Spinoza’s Challenge to Jewish Thought

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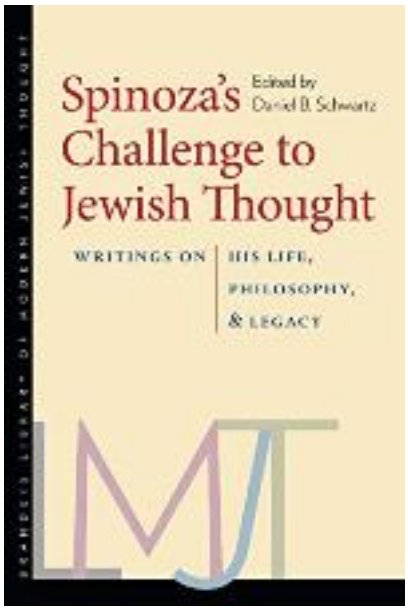
Daniel B. Schwartz, ed.: Spinoza’s Challenge to Jewish Thought: Writings on His Life, Philosophy, and Legacy.Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought Series. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2020. 296 pp. $24.95 (paper).



It is the history of Baruch Spinoza’s presence—his meaning as the very symbol and expression of Jewish modernity, for good and for bad—and also of the various interpretations, appropriations, accommodations, and even rejections of his major ideas in the name of Judaism that Daniel B. Schwartz has brought together, organized, introduced, and explained in his edited volume, *Spinoza’s Challenge to Jewish Thought: Writings on His Life, Philosophy, and Legacy*. With excellent clarity and comprehensiveness, Schwartz presents the reader with the full range of Jewish responses to Spinoza, from the Far Right to the Far Left and everything in between, providing exhaustive evidence that both Spinoza’s presence as figure and his thought are everywhere and inescapable in Jewish modernity. This is the first volume to bring together the full array of responses to Spinoza from the seventeenth century to the present. Furthermore, Schwartz’s decision to include well-chosen excerpts as well as explanatory introductory short essays that contextualize them within the appropriate Jewish cultural trends, movements, and historical landscape, along with biographical portraits of the writers, makes these texts accessible and comprehensible and also shows their relation to each other, thereby painting a picture of Jewish modernity as a whole. It becomes absolutely apparent that Spinoza’s shadow hovers over all. As Schwartz remarks in the volume’s introduction, “One can include or exclude Spinoza; one cannot ignore him” (p. xi). This book brings together examples comprising the “configuration” of modern Jewish responses up to the present moment, clearly demonstrating that Spinoza remains a living presence for Jews and for Judaism and not just a historical footnote of only academic or antiquarian interest.

The title, *Spinoza’s Challenge to Jewish Thought*, is telling for it reveals a point of view and literary purpose: Schwartz brings together not a selection whose arc is the entire history of Jewish readings or the scholarship of Jewish philosophers and academics about Spinoza’s life and work,

but, instead, the principle of selection is Jewish *responses to Spinoza*, which is to say, all the selections address the meaning of Spinoza's Jewish heritage not for Spinoza himself so much as for Jews of different eras and different allegiances. Spinoza's Jewishness—whether he "belongs," whether he was loyal or traitorous, what his Jewish identity consisted in and whether he sustained it or renounced it, or in what sense he honored or dishonored or sidestepped his Jewish education—is central to these thinkers' minds. And the answers to these questions are generally less about investigating Spinoza than about raising the question of where Spinoza might fit in the Jewish landscape given each writer's own particular Jewish commitments. Schwartz puts it in the very first paragraph of the book in his introduction: "Spinoza and Spinozism have proved a litmus test for virtually every modern configuration of anything Jewish" (p. xi). The questions the excerpts address are thus not so much about Spinoza but about Spinoza's meaning to Jews and to Jewish thought and ideas. Is he one of us? Are we to fashion and refashion ourselves in his image? Do we, instead, define ourselves by the rejection of Spinoza? What does it mean to be Jewish in the aftermath of Spinoza is the guiding question uniting the excerpts collected in this volume. Schwartz proposes that "the entire project of constituting 'Jewish identity' and 'Jewish thought'—the wrangling over their boundaries and basic character—has been linked from birth with interpretations of Spinoza and in particular the dilemma of his Jewishness" (p. x). Hence, it is the subjective *meaning*—the spectrum from passionate love to virulent hatred, from appropriation to complete rejection and everything in between—of Spinoza's life and work, and especially of his image, his ongoing symbolic presence, for different Jewish groups from liberal to Orthodox, Zionist to universalist, that Schwartz surveys. He does so with judicious fairness and inclusiveness and comprehensiveness. It is this modern Jewish landscape that Schwartz presents so well and so clearly in the introduction.

