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SEPHARDIM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: NEW DIRECTIONS AND OLD VALUES*

By JOSÉ FAUR

I. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

The ideology underlying rational secularism in general and the political emancipation of the Jews in particular, constituted a grave threat to the foundation of Jewish life and culture. The participation of Jews in national revolutions, and the demand of citizenship, presupposed the abandonment of the ancient claim that the Jews were a nation in exile.¹ Indeed, those who favored granting of political emancipation to the Jew demanded the abolition of the Jewish nation.² Jewish acceptance of the supreme political and judicial authority of the host country constituted a "heinous dereliction of the tenets of Mosaic law, for they thereby gave up the hope of the expected Messiah, and the everlasting possession of the Promised Land which they deemed a part of the sacred Covenant between God and His chosen people."³

This is why Sephardim generally did not favor political emancipation and citizenship in the host country. Some of the most prominent Sephardim of Holland objected to the emancipation in 1796.⁴ Moreover, even those who favored political participation,

* Dedicated to my good friend, Judge Jacob Azulai, humanist and humanitarian.

¹ See my "Early Zionist Ideals Among Sephardim in the Nineteenth Century", *Judaism*, 25 (1976), pp. 54-56.

² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³ F. D. Kirwan, Esq., trans. of *Transactions of the Parisian Sanhedrin* (London: Charles Taylor, 1807), p. xv.

⁴ Cf. Herbert I. Bloom, *The Economic Activities of the Jews of Amsterdam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, (Williamsport, Penna.: The Bayard Press, 1937), p. 83, note 18. I hope to present a detailed study of this issue in a forthcoming article.

perceived the ugly aspects of the revolutionary movement, and the potential dangers that it bred. In an imaginary vision, in which Moses and Voltaire come face to face, Joseph Salvador (1796–1873) gives us a glimpse of his intimate feelings concerning the merits of the French Revolution. Voltaire is transported to a desert covered with bones. Between piles of corpses, there are rows of perpetually green trees. At the end of each row stands a patriarch with tearful eyes. When Voltaire asks what the patriarch's function is, he is told to wait. Finally, as the vision ends, Moses reappears:

“Is it over?” — cried Moses, with a voice stronger than before; and, without waiting for an answer, he took the arm of the philosopher and told him: “You have demanded to know why these great, venerable patriarchs with tearful eyes, are standing at the end of these green rows? Come and see!” One of them was engraving this inscription on an enormous stone: “Carnage of the French Revolution.”⁵

It was owing to reactions like Salvador's, that the Sephardim were not overwhelmed by the political life and revolutionary movements generated by the French Revolution. It has been noted that there was more Sephardic participation in the political life of France under the Old Regime than in post-revolutionary France.⁶

Rabbi Yisrael Moshe Hazzan (1807–1863), one of the most influential Sephardic personalities of the time, opposed revolutions and democratic forms of government, favoring instead the autocratic rule of Pope Pius IX (1792–1878).⁷ In 1850 he wrote:

You should know, my dear reader, that upon my arrival in this city (Rome, 1847) I composed a very long homily, entitled “The Crown of the Government”. ... It was translated into Italian, but I did not publish it, because of the dis-

⁵ Joseph Salvador, *Paris, Rome et Jérusalem*, vol. I (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1860), pp. 253–258.

⁶ Laurent Carmona-Benveniste, “Les Sephardins ou ‘Juifs Portugais’ en France sur L’Ancien Régime”, *La Revue Hebdomadaire*, 25 March 1939.

⁷ On Hazzan's relation with the Pope, see A. Berliner, *Geschichte der Juden in Rom*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt a.m.: 1893), pp. 209–212.

turbances (taking place then.)⁸ That homily expresses the opposite of the prevalent opinion among the masses, which — as it is well known — opposes the political establishment. But I support the political establishment with all my might, because only when there is a (legally constituted) political government, is there stability, and a solid basis for all religions to flourish. However, popular governments can not function properly unless they already have a law, exactly as our Law,⁹ and unless the people's situation is similar to that of our nation during the time of Joshua and the Elders after him, or that of a small city, with a small population (like that of the Greek Polis of ancient times) in which the majority is naturally inclined to engage in constructive activities. In this case, even a young lad could rule them. But, otherwise, all this is but a dream!"¹⁰

More grave was the danger of the new ideology to the traditional values and institutions of the Jewish people. Essentially, the Enlightenment taught that there were absolute canons of truth, according to which the merits of all cultures and societies were to be measured. From the perspective of these canons, all religions, and Judaism in particular, were, to use Isaiah Berlin's words, "obsolete relics of a barbarous past."¹¹

Political emancipation and rational secularism also affected Sephardic Jewry, from the Americas, Holland, France and Italy, in the West, to North Africa and the Ottoman Empire in the East. The first Reform Synagogue in the United States, the Reformed Society of Israelites, was established by the Sephardic commu-

⁸ On the impact of these revolutions on the Jewish mind of the time, see Salo W. Baron, "The Revolution of 1848 and Jewish Scholarship", *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research*, 18 (1948-49), pp. 1-66.

⁹ Probably, he meant a Law that is considered perfect and immutable, and not subject to abrogation.

¹⁰ Yisrael Moshe Hazzan, *Kerakh shel Romi*, (Leghorn: Yisrael Costa, 5636), fol. 116 a-b, see *ibid.*, col. a in which he explicitly mentions "democracy".

