What Ifs of Jewish History
From Abraham to Zionism

Edited by
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The following text is an English translation of an unpublished encyclopedia entry entitled “Baruch de Spinoza” (Figure 11). The author of the entry was the controversial Jewish philosopher and publisher, Jakob Klatzkin (1882–1948). He wrote the draft sometime after 1933, three hundred years after Spinoza’s birth, for the German language edition of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Klatzkin co-edited the encyclopedia with the Jewish historian Ismar Elbogen for the Eshkol Publishing Society in Berlin. Between 1928 and 1934, the first ten volumes appeared, spanning the entries “Aach” to “Lyra.” An additional five volumes were planned. The volume in which the entry for Spinoza would have appeared was never published, due to the crushing political and financial strains upon Jewish publishing houses in Nazi Germany.

Born in Bereza Kartuskaya, Russia, Klatzkin was the son of a respected orthodox rabbi. At age eighteen he traveled to the university town of Marburg, Germany, to study philosophy with the famed German Jewish neo-Kantian philosopher, Hermann Cohen. Klatzkin went on to receive his doctorate at the University of Berne in 1912. During the Second World War, Klatzkin took refuge first in Switzerland before fleeing to the United States, where he lectured at the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago. In 1947, after a brief period in New York,

* This chapter is a work of fiction. It is dedicated to the memory of Richard Popkin. His ceaseless skepticism regarding the state of historical knowledge about early modern scientific skepticism inspired and informed some central assertions attributed to Spinoza in what follows.
he returned to Switzerland where he died in 1948. Throughout his career, Klatzkin was an ardent Zionist who polemicized against Jewish assimilation and promoted a militantly vitalist vision for a Jewish state. Vitalism for Klatzkin meant that a biological national will determined all standards for Jewish existence. In his worldview, Zionism entailed
the thoroughgoing recovery and secular transformation of concepts deriving from the Jewish people, the Hebrew language, and the land of Israel. All of Jewish history and thought – indeed, the entire history of the world – needed to be reconceived within a cosmological drama centering on the exertion of the Jewish national will. For Klatzkin, Zionism gathered its strength as it freed itself from the reliance on foreign culture and the political conditions of powerlessness. Klatzkin’s political philosophy further represented a Jewish version of Nietzschean _Lebensphilosophie_. He sought to transform the unhealthy foreign influence of the classical legacy of Greece and Rome upon the Jews by translating that legacy into Hebrew. This effort was part of a larger nationalist campaign to once more root the Jewish people – like Judaism itself – in their primordial land and language.

Readers may wonder what relevance, if any, Klatzkin’s philosophy had for his views on Spinoza. After all, Spinoza’s intellectual persona was profoundly shaped by a fierce independence from – and, indeed, an attack on – Jewish sources and philosophical traditions. Moreover, Spinoza became the hated or celebrated forerunner of the modern assimilated Jew who sought to live in a world and think in terms beyond the confines of Judaism and Christianity. Klatzkin was incensed by the way in which Spinoza’s punishment for transgressing Judaism’s proscribed boundaries became the source of non-Jewish _Schadenfreude_. In the eyes of many observers, the Amsterdam Jewish community’s notorious ban against the philosopher became the marker of Jewish narrow-minded and cruel dogmatism. And, yet, Klatzkin surprisingly affirmed Spinoza and his legacy. In the early 1920s, Klatzkin wrote a Hebrew book on Spinoza’s “life, works, and system of thought” and translated Spinoza’s _Ethics_ into Hebrew (_Torat hamidot me-et Baruch Spinoza_). Based on nationalist criteria as well as his own hubris, Klatzkin viewed his translation as a more original achievement than Spinoza’s original Latin text. Klatzkin sought to overcome the double distortion of Spinoza’s text: its Latin composition as well as the philosophical reliance on geometric method. In his view, both elements mangled Spinoza’s authentic Jewish voice, which could only be recovered by returning to the Hebrew of his original thinking. Klatzkin’s translation generated a philosophical vocabulary that helped shape such a lexicon during a formative moment in the development of modern Hebrew. He was determined to capture and return Spinoza to the national fold, an effort that, for him, marked a natural continuation of Spinoza’s own
belated atonement and return to Judaism. Spinoza’s philosophy marked a systematic rebellion against the classical rabbinic and medieval Jewish philosophical traditions of a personal transcendent God and the acceptance of rabbinic dogma. For Klatzkin, however, these factors provided all the more reason to elevate Spinoza into a modern nationalist hero. At the center of Spinoza’s revolt lay the status of a transcendent God, a paradox confirmed in Spinoza’s pivotal – if private – legalistic return to the Jewish fold in the year 1672.

