
Romancing Spinoza

Allan Nadler

IN HIS recent memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, the Israeli novelist Amos Oz recalls discussions he overheard in the late 1940's as a child in a working-class Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. Everybody, he writes, had "definite views" about everything, from the future of Zionism to the novels of Kurt Hamsun to women's rights. Among some local "thinkers and preachers," Oz adds, were those "who called for the Orthodox Jewish ban on Spinoza to be lifted." This ban of excommunication, or *herem*, had been imposed on the great philosopher in 1656.

One of the local Spinozist "thinkers and preachers" was Joseph Klausner, a renowned professor at the Hebrew University (and Oz's great-uncle). In a 1927 public lecture coinciding with the 250th anniversary of Spinoza's death in 1677, Klausner, an apostle of "Jewish humanism," took it upon himself not only to declare "our recognition of the terrible sin" that the Jewish people had committed against Spinoza in excommunicating him but to repudiate the idea that Spinoza was, in fact, a heretic. Hailing "the Jewish character of Spinoza's 'Torah,'" Klausner rose to his peroration:

[T]o Spinoza the Jew we call out . . . from atop Mount Scopus, out of our new sanctuary—the

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Hebrew University of Jerusalem—the ban is rescinded! Judaism's wrongdoing against you is hereby lifted, and whatever was your sin against her shall be forgiven. Our brother are you, our brother are you, our brother are you!

At the time, Klausner's performance evoked a decidedly mixed reaction. Among the luminaries present for the occasion was Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, who would later recall that "many people were laughing at [Klausner's] emotional performance ('our brother are you,' indeed!)." But Klausner was hardly the first, and by no means the last, in a long line of Jewish romancers of Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza, the meaning of whose life and thought has sometimes seemed permanently up for grabs.

SPINOZA (1632-1677) was excommunicated with the harshest version of the *herem* (ban) available to the leaders of Amsterdam's Portuguese Jewish community. Most of these men had, like Spinoza's own parents, escaped the Inquisition and found refuge in the tolerant, cosmopolitan Dutch Republic. Their own tolerance, however, had been severely tested by this renegade among them. Interestingly, though the text of the *herem* alludes to Spinoza's "evil opinions" and "horrible heresies," he was placed under ban a full fourteen years before those opinions and heresies would be published in developed form in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological-Political Treatise*).

Clearly, word about him had gotten out long before the appearance of this work, whose unforgiving and unprecedented critique of revealed religion would send shockwaves all across Europe. Already before the *herem*, rumors had been circulating in Amsterdam that the young Spinoza was teaching three basic heresies: that “God can be conceived corporeally,” that “angels do not exist,” and that “the soul perishes with the body.” These rumors, according to the earliest Spinoza biographers, were what set off the chain of events that ended with the *herem*.

As the *Tractatus* would bear out, the rumors were perfectly accurate. In both his materialist conception of God and his conception of man as just one among the infinite modes of “Substance,” Spinoza left standing no pillar of traditional Jewish or Christian theology. Indeed, given his brazen attack on Scripture and ecclesiastical authority, his cynical mockery of the “madness” of supernatural religious faith, and his insistence on defining God out of any theologically meaningful existence, the Amsterdam rabbis’ prescience in expelling him seems all the more remarkable.

The terms of the ban were so strict as to sever any possible future contact between Spinoza and his family and community. Yet, far from displaying any interest in contritely returning to the Jewish fold—as had most previous excommunicants in Jewish history—Spinoza’s response to the terrible edict was at best indifferent and, very likely, one of genuine relief. Upon receiving word of the verdict (he did not bother to show up for his own excommunication), he declared, according to his first biographer and friend Jean-Maximilian Lucas:

They do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal; but, since they want it that way, I enter gladly on the path that was opened to me.

After his departure from Amsterdam’s Jewish community, Spinoza took his friends from among liberal, dissenting Christian sects like the Collegiants, Mennonites, Anabaptists, and Quakers. Upon his untimely death at the age of forty-four, he was given a decent funeral and respectful interment in the New Church graveyard in the Hague.

