

Matan - Great Debates in Jewish History, Philosophy, and Halakha

Baruch Spinoza and the Amsterdam Rabbinate



Spinoza: A Life, Steven Nadler

And yet, it can hardly be said that Spinoza's break with Judaism was perfectly clean and complete. Things are rarely so black and white in the history of ideas, least of all with as deep and complex a philosopher as Spinoza. While he may no longer have thought of himself as a Jew, and while he even had great contempt for Judaism and other organized sectarian religions, it cannot be denied that Jewish texts, history, and thought continued to play an important role in Spinoza's thinking, so much so that Spinoza can rightfully be considered a Jewish philosopher, both because his ideas exhibit a strong engagement with earlier Jewish philosophy and because in his major works he philosophized about Judaism.³

The Writ of Excommunication Against Baruch Spinoza (July 27th, 1656), The Sephardi Community of Amsterdam

"The Lords of the Ma'amad", i.e. the governing body of six parnassim and the gabbai, announce that Having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, they have endeavored by various means and promises, to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and born witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter; and after all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honorable hakhamim, they have decided, with their consent, that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel..."

"By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day."(3)

"That no one should communicate with him neither in writing nor accord him any favor nor stay with him under the same roof nor within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him."

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Chapter 6

A ban of ostracism is imposed upon a person - either man or woman - for [the following] 24 reasons:

- a) a person who disgraces a sage, even after his passing;
- b) a person who embarrasses a messenger of a court;
- c) a person who calls a colleague a slave;
- d) a person who was ordered [to appear before] a court at a specific time and did not come;
- e) a person who treats even one point of Rabbinic law with disrespect; needless to say, this applies regarding [matters of] Torah law;
- f) a person who refuses to comply with the decisions [rendered by a court] is placed under ban until he complies;
- g) a person who possesses an entity that can cause damage - e.g., a dangerous dog or a faulty ladder - is placed under ban until he removes that entity;
- h) a person who sells land to a gentile is placed under ban until he accepts responsibility for any damages which the gentile may cause his Jewish neighbor;
- i) a person who testifies against a Jewish colleague in a secular court and causes money which Torah law would not [require him to pay] to be expropriated from him is placed under ban until he repays [that amount];
- j) a butcher who is a priest and does not separate the priestly gifts and give them to another priest is placed under ban until he gives them;
- k) a person who violates the sanctity of the second day of the festivals in the Diaspora, even though [their observance] is only a custom;
- l) a person who performs work on Pesach eve after noon;
- m) a person who takes God's name in vain or takes an oath casually;
- n) a person who causes the many to desecrate God's name;
- o) a person who causes the many to eat sacrificial food outside [its proper place];
- p) a person who calculates the years [and declares a leap year] or fixes the day of the new month in the Diaspora;
- q) a person who causes the blind [- i.e., the morally unaware -] to stumble;
- r) a person who prevents the many from performing a mitzvah;
- s) a butcher who sold non-kosher meat;
- t) a butcher who does not inspect his knife in the presence of a sage;
- u) a person who intentionally causes himself to have an erection;
- v) a person who divorced his wife, and then entered into a partnership or business dealing with her which requires them to come into contact. When they come to court, they are placed under ban;
- w) a sage whose reputation is unsavory;
- x) a person who places a person under ban when the latter does not deserve [such punishment];

Baruch De Spinoza, Ethics

"Those who wish to seek out the cause of miracles and to understand the things of nature as philosophers, and not to stare at them in astonishment like fools, are soon considered heretical and impious, and proclaimed as such by those whom the mob adores as the interpreters of nature and the gods. For these men know that, once ignorance is put aside, that wonderment would be taken away, which is the only means by which their authority is preserved."

Steve Nadler, Spinoza: Who Wrote the Bible Determines How We Read It

Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise (TTP, from the Latin title Tractatus Theologico-Politicus) was regarded by his contemporaries as the most "atheistic," "blasphemous" and "soul-destroying" book ever written.[1] (One overwrought critic called it "a book forged in hell by the devil himself." [2]) Spinoza's views on miracles, God, "superstitious"

religious ceremonies, and the relationship between “church” and state scandalized his seventeenth-century readers. Perhaps nothing troubled them more, however, than Spinoza’s views on the Bible.[3]

