



## Spinoza the Jew

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*Edward Feld*



## SPINOZA THE JEW

### I

Although one of the very first works of Spinoza scholarship, Johann George Wachter's *Der Spinozismus im Judentum*, (Amsterdam, 1699) attempted to demonstrate that Spinoza's philosophy was devolved from Jewish mysticism, and so placed Spinoza within one of the regnant intellectual currents of the Jewish community, this attitude did not dominate Spinoza research. Rather Spinoza was understood to have gotten his essential philosophical education outside of the Jewish community and was thought to have been primarily influenced by Enlightenment philosophers and radical Protestant Reformation theologians.

Wachter had read a Latin abridgement and translation of Abraham Herrera's *Puerto del Cielo*. Herrera, a descendant of Marranos who had grown up in Italy and had been educated there in the new mystical doctrines being spread by the students of Isaac Luria, migrated to Amsterdam after having been kidnapped by English pirates and held in London for ransom for five or six years. After settling in Amsterdam, he authored the only mystical Jewish tract written in Spanish. The work was an attempt to expound philosophically in Neo-Platonic categories the new doctrines of Lurianic Kabbalah as Herrera had learned them from his teacher R. Israel Sarug, one of Luria's chief disciples. Herrera had a profound influence on the intellectual life of Amsterdam Jewry. Isaac Aboab, who was to become Amsterdam's chief Rabbi in 1670, translated Herrera's work in an abridged form into Hebrew which was published in Amsterdam in 1655 a year before Spinoza was excommunicated. This was the basis of a Latin translation and abridgement which became the major part of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala Denudata* (Salzburg, 1677-1684) which Wachter read. Gershom Scholem has argued that the Latin translation of Herrera's work was the main vehicle for Europeans learning about Jewish mysticism throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It was an abridgement of Herrera's work and left out a crucial chapter in which Herrera distinguished Jewish mysticism from pantheism. On the basis of Knorr's translation, Wachter argued that Spinoza's pantheism was derivative of Jewish mysticism and that Spinoza was an essentially an exponent of Jewish mystical understanding.<sup>1</sup> While

Wachter himself came to develop a different understanding of Jewish mysticism and later retracted his own identification of Jewish mysticism and pantheism, it is true that Spinoza had read Herrera carefully: Harry Austryn Wolfson has shown that at least two passages in Spinoza's *Ethics* can be directly traced to Herrera's work.<sup>2</sup>

But looking for influence on Spinoza from within the Jewish community did not prove a popular enterprise, rather almost all biographers of Spinoza saw him as a figure who developed his philosophic genius precisely in his breaking away from the Jewish community. They depicted the latter as a benighted place and assumed that Spinoza could not have acquired any of his primary philosophical education from the Jewish community.

The early biographers of Spinoza<sup>3</sup> saw the conflict between him and the Jewish community in the same way as they perceived the clash between church and Enlightenment philosophy. Spinoza was depicted by them as a principled seeker after Truth while the Amsterdam Rabbis are seen as the defenders of medieval "churchly" privilege. When Spinoza questioned their theological interpretations, ". . . the Rabbis only answered him after the manner of ignoramuses . . ." <sup>4</sup> But it is not only the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment historians who depict the conflict in this way, this portrayal continues almost up to our own time. Sir Frederick Pollock, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, sees the Amsterdam Rabbis as being caught up in "the east wind of mystical ravings . . ." and so having dismissed the possibility of Spinoza receiving any significant philosophical education from within the Jewish community argues that Spinoza must have gotten his secular learning elsewhere than in the Jewish community.<sup>5</sup> It would be wrong to assume that Pollack's argument is a kind of intellectual anti-semitism since these passages disparaging the intellectual life of Amsterdam Jewry are primarily based on the equally vituperative attacks of the great nineteenth century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz' *History of the Jews*<sup>6</sup>.

The early biographies follow a Cartesian conceit and see Spinoza as largely self-taught, deciding "to consult no one but himself in this matter . . ."<sup>7</sup> He is in lonely pursuit of a philosophic path to enlightenment until he comes upon the work of Descartes which is seen as the chief influence on his own work. (It should be remembered that Descartes stayed in Holland from 1628-1649, and thus had a very decisive influence on the development of Dutch thought). Insofar as he needs to acquire a skill that can not be self-taught, he goes out of the ghetto to study Latin with Francis van der Enden,<sup>8</sup> a well known Amsterdam teacher.

This perspective, that Spinoza was largely self-taught and that whatever philosophic skills he acquired he did so away from home, frequently persists down to our own day. Alisdair MacIntyre writing in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says of Spinoza that he "is of all philosophers the

one whose life has least apparent connection with his work.”<sup>9</sup> In this view, Spinoza has no personal history, no biographical context, which is significant for our understanding of his work. He is seen as being his own unique creation and thus the ultimate student of Descartes: the thinker who begins the act of philosophizing with himself, the person whose act of introspection creates his philosophic position, the “I” who begins thinking *de novo*.

Certainly Cartesian thought looms large in Spinoza’s philosophy—Spinoza’s first published work is a textbook introduction to the thought of Descartes prepared for his friends and students. But Spinoza is also careful to distance himself from Descartes, and his thought is as much an argument with Descartes as it is influenced by him. Even in his own textbook on Descartes, Spinoza is careful to say that though he is here expounding Descartes’ philosophy he is not necessarily delineating what he thinks is philosophically true. When we open any of Spinoza’s works we do not simply feel that we are dealing with a disciple of Descartes, but with someone who inhabits a very different mental universe. Spinoza’s opening definitions and hypotheses are not simply derivative of Descartes—had they been so he would have proven a much more accessible writer. The differences between Descartes and Spinoza loom especially large in their different treatment of religious themes. Descartes always maintained that he was a pious Catholic, a loyal son of the Church who was only differing with the Aristotelian overlay of doctrine, while Spinoza’s attack on religious doctrines is an essential part of his philosophic agenda. His *Theologico-Political Treatise*, with its critique of so much of his Jewish background, including his questioning of the authority of the Hebrew Bible, and his demolition of the Maimonidean philosophic rationalization of Judaism, was his only major work to be published in his lifetime and it demonstrates that religious concerns were central to his philosophic agenda. It is not unreasonable to try to seek the primary influences on Spinoza’s thought elsewhere than Descartes. Similarly, it is hardly credible that a great philosopher is entirely self-taught. The persistence of that myth, which has as its corollary that philosophy is an individual enterprise rather than a social activity, must be seen as an Enlightenment conceit which is still at the root of much philosophic self-delusion.

