

SPINOZA AND CONTEMPORARY JUDAISM

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I. Introduction

On April 1, 2012, roughly 200 people gathered at Washington D.C.'s Jewish theater, Theater J, to attend what had been billed as an all-day "Spinozium." We listened to scholars discuss his life and philosophy. We witnessed a mini-trial on the issue of whether, if we had the chance, we would rescind Spinoza's excommunication (or "cherem") by the Amsterdam Sephardic-Jewish community. Then, after the trial, everyone cast a vote. The result was that 79 percent of the attendees supported rescinding the cherem and 21 percent opted to maintain it.

Most likely, this was viewed as a victory for Spinoza. But my reaction to the vote was visceral and negative. I was appalled at the 21 percent who voted with the minority. I had taken note that prior to the Spinozium, the theater had been polling the issue on-line and had received an even higher percentage of "Rescind!" votes. Somehow, spending an afternoon learning about the relevant issues had persuaded many attendees to support continuing the *cherem*. I knew going into the Spinozium that the vast majority of the voters would be Jews, and because I was one of only a handful of people present covering their head, I surmised that only a tiny percentage of these Jews could be Orthodox. Why, I wondered, would dozens of non-Orthodox Jews vote against accepting Spinoza as part of the Jewish people?

This talk is an attempt to come to grips with that vote. First, I will explain my visceral reaction against voting to maintain the cherem. Then, I will provide a basis for how such a vote might actually be defended; specifically, I will explain ways in which Spinoza's teachings harmonize with those of modern anti-Semitism. But when all of that is said, profound questions will remain. What should contemporary Jews do with this guy? Should we want him in our pantheon of sages as a patriarch of modern Judaism? Or should his disrespectful comments about Judaism preclude him from being accepted as an authentically *Jewish* thinker, let alone a role model? I will make my best effort to answer these questions.

II. Spinoza's Claim to Membership in the Pantheon of Modern-Jewish Heroes

For me, Spinoza is among the handful of modern luminaries who best exemplify what it means to live an inspiring, Jewish life. Allow me first to defend that thesis before explaining why others may legitimately have a different point of view.

Judaism is unique in that it is a *folk* (or a people, with a distinctive culture) as well as a faith. Underlying both is a set of values. To begin, Jews should be committed to working for justice and caring for all human beings, including themselves. Jews are also supposed to be devoted to truth. In addition, Jews are taught to be pious and thereby venerate the individuals and institutions that have stood the test of time. In that vein, Jews have traditionally come to revere above all else a singular figure at the heart of civilization. I am referring to the "One God" who has many names but whose essence must remain largely beyond our grasp.

Shema Israel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad. So goes the most hallowed of Jewish phrases, which can be translated as. "Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." Different Jewish teachers have come to conceive of God differently – hence the expression, "two Jews, three opinions" -- but according to our tradition, God, however conceived, remains the Ultimate One. God is the most blessed, the most beloved, and the most high.

Today, however, an increasing number of Jews don't feel compelled to think about God. Some reject the existence of any deity, whereas others have stopped caring about the topic. It has also become common among Jews to avoid concerning themselves with anything uniquely Jewish. Many have no interest in Hebrew and don't study the Scriptures in any language. To the extent they follow the spirit of Jewish ethics, it is because that spirit has percolated into Western Culture, not because it is being transmitted by teachers specifically associated with Judaism.

Now place Spinoza into this equation. Born into a respectable Sephardic-Jewish family, he threw himself into Jewish texts as a child. At the age of 38, 14 years after the *cherem*, he completed a treatise (the *Theological-Political Treatise*, or "*TTP*") that centered largely on an examination of the Hebrew Scriptures. At around the same time, he was also beginning to put together an analysis of Hebrew Grammar, which ultimately resulted in a 33-chapter discussion of that language.