In chapters seven through ten of the TTP, Spinoza denies that the Bible is literally of divine origin and that Moses (either as God’s amanuensis or on his own) wrote all or even most of the Torah. Much of the evidence he brings forward for this thesis was not unfamiliar to contemporary Bible scholars. It had been used before to argue against Moses’ comprehensive authorship, most famously by Abraham ibn Ezra in the twelfth century, but also by other writers before Spinoza. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther, and in the seventeenth century, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the French Calvinist Isaac de la Peyrère and the English Quaker leader (living in Amsterdam) Samuel Fisher, all questioned the Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch.[4]

Most of these earlier thinkers, however, had argued for a very limited claim, namely, that Moses did not write every single line of the Pentateuch. After all, Moses could not have related the circumstances of his own death (Deut 34). Spinoza, by contrast, goes quite a bit further. He notes that not only is Moses consistently referred to throughout the Torah in the third person, but that the writer of these texts also claims to “bear witness” to many details concerning him.

Moreover, the narration describes not only the death, burial and mourning of Moses, but also compares him to all the prophets who came after him; refers to places not by the names that they bore in Moses’s time but by names that they acquired only much later; and continues beyond the death of Moses. All of these points, Spinoza insists, “make it clear beyond a shadow of a doubt” that the writings, commonly referred to as “the Five Books of Moses,” were, in fact, written by someone who lived many generations after Moses.[5]

Spinoza’s Originality

Spinoza was working within a well-known tradition. There was nothing original, by 1670, not only in claiming that Moses did not write all (or even most of) the Torah, but even in suggesting that the Bible was composed by human beings and transmitted through a fallible historical process; Samuel Fisher, for one, had been willing to go this far in *The Rustick’s Alarm to the Rabbies*, published in 1660.

Still, it was not a common view, and in the eyes of most contemporary theologians and scholars, denying the general Mosaic authorship remained a highly unorthodox and subversive position. Spinoza notes that “the author [of the Pentateuch] is almost universally believed to be Moses,” and he knew that rejecting that dogma would earn an author the condemnation of religious authorities.

However, where Spinoza’s real originality appears is in his radical and innovative claim that this account of the origin of the biblical texts holds great significance for how they are to be read and interpreted. He was dismayed by the way in which Scripture itself was worshiped, by the reverence accorded to words on the page rather than to the moral message they convey.

A Work of Nature

If the Bible is an historical and thus natural document, then it should be treated like any other work of nature. The study of Scripture, or biblical hermeneutics, should therefore, Spinoza insists, proceed as natural science proceeds. Just as the study of the “Book of Nature”—operating according to the inductive method codified by Francis Bacon earlier in the century—gathers and rationally evaluates empirical data (especially causes and effects) in order to

discover the laws of nature, so must the “science” of Scripture examine the book itself and its “causal” or compositional background for its general principles:

I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it. For the method of interpreting Nature consists essentially in composing a detailed study of Nature from which, as being the source of our assured data, we can deduce the definitions of things of Nature. Now in exactly the same way the task of Scriptural interpretation requires us to make a straightforward study of Scripture, and from this, as the source of our fixed data and principles, to deduce by logical inference the meaning of the authors of Scripture ... allowing no other principles or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture.[8]

Just as the knowledge of nature must be sought from nature alone, so must the knowledge of Scripture—the discovery of its authors’ intended meanings—be sought from Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), that is, from the text and the circumstances of its composition.[9]

The goal is to ascertain the most general principles being proclaimed by the Bible, especially moral imperatives, and to do so through the reading and analysis of its texts and a study of the backgrounds of its authors, its composition and transmission, and the religious and political contexts of its canonization, without appealing to any independent authority or criteria external to the text and its history (such as ecclesiastic tradition or the pronouncements of philosophy and “reason”):

We must first seek ... that which is most universal and forms the basis and foundations of all Scripture; in short, that which is commended in Scripture by all the prophets as doctrine most eternal and most profitable for all mankind. For example, that God exists, one alone and omnipotent, who alone should be worshiped, who cares for all, who loves above all others those who worship him and love their neighbors as themselves.[10]

It follows that the implementation of the method to discover the meaning of Scripture, to learn what its authors intended to teach, requires a number of linguistic, textual and historical skills—above all, a knowledge of the original language and the culture of the ancient Hebrews. Since much of this information has been lost to time, especially concerning the language, there are obstacles to even the most well-trained of scholars who seek to discover the meaning of the prophetic writings.

Theological-Political Treatise
Preface.

