

## Why Spinoza Was Excommunicated

Yirmiah Yovel

ON JULY 27, 1656 a sentence of excommunication was pronounced on a twenty-four-year-old Jew of the Portuguese community of Amsterdam and recorded in the communal record book as follows:

The members of the *ma'amad* [i.e., the elders or *parnasim* of the council] make known to you that having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch d'Espinoza, they have endeavored by various means and promises to turn him from evil ways. Not being able to find any remedy, but on the contrary receiving every day more information about the abominable heresies practiced and taught [to others] by him, and about the monstrous acts committed by him, having this from many reliable witnesses who have deposed and borne witness on all this in the presence of said Spinoza . . .; all this having been examined in the presence of the wise gentlemen [i.e., the rabbis], they have decided, with the consent of the latter, that the said Espinoza be excommunicated and banished from the people of Israel, and they accordingly excommunicate him as follows:

By the decrees of the Angels and the proclamation of the Saints, we hereby excommunicate, ban, and anathematize Baruch d'Espinoza, with the agreement of the Blessed Lord and his Holy Congregation. . . . May he be cursed in the day and cursed in the night, cursed in his lying down and cursed in his rising up. Cursed in his going forth and cursed in his coming in; and may the Lord not forgive him, and may His wrath and jealousy destroy him utterly, and may the Lord blot out his name from under the sky and separate him from all the tribes of Israel with all the curses of Heaven that are contained in this book of the Law. But you who cleave to the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.

And we hereby warn you that none may communicate with him by word of mouth or writing, nor show him any charity whatsoever, nor stay with him under one roof, nor come into his company, nor read any composition made or written by him.

The object of this excommunication, Baruch

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d'Espinoza, belonged to the upper crust of the Jewish community. His father, Michael, was a highly respected merchant active in civic affairs who had served several times as a *parnas* (elder), an extremely powerful office in Amsterdam. The young Baruch (Bento) received a traditional Jewish education, studying Hebrew and Scripture, Talmud and Jewish philosophy, and also read independently on secular subjects (including works in Hebrew on mathematics, physics, and astronomy), preparing himself for a life in commerce. At the age of six he had lost his mother, Hana Devora, and from then on death visited the family frequently, taking his younger brother, Yitzhak, his sister, Miriam, his stepmother, Esther, and finally his father.

Spinoza was twenty-two when his father died. Together with his brother, Gabriel, he founded a commercial company, "Bento et Gabriel d'Espinoza," for the import and export of fruit. The venture was only moderately successful, and on one occasion the brothers suffered losses due to a shipwreck. During this period, Spinoza continued to attend the Keter Torah yeshivah headed by Rabbi Shaul Levi Mortera, and apparently also kept up his connection with his former teacher, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, whose home was a kind of center for scholars and educated Jews passing through Amsterdam. On the surface, at least, no change was as yet perceptible in Spinoza's relations with the Jewish community; for more than a year after his father's death he continued to be on good terms with the synagogue authorities, was scrupulous in the payment of his dues and the honoring of his pledges, and was not involved in any open conflicts with authority.

Nevertheless, he was apparently full of doubts and heretical thoughts. He knew the Bible by heart and found many contradictions in it. The notion of miracles, for example, seemed to him to contradict both reason and the laws of nature, and in the prophets he found evidence of great imaginative power but not of ordered rational thought. The ordinances of the Torah and the halakhah seemed to him arbitrary and merely historical, having nothing to do with the laws of God: if God did indeed have laws, they could only be inherent in the universe itself in the form of the universal

and immutable laws of nature. Moreover, in view of the death which awaits us all (and which Spinoza himself had already encountered from the years of his early childhood on), there was no comfort in the vain idea of a life to come. Death was the absolute end of every living creature, of both body and soul; if there was any value or purpose in life, it had to be found in this world—in a life of inquiry and understanding and in the intellectual freedom of the individual.\* Spinoza still clung to the idea of the eternal, the infinite, the perfect—in other words, the idea of God—but this deity was not in his view a unique and separate *persona* existing outside the world and the nature he had created. God, the object of our love, was, rather, the universe itself, insofar as it could be grasped as a single whole. Nature and God were one, and the knowledge of nature was therefore the knowledge of God.

