

Was Spinoza a traitor to Judaism?

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Spinoza is the prototype of the emancipated Jew. Emancipation meant liberation from tradition and authority. More than that, emancipation meant universality and, therefore, renunciation of Jewish particularity. The emancipated Jew did not substitute one identity for another but embodied the free or autonomous individual, what Franz Rosenzweig has called the abstract man-in-general.¹ To prove one's credentials as a truly emancipated individual, one must be prepared to submit one's own tradition to a critical analysis. Spinoza ridicules the idea of a divine election of the Jewish people and regards their survival over centuries of Diaspora as simply "nothing to wonder at." Thus, throughout the *Theologico-Political Treatise* Spinoza consistently demeans the Hebrew Bible in comparison to the Christian revelation. Judaism is depicted as narrow and particularistic, scarcely a religion at all, while Christianity is praised as universalistic and ethical. Further, Moses is disparaged as a cynical and calculating politician in comparison to "Christ," who

is portrayed as a teacher and philosopher in intellectual communion with God. Spinoza, who claims to write *sine ira et studio* (without anger and bias), may well have known that these comparisons were unjust and ideologically loaded. Why, then, did he engage in what must surely be considered a powerful and emotionally charged polemic against his own people?

The answer to this question illustrates the dilemmas of emancipation in a particularly vivid form. The *Treatise* presents itself as one of the great works of emancipation. The aim of the work as a whole is the liberation of the individual from bondage to superstition and ecclesiastical authority. Spinoza's ideal is the free or autonomous individual who uses reason to achieve mastery over the passions. The *Treatise* culminates in an exhilarating vision of republican government where citizens live in peace and toleration and everyone is free "to think what he likes and say what he thinks." Though presenting himself at the same time as a man who rises above all bias and prejudice, Spinoza does not cease from carrying out a scathing attack on Judaism. Indeed, this attack is made all the more troublesome in that it is carried

¹ Franz Rosenzweig, "Lessings Nathan," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Reinhold Mayer and Annemarie Mayer (Dordrecht, Neth.: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984)

out by a learned Jew steeped in biblical and talmudic studies who uses religious sources as weapons against Judaism itself. Why does he do this? Why does Spinoza consistently debase Judaism before a predominantly Gentile audience? Why does he play deliberately and self-consciously to anti-Jewish prejudice?

Three hypotheses have been offered in response to the question. One widely held view is that Spinoza's defamation of Judaism was the result of Jewish self-hatred. Spinoza was the archetype of the self-hating Jew. In an influential essay Herman Cohen attributed Spinoza's critique of Judaism to his "unconcealed hatred" of his own people.² Cohen ascribed the premises of the *Treatise* to a desire to take "revenge" on the rabbis of Amsterdam, for excommunicating him. According to Cohen, Spinoza's naturalism blinded him to the ethical idealism of the prophets and the universalism of their teaching. Spinoza's chief sin was his depiction of Judaism as a purely carnal political legislation void of moral content. Accordingly, he was denounced as a "renegade" and an "apostate." (298) He derogated Judaism, trafficking in anti-Jewish stereotypes that were the source of later hostility toward Jews. Spinoza thus stands convicted of a "humanly incomprehensible betrayal." (361)

The view that Spinoza is a defiler of Judaism was reiterated recently by the French philosopher and a talmudist Emmanuel Levinas. In an essay entitled "The Spinoza Case" Levinas questions the wisdom of Ben Gurion's attempt to have

the ban against Spinoza lifted.³ Indeed, he remarks that the case of Spinoza still constitutes an "essential question" for the Jewish people. Within the history of ideas, Levinas asserts, Spinoza exerted an influence that was both "decisive and anti-Jewish." (p.107) Repeating Cohen's verdict, Levinas maintains that Spinoza remains "guilty of betrayal" for his subordination of the Hebrew Bible to the Christian Scripture and calling them simply stages in the development of reason. To Levinas, lifting the ban on Spinoza appears both, unnecessary and unjust - unnecessary because Spinoza's rationalism has already emerged triumphant and unjust because removing the ban would merely sanction his slanders against Judaism.

