Spinoza's Paradox:
Judaism and the Construction of Liberal
Identity in the Theologico-Political Treatise

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Spinoza's Paradox

I begin with an apparent paradox. Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise presents itself as one of the great works of enlightenment liberalism. The aim of the work as a whole is to liberate the individual from bondage to superstition and ecclesiastical authority. Spinoza's ideal is the free or autonomous individual who uses reason to conquer fear and achieve power over the passions. His work could just have easily used Kant's definition of enlightenment as its epigraph, namely, sapere aude—"have courage to use your own understanding." As if this were not enough, the work culminates in an exhilarating vision of republican government where citizens live in a state of peace and toleration despite their religious differences.

At the same time the Treatise makes its case for enlightened individualism and republican government by means of a scathing and unsolicited attack upon historical Judaism. Indeed, this attack is all the more invidious because it is made by a learned Jew steeped in biblical and talmudic sources who uses these sources against Judaism itself. Spinoza consistently employs a double standard when he contrasts Judaism and Christianity, a contrast which plays directly into the hands of anti-Jewish bigotry. The question is why this most humane and enlightened of men who claimed to write sine ira

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1 I have used Benedict de Spinoza. Theologico-Political Treatise, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951) (henceforth cited as TPT with reference to chapter and page numbers) and Carl Gebhardt's Latin edition of Spinoza Opera 4 vols. (Heidelberg: C. Winters, 1925) (henceforth cited as SO followed by reference to volume, page, and line numbers in parentheses).
et studio used his knowledge to the apparent detriment of his own people. Let us call this Spinoza’s paradox.

The history of the reception of Spinoza’s philosophy represents a manifest failure to come to terms with the two sides of this dilemma. For some of the more orthodox, Spinoza’s blasphemies against Judaism were more than sufficient to warrant the edict of excommunication which, incidentally, has not been lifted even to this day. For others more sympathetically inclined, Spinoza is seen, like Socrates, as one in a long line of martyrs to the cause of freedom of thought and opinion. The image of Spinoza handed down by the philosophical tradition is that of a man of reason, of sweetness and peace, hunted down and persecuted by the forces of ignorance and religious intolerance. Whether Spinoza was a blasphemer or a secular saint remains even today a subject of lively debate.

What, then, can account for the evident contradiction between Spinoza’s professed wish to view himself and the world sub specie aeternitatis and his passionate ire with respect to his coreligionists? In the words of Emile Fackenheim: “Why does the author of the Ethics, who claims to rise above all bias and prejudice to nothing less than eternity, resort in his Theologico-Political Treatise to the grossest distortion of the minority religion which he has left and above all when he compares it to the majority religion which he yet refuses to embrace?” To answer this question, three hypotheses have been offered.

The first is that Spinoza’s paradox arises out of Jewish self-hatred. In a still powerful essay Hermann Cohen attributed Spinoza’s critique of Judaism


5 The documents surrounding Spinoza’s excommunication have been gathered by I.S. Revah, Spinoza et le Dr. Juan de Prado (Paris: Mouton, 1959); the complicated history of the legal proceedings against Spinoza, as well as his contemporary Juan de Prado, has been treated extensively by Yosef Kaplan, From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orbelio de Castro, trans. Raphael Loewe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 123, 130–46, 263–69.


7 Fackenheim, To Mend the World, p. 38.