Pray for the wellbeing of the kingdom:
For were it not for the fear it inspires,
man would swallow his neighbour alive.

I. The Rabbinical Connection

The above motto, which fits to perfection the central political conviction of Hobbes, and may suit the present study as well, is not taken from any of the philosopher’s writings, but is attributed to Rabbi Hanina, a Jewish scholar from the first century A.D.1 The saying contains Hobbes’s famous dictum homo homini lupus est. Indeed, even the metaphors “swallowed alive” and “wolf” could be regarded as complementary, if we recollect the story of Red Riding Hood. The saying of Rabbi Hanina also stresses the fear of authority as an effective protection against human pugnacity and its social corollary, bellum omnium contra omnes. It also invokes the fundamental interest of human beings in the wellbeing, or well-functioning, of the state, and even summons religion in support of the political institution, which also accords with the philosophy of Leviathan.

Does this suggest a major influence of rabbinical thinking, preceding the publication of Leviathan by more than a millennium and a half, on the political philosophy of Hobbes? Are there some hidden links between Rabbi Hanina from Jerusalem and the English philosopher, which have not yet been uncovered, but which could be explored and brought to light?

Though one cannot outright rule such a possibility, as long as no evidence is produced to substantiate such a thesis, one has to treat it with undogmatic skepticism. After all, the idea of human depravity was not discovered or invented by Hobbes. It is expressed in no uncertain terms in the Bible: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the

1 The saying is translated from Pirkei Avoth (The Sayings of the Fathers), a tractate of the Mishna, Chapter 3:2. Rabbi Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim (Deputy High Priest) lived during the last years of the existence of the Second Temple.

thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” The Biblical source, with which Rabbi Hanina and Hobbes were quite familiar, may have affected both, or, more likely, corroborated the experience and observation of each. The coercive power of the state and its enforcement of civic order was the experience of antiquity, as well as of the epoch into which Hobbes was born. Thus, the epigrammatic formulation of Rabbi Hanina and the cryptic statements of Hobbes may have been founded both, in a common religious source and in similar individual observations, even if no direct link between the rabbi and the philosopher can be discovered.

Interestingly enough, there is another instance in which an important element in Hobbes’s political theory can be connected with a rabbinical saying in antiquity, even if Hobbes may not have been aware of the source to which he was indebted. When discussing and enumerating the laws of nature, which dictate to man the rules of social behaviour to be followed in order to escape social chaos and individual danger, such laws are simplified into a fundamental principle intelligible to all, or, as Hobbes puts it, “they have been contracted into one easie sum, intelligible, even to the meanest capacity; Do not that to another, which thou wouldest not have done to thy selfe”.

The two statements, the positive and the negative, are perceived by Hobbes as complementary. While the positive statement is presented as the Law of the Gospel, the Latin dictum, identical in contents with the English one mentioned above, is described as “the Law of all men.” Yet, significantly, this maxim appears in the Talmudic literature, where it is attributed to Hillel, one of the most venerated rabbis, who lived from circa 70 B.C. to 10 A.D. The saying, recorded in Aramaic, reads in English translation: “What is hateful to thee, do not to thy neighbour (fellow being).” Of course, both Hillel’s and Jesus’s statements can be seen as practical applications of the Old Testament maxim (Leviticus 19:18), “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

The affinity between the Judaic perception of the basic norm of human rela-

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3 Leviathan, Chapters 14 and 15.
5 Ibid, Chapter 14, p. 92.
6 The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath 31a.