

Baruch Spinoza as a Jewish Thinker

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?¹ — Rebecca Goldstein

Baruch Spinoza, while undeniably brilliant, is easily one of the most contentious thinkers in the history of Western thought. For the past few hundred years, the Jewish community has continuously debated over his status—is he a Jew or not? During his life, and since then, he has been denied his Jewish heritage based on Orthodox conceptions of what it means to be Jewish. In cases like this, the Orthodoxy maintains a veritable monopoly on what is considered a “legitimate” Jewish experience. The reasons for excommunicating Spinoza and sustaining his exile are rooted in those Orthodox rulings. However, regardless of how they perceive of Jewishness, Judaism and the Jewish experience are not predicated upon their singular vision.

In order to dismiss him, there were a few key accusations levied against Spinoza. In the actual writ of herem, the sins of Spinoza were sufficiently vague to be a puzzle to this day.² They simply referred to his actions as either “abominable heresies which he practiced and taught” or “monstrous deeds.”³ Despite this, other texts regarding him, the teachings against Spinoza within the Orthodoxy, and the work of Spinoza scholars have helped shed some light on the issue. First, Spinoza has been condemned for his views on God. Second, he has been accused of rejecting the divinity of Hebrew scripture and the laws it contains. Third, they have claimed that he repudiated

¹ Rebecca Goldstein, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2006), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

the doctrines of both the immortality of the soul and the future resurrection of the physical body. In this essay, I will argue that these three criteria are not sufficient grounds for rejecting Spinoza as a Jewish intellectual. Some of the claims are categorically false. Others, however, while true, do not prevent him from being considered Jewish. Baruch Spinoza was, and still is a Jewish thinker.

It would be beneficial to provide some additional background before continuing forward. Few Jews were as firmly rejected in such a holistic manner as Baruch Spinoza. His thoughts have been banned since early in his lifetime. Today, the Jewish Orthodoxy in Amsterdam refuses to rescind the writ of herem against Spinoza. Herem is a Jewish form of temporary excommunication used as a means of reinforcing obedience to normative rules. Spinoza's writ of herem, however, was unique in being an eternal excommunication. He was condemned with no chance for moral parole. Beyond this, contact with Spinoza and his thought became taboo: "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."⁴

Spinoza and God

Claims surrounding Spinoza's beliefs in God are some of the most prevalent. Some deride him as an atheist and others as a pantheist. Understanding the God of Spinoza and its relation to Jewish thought are vital to unraveling the claims against his Jewishness. In her book *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*, Rebecca Goldstein discusses the views of Spinoza's philosophy and claims against him from the lens of the way she learned about Spinoza while she learned at an Orthodox day school. The two things they taught about

⁴ Ibid., 18.

Spinoza's philosophy were that "the Torah was not a divine revelation but rather written by man," and that "God was identical with nature."⁵ From these, further notions of Spinoza's faith were derived. The synonymy of God and nature would naturally lead to the "denial of divine authorship" of Jewish scripture, which is a vexing issue.⁶ The teaching about Spinoza's view on scripture will be discussed in the next section. For now, it is important to discuss this conception of God.

Placing God and nature as synonymous, according to Orthodox beliefs, conflicts with the "true" conception of God. While Orthodox Jews refer to God as H', an abbreviation of the tetragrammaton,⁷ Goldstein's teacher refused to use that name in reference to the God of Spinoza.⁸ She believed that, even if Spinoza truly believed in a God, it would not be the Jewish God.⁹ This is owed to the Jewish creationist account of the universe: "Berayshis barah Elokim es ha-shemayim vi'es ha-eretz—In the beginning the Lord created the heavens and the earth."¹⁰ If God both pre-existed the universe and exists outside of it, then simultaneously being nature itself would not seemingly be compatible.

From there, Goldstein's teacher derived a conclusion as to the beliefs of Spinoza—he was an atheist.¹¹ Her teacher attempted to show the depths of Spinoza's heresy by first comparing him to a Christian heretic: Descartes. Descartes, she explained, "believed that there is a God,"

⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The tetragrammaton is four-letter name for God—considered in Judaism to be the true name of God. It is considered too sacred to utter, and it is consequently referred to while masking the full spelling or pronunciation. This is why referring to the God of Spinoza by even the abbreviation of the holy name was taken as an obscenity by Goldstein's teacher.

⁸ Goldstein, 28.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 29.

but was “considered dangerous to the Catholics” because he wrote that “people should not believe in God unless they can prove His existence according to the strictest rules of logic.”¹² In essence, Descartes rejected the value of “faith.”¹³ Spinoza, however, exceeded the wickedness of Descartes. She argued that, “[u]nlike Descartes, Spinoza would go on and argue for atheism, saying that the God we can prove is nothing over and above nature, which, of course...isn’t God at all” for anyone.¹⁴ Spinoza, she said, “wasn’t fooling anyone by playing around with words, saying that he believed in God, only making God be nothing more than nature.”¹⁵ Spinoza’s God could not be considered God because, in her eyes, It didn’t meet the criteria of what defines God. A non-transcendent God is no God at all. The next argument against Spinoza builds upon this one, so rather than dissect this Orthodox argument now, it is preferable to fully expand this line of argumentation.