While Spinoza is praised by fans as having spawned the field of academic Biblical analysis, he is castigated by others as an enemy of the Hebrew Bible. Yet Spinoza viewed

himself as “strengthening” God’s word, as well as true religion and faith.¹ Moreover, despite having been viciously booted from his native community for teaching doctrines that are now largely accepted by contemporary Jews, Spinoza touted the Jewish Scriptures as a means of inculcating necessary values, including obedience. He also praised the ancient Hebrews for the way they organized their society. The Jews, Spinoza said, were indeed chosen as to “their temporal material prosperity and freedom – i.e., their political independence – and to the manner and means whereby they achieved it, and consequently to their laws as well...”² In short, instead of reacting to the *cherem* with petty vengeance, Spinoza became a Torah scholar, a teacher of the Hebrew language, and a devotee of the ancient Hebrew approach to politics and economics.

Spinoza also came to epitomize what it means to practice the values his ancestors preached. Like Hillel before him and the Baal Shem Tov after him, he opposed asceticism and hailed a life filled with joy. His ethics recognized the central importance of taking care of one’s own individual interests, but it also appreciated that however self-centered we may be as creatures, we must also be high-minded, just and charitable -- in other words, we must take care of our fellow human beings. The annals of the history of philosophy are filled with kind words for Spinoza, including the following from Bertrand Russell: Spinoza “is the noblest and most loveable of the great philosophers.... [E]thically he is supreme. As a natural consequence, he was considered, during his lifetime and for a century after his death, a man of appalling wickedness.”³ Stated simply, Spinoza had the courage of his convictions, they compelled him to preach a philosophy that was ahead of its time, and as a result, he became *persona non grata* with Jew and gentile alike, at least until our world began to catch up with his teachings.

One principle that Spinoza took to heart is that *Torah means truth*. This is a doctrine that I had heard on different occasions when studying with Orthodox rabbis. Spinoza was especially passionate about the search for truth, and he decided that truth requires conformity to the voice of reason. Like his hero, Maimonides, Spinoza felt compelled to place that voice at the heart of all intellectual endeavors, including the study of Scripture. Maimonides invariably interpreted Scripture so as to ensure that it seemed reasonable to a 12th century mind. By contrast, Spinoza took the words of Scripture at face value and refused to place an Enlightenment Era gloss on them – even if it meant finding that a Scriptural statement no longer sounds reasonable. In that

¹ Spinoza, *Theological Political Treatise* (“TTP”), Chapter 12, reprinted in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, Samuel Shirley Translation (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002) (hereafter, “Shirley”), at 504. All quotations from Spinoza’s works herein are taken from *Shirley*.

² TTP, Chapter 3, reprinted in *Shirley* at 420.

³ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Touchstone, 1972), at 569.

regard, he has been followed by a large swath of modern, liberal Jews who enjoy studying Scripture but interpret it based on what it was originally intended to mean. That hardly makes them less “Jewish,” or even “religious,” than the followers of Maimonidean hermeneutics.

For example, consider the passage in Leviticus (18:22) proclaiming it an abomination for a man to lie with a man in the way that he’d lie with a woman. If you’re a disciple of Maimonides, you never want to interpret the Torah so as to make it seem unreasonable. That’s why some contemporary rabbis have interpreted that passage to say that it’s not prohibiting homosexuality; it’s only talking about the physical differences in the way that men have homosexual and heterosexual sex. But Spinoza could never abide such clear revisionism, and I’d question how anyone could claim that makes him less Jewish than Maimonides. Maybe Spinoza was simply more insistent that we treat the Torah honestly – and if you want the Torah *really* to mean “truth,” then why not be honest about it?

Now, let’s turn to Spinoza’s relationship with Judaism’s most central figure: God. In his time, Spinoza was mocked as an atheist; today, he is often praised as one. Yet Spinoza himself never viewed himself as anything but a committed God-lover, and he is hardly alone in that assessment. Novales termed him “God intoxicated,”⁴ Goethe called him the “most religious” human being,⁵ and many prominent thinkers have cited Spinoza for creating a God-centered philosophy in which we are taught to love and think about God above all else.

