

Jeremy Rosen - Was Spinoza a Jewish Philosopher

- Okay, Jeremy. So I see that it's two minutes past the hour. And a couple people are still coming in. I think maybe we can start, Jeremy.

- Yep, okay.

- [Wendy] Hand over to you. Thank you.

- So Spinoza is a very controversial guy. On the one hand, he is regarded as one of the nicest philosophers ever. A genuine, sincere, lovely guy without ambition, aggression, or arrogance. On the other hand, he is the only philosopher that has been so to speak, excommunicated, I'm going to come to that in a minute. The question is, what was his philosophy like from a Jewish point of view? Now, I am not going to treat this as a session in serious heavy duty philosophy. So those of you who are looking for an in detailed analysis of Spinoza's thought, particularly in his major work, which was published after his death called "Ethics" are going to be disappointed. I'm going to try to make this an entertaining overview. I want to start with the background to his life. You'll be familiar with the fact that the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 by Ferdinand and Isabella, and they were expelled after a period in which there'd been a massive campaign to convert Jews to Christianity.

And the pressure was so great economically, socially, physically, that many Jews decided to convert outwardly, but privately and secretly retain their Jewish religious identity. They are known to us either as Marranos, which is a term of abuse, you pigs, you hypocrites, or as new Christians. The truth is, there were such examples in the Islamic world, but never to the extent that there were under Christianity in Spain, but not just in Spain. Ferdinand and Isabella encouraged what we now know as the Inquisition, and the Inquisition was a church. Till that moment there was only the Catholic church, the Catholic attempt to purge Christianity of alien influences. And the new Christians were considered suspect, most people say they were considered suspect 'cause they were doing very well in Christian society and they were seen as rivals. But there was also an idea of the purity of blood that somebody who wasn't a pure Christian was considered a danger. And the result was that the inquisitions started looking, hunting for, listening on Christians who might be suspect of being secret Jews.

The result of this, apart from the many who were burnt at the stake, was that Jews started moving from Spain to Portugal. The original Jews who just got up when were expelled, they moved Eastward, they moved first of all to Italy, from Italy towards Greece, from Greece towards Israel when the Ottomans welcomed them. But the new Christians moved essentially from Spain to Portugal, and in Portugal, initially they were free and easy, allowed to remain so long as they were outwardly Christian, they couldn't admit that they were Jewish. Unfortunately, the inquisition followed them into Portugal, and so new Christians started moving out of Portugal, and they moved to different places, Hamburg in Germany, to the Caribbean, to Brazil, which at the time was under Portuguese authority, not Spanish authority.

And they were able to come out in many cases as Jews, wherever it was that they were. But these are people who had for at least one generation being totally detached from their actual Jewish communal life. And therefore their relationship with Judaism when they began to return was complex. The classic example of this migration was a woman called Beatrice de Luna. She was born in Spain, her family as new Christians, took her to Portugal. In Portugal, she married another Christian Jew called Mendez, married him, he died, she inherited his business. She moved to Antwerp via England, in Antwerp, she still had to live as a Christian. This was also at a time when there were some new Christians in England, the doctor to Queen Elizabeth, but he also had not to say publicly that he was a Jew. In this atmosphere, many of these new Christians who become Jewish, found themselves ambiguous in relation to the established Jewish communities they found in different places.

And this was a period also where there was tremendous tension between the Catholics, and now the emerging Protestants. There was a hundred years war in which the Catholics were hoping to hold on to the whole of Europe, the whole of the Roman empire, whereas the Protestants from Germany and the North were beginning to encroach on their territory. And this was the reformation, the reformation, the reforming of Christianity brought about the counter reformation, in which the Catholic church got stricter and stricter, and was not only looking for heretics in the church, but also looking for heretics everywhere. So this during the 17th century was the atmosphere in which people's identity was being challenged. And the new Christians were finding it difficult to know where they belonged. One of the most famous new Christians was a man known as Uriel Acosta. Uriel Acosta suddenly discovered he was really Jewish in Portugal, and he actually then circumcised himself very painfully. And then he moved into Amsterdam and into Northern Europe, and started preaching a kind of a Judaism that was in a way kind of the equivalent of what we might call reformed Judaism. We don't want to practise too many things that make us look different, so the religious ritual side we can adopt, but the ideas, the general principles are what really count.

The trouble was he was a rebel and he got into trouble. He got into trouble with the Catholic church, let alone with any other church. And poor Uriel Acosta was excommunicated, driven out and ended up unfortunately burnt at the stake. Or least he disappeared in a way that looks as though he was burnt in the stake. There was another man by the name of De Prado who challenged the idea that the Bible was written by Moses, who felt that we ought to bring an academic approach and an objective philosophical approach to Judaism and not rely only on what had been handed down and accepted blindly. So just as within the Catholic church, there was this idea of challenging authority. So in the same way in the Jewish world, there were challenges to authority coming from this new wave of Jews who had come out as Jews, but were in a sense not entirely part of the Jewish community. To make matters more complex at the time we're talking about, there was a battle for the supremacy of Holland.

The low countries had always been part of the Holy Roman empire. The Holy Roman empire was by now dominated by the Habsburgs, there were Habsburgs in Austria, there were

Habsburg in Spain. They were the dominant force, the lowlands were part of the Christian world, but part of Burgundy. And Burgundy was coming under attack and assault from the Habsburgs, and Charles the V, was the Habsburg emperor who became the emperor of the whole of Northern Europe, during the 16th century. There was this battle, this battle between the Protestants and the Catholics that waged on for war, for a long time until 1648 when there was a final truth, the truth of west failure, in which for the first time the Protestant states of Holland, were able to attain official independence under what was called the House of Orange.

So for the first time you have the establishment of a Protestant area in Holland, which abuts the Christian Catholic area of where we'd call Belgium into France today. Amsterdam therefore being in a sense more Protestant, was in a sense more welcoming to the new Christians. And so Amsterdam became a centre of the new Christian and of Jewish life before any other country, or town, or state in Northern Europe. But Amsterdam was still caught up in this battle between the Catholics and the Protestants. And even the Protestants had to show how religious they were and non revolutionary for fear of scaring the Catholics. The Catholics wanted to put pressure on the Protestants to make sure that they weren't going off the rails too much, and there was constant threat. In fact the French invaded, the French Catholics invaded Holland because they wanted to take it back for the Catholic church.