We do not know when these ideas matured in the mind of the heterodox youth, but the process apparently began at a rather early stage. About four years after his excommunication, the first part of Spinoza's most important work, the *Ethics*, containing the essence of his pantheism, already existed in manuscript form. With these ideas Spinoza excluded himself from both Judaism and Christianity, and even from the accepted philosophical tradition; he was a heretic not only from the point of view of the established religions, but also from the point of view of the free thinkers, and the several varieties of philosophic deism they were espousing at the time. Deism rejects religion in the name of an external and remote "philosophic" deity which does not intervene in the affairs of this world and does not possess the attributes of particular providence, punishment, and reward, or commandment and ritual. But the deistic heretics at least acknowledged the existence of a transcendent deity elevated above the world, whereas Spinoza dismissed this idea and identified God with the whole of the universe. In short, Spinoza proclaimed himself a heretic not only among the faithful, but also among representatives of the accepted heresy of his period, thus cutting himself loose from all the main spiritual currents of his time.

IN ITS mature form, Spinoza's system is one of the most important in the history of philosophy. Although he had few actual disciples, it has simply not been possible, ever since the republication of his works, to participate in the enterprise of philosophy without taking his world view into account. In the words of Henri Bergson: "Every philosopher has two philosophies: his own and Spinoza's." It is no coincidence that minds as opposed as Hegel's and Nietzsche's, for example, both saw Spinoza as their great forerunner: his doctrine is more complex and many-faceted than it might at first appear.

But Spinoza's ethics and metaphysics—the es-

sence of his teaching—were not his first achievements. They were preceded by a profound critique of religion and a vigorous attack on its sacred texts—first and foremost the Bible. When he wrote this critique, the young Spinoza, who did not know Latin, had not yet read the new scientific and philosophical works which would change the face of the age. He had not come into contact with the students of Descartes and the scholars of the Royal Society of London, and was not acquainted with Hobbes, Machiavelli, or Galileo. He developed his reflections and criticisms of religion solely from within the world of contemporary Judaism—a world far more complex and various than we tend to imagine today.

The Jews of Amsterdam in Spinoza's time have been described both in literary works and by historians (mainly those following Graetz) as a narrow-minded and fanatical lot who deliberately shut themselves off from any spark of illumination or enlightenment from the outside world. This picture is inaccurate. The truth of the matter is that the Amsterdam community was one of the most enlightened and cosmopolitan Jewish communities of the period. The people who inhabited Amsterdam's Jewish Street—which was worlds apart from the closed ghettos of Eastern Europe—were former Marranos or sons of Marranos, most of them prosperous businessmen living in relative freedom within a tolerant state. Engaged mainly in import and export and other forms of international commerce, they were accustomed to mingling with Gentiles, and were rather openminded and receptive, having been educated in the schools of Spain and Portugal, or later on in the flourishing educational system developed by the community itself. At the same time, their experience as former Marranos was a never-ending source of perplexity and self-questioning to them, an experience which led to numerous difficulties of adjustment and deep-seated problems of identity. It is against this background of the experience of the former Marranos that we must understand both Spinoza's heresy and the excommunication which was its result.

