

Review Essay

Strauss, Spinoza and Sinai: Orthodox Judaism and Modern Questions of Faith, Edited by Jeffrey Bloom, Alec Goldstein and Gil Student (New York: Kodesh Press, 2022) 327 pp.

Reviewed By: BEZALEL NAOR

This book is a collection of seventeen essays, based on a short passage in Leo Strauss' *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, where Strauss claims that while the Enlightenment cannot successfully disprove religion, Jews cannot prove religion to be true either. In the face of this impasse, Jeffrey Bloom and his co-editors solicited articles from rabbis, PhD., and other thoughtful Orthodox Jews asking whether Orthodoxy would accede to Strauss' claim that it does not believe it can prove its own tenets, or if there is a substantive response beyond Strauss by which Orthodoxy can respond more forcefully than Strauss to the accusations of the Enlightenment.

Just when we thought that the ban of excommunication (*herem*) issued against Baruch de Espinoza by the *Ma'amad* of the Amsterdam Jewish community in 1656 was no longer relevant, this tragic chapter in history once again made breaking news when Yitzhak Melamed, a professor of philosophy at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, was barred from filming a documentary of the life of Spinoza in the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam. In an official letter of 28 November 2021, Rabbi Joseph Serfaty declared Professor Yitzhak Melamed "*persona non grata* in the Portuguese Synagogue complex."

The present volume, coming a few months later, may be another sign of Orthodox Judaism's renewed struggle with Spinoza's challenge.

Spinoza challenges Orthodoxy on two fronts, represented by his two major works, the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza unfurls his pantheism. While several Orthodox Jewish thinkers

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have engaged with Spinoza's pantheistic belief (most notably Moses Mendelssohn, Elijah Benamozegh, and Abraham Isaac Kook),¹ the focus of the present volume is decidedly the *Theological-Political Treatise*, an assault not so much upon the God of Israel as upon His Torah revealed at Sinai. By denying the Mosaic authorship of the Torah and attributing it instead to Ezra, who lived at the beginning of the Second Temple, roughly a millennium later; and furthermore reducing the Torah from theology to the realm of *realpolitik* and statecraft, Spinoza sought to shake the underpinnings of Judaism.

The consensus is that Spinoza's critique of the Bible paved the way for modern Biblical criticism tagged to the name of Julius Wellhausen (with which Orthodox scholars such as David Zvi Hoffman, Chaim Heller, Umberto Cassuto, and most recently, Mordechai Breuer, did pitched

¹ Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), *Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Dasein Gottes* (Berlin, 1785); Elijah Benamozegh (1823–1900), *Spinoza et la Kabbale* (Jerusalem 5748/1988; photo offset of *L'Univers Israelite*, Paris 1864); Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), “*Da’at Elohim*” in idem, *Ikevi ha-Tson* (Jerusalem, 1906).

The Italian kabbalist Benamozegh subscribed to the school of thought that Spinoza's pantheism was rooted in kabbalistic tradition. See further Richard Popkin, “Spinoza, Neoplatonic Kabbalist?” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Len E. Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 387–409; Mozes Heiman Gans, *Memorbook* (Baarn: Bosch & Keuning, 1977), p. 89 (quoting Rabbi J. d’Ancona).

Rav Kook's engagement with Spinoza is the subject of a recent doctoral dissertation. See Ehud Nahir, *Tikkun: Ha-Etgar ha-Spinozi be-Kitvei Harav Kook* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2017). An English version, “*Tikkun*”: *The Spinozian Challenge in Rav Kook's Writings*, is scheduled for publication by Gorgias Press.

Inter alia, upon publication of his work, *Della Divina Providencia, ó sea Naturalezga Universal, ó Natura Naturante* (London, 1704), David Nieto (1654–1728), *Hakham* of Sha’ar ha-Shamayim, the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of London, was falsely accused by some of his congregants of harboring Spinozist—which is to say, pantheistic—belief. He sought and received the vindication of the halakhist Rabbi Zvi Ashkenazi of Altona-Hamburg. See *She’elot u-Teshuvot Hakham Zvi*, no. 18. Nieto wrote to *Hakham Zvi* that the Hebrew word for nature, *teva’*, is of relatively recent vintage, but four or five hundred years old. In oral conversation with a group of young rabbis visiting from America, the Gaon Rabbi Yosef Rosen (known after his birthplace as “the Rogatchover”) pointed out that Nieto had erred in this respect. “*Teva*” does occur in the Talmud. The Rogatchover referred them to *b. Niddah* 20b. See Moshe Sherman, “The 1934 Diary of Oscar Z. Fasman, Journey to Europe and the Land of Israel,” *Hakirah* 30 (Winter 2021), p. 13. See also Alexander Kohut, *Aruch Completum*, vol. 3 (Vienna, 1882), s.v. *teva’*.