Personally, I find in Spinoza’s God profound Jewish antecedents: namely, Maimonides’ theology as expressed in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, as well as the Kabbalistic conception of the *Ein Sof*, which has been referred to as the God *above* the Biblical God. What I take to be especially inspiring about Spinoza is the fact that his devotion to God survived an unwillingness to believe in anyone or anything that flies in the face of the laws of nature. Spinoza’s God is transcendent without being supernatural. Indeed, Spinoza sparked a trend within Judaism to affirm the One God even if the voice of reason urges *against* believing in the supernatural. That is a faith that can actually survive among 21st century minds with secular educations.

To quote one of my friends, “Spinoza is the last refuge of the contemporary Jew who wants to believe in God.” I take this to mean that in a post-Holocaust age when it seems almost blasphemous to talk about supernatural intervention, Jews can still believe in the Holy One *if*

⁴ Pierre-Francois Moreau, “Spinoza’s Reception and Influence.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, edited by Don Garrett, 408-33 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), at 421.

⁵ Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), at 105.

they are willing to re-evaluate what is truly ultimate and divine. Spinoza taught us to do that. Plus, he taught us to be Biblical and Hebrew scholars. Plus, he taught us to steep ourselves in Jewish philosophy and mysticism. Plus, he taught us to honor our voice of reason and our will to truth. Plus, he taught us to preach a moral code that has its origins in the Torah. Plus he taught us to live a lifestyle that exemplifies what we preach. And yet, there are still those who have the chutzpah to suggest that he wasn't an authentic Jew.

It is no wonder that when modern Jews finally came to acquire their own country, its leaders embraced Spinoza as a spiritual and political role model for the new Jewish state. Spinoza also inspired the German-Jewish intellectuals in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to create the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment. That movement helped to usher in the birth of Reform Judaism, which is now the most popular branch of Judaism in the United States.

According to Leo Strauss, “modern Judaism is a synthesis between rabbinical Judaism and Spinoza.”⁶ If you agree with Strauss, you can see why I was so disturbed to see dozens of non-Orthodox Jews cast their vote to continue Spinoza's excommunication. Instead of treating Spinoza as a hero, like Einstein and Freud did before them, they were treating him as a pariah. “How terribly ungrateful,” I thought to myself, with no shortage of indignation.

III. How Some of Spinoza's Words Can Aptly Be Associated with Garden-Variety Anti-Semitism

Prior to voting, the audience in the Theater J Spinozium was asked to talk about whether it made sense to rescind the *cherem* today, rather than whether it made sense for Spinoza's community to excommunicate him back in 1656. If they had been asked to do the latter, I would have been much more understanding of those who voted against him.

Spinoza was excommunicated before any of his treatises were published. When the *TTP* came out, it would have been seen as heretical to Christians and Jews alike. The extent to which he strayed from Christian orthodoxy would have been especially dangerous to his native Jewish community if it hadn't already excommunicated Spinoza. Owing their survival to the tolerance of their Christian hosts, these insecure Jews could ill afford to have such an articulate heretic philosophizing in their midst.

Jewish traditionalists might have forgiven Spinoza for being a heretic if he had forever remained an equal-opportunity gadfly. But when he published the *TTP* in 1670, he went out of his way to clarify that of the two Biblical “Testaments,” he preferred the newer one. Repeatedly,

⁶ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Preference to the English Translation (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), at 27.

he adopted charitable interpretations of the New Testament but not the Hebrew Bible, thereby causing his Jewish readers, including fans like me, to shudder at portions of the *TTP*. Now, it is time for me to confront that treatise head on.

Spinoza began the *TTP* with a diatribe against superstition, which he identifies as being caused by fear. Then, when it came time to characterize Scripture, he identified the purpose of religion generally and the Hebrew Bible in particular as inculcating obedience, which is generally associated with a concern about what happens to those who disobey. It is true that Spinoza praised Moses for introducing the religion of Judaism so as “to make the people do their duty from devotion rather than fear.”⁷ Nevertheless, Spinoza said, the basic goal of Moses’ prophesies was to get people to do what they’re *commanded* to do, and his appeal was primarily to authority rather than reason. The result, Spinoza argued, was a people who were the antithesis of free.

