, the modern age's most pernicious ideologies, from communism to Nazism to radical Islamism, all appealed to the yearning for a perfect political order, to be brought into being through extreme economic, social, or religious means. This naturally gives rise to the question: Were such movements products of misplaced hope? Are they still? Moreover, given the propensity for perversion, is politics per se a worthy object of our aspirations? And finally, we might ask, what *may* we hope for, within reason, from politics?

Since the nineteenth century, these questions have taken on a particular urgency for the Jewish people. During nearly two millennia in the diaspora, politics for the Jews had been, for the most part, aimed at securing or

sustaining the ability to live as an autonomous religious community within a foreign society. Beginning with the Emancipation, which brought European Jewry out of the ghettos and into civil society, the Jews were introduced to new possibilities for politics. Many seized upon the opportunities it offered for social and economic integration. For some Jews, modern Zionism offered an alternative political response to the persistence of antisemitism in emancipated Europe. Yet ultimately, it was the establishment of a Jewish state in 1948 and the subsequent challenge of sovereignty that forced the Jews as a nation to re-formulate their relationship to politics and to consider what hopes they might rightly invest in it.

Three iconic, modern, German Jewish thinkers—Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Martin Buber—each writing in the most promising and calamitous of political epochs, engaged the nexus of hope and politics explicitly. Cohen, a product of the nineteenth century deeply shaped by Kant’s doctrine of progress, saw politics as a necessary and virtually sufficient framework for hope. To his mind, politics properly conceived and executed was the principal vehicle for redeeming the world. Rosenzweig, by contrast, took a diametrically opposed view, espousing a *withdrawal* from politics—at least for the Jews, whom he encouraged instead to nourish their own divinely guaranteed eternity. Finally, Buber, a collaborator with Rosenzweig and prolific social thinker, charted a middle course. While politics is inherently corrupting and unjust, he reasoned, it is also necessary. As such, it may be at least partially redeemed by prudent and moral action as the hour demands. Buber’s politics—shorn of both Cohen’s progressivism and Rosenzweig’s quietism—is thus rendered no different from any other human project.

These three Jewish thinkers represent three dramatically different views, and three different ideals. In the following essay, I argue that it is Buber’s view that best follows from the biblical and Jewish understanding of hope. As such, it is Buber who ultimately provides us with a well-grounded answer to the question of how much hope ought to be placed in politics: quite simply, neither too much nor too little.

It may seem counterintuitive to portray Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) as a thinker who invested a surfeit of hope in politics. Indeed, at first glance, Cohen seems decidedly *anti*-political. He was, after all, outspoken about his rejection of Jewish nationalism: Believing in the profound inner affinity of Judaism with “Germanness” (*Deutschtum*), he called instead for a liberal acculturation with the Fatherland.¹ (The tragedy of Cohen’s choice of acculturation is made all the more poignant by the fact that although he died in 1918, several months before the defeat of his beloved Germany, his wife perished twenty-four years later in the Nazi concentration camp of Theresienstadt.) Yet while Cohen rejected political distinctiveness for Jews, in the form of both the ancient Jewish state and the Zionist hope for the restoration of a modern one, he did not reject politics as such.² On the contrary, he embraced politics as the principal means of actualizing the messianic promise of biblical monotheism in the world.

This view of the messianic potential of politics derives from Cohen’s interpretation of Immanuel Kant. The Enlightenment philosopher had a hopeful reading of the trajectory of human history, according to which humanity is always advancing toward the “Kingdom of Ends,” the universal ethical community. According to Cohen, the human race can achieve its moral destiny only through its persistent practice of ethics in the present. When directed to society as a whole, he continued, ethics must take the form of a morally grounded politics. Cohen thus adopted Kant’s idea that humanity is progressing, despite appearances, toward a future of perpetual peace, but translated Kant’s peaceable Kingdom of Ends into the Jewish concept of the messianic age. As such, Cohen’s philosophy—the leading modern expression of Jewish rationalism—wed Kant’s theories of history and ethics to traditional Jewish faith.

Judaism’s central philosophical insight, for Cohen, is the uniqueness of God. As he writes in his seminal work, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, the injunction from Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!” does not assert in a mere numerical sense that

there is one God as opposed to many gods.³ Rather, it declares that God is wholly *unlike* everything in his creation. And it is precisely this notion of the distinctiveness of God as against all extant things that leads to the ethical imperative.⁴ This radical distinction between creator and creation is paralleled by the distinction between “ought” and “is”: To live in response to the “ought,” believed Cohen, is to live in imitation of the ways of God.

In Cohen’s view, men and women discover themselves as creatures capable of moral action toward one another; consequently, they discover that they are not merely juxtaposed to, but can *care* for, each other. In this realization of their fellowship, they in turn realize what they must do and become. In short, they become aware that the sphere of ethics must govern their interactions. This perception of the moral dimension of human affairs is deeply Kantian: Biblical Judaism’s presentation of God’s law as a revelation from above is, in Cohen’s view, a picturesque, mythopoeic way of conveying the essential autonomy and transcendental rationality of ethics. In other words, ethics, as the expression of the world of the “ought,” is not grounded in any natural condition—that is, in the world of the “is.” Rather, the discovery of ethics is tantamount to the revelation of the one, unique God.

