Machiavelli's Theorizing of Power Juxtaposed to the Negative Theological Conceptualization of God: Implications for Mideast Peace

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Ludwig Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* (Aphorism # 471; p. 62e) tells us that "It is so difficult to find the *beginning*. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back." I want to begin this paper with a mini-genealogy of Maimonides' negative theology (which declares that we can only endlessly say what God is not, but not what He is), which traces it to a specific and recurring Talmudic source. I will then go on to argue that Machiavelli who is one of the great theorists of power in the Western intellectual tradition structures his argument about power in a manner that is directly analogous to Maimonides' argument about God. I will be drawing the practical implications of this association throughout the paper. My starting-point for the development of this argument is arbitrary. One can trace the argument of negative theology to numerous Greek, Islamic, and Rabbinic sources. However, the vein of interpretation that I am mining here is relatively under-developed, so I think that it deserves special attention.

Perhaps, the most immediate and most compelling Talmudic precursor for Maimonides' negative theology is Rabbi Akiva, about whom the Babylonian Talmud in Sanhedrin 86a famously tells us that "Rav Johanan said: The author of an anonymous Mishnah is Rav Meir; of an anonymous Tosefta , Rav Nehemiah; of an anonymous dictum in the Sifra, Rav Yehudah; in the Sifre, Rav Shimon; and all are taught according to the views of Rabbi Akiva." All of the prime Talmudic collections of Tannaitic rulings and interpretations were compiled and organized by Rabbi Akiva's star pupils. Rashi in

his gloss on this Talmudic passage says "From what they learned from Rabbi Akiva they formulated the statements that constitute the substance of these collections."

According to Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829-1908, the author of the classic 19th Century codification and interpretation of Jewish law called *Aruch HaShulchan*), a guiding – if not *the* – guiding principle of Rabbi Akiva in both his halakhic and aggadic (legal and homiletical) readings of both the Written and Oral Law of Judaism is *Ein Danin Efshar M'Dei Efshar* – one cannot (should not) deduce the possible from the impossible. In a halakhic sphere, the paradigm Rabbi Epstein attributes to the rabbinic sage Rabbi Akiva is a conception of the relationship between the possible and the impossible that has immediate and profound implications for the status of negative theology in rabbinic understanding.[1] Rabbi Epstien claims that Rabbi Akiva subscribes as a general principle to the view that one cannot infer or deduce the possible from the impossible and that this shapes his understanding of the subject-matters dealt with in both the legal and homiletical and philosophical portions of the Talmud. This principle of the non-inferrability of the possible from the impossible represents a kind of methodological condensation and translation of the principles of negative theology so as to render them applicable for the fashioning and construing of Halakhic rules and Aggadic (homiletic, non-legal) material as a whole. Negative theology comes up against the limit that in order for God to serve as our ultimate "explanatory" concept, He has to embody a principle of difference so radically dissimilar to things human that He cannot explain anything at all in a literal sense. The theological upshot of monotheism (according to the critique offered by negative theology) is that we cannot make sense of the possible (our daily familiar selves and world) by invoking the impossible (God). Rabbi Akiva applies this principle of not drawing inferences to the possible from the impossible as a general meta-Halakhic norm and decision-making rule -- as well as a hermeneutical principle for interpreting non-legal formulations in the Talmud. Rabbi Epstein adduces two examples in support of this reading of Rabbi Akiva -- and I would like to add more examples to this list, and consider their epistemological and theological implications. The scholarly upshot of this investigation is to be able to show how

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[1]. Yechiel Michel Epstein, Aruch Ha-Shulchan (New York: Jonathan Publishing Compay, 1961), Orach Chaim, Volume Three, Siman 625, Paragraph 2, p. 63.

Maimonidean negative theology has strong rabbinic roots – and that aside from the Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Islamic influences that are doubtless present in his work and that have been amply documented by scholars over the last century, it is perhaps the shaping influence of rabbinic texts that most poignantly legitimates the pursuit of negative theology by Maimonides and establishes the right degree of equivalence between rabbinic thought and secular, largely Platonic, understandings that provides him with the psychic equilibrium to pursue his project with vigor and confidence.