Karl Meinsma writing at the turn of the century revolutionized Spinoza scholarship by arguing that Spinoza had been largely influenced by the radical fringes of the Protestant Reformation in Holland.<sup>10</sup> Specifically he identified Spinoza as an associate of the Collegiants who were a dissident sect in Calvinist Holland. Dissenting Calvinist preachers known as Remonstrants arguing among other things for a more Biblically centered faith and for greater tolerance of diversity had been removed from office in Holland in 1618-19. Those dissenters then met at unofficial

services which were anti-ecclesial in nature. They emphasized that they were a lay movement and Sunday services were organized as meetings in private homes for Bible study. Twice a year the movement gathered for conferences in the small rural town of Rijnsburg from 1640-60.<sup>11</sup> It was these Colleges which gave the movement its name. After leaving Amsterdam in 1660, Spinoza moved to the town of Rijnsburg and lived in the home of a Collegiant.

Meinsma carefully documented the fact that Spinoza's friends were not members of the dominant Dutch Calvinist Church but of dissenting Protestant groups, with some interested in radical fringe groups such as the Mennonites and Quakers. For instance, one of Spinoza's friends, Peter Balling, probably wrote, although possibly only translated from Latin,<sup>12</sup> a lovely Quaker work entitled *The Light of the Candlestick*, which identifies the inner light with the search for truth.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, Meinsma's argument that Spinoza was a member of the Collegiants has by now lost its appeal. Colerus, the Lutheran minister who had every reason to try to identify him with a radical Protestant sect, says of him, "Yet, to speak the truth, he never embraced Christianity, nor received the Holy Baptism: And tho he had frequent conversation with some learned *Mennonites*, as well as with the most eminent Divines of other Christian Sects, yet he never declared for, nor profest himself to be a Member of any of them."<sup>14</sup> While his friends were involved in radical Protestant theologies, they can not be identified as Collegiants, and the French scholar, Madelaine Francis, in her refutation of Meinsma's work, points out that the none of the arguments which animated the Amsterdam Collegiants in the mid-seventeenth century are reflected in Spinoza's writings, nor do any of the known Collegiant figures ever mention Spinoza.<sup>15</sup>

It is only in the mid-twentieth century that the scholarly bias which saw Spinoza as developing as a philosopher only once he was outside of the Jewish community began to change, and researches have uncovered Spinoza's philosophical roots within the tradition of Jewish philosophical analysis, and even his heretical roots among the cabal of Marrano philosophers in the Amsterdam ghetto.

The pioneering work in this area was begun by Carl Gebhardt in Germany, and by Harry Austryn Wolfson in this country. Gebhardt's work was interrupted by the rise of National Socialism, and while Wolfson began his work on Spinoza in the 20's, his two volumes on the *Ethics* were not published in this country until after the Second World War. Gebhardt's historical efforts were continued by the French school led by I. S. Revah. The latter's work began appearing in the late 50's and early 60's so that it is really the mid-twentieth century which has seen the change in the scholarly understanding of the relationship of Spinoza to the Jewish community.

What has emerged is a sense that Spinoza was educated in an extraordinarily unique and sophisticated Jewish community, quite aware of the secular learning and of Christian theology of its day. In addition to his traditional education within the Jewish community, probably at the noted Amsterdam school *Etz Hayim* where the major Rabbinic figures taught, Spinoza was associated with several Jewish heretics who had been educated in Spain and Portugal and who had brought their skepticism with them to the Amsterdam ghetto. Spinoza, then, was nurtured by and rooted in Marrano culture and we can better understand both his intellectual and personal development and aspects of his philosophy if we understand the currents of the culture that produced him.

## II

Amidst seventeenth century Europe, the Amsterdam Jewish community was unique. While elsewhere, Marranos fleeing from the Iberian Peninsula attached themselves to existing Jewish communities and came under their authority, in Amsterdam there was no such Jewish community for Holland had been under Spanish rule in the sixteenth century and the Inquisition had operated there as it had in Spain itself, so that the few Jews who had managed to survive had themselves been Marranos. Amsterdam was perhaps the most tolerant community in all of Europe and the Dutch themselves had suffered at the hands of the Spanish, so we should not be surprised that the Dutch allowed fleeing Marranos to settle and a flourishing Jewish community was established in Amsterdam soon after Holland achieved independence. By 1608 two synagogues had already been founded in Amsterdam, and by the middle of the century, Jews were significant enough traders on the Dutch stock exchange that they could convince the overseers of the Dutch West India company that their compatriots in New Amsterdam should receive toleration from the Governor, Peter Stuyvesant.<sup>16</sup>

New immigrants were constantly arriving either directly from the Iberian Peninsula, or via other escape routes such as France. Spinoza's own family came by way of this latter route and his father and grandfather are mentioned in communal documents by the 1620's.<sup>17</sup>

