The Hebrew Spinoza

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Abstract
Spinoza has gained acceptance into Hebrew culture in the last two centuries, a period that includes the Jewish Haskalah in Europe, the culture created in Eretz Yisrael in the pre-statehood days, and contemporary Israeli culture. This acceptance is rather intimate by nature. Hebrew authors and their readers turned to Spinoza to clarify their own problems. To these audiences, Spinoza was not only a great philosopher, whose writings are worth interpreting and spreading. He was also perceived as someone who could help formulate what Judaism is and learn the possible meaning it can find in the world of Jews who had moved away from a religious lifestyle.

Keywords: Spinoza, Hebrew culture, Jewish thought, Zionism, Israel

1 Introduction

Spinoza has gained acceptance into Hebrew culture in the last two centuries, a period that includes the Jewish Haskalah in Europe, the culture created in Eretz Yisrael in the pre-statehood days, and contemporary Israeli culture. This acceptance is rather intimate by nature.\(^1\) Hebrew authors and their

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\(^1\) Of course, I do not presume to include everything that has been written on Spinoza in Hebrew, not should all this writing be considered “intimate.” This paper will not address Israeli academic research on Spinoza. For a number of generations, even prior to statehood, wrote many articles and even monographs on Spinoza. Some of these writings were published in Hebrew, others in other languages. These studies all discuss problems that are known to Spinoza scholars worldwide—the types of knowledge, the meaning of attributes, and attitudes toward religion and politics. In my opinion, this hermeneutic corpus is Israeli only in that its authors are Israeli, not because they seek to unravel any Israeli issues. I therefore preferred other corpuses because, first, they enable us to discern ongoing writing in Hebrew, with its own trends and continuity. Second, I believe that these Hebrew-writing intellectuals express a special affinity to Spinoza’s thinking and personality. In this introductory section I will give some background on Hebrew culture and the revival of Hebrew. For further information, please see: Arieh Saposnik, *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine* (Oxford: University Press, 2008). Benjamin Harshav, *Language in the Time of Revolution* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1993). For a broader picture, and in some ways a different one, on Spinoza’s position in Jewish

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readers turned to Spinoza to clarify their own problems. To these audiences, Spinoza was not only a great philosopher, whose writings are worth interpreting and spreading. He was also perceived as someone who could help formulate what Judaism is and learn the possible meaning it can find in the world of Jews who had moved away from a religious lifestyle.

Before turning to the details, I would like to make a few comments regarding the very choice of writing in Hebrew, including writing about Spinoza and translating his writings into Hebrew. After having served for generations almost exclusively for liturgical purposes only, Hebrew was revived into Modern Hebrew, and for the past two hundred years its use spread to all realms of life. Seemingly, this revival—a rare event in human history—was not really necessary. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, most of world Jewry spoke Yiddish, a language that was alive, even kicking, with a rich literature. The preference for Hebrew is an outcome of the fact that the spiritual treasures of Judaism, first and foremost of which is the Hebrew Bible, are written in Hebrew. In its position as a national liberation movement, Zionism could not give up on the basic symbols of the Jewish people—the Hebrew language and the Land of Israel.

The revival of Hebrew was a multidimensional process. It was established in the various education systems, where it acquired a status of both a vernacular and a mother tongue. However, this could not have happened without the momentum provided by the many genres and forms of literary writing. It was in these writings that “the passive language of the religious Hebrew library, destined for Halakhic learning and use, at once burst through its thematic boundaries and turned into malleable clay, which the potters could use to relate to the world and to the language in a contemporary and personal way, molding it creatively.”

Philosophical writing in Hebrew was, of course, part of this literary creation, and even the root of its achievements. The highlight of this writing—especially in the beginning of the twentieth century, but later as well—was the translation of Western masterpieces. The motivation behind these translations was not only to enrich the intellectual life of readers, many of whom were polyglots. It was a national project, one aimed at enabling the existence of abstract thinking in Hebrew, which historian and thinker Joseph Klausner called the “revival of Hebrew learning.”