battle).² Spinoza himself drew on the Bible commentary of the peripatetic Andalusian, Abraham Ibn Ezra, for support. In his commentary, Ibn Ezra dropped occasional hints that the text of the Torah contains post-Mosaic interpolations.³

(It is interesting that Ibn Ezra, for not readily comprehensible reasons, was spared the wrath of the rabbinic establishment. Ezra of Gerona, an early thirteenth-century kabbalist, while decrying this theory of interpolation as heresy, never once mentioned Ibn Ezra by name.⁴ Ibn Ezra's most outspoken critic, the supreme Talmudist, Rabbi Solomon Luria of Lublin [MaHaRaShaL] [1510–1574], contained his contumely to observing that Ibn Ezra “gave a hand to heretics and the light of faith.”⁵ On the contrary, Rabbi Simḥah Bunim Bonhardt of Przysucha [pronounced Pshisucha] [1765–1827], the man credited with establishing the rational school of Polish Ḥasidism that later flourished in Kotzk, Gur and Sokhatchov, bequeathed this imagery: “*Tkb fershteb nisht vie die pleyzēs zennen*

² Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) refers to Spinoza (and Ibn Ezra) in his *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels (Prolegomena to the History of Israel)*, 2nd edition (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1883) as having provided precedent for his own documentary hypothesis:

Since the days of Peyrerius and Spinoza, criticism has acknowledged the complex character of that remarkable literary production ... (Ibid. p. 6)

And the Jehovist does not even pretend to being a Mosaic law of any kind; it aims at being a simple book of history; the distance between the present and the past spoken of is not concealed in the very least. It is here that all the marks are found which attracted the attention of Abenezra and afterwards of Spinoza, such as Gen. xii.6 (“And the Canaanite was then in the land”), Gen. xxxvi.31 (“These are the kings who reigned in Edom before the children of Israel had a king”), Deut. xxxiv.10 (“There arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses”). (Ibid. p. 10)

See further Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Craig G. Bartholomew, *The God Who Acts in History: The Significance of Sinai* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), chap. 5.

³ Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York, NY: Dover, 1951), chap. 8 (pp. 120–123).

⁴ Rabbi Ezra of Gerona, conclusion to “Commentary to Song of Songs,” in *Kitvei RaMBaN*, ed. C.B. Chavel, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1968), p. 548. See further Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret (RaShBA), *Ma’amar ‘al Yishmael*, ed. Bezalel Naor (Spring Valley, NY: Orot, 2008), pp. 23–28, 136–143.

⁵ Rabbi Solomon Luria, *Yam shel Shelomo, Bava Kamma* (Prague, 1616–1618), Introduction, 2b.

ihm nisht arop fir grois yiras Shomayim,” “I do not understand how the shoulders [of Ibn Ezra] did not give way under the weight of the great fear of Heaven that he possessed.”⁶

The specific spur of our volume is the pronouncement of Leo Strauss (1899–1973), the German-American Jewish thinker most famous for his political philosophy, in the preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*:

The results of this examination of Spinoza’s critique may be summarized as follows. If orthodoxy claims to *know* that the Bible is divinely revealed, that every word of the Bible is divinely inspired, that Moses was the writer of the Pentateuch, that the miracles recorded in the Bible have happened and similar things, Spinoza has refuted orthodoxy. But the case is entirely different if orthodoxy limits itself to asserting that it *believes* the aforementioned things, i.e., that they cannot claim to possess the binding power peculiar to the known.⁷

Strauss concludes:

Certain it is that Spinoza cannot legitimately deny the possibility of revelation. But to grant that revelation is possible means to grant that the philosophic account and the philosophic way of life are not necessarily, not evidently, the true account and the right way of life: philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral.⁸

The challenge posed by Jeffrey Bloom (responsible for conceiving this project) to the many contributors to the present volume was: Can Orthodox Judaism muster a better defense of tradition than that of Strauss (which to this reader is vaguely reminiscent of Pascal’s wager)?