THE MAIN outlines of Spinoza’s thought could not be clearer or more sweeping. In the *Tractatus*, he openly questioned the divinity of Scripture and assailed the authority of the Church. In place of the first, he offered a “natural,” critically historical and philological reading of the Bible; in

place of the second, a secular state in which religious authorities would enjoy no power.

Anticipating late-19th-century developments in the critical study of the Bible, Spinoza was interested only in understanding the literal sense of Scripture, not in assessing its philosophical truth (if any). On this basis, not content simply to deny the divine origins of the Bible or the inerrancy of its text, he openly ridiculed many of its narratives, and none more directly than those attesting to miracles:

God’s decrees and commandments, as well as His providence are in fact nothing more than Nature’s order; so that when Scripture describes this or that having been accomplished by God or His will, nothing more is claimed than that it came about in perfect accord with Nature’s law and order, and not, as the vulgar multitude believe, that Nature’s time was suspended [by God] or that her order was temporarily interrupted.

To appreciate why Spinoza found miracles particularly offensive, it helps to grasp the basic principles of his metaphysics, contained in his posthumously published *Ethics* (1678). Centuries of interpretation have had the effect of miring the *Ethics* in a vast and confusing thicket of scholarly debate; but its core ideas are quite simple and consistent.

At the center of Spinoza’s system is the doctrine that everything in the universe—Nature writ large—inheres in a single, perfect “Substance.” This infinite and eternal Substance is what Spinoza calls “God, or Nature.” It alone is self-caused, absolutely determined, and uncontingent upon the existence of any other thing.

In this system, there is no room for a transcendent God Who willfully created the physical universe and Who stands outside of it as its master, communicates with prophets, chooses His favorite nations and individuals, judges, rewards, and punishes His creatures at will—or performs miracles. Instead, Spinoza’s God is totally bound by His own immutable laws, i.e., the laws of Nature. This conception robs the traditional deity of autonomy and strips Him of all the anthropomorphic, moral, and psychological attributes through which He had always been conceived in traditional monotheistic faiths.

And man? The same simple and exacting ideas that underlie Spinoza’s metaphysics thoroughly inform his anthropology as well. As just one of the infinite “modes,” or individuated things, within infinite Substance, man is no different in essence from any other existing thing. This is a stunning refutation of the biblical notion that man alone was created in the divine image, and was separated by God to enjoy dominion over all of the inferior

species of the earth. Spinoza repeatedly derides the vanity inherent in that traditional view, repudiating the arrogant delusion that man uniquely possesses a mind, or soul, which lives on eternally after the body expires.

AND YET, the harsh clarity of his thought notwithstanding, both Spinoza the man and Spinoza the philosopher have been drowning for more than two centuries in a vast sea of legends and willful misreadings.

In this enterprise, non-Jews have been as active as Jews. Among the first to re-create Spinoza in a more pleasing image were the early-modern German romantics, among them Goethe and Herder. They viewed Spinoza's identification of God with Nature from, as it were, the other side: not as the materialist atheism it is but as the very opposite, i.e., a mystical form of pantheism that eliminates Nature's autonomous reality by overwhelming it with an immanent divine presence. Hence Goethe's insistence on calling Spinoza "most theistic [*theissimum*], even most Christian [*Christianissimum*]," and the famous description of him by the German poet Novalis as a "God-intoxicated man."

On another front, especially in the 20th century and extending to our own day, many liberal Jewish scholars and intellectuals have developed their own passionate attachment to Spinoza and have stubbornly refused to let go of it. Insisting on his essential "Jewishness," they have in effect joined their names to the motley collection of "thinkers and preachers" of Amos Oz's youth and, like Joseph Klausner, have yearned to rescind the *berem* and reclaim him as their "brother."

