

## Spinoza and Judaism

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There is little in Spinoza's life and thought that is not complicated. This is especially true of his relationship to Judaism. Despite attempts to 'marranize' Spinoza's experience<sup>[1]</sup>, his upbringing and education took place within an open, well-established, albeit (because of its historical converso roots) not always perfectly orthodox Jewish community. It is true that his parents had been through the marrano experience, in Portugal and, in the case of his father, France. But Spinoza himself grew up under the watchful eyes of Amsterdam's Portuguese rabbis: he attended the elementary school of the united Talmud Torah congregation, and most likely continued his studies in the Keter Torah yeshiva run by the congregation's chief rabbi, the Ashkenazic import Saul Levi Mortera.

In July of 1656, however, Spinoza was expelled from the Portuguese community with the harshest writ of *herem* (ostracism) ever issued by its leaders. The only extant documentation of this event refers to his 'abominable heresies' and 'monstrous deeds', but it still remains something of a mystery why exactly Spinoza was punished with such extreme prejudice. The order was never rescinded, and Spinoza lived the rest of his life outside any Jewish context. In fact, he seems not to have had any residual sense of Jewish identity. In his writings, he seems to go out of his way to distance himself from Judaism, and always refers to the Jews in the third person – as 'them'; nor does he exhibit any fundamental sympathy with Jewish history or culture.

And yet, it would be inaccurate to say 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 rightly be called a Jewish philosopher, both because his ideas were deeply influenced by earlier Jewish philosophy and because in his major works he philosophized about Judaism.

Now it may seem odd to describe Spinoza as a Jewish philosopher. After all, Spinoza clearly rejects the God of Judaism -- the all-powerful, all-knowing deity who is the creator of things and the cause of great deeds, the wise, just, jealous, and providential God who knows the hearts and minds of His creatures and judges their actions according to their obedience to His commands. The God of Hebrew Scripture is, one might say, a very personal God, both in the sense of being a kind of person and in the sense of being there *for* a person. And it is precisely this picture of God that Spinoza takes issue with in the very opening propositions of his philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics* (begun around 1663 but not published until after his death in 1677). Spinoza's philosophy is a far cry from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Spinoza's God is not some just, wise, good and providential being; it is not a personal being whom one would thank or bless or to whom one would pray or go to seek comfort. It is not a God that fosters a sense of awe and spiritual piety, nor does it sustain the hope of eternal reward or the fear of eternal punishment. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza strips God of all traditional psychological and moral

characteristics. God, he argues, is substance, the ultimate and immanent reality of all things, and nothing more. Endowed with the infinite attributes of Thought and Extension, Spinoza's God is identical with the active, generative aspects of nature. In an infamous phrase that appeared in the Latin but not the more accessible Dutch edition of the work, Spinoza refers to *Deus sive Natura*, 'God or Nature'. 'By God', he says in one of the opening definitions of Part I, 'I understand a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.' In other words, God is the universal, immanent system of causal principles or natures that gives Nature its ultimate unity.

This definition is meant to preclude any anthropomorphizing of the divine being. Spinoza explicitly tells us that he is writing against 'those who feign a God, like man, consisting of a body and a mind, and subject to passions . . . [T]hey wander far from the true knowledge of God' (*Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 15 scholium). Besides being false, an anthropomorphic conception of God as providential judge can only diminish human freedom, activity and well-being, as it tends to strengthen passions such as hope and fear. When understood in the philosophically proper manner, 'God' is not the giver and enforcer of the Law, but simply the impersonal, infinite, unique, uncaused causal source of everything else that exists – that is, Nature itself.

But the greatest of all Jewish thinkers, Maimonides, also devoted a good deal of his philosophical efforts to de-anthropomorphizing God. This is one of the central themes of his *Guide of the Perplexed*. Indeed, much of Spinoza's philosophy can be seen as a kind of dialogue with Maimonides, Gersonides, and others, taking their rationalist approach to metaphysical, epistemological, and moral questions to its ultimate logical

conclusion. Spinoza's conception of the intellectual love of God as the *summum bonum* of human endeavor; his account of the relationship between a rational, intellectual understanding of things and the happiness that is resistant to the vicissitudes of fortune; and his denial of the immortality of the soul and the world-to-come, substituting for those classic rabbinic doctrines a sparer model whereby what persists after a person's death is simply the knowledge that they had acquired during their lifetime all owe a good deal to his medieval Jewish rationalist forbears.[<sup>2</sup>]