What Schwartz claims that he will address and try to explain is "how and why Spinoza became, and has remained, so relevant to a range of Jewish thinkers and in particular to the problem of self-definition" (p. xi). He aims to convince the reader in his introduction that he is "eminently justified" in considering Spinoza of "unique importance to the fashioning of modern Judaism" (p. xxx). Schwartz divides the Jewish responses to Spinoza into three camps or categories. First are "those who regard Spinoza as a nonconformist Jew, perhaps even as a heretical Jew, but as someone who was definitely Jewish to the end and drew on the best traditions and ideals that Judaism had to offer." Spinoza is seen by these thinkers as belonging to a "long and proud Jewish 'countertradition' of prophets, philosophers, rebels, would-be reformers and heretics" (p. xiv). This view, embraced by the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), paints Spinoza as a romantic hero and the first modern Jew. The second category consists of those who charge Spinoza with apostasy as well as heresy. To them he is the great traitor to Judaism. In the words of the German Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen, who embraced this position, as quoted by Schwartz, Spinoza was guilty of "humanly incomprehensible betrayal" (p. xv). The contemporary Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is similarly virulent in his rejection. The third group consists of those who have trod a middle path between the two extremes, Moses Mendelssohn being the first and great example. For those in this category Spinoza is reclaimable with some softening and modification of his thought. The book is planned along a spectrum, "ranging from near-total inclusion on one end to near-total exclusion on the other" (p. xxii). Schwartz groups the responses to Spinoza chronologically within each category from full receptivity to rejection, and finally also places them within pertinent movements, including the Haskalah, proto-Zionism and Zionism, secular literary Jewish drama and poetry, the Scientific Study of Judaism (the *Wissenschaft*), and the Israeli state (David Ben-Gurion's call to rescind the writ of excommunication). And he finally brings us into the North American present with a repetition of the extremes of the embracing love of Spinoza exemplified by the work of philosopher Rebecca Goldstein (*Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* [2006]), who grew up Orthodox, posed against a call for a final rejection and relinquishment of Spinoza as relevant to modern Jewish identity by Jewish studies scholar Allan Nadler.[1]

All the thinkers and excerpts are chosen with care and breadth. There are only two telltale signs

that Schwartz betrays about where he himself stands in his portrait of the modern Jewish landscape and on the conservative to liberal spectrum carved out by responses to Spinoza. First, he ends the volume with a selection of excerpts from the rejectionists in part 5, "Contra Spinoza," that range from Samuel David Luzzatto (in 1847) to Nadler (in *Commentary* in 2006), thus giving them the last word rather than with the *Wissenschaft* scholars who embraced Spinoza, from Manuel Joël to Harry Wolfson (part 4, "Through the Lens of *Wissenschaft*") or the contemporary Goldstein. Second, he makes a slip in his introduction that is telling: Schwartz claims that a principle of Spinoza's "historical-critical method for reading the Bible" was to challenge and reject the "axiom of his day" that "the Bible should serve as the basis for contemporary politics" (p. xxxi). In support of this claim, Schwartz quotes the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), chapter 18, where Spinoza states: "Though the Hebrew state could have lasted forever, nevertheless, no one can imitate it now. Nor is this even advisable" (p. xxxii n16). Looking back at the chapter of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in question, one wonders why Schwartz stopped there, for a few lines later Spinoza clarifies and modifies his position: "However, although it cannot be imitated in all respects, it possessed many features which are at least worthy of note and which it may perhaps be quite profitable to imitate."[2] To omit this further clarification is to fail to acknowledge Spinoza's great admiration for the Hebrew biblical state and his drawing on many of its liberal features (chapter 17)—which included democratic governance, social equality, limits to the amassing of wealth, a citizen army, and checks and balances—in proposing in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* a model democracy for the Netherlands. Spinoza further remarked that these features and others he drew our attention to in chapter 17 might have enabled the Hebrew commonwealth to "last indefinitely," a high compliment from a political theorist whose repeated aim was in devising a state that would exhibit stability over time.[3] Moreover, Spinoza had clarified at the end of chapter 17 that the issue of imitation was not "if" at all but rather how much, that is, to what extent the ancient Israelite state should be a model for a modern society: "As to whether the first state, regarding only its lasting qualities, is a model to be imitated, or whether it is a pious duty to imitate it as far as possible, this will be made clear in the following chapters."[4] One wonders how and why Schwartz could have missed the several statements in which Spinoza embraced major features of the ancient Hebrew commonwealth as precisely the model for his envisioned modern democratic polity, choosing to quote and misread the one ambiguous statement by taking it out of the context that clarifies its meaning. This would not be of such significance if Schwartz did not at the same time (falsely) maintain that the rejection of the Bible as a source for contemporary politics was a major innovation of Spinoza's method of biblical interpretation! Clearly, Spinoza was using the Bible for just that purpose even if not wholesale. Spinoza was proposing a new reading of the Bible along ecumenical lines to be used as a constitution for his envisioned modern liberal pluralist democracy. This is hard to miss in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* so why is Schwartz blind to it? One wonders if his omission is due to feeling so offended by some critical remarks of Spinoza about things Jewish—albeit remarks sometimes given not in the most generous spirit—that he is blinded to the other side of the coin? If so, he is in the company of many of the writers on this conservative side of things whom he cites and whose work he excerpts. Their animus often drives their reading or really misreading. The mirror image fault, namely, the over-enthusiastic reading of Spinoza by those Schwartz coins "the romantics," is of course also discernible in many of the selections but perhaps not as glaring nor as skewed as those driven by rage and hatred. This slipup along with the previously noted choice to end the book with "Contra Spinoza," notwithstanding, Schwartz does an admirable job of collecting, organizing, and describing the full range of Jewish responses to Spinoza.