And therefore the Jews living in Amsterdam, were very sensitive, they didn't want to make waves, they didn't want to disturb anybody, because they felt they were still relatively vulnerable. And therefore they felt it important to keep the community in low key. This had been the case for a long time in the Catholic church, so for example, Jewish communities living under Catholics, were frightened ever to carry out a divorce because divorce was forbidden in the Catholic church, and as a result they felt inhibited. So this was the atmosphere, and it was an atmosphere remember also of Galileo. It wasn't just the Jews who's suffering, poor old Galileo, he was put on a forbidden list. He was almost excommunicated. So excommunication was one of the major ways in which the Catholic church could wield its power. The Popes have been threatening excommunication to the emperors of the Roman Empire for a long time. The famous encounter with Canossa was where the emperor of the Holy Roman empire bowed down to the Pope. And remember Henry VIII was very worried in England, about whether the pope would excommunicate or not.

Excommunication in the Catholic church meant you would be totally cut off from this world, the church would not accept you in any way and all your property could be confiscated, you could be driven out into exile anywhere, and this was the major tool that the Catholic church had, this idea of excommunication. I mentioned all this because also you had a similar kind of an idea in Judaism. Going back to the Bible, the idea of cherem, cherem basically meant don't touch it, this is pagan. After the Biblical period, by the time you come to the Talmudic period, they had something called cherem or niddui, which basically meant, look, you don't want to abide by our rules, that's fine, no problem, you're still a Jew, but just get out of town sometimes for seven days, sometimes for a month. The cherem did not carry with it any of the theological alienation that excommunication did.

The fact is that cherem, the ban was used, the niddui, by Jewish communities internally in the exile for a long time, and different communities apply different stringencies. How long for? Some even introduced the idea of 40 lashes, except 40 lashes were not the lashes we see that the slaves in the Caribbean and elsewhere were subjected to, or indeed even English soldiers as sailors to the cat-o-nine tails. It was a symbolic tapping 40 times. And there were other customs that somebody had to prostrate themselves in front of the community. But the idea of cherem in Judaism was nothing like excommunication in the Catholic church. The pressure that would be brought on the Jewish community to excommunicate Spinoza was not an inherent Jewish way of dealing with such problems. So there we have some of the background, and we have the background to this man whose father, the father of Spinoza migrated to Amsterdam, came out as a Jew, joined a Jewish community there, was an officer in the synagogue and gave Spinoza his son a very good solid Jewish education in the community.

But Spinoza right man as he was, was listening to the ideas of Prado or the ideas of Acosta. And not only that, but there were also certain Protestant theologians. The most famous one was a man called who had already said before Spinoza, "I'm not certain of the Torah, the Bible is the word of God. I'm not certain it was written by one person at one time, it could have been a composite written at different times." So these ideas were current in the world in which Spinoza grew up. He joined the family business. The family business was affected as often happens by changes in fashion, shipwrecks on the sea, but this was a time when in a sense Holland was at its most powerful as a commercial empire, that extended all the way to Java and the Pacific coast. And there was import and export and Jews played an important part because there were Jews all around the world, they could trust each other.

They didn't have to send money in a golden packet on some human being that might be robbed or lost in the sea, they could send letters of trust to their compatriots around the world, and they played an important part. Unfortunately, Spinoza's father died, the company fell on hard times, Spinoza and his brother tried to keep it going. In the end, Spinoza withdrew, I'm not cut out, he said to be a businessman, and he found a way of earning a living, grinding lenses. And during this time, he began to think about what mattered in life. First of all, he started with his critique of the religion. And his critique of religion was generally a critique of all religion, he saw the bad influence, the Protestant and Catholic conflict was having, this determination to insist that there was only one way of being religious. Only one way of looking at the world was something he set about attacking, and he attacked, I think quite legitimately the abuses of religious power. And in attacking the abuses of religious power, he began to think about then what really should we be thinking in order to lead good lines? If we feel that religion is failing, what is the alternative? What are the options?

Nobody thought at that time, I have to say, that there was not such a thing as God. There was no such thing really at that moment as atheism. There was a difference between what we would call deism and theism. There was a difference between those people who said, "Yeah, God made of the world, somebody had to make the world," they've got no better theory, but you're

not really interested in what we're doing. As opposed to theism says, yes, God cares about every action you take on the world and punish you one way or another if you don't behave. So this distinction between theism and deism was the nearest you came to atheism at the time of Spinoza. There was no secular world at this moment, only religious worlds, and if you didn't want to belong to one you so to speak had to belong to another. In this ferment you have of course the emergence of Voltaire, but this is coming later, this idea of challenging religion altogether and challenging the idea of God and the full enlightenment. But this is the beginning. This is the beginning of looking at religion in a different way. And in his book the "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus" he has two major themes.

This was a book that was published as an attack on religious coercion, on trying to differentiate religion from politics. And at the same time trying to puncture the idea, that religion had all the answers, and that religion was in errant. He couldn't make a mistake, it was in a sense not fundamentalist. And so in his book, the "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus" he says, "Look, this doesn't make sense. I look at the Bible, I can see there are different versions of the same story. There's Moses. How did he get the message from God? How did he transmit it? Was it the 10 Commandments? Was it more than the 10 Commandments? And why was he so interested in imposing laws? Because I as a philosopher think it's ideas that count, it's ideas that really matter." And of course this is the time when you have the emergence of let's say Hobbes as a philosopher in England, challenging the authority of religion, the authority of the king, of the divine right of kings. You have the emergence of Descartes in France who is trying to identify what makes us a human.

