

## Preface

One of my father's favorite memories of his mother – my grandmother -- was that she was the first Jewish woman in the Polish town of Wloclawek to grow her own hair. A small, but significant rebellion. Since ancient times, the Jewish code of female modesty required married women to cover their hair, either with a scarf or, for Eastern European Jews of means, by a headdress encrusted with jewels, called in Yiddish a *shterntikhl*. In the nineteenth century, a new fashion of wigs swept the Jewish world, splitting the ultra-orthodox, who denounced the new head coverings as “Gentile wigs,” from the merely orthodox, who believed that Jewish women were still within the bounds of tradition with their heads covered by someone else's hair. By taking off this *sheitel*, my grandmother declared her independence from a longstanding custom and thus, by a female gesture, heralded the beginnings of secularism.

Her declaration was hardly born of a well-conceived ideology or of conscious intent to overthrow the religion of her ancestors. She, like my grandfather, was in most respects a thoroughly orthodox Jew, nominal followers of a pietistic Hasidic sect. Yet, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the winds of radical change began to blow through the 10,000 strong Jewish community of Wloclawek, some 200 kilometers northwest of Warsaw. Despite his Hasidic leanings, my grandfather joined the Mizrahi, the party of religious Jews who supported the Zionist movement. He was also instrumental in creating a Hebrew gymnasium in the town. The renaissance of the Hebrew language, so often associated with secular Zionism, did not seem to him to contradict the dictates of the Jewish religion.

These halting gestures towards modernity left a deep impression on my father. In the interwar period, when Polish Jews embraced a host of conflicting ideologies he, with his sister, joined Hashomer Hatzair, the Zionist youth movement that espoused socialism and a romantic

return to nature. His younger brother gravitated in the opposite direction, also to Zionism but instead to the Revisionist Betar, the hard-line nationalists who wore military uniforms and rejected social revolution. Both movements, despite their differences, were staunchly secular, viewing the Jewish religion as complicitous in the sufferings of the Jews. The arguments around the Shabbat table of the Bialoglowsky household in the 1920s were consequently fierce. But since the parents themselves had already taken the first steps towards the modernity that their children now completed, a total rupture never took place. On the contrary, a spirit of tolerance prevailed that partially eased the path, often so rocky for others, between religion and secularism.

The early twentieth century was a time, like our own, of great quests for identity. For my grandparents, and even more for my father and his siblings, the old ways of being Jewish were no longer relevant in a modern world. Many, of course, continued to adhere to them, but growing numbers did not. The attractions of a greater world beyond the *shtetl* and the disabilities of being Jewish called out for new solutions. Many abandoned not only the Judaism of their parents but Jewish identity altogether. For others, universalism and assimilation were inadequate. In 1913, a young, assimilated German Jew named Franz Rosenzweig, on the verge of converting to Christianity, attended Yom Kippur services and, having experienced a kind of epiphany, concluded: “so I remain a Jew.” For my father and his comrades, the *violation* of Yom Kippur became the way to proclaim a new identity. The young members of Hashomer Hatzair famously demonstrated their antinomian contempt for their elders by celebrating Yom Kippur with a ball provisioned with non-kosher food. But in all these cases – secularization or the return to religion -- identity had become fluid, up for grabs.

This admittedly anecdotal and personal account of one family’s journey provides the backdrop for the theme of this book. For many, rejection of religion in favor of a secular life

was not the result of ideology, but instead a response to the dislocations of modernity: secular education, urbanization, migration and the breakup of traditional society. Thus, my grandparents on my mother's side abandoned traditional Judaism almost without reflection when they immigrated to America in 1912. It was not so much a revolution of ideas as it was the flight from traditional communities, rabbinic authority and the daily routine prescribed by Jewish law.

For others, such as my father and his siblings, however, the secular revolt was deeply ideological, driven by new cultural ideals and political programs. They wanted to escape from what they considered the oppression of an obscurantist, medieval religion and to create a new Jew and a new society. A world without religion promised liberation from their disabilities as Jews. Secularism became a way of resisting their minority status, something that they shared with other minorities in multi-ethnic states and empires. Their ideologies ranged from Communist to Zionist, from Yiddishism to assimilation. But one thing characterized all of them: a generational revolt against a world in which the Jewish religion, economic plight, political impotence and cultural backwardness seemed wrapped up together in one unsavory package.

The Yiddish memorist and Zionist, Puh Rakovsky (1865-1955), described the contradictory ideological trajectories of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Eastern European Jews, much like the different courses taken by Tevye's daughters in Sholem Alechem's famous story.<sup>1</sup> While she herself was a socialist Zionist, her son became a Communist revolutionary and ended up in Soviet Russia. Her youngest daughter (by a third marriage) ended up in Palestine, but her younger sister joined the Bund (the Jewish Workers Movement in Poland). It is clear in Rakovsky's account that all these choices within the family, despite their ideological differences, were common responses to the religious, economic and political crisis of this transitional period of Jewish history.