Men would never be superstitious, if they could govern all their circumstances by set rules, or if they were always favoured by fortune: but being frequently driven into straits where rules are useless, and being often kept fluctuating pitiably between hope and fear by the uncertainty of fortune's greedily coveted favours, they are consequently, for the most part, very prone to credulity. The human mind is readily swayed this way or that in times of doubt, especially when hope and fear are struggling for the mastery, though usually it is boastful, over - confident, and vain.

This as a general fact I suppose everyone knows, though few, I believe, know their own nature; no one can have lived in the world without observing that most people, when in prosperity, are so over-brimming with wisdom (however inexperienced they may be), that they take every offer of advice as a personal insult, whereas in adversity they know not where to turn, but beg and pray for counsel from every passer-by. No plan is then too futile, too absurd, or too fatuous for their adoption; the most frivolous causes will raise them to hope, or plunge them into despair - if anything happens during their fright which reminds them of some past good or ill, they think it portends a happy or unhappy issue, and therefore (though it may have proved abortive a hundred times before) style it a lucky or unlucky omen.

Anything which excites their astonishment they believe to be a portent signifying the anger of the gods or of the Supreme Being, and, mistaking superstition for religion, account it impious not to avert the evil with prayer and sacrifice. Signs and wonders of this sort they conjure up perpetually, till one might think Nature as mad as themselves, they interpret her so fantastically.

Thus it is brought prominently before us, that superstition's chief victims are those persons who greedily covet temporal advantages; they it is, who (especially when they are in danger, and cannot help themselves) are wont with Prayers and womanish tears to implore help from God: upbraiding Reason as blind, because she cannot show a sure path to the shadows they pursue, and rejecting human wisdom as vain; but believing the phantoms of imagination, dreams, and other childish absurdities, to be the very oracles of Heaven. As though God had turned away from the wise, and written His decrees, not in the mind of man but in the entrails of beasts, or left them to be proclaimed by the inspiration and instinct of fools, madmen, and birds. Such is the unreason to which terror can drive mankind!

Superstition, then, is engendered, preserved, and fostered by fear. If anyone desire an example, let him take Alexander, who only began superstitiously to seek guidance from seers, when he first learnt to fear fortune in the passes of Sysis (Curtius, v. 4); whereas after he had conquered Darius he consulted prophets no more, till a second time frightened by reverses. When the Scythians were provoking a battle, the Bactrians had deserted, and he himself was lying sick of his wounds, "he once more turned to superstition, the mockery of human wisdom, and bade Aristander, to whom he confided his credulity, inquire the issue of affairs with sacrificed victims." Very numerous examples of a like nature might be cited, clearly showing the fact, that only while under the dominion of fear do men fall a prey to superstition; that all the portents ever invested with the reverence of misguided religion are mere phantoms of dejected and fearful minds; and lastly, that prophets have most power among the people, and are most formidable to rulers, precisely at those times when the state is in most peril. I think this is sufficiently plain to all, and will therefore say no more on the subject.

Theological-Political Treatise:

Theological-Political Treatise:

Chapter 3- OF THE VOCATION OF THE HEBREWS, AND WHETHER THE GIFT OF PROPHECY WAS PECULIAR TO THEM.

The passages which they think teach most clearly this eternal election, are chiefly:

(1.) Jer. xxxi:36, where the prophet testifies that the seed of Israel shall for ever remain the nation of God, comparing them with the stability of the heavens and nature;

(2.) Ezek. xx:32, where the prophet seems to intend that though the Jews wanted after the help afforded them to turn their backs on the worship of the Lord, that God would nevertheless gather them together again from all the lands in which they were dispersed, and lead them to the wilderness of the peoples - as He had led their fathers to the wilderness of the land of Egypt - and would at length, after purging out from among them the rebels and transgressors, bring them thence to his Holy mountain, where the whole house of Israel should worship Him. Other passages are also cited, especially by the Pharisees, but I think I shall satisfy everyone if I answer these two, and this I shall easily accomplish after showing from Scripture itself that God chose not the Hebrews for ever, but only on the condition under which He had formerly chosen the Canaanites, for these last, as we have shown, had priests who religiously worshipped God, and whom God at length rejected because of their luxury, pride, and corrupt worship.