The importance of the translations and the national motives behind them are the background for a characteristic textual map of sorts. The appearance of a translated masterpiece is accompanied by texts discussing its special meaning, like moons orbiting a star, enhancing its light. These orbits also include meteorites of long introductions, articles, lectures, pamphlets and numerous footnotes. Many of these orbiting texts were written by the translators, and this corpus is richer—both in number of items and topics of discussion—than one finds in a regular critical apparatus. Such texts are published soon after the translation has appeared and continue to accompany the translation and


explain its importance to the public and the nation. Such a textual map is characteristic of the appearance of Spinoza’s writings toward the end of the Haskalah at the end of the nineteenth century and is also characteristic of the last translation of the *Ethics* published in the 1990s.3

We will now look at five such cases in three historical contexts. Solomon Rubin and Hillel Zeitlin worked at the end of the Haskalah. Rubin, in 1885, was the first to translate the *Ethics* into Hebrew, and Zeitlin published a monograph on Spinoza in 1900. Both were somehow linked to Zionism, but it is a stretch to claim that Zionism defines their identity. Their nationalist tendencies are primarily manifested in the fact that they wrote in Hebrew, and an important part of their discourse on Spinoza is justifying the Jewish nature of his thinking. They were followed by Jacob Klatzkin. Klatzkin—a philosopher, polymath, and a leader of the Zionist movement—published texts on Spinoza in the 1920s. His important argument is that Spinoza was necessary for the national revival movement, of which he was one of the formulators. He viewed Spinoza’s philosophy as provisions that the Jewish people will need on their journey toward spiritual and existential revival.

Joseph Klausner, too, operated within Klatzkin’s context. The affinity between Spinoza’s thinking and the idea of revival, *Techiya*, was the central theme of Klausner’s lecture at the Hebrew University in 1927, delivered to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Spinoza’s death. The last person I will discuss is Yermiyahu Yovel, who was the third person to translate the *Ethics* into Hebrew, a renowned Spinoza scholar, and the founder of the Spinoza Center in Jerusalem.4 His writings on Spinoza were published in the 1990s, and he linked Israeli issues—debates on Zionism and the difficulties faced by Israeli secularism—to Spinoza’s ideas, which Yovel presents as a solution, or part of a solution.

In considering this ongoing writing, we note that Spinoza serves as a framework for clarifying the identity problems of secular Jews who had moved away from tradition. At the same time, Spinoza’s thinking, language, and persona have become part of the idea of “national revival,” related to—yet distinct from—the identity problem. Identity is examined in relation to the past, and revival is about the future. Moreover, the problems that occupy Israelis are a continuation of those that had occupied their predecessors. The common denominator is the issue of their relationship to the past, and the fact that Spinoza has become a useful tool for dealing with it. The uniqueness of Israeli identity problems is not the problem itself but rather its circumstances.

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3 This is also characteristic of the publication of translations of other philosophers, among them Kant, Plato, the Stoics, and Nietzsche. However, to the best of my knowledge it continues only for Spinoza.

4 The Spinoza Center archive went up in flames a few years ago. As of this writing (October 2023), the ongoing war is preventing me from reaching to whatever little remains. The Spinoza Center was founded by Yermiyahu Yovel in 1987. Its aim is to advance research on Spinoza’s thinking, its sources, contemporary intellectual history, and the relevance of his thinking to current events. The Spinoza Center initiated public discourse on issues of Israeli identity, relations between religion and state, and tolerance. In 2010 the Center’s activity was moved to the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, and it is now headed by Professor Pini Ifergan and Professor Dror Yinon, both of Bar-Ilan University.
2 Discussion

Solomon Rubin (1823-1910), the first translator of the *Ethics*, was among the *maskilim* of Galicia. He studied Maimonides, Spinoza, and the popularization of science. In his many writings on Spinoza, he strove to legitimize both Spinoza’s method of thinking and lifestyle. Rubin’s struggle to acquit Spinoza is also his own struggle for his identity. Like Spinoza, Rubin had been persecuted and ostracized, and his life was a series of peregrinations and confrontations with the rabbinical establishment.

As part of his various attempts to acquit Spinoza, Rubin tried to convince his readers that Spinoza’s sources are Jewish, and presented them with long lists of Jewish philosophers whom Spinoza had studied. He viewed Spinoza’s philosophy as resting on three principles: First, the rejection of the idea of *ex nihilo*; second, the denial of free will; and third, the rejection of the similarity between God and humans. Rubin found affinities between these principles and those of accepted Jewish thinkers, among them Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi, and Joseph Karo. To Rubin, “Spinoza’s method is Jewish in all judgement and law,” yet another link in the chain of intra-Jewish opinions.

Rubin’s translation of the *Ethics* into Hebrew was part of his effort to legitimize Spinoza. His claim, for which he offered no source, that Spinoza used Latin for fear of the rabbis augmented the translation into a correction of the wrongs of religious persecution. In Rubin’s mind, the Hebrew translation of Spinoza as the return of a lost son to his mother, and returning the *Ethics* to its Hebrew sources was a way to rectify Spinoza’s rejection. When Hebrew readers gained direct access to Spinoza, they would realize that his ostracization was not justified. The underlying assumption implicit in Rubin’s legitimization of Spinoza is that Judaism is pluralistic and contains a multitude of perceptions and viewpoints. Because Spinoza’s thinking is similar to that of accepted philosophers, it, too, should be accepted.