Klausner himself was far from alone in 1927. Indeed, during the course of that anniversary year, Spinoza was feted as the Jews' greatest unjustly-slighted philosopher in communities around the world, from Warsaw, Vilna, and Paris to New York, Buenos Aires, and Montreal. The Hebrew and Yiddish journals of Poland and the Americas were filled with studies documenting the essential Jewishness of Spinoza's pantheism. In both New York and Tel Aviv, the ladies of Hadassah gathered to honor his memory.

Five years later, there were still more elaborate commemorations of the tricentennial of the philosopher's birth. Even some rabbis were moved to join the celebrations. In 1933, Dr. Samuel Schulman, the ultra-liberal "minister" of New York's Temple Emanu-El, waxed penitential over the offense committed by Amsterdam's Jewish authorities against their "God-intoxicated" son. Decrying the *berem* as a "tragic event," Schulman concluded by

hailing Spinoza as "a true son of the synagogue. . . . We love and revere his memory."

Not all of the attention devoted to Spinoza was mindless; nor was the formidably learned Klausner the only student of his work to see him as a forerunner to a peculiarly Jewish form of modern secularism, including in its Zionist incarnation. Around the same time as Klausner's speech, Leo Strauss, then a young scholar in Weimar Germany, was hard at work on his first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Berlin, 1930). Strauss was far more skeptical than Klausner about the allegedly Jewish nature of Spinoza's philosophy, and had little taste for the philosopher's contempt for revealed religion. But he found in the *Tractatus* a "natural," secular rendering of Jewish history that was compatible with and essentially supportive of the Zionist worldview—a worldview that Strauss regarded as, increasingly, the sole answer to Germany and Europe's long-festered "Jewish problem."

Like Jewish romancers of Spinoza before and since, Strauss cited the so-called "Zionist passage" from the third chapter of the *Tractatus*:

Nay, I would go so far as to believe that if the foundations of their religion have not overly emasculated their minds, [the Jews] may even, if occasion arises, so changeable are human affairs, raise up their empire afresh, and God may a second time elect them.

As it happens, this passing suggestion appears at the end of a chapter otherwise dedicated to debunking the biblical doctrine of the divine election of Israel and rather brutally blaming the Jews' sufferings on their own clannishness and self-imposed isolation. Nevertheless, Strauss joined others in seizing upon it as evidence that this most radical progenitor of modernity was also a proponent of restoring the Jewish commonwealth.

The Jewish enthrallment with Spinoza dissipated somewhat in the 40's, trailing the fall-off of interest in him by Western philosophers in general. Neither idealists nor positivists, it seems, had much use for Spinoza's strictly a-priori metaphysics. In a clearly autobiographical anecdote, the late Richard H. Popkin would recall the time, shortly after the end of World War II, "when a young American professor submitted an article to a leading philosophical journal, explaining a difficult point in one of Spinoza's arguments. In short order, he received his manuscript back with the news, written on it by hand, that 'we are not now, and never will be, interested in Spinoza.'"¹

¹ Popkin's *Spinoza* (Oxford, 2005) is the best short introduction to the philosopher's life and thought.

But by 1956, the 300th anniversary of the *herem*, the Jewish romance, at least, had revived. Israel's first prime minister, David ben Gurion, himself an avid Spinozist, took the occasion to appeal to Israel's chief rabbi to lift the ban. The May 1956 issue of COMMENTARY featured a panegyric by the Czech-born intellectual Felix Weltsch, "The Perennial Spinoza," whose dialectical thesis was that thanks to Spinoza's strictly rationalist philosophy, later Jewish thinkers like Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig were spurred to develop far-reaching counter-theologies of their own, centered on a more personal, or existential, relationship with God. And so forth.

