

## **A Missed Opportunity?**

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Written by Daniel Spiro  
Performed by Chaim Gartman,  
Kathleen Spiro and Daniel Spiro**

(A One-Act Play With Three Characters: David Levine, Miriam Frankl, and Micah Moskowitz)

Rabbi Levine – Good afternoon. My name is David Levine. I’m a rabbi at Temple Tikkun Olam in beautiful Brooklyn, New York – otherwise known as the Medina of the modern Jewish world. I want to thank both of you for coming today to this Special Session of the Council for Progressive Jewish Congregations.

Some people have referred to this session as an act of desperation. Who knows? Maybe they’re right. The fact is that our community is not at its healthiest. Israel is embroiled in a fight for its physical and moral survival. We have faith that Israel will someday survive the threat posed by its external enemies, but we’re not sure if it will emerge as a beacon of light to the world. Here in America, our community is dwindling in size due to assimilation, intermarriage and just plain old fashioned apathy. Many who do attend our congregations call themselves atheists; they only come for the social interaction and to make sure that their kids learn about the culture, or at least enough about it to decide for themselves that God doesn’t exist. Meanwhile, the Orthodox community is growing. Yet rather than embracing us, they often treat us with ridicule. In fact, they question whether we’re even Jewish. My colleague, the bar mitzvahed son of a Jewish father and gentile mother, at Temple Tikkun Olam we call him Rabbi. The Orthodox call him a goy.

Under the circumstances, I hope you understand that we felt the need to do something about the mess we’re in. We came up with the idea of identifying a number of missed opportunities and mistakes for which Jewish individuals and groups are responsible. But before we make any of our allegations known to our member congregations, our Executive Committee wanted to give interested parties a chance to weigh in on our ideas and let us know whether we’re on the right track. We called this session in order to get both points of view on each proposal – pro and con. That’s why you’re here – to give some guidance as to whether we’ve truly put our fingers on a missed opportunity or a mistake in the modern Jewish world.

Without further adieu, I want to read to you for the record one of our draft resolutions, which I understand both of you have seen in advance of this meeting. It is entitled: “A Missed Opportunity – The Neglect of Spinoza’s Philosophy by Modern Jewish Theologians.”

“BE IT RESOLVED THAT the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza has been largely the subject of neglect by modern Jewish theologians, which has exacerbated one of the greatest problems facing American Jews today: the rampant unwillingness to embrace the concept of divinity. While the responsibility for such neglect is shared widely among Jewish writers and clergy, we lay the blame primarily at the feet of legendary theologians in our midst who, to be blunt, knew better. At the top of this list belongs arguably the greatest Jewish theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Buber.

“Buber must have been aware of Spinoza’s potential power in inspiring Jewish spirituality. Buber once wrote that Spinoza is “the greatest philosophical genius Judaism has given to the world.” In other writings, Buber recognized the resonance between Spinoza’s thought and certain fundamental tenets of Buber’s beloved Judaism, including the notion that only in the world as we know it can humankind find the divine, or the notion that Jews must exercise extreme restraint in claiming to know the attributes of their beloved God. According to one commentator, Buber was also attracted to Spinoza’s noble lifestyle and his maverick, freethinking approach to matters of tradition.

“Unfortunately, for all Buber respected, or even loved, in Spinoza, Buber could not bring himself to enlist Spinoza as a philosophical ally. Essentially, Spinoza’s rationalistic writings became for Buber yet another example of what is *lacking* in philosophy: namely, the failure to engage the human spirit beyond merely the intellectual faculties. As a result, Buber resorted to straw men to discuss Spinoza in a way that could not help but limit Spinoza’s appeal. Worse yet, whereas Buber at least showed Spinoza the respect of talking about his ideas, some of Buber’s disciples ignored Spinoza altogether. Take Maurice Friedman, who is generally considered to be the world’s leading expert on Buber, and whose greatest work, Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue, was hailed by Buber as a “remarkable achievement” in systematizing Buber’s own philosophy. That “remarkable” work mentioned Spinoza’s name exactly zero times.

“Hegel once said that ‘thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all philosophy.’ The same thing could be said about any freethinking Jew who comes to embrace God in a post-Holocaust world. First, it is necessary to purify your faith in the spirit of Spinoza. It would then be possible to recognize how much there is in Spinoza’s specific teachings that resonates with more mainstream Jewish theologies like Buber’s. For all their differences, Buber and Spinoza complement each other. It is time for the members of our congregations to discover Spinoza and realize just how Jewish his philosophy really is.