This Cohenian concept of the One God correlates with another of his philosophical notions, the one humanity. This unity of mankind, according to Cohen, was to be achieved when, in the messianic age, all nations and faiths become one. From the knowledge of God, through which we recognize our neighbor (*Nebenmensch*) as our fellow (*Mitmensch*) whom we are to love, comes moral knowledge and commitment. The factual pluralization of humanity into nations in the present, however, requires that the *idea* of a unified humanity be kept alive and available in another form: the concept of the one people, Israel. Cohen argues that Israel is not just another *Volk*. Rather, it is a people that has come into being in an unnatural way; a people whose very existence is constituted by an *ethical* calling. Until the achievement in history, via ethical-political action, of

the messianic age, the Jews are required to retain their exemplary oneness as a sign, a symbol, and, tragically, as a provocation to the nations. The Jews, alone among all the peoples of the earth, are made to suffer for the messianic cause, which flows from the deepest logic of monotheism. Put simply, if ethics is the praxis of social love, then Israel—the suffering people par excellence—must bear responsibility for putting the love of humanity into practice in the social-political domain.⁵

The ideal of a unified humanity is intertwined with the biblical belief that man was made *b'zelem Elohim*, in the image of God. This insight gives rise to the emotion, indeed, the Hebraic virtue, of compassion (*Mitleid*). To be sure, compassion goes a long way toward recognizing the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the marginal one as our *Mitmensch*. But compassion alone is not enough. To make compassion effective as an engine of social justice, one needs a rational politics. Thus, Cohen demands the merger of biblical compassion with the modern project of political economy. Jerusalem's holiness needs Athens' science and politics.

As much as Jerusalem needs Athens, however, Athens also needs Jerusalem. "Greek" philosophy may lead to the *techné* for social amelioration through politics, but without "prophetism," it would lack the motivation to do so. Cohen correctly points out that the Greeks did not treasure hope as a virtue. Hope was, at best, "a sense of personal relief, affecting the imagination of the poor or unhappy individual. Nowhere in paganism does the concept of hope suggest a general enhancement of all human existence."⁶ In order for philosophically indifferent or misguided "private hope" to grow into well-grounded "social hope," Jerusalem's faith in the One God (and consequently, the ideal of one humanity) is necessary. The "widening-out [of private hope]," Cohen writes, "into the non-personal, ethical realm, this spiritualization of a basically materialistic-personalistic emotion, is the effect and indeed one of the surest marks of the idea of God's unity or—what amounts to the same thing—of his pure spirituality. In Old Testament usage, hope and faith are identical." He continues:

[Hope] is the product as well as the expression of faith in divine providence. And divine providence means neither a concern, first and foremost, with the individual nor exclusively with one's own people, but rather with all mankind as the children of God. Hope for one's own well-being is conducive to vanity. Hope for the well-being and continued existence of one's own people, though possibly conducive to the development of courage and a sacrificial spirit, easily engenders pride as well. And when one's own country experiences a prolonged period of distress, all hope seems to be in vain, adding merely to one's sense of frustration and dejection.

But man's hope is transformed into faith when he no longer thinks of himself alone, that is, of his salvation here and now, or of his eternal salvation (the latter, if I may say so, with calculating sanctimoniousness). Hope is transformed into faith when man associates the future with the emergence of a community whose concerns will reach beyond its everyday concrete reality. Such a community will not be composed merely of man's immediate circle of friends or family nor will it include only those who share his own cherished beliefs; indeed, it will even cut across the borders of his own country, because it will represent the community of mankind. As faith in mankind, Israel's faith is hope. And it is this epitome of Israel's prophetism, this hope in mankind's future, that comprises the substance of the messianic idea.⁷

Here hope is more than an emotion. For as an emotion, hope would remain private, feckless, faintly selfish, and therefore morally suspect. But as a path to (or from) rational faith in God, hope culminates in the messianic idea of a united humanity, living together in peace and justice. This alone is the proper deployment of hope.

To Cohen, the path to this eschaton—the messianic praxis—is social ethics effectuated through socialism. By socialism, Cohen means a just social order in which poverty is eliminated, people rule themselves in a democratic manner, education is universal, and compassion drives public policy. Cohen does not fill in the details of a socialist politics; rather, he takes it for granted that democratic socialism, as it was articulated in Germany in the

nineteenth century, is the most just form of political order.⁸ It would, foremost, entail a politics of complete equality between human beings: There would no longer be ruler and ruled—all would participate as equals in a self-governing society.⁹ (Indeed, Cohen vigorously faults Plato's static division of his republic into a philosophical governing class and a non-philosophical mass.) The perfection of such an order, Cohen believes, is what will eventually constitute the messianic age. Yet, strictly speaking, Cohen believes that the messianic age will never, indeed *can* never arrive. Rather, it is an ethical ideal, an "ought" that should motivate and guide us. But as an "ought," it is not an actuality that could be achieved (it is not, in other words, an "is"). We can approximate it; we cannot attain it. The messianic age is thus a regulative idea, a *telos* toward which our moral duties are ordered.