Here are the Aruch HaShulchan's examples – followed by my own series of examples – of Rabbi Akiva's adherence to the principle of *Ein Danin Efshar M'Dei Efshar* – one cannot deduce the possible from the impossible – which is a large background premise supporting negative theology – that one cannot say what the infinite God is – but only what He is not:

1. A *braita* cited in the Talmudic tractate of *Sukkah* 11b says the following: "'For I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths'"[2]: These [the booths] were clouds of glory, so Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Akiva says, They made for themselves real booths."[3] Apparently according to Rabbi Akiva, the physical artifact called "booth" can in no way be compared to the "Divine artifact" called "clouds of glory." Since there is no way to close or to traverse the space between the possible and the impossible, the Biblical model for the Halakhic requirement that Jews build and reside in a booth during the festival of Sukkot has to be the physical booths that the Jewish community constructed for themselves during their sojourn in the desert rather than the "impossible" "clouds of glory" which we cannot comprehend and therefore cannot duplicate. Rabbi Eliezer, by contrast, permits inferences across the chasm that separates the possible from the impossible. He could conceivably be adhering to a realist position in comparison with Rabbi Akiva's implicit nominalism -- so that a general term and concept like God need not be answerable to the rationalistic constraints on patterns of derivation from discrete particulars to universals that might inhibit Rabbi Akiva from extrapolating from "clouds of glory" (which cannot be deconstructed into discrete, humanly accessible particulars) to literal,

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[2]. Leviticus 23:43.

[3]. The Babylonian Talmud: Sukkah. Trans. Israel W. Slotki. (London: Soncino Press, 1984).

physical booths. From Rabbi Eliezer's perspective, as rationally unencompassable as the term God is, it can still be realistically (in the sense of philosophical realism) postulated and we can draw whatever inferences we deem appropriate.

2. The Mishnah in *Menahoth* 82a states that "Everything [e.g., animal sacrifices] that is obligatory may be offered only from what is unconsecrated." The Halakhah stated in the Mishnah comes to preclude fulfilling one's ritual obligations to slaughter and eat certain prescribed animals by utilizing animals that had been previously consecrated as "Second Tithe Animals" which one has to consume in Jerusalem and the consecrator might be tempted to think that he could use this animal both to meet his Second Tithe obligation and for whatever additional ritualistic requirement he wanted to use the animal for. The Mishnah states that the Biblical source for the notion that obligatory sacrifices can only come from what is unconsecrated is the paschal lamb sacrificed on the day preceding Passover. The Talmud immediately goes on to ask: "And whence do we know it [this principle] for the Passover-offering itself? -- It was taught [in a braita in Yebamoth 46a]: Rabbi Eliezer said: A Passover-offering was ordained to be brought in Egypt and a Passover-offering was ordained for later generations; as the Passover-offering that was ordained in Egypt could be brought only from what was unconsecrated [For at that time the law of the Second Tithe had not been promulgated, and even later when this law was given it was not to come into force until the Israelites entered the Holy Land], so the Passover-offering that was ordained for later generations may be brought only from what is unconsecrated. Said to him Rabbi Akiva: Is it right to infer the possible from the impossible? [The Passover-offering in Egypt could not possibly have been brought from Second Tithe whereas that of future generations could.]"[4] As in the case of the Biblical model for Sukkot (booths), Rabbi Akiva again invokes the principle that it is illegitimate to infer the possible from the impossible. The Passover-offering tendered at the time of the Exodus from Egypt could not possibly have come from a consecrated Second Tithe animal. Therefore we are not entitled to draw any inferences from that unique event to later phases of Jewish history when the law of the Second Tithe had already been promulgated and the Jews had already come to inhabit the land of Israel which made this law obligatory. It is important to note that Rabbi Akiva interprets the principle that one

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4. The Babylonian Talmud: Menahoth. Trans. Eli Cashdan. (London: Soncino Press, 1989).

cannot infer the possible from the impossible in exactly the same way when the subjects of comparison are God and man (as in the case of Sukkah) and when the subjects of comparison are two different phases of Jewish history (as in the case of the ruling that everything that is obligatory may be offered only from what is unconsecrated). Apparently, Rabbi Akiva seeks to stay within the parameters of the rational and the humanly sustainable whether he is dealing with God-data or human-data. The God-data, also, has to be assimilated and rendered coherent within a human context.