“ACCORDINGLY, WE RESOLVE THAT rabbis in our congregations

shall research the teachings of Spinoza, work these teachings into their sermons and classes, and speak specifically about the relationship between Spinozist thought and that of the theologians, like Martin Buber, who have dominated modern Jewish discourse.”

That’s the text of the draft resolution. Now, I’d like to turn this hearing over to the two of you. Professor Frankl, I understand you wanted to speak first. The floor is yours.

Prof. Frankl -- Thank you very much, Rabbi Levine. On behalf of the Buberian League, it’s an honor to address the Council on this topic. While we don’t agree with the text of this resolution, we can’t question the Council’s motivations. There’s certainly a crisis of faith in the community today, and it makes sense to look in as many places as possible for a source of inspiration that will bring Jews back to God. I’m just not sure you’ll find your solution in Spinoza. And I’m quite sure it would be unfair to Buber, or Maurice Friedman, to assign blame to them for failing to base their theology on Spinoza’s teachings.

Before I talk about Spinoza, I want first to explain the key ideas of Martin Buber. By the time I finish, it should be pretty obvious how different these two men’s philosophies really were.

When people think of a theologian, they typically have in mind someone whose main concerns are with God, transcendence and abstractions. Buber was just the opposite. He was concerned fundamentally with human beings – in particular, how we can become whole, not alienated from our deepest selves. Instead of seeking the solution in heaven or some other sort of transcendent realm, Buber sought salvation in the here and now – the realm of space and time in which we all live our daily lives. Buber urged us to find the holy in the most mundane events. To Buber, separating the sacred from the rest of life is what is truly profane.

As far as abstractions are concerned, Buber discussed them, to be sure, but he preferred the concrete. It’s in the concrete event, and especially the meetings that take place between a person and some “other,” be it a human “other” or a community or even an animal, where human beings encounter the divine. As a child, Buber fell in love with the Hasidic attitude that we honor God best through celebrating God’s creation – person by person, event by event, embrace by embrace.

To Buber, human excellence isn’t measured by how many profound concepts we can manipulate in our cerebrums. It is a function of our actions, and particularly our decisions. It is in the act of decision that people reveal their freedom. Genuine moral decisions are, to Buber, the only truly religious acts. And these decisions involve our response to a unique set of circumstances – not our talent at identifying abstract, universal principles that supposedly apply regardless of circumstance. Buber understood the value of principles, of societal norms, but his religiosity was based on living in the

present and in elevating the importance of every lived moment as an opportunity to manifest holiness.

Famously, God asked the question “Where art Thou Adam?” To the Buberian, this is the question that is asked of us at every instant. The measure of our spirituality is in our ability to respond – our *response-ability*. When we respond in a way that honors the human beings who address us, when we respond in a way that shows how much we value the mundane, the everyday aspects of this earth, when we respond in a way that reflects our sense of wonder and adoration about life itself, that’s when we do our part to repair this world. That’s when we behave as Jews.

In the Bible, God addressed Abraham and Moses, and they responded. They heard God’s words and immediately entered into a dialogue with the Holy One. While that dialogue was taking place, all other concerns faded away, and God’s word filled the heart, the mind and the viscera. Abraham and Moses approached God not as they would have wished Him to be, but rather as He truly revealed Himself – and sometimes, as on Mount Moriah, God’s words pierced the heart like a dagger. But no matter, these prophets encountered God’s words in truth, and lovingly accepted Him as their partner in a relationship characterized on both sides by love.

This type of relationship is what is known, in Buber’s writings, as the I-Thou relationship. God calls to us “Where Art Thou,” and we allow ourselves to hear God, and God alone, and to respond, in essence, “What can I do for You, whom I love?”

As I say these words, I find myself thinking how clichéd they are as they apply to a person’s response to God. How else would we encounter God? As long as we know what’s good for us, what sane alternative is there? Buber’s point, though, is that the I-Thou relationship shouldn’t apply only to the way we encounter God. This needs to be the way we encounter *each other*. This needs to be the way we encounter the world. Perhaps we cannot expect ourselves to approach one another with the same degree of awe and reverence that our ancestors brought to an encounter with the Almighty. But we can meet one another with exclusivity, as if nothing else in the world mattered but the person we’re meeting. We can meet each other with sympathy, warmth and concern. We can meet each other with fascination. And we can meet each other with love. Indeed, not only can we, but we must.