The Kantian basis of Cohen's philosophy thus bequeaths a disturbing contradiction: We are to believe in ideas, such as the messianic age, with all our hearts, all the while knowing that they are, at best, necessary and useful fictions. Cohen would object strenuously to putting it this way—a regulative idea is certainly not arbitrary or will-o'-the-wisp in the way "fiction" implies—but the criticism is nonetheless valid. Cohen would have us banish pessimism and despair, which a consideration of the bloodbath of history could easily inspire, as based on fear rather than on knowledge. In truth, he insists, we *know* in the way that we know moral truth and moral duty that a vision of universal peace is necessary, and an ideal culmination of ethics. Hope and faith are its allies. To have hope and faith in the messianic age is not to impose imagination on history; instead, it is to draw the ideas of ethics together into an ideal, coherent synthesis. As a philosophical idealist, Cohen believes that such ideas are not contradicted by reality. On the contrary, they *constitute* reality in its highest expression. As such, disconfirming evidence cannot truly disconfirm, for the ideas are insulated against assault by their own ideal coherence with one another. Similarly, socialism would not be disconfirmed by, for example, its poor performance as an economic model, or the cost in coercion that one must pay for a socialist politics. Nor would German liberal politics be disconfirmed by its collapse before Nazi

dictatorship. Rather, the idea *in its purity* is the thing—or, more precisely, *ought to be* the thing. And it is the “ought,” the messianic pull that the idea exerts on every prevailing reality, that defines reality at its highest level.

Cohen thus exemplifies what the political economist and sociologist Max Weber described as “an ethics of pure intention,” or *Gesinnungsethik*.¹⁰ Scornful of consequences and tethered to the highest values, the *Gesinnungsethiker* engages in political action, albeit under the sign of essentially apolitical ideals. It is important to note that it is not that Cohen was overly optimistic about Germany. Rather, it is that he was overly idealistic about knowledge, conduct, and politics. The Cohenian state is in itself an ideal: a normative elevation of unequal social classes and natural groupings into a transcendent realm of equality, and thus a step on the path to the messianic future.

Yet a politics driven by moral yearning and oriented toward moral perfection fails to be politics in a practical sense. Cohen’s politics eschews power—the very medium of politics—for a rapturous focus on justice. But how, we might rightfully ask, can justice be approximated without a responsible deployment of power? Cohen, in the end, embraces the dissolution of politics into pure ethics. But one might say to Cohen, with apologies to Lord Acton, that powerlessness, too, corrupts, and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely. It is unfair, perhaps, to criticize Cohen for failing to see the direction in which his *Vaterland* was headed. But it is fair to criticize his hopefulness, however densely argued, about the eventual triumph of the good, to be forged through human exertion on the stage of politics. Cohen’s disciple, Franz Rosenzweig, deployed precisely that critique.

If Cohen can be said to have invested a surfeit of hope in politics, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) represents the opposite approach. Rosenzweig, a student and early admirer of Cohen’s, both accepted and rejected elements of the latter’s social thought. In particular, he disagreed with Cohen’s most liberal convictions: Jewish assimilationism, German nationalism, democratic socialism, and gradualist and reformist politics as a strategy

of messianism. He argued instead that politics is concerned with fate and struggle, and as such is completely of this world. The fitting vehicle for politics in history, says Rosenzweig, is Christianity, whose task it is to propagate revelation. Judaism, by contrast, has to do with eternity and inwardness, and thus should have no share in the political at all. By the same token, Rosenzweig retains Cohen's *Gesinnungsethik*, the ethic of pure intention, as the *modus vivendi* of Jewish life in an ahistorical, apolitical, and eternal now (*nunc stans*). The Jewish people, he believed, exist outside of time, misunderstood and scorned by the nations, and nourished by their own divine fire, burning at the heart of a universe shaped into a "star of redemption."¹¹

Hence, Rosenzweig envisions a cosmic division of labor. The Church, he believes, represents the dynamic process of the universe—the light that streams out of the Jewish fire at the heart of the star. If the Jews live beyond time, the Church lives in the midst of time. Indeed, it copes with time by mastering it, by creating a division in time, known as the Christian epoch.¹² The Church is all about struggle and transformation in "real time," and yearning to achieve what for the Jews is already given: a final, transfigured form. As such, the Church wrestles with its own internal contradiction, and is at once both Jewish and Gentile, biblical and pagan. The struggle over history and politics that constitutes the world derives from the inner struggle of the Christian soul; Siegfried, the pagan hero, is at war with Jesus. Restlessness and tension drive the world process. Christianity must spread and convert all of pagan humanity, as well as convert the paganism within itself.

The Jewish people, by contrast, is "already at the goal toward which the peoples of the world are just setting out." That goal is the "inner harmony of faith and life," of *fides* and *salus*.¹³ The encounter with God and the tasks of daily life must be unified. For Christianity, which is wedded to history in a way that the Jews are not, the tasks of history, politics, and war must become holy politics and holy war. The conversion of the world is at stake, and these are the means at its disposal. For the Jewish people, on the other hand, all strife, however tragically it may affect it, is mere strife; all of that

is behind it, it has no stake in it. (Its holy battle against the Canaanites was long in the past. It is one of the worldly things “taken away” from the Jews when they entered eternity.) The Jew is the only genuine pacifist; he cannot take violent struggle seriously.¹⁴ The same is true of politics: The Jews are beyond the political.

