

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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The attitudes of Jewish thinkers toward Spinoza have defined a fault line between traditionalist and liberal ideas about Judaism and Jewish identity ever since the time of Moses Mendelssohn. Perhaps as a result, by the twentieth century many text-based historical studies of the impact of Jewish philosophy on Spinoza's ideas were available. Yet there have been remarkably few philosophical treatments of what is or is not Jewish in Spinoza's *philosophy*. The present volume speaks to that question. The authors address the question, directly in some cases and indirectly in others: Is Spinoza's a Jewish philosophy? What is its significance for Jewish philosophy as a living enterprise? What is its impact on the trajectory of such philosophy now and on the prospects of Jewish philosophy as we look to the future?

Among the works available in English that trace the impact on Spinoza's philosophy of his many Jewish predecessors, Wolfson's magisterial study still towers above the rest; Shlomo Pines's contribution is of lasting importance too, as is the work of many other scholars.¹ Yet that historical question is not ours. Nor do we aim to investigate the history of Jewish attitudes toward Spinoza and the varied appropriations of his thought that have been so much a part of the emergence of modern Jewish identities. These questions are fascinating in their own right but beyond our present concern. Mendelssohn, in his *Jerusalem*, to name just one important example, relied on the *Treatatus* as the model for a modern approach to Jewish philosophy. Such responses are of profound interest and are eminently worthy of further investigation than they have as yet received. So are the hagiographic attitudes of the Reformers toward Spinoza and those of some early Zionists and Yiddishists. Equally worthy of study is the contrasting approach of Hermann Cohen, for whom Spinoza's was the anti-Judaic philosophy par excellence,

against which all subsequent Jewish philosophies must be tested. Cohen saw a stark dichotomy between Judaism and Spinozism, and many living philosophers and theologians still echo his views. Emil Fackenheim, for one, posed the fundamental choice of modern Judaism as a fateful decision to be made between Rosenzweig and Spinoza. Emmanuel Levinas made Spinoza the foil for his own Judaic philosophy. And David Novak's recent *Election of Israel* suggests that all modern Jewish thought must take its start from a successful response to Spinoza's challenge to the divine chosenness of Israel.

Sometimes Spinoza becomes a stalking horse, and less than dispassionate treatments yield troublesome results rather than philosophical clarity. Nor are the troubled waters always made clearer by Leo Strauss's further challenge, the claim that Spinoza's words bear an esoteric meaning conditioned by the hostile environment in which the philosopher lived and quite different from their seemingly candid, even outspoken lines of argument. We can learn much from Strauss about Spinoza, but in many of the writings of Strauss's less trenchant followers we learn more about Strauss than about Spinoza. Strauss did not distort Spinoza in the effort to surmount him. But with Cohen and Levinas that is less clear. The effort to set up Spinoza as the anti-figure of all that is Jewish may have helped these thinkers to clarify their own religious stance, but the resulting portrait of Spinoza grows twisted and distorted in the process, as areas of disagreement or disturbance are enlarged, and areas of profound affinity overlooked.

Many readers may be familiar with Julius Guttman's claim that Spinoza's philosophy belongs more to European than to Jewish thought. But we think this claim rests on a false dichotomy. For Jewish philosophy and Jewish thought in general, in every period, have been actively engaged with the ideas of the surrounding environment, and have critically and creatively engaged those ideas. Nor can we concur with Guttman's assumption that the primary goal of classical Jewish philosophy was apologetic. For to defend a tradition one must not only interpret it but also render it defensible, in one's own eyes as well as in those of others. For that reason, from its most ancient beginnings, Jewish thought in general and Jewish philosophy in particular have been engaged in tasks of critical reappropriation that have made Judaism and the Jewish tradition capable of impressive longevity and vitality. Guttman's Spinoza is a cognitivist and a logicist, a deductivist philosopher who actively rejected "all considerations of value," the bearer of a philosophy that caricatures the depth and nuance, the subtle syntheses of Spinoza's philosophical theses and arguments. Guttman's portrayal of Judaism is similarly pallid and cartoonish. It lacks in the depth and color, diversity and fluidity of the reality that he seeks to portray and contrast with Spinoza's views.