Steven Nadler, one of today’s most prominent Spinoza scholars, has expressed that there is immense value in understanding Spinoza as a Jewish thinker.¹⁶ Despite this, he continues to insist—like the Orthodoxy—that Spinoza is indeed an atheist.¹⁷ In his article “Spinoza the Atheist,” he begins by breaking down historical perceptions of Spinoza’s God. He argues that, despite “German romantics” viewing him as either a “God intoxicated man” or “theistic,” any substantial and “thorough...” reading would clearly prove that the God of Spinoza is not the “providential God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”¹⁸ Nadler acknowledges that Spinoza being a

¹² Ibid., 37.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Steven Nadler, “The Jewish Spinoza,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 3 (2009): 491-510, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20621904>.

¹⁷ Steven Nadler, “Spinoza the Atheist,” *New Humanist*, accessed 5/23/2018, <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/964/spinoza-the-atheist>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

pantheist is a “popular interpretation,” but he subsequently dismisses it. For Nadler, Pantheism is still fundamentally a form of “theism.”¹⁹ Despite the fact that both atheists and pantheists “might agree that ontologically there is nothing in the world but nature,” they would “part company” when pantheists begin ascribing “religious psychological attitudes” to nature.²⁰ Believing nature to be in any way “holy or sacred,” or “regarding” nature with “worshipful awe” are an absolute break with atheism.²¹

Atheists, in contrast, regard nature as purely natural—devoid of any spiritual or supernatural qualities.²² He argues that this is in fact more aligned with Spinoza’s view of nature, or God. Nadler views Spinoza’s God as purely natural and separated from the realm of the mystical or the divine. To “love God is nothing but to understand nature,” and there is “no place in Spinoza’s system for a sense of mystery in the face of nature.”²³ Rather, “such an attitude is to be dispelled by the intelligibility of things.”²⁴

Nadler’s criteria for determining Spinoza to be an atheist are insufficient, however, and largely off-base. While many Orthodox Jews do consider the spiritual to be imperative in our understanding of God, it is not a necessity. Spinoza doesn’t reject the spiritual; he reimagines it. Spinoza argues that the supernatural is nothing more than superstitions of humans who don’t comprehend the science at work, so they assume it must be the work of miracles.²⁵ The “ancients took for a miracle whatever they were unable to explain in the manner the common people

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Benedict De Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 81-83.

normally explained natural things.”²⁶ On a core level, treating the spiritual as supernatural would be to suggest that “nature...contradicted its universal laws,” which would “also necessarily contradict the decree and understanding and nature of God.”²⁷ Spinoza is aligning himself—perhaps unknowingly—to the words of the Hebrew Psalms: “...Thou art the selfsame...”²⁸ After discussing how all other things change and disappear, Psalm 102 proclaims that God does not change. As a result, the nature of God, and of God’s natural rules, would not shift in such a fundamental way as to produce something supernatural—something outside of God and nature. To believe in God, or in the spiritual, can exist as a lens: viewing the natural world as having deeper meaning. It is not necessary to lump it together with a belief in the supernatural.

Next, the concept that knowing God is knowing nature is sufficient. Judaism teaches that the height of human existence is the pursuit of knowledge of God. While that has largely existed as a practice of studying scripture, if God is understood as being nature, then studying nature would satisfy a genuine pursuit of knowledge of God. While it might not perfectly line up with Orthodox Jewish notions of understanding God, it certainly doesn’t preclude Spinoza from being a theist.

Next, the idea that a perpetual sense of mystery is necessary for theism, while an attempt to rationally comprehend the universe is counter-theist, is patently false. Theism does purport the existence of some deity or higher power. However, the idea that mystery is a fundamental element, is assuming a connection between the experience of mystery with the notion of a deity. The idea of perpetuating mystery—eternalizing a state of ignorant awe—is inconsistent with one of the primary values in Judaism: studying to know God. Using awe as a preliminary mode of

²⁶ Ibid., 84.

²⁷ Ibid., 83.

²⁸ “Psalms Chapter 102,” Mechon Mamre, accessed 6/6/2018, <https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt26a2.htm>.

respectfully approaching God is understandable, but sustaining that state does not enable Jews to study or learn more about God. To value mystery to such a degree discourages searching and growth. You can be in awe of both the immanence and scope of God without succumbing to ignorance—accepting mystery without further searching. Extracting and removing mystery from God enable us to better learn about It. It does detract from it.

Furthermore, the idea that mystery is needed in viewing the universe has no rational basis. To assume that mystery is needed would be to reject the material existence of the universe. Like with the teaching that you need mystery when dealing with God, attempting to enforce mystery in the universe is a way of hindering our understanding and impeding progress. The Torah teaches in the book of Breshit that humans are to be stewards of the earth. How can we be proper stewards if we don't even understand the earth? How can we care for the environment if we refuse to learn more about it? Again, being in awe of the scale of the universe—its vastness and intricacies—does not require a sense of mystery.

