REBECCA NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN

BETRAYING SPINOZA

THE RENEGADE JEW WHO GAVE US MODERNITY

"In all of her approaches to Spinoza, Goldstein's work is both satisfying as scholarship and a pleasure to read . . . This is a splendid book."
—Harry G. Frankfurt, author of *On Bullshit*

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The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity

NEXTBOOK · SCHOCKEN · NEW YORK

Originally published in hardcover in the United States by
Schocken Books, a division of Random House, Inc.,
New York, in 2006.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Goldstein, Rebecca, [date]
Betraying Spinoza : the renegade Jew who gave us modernity/
Rebecca Goldstein.
p. cm. — (Jewish encounters)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-8052-1159-7
1. Spinoza, Benedictus de, 1632–1677. 2. Jewish
philosophers—Netherlands—Biography. 3. Heretics, Jewish—
Netherlands—Biography. I. Title. II. Series.
B3997.G65 2006 199'.492—dc22 2005040175

www.schocken.com
Printed in the United States of America
First Paperback Edition
2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

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Prologue: Baruch, Bento, Benedictus

By what right is Benedictus Spinoza included in this series, devoted as it is to Jewish themes and thinkers?

Can the seventeenth-century rationalist, who produced one of the most ambitious philosophical systems in the history of Western philosophy, be considered, by any stretch of interpretation, a Jewish thinker? Can he even be considered a Jew? Benedictus Spinoza is the greatest philosopher that the Jews ever produced, which adds a certain irony to his questionable Jewishness.

He was excommunicated at the age of twenty-three by the Portuguese-Jewish community in which he had been raised and educated. It was a community of refugees from the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition, a Jewish calamity whose tragic proportions would be exceeded only in the twentieth century. The members of the community were predominantly former Marranos, who had lived on the Iberian Peninsula, mostly in Portugal, as practicing Christians since Judaism had been formally outlawed on the peninsula at the

end of the fifteenth century. The word *marrano* is believed to derive from the old Castilian for "swine," a particularly apt slur to insult those believed to be concealing Jewish practice beneath Christian performance. The relatively liberal city of Amsterdam provided the conditions for their reconnecting to a Judaism that most of them barely knew. Brutal forces of history had given this community its distinctive tone: ambitious for the material trappings of middle-class stability and yet skittish, anxious; enviably accomplished and cosmopolitan and yet filled with religious intensity, confusion, disillusion, and messianic yearning.

Before his expulsion from it, the hothouse world of Amsterdam's Sephardim—as Jews who derived from Spain (*Sepharad* in Hebrew) continue to be called to this day—had been Spinoza's world as well. Yet when it closed its doors to him, he made no attempt to reenter it or any other Jewish community.

Excommunication, as it was practiced in his community, was not as severe and final a punishment as the word now suggests. The period of isolation from the community (the terms of excommunication did not extend outside of Amsterdam) typically lasted anywhere from a day to several years. The imposed banishment was a tool of chastisement resorted to with quite common frequency, fundamentally a form of public embarrassment with which to exert control over the volatile mix contained within "the Portuguese Nation," as the Amsterdam Sephardim continued to identify themselves.

Whereas others among the chastised had obediently—and sometimes desperately—sought reconciliation, Spinoza

calmly removed himself from any further form of Jewish life. Nor did Spinoza seek out another religion. In particular, he did not convert to Christianity, though it would have been convenient for him to do so. Spinoza opted for secularism at a time when the concept had not yet been formulated.

He supported himself by grinding lenses, which was no lowly menial occupation, as it is often presented to have been in romanticizing versions of the philosopher's life, but was rather a craft that drew extensively from Spinoza's serious interest in the science of optics. The quality of his wares was highly valued by other scientists of his day. The important Dutch astronomer Christiaan Huygens, who discovered Saturn's rings as well as one of its four moons, preferred Spinoza's lenses to all others. "The [lenses] that the Jew of Voorburg has in his microscopes have an admirable polish," Huygens wrote to his brother in 1667.[1] The one part of the romantic lens-grinding legend that is sadly true is that the dust from the optical polishing was unhealthy for Spinoza, whose mother and brother had both died young from tuberculosis. He himself succumbed to the disease at the age of forty-four.