For our part, we do not undertake to predefine a Judaic philosophic stance against which Spinoza is to be judged (and found wanting). Rather, we have gathered together essays that explore Spinoza's philosophic ideas and raise the question of the resonance or dissonance of these ideas with the full array of Jewish sources, traditions, and themes. Are some of Spinoza's ideas secularizations of traditional Jewish values and concepts, in the way that, say, the capitalist work ethic is often said to be a secularization of Protestant religious values? What of the Kabbalah, the tradition of Jewish mysticism that grows out of ancient Neoplatonic thinking and explains all being as a declension from the divine Infinite (the *Ensof*) by way of hypostatic numbers (the *Sefirot*) that are given the names of God's attributes? To what extent, despite his disparagement of its extravagances, does Spinoza transform Kabbalistic ideas into authentic and viable Jewish philosophy?

And what of the political ideas of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the unfinished *Tractatus Politicus*? Do they represent a Jewish politics, as Spinoza himself implied? Do Spinoza's reflections on language in his projected Hebrew grammar cast a light on his philosophy? Does his earliest encounter with the nexus between language and thought arise in the study of a non-European language that has formed a common pedagogic awakening for so many Jewish youngsters across the generations? Again, is there a deep structure to Spinoza's philosophic and political thought that expresses Jewish ideas or values, perhaps in a heterodox way, as Hegel, say, claimed that his central philosophical conception was a rational articulation of the ideas of Trinity and Incarnation? Our aim is to take the most empirical and wide-ranging view of what can and should be deemed Judaic and to seek the resonances and the enduring insights that re-echo from those resonances in the philosophy of Spinoza.

The contributors to this volume represent the rich diversity of Spinoza scholarship today: Jewish philosophical, Jewish historical, Cartesian-analytic, Continental-Marxist, political scientific, and intellectual historical. The essays can be divided by their major themes: Lenn Goodman argues that Spinoza grafts together and brings to fruition the parallel shoots of Jewish monotheism and Western philosophical monism. Lee Rice and Warren Montag suggest that some of Spinoza's ideas about divine immanence are philosophical elaborations of ancient Jewish religious insights. Warren Zev Harvey proposes that Spinoza found in the Hebrew language seeds or stimuli for the distinctive categories of his metaphysics and ethics. Kenneth Seeskin sounds a note of caution, reminding us that in denying the creation of the world and asserting its eternity Spinoza rejected a fundamental tenet of Jewish monotheism, a thesis that lay at the heart of Maimonides' adjudication of the issues between Judaism and rationalism. Edwin Curley assesses

Spinoza's response to Maimonides' theodicy, exposing both continuities and departures from Maimonides and the biblical tradition. Michael Rosenthal and Heidi Ravven assess Spinoza's conception of Judaism as a product of the imagination. Rosenthal finds in the Judaism of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* a paradigm case of exemplars or normative ethical models that Spinoza proposes in the *Ethics*. And Ravven finds in Spinoza's critique of tradition a starting point for his philosophical journey. Both Ravven and Rosenthal conclude, however, that Spinoza made the Ancient Jewish Commonwealth the model for his ideal of a modern and tolerant democratic state. Richard Popkin in the concluding essay presented here, sets Spinoza's excommunication in its historical context, filling in our picture of the actual Jewish community with which Spinoza came into conflict. The impact of his paper is to debunk the tendentious image fostered by later writers, of Spinoza as a martyr to the dark forces of religious intolerance.

What follows is a brief overview of the chapters in this book:

LENN GOODMAN, "WHAT DOES SPINOZA'S *ETHICS*
CONTRIBUTE TO JEWISH PHILOSOPHY?"

