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 Steven Nadler
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CHAPTER I

Spinoza's life and works

A JEWISH MERCHANT OF AMSTERDAM

Bento de Spinoza was born in Amsterdam on November 24, 1632, to a prominent merchant family of that city's Portuguese-Jewish community.¹ He was the second of three sons, and one of five children of Michael de Spinoza and his wife, Hannah Deborah Senior, recent immigrants to the Netherlands from Portugal.²

New Christians – the descendants of Jews who had been forcibly converted to Christianity in Spain and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century – had been living in the Low Countries, still under Spanish dominion, throughout most of the sixteenth century. Many of them resided in Antwerp, where they were able to pursue their business affairs at a relatively safe remove from the heart of the Inquisition. With the beginning of the armed revolt of the seven northern provinces, now called the United Provinces of the Netherlands, in the 1570s, and the consequent eclipse of Antwerp by Amsterdam as a major center for trade, many of these families moved up to that more liberal and cosmopolitan city on the Amstel River. In Amsterdam, with its generally tolerant environment and greater concern for economic prosperity than for religious uniformity, the Portuguese New Christians, or “conversos,” were able to

¹ This chapter is drawn from the more extensive biography in Nadler 1999.

² It is actually unclear whether Spinoza's older brother, Isaac, is Hannah's son or the child of Michael's first wife, Rachel, who died in 1627; and likewise whether Spinoza's younger sister Rebecca is Hannah's child or the daughter of Esther, Michael's third wife (whom he married after Hannah died in 1639). There was also a brother, Gabriel (Abraham), and a sister, Miriam, who certainly are Michael and Hannah's children, and thus Spinoza's full siblings. My suspicion (but it is certainly no more than that) is that all were the offspring of Michael and Hannah.

return to the religion of their ancestors and reestablish themselves in Jewish life.

By the middle of the second decade of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam was home to three congregations of Iberian, or Sephardic, Jews. While formal approval by the city's leaders of public Jewish worship was still a few years away, the Jews enjoyed *de facto* recognition and were able to meet and follow their traditions in relative peace. There were always conservative sectors of Dutch society clamoring for their expulsion, but the more liberal regents of the city, not to mention the more enlightened elements in Dutch society at large, were unwilling to make the same mistake that Spain had made a century earlier by expelling a part of its population whose economic productivity would make a substantial contribution to the flourishing of the Dutch Golden Age.

The Spinoza family was not among the wealthiest of the city's Sephardim – whose wealth was, in turn, dwarfed by the fortunes of the wealthiest Dutch – but they were comfortably well-off. They lived on the Houtgracht, one of the main boulevards of the neighborhood where Jews tended to reside in Amsterdam. (This quarter, called “Vlooienburg,” was favored by artists and art dealers as well, and the Spinoza home was one block away from the house in which Rembrandt lived from 1639 to 1658.) Michael's business was importing dried fruit and nuts, mainly from Spanish and Portuguese colonies. To judge both by his accounts and by the respect he earned from his peers, he seems for a time to have been a fairly successful merchant.

The family belonged to the Beth Ya'acov congregation, the first one established in the city. Michael served in various leadership capacities both in his synagogue and in the community, including a stint as a member of the *Senhores Quinze*, the joint group of representatives from the three congregations which was charged with managing issues of common concern. When, in 1639, the three original congregations – Beth Ya'acov, Neve Shalom, and Beth Israel – merged into one, called Talmud Torah, this leadership group was replaced by the *ma'amad*, the all-powerful lay governing board that ran the community's religious and secular affairs. Michael sat on the *ma'amad* for a term, in 1649, and took a turn on Talmud Torah's educational board as well.

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Hannah Deborah, Spinoza's mother, was Michael's second wife. His first wife, Rachel, had died in 1627. Hannah herself was never very well, and she died in 1638, when Spinoza was only five years old. Michael, undoubtedly greatly in need of help in the home with five children, married the forty-year-old Esther Fernand in 1641. Esther would live only another twelve years; she died in October 1653. Michael himself followed her to the grave five months later. The household in which Spinoza grew up seems to have seen more than its fair share of sorrow.

Spinoza must have been an intellectually gifted youth, and he would have made a strong impression on his teachers as he progressed through the levels at the community's school on the Houtgracht. He probably studied at one time or another with all of the leading rabbis of Talmud Torah, including Menasseh ben Israel, an ecumenical and cosmopolitan rabbi who was perhaps the most famous Jew in Europe, and who was teaching in the elementary grades when Spinoza attended the school; the mystically inclined Isaac Aboab da Fonseca; and Saul Levi Mortera, the chief rabbi of the congregation whose tastes ran more to rational philosophy and who often clashed with Rabbi Aboab over the relevance of kabbalah.

