An Icon for Iconoclasts: Spinoza and the Faith of Jewish Secularism

Daniel B. Schwartz

In late 1953, David Ben-Gurion, then in between stints as Israel's prime minister, published an article in the main labor union daily *Davar*, entitled "Let Us Amend the Injustice." The specific "injustice" that moved the "Old Man" of Israeli politics to speak out from his Negev retreat involved none of the most obvious controversies of the day besetting the five-year-old Jewish state: the fallout from Israel's bloody raid two months earlier on the West Bank village of Qibya, the continued housing of tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants from the Middle East in shantytowns, nor the Palestinian refugee crisis. Rather, Ben-Gurion entered the fray to plead for a philosopher who had been dead for close to three hundred years: Benedict, or (for Ben-Gurion certainly) Baruch Spinoza.

The seventeenth-century Spinoza was one of the pioneers of modern philosophy and biblical criticism. He was also arguably the most notorious heretic in Jewish history. In 1656, the Sephardic community of Amsterdam had excommunicated Spinoza, then twenty-three, for his "horrible heresies" and "monstrous deeds," explicitly barring the faithful "read[ing] anything composed or written by him." Now, just three years shy of the tercentenary of the rabbinic ban, Ben-Gurion called for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—the crown jewel of Israel's higher education—to publish a Hebrew translation of the collected works of "the deepest, most original thinker to emerge from [our people] from the end of the Bible to the birth of Einstein." Moreover, though he never explicitly petitioned for the excommunication to be formally lifted, it was (and, to a striking degree, still is) widely believed that he had done just that, conjuring echoes of the Hebrew literature scholar Yosef Klausner's use of the phrase traditionally used to repeal the rabbinic ban ("Our brother are you!") at a Hebrew University commemoration of the two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of Spinoza's death in 1927. In the wake of Ben-Gurion's article, debate raged from the halls of the Knesset to the pages of the international Jewish press over the prospect of a full pardon for the philosopher. Opinions were sought from both the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel and the head rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam as to whether, from a halakhic perspective, the *herem* could in fact be annulled. For a time, admirers of Spinoza, his detractors, and the ambivalent Jewish majority were abuzz over the rescinding of a judgment the heretic himself had never recognized as authoritative to begin with.

Ben-Gurion had a preoccupation with the author of the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* dating back to his east European youth. He was far from alone. In seeking to reclaim Spinoza in 1953, Ben-Gurion was heir to a long and remarkably diverse history of vindications, canonizations, and repudiations of Spinoza in Jewish culture. This had led, by 1953, to a view of the Dutch Jewish freethinker as a pioneer of secular Jewish identity and as primus inter pares in the camp of Jewish historical heretics turned hero.

Spinoza's heresy was revolutionary and far-reaching. It was founded on his conflation of God and Nature and resulting rejection of the reality of the supernatural, which did away with belief in a personal and transcendent deity, free will, miracles, the revealed character of the Bible, the eternal "chosenness" of any people or religion by God, and—most problematically from a traditional Jewish perspective—the notion of a divine ceremonial law distinct from the universal laws of nature. The scandal of his ideas met its match in the radicalness of his personal example. After his excommunication, Spinoza made no effort to reconcile with Amsterdam Jewry; nor did he embrace some form of Christianity. He simply went without membership in a religious community in an age when confessional status remained a primary criterion of identity. Swept under the rug by Jews in his own time and for decades thereafter, the Spinozan rupture re-emerged in Jewish historical consciousness as a milestone—a perceived turning point between the medieval and the modern and breakthrough of the secular—in the nineteenth century. For a growing number of Jews and particularly intellectuals, the fiercely independent Spinoza became a model to be emulated; for others, he remained a corrosive threat to Jewish continuity that now had to be met head-on; for still others, he appeared in a decidedly ambiguous light, both heroic and troubling at once. Those who heralded the Amsterdam philosopher as a prototype of the modern, secular Jew disagreed over the proper interpretation of this identity. Some saw Spinoza as a founding father of the Jewish cosmopolitan committed to reason and freedom over any ethnic loyalties, a type famously labeled the "non-Jewish Jew" by the Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher. Others—like Ben-Gurion—regarded Spinoza as "the first Zionist of the last three hundred years." A precursor of Jewish liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and various cross-pollinations of these and others isms, Spinoza became, to a degree matched only by the eighteenth-century German and Jewish Enlightenment thinker Moses Mendelssohn (the other most oft-mentioned candidate for "first modern Jew"), a perennial landmark and point of reference for constructions of modern Jewish identity.