Philosophical “Spinozism” and Spinoza’s critique of revelation remained anathema to Klatzkin’s teacher, Hermann Cohen. But even this liberal founder of neo-Kantian idealism eventually conceded that Spinoza’s malicious motives for his critique of Judaism were mitigated by his willingness to officially atone for unspecified actions and opinions that were contrary to the true teaching of the Torah; this was especially true given the fact that his atonement was intended to protect the Jews of Amsterdam who were vulnerable to persecution following the French seizure of the city in 1672. For Cohen’s Zionist opponents, Spinoza’s repentance was especially important. Several Zionist thinkers, religious and secular, looked to Spinoza’s politically motivated return to Judaism as a crucial turning point in Jewish history. They believed that he acted as he did in order to secure the safety of Amsterdam Jewry, thereby solidifying his place in the national memory as a precursor to the type of political consciousness approaching modern Zionism. In his Ethics, Spinoza argued that the incorporation of mathematics into philosophy allowed the latter to finally be released from scholastic theological presuppositions. A concomitant reliance on mundane political causation allowed him to forge a new political project: helping the Jews return to their ancestral homeland without the aid of messianic intervention.

Spinoza was already living outside Amsterdam’s Portuguese Jewish community and circulating openly among Quakers and free-thinking Christians when the herem (or religious ban) was issued against him in the year 1656. According to Klatzkin, Spinoza simply wanted to live out of the reach of what he believed was the falsely pious, financially minded lay leadership (parnasim) of the Amsterdam Jewish community, who could use their financial leverage at any time to crack down against the presence of a confession-free man in their midst. The official document of excommunication, like the document that formally accepted his repentance and return to the community, lay unnoticed in the back of a closet of the Etz Chaim library for almost
two centuries. Up until that point, Pierre Bayle's famous account of the events in the French Encyclopedia offered the consensus view of what had happened: the Amsterdam Sephardic Jewish community tried to prevent Spinoza from being too disruptive and keep him within the communal fold. Spinoza tried to be one of the first individuals to live without any religious affiliation, but found that he could not escape his past and was pestered constantly about the Jewish view of things by his philosemitic millenarian friends.

At this juncture, he finally came to breaking point and called in a few favors. The intervention of his friend, Rabbi Benjamin Musafia of Copenhagen, together with pressure from the Venetian authorities and Menash ben Israel, convinced the Amsterdam Sephardic mercantile leadership to perform a second, semi-private ceremony, this time to re-admit Spinoza into the community. Just as he was most likely absent when he was officially banned, he was probably absent for his re-admission. And, yet, one can imagine that there was a dramatic scene similar to the one experienced by the famed apostate, Uriel da Costa, who underwent a painful and humiliating penance in Amsterdam in 1640. Indeed, it may have resembled the scene depicted in Berthold Auerbach's famed biographical novel, Spinoza (1840), in which the writer embellished da Costa's own account of lying underneath the front door of the synagogue so as to facilitate his own public trampling. On a formal note, the banishment was neither rescinded nor annulled. Instead, the banned individual confessed guilt for his transgressions, begged forgiveness, and pledged to follow the authority of the Torah. There is an element that appeared in the case of da Costa that was curiously absent in the case of Spinoza: in the latter, the banned individual was not required to affirm the authority of either the communal leadership or the congregation. Even though he may have never seen the document, Rabbi Musafia probably knew that the absence of any promise to obey communal authority was too incredible to pass muster with other rabbinic authorities if it ever became public.

Once the discovery of Spinoza's repentance document secured him official re-admission into the Amsterdam Jewish community, the philosopher's legacy began to exert a subtle but powerful impact upon generations of Jewish thinkers. His heretical views remained essentially untouched by his statement. Nevertheless, figures ranging from Moses Hess to Rav Abraham Isaac Kook proceeded to lionize Spinoza for his momentous and spiritually questionable act of atonement. Non-Jewish
critics of rabbinic and Jewish communal authority, meanwhile, were no longer able to gloat that ghetto-bound Jews retained punitive powers in matters of dogmatic belief.

Klatzkin's encyclopedia entry reveals a particularly Jewish nationalist and Zionist ambivalence regarding earlier renegades such as Spinoza. For even if Spinoza's atonement was illegitimate in spirit, even if Spinoza had never made any such gesture, Klatzkin's reception history would not change all that much when it came to Zionist engagements with this seminal Jewish heretic and hero.