Last, removing the value of faith, as Orthodox teaching condemned, is not in violation of Jewish thought. Judaism is a system of thought whose materialism actually hinders the concept of faith. For example, many Christian theologians try to convince Jews that Jesus is the Messiah without understanding that Jews don't function on faith in the same way. In Judaism, the Messiah is only the Messiah one he/she has fulfilled the task of the Messiah. If a person “dies before he completes the mission of the mashiach,²⁹ then that person is not the mashiach.”³⁰ Similarly, prophets are only considered if their visions come to pass.³¹ In the Tanakh, there is an entire story which broaches the idea of blind faith before rejecting it. In the book of Judges, or

²⁹ Mashiach is the Hebrew word for Messiah.

³⁰ “Mashiach: The Messiah,” Judaism 101, accessed 6/5/2018, <http://www.jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm>.

³¹ “Prophets and Prophecy,” Judaism 101, accessed 6/5/2018, <http://www.jewfaq.org/prophet.htm>.

Shoftim, Gideon receives a command from God. Before agreeing to follow God, Gideon requests a sign proving that it is indeed God's will. For Gideon's test, he placed wool on the ground outside. If the wool was wet in the morning while the ground surrounding it was dry, then it would be enough for him to not be accepting God's word on blind faith. It came to pass, but Gideon wished still for more evidence. The second time, he asked God to keep the fleece dry but the ground all around it wet. Only after both tests were completed did Gideon follow God's command. Gideon was never punished or rebuked for questioning God or asking for proof. Rather, God fulfilled Gideon's wishes, then Gideon marched out on God's command.³² While it is true that figures like Abraham are praised for their faith—leaving his family and homeland upon hearing the call of God—asking for signs and digging for evidence are not treated as sins. As a result, Spinoza rejecting the notion of faith does not contradict an incontrovertible rule of Jewish values and cannot be used as substantial evidence against him.

Many who have not condemned Spinoza because of a perceived atheism still condemn him of pantheism.³³ Now that the Orthodox claim of atheism and Nadler's rejection of the pantheism claim have been dissolved, the claim of pantheism must be taken up again. Pantheism is the "doctrine that the universe conceived of as a whole is God and, conversely, that there is no God but the combined substance, forces, and laws that are manifested in the existing universe."³⁴ God and the universe are one. There exists nothing which is outside of the spheres of God's influence, since God is all-encompassing.

³² This story is in Shoftim chapters 6-7.

³³ "Baruch Spinoza," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed 6/6/2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza/>.

³⁴ William L. Reese, "Pantheism," Encyclopedia Britannica, Accessed 6/4/2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/pantheism>.

Spinoza 's metaphysics convey a pantheist doctrine. In the beginning of *Ethics*, Spinoza clearly lays out the nature of God. He begins defining the idea "self-caused," which he defines as "that whose essence involves existence," or "that whose nature can be conceived only as existing."³⁵ It is that which is not created by any other force or being. It necessarily exists. From there he forms the propositions which serve as a foundation for his view of God. Spinoza argues that "existence belongs to the nature of substance"³⁶ and is "necessarily infinite."³⁷ He then argues that "the more reality or being a thing has, the more attributes it has,"³⁸ and that "each attribute of one substance must be conceived through itself."³⁹ Spinoza then shows that God and substance are synonymous: "God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists."⁴⁰ God is infinite and exists necessarily. Spinoza then provides an argument against the idea of more than one God: "absolutely infinite substance is indivisible."⁴¹ God is necessary for existence itself because "there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God."⁴² Spinoza is a pantheist. God and nature, or the universe, are one. All of existence is comprised of God. However, now that it has been made clear that Spinoza is, in fact, a pantheist, a new issue arises which must be addressed. Is pantheism compatible with a Jewish system of thought?

³⁵ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics: Treatise on The Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 31.

³⁶ Ibid., 34.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 36.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁴¹ Ibid., 39.

⁴² Ibid.

Judaism is a monotheistic religion. Monotheism is the “belief in the existence of one god, or in the oneness of God.”⁴³ However, within Jewish thought, the concept of the divine spark makes creating a sharp distinction between monotheism and pantheism difficult. In his article “Individuality and the Divine Spark,” Rabbi Tzvi Freeman expounds upon the concept. Each and every person had a spark of the divine—a “spark of G-d”—within them.⁴⁴ He suggests that the “divine spark” does not express “itself identically in all people,” but rather, is the very thing that “makes each of us unique and gives us purpose.”⁴⁵ Despite a multiplicity of divine sparks, and a seemingly infinite number of unique manifestations, Freeman maintains that this does not contradict the doctrine of monotheism. To convey this, he refers to “an analogy from the Maharal of Prague,” stating that “from a single point an infinite number of lines may be drawn through infinite dimensions.”⁴⁶ This is surprisingly consistent with Spinoza’s eleventh proposition, which was already established to be pantheist in nature. God is that which possesses “infinite attributes, each of which expresses...infinite essence.”⁴⁷ Additionally, it is in-line with Spinoza’s sixteenth proposition: “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways..., (that is, everything that can come within the scope of infinite intellect).”⁴⁸ While Freeman attempts to draw a distinction between pantheism and the teaching of the divine spark in his article “How Is Chassidic Thought Distinct from Pantheism?,” it does not bear scrutiny. He states that “everything that exists is sustained by G-d and has no true reality

⁴³ Theodorus P. van Baaren, “Monotheism,” Encyclopedia Britannica, Accessed 6/4/2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/monotheism>.