¹¹ Isaiah Berlin, "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities", *Salmagundi*, 27 (1974), p. 29; see *ibid.*, pp. 17-22.

nity of Charleston, South Carolina, in 1824. The most prominent founders of the West London Synagogue of British Jews, in 1840 — the first Reform Temple in England — were Sephardic Jews. Likewise, Temple Emanu-el, was founded by Sephardim in Curaçao in 1864, as the first Reform Synagogue in South America. Noteworthy is Elissa Lisbonne (b. 1806), a son of one prominent Sephardic family in France, whose members extended to Damascus. In his *De L'Emancipation de la Femme dans le Culte Hebreu* (Avignon: Impreserie Administrative Gros Frères, 1865) he urged full participation of Jewish women in all rituals and religious ceremonies. In the Ottoman Empire and the Near East, men like Count Abraham de Camondo (1785–1873) and Eliyahu Cattaui (1801–1883) established schools where young Sephardic students were exposed to the ideas and values of the time. Upon visiting this last school in 1888, E. N. Adler (1861–1946) remarked: “The ‘Ecole Payante’ or ‘Ecole Cattaui’ for boys is deserving of much praise, and it would be well if we had a similar institution in London.”¹² With the establishment of the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* in 1860, the new ideology began to affect the patterns of thought and feeling of the youth of the entire Sephardic world.

II. THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF RATIONAL SECULARISM ON THE JEWS

The central figure among Sephardim in the XIXth Century, a man most gifted and of a long intellectual tradition, was Rabbi Yisrael Moshe Hazzan. Born in Ismir, Turkey, in 1807, he was highly respected by his contemporaries, who recognized him as the leading figure in rabbinic scholarship, jurisprudence, Jewish philosophy, and theology. He died in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1863.

Hazzan advocated religious humanism as a viable alternative to rational secularism. He pointed out the dangers which the ideology of the Enlightenment posed to the European establishment in general, and to the Jews in particular.¹³ His views were widely

¹² Elkan Nathan Adler, *Jews in Many Lands*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1905), p. 27.

¹³ Of course, Jews in France, Germany, and some parts of Italy, were exposed to the Enlightenment already in the XVIII Century. However, it did

known in Sephardic circles: from Morocco, Portugal and Holland, to Syria, the Holy Land, and Egypt. His opposition to the ideology of the Enlightenment must not be seen as an opposition to the participation of Jews in non-Jewish culture. The foremost Rabbinic authorities of the time, Rabbis Yishma'el Ha-Kohen¹⁴ (1723–1811), Ḥayyim¹⁵ (1788–1869) and Abraham¹⁶ (1809–1899) Palaggi, Yisrael Moshe¹⁷ and Eliahu (1845–1908) Ḥazzan,¹⁸ Yishaq ben Walid¹⁹ (1777–1870), Raḥamim Yosef Franco (1835–1901) and Yosef Arrawaş²⁰ (1847–1925), as well as others, permitted secular subjects to be included in the curricula of the Jewish schools. Moreover, prominent Rabbis, like Ḥazzan²¹ and Yehuda Bibas (1780–1852), insisted that the Jew acquire a wide humanistic education to prepare him for the complexities of modern society. In the view of Bibas, in modern times a proper education in the “seven wisdoms” even takes precedence over the study of Tora:

By the seven wisdoms, the sciences, music, astronomy, etc. are meant. When a man is well, if he takes medicine, it will do him harm; but if he is ill, he must put away bread and take the medicine. Now, the law is bread, but the Jews are

not affect world Jewry, in places like Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, until the XIXth Century. A serious work on the Jews and the Enlightenment is still a *desideratum*. The best study on this subject is the brilliant analysis of the impact of the Enlightenment on the German Jews in the work of Henry Brunswick, *Société et Romantisme en Prusse au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), pp. 107–162. The substance of that chapter was already published by Brunswick in *Annales historique de la Revolution française*, 1935–6.

¹⁴ *Zera' Emet*, vol. 2 (Leghorn: 5556 [= 1796]), par. 107.

¹⁵ *Leb Ḥayyim*, vol. 2 (Izmir: 5583 [= 1823]), par. 52.

¹⁶ *Va-Ya'an Abraham*, (Izmir: 5646 [= 1886]), *Yore De'a*, par. 8.

¹⁷ *Sheerit Ha-Naḥala*, (Alexandria: 5622 [= 1862]), p. 13 ff.

¹⁸ *Ta'alumot Leb*, vol. 1 (Leghorn: 5639 [= 1879]), *Yore De'a*, par. 4.

¹⁹ *Va-Yomer Yişhaq*, vol. 1 (Leghorn: 5615 [= 1855]), *Yore De'a*, par. 99.

²⁰ Both *responsa* are printed in Franco's *Sha'are Raḥamim*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: 5669 [= 1909]), *Yore De'a*, par. 23.

²¹ See *Sheerit Ha-Naḥala*, pp. 13–16, 24 ff., etc.

²² (Andrew Bonar, Robert Murray M'Cheyne), *Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, Third Edition), p. 380.

sick, they are ignorant and degraded. You must therefore lay aside the study of the law and take the medicine, the seven wisdoms or sciences...

Sephardic Rabbis were mainly concerned with the *negative effects* of the new culture upon Jewish society. In particular, they questioned the wisdom of the Jewish educator who used the classroom to criticize traditional values and institutions. Originally, criticism was an essential aspect of the Enlightenment for the discovery of new truths. In time, however, it became an end in itself.²³ The negative nature of rationalist criticism was especially felt in its pessimistic view of the human past and the traditional institutions.²⁴ Hazzan was reacting to this characteristic of the Enlightenment and the enlightened Jew when he wrote:

The righteous people know that in this low generation, reason and religion are handled indiscriminately: as one wields an axe. Whatever can not pass the fire of modern civilization... they wish to destroy.