I would submit to you that if you put aside Buber for a moment, and considered instead Plato, and if you searched in your own minds for the Platonic form of the “holy person” from any culture, what you’d find is the idea of a person whose life is dominated by I-Thou relationships. I would also submit that if you searched for the Platonic form of the holy Jew in modern times, you’d find the face of Martin Buber.

Sadly, Buber said, with the passage of time and the increasing complexities of civilizations, the I-Thou relationship has become rarer and rarer. The dominant mode of interaction is, instead, the I-It mode. We all instinctively understand what this means merely from its name, because we all treat one another as “Its” on a regular basis.

The I-It relationship involves analysis. Rather than respecting the uniqueness of the “other,” rather than meeting it with fascination, we immediately begin sizing the It up as an object of study. The It is categorized in terms of how it compares and contrasts to others. We come to understand the It in terms of universal concepts that either do or do not apply to the It. And when we finish this process of analysis, what appears before us is not a face, or a flower, or a living community, but a set of concepts, a set of symbols. The temperature and humidity of the relationship are much lower when we relate to an It than to a Thou.

For those who reside in the I-It relationship, there is never much of a present. Whereas the “Thou” is met in the moment and the focus on the moment continues as long as the I-Thou encounter takes place, the “It” almost entirely involves the past and the future. When we size the It up, we relate to it as someone or something that we have experienced in the past, if only two seconds ago, and as someone whom we wish to utilize in the future. Above all else, the I-It relationship is one of utilization. People and things become useful means to our ends, and it is our ends alone that concern us. Their ends are important only insofar as knowing them, and helping to satisfy them, can ultimately be of use to ourselves.

Buber understands that the I-It mode is not evil. We all need to invoke this relationship simply in order to survive. How else can we eat, or feed ourselves, or find reasonable shelter? How else can we cure diseases? The problem is that we invoke the I-It when we don’t have to. We invoke it because we have lost the ability to invoke the I-Thou, we have lost our capacities to demonstrate *response-ability*. Some have lost this capacity altogether. Others retain it, but have relegated it to the synagogue or the bedroom, or to other limited places where people do not primarily make their marks in this world. The person who deals almost exclusively on the I-It level becomes fragmented – he lives through his mind, his scheming mind, but not through his heart. Not through his soul. Tragically, because these people currently dominate our world, it should surprise no one that the world is tearing apart at its seams.

Rabbi Levine, I heard you identify yourself as coming from Temple Tikkun Olam. You should know that the concept of *tikkun olam*, which I understand to mean the requirement to repair or perfect this world, is very important to Buber’s philosophy. As I said before, Buber saw human beings as God’s partners in making this world whole. Our *response-ability* involves nothing less than God’s fate, God’s unification, in this world. Buber was very clear about this: the Jew lives in the dimension of time, even more than in the dimension of space. It is through time that we will fulfill our part of the Covenant.

Before I consider Spinoza, permit me to say a few words concerning the question: Who or what is Buber’s God? Buber discusses God. You might even say that Buber defines God. But he doesn’t attempt to describe God’s essence or nature. Buber merely discusses God in terms of God’s relationship to humankind. The most famous of Buber’s

descriptions of God are as “Eternal Thou” and as the “Absolute Person.” In both cases, Buber is pointing to God as someone whom a human being can encounter in a reciprocal I-Thou relationship. That is what qualifies God as a “person” in Buber’s terminology. But God isn’t like any other person. God is unlimited, incomparable, unconditioned. God grounds all other beings, all other potential Thous. That’s what makes God the “Absolute” person. That’s what makes God the one Thou who is “eternal.”

To the Buberian, God is encountered through our relationships with others. If we encounter them as Thous, and not Its, we are encountering God. Some have referred to Buber’s God as some sort of repository, some sort of place where we enter and where we can find the sum of everyone’s I-Thou relationships. That is a crude description. God is not in any one place. God is omnipresent, and is everywhere calling out to us. He is in the I, in the Thou, and particularly in the space that connects them. Whenever we treat another as a Thou, we honor God. God’s is the hand that draws us out of the abyss of the It and brings us into wholeness, into unity. For at bottom, our relationship with God is characterized by a joint quest for unity. Unity and wholeness.