Having grown up with the severe limitations imposed by the conditions of life under the Inquisition, these newly arriving Jews were largely ignorant of Jewish tradition and much of the effort of the Rabbis of Amsterdam was expended in trying to educate the new arrivals. A great deal of Amsterdam Jewish printing consisted of introductory textbooks written in Spanish on Jewish life and law and of Spanish translations of fundamental Jewish texts. Yet even as these Conversos now living in freedom seriously undertook a process of reeducation they

could not help but be affected by their former lives. Abraham Israel Pereyra typified this attitude when he wrote, "Shall I escape from the falsehoods into which I sank. But woe to me! They are so deeply submerged within me that only with difficulty shall I be able to free myself from the false views that dominated me." Orobio de Castro, the only Amsterdam Jew of the seventeenth century to write a formal refutation of Spinoza's philosophy, said of himself that all former Conversos who had received a university education on the Iberian Peninsula had been filled with doubts so that their religious faith was never whole even when they were allowed to live in a functioning Jewish community like Amsterdam.<sup>18</sup>

Most of the arrivals in Amsterdam had come from Portugal and the communal records were kept in Portuguese. The Inquisition had not begun to operate in Portugal in full force till the mid-sixteenth century, and so the older arrivals in Amsterdam had some closeness to a practicing Jewish generation, but those who came in the mid seventeenth century had lived for a hundred years under the rule of the Inquisition.<sup>19</sup>

Cecil Roth gives us some idea of what the underground experience of these later generations was like. Parents who were attached to Judaism were fearful of informing their children that they were Jewish until they were twenty, old enough to be trusted with so dire a secret, but late enough in life so that patterns of thought and behavior had been set by a different tempo than a Jewish one. Frequently all sense of what constituted Jewish observance was lost and one learned of what Jews were supposed to do from what the Inquisition had outlawed. There were no Jewish calendars and those who observed the festivals calibrated them by a solar reckoning, e.g. Yom Kippur was observed as the tenth day following the new moon of September, though in fact people would fast on the eleventh day in order to fool the Inquisitorial authorities. Roth remarks that later generations of Marranos even when they returned to practicing Jewish communities had their understanding of Judaism formed by a Christian theological vocabulary.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, those educated in the universities of Spain and Portugal were sophisticated and worldly without having access to an equally intellectually sophisticated Jewish tradition from which they could draw.

The biographies of many of those who came to Amsterdam indicate that several arrivals had been long time Catholic believers before their emigration. In Spain and Portugal, their public Catholic identities had not simply been a cover against persecution, but had been a conscious declaration of religious faith, although the decision to leave frequently was associated with the decision to return to Judaism. Uriel de Costa, Spinoza's cousin who was later excommunicated in Amsterdam, remarks in his autobiography that he had been a Catholic believer, had gotten a degree in canon law and had held an ecclesiastical post.<sup>21</sup> Juan de Prado, another excommunicant, whom we will have reason to remark on below,

evidentially began as a believer but became an underground Jewish organizer at the University of Alcalá, where he helped convince Orobio de Castro who had also been a believing Catholic to Judaize.<sup>22</sup> Saul Levi Morteira, the Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam, composed a fictional dialogue between two Portuguese Conversos one of whom has just travelled to Rome to receive a Papal dispensation to join the Jesuits, since Jews were proscribed from membership in the order. Though the work is fictionalized there can be little doubt that Morteira's figure is based on people he himself had encountered or knew of.<sup>23</sup>

Even when Jews who had been raised as Catholics reverted to Judaism in Spain and Portugal, the kind of Judaism they practiced was uneducated and these patterns of behavior could persist even when they achieved freedom and settled in communities like Amsterdam. At least one leading member of the community, Pimentel, faithfully preserved the secret until he made a deathbed confession that his wife was not Jewish and that she had not been converted.<sup>24</sup> Although intermarriage was not a dominant pattern among Conversos, there is no reason to believe that his is the only such case. In the early part of the seventeenth century it was discovered that the kosher butcher in Amsterdam knew few of the laws of kosher slaughtering.<sup>25</sup> If this is the level of public observance one can only guess at what private religious practice was in such a community. Along with the educational efforts made through publishing introductory Jewish materials, an important feature of Jewish communal organization was adult Jewish education.

The community the Amsterdam Rabbis presided over should be seen as one composed of extraordinary diversity: some Converso families returning to Judaism were anxious to throw themselves fully into the religious life of their ancestral faith while others had developed patterns of life and thought which they found hard to change even though they now found themselves within a community in which they could be fully Jewish. Some were merely lax in their observance, some disappointed that the Jewish life of their dreams was different from the Jewish community they encountered, and some were antagonistic to any communal authority. We ought not to be surprised if the Rabbis and lay leaders felt that the latter group might corrupt the whole community and that the Jewish practice and beliefs of the new immigrants were fragile.

Granted permission to settle on a peninsula jutting out into the Amsterdam harbor, the community known as 'the Portuguese nation' managed to organize itself into a center of Jewish life so successfully that it could see itself as the new 'Jerusalem'. The success was an economic one, Jews became important Dutch traders, but they could also be proud of the community they had established. Shortly after Spinoza was born the three rival synagogues had combined and joined in sponsoring a school, Yeshivat Etz Hayim, a model educational institution where each



of the three main Rabbis taught. Spinoza probably studied there, his father was a trustee of the school. The early biographies all state that Baruch Spinoza studied with the Chief Rabbi, Saul Levi Morteira, who taught the advanced classes at the school, and so even though Baruch is not listed on any of its records we ought to presume that he studied there.<sup>26</sup>

Though earlier works described the Rabbis of Amsterdam as second rate minds, more recent works have been appreciative of their originality and learning.<sup>27</sup> They combined Jewish knowledgeability with secular learning in a way which typified Sephardic Rabbinic training. The Chief Rabbi, Saul Levi Morteira, was born in Venice of Marrano origin. In one of his works he mentions that his parents had been forced to convert and practice Christianity. A book of his sermons was published in his lifetime and they are quite eloquent exempla of that genre. (Undoubtedly Spinoza growing up in that community heard many of them). The bulk of his works have remained unpublished and are apologetic attacks on Christianity including a report of his conversations with Calvinist Dutch clergymen. These works demonstrate that Morteira was quite aware of contemporary Christian theologies and was in contact with the non-Jewish world of the Netherlands.<sup>28</sup>