In the eyes of Sephardic Rabbis, the root problem with the enlightened Jew was his profound ignorance of the culture with which he became involved. His knowledge of it was at best only external and specious. He confused a superficial knowledge of French with an actual understanding of French culture and civilization. Rabbi Abraham Hamwi of Aleppo, who lived in the second half of the XIXth Century, wrote on a visit to Europe:

I am disheartened because of what is happening with our generation. Many among the masses, who pretend to philosophize, and have acquired some French — I wish they would have learned French adequately! — become arrogant upon

²³ See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); pp. 141 ff.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 32 ff.; and "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities", pp. 17–22

²⁵ *Kerakh Shel Romi*, fol. 18a.

leaving school, mocking and making fun of our sacred sages of blessed memory...²⁶

Equally, Hazzan derided the naivete and “intellectual lethargy” of Jewish pseudo-intellectuals who believed that one could acquire a modern education by reading a few articles in Diderot’s *Encyclopoedia*.²⁷ In his book *She’erit Ha-Nahala*, a dialogue between two Sephardic Rabbis from Jerusalem and a rich Sephardic merchant from Leghorn, one of the rabbis says to the merchant:

You, too, have fallen in the trap that has seduced some Europeans of our time: the obsession to know every subject and topic standing on one foot! We were distressed in the past, as in this very night, by the deplorable trend in this region: that by reading some volumes of the *Encyclopoedia*, anyone could become a scientist, etc., etc. It is truly impossible for anyone to become a rabbinical philosopher and philologist instantly. This takes time!²⁸

A superficial knowledge of the newly adopted civilization resulted in ideological aggressiveness bordering on blind fanaticism. Paraphrasing Hosea 4.12, Rabbi Hazzan described the superstitious attitude with which the newly enlightened Jew approached modern culture. “To the stock of Voltaire and Mirabeau he asks counsel, and the staff of Diderot declaireth unto him.”²⁹ This becomes

²⁶ *Lidrosh Elohim*, (Leghorn: 5640 [= 1880]), fol. 15b.

²⁷ Cf. *Nahala Le-Yisrael*, p. 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁹ *Kerakh Shel Romi*, fol. 117c; cf. *Nahala Le-Yisrael*, p. 7. They are symbolic of the three aspects of the Enlightenment that produced the greatest impact on the Jewish society. Voltaire was the most distinguished spokesman of the *philosophes*. Le Comte de Mirabeau was the paradigm of the enlightened nobleman, championing Jewish political emancipation; see his *Sur Moses Mendelssohn, Sur la Reforme Politique des Juifs* (London: 1787). The objection to his political doctrine becomes evident when one realizes that the price for “emancipation” was the dissolution of the Jewish Nation. Thus, Hazzan opposed the democratic political movement and publicly supported the more conservative forms of government, cf. above, p. 30–31. Diderot was the first encyclopaedist whose work helped develop the dilettant type for whom

specially significant when one realizes that — as was brilliantly stated by Peter Gay — the main objective of the Enlightenment was to “assimilate the two pasts they had inherited — Christian and pagan — to pit them against one another and thus secure their independence.”³⁰

In the opinion of Hazzan, the secular ideals and anti-religious values that were proposed as solutions to the problems of modern Jewry, were not grounded in a genuine understanding of the specific situation of the Jew. Rather, these solutions were “the effect of trying to imitate the ideals of Voltaire and Mirabeau.”³¹

The most ardent admirers of the new culture, and the harshest critics of the traditional values of Judaism, were the so-called “Jewish intellectuals” and professional educators. According to Hazzan, they were sceptics who used the classroom to propagandize, rather than to teach. In this way, education was made to undermine the confidence of the student in the traditional values and institutions of the Jewish people:

...Many of the professors, as well as the teachers of language and science, don't even believe in the hot bread and cooked food that they eat daily. We have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears the deadly venom that they inject with their teaching into the tender children and young pupils.³²

The same criticism against this type of Jewish education was raised by other Sephardic rabbis of that time. R. Raḥamim Yosef Franco wrote:

I must readily confess that in our time, unfortunately, we are seeing that instruction in foreign languages and literature is a viper's venom: a trap to capture innocent souls, especially tender children.³³

Sephardim had little sympathy; cf. *Naḥala Le-Yisrael*, p. 10, and below pp. 36–37.

³⁰ *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, p. xi.

³¹ *Sheerit Ha-Naḥala*, p. 7.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 12 and cf. p. 11.

³³ *Sha'are Reḥamim*, vol. 2, fol. 29c.

Rabbi Yehuda Maslaton, who lived in Damascus at the end of the XIXth Century, and was later appointed *Dayyan* in Cairo, expressed the same concern:

I will speak candidly on this matter of instruction in foreign languages. We have personally witnessed and heard many students who in consequence of their study of foreign languages have lost their (faith in) Judaism and their veneration of God. Even the few who manage to preserve some Jewish principles and veneration of God, have only superficial knowledge of Tora and prayers. Since they never had any real contact with Judaism, they cannot return to it with full heart and soul.³⁴

Accordingly, Sephardic Rabbis opposed the establishment of this type of schools. Ḥazzan's report is exceedingly illuminating:

It was not in vain that the sages of Turkey, Asia, and Africa have roared as young cubs, and stood firm like lions, to prevent the establishment of this type of secular schools in the Jewish communities. Because if by establishing these schools we are saved from the exile of body,³⁵ then we are caught like a bird in a trap — the bitter and destructive exile of the soul which is sectarianism and heresy.³⁶

It is significant to note, in this connection, that S. D. Luzzato (1800–1865), who certainly was not sympathetic to Sephardic rabbis, expressed the same criticism about this type of education, which was offered to the Jew in the name of progress.³⁷

In the view of Ḥazzan, European Jewry had reached a stage of total disintegration, due to its inability to cope with Western culture. He attributed this failure to what he described as “the

³⁴ *Ve-Zot Lihuda*, (Cairo: 5697), p. 65.