[I]n order that a people incapable of self-rule should be utterly subservient to its ruler, [Moses] did not allow these men, habituated as they were to slavery, to perform any action at their own discretion. The people could do nothing without being required at the same time to remember the law and to follow its commands, which were dependent solely on the ruler’s will. Ploughing, sowing, reaping were not permitted at their discretion, but had to accord with the fixed and determinate command of the law. They could not even eat, dress, cut their hair, shave, make merry or do anything whatsoever except in accordance with commands and instructions laid down by the law. And this was not all; they had to have certain signs on their doorposts, on their hands and between the eyes, to give them constant reminder of the duty of obedience.⁸

In short, after being slaves under Pharaoh, the ancient Jews came to endure a second kind of servitude under the Law of Moses, which was sanctioned by the Jewish Scriptures. By contrast, Spinoza wrote, “Christ taught only “moral precepts.... It is for this reason that Christ promises a spiritual reward, not, like Moses, a material reward.”⁹ Spinoza attributes to Paul the teaching that Christ was sent “to free all men ... from the bondage of the law, so that no longer would they act righteously from the law’s command but from the unwavering resolution of the heart.”¹⁰ In that regard, Spinoza said, Paul’s teaching was identical to his own. By preaching the liberation of human beings from the bondage of law, Paul and Jesus attempted to instill both

⁷ Spinoza, *TTP*, Chapter 5, reprinted in *Shirley*, at 439.

⁸ *Id.* at 440.

⁹ *Id.* at 436.

¹⁰ *Id.*, Chapter 3, at 423.

purity of heart and wisdom. According to Spinoza, “men, women and children all are equally capable of obedience by command, but not of wisdom by command.”¹¹

It is clear from the *TTP* that whereas Spinoza saw Moses as a Prophet, he saw Jesus as a fellow philosopher, and therefore a much wiser man. Moses, Spinoza taught, “imagined God as a ruler, lawgiver, king, merciful, just and so forth” -- terms that are “not at all applicable to the divine nature.”¹² By contrast, Christ may *appear* to have laid down laws in the name of God, but

we must maintain that he perceived things truly and adequately; for Christ was not so much a prophet as the mouthpiece of God. ... God revealed himself to Christ, or to Christ’s mind, directly and not through words and images as in the case of the prophets. ... Christ perceived truly, or understood, what was revealed. For it is when a thing is perceived by pure thought, without words or images, that it is understood.¹³

There you have modern anti-Semitic stereotypes numbers one and two. First, that Judaism is the voice of law and obedience, whereas Christianity is the voice of love and freedom. Second, that Judaism’s greatest Prophet is intellectually limited, whereas “Christ” has such a divinely inspired intuition that his instruction is always spot on. Even Paul – who made some of the least Spinozist statements imaginable, such as the claim that salvation is only possible because of Jesus’ resurrection -- is treated with kid gloves in the *TTP*. Spinoza praised him for having anticipated Spinoza’s own esoteric metaphysical teachings and rationalized Paul’s supernaturalist doctrines as a byproduct of his effort to speak to common people at their level of understanding.

Chapter 5 of the *TTP* is generally devoted to challenging the spiritual value of the Jewish ritual laws. And in that chapter, Spinoza included a comparison between Judaism and Christianity that speaks volumes about his frustrations with his native faith:

[H]e who is totally unacquainted with the Biblical narratives, but nevertheless holds salutary beliefs and pursues the true way of life, is absolutely blessed and has within him the spirit of Christ. Now the Jews take a completely contrary view. They maintain that true beliefs and a true way of life contribute nothing to blessedness as long as men embrace them only from the natural light of reason, and not as teachings revealed to Moses by prophetic inspiration.¹⁴

¹¹ *Id.*, Chapter 13, at 512.

¹² *Id.*, Chapter 4, at 431.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*, Chapter 5, at 443.

Those who are familiar with Spinoza's devotion to reason understand just how invidious a comparison that is from the standpoint of Judaism.