AND NOW, to mark the 350th anniversary of the ban, we are in the midst of another mini-revival. Like its predecessors, this one is attuned to the needs of the hour. Thus, while many earlier reclaimers were struggling to articulate a modern, non-theistic and/or nationalist Jewish identity of their own, and discovering precedents for it in Spinoza, today's seem perfectly satisfied with the standard contemporary version of liberal universalism, and want only to be able to affix the label "Jewish" to it. Such, at any rate, appears to be the impulse behind a widely publicized new book by Rebecca Goldstein, entitled *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave us Modernity*.²

A novelist and philosophy professor, Goldstein here deploys her considerable literary imagination in an effort to recast Spinoza's philosophy as the product of a "working through" of his Jewish identity—an identity that, paradoxically, he would embody most perfectly in appearing to reject it. That there is more than a particle of self-justification in this exercise of Goldstein's is something she makes no attempt to hide. Thus, explaining her choice of title, she confides that her intention is to draw the essentially Jewish Spinoza out of his secular, rational hiding-place; to rediscover the faithful young Jewish son he was before he went public with the heresies that resulted in his excommunication.

For Goldstein, this mission is as much personal as it is intellectual:

There was a moment long ago when I knew next to nothing about the . . . [philosophical] system of Spinoza, and yet when I felt I knew something about what it was like to have been him, the former yeshiva student, Baruch Spinoza. I would like to know that feeling again.

Over the course of some 50 pages that might have been better devoted to a basic explication of Spinoza's life and thought, the reader is then treated to a mem-

oir of teenage "encounters" with Spinoza through the Jewish-history lessons the young Rebecca Goldstein received at an Orthodox high school for girls on New York's Lower East Side.

What she imbibed from those lessons, she writes, and what caused her to fall in love with Spinoza, was the sense that as a young man, he had repressed his incipient heresies so as to remain steadfast in his respect for his family, thereby showing a deep reverence for the traditional Jewish values of filial piety and domestic peace. The proof of this, she was instructed as a schoolgirl and still appears to accept, was the fact that Spinoza held back from revealing any of his heterodox thinking until after the death of his parents, and after he had dutifully fulfilled "the prescribed mitzvahs for mourning a parent, going every day to the synagogue, saying kaddish." It was this, the mature Rebecca Goldstein tells us, that made her think Spinoza "must have been a lovable man. I sat in . . . class, and I felt that I loved him."

THE THOUGHT certainly has its charms. But there is not a shred of historical evidence in support of this tale, and it goes no way toward defining anything essentially Jewish in Spinoza's philosophy, let alone his emotional makeup. On this score, Richard Popkin's conclusion is definitive:

Spinoza showed practically no interest in his Jewish past. He lived his entire life in the Netherlands and does not seem to have been infected by anything concerning his Jewish background. . . . [T]he fact is that Spinoza was essentially stone deaf to Jewish reactions and attitudes.

Of course, this has not stopped people from searching, like Rebecca Goldstein, for even the slightest traces of Jewish sentimentality on Spinoza's part. One such alleged piece of evidence, adduced by her and others, is the fact that unlike earlier unrepentant heretics or excommunicants, he did not convert to Christianity. But this, too, is nonsense.

Spinoza was famous for his strong aversion to hypocrisy and his indifference to social prestige or individual fortune. To convert to Christianity, another religion asserting supernatural doctrines, would have made no rational sense to him. Worse, it would have been a betrayal of the very core of his belief, boldly articulated in the *Ethics*, that man's happiness and freedom are directly proportional to his submission to sober reason alone.

Nor does his refusal to undergo baptism suggest a lingering attachment to Judaism. The fact is that,

² Schocken/Nextbook, 287 pp., \$19.95.

while never formally converting, Spinoza did clearly favor Christianity over Judaism as a reliable source of “true religion”—his term for the universal teachings of morality and virtue that he distilled from the Christian Bible and contrasted to the allegedly tribal and archaic laws of the Torah. In the *Tractatus* especially, Spinoza repeatedly and effusively praises the message of Jesus, whom he always refers to as Christ, invidiously comparing that message with the narrow-minded exclusiveness of the Pharisees (as he nastily dubs the Jews throughout his writings).