Portrait of Baruch Spinoza. Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel: B 117.

Whether Spinoza *should* be viewed as the first modern or secular Jew is questionable. Certainly, as a descriptive label for the philosopher of history it is anachronistic, a claim Spinoza himself would have probably found unintelligible. Steven Nadler, the author of the definitive biography of Spinoza in English, argues that while Spinoza never converted to Christianity in the wake of his break with Judaism he did not continue to identify as Jewish either; at most, then, he should be considered the first secular person but not the first secular Jew.

Regardless of whether Spinoza would have recognized himself in titles such as the first modern Jew or the founder of Jewish secularism, the connection between his Jewish reception and the secularization of Jewish thought, culture, and identity is irrefutable. From Berthold Auerbach in the nineteenth century to Rebecca Goldstein today, countless seminary students turned secular intellectuals have testified to the seminal impact that reading Spinoza (or simply reading about Spinoza) had in stripping them of belief in *Torah min ha-Shamayim* ("Torah from Heaven"), the divine authority of Jewish law, and the existence of an immortal soul separate from the body. Spinoza became "the first great culture-hero of modern secular Jews," in the words of the late Yosef Yerushalmi, through both the secularizing of Jewishness—by redrawing the boundaries of Jewishness to not only accommodate but venerate a notorious enemy of rabbinic religion—and the Judaizing of secularity—by defining values such as "the freedom to philosophize," the questioning of authority, the embrace of reason, science, and even universalism itself as quintessentially "Jewish." All told, Spinoza's posthumous course from heretic to celebrated, if still controversial, hero in Jewish consciousness is a case study par excellence of both the process and project of intellectual secularization in modern Jewish history.

Yet secularization, as sociologists and historians have increasingly come to realize, is not a one-way street from the religious to the profane, and the rehabilitation of Spinoza in Jewish culture is perceived in only partial light if seen as a history of desacralization exclusively. When we turn to the actual rhetoric of this recuperation we find a striking persistence of sacral metaphors and motifs, of frames, languages, even modes of interpretation with a traditional pedigree. This is especially glaring in descriptions of the first formative engagement with the life and thought of the Amsterdam heretic, which frequently echo narratives of conversion or calls to prophecy. No less a religious insurgent than Micah J. Berdichevsky, the militantly secular fin-de-siècle Hebrew writer who sought a radical break with Jewish tradition, recalls in a diary entry from 1900 rich with theological imagery his discovery of Spinoza ten years earlier. He refers to the *Ethics* as "the Tablets of the Covenant," and recounts how, having picked up a copy of the first Hebrew translation of Spinoza's magnum opus, the earth trembled, the philosopher appeared before him in a vision, and a voice cried out, "The book in your hands is the answer to the mystery of the universe!" There is, no doubt, embellishment in this account, but not a whit of irony. Berdichevsky's professed experience of ecstasy on encountering Spinoza has several equivalents in modern Jewish literature, including in the writing of I. B. Singer.

All this suggests that a process of sacralization, as well as secularization, has taken place in the course of the transformation of Spinoza into an icon for iconoclasts. And this, in turn, may offer insight into why at least some devout Jewish secularists would find the idea of rescinding the ban on Spinoza attractive in principle. An amnesty, even if only figurative, was a gesture that contained hints of both secularization and sacralization, the former by implying a total "ingathering" of the prototype of the modern secular heretic in Jewish culture, the latter by investing this ingathering with an authority drawn from the appropriation of a religious idiom and symbol. This constant oscillation between the secular and the sacred is at the very heart of the history of the Jewish reclamation of Spinoza, and indeed, of the history of the secularization of Jewish culture more broadly.

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