As such, the Jewish people is exempt from the laws of history. It neither develops nor changes. It lives an eternal life, ordered by the timeless cycle of the Jewish liturgical year.¹⁵ The Jews may anticipate a final redemption, but they also live it in the timelessness of the present. “Eternity,” Rosenzweig writes, “is not a very long time, but a tomorrow that just as well could be today. Eternity is a future, which, without ceasing to be future, is nevertheless present. Eternity is a today that would be conscious of being more than today.”¹⁶ The festivals of the year provide a grammar for the speech of the Jewish community, making it one endless prayer. It is in the depth of the collective experience that the individual Jew finds orientation and realization. In Rosenzweig’s words, the liturgical forms are “the light in which we behold the light,” and “[a] calm anticipation of a world shining in the silence of the future.”¹⁷ It is eternal liturgical life, not political struggle in a historical world, which governs the life rhythms of the Jewish people.

From this one might get the impression that, for Rosenzweig, the Jews have nothing to hope for, that they should, perhaps, simply immerse themselves in the depths of the present without any expectation. But that is emphatically not Rosenzweig’s view. The Jews *do* have something to hope for: redemption. Unlike modern believers in progress, such as Kant and Cohen, to Rosenzweig, the Jew animates the coming future with the possibility that the messianic age can come *now*. The Kingdom of God is not set in some far-off future. The belief in progress flattens eternity, in his special sense of the term, into infinity: a string of qualitatively similar moments stretched out into a forever. Unlike the believer in progress, the Jew who believes in eternity believes that the Kingdom of God is capable of arriving at any time. Through the liturgical life, then, the Jewish people takes action—its own peculiar kind of action, to be sure—to “knock at the locked door” of the

world and to make “the Messiah arrive before his time.”¹⁸ But what kind of action does liturgical life embody? Is there still here some sort of politics, however transfigured, as in Cohen’s transference of an ethics of compassion into a democratic socialism? Not at all. Rosenzweig writes of the action that anticipates the future kingdom of God:

Owing to this anticipation, growing and taking action become eternal. But what is it that they are anticipating? Nothing other than—each other. The taking action of the soul, turned consciously and actively toward the given neighbor in the moment, obviously anticipates the whole world in the will. And the growth of the kingdom in the world, when it anticipates in hope the end for the moment that is coming—what could it expect for this moment that is coming if not the act of love?¹⁹

The kingdom for which both Jews and Christians pray is a world in which love prevails, in which there is, accordingly, nothing left to pray for. “The union of the soul with the whole world, having taken place in the act of thanks, the Kingdom of God has come—for this Kingdom is nothing other than the mutual union of the soul and the world—and every prayer that was ever possible is answered.”²⁰ And this can happen, according to Rosenzweig, at any time. For Cohen, the end of history, in principle, could not come; for Rosenzweig, it *must*. As he writes, “God himself must speak the last word—there cannot be any word afterwards. For there must be an end, and no longer merely anticipation of it.”²¹ God, not the ethics and politics of man, is the true agent of redemption. Therefore, man’s only agency is love and prayer; politics avails nothing.²²

Try as he might to isolate the Jews from politics and sequester their action into a sphere of liturgical performance, however, Rosenzweig still requires the Jews to do *something* practical in the world. In a word, they need to reproduce. Unlike the Christians, who need to win souls, the Jews need to have babies. Biology, not mission, ensures their eternity.²³ And here Rosenzweig’s extraordinarily anti-political view shows its Achilles’ heel: The perpetuation of “Jewish blood,” a charged term that Rosenzweig

nonetheless does not shrink from using, cannot simply mean “having Jewish babies.”²⁴ It would be meaningless, after all, to bring Jewish children into a world in which they cannot grow and mature into Jewish adults, and thus carry out their own generative responsibilities. The perpetuation of the Jews perforce entails attention to securing conditions in which Jewish life is viable. It entails, therefore, attention to politics. Rosenzweig thus stumbles into a grave contradiction. He systematically and on principle scants a dimension of human experience on which his own view must nevertheless rely. Surely, one might argue, the logic of his own position ought to compel him to take historicity and politics seriously as conditions for Jewish survival.

To be sure, it is tempting to view history and politics—or “worldliness”—as a reality from which the “eternal people” can remain aloof. This is certainly a deep temptation within Christianity, as evidenced at least as early as the second-century Epistle to Diognetus. But it has been far less of a temptation among the Jews, although Rosenzweig is a fascinating example of it. Reality shows us why: The real story of Jewish survival—“real,” that is, for those who take history seriously—is that the Jews survived because they understood the political challenges of a stateless existence. They operated with keen political skill in dangerous environments as a stateless, but nonetheless organized collectivity. Far from being indifferent to politics, Jews pioneered a mode of diasporic political life that was acutely realistic, worldly, and historically efficacious.²⁵ Thus, while Jews of a certain metaphysical cast of mind may derive a sense of strength from Rosenzweigian apathy toward politics, it is doubtful that the Jewish people as a whole could have survived if it had institutionalized this feeling in its communal life. In the end, Rosenzweig gives us little more than a prescription for pariah status, for what Hannah Arendt aptly called “worldlessness.” His contemporary Martin Buber, however, attempted to chart a middle course between Cohen and Rosenzweig, between a belief in politics as the key to redemption and a rejection of any redemptive power in politics whatsoever. The result is a far more pragmatic approach to the question of what the Jews may hope for from politics.

