The Heterodox Judaism of Baruch Spinoza

***By Richard Mather***

***There is only one and unique substance in existence, a substance that is infinite, self-caused, and eternal. This substance is the spatio-temporal world. But it is also God, says Baruch Spinoza, the Sephardi Jew from Amsterdam excommunicated by the Talmud Torah congregation.***

Baruch Spinoza was born in 1632 in Amsterdam to a Sephardi Jewish family who had fled Portugal because of persecution by the Catholic Church. Spinoza had a traditional Jewish upbringing, attending the Keter Torah yeshiva of the Amsterdam Talmud Torah congregation. He studied the Talmud and Maimonides (who continued to exert a lifelong influence on Spinoza). Spinoza’s controversial ideas about God and the nature of soul resulted in his ejection from the Jewish community when Amsterdam’s Talmud Torah congregation issued a *cherem* (חרם), a kind of ban or excommunication. At the young age of 23, Spinoza was excluded from – and shunned by – the local Jewish community.

The *cherem* did not stop Spinoza. He went on to write his *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, which contained many of the ideas that appeared in his philosophical masterpiece *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata*, commonly known as *Ethics*. He wrote to scientists, philosophers, and theologians throughout Europe. He wrote and published his *Theological Political Treatise* (a pre-emptive defence of his forthcoming *Ethics*) and earned money by grinding lenses and making cutting-edge optical equipment, notably the microscope and the telescope. Whilst in The Hague, he continued work on *Ethics*, but also wrote two scientific essays, as well as a Dutch translation of the Bible and a compendium of Hebrew grammar.

What is Spinoza’s philosophy and what are its theological implications? Spinoza argues that there is only one and unique substance in existence, a substance that is infinite, self-caused, and eternal. This substance is the spatio-temporal world. But it is also God, the self-caused Being. As Spinoza says, “God is one, that is, only one substance can be granted in the universe.” Spinoza famously said that God is Nature. But when Spinoza says Nature, he means Being and Becoming, the essence of everything that is and will be. Every physical thing in the universe, including you and I, are simply “modes” or modifications of the single substance that is God and conceived under the “attribute” of extension (more on this later). Manchester’s leading Reform rabbi Reuven Silverman describes it this: “[Spinoza’s] God is not merely the sum-total of all that exists […] but is also the process by which everything exists.”

Spinoza rejected the notion of a personal God. God is neither male nor female. God is “the indwelling and not the transient cause of all things.” In other words, God is not a transcendent Creator but is immanent within the world. Nor did God exist prior to Creation. Everything that is, is *in* God. Spinoza’s view is called neutral monism, which means that only one substance exists, and it is neither mental nor physical. Spinoza’s claim that divinity is not beyond this world but is expressed *in* the world can perhaps be described as “theomonism” – the idea that the oneness of Being is manifest in the created universe , that the world itself a revelation, and revelation is happening at every moment.

One of Spinoza’s most radical ideas is his notion that God “does not love anyone.” Neither does God hate anyone. God is indifferent to individuals. In a statement that must have scandalised his contemporaries, Spinoza said that anyone “who loves God cannot endeavour that God should love him in return.” Spinoza believed that God is without passions, intentions and purposes. God is unaffected by any emotion of pleasure or pain. To Spinoza, a passionless God is a perfect God. When *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) calls on us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart,” Spinoza had in mind a kind of love that is without emotion or passion. He calls it the “intellectual love of God.”

Spinoza wanted to demystify religion and divest God of any moral agency. God, says Spinoza, does not intervene in the course of history. God doesn’t judge individuals. There is no heaven or hell. There is no supernatural realm, no miracles or angels, and no external authority that determines morality. “God gives no laws to mankind,” says Spinoza. Spinoza describes circumcision as merely a way of differentiating the Jews from other nations. The law of Moses was not divine but was the earthly legislature of the Israelites and Judeans . Any notion of chosen-ness was bound in with Jewish legislation and ethical precepts. Moreover, the commandments were limited to a particular time and place – the Land of Israel prior to the Roman destruction in 70 CE.

Spinoza did foresee a time when the Jews would return to the Land of Israel, but it is unlikely that he thought the Torah should play a part in the national legislature. In a sense, he foreshadows the secular Zionist pioneers who spurned the passivity of the rabbis who were waiting for the Messiah. “Were it not for the fact that the central principles of their religion have so emasculated them,” says Spinoza, “I would not hesitate to believe that they [the Jews] might one day […] re-establish their independent state, and that God will again choose them.” There is a touch of irony in the last part of his statement. According to Spinoza, God is indifferent to man – including the Jews. The rebirth of Israel would not be the product of divine intervention but the work of human hands.

Spinoza also rejected teleological explanations. There are no final causes, not even for God. In other words, there is no end to history, no messianic era, no kingdom of heaven on earth. Hardly surprising for a man who dismissed supernaturalism, angels and miracles. There is only one kingdom in Spinoza’s world – the kingdom of God or Nature. Cats, trees, humans, stars, and so on, all belong to this kingdom – and they belong equally. Humans are not special; nor are they set apart from Nature as Charles Darwin would later testify.

In Spinoza’s theology there is no good or evil in the absolute sense . Good and evil are relative notions that vary according to the particular prejudices of humanity. He did believe, however, that bodily and worldly pleasure are authentic expressions of human desire. In words that are reminiscent of *Sefer Mishlei*  (Book of Proverbs), Spinoza said we should not shun pleasure, but neither should we act gratuitously: “It is part of a wise man,” says Spinoza, “to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theatre.”

