Political thought is by nature paradoxical, consisting always of an admixture of idealism and realism. Almost no political project, political statement, or philosophical appreciation of politics is thinkable without reference to an ideal state, an ideal ruler, or some idealized vision of the past that can be prospected for utopian remedies to existing political ills—from the loss of freedom to the fragmentation of states and the decline of cities, or even empires. As a rule, a philosopher usually attempts to transcend the particular, the accidental situation, leaving the details of reality aside in favor of generalizations. Reality becomes conceptualized in the form of a philosophical proposition. Nevertheless, political thought always starts out from contingent historical situations. A critical examination of the history of philosophy shows us that as an absolute prerequisite to the discovery, creation, and formulation of political theories, every philosopher, statesman, and intellectual must build on his own historical experience of a real political system, out of which he constructs a new existence (utopia). There is no lack of examples: Plato’s republic can be understood only within the context of the Greek polis; Machiavelli’s idea of the prince is a direct response to Cesare Borgia’s political experience; the significance of Hobbes’s theory of the state cannot be appreciated without taking into account the political, social, and military changes that shook seventeenth-century Europe. Turning now to Jewish thinkers of the humanistic period, I would mention in this context Isaac Abravanel, whose theory of the republic is a negative reflection of his unsuccessful experience with monarchy: his idealization of Venice is comprehensible only as a political celebration of a “tolerant” state.¹ Thus, political thought manifests itself, paradoxically,

as universal theory originating in a contingent historical situation that simultaneously provides the key to explaining that theory.

The definition of Jewish political thought, and the elements that constitute its essential features, is a question that has received a good deal of scholarly attention over the past decade. This is due in part to the publication of the valuable collection of essays, *The Jewish Political Tradition*, edited by Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam J. Zoar, which attempts to do justice to a chapter in Jewish philosophy whose importance was long underestimated. Taking a wider view of political thought, which goes beyond the question of state sovereignty, the editors embrace a vision of society that sees the political in all facets of social organization—a vision that reflects wide-ranging Jewish discussion of and commentary on the Bible. The presence of a political tradition in Judaism is revealed, according to the editors, in comments on the organization of community life; on political choices concerning the distribution of power and influence; on the development and enforcement of a set of laws; on the imposition of taxes for purposes of security, welfare, religion, and education; on relations, of one sort or another, with non-Jewish authorities; and on attempts to limit the use of power by both Jews and non-Jews. In addition to these issues related to the practical regulation of Jewish life, the Jews were concerned also with theoretical questions ("ideas and arguments"), as expressed both in recollections of the biblical past (foundation) and in hopes of a messianic future (utopia). The editors of the collection acknowledge that this tradition is not political in its outward form, “but


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3 1:xxi.