The case of Hillel Zeitlin, who was born in 1872 and murdered in Treblinka in 1942, evinces a different strategy. Zeitlin was born to a Hassidic family, and being close to Judaism’s mystical tendencies, based his arguments about the Jewish nature of Spinoza’s thinking on comparisons to Kabbalistic and Hassidic ideas. Although he does not see total similarity, for example, regarding determinism, he reminds us that in numerology, as the Kabbalists know, God is nature. Thus, Spinoza’s devotion and love of God are reminiscent of the enthusiasm of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hassidism. Furthermore, the high value Spinoza places on joy, is similar to that of Rabbi Zalman of Liadi, the founder of an influential Hassidic movement—“Sadness is demonic (from *sitrarh ahara*, literally, the other side).”

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For now, the main point is that returning Spinoza to Judaism both undermines Judaism’s traditional images and attempts to expand them. Acquitting Spinoza is akin to acquitting those who wrote about him, Jews who, while deviant, wanted to remain loyal to their people and their tradition. Such attempts, represented here by Rubin and Zeitlin, define both Spinoza and Judaism. The former defines him in an eclectic, the latter as a mystic.

Jacob Klatzkin did not seek to define Spinoza’s Judaism, but rather to instruct us as to how his thinking should be placed within the national revival project. His pessimistic philosophical perception and his Zionist viewpoint constitute the origins of his views on Spinoza. He detailed his philosophical perception, influenced by Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, in his book *Decline of Life*, where he explained that life—in the broadest human sense—is declining because of the expansion of reason. He views this as a total and uncontrollable process. Reason neutralizes sensory data, religion, and faith—it is a blind adherence to being. This decline is inherent to life, and the very realization of life must reveal its developed forms, namely reason, which is what will bring about its demise.

From the perspective of this pessimistic philosophy, Spinoza is a manifestation of the vital past. His method is reminiscent of religious teaching: just as faith connects the believer to the world, so too in Spinoza’s thinking are humans connected to being. Although Spinoza’s pantheism is far from the Jewish perception of transcendence, rendering Spinoza’s thinking “not Jewish in spirit” seems trivial to Klatzkin. What is important is its religious and vital nature.

The decline of Judaism is not unique. It is the fate of all religions and all life at this time, and Spinoza’s thinking too is part of the manifestation of declining life. But, if so, what is the point of continuing to delve into it or translate his works into Hebrew? The answer lies with the new inroads toward identity provided by Klatzkin’s Zionist position. Klatzkin’s national identity is not dependent—as was his predecessors—on clarifying the Jewish nature of Spinoza’s thinking. His identity emerges from a broader reckoning of past and future. Religion and life, not Judaism, become the fundamental categories of the “past,” and the future is loaded with a new, momentous meaning.

To elucidate, I will digress and describe Klatzkin’s Zionist position. Klatzkin narrowed the basis for the Jewish people’s future existence to “secular formations,” referring to the Hebrew language and a common territory. Accordingly, the logical methodology of the *Ethics* is a Hebrew one. Klatzkin emphasizes that Spinoza was influenced by Hebrew, and therefore “the Hebrew language is best fit for the translation of this book.” He then continued to imbue the Hebrew translation with the status of the original, the source. The Hebrew term *muskal* can be loosely translated as logical or thought out. When combined with its grammatical derivatives, *muskal* best matches Spinoza’s thinking, and the Hebrew translation underscores and reveals the nature of the Spinozist method. This, according to Klatzkin, is a result of the perfect suitability of the Hebrew language to the text and so is completely unrelated to the translator’s skills. Klatzkin concluded, “It is my contention that this book should not be translated again to Western languages without comparing the translation to the Hebrew one, which, in a manner, becomes of first source of sorts even in relation to the Roman corpus.” Because Hebrew underlies the *Ethics*’ method of thinking, the book is an

9 Ya’akov Klatzkin, *Baruch Spinoza: His Life and Method* (Tel Aviv: Masadah, 1933), 76.
asset of the Hebrew language. Furthermore, because, according to Klatzkin, the future existence of the Jewish people could be based on the secular formations of language and territory, translating Spinoza is an act of returning a huge asset back to the Hebrew language, which is the foundation of the existence of the Jewish people after their religion collapsed. Incidentally, this was also Klatzkin’s reason for compiling the large Hebrew philosophical dictionary.12