Spinoza's direct engagement with Jewish philosophy – something that distinguishes him from other great philosophers of the seventeenth century, such as Descartes and Leibniz – was also often highly critical. On the matter of the proper interpretation of Scripture, for example, Spinoza explicitly takes Maimonides to task in his *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Spinoza denies that God is literally the author of Scripture and that Moses (either as God's amanuensis or on his own) wrote all, or even most of the Torah. The references in the Pentateuch to Moses in the third person; the narration of his death and, particularly, of events following his death; and the fact that some places are called by names that they did not bear in the time of Moses all '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. Moses did, to be sure, compose some books of history and of law, and remnants of those long lost books can be found in the Pentateuch. But the Torah as we have it, as well as other books of the Hebrew Bible (such as Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) were written neither by the individuals whose names they bear nor by any person appearing in them. Spinoza argues that these

were, in fact, all composed by a single historian living many generations after the events narrated, and that this was most likely Ezra. It was the post-exilic leader who took the many writings that had come down to him and began weaving them into a single (but not seamless) narrative. Ezra's work was later completed and supplemented by the editorial labors of others. What we now possess, then, is nothing but a compilation of human literature, and a rather mismanaged, haphazard and 'mutilated' one at that.

But 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 proceed as the study of nature, or natural science proceeds: by gathering and evaluating empirical data, that is, by examining the 'book' itself for its general principles. Just as the knowledge of nature must be sought from nature alone, so must the knowledge of Scripture -- an apprehension of its intended meaning -- be sought from Scripture alone, and not according to any external and independent standard of truth or reasonableness. As Spinoza himself tells us, this runs directly counter to Maimonides's view in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Maimonides had argued that deciphering the meaning of Scripture is a matter of seeing what is consistent with reason. Because Scripture is the Word of God, its intended meaning must be identical with the demonstrable truth. Therefore, if some passage, when read literally, cannot possibly be accepted by reason as true, then the literal meaning must be rejected in favor of a figurative one. For example, the Bible speaks, on occasion, of divine bodily parts. But reason tells us that an eternal, immaterial God does not have a body. Therefore, any references in Scripture to God's feet or hands must be read metaphorically.<sup>[3]</sup> For Spinoza, this type of exegesis is illegitimate in so far as it goes beyond Scripture itself in

order to interpret Scripture. ‘The question as to whether Moses did or did not believe that God is fire must in no wise be decided by the rationality or irrationality of the belief, but solely from other pronouncements of Moses.’<sup>[4]</sup> There must be a distinction between the meaning of Scripture, which is what one is after when interpreting it, and what is philosophically or historically true. Much of what Scripture relates is not, in fact, true. Scripture is not a source of knowledge, least of all knowledge about God, the heavens or even human nature. It is not, in other words, philosophy or science, and therefore the principles of reason must not serve as our sole guide in interpreting Scripture. The moral message of Scripture does, indeed, agree with reason in the sense that our rational faculties approve of it. But *that* Scripture teaches such a message can be discovered only through the historical’ method.

The *Theological-Political Treatise* also contains Spinoza’s reflections on Judaism itself, particularly Jewish law and Jewish history, which continue his project of naturalization.

The Torah says that the Law was revealed by God to Moses in a series of commandments (*mitzvot*). Whether the object of a particular commandment regards ethical behavior (the way one human being is to treat another human being), piety (the way a human being is to relate to God), or more mundane matters (a prohibition against combining fabrics in a garment or the numerous dietary restrictions), all of the commandments are, according to tradition, literally divine, and complying with them is obedience owed to God. The changed historical condition of the Jews may have made fulfilling some of the *mitzvot* unnecessary or even impossible (such as those regarding Temple sacrifice), but the suspension of one law or another is brought about by the

decision of Jewish *halachic* or legal authority, not by mere historical or political circumstance per se.

