

SPINOZA'S RABBI

Saul Levi Morteira's Sermons to a Congregation of Amsterdam "New Jews"
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In the last years of the sixteenth century, following the successful revolt that freed the northern provinces of the Netherlands from Spanish Hapsburg rule, a new destination became possible for Portuguese "New Christians" seeking to escape the clutches of the Inquisition. By the year 1600, a small group of Portuguese New Christian emigrants were living openly as Jews in the burgeoning commercial and cultural center in Amsterdam: worshipping together, acquiring a cemetery, providing for properly slaughtered meat. The first two generations of the Portuguese community was composed almost entirely of immigrants with this common background.

Their ancestors had converted in Portugal during the universal forced conversion of 1497, more than 100 years before. They had not fully integrated into Portuguese Christian society but were considered by most of their Portuguese neighbors to be in a separate category because of their Jewish "blood." Some of them had indeed run into serious problems with the Inquisition, accused of "Judaizing": observing a Jewish practice or professing a Jewish belief, which was according to the law of the Church permitted for Jews, but heretical for Christians. Many had fine general educations from Portuguese universities; they were successful international merchants, or highly respected physicians. They had the psychological mobility to decide to pull up their stakes and leave behind the familiar environment of the Iberian peninsula for a totally different environment. They had made a decision to live as Jews, leading them to opt for a Jewish community, rather than Antwerp or Bordeaux, where emigrants from Portugal lived nominally as Christians without an Inquisition to investigate. But they knew very little about what this actually meant. There may have been some underground programs of rudimentary Jewish education that survived through the sixteenth century despite the Inquisitional surveillance. They knew that Jews accepted only the Old Testament, not the New Testament. But their knowledge of the rich post-Biblical Jewish tradition was extremely limited. Now, in Amsterdam, they were building a Jewish community virtually *ex nihilo*. How were they to learn what it meant to live as a Jew?

First, there was a need for publication of classical works of the Jewish tradition in languages the people understood. Educated Portuguese Jews read Spanish, and reprints of the classical Ferrara Spanish translation of the Bible were available to them. Other works were translated and printed in Amsterdam. Prayer books were generally published with an accompanying Spanish translation. Bahya ibn Pakuda's classic on spirituality, *Duties of the Heart*, was published in Spanish translation in 1610 and in Portuguese in 1670 (Swet, 293). In 1613 a book called *Livro intitulado Thesuba que he contriti3n* was printed, a Spanish rendering of Maimonides' codification of the laws of repentance, obviously an important theme for the community. The first part of the Kabbalistic ethical work *Reshit Hokhmah* was printed by Menasseh ben Israel in a Spanish translation in 1633.

In addition, basic works outlining the commandments Jews were expected to obey were written in Portuguese especially for the community, one published in 1627 by Abraham Farrar), another (by Menasseh ben Israel), in 1645.

But books were not enough. The central role of educator for this community of “New Jews” was played by the rabbis. For the first decades of its existence, these were rabbis who came from outside the community; Menasseh ben Israel was the first rabbi actually educated in Amsterdam. The rabbis conducted classes at various levels, both for children and for adults. But the major instrument at their disposal for the education of the community as a whole, I would argue, was the sermon. And the finest exemplar for the use of the pulpit as a sustained, ongoing program of adult education was Saul Levi Morteira.

Not much is known of his early life. Born into a distinguished Italian Ashkenazi family, he was educated in Venice, studying with the colorful and multi-talented rabbi Leon Modena. He accompanied to Paris the distinguished converso physician Elijah Montalto, who had recently converted to Judaism; in Paris Montalto served in the court of Queen Marie de Médicis, a position that required a special waiver of the prohibition against professing Jews in France. When Montalto died suddenly in 1616, his body was brought to the nearest Jewish cemetery: the Ouderkerk cemetery of the Portuguese community in Amsterdam. It was in this entourage that Morteira first came to Amsterdam. At that time the Portuguese Jewish community numbered perhaps 550 souls. He was asked to remain; apparently a powerful inducement was a budding relationship with a young woman from the community named Ester Soares, whom he married soon afterward, allowing him to be considered a kind of honorary Sephardi. Before long, he was preaching in Portuguese, the only language the congregation understood.