In this book, I aim to investigate the ideas that informed those who chose an ideological path to the secular. To be sure, as the story of my Polish Jewish grandparents shows, and as Shmuel Feiner has recently demonstrated for the eighteenth century, the secularization of Jewish society often *preceded*, rather than followed, the intellectual expression of secularism.<sup>2</sup> But a full account of this social transformation – which is really the story of modern Jewish history writ large – is a story too big to be told here. Similarly, this is not a book about the many varieties of secular Jewish culture, which range from fiction and poetry to art, theater, film and museums and include everyday practices and material culture. This, too, would be a work too sweeping for my admittedly limited ambitions. Instead, I set my sights more narrowly on ideas expressed primarily in essays and other programmatic and philosophical works, albeit with occasional reference to other literary creations. And, finally, and with regret, since it was largely men who shaped the intellectual tradition of Jewish secularism, this story, begun with my grandmother’s act of rebellion, cannot fully embrace the female experience, just as it must eschew that of unlearned men.

Nor is this a work about secular thinkers who happened to be Jewish or came from Jewish origins -- those whom Isaac Deutscher famously labeled “non-Jewish Jews” -- unless their work dealt substantively with questions of the Jewish past or present. Karl Marx is a useful limit case. Marx was baptized as a child, but, to the best of our knowledge, never denied that he was a Jew. However, his only sustained engagement with the Jewish question was in his notorious essay of that name. “On the Jewish Question” is a complex work that can be read equally as a defense of Jewish emancipation and as trafficking in antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as “the principle of money.” For the purposes of this book, Marx’s signal contribution was the distinction he drew between the “Sabbath Jew” and the “everyday Jew.” He wished to shift the

debate from the Jewish religion to the secular life of the Jews and it is in this sense that he plays a role in the history of Jewish secularism. But, in the final analysis, Marx was not really interested in the Jews as real people; they were a place holder in his argument.

It is true that generations of secular Jews, including Deutscher, would include Marx in their pantheon. In fact, a study of the reception of Marx as a Jew still awaits its author. Unlike Baruch Spinoza, however, who apparently did disavow his Jewish affiliation but did so by writing a whole treatise attacking the Bible, Marx as a thinker – as opposed to the later image of Marx -- remains peripheral to the intellectual tradition I wish to reconstruct in this book. This tradition is distinctively different from Deutscher's "Non-Jewish Jews" since it rests on those whose writings engage with the metaphysical, textual, political and cultural dimensions of the Jewish experience. Many of these authors may not have consciously regarded themselves as contributing to such a tradition, although some surely did, but taken collectively, they make up a tradition of secular Jewish thought counter to the religious tradition called "Judaism."

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This book owes its origins to the work of Felix Posen, that rarest of philanthropist who takes deep intellectual interest in the causes he supports. His quest to make better known the secular turn in modern Jewish culture and to uncover the social, political and intellectual sources of Jewish secularization have had an enormously stimulating effect on a generation of Jewish Studies scholars. This book was undertaken initially with a grant from the Posen Foundation that allowed a year of uninterrupted research and writing away from my usual academic duties. The Foundation was highly generous in its support without ever constraining or directing me in developing my ideas where the spirit took me. I also owe a great debt to the participants in the yearly Posen Foundation conferences and even more to those who took part in the 2009 Posen

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## Introduction

### Origins

In “The Non-Jewish Jew,” the Polish social revolutionary, Isaac Deutscher, who began his education as a yeshiva student, argued that those who rejected their ancestral religion and their 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>3</sup> This “Jewry” is “Judaism,” not only the religion, but all of the traditions built up over nearly three millennia. Yet, in transcending Judaism, the heretic finds himself or herself in a different Jewish tradition, a tradition no less Jewish for being anti-traditional. Secular universalism for these heretics paradoxically became a kind of Jewish identity.

Many of these ideas originated in the European Enlightenment, but they also often had a Jewish provenance, or at least were believed by secular Jews to have such a provenance. Deutscher, for example, started his famous essay on an autobiographical note, remembering how, as a child in the yeshiva, he had read the story of the heretic Elisha ben Abuya (or *Aher* – the Other – as he is known). Elisha’s favorite student, Rabbi Meir, became one of the towering legal authorities of his generation, yet he never renounced his wayward teacher. By raising the question of the relationship of the orthodox Rabbi Meir and the heretic Elisha, Deutscher implied that even the heretic remains somehow connected to that which he rejects, for the source of his heresy may lie within that tradition. For Deutscher, Elisha was the prototype of “those great

revolutionaries of modern thought: Spinoza, Heine, Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky and Freud.” They were all heretics, yet their heresy might be understood as a rejection that grew out of the Jewish tradition itself.

Like Deutscher, I want to argue that Jewish secularism was a revolt grounded in the tradition it rejected. The relationship between the premodern and the modern, in which the first is associated with religion and the second with the secular, remains one of the most fraught for students of religion. According to a common master narrative of the Enlightenment, also sometimes called “the secularization theory,” modernity represented a total rupture with the past as innovation was privileged over tradition, science over superstition, rationalism over faith. In what Mark Lilla has called “the Great Separation,” religion was divorced from the state, with the secular sovereign taking the role of God.<sup>4</sup> Religion may continue to exist in modernity, but it has become one choice among many and is no longer hegemonic.<sup>5</sup> All of us are free to choose and if such choice is an inherent meaning of secularism, then even those choosing to be religious are, in a sense, secular.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, this dichotomous break has come under new scrutiny, especially given the persistence of religion in the modern world.<sup>7</sup> The contemporary resurgence of religion is clearly a complex response to secularism, just as secularism was – and still is – a response to religion. These two mortal enemies are very much defined by and through the other. And not only does it appear that religion and secularism in modernity are deeply implicated in each other, but it may well be that their contemporary entanglement owes something to the way the secular emerged out of the religious, not so much its polar negation as its dialectical product.