As for Spinoza, I don’t have to remind the Council of the high regard in which Buber held him. The fact, remains, however, that their views were largely incompatible. Spinoza exemplified a good part of what Buber was trying to *oppose* in his teachings.

Spinoza was the quintessential rationalist. His books reveal nothing about himself as a man. Quite the contrary. They appear to demonstrate how a human mind can detach itself from any relationship to the concrete unique events that shape the author as a person. Once this mind has been properly detached from the emotional flux of life, once it has become worthy of entrance into the School of Athens, then it can discover universal principles that govern the workings of the world. In that sense, Spinoza spoke for most philosophers. And scientists, too. He regarded the world as an object to be studied, and his was the expert mind doing the studying.

Buber, who was a university professor, observed that world of philosophers and scientists during much of his life. It is the world of the I-It. You’ll forgive Buber for not embracing it wholeheartedly. You’ll forgive him for believing that the key problem with that world is precisely that nobody can embrace such a realm with their whole hearts -- save perhaps for the select few whom Spinoza and his ancestor Plato believed were capable of doing *real* philosophy. Buber wanted a world where spirituality represented the unity of heart, mind and other faculties, a world that was not the province of an intellectual elite. Buber also wanted a world where spirituality takes the form of a dialogue, and not a monologue. He once wrote that in Spinoza’s view, “there is no speech between God and man.” I studied Spinoza carefully in preparation for this session and couldn’t find anything that contradicted that statement. Where there is no speech, no dialogue, Martin Buber’s heart and soul are silent.

Call it a missed opportunity if you’d like. I prefer to attribute Buber's attitude to his profound understanding of Judaism. Where there is no speech, no dialogue, there is

no prayer. No community. No Israel.

Another divergence between Buber's and Spinoza's philosophies involves their treatment of time. As I've said, Buber saw man's dialogue with God as occurring through time, whereas Spinoza tried to obliterate time altogether in any discussion involving God. To Spinoza, God is to be approached *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the form of eternity. That essentially means that Spinoza's God transcends time, and He is to be viewed as if He has no past or future but only a present, during which all things in reality – past, present and future -- are occurring as if at once. Fascinating stuff. But it doesn't get us where we need to go to resolve the ultimate concerns of Judaism. To a Jew, repairing the world *through time*, is a commandment, one that involves God and His Covenant every bit as much as it involves humankind.

I sense in Buber almost pity for Spinoza when he wrote the following words, which I believe demonstrate how fully Buber understood Spinoza's greatness and also his limitations:

One individual, Spinoza, possessed enough *natura naturans* to step from the ghetto into the cosmos actively and peacefully and to take hold in the Infinite as no one else before him. But how much of the most delicious temporality did he have to sacrifice – how much of the most irreplaceable emotional connection with past and future generations of his tribe? Which new and unspeakable martyrdom did he have to take upon himself and with him into his great peace? What barely intimated mystery of an incredible separateness did this liberated Talmudic Jew leave for posterity!

Buber wrote those words in 1903, at the age of 25. He went on in the same essay to say that the more modern Jews whom Buber claimed “stroll in the paths of Spinoza” but without Spinoza's genius, have discovered, not redemption or purification, but only assimilation. Assimilation into a society that, to use Buber's later terminology, has increasingly been dominated by the It, not the Thou. This is the path of spiritual alienation. It is not the Jewish renaissance for which I believe the Council is searching.

If you want that renaissance, I suggest that instead of concentrating your members' efforts on Spinoza, you focus on Buber or, for that matter, Heschel. It is one thing for a rabbi to drop the names of these modern luminaries often enough so that the congregants have cocktail party familiarity with their ideas. It is quite another for a rabbi to teach their words with sufficient force and precision that the congregants will begin to understand viscerally what these luminaries really meant. And what these luminaries really *felt*. May I add, it is still another thing – the hardest one of all -- for a rabbi to fully model in his or her personal behavior the teachings of Martin Buber or Abraham Joshua Heschel. It is difficult. But as some philosopher once said, all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.

Rabbi Levine – Thank you very much, Professor Frankl. Next, we'll hear from

the representative of the National Spinoza Association, Micah Moskowitz.

Mr. Moskowitz – Thank you, Rabbi Levine. And good afternoon to you and to you, Professor Frankl. I must say at the outset that I am not here to compare the merits of Buber and Spinoza. I adore them both, and so much so that I don't think either one can be fully appreciated without understanding the other.