3. The Talmud in Pesahim 22b informs us that "Simeon Imsoni -- others tate, Nehemiah Imsoni -- interpreted every eth in the Torah [as an extending particle]; [but] as soon as he came to, Thou shalt fear [eth] the Lord thy God[5], he desisted [holding it impossible that this fear should extend to another]. Said his disciples to him, 'Master, what is to happen with all the ethin [plural of eth] which you have interpreted?' 'Just as I received reward for interpreting them,' he replied, 'so will I receive reward for refraining from interpreting them.' [Since the eth in one verse does not does not signify extension, it cannot do so elsewhere.] Until Rabbi Akiva came and taught: 'Thou shalt fear [eth] the Lord thy God' is to include scholars. [Hence the verse exhorts obedience to religious authority."[6] Apparently, again according to Rabbi Akiva, since fearing God is an impossible demand to sustain because we cannot grasp what the epithet "fear" means in relation to God, we renounce the effort to deduce the possible from the impossible and we extend the reference of this verse to include the fear (i.e., reverence and compliance) owed Rabbinic leaders. Rabbi Akiva does not displace God as the reference of this verse (the verse is still referring to God even according to Rabbi Akiva). He merely extends the scope of the verse to include human sources of authority while leaving untouched but also untranslated (except in the mediated sense of holding in awe the promulgations of rabbinic expositors of the Divine word) the literal requirement to fear God.

4. In Baba Mezia 62a, we find the following braita: "If two are travelling on a journey [far from civilization], and one has a pitcher of water, if both drink, they will [both] die, but if one only drinks, he can

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[5]. Deuteronomy 6:13.

[6]. The Babylonian Talmud: Pesahim. Trans. H. Freedman. (London: Soncino Press, 1967). I have introduced two emendations into the Soncino Press translation.

reach civilization. -- The Son of Patura taught: It is better that both should drink and die, rather than that one should behold his companion's death. Until Rabbi Akiva came and taught: 'that thy brother may live with thee': thy life takes precedence over his life. ['With thee' implies that thy life takes first place, but that he, too, has a right to life after thine is assured.]"[7]

The assured death of two parties when one party (the party that is the official owner of the life-sustaining resource) could have survived represents for Rabbi Akiva the condition of the impossible. Death is in this sense like God that it constitutes a limit to the human condition which suspends the applicability of the traditional human logical and rational "operators" such as reasoning by way of analogy or direct inference. (My traveling companion is exactly like me. If I have a right to life, so does he.) In such a context, Rabbi Akiva advocates a rational and moral "regrouping" from the perspective of the possible -- from the perspective of life. On a sheerly pragmatic basis, since the pitcher of water is owned by only one person, he becomes the person who is entitled to stay alive in a climate defined by limits and impossibilities of all sorts: Limits of resources (an amount of water that can only keep one person alive); limits to knowledge of self and other (we cannot indubitably attest who of the two traveling companions is the more morally virtuous person); limits to knowledge of the Divine will or perspective (we have no way of knowing how God evaluates these people -- and what fates he has decreed for them).

In Makkoth 24a-24b, we find two striking, overlapping examples of how Rabbi Akiva conceives of the phenomenon of redemption:

> Long ago, as Rabban Gamliel, R.. Elazar b. Azariah, R. Joshua, and R. Akiva were walking on the road, they heard the noise of the crowds at Rome [on traveling] from Puteoli, a hundred and twenty miles away. They all fell a-weeping, but R. Akiva seemed merry. Said they to him: Wherefore are you merry? Said he to them: Wherefore are you weeping? Said they: These heathens who bow down to images and burn incense to

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[7]. The Babylonian Talmud: Baba Mezia. Trans. H. Freedman. (London: Soncino Press, 1986).

idols live in safety and ease, whereas our Temple, the "footstool' of our God, is burnt

down by fire, and should we then not weep? He replied: Therefore, am I merry. If they

that offend Him fare thus, how much better shall fare they that do obey Him!