³⁵ In the original there is an error “ve-hanefesh”, and it should be deleted.

³⁶ *Sheerit Ha-Naḥala*, pp. 11–12. For some data on this point, see Moïse Franco, *Essai sur l'histoire des Israelites de l'Empire Ottoman* (Paris: Librairie A. Durlaehner, 1897), pp. 164–6.

³⁷ *Kinnor Na'im*, (Warsaw: 5673), pp. 9–10, see especially the note.

European plague, which is the illness of 'either extreme'.³⁸ By this he meant the attitudes of either total surrender to the dictates of modern civilization, or total rejection of all aspects of both Jewish and Western culture. Hence, the Sephardic dissatisfaction with both the religious and the secular products of these attitudes. According to Hazzan, this extremism was the result of a superficial knowledge of either one of the two systems.³⁹ This superficiality produced a chain of attitudes intimately related to each other: *religious fanaticism* that leads to *hypocrisy*, both of which discourage the best elements of the Jewish population from any serious participation in the religious life and traditional institutions of Judaism, causing *religious indifference* among the Jewish elite. On the other hand, the aggressive ideological extremism weakens Jewish values and institutions, giving rise to *schism* and *internal enmity*.⁴⁰

About the year 1850, Hazzan drew a gloomy picture of the future spiritual and physical state of European Jewry.

Behold, there it lies before us, the great corruption that (prevails) among us in this region of Europe — something that we have not dared to imagine or to think. About a hundred years ago, (the seeds) of corruption were sown in these countries. In our times, they have grown like grass, taken roots, and covered the earth. They have covered the mountains of Ashkenaz, and their shadow and numerous branches have reached Italy. Woe unto us, for this has taken place in our times! Who could prescribe a remedy for us. Satan is dancing among us, establishing sects in our nation, numerous parties, and different altars... This corruptive trend of introducing novelties and dividing hearts will chase many of our beloved children away from our Holy Tradition. It will be to blame

³⁸ *Sheerit Ha-Nahala*, p. 24, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 35–73.

³⁹ Cf. Rabbi Hazzan, *Qanteris Qedushat Yom Tob Sheni*, (Vienna: 5617), fol. 20b.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 29a ff.

if the name of Israel is never again to be mentioned there.
God save us.⁴¹

III. VICO: A MODERN ALTERNATIVE TO RATIONAL SECULARISM

Croce, the great admirer of Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), remarked:

The real revolutionary who by putting aside the concept of probability and by conceiving imagination in a novel manner actually discovered the true nature of poetry and art and, so to speak, invented the science of Esthetics, was the Italian Giambattista Vico.⁴²

Today, Vico is recognized as a leading figure in the development of modern Western thought. The broader concepts of man, culture and history, so fundamental to modern humanities, are a direct outgrowth of Vico's vision.⁴³ The point to be remembered, however, is that until relatively recent times he was almost unknown.⁴⁴ It is to the credit of a small group of Sephardic rabbis, led by Hazzan and Eliahu Benamozegh (1822–1900),⁴⁵ to have discovered the deep significance of Vico's contributions. To the Jew, Vico offered a genuine alternative to vindicate his own specific spirituality and subjectivity, without either surrendering to rational secularism or remaining confined to a mental ghetto.⁴⁶

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 31a.

⁴² Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 220.

⁴³ See "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities", pp. 22–40.

⁴⁴ See A. Robert Caponigri, *Time and Idea*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. ix. A poignant example may be seen in Leo Strauss, who in his *Natural Right and History*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), and in his *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966) was totally unaware of Vico's contributions in these fields.

⁴⁵ On his life and works, see R. De Felice, "Benamozegh, Elia", *Dizionario Biografico Degli Italiani*, vol. 8 (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1966), pp. 169–170; and Rabbi Sabato Morais, *Italian Hebrew Literature*, (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1926), p. 213 ff.

⁴⁶ Cf. Aline Lion, *The Idealistic Conception of Religion*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), pp. 58–63.

The Sephardim were acquainted with Vico while he was still an obscure professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples. In November 1731, shortly after the second edition of his *New Science*, he sent a copy to Joseph Attias.⁴⁷ Attias, in replying, mentioned that he had given the *New Science* for the perusal by some of his friends, many of whom were Jews:

I am infinitely obliged for your courtesy in giving me a copy of your book. It has been read by my friends and has been much admired for the sublimity of its subject and the abundance of new thoughts which... it suggests, great and wonderful for their rarity and sublimity, over and above the pleasure and profit yielded by all your works when attentively read.⁴⁸

It is important to observe that, unlike Voltaire, Vico never derided Judaism. Throughout his writings, he treated both the Jew and his religion with respect and admiration. The following quotation illustrates this point. In his Autobiography, referring to himself in the third person, Vico writes:

He always takes account of the essential differences between the Hebrews and the gentiles. The former from the beginning arose and stood steadfast on the practices of an Eternal Justice.⁴⁹

Voltaire conceives of man as an intrinsic part of nature, to be understood exclusively in the light of nature. There are canons, eternal and immutable, that are operative in all spheres of human activities. These canons are recognizable by human reason and are valid at all times and in all societies. Contrariwise, Vico conceives of man in historical terms. He rejects the notion of eternal and immutable truths, of absolute canons of thought and feeling.