Spinoza's personal life was, as he wished it to be, simple and relatively isolated. There was a small circle of devoted friends, freethinking Christians from various dissenting Protestant circles, who regarded Spinoza as their master and closely studied, and guarded, his thoughts. He combined a Marranoist cautious discretion about revealing his true views to the dangerously narrow-minded with a touching faith in the power of reason to persuade. So he published his

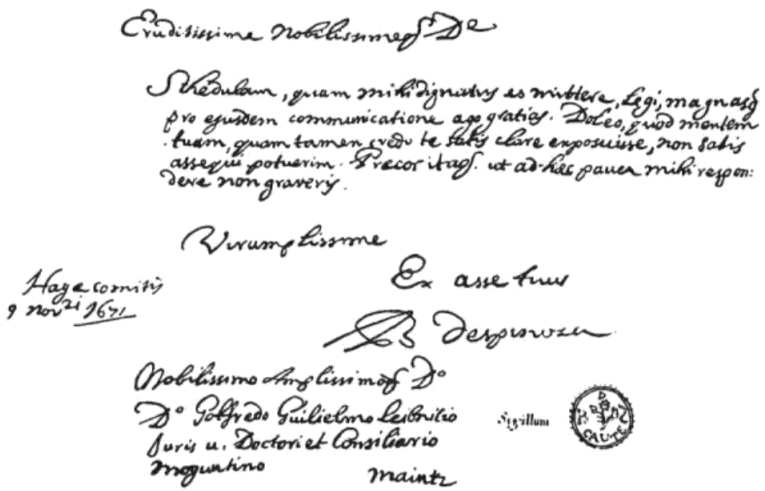
Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (*The Treatise on Theology and Politics*) anonymously, but also hoped that it would convince the powers that be of its main conclusion, which is succinctly stated in the book's subtitle: *Wherein is set forth that freedom of thought and speech not only may, without prejudice to piety and the public peace, be granted; but also may not, without danger to piety and the public peace, be withheld.* The book evolves into one of the most impassioned defenses of a free democratic state in the history of political theory, an eloquent plea for the separation of church and state. Spinoza allowed himself to hope that, should its argument for tolerance find its mark, he might be able to publish the work on which he had been toiling for years. The rain of abuse that poured down on the author of the *Tractatus*, whose true identity was soon an open secret throughout Europe, made him a very dangerous man to even remotely acknowledge, and all but foreclosed the possibility of his publishing his magnum opus in his lifetime. This is *The Ethics*, a work that makes all the claims for reason that have ever been made.

Some favors came his way. The University of Heidelberg, which had fallen from its perch of previous glory through the prolonged tribulations of the Thirty Years' War, had no professor of philosophy on staff and, in the name of Karl Ludwig, Elector Palatine, offered him a chair of philosophy. "You will not find elsewhere a Prince more favorably disposed to men of exceptional genius, among whom he ranks you. You will have the most extensive freedom in philosophizing, which he believes you will not misuse to disturb the publicly established religion." The philosopher delicately

declined: "If I had ever had any desire to undertake a professorship in any faculty, I could have wished for none other than that which is offered me through you by the Serene Highness the Elector Palatine, especially on account of the freedom to philosophize that this most gracious Prince is pleased to grant, not to mention my long-felt wish to live under the rule of a Prince whose wisdom is universally admired." But his instinct for caution had been alerted by the ambiguity of the terms of the offered freedom. "I do not know within what limits the freedom to philosophize must be confined if I am to avoid appearing to disturb the publicly established religion. . . . So you see, most Honorable Sir, that my reluctance is not due to the hope of some better fortune, but to my love of peace, which I believe I can enjoy in some measure if I refrain from lecturing in public."

Some important intellectual figures of the day made their way to the modest rooms he rented in the Hague in his last years, including the up-and-coming young go-getter Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who would emerge as one of the most dazzling figures in the seventeenth century's impressive lineup of genius. Leibniz spent a few days with Spinoza, conversing on metaphysics. The only written record of their extensive conversations was a slip of paper on which Leibniz had written down, for Spinoza's approval, a proof for God's existence. Leibniz was profoundly influenced by Spinoza's ideas but sought always to conceal his philosophical debt, and is on record as denouncing the philosopher. When a professor of rhetoric at the University of Utrecht, one Johan Georg Graevius, wrote to Leibniz, castigating the *Tractatus*

Theologico-Politicus as a "most pestilential book," whose author "is said to be a Jew named Spinoza, but who was cast out of the synagogue because of his monstrous opinions,"[2] Leibniz prudently chimed in with his own diplomatic calumny: "I have read the book by Spinoza. I am saddened by the fact that such a learned man has, as it seems, sunk so low."



A letter from Spinoza to Leibniz. Note his watchword, *caute*, in the lower right-hand corner.

Spinoza remained throughout his life, and well into the eighteenth century, a thinker whom one could admire only in secret, hiding one's sympathy just as his Marrano antecedents had concealed their wayward Jewishness. Open admiration could destroy even the most established of reputations, well into the eighteenth century's so-called Age of Reason. In the 1780s, for example, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi

launched a generalized attack on Enlightenment thought by claiming that the late poet Lessing had been a closet Spinozist, a charge sufficient to compromise the entire movement for which Lessing had been a leading spokesman.[3] Jacobi even went after Immanuel Kant and his successors, arguing that "consistent philosophy is Spinozist, hence pantheist, fatalist, and atheist."