Once again they were coming up to Jerusalem together, and just as they came to

Mount Scopus they saw a fox emanating from the Holy of Holies. They fell a-

weeping, and Rabbi Akiva seemed merry. Wherefore, said they to him, are you

merry? Said he: Wherefore are you weeping? Said they to hin: A place of

which it was once said: And the common man that draweth nigh shall be put

to death, is now become the haunt of foxes, and should we not weep? Said he

to them: Therefore am I merry; for it is written, And I will take to me faithful

witnesses to record, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the Son of Jeberechiah. Now

what connection has this Uriah the priest with Zecheriah? Uriah lived during

the times of the first Temple, while Zecheriah lived [and prophesied] during

the second Temple; but Holy Writ linked the [later] prophecy of Zechariah with

the [earlier] prophecy of Uriah. In the [earlier] prophecy [in the days] of Uriah

it is written, Therefore shall Zion four sake be ploughed as a field etc. In

Zechariah it is written, Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, There shall yet old men

And old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem, so long as Uriah's

[threatening] prophecy had not had its fulfillment, I had misgivings lest

Zechariah's prophecy might not be fulfilled; now that Uriah's prophecy has

Been [literally] fulfilled, it is quite certain that Zecheriah's prophecy also is to

find its literal fulfillment. Said they to him: Akiva you have comforted us!

Akiva, you have comforted us!

Both of these texts dramatize for us how in his strategies of textual interpretation and in his construal of theological conundrums Rabbi Akiva has recourse to the principle that we do not infer the possible from the impossible, but that we must go through the theoretical loop of only inferring the possible from the possible. The words of consolation and deliverance of the prophets cannot be grasped by us as straightforward transcriptions of the intentions and overall designs of God but only as grounded in the constraints and rhythms of human life. The empirical witnessing of the celebrations of the pagans constitutes the emotional and existential guarantor of the continual rotation of fortunes in human life and the reconstruction of Jerusalem. The Roman success in the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of its temple implodes at the moment the Romans begin to celebrate their victories. The celebration could at least partially be seen as a cover for nagging feelings of guilt and anxiety provoked by their destructive acts. Once they are put in circulation in this indirect way, these feelings stand poised to rise more fully and prominently to the surface and to become in the end unmanageable. The public displays of Roman triumphs can also be expected to trigger (after the manner of Machiavelli's paradoxical notion of opportunita) strong desires for revenge on the part of the vanquished Jewish population that might now work in especially hard-headed and realistic ways to re-appropriate its place in the sun. We engage the impossible – God's redemption – which we cannot fathom, through the intermediacy of the possible – human glorying in remarkable but transient successes, which we can grasp. It is only through the interposition of this metaphysical layer of the "possible" that we can appropriately orient ourselves toward prophetic discourse concerning redemption.

Rabbi Akiva manifests a similar approach in dealing with the competing and conflicting prophecies of Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah concerning redemption. When confronted by a fox coming out of what was formerly the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, Rabbi Akiva (unlike his colleagues) is consoled because the level of devastation that Jerusalem had suffered was an indirect but still powerful testimonial to the breadth of the renovation and rebuilding to come. The empirical confirmation of the prophecy of destruction reduces from the level of the "impossible" to the plane of the "possible" the prophecy concerning rejuvenation and renewal. Our only point of access to the realm of the "impossible" is through the intermediacy of the possible. On a sheerly naturalistic level, extreme possibilities have a way of engendering and facilitating each other.

Rabbi Akiva's refusal to draw any inferences across the boundary that separates the possible from the impossible can be interpreted as reflecting certain logical scruples. To draw such inferences would be to deny skepticism and the idea that there are limits to rationality. However, to reject the category of the impossible would also not be an acceptable alternative because that would involve illegitimatley transforming limits to knowledge into a spurious knowledge claim: The impossible does not exist. Rabbi Akiva opts for a position that can be construed as being a counterpart to a generalized agnosticism. He does not take a decisive position against the idea of the impossible -- and refrains as assiduously from rejecting it as he does from affirming it by debarring the conceptual and logical apparati of the possible from regularly interacting with it. The "impossible" remains intact as a "possibility" that is neither affirmed nor denied -- and the regular operations of mind are restricted to the domain of the possible.