Spinoza sees things otherwise. Not all (or even most) of the laws or commandments of the Torah are divine; consequently, not all of them are of universal scope or perpetual validity. He draws a sharp distinction in Scripture's laws between those that are divine and those that are merely ceremonial. The divine law is very simple, and is concerned only with the 'supreme good'. What this supreme good consists in is the perfection of the intellect — 'the better part of us' — through the acquisition of knowledge. Now since all true knowledge refers things back to their first and highest causal principles, it ultimately consists in the understanding and the intellectual love of God (or Nature). Consequently, the 'divine' law is constituted only by the prescription of those means necessary for the achievement of this intellectual perfection.

This, then, is the sum of our supreme good and blessedness [*beatitudo*], to wit, the knowledge and love of God. So the means required to achieve this end of all human action — that is, God in so far as his idea exists in us — may be termed God's commands, for their are ordained for us by God himself, as it were, in so far as he exists in our minds. So the rules for living a life that has regard to this end can fitly be called the Divine Law.<sup>[5]</sup>

In addition to the pursuit of the knowledge of God (or Nature), the Divine Law requires certain types of conduct, but only to the extent to which these are conducive toward that cognitive goal, both for ourselves and for others. These will be the principles of action essential to a good commonwealth and healthy social organization, as well as to the flourishing of our fellow human beings. This part of the law is very neatly summed up in

a single phrase: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself’. Together with the command to love God — not from fear of punishment or hope of reward, but from the love due to our true good — this exhausts the content of Divine Law.

This law alone is what is universally valid, regardless of time, place and circumstance, and binding upon all human beings, regardless of religious persuasion. The supreme moral law, it can be known through human reason and deduced from human nature, although it is also the message of Scripture. And it demands nothing in the way of beliefs about what did or did not take place with regard to a certain people in the course of time. ‘It does not demand belief in historical narratives of any kind whatsoever.’<sup>[6]</sup>

All the other commandments found in the Torah relate only to ceremonial practices and sectarian religious rites. Unlike the Divine Law, which is universalistic, a kind of eternal truth, the ceremonial laws are particularistic and of only limited scope and validity. They were instituted by Moses for the ancient Hebrews alone and thus adapted to their historical and political circumstances. Moses, realizing that devotion was a much better motivator than fear, created a state religion in order to get the people to do their duty. The laws of this state religion are, in fact, social and political regulations. They do not at all contribute to true blessedness and virtue, Spinoza insists, but tend only toward ‘the temporal and material prosperity’ of the community and the peace and security of its government. In and of themselves, ‘they are of no significance and are termed good only by tradition’; they have, in other words, not intrinsic but only instrumental value.<sup>[7]</sup> With the end of the Hebrew commonwealth, moreover, Moses’s laws lost their normative force. ‘The Hebrews are not bound to practice their ceremonial rites since the destruction

of their state . . . Since the fall of their independent state, Jews are no more bound by the Mosaic Law than they were before their political state came into being', that is, before Moses issued the Law in the form of the commandments.[<sup>8</sup>]

Spinoza's views on the Law bear on an important set of related issues. In rabbinic Judaism, there is generally no distinction drawn between law and morality. What God decrees as law is thereby what is moral. There is no independent code of moral behavior distinct from divine law (and in accordance with which that law can be judged). Consequently, there is no such thing as natural law, that is, a universally valid law discovered by and justified through reason, without any appeal to the will of God. Spinoza departs from Jewish tradition on this question, and does so once again from a naturalizing standpoint. What he calls Divine Law is the supreme moral law, and it is distinct from Jewish religious (or ceremonial) law. And the Divine Law, while revealed by Scripture, is in principle discoverable and justified by reason alone; in fact, Spinoza insists, it is 'innate' in the human mind. Jewish ceremonial law, on the other hand, is a human convention, instituted by Moses and later codified and systematized by Ezra, the Pharisees and the Mishnaic sages.