⁴⁴ Tzvi Freeman, “Individuality and the Divine Spark,” Chabad, accessed 6/4/2018, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/676238/jewish/Individuality-and-the-Divine-Spark.htm.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics: Treatise on The Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, 37.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

without Him.”⁴⁹ He continues, arguing that, according to the “doctrine of hidden sparks,”⁵⁰ “every creation must contain some glimmer of holiness—or else it could simply not exist.”⁵¹ The divine spark theory states that God is inside of all things. This falls into the realm of panentheism, which “considers God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world.”⁵² It is true that pantheism and panentheism are not identical. However, there are not significant enough differences to entirely discount pantheism in a Jewish context. In panentheism the “world is included in God,” but “God is [still] more than the world.”⁵³ That is the primary factor keeping Spinoza’s philosophy from being considered pantheist. For Spinoza, the idea that God is more than the world would suggest that there exists something beyond the universe. Since Spinoza argues that God and the universe are one and the same, the idea that there could exist something outside of God is an absurdity. Spinoza states that “there can be no substance external to God, and consequently no such substance can be conceived.”⁵⁴ Consequently, it “follows quite clearly that God is one” and that “in the universe there is only one substance.”⁵⁵ In other words: “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.”⁵⁶

The reason why the panentheism of the divine spark theory is typically readily accepted while pantheism is not is due to a dispute over the physicality of God—whether or not God has a

⁴⁹ Tzvi Freeman, “How Is Chassidic Thought Distinct from Pantheism,” Chabad, accessed 6/4/2018, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/512437/jewish/How-Is-Chassidic-Thought-Distinct-from-Pantheism.htm.

⁵⁰ Hidden sparks is the idea that the divine sparks are hidden in all living things, waiting for people to uncover them and draw them out.

⁵¹ Freeman, “How is Chassidic Thought Distinct from Pantheism.”

⁵² “Panentheism,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed 6/6/2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism/>.

⁵³ Reese.

⁵⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 39.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

body. Jewish scripture and the Talmud “speak of various parts of G-d’s body” or “speak of G-d in anthropomorphic terms.”⁵⁷ Despite this, Judaism “firmly maintains that G-d has no body,” and that “any reference to G-d’s body is simply a figure of speech,” or a “means of making G-d’s actions more comprehensible to beings living in a material world.”⁵⁸ This is largely supported through the later writings of Maimonides.⁵⁹ Spinoza rejects this notion, arguing that God possesses a physical form: “...These I dismiss, for all who have given any consideration to the divine nature deny that God is corporeal.”⁶⁰ He backs this up by referring back to what he previously established. God is nature and there can exist “no substance external to God.”⁶¹ He concludes his argument against a non-corporeal conception of God by arguing that “all things...are in God, and all things that come to pass do so only through the laws of God’s infinite nature and follow from the necessity of his essence.”⁶² This presents a serious dilemma. If Spinoza’s pantheist conception of God is to be rejected, then it must be admitted that there exists something outside of God—something outside of both Its power and influence.

It would also be beneficial to present ways in which, despite the view of God which orthodoxy holds as singularly correct, Spinoza is indeed aligned with Jewish conceptions of God. In particular, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber argued that Spinoza didn’t just believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but believed more deeply and purely than nearly any other Jewish thinker. Spinoza himself gave credence to the immanence of G-d. Buber perceived this,

⁵⁷ “The Nature of G-d,” Judaism 101, accessed 6/5/2018, <http://www.jewfaq.org/g-d.htm>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics: Treatise on The Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, 40.

⁶¹ Ibid., 43.

⁶² Ibid.

and he saw Spinoza in a different light than the bulk of the Jewish world—as someone that pierced through to the core or spirit of Judaism:

Spinoza undertook to take from God His being open to man's address. One cannot suppose that his *deus sive natura* is "another God." He himself meant no other than Him whom he had addressed as a boy, Him who is the very origin and goal of all being; he only wanted to purify Him from the stain of being open to address. A God who was capable of being addressed was not pure enough, not great enough, not divine enough for him. The fundamental error of Spinoza was that he imagined that in the teaching of Israel only the teaching that God is a person was to be found and he opposed it as a diminution of divinity. But the truth of the teaching is that God is *also* a person, and this is, in contrast to all impersonal, unaddressable "purity" of God, an augmentation of divinity.⁶³

To the majority of the Jewish world, Spinoza maybe have been perceived as a renegade and a heretic. But for Martin Buber, Baruch Spinoza was a paragon of Jewish virtue. Spinoza had an utmost respect G-d. So much so, that it in many ways transcended the conceptions utilized in traditional Jewish thought.