⁴⁷ For some brief remarks about him, see Cecil Roth, *The History of the Jews in Italy*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), p. 422.

⁴⁸ *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, (Ithaca, New York: Great Seal Books, 1963), p. 174.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172. Cf., *The Idealistic Conception of Religion*, p. 61.

The canons operating in the realm of history are relative and dynamic. The patterns and categories of human thought and feeling, as well as the fundamental concepts of the human mind, are subject to constant change. This change is not a progress from the imperfect to the perfect, since such a notion would entail an absolute criterion of value. Vico understands man in terms of history, but history for him is not merely a compilation of data. Rather, it is the understanding of the specific sets of values and conventions of a group or society at a specific time.⁵⁰

Whereas many prominent Jewish thinkers in Central and Eastern Europe identified with the Enlightenment, Sephardim saw in the Religious Humanism of Vico a valid alternative to the rational secularism of Voltaire. Rather than conceive of man in terms of Nature — as if he were governed by uniform and categorical laws — they conceived of man in terms of Viconian history. What Voltaire perceived as forms of unreason and human decadence, were for Vico monuments of the human past— expressions of the constant change of the patterns and categories of human experience.

Accordingly, rather than conceive of the Jewish past as static and uniform — as the strict traditionalists did — or dismiss it as a mass of irrelevant nonsense — along with the secular rationalists — Sephardic Humanists applied Viconian methods to the interpretation of classical Hebrew texts and history. Benamozegh wrote:

The great investigator, Vico, thanks to his vast knowledge of ancient Latin, was able to discover through analysis of words and names, and their constitutive (elements) and origin, important concepts that were never explicitly stated in the history and antiquities of the Romans. He formulated the principle that in every language, beliefs and early history are stored. Therefore, I thought to pursue the same method and to see whether I (too) could discover (the) fundamental aspects of our Holy language. The Lord was with me and

⁵⁰ See "The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities", pp. 28-39; *Time and Idea*, pp. 55-70, for an excellent analysis of this aspect of Vico.

I made significant discoveries, part of which is presented in this work.⁵¹

Elsewhere, he wrote:

In my opinion, the proper method to be applied when examining the Holy Scriptures in their relation to the tradition of our Sages, is to investigate the roots of the language, and see whether it is possible to discover the connection of the verse with the law, exegesis or event. We have learned from Vico — the great Italian sage — that the ancient languages hide... in their idioms and expressions... customs, beliefs and deeds that were once known among the peoples who used them and later were totally forgotten. I too, since some time ago, have tried to follow these methods, and the Lord helped me in these pursuits.⁵²

By applying Viconian concepts to classical Hebrew literature, it became obvious that traditions which in the past were considered mutually exclusive, could in fact be explained as complementing and illuminating each other. Let us take one example. It is written that Jacob tricked his blind father, Isaac, who gave him the blessing which he had reserved for his first-born Esau (Genesis 27). Needless to say, the ethical aspects of this episode deeply disturbed the Rabbis. They exhonored Jacob by explaining that when he said “I am Esau, your first-born” (Genesis 27:19), he actually meant to say, “I am myself; Esau is your first-born.” Benamozegh remarked:

Without examining the correctness of these words in themselves, whether they were deceptive or not, nonetheless, we know that when the ancients did not want to reveal something they had in their hearts, they used this sort of linguistic

⁵¹ *Em la-Miqra*, 5 volumes, (Leghorn: 1862–3). In the following places Vico is explicitly mentioned: vol. 1: 3b, 44b, 48b, 51b, 79b, 87b, 109a, 158a; vol. 2: 52b; vol. 3: 10a, 70b, 120a–b, 142b, 153b, 178b; vol. 4: 38b; vol. 5: 21a, 36a, 66b, 70a, 85b, 120a, 142a. Quotation is from vol. 5, fol. 70a.

⁵² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, fol. 109a.

subterfuge. Accordingly, the Rabbis expounded this verse in the light of their conventions, and nothing else. The principle is quite clear in Vico, *Scienza Nuova*... that in heroic times, they would try to escape moral responsibility by using this type of linguistic subterfuge.⁵³

In particular, Vico, made it obvious that it was necessary to study a text in light of the specific context and the conventions of its time. To illustrate this method again: the Rabbis declared that each of the 318 lads that accompanied Abraham in his expedition to rescue Lot was named Abraham. Benamozegh made the following comment:

There is no doubt that in ancient times it was customary to be named after the head or leader of the clan. Not only in the city of Rome — as it is known that the clients were called by the names of their patrons — but also in Greece and the Orient, as was shown at length by Vico. There is a *midrash* of our Rabbis stating that Israel was called by the name of its Patron (i.e., God). This homily is grounded in the usages of their times.⁵⁴

Benamozegh therefore concludes:

The same is with many other homilies that cannot be adequately understood without knowing the conventions of former generations. Hence, it is imperative to know... these conventions and useages thoroughly.⁵⁵

The same method was applied by Ḥazzan and Benamozegh in the area of juridical exegesis, examinig the interpretation of Scripture in

⁵³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, fol. 48b.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 87b.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 87b–88a. This reflects the position of the classical Sephardic exegets, that the biblical text is to be interpreted on the basis of philological principles. Rabbinic exegesis may be authoritative in the realm of jurisprudence, i.e., it directs the judiciary on how to interpret and apply biblical law. However, it does not preclude other interpretations outside the Court of Justice, much as the Supreme Court's interpretation of the constitution is not binding outside the judiciary.