How do we know we exist? What does existence matter? And in his "Tractatus Theologicos" he says that, "The true way to find truth, is through the mind," and this of course goes back to the great Greek philosophers. "It is the mind that can discover truth. We don't want revelation, we don't want to be told what to do. We want to be encouraged to think, and thinking leads me to believe that if I can't justify something, then I shouldn't abide by it. I should only behave on the basis of what I can either prove or experience for myself. And therefore I believe that God reveals himself to us through the mind and it's our mind that connects with God." "And that..." he said incidentally, "Is why I believe, that Christian belief in Jesus is superior to Jewish belief in Moses. Because God revealed to Moses the law. The law is about behaviour, it's about discipline, it's about restricting. Whereas God revealed God to Jesus in a revelation that was just about ideas. So that was superior." Now ironically, he didn't in his book "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus" then go on to say, "Ah yes, but Christianity now has as many laws and rituals and restrictions. And it's all very nice to talk about the spirit. But Spirit always needs some sort of structure without structure. The question is, where do you find a balance?"

But this challenge, the Christian Church, as much as it challenged Judaism, "What you're saying, religious isn't the way to behave? You are a danger, and not only are you a danger in the Catholic church to Catholic ideology, you are a danger to us, we Protestants here because we Protestants also want to show that we are very religious and we are not backsliders and we are not going to be heretics. So somebody who's preaching heresy is a real problem for us." And at

this time people are still being burnt at the stake for heresy. So this initial statement of Spinoza in the "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus" got him into tremendous trouble with the Catholic church, with the Protestant church, and they began to put pressure on the Jewish community to take action. And so the Jewish community bent over backwards, I have to say, they bent over backwards to get him to sin and retract just as a Catholic church tried to persuade Galileo to change his mind, or if he wouldn't change his mind, at least not to go on preaching that the earth went round the sun rather than the sun going round the earth.

So in this atmosphere, it was the pressure from the outside as much if not more than the pressure from inside that led to his communication in 1656. By then he had already begun to mix with enlightened people around the Protestant world, both in Holland and in the German states. He was invited to come and lecture, he was something of a celebrity. There were people who had a profound input influence on him. The first person probably to have the major influence on him was a Dutch Protestant theologian called Van Den Enden. Van Den Enden Franciscus was a very religious man, but he was an open-minded man, a man who was interested in issues as was grocious of law, as was Galileo and cosmology. And he had an open home and invited Spinoza to spend time with him, and he studied with him and was impressed by Van Den Enden. Van Den Enden actually also had a beautiful daughter.

And story has it that Spinoza fell mad in love with her, but she maybe something of a blue stocking or for other reasons didn't reciprocate. And maybe that's one of the reasons why Spinoza never got married. In addition to men like Van Den Enden, the political climate in Holland was dominated by two brothers called de Witt, young de Witt was the main thinking one, that he had younger brother and he fought for freedom from religious oppression. Not only did he get into trouble with a Catholic church, but the first William of Orange didn't like him either, 'cause he was a religious man and he didn't like William being challenged. The younger Witt took over the management of the country when William died, and he was, if you like the prime minister, the president. But he got caught up in the French invasion who tried to rub out this independence, and unfortunately as a result of a series of disasters, he was, what's the word, lynched. He and his brother were lynched in Amsterdam, in the Hague as part of this political upheaval. So again, poor Spinoza found himself isolated.

He withdrew to small little communities, he had a few patrons who were able to look after him, and protect him. But as we know, he died at a young age, a ridiculously young age, 1677 of illness probably that came from the infection of his lungs. But this short life had a profound impact. It was made greater by the fact that after he died, his famous book, the "Ethics" was published, he was frightened to publish it beforehand, people warned him not to because it challenged established authority. And therefore many of the philosophers that came after him in Holland, in Germany, Hegel, Kant and others held him in immense esteem. Both because of his pure philosophical thinking, and also because of his courage to stand up to authority. So having said all that and having said that he's been excommunicated from the Jewish community, which so many people I know regret on which it hadn't happened, and which there could have been some way of putting it back 'cause it sounds much worse than it actually was.

How Jewish was Spinoza. Well he had rejected the religion, flat out he was against religion, he was not in favour of it. But I believe that in his ideas he was profoundly Jewish, and that's the second part of this lecture that I want to focus on. He is known for his idea of what we call pantheism. Pantheism is a way of saying God is everything, Spinoza took the view that God is not material in any physical way. Even minologues who he studied and valued the great rationalist had said very clearly, "You cannot say what God is." You can only point to physical objects and say this is what God is. You can't say anything more, that God is good, that God is bad, that God is nice or is not nice, or kind or just or unjust, because these are all things we apply to human beings. And God is not a human being of course.

So what can we say God is? To which Spinoza comes up with an idea that God is everything. God was there beginning, at the middle, right through, God is everything. God is the universe, God is nature, everything is God. And therefore in a sense we are part of God, 'cause we are made up of God. Now that's an idea that comes in Jewish mysticism, as I've spoken before about the Kabbalah. The idea is God is everything aims of endless. There's no way that God can communicate endless, non-physical with a physical being such as we are. And therefore God in a sense has to go through a process of materialisation to become the universe. And so you have this idea that God makes the universe out of God, and therefore we are all part of God. We have a physical structure. But within this physical structure there is this spark, this soul we'll call, which according to Spinoza is the mind, and it's the mind that connects us with the universe and connects us with God.

So we don't have to have all these dogmas that say, God is this, God is all powerful, God is not all powerful, God is good, God is bad, and so forth and so on. It's a concept of being part of the universe, which of course as we know is very similar to the Buddhist idea. So if that is taken, I think very clearly from the Kabbalistic tradition, that the new Christians found very attractive and brought into Amsterdam, that he found himself tremendously attracted to. As I mentioned before, another side of Kabbalah mysticism to do with the practise and to do with the magic and the hocus pocus, of course he wasn't interested in. But this idea of God as being pantheistic, as being part of the universe in itself makes sense, even though it is now common for within Judaism to say, "Ah, yeah." But the big difference is this, Spinoza said the universe is all there was, is all there is and God is not beyond it. Whereas religion says that God is transcendent. It's rather like electricity passing through. There is God which is of a different substance, just to the material. But even that was a very controversial idea, and yet not dissimilar to the sort of ideas that the French philosopher Descartes was talking about.