One example of this process can be found in the history of the very word “secular.”<sup>8</sup> The term comes from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning “century” or “age.” Christian theology held that

between the First and Second Coming, the world was in a “middle age.” Following Augustine’s *City of God*, the Church saw itself existing apart from this age, wandering on the earth, but not a part of it. That which belonged to this age, belonged to the earth. Thus, to be a part of the *saeculum* meant to belong to the unredeemed world. The term conflated time and space: a “temporal” power is a power pertaining to this world (the Hebrew word *olam* carries a similar double meaning: “world” and “eternity”). But “secular” also distinguished those clergy who were “of this world,” as opposed to those who took “religious” (i.e. monastic) vows. *Seculatio* referred to the process of leaving the monastery. In this sense, “secular” in the medieval vocabulary could not be divorced from the context of religion.

By the seventeenth century the word began to lose its linkage with a religious context and came to stand in sharp opposition to it. As the seventeenth-century Cambridge neoplatonist, Henry More, wrote: “The Sun and the Moon have either a Spiritual signification or a Secular.”<sup>9</sup> As a product of modern scientific thinking, this world became detached from the divine, the natural from the supernatural. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century political theorists also began to use the word “secular” to imagine a state free of religion (however, the word “secularism” was a nineteenth-century invention). And, finally, with the Reformation, the Wars of Religion and the French Revolution, “secularization” took on the meaning of church property appropriated by the temporal power. Thus, the word “secular,” originating in a medieval religious milieu, now came to signify a world opposed both metaphysically and politically to religion.

A number of scholars have accordingly argued for a dialectical path that secularism followed out of religion. Amos Funkenstein used the term “secular theology” to describe this relationship.<sup>10</sup> According to his argument, the proponents of Enlightenment rationalism and the scientific revolution adopted the medieval scholastic divine attributes – God’s omniscience,

omnipotence and providence – and invested them with earthly meaning. The desacralization of the world was thus accomplished with the tools of theology. Similarly, Karl Löwith proposed that the secular idea of progress owes much to the secularization of Christian apocalypticism.<sup>11</sup> And Carl Schmitt argued that modern “political theology” secularized the power of a transcendent God in the power of the state.<sup>12</sup> If these scholars found the origins of modernity primarily in medieval Catholicism, Peter L. Berger, building on Max Weber, suggested that the roots of the secular lay rather in Protestantism, which had shrunk the medieval realm of the sacred and created a heaven empty of angels.<sup>13</sup> Berger also observed that this Protestant move in turn had its roots in Old Testament monotheism, since the ancient Israelites had already banned the gods from the world: monotheism thus became the first step towards secularization.

This last argument -- albeit without specific reference to Berger -- found a thoroughgoing exponent in Marcel Gauchet in his challenging book, *The Disenchantment of the World*.<sup>14</sup> In a magisterial account of human history, Gauchet argued that the secular began with what Karl Jaspers called the “axial age,” when Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism banished the idols. Thus, the emergence of the “major” or “universal” religions was the first stage in the eventual disintegration of religion: the greater and more transcendent the god, the freer are humans. Monotheism dissolves the unity of the world into oppositions: God versus the world, the one versus the many, the sensible versus the intelligible. In this way, the modern dichotomy of “secular” versus “religion” is itself a product of religion. For Gauchet, monotheism by itself did not destabilize religion since Judaism and Islam assumed God’s continued presence in the world. Only Christianity, in its doctrine of incarnation, postulated God’s radical otherness, which required the mediation of God’s son. Only Christianity created a religion of interiority and

abdicated the world to its secular rulers. The monotheistic religions – and Christianity in particular – thus produced their own secular subversions.

All of these sweeping arguments suffer from a notable defect: they assume that secularization was a homogeneous process rooted in Christianity. But even within Europe itself, different local conditions created different types of secularization. Puritan England gave rise to a different form of the secular than did Lutheran Germany. Catholic Poland scarcely secularized at all, until a late date, while Catholic France cut off the heads of its clergy when it underwent its revolution. Moreover, this focus on Christianity – and particularly on its Western European expressions – fails to acknowledge that secularism has many and varied manifestations outside of Europe. In far-flung places like China, India and Turkey, modern secular movements reflect, in one form or another, the religious contexts -- Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam – out of which they sprang. To attend to secularisms in the plural is to pay attention to the specific traditions which they reject, but which inevitably shape their character.<sup>15</sup>

In this book, I will argue Jewish secularism is a tradition that has its own unique characteristics grounded in part in its premodern sources. While the Christian origins of the word “secular” are connected to the dichotomous way Christian theologians saw the “city of God” and the “city of man,” Judaism never made such a sharp distinction: the profane world is not irredeemably polluted. While traditional Jewish sources repeatedly hold that this world is not the same as the next (or the one above), nevertheless, a strong *worldliness* informs much of the biblical, rabbinic and medieval philosophical traditions. Even the Kabbalah, the most theosophic genre of Jewish literature, held that forces within this world mirror those above and vice-versa; the two worlds can never be separated.

