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WAS SPINOZA A JEWISH PHILOSOPHER?

J. David Bleich

“Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.”

Friends—and I hope we shall remain friends—Cardozans, fellow men and women, lend me your ears, I come to bury Spinoza, not to praise him. I would have used a less harsh phrase and more diplomatic nomenclature but this is the hand that I was dealt by Shakespeare. Let me hasten to add: Not to worry. Even if by some miracle—or by some generous stretch of your imagination—I manage to succeed in the task that I have set for myself, I assure you that the other speakers will disinter Spinoza.

Let me turn to the question that I have been asked to address: “Was Spinoza a Jewish philosopher?” That is a question which is readily trifurcated or, if you prefer, a question that can be formulated in a trinitarian manner. And, by no leap of faith, can the three questions be conflated into a single query. The question can be formulated in three separate and distinct ways:

First, the question “Was Spinoza a Jewish philosopher?” can be understood as querying: Was Spinoza the philosopher endowed either with Jewish ethnic identity or with halakhic identity as a Jew? That question, if asked, is trivial in nature and has an obvious answer. That Spinoza was raised and educated as a Jew is a matter of historical record. That, halakhically speaking, Spinoza was a Jew goes without saying. After all, Spinoza had a Jewish mother. Spinoza may have been an excommunicated Jew, but he was a Jew. Of course, as formulated, the query represents a compound question. To ask whether Spinoza was a Jewish philosopher antecedently assumes that he was a philosopher. Was Spinoza a philosopher? I am certain that no one really wishes me to define the term “philosopher.” Let us simply take judicial notice of the fact that for a period of more than 300 years Spinoza has been deemed to be a philosopher and therefore we can justifiably and safely refer to him as a Jewish philosopher. Thus, we can answer the first, but trivial, formulation of our question in the affirmative.

In a work titled *The Philosopher and Theology*, Etienne Gilson, a professor at the Sorbonne and a historian of medieval philosophy, wrote that there were three remarkable things about the Sorbonne in the early part of the twentieth century: 1) There were a remarkably large number of Jewish philosophers at the Sorbonne; 2) Even more remarkable was the fact that they were, in fact, not Jewish philosophers at all; 3) But most remarkable was the fact that each one of those Jewish philosophers, who was not in fact a Jewish philosopher, espoused two separate and distinct philosophies, one was Spinozism and the second was his own idiosyncratic philosophy.

So let us move to the second of the three formulations of the question "Was Spinoza a Jewish philosopher?" Was Spinoza a Jewish philosopher in the sense that his philosophy was reflective of, or at least compatible with, Jewish thought and ideology? Gilson certainly knew the answer to that question. The many philosophers at the Sorbonne who were of Jewish extraction and who espoused Spinozism were depicted by Gilson as not having been Jewish philosophers at all. However, that assessment, I believe, requires at least a modicum of analysis.

Judaism, as everyone knows, is first and foremost a religion of law; but that is not to imply that Judaism does not have its own philosophy and its own ideology. All that one has to do is to open the very first volume of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, his legal magnum opus, and read the title headings which include a section entitled "Hilkhot De'ot," or "Laws of Belief," or to examine Bahaya ibn Pakuda's philosophical work which bears the title *Hovot ha-Levavot*, *The Duties of the Heart*, or, more accurately, "*The Duties of the Intellect*," and one very quickly comes to the realization that "laws of belief," i.e., philosophy, theology, ideology etc., are all very much integral parts of Jewish law. And of course, as any rabbinic student knows, neither Judaism nor Jewish law is monolithic. But that does not mean that the Dogma of Dogmalessness, as I have referred to it elsewhere, reflects a valid prism through which to contemplate Jewish thought and Jewish philosophy.

There are limits to controversy and diversity within every system of law. There are parameters that serve to limit controversy with regard to more conventional areas of Jewish law and there are also limits to legitimate diversity with regard to matters of ideology and belief. A story is told of an American rabbinic scholar, the late Rabbi Jacob Ruderman, who was the head of the Ner Israel rabbinical seminary. Rabbi Ruderman once made an extremely caustic remark to a visitor whom he held in rather low regard. He said to him, "If you knew as many rabbinic responsa as I, you would be a gentile. If you were acquainted with as many precedents for leniencies as I can cite, your lifestyle would not be the lifestyle of an observant Jew." Why? Because that individual would have eclectically selected each one of those leniencies and have

conducted himself accordingly. And, at some point, a person comporting himself in such a manner would have placed himself beyond the pale of the halakhic community. The same is true, *a fortiori*, with regard to matters of dogma. I can envision Benedictus de Spinoza waking up one morning, staring at his reflection in the mirror and saying, "Baruch Spinoza, if you knew as much philosophy as I, you would be a Spinozist!"

