

One Book Programmer

Betraying Spinoza

BY REBECCA GOLDSTEIN

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JEWISH LITERATURE,
CULTURE & IDEAS

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***Betraying Spinoza* by Rebecca Goldstein**

About the Book

On July 27, 1656, Amsterdam's Jewish community declared Baruch Spinoza excommunicated, and, at the age of twenty-three, he became the most famous heretic in Judaism. His "abominable heresies"? He denied the immortality of the soul and challenged the accepted belief that the Torah was literally given by God. His work remains as resonant and provocative today as it was when it first appeared.

In *Betraying Spinoza*, Rebecca Goldstein sets out to rediscover the flesh-and-blood man often buried beneath the veneer of rigorous rationality and to provide a comprehensive cultural and religious context for the formation of his ideas. Here is a Spinoza both hauntingly emblematic and deeply human, both heretic and hero—a surprisingly contemporary figure ripe for our own uncertain age.

About the Author

Novelist and scholar Rebecca Goldstein was raised as an Orthodox Jew. She describes her father, a cantor, as a *shtetl* Jew and says he was known as "the Tzaddik of White Plains." Dissatisfied with her Orthodox high school education, the rebellious Goldstein took philosophy classes during the summer. She continued in her academic pursuit, eventually receiving her Ph.D in philosophy from Princeton University and teaching at Barnard College, her Alma mater, for ten years. One summer vacation, Goldstein wrote her first novel, *The Mind-Body Problem*. Philosophically motivated, the book became a critical success and encouraged her to continue writing. Goldstein is now the author of six novels, a biography, and a book of short stories, for which she was awarded a National Jewish Book Honor. Her most recent novel, *Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel*, was featured in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*.

Reviews

**NIALL FERGUSON, AUTHOR OF *Colossus: the Rise and Fall of the American Empire*
AND LAURENCE A. TISCH PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT HARVARD**

"If, like me, you have ever felt daunted by Spinoza's thought, Rebecca Goldstein's captivating new book provides the key. By engaging with not only Spinoza's Jewish origins but her own Jewish upbringing, Goldstein brilliantly—and movingly—illuminates this self-effacing champion of rationalism and secularism. Excommunicated for heresy by the Jewish community of Amsterdam, Spinoza was thereby excommunicated from his own (and Europe's past) and freed to leap forward to a future of unbounded individual inquiry. Enlightening in every sense."

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CONTINUED

JAMES CARROLL, AUTHOR OF *Constantine's Sword* AND *House of War*

"We are all children of Spinoza. But even now we are in danger of betraying him. Rebecca Goldstein reminds us of what is urgently at stake in a clear-eyed appreciation of this prophet of tolerance, democratic value, and authentic faith. This book is as timely as it is beautifully crafted and inspiring as its subject."

ANTONIO DAMASIO, AUTHOR OF *Looking for Spinoza* AND *Descartes' Error*

"Rebecca Goldstein has written a brilliant, engaging and personal reflection on Spinoza's thinking, life, and historical context. I read this intellectual page-turner in one sitting. I recommend it to anyone curious to know how Spinoza was doubly betrayed, first by those who failed to acknowledge his monumental contribution to modernity and then by those who are now intent on dismantling it".

HARRY FRANKFURT, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *On Bullshit* AND PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF PHILOSOPHY AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

"This is a splendid book. Goldstein provides a richly illuminating history of the Amsterdam Jewish community in which Spinoza was born and raised, and by which his distinctive outlook on human life was formed; she develops perspicuous accounts of some of Spinoza's most central metaphysical and ethical doctrines; and she sketches insightful portraits of his intellectual and personal identities. In all of her approaches to Spinoza—historical, philosophical, and personal—her work is both satisfying as scholarship and a pleasure to read."

Interview

Free Radical, interview by Stephen Vider

Betraying Spinoza, the fourth book in Nextbook's *Jewish Encounters* series, presents the 17th-century rationalist as both the first modern thinker and the original yeshiva dropout. Baruch Spinoza's rejection of traditional tenets—and his questioning of what it means to be a Jew—scandalized his Amsterdam community but has inspired disciples from Moses Mendelssohn to Albert Einstein to Rebecca Goldstein. A novelist and professor of philosophy at Trinity College, Goldstein dares to inhabit the mind of a man who preached objectivity, offering a lucid and often surprising exploration of how Spinoza's Sephardic roots informed his greatest work, *The Ethics*.

> Read this interview at: www.nextbook.org

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Suggested Reading

For more on the philosophy and life of Spinoza

Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*

Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism*

Margaret Gullan-Whur, *Within Reason: A Life of Spinoza*

If you are interested in Jewish philosophy

Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*

Daniel Frank, *The Jewish Philosophy Reader*

Jehuda Halevi, *Kuzari: an Argument for the Faith of Israel*

For more by Rebecca Goldstein:

Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Godel

The Mind-Body Problem

Properties of Light: A Novel of Love, Betrayal, and Quantum Physics

Reader's Guide

The Nextbook Readers' Guide for *Betraying Spinoza* will be sent to you with your book order and can also be found on line at: http://www.nextbook.org/publishingprogram/goldstein_guide.html

Programming Ideas and Resources

- > Ask your rabbi to form a series of discussions on Spinoza's thought, using excerpts from *Betraying Spinoza*.
- > Discuss the concept of excommunication and acceptance within Judaism. How do contemporary Jewish communities deal with change? How would Spinoza be received today?
- > Read *Betraying Spinoza* as an introduction to other Jewish philosophers—Jehuda Halevi, Moses Mendelssohn, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber—in a year-long study group.
- > Invite the author to speak and lead a discussion. Authors can be reached through their publicists and/or designated agent.