The holy furor aroused by the name Spinoza is in contrast to the man's predilection for peace and quiet. He confessed himself to have a horror of controversy. "I absolutely dread quarrels," he wrote an acquaintance, explaining why he had declined to publish a work that contains some of the main themes of *The Ethics*, titled *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*.[4] The signet ring he wore throughout his life was inscribed with the word *caute*, Latin for "cautiously," and it was engraved with the image of a thorny rose, so that he signed his name *sub rosa*. One might argue that the very form of *The Ethics*, written in the highly formalized "geometrical style" inspired by Euclid's *Elements*, is partially designed for the practical purpose of keeping out any but the most gifted of readers, rigorously cerebral and patiently rational.

Spinoza's ambitions on behalf of reason are staggering: he aims to give us a rigorously proved view of reality, which view will yield us, if only we will assimilate it, a life worth living. It will transform our emotional substance, our very selves. The truth shall set us free. His methodology for exposing the nature of reality was inspired by one of the strands that the seventeenth century's men of science were weaving into what we now refer to as the scientific method, that magnificently subtle, supple, and successful blend of

mathematical deduction and empirical induction. Spinoza was keenly interested and involved in the intellectual innovations that we now look back on as constituting the birth of modern science. His inspiration came from the mathematical component of modern science, not its empiricism. The methodology he believed could reveal it all was strictly deductive, which is not the way that science ultimately went. (Still, there are contemporary physicists and cosmologists who are inspired by the Spinozist ideal of "a theory of everything," one in which the mathematics alone would determine its truth. String theorists, in particular, pursue physics almost entirely as a deductive endeavor, letting their mathematics prevail over niggling empirical questions. The spirit motivating them is Spinozism, which sometimes makes other scientists question whether what string theorists are up to really qualifies as science at all.)

But if the claims Spinoza makes on behalf of pure reason can strike us as staggering, there are also, staggeringly, a number of propositions that he produced from out of his deductive system that have been, centuries later, scientifically vindicated. A leading neurobiologist, Antonio Damasio, argues in his *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* that Spinoza's view of the relationship between mind and brain, as well as the complicated theory of the emotions that he deduced from it, are precisely what the latest empirical findings support. Spinoza, despite his nonempiricist methodology, is not scientifically irrelevant.

But there are claims that come out of Spinoza's deductive system that are even more important for our times, more

piercingly relevant, than his happening to have produced a stunningly contemporary answer, through pure deductive reason, to the mind-body problem and given us a view of the emotions that science has caught up with, in thinkers like Damasio, after some three hundred years. What Spinoza has to say about the importance of allowing the discovery of nature to proceed unimpeded by religious dogma could not speak more pertinently to some of the raging controversies of our day, including the recurring public debate in America over Darwin's theory of evolution. The sides are drawn up now much as they were in Spinoza's own day.

Just as relevant to current concerns, particularly in America, is his fundamental insistence on the separation of church and state. John Locke, who spent some years in Amsterdam, right after Spinoza's death, associating with thinkers who had known and been influenced by Spinoza, transmitted this insistence to the founding fathers of America. The spirit of Spinoza lives on in the opening words of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the phrase referred to as the Establishment clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

Spinoza placed all his faith in the powers of reason, his own and ours. He enjoins us to join him in the religion of reason, and promises us some of the same benefits—while firmly denying us others—that traditional religions promise. Rigorous reason will lead us to a state of mind that is the height of what we can achieve not only intellectually but also, in a sense—the only sense compatible with his rationalism—spiritually. The aim of his ethics is to give us the means to

arrive at a "contentment of spirit, which arises out of the . . . knowledge of God." This is the state of mind dubbed "blessedness" by the man who had been known in three different languages—Hebrew, Portuguese, and Latin—by a name that translates into "blessed": Baruch, Bento, and Benedictus.

It is hard for us to appreciate the loneliness of Spinoza's secularized spirituality. For an individual of the early seventeenth century to live outside the bounds of a religious identity—to aim to be perceived as neither Jew, nor Christian, nor Moslem—was all but unthinkable; and, in fact, Spinoza did continue to be called, with predictable disdain, a Jew. Huygens, for example, never refers to Spinoza by name in his letters, even though the two often conversed on such fields of mutual interest as mathematics and optics; but rather Spinoza is always "the Jew of Voorburg" or, even more belittlingly, "our Israelite," "our Jew."

The social frame of reference enclosing every individual of the premodern era was inherently religious. Spinoza's choice was an instance of a principle that had yet to be discerned in even the vaguest outline. Part of the horror he invoked throughout Europe derived from the radical stance he assumed simply by pursuing a life with no religious affiliation. Though the Romantic poet Novalis called him, and for good reason, "God-intoxicated," he was also routinely excoriated as an atheist. He seemed to have been genuinely dismayed by the charge, though his conception of God is sufficiently peculiar—and subtle—that one can see how his constant talk of God might strike even us today as disingenuous, yet another old Marranoist trick of hiding one's

unacceptable beliefs under formulaic insincerities. We should accept Spinoza's dismay at face value and use it to guide us to understand what he meant by "religion" and "piety," both of which he nonhypocritically endorses.