There is, however, a third formulation of the question "Was Spinoza a Jewish philosopher?" The third formulation of the question — the formulation which really requires thoughtful analysis — is: Was Spinoza's philosophical system spawned, either legitimately or illegitimately, by Jewish thought and Jewish ideology? In order to arrive at any meaningful answer to that question, I believe that it is necessary to recognize that Spinoza struggled with a number of classic problems in Jewish philosophy and was profoundly influenced in one way or another by classical Jewish sources.

From its earliest days, Jewish philosophy has repeatedly come to grips with the problem of divine omniscience versus freedom of the will. If God knows everything in advance then human actions are predestined. If so, how can man be free? And if man is truly free, it would apparently follow that the Deity cannot have foreknowledge of human acts. Infallible knowledge of future events is possible only with regard to that which is necessary, as opposed to that which is merely contingent. Infallible knowledge, if it is indeed infallible, entails the necessity of that which is known. That vexing philosophical problem was addressed by Sa'adia Ga'on, by Judah ha-Levi, by Ibn Daud, by Maimonides and by virtually every one of Maimonides' successors.

For Spinoza, the dilemma was resolved by his acceptance of a form of determinism. But Spinoza was hardly the first person of Jewish birth, let alone of Jewish faith, to uphold determinism at the expense of freedom of the will. For that position Spinoza had a formidable precedent in the philosophical system of Hasdai Crescas.

However, for Spinoza the problem was even deeper than the clash between freedom of the will and omniscience. For Spinoza, there existed an even more troubling problem in the tension between the notion of omnipotence and the notion of freedom. That problem also was both well-known and much debated in both Jewish and Kalam philosophy. If God is all-powerful, and if that notion is understood literally, it means that God is not only potentially all-powerful but He is all-powerful in actuality, i.e., all power not only flows from God but is reserved to God and to God alone. But if God is all-powerful in actuality, it follows that man and man's will are bereft of any independent power and hence human freedom must be a chimera. Thus, Spinoza found yet another reason to reject the notion of an autonomous will.

Spinoza, moreover, rejects not only the reality of human freedom but extends his rejection to a rejection of freedom in any conventional philosophical sense, including freedom as attributed to the Deity. This again represents another area in which Spinoza struggles with problems that were integral to the Jewish philosophical tradition. And here again Spinoza was not struggling in a vacuum.

Ostensibly, there is a logical contradiction between positing a Deity who is a necessary being and at the same time ascribing freedom to that necessary being. "*Nezah Yisra'el lo yishaker ve-lo yinahem*—The Eternal of Israel will not lie nor will He change his mind" (Isaiah 15:29). If God is a necessary being how could He possibly change his mind? But if God can not change His mind, then how can He intervene in the laws of nature? If the laws of nature are a manifestation of divine wisdom and if they are part and parcel of the divine blueprint for the government of the created universe, then a miracle, which represents a deviation from, and hence a violation of, natural law constitutes nothing less than a renunciation of eternal norms which emanate from the divine intellect. The Deity is a necessary, and hence unchanging, being. How, then, is God free to contravene His own laws of nature by working miracles? On the other hand, a Deity who is powerless to intervene in the natural order can hardly be said to be omnipotent.

Spinoza was certainly not the first to address that dilemma. The problem of miracles was recognized in Jewish sources long before a systematic Jewish philosophy was formulated by any Jewish thinker. The Midrash declares that a miracle originates in "a condition that The Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the artifacts of Creation" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 5:4). Indeed, what we are presented with in that classical text is a recognition of precisely this problem: How can there be both natural law and miracles at one and the same time? Or, to express the same problem in different words, how can God change His mind?

This rabbinic dictum might well be interpreted as declaring that the determination that a miracle will occur at a certain time was always inherent in the eternal intellect of the Deity. Since the divine will wills miracles in precisely the same manner as it willed the act of creation, miracles may be spoken of as willed by God from the moment of creation. Accordingly, the actual occurrence of a miraculous phenomenon does not represent a change either in His essence or in His will.