A second and less hostile explanation of Spinoza's strategy is offered by Leo Strauss, who in an early essay denies that Spinoza's philosophy can be understood as motivated simply by a desire for revenge.⁴ Cohen's emphasis on Spinoza's excommunication as a motive for writing the *Treatise* is at best a "conjecture," given that Spinoza seems to have been working along the same lines well in advance of his expulsion from the synagogue. According to Strauss, Spinoza was motivated above all by a desire to liberate philosophy from ecclesiastical supervision, a move that could have been accomplished without any untoward hostility toward Judaism. Instead, Spinoza's critique of the Old Testament was aimed at the spiritual and political domination of Dutch Calvinists, who saw themselves as the heirs of the

2 Hermann Cohen, "Spinoza ueber Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum," in *Juedische Schriften*, ed. Bruno Strauss (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), Vol.3, P.290-372.

3 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Spinoza Case," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays in Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (London: Athlone, 1990) pp. 106-110.

4 Leo Strauss, "Cohens Analyse der Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas," *Der Jude* 8 (1924): 295-314.

ancient Hebrew theocracy. Spinoza's *Treatise* was directed less at seeking revenge on the Jewish community than at liberating the sect-ridden Netherlands of the seventeenth century from ecclesiastical control. (pp. 309-11)

Forty years later Strauss embellishes upon his position without fundamentally altering it.⁵ He argues that Spinoza, to achieve his objective, the liberation of philosophy from theology, had to appeal to the prejudices of his predominantly Gentile audience. Spinoza's strategy of demeaning Judaism before his non-Jewish readers was part of an elaborate rhetorical ruse to gain a hearing; it did not derive from any animus against Judaism as such. Strauss goes so far as to suggest that Spinoza even felt a sympathy for his people that he had to conceal if he were to gain a popular audience for his cause. Spinoza may have hated Judaism, according to Strauss, but he did not hate the Jewish people. (p.21)

This is not to say that Strauss was Spinoza's defender. "Our case against Spinoza," he writes, "is in some respects even stronger than Cohen thought." (p.19) Spinoza's strategy of appealing to anti-Jewish prejudice, while dictated by considerations of prudence, was nevertheless Machiavellian in the literal sense; that is, he used base or ignominious means to achieve a lofty

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goal. Spinoza's betrayal of Judaism may have been humanly comprehensible, but he was still playing "a most dangerous game," even an "amazingly unscrupulous" one. (pp.19, 21)

A third explanation for Spinoza's critique looks to his Marrano background. Yirmiyahu Yovel, in a two-volume study of Spinoza, has depicted the philosopher as having internalized a pattern of thought and behaviour typical of *converso* mentality.⁶ The *conversos* were Jews of Iberian descent who had converted to Catholicism

during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries but who remained secret practitioners of their ancient faith. These *conversos* may have paid lip service to official Catholic doctrine, but they remained subterranean Judaizers, even to the point of confusing or mixing up their Judaism with the symbolism and imagery of the Catholic church.

Over time this dual existence became internalized to such a degree that their successors, like Spinoza, who never stepped foot in Catholic Spain, wore the mask of the *converso* almost as second nature. (pp. 15-39)

According to Yovel, the Marrano model fits Spinoza like a glove. Among the features ascribed to Marranism are, first, skepticism about revealed religion and traditional routes to salvation. Marranos

⁵ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E.M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken, 1965), pp. 1-31.