While one of the writers confronts Spinoza *ad hominem* (see Avraham Edelstein, “Spinoza: A Superb Intellect Sacrificed on the Altar of Human Arrogance”), in many instances the battle lines become blurred as Spinoza morphs into Kant. Alec Goldstein’s essay, “The Validity of Religious Experience in a Post-Kantian World,” sets the tone for this reconfiguration. Goldstein asserts: “We are children of Kant” (p. 76). From there, the

⁶ Quoted in Rabbi Yerahmiel Yisrael Yizhak Danziger of Alexander, *Yismah Yisrael* (Lodz, 1911–1912), *Terumah*, 34b.

⁷ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, translated by E.M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), Preface to the English Translation, p. 28. The Preface is datelined “The University of Chicago, August, 1962.” Italics mine (BN).

⁸ Ibid. p. 29.

nemesis takes on many guises: “historicization ... of commandments” (Mark Gottlieb, p. 122), “moral relativism” (Jeremy Kagan, p. 159), and “postmodernism” (Simi Peters, 216ff. and Gil Student, 251ff.).

Rav Kook had his hand on the pulse of the post-Kantian era when he wrote:

The *kefirah* (denial) found now among the masses, does not flow from the source of objective science, to say “There is no God,” but rather as the result of subjective relation; this is truly the source of denial and *apikorsut* (Epicureanism) of the founders of the negation in its original source.⁹

How does Orthodox Judaism survive in a post-Kantian Era? Rav Kook’s own response was to fall back on Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition:

The truth of the matter is that we have always known—and did not need Kant to reveal to us this mystery—that all human consciousness is subjective, relative. This is the “*Malkhut*” (Kingdom) as a vessel that has nothing of its own. It is the “*Beit Knesset*” (Synagogue), or the “Moon” that receives light, and all of our deeds, emotions, prayers, thoughts, all depend on “*Zot*” (This): “In this (*Zot*) I trust” [Psalms 27:3].¹⁰

Adopting a different stratagem, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Boston (1903–1993) responded to the challenge in his seminal work *Ish ha-*

⁹ *Pinkesei ha-RAYaH*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Makhon RZYH Kook, 2021), *Koveẓ mi-Tekufat Yaffo-Schweiz*, chap. 5 (p. 111). The loanwords *obyektivni* and *subyektivni* occur in the Hebrew original.

¹⁰ *Iggerot ha-RAYaH*, vol. 1, ed. Rabbi Zvi Yehudah ha-Kohen Kook (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1962), Letter 44 (to Shmuel Alexandrov), pp. 47–48. The loanword *subyektivnyot* occurs in the Hebrew original.

“*Beit Knesset*” and the moon are symbols of the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*. Likewise, the keyword “*Zot*” is code for *Malkhut* in the kabbalistic lexicon. Consult the various kabbalistic dictionaries, e.g., Rabbi Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim, sha’ar 23 (Sha’ar ‘Erkei ha-Kinuyyim)*; Rabbi Meir Poppers, *Me’orei ‘Or*, s.v. *Zot*.

An English translation of the entire letter to Alexandrov is available in Tzvi Feldman’s *Rav A.Y. Kook: Selected Letters* (USA: Ma’alot, 1986), pp. 81–107. Our quotation occurs there on p. 92. Feldman’s footnotes are helpful.

More recently, see *Kevazim mi-Ketav Yad Kodsbo*, ed. Boaz Ofen, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 2008), *Pinkas ha-Dapim* I, par. 1 (pp. 43–44): “Then there is revealed to us the Kantian conception that knowledge, even sensory, is not revealed to us in its true character, and so all that we see, is but the shadow of the thing, and not the thing (*davar*)” *Davar*, of course, is Rav Kook’s Hebrew translation of the German *Ding an sich*.

Halakhab (1944) by positing a *Halakhab* that is objective, its categories *a priori* as those of mathematics—as opposed to the conception of Jewish Law as *a posteriori* and history-bound.¹¹

In this, he followed in the footsteps of his illustrious ancestor and namesake Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik of Brisk (1820–1892), who responded to Reform by making the commandments of the Torah extramundane and ahistorical. In his commentary to the Torah, *Beit ha-Levi*, he reversed cause and effect. Where Reform Judaism had the commandment of eating matzah (unleavened bread) on Passover dependent on the historic event of the Exodus from Egypt—which invites abrogation—the Rabbi of Brisk boldly made the Exodus the result of the commandment of eating matzah, which preceded the creation of the world.¹²

In a memorable address before his rabbinic disciples, the doyen of American Orthodoxy lashed out against one author in particular who attributed the many leniencies in regard to the construction of the *sukkah* (considered *Halakhab le-Moshe mi-Sinai*) to the historic reality that there was a shortage of available lumber in Eretz Yisrael in Talmudic times.

