

Jewish thought

Against liberalism

Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity

Steven B. Smith, Yale University Press, 1997, 288 pages
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Western philosophy, Leo Strauss once said, is a series of footnotes to Plato. With no less justice, modern Jewish thought could be characterised as a series of footnotes to Spinoza. For it was he who more than anyone else prepared the ground for the secularisation of Jewish identity, and his lonely figure still casts its shadow over the fateful crossroads between Judaism and the modern world.

Steven Smith, a professor of politics at Yale, has written an impressive account of Spinoza, restoring him to his place as one of the founders of modern liberalism. More radically than Milton and Locke, Spinoza argued for a political order that placed the freedom of the individual at the apex of its values. Perhaps it took a Jew and a descendant of marranos to feel the full pain of a world riven by religious conflict, and to search for a way out. Spinoza's dream was of a society that had finally cured itself of religion in its particularised forms, adopting instead a universal ethic of love and tolerance. In such a world there would be no more persecution by Christians of Jews for the simple reason that there would be no more Christians and no more Jews. Only when we shrug off the vestiges of ancestral piety can we meet as equal human beings in the naked public square.

One of the ironies of history, though, is that Spinoza, who argued for the dissolution of Judaism, became the inspiration of three revolutionary new forms of Jewish identity. Radical nineteenth century Reformers like Samuel Holdheim adopted his argument that, with the loss of sovereignty in the first century of the Common Era, Jewish law – the law of a nation in its land –

ceased to 'apply. All that was left was ethics. Secular Zionists thrilled to Spinoza's teasing speculation that 'if the foundation of their religion did not effeminate their hearts, I would absolutely believe that some day, given the opportunity, they will set up their state again'. And Jewish secularists who were neither Zionists nor adherents of Reform cast Spinoza as the quintessential emblem of the modern Jew, emancipated from tradition, fearless in pursuit of freedom.

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What they forgot or did not wish to remember is that Spinoza was ahead of them, doggedly pursuing his thought to its logical conclusion, namely the disappearance of Jews and Judaism. So long as Jews stayed different, they would be persecuted. The only solution to 'the Jewish Question' was the voluntary renunciation of identity. What Spinoza saw long before anyone else was that modernity heralded the possibility of a dignified funeral for Judaism. A secular state offered assimilation without conversion, citizenship without baptism. It allowed Jews to leave Judaism without becoming anything else. Liberalism meant a society without group identities beyond loyalty to the state. Enlightenment would bring about what centuries of Christian persecution had failed to achieve. Immanuel Kant put it bluntly. The 'pure moral religion', he wrote, is 'the euthanasia of Judaism'.

Steven Smith is an admirer of Spinoza. Yet he is honest enough to write that, 'To assert that liberalism is the last best hope for Judaism is still a far cry from asserting that Judaism and liberalism are fully compatible'. He goes further. 'The spiritual core of Judaism remains a

belief in the reality of a supernatural revelation ... Unless it can somehow be demonstrated that this revelation demanded the unification of all humankind through the abandonment of each particular faith, Jews are justified in remaining attached to their own particularity.'

Precisely. It is one of the sadder reflections on the current state of Jewish thought that almost no one has taken up the challenge I have mounted against liberalism – in my *Persistence of Faith, Faith in the Future* and *The Politics of Hope* – that while it does justice to personal freedom, it is inadequate in its account of identity and its matrix in shared practices and memories. Martin Buber's claim, in 1933, that Europe had emancipated Jews individually but not collectively, echoes in the wake of the Holocaust like an unanswered cry.

Smith hints – though he does no more than hint – at an alternative. There were, he rightly notes, two traditions of liberalism. One, the 'hard' version of the Enlightenment, envisaged a completely new intellectual order. Rationalism would supersede the religions of revelation. The other, the 'soft' version, foresaw the persistence of religious identities. Civic peace would be secured not by the eclipse of religion but by the separation (formal or substantive) of religion and state. It was this second view which prevailed in Britain and the United States. On this more modest account, liberalism is a theory not about metaphysics and the nature of mankind, but about the limits of government and the maintenance of civic peace between groups who hold conflicting views. Spinoza was the first, and one of the greatest, of liberals of the first kind. If history can ever be said to deliver a verdict, it is that his view was wrong. A political order that promises to liberate individuals only at the cost of the renunciation of their most fundamental commitments is not yet a free society.

excellent and if one wants more detail on the particular topics mentioned, one is in the right CD-ROM to find it. By the same token, anyone who has ever wanted to know more about the oft-mentioned philosophers who influenced the great Jewish thinkers, whether al-Farabi for Maimonides or Immanuel Kant for Rav Soloveitchik, has the perfect opportunity to indulge themselves.