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Baruch de Spinoza (Encyclopedia Judaica entry, unpublished)

Baruch/Benedictus de Spinoza was born on November 24, 1630 to Portuguese Jewish parents in Amsterdam. He was excommunicated by the Amsterdam Sephardic community in 1656. While learned in medieval and classical thought (Jewish, Greek, and Roman), he boldly carried a vision of philosophy and science beyond the medieval world into the modern era. He became one of the most famous and controversial thinkers by the late eighteenth century for attempting to construct a philosophical system — from root to branch — without any theological assumptions. He was just as controversial politically. His Theologico-Political Treatise, initially published anonymously in 1670, presented a republican form of government free from the pernicious effects of ecclesiastical hypocrisy and intolerance. He demanded that philosophy not be forced to play the maidservant to theology. This political vision was connected to a critical historical approach to the Bible, one that restored the words of a putatively sacred text to the natural world of humanity. Along the way, Spinoza launched a sustained assault upon rabbinic Judaism. To name but a few examples, he denied the Mosaic authorship and origin of the Pentateuch, arguing that the texts were written, compiled and redacted over several generations. As for the legitimacy of any Jewish claims to being elect among the nations, Spinoza argued that divine election of the Hebrews was conditioned upon sovereignty. Now that there was no longer a Hebrew commonwealth, Jews had no
claim to chosenness. One further implication of this political reading of Judaism was that rabbinic authority had no juridical authority on post-exilic Jewry. The validity of the Torah as a legal constitution was also purely dependent on sovereignty. Once Jewish sovereignty ceased to exist, so did any legal obligations and authority based upon it.

Spinoza's legacy raises difficult questions for scholars. Was he a "God intoxicated philosopher," as claimed by the German romantics? Or was he a skeptical atheist, who ultimately broke with his nascent community and never looked back? There is little doubt that Spinoza must be considered one of the first modern Jews: a Jew who crossed the threshold beyond rabbinic authority and nevertheless ultimately remained faithful to the nation of his ancestors. Perhaps he did appoint himself as the founder of a new church, one that insisted upon commitment to the dictates of reason; yet, he recognized that in order to secure the possibility of individual and collective felicity, creative accommodation to certain beliefs and even covenants was required. He had the political impudence to transform Amsterdam Jewry according to the dictates of his Theologico-Political Treatise, wherein wisdom would no longer be held captive to the medieval ghetto authority of an unenlightened clergy. Spinoza never had the chance to implement his grand political scheme, but he made the ultimate intellectual sacrifice to do so. In the midst of intrigue and foreign occupation, he found a way to officially repent and return to the then-recognized authoritative structure of Judaism without fully compromising his radical materialism and rationalism.

The paradoxes of Spinoza's life and thought explain the dynamic reassessment, appropriation, and rejection of his legacy in the centuries that followed. As an elitist who weighed the power and felicity of a polity's constituents as the decisive force in determining the value of any state; as a Jew who sought to cast off the shackles of Jewish rabbinic and communal authority, but who only stepped into the political arena in the hope of salvaging a people whose official opinion of him was one of indifference or contempt, Spinoza has remained problematic for most individuals in positions of Jewish religious and communal leadership. Given his desire to live beyond the constraints of normative Judaism and his transgression of the boundaries of received prejudice, how could Spinoza have acquiesced to religious authority and affirmed his loyalty to Judaism and the Jewish people?

Although initially confounding, his actions become more comprehensible once we understand how the philosopher viewed the terms
of his testament. Despite the outward appearance of his apology – indeed, despite his affirmation of a biblical and rabbinic tradition of revealed legal authority – Spinoza remained true to his own free intellectual spirit. He successfully returned to Judaism and the Jewish community without undergoing the kinds of physical and spiritual humiliations experienced by Uriel da Costa. Spinoza’s peculiar confession of atonement explicitly affirmed Jewish religious authority while subverting the very pillars of received belief that would crumble over the coming centuries. In the end, Spinoza’s act must be seen as a nationalist one, wherein Judaism’s theological bases were translated and recast in political nationalist terms.