The best Goldstein can muster in arguing for Spinoza’s mythical self-identification as a Jew is a single reference in his correspondence to the martyrdom of the Portuguese Marrano Don Lope de Vera y Alarcon (remembered by Jews as “Judah the Faithful”), burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1644. The background is this. A former student of Spinoza’s, one Albert Burgh, had converted from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism. In announcing this fact to his former teacher, Burgh pointed to the long history of Catholic martyrdom as “proof” of the “truth” of the Roman Church. Spinoza retorted by pointing in his turn to “the same old song of the Pharisees,” who “with like arrogance boast that their church continues to this day . . . in spite of the bitter hatred of heathens and Christians.” “The miracles [these Pharisees] tell of,” he mockingly writes before invoking the name of Don Lope, “are enough to weary a thousand tongues.”

Citing this piece of sarcastic derision, Goldstein says of it: “One of the last letters [Spinoza] wrote in his short life, in December 1675, only two months before his death, betrays his emotional affinity with the narrative of Jewish history.”³ Hardly. Since the mid-19th century, numerous Jewish apologists for Spinoza have seized gratefully upon this same passing reference to Jewish martyrdom, seemingly unique in a literary corpus that brims with anti-Judaism. But it is in fact no exception to the rule; its underlying animus is of a piece with all the rest.

In her search for hidden affinities, Goldstein reaches back intellectually as well as psychologically. Thus, she seeks to connect Spinoza with the great Jewish philosophers and kabbalists of the Middle Ages. At one point she claims that “some aspects of Lurianic kabbalah . . . stirred [Spinoza’s] thinking,” despite the fact that in all his writings there is but a single overt reference to kabbalists, in which he dispatches them as “madmen.” Not that Spinoza was ignorant of medieval Jewish sources; quite the contrary, as Harry Wolfson definitively showed in *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Uncovering the*

Latent Processes of His Reasoning (1934). It is rather Goldstein who seems imperfectly conversant with them. Her discussion of Maimonides (1135–1204) is typical:

Though Maimonidean philosophy, just because it is philosophy, has been controversial ever since [his] own day, raising generations of Jewish eyebrows (the position in my high school was to keep a respectful distance), there was one aspect of his work that became ensconced firmly in the mainstream, perhaps precisely because it eschews philosophical grounding for straightforward faith. This is the Thirteen Articles of Faith, which have become such an accepted aspect of Judaism that they are recited on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year.

The single correct phrase in this passage is the very last one: Yom Kippur is in fact “the holiest day of the Jewish year.” But there exists no custom, in any version of the Jewish liturgy, of reciting Maimonides’ thirteen principles of faith on that day.⁴ Nor is this the only confusion here. As it happens, this credo of Maimonides is very deeply rooted in his philosophy; but many elements of it were never universally accepted either by “mainstream” rabbis or by rival Jewish philosophers. By contrast, his fourteen-volume code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, has been a foundational mainstream text since the late Middle-Ages.

But the most debilitating errors in this book are those touching on the essentials of Spinoza’s thought, which Goldstein tries valiantly but unsuccessfully to conflate with modern liberalism. Thus, according to her, the *Theological-Political Treatise*⁵ is “one of the most impassioned defenses of a free democratic state in the history of political theory”—and a harbinger, no less, of the American Bill of Rights:

Just as relevant to current concerns, particularly in America, is [Spinoza’s] fundamental insis-

³ *Betraying Spinoza* is pickled with errors of every kind, of which this sentence offers an all too typical example. Thus, Spinoza’s letter to Burgh was indeed composed in December 1675, but that was not “two months before his death” in February 1677. In subsequent references, the exchange between the two men is described no less erroneously as having occurred “in the dead of his final winter” and in “the final months of [Spinoza’s] life.”

⁴ I can only surmise that Goldstein has confused these thirteen principles with the thirteen biblical attributes of divine mercy, whose recitation permeates the High Holy Day prayers.