The Talmud's gloss in Sanhedrin 26b of tohu wa-bhohu as the speech upon which the world rests can also be seen as implicitly following Rabbi Akiva's principle that one cannot infer the possible from the impossible. The categories of the possible and the impossible regardless of what they do and do not refer to are after all human conceptualizations -- human leaps and delimitations above the interminable flux of experience. To be committed to the value of infinity means to acknowledge that the challenges, stumbling-blocks, and elisions that confront us as we go about wending our way through the labyrinthine mazes of our own conceptualizations and the

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relationships that they spawn reflect back upon our own efforts to stabilize our situation in the world and leave us in the dark as to what reality (mediate and ultimate) is about. Creation from a humanly-graspable perspective takes place on the level of speech -- which means that it ceaselessly questions its own questioning and questionableness and leaves the nature of reality as a continually-deferred open question.

Maimonides in *The Guide of the Perplexed* also utilizes the vocabulary of "the possible" and "the impossible" to dramatic effect. In the very same chapter in the *Guide* where Maimonides vigorously asserts the finality of the category of "the impossible," he retraces his steps and suggests a countervailing position: "the point with regard to which there is disagreement concerns the things that could be supposed to belong to either of the two classes – whether they belong to the class of the possible or to the class of the impossible."[8] The reason why the subsumption of a particular notion or phenomenon under the rubrics of either "the possible" or "the impossible" remains contestable is that there is no prima facie , mechanical test for distinguishing between the operation and products of reason and the imagination. Maimonides formulates his attack on the distinction between reason and the imagination in a series of cumulatively structured rhetorical questions:

Would that I knew whether this gate is open and licit, so that everyone can claim

and assert with regard to any notion whatever that he conceives: This is possible;

whereas someone else says: No, this is impossible because of the nature of the

matter. Or is there something that shuts and blocks this gate so that a man can assert

[8] *Guide*, III:15:461. This nomenclature refers to the part, chapter, and page in the Shlomo Pines translation of the *Guide:* (Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed.* Trans. Shlomo Pines. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

decisively that such and such a thing is impossible because of its nature? Should this

be verified and examined with the help of the imaginative faculty or with the intellect?

And by what can one differentiate between that which is imagined and that which is

cognized by the intellect? For an individual sometimes disagrees with someone else

or with himself with regard to a thing that in his opinion is possible, so that he asserts

that by its nature it is possible; whereas the objector says: This assertion that it is possible

is the work of the imagination and not due to consideration by the intellect. Is there

accordingly something that permits differentiation between the imaginative faculty and

the intellect? And is this something altogether outside both the intellect and the

imagination, or is it by the intellect itself that one distinguishes between that which is

cognized by the intellect and that which is imagined?[9]

In this passage, Maimonides not only points to the circularity attached to the task of
achieving an unequivocal description of a series of data as either "rational" or "imaginative," he
also suggests that the circularity extends even toward attaining a noncontroversial designation of
the faculties from which the data spring as being either "reason" or the "imagination." If it is
"by the intellect itself that one distinguishes" between reason and the imagination -- and if one
supports one's claims by adducing evidence consisting in the products produced by the
respective faculties of the intellect and the imagination – then one's mode of reasoning becomes
eminently circular. The presence of a rational faculty is attested to by rational arguments, and

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[9] *Guide,* III:15:460-61.

the existence of the imagination is corroborated by imaginativwe formulations – but since the

invocation of the one (product or faculty) is cited in an endlessly circular manner to confirm the

validity and autonomy of the other (product or faculty), the identity of both remains everlastingly

indeterminate. Maimonides tantalizingly insinuates that perhaps there is something that falls

outside of the confines of both reason and the imagination that is responsible for the way we

classify our verbal and textual artifacts as being either "rational" or "imaginative":   "Is there

accordingly something that permits differentiation between the imaginative faculty and the

intellect? And is that thing something altogether outside both the intellect and the imagination?"

Perhaps where there is enough convergence surrounding a particular conception we

pragmatically label it "rational," and where a sufficient degree of divergence still prevails we call

it "imaginative."[10]

       The path that both Rabbi Akiva and Maimonides situate us upon is a skeptical one

that leads to the recognition that knowledge, certainty, and truth are as impossible as

God. Claims to knowledge, certainty, and truth are vulnerable to the charge that the

evidence that we invoke to buttress these claims will always be willy-nilly infiltrated by

categorial presuppositions and commitments that vitiate the objective corroboration that

we seek. As Plato long ago pointed out in the *Meno,* in order to know anything, on some

level we already have to know it. Knowledge proceeds in the trajectory of circularity –

not in an all-or-nothing engagement or conquest of the truth. Knowledge of God resides

on the same plane as knowledge of physical objects. In both l have to be careful not to

fall into the trap of worshipping idols in the name of God, since in accordance with

monotheistic teaching, we can only ascribe things to God without being able to validate

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[10] Stuart Hampshire, "A New Way of Seeing," *New York Review of Books,* July 13, 1995, p. 48.

them in any direct experiential way. The responsibility for reading, interpretation, and translation into practice always falls squarely on us.

