

Online lezing door Steven Nadler op 3 november 2024 in de OBA bij het festival:

Amsterdam: bevrijdend denken van Spinoza tot nu

Was Spinoza an Anti-Semite?

Over the centuries, Bento, or Baruch, de Spinoza has been a lot of things to a lot of people: rationalist, mystic, romantic, atheist, pietist, liberal, socialist, totalitarian, libertarian, proto-Marxist, even Zionist. Spinoza serves as a kind of Rorschach test: people see in him just what they want or need to see. Sooner or later everybody claims him.

What Spinoza has never been accused of, however, is being kind to the Jews, and with good reason. Judaism does not come off well in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. Some have suggested that Spinoza's hostility to Judaism can be explained by what must have been his lingering resentment towards the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community in which he was raised, and from which he was expelled, with great prejudice, in 1656, at the age of twenty-three. For his "horrifying heresies" and "monstrous deeds" — none of which are specified in the extant documentation; he had not published anything yet — Spinoza was issued a *herem* like none other in the period. The ban was permanent.

Yet Spinoza's negative view of Judaism was, among views, more than likely the cause, rather than the effect, of his ban. We have good reason to believe that the young man had experienced a serious loss of faith and commitment to Judaism by the mid-1650s.

Anti-Semitism, prevalent as it is, and becoming more so, is increasingly difficult to define with any clarity. It rears its ugly head on both ends of the political spectrum, albeit in very different ways and for very different reasons. It is too often conflated with anti-Zionism, or even with criticism of Israeli policy and action, though it is also true that a healthy number of anti-Semites hide behind the banner of anti-Zionism. The term 'anti-Semite' can all too often become an all-purpose epithet to use against one's political or

religious opponents — much like the term “communist” in modern America, or “atheist” and “Spinozist” in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe.

I am not going to join the scrum on what constitutes anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism—Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. Department of State’s Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, has said simply that “I know it when I see it”, which, while likely true for many, is not intellectually all that helpful. I will instead rely on the definition of anti-Semitism shared by the Office of the Special Envoy and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: “Discrimination, prejudice or hatred toward Jews.” As for anti-Judaism, scholars have, rightly, distinguished it from anti-Semitism, and it can be correlatively defined as prejudice against or hatred of the Jewish religion. Leo Strauss, for one, once suggested that Spinoza may have hated Judaism but did not hate the Jewish people.

The question I want to address is not whether Spinoza’s remarks on Jews and Judaism can feed anti-Semitism or be used to support a campaign against Judaism. Of course they can, although present-day anti-Semites certainly have no need of a seventeenth-century philosopher to beef up their bigotry. Rather, I want to ask whether Spinoza himself -- one of the central figures in the Jewish intellectual tradition and the European Enlightenment -- had a particular animus toward the Jews and their religion that can appropriately be called anti-Semitism.

The answer is, yes and no.

The general consensus does seem to be that Spinoza is indeed an anti-Semitic thinker and a prime example of what some like to call a “self-hating Jew”. The great Kantian Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen, for one, in an essay in 1915 titled “Spinoza on State and Religion, Judaism and Christianity”, wrote of Spinoza’s “unconcealed hatred of his own people” and his “vengeful hatred of the Jews.”

Now there is, to be sure, the well-known passage in the third chapter of the *Political-Theological Treatise* where Spinoza says of the Jews that “after they separated themselves so from all the nations that they have drawn the hatred of all men against themselves, not only by having external customs contrary to the customs of the other nations, but also by the sign of circumcision.” But for Spinoza, hatred, though a natural response to debilitating features of the world, is an irrational emotion, a passion that

free and virtuous people strive to avoid and that a good sovereign will seek to eliminate or at least control — not by eradicating or changing the hated object, but by modifying the response to it in the hearts and minds of citizens. It is hard to imagine Spinoza recommending or even just condoning hatred about anything.

There is no denying that Spinoza has harsh and disparaging things to say about the Jewish people and Judaism. While Spinoza addresses religion, piety, and the proper way to conceive of God in the *Ethics*, it is in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that we find his critical reflections on Jewish texts, Jewish law, and Jewish history.