⁶ Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 1: *The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

were often those who had lost one faith but were incapable of ever fully accepting another. (pp. 26-27) Second, the Marrano experience was typified by a propensity for multilevel language and the elaborate use of other literary disguises. Brought up with a fear of inquisitorial methods, the true Marranos dissembled their views out of a cautious fear of persecution. (pp. 29-32) Third, the propensity for esotericism was coupled with a philosophical elitism. For Spinoza this meant that redemption was attainable through neither the Christian sacraments nor the law of Moses but through the use of reason. Reason understood as *scientia intuitiva* acquired an almost mystical status leading to a state of *beatitudo*, or the intellectual love of God. The practice of rationality was the preserve of a tiny minority, with the majority of humankind condemned to live a life of superstition under the sway of *imaginatio*. (38-38)

Each of these explanations sheds some light on the dilemmas of emancipation, but none is, in my opinion, satisfactory. The argument from Jewish self-hatred is perhaps the least adequate. To explain Spinoza's critique of Judaism as motivated by a desire for revenge is both simplistic and reductionist. More important, it cannot explain those parts of the *Treatise* where Spinoza expresses a genuine sense of Jewish pride and self-respect. The *Treatise* is, to my knowledge, the first modern work to advocate the restitution of Jewish sovereignty and a Jewish state. Cohen and Levinas both miss the extent to which Spinoza's critique of Judaism is also indirectly a critique of Christianity. Being unable to attack Christianity directly, he does so through the back door.

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Strauss's view has the advantage of focusing on Spinoza's famed passion for secretiveness and self-concealment. Spinoza often put forward shocking and novel opinions while professing moderation and conformity with prevailing orthodoxies. Even his apparently boldest statements, when sufficiently unpacked, conceal layers of meaning that turn out to be bolder still. But Strauss's claim that the ultimate purpose of the *Treatise* is the liberation of philosophy from religion, though surely correct, downplays the political character of the work. Spinoza wrote not only to liberate philosophy from religion but also to liberate politics from religion and to subordinate the clergy to the secular state. To be sure, Strauss is closer to the truth than Cohen when he pronounces Spinoza's apparent betrayal of Judaism humanly comprehensible, but he attributes the intelligibility of Spinoza's motives to a strategy of achieving the liberation of philosophy from Scripture rather than achieving control of the clergy by the state.

Finally, Yovel's explanation of Spinoza's treatment of Judaism of the Marrano experience, though biographically illuminating, is philosophically unpersuasive. In the first place, Spinoza's use of strategies of duplicity was a common literary trope used by many non-*converso* authors during the Renaissance. To describe this rhetorical device as specifically Marrano is to bend the term out of all proportion. Second, notwithstanding depiction of Spinoza as the "Marrano of reason," Marranism re-

mains deeply embedded in the outlook of the medieval Jewish experience. Spinoza's *Treatise* ultimately has less in common with the classics of *converso* literature than with the language and outlook of enlightened Europe. Whereas Marranism represented a strategy of survival for Jews living in hostile lands, Spinoza's arguments for freedom of conscience and toleration of religion became the basis for Moses Mendelssohn's appeals for Jewish and civil equality a century later.⁷

I argue that Spinoza's treatment of the Jewish Question is inseparable from his liberal political theory. His denigration of Judaism cannot be the result of self-hatred, or the desire to emancipate philosophy, or his Marrano background. Each of these explanations is essentially outside or external to his politics.

Spinoza's critique of religion is the direct consequence of his political aspiration: the creation of a new kind of liberal polity with a new kind of liberal citizen. This effort to establish a new liberated individual who inhabits a modern secular state could not but represent a profound break with historical Jewish experience. His attack on the ceremonial law as an instrument of worldly well-being, his denigration of Moses and the prophets as men of fervid imagination but enfeebled intellect, his

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depiction of the Scriptures of Israel as *antiqui vulgi praejudicia* (ancient common prejudices) were all intended to divest traditional identities and their attachments to an ancient tradition. His efforts to undermine, and replace, the older theologico-political identity is, I suggest, a key premise of the modern liberal state.