In 1619, following a schism that produced two separate congregations (a third one would follow soon after), he undertook to preach *every Sabbath* in the more established Beth Jacob synagogue, imposing upon himself a discipline for which I know of no parallels in the history of Jewish homiletics. His first year, his sermon was based on the first verse of each Torah *parashah*; his second year on the second verse, and so forth, moving systematically through the verses. In 1645, two of his disciples published a book containing a sermon they had selected from each *parashah* entitled *Giv'at Sha'ul*. In their introduction, they wrote that at the point, Morteira had Hebrew texts of 1400 different sermons that he had already delivered. Until the late 1980s, all of those interested in the Morteira and the Amsterdam community assumed that these manuscripts had been irretrievably lost. Then a set of microfilms arrived at the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem, reproducing the contents of five massive volumes of Morteira's manuscript sermons in the uncatalogued collection of the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest, where apparently no one had ever considered them significant enough to bother studying or even describing them. When I came to Jerusalem for a sabbatical leave with the Institute for Advanced Studies in the spring of 1989, I found about 550 different manuscript sermons in this collection—not everything that Morteira wrote, to be sure, but 11 times the number of sermons in his book. This is the material that formed the basis for my *Exile in Amsterdam*.

In addition to serving as evidence for an ongoing program of adult education, these sermons provide an essential context for Jewish intellectual history in the first 60 years of the 17th century, especially in the Amsterdam community, the environment that produced passionate spokesmen who defended Judaism with the zeal of the convert, as well as others who challenged the tradition, the most famous being Uriel da Costa and of course Spinoza. Furthermore, these texts—the largest extant collections of sermons by a single Jewish preacher before the late nineteenth century—are an invaluable resource for our understanding of the history of Jewish preaching and the nature of the rabbinate. They demonstrate how a rabbi worked on his preaching throughout his rabbinic career, they indicate the amount of effort he must have devoted to the preparation of a sermon during the course of each week, they reveal how he used earlier sermons in the preparation of later ones. And Morteira was one of the true masters of Jewish homiletical art, whose reputation is confirmed by this extraordinary written legacy. In the time remaining, I would like to illustrate by sharing with you some of my favorite passages from the texts.

I begin with some passages illustrating what I call the rhetoric of rebuke. Many of those who arrived from Portugal had lost most of their possessions, and poverty was a problem the community had to confront directly. Yet some of the first generation of Portuguese arrivals were indeed wealthy and prospering. An early sermon by Morteira, entitled “The People’s Envy” delivered in January of 1622 and included in the 1645 edition of *Giv’at Sha’ul*, indicates that he considered the ostentatious display of this opulence to be a serious problem. I published an annotated translation of this fascinating sermon, in my *Jewish Preaching 1200-1800*, before I knew of the manuscripts; it is still one of my favorites. Morteira uses a verse near the beginning of Exodus (Exod. 1:7) about the Israelites flourishing in Egypt as a prototype for the kind of behavior that has always caused problems for Jews in exile—behavior that arouses both the anger of God and the hostility of the host population.

The tragic paradigm is stated in the introduction. “Expelled from certain countries, we have arrived in others totally destitute, and God has graciously enabled us to acquire new wealth and possessions. Those who knew at first hand the circumstances of their arrival lived in peace. But after their deaths, others have become arrogant, indulging in empty vanities, until the indigenous population eventually expelled them.”¹ This arrogance is displayed first in the propensity to acquire unnecessarily large houses. Those who live in exile should be content if they have what is necessary for subsistence living.

But such a contented disposition is not what we see today. A man who is alone with his wife, or even a single man, lives in a large house with unnecessarily spacious rooms. Such people waste their money, which they may well need some day, by giving it to the Gentiles and receiving nothing of value in return. This is not befitting a people living outside its land, in the land of its enemies.

¹ Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching*, p. 274.

Second is the social pressure to wear exorbitantly expensive clothes and to show disdain for all who eschew the latest costly fashions. Morteira's own personal frustration may be reflected in his formulation: "Since only those who dress ostentatiously are honored, and garments are a prime source of prestige, those who refrain from such dress will be called misers. No one will think highly of them. They will be hated and scorned."² Finally, there is the wasteful expenditure of money on sumptuous banquets in order to impress others. The preacher's interpretation of Amos 6:6, *they are not concerned about the ruin of Joseph*, introduces the theme of social consciousness in the face of blatant economic inequality, with obvious resonance for his own context:

they forget that some of their brothers have no bread at all for themselves or their children. It would be better for them to spend their money inviting the poor and providing them with food and other necessities. But they curse the poor and spend their money on trivial luxuries that can do them no good, giving money again and again to men who mock them as soon as they leave their homes.