Spinoza may have excelled in school, but, contrary to the story long told, he did not study to be a rabbi. In fact, he never made it into the upper levels of the educational program, which involved advanced work in Talmud. In 1649, his older brother Isaac, who had been helping his father run the family business, died and Spinoza had to cease his formal studies to take his place. When Michael died in 1654, Spinoza found himself, along with his other brother Gabriel, a full-time merchant, running the firm "Bento y Gabriel de Spinoza." He seems not to have been a very shrewd businessman, however, and the company, burdened by the debts left behind by his father, floundered under his direction.

Spinoza did not have much of a taste for the life of commerce anyway. Financial success, which led to status and respect within the Portuguese-Jewish community, held very little attraction for him. By the time he and Gabriel took over the family business, he was already distracted from these worldly matters and was devoting more and more of his energies to intellectual interests. Looking back a few years later over his conversion to the philosophical life,

he wrote of his growing awareness of the vanity of the pursuits followed by most people (including himself), who gave little thought to the true value of the goods they so desperately sought.

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected – whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity.

He was not unaware of the risks involved in abandoning his former engagements and undertaking this new enterprise.

I say that “I resolved at last” – for at first glance it seemed ill-advised to be willing to lose something certain for something then uncertain. I saw, of course, the advantages that honor and wealth bring, and that I would be forced to abstain from seeking them, if I wished to devote myself seriously to something new and different; and if by chance the greatest happiness lay in them, I saw that I should have to do without it. But if it did not lie in them, and I devoted my energies only to acquiring them, then I would equally go without it. (TIE, G II.5/C I.7)

By the early to mid 1650s, Spinoza had decided that his future lay in philosophy, the search for knowledge and true happiness, not the importing of dried fruit.

CHEREM

At around the time of his disenchantment with the mercantile life, Spinoza began studies in Latin and the ancient classics, especially drama. Latin was still the *lingua franca* for most academic and intellectual discourse in Europe. Spinoza would need to know Latin for his studies in philosophy, especially if he intended on attending any university lectures, and would eventually compose his own philosophical works in that tongue. He had to go outside the Jewish community for instruction in these disciplines, and found what he needed under the tutelage of Franciscus van den Enden, a former Jesuit and political radical whose home seemed to function as a kind

of salon for secular humanists, arch-democrats, and freethinkers. (Van den Enden himself was later executed in France for his participation in a republican plot against King Louis XIV and the monarchy.) It was probably Van den Enden who also first introduced Spinoza to the works of Descartes and other contemporary thinkers. While pursuing this secular education in philosophy, literature, and political thought at his Latin tutor's home, Spinoza probably continued his Jewish education in the *yeshiva* or academy, Keter Torah ("Crown of the Law"), run by Rabbi Mortera.

Although distracted from his business affairs by his studies, and undoubtedly experiencing a serious weakening of his Jewish faith as he delved ever more deeply into the world of pagan and gentile letters, Spinoza kept up appearances and continued to be a member in good standing of the Talmud Torah congregation throughout the early 1650s. He paid his dues and communal taxes, and even made the contributions to the charitable funds that were expected of congregants.

And then, on July 27, 1656 (the sixth of Av, 5416, by the Jewish calendar), the following proclamation was read in Hebrew from in front of the ark of the Torah in the crowded synagogue on the Houtgracht:

The *Senhores* of the *ma'amad* [the congregation's lay governing board] having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, they have endeavored by various means and promises, to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and born witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter; and after all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honorable *chakhamim* ["wise men," or rabbis] they have decided, with their consent, that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel. By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse, and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and

with all the castigations which are written in the Book of 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 spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.

The document concludes with the warning that “no one should communicate with him, not even in writing, nor accord him any favor nor stay with him under the same roof nor [come] within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him.”³

It was the harshest writ of *cherem*, or ostracism, ever pronounced upon a member of the Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam. The *parnassim* sitting on the *ma'amad* that year dug deep into their books to find just the right words for the occasion.⁴ Unlike many of the other bans issued by *ma'amad*, this one was never rescinded.

