The Heretic Jew
A study of Spinoza, Judaism's eminent outcast.

JETRAYING SPINOZA
The Renegade Jew Who Saved Us Modernity.
By Rebecca Goldstein.
By HAROLD BLOOM

To analyze influence, you may well begin with its greatest denier, Baruch de Spinoza. His "Ethics" excites controversy, singularity and all scenes of instruction, by which we learn from those who precede us. But was this Great Original original? He flew through the nets of Judaism, Calvinism, Aristotelianism and the Cartesian dualism, but nevertheless Descartes was his starting point. Could he have become Spinoza? Descartes? Did he beget himself, as Socrates did, or even as Hobbes largely was self-generated? Spinoza's "Nature or God" is not only another of the Cartesian formulations, but Spinoza relies upon a number of Cartesian concepts.

Spinoza, though the Oxford philosopher Stuart Hampshire found in him a prophet of what we now call "science," has confused many others who also exalted him. Novats and Coleridge found in him the "God-intoxicated man"; Shelley, however, discovered in him another inspiration for his essay "The Necessity of Atheism." Shelley was right (as almost always). Spinoza is the death of Biblical Revelation, as was Hobbes. Blake's negative litany "Bacon, Newton and Locke" could also have been "Spinoza, Hobbes and Christian Huygens," the Dutch astronaut who preferred lenses ground by the meticulous Spinoza. Leo Strauss (never to be confused with our plague of his disciples' disciples) implicitly manifested a distaste for Spinoza, in surprising contrast to his high regard for Machiavelli. After expending a recent month in constantly reading Spinoza, I find myself ambivalent toward this grandest of Jewish secular philosophers. (Wittgenstein was uneasily aware of his Jewish lineage, and rectificed about it.) Rebecca Goldstein's poignant brief life of Spinoza seems free of any ambivalence toward him, perhaps because she studies him as a melancholy instance of the increasingly vexed question of Jewish identity. Excommunicated by Amsterdam Jewry in 1656, the not-deeply charigned 23-year-old Spinoza did not become a Calvinist, and instead consorted with more liberal Christians, particularly Mennonites. The magnificient John Milton and his friend Henry Vane also were champions of the conviction that each Christian was to read and interpret the Bible for himself or herself, illuminanted only by a light shining inward.

The German and English Romantics (Shelley aside) got Spinoza wrong. Reading his superbly cryptic masterpiece, the "Ethics," I find myself agreeing with Strauss that Spinoza pragmatically was an Epicurean materialist. As in Epicurean Lucretius, Spinoza's God is scarcely distinguishable from Nature, and is altogether indifferent to us, even to the intellect. Love for him as urged upon us by Spinoza. Many Americans are persuaded that God loves each of them, personally and individually. I am not so blessed, in this era of George W. Bush, or is it the American malaise, partly productive of the daily sloughing on the streets of Baghdad? A transfiguration of Spinoza into our religion-mad nation could only be a good thing.

Is it possible, right now, to affirm Jewish identity, or any other spiritual affinity, and not betray Spinoza? Goldstein, a novelist and professor of philosophy, ruefully fears that we have to betray Spinoza constantly, not just religiously, but to yield to any human affect, love included. Spinoza was uncanonically, both personally and philosophically. He wore a signet ring reminding him to be cautious, in contrast to the flamboyant Shelley, whose own ring proclaimed that the good time would come. And yet Spinoza was fearless (like Shelley) in regard to this life, as to the nonexistent next life. He denied personal immortality, and worshiped reason alone. He appears to have had no sexual life, existed austerely, and sensibly allowed his most important writings, including the "Ethics," only a limited publication. As a teacher of reality, he practiced his own wisdom, and was surely one of the most exemplary human beings to have lived. He troubles me most by his extraordinary autonomy, all but unique in that Jewish history of which he did not desire to be a participant, in any way whatsoever.

Spinoza's family were Portuguese Marranos, enforced Jewish converts to Roman Catholicism who returned to Judaism when Calvinist Holland permitted it. Portugal, like Spain, destroyed its prosperity and much of its culture by expelling Jews and Moors, or by converting them into second-class citizens. New Christians under perpetual threat of Christian acts of the faith, public burnings that served both as spiritual purification and popular entertainment. Though he evaded Christianity, Spinoza gladly absorbed many of its standards against Judaism. I am justly angry when he employs "Pharisee" as a term of abuse, in the manner of the New Testament: "what did he think of Rhi- " God of heaven and earth, as the greatest of the prophets, surpassing Moses. Is there anything Jewish about Spinoza? Goldstein seems to me weakest when she rather desperately argues by inference that his detachment and loftiness were defenses against the sufferings of Jewish history. She has to extrapolate from one ambiguous letter, to a former student who had converted to Catholicism, in order to surmise a Spinoza anguished at the ordeals of his own people. I like her for it, but am not persuaded when I read back and forth in the philosopher's copious pages and encounter his icy sublimity. Strauss, subtly reading between the lines, uncovered a Spinoza hostile to the Hebrew Bible, and to the Oral Law of a tradition he had repudiated before his people, in response, excommunicated him.

Goldstein seems well aware that the word "betraying" in her title is both verb and adjective. She perhaps means by it her own anxiety at betraying him, but I cannot avoid interpreting it as a modifier, since she insists upon a Jewish context, which ultimately seems to me irrelevant. Spinoza taught an intellectual love for his God, a God himself incapable of love. Though his enemies called him an "atheistic Jew," he himself emphasized his stance as a Dutch democrat, anti-monarchist and elitist, since he overly despised the multitude of his fellow citizens. I do not think Spinoza would have wept for Amsterdam, just as Socrates would not anguish over Athens, unlike the Jesus who wept for Jerusalem. I wish I could agree with Goldstein, who finds in Spinoza's salvation-through-peace-of-mind a reaction-formation in response to Jewish martyrdom. But he was greatly cold, and coldly great; personally admirable and one of philosophy's rare saints. Read his "Ethics": it will illuminate you, through light without heat.

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