And there's more. On countless occasions in his treatise, Spinoza emphasized that the Hebrew Scriptures were given to a particular people at a particular time, and that the laws included in those Scriptures were only meant to bind the ancient Hebrews until such time as they lost control over their state. The New Testament, by contrast, was intended for *all* people as a vehicle to set forth the universal moral principles that apply for all peoples at all times. You can see from discussions like Spinoza's why so many Christians over the centuries have taught that their faith *supersedes* its precursor, Judaism, which allegedly became an anachronism as soon as its adherents rejected the redeemer who was sent to free them from the bondage of the Law.

While he never bought into certain major aspects of Christian metaphysics (such as supernatural miracles), Spinoza didn't hesitate to invoke strong language to praise the universal nature of the Christian faith. Indeed, in reference to the religion practiced by the ancient Hebrews, Spinoza pointed out that "the universal religion [Christianity] had not yet become known through revelation."¹⁵ By contrast, Spinoza wrote, "the Hebrews were not required as a religious duty to practice piety towards peoples who were not party to the contract, but only towards their fellow citizens."¹⁶ In other words, the idea that we are supposed to treat *all* people with charity and justice had to wait until Christ and his apostles showed up on the scene, for the Judaism preached by Moses and his disciples was merely a vehicle to improve the conduct of one Jew toward another, rather than Jew to gentile, gentile to gentile ... or, as history has taught us, gentile to Jew.

Further, as depicted by Spinoza, the Jewish religion is as chauvinistic as it is tribal. Chapter 3 of the *TTP* was devoted to debunking the myth that Jews are "the chosen people" or that they alone have been given the gift of Prophecy. Spinoza decried the idea that Jews are somehow more intellectually advanced than gentiles and even refused to give them much credit for surviving so long. Spinoza attributed that survival to the fact that Jews were so universally hated that they were not assimilated into societies and remained separate.

Speaking of hatred toward Jews, the *TTP* includes a few more examples that could add kindling to the fire of anti-Semitism. To begin, Spinoza adopted the old trope that "It was in giving way to the anger of the Pharisees that Pilate ordered the crucifixion of Christ, whom he knew to be innocent."¹⁷ Spinoza also suggested that "[t]he Pharisees did indeed retain [a great

¹⁵ *Id.*, Chapter 19, at 560.

¹⁶ *Id.*, Chapter 17, at 552.

¹⁷ *Id.*, Chapter 18, at 555.

part of the Torah's ceremonial laws] after the loss of their independent state; but their object in so doing was to oppose the Christians rather than to please God.”¹⁸ Spinoza even suggested that the prohibition of adultery was not intended “to be a moral precept that had regard ... to the peace of mind and the true blessedness of the individual, [or else Moses] would have condemned not merely the external act but the very *wish*, as did Christ, who taught only universal moral precepts” (emphasis added).¹⁹ Apparently, Spinoza did not deem “You can look but you better not touch,” to be a sufficiently rigorous guideline for a legitimate moral system.

Spinoza's overall assessment of the Jewish ethos is hardly flattering to his ancestors. He held them responsible for one primitive idea after another, such as the obsession with religious rituals, fanciful superstitions, and arbitrary proscriptions as well as the notion that God favors one group of people above all others. In light of such criticisms, and particularly when they are compared with the more laudatory treatment given to Jesus and Paul, it is not hard to understand why some believe that Spinoza rejected Judaism every bit as much as the Jews rejected him.

IV. Spinoza's “Good Name” and Its Relationship to Contemporary Judaism

The *Ethics of the Fathers* in the Talmud quotes Rabbi Simeon in saying that “There are three crowns -- the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of kingship. But the crown of a good name excels them all.”²⁰ In light of all we know about Spinoza, what should the Jewish people today make of his name?

For starters, I'd hope, we'd place his name in historical perspective. Personally, when I do that, I am less threatened by his criticisms of Judaism and more forgiving of why he expressed them.