Lenn Goodman undertakes a complete review of Spinoza's philosophy. At every point along the way he finds Spinoza addressing classic problems that Jewish philosophy shares with the larger philosophical tradition and addressing them with creative and constructive solutions that draw upon Jewish themes. Goodman reconstructs Spinoza's philosophy and finds in its principal theses and arguments distinctive reconciliations of the classical oppositions of philosophy: the one and the many, freedom and determinism, mind and body, is and ought, power and justice, reason and emotion, creation and eternity, knowledge and skepticism, correspondence and coherence, matter as active and matter as inert, transcendence and immanence, finitude or infinitude in nature's scope or duration, and teleology and mechanism. The common thread in Spinoza's approach is a rigorous reconceptualization of the core concepts of philosophy. That radical conceptual reworking is what allows a synthesis, and it often leads Spinoza to a reappropriation of notions that seem at first blush to have been rejected. Behind Spinoza's approach, and making it possible, Goodman finds not only the dialectical skills of a conceptual genius but an uncompromising commitment to philosophical monotheism, a commitment that, in its tenacity and rigor, makes Spinoza's metaphysics the most coherent yet to be developed in the checkered history of philosophical speculation. On the basis of this analysis, Goodman finds Spinoza's philosophy to be Judaic to the core, Jewish not merely in ethos and outlook but also in its central philosophical values and conceptual com-

mitments. In the course of his exposition, Goodman describes Spinoza's many points of engagement with his Jewish (and non-Jewish) philosophical predecessors, including the great Jewish rationalists Maimonides and Saadiah. But the thrust of these comparisons is not to discover sources or points of departure but to trace the course of an enduring thematic development.

The Jewish questions raised by Spinoza's philosophy prove, in Goodman's analysis, to be identical with the big questions of philosophy, and the understanding of Spinoza's theses and arguments that emerges from this perspective gives us new insight into the coherence and contemporary relevance of his philosophy. A sustained engagement with Spinoza's own dialogue with the tradition in which he was raised gives us a sense of the power of Spinoza's philosophic mind and character, of what Goodman calls the moral strength of Spinoza's independence of mind. We appreciate anew Spinoza's unflinching honesty as a model of philosophic praxis. Goodman shows us that at the roots of Spinoza's insights, and of the purity, force, and clarity of his thought, lies a Judaic monotheistic, and ethical motive. But beyond that, Spinoza's philosophic achievement casts Judaic monotheism itself in a new key. Thus, Goodman's synoptic account of Spinoza's thinking ends by pointing to Spinozist avenues yet to be taken, even continents to be explored.

LEE RICE, "LOVE OF GOD IN SPINOZA"

Lee Rice in his essay points to a particular Judaic theme that lies at the heart of Spinoza's project, the immanence of the divine. Rice shows how Spinoza's account of divine love articulates and specifies the Judaic notion. He argues that Spinoza identifies three kinds of love of God. Each is the affective expression or correlate of one of the three kinds of knowledge: imaginative, rational, and intuitive. Love at the level of imagination is characterized by its passivity to external events and phenomena. The imaginative knowledge of God "provides at best only a metaphorical knowledge," frequently miscasting God "as judge, a governor of nature capable of directing natural events to human ends." This kind of love for God presupposes a supernaturalist dualism. Yet it can be of considerable social utility when put to work as a motive for kindness and tolerance.

Rational love, unlike imaginational love, is "self-determined." It originates in *generositas* or "strength of mind." When its object is God, this love does not demand reciprocation, for that would entail a misunderstanding of the divine nature. Instead, it seeks union with God.

Spinoza's famous conception of the intellectual love of God is the correlate of the intuitive form of knowledge. Recognition of that fact returns us

to Spinoza's thesis that intuitive knowing/loving allows God's act of loving and the human act of loving God to converge: Human knowing/loving is divine activity, the active expression of the immanence of the divine. This daring thesis, as Rice points out, is identified by Spinoza as an ancient Jewish insight.