For us, trying to understand the event three and a half centuries later on the basis of very meagre documentary evidence, it is all a bit of a mystery. We do not know for certain why Spinoza was punished with such extreme prejudice. That the punishment came from his own community – from the congregation that had nurtured and educated him, and that held his family in such high esteem – only adds to the enigma. Neither the *cherem* itself nor any document from the period tells us exactly what his “evil opinions and acts [*más opinioins e obras*]” were supposed to have been, nor what “abominable heresies [*horrendas heregias*]” or “monstrous deeds [*ynormes obras*]” he is alleged to have practiced and taught. He had not yet

³ The Hebrew text is no longer extant, but the Portuguese version is found in the Book of Ordinances (*Livro dos Acordos de Nação e Ascamao*), in the Municipal Archives of the City of Amsterdam, Archives for the Portuguese Jewish Community in Amsterdam, 334, no. 19, fol. 408.

⁴ The text used for the *cherem* had been brought back to Amsterdam from Venice by Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera almost forty years earlier, ostensibly to be used in case an intramural congregational dispute in 1619 could not be resolved amicably.

published anything, nor (as far as we know) even composed any treatise. Spinoza never refers to this period of his life in his extant letters, and thus does not offer his correspondents (or us) any clues as to why he was expelled.⁵ All we know for certain is that Spinoza received, from the community's leadership in 1656, a *cherem* like no other in the period.

Writing many years after the fact, and claiming to have talked with Spinoza himself, his earliest biographer, Jean-Maximilian Lucas, relates that Spinoza was convicted "not of blasphemy, but only of a lack of respect for Moses and the law."⁶ Perhaps Spinoza was violating the restrictions of the Jewish Sabbath or the dietary code of *kashrut* or some other aspect of *halakhab*, Jewish law. On the other hand, it has been argued that his "sins" were more secular in nature, and that Spinoza, who had gone over the heads of the community's governors and appealed to the Dutch authorities in order to escape his inherited debts, "had to be removed from the community because legal and financial interests were at stake."⁷

Neither of these explanations, however, appears to be sufficient to account for the singular venom directed at Spinoza in his *cherem*. Instead, what seems really to have been the offense behind the vicious *cherem* earned by Spinoza are not actions, either religious or legal, but rather, as the proclamation reads, *más opinioins* and *horrendas heregias*: "evil opinions" and "abominable heresies" – that is, ideas.

Three relatively reliable sources from the period tell us as much. In Lucas's chronology of the events leading up to the *cherem*, there was much talk in the congregation about Spinoza's opinions; people, especially the rabbis, were curious about what the young man, known for his intelligence, was thinking. As Lucas tells it – and this particular anecdote is not confirmed by any other source – "among those most eager to associate with him there were two young men who, professing to be his most intimate friends, begged him to tell them his real views. They promised him that whatever his opinions

⁵ Spinoza's friends, who edited his works and letters for publication immediately after his death, seem to have destroyed all letters that were not of mainly philosophical (as opposed to biographical and personal) interest.

⁶ Freudenthal 1899, p. 10.

⁷ See Vlessing 1996, pp. 205–10.

were, he had nothing to fear on their part, for their curiosity had no other end than to clear up their own doubts.”⁸ They suggested, trying to draw Spinoza out, that if one read Moses and the Prophets closely, then one would be led to the conclusion that the soul is not immortal and that God is material. “How does it appear to you?”, they asked Spinoza. “Does God have a body? Is the soul immortal?” After some hesitation, Spinoza took the bait.

I confess, said [Spinoza], that since nothing is to be found in the Bible about the non-material or incorporeal, there is nothing objectionable in believing that God is a body. All the more so since, as the Prophet says, God is great, and it is impossible to comprehend greatness without extension and, therefore, without body. As for spirits, it is certain that Scripture does not say that these are real and permanent substances, but mere phantoms, called angels because God makes use of them to declare his will; they are of such kind that the angels and all other kinds of spirits are invisible only because their matter is very fine and diaphanous, so that it can only be seen as one sees phantoms in a mirror, in a dream, or in the night.

As for the human soul, Spinoza reportedly replied that “whenever Scripture speaks of it, the word ‘soul’ is used simply to express life, or anything that is living. It would be useless to search for any passage in support of its immortality. As for the contrary view, it may be seen in a hundred places, and nothing is so easy as to prove it.”