Much has happened since Spinoza published his *TTP*. Jewish communities – even Orthodox ones -- have become communities of choice. Many Jews are choosing to lose their sense of ethnic identity altogether. When you consider how libertine the Jewish world has become, some of Spinoza's criticisms ring hollow. The idea of Jews as a robotic group of servants dutifully going through their rituals has become unrecognizable, except in the imagination of anti-Semites. Many who self-identify as Jews derive that perspective solely from the values and culture passed down by their ancestors, and may choose to ignore Jewish theology

¹⁸ *Id.*, Chapter 5, at 437.

¹⁹ *Id.*, at 436.

²⁰ *Ethics of the Fathers*, reprinted in *Daily Prayerbook (Ha-siddur Ha-shalem)* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1986), Chapter 5, verse 17, at 508.

or any number of religious rituals. I, for example, grew up in a family where my parents translated the word “mitzvah,” which literally means “commandment,” as “good deed.”

Moreover, Jewish religious rituals are laced with such beauty that even Orthodox communities are composed in part of atheists who adore the rhythms and spirituality of what Spinoza would call the “ceremonial laws.” It is laughable to think that these rituals are observed, as Spinoza said, purely to gain material benefits and earn the favor of some authority figure.

It is also laughable to depict Jews, as Spinoza sometimes did, as anti-philosophical drones. When, in 1981, I studied at one of those Orthodox yeshivas whose primary job was to bring non-Orthodox Jews into the fold, I met some unphilosophical drones. Yet I can also report that for many others, the days were filled with soul searching and rigorous debate. The one word you’d never hear at the yeshiva is “study.” We’d say instead that we were going to go “learn,” because we wanted to be self-motivated, free-thinking intellectuals. To be sure, we were taught that “if you open your mind too much your brains will fall out” – lest we turn into, oh I don’t know, Spinozas – but I’ll never forget hearing from an Orthodox rabbi that a religious Jew should wake up every morning questioning everything, even the existence of God.

It is a matter of pride among contemporary Jews that Jacob received the name “Israel” to signify that he literally wrestled with an angel of God and that Jacob’s descendants are tasked with doing the same thing metaphorically. In today’s world, religious Jews should be as intellectually ornery as they are spiritually submissive.

Spinoza sometimes referred to the modern followers of the ancient rabbis who gave us the Talmud simply as “Pharisees,” which to put it mildly was hardly a compliment. The way he used that word makes a contemporary Jew shudder, as we associate that usage with the basest anti-Semitism of the past few hundred years. But to be fair, we in the 21st century are in no position to speculate about exactly how intellectually free or dynamic the Jews were in Spinoza’s day. Perhaps the freedom or spirituality Jews enjoy today was less common in 17th century Amsterdam. My guess is that in the past 3 ½ centuries, Jewish communities have come a long way in developing Spinozistic virtues, and I credit the man himself for playing a big role in making that happen.

Besides, whatever you would like to think about the nature of the prominent Sephardic-Jewish community in which Spinoza was raised, we cannot forget that it cast out Spinoza in the most vituperative terms imaginable. (“Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed by 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.....”²¹ You get the picture.) His purported sin was to question such things as the existence of the supernatural and the kind of personal immortality that traditional theists have used to convert lost souls. In other words, he had the courage to advocate precepts that are now taken as true by many if not most 21st century Jews. For that offense, every Jew in his community was prohibited from being under the same roof as Spinoza, standing within six feet of his body, or reading any of his heresy. When you consider that context, it is impressive that he was as evenhanded as he was in describing the Jewish Scriptures and the communities that emerged from them.