I do believe that Buber and his disciples have missed an important opportunity. Clearly, they think of Spinoza as a great guy, yet they also see him as something of an ideological enemy. That is far from the truth. Compared to their similarities, the differences between Buber's and Spinoza's philosophies are superficial. They reflect mostly the differences in the circumstances of their lives.

Buber, relative to Spinoza, lived a life of luxury. He was a professor who was widely regarded as a prophet in his own time, both in gentile and Jewish communities. Spinoza, however, earned a meager living as a craftsman and was viewed as a purveyor of evil by his own Jewish community as well as the Christian-Dutch authorities. When Buber walked about town, he was seen as enveloped by holiness, and he couldn't help but know this by the way others reacted to him. When Spinoza walked about town, he knew he had a target on his head.

Writing about politics, Buber allowed himself the luxury of adopting a utopian socialist position. He envisioned a world composed of a myriad of small, authentic communities, in which the members serve each other's needs as happily and willingly as they would serve their own. Such a vision, while lovely, is blatantly unrealistic – as is evidenced by the word “utopian,” which literally means no-place. Spinoza's views, however, were drenched in realism. And in blood. He was a strong advocate of liberal democratic republics, places that tolerated economic freedom despite the inevitable excesses that such freedom entails. Spinoza championed such democratic republics while understanding fully well the horrors of which the masses are capable – as when the leader of the Republicans, Spinoza's beloved Johan de Wit, was, together with his brother, hung by his feet, stripped naked, and ripped literally to pieces by a mob that included respectable middle-class citizens.

Spinoza waited for such barbaric acts to befall him, but they never did. He was able to die what you might call a natural death -- brought on not by the hands of a mob, but by tuberculosis resulting from inhaling fragments of the lenses that he willingly crafted to earn his living rather than accepting a job offer to be a professor, and thereby risk losing the autonomy that a philosopher needed to be true to his principles. Spinoza left us at 44, approximately half as old as Buber was when he died 288 years later.

I go through these facts for two reasons. First, they illustrate how inspiring Spinoza's personal life can be to any modern Jew who wishes to find a role model who was not in the grave when Guttenberg invented the printing press. Second, they introduce the key topic of our discussion: these thinkers' approaches to the divine.



I submit that Malcolm Diamond was correct when he wrote that Buber did not write to “find an objective point of contact with the non-believer,” but instead attempted to “reformulate the faith in contemporary terms for those who are already passionately engaged.” That is a luxury, my friends, that we Jews simply don’t have today. It is a luxury associated with utopianism, something that you will often find in the works of eminent theologians, but not in Spinoza.

Spinoza wrote at a time when even educated people conceived of God based on a wide array of myths and superstitions built around the literal words of the Bible. He saw fit to slay those myths and erect an edifice of purity on which people can lay more and more truths about God and, also, the world of humanity. Now, in the year 2003 BCE, we have the opposite problem. Educated people are no longer willing to embrace the old myths and superstitions, but they’re throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The concepts of God and divinity are now so associated with these discredited myths that many people wish to be done with religiosity as a whole. Others call themselves religious, but in truth, they have left for themselves only the rubble of the “holidays” to scratch their minimal itch for the realm of the divine.

Buber was not sufficiently in touch with this dynamic. And he should have been, because he lived at a time when Jewish people were abandoning the old God in droves. Nevertheless, Buber refused to declare war on the old expressions of faith. He simply reinterpreted them a bit. For example, he championed the idea of “fearing God,” though he redefined it a bit to mean “trembling” at the thought of God’s incomprehensibility. Moreover, when Buber wrote that “the love of God for His world is revealed through the depths of love that human beings can feel for one another,” he never stopped to ask the next question: if that is a meaningful statement about divine love, what does it say about divine hatred?

In short, Buber’s discussions about religion reflect an unwillingness to let go of many of the traditional approaches to divinity that no longer resonate in our world. Consequently, he cannot be a Moses, but only a Joshua. His views won’t get contemporary non-believers into the promised land. At best, they can merely be used as supplements to the thoughts of people, like Spinoza, whose work speaks equally well to believers and non-believers alike. How ironic is it that Spinoza, who wrote in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, better anticipated the concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century man, than a writer like Buber who lived until 1965?

One of Spinoza’s secrets is that he was able to anticipate so much of Buber’s genius hundreds of years before Martin was born. By that, I mean that Buber’s greatest teachings are largely implicit in Spinoza’s philosophy, for if you carried this philosophy to its logical conclusion, there you would discover for yourself Buber’s principles, though perhaps in less poetic language.