Some, like Richard Popkin in his study of the subject, have seen in the Marranos the "beginning of modernization in Europe." But even without going so far, it is clear that a man who had been educated as a Christian and who then chose to return to Judaism could not belong entirely or simply to either faith. He would of necessity be faced with enormous difficulties in reintegrating himself into the community to which he indeed belonged, but whose daily life and whose deepest values and symbols were not actually part of his experience. This is not the place to discuss the variety of nuances to which the Marrano experience gave rise

\* Spinoza does speak in the *Ethics* of a kind of immortality of the soul, but not in any individual sense; the individual perishes and what remains is a kind of "eternal truth."

in those who returned to Judaism as adults (or, for that matter, among those who became Christians), though interesting research on this subject is currently under way. But it is not hard to understand how a man who is not simply either a Christian or a Jew but who is divided between the two, or who possesses memories of the one existing within the other, might be inclined to develop doubts about both, or even to question the foundations of religion altogether. As Yosef Yerushalmi has argued,\* the wonder is not that the return of the Marranos to Judaism gave rise to doubts and heresies, but rather that the majority should have succeeded as far as they did in reintegrating themselves into the framework of normative Judaism. In any case, Spinoza did not lack for predecessors in his heresy among the Marranos—this dough of the “new Jews” seems to have contained a leavening agent which gave rise to a constant intellectual ferment from within.

For rejecting the oral law and the rabbinical canons of Judaism and for denying the immortality of the soul, Uriel da Costa had twice been excommunicated. Twice he had recanted, only to commit suicide in the end, after many harassments and humiliations, by shooting himself. Indeed, Bento d’Espinoza, who was only eight years old when da Costa killed himself, may very well have been among the little boys whose persecutions da Costa complained of during his ordeal. Whether or not he was, by the time Spinoza grew up and began to think for himself, both the fate and the views of Uriel da Costa must have provided him with food for thought, just as he must certainly have been aware of the less spectacular cases of nonconformity which were then troubling the community. It is commonly claimed that Spinoza’s critique of religion was influenced above all by his reading of Jewish philosophy. But why should the boy have pored over ancient Jewish texts and extracted from them elements which might have sounded heretical out of context (although in context they were still within the framework of legitimate Judaism) unless there was some incentive for him to do so in his external environment? There is no doubt that Spinoza’s apostasy contained an element of spontaneous awakening—that spiritual breakthrough of a single genius which cannot be fully explained by a set of foregoing events. Yet this breakthrough did not occur in the void but within a specific social and cultural milieu, which must be taken into account if we are to understand the phenomenon of Spinoza at all.

THE CURIOUS fact that, until a mere six months before his excommunication, Spinoza continued to conform externally to the norms of Jewish life in his community, may be explained by his own rules of caution, which state that “we must speak to the multitude in the language it understands” and “conform to the customs of the land which are not opposed to our

aims.” Although he was one of the most independent thinkers of his generation and displayed an extreme and extraordinary boldness in his intellectual attitudes, Spinoza was not interested in making a public show of his opinions or boasting of his intellectual independence. On the contrary, a combination of spiritual elitism and personal caution (both of which he inherited from Maimonides, among others) led him to speak in disguised language and to confine his activities to a small circle of trusted friends and acquaintances. (Even in his most provocative book, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza continued to disguise his true opinions and to speak in the “language of the multitude.”) The ring he wore on his finger—this freest and boldest spirit of his generation—was engraved with the warning “caute” (be careful), and to this combination of daring and caution Spinoza remained true all his life. How then can we account for the fact that one day in the autumn of 1655 he suddenly began making his opinions public and became so disruptive a presence in the synagogue that, after several warnings, he was finally excommunicated and anathematized?

Two conjectures are possible here, and they are mutually compatible. Spinoza’s first biographer, Jean M. Lucas, claims that the break with the Jewish community was a product of Spinoza’s own wishes; at a certain stage, according to Lucas, Spinoza discovered that his pretended conformity with the “customs of the land” was beginning to conflict with his spiritual goals, and so he discontinued it. Other sources point to the influence of Juan de Prado, an Andalusian doctor who had been active for many years in the Marrano underground in Spain. By leading an underground life, Prado had succeeded in escaping the clutches of the Inquisition, only to fall prey, in the very midst of his activities as a secret Jew, to profound theological doubts. By the time he finally escaped to Amsterdam (less than a year before Spinoza’s excommunication), these doubts had become articulate—he began to express his deistic opinions publicly, to mock the rabbis, and to transgress openly against the commandments of Judaism. Prado was an educated man who had studied science and philosophy, but he was also vain and arrogant, and could not resist the temptation to boast of his scholarship and enlightened views. He was about twelve years older than Spinoza, and it is reasonable to suppose that when he arrived in Amsterdam the young Baruch found in him a man with whom he could discuss his own doubts. Along with Prado, an even more famous heretic appeared in Amsterdam at this time—the Calvinist theologian, Isaac La Peyrère, who was one of the first Bible critics.