First of all, Spinoza offers a highly reductive account of the Hebrew Bible and its value. He maintains that the Hebrew Bible as a whole is nothing but a very mundane and historically fixed document, a selected compilation of human writings composed over many generations. The Bible as we have it is simply a work of literature like many others, and a rather “faulty, mutilated, and inconsistent” one at that. It is a mixed-breed by its birth and corrupted by its descent and preservation, a jumble of texts by different hands, from different periods and for different audiences. Moreover, Spinoza supplements his “critical” theory of the origins of Hebrew Scripture with an equally deflationary account of its authors. The Hebrew prophets, in his account, were not especially learned individuals. Though endowed with vivid imaginations and strong moral character, they did not enjoy a high level of education or intellectual sophistication. They certainly were not philosophers or scientists.

What all this means is that the texts of the Hebrew Bible are for the most part not to be read as sources of truth. This was the genuinely subversive conclusion that Spinoza reached. The Hebrew Bible's authors were not physicists or astronomers, so there are no truths about nature or the cosmos to be found in their writings. Joshua apparently did believe that the sun revolved around the earth. But neither is the Bible a source of metaphysical or even theological truths. The prophets often had simple, naïve, even false beliefs about God. Moses, for example, clearly thought that God had a body of some sort.

This deflationary account of Jewish Scripture is accompanied by a corresponding downgrading of Jewish law and a dismissal of its contemporary relevance. The Torah says that the Law was revealed by God to Moses as a series of commandments. Whether the object of a particular commandment regards ethical behavior toward

others, piety toward God, or more trivial matters such as combining fabrics in a garment or the numerous dietary restrictions, all of the commandments are, according to tradition, literally divine, and complying with them is obedience owed to God. The changed historical condition of the Jews may have made fulfilling some of the commandments unnecessary or even impossible (such as those regarding Temple sacrifice in the aftermath of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem). But the suspension of one law or another is brought about by a decision of Jewish halachic or legal authority, not by mere historical or political circumstance per se.

Spinoza sees things differently. Not all (or even most) of the laws or commandments of the Torah are divine — not literally, and not even in Spinoza’s reductive sense of contributing to piety, which in turn is understood as a moral life engaged in justice and charity; consequently, not all of them are of universal scope or perpetual validity. He draws a sharp distinction among Scripture’s laws between those that are divine (contributing to piety and moral behavior) and those that are merely ceremonial.

The divine law itself is very simple. It is concerned only with the “supreme good”: the perfection of the intellect — “the better part of us” — through the acquisition of a deep knowledge of God or Nature. The most famous sentence that Spinoza ever wrote was just a phrase: *Deus sive Natura*, “God or Nature.” For Spinoza, the two are one and the same. The question as to whether Spinoza was an atheist is much debated by scholars, but one thing is certain: his equivalence of God and Nature left traditional Abrahamic theology in ruins.

In addition to the pursuit of the knowledge and love of God or Nature, the divine law commands certain types of conduct, but only to the extent to which these are conducive toward that cognitive goal of intellectual perfection, for ourselves and for others. These corollaries of the ultimate divine law — the true commandments — will be principles of action essential to a good commonwealth and a healthy social organization, as well as to the flourishing of our fellow human beings. This part of the law is very neatly summed up in the single Scriptural phrase “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Together with the command to know and love God — not from fear of

punishment or hope of reward, but from the love due to our true good — this exhausts the content of divine law.

Only the divine law so understood as a strictly moral prescription is universally valid, regardless of time, place, and circumstance. It is binding upon all human beings, no matter their religious persuasion or lack thereof. The supreme moral law can be known through human reason and deduced from human nature, as Spinoza does in the *Ethics*, but (he argues) it is also the universal and true message of the Bible discovered empirically through the proper scientific interpretation of its texts.