Buberians might think of Spinoza, the writer, as the champion of the I-It, but

Spinozists know that Spinoza, the thinker, was the champion of the I-Thou. Nowhere is this fact better illustrated than in Spinoza's relationship with God.

Spinoza's Ethics starts with God – specifically, with a rationalistic proof of God's existence. But long before the Ethics was written, Spinoza was thinking about God. Reasoning, that is. And emoting and intuiting as well. Particularly in light of the brilliance of Spinoza's conclusions concerning God, it is difficult to question the manner in which he reached his conclusions simply on the basis of the rationalistic language that he sometimes used to demonstrate them.

In his encounters with God, Spinoza respected one element of the I-Thou relationship above all others: the commitment to truth and honesty. Abraham pointed the dagger at his son not because it was more “meaningful” to do so or more conducive to a loving relationship with his God. No. Abraham pointed the dagger because he took God's words as he found them. He refused to compromise his integrity. He realized that to lie to himself would entail dishonoring his Thou. Similarly, when Spinoza's conclusions concerning God are stripped away from his baroque logic and considered in the light of a 21<sup>st</sup> century day, what you will find, I submit, is that they reflect a commitment to truth that resonates better than any words about God that have been chronicled before or since.

To travel with him, Spinoza asks of his reader to begin with a leap of faith: the ultimate belief in unity, that classic principle of Semitic life. Given this leap, Spinoza will take his readers to a place where a belief in God makes sense. That became possible when Spinoza dispensed altogether with the chains of theology – all the myths and superstitions, and the need to preach a philosophy that is understandable to a simpleton or a child. Spinoza's only guide was the truth. This commitment to truth is hardly the sole feature of the I-Thou relationship, but it is by far the most crucial.

The principle of unity means to Spinoza that all being, all substance, is unified. This is certainly a view that has held up even after the discoveries of modern science. But is it consistent with the views of theologians? Most claim to extol the principle of unity, but for some reason they love to treat God as an exception to that principle. They might discuss God creating us from the outside, like a painter paints a painting. Or they may praise the Kabbalistic view that God created us by withdrawing or contracting so that he could let us fill the void. Those theories always sounded to me like stories – tales we tell so that we can relate to God as if “He” were one of us. They never rang true. Nor do I like their result: a world where God is limited in space, so that we occupy the parts that God does not. Who are we to limit God? To confine God?

Spinoza's commitment to unity is more rigorous than that of most theologians. His God occupies *all* the world. All its space, its matter, its thoughts, its time. There's no physical separation between this God and the world. Yet I wouldn't equate his God to the world either. God is a name Spinoza assigns to reality when viewed from a particular perspective.

In Spinoza's unified world, reality can be conceived from two perspectives. We can't understand Spinoza without appreciating both of them. The first perspective is the one most familiar to all of us, which is ironic since Spinoza's critics would like to pretend that he ignored this perspective altogether. It is the one most naturally perceived by our egos, and extolled so beautifully by Buber. This is the perspective that views reality through the lenses of space and time – revealing legions upon legions of unique, though limited, beings. We see that they occupy a certain amount of space, and no more. We see them born. We see them die. And we notice, from this perspective, that everything is molded by a myriad of encounters – yes *encounters* – with one another. Human beings, in particular, are shaped by encounters with other human beings. If we are enlightened, we will approach these encounters with an eye to true friendship and cooperation. These are Spinoza's teachings. You'll note that they are fully consistent with Buber's philosophy of dialogue.

That's the perspective of multiplicity and temporality, or, if you prefer, the horizontal perspective. Now for the vertical. The perspective of ultimacy. Remove from the way we view the world the limitations of space. Remove also the limitations of time – yes, reflect on life under the form of eternity. What are you left with but pure Being, unconstrained by anything outside itself, for there is nothing outside it – there never was, there never will be.

Perhaps it takes a second leap of faith to affirm this perspective of ultimacy, but it's a small leap. It doesn't involve embracing a complex myth, or any plot-line at all; only the willingness to accept a level of reality beyond limitation. Beyond division. Beyond birth and death. Beyond creature status. That's where you find pure Being.