Explicit application to the present comes some moments later. "Such is our way today. All of us complain and weep about hard times, but when we get something, we spend a fortune on banquets with wine. The same is true of all the other unnecessary things." The message is clear: let's learn from history and not make the same mistake again in this new environment, but the sermon ends with an expression of virtual despair at the chances of reforming the behavior of a community in which patterns of behavior are so deeply ingrained and social pressures so powerful that a preacher can hardly expect his admonition to be heeded.

This sermon provides a social-psychology explanation of antagonism toward Jews in their dispersion: it is a response by a native population to immigrants who begin to flaunt their newly acquired wealth. In a later sermon among the manuscripts, hatred is presented not as a natural byproduct either of inappropriate Jewish behavior or of the regimen imposed by the commandments, but as the direct providential creation of God, in violation of the natural order. The preacher outlines in detail those aspects of Jewish character and lineage that would naturally be expected to arouse admiration and love. Such feelings among the Gentile neighbors would lead to intimate social relations that would threaten Jewish identity and survival as a distinct group.

However, foreseeing this natural danger, God removed it from us and generated in the hearts of these nations, a great unnatural hatred, unprecedented before, so that they would despise us and set us at a distance from them. Lest they seduce us with their honors, God ensured that they would set us aside like a menstruous woman in her impurity—all for our own benefit and to ensure our survival up to this day.

² *Ibid.*, p. 280. This is, of course, a common theme in both Jewish and Christian preaching and communal legislation in the late Middle Ages and early modern periods. For an example from sixteenth-century England, see the sermon "On Excess of Apparel," in Chandos, editor, *In God's Name*, pp. 63–67, including, "She doth but waste superfluously her husbandes stocke by such sumptuousnesse, and sometimes is the cause of much briberie, extortion, and deceite . . ." (p. 66).

The idea that it is hatred of the Jews, engendered by their separatist religious rites, that makes possible their survival would appear two generations later, *freed from its providential context*, in the *Theological-Political Treatise* work of the student whom Morteira had joined in banning from the community, Benedict Spinoza. In its original homiletical context, the doctrine is rather more complex. Morteira insists that according to nature, Jews would inspire the utmost esteem and affection within the Gentile population. This is indeed a claim that would hearten listeners harboring doubts about Jewish identity. But the impact of the assertion that hatred for the Jews is endemic to exile because it is part of God's plan would have been more ambivalent. Did it fit the experience of the listeners in Portugal, or in Holland? Were they more comforted by the assurance that God looked out for the well-being of the Jews, or disturbed by the claim that nothing they could do would alleviate the hostility of their neighbors? The impact of these words might have varied with the experience of the individual.

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The appeal to history to drive home a moral lesson that the listeners should take to heart, which we have seen in the "People's Envy" sermon, is exemplified in a sermon delivered in 1627 on a special occasion that brought all three Portuguese congregations of Amsterdam together in an emergency appeal to aid Jews in the Land of Israel suffering under a new regimen of oppressive Ottoman taxes:

Whoever is wise would understand this and learn from earlier times: from the greatness and glory, the affluence and wisdom that were long ago in the [Jewish communities of the] kingdoms of Spain and France. Let him see now: all is destroyed and abandoned, nothing remains. He may cry out, "Aha! O Eternal our God, what is this all about? Will You totally destroy the remnant of Your estate?" (cf. Ezek. 11:13). If he had any insight, he would turn his words back against himself. *The judgments of the Eternal are true, they are just in their entirety* (Ps. 19:10). Let him read the matters in the judicial questions and responsa left by these sages: the abundance of violence, the lust, the envy, the conflicts, the informers [to government authorities about fellow Jews], the most serious sexual offenses, sexual congress with Gentile women, the neglect of Torah, the eager pursuit of money, and similar things that can be found in these books by anyone who would read them.