Rubin’s returning of Spinoza to the folds of Hebrew differs from Klatzkin’s. Rubin worked to tear down the barrier between his Jewish readers and Spinoza to acquit him, which he also did in his attempts to resolve the identity difficulties of Jews like himself. Klatzkin, however, sought to place his translation as yet another intellectual asset of the Jewish collective, now forced to change its ways of existence and base them on secular formations. Klatzkin’s Zionist perception is what allows him to shelve aside the question of the Jewish nature of Spinoza’s thinking and redefine along the lines of the future and the idea of revival.

Another attempt to fit Spinoza into the national revival box was heard in Joseph Klausner’s speech immediately following the establishment of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.13 Most of his speech dealt with two arguments on the Jewish nature of Spinoza’s philosophy.14 First, Judaism is a teaching of life, and as such, as with any manifestation of life, it must contain contradictions and discrepancies. Second, Spinoza’s thinking is not an abstract philosophical method that can be free of contradiction, rather, it is infused with it. It contains rationalism and realism, freedom and necessity, understated expression and “a burning love of God. […] From this perspective, Spinoza was a total Jew, and his thinking is of absolute Jewish nature.”15 At the end of his lecture, he discusses the special relevance of this thinking for his own times. He explains that a “chain of philosophers of Jewish origin”—Philo, Ibn Gabirol, Abarbanel, and Spinoza—were all rejected by Judaism. These philosophers influenced each other, and all can be traced back to Plato and the Neo-Platonians. Their thinking expresses Platonic pantheism centered on the concept of love. As long as Judaism was solely a religion, detached from any land, language, and national foundation, it had to be wary of this chain of philosophers. But now, with Judaism beginning to inhale the “scent of a homeland,” they no longer pose a threat but rather “help and strengthen […] its spirit.”16 This is why Klausner’s concluding call, “You are our brother, you are our brother, you are our brother” is not an acquittal—as is Rubin’s apologetics—but a removal of the sins of Judaism.17 Only now, revived, can Judaism accept Spinoza, and even need him.18

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12 Ya’akov Klatzkin and M. N. Tzovol, Otzar ha-Munahim ha-Filosofim / Thesaurus Philosophicus Linguae Hebraicae, 4 vols. (Berlin: Eshkol, reprinted edition 1928–1933). To date, this is still the most important philosophy dictionary in Hebrew. It has been unloaded online, with additions and corrections by the Pshat Project.
14 Klausner, The Jewish Nature, 188.
15 Klausner, The Jewish Nature, 188.
18 I jump between several eras here. In any case, a complete picture of Spinoza in Hebrew culture is not possible within a short article. The reader can find information and ways of interpretation in the items indicated in the footnotes. Mainly, I am omitting here David Ben-Gurion’s comments on Spinoza. In my humble opinion, they have no meaning beyond the claim heard by many Zionist thinkers that Spinoza is one of the forerunners of Zionism.
Finally, we will discuss Yirmiyahu Yovel’s writings and his views on Spinoza, with the important backdrop for these being two crises—the crisis of secularism in Israel and the crisis of Zionist ideology. These crises, which began manifesting themselves in the late 1970s, are distinct yet intertwined. Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel are linked to the creation of a secular Jewish identity. Such secularism was the only way to challenge the religious explanation for exilic life. However, Zionism is not merely a rebellion. It is also an attempt to redefine its relationship to the Jewish past. An important part of this attempt is Ahad Ha’am’s (1856-1927) perception of “Judaism as culture.” Ahad Ha’am’s basic claim was that Judaism is not a religion but the spiritual and intellectual creation of generations of Jews. Judaism is a national culture. It is not a divine certification. Ahad Ha’am’s idea strongly impacted Israeli culture, shaping the position toward Judaism in the secular sector of state education. The idea of Judaism as culture was the inspiration for Israeli canonization efforts, designed to reintroduce “the Jewish bookshelf.”

This idea has been losing its foothold since the late 1970s. One main reason is the political shift that took place in 1977, when the right wing came into power. This political change also generated a change in the position of Mizrahi Jews. Mizrahi, literally Eastern, is the term used in Israel for Jews who had immigrated from Muslim countries, and whose worldview was not shaped by a sharp break from Jewish tradition, as had been the experience of European Jews. Rather, within the Mizrahi population, secularization was a slow and partial process, and the Israeli term for their identity is masorti, or traditional—conveying loyalty to a softened version of religion tradition. These transformations turned the idea of Judaism as culture from an alien concept to a prominent part of Israeli society.