Moses (Lev. xviii:27) warned the Israelites that they be not polluted with whoredoms, lest the land spue them out as it had spued out the nations who had dwelt there before, and in Deut. viii:19, 20, in the plainest terms He threatens their total ruin, for He says, "I testify against you that ye shall surely perish. As the nations which the Lord destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish." In like manner many other passages are found in the law which expressly show

that God chose the Hebrews neither absolutely nor for ever. If, then, the prophets foretold for them a new covenant of the knowledge of God, love, and grace, such a promise is easily proved to be only made to the elect, for Ezekiel in the chapter which we have just quoted expressly says that God will separate from them the rebellious and transgressors, and Zephaniah (iii:12, 13), says that "God will take away the proud from the midst of them, and leave the poor." Now, inasmuch as their election has regard to true virtue, it is not to be thought that it was promised to the Jews alone to the exclusion of others, but we must evidently believe that the true Gentile prophets (and every nation, as we have shown, possessed such) promised the same to the faithful of their own people, who were thereby comforted. Wherefore this eternal covenant of the knowledge of God and love is universal, as is clear, moreover, from Zeph. iii:10, 11 : no difference in this respect can be admitted between Jew and Gentile, nor did the former enjoy any special election beyond that which we have pointed out.

Theological-Political Treatise - Chapter 6 - OF MIRACLES.

As men are accustomed to call Divine the knowledge which transcends human understanding, so also do they style Divine, or the work of God, anything of which the cause is not generally known: for the masses think that the power and providence of God are most clearly displayed by events that are extraordinary and contrary to the conception they have formed of nature, especially if such events bring them any profit or convenience: they think that the clearest possible proof of God's existence is afforded when nature, as they suppose, breaks her accustomed order, and consequently they believe that those who explain or endeavour to understand phenomena or miracles through their natural causes are doing away with God and His providence. They suppose, forsooth, that God is inactive so long as nature works in her accustomed order, and vice versa, that the power of nature and natural causes are idle so long as God is acting: thus they imagine two powers distinct one from the other, the power of God and the power of nature, though the latter is in a sense determined by God, or (as most people believe now) created by Him. What they mean by either, and what they understand by God and nature they do not know, except that they imagine the power of God to be like that of some royal potentate, and nature's power to consist in force and energy.

The masses then style unusual phenomena, "miracles," and partly from piety, partly for the sake of opposing the students of science, prefer to remain in ignorance of natural causes, and only to hear of those things which they know least, and consequently admire most. In fact, the common people can only adore God, and refer all things to His power by removing natural causes, and conceiving things happening out of their due course, and only admires the power of God when the power of nature is conceived of as in subjection to it.

This idea seems to have taken its rise among the early Jews who saw the Gentiles round them worshipping visible gods such as the sun, the moon, the earth, water, air, &c., and in order to inspire the conviction that such divinities were weak and inconstant, or changeable, told how they themselves were under the sway of an invisible God, and narrated their miracles, trying further to show that the God whom they worshipped arranged the whole of nature for their sole benefit: this idea was so pleasing to humanity that men go on to this day imagining miracles, so that they may believe themselves God's favourites, and the final cause for which God created and directs all things.

What pretension will not people in their folly advance! They have no single sound idea concerning either God or nature, they confound God's decrees with human decrees, they conceive nature as so limited that they believe man to be its chief part! I have spent enough space in setting forth these common ideas and prejudices concerning nature and miracles, but in order to afford a regular demonstration I will show -

It now only remains to us to answer the arguments of those who would persuade themselves that the election of the Jews was not temporal, and merely in respect of their commonwealth, but eternal; for, they say, we see the Jews after the loss of their commonwealth, and after being scattered so many years and separated from all other nations, still surviving, which is without parallel among other peoples, and further the Scriptures seem to teach that God has chosen for Himself the Jews for ever, so that though they have lost their commonwealth, they still nevertheless remain God's elect.

Chapter 15.

- THEOLOGY IS SHOWN NOT TO BE SUBSERVIENT TO REASON, NOR REASON TO THEOLOGY: A DEFINITION OF THE REASON WHICH ENABLES US TO ACCEPT THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE.

Those who know not that philosophy and reason are distinct, dispute whether Scripture should be made subservient to reason, or reason to Scripture: that is, whether the meaning of Scripture should be made to agree with reason; or whether reason should be made to agree with Scripture: the latter position is assumed by the sceptics who deny the certitude of reason, the former by the dogmatists. Both parties are, as I have shown, utterly in the wrong, for either doctrine would require us to tamper with reason or with Scripture.