Spinoza provides an equally deflationary account of God's election, or the 'vocation', of the Hebrews. It is 'childish', he insists, for anyone to base their happiness on the uniqueness of their gifts. In the case of the Jews, it would be the uniqueness of their being chosen by God from among all nations and all peoples. In fact, he insists, the ancient Hebrews did not surpass other nations in their wisdom, their character or (which amounts to the same thing) their proximity to God. They were neither intellectually nor morally superior to other peoples. Reason and the capacity for virtue are distributed by

nature equally among all individual human beings, and the achievement of virtue is found among all nations. ‘The Hebrews surpassed other nations not in knowledge nor in piety . . . the Hebrews [were] chosen by God above all others not for the true life nor for any higher understanding.’<sup>[9]</sup>

There is, then, no theologically, morally or metaphysically interesting sense in which the Jews are a chosen people. The only respect in which the Israelites were chosen by God (or Nature) is in regard to their social organization and political good fortune. ‘The individual Jew, considered alone apart from his social organization and his government, possesses no gift of God above other men, and there is no difference between him and a Gentile.’<sup>[10]</sup> This ‘chosen-ness’ is, in fact, nothing but the fortunate external circumstances that came their way from the determinate operations of the ordinary course of nature. The Israelites obeyed the laws that had been set for them, with the natural consequence that their society was well-ordered and their autonomous government long-lived. The process requires no supernatural intervention. If a group is provided with wise and pragmatic laws, and it lives by them, then the result will (naturally) be a secure and prosperous polity.

The Hebrew nation was chosen by God before all others not by reason of its understanding nor of its spiritual qualities, but by reason of its social organization and the good fortune whereby it achieved supremacy and retained it for so many years. This is quite evident from Scripture itself. A merely casual perusal clearly reveals that the Hebrews surpassed other nations in this alone, that they were successful in achieving security for themselves and overcame great dangers, and this chiefly by God’s external help alone. In other respects they were no different

from other nations, and God was equally gracious to all . . . Therefore their election and vocation consisted only in the material success and prosperity of their state . . . In return for their obedience the Law promises them nothing other than the continuing prosperity of their state and material advantages, whereas disobedience and the breaking of the Covenant would bring about the downfall of their state and the severest hardships.[<sup>11</sup>]

The election of the Jews was thus a temporal and conditional one. With their kingdom now long gone, their distinction has come to an end. At the present time there is nothing whatsoever that the Jews can arrogate to themselves above other nations.’[<sup>12</sup>] With respect to understanding, virtue and true happiness, with respect to blessedness, there is not, never has been and never will be anything peculiar to the Jews.[<sup>13</sup>]

Spinoza’s philosophical analyses of Hebrew Scripture, Jewish law, and history, and his naturalism about God and ‘salvation were, of course, looked upon as scandalous and heretical to religious authorities of all persuasions. He was branded as an atheist, and the *Theological-Political Treatise* was regarded by its many vehement critics as ‘a book forged in hell’. But there can be no denying the importance of his insights, and the tremendous influence they exerted not only upon the subsequent history of philosophy in general, but especially upon later Jewish thought.[<sup>14</sup>]

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<sup>1</sup> See Yirmuyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 1, “The Marrano of Reason” (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). For a critique of Yovel’s reading, see Wiep Van Bunge, “Baruch of Benedictus: Spinoza en de ‘Marranen’”, *Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis* 81 (2001).

<sup>2</sup> For an examination of Spinoza’s relationship to Jewish philosophy, see Steven Nadler, *Spinoza’s Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Carlos Fraenkel, “Maimonides’ God and Spinoza’s Deus sive Natura”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (2006): 169-215; Heidei Ravven and Lenn Goodman, eds., *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); Heidi Ravven, “Some Thoughts on What Spinoza Learned from Maimonides on the Prophetic Imagination: Part Two: Spinoza’s Maimonideanism”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 385-406; and Catherine Chalier, *Spinoza Lecteur de Maïmonide: La question théologique-politique* (Paris: Cerf, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> See *Guide of the Perplexed* II.25.

<sup>4</sup> *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP), Spinoza Opera*, 5 vols., Carl Gebhardt, ed. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitaetsverlag, 1925, 1987; henceforth abbreviated as ‘G’), vol. III.100-1.

<sup>5</sup> TTP, G III.60.

<sup>6</sup> TTP, G III.61.

<sup>7</sup> TTP, G III.62 , 69.

<sup>8</sup> TTP, G III.72.

<sup>9</sup> TTP, G III.45.

<sup>10</sup> TTP, G III.50.

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<sup>11</sup> TTP, G III.47-48.

<sup>12</sup> TTP, G III.56.

<sup>13</sup> . For a discussion of Spinoza on the election of Israel, see David Novak, *The Election of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1995), chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> To cite only the most obvious case, Moses Mendelssohn. For a monumental study of Spinoza's general philosophical influence, see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).