It is possible that meeting these two men accelerated processes in Spinoza which were already well under way. If nothing else, these meetings

\* From *Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, 1971.

must have helped to put an end to Spinoza's isolation—the isolation of a young man who had no one with whom he could share his doubts—and must have encouraged him to be more explicit both with himself and with others. More specifically, it is possible that these contacts helped Spinoza make up his mind to declare his independence and detach himself from the daily rituals of Judaism, even at the possible cost of cutting himself off from the community.

Once Spinoza had reached this decision, nothing could stop him. He ceased attending services at the synagogue, broke the commandments of the Torah, and began to reveal his doubts to those of his acquaintances he felt he could trust. He still did not perpetrate these deeds in public but he did, at least, put an end to his former pretense. The heads of the community did what they could to dissuade him, and there is even a conjecture that among the "various means and promises" they employed (as itemized in the writ of excommunication) was an attempt to bribe him to take part in synagogue services. Similar pressure was put on Prado, since the scandal involved them both, but the reactions of the two friends were very different. Prado preferred to continue the double life he had become accustomed to in the Marrano underground in Spain and fought doggedly to remain within the Jewish community. Spinoza, however, stood up openly for his ideas, composed a detailed defense of his actions which has unfortunately not survived (although the main points seem to be included in the *Tractatus*), and resigned himself to excommunication and isolation.

**D**RASTIC though it sounds to modern ears, excommunication was a fairly common sanction in the Amsterdam Jewish community. Although only the most prominent cases have come down to us, one contemporary Canadian scholar has estimated that there were as many as two hundred cases in Amsterdam, including that of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel himself who was excommunicated—though only for a day—for alleged implication in some affair involving taxes and the misuse of propaganda materials. Grounds for excommunication, as laid down in the community regulations, were not confined to heresy and blasphemy, but also included such seemingly minor transgressions as speaking too loudly or carrying weapons in the synagogue, disseminating libelous literature, organizing a private *minyán*, representing the Jewish community without the permission of the *parnasim*, and associating with people who had refused to pay taxes—all of which indicates that excommunication was primarily an internal sanction used by the community as a way of maintaining authority over its members.

Those empowered to pronounce the sentence of excommunication, moreover, were not the rabbis

but the "civil" authorities. These were represented by the council known as the *ma'amad* which was made up of six *parnasim* or elders, and a *gabbai* or treasurer. The *ma'amad*, which enjoyed both executive and judicial powers, was accountable to no one, and was not even elected by the community, its members having been appointed by their predecessors. Among the functions of the *parnasim* were those usually associated with rabbis or religious officials, such as supervision over ritual slaughtering practices. But they also had authority to impose excommunication, though it was carried out in consultation with the rabbis and with their consent.

Many hypotheses have been put forward to explain Spinoza's excommunication. One school argues that the reasons were political, and stemmed from the community's relations with the outside world rather than its own internal needs. Those who hold this view base their case chiefly on a document known as the "Remonstrance" which regulated the legal status of the Jews in the Dutch republic. Adopted in 1619, this document states that the presence of "atheists and godless men" will not be tolerated in the Jewish population; that such individuals are to be "properly isolated from the others and punished without mercy," and that all Jews fourteen years of age and older are required to declare to the civil authorities their belief in God, Moses, and the prophets, and in the existence of life after death. Furthermore, any person disseminating ideas contrary to these would be liable to "the death penalty, or corporal punishment, in accordance with the gravity of the crime." While there is no reason to suppose that these harsh penalties were ever actually imposed, it is nevertheless clear—in the opinion of those who hold this view, at least—that the Amsterdam community would in the circumstances have been apprehensive about its status in the Dutch republic, and would have done anything possible to prevent manifestations of atheism among its members.