However, the rabbinic reference to a "condition" that was "stipulated" by the Deity is not a mere literary flourish; the nomenclature reflects a profound thesis. In resolving the dilemma posed by the apparently contradictory notions of divine freedom versus the necessary nature of God and of miracles versus divinely willed immutable laws of nature, the Midrash is actually advancing the thesis that all miracles are

inherent in the natural order. Although to the perceiver, who is accustomed to regularity in nature, the miraculous events may seem to be incompatible with the laws of nature and hence rationally inexplicable, in actuality, the exceptional occurrences as well as the usual and regular phenomena are subsumed under a more general law of nature that is not immediately grasped by the human intellect. A clock may be programmed to skip a tick every sixty minutes. A clock-gazer who observes that phenomenon for the first time will regard the event as an aberration. Only with the passage of a significant number of hours and multiple observations of that peculiar phenomenon will he be able accurately and precisely to reconstruct the law of clockology in accordance with which the clockmaker has regulated his clocks.

However, in Spinoza's *Tractatus* we find a rejection of the notion of a divine will that is co-eternal with the divine essence. And if divine will does not coexist with the divine essence a freely undertaken act of creation could not occur and, by the same token, there cannot be any form of contingency with regard to natural events.

Thus we encounter in Spinoza a recognition and acceptance of serious problems coupled with rejection of the manifold theses that have been advanced in resolution of those problems throughout the course of the history of Jewish philosophy. Most significant is Spinoza's rejection of the notion of the divine will as co-eternal with the divine essence. That rejection is a direct outgrowth of other aspects of Spinoza's philosophical system. As did the classical Jewish philosophers, Spinoza came to grips with the problem of divine attributes. If God is a unitary being, if He is One in the sense that He is not composed of parts, if He is One in the sense that He is *ousia* par excellence, i.e., that He is pure and simple being and hence there cannot conceivably be any multiplicity in His essence or nature, how is it possible to ascribe attributes to God? The problem of divine attributes was resolved in a variety of ways by medieval Jewish philosophers.

For Spinoza, the problem is not really a problem because Spinoza rejects the conventional theological view regarding the nature of the Deity. According to Spinoza, the entire universe consists of but a single substance. That substance, however, exists in conjunction with an infinite number of attributes. For Spinoza, the Deity and the universe are one and the same. In effect, Spinoza is willing to accept a kind of Monist position with regard to the essence of the Deity and, at one and the same time, to ascribe a multiplicity of attributes to that substance. In effect, Spinoza dismisses the problem of divine attributes with a wave of his philosophical wand.

A related problem with which Spinoza also grapples stems from the age-old recognition that there is an apparent contradiction between the infinite nature of the Deity and the finite nature of the material uni-

verse. As Crescas formulated the problem, one thing cannot be the cause of another thing unless that which is caused is part of the essence of that which is its cause. The effect must be related in some manner to the essence of the cause. However, since the finite is so drastically different from the infinite, how can the infinite possibly be the source of the finite? Or, to pose the problem in the terminology of Gersonides, form cannot be the source of matter because form is totally different from matter and hence matter cannot emanate from form. That problem led Gersonides to acceptance of the existence of a *homer hiyulei* that is eternal. Gersonides posited the existence of a hylic substance that is material in nature but which is eternal just as the Deity is eternal. For having espoused such a radical position, his philosophical work, *Milhamot ha-Shem*, was derisively referred to as *Milhamot Neged ha-Shem*, i.e., *Wars Against God* rather than *Wars on Behalf of God*.

It was this problem that led the Kabbalists to formulate the doctrine of *creatio ex essentia Dei* in place of the less complex notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. The kabbalistic doctrine, which regards the created universe as the product of emanations from the essence of the Deity, was designed to explain how a finite entity can proceed from an infinite being. This concept is expressed in kabbalistic literature in the doctrine of *zimzum*, i.e., the notion of "contraction" or self-limitation on the part of the Deity.

In focusing upon a different aspect of the problem, the Kabbalists argued that, if God is infinite, there is then no room in the universe for the existence of anything else. "*Hu mekomo shel olam*—God is the locus of the world" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 68:10), or, in other words, the whole world is suffused by the Deity. And if God fills the entire universe then there cannot possibly be room for anything else. And conversely, if a finite universe does exist, there can be no place in that finite universe for an infinite Deity. The Kabbalists resolved the problem by appealing to the doctrine of *zimzum* based in part upon the rabbinic aphorism "*Hu mekomo shel olam ve-ein ha-olam mekomo* —God is the locus in which the world exists but the world is not the locus of God's existence."

For pantheists, God and nature are one and the same; for pantheists, God and the universe are one and the same. Hence, *voilà*, there is no longer any problem with regard to how the finite could possibly emanate from the infinite because, although everything is encompassed within the infinite, the infinite is nothing more than an aggregate of finitudes.