And Descartes, as you know, followed this great Greek tradition of dualism. There is body and there is mind. The body is like a machine and the mind is like a ghost in the machine, and the body wants to do all dirty, bad, nasty things, and the mind is pure and trying to get the body to behave and do the good things all the time. And these two are in constant conflict. Now the question is of course, where does all this problem come from of the conflict between the body and the mind? Is it an inherent conflict or is it an adopted one? An acquired one? But the fact is

that Kabbalah, again, Jewish mysticism says there shouldn't be a distinction between body and mind. It all comes from God, it's holistic. Or as we might say, you cut off the supply of oxygen and blood to the brain, it ceases to function. So where's your soul then if you've got no blood or no supply coming in. So the idea therefore of the difference between matter and spirit, the role of mind, these are all important ideas that influence Spinoza's thought.

And although he expressed it in very rational terms, in a very formulaic terms, terms that in a sense removed God from the picture altogether if you wanted to. You cannot say that these ideas are not found within the mystical as well as the rational tradition of Judaism, that he inherited and that he studied as a young child. So the rejection is merely the expression, if you like, of his freedom, his own free will to think for himself, which I believe is a fundamental principle in Judaism. That we all have to find our own way to God to understand what God is, how God is, how God works, how we relate to it. It is this enthrallment of our capacity to think for ourselves and to experience for ourselves that lay at the root of Spinoza's ideology, and is at the root of our ideology. And if you turn around and say, well why is it not like that?

Because unfortunately we humans manage to screw up absolutely everything, from politics to sport, to love, to anything you mention. We have this infinite capacity to rise and to sink as the Talmud says, "Why does the Bible compare the Jews to the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens?" Because when we rise we can rise to the heavens, and when we sink we can sink to the dust. And that's true of mankind in general and that's why the ideas of Spinoza are so universal, and that's why he's so universally loved. And that's why I love the guy, even though I disagree with him of course, but who am I to disagree with Spinoza? And I think he is worthwhile accepting as a Jewish philosopher even if he did reject the constraints of Jewish religious life. So that's where I end my presentation, and move over to questions and answers.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: Do modern rabbis tend to agree with Spinoza on some of his opinions are of God?

A: The straight answer is yes. I mean I can think of one modern and orthodox rabbi, actually ironically who comes from from Holland originally, Rabbi Nathan Cardozo who lives in Jerusalem, who is a great supporter of Spinoza in many ways. Of course he disagrees on other things, but he is, if you like somebody who is also very much, sympathetic to Spinoza and regrets deeply the suffering that his brethren and others caused him.

Q: We move on to Stephen an American from Stephen Smith and American professor in Political Science first modern Jew, claiming he was the first well later became known as a Jewish question.

A: I would say he was definitely the first secular Jew, before secular became known, he was a secular Jew. But on the other hand it has to be said that his secularism was such, he didn't want to mix much with Jews and he was happier mixing with non-Jews. But that as much a reflection



of the Jewish community at that time. Nowhere at that time was there such a thing as a secular community, and therefore you had to choose which community you belong to.

Q: Okay, next is Joko. Do you think that Spinoza's use of Judaism, were appallingly affected by the way the Jewish community had treated Uriel Acosta?

A: I have no evidence about that. I have no evidence about that because Uriel Acosta was quite an exception. He was intentionally provocative. Spinoza was never intentionally provocative. He said, "Leave me alone, I don't want to disturb you, I don't want to get in the way of everything." Whereas Uriel Acosta was an evangelist, he wanted a change, he wanted to get people to do what he wanted to do, and therefore he was dogmatic and he brought upon himself these horrible things. And I'm sorry that he met the end that he met, whether it was by suicide or he was a, shall we say, got rid of by the authorities. But I don't think he was a serious religious influence on Spinoza, but he did, if you like, help create this atmosphere of questioning, this atmosphere of saying you don't have to accept authority.

Q: Did Spinoza ideas preached by Jesus, were not from but learned from his knowledge of Judaism?

A: Well that's not what he says in his "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus." He may have said it somewhere else I'm not aware of. But basically he was saying that the revelation of Jesus, the pure revelation was the highest form of revelation as opposed to on Sinai getting some rules and laws, that was the main issue.

Q: I understand cherem was never lifted, if anyone would have the authority to do so now?

A: No, cherems don't have theological authority. A cherem simply means you're not welcome in my community, so no, anybody can say to Spinoza, "Come into my community, I'd be happy to have him in my community to tell you the truth." So the cherem is not in force, it's not an everlasting curse it's simply saying we don't want you in our community. That's it.

Q: As you know, Spinoza did not believe in free will. Would you like to answer this question live?

A: Yes, free will. That's a very good point. He was not a great fan of free will. Of course the question is nowadays, how do we understand free will. If free will means I can do whatever I want to do, then of course he can't because we are constrained by all things. Some of us are constrained by our bodies, by our environment, by our circumstances, by the people we come into touch with. So nobody has total free will, but we do have space for choices. There are certain choices we can make. It's quite true. The fact that once upon a time you might think the fact that I'm male means I'm more likely to marry a female and vice versa. Now we know that's not necessarily the case and people can move in and out, move in and out of religions, moving in out of sexual identities. There are opportunities and yet we are still determined to some extent the religious tradition believes that we can make choices to be better people. We can work

ourselves on ourselves to be better people just as we can do physically to be healthier and fitter so we can, to be spiritual and to be better. And that is a fundamental that I think most religious people do still adhere to to this day. But I think that what basically Spinoza was saying is that there are so many forces in the universe that determine who we are and how we are. The mere way we have evolved is a form of determination. But I think that possibly his purism, his wanting the perfect solution and I don't think there are perfect solutions. That's another way where I disagree both with philosophy and specifically with him. There are no perfect solutions. We are struggling all the time to grate forward.

Q: Next thing, do you think Spinoza was an atheist or just against religion?

A: Look, he was certainly against religious abuse. Nothing wrong with somebody being a good person in religion. And he said so several times that he was against the abuse of religion, which I'm against the abuse of religion. I don't like a lot of religious people who behave in a way I feel offensive and I don't like. But when we talk about an atheist, it depends what you mean by an atheist. Even nowadays, many people can't agree what the difference between an atheist and an agnostic. For example, an agnostic would be somebody who says, "I don't know, I've never encountered God. I'm not saying there isn't God, I just don't know. I don't know how the world was created." I think many of us who are religious still retain certain questions after all, even Moses's turn to God and said, "I dunno who you're gimme a sign. I need to know where are you? What are you, explain?" And so it all depends what you mean by an atheist. I don't like these terms, I prefer to avoid them.