The terms of his excommunication were the harshest imposed by his community, uncharacteristically including no possibility for reconciliation or redemption. Though the statement of his excommunication is long on curses, it is short—to the point of silence—on the exact nature of his offenses. Only vague and general "evil ways" and "abominable heresies" are referred to. Were his deviations practical, doctrinal, or attitudinal? The fact that he was so young, with the philosophical results for which we celebrate him now still years ahead, confounds the situation.

Scholars still ponder the actions of the Amsterdam Jews, propounding theories to explain the unusual vehemence and finality of the denunciation pronounced against the young philosopher. Others had questioned principles of the faith and been meted out their penance and then returned. Why was Spinoza alone deemed irredeemable? The answer is, I believe, entangled in a set of issues that were especially fraught for this community of first- and second-generation refugees from the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition, struggling to reclaim their Jewish identities. Having thrown off their enforced Christianity, they were trying, very consciously and deliberately, to shape their new identities as Jews. What other Jews might have taken for granted, they could not. The preoccupations of the community were ordained to clash violently with its most famous son.

It is no accident that this particular community, which

felt the force of the issue of Jewish identity with unusual passion, should have produced a thinker who still, to this day, confounds us on this very issue. Spinoza probes a historical sore spot for Jews, one which throbbed with special intensity within his own community, but remains tender still. What does Jewishness consist in? Is it theological, biological, ethical, cultural? Are there traits of outlook that define or explain what it is to be Jewish? Is Jewishness an essential attribute for a Jew, part of what makes the person the very person that he is, so that once a Jew, always a Jew? Is it inherited, and if so, is it dominant, or recessive? Just what sort of an attribute is Jewishness?

The Jewish calamity of the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition had forced these questions into the forefront of the consciousness of Spinoza's Jewish community (just as the Jewish calamity of the Holocaust has forced these questions back into an embarrassed silence). The answers Spinoza was to give touched the exposed nerve of communal Jewish passions. They still do.

Even should one decide that Spinoza cannot be considered a Jewish thinker—that he belongs only to the greater world but not particularly to the Jews—the process of drawing this conclusion reveals the tangled difficulties of coming to terms with the meaning of Jewishness. Spinoza certainly struggled with these issues, though one must probe beneath the mathematical austerity of his system to discover the buried signs of his struggle. Perhaps the indication that he wrestled with the question of Jewishness is in itself sufficient claim to Jewishness. And perhaps, too, the sense of an intense, if covert, conflict over the issue of Jewish identity

provides at least part of the explanation of why generations of Jews have felt a mysterious kinship with this philosopher whose system would seem, on the surface, to offer no special meaning or message for Jews.

The philosopher is firm in the denial that any true philosophy could offer some special meaning to some particular group of people. The truth makes no such distinctions. From its remote point of view, that is, the point of view of truth itself, the sort of differences around which groups construct their social identities and distinguish between "them" and "us" could not appear more inconsequential. From the point of view of truth itself, the view that Spinoza dubs "the Infinite Intellect of God," those differences that loom so large in human affairs are not represented at all. These differences emerge only in our limited points of view—finite, all too finite. These insistences on difference are all confused, albeit understandable—*all* is understandable—attempts to substantiate that peculiar and necessary significance one confers on one's self by erecting a view of all reality that would do justice to it. So it is that religions distinguish themselves from one another by declaring their own adherents the favored of God. All such confusions are relegated by Spinoza to the status of superstitions, including any and all difference to which Jews may cling.

The name "Spinoza" derives from the word for "thorn" in Portuguese, which was the language of the Amsterdam Jewish community in which he had been reared and out of which he had been cast. It was the language in which Spinoza remained the most comfortable throughout his life, no doubt the language in which he thought out his incompara-

ble philosophy. The language in which the most universal of systems was excogitated—a system designed to bleach out any reference to personal points of view determined by the contingencies of historical narratives—was itself maculate with the extraordinary history of Spinoza's community.

The name Spinoza strangely suits. Spinoza, as a Jew, presents himself to us adorned in a crown of eternally thorny questions.

II

In Search of Baruch

The *Senhores* of the *ma'amad*,[1] having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Espinoza, have endeavored by various means and promise, to turn him from his evil ways. But having received more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and borne witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter; and after all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honorable *hakhamim*[2] they have decided, with their consent, that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel.

By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire

holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein, cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations that are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smote against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the Law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.