Now that Spinoza's beliefs surrounding the concept of God are not proper deterrents for understanding him as a Jewish thinker, it is necessary to investigate Spinoza's views on the divinity of scripture.

Spinoza and Scripture

The next claim was that Spinoza rejected the divinity of scripture. Judaism is a religion founded on orthopraxy. Consequently, the scripture—particularly the scriptural law—is fundamental to Judaism. It is understood that, if he doesn't accept the divinity of scripture, then

⁶³ Martin Buber, *The Way of Response*, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 43.

he is rejecting the basis of Judaism, functionally excluding him from being considered a Jewish thinker. If Spinoza rejects the rules of God, then he is rejecting God.

It is true that Spinoza does not recognize the claim of exclusivity of true or divinely inspired works, particularly that which Jews traditionally attribute to Hebrew scripture. However, it should be stated that a rejection of exclusive truth does not inherently necessitate nor imply an outright dismissal of the scripture. It doesn't matter if other writings are considered divine. It wouldn't detract from the sacredness of the Torah if the I Ching, for example, were additionally a work of divine inspiration. However, on a more basic level this idea—that a belief in the divinity of scripture is necessary to be deemed a Jewish thinker—is misleading and fallacious. The law may be fundamental, but the structure of Judaism is just as important, if not more important, than the believed origin of said law.

As a religion, Judaism is built upon a strict system of orthopraxis. Following the law and doing good things are synonymous. The good is the law. This is why the laws of the Torah, and the expansions and explanations of the Talmud are so foundational to the religion. Many other religions have condemned Judaism for believing in a supposed “earn your way to heaven” concept—one which teaches that good deeds can earn your way to a positive afterlife. This misunderstanding is rooted in the very orthopraxis which Judaism is based upon. Good deeds—right actions—are morality manifested. This is why Judaism places a premium upon the actions humans perform. Faith isn't entirely ignored, but actions are treated with more severity for two reasons. First, Judaism is a materialist religion. It is intensely physical, treating the here-and-now—the physical world—with the utmost concern. Rather than focus on an abstract potentiality like the afterlife, our actions and the visceral experiences accompanying them are emphasized. Second, Judaism teaches that right thought springs forth from the cultivated land of good actions.

The Hebrew word mitzvah perfectly demonstrates Judaism's grounding in physical actions and their inherent entanglement with orthopraxis. The word "mitzvah" is typically translated in one of two ways. It literally translates as "commandment." Many Jews use this to just refer to the commandments of the Torah. However, many other Jews—primarily non-orthodox Jews—translate it as a "good deed." Again, there is an assumed interconnectedness between the law and moral or ethical behavior.

The Torah serves as the foundation of the Jewish faith.⁶⁴ While much of it serves as mythical narratives,⁶⁵ a large portion of it provides a system of moral law. Rabbi Hillel encapsulated the entire message of the Torah in a single statement: "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow."⁶⁶ The Torah revolves around the way we act, and how we ought to act towards others. The Talmudic scholar Saadiah Gaon "expounded a rationalist theory" which broke the Torah into "two parts": commandments which are "demanded by reason" and commandments "whose authority is revelation alone."⁶⁷ The Torah is built upon the teaching and practicing of commandments. Keeping positive commandments and abstaining from performing negative commandments is considered inherently moral. This conception of law is what provided Judaism with an underpinning of orthopraxis.

The Jewish doctrine of Mussar extracts and encapsulates this idea of actions producing ethical behavior. Ethics are learned not just through academic training, but also through daily practice. It is important to make ethics an everyday ritual so that we can learn to be moral beings

⁶⁴ The Torah is comprised of the first five books of the Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible.

⁶⁵ Myth here is not subbing in for falsehood. Rather, the version of myth which acknowledges the way truth and storytelling in culture intermingle.

⁶⁶ "Judaism: The Written Law – Torah," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed 6/5/2018, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-written-law-torah>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

in all situations. The question “what am I to do?” is easier to answer when you have properly trained yourself to be ethical. In his book *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Path of Mussar*, Alan Morinis states that the practice of Mussar is rooted in the Hebrew scripture. Mussar is “the verse in the Torah that tells us ‘you shall be holy.’”⁶⁸ It is a command about how one ought to live. The call to “be holy” is a call to “elevate” oneself through spiritual growth.⁶⁹ To be holy is to embody virtue and elevate your moral standing through practicing ethics. While Mussar is far more open in regards to methods of exercising right actions, it is still based on the concept that being good is doing good—following normative, ethical rules.