Familial and marrano background

Although Spinoza was born in Amsterdam, his parents originally hailed from Portugal, where they had lived as official Christians (conversos) before inquisitorial authorities had them arrested for Christian heretical practices and beliefs. They both confessed to being Judaizers and then left Portugal for the Netherlands, where they lived under the auspices of the Sephardic Jewish authorities in Amsterdam. The Sephardic community of Amsterdam had officially established itself in 1638 by unifying three synagogues into “The Holy Congregation Talmud Torah.” This young community was self-conscious about its status in the eyes of surrounding Jewish and even Christian authorities, given the unorthodox ways in which returning marranos observed rituals and read canonical texts. While living as official Christians under the threat of the Inquisition, secret Jews would perform Jewish rituals in a covert or inverted way so as to avoid detection: sweeping dirt into the house on the Sabbath; lighting candles for favorite Christian saints on Friday; observing Christian fast days around the time of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). But similar strategies became common when reading sacred texts as well. After all, crypto-Jews could not be caught with Hebrew books, much less post-biblical rabbinic works. They obtained knowledge about Judaism through an over-reliance on the Hebrew Bible. They also read Christian texts, such as the Gospels and even Christian polemics, in order to glean information about dietary laws and rites of mourning. The same held true about such topics as Jewish election, the nature of the afterlife, the Messiah, and Jesus. These reading habits instilled an interpretative approach to the Hebrew Bible that was unhinged
from traditional conventions of commentary and often produced skepticism regarding beliefs and positions prescribed by normative orthodox Judaism. While no longer Christian, several prominent returnees to Judaism came to scrutinize and subvert rabbinic glosses on biblical texts. Thus, Isaac Orobio da Castro and Uriel da Costa could not simply abandon the type of intellectual independence they had exercised when confronting authoritative meanings, be they Jewish or Christian. There seems to have been a remarkable proclivity of many intellectually prominent *marranos* to veer toward innovative, but highly heretical, forms of skepticism.

Many scholars have speculated that Spinoza, being the son of *marranos*, absorbed some of his community’s religious syncretism and tendency to subvert orthodoxy. Like other Iberian refugees who later returned to a normative Jewish practice, Spinoza’s paternal grandfather was circumcised only after his death in 1619. The religious practices of the offspring of former *marranos* were regularly questioned in returnee communities established in places such as Amsterdam during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the fate of former apostates remained a highly sensitive issue for rabbinical authorities struggling to re-absorb new Christians. They officially atoned for their sin of apostasy and made *teshuvah*, or repentance. Spinoza never converted to Christianity, but scholars have often projected his famed heretical skepticism back into his youth and claimed that it led to eventual banishment from the Amsterdam Jewish community.

The excommunication

Spinoza’s life and thought, like his reputation and legacy, are defined by sharp paradoxes. Tumult and tranquility, impiety and piety, virtue and wickedness permeate the scholarly literature on this Jewish heretic, who was expelled from the official Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish community in 1656. While the writ of excommunication (*herem*) offers the most extreme language of curse and banishment that was available at the time, the document does not disclose the nature of his actions that put the budding thinker beyond the pale of acceptable behavior. Although representative of an extreme form of excommunication, the document was still *pro forma*. The lay leadership of the Spanish-Portuguese community (the Senhores of the Mahamad) proclaimed that their repeated attempts to get the young Spinoza to
recognize the wrongness of his opinions and actions had proved futile. His “horrible heresies, which he practiced and taught,” as well as his “monstrous actions,” necessitated a harsh punishment of excommunication, whereby all interaction with the banned be forbidden. The document pronounces the ban as follows:

After the judgment of the Angels, and with that of the Saints, we excommunicate, expel and curse and damn Baruch d’Espinoza with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of this holy community in front of the holy scriptures with its 613 commandments, with the anathema with which Joshua banned Jericho, and with the curse with which Elisha cursed the youths, and with all the curses which are written in the Law. Cursed be he by day, and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down, and cursed be he when he rises up; cursed be he when he goes out, and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not pardon him; the anger and wrath of the Lord will rage against this man, and bring him all the curses which are written in the Book of the Law, and the Lord will destroy his name from under the Heavens, and the Lord will separate him to his injury from all the tribes of Israel with all the curses of the firmament, which are written in the Book of the Law.

While the rhetorical explosions contained in the writ of the ban received considerable attention upon its discovery in 1841, several Europeans in the seventeenth century still joyously pointed to the simple fact of Spinoza’s excommunication as symbolizing an intolerant ghetto Jewish mentality. Yet after the discovery of Spinoza’s testament of repentance, few Europeans have recognized that it implicitly permitted the banished individual to return to Judaism and the Jewish people. It was this possibility of return that proved so influential for subsequent Jewish historians and intellectuals of Jewish descent from the late eighteenth to the nineteenth century in Germany, whether the leader of the Berlin Jewish Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn, the founders of the academic study of Judaism (Wissenschaft des Judentums), the Jewish writers associated with Young Germany (Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Börne, and Berthold Auerbach) and the Young Hegelians (Moses Hess). Moreover, Spinoza’s legacy takes on a new importance within the Hebrew-based participants in Italian Jewish thought (Samuel David Luzzatto, Shadal) and the Eastern European Jewish Enlightenment and historical
study of Judaism (*Hochmat Yisrael*) (Salomon Rubin and Meir Halevi Letteris). The contested legacy of Spinoza takes on a different trajectory among twentieth-century Jewish philosophers and other academic thinkers (Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Joseph Klausner). Moreover, Jewish nationalists — in particular, Zionists — seized upon Spinoza’s return as an inspiration for deracinated modern Jews to return to Judaism in a nationalist spirit.