Warren Montag, in his chapter on Spinoza and the Kabbalist idea of the Shekhinah, comes to a similar conclusion, as does Lenn Goodman in his discussion of immanence in the thinking of Saadiah and in the ancient Hebrew liturgy.

Taking these arguments together, one might justly argue that Spinoza regarded his own account of God, and of the human love and knowledge of God that perfect human existence, as a philosophically elevated and clarified Judaism.

WARREN ZEV HARVEY, "SPINOZA'S METAPHYSICAL HEBRAISM"

Warren Zev Harvey reminds us that Spinoza was an outstanding scholar of the Hebrew language and viewed himself "as a consummate authority on Hebrew." Harvey finds evidence that Spinoza's knowledge was not only theoretical. Spinoza was also an accomplished speaker, writer, and stylist in Hebrew. He apparently saw himself as the first true Hebrew grammarian and devoted much time toward the end of his life to an unfinished Hebrew grammar.

In his *Compendium of the Grammar of the Hebrew Language*, Spinoza set forth a novel theory of the significance of Hebrew nouns, undergirded with a metaphysical analysis of the parts of speech in terms of substance, attribute, and mode. He also sought to explain the distinctive aspects of the Hebrew language in terms of the cultural peculiarities of its speakers. In this way Spinoza linked language with cultural outlook—a natural connection for him to make, since he saw both language and tradition as products of the imagination.

Despite Spinoza's vociferous denial of any philosophic content in Scripture, Harvey shows that Spinoza regarded Hebrew as harboring a perfect conception of substance in its articulation of the idea of an absolute God in the Tetragrammaton. Further, Spinoza said that the Hebrew term *kabod* (glory) points to the (true) human *summum bonum*, the intellectual love of God. Thus Spinoza found elements of the true philosophy, his own, embedded in the Hebrew language, albeit naively and in pre-philosophical hints and gestures.

KENNETH SEESKIN, “MAIMONIDES,
SPINOZA, AND THE PROBLEM OF CREATION”

Kenneth Seeskin argues that Spinoza opts for a non-Judaic position on divine Creation, where Maimonides chose the Judaic one. Seeskin explores the powerful arguments that Maimonides and Spinoza use to defend their opposed positions on the creation (versus the eternity) of the universe. They both take reasonable positions. Not only from the perspective of the science of their times but even from a contemporary point of view, both Spinoza’s account of God as the infinite, immanent cause of the world and Maimonides’ opposing claim that God is the transcendent creator seem plausible. Seeskin turns to contemporary cosmology to suggest that the matter remains unsettled: The historic conflict between Maimonides and Spinoza is still with us, albeit in a somewhat revised form.

Maimonides’ preference for the creation of the world, Seeskin argues, expresses his belief that creation “is the primary way to account for separation” between God and the cosmos, a separation not just of degree but of kind. Maimonides, Seeskin notes, even “denies any sort of relation between God and other things.” Thus from the knowledge of the world we can infer nothing about its origin. Spinoza’s response, Seeskin argues, is that the Maimonidean model lacks explanatory power. Seeskin suggests that Maimonides would not deny the charge but would reply that his approach is to make us confront the limits of our knowledge even of our capacity to resolve the issue.

It remains a question today whether the explanatory categories of physics still apply when we are talking about a time zero “prior” to the Big Bang. Seeskin finds Maimonides’ best resolution of the dilemma in rational restraint. But the dispute remains open between that Kantian position and Spinoza’s pressing for fuller rational explanation and branding the Maimonidean restraint as mere mystification.

The traditional theist will probably view creation in the Maimonidean-Kantian way, Seeskin argues. “In the end,” he says, “the reason people are so desperate to hold on to creation is that without it, we may have a necessary being, a being with infinite attributes, even a being who inspires love; but in the eyes of traditional theists, we do not have God.” Yet these were not considerations that moved Spinoza nor would they move a contemporary Spinozist, Seeskin concludes.