We warn that none may contact him orally or in writing, nor do him any favor, nor stay under the same roof with him, nor read any paper he made or wrote.

—Congregation Talmud Torah, July 27, 1656

Without intelligence there is not rational life, and things are only good in so far as they aid man in his enjoyment of the intellectual life which is defined by intelligence. Contrariwise, whatsoever things hinder

man's perfection of his reason, and capability to enjoy the rational life, are alone called evil.

—BENEDICTUS SPINOZA
The Ethics, Part IV, Appendix V

I first heard the name Baruch Spinoza uttered as an admonition, a cautionary tale of unbridled human intelligence blindly seeking its own doom.

This is what happens, the voice of my teacher warned, when someone thinks that human reason is sufficient unto itself and that the truth divinely given to us can be ignored. This is what happens when philosophy takes the place of Torah.

Baruch Spinoza had come from a good family of God-fearing Jews, similar to your families, girls—all too similar in certain ways. Like so many of your parents and grandparents, your aunts and uncles and cousins, Spinoza's family had suffered *al-Kiddush ha-Shem*, for the sanctification of the Holy Name. No, not in Germany or Austria or Poland. Not in Hungary, Rumania, or Russia. The persecution had been in Spain and Portugal, starting in the fifteenth century and continuing for hundreds of years.

The Espinozas, the philosopher's family, had been Marranos, those who, even though they had been forced by the Church to convert to Christianity, still continued to practice Judaism in secret, hiding their observance of the Torah from the cruel edicts of the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition. The slightest suspicion that they still obeyed the Torah—

that they remembered the Shabbos and kept it holy, that they would not eat pig—and they would have been subjected to brutal torture and horrible death. In Spanish, *auto-da-fé* means "act of faith." What it really meant was the mass trial of those accused of being secret Jews, and then the mass burning to death of all those who were condemned.

And still, as you well know, girls, many of you, from the examples of your own families, not even this terror was able to extinguish the spark of *Yiddishkeit* from their souls. Look at what your own families went through under Hitler, and yet one of the first things that concerned them when they got to this country was to make sure that the next generation—your generation, girls—would still learn Torah. They never lost their faith.

And that was how it was for Spinoza's family. After generations of their dangerous secret Jewish allegiance, his family, like many others before them and after, managed to make their way to the Dutch city of Amsterdam, where a community of Portuguese-Jewish exiles was thriving as it could in few other European cities of that day.

Amsterdam was the most tolerant city in all of Europe. But don't think that it was as free as what you girls have come to take for granted here. Don't make the mistake of thinking that it was as tolerant as New York City in 1967.

Baruch Spinoza had reaped the benefits of the long years of danger and suffering that his family had endured. He had been born into blessed circumstances, had been educated at the yeshiva the community of Portuguese refugees had organized almost as soon as they got to their new shores. It was, by all accounts, an excellent school. Rabbis from other

parts of Europe who visited the Talmud Torah of Amsterdam marveled at the level of learning attained there. Baruch had studied under worthy rabbis, including the chief rabbi of Amsterdam, Rabbi Morteira, and he had distinguished himself. He was a brilliant student, a boy born with blessings. His very name, of course, means "blessed" in the holy tongue.

Yet this misguided young man, my teacher continued, ascending toward the climax, who might have used his superior mind to increase our knowledge of the Torah, had died with the pagan name of Benedictus, excommunicated and cursed by his own people, condemned and reviled as a dangerous heretic even by believing Christians. Let the history of the philosopher Spinoza serve as a warning to you, girls, against the dangers of asking the wrong questions.

In my teacher's telling, this Baruch Spinoza might have been one of the no-goodnik boys attending one of the several yeshivas in the neighborhood, the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where Mrs. Schoenfeld taught at an all-girls yeshiva high school. There was only one such girls' school in the neighborhood, but there were several boys' schools, anachronistic reminders of the once teeming Jewish immigrant neighborhood that was largely dismantled by then. I had a long commute to it from a suburb out in Westchester, where my father served as the community's cantor.

It was an extremely Orthodox school, the sort that had to be single-sex, since its outlook included the dictum that there be no mixing of girls and boys until it was time to think of marriage, and then the necessary encounters would be carefully supervised. And yet, despite the many *oughts*

and *ought-not*s drilled into us, some among us still managed to achieve waywardness. There were girls who were not as pious as they might have been. There was a certain kosher pizza shop on East Broadway that was favored by certain girls from my school, the kind who rolled their skirts of regulation length (down at least to the calf) up above their knees as soon as they were out of the sight of our teachers. These girls would go to the infamous pizza shop for the purpose of flirting with "bumulkes," as my father used to call them, bums with yarmulkes, yeshiva boys who were out on the streets or in pizza shops, up to no good, when they ought to have been in the *beit midrash*, the house of study, bent over their Talmudic tomes from morning until night.