Martin Buber (1878-1965) may seem an improbable candidate to exemplify a realistic and moderate hope for politics. Readers are likely to know of Buber as the great exponent of radically authentic relationships, and, it follows, as a relentless critic of all forms of interaction (such as politics) that stultify our ability to relate to one another in this manner. Buber's 1923 text, *I and Thou*, sets out this conception of relationships in what has become a classic of twentieth-century religious thought.²⁶ Here he describes two modes of attitude toward the world, enunciated by the compound words I-You and I-It. Much of how we interact with other human beings, along with animals, plants, and "spiritual beings" such as artistic inspirations, occurs in the mode of "experience and use," namely of I-It. In such a mode, both the "I" and the "It" are reduced and constricted by the act of having, using, or embedding that characterizes established patterns of experience. In the full, exclusive, spontaneous opening of an I to a You, however, *both* beings instantaneously become the utmost that they can be, only to fall back, inevitably, into a state of withdrawal and constriction. Real living, Buber writes, is meeting; it is our "melancholy lot" that real meeting fades quickly into the "It-world" once again. But we also glimpse a horizon beyond the transience of encounter. All our genuine meetings point toward our ultimate one with the Eternal You, the You who can never become an It. As such, the lines of every I-You encounter converge in God, who Buber insists should only be addressed as You, and not conceptualized or described as a He, She or It.

A teaching such as this appears, on its face, to leave little room for something as low, compromised, and messy as politics. Yet Buber's thought, however indebted to predecessors such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, did not drive him into an apolitical religiosity. Nor did it lead to a dismissive contempt for the inherited forms of the bourgeois world. On the contrary, precisely *because* relations stand at the center of his metaphysics was he concerned for their quality, and especially regarding those that constitute community, society, nation, and state. To be sure, Buber does

display profound streaks of antinomianism, anarchism, utopianism, and even revolutionism, but his thought contains a distinct element of realism as well. In fact, Buber practiced a patient politics of “a thousand small decisions,” struggling constantly to translate the impossible ideal of the I-You encounter into the rough medium of political practice.²⁷ His often inflated rhetoric notwithstanding, he never took flight into pure political fantasy. He might have been inspired by the prophets, but he did not pretend to be one. To the end, he remained what the political philosopher Michael Walzer calls a “connected critic.”²⁸

Buber’s lifelong struggle to hold together both “existence” and “utopia”—the push of life in the “It-world” and the pull of life toward the “You-world”—precluded a simple bifurcation of politics here, ethics there. He rejected the dichotomy of the *Gesinnungsethiker*, in which moral purity is opposed to politics, and must prevail. Buber thought such moral purity dogmatic or doctrinaire, a feckless idealism that has not yet entered the concreteness of life. Yet Buber also rejected the formulation, which Max Weber juxtaposed to *Gesinnungsethik*, of an ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). From the latter point of view, politics and ethics are also structurally opposed, but one must do one’s best, under political circumstances, to do one’s duty, without regard to purist moral inhibitions: Politics brings with it its own moral responsibilities. To act according to pure or apolitical moral considerations in the midst of politics is to offend against *political* morality. It is to offend against what a political actor must responsibly do.

In truth, Buber’s actual political praxis accords with Weber’s ethic of responsibility, but he nonetheless theoretically rejects this view, because he denies its underlying assumption of value pluralism. He is opposed to setting off politics as a separate sphere in the manner of Weber or, more invidiously, of the political theorist Carl Schmitt. Unlike Weber, Buber cannot agree to a fundamental bifurcation of reality into the sacred and the profane, the presumptive binary that lies at the very heart of the modern malaise.²⁹ Politics cannot be structurally separate from ethics, because ethics

is not a codified, extraordinary sphere (*à la* Cohen), distinct from “real life.” Rather, ethics, like politics, is constituted by an authentic response to the demands of the hour. Reality and ideal, is and ought—these are not static polarities, staring at each other across an ontological divide. They are living forces, struggling in a human being faced with a decision. Responding to the needs of the hour *is* the sacred. Buber’s pan-sacramental metaphysics sees all of life as opening toward God. No sphere of human endeavor is truly separated, distinct, or permanently pluralized. One must work within the world to overcome its ostensible divisions, and raise its hidden sparks toward the holy.

We can only work on the Kingdom of God, Buber believes, by working on all the spheres of human life that are allotted to us. There is no universally valid choice of means to serve the purpose. One cannot say, for example, that we must work here and not there, since this leads to the goal and that does not. We cannot, in other words, prepare the messianic world; we can only prepare *for* it. There is no legitimately messianic, and no legitimately “messianically intended” politics. But this does not imply that the political “serpent” is essentially evil; it is, rather, only misled. It, too, ultimately wants to be redeemed. It belongs with the creaturely world: we must deal with it, in flexibility and responsibility.³⁰