In his *Epistola*, Spinoza refers to a certain well-known kabbalistic work, *Pardes Rimmonim*, in which the author, Rabbi Moses Cordovero, develops what some contemporary writers depict as a form of pantheism. Some writers have attempted to identify the pantheism of Spinoza

with the doctrine earlier espoused by R. Moses Cordovero and with the doctrine that they see reflected later, after Spinoza, in the writings of the kabbalistic thinker, Rabbi Chaim Vital. In point of fact, the defenders of the kabbalistic tradition vigorously argue that the theory that was expounded in those kabbalistic sources is not pantheism but something that can best be termed panentheism. They reject the notion that the universe and the Deity are one and the same; rather, they assert that the universe and the Deity coexist in the same place at the same time in a manner that may well defy human understanding. On occasion, I have used a little parable to explain this metaphysical phenomenon. Imagine for a moment that a fire breaks out in an apartment. The fire produces a vast amount of smoke and that smoke permeates a clothes closet. If a person were to open the closet he would find the closet to be permeated by smoke but the clothes would nevertheless continue to appear to fill the closet in its entirety. The smoke infiltrates the garments in the closet and ensconces itself within the various strands of fabric. The smoke penetrates the space between the molecules of the fabric. Yet the smoke has certainly not fused with the material to which it adheres and become an integral part of the material of which those clothes are woven. The smoke continues to constitute a separate and distinct substance.

Spinoza, however, rejects panentheism in favor of pantheism in formulating a facile solution to the problem of the generation of the finite from the infinite. For Spinoza there is no problem at all. God and nature are identified as a single entity; the infinite is identified with the finite and the two become one and the same.

I believe it is accurate to describe the philosophy of Spinoza as a system that grapples with hard questions. But there are two ways of dealing with a hard question. The first is to discover or formulate an answer to the question. If I want to determine whether or not Socrates is mortal I start with the major premise "All men are mortal," then proceed to the minor premise "Socrates is a man" and thus arrive at the conclusion that "Socrates is mortal." I may then explain that this conclusion is necessitated by Aristotelean logic and follows from the very nature of the form of the syllogism rather than from its empirical content. I may also use Boolean diagrams to demonstrate exactly the same point.

But there is another way of responding to the question "Is Socrates mortal?" And that is by recognizing that Socrates may not be a man at all; rather "Socrates" may be a cat endowed with nine lives or "Socrates" may be the devil incarnate. If either is the case, an attempt to construct an Aristotelian syllogism will not prove to be a fruitful avenue for finding an answer to the question. The second method of dealing with the problem involves nothing other than rejection of one or more of the

premises. Indeed, if the premises are erroneous there is really no need to seek answers. Problems often present themselves in the guise of premises that appear to be antithetical to one another. Hence, if one fails to accept one or the other of those premises the problem simply evaporates. When there is no problem, no solution is required.

Despite the fact that contemporary scholars such as Edwin Curley and Richard Mason have striven valiantly to defend Spinoza from the charge of pantheism, it seems to me that the doctrine of *Deus sive natura* was designed precisely as a means of denying a cardinal theological premise, a premise that gave rise to many of the classical problems of philosophy in general and of Jewish philosophy in particular. The doctrine of *Deus sive natura* was basic to Spinoza's philosophical system because it was a way of enabling him to avoid any further grappling with those problems.

In effect, Spinoza has redefined God out of existence. The effect of that redefinition upon philosophical discourse is entirely parallel to the effect that defining Socrates as a cat would have upon the paradigmatic Aristotelian syllogism. If there is no Deity as the theologians understood the term, the problems that philosophers and theologians have struggled with for millennia turn out to be chimeras.

I would venture to add that, if we are talking about whether or not Spinoza was a Jewish philosopher, this is yet another un-Jewish aspect of his philosophy. Traditional Jewish thought engages in head-on confrontation rather than in avoidance of ideological debate. What challenge is there in not having to grapple with philosophical problems? Denial of premises may be convenient but it is hardly satisfying.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. The evil that men do lives after them. The good is oft interred with their bones. So let it be with Caesar." Since I subscribe to the notion of free will, I must leave it to you to decide whether the same can and should be said of Spinoza. For me, and for all exponents of classical Jewish teaching, Spinoza's philosophical system is, at best, the illegitimate issue of authentic precursors. As such, it is beyond the pale of Jewish philosophy.