Plausible though it sounds, this hypothesis has its weaknesses. It is true that in 1619, at the time of the Remonstrance, the Jewish community was still in its infancy and fighting to secure its position in the Dutch republic. It is also true that at the time of the Remonstrance, Calvinist orthodoxy was at the height of its powers, calling for the subjection of the state to the laws of religion and persecuting its opponents within the Christian faith. But Spinoza's excommunication took place about forty years after the Remonstrance and in completely new and different circumstances. Calvinist orthodoxy was in retreat by this time, and the Republican party, much more tolerant in its views, was in power. Indeed, no more than about six months after Spinoza's excommunication, the Netherlands States-General approved a resolution stating that theology and philosophy were two separate subjects which were not to be confused with

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each other, thereby providing a basic legal safeguard for the freedom of philosophical inquiry. Moreover, Jan de Witt, the strong man of the republic (later to become Spinoza's friend), was himself an ardent defender of the freedom of philosophical inquiry at the universities. It is thus difficult to imagine that the excommunication took place simply in the name of the ancient Remonstrance, which had never been literally enforced anyway, and had by now lost much of its force as a statement of principle as well. Indeed, there is room to suppose that Spinoza's excommunication was if anything opposed to the official religious policy just then taking shape within the circles in power in the Netherlands. At the same time, however, it is also possible that the Jewish leadership became conscious of this political change only gradually, so the question must remain open.

This being the case, some scholars have argued that the political reason for Spinoza's excommunication had nothing to do with the position of the Jews in Holland, but hinged rather on the possibility of their return to England.\* On the very day of the excommunication, Spinoza's former teacher Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel was in London, where he was attempting to persuade Oliver Cromwell to allow Jews to resettle in England. Scholars have argued, accordingly, that Spinoza's excommunication was a means of facilitating this scheme. To mollify opponents of Jewish resettlement and dispose of their fears that the Jews might bring heretical ideas and religious apostasy to Puritan England, it was necessary to nip any manifestations of apostasy in Amsterdam in the bud. This is an intriguing theory, but there is no evidence to support it. In the first place, Rabbi Menasseh was not that influential in Amsterdam; in the second place, the notion of the return of the Jews to England was probably Menasseh's own personal (and essentially messianic) idea rather than the official policy of the Amsterdam Jewish community.

Interestingly enough, there is yet another variant of the "political" explanation of Spinoza's excommunication and one which has a peculiarly contemporary ring. This is the argument that blame for the excommunication rests not on the Jewish community of Amsterdam, but rather on the burgomasters of the city, who had intimated to the *parnasim* that Spinoza should be excommunicated. This theory, however, completely distorts the contemporary significance of the excommunication and prevents us from seeing its inner justification—as well as the drama embodied in the whole affair.

**E**VEN if the decision to excommunicate Spinoza was influenced by external political considerations, this should not blind us to the fact that the inner life of the Amsterdam community and its unique situation provide sufficient reason for the excommunication. The need to rid

itself of Spinoza (as also of da Costa and Prado) stemmed primarily from the requirements of the community's survival and the difficult task of creating a shelter for the refugees fleeing the Inquisition. The rabbis and elders of the Amsterdam community were faced with a historic responsibility: that of reintroducing the "new Jews" into the religious traditions of Judaism, and of renewing a process of historic continuity that had been cruelly disrupted. There is no need to point out that this was a far from simple task, in some respects, indeed, an impossible one: organic continuity could not simply be mandated, nor could the Christian-Marrano past of the "new Jews" be effaced and replaced by a simple, uncomplicated Jewish identity. We have already seen that Spinoza's apostasy stemmed in part from this problem, but so did the deep inner necessity for his excommunication.