This is Spinoza's God. Not an effect; merely a cause. *The* expressive cause of all that exists. His God lives in time, to be sure, in that we are in God and we live in time, but Spinoza's God isn't trapped by time. So yes, whatever has happened and will happen are in God, just as much as the present is in God. And whatever finite earthly forms exist are simply parts of God's fabric, a fabric that is indeed omnipresent.

Spinoza's God is unlimited, eternal, unconditioned ... in short, *thoroughly* ultimate. When Buber once defined God as the one "You" who "cannot be restricted by any other," he could have been talking about the God who is beloved by Spinozists. This God is, essentially, the God of the Bible, only without all the anthropomorphic baggage – baggage that generally breaks open like the contents of Pandora's box as soon as one of us posits that God created this world in accordance with a human-like will.

Alas, Spinoza's conception of God is not a mansion. It is but the foundation of one. He left for those who live more than 44 years, and who possess the benefits of reading him and others who came after him, to construct mansions of our own. Yet that shouldn't tarnish the foundation. Spinozism adopts the principle of parsimony – the preference to travel light, to encounter God in purity. We don't say that God wills the

world, because who are we to say that on the most cosmic level possible God acts with the same type of faculty – the will – that a human acts with? Perhaps this entire universe is but one universe among many and was created by God in a state best analogized to one of our dreams? After Hitler, why isn't that at least as plausible as the notion that God shaped this world strictly in accordance with a loving will?

According to Spinoza, the laws of God's nature are "so comprehensive as to suffice for the production of everything that can be conceived by an infinite intellect." That statement says nothing about God having preferences or motivations, let alone explaining what they might be, but it's about as descriptive a claim about God's power as we Spinozists dare adopt.

Spinozists take very seriously the idea that what we can understand about God is dwarfed by what we cannot. By contrast, we *are* able to understand a high percentage of things about ourselves and others like us. The more and deeper we understand one another, the more blessed our lives will be, and the more we will be able to understand God, who contains us as we contain one of our brain cells.

How, then, can we understand ourselves and our fellow human beings deeply? That's a fundamental question to any Spinozist? Why not look to Buber to help supply some answers? Is there any doubt that the understanding of the human spirit can best be accomplished by encountering the world often as a Thou, and not exclusively as an It? How can we come to treat one another so as to accomplish the Spinozist goals of fostering friendships and serving our mutual advantage? Again, is there any doubt that this can only be accomplished by entering into I-Thou relationships? I see no problem as a Spinozist in saying that a society can be evaluated largely by the extent to which its citizens feel free, in all aspects of that word, to enter into I-Thou encounters. I also see no problem in telling my fellow Spinozists that if they wish to experience what Spinoza meant by the highest (intuitive) kind of knowledge, or its corollary, the intellectual love of God, they might want to put away their logic books and gaze with awe and compassion at an insect -- perhaps even spiders, like the ones our mentor enjoyed torturing. These are the kinds of encounters that will lead them to recognize how all of us are in God, but each of us occupies a unique, honorable place. Buber has much to teach us Spinozists. *Very, very much.*

But let me not end on too gracious a note. After all, it is Buber who speaks repeatedly about God's grace, not Spinoza. Spinozists don't wish to utilize that notion. Like so many other notions in theology, we'd rather wage a battle against it. We'd rather prop up God by negating the golden calf.

The Council has an opportunity today that it must not miss. Whether or not the Council embraces Spinoza, it is high time for its rabbis to enter into I-Thou relationships with their congregants and level with us about God. This means that the rabbis have to provide conceptions of God, or at least approaches to relationships with God, that (a) cohere and (b) ring true in a modern, post-Holocaust world. I fully appreciate that rabbis

preach in many different contexts; what they might want to say to children or the bereaved could be different than what they might want to say when addressing the full congregation at a Kol Nidre service. Yet they must appreciate the risk that whenever they throw around inconsistent or antiquated concepts about God in order to comfort the fuzzy thinkers in the audience, they do so only at the expense of preaching to an ever-thinning herd. Buber, for all his greatness, fell right into this trap. He tried to have it both ways. He wanted to be a free thinker, but he couldn't bring himself to jettison the fundamentally anthropomorphic nature of the traditional Jewish deity. Consequently, his disciples must now deal with a Jewish community whose members can't bring themselves to believe in many of the words in their prayerbooks. It's sad. But it's changeable.