The origins of the Hebrew word for “secular” suggest this cultural specificity. One of the biblical roots for “polluted” or “defiled” is *hol*, which came to mean “secular” in modern Hebrew.<sup>16</sup> But *hol* in the Bible can also mean something intermediary between the sacred and the polluted, namely, the profane. So, for example, when David demands bread from the priest Ahimelech, he is told: “I have no profane bread (*lehem hol*), only consecrated bread (*lehem kodesh*).<sup>17</sup> In the later rabbinic division of the week, the days other than the Sabbath or festival days are referred to as *hol*. Thus, the profane is merely that which is everyday, neither holy nor defiled.

The Bible also makes a strict distinction between priests and non-priests. It refers to the latter as a *zar*, or “stranger” (i.e. one who is a stranger in the domain of a Temple). Onkelos, the translator of the Bible into Aramaic, renders this term as *hiloni*, the word that Joseph Klausner, the twentieth-century historian of Hebrew literature, adopted to refer to secular Jews, a usage that soon entered the vernacular of modern Hebrew.<sup>18</sup> In the midrash on Leviticus, a high priest tells a *hiloni* that he can only walk with the priest if he consents not to enter graveyards, which are forbidden to priests.<sup>19</sup> This “secular” Jew thus occupies an intermediary status between the priest and someone who is ritually defiled. The secular here is part of a continuum that presupposes the holy, not its negation.

Another word that demonstrates the continuum between past and present is *apikoros*, one of the key rabbinic terms for a heretic. The word *apikoros* is evidently derived from “Epicurean,” but it probably did not carry the later meaning of “hedonist.” Instead, the philosophical followers of Epicurus believed in the existence of the gods, but denied that they interfered in or interacted at all with our world. The world was made up of atoms which collided with each other in random fashion. If the rabbinic *apikoros* had

such a philosophical outlook, he would have not only denied revelation, but would have professed something like an ancient version of materialism. Since m. Avot 2.14 says that one should study in order to “know what to answer the apikoros,” we can assume that rabbinic Jews faced a real challenge from such heretics. In the talmudic discussion of the Mishna, the rabbis generally understand the apikoros as one who insults the rabbis: “what use are the rabbis to us, they study for their own benefit” and “what use are the rabbis since they never permitted us the raven nor forbade us the dove” (the point here is that the Torah already contains all the knowledge necessary for its interpretation).<sup>20</sup> The apikoros is therefore the one who rejects the rabbis as superfluous authorities, foreshadowing the attack by modern secularists on latter-day rabbis.

While we should not automatically equate the apikoros as defined here with modern secularists, the similarities are nevertheless striking and have to do in part with the similarities between some forms of Greek philosophy and modern sensibilities. As Berger has suggested, the heretic of premodern times becomes the secularist of the modern era: insofar as we autonomously “choose” (one of the original meanings of the Greek *haireisis*) our orientation to religion, we are all heretics.”<sup>21</sup>

As Berger and Gauchet both insist, the Hebrew Bible represented a decisive moment in the prehistory of secularism. But is the appeal to the Hebrew Bible a sufficient explanation for the particular character of Jewish secularism? After all, the strict monotheism that Judaism shares with Islam did not predispose the latter to a secular revolution. It was specifically where the Jews had contact with European modernization – either in Europe itself or in areas under the influence of European colonialism – that Jewish secularism developed. The historical tradition may have provided the kindling, but the European Enlightenment lit the match. The argument

that I will make does not preclude these external influences but is aimed at revealing how secular Jewish thinkers built their philosophies on the religious tradition they sought to replace.

That the earlier tradition fueled and shaped the particular form of Jewish secularism does not, however, mean that the two are identical. To say that they are, as Gauchet seems to at times, effaces what is new and revolutionary about modernity. But I want to argue that aspects of premodern thought not only anticipated their modern successors, but at times even furnished arguments that might be appropriated, adapted and transformed to fit a secular agenda. Even if these ideas in their original contexts were not intended for such a purpose, the social context of modernity cast them in a new light, making it possible to view them as genuine precursors. To use a different metaphor, these premodern ideas were like genes that required the social and political environment of modernity before they could be expressed. They were less the proximate causes of Jewish secularism as much as they provided the dominant *mentalité* – the language and particular flavor – of that secularism when modern forces caused it to emerge.

While the processes of modernization and secularization were typically experienced as ruptures, rather than as continuities with the past, no revolution takes place in a vacuum. The new is always incubated in the old. It is also in the nature of rebels to search for precursors, to legitimize their innovations in traditions of their own. Whether identified by actors themselves or by later observers, the nexus between religion and secularism forms a crucial element in any story of modernization.