To the extent that we can speak of separate spheres, of “pluralism,” in Buber’s thought, we can speak only of the “sphere of wholeness” and the “sphere of separation.” Wholeness, to Buber, is normative: It is the world of immediate relation to the You. Only in relation to the You is the I whole. Separation, on the other hand, is real but incomplete. Political action, which is work in the sphere of separation, “receives its legitimacy from the sphere of wholeness.”³¹ In other words, if we give to God our wholeness, we learn hour by hour how to lead our political lives in the un-whole sphere of the state. What Buber calls “the political principle” has legitimacy, but only in tension with the “sphere of wholeness.” It is therefore a tentative legitimacy. If the political principle were to swallow all things (as Hegel intended), it would lose its tentative validity. Thus Buber, like his French Protestant

contemporary, Jacques Ellul, both validated *and* criticized the political dimension of life according to a religious vision of ultimacy.³²

To a certain extent, Buber takes the political world as a given, focusing on how one may work within it with realism and integrity. Nevertheless, working within it entails constant constructive criticism: Buber ceaselessly criticized the pretensions of the state as an artificial Leviathan inherently inimical to a more humanly scaled society and community. He writes:

I believe that it is possible to serve God and the group to which one belongs if one is courageously intent on serving God in the sphere of the group as much as one can. As much as one can at the time; “quantum satis” means in the language of lived truth not “either-or,” but “as-much-as-one-can.” If the political organization of existence does not infringe on my wholeness and immediacy, it may demand of me that I do justice to it at any particular time as far as, in a given inner conflict, I believe I am able to answer for. At any particular time; for here there is no once-for-all: in each situation that demands decision the demarcation line between service and service must be drawn anew—not necessarily with fear, but necessarily with that trembling of the soul that precedes every genuine decision.³³

Decision within the context of politics—decision on the narrow ridge—must always respond to the imperative of *quantum satis*: how much is necessary. Buber uses this Latin phrase repeatedly in his political writings. It suggests an uncertain, transient border between too little and too much, between the violation of one’s integrity and the enactment of one’s integrity in a deed. Genuine political leadership works within the imperative of quantum satis. Thus, genuine leadership—leadership which facilitates genuine encounter—works through politics, but does not expect success in politics.³⁴ Or rather, it recognizes that all political success is tinged with failure, and that the real successes, the overcoming of human estrangement, outpace the political; they are enacted, however transiently, by other means. In this way Buber validates the political while simultaneously relativizing it. Hope cannot neglect politics, he maintained, but neither can it trust in it unequivocally.

Cohen's depiction of political activity as both necessary and sufficient for the fulfillment of significant human hope invests the sphere of the political with redemptive potential, although at the expense of realism. Rosenzweig empties politics of significance and dissociates the political domain from human, or at least Jewish, hope. Only Buber takes politics seriously as a vehicle for redemptive purpose, although he declines to equate political activity with redemption. For as Buber understood, salvation is God's alone to consummate. Human endeavor is nonetheless a necessary, although not sufficient, part of that goal.

Buber's view of the relationship between hope and politics is not only more practical than those held by Cohen and Rosenzweig, but also more consistent with a biblical understanding of these notions. In the biblical account, hope is similar to what Western ethics call a virtue. It is an excellence of character, displayed by the choice to live in affirmation and celebration of God's goodness. When the psalmist asserts, "Were it not that I believed I should see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thy heart: and wait on the Lord," he is asserting the goodness of life, and repudiating despair, nihilism, and resignation.³⁵ According to this view, hope is more than a spontaneous emotion. It is, rather, both a sign of human excellence (in the biblical-Judaic mode of piety) and a moral imperative. Jews are obliged to cultivate the virtue of hope, to build a hopeful disposition over time through affirmation and choice. Moreover, like any virtue, hope can offer an account of why it is superior to its opposing vice, despair. It must, after all, mount an argument on behalf of a form of life; it must be answerable to reason. Given this rational dimension, we cannot say that hope, in its traditional Jewish conception, is neutral vis-à-vis its objects. Rather, it chooses its objects carefully, and allows itself to be disciplined and constrained by a reasonable and responsible assessment of the world with which it engages. What, then, would the Jewish tradition counsel on the question of how justifiable politics is as a locus for hope?

If there is an “ur-form” of response to this question, then it may be found in Psalms 146. This chapter in Psalms evocatively captures the ambivalence that religious Jews might feel toward politics: “Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goes forth, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God: who made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that is in them: and keeps truth forever.”³⁶ On the one hand, this psalm reminds the worshiper that God alone is worthy of his hopes: “Princes” are mortal, and cannot fail to disappoint. Only God, the Creator, is faithful forever; God alone, and not the institutions of human government, can render true justice. From this perspective, human politics could well be disparaged. After all, the designs of mortal men and women amount to nothing compared with those of the Creator of heaven and earth.