We have shown that Scripture does not teach philosophy, but merely obedience, and that all it contains has been adapted to the understanding and established opinions of the multitude. Those, therefore, who wish to adapt it to philosophy, must needs ascribe to the prophets many ideas which they never even dreamed of, and give an extremely forced interpretation to their words: those on the other hand, who would make reason and philosophy subservient to theology, will be forced to accept as Divine utterances the prejudices of the ancient Jews, and to fill and confuse their mind therewith. In short, one party will run wild with the aid of reason, and the other will run wild without the aid of reason.

The first among the Pharisees who openly maintained that Scripture should be made to agree with reason, was Maimonides, whose opinion we reviewed, and abundantly refuted in Chap. 8.: now, although this writer had much authority among his contemporaries, he was deserted on this question by almost all, and the majority went straight over to the opinion of a certain R. Jehuda Alpakhar, who, in his anxiety to avoid the error of Maimonides, fell into another, which was its exact contrary. He held that reason should be made subservient, and entirely give way to Scripture. He thought that a passage should not be interpreted metaphorically, simply because it was repugnant to reason, but only in the cases when it is inconsistent with Scripture itself - that is, with its clear doctrines. Therefore he laid down the universal rule, that whatsoever Scripture teaches dogmatically, and affirms expressly, must on its own sole authority be admitted as absolutely true: that there is no doctrine in the Bible which directly contradicts the general tenour of the whole: but only some which appear to involve a difference, for the phrases of Scripture often seem to imply something contrary to what has been expressly taught. Such phrases, and such phrases only, we may interpret metaphorically.

For instance, Scripture clearly teaches the unity of God (see Deut. vi:4), nor is there any text distinctly asserting a plurality of gods; but in several passages God speaks of Himself, and the prophets speak of Him, in the plural number; such phrases are simply a manner of speaking, and do not mean that there actually are several gods: they are to be explained metaphorically, not because a plurality of gods is repugnant to reason, but because Scripture distinctly asserts that there is only one.

So, again, as Scripture asserts (as Alpakhar thinks) in Deut. iv:15, that God is incorporeal, we are bound, solely by the authority of this text, and not by reason, to believe that God has no body: consequently we must explain metaphorically, on the sole authority of Scripture, all those passages which attribute to God hands, feet, &c., and take them merely as figures of speech. Such is the opinion of Alpakhar. In so far as he seeks to explain Scripture by Scripture, I praise him, but I marvel that a man gifted with reason should wish to debase that faculty. It is true that Scripture should be explained by Scripture, so long as we are in difficulties about the meaning and intention of the prophets, but when we have elicited the true meaning, we must of necessity make use of our judgment and reason in order to assent thereto. If reason, however, much as she rebels, is to be entirely subjected to Scripture, I ask, are we to effect her submission by her own aid, or without her, and blindly? If the latter, we shall surely act foolishly and injudiciously; if the former, we assent to Scripture under the dominion of reason, and should not assent to it without her. Moreover, I may ask now, is a man to assent to anything against his reason? What is denial if it be not reason's refusal to assent? In short, I am astonished that anyone should wish to subject reason, the greatest of gifts and a light from on high, to the dead letter which may have been corrupted by human malice; that it should be thought no crime

to speak with contempt of mind, the true handwriting of God's Word, calling it corrupt, blind, and lost, while it is considered the greatest of crimes to say the same of the letter, which is merely the reflection and image of God's Word. Men think it pious to trust nothing to reason and their own judgment, and impious to doubt the faith of those who have transmitted to us the sacred books. Such conduct is not piety, but mere folly. And, after all, why are they so anxious? What are they afraid of? Do they think that faith and religion cannot be upheld unless - men purposely keep themselves in ignorance, and turn their backs on reason? If this be so, they have but a timid trust in Scripture.

Kenneth Seeskin, Monotheism at Bay: The Gods of Maimonides and Spinoza

There is much that Maimonides and Spinoza have in common. Both devoted their entire lives to trying to relieve humanity of its tendency to conceive of God in anthropomorphic terms. Both decry the use of the imagination to lead one to truth. Both argue that human beings are only a small part of a vast universe and have no reason to think that it has been designed to accommodate their needs. Both deny that God rewards virtue or punishes vice in a direct or obvious way. Both stress that the goal of human life is to weaken our attachment to temporal things and achieve a higher level of understanding culminating in the intellectual love of an impersonal God.¹