Let us consider one of the most famous stories in the Talmud in which the second-century sage, Rabbi Eliezer, finds himself in a minority of one in opposition to the other rabbis.<sup>22</sup> He invokes various miracles on his side, but the majority is unimpressed. Finally, he insists that if the law is according to his opinion: “let the heavens prove it.” Immediately, a *bat kol*, a

heavenly voice, affirms that his reading of the law is the right one. Against this seemingly iron-clad defense, Rabbi Joshua, the leader of the majority, stands on his feet and declares, quoting Deuteronomy 30:12: “It [the Torah] is not in the heavens.” The Talmud asks: “what does ‘it is not in the heaven’ mean?” A later authority, Rabbi Yermiya explains: “Since the Torah was given at Sinai, we no longer listen to a heavenly voice.” The Torah is now on earth and, so, it is the majority – a majority of rabbis, that is – who will decide its meaning. The text finds the principle of majority rule in another biblical quotation: “according to the majority you shall incline” (Exodus 23:2). It is thus the Torah itself, the divine revelation, that both affirms a secular principle (“it is not in the heavens”) and teaches majority rule.

This story is sometimes cited as evidence of a rabbinic declaration of independence from God. And it is indeed that, but it is also more complicated. The rabbis enact their independence not only in the story itself, but also in the quotations they bring from the Torah to support their case. The verse in Exodus utterly contradicts the rabbis’ use of it. In its original context it says: “You shall not side with the many to do wrong, nor shall you pervert your testimony by following after the many.” The verse clearly means that a witness should adhere to what he believes right rather than following after the majority opinion. But the rabbis turn this negative statement into a positive one: one *should* incline after the majority. It is almost as if to declare their independence from heaven, they needed to radically subvert heaven’s own revelation.

Through the lens of this pregnant story, we can witness the tensions in rabbinic thought between divine revelation and human autonomy. But this is hardly secularism *avant la lettre*. Subvert the Torah the rabbis do, but they are far from discarding it altogether. They clearly believed that some communication from heaven is possible: hence, the *bat kol*.<sup>23</sup> In addition, they argued that their own law – the oral law – was revealed at Sinai together with the written

law. Their legislative innovations were not mere human inventions, but were grounded in revelation. It was probably this last idea that undergirds the Rabbi Eliezer story, since if rabbinic interpretation – majority rule – had its origins in Sinai, then a belated heavenly voice must surely count for less. Moreover, no one in this story – or in others -- doubts either the existence or the authority of God. Immediately after Rabbi Joshua’s statement, God is said to laugh: “My sons have defeated me, my sons have defeated me.” God acquiesces in his own defeat. So, the majority, too, invokes a divine voice, but this time on its own side.

In addition, as Jeffrey Rubenstein has rightly pointed out, the larger story in which this passage is embedded belies the seeming secularism of the text.<sup>24</sup> Following their victory, the rabbis ban Rabbi Eliezer and burn everything that he declared pure. Yet the Talmud clearly takes the side of Rabbi Eliezer since various miraculous catastrophes occur after he is banned. The point seems to be that the victorious majority must not shame the minority. Otherwise, divine punishment will be visited on those who do so. If the rabbis claim sovereign authority for themselves, their own text undermines that claim.

However, we should not be too hasty in minimizing the radical import of our text. The story reveals a sense that the destruction of the Temple created a new world in which human autonomy loomed large, an idea that we might usually associate with modernity. The rabbis asserted that, without a Temple, prophecy had ceased, left only to children and fools.<sup>25</sup> The end of prophecy guaranteed their interpretive monopoly, at least if they could suppress other voices. And, then, there is the very legal dialectic itself: the law was not given definitively, but is instead open to contradictory interpretations, each of which, to quote another famous story is “the words of the living God.”<sup>26</sup> In all of these expressions, the Torah has now become the property of its human interpreters.

The relationship between this text and modern Jewish secularism is therefore not direct, in the sense that it neither leads to nor causes the revolt by later secularists against the tradition. One might argue that it is a symptom of a certain mentality, a willingness to stake out an independence from scripture, even in the thick of a traditional culture. It is this mentality that may have predisposed certain Jews, once they became infected with modernity, to break from the religion. And the text is also available to those moderns who would use it to give their philosophies an historical pedigree, much as Isaac Deutscher's invocation of Elisha ben Abuya is an example of such a search for a secular forebear among religious heretics.

The religious tradition may have prepared the ground for modern secularism in other ways. For example, Gershom Scholem famously argued that the antinomian seventeenth-century messianic movement led by Shabbtai Zvi sowed the seeds of the Jewish Enlightenment by shattering rabbinic authority. Here, the relationship between the premodern and the modern might be called "dialectical" since one of the most mystical movements in Jewish history becomes the ground for its opposite, modern rationalism. Another example of this type, to be examined later, is Moses Maimonides' "negative theology" in which God becomes so transcendent that a later thinker – Spinoza – could turn him into his opposite, the equivalent of the world.

Since the creators of Jewish secularism were intellectuals, some of them products of yeshiva education, it was only natural that they would find their inspiration in books, starting with books from within the religious tradition. Later, the books of earlier secularists, notably Baruch Spinoza, fulfilled a similar role. Jewish secularism as an intellectual tradition is therefore the product of the writers of books basing themselves on other books even as they rejected the books on which they were raised. Intertextuality is the key to this literature.