On the other hand, given the divine commandment to install institutions of government, surely it cannot be impermissible to hope that these institutions, too, might succeed in pursuing justice and walking in God’s ways. Indeed, as the Bible explains, human beings were put in the Garden of Eden “to till it and to keep it,” to care for God’s creation.³⁷ And, when the Israelites reached their promised land, they were told to appoint political and judicial officials—that is, to import a foreign, Gentile political system, if necessary—who would “judge the people with righteous judgment,” and ensure the political security of the people.³⁸ Finally, not only God, but also governing class and ordinary Israelite alike were charged with caring for the widow and the orphan, the needy and the destitute.³⁹ This imperative of *imitatio dei*—to “walk in his ways”—is in fact a dominant motif in Jewish ethics.⁴⁰ As the Talmud puts it, “As he clothed the naked... so do you clothe the naked; as he visited the sick... so do you visit the sick; as he comforted the mourner... so do you comfort the mourner; as he buried the dead... so do you bury the dead.”⁴¹

Is it, then, conceivable that Jews are asked to be God’s agents, to walk in God’s ways, but not to hope that their efforts to do so will be met with some

success? The evidence points to the contrary. Indeed, the hope that human government could be redeemed for fit purposes animated the Israelite prophets in their centuries-long argument against their heads of state. True, they may have given up hope in regard to specific kings, but they did not despair of the possibilities of politics altogether, at least in a world believed to be under the ultimate governance of God.⁴² The teaching of Psalms 146, then, must be understood as cautionary. God is the ultimate guarantor of justice, it says, but he must not be a proximate excuse for our neglect of it. As such, God both calls for a decent human politics *and* reminds us not to expect that it can displace him as the focus of ultimate hope, however effective and humane it may be. In other words, from a biblically oriented point of view, there is hope in politics—within limits.

In the end, the Bible teaches us that we are allowed to hope—indeed, we are *encouraged* to hope—that our engagements with politics will serve God’s redemptive purpose. In full recognition of our human fallibility in matters of political judgment, we nonetheless ought to apply ourselves to the social project of redeeming our world. We ought neither to withhold ourselves in purity from the unpredictable entanglements of our actions—the “fatality of doing,” as Michael Oakeshott put it—nor to expect that our actions, given purity of intention, will succor and save. Politics will inevitably disappoint. But it is, for better or worse, the Jewish way not to hold ourselves aloof from disappointment.

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Notes

1. For a partial translation of Cohen's *Deutschtum und Judentum*, see Hermann Cohen, *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, trans. Eva Jospe (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1971), pp. 176-189.

2. "Hence the split into two [biblical] kingdoms may be regarded as a prelude to the world history of Judaism: David's realm is not the proper soil for the world of monotheism. Neither in this short and bygone past nor in any political present does Israel's historical calling lie. *The meaning and value of monotheism had to prove itself in this historical and political contradiction.* The future becomes the actuality of history. Therefore only a spiritual world can fulfill this national existence" (emphasis in original). Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972), p. 252. For Cohen's critique of Zionism (and Martin Buber's reply), see "A Debate on Zionism and Messianism," in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University, 1995), pp. 571-577.

3. Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, p. 35.

4. Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, p. 67.

5. For Cohen's method of interpreting biblical law as a praxis of humanitarian social ethics, see especially Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, ch. 9, pp. 144-164.

6. Cohen, *Reason and Hope*, pp. 122-123.

7. Cohen, *Reason and Hope*, pp. 123-124.

8. For a bit more detail, as well as a defense of Cohen's demurral on detail, see Steven S. Schwarzschild, "The Democratic Socialism of Hermann Cohen," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 27 (1956), pp. 432-433.

9. Cohen, *Reason and Hope*, pp. 74-75.

10. See Alan Mittleman, "Weber's 'Politics as a Vocation': Some American Considerations," *The Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy* 20:1 (2006), pp. 279-293.

11. Rosenzweig's masterwork, *The Star of Redemption*, is a poetic-philosophical construction of great ingenuity and ambition. It attempts to give, in a sense familiar from German idealism (which it strenuously rejects), a narrative of the genesis, trajectory, and destination of the entire tissue of reality. For Rosenzweig, this tissue is composed of the elements "God," "man," and "world." The story of reality is the story of the interaction of these elements, the deepening of the relationships among them, and their eventual consummation in unity. He depicts these relations pictorially as a six-pointed star—the Jewish symbol of the *Magen David*, or Shield of David—adopted by German and other modern Jews as an emblem. A recent English

translation, by Barbara Galli, goes some way toward clarifying this notoriously obscure and expressionistic work. See Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin, 2005).

There are hundreds if not thousands of studies of Rosenzweig. Many, alas, replicate rather than resolve his obscurity. One that is particularly helpful from the point of view of his political thought is Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003). See also Peter Eli Gordon, "Franz Rosenzweig and the Philosophy of Jewish Existence," in Michael Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007), pp. 122-146. Another study that reduces the opacity of Rosenzweig is Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton, 2000).

12. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 360.

13. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 351.

14. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, pp. 353-355.

15. Typical of what Rosenzweig writes on this is the following: "We alone cannot imagine this sort of time [when our nation will pass away]; for everything in which the existence of peoples takes root, has long ago been taken away from us; land, language, custom, and law long ago departed from the sphere of the living and for us is raised from the living to the holy; but we, we are still living and live eternally. Our life is no longer interwoven with anything external, we have taken root in ourselves, without roots in the earth, eternal wanderers therefore, yet deeply rooted in ourselves, in our own body and blood. And this rooting in ourselves and only in ourselves guarantees our eternity for us." Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 324.

16. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 241; see also pp. 306-307.

17. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 312.

18. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 244.

19. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, pp. 244-245.

20. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, pp. 250-251; see also p. 252.

21. Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 255.