⁵ Goldstein mistranslates this title as *The Treatise on Theology and Politics*, an apparently trivial error that exposes a deeper misapprehension of Spinoza’s point—namely, the utter futility of separating religion from politics.

tence on the separation of church and state. John Locke, who spent some years in Amsterdam after Spinoza's death . . . transmitted this insistence to the founding fathers of America. The spirit of Spinoza lives on in the first words of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the phrase referred to as the establishment clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

But there is in Spinoza no "fundamental insistence on the separation of church and state." To the contrary, what he insisted on was state regulation and control of all religions and their institutions. Nor, as his doctrine of state control is elaborated in the nineteenth chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, does it preclude the possibility of an established state religion. The chapter heading alone makes this abundantly clear:

It is shown that the right over matters of religion is vested entirely in the sovereign, and that the external form of worship must be in accordance with the peace of the Commonwealth, if we are to serve God correctly.

As Matthew Stewart observes in an absorbing new study, *The Courtier and the Heretic*,⁶ Spinoza's insistence on state control of religion "sits a little uneasily with many modern conceptions of the secular state." A little uneasily, indeed: as Stewart writes, Spinoza came perilously close to advocating an official "popular religion that is consistent with the requirements of the state . . . [and] under the strict control of civil (and not ecclesiastical) authorities."

Rebecca Goldstein seems to have missed entirely this key element in Spinoza's political theory. Nor, speaking of ideas that sit "a little uneasily," does she cite the second part of the First Amendment, the "free exercise" clause. Whether or not her omission is intentional, it is certainly understandable. For Spinoza's idea of freedom from church authority and religious persecution adamantly excludes any notion of an obligation by a democratic government to protect the free exercise of religion.

Far from anticipating the Bill of Rights with its landmark protection of religious liberties, Spinoza would almost certainly have preferred France's more militantly secular approach to religion—an approach that, for example, allows for legislation banning Muslim headscarves as well as other "aggressive" displays of piety in the nation's public schools. In the *Tractatus* he rejects the notion of special rights in the exercise of religion as a "sedi-

tious idea," and the very phrase "religious liberties" would likely have struck him as an oxymoron. For anyone seriously attached to the First Amendment, Spinoza is no ally.

IT IS deeply ironic that Spinoza, whose most pernicious heresy was to deny the immortality of the human soul, has been repeatedly resurrected; and that, 350 years since his excommunication, this heresy, in modern form, still holds sway over some of the most hotly debated issues of our day—philosophical, neurobiological, ethical, and political. In denying the existence of an eternal, divinely implanted human soul, and in rejecting totally the biblical notion that man stands apart from the rest of Creation and enjoys dominion over it, Spinoza anticipated the radical conceptions of "animal-rights" philosophers like Peter Singer, as well as the casual demotion of man that is standard among many scientists and professional ethicists. Long ago, Leo Strauss fretted that Spinoza's God was farther "beyond good and evil" than Nietzsche's, and his politics colder than Machiavelli's. Strauss was right.

No less remarkable, despite almost two centuries of determined Jewish efforts to restore the wayward heretic to the bosom of his people, is how little Spinoza has to contribute to current debates over Jewish identity and Jewish destiny. In this respect, the many Jewish romancers of Spinoza, from Joseph Klausner to Rebecca Goldstein, would have been well advised to heed another of Strauss's observations, this one made in 1932:

Spinoza did not remain a Jew, while Descartes, Hobbes, and Leibniz remained Christians. Thus it is not in accordance with Spinoza's wishes that he be inducted into the pantheon of the Jewish nation. . . . It seems to [me] an elementary imperative of Jewish self-respect that we Jews at last relinquish our claim on Spinoza. By so doing, we by no means surrender him to our enemies. Rather, we leave him to that distant and strange community of "neutrals" whom one can call with considerable justice, the community of "good Europeans."

As for everything that has become of that community of "good Europeans" in the decades since Strauss wrote these acute but generous lines, that is another story altogether, if one from which today's romancers of Spinoza understandably avert their eyes.

⁶ The subtitle of this book is *Spinoza, Leibniz, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*. Norton, 351 pp., \$25.95.