Barukh Spinoza – Founder of the ACLU?

Seeing in the Excommunicated Philosopher the Roots of Liberalism

Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity
By Steven Smith
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By ALLAN NADLER

No figure in Jewish history has enjoyed so varied and rich an afterlife as the great 17th-century philosopher and heretic, Barukh Spinoza. For someone who denied the very existence of the afterlife, this is a delicious irony. A son of Marranos who escaped the Inquisition, and a prodigal student of the great Amsterdam rabbis Menasseh ben Israel and Saul Mordeira, Spinoza was, at the tender age of 24, excommunicated by those same rabbis and later condemned as an atheist by the Christian theologians of his day.

Despite the isolation and infamy from which Spinoza suffered during his lifetime, he was posthumously rehabilitated by both Jews and Gentiles and variously adored as a sublime mystic, humanist, pacifist, even a Zionist. The German romanticist Novalis dubbed him a “God-intoxicated man,” and the Hebrew philosopher Avraham Kook venerated him as “our great Rabbi Barukh, of blessed memory.” From atop Jerusalem’s Mount Scopus in 1927, Dr. Israel Klaussner publicly rescinded the rabbinic ban against Spinoza and proclaimed: “Barukh Spinoza! You are our brother, you are our brother!”

For the enlightened Jews of the last century in search of ideological forebears, a reconstructed Spinoza was useful as a precursor to their own particular form of defiance of the rabbinic tradition. In the eyes of those Jews who chose to rebel against that tradition, the first modern Jew; that is, the first Jew to leave the Jewish community without converting to Christianity, thereby remaining a Jew. As Yosef Yerushalmi has observed: “The first great culture-hero of modern secular Jews was Spinoza.”

There is, as a result, a very rich Hebrew and Yiddish literature on Spinoza in which he is portrayed, alternately, as a maskil (enlightened Jew), an authentic Jewish philosopher, a Hebraist and even a champion of secular Yiddishkeit. The nagging, still unresolved question that lies at the heart of this vast body of Jewish writings on Spinoza is: Was Spinoza, at the end of the day, good for the Jews?

Now, Yale philosophy professor Steven Smith has added yet another link to the lavish chain of posthumous reconstructions of Spinoza’s thought, by arguing that the great heretic and pantheist was also the progenitor of Jewish liberalism. Mr. Smith advances his argument so consistently and persuasively that Yale University Press, the publisher of his new book, “Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity,” advertised its appearance with the tantalizing blurb: “Barukh Spinoza: Founding Father of the ACLU?”

One of the central objectives of Mr. Smith’s book is to portray Spinoza, who has until now been studied primarily as a philosopher of religion, as a seminal political thinker as well. Mr. Smith complains that the attention focused by Spinoza’s students on his great philosophical work, “The Ethics,” has obscured the tremendous importance of his political writings. He undertakes to redress this imbalance and establish Spinoza as the very first Jewish liberal. In order to do this, Mr. Smith offers a lucid and compelling, if occasionally careless, interpretation of Spinoza’s monumental critique of biblical religion and medieval politics, the “Theological-Political Treatise.”

Mr. Smith should be commended for his boldness in attempting this revisionist portrayal of Spinoza, about whom thousands of books have already been written. It takes a brave man to question and recast
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The Spinoza that emerges from Mr. Smith's book is not only a fervid liberal, committed to freedom of thought and the liberation of society and politics from ecclesiastical authority. He is also an ardent assimilationist for whom the solution to the Jewish problem lies in the Jews' abandonment of their religion. Spinoza, according to Mr. Smith, was the prophet of the disappearing American Jew.

For all of its strengths, however, there are some serious problems with Mr. Smith's interpretation of the "Treatise." Most seriously, in a book that deals with "The Question of Jewish Identity," Mr. Smith never comes to terms with Spinoza's own Jewish identity. He seems unable to decide whether Spinoza continued to consider himself a Jew after his excommunication and, by extension, how he should be viewed by Jews today.

While clearly portraying Spinoza as an assimilationist, Mr. Smith goes out of his way to emphasize his personal pride and intellectual attachment to his ancestral Jewish faith. Thus Mr. Smith writes: "Spinoza provides us with an alternative route to liberalization of way of Judaism. For Spinoza, Judaism, not Christianity, is the paradigm for liberalism — so much so that the 'Treatise' could almost have been called a defense of liberalism aus den Quellen des Judentums [out of the wellsprings of Judaism]."

But could it? As Mr. Smith himself observes, Spinoza viewed the continued practice of Judaism as the greatest obstacle to his liberal political program. Rather than an outgrowth of Judaism, Spinoza's ideal secular, liberal society is totally incompatible with, and must completely replace, the Jewish religious tradition.

In Mr. Smith's own words: "The Faustian bargain presented by Spinoza is the exchange of an ancient Jewish identity for a modern secular one." Mr. Smith thus oscillates between arguing that the "Treatise" shows a marked affinity with Judaism and explaining Spinoza's critique of his ancestral faith as an attempt to replace Jewish society with a liberal polity to which "Jews were to be welcomed so long as they ceased to be distinctively or recognizably Jewish."

The other major weakness of Mr. Smith's book is the author's obvious unfamiliarity with the vast Hebrew and Yiddish literature on Spinoza, much of which anticipates his own work. It is always discouraging to read a book that deals with the question of Jewish identity by an author who apparently has precious little knowledge of Jewish literature. Then again, this very limitation of Mr. Smith's book serves as a sad illustration of the degree to which Spinoza's assimilationist prophecies have been fulfilled by his latter-day students.

The Spinoza who emerges is an ardent assimilationist — the prophet of the disappearing American Jew.

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