So let us concede that Spinoza can be forgiven for depicting Jews as less than free-thinking, spiritual intellectuals. What do we want to make of his invidious comparisons between Judaism and Christianity? We should credit Spinoza, as a political thinker, for emphasizing the need to liberate the political realm from the control of religious authorities. He could not help but be moved by a religion that spoke of rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s, to God what is God’s, and, may I add, to Christ what is Christ’s. But what makes the Jewish blood boil isn’t Spinoza’s kind words about the Gospels taken by themselves. It’s the juxtaposition of those words with his excessive criticisms of the Jews and their faith. Surely, Spinoza was exposed to 17th century anti-Semitism. He must have known the dangers of telling gentiles that it was Jewish bloodlust that killed Christ, or that Jewish ritual observances after the advent of Christianity were mostly a means to “oppose ... the universal religion,” or that Jews only feel the duty to be good to their own kind. If you were to ask me whether I admire Spinoza for making those statements, I would respond that I put them in the same category as his claims in the *Political Treatise* that women have no place in government. Stated simply, even the Sage of Amsterdam had significant blind spots; he was, after all, human.

But once again, let’s not forget that centuries after Spinoza died, we’ve seen the effects of anti-Semitism move into hyper drive, with atrocities committed of a nature and magnitude that Spinoza could not possibly have anticipated. If he had been familiar with the Holocaust, for example, he might have thought twice before making some of his more anti-Jewish claims to a European audience. Moreover, because the *TTP* was an extremely heretical work from a Christian standpoint, the famously-cautious Spinoza must have feared for his life when he decided to publish that work. Even though it came out anonymously, the name of its author was not a well-kept secret. The possibility thus remains that it was only by favorably comparing Christianity to its precursor faith and by flattering Jesus and Paul alike that Spinoza hoped to avoid the gallows and be allowed to go on writing even more treatises. Perhaps he did put a little thumb on the scale in favor of Christianity for the sake of his being able to influence his era

²¹ Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), at 120.

theologically and influence future eras philosophically, which is what happened when his *Ethics* was published after his death.

So now that we've placed Spinoza's writings in some historical context, let's turn a gimlet eye to the present. I'll begin with a concession: I fully appreciate why, for Orthodox Jews, Spinoza's disrespectful comments about his ancestral faith may disqualify him from belonging in the pantheon of Jewish heroes. But if you're a Jew who is *not* Orthodox, you've taken a close look at his life and work, and you still haven't seen his incredible potential as a Jewish role model, then all I could say is that he's not the only one with significant blind spots.

We live in a time when most Jews are not Orthodox. Inter-marriage rates have skyrocketed, and if present trends were to continue, it would be reasonable to expect that within a few generations, only a small minority of the products of those inter-marriages will consider themselves Jewish. Even the offspring of two Jewish parents are increasingly losing their faith in God. Oh, they may gladly become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or grow up to join a congregation in their suburban towns, yet it would surprise nobody if the faith that they embrace is what has come to be known as H2O Judaism, which means "two holidays only." In other words, many of them will have less in common with committed religious people than with most secular, gentile country-club members, and all that would be left of their "Judaism" is a set of rituals for coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and a tiny number of holidays each year.

That type of Judaism is inauthentic and ultimately not likely to survive. For those who care about the health of the non-Orthodox branches of the Jewish tree, something must be done. Someone – or some pantheon of heroes – must come to the rescue. And therein lies the argument for Spinoza's good, *Jewish* name.

It was Rabbi Hillel who, when asked to summarize the meaning of Judaism while standing on one foot, responded: "What is hateful to you do not do to others. All the rest is commentary. Now go study." Bertrand Russell would argue that of the great Western philosophers – Jew or gentile -- Spinoza applied that critical precept better than *any* of his peers. And when it was time to "go study," he frequently plumbed the depths of either the Scriptures or the language of the Hebrew people, two activities that are increasingly becoming fringe avocations in liberal American-Jewish communities.

What's more, if you sought out the main causes of the widespread religious apathy among American Jews, I suspect you'd quickly see that certain fundamental Jewish teachings, including all that stuff about miracles and God's will, just don't ring true for this population.

They didn't ring true for Spinoza either, and he confronted that fact head on. He searched for the essence of religious concepts – like “God,” “eternity,” “love,” etc. – and re-defined the words so that they not only made sense to him but retained much of the thrust of their traditional meaning. In other words, he did for the great concepts of Jewish philosophy what Maimonides did for the esoteric passages of Jewish Scripture – he made them reasonable! If you care about whether Judaism can live, breathe and evolve over time, you need such philosophers in your fold.