**Political intrigue and repentance: suppressed and recovered**

It is only fitting that the document marking Spinoza’s nominal repentance and official return to Judaism in the year 1672 discloses precious little information about the motivations behind his about-face. The surviving document attesting to Spinoza’s public act of *teshuvah* (literally meaning a return, but signaling an act of atonement or repentance) was authorized by the same body that had excommunicated him some sixteen years earlier, this time under the influence of Benjamin Musafia, the Chief Rabbi of Copenhagen, in the winter of 1672. We can only speculate that Spinoza refused to make any direct concessions to the lay communal leadership that had expelled him. Musafia was indebted to Spinoza for having intervened on behalf of his son-in-law the previous year, but he was also in the natural position of interceding on Spinoza’s behalf prior to the arrival of the French armies, which invaded and occupied the Netherlands beginning in 1672. Spinoza was most likely motivated by his fears for the Dutch Jewish community’s safety under the French in deciding to return to the Jewish fold. The fascination of Louis de Bourbon, Prince of Condé (1621—86), with different traditions of thought, culture, and religion, as well as his specific interest in joining an impressive network of Christian Hebraists, informed his offer to Spinoza to join his court. He wished to have a court Jew of Spinoza’s intellectual stature, but he insisted that the philosopher be recognized as a full-fledged Jew in good standing with his community. In return, the prince promised to extend special consideration to the Jewish community of Amsterdam, suggesting that he would not persecute them. Thanks to the prince’s efforts, Spinoza ultimately found himself officially readmitted as a Torah-believing Jew. Although his repentance document stresses his complete acceptance of the teachings of the Torah, there is no mention of his willingness to accept the authority of the board. This act, regardless of the political intrigue associated with
it, shaped Spinoza’s subsequent reputation as a new type of Jewish man, one who stepped outside the comfort zone of speculation and attempted to change the political fortunes of a community under duress.

In Spinoza’s confession, the reader may be shocked to find the philosopher invoke Psalm 55:23: “Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will bear you; He shall never allow a righteous man to falter.” But upon closer study of Spinoza’s philosophical writings, one can see that his recommendations for how to approach the intellectual love of God parallel more traditional ones. The last part of the Ethics can therefore be seen as a modernization of the Psalms, as Harry A. Wolfson has recently suggested. Consolation requires that all of one’s affections and images of things be put in relation to the idea of God (The Ethics, Prop. xv). Spinoza could honestly invoke Psalm 55 in his confession that “God is the great provider, the great comforter, the rock of our salvation, the only reliable refuge when confronted by evil.” Spinoza’s confession and Ethics both mirror traditional expressions found in Spanish rabbi and philosopher Bahya ibn Paqua’s eleventh-century Duties of the Heart, which speaks to the heart’s tranquility as it rests from worldly cares and enjoys relief from the fluctuations of the mind. Turning to a contemplative stance toward God and acceptance of his providence was the best way to find comfort amidst the mind’s anxiety over its disappointments and bodily desires. The troubled soul could only turn to God for true consolation. The only question was whether the God in question was one of transcendent revelation or immanent substance.

Had Spinoza’s document been successfully suppressed — whether by his well-meaning Christian supporters or by the more ambivalent Amsterdam Jewish communal leadership — we might be entitled to ask whether the philosopher’s fidelity to humanity precluded him from linking his own affiliations with the fate of his fellow Amsterdam Jews. But, as we know, the document did eventually come to light. It did not appear for some time, however, and in the absence of accurate information, rumors swirled around the circumstances of Spinoza’s actions.

Early reports and reception

Pierre Bayle, for one, painted an unflattering portrait of Spinoza’s behavior, stating that the philosopher had actually wanted to be given an academic chair at the University of Heidelberg, but that the offer
was withdrawn during negotiations when he expressed hesitation at a genuine conversion and teaching dogmatics. Bayle also reported that Spinoza met with the Prince of Condé along with the infamous Egyptian physician and libertine, Dr. Henri Morelli. Bayle described how Spinoza turned down the offer due to a fear of Catholic persecution. What Bayle did not know was that this was part and parcel of the prince’s plan to include a Jew in his court upon the occupation of the Dutch center of Amsterdam. In the wake of his excommunication, Spinoza circulated amongst free-thinking Christians as well as libertines. He even translated two Quaker tracts into Hebrew in 1657 and 1658.