Now, the dismissal of Spinoza as a Jewish thinker because of his relationship with Jewish scripture is often rooted in the argument that he rejects the claims of divine inspiration, and that he doesn’t believe that acceptance of the laws is necessary. However, the issue here is conflating the specific texts utilized for Jewish orthopraxis with one of the key things that makes Judaism Jewish: orthopraxis itself. The commandments aren’t Jewish just because they are located in Jewish scripture; they are Jewish because they are built upon a system of orthopraxis.

The Spinozist system is in many ways a Jewish system. It supports a form of orthopraxis and utilizes a natural affinity for the law. Spinoza’s support for orthopraxis is entangled with his theory of the affects. In order to properly argue the correlation between orthopraxis and the affects, it is important to first begin by dissecting Spinoza’s affects. In his book *Affectivity and Philosophy After Spinoza and Nietzsche: Making Knowledge the Most Powerful Affect*, Stuart Pethick notes that, for a “supposed rationalist” like Spinoza, there “has probably never been a philosopher more interested and one who put more value in bodily experience than [him].”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* (Boulder: Trumpeter Books, 2007), 11.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Stuart Pethick, *Affectivity and Philosophy After Spinoza and Nietzsche* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 18.

Amidst the scholia and propositions—an almost cold and calculating geometric metaphysics of reality—is a fascination with bodily experiences, which are notoriously, almost to the point of absurdity, unquantifiable and incalculable. In *Ethics*, Spinoza stated that “no one yet has determined what the body can do.”⁷¹ Pethick explains that, despite the level of “distrust” of bodily experiences that arise from this uncertainty, Spinoza “accepts it as the essential way in which we live and therefore something to be affirmed and appreciated” rather than considering “this constant change and variability” as “a weakness or a hindrance to life.”⁷²

He provides a teleological backing to the foundation and promulgation of orthopraxis in the *Ethics*:

We strive to promote the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to sadness.⁷³

The way normative rulings are established is based upon conceptions of good and bad, which are themselves products of an observation of the affects. Jewish commandments against murder, theft, and adultery can be explained in this way. After observing the negative impact upon both the individuals and the community writ large, they determined those actions immoral. Rather than holding that there are universal laws based on God’s explicit command, the laws are determined through human beings living their lives, using trial and error to uncover what ways are most beneficial for living. It is a process in which the affects of actions are weighed, and the rules are made base upon them.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Spinoza’s Psychological Theory,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed 6/6/2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza-psychological/>.

Spinoza conveys the way in which the interests driven by affects manifest systems of good and bad through politics. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza utilizes the Machiavellian “notion of balancing the interests of competing parties,” as well as the idea that a “proper grasp of human nature” is necessary before providing “prescriptions for improving the governance of a state.”⁷⁴ Just as the affects are inseparable from individual interests, so too are they ingrained in political society—the source of most normative teachings of orthopraxis.

Now, Spinoza does “deny that there is a transcendental standard of justice,” but that is not the same as denying “that there is any normative standard by which we can evaluate action.”⁷⁵ A justification for normative justice can still be judged. For example, the “goodness of an action is to be judged in relation to whether the action aids one’s striving to preserve and augment one’s power.”⁷⁶ It is the “striving to preserve and augment one’s power, which constitutes one’s actual essence...”⁷⁷ and “provides a standard for moral judgments.”⁷⁸ This does not function on a purely individualistic level, however. Rather, Spinoza “takes it as axiomatic that the state ought to do those things that maximize the power of the people as a whole.”⁷⁹ The state, the entity which forms, perpetuates, and enforces normative laws and standards of justice, also utilizes the same justifications for orthopraxis. A community thrives when it advances that which promotes the good and disincentivizes that which results in the bad. As a result, a system in which following the law is considered the good, and breaking the law is viewed as evil. Spinoza’s system of politics, similar to his system of metaphysics, functions on a mode of orthopraxis.

⁷⁴ “Spinoza’s Political Philosophy,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed 6/6/2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza-political/>.

⁷⁵ Ibid. [Curley 1996].

⁷⁶ Ibid. [EIVP18S; TP 2/8; TTP 16/181]

⁷⁷ Ibid. [EIII7]

⁷⁸ Ibid. [Curley 1973]

⁷⁹ Ibid. [TTP 16/184]

Spinoza and the Soul

Another allegation leveled against Spinoza was that he wholly rejected the belief in the concept of an immortal soul. Rebecca Goldstein, like with the claim of atheism, conveys what her Orthodox schooling attempted to teach her. They told her that a massive part of Spinoza's heresy was denying that the Torah taught that the soul was immortal.⁸⁰ Unlike the claim of atheism, this allegation is valid. Spinoza outright repudiated the concept of an immortal soul:

I confess [that]...As for spirits, it is certain that Scripture does not say that these are real and permanent substances, but mere phantoms, called angels because God makes use of them to declare his will; they are of such kind that the angels and all other kinds of spirits are invisible only because their matter is very fine and diaphanous, so that it can only be seen as one sees phantoms in a mirror, in a dream, or in the night.⁸¹

According to historical sources, Spinoza "purportedly" claimed that, "whenever scripture speaks of it [the human soul], the word "soul" is used simply to express life, or anything that is living."⁸²

The denial of the immortality of the soul is contentious because it is viewed as a linchpin of Jewish faith. It is seen as a core element of Judaism because it serves to provide justification for both good and evil in the world. It allows Jews to "reconcile" a "belief in God's justice" with "the fact that many righteous individuals suffer in this life."⁸³ It serves to explain how the righteous receive their rewards while the wicked receive their punishments.