In the introduction to Book I of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides says that his primary purpose is to explain the meaning of certain terms occurring in the works of the prophets. For the rest of that book he devotes over thirty-five chapters to examining words that seem to imply that God has bodily or personal qualities. When the Bible says that humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 1.26), Maimonides replies (*Guide* I.1) that all this means is that humans have intellectual apprehension. When the Bible says that God saw something, all that is meant is that God understood something (*Guide* I.4). When the Bible ascribes place to God, all that is meant is that God occupies a unique rank in the order of existence (*Guide* I.8). When the Bible says that God spoke to a prophet, what is meant is that the prophet understood something that pertains to God (*Guide* I.65). All of this is of a piece with the view that God is immutable and does not experience emotion (*Guide* I.35). It follows that when we say God is jealous or merciful, we are not talking about God himself but the consequences of divine activity as manifested in the created order (*Guide* I.54). Thus “God is merciful” does

not mean that God is moved by prayers of entreaty but rather that God has provided each species with the resources needed to gather food and defend itself from danger.

Although Spinoza disagrees with Maimonides about the prophetic understanding of God, arguing that the prophets *did* ascribe bodily or personal qualities to God, when it comes to his own view, he too takes up the task of depersonalization.² *Ethics* Ip17s says explicitly that intellect and will do not pertain to the nature of God so there is no respect in which God exercises free choice. As stated in the appendix to *Ethics* I, one of Spinoza's primary purposes is to show that God acts by the same necessity with which he exists. Thus any suggestion that God acts with an end in view or has made everything for the sake of human beings is nonsense. At *Ethics* Vp17c, he affirms that strictly speaking, God does not love or hate anyone, from which it follows (*Ethics* Vp19) that someone who loves God should not expect God to love him in return.

The thrust of both philosophies is to depersonalize our understanding of God and argue that our primary way of relating to God is intellectual. For Maimonides, divine providence is consequent on the perfection of the intellect (*Guide* III.18): the more perfection one achieves, the closer to God one gets. For Spinoza, insofar as the human mind perceives things truly, it is part of the infinite intellect of God (*Ethics* IIp43s). Yet for all their efforts at depersonalizing God, Maimonides and Spinoza wind up in different places when it comes to how to respond to God. In a famous passage in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides writes:³

When a man reflects on these things, studies all these created beings, from the angels and spheres down to human beings and so on, and realizes the divine wisdom manifested in them all, his love for God will increase, his soul will thirst, his very flesh will yearn to love God. He will be filled with fear and trembling, as he becomes conscious of his lowly condition, poverty, and insignificance, and compares himself with any of the great and holy bodies; still more when he compares himself with any one of the pure forms that are incorporeal and have never had association with any corporeal substance. He will then realize that he is a vessel full of shame, dishonor, and reproach, empty and deficient.

From Maimonides' standpoint the chief theological virtue is humility, to bow one's head in the face of something too vast to understand.

No matter what interpretation one picks, there is no getting around the fact that Spinoza's identification of God with nature constitutes one more step in the process of depersonalization. People recognized as early as the Book of Job that natural phenomena such as floods, droughts, and earthquakes affect everyone equally, making no distinction between the virtuous and the vicious.⁴⁶ They strike without mercy, cannot be appeased, and are oblivious to love, hate, or any other form of emotion. This accords with Spinoza's view that God acts by necessity and does not love or hate anyone. But in addition to depersonalizing God, Spinoza is also attempting to remove any sense of mystery from God. If God and nature are identical, then to use a medieval term, the ways and works of God are perfectly intelligible. Put otherwise, if nature is infinite so that everything exists in and is conceived through it, then it is impossible to form a coherent idea of anything correctly described as *supernatural*. For all intents and purposes,

In view of this, I suggest that Steven Nadler is right to say that the real question is not so much how we think of God but the proper attitude to take *toward* God.⁴⁸ Maimonides too argued for an impersonal God who could not be swayed by entreaties, but he wanted us to stand in awe of such a God and bow our heads in reverence. For him, Aristotle has given us such an accurate picture of the sublunar realm that anyone who doubts it is a fool. The picture changes dramatically when we get to the heavenly realm and becomes highly speculative. By the time we get to God, we are left with something that stubbornly resists our attempt to understand it. The proper attitude, then, is not to press on with further inquiry, but to recognize our limits and stop.