Seeskin’s position contrasts with that of Goodman, Rice, and Montag on the Jewishness of Spinoza’s doctrines of divine immanence and monism. Goodman argues that Spinoza does not simply choose immanence over transcendence but seeks to synthesize the two, and he notes that Maimonides did

not deny every kind of relation between God and the world: He did not deny the relation of Creator to creature, for example, and he did not think that his wide-ranging negative theology compromised theism. For Goodman, Spinoza's *Deus sive natura* is the descendant and counterpart of Maimonides' perfect and necessary Being. Seeskin, by contrast, argues, that Jewish theism stands or falls with the claim of divine transcendence expressed in a doctrine of temporal creation. What is perhaps most distinctive about this lively philosophical debate over Spinoza's relation to the Jewish tradition is that its focus is not on the terms and phrases that may mark the lines of historical filiation but on the question of which concepts are appropriable today by thinkers who take seriously the values and the problems of Jewish philosophical theology.

WARREN MONTAG, "‘THAT HEBREW WORD’:
SPINOZA AND THE CONCEPT OF THE SHEKHINAH"

Warren Montag contributes to the same debate. He teases out a convincing answer to questions about the exact nature of the threat to Christian orthodoxy that Spinoza and Spinozism were feared to pose by the Amsterdam Reformed Church elders and the municipal council. Both groups strove to root out Spinozism in their investigations into the purportedly Spinozist belief in the Shekhinah, the indwelling divine presence as conceived in Jewish mystical sources. While he eschewed attaching any esoteric Kabbalistic meanings to the content of the Bible, Montag argues, Spinoza did draw on Kabbalistic themes for his own conception of God's immanence.

Spinoza's philosophical reworking of the idea of the Shekhinah, Montag argues, illustrates Spinoza's way of "systematically appropriating and then turning against the enemy his own weapons." Spinoza turned the Kabbalists' concept of Shekhinah against them in two ways, Montag suggests: First, he closed the gap between creator and creation. Second, he substituted the unity of the spiritual and material for the Kabbalists' hierarchically organized universe emergent from divine emanation. In the process Spinoza did away with the notion that materiality was a distancing from God.

It was not Kabbalism per se but what we might call Spinoza's Kabbalistic anti-Kabbalism that the would-be defenders of Christian orthodoxy held against him. As Montag suggests, the investigators had a pretty good idea what they were looking for. Spinoza's doctrine of divine immanence did pose a challenge not only to Christian theology but to widespread notions of Christian morality and to the associated assumptions of hierarchical thinking and oppressive praxis. Judaism and Jewish philosophy have also struggled with the challenge posed by Spinoza and by the immanentism he

spoke for, but these challenging ideas were typically confronted as variations on core Jewish themes. Only occasionally did the more radical versions call forth any concerted response. Spinoza's philosophy, Montag concludes, serves Judaism as a test of its tolerance of internal diversity and as a reminder of some of the authentic and abiding streams of understanding within Judaism itself.

EDWIN CURLEY, "MAIMONIDES,
SPINOZA AND THE BOOK OF JOB"

Edwin Curley carefully analyzes three texts in this essay: first, the biblical Book of Job; second, the chapters on Job in Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*; and finally, Spinoza's references to Job in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. He finds a biblical precedent for Spinoza's denial of traditional theodicies. These ideas are developed by the medievals, particularly Maimonides but also Ibn Ezra. The Book of Job is the key text in this regard. It serves both Maimonides and Spinoza as the occasion for the reduction of moral virtue to (what is deemed to be) a more fundamental and encompassing intellectual virtue. That theme is carried further by Maimonides in his interpretation of the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden, an interpretation adopted almost globally by Spinoza.

Although such rationalist exegeses may seem to torture the text in the interest of an alien Greek philosophical tradition (and in a way that Spinoza sometimes forcefully condemns), Curley shows how the seemingly heterodox themes have their biblical sources not only for the issues dealt with in the Book of Job but also for the apotheosis of wisdom and intellect in Koheleth. If these traditions seem to resonate with outside influence, it is clearly an influence adopted and transformed by the biblical writers and put into a Hebraic idiom. That idiom re-echoes, as Curley shows, from the Bible to modernity.