Spinoza’s earliest biographer Jean M. Lucas offered a report, based on interviews with Spinoza’s landlords, about some of the notable visitors that Spinoza entertained. The Egyptian physician, Morelli, came to the Hague to care for several aristocrats who were suffering from illness. He was accompanied by the Sephardic Jewish merchant Gabriel Milan (1631–89), who was conducting shady business transactions in the name of the Danish crown. Milan was the son-in-law of the Chief Rabbi of Copenhagen, Rabbi Benjamin Musafia, who ultimately played such a crucial role in Spinoza’s repentance. Spinoza appears in official records as a witness for Milan. We now know that Spinoza called upon Rabbi Musafia to orchestrate his own official act of Jewish repentance or “return” to Judaism. For his part, Milan had converted to Lutheranism in order to curry favor with the Danes and in 1684 rose to power as the Danish governor of the Virgin Islands. Only a few years later, however, he was arrested, tried, and executed for fraud and treason. It appears that Milan prevailed upon his father-in-law to accept Spinoza’s act of teshuva. Milan returned to the Hague at the time of the Prince of Condé’s invasion and instructed Rabbi Musafia to tell the leadership of the Amsterdam Sephardic-Portuguese synagogue that they were to accept Spinoza’s statement of atonement and authorize his re-admission into the community. The Prince of Condé made it clear to Spinoza that his former community could only be protected if he had a Jew in good standing serving at his court to represent its interests. Otherwise, Condé suggested, Amsterdam Jewry would face the prospect of expulsion along with a modicum of public violence in order to win over non-Jewish support for the occupiers. At a time when Dutch Jewry faced overwhelming uncertainty and potential catastrophe, Spinoza proved himself to be a virtuous Jewish disciple of the Machiavellian school of Machtpolitik. In the end, it was the political goal of protecting
Amsterdam Jewry from persecution by an occupying force that legitimated Spinoza’s questionable “return” to the Sephardic Jewish community. Spinoza continued to live outside of Jewish Amsterdam even after his putative return.

Reception in the nineteenth century

The impact of Spinoza’s return to the Jewish fold can be registered in the nineteenth century. The Italian Jewish scholar Samuel David Luzzatto (Hebrew acronym, Shadal, 1800–65) wrote several different works that expressed his ambivalent attitude toward Spinoza. Luzzatto consistently rejected Spinoza’s method of biblical criticism and his rationalist critique of emotions. His early Hebrew polemic, Against Spinoza (Neged Spinoza), left no doubt as to what he thought of Spinoza’s effect on Jewish philosophical ethics. Spinoza’s misplaced confidence in reason and nature rather than faith in a providential and transcendent God had to be rejected entirely. Like many other interpreters, Luzzatto turned to Spinoza’s biography for confirmation of his theoretical criticism. He vehemently rejected the portrait of Spinoza as a truly pious Jew circulated by the Galician enlightener Meir Halevi Letteris (1800–71) in the mid 1840s, following the discovery of Spinoza’s apparent act of atonement and return to the community. Letteris was among the first interpreters to recognize the Hebrew, and therefore essentially Jewish, foundation of Spinoza’s writings and life story. For Letteris, Spinoza only stayed away from the synagogue and Jewish community out of fear for his life. By contrast, Luzzatto saw Spinoza’s separation from Jewish communal life as an outward manifestation of a deeper rejection of Jewish norms, such as belief in providence and ethical reliance on compassion above doctrines determined solely by intellect. Spinoza’s intellectual arrogance allowed him to cut himself off from any ethical impulse to sympathize or empathize with other human beings. Luzzatto recoiled when he quoted Spinoza’s revealing credo: “I have striven not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them, nor to hate them, but to understand them” (Political Treatise I.4). Such dispassion was nothing short of inhuman for Luzzatto.

Luzzatto repeatedly returned to the rather grim, if not “pathetic,” last chapter of Spinoza’s life: living his last years outside the geographical boundaries of the Amsterdam Jewish community, ultimately dying alone, without a wife or children. Moreover, Luzzatto
called attention to the fact that the physician who treated Spinoza in his final moments absconded with what little money the philosopher had managed to save.

After Luzzatto learned of Spinoza's *teshuvah* document, however, he came to regard the philosopher as having made an about-face by disowning his earlier impertinent notions. This later interpretation viewed Spinoza as a genuine penitent who was determined to secure not only his blessedness in this world, but in the world to come. In other words, Spinoza's action mitigated and even canceled out the harm associated with his previous impious actions and dangerous philosophy. The key, for Luzzatto, was Spinoza's newfound ability to feel compassion for his fellow Jew and place his fate in the hands of a providential God.