All the other commandments in the Torah relate only to ceremonial practices and sectarian rites. Unlike the divine law, the ceremonial laws are particularistic and of limited scope and transient validity. They were instituted by Moses for the ancient Hebrews alone and thus adapted to their very special historical circumstances. Moses, realizing that devotion was a much better motivator than fear, created a state religion in order to unify the people and get them to do their civic duty. The laws of this state religion are, thus, primarily ethical, social, and political regulations. They do not contribute to true blessedness and virtue, Spinoza insists, but tend only toward “the temporal and material prosperity” of the community and the peace and security of its government. In and of themselves, the Jewish ceremonial observances and rites “are of no significance and are termed good merely by tradition”; their value is not intrinsic but instrumental. With the end of the Hebrew commonwealth, however, Jewish ceremonial laws, in Spinoza’s view, no longer have any *raison d’être*. They are just a bunch of empty superstitious beliefs and practices without any purpose other than to distinguish Jews from gentiles. Latter-day Jews thus have no obligation or even justification for observing them.

Spinoza provides an equally deflationary account of God’s election of the Jewish people. It is “childish,” he insists, for anyone to base their happiness on the singularity of their gifts. In the case of the Jews, it would be the alleged uniqueness of their being chosen by God from among all nations and all peoples. In fact, Spinoza argues, the ancient Hebrews did not surpass other nations in their wisdom, their character or their proximity to God. They were neither intellectually nor morally superior to other peoples. Reason and the capacity for understanding are distributed by nature equally among all

individual human beings, and the achievement of virtue is found in all nations. “The Hebrews”, he says, “surpassed other nations not in knowledge nor in piety.”

There is, then, no theologically, morally or metaphysically interesting sense in which the Jews are a chosen people. The only way in which the Israelites were privileged by God (Nature) is in regard to their political good fortune. “The individual Jew, considered alone apart from his social organization and his government, possesses no gift of God above other men, and there is no difference between him and a Gentile.” This “chosenness” is, in fact, nothing but the benefits that follow the combination of the Jewish commonwealth’s superb intramural organization and its fortunate and fortuitous external circumstances — benefits that come to the Jewish people solely through the ordinary course of nature. Moses was only a wise and insightful legislator, and the laws that he promulgated were well suited to the unique situation of the Israelite tribes on their departure from Egypt.

The election of the Jews was thus a temporal and temporary one. With their kingdom now long gone, their distinction has come to an end. “Therefore at the present time there is nothing whatsoever that the Jews can arrogate to themselves above other nations.” With respect to understanding, virtue, and true happiness — with respect to blessedness — which is open and in principle accessible to all people, there is not, never has been, and never will be anything peculiar to the Jews.

Spinoza’s discussion of Jewish chosenness concludes with what might be his harshest set of remarks about Jews as a people and Judaism as a religion. In a famous passage from the *Treatise*, concerning the survival of the Jewish people despite “being scattered and without a state”, Spinoza says that their persistence “is nothing to wonder at, after they separated themselves so from all the nations that they have drawn the hatred of all men against themselves, not only by having external customs contrary to the customs of the other nations, but also by the sign of circumcision, which they maintain most scrupulously.”

In fact, Spinoza continues — following Tacitus and foreshadowing Jean-Paul Sartre — it is only that hatred, only anti-Semitism, that has preserved the Jews as a people. At the same time, and citing the non-Judaizing conversos of early modern Iberia as an example, he claims that, as a matter of historical fact, when Jews accept

conversion, assimilate with gentile society, and thereby remove the cause of hate, they disappear.

Even were the hatred against the Jews to dissipate, their persistence would be assured by their rituals, especially circumcision. He compares the efficacy of circumcision to the pigtail that, he says, was essential to preserving Chinese identity. These passages are not Spinoza at his best, but they do illuminate his reductive, and pejorative, view of Judaism.