A traditional Jewish argument for the immortal soul is as follows:

⁸⁰ Goldstein, 31-32.

⁸¹ Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind*, 29.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, "The Soul," Aish, accessed 5/18/2018, <http://www.aish.com/jl/sp/bas/48942091.html>. [From "*The Handbook of Jewish Thought*" (Vol. 2, Maznaim Publishing. Reprinted with permission.)

If one believes in a God who is all-powerful and all-just, one cannot believe that this world, in which evil far too often triumphs, is the only arena in which human life exists. For if this existence is the final word, and God permits evil to win, then it cannot be that God is good. Thus, when someone says he or she believes in God but not in afterlife, it would seem that either they have not thought the issue through, or they don't believe in God...⁸⁴

This argument has persisted for countless years because it is legitimately enticing. Suffering can appear absolutely senseless, and those who commit the greatest evils often live long, happy lives while their victims perish in excruciating ways. Spinoza answers this line of argumentation by interrogating the concepts of good and evil. He argues that “knowledge of evil is inadequate knowledge.”⁸⁵ Knowledge of evil, he states, is “pain itself.”⁸⁶ Pain is a “transition to a state of less perfection,” meaning it “cannot be understood through man's essence itself” and is consequently a “passive emotion” which “depends on inadequate ideas.”⁸⁷ From there Spinoza derives a new corollary: “...it follows that if the human mind had only adequate ideas, it could not form any notion of evil.”⁸⁸ Spinoza subsequently argues that “If men were born free, they would form no conception of good and evil so long as they were free.”⁸⁹ It is due to the natural limitations of the human mind—in addition to our propensity to latch onto inadequate ideas—which trap us under the conceptual framework of good vs. evil. A person who is “born free and remains free has only adequate ideas and thus has no conception of evil...and consequently no conception of good...”⁹⁰ As a result, human perception of suffering—since it consists of

⁸⁴ “Jewish Concepts: Afterlife,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed 5/18/2018, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/afterlife-in-judaism>.

⁸⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics: Treatise on The Emendation of the Intellect and Selected Letters*, 190.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 192.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

inadequate ideas—creates the unnecessary notion that God must be just. The idea of injustice is rooted in those same inadequate ideas, and without injustice, justice is unnecessary.

Spinoza's God, however, is not necessarily a just god. It "does not choose the best of all possible worlds."⁹¹ The God of Spinoza "does not choose anything whatsoever," since "Spinoza's identification of God" is "with the eternal, infinite, necessarily existing substance of Nature itself."⁹² Consequently, "whatever exists within Nature (and all that is everything possible) "follows from" or is caused by God or Nature with an absolute, inevitable necessity."⁹³ With God there are no contingencies. Rather, "All things...are in God, and all things that happen, happen only through the laws of God's infinite nature and follow...from the necessity of his essence."⁹⁴

This conception of God—one which forgoes any notion of justness—appears to be at odds with the vast majority of Jewish thought. As a religion of orthopraxis, Judaism is supremely concerned with justice. In some instances, the Torah claims that "All [God's] ways are just; He is a faithful God, never unfair; righteous and moral is he."⁹⁵ However, there are other instances in Jewish thought which either shrug when confronting the ineffability of God being just, or outright paint God as unjust. The book of Job in the Tanakh is a story centered around the seeming senselessness of suffering, and the coinciding difficulty of locating any semblance of

⁹¹ Steven Nadler, *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 227.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Nadler, *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil*, 227. Originally from *Ethics*, IP15S[VI], G II.60; C 424.

⁹⁵ Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, "Reward and Punishment," Aish, accessed 5/19/2018, <http://www.aish.com/jl/sp/bas/48938277.html>.

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⁹⁶ The verse in citation 103 is from Deuteronomy 32:4.

justice within that suffering. Job, considered in scripture as an exceedingly righteous man, suffered immense loss repeatedly. Behind the scenes, the reader is made privy to information Job himself was cut off from; God subjected him to this suffering as a test of his piety and devotion. At the end Job, after finally snapping and crying out to God, is confronted by God. God responds by telling Job that the two of them are not equals. Job cannot measure up to the majesty or complexity of God and cannot, therefore, question God's actions.