Because the Amsterdam community was engaged in a daily and hourly struggle to reintegrate the Marranos into Judaism, the issue of unity was necessarily more crucial than any other. The problem faced by the Amsterdam rabbis, and by the community's teachers and publicists, was not only to translate Jewish culture into the idiom of the Iberian peninsula, but, even more important, to restore the daily pattern of Jewish life in accordance with the ancient customs of Israel. In the light of this necessity, acts like Spinoza's, which challenged tradition in the name of freedom of thought and sabotaged the endeavor to repair the torn fabric of Jewish life, could not be tolerated. And in fact, the emphasis throughout the proceedings against Spinoza was more on his acts than on his opinions (so long as he kept those to himself); for the survival of Judaism—as Spinoza himself was later to maintain—had never depended on theory, but rather on a complex network of specific and particular actions.

The Amsterdam community, it must be remembered, was still living in the shadow of the Inquisition, whose persecutions continued unabated on the Iberian peninsula. Refugees from Spain and Portugal continued to arrive in Holland in a steady stream. In May 1655, fourteen months before Spinoza was excommunicated, one Avraham Nuñez Bernal, who had relatives and acquaintances in Amsterdam, was burned at the stake in Cordova; the community was much shaken by the news. Two months before, another young martyr, Yitzhak da Alameida Bernal, was burned at the stake in Galicia, and Spinoza himself speaks in his letter of yet a third victim of the Inquisition whose fate must surely have shocked him deeply. Given these events, the Amsterdam community felt itself to be living in a state of emergency: it was fighting to crystallize its own Jewish life from within and at the same time to provide both physical security and a new social and spiritual ident-

\* J. L. Teicher, "Why Was Spinoza Banned?" *Menorah Journal* 45 (1957), pp. 41-60.

ity to the refugees from the Inquisition. Against this background, Spinoza's challenge could only be interpreted as profoundly dangerous to the community, and an action which had to be defended against by every possible means.

On the other hand—and there is no need to elaborate here—Spinoza's stand was also justified. As against the weight of tradition, Spinoza demanded that the tradition itself be subjected to the test of his individual judgment and reason, and refused to accept any truth—or any practical or moral commandment—unless it was compatible with his own subjective consciousness when following the guidelines of universal reason. From the point of view of the guardians of the tradition he was questioning, this was a destructive and subversive principle; but from the point of view of his own dignity and freedom as a man, it was an act of progress and emancipation. In this sense, Spinoza's break with both Judaism and Christianity was a harbinger of the modern era.

Spinoza's excommunication should thus be seen as a non-tragic clash between two valid points of view. Hegel defined tragedy as the clash of justice with justice; but in Spinoza's case the drama ended without a fall, without death or extraordinary suffering, and therefore without tragedy. Indeed, popular legend has greatly exaggerated his case. He was never impoverished, he was never the victim of persecution, and he did not live out his life as a social outcast. Although he had cut himself off from all religious affiliations, and although he was alone in the deepest sense of the word (having no true intellectual or spiritual peers even among his colleagues), Spinoza did not lead the life of an embittered or alienated man, but remained open to social relationships and acquired both friends and admirers. Nor did he lack the means of a livelihood. Though his needs were modest, he did not deny himself the small pleasures of life, and he scorned the ascetic ideal both personally and on principle.

The notion that he was obliged to grind lenses for a living is also highly exaggerated: in fact, Spinoza lived on a rather generous allowance provided by friends to enable him to pursue his studies. He ground lenses mainly in order to further his own research into optics, which was then a new and pioneering science. In one respect, though, the legend is not entirely inaccurate: it is possible that the glass dust from the lenses may have hastened the progression of the hereditary lung disease (apparently consumption) from which Spinoza suffered, a disease for which the causes were not then known, and from which Spinoza died at the age of forty-four on February 21, 1677—three hundred years ago this year.