That's all that I have to say to the Council. But I have a bit more to say to you, Professor Frankl, if I may. I accept your claim that you couldn't find in Spinoza anything about "speech" between God and man. Just remember this: Spinoza went out of his way to use repeatedly the name "God" to refer to what he could just have easily called "nature" or "substance," and nothing more. I've got to believe he made that fateful decision with a purpose in mind. I've got to believe he left it to those of us who wish to build on his foundation to speak to God and to listen to God whenever we encounter voices of people, music, or wind. The century in which Spinozists were all thought of as atheists should be long gone. Many of us are believers, just as devout as you are. And the God we believe in is just as alive as Buber's God. The main difference between us is only that we're spending as much time cleaning out the temple as we are adding to its treasures. Believe me, the temple needs to be cleaned – you know it, I know it, and Buber certainly knew it. He used the right terminology in describing Spinoza: when talking about God, Spinoza liked his religion as "pure" as possible. No apology for that attitude is necessary.

You might ask, Professor Frankl, why Spinozists find it so viscerally distasteful to hear God anthropomorphized. I'll try to respond in your language. In our love for God, we are committed to treating God like a Thou. And that imposes obligations on us to view God just as God is presented to us. It's the same reason why, when you look at a bird or a squirrel, and you behold its beauty and all the things you have in common with it, you nevertheless stop short of attributing to its conduct a human-like will. Even if it were of use to you to do so, you'd still not do it. It wouldn't be respectful to the animal. And I trust we both agree that respect, ultimate respect, is critical to any I-Thou relationship.

Finally, Professor, you spoke about Buber's commitment to unity and wholeness. Hopefully, I've satisfied you that Spinoza was at least as committed to unity. But I haven't said much about the importance to his philosophy of the concept of wholeness. And I can't let you leave here thinking that Spinoza was just another rationalist who cared only about the human capacity to reason, and was willing to neglect all other aspects of our souls. That's not a very Jewish attitude, and in case you can't tell by now, Spinoza wasn't only a philosophical Jew, he was a *Jewish* philosopher.

Consistent with Judaism, Spinoza recognized that human beings are impelled above all else by their emotions. He never was so stoic as to preach that the emotions can simply be blotted out by the will; he respected their power far too much for such an attitude. Yet, as is also taught in Judaism, Spinoza wrote that the reasoning faculty can and should be our ultimate guide. His great discovery here was that, potentially, our reason can become the strongest emotion of all. And this is due to the power of wholeness. When our mind becomes powerful enough to allow us to understand ourselves and our environment, and to act in a way that is consistent with our deepest natures, we experience true bliss. That emotion, that feeling of blessedness, that unity of reason and affect, is stronger than any fears or other pains we might experience.

Rabbi Levine – I'd like to thank both of you for your comments today. They've been recorded and will be quickly transcribed for a Council panel to review. We'll let you know our decision within the next fortnight.

Before we adjourn, though, I'd like to make a personal statement to you, Mr. Moskowitz. You've scored some points with me when talking about how sensible Spinoza's conception of God is. In reaching for purity, he obviously arrived at a theory that doesn't sound contrived or ring hollow in light of human history. Perhaps we can even say that his is the most intellectually powerful argument for a belief in God. But does it alone get us where we need to go? I see a lot of people, educated people, who have lost all interest in seeking the divine. Even you admit that leaps of faith are involved in adopting Spinoza's theory. How are you going to reach these people who say they don't need God, and sure as heck aren't going to take leaps of faith to find Him?

Mr. Moskowitz – Well, I'd respond that ...

Rabbi Levine – I'm not finished, Mr. Moskowitz. I suppose Spinoza's answer might be that those people who accept his theory would find themselves in a blessed emotional state. And that's why they should take the leaps – to attain that state without compromising their integrity. If that's your answer, let me make this suggestion to you and your fellow Spinozists wherever they are; it's a suggestion that's consistent with the spirit of Professor Frankl's closing comments. The best way to persuade people to embrace Spinoza's God is to model what this belief has done for your lives, and I don't just mean your beliefs. I'm talking about modeling in a very concrete way what Spinoza meant by emotional blessedness. In other words, to act like Buber. You accomplish that, and more and more people will start to explore your secret. If you don't, you might find that Spinoza will remain as obscure 100 years from now as he is today.

Now if you both will excuse me, I've got to run. Presentations are about to begin on the topic of whether the American Jewish community has been too soft on the Israeli settlements. In the spirit of Buber *and* Spinoza, I wouldn't dare miss a word of those talks.