Isaac Aboab de Fonesca, who succeeded Morteira as Chief Rabbi upon the latter's death in 1660, may have been the greater intellect. His interest in mysticism is evident in his translation of the works of Isaac Herrera who was undoubtedly his teacher. Aboab was of Marrano lineage having come himself from the Iberian Peninsula when he was a child. He was also adventuresome, and left Amsterdam in 1641 to go to Recife, Brazil while it was under Dutch control and thus became the first Rabbi in the Americas. He returned to Amsterdam in 1654, two years before Spinoza was excommunicated. Along with standard Rabbinic and Kabbalistic works, his library included Greek and Latin classics ranging from Homer to Aristotle and Lucretius and modern works such as those by Machievelli, Montaigne, his fellow Dutchman Grotius and even Hobbes. It is hard to say how much contact Spinoza had with him since he was not in Amsterdam for most of the time Spinoza was growing up, but he is one of the Rabbis responsible for Spinoza's ban of excommunication.<sup>29</sup>

Menasseh ben Israel was not only an important Rabbi and communal leader but also as a printer helped make Amsterdam a new center of Jewish publishing. He too was of Marrano origin. His own works are extensive including *Esperanca de Israel* in which he identified the newly discovered American Indians with the ten lost tribes. This work resulted in a summons to England to discuss his findings with theologians there and so he was not present for Spinoza's excommunication. In Amsterdam, he had extensive contacts with Christian Hebraists and became a tutor for several of them. He also was acquainted with Rembrandt and com-

missioned him to do a series of plates for one of his works<sup>30</sup>. Most likely he was one of Spinoza's teachers.

The communal school at which these Rabbis taught was a model of Sephardic (Iberian) education. It stressed familiarity with the Bible, first the Pentateuch then the remainder of the Hebrew Bible. The study of Hebrew grammar was an important part of the curriculum as well as the codes of Jewish practice. Talmud was studied intensively only after these subjects had been acquired.<sup>31</sup>

Spinoza reflects this educational system. Like his teachers, Isaac Aboab and Menasseh ben Israel, he wrote a Hebrew grammar though it was not completed at his death. His *Theological-Political Treatise* is a path-breaking work in Biblical studies, the first published critique of the Pentateuch offering an account of its multi-authorship, its editing during the Babylonian exile and its final redaction by Ezra. Spinoza frequently quotes traditional Jewish Biblical commentators, particularly Ibn Ezra, whose rationalist approach to Biblical study especially recommended him to Spinoza. Though he clearly is a close student of the Bible, Spinoza never quotes or alludes to a passage of Talmud and it may very well be that his formal Hebrew schooling ended before he was introduced to Talmudical study. We know that he took over his father's business after the latter's death, when Spinoza was 22, and his lack of Talmudical training may have been due to his having begun to work even as an early adolescent and so never having attended the higher classes at school.<sup>32</sup>

Spinoza is quite aware of the history of Jewish philosophy. While philosophy may not have been a formal part of a young man's curriculum, undoubtedly the same Rabbinic teachers who were willing to argue theological questions with their Calvinist colleagues would do so with their own advanced students. And the Amsterdam Synagogue boasted a great library which students could use during their free hours and we can hardly imagine that Spinoza did not make himself at home there. Certainly there were adult circles which studied philosophy—we have definite evidence of the existence of heterodox groups and we can presume that the theological argumentation which the Rabbis engaged in had some internal audience to which both their published and unpublished works were aimed.<sup>33</sup>

The first six chapters of the *Theological-Political Treatise* are an extended argument with Maimonides: Spinoza many times explicitly indicates that Maimonides is the one who holds the position he is seeking to demolish. It is the Maimonidean identification of Judaism and rationalism which takes the full brunt of his criticism and his argument that prophets are not philosophers is offered to free philosophy from its religious connection. The major portion of the remainder of the book is taken up with Spinoza's Biblical criticism which is exclusively aimed at the Hebrew Bible. The last part of the work deals with the nature of the state and has the feel of not flowing readily from the other parts of the

book. Although this is clearly the most religiously oriented of Spinoza's works, and while in the first two parts many Jewish sources are cited, there are no Medieval Catholic or Reformation and contemporary Protestant works alluded to. There is a biographical report that Spinoza had written a reply in Spanish addressed to the Amsterdam Rabbis after his excommunication, and that this formed the core of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.<sup>34</sup> Whether or not this is the case the work is that of someone whose education has been largely composed of Jewish sources: Biblical, hermeneutical and philosophical. One of the two major works by Spinoza then, intensely reflects his Jewish background.

If Spinoza's education was a traditional Jewish one he was also introduced to heretical thinking by members of the Jewish community. Almost 300 years after his excommunication, it was Carl Gebhardt who turning over the page in the Jewish communal register which recorded Spinoza's excommunication discovered that the flyleaf recorded the recantation of Juan de Prado. These two contiguous events raised the possibility that Spinoza was part of a circle of people entertaining unorthodox ideas.<sup>35</sup>

And because of the hiatus of the war, it took another thirty years for Gebhardt's suggestion to be followed up in a series of brilliant discoveries by I. S. Revah. The latter uncovered several reports, in the archives of the Inquisition, of heretical conversations held in salons in Amsterdam. These eyewitness accounts tell of Spinoza and Juan de Prado attending private meetings with other Spanish exiles. In the documents, the former is described as the young colleague of the latter. A further search of the Jewish communal archives led to the identification of at least one other member against whom an investigation regarding heresy had been undertaken by Morteira, Daniel Ribera. The latter, though, seems to have left Amsterdam before any formal action was taken.<sup>36</sup>