The passage is remarkable in several ways, not the least of which is Morteira's invocation of the responsa literature not as a repository of legal precedent but as a historical source for what we would call social history—how ordinary Jews actually lived—material he uses for its ethical, homiletical value. Here we encounter a powerful ambivalence toward the communities of France and of Spain. On the one hand, "greatness and glory, affluence and wisdom." But Morteira implies that this is not the full truth; there is a darker reality beneath the surface, accessible (to those who read Hebrew) in the dense pages of legal texts. These reveal the lives not just of the spiritual and intellectual leaders but of the entire population of Jews, and the resulting picture, Morteira insists as he

reiterates many of the sins for which he had already chastised his listeners, is dismal indeed.

A bit later in the same sermon, the preacher turns to the lay leaders of the *Mahamad*, the powerful council of regents or wardens, and reminds them of *their* responsibility for the behavior of the people. “Indeed, how great is the obligation of the leaders of these congregations to bestir themselves to improve our way of serving God, in that He has favored *us* more than any other Jews in the Diaspora.” To concretize this point, the preacher proceeds with an extremely powerful passage ranging through the great Jewish communities of the world and succinctly specifying the humiliations and persecutions distinctive of each.

Where here are the taxes of Venice? The censorship of books that is all over Italy? The seizing of children for forced conversions? The sign of the [Jewish] hat that is there? The Ghettos? The need to receive periodically permission [to remain]? Being shut in at the evil time [Holy Week]? Where is the derision shown toward the Jews of Rome, [forced to] go out naked on their holidays, forced to attend their services, forced to bow down to the Pope? Where are the blood libels of Poland? Where are the humiliations of Germany? Where are the hours when they prevent Jews from attending the [commercial] fairs? The entrances through which we may not walk, the wells from we may not drink? Where is the harsh oppression of Turkey? The poll tax that is levied there? The cruelty of the Gentiles? The fire thrown into houses? The deadly tortures connected with the manufacturing of their clothes? Where is the degradation of Barbary? Where is the youngster who will strike an old man? Where are the animal carcasses which they compel us to remove from their paths?

In this whirlwind survey of Jewish geography expressed in an extraordinary series of rhetorical questions, Morteira begins with his own native city of Venice, which Amsterdam Jews looked upon as a model: older, larger, more established, more cosmopolitan than their own, the city to which they turned for guidance and leadership when problems arose. Yet it could not be denied that the Jews of Venice, and Rome, and the rest of Italy, suffered from disabilities and humiliations that were simply not present in Amsterdam. And if that was true of Italy, how much more was it true for other great Jewish communities of the Diaspora: Poland, Germany, Turkey, North Africa. “Why then are we ungrateful?” he continues to ask, driving the point home. “Why do we not wake up and open our eyes [to see] that just as God has favored us more than all our brothers, so should we surpass them all in our conduct, serving as an example, a model of goodness and decency.”

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Of particular interest is the material in the sermons relating to Christianity and the New Christians who remained in Portugal. Morteira wrote a number of polemical works in Portuguese, all unpublished during his lifetime. The full texts of the extant sermons enable us to see continuities in his writing between what he said from the pulpit and the overtly polemical works. Even in Amsterdam, Jews did not have unlimited license to say

whatever they wanted about Christianity. Much of the polemical material in the sermons therefore refers not to the Calvinist faith of his neighbors, but to the Catholic faith in which his listeners had been educated. Apparently he believed that an integral part of the construction of the new Jewish identity was the demolition of the old Christian identity. The familiar doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, are quickly rebutted with considerable contempt; the triumphalist claim that Jewish suffering in exile proves that the Jews have been rejected by God requires considerably more attention. I will share with you one passage that focuses upon a less familiar claim relating to Roman Catholic spirituality and practice. In a sermon on *Va-Yiqra*, delivered in 1629, he responds to a challenge by Christian polemicists.

Thus some of them cynically and falsely rebuke us for what is in truth and by nature in *them*. . . . One [example] . . . is something I have seen in their books; it is also cited by [Rabbi Joseph Albo], the author of *Sefer ha-'Iqqarim*, in the 25th chapter of part 3 of his book. This is a challenge brought against Albo by one of their gaping-mouthed scholars, saying that the divine service of sacrifices in the Torah is not pure, but rather filthy because of blood and skins and fats and the killing of animals, all of which causes defilement. They speak at length of such things, may the lying lips that speak libels about the Righteous One of the Universe be struck dumb!