Alongside the crisis of secularism is a second crisis—the weakening of Zionist ideology. This weakening is related to the fact that the goals of Zionism, which were formulated in the early twentieth century, were achieved with Israeli statehood in 1948. The question of the meaning of this ideology is a burden on Israeli society, echoing the adage about dreams coming true. Added to this is the exhausting ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, and the spreading of critical and postmodern ways of thinking in Israeli academia and Israeli public sphere. Intellectuals who express these trends view Zionism’s major achievements—national liberty and Israeli statehood—with a degree of suspicion and reserve.

Clearly, these two crises are interrelated, if only because reservations about Zionism represent, in and of themselves, the lowered esteem in which the thoughts and solutions of its formulators are now held. But the essence is the outcome of these two crises—the undermining of the identity of the secular Israeli individual, that person’s tradition or past. As I see it, part of Yovel’s discussions of Spinoza is his attempt to deal with this difficulty. Yovel translated the *Ethics* in 2002, which was preceded by *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, published in 1988 and achieving the status of bestseller. In the Epilogue, especially relevant to our discussion, he explains that embedded in Spinoza’s thinking thanks to his claim in TTP about the possible political revival of the Jewish people. Those interested in more details are welcome to review these two studies: Jacob Adler, “The Zionists and Spinoza,” *Israel Studies Forum* 24, (2005): 25–38; Menahem Dorman, *The Jewish Polemics about Spinoza: from David Niyeto to David Ben-Gurion* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 1990).

is a positive attitude toward Zionism. He bases this on three claims which I will present here briefly, without Yovel’s supporting arguments.

1. Immanence is a fundamental principle of Spinoza’s thinking, and, according to Yovel, immanence is the essence of secularism. This position means that humans and their actions have nothing but laws of nature and of history.

2. Spinoza anticipates the discussion of modern identity. The implicit perception in the Ethics is that a Jew, as any other individual or group, is not one who chooses an identity but rather is condemned to sustain it. This identity is also dependent upon the image of Jews in the eyes of others, and not only upon the way they define themselves.

3. Within the modern state—Spinoza lived in an era when such states were forming—there is no longer the option of living in a ghetto—namely in an autonomous community—which is a sub-state of sorts. In the modern state, individuals must exist as citizens, without divisions dictated by group ascriptions.

Yovel attributes these three claims, taken from different parts of his writings, to Spinoza. He then concludes that hidden in Spinoza’s thinking is an affirmation of Zionism. The first claim implies that the solution to the problem of the Jews cannot be found in abandoning their identity. The second claim teaches us that they cannot keep living in countries that are not their own. Finally, the third claim indicates that the solution relies on organizing politically, secularly, and immanently. All these taken together add up to Zionism.

Yovel’s arguments cannot be summarized as a new articulation of Zionism. Rather, they identify Spinoza as a proto-Zionist and as a generator of secularism, granting both Zionism and secularism an exquisite pedestal on which to stand. This move is part of Yovel’s overall attempt at constructing a new Jewish past. He points to the Hellenistic Jews and to the Conversos as early examples of Jewish secularism. Yovel was the editor of the New Jewish Time Encyclopedia, aimed at exposing secular-Zionist-Israelis to the full array of their culture.20 By pointing to distant and surprising roots, displaying the rich cultural canopy, and using immanence as the source of secularism—Yovel works toward entrenching and deepening secular Zionist identity and helps it overcome its problems.

3 Conclusion

Sometimes, Hebrew writings about Spinoza are an attempt to define the identity of the national Jew, Jews who have distanced themselves from their tradition. Other times, it is an attempt to understand the meaning of national revival. These attempts are consistent with each other and reflect their changing historical contexts. The question weighing down on modern Jews is their relation to the past. The successes of Zionism, in the early twentieth century, were expressed in the greater place its thinkers accorded to the future and the momentum of the present. With Israeli statehood—the main goal of Zionism—secular Jews returned to grappling with their identity. This is what I meant in my argument that Yovel’s problem differs from Rubin’s, especially circumstantially. To sum up,

20 Yirmiyahu Yovel, New Jewish Time: Jewish Culture in a Secular Era—An Encyclopedic Perspective (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007).
these Hebrew writers, in their various contexts and trends, when thinking of their future and their past, return to Spinoza. The outcome is that it is Spinoza—the man who left his community—that becomes the guide to Jews who are seeking to return to themselves and come together in rebuilding themselves using the building blocks of their tradition.

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