light of the conventions and modes of thinking prevalent at that time. Thanks to Hazzan's superb mastery of the entirety of Rabbinic literature, he was able to develop this method furthest. He⁵⁶ accepted Vico's view that in Latin "almost the whole corpus of words had sylvan or rustic origins",⁵⁷ and applied the same principle to the biblical lexicon.⁵⁸ Taking cognizance of semantic developments affecting the Hebrew language, he attempted to show the relationship between the philological meaning of a term, and the meaning it had acquired through juridical exegesis.⁵⁹ The complexity of the subject prevents us from illustrating this method of analysis. It may be appropriate, however, to cite the impressions on this matter of one of the most distinguished Jewish scholars of the last century. When Hazzan's *Nahala le-Yisrael*, a work concerning aspects of the laws of inheritance, reached R.S.J. Rapoport (1790–1867), he wrote:

Without indulging in any form of flattery, I must say that never before has a work of this quality come to my attention. The author shows marvels by his correct method of interpreting (the texts), not only in the vast field of Talmudics, but in the field of biblical exegesis as well, as concerning the verses on the subject of inheritance. He does this with the purest and most subtle intellect. It suffices to show to every reader, even if he be a gentile scholar, the correct and appropriate law, without requiring recourse to the authority of tradition. However, he also was able to raise it (Jewish tradition) as if it were a flag for us — the House of Jacob — on the basis of extraordinary erudition, deep understanding, and the proposition of logically correct and quite plausible theories. He managed to accomplish this, using the Talmud and all

⁵⁶ *Sheerit Ha-Nahala*, pp. 26 (par. 95), 28 (par. 112), and 79.

⁵⁷ *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, (T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch), (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), LXV, 240, p. 78.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29 (par. 120), 30 (par. 122), 32–33 (par. 132), 35 (par. 147) ff., and 76 ff.

⁵⁹ Cf., *Ibid.*, pp. 30–32, 44–48, 74 ff., etc. This method underlies his *Nahala Le-Yisrael*, printed first in Vienna, 1851.

the commentaries that came after it, whether in the Codes of Law or the books of *Responsa*... thoroughly exhausting the subject and leaving no doubts at all on the matter. I am shocked and dismayed that until now the name of this great man, outstanding among tens of thousand, has not yet been heard throughout the globe!⁶⁰

Sephardic lay leaders, too, perceived the negative aspects of rational secularism and supported a philosophy in which the role of religion could properly be safeguarded. Moses Ḥayyim Picciotto (1806–1879) of Aleppo, a member of a family with a long tradition of distinguished diplomatic service, expressed directly and pointedly his concern about the negative aspects of the Enlightenment. Like many Sephardic lay leaders, he displayed particular sensitivity to the pedantic ways the enlightened thinkers treated religion and traditional institutions:

It was very easy, and very amusing, for the philosophy of the eighteenth century to ridicule the ignorance and superstition of the ancients, and to denounce the modern people who follow in the same direction, though by different tracks. But the true philosophy of the present age, which has penetrated deeper into the recesses of the human heart, has arrived at the double conclusion, that a superior power has implanted in it certain elements which human power cannot remove; and that what is inherent in human nature cannot be combatted, but must be wisely directed. Hence, modern civilization deals less than preceding ages in abstractions; and in its intellectual development, accepts religion as a starting point in the laborious but open walk, which leads to human happiness.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Nahala Le-Yisrael* (Alexandria: 5622), p. 69. Hazzan began to compose a work, *Torat Moshe Ve-Yisrael*, applying this method to the entire Talmud. See *Sheerit Ha-Nahala*, pp. 41–42.

⁶¹ Isaac Reggio, *A Guide for the Religious Instruction of Jewish Youth*, translated from the Italian by M. H. Picciotto, (London: Simpkin, Marshal, and Co., 1885), p. 12, note of the translator.

IV. A HUMANISTIC VIEW OF JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY: TWO BRANCHES OF ONE TREE

The image of Western civilization as projected by Voltaire was radically different from that projected by Vico. For Voltaire, the civilization of the West was elitist, and was imposed on the masses by enlightened oligarchies. The Jew, depending on his commitment to Judaism, was either subservient to the dictates of modern civilization or else resentful towards a culture that negated his most sacred values and institutions.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the negative attitude towards Western culture among some Jewish circles in modern times may have resulted from their identification of Western civilization with rational secularism alone.

The Sephardic Rabbi and layman were acquainted with the materialist trends in the Western world, but they never believed that these trends alone represented Western culture, or even reflected its highest ideals. Specifically, they rejected the notion that a sound relationship between Jew and non-Jew could best be established on the ground of rational secularism and materialism. The Viconian concept of Religious Humanism appeared to him a basis by far more attractive and historically sounder for such a relationship. The Sephardi was aware of the fundamental values and institutions common to Jew and Christian; however, he also was aware of what separated them. Joseph Salvador described the relationship of Jews and Christians as of two branches growing from one trunk,⁶² and Ḥazzan used precisely the same image.⁶³ Its meaning is clear: we have common roots, but we have grown in different directions. It is the special duty of the Jew to contribute to the preservation and growth of humanistic values. Rabbis like Ḥazzan and Bibas believed that only in societies whose

⁶² *Paris, Rome, Jerusalem*, vol. 1, p. 336 ff.