German thinkers were also eager to reassess Spinoza. The famed writer and poet Heinrich Heine was drawn to Spinoza's universalism, but from the heretical vantage point of apostasy rather than excommunication (Figure 12). Heine had participated in the early founding of the circle of Jewish university-educated intellectuals that launched the Scientific Study of Judaism a half decade or so before he converted to Christianity in 1825. Heine incessantly projected his own wishful character onto his protagonists and seized on Spinoza's excommunication from the Jewish community as demonstrating his Christ-like character and significance. "It is a fact that Spinoza's life was beyond reproach and pure and spotless as the life of his divine cousin, Jesus Christ. Like Him, he too suffered for his teachings; like Him he wore the crown of thorns. Wherever a great mind expresses its thought, there is Golgotha."

Spinoza's ordeal of excommunication not only verified his purity of soul, but condemned his Jewish persecutors as executioners of sadistic pomp. Heine narrated the solemn rite of excommunication of Spinoza, culminating in the terrible shriek of the ram's horn (the shofar) rendering the banned Spinoza stripped of any claim to Jewishness. "His Christian enemies," Heine wryly noted, "were magnanimous enough" to still view him as a Jew. By contrast, the Jews, "the Swiss guard of deism," remained vehement in denying Spinoza's place as a Jew with dignity, even after he attempted to rejoin the community. Heine recognized Spinoza's act of atonement as a foolhardy exercise in futility. He subjected himself to the most miserable indignities: being trampled by the community under the front doors of the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam, the very site where "they once tried to stab Spinoza with their long daggers."
Heine’s critic Berthold Auerbach systematically engaged Spinoza and his legacy. In the historical novel *Spinoza* (Mainz, 1837), Auerbach reflected how German Jews viewed their own commitment to culture, science, and ethics as embodying the most universal agents of progress in the first half of the nineteenth century. Auerbach’s historical
novel celebrated the independent man of reason who transgressed the boundaries of all normative religious convention and authority – even the most free-thinking Dutch representatives of the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant faiths. While his skepticism moved him beyond the limits of Judaism in his time, Spinoza embodied a new type of individual whose reflected experience as a Jew detached from particular dogma essentially shaped his independent ethos of concrete universalism. While Spinoza paid a heavy price for his principles, the novel ends with Spinoza paving the way for a type of secularized redemption that can be realized by future generations of those very Sephardic Jews who exiled him and held him in such contempt.

Of course, following the discovery of Spinoza’s repentance documents in 1842, Auerbach needed to modify his portrait of the philosopher. Auerbach had translated Spinoza’s complete works into German in 1841. But in his revised scholarly biographical portrait written in 1843, Auerbach emphatically denied that Spinoza was a universal individual before his time. Instead he saw him as representing a new kind of complicated heretic with a conscience. When the moment came, Spinoza sought to prevent pointless martyrdom of his people. His practical statement of atonement did not have to be seen as hypocritical, but rather as a heroic act of historical necessity. Spinoza had heard about several acts of martyrdom under the Inquisition, not only of Jews and marranos but also Christian scientists, such as Giordano Bruno. He certainly would not undergo the horrifying humiliation that he saw Uriel da Costa suffer. Auerbach’s novel opened with a young Spinoza empathizing with the repentant sinner, whose trampling and whipping eventually drove him to suicide. The novel closes with a broken-hearted Spinoza remaining true to his universalist principles outside the contours of the Judaism of his day, but embodying the most essential realization of Judaism’s universal commitments to science and ethical behavior. Spinoza’s world and his Jewish community did not exhibit these attributes, but this is all the more reason why he inspired nineteenth-century German Jews, who were striving to realize Spinoza’s great efforts. When Auerbach published Spinoza’s writings and translated them into German a year later, he took note of the atonement, which had been brushed aside in the novel as an unsubstantiated rumor. Rather than seeing Spinoza as a tragic and ultimately isolated hero, Auerbach’s introduction framed Spinoza’s life between his excommunication and his return. Auerbach saw the act of return as the mark of a new type of Jew and
Judaism – a Jew who stayed loyal to his ancestral people and essential religious principles, but who nevertheless still remained incapable of accepting dogmatic belief and authority.

Knowledge of Spinoza’s return to the Jewish community was subject to wild speculation for almost one hundred and fifty years after his death. Some of the best-known images of Spinoza are captured in Ernst Altkirch’s book, *Spinoza im Porträt* (Jena, 1913). In addition to icons of the philosopher as a dangerous source of malicious atheism and as a somewhat secularized Christian ascetic, readers will not be surprised to find Spinoza as a more traditionally observant Jew. Friedrich Roth-Scholtz’s 1725 copper-plated engraving (*Kupferstich*) features Spinoza wearing rather conventional dress from the 1670s, but upon closer inspection one sees the barely visible presence of a tallit, a Jewish prayer shawl, under his overcoat.