FROM time to time, petitions are made to have Spinoza's excommunication revoked. In 1925, the late critic and historian Joseph Klausner stood on Mount Scopus and proclaimed:

"Baruch Spinoza, you are our brother, you are our brother." In the 1950's, David Ben-Gurion conducted a campaign to have the ban lifted. And in 1953, the then Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yitzhak (Isaac) Halevi Herzog, replied to an application from the late G. Herz Shikmoni, director of the "Spinozeum" in Haifa, asking him if the excommunication was still in force from the point of view of the halakhah. The rabbi divided his response into two parts. In reply to the question of whether the excommunication was intended to apply only to Spinoza's lifetime or also to future generations, Rabbi Herzog did not rule, leaving the matter open to further consideration. But with regard to the ban on Spinoza's *works*, the rabbinical ruling was clear:

... I have examined the text of the proclamation [the writ of excommunication quoted at the beginning of this article] and I have found: (a) at the end in regard to his books and composition it is written only "we warn" and not "we warn to excommunicate"; (b) even if we say that we can deduce the end from the beginning, it is shown by the language of the above sentence that the intention is not specified for future generations, but only for the period of Spinoza's lifetime. It is possible that it was thought unnecessary to prolong the period of the ban, and it is possible that due to modesty the authorities did not wish to rule for future generations. Be this as it may, it seems that the ban on the reading of Spinoza's books and compositions no longer stands.

A legalistic quibble, in other words, enabled the Chief Rabbi to rule that there was no longer a ban on the reading of Spinoza. And one gains the impression from the beginning of the letter that Rabbi Herzog was also seeking a loophole that would have enabled him to rule that the excommunication, too, was no longer in force.

But the question remains as to whether all these attempts to have the excommunication revoked are not really beside the point. In my opinion, they are. Spinoza does not stand in need of certification by the authorities, whoever they may be, and one cannot but be struck by the astonishing discrepancy between his importance in the history of civilization and the attempts being made to gain institutional legitimization for him today. (Those who seem unaware of this discrepancy should perhaps be reminded that even according to the halakhah, "an Israelite, even when he has sinned, is nevertheless an Israelite," and this includes those who have been excommunicated and anathematized.) Spinoza remains a Jew—heretical, sinning, or secular, as we wish; his problematic Jewishness is a fact which cannot be blotted out.

The significance of the excommunication was in isolating Spinoza from the actual Jewish community of his day, and whoever wishes to revoke it today is therefore late by three hundred years. The demand to revoke the excommunication

would not sound anachronistic only if we were to see its meaning as symbolic—national, perhaps, or ideological—rather than purely religious; in such a case, however, we would be in the untenable position of both adopting the religious concept of excommunication (as implied in the demand to revoke Spinoza's ban) and at the same time rejecting it (by changing its meaning).

Lastly, and this is perhaps the crux of the matter, who in the Jewish world today might be authorized to accept Spinoza back into the Jewish fold? The Lubavitcher Rebbe? The Prime Minister of Israel? The President of Yeshiva University? The B'nai B'rith? There is no longer a single normative Judaism today—a development of which Spinoza himself was one of the harbingers.

In abandoning the observant Judaism of his day, but refusing to convert to Christianity, Spinoza unwittingly embodied the alternatives which lay in wait for Jews of later generations. Perhaps we can see in him the first secular Jew, at a time

when this category did not yet exist in any sense; with equal justice, we might regard his case as embodying the assimilationist option. In short, Spinoza prefigures a number of the problems stemming from the encounter of Judaism with the modern world. As a result of this encounter, we no longer have one norm of Jewish existence today. We have Orthodox and secular Jews, Conservative and Reform Jews, Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews, and nuances and sub-categories within all of these; in fact our Judaism today is determined by the way we live it, and not by any one compulsory model. This being the case, we no longer possess an institution or an individual empowered with the authority to include or exclude, to excommunicate or bring back to the fold (even symbolically). Since Spinoza himself foretold this development (less in his philosophy than in his biography and personal fate), he has once more become central to our thinking about Judaism and the complexities of its existence and survival.