Negative theology in Maimonides' hands can be construed as Maimonides' response to Rabbi Akiva's challenge that one cannot deduce the possible from the impossible. Human beings are finite – and God is infinite. There is no way that we can cross the boundary between the finite and the infinite – and directly, literally conceptualize God and our mode or modes for relating to Him. Given the unbridgeable chasm between us and God, the most we can do is to point to the incompleteness of the operations of human reason that prevent us from achieving a self-sufficient explanation of any phenomenon. The most that can be achieved by this approach to God that embarks from a recognition of the limitations of human reason is a continuing further intensification of the preoccupation with the limitations of human reason – and an institutionalization of the insight concerning the elusiveness of the Biblical God.

Machiavelli (1469-1527) does to "power" exactly what Maimonides does to "God." Power for Machiavelli remains enduringly mysterious and beyond our range of comprehension. It generally represents for Machiavelli the operations of a malicious Fortuna. Fortuna (in Michael Oakeshiott's phrase) refers to "the geological forces in politics" – the forces in politics (such as globalization in today's world) over which no one political actor can exercise an effective veto. Fortuna is famously personified by Machiavelli as a capricious and imperious woman – who remains forever inscrutable to the men who are devoted to her and worship her. She can only be courted and "tamed" (to utilize Machiavelli's word) by political actors and strategists who learn how to capitalize upon and work with their own intellectual limitations, instead of attempting in one grandiose, romantic gesture to pierce through those limitations and overwhelming and possessing her once and for all.

The Machiavellian political actor operates with what Michael Oakeshott has called "safe assumptions" – such as that it is better (all other factors being equal) to align oneself with the middle class and not the nobility in seeking to take over a principality – rather than with any putative set of certainties. Machiavellian political thought is formulated in an idiom of approximation – rather than in an idiom of certainty. Nothing is known for sure – neither what is happening in the world (all of the factors at work in any given political or military situation), nor how to respond to it. The gap between what the political actor is seeking to learn and master and the objects of his search is infinite. The uncertainty surrounding political deliberation and action is without end – but the imperative to act is equally unrelenting and infinite. The monotheistic believer's relationship to God in Maimonides eerily prefigures the political actor's relationship to power in Machiavelli. The first almost seems to serve as the inspirational model for the second.

From a Machiavellian perspective, peace is war by other means. You can have a much greater watchful vigilance of your former opponent in times of peace than in a time of war. (Carl Schmitt would in all likelihood have approved of this idea – but he would not have acknowledged it as Machiavellian. He would rather have attributed it to Hobbes.)

Israel needs to evolve into a sponsor (or co-sponsor) of a kind of Middle East Marshall Plan: Rebuilding your enemy so that he becomes your ally and friend. The title of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel, *Enemies – A Love Story*, comes to mind as a title capturing an analogue to this process.

Enemies must learn to use each other's weapons. The weakness of the Palestinians has to be matched by the deliberate, self-consciously generated weakness of the Israelis in the form of benevolence and generosity in order for both sides to emerge as triumphant. If this approach is

pursued, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict harbors the prospect of turning into a sum-sum conflict, where both sides stand equally to gain by pursuing peace.

Asymmetricality generally needs to be perceived as a diagnostic tool – rather than as a prescriptive tool. When you notice that the resources arrayed on one side of a conflict are asymmetrical in relation to the resources being mobilized on the other side of a conflict, when, for example, your nation embarks on a policy of deliberately mobilizing and displaying superior force in order to expedite victory over a pronouncedly inferior nation, then, after an initial time-limited period where one strives to assess whether one's opponent can attack or fight on the same level that one's own nation is attacking or fighting, one has to reintroduce symmetry in order for each side to have a better chance of prevailing over the other. A fox has to be fought with fox-like tactics; similarly, a lion has to be contained through a lion-like build-up of armaments on the other side, satisfying the conditions of deterrence. Weakness has to be combatted by an equally effective form of weakness, so that the asymmetrical advantage achieved by the first nation's display of weakness can be neutralized. Military weakness must be met with generosity in order to equalize the confrontation. Otherwise, you end up with South Africa or Vietnam – where the winner turns loser and the loser turns winner.