Spinoza did not trust the motives behind the curiosity of his “friends” – with good reason – and he broke off the conversation as soon as he had the opportunity. At first his interlocutors thought he was just teasing them or trying merely to shock them by expressing scandalous ideas. But when they saw that he was serious, they started talking about Spinoza to others. “They said that the people deceived themselves in believing that this young man might become one of the pillars of the synagogue; that it seemed more likely that he would be its destroyer, as he had nothing but hatred and contempt for the Law of Moses.” Lucas relates that when Spinoza was called before his judges, these same individuals bore witness against him, alleging that he “scoffed at the Jews as ‘superstitious

⁸ Freudenthal 1899, p. 5.

people born and bred in ignorance, who do not know what God is, and who nevertheless have the audacity to speak of themselves as His People, to the disparagement of other nations’.”⁹

Then there is the report of Brother Tomas Solano y Robles. Brother Tomas was an Augustinian monk who was in Madrid in 1659, right after a voyage that had taken him through Amsterdam in late 1658. The Spanish Inquisitors were interested in what was going on among the former New Christians now living in northern Europe, most of whom had once been in its domain and still had converso relatives back in Iberia. They interviewed the friar, as well as another traveler to the Netherlands, Captain Miguel Pérez de Maltranilla, who had stayed in the same house in Amsterdam, and at the same time, as Brother Tomas. Both men claimed that in Amsterdam they had met Spinoza and a man named Juan de Prado, who had been expelled from the community shortly after Spinoza. The two apostates told Brother Tomas that they had been observant of Jewish law but “changed their mind,” and that they were expelled from the synagogue because of their views on God, the soul, and the law. They had, in the eyes of the congregation, “reached the point of atheism.”¹⁰ According to Tomas’s deposition, they were saying that the soul was not immortal, that the Law was “not true” and that there was no God except in a “philosophical” sense.¹¹ Maltranilla confirms that, according to Spinoza and Prado, “the law . . . was false.”¹²

⁹ Freudenthal 1899, p. 7.

¹⁰ Revah 1959, pp. 32–3.

¹¹ The text of Brother Tomas’s deposition (in Revah 1959, p. 32) reads as follows:

He knew both Dr. Prado, a physician, whose first name was Juan but whose Jewish name he did not know, who had studied at Alcalá, and a certain de Espinosa, who he thinks was a native of one of the villages of Holland, for he had studied at Leiden and was a good philosopher. These two persons had professed the Law of Moses, and the synagogue had expelled and isolated them because they had reached the point of atheism. And they themselves told the witness that they had been circumcised and that they had observed the law of the Jews, and that they had changed their mind because it seemed to them that the said law was not true and that souls died with their bodies and that there is no God except philosophically. And that is why they were expelled from the synagogue; and, while they regretted the absence of the charity that they used to receive from the synagogue and the communication with other Jews, they were happy to be atheists, since they thought that God exists only philosophically . . . and that souls died with their bodies and that thus they had no need for faith.

¹² The original text of Maltranilla’s testimony is in Revah 1959, p. 67.

The community poet-historian David Franco Mendes is our final witness on this matter. Although he was writing many years later, his work undoubtedly represents a repository of communal record and memory. He insists, in his brief report on the case, that Spinoza not only violated the Sabbath and the laws governing the festivals, but also was filled with “atheistic” ideas, and was punished accordingly.¹³

“God exists only philosophically,” “The Law is not true,” and “The soul is not immortal.” These are rather vague and indeterminate propositions, particularly the first two. Ordinarily, there is no more telling what is intended by them than what is meant by the notoriously ambiguous charge of “atheism.” But in Spinoza’s case we have some fair basis for knowing what he would have meant, for they are likely just the views that he would at least begin elaborating and arguing for in his written works within five years. To be sure, we cannot be certain that what we find in those writings is exactly what he was saying *vive voce* within the community. But the report by Lucas and the testimony by Brother Tomas indicate that the metaphysical, moral, and religious doctrines that are to be found in his mature philosophical works were already in his mind, and not necessarily in only an embryonic form, in the mid-1650s.

According to Lucas, Spinoza took his expulsion in good stride. “All the better,” he quotes Spinoza as saying, “they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal . . . I gladly enter on the path that is opened to me.”¹⁴ By this point, he was certainly not very religiously observant, and must have had grave doubts about both the particular tenets of Judaism and, more generally, the value of sectarian religion. Besides the opportunity it afforded him to maintain the family business and earn a living, membership in good standing in the community seems to have mattered little to him.

A PHILOSOPHER IN THE COUNTRY

Contrary to yet another myth about Spinoza’s life – and, given the dearth of extant biographical information, there are many – after the

¹³ Mendes 1975, pp. 60–1.

¹⁴ Freudenthal 1899, p. 8.