The Inquisitorial testimony was given by two Spanish travellers, a ship's captain and a priest both of whom attended these private theological discussion groups while staying in Amsterdam. The Inquisition was interested in gathering such information either because it expected to re-enter the Netherlands soon—the Dutch were then at war with France—or because it sought to implicate relatives yet remaining on the Iberian Peninsula. The reported discussions took place during 1658-9, two years after Spinoza was excommunicated. They indicate that Spinoza was still in contact with heretical friends from the ghetto. The two travellers, especially the ship's captain, were not theologically sophisticated and their description of the participants as being Deists ought not to be taken as describing particular philosophical outlooks—Deist, here, probably is equated with any position judged as philosophically heretical. What does emerge, though, is that after his excommunication, Spinoza continued to meet with fellow Jews, mostly Marranos, including many recent arrivals, that he is called, in both accounts, a young associate of Juan de

Prado, that the group discussed theological and Biblical questions, and that they practiced what they preached: non-kosher food was served at these gatherings.

Until these findings it had been assumed that Spinoza had left the ghetto after his excommunication and had found haven among Christians, and that he had nothing more to do with members of the Jewish community. This was deduced from the fact that none of the surviving correspondence is addressed to Jews and the friends to whom he writes are young Christian radicals, though the assumption that they were the ones he turned to after his excommunication was always a matter of conjecture since the first letter in the collected Spinoza correspondence is dated from 1661. It now seems that Spinoza continued his association with old Jewish friends even as he began to move on to a different world.

One of the travellers makes a reference to Spinoza as being a student at the University of Leiden, though Revah has found no archival evidence that Spinoza was a student there. It seems plausible, though, that because he was Jewish he was an unmatriculated student there—Jewish students having to be enrolled by the Jewish community—and that it was at Leiden which was a center of Cartesianism that he gained his instruction in Descartes' philosophy. He may even have met his new Christian friends there.<sup>37</sup>

The new evidence furthers the sense that Spinoza was a Jew whose education was a Spanish-Jewish one and that we need to turn to Jewish materials to understand the context which nurtured him. His education in Bible and medieval philosophy was a traditional Jewish one, and even his heretical beginnings took place in a Jewish context. This portrait dovetails with other pieces of evidence we have as to Spinoza's background.

He spoke Dutch with a thick accent and his native tongues were Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>38</sup> His own library, which was notarized at his death, contained Spanish belles-lettres such as Quevedo and Gongora, but no works in Dutch. When his first book was being published, he allowed that his Latin was poor and permitted his publisher to correct any errors he may have made, even without informing him.<sup>39</sup> It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that Spinoza's early education was limited to Hebrew and Spanish sources.

He was then the twofold product of Spanish Jewry—it was that cultural milieu which provided his traditional education and his philosophical grounding, on the one hand, and his heretical beginnings, on the other.

### III

We have spoken of Spinoza's formal education at Yeshivat Etz Hayim, the acquisition of his philosophical learning within the Jewish community

of Amsterdam and the formative stamp this placed on at least his early thought, but what is equally significant in his development were the informal cultural elements of Marrano culture which were everywhere in the air during his growing up.

In an important sense, Spanish-Jewish culture was defined by the trauma of the Expulsion. The product of a wonderful history of cultural synthesis, Spanish Jews could hardly assimilate the shock of their rejection by their homeland. Most Jews chose to remain on the Iberian Peninsula and were baptized, their inner existence now tortured by the guilt of their own betrayal of their faith. But their persecution did not stop with their conversion. The Inquisition was instituted to root out these false Christians. In the end, racial laws were passed excluding Jews from governmental and ecclesiastical posts on the basis of their birth not their conviction. Even as their exit was now barred many sought to flee their now increasingly intolerable circumstance. Yet they remained attached to the culture which had given them birth. It was not uncommon for those who left to discover how difficult it was for them to abandon the world of their birth and so return to Spain. Immanuel Aboab had to plead with Jews in Bordeaux not to go back to Spain.<sup>40</sup>

Some Spanish Jews had fled to Portugal, but there in 1498 Jews were rounded up for expulsion, and then forcibly baptized while waiting in the harbor. Converted as a whole community with their leadership intact they were able to preserve more of their religious life. Also, the Inquisition was not instituted in full force in Portugal till the mid-sixteenth century. Although their persecuted condition look longer to develop, by the time of Spinoza's birth Portuguese Jewry was in no different a position than Spanish Jewry.

Their own Exile, their loss of a homeland—a painful experience exacerbated by the degree to which they had been socially and politically integrated into society—evoked the deeper memories of the exilic condition of the Jew. The literature of this period is replete with efforts to explain what had happened. In the hands of Isaac Luria, exile itself became the primary means of understanding the condition of humanity and Divinity. This mystical system spread quickly and was ubiquitous in the Jewish communities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, testimony to how deeply felt the fact of exile was.

Those living in the Amsterdam ghetto, like the Spanish-Jewish exiles everywhere, were conscious of their relatives still living in Spain and Portugal and of their continuing martyrdom at the hands of the Inquisition. Recent immigrants, constantly arriving from the Iberian Peninsula, would bring tales of their own persecution and torture, and the Jewish community in Amsterdam would declare a fast day whenever there was an auto-da-fé on the Peninsula. These stories of martyrdom were burnt deeply into Spinoza's consciousness so that shortly before his death, long

after he had left the Jewish community, he could still write passionately of their tragedy. In response to the son of a friend who tried to prove the truth of Catholicism by pointing to the faith of its martyrs, he could reply:

But what they ["the Pharisees"] chiefly pride themselves on is that they number far more martyrs than any other nation and daily increase the number of those who with extraordinary constancy of mind have suffered for the faith which they profess. And this is not untrue. I myself, know, among others, of a certain Judah, whom they call the Faithful [Don Lope de Vera y Alarcon, burnt at Valladolid, June 25, 1644], who in the midst of the flames, when he was believed to be dead already, began to sing the hymn which begins 'To thee, O God, I commit my soul' [*Psalms* 31:4], and died in the middle of the hymn. (Letter 76).<sup>41</sup>

In the appendix to the first part of *The Ethics* Spinoza explicitly says that it was the question of theodicy which animated his description of God and Nature.