Mrs. Schoenfeld's discussion of Baruch Spinoza suggested that she had seen his type before, and so, she feared, had we. A boy who thinks he knows better than his rabbis and the Torah, who flaunts the Law and flirts with girls. Baruch Spinoza, a bumulke.

Mrs. Schoenfeld was a serious woman of middle age. At least I remember her as middle-aged. I was of an age when middle age might have meant late twenties. She wore matronly suits with calf-length skirts, and her prim head was topped by both an unbecoming wig and an unbecoming felt hat, a double precaution against committing the sin of a married woman's hair being seen in public. (Actually, the double precaution is taken so that nobody fooled by the verisimilitude of her wig, might mistakenly think a married woman's hair is uncovered. From what I remember of Mrs. Schoenfeld's wig, there was little reason for the hat.) Mrs.

it was scientifically unproven and, more important, contradicted by Torah.

Studying the Jews of modern Europe seemed to carry the subject of *historia* a thrilling distance away from the religious sphere and closer to the domain of credible secular fact. With relief, I felt that I could put aside my spiky doubts in Mrs. Schoenfeld's class, reassured by her intelligent accent and syntax. And because of the complexity of the material that year, we were being taught *historia* in English, again reassuring me of its proximity to trustworthy temporality.

It would be some while into the school year before I would hear tell of the *apikorus*, or heretic, Spinoza. Spinoza's introduction into our classroom awaited the discussion of the touchy subject of the Haskalah, or Jewish enlightenment. Only, in our classroom it wasn't called by the approbatory term Haskalah. We called it "modernity," pronouncing it with a Hebrew accent.

The pivotal figure in modernity was the late-eighteenth-century thinker Moses Mendelssohn, grandfather of the famous composer, both of whom were also mentioned as part of the extended cautionary tale. Moses Mendelssohn had urged that Jews not keep themselves intellectually and culturally separate. He had argued that adherence to the Torah, to which he held firm—he was not an *apikorus*, girls—did not exclude participation in the arts and sciences. He had urged that Jews educate themselves in the accomplishments of Western civilization. So had argued the grandfather. And the grandson, Felix, was a great musician. His compositions are still played by famous orchestras all over the world. But,

girls, he was also a convert to Christianity. The descendents of this illustrious family probably don't even remember that they were once Jewish. They probably don't know the first thing about the *Yiddishkeit* of their ancestors.

Mrs. Schoenfeld's expressions, both on her face and in her voice, made the articulation of the moral of the Mendelssohn story gratuitous: admiration leads to accommodation, which leads to assimilation, which leads to the worst. The so-called Haskalah had wanted to mix the immiscible: the insular Torah Jew into the modern world, the modern world into the Torah Jew. We were in favor of insularity, and Mrs. Schoenfeld was no exception, despite her fancy way around English syntax. I still unconsciously think of the word "modernity" as being a Hebrew word, hearing it pronounced with its *r* rolled and with a tone of stern admonition.

Spinoza predated Moses Mendelssohn by a good century and a half, but Mrs. Schoenfeld spoke of him as a precursor. He was, she very rightly suggested, the first modern Jew. Spinoza headed the long line of yeshiva boys who were not as pious as they might have been. He was one of the so-called enlightened Jews, a so-called *maskil*, long before the term had been introduced. (I remember a student in the class once mistakenly saying *masik*—which means "a little devil," often used affectionately for children—for *maskil*, an error which propelled sober Mrs. Schoenfeld to the very verge of laughter.) This Benedictus-né-Baruch was an early sign of the sickness to come, and his own community had tried to keep the contagion from spreading. That is why they took the drastic step of putting him into *kherem*, girls, excommunicat-

ing him when he was only twenty-three years old. Had Moses Mendelssohn studied the case of Spinoza a little better, he might have saved himself, his family, and the Jewish people a lot of *tzurris*.[3]

Mrs. Schoenfeld suggested that a lot could be learned from understanding the case of Spinoza, as opposed to the philosophy of Spinoza. About the latter she said very little; only that he had had two basic beliefs: The first was that the Torah was not a divine revelation but rather written by man—written in fact by several men who came much later than Moshe Rabbenu, Moses Our Teacher. And the second was that God was identical with nature.

Mrs. Schoenfeld used the English word "God," which was not a word we normally used. Instead we said *Ha-Shem*, Hebrew for "The Name," a designation that at once circumvents and underscores the prohibition against uttering God's true and awful name. If His true name were transcribed, then the paper on which it was written would be too holy to be thrown away. It would have to be buried like a human corpse. Even the English word radiated sanctity, which is why we were taught to write "G—d."

As brief as it was, Mrs. Schoenfeld's synopsis of Spinoza's philosophy intrigued me, by reason of its very incomprehensibility, so that I couldn't stop thinking about it. First of all, if Spinoza thought that God was identical with nature, then of course he didn't think the Torah was revealed by God. The denial of divine authorship seemed barely worth mentioning, once one had made the astounding claim that God and nature were one.