Philosophers aim to understand the deepest structures of the natural universe and also to understand human nature. Some also aim to apply this knowledge to intervening in the political arena. Spinoza was the quintessential philosopher. He wrote *Ethics* (1677) as the first scientific psychology (so he claimed) aimed at discovering, rationally articulating, and defending a path for achieving what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*, the true and best human life, one of joy, well-being, and emotional health. Such flourishing also resulted in the highest moral transformation and commitment—hence the title of the book that Spinoza had earlier referred to as "my philosophy." In

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the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, a work whose urgency led him to take a five-year break during the writing of *Ethics*, Spinoza addressed not philosophers but the educated public of the Netherlands at a crucial moment and turning point. In that work he specifically aimed to intervene in the politics of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic to try to mitigate a threatened and growing retrenchment and scaling back of democratic and liberal improvements and reforms. The style of the treatise is more polemical and suasive than his strict philosophical writing, and his literary method owes particular debts to the Latin historians' and Machiavelli's use of examples from history to illustrate their points, on the one hand, and famously to Maimonides's esoteric method in the *Guide for the Perplexed* of hiding what he was saying behind layers of deliberate contradiction and obfuscation, on the other hand. Neither of Spinoza's two great completed works was intended for a specifically Jewish audience nor did either address specifically Jewish concerns. This is hardly surprising given the terms of Spinoza's excommunication, which prohibited members of the Jewish community from reading any of his writings or having any contact with him. In neither work was analysis of or intervention in the Jewish community of his day or the transformation of, or even a contribution to, Jewish thought among his literary, philosophical, or political purposes. Hence Spinoza's Jewish sources, education, and examples and citations serve in his writings other purposes than *directly* Jewish ones, although we can find in his political works, in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* but also in the unfinished *Political Treatise*, ideas for the creation of a modern liberal polity that would affect the Jewish community if enacted. For example, Spinoza's proposal of Seven Universal Moral and Ecumenical Religious Principles of Faith as the constitutional backbone of his envisioned modern democratic state was intended to grant equal citizenship to Jews and to Christians of all denominations, and hence would radically transform Jewish life in European societies if it were to be carried out, although that was certainly not Spinoza's principal concern. That his political vision embraced a true pluralism, and not just a nod to tolerance, exposes a commitment perhaps expressive of Spinoza's experience, and that of the many generations of Marranos from whom he descended, of the precariousness of Jewish life in Christian Europe. Moreover, this vision of a pluralist modern democratic society relied on a proposed method of reinterpreting the Bible as offering at its heart a broad vision of universal ethics and also of a model of ancient Israelite political justice many of whose features could—and he believed, ought to—serve as a model for the Dutch Republic and all other aspiring liberal polities. Nevertheless, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* was not written with the principal or even secondary aim of enabling the Jewish community to improve its political plight but rather for assisting the Dutch in their time of urgent need. Nor was Ethics written to enhance or reform the Jewish tradition and way of life but rather it addressed moral psychology—and many other philosophic topics of universal interest. It is a loss that Spinoza became more figure and symbol for Judaism, while his thought remains too lightly considered as a possible contribution to it. This fact perhaps signals that Jewish philosophy, as it was understood by its great proponents as an open rational endeavor to understand the world, God, human nature, political community, the nature of religious language and meaning, and the like, is dead and has already been reduced to articulating and justifying narrow boundaries and sectarian ideas. If we have become a Jewish "religion" in a narrow, compartmentalized sense, as some argue, it is a loss of terrible proportions and marks an impoverishment of vitality in the name of survival, an unfortunate cost loyalty exacts, growth being confined to the other hats we wear. Because Spinoza remains such a living presence in the Jewish mind, however, we can be inspired by this volume to take his philosophy seriously, allowing him to challenge us to really think through and engage his broader philosophy. That is a gift that the mere academic and historical treatment of Spinoza's thought cannot aspire to. But we have to get beyond the anxiety of repetition of the narrow focus on loyalty, regardless of whether we judge Spinoza positively or negatively, to begin instead to benefit from what in Spinoza's philosophy might still be able to speak to us and offer us wisdom.

[1] Allan Nadler, "Romancing Spinoza: Efforts to Reclaim the Great Philosopher and Heretic Continue—and Continue to Fail," *Commentary* (December 2006): https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/romancing-spinoza/.

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[2] Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 270.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 271.

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