Q: Can you recommend further reading of Spinoza?

A: There are books coming out all the time. There are so many books coming out all the time about him. One of my favourite ones is by an Israeli professor called Menachem Kellner, K-E-L-L-N-E-R, are about Moses and relating it to Spinoza. But they're coming out all the time, so I'm not up to date with the latest books. So I think you're going to have to ask somebody who is in the publishing world what the latest books on Spinoza are to recommend. If you want an overview of him, of course you can always go on to the internet and read Wikipedia's article on Spinoza and that will give you some idea, and it'll also give you some bibliography. So why not try that?

Q: What is official Jewish status in Israel?

A: I really don't know. I don't think Israel in a sense has any... Israel has two categories of status. Category of status number one, is the civil state of the law of return. When Israel was established, it said, "Listen, nobody came to help the Jews when they were being wiped out, and therefore our is to make sure that never again will anybody who is persecuted for his Jewish identity have nowhere to go. And therefore we are going to use the same criteria that Hitler used to define a Jew. So that so long as you are eventually Jewish through one grandparent, we will accept this as your Jewish identity for the purposes of the law of return to

come back to the land of Israel." That doesn't say anything about whether you are Jewish religiously, the religious definition of the Jews was given to the chief rabbinate on Ministry of religion working with the chief rabbinate. I have reservations about this, but that's something will come in maybe when I discuss Mendelssohn and state and religion. But a definition of a Jew in purely secular terms is for protective reasons. And I think that is a perfectly legitimate way of looking at things, and it's different to the religious way, but Spinoza was Jewish from every point of view. He had a Jewish mother on the one hand, which makes him Jewish in the religious sense. He had Jewish grandparents, which makes him religious in the civil sense. So without any question, it seems to me that if he were alive today, we'd welcome him home and we'd put on a big kiddish for him in shul on shabbos and we'll call him up to read from the Torah. And I think Einstein asked if he believed in God and his answer was the same, "Yes, that's quite true." Einstein did say his belief was that God, if you like, is the spirit of the universe or what the source of the universe is.

And you know, I think that's a lovely idea. I still philosophically have a problem with the idea of God being the creator of the universe in purely rational terms. Because in purely rational terms all you can come up with is to say something or someone must have started this whole thing, it couldn't have come from nowhere. Whether it's Big Bang or what. And you know that's probably true. Various philosophers who in my deck Cambridge were atheists towards the end of their lives came back and said, "No, I also believe that God must have started it off." My problem is okay, something did. But that something doesn't tell us what God is, what God is in terms of how I relate to it, and what it means. How do I know that Mickey Mouse didn't start the universe? So it's... you know, love Einstein. I love the fact that he was prepared to say such things as, "God doesn't play dice." That's a lovely idea, in other words, it means there is an order to the universe, sometimes it seems to me there's no order at all. But he meant that in the physical sense.

Q: Why was the recent attempt to resay the cherem rejected?

A: I think it was rejected 'cause it was meaningless. You can't reject something that doesn't exist, that has no function, that has no force in Jewish law. You can say whatever you like, but you can't reject nothing and it's a nothing.

Q: Why from Portugal to Amsterdam are not to Jerusalem. Are they not prayed for 1600 years to return? Yes. Why did they go to Amsterdam?

A: This was Portugal to Amsterdam, not Jerusalem. Well first of all, remember the Ottoman Empire was a stage removed from Spain. You had Spain then you had Italy. Italy was the papal states. Most of the papal states were under the control of the pope, under the control of the inquisition. Many of the Jews who got to the papal states could only get to the papal states as Christians. And so for example, so we go back to Beatrice Deluna who started in Spain as a new Christian, moved to Portugal as a new Christian, took a boat to England as a new Christian, then moved across to Amsterdam as a new Christian. And in Amsterdam she still had

to say she was a new Christian, and she, you read this, Simon Sharma mentions this in his book of Jewish history. She had to go on a perilous journey as a new Christian with spies everywhere of the Inquisition down through France, down through to Italy where you could find some places like the Duchy of Ferrara that allowed new Christians to come in even though they knew they were new Christians, but other places they couldn't go from Ferrara. She went to Venice, Venice kicked her out, she went somewhere else to Ancona and eventually she was able to get to the Ottoman Empire, and in the Ottoman Empire she came out and said, "I'm Jewish, I changed my name, I'm not Doña Gracia de Luna, I'm not Dona Gracia de Mendes, I'm Gracia Nasi, Nasia." And that was the way you got there, so it was difficult if you wanted to get out, because the inquisition was chasing you in Spain and then chasing you in Portugal. Either you went to the Caribbean or you went up north to Hamburg or to Amsterdam. Later on when it was easier to move people could move and the Ottoman Empire as you know, welcomed Jews in and they reestablished Jewish centres in South Romania and in Jerusalem. So it was the only way to get out.

I've answered why they haven't lifted the cherem. So I don't need to answer that again.

Q: Prove that HaShem is an issue in politics, and does the cherem of Spinoza prove that cherem is an issue of politics and power, not religion?

A: Yes, yes. I definitely think as now most within the ultra orthodox world that accuses other people of not thinking the right way, even of other Orthodox people is all to do with social control. I want to control my community, and social control is very important. For example, in America it's so important, because this explains why both Democrats and Republicans caught these Hasidic dynasties, these Hasidic townships of 30, 40, 50,000 ultra Orthodox Jews. And they go to them and they speak to them, 'cause they want their votes, they want their votes. So the rabbi knows that if he can control all these people and how they vote, he's going to get money from the state and therefore it's in his interest is keeping everybody under control. It's the same thing in Israel. The Israeli Orthodox hold over the political system is to do with finance and control. It's not really about religion, but that's humans again.

Q: Are there many Jews who've been excommunicated?

