

Letters on “The Nation, Jonathan Israel and the Enlightenment”

15 June 2010

The following letters were sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to the essay, “The Nation, Jonathan Israel and the Enlightenment”

Thank you for this. It has been noted that the *Nation* relies heavily on its readership’s not coming into contact with the original material they “review” in such a way.

Indeed, Israel’s work is denser than most non-students have time for, and his books are not stocked in most bookstores to begin with. Far easier to just take the *Nation*’s word for it! This would be irresponsible, though, and I thank you for spelling out why. As usual, you counter the postmodern hoochery ably, thoroughly, and with wit.

Christie MS
11 June 2010

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Thank you for this defense of Jonathan Israel’s writing. I have benefited from Prof. Israel’s work for many years now and find it distressing that postmodernism—a dead intellectual movement if there ever was one—is still twitching enough to reach out from a major publication to try to choke off a truly living thinker. You note, “The idiotic pairing of George W. Bush and Maximilien Robespierre as brothers in arms testifies to the ahistorical and false character of the argument.” I couldn’t agree more. Thanks again and keep up the good work.

Mark H
Chengdu, China
11 June 2010

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I think Samuel Moyn’s style of ill-tempered polemical attack on Professor Israel, Spinoza and the Enlightenment actually comes from a different source from the post-modernists and their radical opposition to

reference that you mention in your excellent review. It is not the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer in the shadow of Auschwitz, but Leo Strauss, father of the neo-cons among creepy currents in the closing days of the Weimar republic and later.

Strauss was wrestling then with Spinoza and chasing after the national socialist blood-and-soil philosopher Carl Schmidt for comment on the Spinoza material he published through 1931 and 1932. He republished them with a new introduction when he was preparing disciples for State Department power at the University of Chicago in the sixties.

As in Professor Moyn’s use of Levinas, Strauss needs the medieval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, and Talmudic logic Spinoza firmly set himself against to uncover by this method revelations and secret codes in Greek texts, his schtick for the rest of his life. This is, you note, twisted scholarship. It is characteristic of the time when they were first framed on the eve of social breakdown and war in the thirties, and there is good reason why it rules today.

AL
Toronto, Canada
12 June 2010



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