⁶³ *Nahala Le-Yisrael*, p. 55. Rabbi Ḥazzan, like many other Sephardic rabbis of the time, had a positive attitude towards Christianity, cf., *ibid.*, p. 54; *Sheerit Ha-Nahala*, pp. 7-8; *Kerakh Shel Romi*, fol. 114a, b; 117c, d.

basic institutions are grounded in a religious humanism can a Jew have a modicum of spiritual and material safety.⁶⁴

Viewed from this perspective, the heritage of the Jew is best preserved by nourishing the roots from which both Jewish and gentile cultures grew. Bibas, who was rightly called "a genuine Pharisee of the old school, rigidly observing the Jewish law,"⁶⁵ unmistakably expressed the attitude of the Sephardic Rabbinate in a conversation reported by Bonar:

He denied that God ever meant the Jews to be a people separate from other nations, asserting that He intended them to enlighten all the earth, a duty which they must still perform whenever it shall be in their power. If they had the means, like the English, they ought to send out missionaries.⁶⁶

Accordingly, the preservation of the Jewish faith and tradition can not imply a disrespect or a lack of love for members of other religious groups. This was eloquently expressed by Bibas when he declared "that he loved Christians exceedingly, and that no Christian loved the Jews more than he did the Christians."⁶⁷

These ideas were not only operative in the intellectual realm, in terms of mere social pleasantries, but were actually formulated as law by some of the most prominent Sephardic jurists of the time.

⁶⁴ This was the main objective of Sephardic thinkers like Joseph Salvador; see Gabriel Salvador, *J, Salvador: Sa Vie Ses Oeuvres et Critique*, (Paris: Michel Levy Freres, 1881), pp. 86-88; cf. *Paris, Rome et Jerusalem*, vol. 1, p. 336 ff. The same is true of Rabbi Bibas (see below) and many others. In this connection, it is worth noting that in the traditional Sephardic sermon, contemporary "gentiles" (i.e. Christians and Moslems) served as *good* examples. I do not recall a single case in which a "gentile" is referred to as an inferior moral being, to illustrate a bad habit that a Jew ought to avoid. There are Sephardic folktales in which a gentile plays the role of the good character, while a Jew is the guilty party who abuses him; the gentile searches for justice in conventional institutions, but somehow the Jew manages to outsmart him. Finally, the gentile decides to go for justice to the Rabbi who cleverly traps the Jew and vindicates the gentile.

⁶⁵ *Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews*, p. 526.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

When Ḥazzan, for example, came to Rome in 1847, he discovered that some practices connected with the synagogue services and Jewish rituals had been the objects of mockery by elements of the Christian population. While local Jews interpreted this attitude as an expression of disrespect for Judaism, Ḥazzan, in line with his humanistic approach to Jewish law,⁶⁸ concluded that it was the Jewish behavior that was offensive to the aesthetic standards of the society at large, and that this behavior was not prescribed by Jewish law; in fact, in many instances it was explicitly forbidden. Ḥazzan convincingly argued that, according to Jewish law⁶⁹, Jews are to take cognizance of the standards of the society in which they live, and he therefore issued a series of *responsa* prohibiting the continuation of those practices.⁷⁰ Ḥazzan's analysis and conclusions illustrate what we usually refer to as the humanistic approach to Jewish law among Sephardic jurists.⁷¹

This was not the only instance indicating the concern of Sephardic jurists with the relation of the Jewish Law to the aesthetic standards of the non-Jewish society. The case of music in the synagogue, which generated a heated controversy in the Ashkenazic communities, may serve as an illustration of the more worldly and humanist attitude of the Sephardim.

One aspect of the legal problem was the question of whether the organ may be played in the synagogue, or must be forbidden on the grounds of its traditional association with the liturgy of the Church. Rabbi Shem Ṭob Samun, who lived in Leghorn,⁷² and Ya'aqob Recanatte (1759–1824) of Verona,⁷³ adjudicated that

⁶⁸ Cf., *Kerakh Shel Romi*, fol. 4a–b.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, fol. 2b ff.

⁷⁰ This topic was the subject of an excellent article by Rabbi Roberto Bonfil, "Temuroth l'minhagim ha-datyim shel Yehudei Roma bitequfath kehunato shel R' Israel Mose Hazan", *Scritti in Memoria di Enzo Sereni*, (Jerusalem: Editrice Fondazione Sally Mayer, 1970), pp. 228–251.

⁷¹ "Introducing the Materials of Sephardic Culture to Contemporary Jewish studies", *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 63 (1974), p. 347.

⁷² *Nogah Ha-Šedeq*, (Dessau, C. Schlieder, 1818), pp. 3–6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–13.

it was permissible. Their decision was approved, though reluctantly by Rabbi Ḥayyim 'Ayyash, the grandson of the illustrious Rabbi Yehuda 'Ayyash (died 1760)⁷⁴ and son of the *Rishon Le-Ṣion*, (Chief Rabbi of Israel).

A second question, analyzed by Rabbi Rephael Aharon ben Shim'on (1848–1929), was whether a gentile instrumentalist could be engaged before the Sabbath to play on the Sabbath? After a meticulous analysis of all the legal sources on the matter, he concluded that if the music is connected with a religious celebration, it is permitted on the basis of *Shebut de-shebut le-shem mišva mutar* — namely, that it is permitted to instruct a gentile to do work forbidden by the Rabbis when it is in some way connected with the performance of a religious act. He further noted that engaging gentile musicians to play on the Sabbath was a widespread custom among Sephardim.⁷⁵ Rabbi Moshe Pardo (died 1888), grandson of the illustrious Rabbis David Pardo (1719–1792), and Ḥayyim David Azulai (1724–1806) also made reference to the practice of Sephardim to engage gentile musicians to play in the synagogue on Holy Days when the scroll of the *Tora* is returned to the ark.⁷⁶

A third and related question, taken up by Rabbi Yosef Nessim Burla (1829–1903), a member of the High Rabbinic Court in Jerusalem, was whether gentile singers could participate in the synagogue choir. After a careful analysis, he concluded that the only grounds for proscribing gentile participation in the synagogue choir is the technicality that one may not teach *Tora* to a gentile.⁷⁷

The most significant aspect of the problem of music in the synagogue was adjudicated by Ḥazzan himself: is it permitted to

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁵ *Nehar Mišrayim*, (Alexandria: 5668), vol. 1, fol. 15b–19b.