A: Well, not in the sense that you say excommunicated, it doesn't exist as such. A cherem was very common in the mediaeval times as the only tool of control Jewish communities had to say get out of town. We don't know how many people got out of town. Not very many because they had nowhere to go unless you converted to another religion. There was no middle ground in those days before the enlightenment. But I don't know, I can only speculate. I'm not an expert in this area so I wouldn't like to guess how many people had a cherem.

Q: How would you define a modern rabbi by time or thinking, and where does Spinoza fall?

A: Well it depends what you mean by a modern rabbi. It's, you know, it's almost like saying how

do you define a Jew? It's very, very difficult. I would say that my position is that I am committed to the constitution. I believe we need a behavioural system to identify us, to keep us together in order to preserve our culture and our identity, and in the end, the strongest reason I have is Jewish continuity. I want to keep our us alive. We've been alive for so long, for so many thousands of years, we've got so much still to say about how to lead a religious life, I want to keep it going. And the way to do that I believe is through some form of a constitution that a Jew no matter where he or she's in the world, they're all doing the same thing on the same day, it's not completely less a fair and free for all. At the same time. I believe in freedom of thought. I believe we have to be free to think for ourselves. You can't force people to think there's no law in the Torah says you must think. The first of 10 commandment says "I am God, it's up to you to encounter me in whichever way you can." But it doesn't say it's an obligation to believe anybody who translates the Bible, 10 commandments that way, you must believe in God, is mistranslating it.

Q: Which Jewish community body?

A: It was what's called the Ma'amad, The committee of the Synagogue in Amsterdam, they did.

Q: Is cherem seen as a force going to be corrected after death?

A: Cherem is not a feature. I don't know any official community that has such a thing functionally as a cherem. I do know communities where if you challenge the authority of the rabbi, they'll send the tough guys in to beat you up unfortunately. But the cherem doesn't exist because now we have civil laws that impose discipline the law of the land. And if somebody were to imply do something that contradicts the law of the land, then it's going to be nullified anyway. It was only a tool used under conditions of the exile and limited self-control.

Geoffrey Faleck in Detroit calls our Sunday school the Spinoza Club. Very nice. Good luck.

Q: Anything you teach a Jew about his heritage, about the good as well as the not so good is good. Do you think had he lived a greater age, his views might have matured?

A: I can't speculate about that Tony, maybe yes, maybe no.

Q: Then when and how did secularism emerged?

A: Well, secularism only emerge after what we call the enlightenment, after people like Voltaire and others, he didn't like the Jews very much. None of them ever liked the Jews, and not only that, but after the Enlightenment the Jews ended up being persecuted in Europe just as much as they were in many ways beforehand. So they didn't use the inquisition, they just Jews being beaten up and killed. But the secularism really began first of all with what's called Haskalah,, the Enlightenment. When people began in Europe to challenge the accepted point of view, it then merged into early reform. But it basically began in the 19th century when people didn't have to

belong to a religious community. And so people like Marx and others, although their parents initially converted to Christianity in order to escape their Judaism, he ended up not having belonged to any religion, and so it really emerged in the 19th century. And that's something that I'm sure any of Trudy Gold's lectures are going to be able to tell you the nuts and bolts of it as well as I can.

Q: Next one, Lydia Abel, did he go to Coimbra University? What did he do there?

A: There's a plaque to him. Yes, he was invited to study there and he was invited to study a lot of places, so he did spend some time there. He didn't officially graduate there and he certainly didn't lecture there officially. But he did go to study and to meet and mix and join in symposia with people. In your prayer the Bible refers to God as HaShem Jehovah, this reference such an omnipotent power. The trouble is that all biblical words, do not translate well into English. It's very difficult and none of them, if you like say something about omnipotence, let's take the word Jehovah or which is Jehovah. It is made up of the Hebrew letters. Those Hebrew letters say basically are the same letters that explain past tense, present tense and future. So it is a way of saying God is not a physical object which changes from past, present to future. 'Cause all material things are in past, present, and future. God is beyond time, it's beyond space. God is nothing physical we know of. It has to be approached in a different way.

Of course you could say, but we are physical. How do we do it? Well this is the challenge that we all have and that's why I think experience and sense plays as much a role in this God talk, as does philosophy. So when we talk at these words that we use for God are, if you like metaphors, my favourite metaphor is the one that comes up in the Talmud which we still use to this day. Makom, God is Makom, the place every place, no specific place, anywhere universally can be encountered. So that's a term that's used. We say this when somebody dies and we say, "May God comfort you wherever you are in whatever state you are, wherever God is." So these are all metaphors. They are not scientific definitions. And as again my favourite, Wittgenstein says, "The meaning of a word is its use." How do you use it? And the truth is, if you ask two people what they mean by God, they'll come up with two different answers. And therefore it's an idea of God, and that is something that you can't put into a definition. Yana and Alfred both Spinoza and Baal Shem seem to inspire imminence of God in everything.

Q: What change in the society that Besht was not excommunicated?

A: Well you know the Baal Shem Tov was excommunicated 'cause he remained an Orthodox Jew and he was saying through Kabbalah, this is the way to connect with God. God if you like, filters God through different channels to get to us. It's rather like we are, how can we put it? Transistors that pick up a message from somewhere else and we decode it onto the next stage. And this is the idea of the Sefirot and it's the idea that Baal Shem Tov adopted. But remember he adopted it and explained it in a way that also included God as an independent force. In other words, pantheism was not the sum of God, it was the sum of God on earth and in the physical universe, but not in the spiritual universe. For Spinoza, there wasn't that spiritual universe. I

understand some Spinoza's were condemned as heretics and burn at the stake.

Q: If that was the case, why wasn't Spinoza persecuted?

A: Spinoza was persecuted, he was hounded and he had to move on away from the inquisition all the time. The inquisition burnt people they had control over and could get their claws into.

Q: It was that risky?