Further investigation of the *Guide* would uncover Maimonides' reconciliation of the strains Curley exposes—Aristotelian intellectualism, divergent understandings of Providence within the biblical and rabbinic traditions, and mainstream Jewish theodicy.

HEIDI RAVVEN, "SPINOZA'S RUPTURE WITH
TRADITION—HIS HINTS OF A JEWISH MODERNITY"

Heidi Ravven argues that Spinoza regards the imagination, not only in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* but also in the *Ethics*, as a vehicle of socialization and a medium for the transmission of tradition. She challenges the

widespread assumption that the imagination in Spinoza only receives the images conveyed to it by sense perception. To understand the role of imagination in Spinoza's psychology we need to recognize its associative operations in connecting images and memories to make a meaningful scene and picture of the world. The world constructed by the imagination is, according to Spinoza, represented symbolically in language. The resultant vistas are transmitted by authoritative tradition, and the norms constructed as a result are enforced politically by rewards and punishments.

Spinoza identifies language and religion as the two great forces of the imagination that bring the individual into conformity with the group and under the authority of group traditions. The imagination thus becomes the basis of a primitive form of morals. Ravven argues that in both the *Ethics* and the *TTP* Spinoza lays out a path of intellectual and moral development and education that leads from religious authority, internalized but backed by external political coercion, to rational self-determination and ethical autonomy.

In the *TTP*, Spinoza finds the ideal use of the imagination in religion. Religion can legitimate and reinforce a democratic distribution of power and a just judicial system. It need not support only authoritarian powers. Religion and its imaginative suasions, used with proper restraint, can evoke enthusiastic obedience to a system of government that fosters self-determination and independence of mind. The imagination can thus be called into the service of a form of government that reason itself commends as the best support of human fulfillment. To illustrate the proper social function of the imagination, Spinoza chooses the example of the ancient Israelite commonwealth, as described in the Hebrew Bible. As Michael Rosenthal also argues in the present volume, Spinoza envisioned the reshaping of Holland—and of all modern polities—along the general lines of the democratic political constitution that he finds typified in the original Jewish commonwealth.

Spinoza's *Ethics* sets out a path of education that aims at transcending the hold of the traditional religious community over the individual. But his political theory embraces, reinvigorates, and hopes to universalize the Jewish political tradition as a means to that very end.

MICHAEL ROSENTHAL, "WHY SPINOZA CHOSE
THE HEBREWS: THE EXEMPLARY FUNCTION OF
PROPHECY IN THE *THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL TREATISE*"

Michael Rosenthal explores Spinoza's use of the ancient Hebrew commonwealth as a historical exemplar that sets a universal standard. He raises both

logical and historical issues: What is the status of a model of this kind for Spinoza? What did the polity of the Ancient Israelites connote for a Dutch audience who were asked to view it as a model? Rosenthal argues that Spinoza intended the original Mosaic state in the *Tractatus* as an imaginative universal, that is, a provisional exemplar of political behavior analogous to the exemplar of human nature that Spinoza proposes in the Fourth Part of the *Ethics*. Both models are provisional—indeed false if taken strictly literally. Yet, even as fictions, these models have moral and political utility.

An exemplar is an imaginative construction, not a true idea. Its appeal is established not by philosophical arguments but by narratives and rhetoric. The aim of such persuasions is not understanding but allegiance. Such is the strategy of the biblical prophets. As Rosenthal points out, Spinoza himself uses persuasion rather than strictly rational argumentation in the *TTP* when setting out his version of the biblical account of the ancient Israelite commonwealth. He writes with his eye on his Dutch audience, who identify with the Israelites and the circumstances of the Exodus. Spinoza's naturalized retelling of the founding of Mosaic society aims toward a systematic revision of our reading of the Bible. But it also aims to persuade his Dutch audience of the efficacy and value of the strategy that Spinoza imputes to the ancient Israelite commonwealth. Spinoza uses the ancient Israelites to argue the value of tolerance and to warn of the dangers of unchecked ecclesiastical power. "In the interpretation of this particular exemplar," Rosenthal concludes, Spinoza "is himself trying to govern its meaning and use in political life."