What we find here is the Jewish analogue to another of Funkenstein's definitions of secular theology: non-theologians practicing theology. In the Jewish case, these literati, starting with Spinoza, were often not rabbis, indeed, they were self-conscious rebels against the rabbis. This literary chain reaction had a peculiar character. The creators of Jewish secularism were primarily Ashkenazi (i.e. Northern and Eastern European Jews). Theirs was a revolt of sons against traditionalist fathers. But the tradition in which they found inspiration was often that of the Sephardic (Spanish) Jews, especially the philosophical tradition mediated through Islam.<sup>27</sup> One might argue that in revolting against their fathers, they turned instead to their "uncles."<sup>28</sup> The most prominent of these uncles was Moses Maimonides, the towering figure whose thought will figure prominently in the chapters to follow.

This uncle-nephew relationship continued with the adoption of Spinoza, the Sephardic son of Marranos, as their radical progenitor. In "The Non-Jewish Jew," Isaac Deutscher relates that he came to question religion when his father gave him Spinoza to read. Deutscher's father had himself written a book on Spinoza and was thus already on the road away from religion. Deutscher's path to secularism through Spinoza was not unique and the enigmatic Dutch philosopher will not surprisingly be a central figure for much of this book. Spinoza stood on the cusp of modernity, indeed, arguably as the first secular philosopher. While he would no doubt have resisted the title "secular Jew," since he evidently relinquished all ties to the Jewish people, he was embraced by generations of Jewish secularists as their model and precursor.

Because Spinoza was not only the first modern, but equally the last medieval philosopher, he points back to the premodern Jewish tradition before he points forward to his modern inheritors. It was often by adopting Spinoza as one's spiritual father that later Jewish secular thinkers indirectly came into dialogue with the medieval tradition, even if they never

explicitly mentioned it. Spinoza will therefore serve as a fulcrum for the first three chapters of this book, providing the bridge between the religious tradition and its secular progeny.

I have referred repeatedly to the term “secularism” without having defined it and a preliminary definition would seem to be in order. Since, as I have already suggested, there are many varieties of secularism depending on their cultural context, we may be justifiably hesitant before giving a global or essential definition of Jewish secularism. Such a definition will instead have to emerge phenomenologically from the sources. But, following Talal Asad, we can distinguish two separate, if related, meanings of the word.<sup>29</sup> In his vocabulary, “secular” refers to a metaphysical position: the rejection of the supernatural in favor of a materialist view of the world. The word “secularism,” on the other hand, refers to the political doctrine of separation of church and state.<sup>30</sup> For the secularist, following Immanuel Kant, law should derive not from an external, divine source, but from autonomous, human decisions. To remove religion from the state means to leave humans in full command of their political fate. While materialism thus defines the metaphysical philosophy of the secular, humanism defines the political theory of secularism.

These categories are not entirely adequate by themselves and adoption of one does not necessarily entail adoption of the other. Consider, for example, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, who certainly believed in the existence of the deity and in its role in the world, but nevertheless outlined a secularist theory of the separation of religion from the state. Moreover, there are many Jews today – as well as in the past – who claim to believe in the existence of God, but also define themselves as secular, by which they mean that they do not identify with any of the religious movements of Judaism and do not follow the revealed law. To translate a modern Christian term, they are the “unsynagogued.” These

Jews are religious in terms of abstract belief, but secular in terms of practice. On the other hand, there are those who *do* belong to synagogues and practice Jewish law, but are secular in their beliefs. One can reject God's existence but still live according to his law.

For many of the thinkers we will consider, the metaphysical and the political went hand in hand. Zionist thinkers will necessarily play a major role in this book since the movement originated as a profoundly secular revolution against the perceived religion of exile. But Zionism as both a political and cultural movement was itself the product of a moment in history – before and after the turning of the twentieth century – that produced many ideological challenges to traditional life. Fed by mass emigration, urbanization and economic upheaval, social revolution and nationalism in both their Jewish and non-Jewish forms captured the Jewish street. Bundism, territorialism, Communism and liberalism joined Zionism as political answers to the crisis of late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century Jewish life. All sought salvation in some form of politics and all did so in conscious opposition to traditional religion.<sup>31</sup> The power of such politics was such that even the Orthodox felt compelled to form their own political movements, if only to defend themselves against the anti-religious alternatives.

In addition to the metaphysical and political “formations of the secular,” two others seem critical: history and culture. Secular Jews often describe their relationship to their identities in terms of history. They may identify with the Hebrew Bible not as a work of religion, but instead as a prescription for social justice or as a document of culture. They may find in the narrative of Jewish history a collective past that informs who they are today, even if their beliefs and practices have no connection with Judaism as a religion. This attention to history is not, however, merely academic or antiquarian. Rather, it is a form of what Maurice Halbwachs called “collective memory.”<sup>32</sup> Although Jews have always defined themselves according to

mythic memories – the Exodus from Egypt, the destruction of the Temples – modern Jews have created their own secular versions of collective Jewish memory, often grounded in non-theological readings of the Bible as well as later history.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, for many modern Jewish intellectuals, this past was prologue to a secular Jewish culture in the present. The *fin de siècle* was as much a moment of cultural revolution as it was political. Secular writers sometimes claimed that the historical culture of the folk, as opposed to that of the rabbis, could inspire a non-religious renaissance of Jewish culture in the modern period. Others translated the non-Jewish cultures of their surroundings into a Jewish idiom. To do so, some argued for a secularization of Hebrew, the ancient language of the Jews that had long been associated with the religion of Judaism. Others found salvation in the Jewish dialects of Yiddish and Ladino. And, finally, there were those who created a new Jewish culture in European languages, whether Russian, German, English or French. Divorced from religion, language became the handmaid of history for constructing a secular culture.