22. Rosenzweig works out the relationship between love, prayer, action, and community in *Star of Redemption*, pp. 283-293. He arrives at his radically anti-political (or apolitical) view from his reading of Hegel and subsequent rejection of Hegelianism. In his doctoral dissertation, entitled *Hegel and the State (Hegel und der Staat)*, Rosenzweig traces Hegel's mature doctrine of the state back to the concerns of the latter's early theological writings. In the mature doctrine, the state

is the ultimate embodiment of reason, which overcomes all the contradictions of being and of history. In Rosenzweig's interpretation, this view is already heralded in Hegel's youthful writings on Judaism and Christianity. Hegel sees Judaism as ensnared in the bitter stalemate of fate. (See Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, pp. 91-113.) It suffers, he explains, from a twofold contradiction: Its God is irreconcilably divided from the world, and the Jews are irreconcilably divided from other peoples. Its bitter fate is division without reconciliation. Christianity, by contrast, reconciles the first of these two divisions through incarnation, and the second (at least in principle) by the universality of its constitution of a new, elect people of God. In practice, of course, Jesus and his followers were isolated and persecuted; like the Jews, they were set apart from the world and its politics. They lived in "tragic seclusion" from the political sphere, instantiating their own holy Kingdom of God at the margins of the political. (See Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, p. 99.) Hegel's mature doctrine of the state, which views it as the overcoming of all contradictions, was inspired, according to Rosenzweig, by this youthful reflection on fate and reconciliation, even though it eventually moved beyond Christianity. Rosenzweig, however, took Hegel's description of Jesus' tragic seclusion from the political and applied it to the Jewish people. Thus the building of the Kingdom of God through communal, albeit apolitical, holiness; of instantiating eternity in the midst of time—all this becomes the *raison d'être* of the Jews. The dialectical struggle through history toward reconciliation and liberation from fate in turn becomes the mission of the Church.

23. See, for example, Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, p. 318: "Whereas every other community that lays claim to eternity must make arrangements to pass the torch of the present on to the future, only the community of the same blood does not have need of making such arrangements for the tradition; it does not need to trouble its mind; in the natural propagation of the body it has the guarantee of its eternity." Rosenzweig also has some very suggestive, if obscure, thoughts here on hope for the future and its guarantee in the present for Jews and non-Jews (*Star of Redemption*, p. 318).

24. For an analysis of what Rosenzweig means by "blood," see Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation*, pp. 74-76; and Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, pp. 210-214.

25. The modern recovery of the Jewish political tradition owes much to such scholars as Ismar Schorsch, Daniel J. Elazar, David Biale, Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Ruth Wisse. For a review of some of the relevant literature see Alan Mittleman, *The Politics of Torah* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), pp. 25-48. See also Alan Mittleman, "Review of 'The Jewish Political Tradition: Volume I, by Michael Walzer et al.,'" *Jewish Political Studies Review* 13:3-4 (Fall 2001), p. 197. On the matter of power, see Ruth Wisse, *Jews and Power* (New York: Schocken, 2007).

26. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Continuum, 2004).

27. The phrase is from a speech Buber delivered to the Sixteenth Zionist Congress in 1929. He asserted that the time for great ideological declarations has come to an end, and that henceforth only conscientious responsibility effectuated in a thousand small decisions would do. See Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), p. 80. Mendes-Flohr's introduction to this volume is an indispensable analysis of Buber's political thought. See especially pp. 16-22. Additional important studies of Buber's political thought are Robert Weltsch, "Buber's Political Philosophy," in Paul Arthur Schilpp and Maurice Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1967); and Bernard Susser, *Existence and Utopia: The Social and Political Thought of Martin Buber* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson, 1981).

28. Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic, 2002), pp. 20, 64-67.

29. Mendes-Flohr, *Land of Two Peoples*, p. 18.

30. Martin Buber, "Gandhi, Politics, and Us," in Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 137.

31. Martin Buber, "The Validity and Limitation of the Political Principle," in Buber, *Pointing the Way*, p. 213.

32. See Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen (New York: Vintage, 1972).

33. Buber, "Validity and Limitation," p. 217.

34. Buber refers to this conception in his writings on biblical leadership, where he repeatedly claims that failure, rather than success, marks the work of the typical biblical leader. Whereas profane history, he writes, counts only unalloyed success as valuable, "the [Jewish] Bible knows nothing of this intrinsic value of success. On the contrary, when it announces a successful deed, it is duty-bound to announce in complete detail the failure involved in the success." Buber draws examples from the life of Moses, concluding that his "work, it is true, survives him, but only in new defeats, new disappointments, and continual new failures—and yet this work survives also in a hope that is beyond all these failures." See Martin Buber, "Biblical Leadership," in Asher D. Biemann, ed., *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential Writings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 36.

35. Psalms 27:13-14.

36. Psalms 146:3-6.

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37. Genesis 2:15.
 38. Deuteronomy 16:18.
 39. Deuteronomy 24:12, 17-22.
 40. Psalms 128:1.
 41. Sotah 14a.

42. Individual prophets took different attitudes toward the monarchy *per se*. First Isaiah is fully committed to the Davidic monarchy. Hosea condemns the monarchy as a whole (e.g., Hosea 8:4). Deutero-Isaiah transfers allegiance from the monarchy to the nation; he hopes for the political renewal of the people as such rather than for the Davidic line (e.g., Isaiah 60:21). None of these, however, despair of the political dimension of Jewish life.