Spinoza, then, might legitimately be said to have revised the meaning of Ancient Judaism for his contemporaries—in this case for non-Jews. But his revision took on a new life within Judaism when Mendelssohn, the thinkers of the Haskalah, and later the Reformers, developed new models of Judaism inspired by Spinoza's proposals.

RICHARD POPKIN, "SPINOZA'S EXCOMMUNICATION"

Richard Popkin takes a hard look at what we really know about Spinoza's excommunication and what has passed into print by way of embellishment, much of it, ideologically motivated. Spinoza did not attend his excommunication, was already living apart from the Jewish community when it took place, and rarely referred to it later. The elaborate descriptions in some of the early accounts of Spinoza's life and work are not based on any data regarding Spinoza's case but are fabrications and fanciful dramatizations, extrapolated from general rabbinic accounts of how excommunications ought to be carried out.

Any analogy with the public condemnation of Galileo is utterly misleading, Popkin argues. Spinoza's excommunication did not occur in public in the synagogue but in a private chamber. It was hardly a momentous event within the Jewish community of Amsterdam, which was at the time much occupied with an influx of impoverished refugees from Poland. And it was not carried out by the rabbis of the Amsterdam synagogue (who were in any case not advocates of a rigid orthodoxy but enlightened and worldly figures). In fact, the excommunication was an act of the congregational lay leaders, the *parnassim*. Nor was Spinoza completely cut off from all Jewish contacts. Popkin cites evidence that Spinoza even served as a character witness for a Dutch Jewish army officer.

Popkin concludes that the excommunication "was not one of the traumatic events of the seventeenth century or a decisive turning point in the struggle between orthodoxy and modernity. It seems to have been a minor local event in the Amsterdam community, one that was never discussed later on." Moreover, Spinoza clearly benefited by his excommunication in many ways. It freed him to publish without fear of rabbinic censorship. All things considered, Spinoza may not have regretted paying the price of excommunication for the freedom to publish. He did, after all, later refuse the chair in philosophy at Heidelberg whose acceptance no doubt would have entailed embracing or at least mouthing Christian orthodoxies. Nor did Spinoza ever fully embrace another faith or religious community, not even of the most liberal or radical kind.

Popkin's essay is a sobering reminder of the difference between myth and reality and how much of what we think we know about Spinoza's life has been driven by those, on all sides, with axes to grind. It also reminds us that whatever Jewish currents we find in Spinoza's philosophy, his distancing from the Jewish community was at least to some extent mutual. If Spinoza's philosophy proves to be in important respects a Jewish philosophy, it is so obliquely and not because Spinoza intended to work from within to develop a new Judaism.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Spinoza's philosophy is decisively Jewish in one respect we have not yet mentioned: Spinoza's philosophical anthropology reflects the biblical and Jewish understanding of the human person as fallible, poised between constructive and destructive tendencies and between perfection and imperfection. Spinoza's ethical project is to channel, not suppress, the unruly passions into constructive avenues. Desire, not a disembodied reason but a desire embracing mind and body as one, is the human essence. It is to be reformed and thereby most adequately satisfied, not subdued or denied. If one side of

Spinoza's ethical theory is the loosening of the bonds of tradition, freeing the human person and allowing individual movement toward increased independence of mind and action, the other side is learning to understand oneself in the fullest natural causal context. Spinoza's insistence that we—not only our bodies but our minds—are part of nature and must be understood in terms of physics, biology, psychology, and even sociology and anthropology, owes a debt to what one could call the Hebrew Bible's honest gaze, its refusal to take a falsely rosy view of human motives and its equal refusal of the notion (read into the text of Genesis by Christian salvation theory) of the utter corruption or natural depravity of our moral natures. In refusing to bemoan, ridicule, or lament our human nature, Spinoza is characteristically Jewish.