On a more substantive level, there is what some scholars have seen as Spinoza's supersessionism. On this theological and historical principle, Christianity has supplanted Judaism as God's chosen religion, with the Christian prophets and the "New Testament" replacing the Hebrew prophets and their writings. Spinoza famously says that while Moses "spoke with God face to face, as a man usually does with a companion ... Christ communicated with God mind to mind." What he means is that Moses, though a gifted legislator, was, like all prophets, not an especially learned man, and certainly not a philosopher. The virtues of a prophet consist only in an unusually powerful imagination and strong ethical character, "a heart inclined only to the right and the good." Jesus, on the other hand, had a perfection of mind "surpassing all others." He received the Word of God — the divine law — not through the senses or the imagination but through the intellect, "immediately, without words or visions." Jesus, alone among the prophets, was a philosopher and endowed with understanding.

Likewise, while Moses, catering to the sensuous proclivities of his people, promises mundane and material rewards for obedience to the law — mainly security and stability within a flourishing polity — Christ offers a more elevated kind of payoff: "peace of mind and true blessedness." As Spinoza puts it, "Christ promises a spiritual reward, not, as Moses does, a corporeal one." Moreover, where Moses motivates obedience through hope for prosperity and fear of punishment, Jesus relies on generating an internal and heartfelt "consent of the mind" to the divine law. Spinoza elsewhere describes the contrast as between the law written on tablets (Jewish religion) and the law inscribed in hearts (Jesus' teaching). He claims — and here the proponents of a supersessionist reading of Spinoza find real grist for their mill — that "To the first Jews religion was imparted as a law, handed down in writing, because then they were

considered as like infants. But later, Moses (Deuteronomy 30:6) and Jeremiah (31:33) proclaimed to them a time to come, when God would inscribe his law in their hearts.” The implication here is that latter-day Jews who continue to focus on the laws of the Torah are stuck in that infantile stage.

These views, and the enthusiasm for Jesus and the Christian view of Judaism that they express, certainly shatter another popular myth about Spinoza — that he was the first secular Jew. After the *herem*, he left Judaism entirely; being Jewish seems to play no role whatsoever in his self-identity. But neither did Spinoza become a Christian. Rather, he stood outside both, indeed all, denominational or sectarian religions. If anything, he was the first *secular individual*.

The reader of the *Theological-Political Treatise* will have no difficulty finding many other disparaging remarks about the Jews and Judaism. After explaining that true blessedness is a matter of having “salutary opinions and a true manner of living,” even if one is totally unfamiliar with Scripture, Spinoza notes that “the Jews think just the opposite, for they maintain that true opinions and a true manner of living contribute nothing to blessedness so long as men embrace them only by the natural light [i.e., the intellect] and not as teachings revealed prophetically to Moses.” The observance of Jewish law is neither sufficient nor even necessary for blessedness, and may even stand in the way of it.

So there is a good deal that can pass for anti-Judaism in Spinoza’s works. To all appearances, then, Spinoza had an animus against Judaism and against the Jewish people as a group. And yet I suggest that we should hesitate to label Spinoza an anti-Semite. First, there is no reason to think that his prejudice against Judaism as a religion extends to Jewish people, no more than his prejudice against Catholicism or Calvinism is necessarily followed by animosity toward Catholics or Calvinists. What Spinoza offers in the *Treatise* is not a hatred of Jewish people, but a critique directed against the body of authoritative teachings and rules that is Judaism.

A true anti-Semite, by contrast, not only hates Judaism and not only hates “the Jewish people,” but hates Jews, and hates them because of what they are — because they are Jews. This attitude requires a kind of essentialism: that there is something special and inalienable in the nature of the Jew that warrants the animosity. But, on

philosophical grounds, there is and can be no such essentialism in Spinoza's system. All human beings, without exception — regardless of whatever religion to which they may or may not belong — are, as a matter of philosophical principle, the same. As finite modes of the eternal infinite substance that is God or Nature, they stand on the same metaphysical and generic moral plane. No group of people, simply by being that group, is by nature better or worse than any other. "Everyone, Jew and gentile alike, has always been the same", Spinoza says.

Moreover, on a personal level, I believe that it would be misleading to say that Spinoza "hated" Judaism and the Jewish people. All the extant historical evidence suggests that Spinoza was not a person given to hate. Spinoza regards hatred as an irrational passion; it is an emotional reaction to the way in which some external thing or circumstance brings about a decrease in one's power. A person who is guided by reason and knowledge, on the other hand, is active, not reactive. They choose to do what they do because they know that it is a good thing to do, not because of how something happens to make them feel. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza says that one of the virtues of the free and rational person (*homo liber*) is that he hates no one and no thing. The rational person never loses his equanimity, and knows that hatred hurts oneself as much as it hurts its object.