⁷⁶ *Yišmaḥ Moshe*, (Ismir: 1880), fol. 31c–32c; cf. *ibid.*, at the end of the *responsum*.

⁷⁷ *Va-Yesheb Yosef*, (Jerusalem: 5665), fol. 2b ff; cf. *ibid.*, 6d ff. It is obvious to one familiar with Rabbinic jurisprudence that Burla was offering this as a mere technicality in order to satisfy the demands of the Rabbi who submitted the question. Possibly, he also did not want to antagonize Rabbi Elyashar (cf. below, note 79).

use church music at the synagogue services? He concluded that it is permitted, since Jewish law does not forbid the aesthetics of the gentile society, even when these activities are used in religious services.⁷⁸ This decision was approved by the Chief Rabbi of Tiberias, Rabbi Ḥayyim Shemuel Cohen Convorte (died 1873).⁷⁹

We must finally clarify here a major point about the relationship between the humanistic and aesthetic values of society at large and Jewish behavior. It was the general standard of Sephardi rabbis that Jewish participation in the cultural activities of society at large was to be encouraged as long as it did *not* conflict with fundamental Jewish values and institutions. If conflict arises, the preservation of Jewish values and institutions must take precedence. The following is a case in point. Ḥazzan was asked,

⁷⁸ *Kerakh Shel Romi*, fol. 1d ff.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 5d–6b. There are two dissident *responsa* on this matter that are worth examining. The first was by Rabbi Ḥayyim Palaggi, a cousin of Ḥazzan. See *Leb Ḥayyim*, vol. 2, (Salonica–Ismir: 5583), fol. 8c–11a, where he gives a decision on a question submitted to him by the Sephardic community of Paris. Two of the three issues discussed in this *responsum* are directly connected with our problem. The issues are whether it is permitted to use the organ in the synagogue (fol. 8c–10b), and whether it is permitted to employ gentiles as musicians to perform in the synagogue on Sabbath and Holydays (fol. 10b–11a). Palaggi was personally against permitting any of these matters, and he cited numerous sources to support his position; and yet, he did not explicitly say that they are forbidden (*asur*). Rather, he used expressions such as “to stop the custom” (fol. 9c); “they should be prevented”, “we should not play music” (fol. 9d); “there is no place for this” (fol. 11a). The reason for this is that Palaggi was quite aware that the sources that he quoted did not warrant his position. Therefore, although he was personally against allowing these matters, on account of their possible repercussions, he would not explicitly say that they are prohibited (*asur*). The second *responsum* is by Rabbi Ya‘aqob Shaul Elyashar (1817–1906); see *Yiśśa Ish* (Jerusalem: 5666), fol. 99c–d. In this *responsum*, Rabbi Elyashar did not come to grips with the juridical sources as the above mentioned rabbis did. Rather than present a juridical analysis of the problem, he merely gives a few quotations and paraphrases the opinions of those who opposed music. It should be noted, that although he was educated in Sephardic circles by his step-father, in legal issues that bordered on politics, Rabbi Elyashar consistently identified with, and reflected the feelings of, the Ashkenazic Rabbinate.

whether one is permitted to shave on the days between the first and last holy days of Passover and the Feast of the Tabernacle (*Hol Ha-Mo'ed*), since remaining unshaven for a week, as Jewish law demands, conflicts with the standards of modern society.⁸⁰ The rabbi who submitted this question felt that shaving should be permitted, and supported this view with the decision of Ḥazzan allowing church music in the synagogue.⁸¹ In his answer, Ḥazzan distinguished between the former case and the latter, and clarified the position of the Sephardic jurists. In the first instance, he noted, there was no Rabbinic promulgation prohibiting gentiles' music in synagogue services. The only basis for such a prohibition was a *responsum* by a 17th Century rabbi, Joel Sirkes, whom Ḥazzan characterized as "one who finds great pleasure in creating new prohibitions and limitations on the Jewish people." After examining Sirkes' *responsum*, Ḥazzan demonstrated that his position was not warranted by talmudic sources. In the second instance however, the prohibition against shaving on those days in question, this was promulgated by the highest judicial authority of the Jews, and was upheld by both Talmudic and post-Talmudic traditions. Finally, Ḥazzan concluded, while the expression of Jewish devotion in accordance with the aesthetic standards of society at large should be encouraged,⁸² "if the values and aesthetic standards of the non-Jewish society come into conflict with our sacred *Tora* or the tradition of our Sages of revered memory, we will not surrender even the point of the letter *yod*."⁸³ In other words, the concern for Jewish existence takes precedence over the regard for the aesthetics of the general society.

Concluding Remarks

We may summarize the foregoing as follows:

(a) Sephardic Rabbis found in Vico a theoretical alternative to the radical secularism of the Enlightenment.

⁸⁰ *Kerakh Shel Romi*, fol. 14d-15d.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 18d.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, fol. 4d.

(b) Sephardic rabbis made use of the methods developed by Vico and applied them to the interpretation of classical Jewish text.

(c) Religious Humanism, as reflected in Vico's ideology, afforded a deeper understanding of both Judaism and Christianity. While allowing participation in the intellectual and cultural life of the times, it did not demand that the participants surrender their spiritual heritage and individuality.