In the case of the Holy Name, Spinoza has inspired the theological thinking of so many Jewish seekers, including myself. The way he conceived of “God” is a reminder of what that word traditionally *denotes*: namely, the *Ultimate*, with all the mystery that concept conveys. As for the word's traditional *connotation* -- the omni-excellent, miracle-working, human-like Scriptural character who once gave us the Great Flood and more recently, presumably, the Holocaust – Spinoza liberated us from having to equate that with divinity. With Spinoza as a role model, Jews are now free to search through the principles of science, philosophy, history, and yes, Scripture too, to find the God we *can* believe in. And to those who say “but your ‘God’ is not *the* God,” we can simply say thanks for the dogmatism, but no thanks.

You might not agree with everything Spinoza wrote. Clearly I don't. But nor would I deny that he took to heart a devotion to Judaism's highest values – iconoclasm, courage, reverence, diligence, a commitment to advancing the human condition, and an undying respect for the voice of reason. As a result, he became one of the fathers of modern liberal Judaism. If he could have looked into a crystal ball and view, say, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College or Hebrew Union College, he might recognize that contemporary liberal Judaism emerged from the atmosphere he created. Perhaps, this future-gazing Spinoza might even have developed a favorable view of the faith, or at least the potential that liberal Judaism has to offer.

Rabbi Heschel, who is clearly in the pantheon of liberal Jewish heroes, once said that he would judge a man by the extent to which he is willing to take on deep problems.²² If that is the case, Spinoza would be deemed a mensch among mensches, because his entire adult life was an exercise in taking on deep intellectual problems, even at the expense of maintaining his “good name.” It is up to contemporary Jews who take Heschel's claim seriously to reclaim Spinoza's name and give it an honored place at the table of Jewish role models.

²² Abraham Joshua Heschel, “A Conversation with Doctor Abraham Joshua Heschel.” Interview with Carl Stern. *The Eternal Light*. NBC. February 4, 1973. Television. Reprinted as “Carl Stern's Interview with Dr. Heschel” in *Moral Gandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, edited by Susannah Heschel, 395-412 (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), at 402.

To those Jews who are so offended by the statements quoted in the previous section of this essay that they do not wish to celebrate Spinoza as a Jew, I offer a challenge. Let's stipulate that Judaism, at bottom, requires a balance between the mindsets of tribalism and universalism, and that some of Spinoza's least appealing statements involve the total denigration of the tribalist component. Should we not still acknowledge that, when it comes to striking that balance, the universalist mindset must generally take precedence? And in the case of Spinoza, that universalist-Jew-par-excellence, if we reject him in spite of all that he has to offer us, aren't we really saying that we'd prefer to strike the balance in favor of the tribal over the universal?

From a Jewish standpoint, Spinoza's blindspots surely have prevented him from achieving his fullest potential as a philosopher. Still, at least we can praise him as a prophetic voice in relatively modern times. Here we have a passionate thinker who pointed to the need to reform Judaism by somewhat secularizing it, thereby creating what could be called a synthesis between traditional Judaism and Western philosophy. The so-called "Jewish Enlightenment" belongs as much to Spinoza as to his disciple, Moses Mendelsohn.

V. Conclusion

Contemporary Jews have the privilege of building the synthesis that Spinoza helped to create. At a minimum, they can take inspiration from his righteousness and intellectual brilliance. They also can take pride in the fact that he was not only a Jew who thought, but an authentically Jewish thinker. Spinoza shared the ancient rabbis' passions for those timeless ethical and metaphysical concerns that are central to Jewish texts. But what makes him special is that he devoted his heart and mind to charting a path reflecting a courageous and largely compelling response to these concerns. The fact that he did not always follow the rabbis' every lead does not make him less Jewish. In fact, it might make him more so. For like his ancestor Jacob, the Godwrestler, Spinoza has shown how Judaism can evolve organically. By choosing not to embrace such a thinker, contemporary Jews risk their own religious vitality and their grandchildren's Jewish identity.