Judaism as a religion is a modern invention no less than Jewish secularism. In an effort to define this religious formation, many modern Jewish thinkers have searched for an “essence” or “essences” of Judaism, a reduction of its many beliefs and practices to an eternal core. Already in the Middle Ages, philosophers tried to articulate “principles of belief,” ranging for thirteen to one. The Zohar, the chief work of the medieval Jewish mysticism, proposed the a tripartite definition, proclaiming that “Israel and the Torah are one,” that God and Israel are identical and that the Torah is nothing but God’s name.<sup>34</sup> In this fashion, a kind of Jewish version of the trinity emerged. The trope took on new life in the modern period. Updating the Zohar’s argument, a range of thinkers suggested that Judaism rests on three concepts: God, Torah and Israel. Thus, for example, the American Jewish theologian, Mordecai Kaplan, in his

*Judaism as a Civilization*, refers to the “well-known trilogy, God, Israel and Torah.”<sup>35</sup> Or, more recently, the Reform rabbi, Leo Trepp, writes: “The Covenant unfolds through the interaction of God, Israel and Torah. They are one and inseparable: God has an ongoing direct relationship with Israel, structured by Torah.”<sup>36</sup>

Jewish secularists typically reject the idea that Judaism has an essence. The past is no more harmonious or homogeneous than the present and, indeed, the secularist insistence on the pluralism of the past can serve as an argument for pluralism in the present. Nevertheless, I will argue that these three, originally medieval categories provided the questions to which secular thinkers responded with new answers. To quote Hans Blumenberg, “the [modern] philosophy of history is an attempt to answer a medieval question with the means available to a post-medieval age.”<sup>37</sup> In this way, even if a modern thinker did not explicitly invoke the past, it was often that historical tradition that provided the very structure for the “post-medieval age.”

The chapters that follow are therefore organized around the categories of God, Torah and Israel. Each chapter starts by examining how the traditional categories might have contained in a nutshell the source of their later secularizations. In chapter one, “God,” we will see how the God of the Bible lost his personality in the philosophy of Moses Maimonides and then became nature in the renderings of Spinoza and his disciples. The medieval Kabbalah provided the source for another modern vision of God, as “nothingness” or “void.” And, finally, paganism suggested another alternative to the God of tradition. In chapter two, we turn to secular readings of the Bible, but first pausing to observe how the Bible itself and some of its medieval interpreters already prepared the ground for such readings. Stripped of its status as revelation, the Bible now emerged as an historical, cultural or nationalist text. Chapters three and four treat the final category, Israel. Chapter three concerns itself with the new definitions of Israel as a nation, a

definition that has its roots in earlier Jewish history. But the way secular thinkers shaped this definition was equally grounded in modern ideas: race, nationality and the state. Chapter four turns to another way of defining the traditional category of Israel: history, language and culture. Culture in particular is a modern concept that, in the hands of Jewish secularists, comes to take the place of religion. In the modern transformations of each of these traditional categories we will find the Jewish analogues of Funkenstein's secular theology, the construction of secular ideas with the tools of theology.

Although the argument of this book is that secularism has its dialectical ground in the tradition it overturns, not every thinker I will discuss necessarily spelled out his or her debt to the tradition. But by offering secular answers to the questions raised by the categories of God, Torah and Israel, I want to claim that all these thinkers are in dialogue, however implicitly, with premodern Judaism. Moreover, not all these thinkers necessarily addressed all three categories. Some struggled profoundly with the question of God, while others were indifferent to it. The tradition of secular Jewish thought might perhaps better be called *traditions* in the plural.

Jewish secularism may be seen as the attempt to fashion a counter-tradition,<sup>38</sup> an intellectual lineage in which Spinoza played one of the leading roles. While it may sometimes seem as if the story of secularization is a narrative of the world we have lost, secularism is not only a negative; it is also an effort to fashion a new identity out of the shards of the past. This lineage consists of a chain of ideas that arose in rejection of the religious tradition yet were still tied to that which they overturned. It is my aim in this study to make explicit the warp and woof of this counter-tradition and, in so doing, illuminate the identity that Jewish secular thinkers have sought to create.