Some of the Rabbi of Boston's contemporaries found the typology of the Man of Halakhah portrayed in the groundbreaking essay by that name, to be an extreme example, far-fetched and fanciful.¹³ Abraham Joshua

¹¹ In 1983, there appeared an authorized English translation by Lawrence Kaplan under the title *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1983).

¹² See Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik of Brisk, *Beit ha-Levi* (Warsaw, 1884), *Bo*, s.v. *ve-bigadta le-vinkha* (8d–10a). The loanword *Reform* occurs in the Hebrew original. Cf. the commentary of Ibn Ezra to that verse (Exodus 13:8) disputing the interpretation of Rabbi Marinus (i.e., Ibn Janah).

Though unreferenced in *Beit ha-Levi*, the author may very well have relied on the famous statement of the *Zohar* (II, 161a): “When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, He looked in the Torah and created the world.” (Cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 1:2.) The ancestor of the *Beit ha-Levi*, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, devoted an entire chapter of his work, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, to the theme that the Torah is the blueprint of Creation, invoking Lurianic Kabbalah that the supernal root of the Torah is in the “*Olamot ha-Ein Sof*” (“Worlds of the Infinite”). See *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* 4:10. (From this invocation of the *Olam ha-Malbush*, Rabbi Shlomo Eliashov deduced that Sarugian Kabbalah was accepted as authoritative in the school of the Vilna Gaon. See *Leshem Shevo ve-Ahlamah: Sefer Hakdamot u-She'arim* [Piotrków, 1909], Introduction to *Sha'ar ha-Poneh Derekh ha-Kadim* [59b].)

¹³ Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik in his *Halakhic Man* says similarly, “Obviously the description of halakhic man given here refers to a pure ideal type, as is the case with the other types with which the human sciences... are concerned. Real halakhic men, who are not simple but rather hybrid types, approximate, to a lesser or greater degree, the ideal halakhic man, each in accordance with his spiritual image and stature...” p. 139, n. 1.

Heschel (1907–1972) is reputed to have responded (paraphrasing the Talmudic verdict concerning the Biblical character Job): “The *Isb ha-Halakhah* never existed and was never created, but was a parable.”¹⁴

Into the next generation, it seems that the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s son, Professor Haym Soloveitchik (1937–), devoted his academic career to providing historical context to *Halakhah*, producing important studies of pawn broking and viticulture in the Middle Ages as they relate to the Halakhic authorities’ decisions in the realms of *ribit* (usury) and *stam yeinam* (gentile wine).

One of the present writers, reacting to Strauss’s “*Orthodoxie*” (perhaps in its own way as ironclad and objectivist as Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik’s *Halakhah*, as it too strives to shield Torah-true Judaism from the ravages of Reform), asks that we actually embrace subjectivity. Joshua I. Weinstein (“*Orthodoxie* and the Oral Law”) notes that though raised in an observant home, Strauss was oblivious to the *Torah she-be-‘al Peh*, the Oral Law, which is a celebration of individuality and subjectivity.

Weinstein might have quoted in this connection the famous introduction of Naḥmanides to his *Milḥamot Hashem*. “Anyone who studies our Talmud knows that in the controversy of its interpreters there are no absolute proofs, nor decisive questions, for in this wisdom there is no proof clear-cut as the computations of trigonometry and the demonstrations of astronomy.”¹⁵

In this reviewer’s mind, a glaring omission from this wonderful cornucopia of ideas is Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige* (1917). Alec Goldstein has written how direct, unmediated experience has come to play an important role in the religious life of “the children of Kant.” He has also written of conversionary experiences, holding up as an example Franz Rosenzweig’s legendary “conversion” at a Yom Kippur service. Otto satisfies both these criteria. He arrived at his dimension of “holiness,” which is *sui generis* and defies rational explanation, while visiting a synagogue in Morocco in 1911.¹⁶