But what did the man mean by this inscrutable identification?

Did he mean that nature had hidden mystical qualities, that it was imbued with *nefesh*, with spirit, the very spirit of God? Did he think that nature was a great deal more than what we normally think of it as being?

Or was Spinoza saying that nature is only nature—that it was all those things that the Torah taught were created on the first five days (light and dry land and the heavenly bodies and plants and animals)—and was his assertion that God is nature just a sneaky way of denying the existence of God?

I rarely posed questions in class, preferring to try to think things out for myself, but I was intrigued and confused enough to ask Mrs. Schoenfeld to explain more about what Spinoza had meant by saying that *Ha-Shem* was nature. Ironically, given how happy I was that *historia* was being taught in English, I had used, out of habit, the Hebrew designation for the Unutterable.

Mrs. Schoenfeld's response came mainly in the form of rebuking me for saying *Ha-Shem*. She had deliberately said "God" and not "*Ha-Shem*" because whatever Spinoza meant by the word, it certainly wasn't *Ha-Shem*. *Berayshis barah Elokim es ha-shemayim vi'es ha-eretz*—In the beginning the Lord created the heavens and the earth. This is the first sentence of the Torah, and if someone doesn't know this about *Ha-Shem*, he doesn't know the first thing about *Ha-Shem*. *Elokim*—the Lord. *Ha-Shem* is the Lord over all He creates. He chose to create nature. He chose *that* it should be and

what it should be. If someone says that God is nature—is the heavens and the earth—then he is not talking about *Ha-Shem*.

Then Spinoza was an atheist?

Yes, she answered me, an atheist. Why do you look so baffled by that? Do you still have a question, Rebecca?

I did, and since she was pushing me, I asked it: Why did he take such a roundabout way just to say that God doesn't exist? It sounds like he was trying to say something more by saying that God is nature.

No, Mrs. Schoenfeld answered me, and so assertively that I thought to ask her if she herself had read the works of the heretic. Of course, I didn't pose the question that rose to my lips, since it could have been heard as disrespectful of her, a veiled challenge, and *derekh eretz*—literally, "the way of the land," a phrase meaning "respect for parents and teachers"—was a virtue drilled into us from an early age.

Spinoza, my teacher reiterated, was an atheist, even though when the Amsterdam community excommunicated him he hadn't yet revealed the full extent of his godless immorality. He had left the yeshiva when he was a teenager. We don't know why exactly, since a student of his caliber would have been expected to go on and get *smikha* (the ordination for the rabbinate). His teachers, including Rabbi Morteira, an Ashkenazic scholar who had come from Vienna to lead this Sephardic congregation (*Ashkenaz* means "Germany" in Hebrew), had permitted themselves to indulge the highest expectations for him, a true *talmid khokhem* (a gifted scholar, literally a "disciple of the wise"), emerging out of

here Baruch let slip out probably more than he intended. He argued that the Torah uses the Hebrew words for "soul"—*ruakh* or *nefesh* or *neshama*—only to mean life or anything that is living, and that it nowhere commits us to believing that the soul survives the body's death. On the contrary, he said, there are many places in the Torah where the exact opposite of immortality can be shown, and nothing is easier than to prove this.

When word of Spinoza's ideas got back to the rabbis, they were stricken with horror. Here was one of their most brilliant students spouting ideas that not even the non-Jewish *apikorsim* would dare to contemplate. It was terrible to think that a boy who had shown so much promise and who had received such a fine education from the best rabbis in the community—learned rabbis, who had published books of their own—could reject everything. And the community also had to worry about what the *goyim* would think if word got out that such a wild heretic was living among them.

Remember, girls, these were former Marranos who had seen the very worst of what Christian intolerance can mean for the Jews. Amsterdam was a relatively tolerant city, Protestant rather than Catholic. Still, who knew how far their tolerance could be extended? It was true that the seventeenth-century Dutch were a very practical society, concerned at least as much with their economy as with their theology, and this practicality was good for the Jews. At the time of Spinoza's birth, 1632, the Jews had been living in Amsterdam only a few decades, but they were already contributing to the thriving Dutch economy, using their con-

nections to other Marranos scattered around the world, including those still back in Spain and Portugal, to import and export. Still, there were Protestant theologians even in Amsterdam, particularly the Protestants known as "Calvinists," who weren't thrilled about the Jewish newcomers. The Calvinists were not as tolerant as some of the other Protestant sects. And it had been a condition of the Jews being allowed to reside in Amsterdam—because, of course, they had had to get official permission—that they keep order and decorum among their own, in regard not only to behavior but to beliefs as well. Strangely enough, the Dutch authorities wanted the Amsterdam Jews to abide by the Torah. They wanted Amsterdam's Jews to be *frum* (pious).