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<sup>1</sup> Rakovsky's memoir was published in an abbreviated Hebrew translation in 1951 and in the Yiddish original in 1954. For the English, with an excellent introduction by Paula E. Hyman, see Puah Rakovsky, *My Life as a Radical Jewish Woman*, trans. Barbara Harshav with Paula E. Hyman, (Bloomington, In, 2002). See also the preface by Yitskhok Niborski in the French translation, *Mémoires d'une révolutionnaire juive*, trans. Isabelle Rozenbaum (Paris, 2006). For the brilliant use of Tevye's daughters to mark out the different paths of East European Jewss, see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2002), ch. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Shmuel Feiner, "Haskalah, Secularization and the Discovery of the Jewish 'New World' in the Eighteenth Century," *Simon Dubnow Institute Year Book 6* (2007): 1-13 and idem, *Shorshei ha-Hilun: Matiranut ve-Safkanut be-Yahadut ha-Me'ah ha-18 (The Sources of Secularization: Permissiveness and Skepticism in Eighteenth-Century Judaism)* (forthcoming, Jerusalem, 2010). With this thesis of the pre-Haskalah secularization of Central European Jewish society, Feiner has updated the older work of Azriel Shochat, *Im Hilufei ha-Tekufot* (Jerusalem, 1960)

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (Boston, 1968), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West* (New York, 2007). For a good discussion of the secularization theory as well as a critique, see José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994), 11-39

<sup>5</sup> For a recent work that operates with this paradigm, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007)

<sup>6</sup> See Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> See, among other recent works, Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (New York, 1999), David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington, VT, 2005), Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, 2003), David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (eds), *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, (Stanford, 2006), and Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation and Modernity* (Chicago, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> See Casanova, *Public Religions*, 12-14

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in "Secular," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3.a.

<sup>10</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (Princeton, 1986). Hans Blumenberg formulated this relationship somewhat differently by arguing not so much for a dialectical progression as for modern ideas occupying the places vacated by medieval theology. See *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA, 1983)

<sup>11</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1949).

<sup>12</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA, 1985). For a more recent treatment of political theology, albeit unaccountably without any mention of Schmitt, see Lilla, *The Stillborn God*.

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY, 1967)

<sup>14</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris, 1985), English version, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> See, among other recent works, Casanova, *Public Religions*, Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics* (Delhi, 1998), and Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds. “World Secularisms at the Millennium.” *Social Text*, 18:3 (Fall 2000):1-27

<sup>16</sup> For example, Leviticus 21:4 referring to the ritual pollution acquired from contact with a corpse or 21:9 to the pollution acquired by the daughter of a priest through illicit sex. The root *hll* also means “wounded” or “fallen” (as in battle), which corresponds to the law that a damaged or wounded animal cannot be consecrated.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Samuel 21:5

<sup>18</sup> See Azzan Yadin and Ghil`ad Zuckerman, “*Blorít* – Pagans’ Mohawk or Sabras’ Forelock?: Ideologically Manipulative Secularization of Hebrew Terms in Socialist Zionist Israeli,” in Tope Omoniyi, ed., *The Sociology of Language and Religion: Change, Conflict and Accommodation*, (London, 2010), ch. 6. *Hiloni* was not the word that denoted a secular person: *hofshi* (free or freethinking) had a similar connotation, but by the end of the twentieth century, the former had largely replaced the latter.

<sup>19</sup> Leviticus Rabba 25.5. The word derives from the Aramaic for a stranger

<sup>20</sup> b. Sanhedrin 99b-100a.

<sup>21</sup> Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*.

<sup>22</sup> b. Baba Metzia 59b

<sup>23</sup> For the partial substitution of the bat kol for the prophet, see b. Yoma 9b

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories* (Baltimore, MD, 1999), 34-63.

<sup>25</sup> b. Baba Batra 12b. On our text and the end of prophecy, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, “‘We Pay No Heed to Heavenly Voices:’ The End of Prophecy and the Formation of the Canon,” in his *Treasures Old and New: Essays in the Theology of the Pentateuch*, (Grand Rapids, 2004), 192-207.

<sup>26</sup> b. Eruvin 13b.

<sup>27</sup> See David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996). Sorkin shows how the Andalusian traditions of exegesis were the ones particularly influential for Mendelssohn, but the point can be generalized.

<sup>28</sup> Naomi Seidman suggested this metaphor drawn from literary theory.

<sup>29</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA, 2003), introduction

<sup>30</sup> For a parsing of the different types of secular political theories, see Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics* (Delhi, 1998), 31-53.

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<sup>31</sup> See Jonathan Frankel, *Politics and Prophecy* and Eli Lederhendler, Ezra Mendelssohn

<sup>32</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris, 1997)

<sup>33</sup> I therefore disagree with Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's argument in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982) that collective memory is primarily a characteristic of premodern times and that modern identity is characterized instead by critical history. While the latter is clearly true, so is the former.

<sup>34</sup> For the identity of Israel and the Torah, see Zohar 3:73a. For the identity of God and Israel, see *ibid* 3:93b. For the very prevalent view on the Torah is God's name, see Zohar 2:60a, 87a, 90b, 124a, 161b; 3:13b, 19a, 21a, 35b–36a, 73a, 89b, 98b, 159a, 265b, 298b. See further, Isaiah Tishby in *Kiryat Sefer* 50 (1975): 480-92, 668-74 and Bracha Sack, *ibid* 57 (1982): 179-84. I thank Daniel Matt for providing me with these references.

<sup>35</sup> Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York, 1934), 328.

<sup>36</sup> Leo Trepp, *A History of the Jewish Experience* (Behrman House, 2000), 537

<sup>37</sup> Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of Modern Age*, 48-49. See further, David Ingram, "Blumenberg and the Philosophical Grounds of Historiography, *History and Theory* 29 (1990): 1-16

<sup>38</sup> For the idea of counter-tradition, see my *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA, 1979)