In rejecting Descartes' solution to the moral (and the epistemic) problem in a turn to inner psychic control by acts of will, Spinoza embraces the reality of our human limitations and resists the fantasy of our willful omnipotence, even in the inner citadel of individual subjectivity. Our minds are not of our own invention or subject to our direct and all-encompassing control, as our tendency toward magical thinking might suggest. Spinoza insists instead that our beliefs are more often than not socially constructed and uncritically held, and that our emotions follow naturally from those beliefs. Our minds, no less than our bodies, are subject to external influences of all kinds, social and natural. Our hope comes not from any ability to will ourselves free of external and internal determination and still less from casting ourselves on some mythic eschaton in a surrender of reason and intelligence to the sheer sense of our creatureliness. It comes from understanding ourselves and pursuing our interests within the largest causal and social nexus, one that recognizes and furthers our human connectedness rather than denies it.

That we are part of nature and cannot escape it is profoundly humbling. Honest ethics begins when we come to understand the contexts of our desires, beliefs, and actions, and thereby recognize that the same laws, the same desires and struggles, apply to us as to everyone and everything else. We realize our interdependence with all things, and most especially with the beings most fittingly allied with ourselves, that is, our fellow human beings. Ethics is not the assertion of a superhuman control over our thoughts and feelings, nor is its project the dream that Spinoza (using that word) defines as utopian, the project of a human nature remade. Such notions only open up a route to self-deception and can lead us into doing evil in the name of the good. Ethics involves our recognition both of our finitude and of our stake in the whole. It involves a recognition of the reality but the finitude of our powers. It is only through the understanding of ourselves and our passions and of the natural and social contexts in which they arise that we can reliably enhance those powers. The joy that results is the natural concomitant of

our growth in understanding and as a result in power. This is the conceptually tough and philosophically enduring sense behind the ancient rabbinic idea that real power lies in self-governance, and in the still older, scriptural idea that wisdom opens the route to self-mastery.

Spinoza's ethics, in its own way, does express the Torah's insistence on the infinite distance between the human and the divine. But at the same time it discovers a spark of the divine in each human being, giving a new yet profoundly ancient meaning to the biblical trope that tells us, almost paradoxically, that God is near to those who call upon him. In this respect, regardless of his troubles with the synagogue and his disappointments with earlier attempts at a synthesis of the Mosaic and the philosophical ideals, Spinoza made a Jewish choice.

Spinoza had not the standing to create a new Judaism, and his ideas could not command the allegiance of his contemporaries, whether Jewish or non-Jewish. Yet Spinoza's philosophical ideas have long been a springboard to moral and intellectual independence for many, as much if not more for lovers of philosophical thinking as for professional philosophers. In an age like our own, when all thinking persons must construct their own thinking and reconstruct, if they can or will, the links that bind them to the cultures and traditions from which we all spring, Spinoza's radical reconstruction of Jewish ideas can provide an opening toward moral and intellectual rediscovery. For what is radical is what goes to the root, not merely for purposes of destruction or deracination but also, potentially, for creativity and growth.

NOTE

1. See, for example, Pines's essay, "Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the Jewish Philosophical Tradition," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); "Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant," in *Further Studies in Philosophy*, ed. Ora Segal, *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, vol. XX, Jerusalem (1968); "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). Notable also in the first mentioned volume is Septimus's "Biblical Religion and Political Rationality in Simone Luzzato, Maimonides and Spinoza." Unfortunately, we do not have the space here to offer a comprehensive account of the scholarship on the influence upon Spinoza of his Jewish philosophical predecessors or even to name the full range of scholars who have addressed that issue.