So the community leaders approached Spinoza and gently tried to change his mind. When he showed his stubborn arrogance, they begged him at the least to keep his ideas to himself, lest the Christian authorities learn of them and bring sanctions against the whole community. But apparently it did no good. The community met together in the synagogue. It was the *parnassim*, the community's lay leaders, who, strictly speaking, had the power of excommunication, rather than the rabbis. The rabbis were also present in the synagogue, except for the chief rabbi, Rabbi Morteira, who had an obligation elsewhere.[5] The community met to give Spinoza an opportunity to answer his accusers.

The two young men who had questioned Spinoza stood before the congregation and told them that they had spoken with Spinoza several times and that his views were full of heresies, and that he didn't deserve to be held in such high

esteem as a brilliant scholar by his former teachers. They said that Spinoza had spoken of the Jews as "a superstitious people born and bred in ignorance, who do not know what God is, and who nevertheless have the audacity to speak of themselves as His people, to the disparagement of other nations."[6] Spinoza had said that so far as the authorship of the Torah was concerned, it had been by someone other than Moses. The Five Books of Moses, he was saying, weren't written by Moses, but rather by someone who had come many generations later, and someone who had known more about politics than about religion. It would take only some small good sense to discover the imposture, this *apikorus* said, and whoever continued to believe in it was as naïve as the Jews of Moses' time.

This is how it often is, girls—that the vilest accusations against the Jews come from irreligious Jews themselves. It is as if, betraying the special task of holiness that *Ha-Shem* bestowed on the Jewish people, they must go to the opposite extreme, become leaders of godlessness among men.

I don't have to remind you girls that Karl Marx was Jewish.

Spinoza refused to defend himself against his accusers. He said only that he was sorry for everyone there who had chosen to judge him so hastily and so harshly. Rabbi Morteira, informed of how his former prize student was accounting for himself at the synagogue, now rushed there and confronted the *apikorus* himself. He asked Spinoza whether this was to be the fruit of all the pains that he, his former teacher, had taken with his education, and whether he wasn't afraid of falling into the hands of the living God? The scandal was great, but there was still time to repent. But if there was to

be no sign of contrition, then the community would have no choice but to excommunicate him.

And do you know, girls, how this so-called philosopher, whom the world has decided to call great, answered his former rebbe, how he threw off his *derekh eretz* together with all else that he had been taught? He answered his teacher that he understood very well the seriousness of the charges against him and the nature of the threats that were hanging over his head, and in return for the trouble Rabbi Morteira had taken to teach him the Hebrew language, he, Spinoza, was quite willing to show him the proper method of excommunicating someone.

When Rabbi Morteira heard the way this young man spoke to him, with so much chutzpa, he dismissed everyone and left the synagogue. He saw that he had been completely mistaken in who this young man was. Before, he had told people that he was as impressed with Spinoza's character as with his mind,[7] that it was rare that one so brilliant would also be so modest. But now he saw that the situation was exactly the reverse. Baruch Spinoza was a monster of arrogance. There was no way of reasoning with this young man, as brilliant as he no doubt was.

Human intelligence is the greatest gift that *Ha-Shem* gave to human beings, making us closer to the *malakhim*—the angels—than to the beasts of the field. But if we forget from Whom we got this divine gift, if we begin to believe that we are somehow the source of our own intelligence and that we are capable of figuring out everything for ourselves without relying on the Torah, then we fall even below the animals. This is why all philosophy is *apikorsus.* The very word *apikor-*

sus, girls, comes from the name of a Greek philosopher, someone who was called Epicurus, who believed that pleasure is all that people have to live for.

After this confrontation in the synagogue, Spinoza moved away from the community, taking rooms with a non-Jewish friend of his outside of Amsterdam. He had already, for some time now, been mixing with non-Jews, preferring them to his own people. He had been studying Latin with a former priest who had also become a heretic in his own religion, by the name of Franciscus van den Enden.

In fact, there are some who say that Baruch tried to marry van den Enden's daughter but that she rejected him for another student of her father's who wasn't going to become an impoverished philosopher, like Spinoza, but rather a doctor. Some say that this young man gave the young lady in question a pearl necklace and that is what finally decided her. Whether it's true or not that he had tried to marry this non-Jewish girl, Spinoza never did marry, and in fact it seems that he never again tried to.

He lived alone, very simply, supporting himself by grinding lenses for telescopes and other optical instruments, and writing his blasphemous works. He had a small group of friends with whom he discussed his ideas. These were all Christians, although renegades among the Christians. Once he moved away from his old home, he had nothing more to do with Jews, nor with his old yeshiva friends, or even with his family. Because of the *kherem*, which in his case was permanent, no Jews were allowed to speak with him for the rest of his life, so he really had no choice here.