The statement of the challenge is fairly close to that recorded in a celebrated polemical chapter from Albo's classic work. But Albo's response to this challenge is a relatively moderate defense of the Temple sacrifices, accompanied by a critique of the Christian "sacrifice" as having no empirically verifiable efficacy and entailing a doctrine (transubstantiation) that goes against reason. Morteira's pugilistic response is highly charged with indignant emotion:

They have not seen that they try to disqualify us with their own blemish! For none of the forms of idolatrous worship that preceded them was as steeped in impurity and squalor as *their own worship*. Even the worship of Peor [Num. 25:1–5], which was so despised, was not nearly as despicable as their impurity. This can be seen first from the *burial of the dead in their churches*. It is God's command that the body of the dead is the most severe source of impurity, and God prohibited allowing it to remain overnight within the city (Deut. 21:23). Wherever Jews dwelled, their cemeteries were outside the city domain.

Furthermore, look at the power of their *veneration of bones and skulls of the dead*. To them they burn incense, to them they bow down, before them they fall and prostrate themselves. The extensive use of bones of the dead by those who [in biblical times] summoned up ghosts and spirits (Lev. 20:27) has not dried up. . . . For this impurity passes every border and boundary; it is therefore called the "spirit of impurity" (Zech 13:2) because of its powerful prevalence.

Yet with all this, they have the gall to criticize us for the very things that are decisively found in themselves!

In this passage, Morteira does not even bother to defend the sacrificial cult. That will come later in the sermon. Instead, he moves directly to the attack. The association of Christianity with pagan idolatry is pronounced. Elsewhere he portrays Christianity as an imitation of Jewish practices and institutions; here, he presents in continuity with the forms of pagan worship described in the Bible. Pouncing on practices he considers particularly repugnant—the veneration of bones of the saints and the use of the church as a place of burial—the preacher presents it as worse—more impure—than any of its predecessors, even the sexual licentiousness associated with the worship of the Moabite Baal-Peor. As important as the cult of the saints was for medieval Christian popular piety, Morteira undoubtedly knew that many would not describe it as central to Christianity, and that Protestants (who made the same argument against Jewish sacrifices) attacked the veneration of relics. It is another debater’s trick: to defend one’s position by attacking at the weakest point of the opponent.

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Morteira frequently refers to the New Christian—acquaintances, neighbors, even relatives of his listeners—who chose to remain in Portugal or in other lands where they could not live openly as Jews, and proposes explanations for their troubling decision. Perhaps to reassure his listeners that they chose correctly, Morteira shows little doubt about the ultimate fate of the New Christians remaining in the “lands of idolatry.” Try as they may, they cannot escape their Jewish identity. They remain Jews, and they will ultimately be punished as sinning Jews: a message asserted on many occasions in some of the most powerful passages of Morteira’s preaching: I will cite one of these passages. In early 1624, speaking on the lesson *Mishpatim*, Morteira raised the question why the first Biblical chapter devoted entirely to legal matters begins with the apparently minor case of the Hebrew slave. The answer, coming at the conclusion of the sermon, is that the passage should be read as a warning about issues of contemporary resonance. Here is the rather impressive and apparently original unpacking of the Bible verses:

If his master gives him a wife (Exod. 21:4) means, if his masters compel him to take another wife and a new religion, as occurred to many of our people because of our sins, *and she bears him sons or daughters* who are devoted to it, despite it all they [i.e., the masters] will not extinguish the love nor will they remove him from the Jewish people, for “even though he sins he remains a Jew.” *The wife and her children will belong to her master, and he will go forth alone* (Exod. 21:4). Since the wife belongs to an alien faith, they are not truly his children. *The scepter of the wicked surely will not rest over the portion allotted to the just* (Ps. 125:3); *may God lead [the wicked] away with the evildoers, and may peace be upon Israel* (Ps. 125:5). He will go forth alone, and be counted with his people.

But *if the slave should say, “I love my master and my wife and my children, I will not go forth to freedom”* (Exod. 21:5), meaning, if this slave should be one of those Jews who sin by defiling their bodies, saying that he actually loves the qualities of the people where he has been exiled, and his Gentile wife, or the new religion and his children who are devoted to idolatry, and will therefore not go forth to freedom, *his master*, namely, his original Master *will*

bring him to judgment (Exod. 21:6), removing him from the exile to pass sentence against him. . . .