A: And that's one of the reasons why the Jewish community was so scared of anybody sort of wanting to make more of this otherwise. John Donne preached at the stump by St. Paul's Cathedral about the fear Protestants had for Catholics that helped Jews to reenter the United Kingdom. And Jews were helped to United Kingdom by many factors. One of the most famous ones, of course was from Amsterdam Manasseh Ben Israel, the rabbi of Amsterdam wrote a special book called "Spes Israel, The Hope of Israel" in which he argued for Christianity to accept that Christianity believed that Jesus would only come a second time when Jews were scattered all the way around the world. And for as long as Jews were excluded from certain countries, Jesus wouldn't come. And so he went and he argued to Oliver Cromwell that he should open the doors of England to the Jews and that would speed up the second coming. But there were non-Jews in England at the time who also believed that this was a way of bringing Jesus and the Jews should be allowed in.

Of course, when it came to discussing it in parliament, a Cromwell wanted a pass, a bill allowing it officially, the merchants objected because they thought that it was going to affect their business. They didn't want competition. Most churchmen and the established church didn't want to 'cause they thought that Judaism was heretical and dangerous. Even one person wrote an article saying that "If the Jews come here, they'll ban pork, and they'll have us all circumcised." And so although he couldn't pass the law officially allowing the Jews in, he did turn a blind eye and Jews began to come in and then they established a synagogue. And it was actually Queen Anne who donated to the building of the second synagogue in London and put in an appearance there too. What would Spinoza's answer? Like what liberal reformism Judaism. I think he'd say the same about orthodoxy. What do you need to have your rules and your regulations for? What do you need a separate group? Why do you need power or authority? Leave me alone, I don't want any of it.

Q: What Spinoza have particular influence on the charite, way of thinking.

A: That's an excellent question. A lot of people think that charism was an influence on Spinoza to some extent because they too said, "Look, we're happy with the Bible. We just don't want all this rabbinic stuff that came afterwards." But Spinoza was not happy with the Bible, he didn't want to be bound by it. So although the idea of charism created this ferment of ideas from Uriel Acosta and others, it wasn't actually a serious influence on him, in my opinion, on his Jewish life.

Q: Did he ever question the existence of God?

A: Well he questioned the existence of God as most people. consider God, you know, as this kind of superman in the sky or superwoman in the sky or super it in the sky who intervenes when we are about to do something wrong, who intervenes in human history and punishes the bad and rewards the good, that kind of God he had no time for, and he certainly didn't believe in.

Q: So how old was Spinoza when he died?

A: Well you know, if he was born in 1632 and if he died in 1677, you couldn't do your maths. Challenge to you. Michael Ben-

- [Wendy] Jeremy, hi.

- Yeah.

- [Wendy] I want to jump in for a minute.

- Yeah, sure.

- Hi. No, no, not at all. I just want to say thank you very much for an excellent presentation. You've got many questions, it's just up to you. I just wanted to give you the chance to stop if you want to, but otherwise there's no urgency. It's up to you.

- I'm happy to go on for another 10 minutes or so.

- [Wendy] How much time do you have?

- I'm definitely going to-

- [Wendy] Okay, great. Thank you very much. So you'll wrap up then?

- Yes.

- I'm here.

- Okay. So I'm on to Benshamal.

Q: Can you establish a comparison between the second Jews in US and the Orthodox Jews with Spinoza representing the secular Jews?

A: I'm not sure what you understand. Secular Jews, by and large don't want to be bound. They



don't want to be bound by religious law, religious ritual, they want to be free. Now there's a book out in Israel by Micah Goodman who talks, about in Israel there are different kinds of secular Jews. There are secular Jews that like some traditions, they don't like others, there's some traditions, that secular Jews who don't want to know anything about religions. So even among secular Jews, there are certainly different shades and mode. They're even secular yeshivas where people go to study in Israel. So there's a whole variety. So I'm not sure I understand that question, so sorry about that.

If you want to email me by all means, and I'll carry on the discussion with you.

Peter Savitz, Spinoza's, Pennsylvania and Amsterdam's all Jewish cemetery. Yeah.

Q: Baruch Spinoza has been how does Spinoza respond to his excommunication?

A: Well that's precisely, he said, "Well I'm not part of the community. I'm not part of the community." And actually he spent a lot of his time living with actually ministers, Christian ministers and was very friendly with them, with one in particular who was his landlord. And so he no longer wanted to identify with the Jewish community, and that's why he gave no instructions to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Even though had he, I believe that he might have been buried there, because a cherem wouldn't stop him being buried in the Jewish cemetery. But I think it was his choice not to. So that answers those. And now I come to Jonathan and Janet, why do you say you disagree with Spinoza when he appeared to there was and always will be only God, nothing other than God. Because his understanding of what he meant by God is the universe. And the universe is a physical phenomenon. It's matter and God is not matter. So that's why his idea of God and my idea of God are two different things. I'm not saying he's right and I'm wrong or I'm right and he's wrong.

Q: What was the takeaway from Spinoza's ethics?

A: Well the Spinoza's ethics, basically it's concerned with freedom of choice, freedom of ideas with ability to think and examine how we make our ethical decisions. And we should do so on the basis of our own rational thought. Not on the basis of what's imposed upon us from the outside, which is basically what can't said and can't refined it. But it's very, very similar. Mordecai Kaplan, 80 years ago was excommunicated for his unorthodox beliefs. Oh I dunno if he was excommunicated, if he was, I dunno what that means. And I don't think it mattered very much. Probably it meant some people said, I don't like you.

Q: Sean Weisel, is there a modern day Spinoza?

A: I think there are lots of modern day Spinoza, there are lots of Jews who think, I think Yuval Harari would be a good idea. Yuval Harari is not a philosopher as such, but he is a thinker, and he's a writer, and he is secular, and he challenges religious authority. So, you know, I think he'd be a good candidate.

Q: Is there evidence Spinoza was influenced by monologues?

A: Oh yes, most definitely, he was taught by monologues it was part of the curriculum of the of the synagogue that he studied in, so he definitely did.

Q: Was Spinoza's idea an early link towards inline, which placed rationalism above religion.

A: Yes, Barbara most definitely. Were the Jews, the first atheists, I believe my rabbi, the Greeks referred to Jews as atheists, because they didn't accept the Greek gods. Yes, that's quite true. Anybody who doesn't accept God was concerned an atheist and they understood God in their way, but they weren't offended by this. And after all the Greeks, Alexander the great insisted that Greek Judaism as a religion should be accepted in his empire by everybody. So that was one response.