Nadler is also right to say that nothing could be further from the spirit of Spinoza. Having rejected the ritual component of the law, Spinoza still

could have argued that we have no choice but to stand in awe of God or nature as something too great for us to understand. If he had, then the God-intoxicated epithet might be accurate. The truth is, however, that he argued for the opposite: the goal of human life is to become so familiar with the causal structure of nature that one sees intuitively how everything that happens follows from God. As he says in the appendix to *Ethics* I, the dispelling of ignorance entails the disappearance of wonder. By dispelling ignorance, the mind moves from a passive to an active state, which, as we have seen, is experienced as joy and culminates in love of God.

Love for Spinoza is “Joy, accompanied by the idea of an external cause” (*Ethics* IIIp59def6). The highest achievement is to view everything that happens to us as governed by necessity and as related to the idea of God. As we saw, love of God leads to a state of blessedness, which Spinoza associates with what Scripture terms glory (*kavod*, *Ethics* Vp36c). Putting all this together, we arrive at the conclusion that blessedness is not a matter of being singled out by God but of coming to accept a proper conception of God and the mind’s ability to know God. From Spinoza’s perspective, Maimonides and the medievals are too pessimistic. There is no room for fear and trembling in his thought and no awareness of ourselves as a vessel full of shame and dishonor. On the contrary, love of God is a form of empowerment. Without it, our lives are subject to the whims of fortune as one emotion follows another without any rhyme or reason.

The Afterlife of Spinoza - Should the Ban be Undone?

Jacob Adler, The Zionist and Spinoza

The One Famous Sentence. It is with a single striking sentence that Spinoza entered the history of Zionism. Towards the end of Chapter 3 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza writes:

Indeed, were it not that the fundamental principles of their religion discourage manliness, I would not hesitate to believe that they will one day, given the opportunity—such is the mutability of human affairs—establish once more their independent state, and that God will again choose them (Spinoza 1998: 47).

And along the same lines we have Joseph Klausner's famous speech, delivered upon Mount Scopus (which we have already alluded to). His moving words are worth citing:

To Spinoza ... we call out, in acknowledgment of the great sin that his people committed against him and the also not insignificant sin that he committed against his people, three hundred years after his birth, from the heights of Mount Scopus, from our Small Sanctuary,² the Hebrew University:³ The ban is dissolved! Wiped away is Judaism's transgression against you! Atoned is your guilt against [Judaism]. You are our brother! You are our brother! You are our brother! (Klausner 1962: 133)

There was nonetheless a particular affinity between the Zionists and Spinoza. He was an innovative thinker, oppressed by narrow-minded rabbis, whose religion emasculated them. When he tried to exercise his freedom of thought, they expelled him from the community. The Jewish people thus spurned one of its greatest geniuses. And he at least had the thought of the restoration of the Jewish kingdom, even if he did not say much else about it.

Although Spinoza's policy recommendation (if we have discerned it correctly) is far from Zionist, his idea of the stark either/or is very much in line with the Zionists. Jewish life in the diaspora is doomed, either by persecution or by assimilation. We see here the doctrine of *shelilat ha-galut*.

Moreover, the reconstituted Jewish state—if it should come into being—will arise, according to Spinoza, by purely natural causes, the same sort of natural causes that led the Chinese to lose and then regain dominion over their country (Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 3, p. 46; Smith 1997: 102). Thus Spinoza, like the Zionists, rejects the prevailing religious idea that the Jews must wait passively for the messiah.

This passivism may be what Spinoza is referring to when he says that the foundations of the Jewish religion emasculate the minds of the Jews. It is not clear that he is referring *precisely* to the prohibition on human action to re-establish Zion; he may just be referring in a general way to those Jewish teachings that (in his mind) weaken the Jewish spirit. In any case, Spinoza states, by implication, one more major teaching of (secular) Zionism: if the Jews are ever to re-establish their state, they must reject the foundations of their religion (Levy 1989: 75; Smith 1997: 102).

The secular Zionists rejected religion altogether. Theoretically, Spinoza's statement allows for the revision of the basic principles of Jewish religion, exchanging old doctrines that weaken the spirit for new ones that strengthen it. So, Reconstructionism is another possible Zionism (see Kaplan 1934: 173–76 and Kaplan n.d.).

David Ben Gurion - JTA, 1953

The abolition of the excommunication declared by the Amsterdam Jewish community about 300 years ago on the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and the publication of all his works, is demanded by David Ben Gurion, retired Israel Premier, in his first article written in Sdeh Boker, his residence in the Negev. The article is published in Davar, a pro-government Laborite daily newspaper.