Spinoza also dismissed the concept of free will. Every action is part of a chain reaction of cause and effect. “All things in nature proceed from certain necessity,” he states. We are not in a position to understand the chain of causality because we are not omniscient. And we are ignorant of the causes of our desires. We might *appea*r to be free, but we’re not. God alone is free – but only in the sense that God acts from the necessity of God’s own nature. We can, however, strive to master our emotions and passions, which are often confused because they are reactions to events over which we have no control. An emotion can only be overcome by a stronger emotion. One of those stronger emotions is Reason.

Spinoza places a great deal emphasis on Reason. Spinoza recommends that we endeavour to understand the world around us and gain a greater degree of *conatus*, which is the term Spinoza uses to express the power that is found when an individual “strives to persevere in its own being.” When we recognise that everything we do is determined by things outside of our control, we can claim to be active participants in the world, rather than passive victims.

Once we comes to terms with the necessity of everything that happens, there is no point feeling despair. Despair comes when we foolishly wish for things to be otherwise. Given our inability to change things, we may as well accept the necessity of all things.

But accepting reality is not about being passive; rather, it is an exercise in activity. It is an active striving for “blessedness.” The more we are conscious of ourselves and the universe, the more perfect and happy we are. This happiness is not a spontaneous outburst of joy, but a kind of beatitude or serenity. In Hebrew, we might call it אושר (*ohsher*), but without the connotation of wealth (עשור). The psalmist would describe it thus: “Blessed (אַשְׁרֵי) are those that dwell in your house, they are ever praising you.” Of course, Spinoza’s idea of praise was purely intellectual. Nor was it wasn’t limited to the knowledge that all things are connected. This kind of knowledge is adequate but incomplete.

God is to be approached *sub specie aeternitatis* (“under the aspect of eternity”). According to Spinoza, the senses grasp the world as it appears from a given viewpoint at a given moment. But by showing how a thing follows necessarily from one or another, we see the world under the aspect of eternity. It is the nature of Reason to regard things under the species of eternity, says Spinoza. It is what is known as the third kind of knowledge, intuition, which takes what is known by Reason and grasps it in a single act of the mind.

To quote Spinoza expert Genevieve Lloyd, “We know that we are in God, and are conceived through God. […] I can understand that dying is of no consequence to me, since, in understanding myself in relation to substance which is eternal, the greater part of my mind is given over to what is eternal, rather than to what is individual and perishable in me, my imagination and memories.” This is the nearest we will ever get to immortality in the Spinozian system.

Whether or not you agree with Spinoza’s ideas, it is hard to avoid him. He is the subject of a great many books and articles, many of which are written by rabbis. Can Spinoza the Jew be rehabilitated in the twenty-first century? Well, the rehabilitation is already more than a century old. In 1891, Reform Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf said that in the whole history of Israel there has never been a “truer, purer, nobler Jew.” The great Jewish scholar Martin Buber held Spinoza in high regard. Buber once wrote that Spinoza is “the greatest philosophical genius Judaism has given to the world.” David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of the State of Israel, wanted the rabbinical authorities to rescind Spinoza’s excommunication. Reuven Silverman, the rabbi of the Jackson Row Reform Synagogue in Manchester, has written sympathetically about Spinoza. In December 2015, Jerusalem’s Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo (although hostile to Spinoza’s ideas) called for a lifting of the *cherem*. But Amsterdam’s Chief Rabbi Pinchas Toledano has so far resisted, saying that “the moment we rescind the *cherem* […] it would imply that we share his heretic views.”

No doubt the war of words between Jews want to reclaim Spinoza as Judaism’s greatest genius and those who reject him as a heretic will continue for a long time to come. But it is worth pointing out that some of Spinoza’s views do overlap with orthodox Jewish ideas. The accusation that Spinoza is a pantheist overlooks the fact Spinoza believed that Nature is only God when seen under the “attributes” of thought (mind) and extension (physical bodies). Spinoza argued that mind and matter are not two opposite substances but are two different ways of conceiving one and the same substance. But the attributes of mind and matter do not exhaust God’s attributes. God has infinitely more attributes. It’s just that we’re not aware of them.

It is self-evident that Spinoza was no atheist. He believed in the oneness and uniqueness of God, and although he dismissed the notion of God as transcendent, he did believe in the immanence of God. Spinoza’s views on the mortality of the soul (that the soul is synonymous with life) chimes with the Hebraic biblical word *nephesh,* whichliterally means “living being,” although it is commonly rendered as “soul” in English translations. The concept of an immortal and immaterial soul that is distinct from the body was not found in Judaism until after the Babylonian Exile.

The ongoing controversy surrounding Spinoza and his ideas on God, soul and scripture ensures that his writings will be dissected and discussed by Jews on either side of the debate. Even Jews hostile to his ideas should at least be proud of the fact that Spinoza, the Sephardi Jew from Amsterdam, is routinely described as the one of the greatest ever philosophers to have ever lived. It’s not for nothing that twentieth century French cultural theoretician Gilles Deleuze crowned Spinoza “the prince of philosophers.” In 2003 at a special session of the Council for Progressive Jewish Congregations on the subject of Baruch Spinoza and his relevance in the twenty-first century, Micah Moskowitz from the National Spinoza Association, said: “Spinoza’s commitment to unity is more rigorous than that of most theologians. His God occupies all the world. All its space, its matter, its thoughts, its time. There’s no physical separation between this God and the world.”

In other words, Baruch Spinoza wasn’t only a philosophical Jew, he was a *Jewish* philosopher.