Though Rabbi David Cohen (the “Nazirite”), the disciple of Rav Kook and editor of his magnum opus, *Orot ha-Kodesh*, does not mention

¹⁴ Cf. b. *Bava Batra* 15a: “*Iyov lo’ hayah ve-lo’ nivra’ ‘ela mashal hayah.*”

¹⁵ Quoted by Rabbi Isaac Hutner in *Paḥad Yitḥak: Kuntres Ve-Zot Hanukkah* (New York, NY, 1989), 9:3, 5. For Rabbi Hutner, Naḥmanides’ assessment, rather than expressing the inferiority of Talmudic debate in comparison to the exact sciences, bespeaks its superiority!

¹⁶ Goldstein discusses Rudolf Otto elsewhere. See Alec Goldstein, *A Theology of Holiness* (Kodesh, 2018), pp. 209–226 *passim*. As Rabbi Neḥemiah said: “Words of Torah are poor in their place and wealthy in another place” (*y. Rosh Hashanah* 3:5).

Otto's *Das Heilige*, I believe that he was familiar with his work. Cohen writes in the Introduction to *Orot ha-Kodesh*:

The holy (*kodesh*), this is the first foundation, the main one, the beginning of the wisdom of the holy, of the Rav [Kook], of blessed memory ...

The essence of the holy (*kodesh*) is indefinable, for it is the depth of depths, the beginning of all, and not given to definition.

When the Rav [Kook] was asked at the beginning of the editing of the section "The Holy," what is the definition of the holy, the response was: "That which is revealed through the Torah, which is the supernal will."

I felt that our Rabbi did not provide any definition of the holy (*kodesh*), for the depth of its essence... but rather the holy that is revealed in holiness (*kedushah*).

The holy (*kodesh*), whose entry is not found in the philosophic lexicon, whose place is thought to exist only in religion, is the essence of the wisdom of the holy that is revealed in holiness (*kedushah*), which extends throughout the world.

And so at the head of the section "The Holy" is the word of the *Zohar*¹⁷:

"Kodesh is a thing unto itself." ("*Kodesh milah be-garmeh hu.*")¹⁸

"What is *kodesh*? The perfection of all, which is called supernal wisdom."¹⁹

"And even though it is a hidden side, and called '*kodesh*,' from there it extends below, and is called '*kedushah*.'"^{20,21}

¹⁷ The heading of that section of *Orot ha-Kodesh*, with its three quotes from the *Zohar*, was created by the editor, Rabbi David Cohen, and thus reflects his understanding of the holy, not necessarily Rav Kook's. Lately, there is discussion in academic studies to what degree the *Lights of Holiness* are broken up through the prism of "the Nazirite"'s own consciousness, which is to say, the structure imposed upon Rav Kook's writings is itself a philosophic statement—that of the Editor. See Ehud Nahir, *Tikkun: Ha-'Etgar ha-Spinozi be-Kitvei ha-Rav Kook*, p. 58, n. 555.

¹⁸ *Zohar* III, 94b. See also *Shemu'ot RAYaH: Sefer Bereshit* (Jerusalem, 1939), *Hayyei Sarah* 5690 [i.e. 1929], p. 42, where Rav Kook explicates the *Zohar*'s Aramaic term, *mi-garmeh*, in Hebrew: "*kedushat ha-'ezem*" ("holiness of the essence").

¹⁹ *Zohar* III, 61a.

²⁰ Cf. *Zohar* III, 93a.

²¹ Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook, *Orot ha-Kodesh*, ed. Rabbi David Cohen, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), Introduction, par. 4 ("The Holy") (pp. 18–19). See further *Orot ha-Kodesh*, beginning vol. 2, the folio preceding page 283. Following the three quotes from the *Zohar*, there is a word of explanation: "The general, essential, indefinable holy (*kodesh*) is observed in the

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As for Spinoza, Rav Kook once exclaimed: “The biggest *Apikoros* (Epicurean) in Israel believes more than the biggest believer of the Nations.”²²



general, purposive holiness (*kedushah*) that extends in man and the world.” Also, Rabbi David Cohen, *Kol ha-Neru'ah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1979), p. 108: “The holy (*kodesh*), the essential, essential being.”

²² Rabbi Zvi Yehudah ha-Kohen Kook, *Li-Sheloshah be-Elul*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1947), p. 17, par. 36.