All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end . . . For example, if a stone has fallen from a roof onto someone's head and killed him, they will show . . . that the stone fell in order to kill the man . . . as if order were anything in nature more than a relation to our imagination.<sup>42</sup>

Instead of a God who was "as mad as men" he substituted a doctrine of necessity, that all things are as they need to be. In most fundamental ways, we can not affect what happens to us, our fates are largely determined by forces at work in the world which are uncaring of who we are. But what we can do, is develop our internal life, so that we understand what is happening to us, and in ceasing to rail against the wind, develop a measure of internal tranquility.

This distinction between an outer world which is at best uncaring, at worst antagonistic to our being, and an inner world of tranquility is an elemental aspect of Marrano culture. Marranos living under the watchful eye of the Inquisition had developed a radical reorientation of Jewish life emphasizing the religion of the inner heart. They may have been forced to enter the Church and bow to the image of the cross, but they did not consider what they were doing to be an act of apostasy since they simultaneously mentally denied the validity of their act. Because their heart never accorded with what they were doing they felt they had not violated their religion even as they were kissing the Cross. What was crucial was inner assent, everything else was secondary to this inner belief which was now understood to constitute the essence of Judaism.<sup>43</sup> Having been deprived over an extended period of participation in a practicing Jewish community, their religious life almost ceased to exist as

a community of common practice, rather they engaged in a radical reinterpretation of Jewishness, in which the sign of remaining faithful became an inner one, mental attitudes became the test of proper Jewish religiosity.

This new religious orientation remained with them even as they attained freedom. Marranos, having escaped from the clutches of the Inquisition, did not readily seek to reestablish a Jewish community. Cecil Roth finds this to be the explanation of why "it was possible that there could grow up, for example, in London, in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, a community of New Christians numbering nearly one-hundred souls, without any sort of organized Jewish life manifesting itself. Conditions were very similar at Antwerp, at Lyons, at Rouen and many other places."<sup>44</sup>

Spinoza took over this radical distinction between outward act and inner belief, utilizing it in his system to describe the world at large which was bound by necessity and apart from our control, and our inner mental life, the single area in which one could attain freedom. If there was any religious triumph to be achieved it was only here in one's heart. As if to verify its origins, Spinoza names this achievement a movement from slavery to freedom, thus borrowing for his own system the central nomenclature of Jewish self-understanding.

Marranos were a people who had to exercise a great deal of self-control. Any false move would give their true identities away to the Inquisition. Outwardly they had to act with reserve, never allowing the world to guess at their inner feeling. It is curious that Spinoza adopted as his own motto the single word *Caute*—caution and had it inscribed as his seal. Frequently Marranos had to hide some matters even from their own family. For instance, many Jewish parents in Spain and Portugal were fearful of informing their children of their Jewish identity till they were twenty years old.<sup>45</sup> One can only speculate on the emotional distance that this fear engendered. Undoubtedly there was a deep and terrible sense of aloneness which was an elemental part of Marrano culture.

This sense of Marrano privatism manifests itself in Spinoza first in his own biography: he never married and he chose to live by himself, in garrets and backrooms, even at some distance from his circle of friends in Amsterdam. But it is not simply that this is a peculiarity of his biography, Spinoza gives this aloneness philosophical justification. For Spinoza, love is the giving up of self-control. By attaching ourselves to another human being we become dependant and suffer pain and bondage. Our freedom is dependant on our overcoming the bondage of emotions.

Next, it should be noted that sickness of the mind and misfortunes take their origin especially from too much Love toward a thing which is liable to many variations and which we can never fully possess. For no one is disturbed or anxious concerning unless he loves it, nor do wrongs, suspicions, and enmities arise except from Love for a thing which no one can really fully possess. (*Ethics*, Part V, Prop. 20, Scholium)

His own loss of his mother when he was six, his stepmother when he was twenty, his father when he was twenty-one and his sister when he was eighteen imprinted on him the deep pain that love and the loss of love could inflict. But surely it was the Marrano sense of emotional distance which channeled the way Spinoza came to understand his grief.

Similarly, Spinoza sees the effort to survive to be the fundamental energy pushing the universe through time. Surely this view—seeing survival itself as the essential motivating force of all activity and especially descriptive of human behavior—represents a translation of the Marrano experience to universal dimensions. Life under the Inquisition meant that one's daily concern as a Marrano centered on the question of survival. One had given up one's religious practice, and outward manifestation of Judaism in order to continue to live in the land of one's birth. Spinoza understands the instinct for survival as the central principle around which we construct even our ethics, and it is clear that this principle is derived from the central experience of Marrano life.

Fundamental aspects of the way a culture perceives the world are the most formative kinds of influence, and what Spinoza gained first of all from Marrano culture was a questioning of all authority. Marranos were people who sat in their church pews and mentally refuted the preacher who sermonized before them. They were quintessentially the Jewish outsider who, alienated from accepted mores, questions all the givens of their society. Upon entering a free Jewish culture in Amsterdam, many did not give up this quality of being an outsider, of doubting and of questioning authority. On the Iberian Peninsula they had learned to be dependant on themselves. They had learned to trust their own intellectual determination of where truth lay and they did not always easily give up this quality once they rejoined a Jewish community. Even someone who attempted to become an Orthodox Jew, like Orobio de Castro, could remark that anyone who like himself had been educated in a University on the Peninsula could never be fully pious since there was always a skepticism which they brought with them. At the heart of Spinoza's system is the individual person, who determines truth for himself, rationally, step by step, with no bow taken toward received authority. This is the central point of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. This self-contained intellect had been formed amidst the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, even as its prime spokesman had been born in Amsterdam.

