IN THE EYE OF THE TRANSLATOR:
SPINOZA IN THE MIRROR OF THE
ETHICS’ HEBREW TRANSLATORS

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Spinoza’s main work, the *Ethics*, has been translated into Hebrew three times, a rarity for philosophical works.1 It was first translated by the Galician intellectual Solomon Rubin (1823–1910), next by philosopher Jacob Klatzkin (1882–1948), and most recently by Yirmiyahu Yovel (b. 1935), a professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.2 The translations appeared in the nineteenth,

1 The Hebrew reader has not been “pampered” with translations of philosophical works. Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed* has been translated into Hebrew four times, and Plato’s *Symposium* has been translated three times, but many philosophical works have not been translated at all. Others have been translated only once, not always in full, and the translations are now often outdated. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *Physics*, for example, have not been translated in full, nor have Hegel’s major works. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Hume’s *Essays* are only partially available to Hebrew readers. This same state of affairs also exists in Jewish philosophy. For example, the only Hebrew version of Moses Hess’s *Rome and Jerusalem* is an antiquated translation.

2 Solomon Rubin was born in 1823 in Dolina, Galicia (today southeast Poland-northwest Ukraine). He was a prolific writer, much of whose work dealt with Jewish folklore and customs. His special interest was in Jews who were persecuted because of their ideas. He translated the play *Uriel Acosta* by Karl Ferdinand Gutzkow into Hebrew. His interest in persecuted Jews was the reason for his ongoing preoccupation with Spinoza. Rubin wrote several works and articles on Spinoza, and he translated Spinoza’s grammar of the Hebrew language, *Compendium Grammaticae Linguae Hebraeae* into Hebrew (*Diqduq sefat ever*). Rubin’s life was marked by frequent relocations in Europe as well as by confrontations with the rabbinical establishment. He died in 1910 at the age of eighty-seven. Details of his wanderings and the rabbinical attacks against him appear in Joseph Klausner’s preface to S. Rubin, *Solomon’s Anthology: Ten New and Old, Specific and Revised Articles* [Hebrew] (Krakow, 1896); and M. Dorman, *Spinoza’s Controversy in the Jewish Mirror* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1990), 190, n. 106. A recent study of Rubin is A. Jacont, “Shlomo Rubin (1823–1910): A One-Man Library of Enlightenment” (Ph.D. diss., Tel Aviv University, 2006).

Jacob Klatzkin was born in 1882 in the Russian town of Berezka-Kartuskaya to a family of rabbis. In 1912 he received a doctorate of philosophy from the University of Bern. After WW I he founded the Eshkol publishing company in Berlin, where he published the *Enzyklopedjah Tosev’el* in Hebrew, and, together with M. Zobel, © Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2007
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twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, paralleling dynamic changes in the history of the Jewish people. Rubin’s translation was published in 1885 in the midst of the Eastern European enlightenment and the very naissance of Zionism. The second appeared in 1925, when the Zionist idea was coming into fruition, and the third translation was published in the State of Israel in 2003.3

In this article I discuss the views of the Hebrew translators of Spinoza’s Ethics. Over the years, many modern Jewish philosophers and intellectuals have investigated Spinoza: Moses Mendelssohn, Moses Hess, Hermann Cohen, Solomon Maimon, Leo Strauss,4 Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Nachman Krochmal, Abraham Krochmal, Samuel David Luzzatto, Meir Letteris, Aaron Zeitlin, and others.5 Several autobiographies by Enlightenment intellectuals describe Spinoza as an influential figure whose work was the impetus for the

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3 B. Spinoza, An Investigation of God with the Science of Man [Hebrew], trans. S. Rubin (Vienna, 1885); B. Spinoza, Ethics [Hebrew], trans. Y. Klatzkin (Tel Aviv: Masadah, 1954); and B. Spinoza, Ethics [Hebrew], trans. Y. Yovel (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hmeuchad, 2003).