From a Machiavellian perspective, success and failure – military and political victory and military and political defeat – are always poised to become their dialectical opposite numbers unless they are approached with the subtlety of the dialectician, fully aware of the fluidity and interchangeability of military and political outcomes – indeed, of virtually all life outcomes.

Machiavelli's theorizing of Opportunita (one of the four key terms in his political vocabulary, together with Fortuna, Necessita and Vertu) eerily resonates with the famous passage at the conclusion of the Babylonian Talmudic tractate of *Makkot* quoted above.

In the first episode cited earlier, Rabbi Akiva appears to derive consolation upon hearing the sounds of Roman triumph from what he takes to be the natural rhythms of human history. Great success often becomes the platform for degeneration – and ultimately for failure. Scaling the heights sets in motion a reverse dynamic that in many instances leads to failure.

This movement discerned by Rabbi Akiva becomes the crux of Machiavelli's concept of opportunity. In conceptualizing and elaborating upon his notion of Opportunita, Machiavelli very sharply says: "For Romulus to become king of Rome and founder of his country, he had to have left Alba and been exposed to die when he was born." (*The Prince,* Chapter Six, pp. 50-51) Romulus's great moment of opportunity was to have had the good fortune to enter the world in the turning of the wheel of fortune to its lowest ebb. His parents left him exposed to die as an infant, with only very dim prospects of rescue and survival. At birth, he was lucky enough to be at rock bottom, so that he could only move up. The rhythms of life that both Rabbi Akiva and Machiavelli were familiar with (and that Hegel was to capture with his notion of *weltgeist,* which moves in the course of time from one country or culture to the next to the next*)* suggested that he could only move up in the world. Machiavelli obviously cannot claim to know this connection with unconditional certainty. There are too many interlocking causal chains in the career of Romulus to be able to pinpoint with precision which one was a necessary and sufficient condition for his rise to power. Power generally operates under

the aegis of a malicious Fortuna, so all we have are what Oakeshott has called "safe assumptions" in trying to engage the inscrutability and mystery of Fortuna. Rabbi Akiva and Machiavelli are operating with the same "safe assumptions" in delineating similar productive outcomes for oppression.

One could say that Machiavelli has a negative conception (using the adjective "negative" in the same way that it is being used in the term "negative theology") of power. He very strenuously emphasizes from multiple points of view that power does not consist in force, violence, or coercion. If anything, it is to be associated with their strategically calculated avoidance. It is the substitutive mechanisms of power such as reputation and deterrence generally that facilitate one's attainment of power and his stabilization and entrenchment in it. Power itself remains an impenetrable mystery for Machiavelli. We only know it through its behavioral consequences – the compliant actions that it generates and legitimates on the part of one's constituents and opponents – and not through what it is in and for itself. There are a series of safe assumptions – such as that it is better to relate to one's supporters on the plane of fear (where they fear the sanctions that would accrue from non-compliance) – rather than on the level of love or hatred (trying to get your followers to love you or hate you as a means of intensifying your control over them). Power as presence is a mystical and mystifying concept. Power as absence (as a series of substitutive mechanisms) is the domain in which power operates and flourishes.

Because power remains an incompletely conceptualizable notion, one has to continually learn from the relevant others in one's political life how to exercise it. One has to regularly imbibe cues and signals from one's enemies how to effectively mobilize

power against them. If your opponent trades in weakness (even necessarily, because of

his lack of resources), you have to learn how to utilize some version or counterpart to

weakness against him. One needs to cultivate an endless flexibility to pick up the

intimations of current rhythms and configurations of power in order to mobilize

commensurate approaches to one's apparent enemies. For Machiavelli, "friend" and

"enemy" remain fungible, interchangeable categories on an ongoing basis as long as the

counter-players in a conflict-ridden situation realize that there is more within their power

to do than they are wont to recognize at any given moment of perception and analysis.