Spinoza adopted the strategy that he did, not out of an anti-Jewish animus, much less self-hatred, but for the supremely political reason that Christians excelled Jews in power and influence. The hope for a liberal and tolerant society was more likely to be expedited by appealing to Christians, rather than Jews, and to those potential philosophers among the Gentiles. That his derogation of Moses and the prophets is in the service of a state that is ostensibly tolerant of the differences between

Jews and Gentiles is clear. What this state was to effect, however, was nothing short of a transformation of Judaism. Jews were to be welcomed into the new liberal polity so long as they ceased to be distinctively or recognizably Jewish. Toleration was to extend to individuals as a first step toward their assimilation into modern-secular-Christian culture. It is this transformation that Spinoza was the first to propose. It has remained the unspoken premise of liberalism ever since.

⁷ See Julius Guttman "Mendelssohn's 'Jerusalem' and Spinoza's 'Theologico-Political Treatise,'" in *Studies in Jewish Social Thought*, pp. 361-85.



Daniel Fischer: Velká geometria



On Spinoza Today

Slavoj Žižek

*Excerpt from Spinoza, Kant, Hegel... and Badiou
in: Lacan.Com*

One of the unwritten rules of today's academia from France to the US is the injunction to love Spinoza. Everyone loves him, from the Althusserian strict "scientific materialists" to Deleuzian schizo-anarchists, from rationalist critics of religion to the partisans of liberal freedoms and tolerances, not to mention feminists like Genevieve Lloyd who propose to decipher the mysterious third type of knowledge in *Ethics* as feminine intuitive knowledge surpassing the male analytic understanding... Is it, then, possible at all not to love Spinoza? Who can be against a lone Jew who, on the top of it, was excommunicated by the "official" Jewish community itself? One of the most tou-

ching expressions of this love is how one often attributes to him almost divine capacities - like Pierre Macherey who (in his otherwise admirable *Hegel ou Spinoza*), against the Hegelian critique of Spinoza, claims that one cannot avoid the impression that Spinoza had already read Hegel and in advance answered his reproaches... Perhaps, the most appropriate first step to render problematic this status of Spinoza is to draw attention to the fact that it is totally incompatible with what is arguably the hegemonic stance in today's Cultural Studies, that of the ethico-theological "Judaic" turn of deconstruction best exemplified by the couple Derrida/Levinas - is there a philosopher more

foreign to this orientation than Spinoza? Or, even, more foreign to the Jewish universe which, precisely, is the universe of God as radical Otherness, of the enigma of the divine, of the God of negative prohibitions instead of positive injunctions? Were, then, the Jewish priests in a way not RIGHT to excommunicate Spinoza? So what is Spinoza? He is effectively the philosopher of Substance, and at a precise historical moment: AFTER Descartes. For that reason, he is able to draw all the (unexpected, for most of us) consequences from it. Substance means, first of all, that there is no mediation between the attributes: each attribute (thoughts, bodies...) is infinite in itself, it has no outer limit where it would touch another attribute - "substance" is the very name for this absolutely neutral medium of the multitude of attributes.



The first philosophical consequence of this notion of Substance is the motif on which Deleuze insists so much: the univocity of being; among other things, this univocity means that the mechanisms of establishing ontological links which Spinoza describes are thoroughly NEUTRAL with regard to their "good" or "bad" effects. Spinoza thus avoids both traps of the standard approach: he neither dismisses the mechanism which constitutes a multitude as the source of the irrational destructive mob, nor does he celebrate it as the source of altruistic self-overcoming and solidarity. Of course, he was deeply and painfully aware of the destructive potential of the "multitude" - recall THE big political trauma of his life, a wild mob lynching the de Witt brothers, his political allies; however, he was aware that the noblest collective acts are generated by exactly the same mechanism - in short, democracy and a lynching mob have the same source. It is with regard to this neutrality that the gap which separates Negri and Hardt from Spinoza becomes palpable: in *The Empire*, we find a celebration of the multitude as the force of resistance, while in Spinoza, the concept of the multitude qua crowd is fundamentally ambiguous: the multitude is resistance to the imposing One, but, at the same time, it designates what we call a "mob," a wild, "irrational" explosion of violence which, through *imitatio affecti* (**imitation of affects**), feeds on itself and self-propels itself.

Dom v Haagu, v ktorom býval Spinoza posledných 6 rokov svojho života.