

# Spinoza

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1632-1677) was one of the greatest of philosophers. Not only, but he was possibly the most honest and moral of them all. He was a gentle, if prickly, principled human being who led an ethical, modest life unaffected by money or fame. He won a court decision over his father's estate and promptly handed it all over to his estranged sister. He turned down an offer of a professorship and life pension from a German prince, because he feared he might not be able to say what he thought.

He was born Jewish and had a good Jewish education. Technically, Spinoza remained Jewish even though he was put under a ban (Cherem) by the Amsterdam Jewish community. He never converted to another religion, but he was given a Christian burial, and his remains are buried in the churchyard of the Nieuwe Kerk in The Hague.

What led to his ban (Cherem is not strictly the same as Excommunication, which has very specific Catholic theological ramifications) were his views on the Bible, on God, and on religious authority. They were as much a threat to the Catholic Church and Protestantism as they were to Judaism. There is some dispute as to how much pressure from the church was brought to bear on the Jewish community in Amsterdam to disown him. All his writing was put on the Catholic *Index of Forbidden Books*.

In the religious and political turmoil of the Netherlands of the day, Spinoza courted the opposition of all religions. The so-called Eighty Years' War, from 1568-1648, was an attempt by Catholicism, in its struggle with Protestantism, to retain its grip over Northern European countries. The Netherlands ended up being divided into a Protestant North and a Catholic South. It was still divided over religion in Spinoza's day, and the Enlightenment was only beginning to sprout its controversial shoots. Only a handful of freethinking intellectuals, such as his teacher Van den Enden (another one whose books were banned by the church) and the brothers Johan & Cornelis de Witt, supported him. Even then the situation was so tense and volatile that the much respected Johan de Witt was lynched by a mob of religious fanatics.

The case for Spinoza is that he came from Marrano stock and was subjected to all kinds of alien ideas, and the family had only recently reentered the observant Jewish community. But he had been taught by several distinguished and actually open minded rabbis, including the great Rabbi Menasseh Ben Israel, a friend of the legal giant Grotius and the artist Rembrandt. Spinoza's scandalous views included denying the Mosaic single authorship of the Bible, rejecting theological ideas of life after death, and describing God as the sum of the universe (an idea that can be found in the Kabbalah, too). These are the sorts of ideas that nowadays can be found as topics of debate and discussion in more open Orthodox circles. But it is true that if the Amsterdam community was the equivalent of the Charedi community today, he would certainly have been branded a heretic.

Spinoza did not initially intend to leave the Jewish community. He recited kaddish for a year for his father. He donated to the Amsterdam Talmud Torah and other charities. It was only when he was driven out of Amsterdam that he cut his ties with the Jewish community altogether. If his philosophy in general is controversial, he frankly disliked all religious authority, all blatant exercises of political power, and was very much attuned to the new intellectual world that wanted to separate state and religion, enthroning reason above all else. So the case for his defense is that he was a reluctant rebel and simply alienated by intransigent communities, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

But there is another angle. In his great religious polemic the *Tractatus Theologicus-Politicus*, he questions the Mosaic authorship of the Torah, and he claims that it is no longer binding on Jews. It is true that he denigrates all religions as having failed their founders. But he sees the prophecy of Moses as being of an inferior level to that of Jesus. He considers the meeting of minds that characterized the relationship of God to Jesus (as described in Christian theology) as being of a higher and purely intellectual order. It has been suggested that he said this only to curry favor with the Christian authorities and try to gain the support of the church. But if we assume that these were really his views, then I can perfectly understand not only the offense taken by the Amsterdam community but by Jews nowadays too. So those who might argue for his posthumous reinstatement are just wide of the mark and clearly have not read his philosophy.

A criterion for belonging to the Jewish religious community is to regard the Torah as the ultimate prophetic communication, whether it was "face to face" or "mouth to mouth" or indeed symbolically. This is what differentiates the Jewish religion from the other monotheistic religions. To deny this is to "deny the rock from whence you were hewn."

In the enlightened world we inhabit, we do not insist on people having to belong to one religion or another. If we are enlightened practitioners of our own religions, we will not object to people finding their points on its spectrum. We approve of freedom of thought and mind when it comes to making personal choices. But we cannot expect the sort of relativism that considers all views of equal significance or all Jews as being an integral part of the Jewish people regardless of what they think or how they behave. Sadly, Spinoza ended up not only rejecting Judaism, but giving up any attachment to his people.

I can certainly sympathize with his sense of alienation, and this is consistent with his philosophy. But you can no more call Spinoza a great Jew than you can Karl Marx. They might be great people who happened to have been born Jewish, but that is a different matter altogether. If the *Cherem* in Amsterdam was based purely on his theological views, and given that in those pre-emancipation years it was only religion that defined a Jew, then clearly Spinoza belonged and belongs to the rarefied world of philosophy. He is not a proponent of religion in general or Judaism in particular. Quite the contrary.

Were he alive today I would like to think he would have been head of the

philosophy department at the Hebrew University where, I am delighted to say, religious parties exercise no influence whatsoever. However, it is much more likely that he would have joined Noam Chomsky!