As the Jew entered Enlightenment society in the West he arrived from a society in which community and authority had already broken down for him. The idea of the primacy of the Self which Enlightenment philosophy and late Reformation theology taught fit precisely into his intellectual predispositions. Spinoza was able to attach the elements of Marrano culture to this newly emergent cultural mood and translate elements of Marrano culture into a world philosophy. Genéviève Bryk-



man has remarked that Marranos frequently had two names, one which was secret by which they were known in the Jewish community, which was always a Biblical or Hebraic name. There was also the name by which they were known in the general community, their Latin name. Migrating from Spain and Portugal, freed from the Inquisition, they gave up these latter names and now openly embraced their formerly secret Hebraic ones. Spinoza reversed the process. He was born Baruch Espinoza, and was called Bento by his family. Leaving the ghetto he became Benedictus. It was an Iberian and Marrano culture which had formed him and which he now took into the world, even as he left the Jewish community behind.<sup>46</sup>

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NOTES

1. Gershom Scholem, *Abraham Cohen Herrera, Leben Werk und Wirkung*, tr. into Hebrew by Haim Isaac and Gershom Scholem, (Jerusalem, 1978). Knorr used both *Puerto del Cielo* and another work by Herrera, *Beit Elohim*, as the basis for his Latin edition.

2. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (New York, 1934). Especially the phrase, 'the face of the whole universe': 'facies totius universi', is taken directly from Herrera, Vol. I, p. 244-5. Wolfson believes that Kabbalistic ideas constitute only a minor influence on Spinoza's thought, Vol. I, p. 17.

3. Probably the most accurate biography is *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza*, ed. and tr. by A. Wolf (London, 1927). Wolf surmises that the probable author is Lucas. The most influential biography, although one that has proven so full of errors that it is hardly to be trusted on any account is that of the Lutheran minister, John Colerus, which can be found in an early English translation as an appendix in Sir Frederick Pollock's work on Spinoza. (see below note 5). There is also a biography of Spinoza in Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, and an introduction to the posthumous edition of Spinoza's works. Both the latter can be found in translation in Wolf's book.

4. *The Oldest Biography, Ibid.*, p. 43.

5. Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy*, (London, 1880).

6. *History of the Jews*. Pollock's description of the Amsterdam Rabbis as feeble and lacking in perception, *Ibid.*, p. 6, seems to be original to him, but his disdain for the Kabbalah is borrowed from Graetz who writes of it as a "fungus" grown on the back of Judaism. Pollock in fact uses the same metaphor.

7. *The Oldest Biography*, p. 43.

8. All the early biographers follow Lucas who must be considered the sole source of this information. Colerus hardly has first hand information as he does not even get the name right and Bayle is entirely derivative of Colerus.

9. (Macmillan, 1967), Vol. 7, pp. 530-1.

10. K. O. Meinsma, *Spinoza und sein Kreis*, tr. into German by Lina Schneider (Berlin, 1909).

11. Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socianism and its Antecedents* (Cambridge, 1945).

12. Jacob Freudenthal, *Spinoza Leben und Lehre*, ed. by Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg, 1927).

13. Printed in English tr. as an appendix to William Sewell, *The History of the Rise, Increase and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers*. The edition I used was printed by Isaac Collins (Burlington, N.J., 1774<sup>3</sup>).

14. *Op. cit.*, p. 415.

15. Madelaine Francis, *Spinoza Dans les Pays Neederlands*, (Paris, 1937).

16. Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos* (New York, 1959), ch. 10, "The Dutch Jerusalem".

17. All the documents relating to Spinoza's family were collected by A. m. Vaz Dias and W. G. van der Tak in *Spinoza, Merchant and Autodidact*, which was translated in English and published as a special edition of *Studia Rosenthaliana*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1982), pp. 103-195.

18. Yosef Kaplan, "The Portugese Jews in Amsterdam, From forced conversion to a return to Judaism", *Studia Rosenthaliana*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1981), pp. 37-51.

19. Roth, *Op. Cit.*, ch. 3. "The General Conversion in Portugal". The distinction between early and late emigrés is upheld in the Responsa literature, see H. J. Zimmels, *Der Marraner in der Rabbinischer Literatur* (Berlin, 1932).

20. Roth, *Ibid.*, ch. vii, "The Religion of the Marranos". Roth's picture is borne out by a close reading of the Responsa literature, see Zimmels, *Op. Cit.*

21. Acosta's autobiography and other writings along with materials relating to his biography were published by Carl Gebhardt as *Die Schriften des Uriel da Costa* (Amsterdam, 1922). An English translation of this autobiography appeared in Leo Schwarz' *Memoirs of My People* (New York, 1943), pp. 884-94. I. S. Revah uncovered material which seems to show that at least some Jewish ritual was practiced by Acosta's family and that his plea of growing up ignorant of Judaism has to be questioned, see his "La Religion d'Uriel da Costa, Marrano de Porto", *Revue de L'Histoire des Religions*, Vol. 161 (1962), pp. 45-76. Nevertheless, this new evidence does not negate the fact that Acosta was a believer during his early adulthood.

22. I. S. Revah, *Spinoza et le Juan de Prado* (Paris, 1959). See also the excellent biography of Orobio de Castro by Joseph Kaplan: *From Christianity; to Judaism: the Life and Work of Isaac Orobio De Castro* (Jerusalem, 1982).

23. Joseph Kaplan, "Rabbi Saul Morteira's Treatise 'Arguments Against the Christian Religion'", in Joseph Michman ed., *Studies on the History of Dutch Jewry*, Vol. I (Tel Aviv, 1975), pp. 9-23.