He will remove him from his home, *and bring him before the door or the doorpost* (Exod. 21:6), meaning close to the entrance or the door to the land of Israel, . . . and there *he shall pierce his ear with a bore*, an implement of iron, wreaking vengeance against them [sic]. *He shall serve him forever* (Exod. 21:6), cleaving to his master and his accursed wife, as in the verse, *Go down and be laid to rest with the uncircumcised* (Ezek. 32:19), for *Their worm will never die and their fire will never be extinguished* (Isa. 66:24).

This is why the section begins with the law of the slave: . . . to teach that if they fail to uphold the terms of the covenant, *These are the judgments* (ha-mishpatim) *which He will place before them* (Exod 21:1).

Morteira's typological approach to the Biblical laws concerning the Hebrew slave enables him to take a passage of merely theoretical interest, with no relevance to the realities of seventeenth-century Jewish life, and unpack a message that speaks directly to the concerns of many of the listeners. The two categories of Hebrew slaves allude to two categories of "New Christians". The slave that goes free in the seventh year represents those who have left the enslavement of enforced Christianity and who sit before him as free Jews in Amsterdam. The slave who chooses to remain with his master represents those still in Portugal, living as Christians. The ceremonial humiliation of the slave who renounces the opportunity for freedom prefigures the punishment ordained by God at the beginning of the messianic age. In addition to validating the choice made by the listeners, this interpretation explains the apparent anticlimax of technical legal material following the revelation at Sinai. The content is not insignificant at all, it deals with the crucial issue of Jewish identity. The word *mishpatim* in the first verse of the lesson is not just "laws"; it is the "judgments" that God ordered to be set out clearly for all Jews who seek to abandon their people.

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The sermons also contain more than a few indications of continued ambivalence and even nostalgia in the minds of at least some of his congregants. Here the Biblical prototype is the Exodus and the wilderness period. One example comes in a sermon from 1638, starting with the astonishing characterization of Egypt made by Dathan and Abiram in *parashat Korah*: *Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness?* (Num. 16:13). Morteira takes the common reaction to this verse and uses it to drive home his message:

Now when we hear what happened in those days, we ask about it [in amazement], considering these people to be inordinately evil. Yet every day our ears hear similar things, and we are not amazed! For what difference is there between these [Dathan and Abiram] and those whom God has brought out with great strength and a strong arm from the Iberian peninsula—a place where death is present at every moment, where terror and fury never cease—and brought them to a peaceful land, where they can save their bodies and their souls from death. Yet day after day, when they "remember the fish" (cf. Num. 11:5), they praise that

land and sigh over it, showing contempt for the land in which they now live. Do they not transform God's mercies into evil? There is no difference between these people and those in the Bible, for they are already prefigured in Scripture. . . . Therefore, just as the punishment of [the Biblical rebels] was extraordinary, so will be the punishment of all who are similar to them, Heaven help them!

Biblical Egypt clearly serves as a type for the Iberian peninsula with its terrors; those who idealize Egypt in their memories because of the difficulties of life in the wilderness pervert the entire order of God's plan. The rhetorical power of the passage derives from the expected assent among the listeners that the villainous view recorded in the Biblical lesson is indeed to be found at present. An even greater challenge to the community was the decision actually to return to the Iberian peninsula, perhaps to attend to family matters or to business affairs, hoping no one would denounce them to the Inquisition for living as a Jew abroad. The lay leaders of the *mahamad* condemned such behavior with the sanction of the ban in a manner consistent with Morteira's denunciations from the pulpit.

Yet Christianity and Christian behavior is not always a purely negative model. The final passage I will cite, yet another example of the rhetoric of rebuke, comes at the climactic point in a sermon on the first *sidrah* in Deuteronomy, printed in the 1645 edition of *Giv'at Sha'ul*. It begins with a Talmudic statement, "Their perversities you have followed, their good ways you have not followed" (b. *Sanhedrin* 39b), and then applies this principle to the present:

Look at the Gentiles among whom we live. We learn from them styles of clothing and haughtiness, but we do not learn from them silence during prayer. We are like them in consuming their cheeses and their wine, but we are not like them with regard to justice, righteousness, and honesty. We are like them in shaving our beard or modeling it in their style, but we are not like them in their refraining from cursing or swearing in God's Name. We are like them in frequenting underground gaming rooms, but we are not like them in turning from vengeance and refraining from bearing hatred in our hearts. We are like them in fornicating with their daughters, but we are not like them in conducting business affairs with faithfulness and fairness.