Disenchantment of the allure of military victory and the reestablishment of a state of

parity and equality is from a Machiavellian perspective the implicit goal of all military

confrontations.

Machiavelli approves of imperialism only if it is supported by a united citizen

army. The country that is being exploited by a colonizing, imperialistic power learns

from its oppressor how to fight back with its own strong citizen army – and the prospect

of parity, and therefore of peace, will be restored. Absent this condition that the

colonizing power has an indigenous, strongly motivated fighting force, the status quo of

non- or anti-imperialism needs to be restored. (Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Book I,

Chapter 4)

Power is theorized by Machiavelli in behavioral, consequentialist terms. It

signifies being able to get other people to do what you want them to do. Because there

are so many imponderable factors that enter into people's calculations – including their

moods and quirks and other complex psychological formations – the whole process of

power-generation and power-maintenance remains inscrutable. Machiavelli famously

tells us at the end of *The Prince* that the unexpected eruptions of power that Fortuna

(which most frequently appears to us as a malicious Fortuna) represents is best

symbolized by the figure of a woman: Fortuna has the capricious, imperious character of

a woman (at least the prototype of Machiavelli's "woman.")   She remains fundamentally

unknowable and unpredictable. She can only be approached in a quasi-Kantian manner

with safe assumptions, dependable generalizations – not secure knowledge.

It is important to note that linked to this feature of the impenetrability and

volatility of power in Machiavelli's thought is his pronouncedly anti-apocalyptic stance

in his theorizing of power. Politics is not about redemption – but how we might

collectively navigate through time without a secure prospect of redemption. The

achievement lies in making it through time itself -- not in closing time or superseding it

by entering an extra-temporal dimension of human life. Politics for Machiavelli is a

mode of organization of human life applied by religion to institutionalize itself and to

create a niche for itself in the world. Religion for Machiavelli is a set of worldly

institutions that requires politics in order to function. At best, Machiavelli is what Walter

Benjamin called a "weak messianist," for whom the outcome of history remains

unknown. Machiavelli shares the proto-Kantianism and the weak messianism with

Maimonides. These two traits of both thinkers are aspects of skepticism that are

inextricably, conceptually linked. For both Maimonides and Machiavelli, we only have

approximative mechanisms for knowing both what the state of the world is currently and

what its future destiny might be

According to game theoretic rationality, we stand to lose the least by risking the

least. We resort to substitutive mechanisms to evoke positive responses to our wishes,

rather than mobilizing the full force of the resources we have available. Power, like God, even though these concepts refer to tools and elements that reside outside of the self, are managed, because of the uncertainty and incalculability associated with these notions, almost entirely from within the confines of the self – the self as aware of its own limitations. Both the aspirations to draw near to God and to assert and achieve power – and the strategies requisite for realizing and attaining them – derive from the self. Both God and power are at the edge of human experience – conjurable, but not controllable, by us. Every move associated with them – from conceptualizing and categorizing what they are to devising strategies for having them operate in our favor and undertaking initiatives to achieve these results – has its roots in us.

Recognizing that Machiavelli in a proto-Kantian fashion is substituting the structure of the mind for the structure of the world – we only know the categories and modes of analysis that we fashion and contribute, not what is out there in the world that is stimulating all of this mental activity – we build upon what awes and vexes us : The extreme volatility of circumstances and contexts; things, events, and phenomena in the world constantly merging into their opposites. To "stay ahead of the curve," we need to continually consider what the next rhythmic swerve in the evolution of circumstances is likely to be. Since the stubborn and unrelenting assertion of strength is likely to be the precursor of a Vietnam- or South African-like defeat, in order to regain the strategic initiative, Israel in relation to the Palestinians needs to put on the Chesed (kindness; generosity) mask (as Menachem Begin to some extent did in relation to the Egyptians in restoring the Sinai to them), and don it to the hilt. Only the willful condensation of strength (aggressive military action) into weakness (being a thorough sponsor and partner

in the fashioning of a Palestinian state) will enable Israel to endure and prevail as a Jewish state. Only deliberately assumed Israeli weakness in the manner that I have described can defuse and de-toxify the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. In Machiavelli, as in Nietzsche after him, everything is instrumentalized. Nothing remains stable long enough to be considered pure substance. So strength can be the outward veneer of weakness – and weakness can be the outward veneer of strength.