B Matthews, "Spinoza" by Steven Nadler. Well, Steven Nadler's a great guy. I haven't read the book as you recommend it. I'll go and have a look at it.

Q: Ralph Freeman, do you think Spinoza was as much a product of the tolerant society or country in which he grew up in is his own intellect?

A: Look, he certainly benefited from the more openness of Dutch society. Dutch society when it managed to break free from the constraints of Catholicism and the French and the Habsburg was a freer society. Generally, Protestantism opened up a freer society and there were protestant states in Germany that actually invited Spinoza to come and to accept a position there. And he chose not to.

I recommend Beth Lord's book the study Guide to "Ethic" editor of university available on Amazon. Thank you David. I will look at that one too. And then there's a Cambridge companion to Spinoza's "Ethics." All great books. You are just going to have to find out what works for you.

I read that Einstein was an admirer of Spinoza. Yes, that's true. He was, and he agreed with many of his views. And there are many quotes to that effect.

There was an attempt to rehabilitate Spinoza, Rabbi Toledano decided to let the cherem remain about recent literature. Steven Nadler has written several books. Well, I don't know which Rabbi Toledano. There are lots and lots of Rabbi Toledano, I don't know with what right he'd said the cherem remains, the cherem is pretty meaningless. But alright, if you want to say so, I frankly, to be honest, this may sound ridiculous to you. I wouldn't be so worried if, pardon me, put me under cherem, what's it mean if I think I'm doing what I believe is right, I should be strong enough to stand up to it.

Great lecture, so clear. Thank you very much Yoland.

Q: Where's Spinoza buried?

A: Spinoza is buried in a church in Holland. You can go and see his grave to this day.

Q: Can excommunicate Jews for their beliefs today.

A: Well, there's no such thing as excommunication. They can say to Jews today, get out of our community. We're not going to call you up to read from the Torah. We're not going to have anything to do with you. They do this hypocritically I have to say, because frankly, if somebody who is a criminal and an adulterer gives enough money to a synagogue or to yeshiva, believe me, they'll call him up to read from the Torah or make up a minion. Whereas somebody who has an idea they don't like, they might say, "Get out of here, we don't." But that's human frailty. That's the inconsistency of humans and it's what's wrong, and what I dislike about religious authority. The big did not need anything to start the laws of quantum mechanics allow such things to happen without what we call a case. That's very guide.

But where do the laws of quantum mechanics come from? What are the laws of quantum mechanics if we actually go down to that? But you know, if you want to carry on the discussion with me online, I'd be happy to.

Q: Why do we assume intellectuals suggest Spinoza to have a better sense of God and the average person?

A: No good reason whatsoever. If you take the idea of God as your personal communication with God, then it is a fundamental of hasidism, even of mysticism that you have as much a right, a clarity, a direct line to God as anybody else. We all have this capacity to get through to God, it's up to us if we want to make it or not. So that's the mystical side of the rational side.

Q: Was Spinoza given a burial.

A: No he wasn't. Spinoza tend to reject your organised religion, didn't superstition, he wouldn't like you calling him Jewish. His ethics were close to Christianity. Looked at Jesus a prophet. He was certainly an atheist.

Thank you David Goldberg. I hear what you say, I beg to defer, but that's what we mean when we look for something beneath the surface. I'm looking for something beneath the surface and I see the influences of Jewish thought on him. Despite the fact he rejected it, as you say.

Q: Does the word cherem mean the word haram, which is forbidden."

A: Yes, exactly the same word, same route.

Q: Cheeky question. Do do you believe in God?

A: And how do you prove I experienced God, I experience God all the time. I don't like this term belief, 'cause belief is pretty meaning. Do you believe? I believe glory. Hallelujah. So I don't like, I experience God and I certainly can't prove his existence. There is no proof. Proof is a physical mathematical phenomenon. I can't even prove I love my wife. It's only my actions that might indicate that I do. I can't even prove that I exist. Thought you could prove you exist, I am therefore I am. But I can't do that. So no, I can't prove that God exists. I don't approve is very important. I think experience is far more important.

Q: Why could Spinoza could be Jew into a cherem ending his status as a Jew?

A: No, cherem does not end a person's status as a Jew. That's what excommunication does to a Christian.

Q: Why is Spinoza cherem so extreme.

A: It was extreme in the context of the times. I regret it, but that's how they felt. they had to respond to show that they were pure than pure.

Q: Did say not freedom of religion, freedom from religion?

A: Yes, I think that's a very good point. That's a very good point. I think it is freedom from the constraints and the corruptions of religion. I love religion. You know, there's a famous English playwright called Baron Corvo who wrote a play called "Hadrian VII" that was put on the Mermaid theatre in London sometime, I think in the sixties. And it's about an English pope who gets to Rome and sets out mythical and sets out to reform the Curia. And he gets blocked by the Curia time and time again. And one night he's so frustrated he cries out, "You know I love the faith, but I hate the faithful." Now I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but I would go so far as to say that the biggest challenge to my religious faith in my religious life is the behaviour about the religious people.

Q: Michael Foxman, was he not transferred to Jewish cemetery afterwards?

A: Well, if he was, I'm not aware of it. So I look into it.

Clive Cass, I think you said, but don't agree with Spinoza.

Q: After you said Spinoza believe God was omnipresent in this world, but not the universe. What is the importance of this? Or please again, why you will not agree with Spinoza?

A: Well, because I consider that the universe is something we call material. Something you can touch or you can see, or you can experiment with and discover new things about. That means it

is to me a material concept. Whereas for me, the idea of God is not a material concept. It's not even necessarily a concept so much as a sense, as an experience of something that is there.

And at that moment, I'm terribly sorry, but I've been asked to wrap up. So please God, I'll see you again somewhere else sometime and we'll get some other questions. But if you want to continue this debate, email me [Jeremyrosen@msn.com](mailto:Jeremyrosen@msn.com) or [jeremy@jeremyrosen.com](mailto:jeremy@jeremyrosen.com). Thank you everybody.

- Thanks very much, Jeremy. Thank you very, very much.