After that encounter, Job is subsequently blessed with a new family and greater wealth than he possessed prior to God's trials. It is portrayed as God repaying him for his obedience and perseverance. The idea that simply granting him new kids and more money in any way made up for the suffering he underwent is questionable, since Jewish law functions on a structure of reciprocity. In the command "an eye for an eye," there is an understanding that if you damage the eye of another individual, then you must pay the price that the eye is worth.⁹⁷ However, Judaism does not have a parallel for the intentional killing of human beings. There is not an object of equal worth which can be substituted for the lost lives. Similarly, a serious issue arises if a pleasant afterlife is considered a just or equivalent exchange for the suffering Job underwent during his life. Judaism is a religion that places an utmost value on human life. It is taught that every life is an entire world.⁹⁸ How, then, can the loss of his children—considered a loss comparable to entire worlds being annihilated—be justly repaid by any afterlife?

Spinoza's denial of the immortal soul is additionally vexing because of its perceived conflict with normative Jewish literature. Both the Torah and Maimonides' 13 Articles of Jewish

⁹⁷ "Eye for an Eye," Aish, accessed 6/5/2018, <http://www.aish.com/atr/Eye-for-an-Eye.html>.

⁹⁸ Philologos, ""The Origins of the Precept "Whoever Saves a Life Saves the World": And what they tell us about particularism and universalism in Jewish tradition,"" Mosaic, accessed 6/5/2018, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/2016/10/the-origins-of-the-precept-whoever-saves-a-life-saves-the-world/>.

Faith discuss immortality. However, neither source gives a clear-cut answer regarding the nature of immortality. In the Torah, the topic is approached with a relative level of vagueness. It is devoid of descriptions of an afterlife, or of souls living on while maintaining their integrity of individuality. The real conflict is between Spinoza and Maimonides.

Maimonides' thirteen articles of faith have, for centuries, been considered the fundamental tenants of Jewish faith—a feat which is exceedingly rare considering the perception and treatment of philosophers in organized religions. The belief of the immortality of the soul is among those thirteen tenants. However, even his version of “immortality” is not the eternal perpetuation of the unique manifestation of the self. Nadler argues that “...if the soul, or at least that part of it that is immortal, is, as we are told in the *Mishneh Torah*, nothing but a form, then what remains of a person after death—the intellect, or the form of the soul itself—would seem not to be able to retain the individuality that it had during its embodied existence...”⁹⁹ Substance is indeed eternal, as Spinoza repeatedly states. However, that is not to suggest that any semblance of individuality transfers over as the substance transmits itself, self-recycling its own matter. Nadler continues, stating that “when one looks closely at what the soul or intellect consists in, and what is said to remain of a person after his death, it becomes harder to see Maimonides' doctrine of immortality as a classical one of the *personal* survival of the individual soul.”¹⁰⁰ This view of Maimonides' work is not novel, either—it has been a consistent source of critique.¹⁰¹ Spinoza's thought does not need to exist parallel to that of Maimonides, especially where inconsistencies reliably crop up, as seen in beliefs about immortality.

⁹⁹ Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind*, 76.

¹⁰⁰ Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind*, 77.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Baruch Spinoza is a Jewish Thinker

If scholars and theologians intend to continue denying that Baruch Spinoza is a Jewish thinker, they will have to use alternative arguments and evidence against him. Spinoza cannot be dismissed for his views on God. Categorically, Spinoza is not an atheist. His pantheism is not sufficient to deny him, since it is not in fundamental conflict with Jewish thought or values. Furthermore, his belief in God and Nature as synonymous is not in conflict with Judaism to an intolerable degree. It is in-line with traditions such as the philosophy of Martin Buber, and it does not dissent from the core beliefs Judaism holds about the singular nature of God, nor its ultimate otherness.

Likewise, Spinoza's rejection of the exclusivity of divinity of Hebrew scripture, and his refusal to acknowledge the absolute obligation to observe Jewish laws are not ample enough reasons to reject him. His philosophy, akin to the structure of Judaism, is built upon a foundation of orthopraxis. Through his teachings on the affects, Spinoza embraces and justifies systems in which following normative ethical rules can serve as manifestations of ethical behavior. Lastly, his rebuttal of the doctrine of the immortal soul does not hold credence as sufficient criteria to continue denying his Jewishness. Scripture and Jewish theology are internally inconsistent, and it subsequently cannot serve to undermine Spinoza in such a way.

Spinoza can be considered Jewish through these very same criteria once used to condemn him. His views of God are largely consistent with the core teachings on God, and they are not significantly distant enough to justify his exclusion. His system of ethics flows and functions in an intimately similar way to Judaism—in such a way that places his foundation learning of Jewish teachings on clear display. Its orthopraxis is similar to that of Judaism, and it differs only based upon the source of authority for the laws. Last, he contributes to the ongoing debate

around the soul and immortality. He is not the first Jewish thinker to reject the notion of the soul. It is, as previously stated, not sufficient criteria for judging his Jewishness. By reclaiming Spinoza as a Jewish thinker, conversations surrounding the importance of his thought being classified as Jewish can finally take place. An investigation into what it means to be Jewish, and how heresy contributes to a religion can additionally be more properly carried out. Baruch Spinoza is a Jewish thinker.

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