24. Cited in Zimmels, *Op. Cit.*

25. From a Responsa of Joel Sirkes, quoted in Gebhardt's *Da Acosta*, *Op. Cit.*, p. xxiv, and see also notes p. 244.

26. Some have theorized that only scholarship students are on the lists in our possession.

27. There are, on the one hand, the vituperative attacks on the Rabbis by Frederick Pollock, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 6-11, including his characterization of Morteira as not, "in the first rank of Jewish learning," and, on the other hand, Joseph Kaplan's

more recent characterization of Morteira as "one of the outstanding personalities of Sephardic Jewry in Western Europe in the seventeenth century", Kaplan, "Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira's . . ." *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

28. Kaplan, *Ibid*, where much of the literature on Morteira is surveyed. H. P. Salomon has argued that Morteira's description of the Portuguese Converso who seeks to become a Jesuit and is refused a dispensation by Rome (see above) is autobiographical, see his "Haham Saul Levi Morteira en de Portugese Nieuw Christienen", *Studia Rosenthaliana*, Vol. X, No. 2 (July 1976), pp. 127-41. Kaplan does not accept Salomon's hypothesis (private communication), and I find it difficult to believe that Morteira acquired all of his Rabbinic and Talmudic training late in life and yet was able to be considered the most knowledgeable of the Amsterdam Rabbis and be selected as the Chief Rabbi. Morteira's work survives widely in manuscript indicating its extensive popularity; several copies of his *Providencia de Dios con Israel* can be found in the Columbia University Library.

29. An announcement of the auction of Aboab's library held subsequent to his death can be found in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The details of his life are taken from Cecil Roth's entry on him in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 2, cols. 95-96.

30. Cecil Roth, *Life of Menasseh ben Israel* (London, 1934). For his contacts with Dutch Hebraists see Aaron L. Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis: Seventeenth Century Apologetics and the Study of Maimonides' 'Mishneh Torah'* (Cambridge, 1984).

31. A seventeenth century traveller reported on the curriculum in his travelogue, see R. Sabetai Bass, *Shivtei Yisheimim*, quoted in S. Asaf, *Mekorot Le-toldot Hahinukh Be-Yisrael*, Vol. I (Tel Aviv, 1930). Also quoted in Zvi Scharfstein, *History of Jewish Education in Modern Times*, Vol. I (Jerusalem, 1960<sup>2</sup>).

32. A. M. Vaz Dias and W. G. Van Der Tak, *Spinoza Merchant and Autodidact*, a special issue of *Studia Rosenthaliana*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1982), pp. 103-195.

33. E.g. the controversy that broke out among the Amsterdam Rabbis concerning the fate of the soul, see Alexander Altmann, "Eternality of Punishment: A Theological Controversy with the Amsterdam Rabbinate in the Thirties of the Seventeenth Century", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. 40 (1972), pp. 1-88.

34. So Pierre Bayle in his *Dictionary*, quoted in *The Oldest Biography*, p. 161.

35. "Juan de Prado", in *Chronicum Spinozanum*, Vol. 3 (1923), pp. 269-291.

36. *Spinoza et le Dr. Juan de Prado* (Paris, 1959), an examination of the Jewish communal documents elaborated the connection with Daniel Ribera: "Aux Origines de la Rupture Spinozienne", *Revue des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 123 (July/Dec 1964), pp. 359-431. Juan de Prado's life was further elaborated in a later series of articles: "Aux Origines de la Rupture Spinozienne: Nouvel Examen des Origines du Déroulement et des Consequences del L'affaire Spinoza-Prado-Ribera", *Annuaire du College de France*, Vol. 70 (1970), pp. 562-8; Vol. 71 (1971), pp. 574-589; Vol. 72 (1972), pp. 641-653.

37. I. S. Revah, *Spinoza et le Dr. Juan de Prado*. Leiden was a center of Semitics study and attracted itinerant Jewish students. Rijnsburg, where Spinoza later settled, is eight kilometers from Leiden and connected to it by canal.

38. Carl Gebhardt pointed this out long ago, “. . . er Mühe hatte sich in dieser Sprache zurecht zufinden.”, in the appendix to Kuno Fischer’s *Geschichte der Neueren Philosophie*, (Heidelberg, 1928), Vol. II, p. 602.

39. A. K. Offenberg, “Letter of Spinoza to Ludwig Meyer”, in Siegfried Hessing (ed), *Speculum Spinozanum: 1677-1977* (London, 1977), pp. 426-435.

40. Cecil Roth, “Aboab’s Proselytization of Marranos,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 23 (1932-3), p. 127.

41. *The Correspondence of Spinoza*, tr. and ed. by A. Wolf, (London, 1928).

42. Earlier Spinoza mocks theologians who try to give a theological explanation of natural disasters: “These, they maintain, happen because the Gods are angry on account of wrongs done to them by men, or on account of sins committed in their worship. And though their daily experience contradicted this, and though infinitely many examples showed that conveniences and inconveniences happen indiscriminately to the pious and impious alike, they did not on that account give up their longstanding prejudice. It was easier for them to put this among the other unknown things, whose use they were ignorant of, and so remain in the state of ignorance in which they had been born, than to destroy that whole construction and think up a new one.

“So they maintained it as certain that the judgments of the Gods far surpass man’s grasp. This alone, of course, would have excused the truth to be hidden from the human race to eternity, if Mathematics, which is concerned not with ends, but only with the essences and properties of figures, had not shown men another standard of truth.” All quotations from the *Ethics* are taken from *The Collected works of Spinoza*, ed. and tr. by Edwin Curley, (Princeton, 1985).

43. Roth, *Marranos*, p. 17; Zimmels, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 79-80.

44. “Aboab’s Proselytization . . .”, p. 127.

45. Zimmels, *Op. Cit.*, p. 77.

46. Geneviève Brykman, *La Judéité de Spinoza* (Paris, 1972).