Obviously in such a large collection the quality of entries is going to be variable. Of the historical articles, it is worth picking out Lenn Goodman's entry on Maimonides, which despite somehow managing to avoid much more than an oblique mention of negative theology, serves as a very good introduction to his thought. Goodman's discussion of the structure of the *Guide* is especially helpful. In contrast the same contributor's entry on Yehudah Halevi is an edited and slightly rewritten version of his Halevi chapter in Routledge's *History of Jewish Philosophy* and does read rather like a butchered version of something else. Also worth mentioning is Seymour Feldman's entry on Hasdai Crescas which is a good introduction to an important

thinker on whom there is a lack of English language material available.

The Encyclopedia's treatment of modern and contemporary Jewish philosophy is fairly comprehensive, and of a high standard. However, there are a few surprises. David Hartman has contributed an article on Yeshayahu Leibowitz, an entry that is in fact longer than his article on Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Yet there is no entry on Samson Raphael Hirsch or his Reform opponents such as Abraham Geiger, despite the Routledge *History of Jewish Philosophy* including chapters on both. It is also interesting to note that Emmanuel Levinas does not appear in the Jewish philosophy subject guide, and indeed although there is a fine entry on Levinas, its author, Robert Bernasconi, chooses to deal solely with Levinas' philosophical works and not with his important contributions to contemporary Jewish thought.

Levinas is, however, discussed by Henry Levinson and Jonathan Malino in their excellent overview of contemporary Jewish philosophy. The authors group Levinas with Fackenheim, Hartman, Leibowitz and other contemporary thinkers

who reject both fundamentalism and historicism and in many ways have accepted a Rosenzweigian agenda for Jewish philosophy. These 'contemporary traditionalists' focus on the six points of concern discussed by Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption*: '(1) Creation, (2) a Revealed Covenant for an Elect People, (3) the promise of Redemption, (4) God as the Creator and Revealer of Covenant, (5) Israel as God's Elect and (6) the World as the beneficiary of God's promise of Redemption'.

Levinson and Malino note that the contemporary traditionalists have primarily been influenced by philosophical schools in the continental tradition: existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, Marxism and so forth. On the other hand, they note, there is very little Jewish philosophy being written by analytically trained thinkers.

If the terms 'existentialism', 'phenomenology' and 'hermeneutics', and the distinction between 'continental' and 'analytical' philosophy leave you feeling a little lost, do not despair. Just get hold of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* CD ROM and click away.

Daniel Rynhold and Tamra Wright are both lecturers at LSJS.

Bookmark

Toward a Jewish (M)orality: Speaking of a Postmodern Jewish Ethics

S. Daniel Breslauer

Greenwood Press, 1998, 192 pages
£48 cloth

In this book Daniel Breslauer attempts to lay the foundations of a postmodern Jewish ethic. But since postmodernism subverts the claims of meaning itself, it is hard to know what constitutes a successful postmodern communication. If it is one in which the reader is mystified by what the author is trying to say, then Breslauer has succeeded.

The book begins with the assertion that the Holocaust has undermined traditional ethics. 'Ideas of rights and justice, the Nazi experience suggests, arise in human minds. They are not ideal absolutes,

but fictions of society.' I can think of no suggestion more offensive and absurd. Lucy Davidowitz was surely right to say that what the Holocaust teaches is neither remote nor obscure. It is the sixth commandment: 'Thou shalt not murder.'

Breslauer continues: 'Learning that morality consists of moving on, of making choices, reassures survivors of devastating events that the arbitrary fact of their existence may be given meaning and purpose.' What? By the postmodern rejection of 'meaning' and 'purpose'?

Jewish postmodernism, in Breslauer's hands, seems to consist in celebrating the midrashic process of finding many meanings in a text while rejecting the *halakhah* which forges a community of practice out of this variety of thought. The result is a mixture of the incoherent and the banal. Thus: 'The ideal to which [a postmodern Jewish ethics] strives

is a community of the diverse in which unique difference rather than indiscriminate sameness wins acceptance.' Or: 'What postmodernism adds to the halachic perspective is a deeper consciousness that we are all caught in the same predicament.' Or: 'To be religious means to be trapped – one must speak the truth, but speaking is a lie; one must act for compassion, but every compassionate deed is also a betrayal of compassion.'

There are reflections here on Levinas, Derrida, Buber, Bialik and Tchernichowsky, but no structured argument, no cogent vision, and ultimately no point. Postmodernism, to be compelling, must be more than bad puns, weak scholarship, misreading of texts, cliché posing as profundity and incoherence as paradox. Professor Breslauer is an intelligent man. He has it in him to write better books than this.

Chief Rabbi Professor Jonathan Sacks.