Mr. Ben Gurion suggests that the Hebrew University should sponsor the publication of the works of Spinoza. He points out that just as the excommunication declared by Athens on Socrates could not prevent the Greek philosopher from being recognized as first thinker of Hellenic times, so the excommunication of Spinoza by the Jews of Amsterdam can not evade the fact that Spinoza was Jewish.

Mr. Ben Gurion urged that the publication of Spinoza's works should be timed for the 300th anniversary of his excommunication, in 1956.

The Archive of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency includes articles published from 1923 to 2008. Archive stories reflect the journalistic standards and practices of the time they were published

The Jewish philosopher Spinoza was one of the great Enlightenment thinkers. So why was he 'cancelled'?

ABC Radio National /

By David Rutledge for The Philosopher's Zone

As it happens, the Amsterdam congregation still exists.

In December 2015, they held a symposium to debate the proposition that the ban should be lifted.

Scholars from four continents were invited to the symposium, to act as an advisory committee. One of the scholars was Professor Nadler.

"They didn't want us to express an opinion as to whether the cherem was good or bad," he recalls.

"They wanted to know: what were Spinoza's philosophical views, what were the historical circumstances of the ban, what might be the advantages of lifting the cherem, and what might be the disadvantages?"

The debate was held before an audience of over 500 people and, at its conclusion, the current rabbi of the congregation handed down his opinion: that Spinoza should remain where he was, officially cancelled, and (to quote the 1656 decision) "expelled from the people of Israel".

Spinoza in Shtreimels: An Underground Seminar

By Carlos Fraenkel | Fall 2012 , Jewish Review of Books

"I'm sitting in my armchair" Abraham tells me on the phone. He is a Satmar Hasid from New York, calling me in Montreal where I sit—less comfortably I suspect—in my McGill philosophy department office. I don't laugh right away, so he adds, "Don't you do philosophy in an armchair? I'm ready to give it a try!" And then a cascade of big questions (and answers) pours over me: Does God exist? (He doubts there's a proof.) Are space and time finite? (He thinks they are infinite and wonders if the creation story is a myth.) Do we have good reasons to observe God's commandments? ("If there's no God, perhaps as social conventions?") I do my best to reply, apparently to his satisfaction. A friend of a friend who heard that I was interested in doing philosophy with people who are not academic philosophers had given Abraham my number. **"I have a group of friends who may be interested," he says. "We're kind of an underground debating club."**

A couple of months later I move to Princeton for a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study. Once settled in, I call Abraham to organize our first meeting. We meet at the Star Bar, a trendy bar and lounge in Soho. Abraham and two friends—Isaac, a fellow Satmar, and Jacob, a Lubavitcher—wink at me from their bar stools. Their black attire stands out in the hip crowd that has already gathered here for an after-work drink. Jake, the bartender—Chinese letters tattooed on his fingers, an unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth—pours us a draft beer that we take with us to the management office on the second floor where Moshe and Miriam, a Lubavitcher couple, are already waiting for us.

Moshe owns the property. He made money in the diamond trade and then invested in real estate. Abraham, who deals with professional electronic equipment, proudly points out that the bass drums we hear through the floor come from a sound system bought from him. (Here and throughout, I have changed names and some details to preserve the anonymity of my students.)

“So what’s in it for you?” Moshe asks me as we sit down. “I’m trying to find out if one can use philosophy to address real-life concerns and to have debates across cultural boundaries,” I explain, somewhat professorially. “The clash between modernity and religious tradition, for example, gives rise to fundamental questions. And I want to know if philosophy can help.”

....

At the same time, Spinoza is fascinating to them not only because he is a fellow lapsed Jew. They also hope to find in him a philosophical expression of Jewish ideals—from the love of God to the quest for peace and justice—that doesn’t require the baggage of traditional beliefs and practices. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (along with two other curious Hasidic philosophers) even join me at a Spinoza conference that Dan Garber, the distinguished scholar of Early Modern philosophy, has organized. Their presence causes puzzlement among the professional philosophers. “Should I have ordered kosher food?” Garber, whose grandfather studied in a yeshiva in Vilna, asks. He then tells a famous joke about a Hasid who arrives in heaven, finds a superb restaurant operated by Moses and supervised by God himself. “I’ll have the fruit platter,” he says. Another Jewish colleague asks me in surprise: “Did I just see a Hasid eating potato salad at the buffet?”