Spinoza's views on the Jewish religion might be better seen as motivated not by hatred or prejudice, much less by personal resentment, but by political considerations. In Spinoza's view, the greatest threat to civil peace and the well-being of the polity — both in theory and, as ancient (Biblical) and contemporary (Dutch) events have shown, in fact — lies in the divisions sown in society by sectarian religion. The existence of large religious bodies, even the existence of one sizable congregation independent of the official public one, poses a danger to a powerful and prosperous commonwealth. Organized religions divide citizens, even set them against each other — Christians against Jews, Protestants against Catholics, Protestants against other Protestants — and, more importantly, against the state itself. As soon as there are alternative sources of authority besides the civil sovereign, the loyalty of citizens is divided: there are now states within the state. It becomes a legitimate question as to whether the citizens are devoted to the polity at-large and the general welfare or to their more narrow sectarian

causes and co-religionists. And a commonwealth within which there is such a schism of loyalties, with piety opposed to patriotism, is more likely to see civil discord. Its stability and ability to withstand internal and external enemies is seriously compromised. As Thomas Hobbes succinctly put it, “no man can serve two masters.” Or, if we prefer Abraham Lincoln to the “monster of Malmsbury”: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

What is especially important to combat in the political arena are superstitious beliefs: about the divine origin of the Bible, about miracles, about heaven and hell, and so on. But in this regard, and from Spinoza’s perspective, Christianity fares no better than Judaism, and perhaps worse. In private correspondence in 1675 with Henry Oldenburg, Spinoza notes that what distinguishes Christians from all other people is neither their faith nor their charity, but that “they rest their case simply on miracles, that is, on ignorance, which is the source of all ignorance, and thus they turn their faith into superstition.” As for the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, he tells Oldenburg that “I have expressly indicated that I do not understand what they say. Indeed, to tell the truth, they seem to me to speak no less absurdly than one who might tell me that a circle has taken on the nature of a square.”

It is true that most of the critique in the *Treatise* is directed at Judaism. But Judaism was the tradition in which Spinoza was reared and in which he could most easily uncover the problematic features of all sectarian religion. Moreover, Spinoza did have to be, if not esoteric in his writing, at least cautious. He could not subject the doctrines of Christianity to the same severe assessment that he gives Judaism in a book directed at Christian readers whom he hoped to win over to the causes of freedom and toleration. An attack against Christianity like his attack on Judaism would certainly have brought the full weight of the law down on him.

Before we accuse Spinoza of anti-Semitism or even anti-Judaism, we should take into account his larger moral, religious and political project, as well as the political and religious context within which he was writing. I am not claiming, along with certain recent university presidents, that it is all a matter of “context.” Anti-Semitism is anti-Semitism, and often we do know it when we see it. But in Spinoza’s case I do not see it.

I think it is wrong to accuse Spinoza, as some do, of a double standard. No doubt in the *Treatise* Judaism comes off much worse than Christianity. But Spinoza is just as troubled by the superstitions and political threats posed by Catholicism and the main line of the Dutch Reformed Church as he is by Judaism. Spinoza is opposed to sectarianism in general and to all the major organized sectarian religions of his time, which he regards as nothing more than organized superstition. Yes, he is, therefore, *a fortiori*, against Judaism. But does that make him anti-Semitic? True, many of the grounds on which he opposes Judaism are different from and independent of the reasons he opposes other sectarian religions. His remark that Judaism is “effeminating” is especially severe. But it does not follow that Judaism is bad because it is Judaism rather than Christianity (even given the moral superiority of Jesus’s teachings) or some other faith. Criticism—especially when it is grounded in metaphysical, moral, and political principles—is not prejudice, and no particularistic faith can be exempted from the strictures of universalism.

Steven Nadler