While Moses Hess is largely known for his notable participation in Young Hegelian philosophico-political disputes, less well known was his rather consistent claim to be a disciple of Spinoza from his early works in the 1830s to the 1860s when he penned his socialist Zionist work *Rome and Jerusalem* (1862). In his earlier book, *The Holy History of Mankind* (1837), Hess described himself as a disciple of Spinoza but portrayed his significance in Hegelian dialectical terms. Christ’s triumph over Judaism was a necessary precondition for Spinoza to eventually resuscitate the “kernel” of Judaism within a form recognizable to Christian conceptions of theologico-politics. “The old law whose body had been buried with Christ has been clarified and resurrected in Spinoza.” Spinoza, the Master, offered a clarification of Jewish universalism that was based not on abstract notions but provide a conception of salvation tied to reason in a concrete, material world. In his writing after 1841, Hess perceived not only world historical significance in Spinoza’s excommunication, but in his documented atonement as well. The latter was seen in philosophical terms as a sublation and overcoming of that alienation from his ancestral religion in which Spinoza sacrificed his own seemingly universalist principles for the good of a particular people. This form of overcoming marked not only the reconciliation of the universal and particular, but provided the hypostatic model of modern Jewish liberation more generally. The fact that Spinoza still remained aloof from official Jewish authority and synagogue life demonstrated that he never abandoned his fierce individuality and yet found a way to reconcile it with the collective good. Spinoza recognized that freedom
was enhanced and not diminished when the individual sees himself as a particular part of a greater totality and labors with others to perfect that collectivity. For Hess, Spinoza’s dive back into the ghetto waters marked an anointment rather than a Jewish baptism. Hess described Spinoza’s return to Judaism not in legalistic but rather conventional poetic terms: “there were tears in the evening and joy in the morning.”

Hermann Cohen, the founder and leader of the Marburg school of neo-Kantian philosophy, would have none of the posthumous whitewashing of Spinoza’s legacy. In the midst of World War I, Cohen offered a strong condemnation of Spinoza, repentant or not. Cohen would later attempt to systematically present Judaism in neo-Kantian terms in The Religion of Reason out of its Sources in Judaism. For Cohen, the root manifestation of Spinoza’s deeper enmity with Judaism lay in the foundations of his philosophy of immanence and historical attack upon the prophetic basis of the Hebrew Bible. Spinoza’s God-or-Nature formula collapsed the fundamental distinction between “is” and “ought” so crucial to ethical monotheism and neo-Kantian ethics. Spinoza’s world did not allow for any divine transcendence nor its ensuing prophetic voice pointing toward a messianic world of the ought. Cohen mobilized a list of offenses that Spinoza had committed against Judaism which were taken from his philosophical works, his historical bringing down to size of the prophets and their writings, and of course his biography. For Cohen, Spinoza’s politically motivated decision to formally “return” to the Jewish community made no sense other than to exemplify Spinoza’s own all-too-worldly orientation.

By contrast, a string of early twentieth-century Jewish nationalists and especially Zionists perceived Spinoza as a properly Jewish Jew. The first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the British Mandate of Palestine, Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), famously recovered Spinoza’s revolutionary zeal as an inspiration for the type of radical transformation of Judaism that could only be integrated within the new confluence of heresy and piety of religious Zionism. Just as the political events of Spinoza’s time prompted him to reembrace his Jewish existence, so the confluence of Zionist unfolding in Palestine would mark the return of all Zionist settlers, regardless of current belief and level of observance.

In 1927, an array of celebrations took place commemorating the 250th anniversary of Spinoza’s death. One of those celebrations took place at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The university’s newly hired Professor of Hebrew Literature, Joseph Klausner, invoked
Spinoza as a heroic model of nationalistic Judaism during the inauguration of the Hebrew University at Mount Scopus. Klausner went beyond affirming Spinoza’s repentance by turning his attention to the historical wrong done to him by the Amsterdam Jewish community. He called for historical restitution in the form of a formal nullification of the original 1656 ban. He called out in liturgical solemnity “To Spinoza the Jew . . . from the heights of Mount Scopus,” from the modern version of “the Temple” which is the Hebrew University. Klausner declared the ban to be officially nullified: “The sin of Judaism against you is removed and your offense against her atoned for twice over. Our brother are you, our brother are you, our brother are you. Baruch Spinoza, you are our brother.”

Klausner’s secularized priestly rite sought to rectify any hesitations regarding Spinoza’s share in Jewish peoplehood. It affirmed Spinoza’s Hebrew core, and reminds us all that the power of the national will cannot be expunged.

J. K.