The underlying theme is assimilation to the ways of the Gentiles, a stock theme in Jewish ethical literature, pertaining to physical appearance (clothing, hair style), speech (curses, oaths), use of leisure time, sexual immorality. But in a new rhetorical strategy, here the condemnation is double, for each example of negative influence is balanced with a potentially positive influence that the Jews ignore. Jewish behavior is rebuked directly—by specifying the elements of negative influence—and indirectly—by alluding to the antithesis of the good things Gentiles do (e.g., *they* are respectfully quiet during prayer, *they* conduct business affairs honestly; *you*, by implication, fail in these respects). The Gentiles of the host society serve here not merely as a seductive danger and a threat, but as a source of positive values from whom Jews could indeed benefit. The message is to be discerning, to distinguish between those characteristics of Christian Amsterdam that must be avoided and those for which emulation is appropriate.

What would be the impact of these sermons on the unique congregation for which they were intended? Let us conclude by an exercise of empathy. Imagine a typical new member of the community. Arriving from Portugal in 1620 with only the most rudimentary knowledge of Judaism and almost no comprehension of Hebrew, he sits in the congregation on the Shabbat morning week after week trying to follow the service. As he gradually becomes more familiar with the prayer book, he still listens to the required Hebrew readings from the Pentateuch and Prophets without understanding what they mean. For such a congregant, it is not far-fetched to conclude that the sermon delivered in Portuguese by a young rabbi exploring one of the Biblical verses in conjunction with a passage from rabbinic literature and a conceptual religious problem, might well be one of the highlights of the morning. Furthermore, that the hypothetical listener not only would have been impressed by the clarity of the preacher's presentation and the elegance of his delivery, but that he would also have learned something about that Biblical verse, or about the rabbinic text, or about the conceptual problem that the preacher raised and explored, something that might remain with him.

As the weeks and months and years elapsed, the listener might find himself not only becoming more familiar with the liturgy and the rituals, but also accumulating a wealth of such insights and integrating them in his mind, so that new information acquired from the weekly pulpit discourse would begin to fit into a pattern. Occasionally, he would hear the vaguely troubling Christian arguments he remembered from his childhood education in Portugal rehearsed and rebutted. He would hear Jewish teachings about the tradition of Torah that the Christians had derided now defended cogently. From time to time he would be informed or reminded that certain patterns of behavior, though familiar and perhaps even prevalent, were unacceptable to the rabbi and should be improved.

Frequently he would be told that he and his family and friends were protagonists in a great drama of a noble people exiled from its land, buffeted by many nations, uprooted from newer homes, but destined for ultimate vindication: events that were the result neither of the vagaries of chance nor of the brutality of power politics, but were rather encoded in the Bible and remained under the direct providential supervision of the Master of the Universe. Gradually, through the ongoing educational program of the sermons, the listener might begin to feel comfortable in his new identity and in the tradition that, though new to him, was presented from the pulpit as something ancient, venerable, and precious. Through the sermons, alongside the other instruments of acculturation mobilized by the community, the "New Jew" would begin to feel rooted.

Of course, there is also another exercise of empathy: imagining a child born into this community in 1632, sitting next to his father—a man named Michael de Espinosa, one of the honored leaders of the community—during Shabbat morning services, listening to Morteira preach. As a child, he undoubtedly tunes out, but as he becomes an adolescent, he begins to focus and concentrate on the sermons, his developing mind acquiring over the years extensive knowledge of the Jewish tradition. Then, gradually, approaching the age of twenty, with the honing of his critical faculties and wider reading

of philosophical literature, he starts to realize that he cannot accept the world view that was being articulated so eloquently by the preacher, with whom he studied Talmud, that he could not repress the critical questions that challenged him so forcefully. Finally he realizes that he had to express his dissent to his rabbi and teacher. But that alternative story—one that has already been told many times, including in two fine recent books by Stephen Nadler called *Spinoza's Heresy* and *Spinoza: A Life*—that alternative story is a topic for a different lecture.