

Buruma, Ian. *Spinoza: Freedom's Messiah*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2024

Elaine Margolin

Volume 19, Number 2, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110282ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v19i2.42669>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Women in Judaism, Inc.

ISSN

1209-9392 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Margolin, E. (2022). Review of [Buruma, Ian. *Spinoza: Freedom's Messiah*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2024]. *Women in Judaism*, 19(2), 1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v19i2.42669>

Buruma, Ian. *Spinoza: Freedom's Messiah*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

I often wonder what drives a biographer to their subject. Is it envy that seduces them? Or curiosity of some sort? Or does the subject at hand touch upon entrenched dilemmas of their own heart? Acclaimed writer Ian Buruma has written on subjects as varied as the memories of war in Japan and German to the evolution of religion and democracy. So why now has he chosen to focus on Spinoza, the renegade Jew of the 17th century who rocked the world with his proclamations about the ludicrousness of religious belief. Buruma claims Spinoza's life in some ways mirrors the treachery of our world today when freedom of speech and thought is once again threatened. Perhaps, but my sense reading his engaging narrative was that Buruma was searching for something else.

Spinoza was born in 1632 and only lived for 44 years. His paternal family, the Despinosas, arrived from Holland where his father Michael was born. His mother died when he was five. Spinoza is buried on the grounds of the Dutch baroque Protestant church in The Hague. Many have come over the centuries to pay homage to him.

Spinoza denied the existence of the Jewish God and thought all biblical texts were mere fantasy. He acknowledged that biblical stories probably provided solace for some, but they were just imaginative tales written and rewritten over the centuries. He denied the existence of the afterlife and did not believe in the immortality of the soul or the divine origins of the Jewish Scriptures. He believed the Jewish assertion that Jews were chosen by God to be absurd and thought Jewish longevity was a result of Jewish organizational expertise and the fact that the Jews separated themselves from others. He didn't believe in good or evil, or repenting for one's sins. He thought God was morally indifferent and there was no such thing as miracles. He thought reason should be the guiding principle in how we live our lives. He didn't call himself an atheist because he believed God was everywhere and was a term easily interchangeable with nature which he saw as the same thing. He thought we didn't have full control of our lives since the laws of nature dictated much of what we experienced. He thought humans could be moral and just without believing in anything.

Spinoza felt the greatest disdain for the prophets of the Jewish Scriptures whose visions offered insights into the workings of God and nature. He found Jesus a more admirable moral figure; not as the literal son of God, but rather for his declarations about universality which was in accord with Spinoza's thinking.

Many felt Spinoza was a pioneer of modern scientific thought. Johann Goethe saw him as an intellectual trailblazer. Gustave Flaubert loved his observations about the world we live in. The Romantic poets worshipped his exalted view of nature. Heinrich Heine adored him, as did Karl Marx who saw in his critique of religion the seeds of his own agenda. Sigmund Freud saw a "man who sought salvation through self-knowledge, who provided a pathway to modern psychology." Buruma never directly assesses Spinoza's contributions to the world, but one senses he has admiration for his unwillingness to be silenced even though his rebelliousness resulted in his being excommunicated from his Jewish community at the age of twenty-three, and before he had published a word.

Buruma explains to us that his short under 200-page book on Spinoza, part of Yale's Jewish Lives Series, is not an attempt to analyze Spinoza's philosophical thinking but rather examine the world in which he lived, both with the Jews and afterwards. For those more interested in Spinoza's philosophical musings, he suggests they refer to the seminal biography on him written two decades ago by Steven Nadler. The book is called "Spinoza: A Life." Thrust into the outside world, Spinoza soon found friends with Mennonites and other open-minded thinkers living in the Dutch Republic. But we never hear about the texture of any relationship with a friend or lover; there seems to be no concrete evidence that he ever engaged in an intimate relationship. Though this seems a subject worthy of further examination, Buruma seems intent on we readers understanding that he was most likely alone. Whether this was by choice, or some other reason, is left for the reader to ponder. We wonder if his Jewishness, despite the new friends he was able to cultivate, kept most at a distance from him. He was in their imaginations, still a Jew, despite his reckless departure from the flock.

The Netherlands at this time was a confederation of Protestant provinces united in rebellion against the Catholic king of Spain in a war that lasted 80 years until 1648. Jews at this time were barred from England, and persecuted in Spain and Portugal. In Germany and Italy, they were forced to live in ghettos. In 14th century Spain, Jews were forced to convert, and after 1492, they were

expelled by the Inquisition. Many of the Jews who remained Conversos or Marranos eventually drifted to the Netherlands where they were tolerated if they didn't stand out too much or upset the staunch Calvinists who had majority rule. Full civil rights did not arrive for the Jews until the French invaded in 1795. Less than two centuries later, most of the Jews would be slaughtered by the Nazis; over 80,000 Dutch Jews were murdered and 5,000 left remaining at the end of the Second World War.

Buruma searches for what prompted Spinoza to behave as he did without fear of the consequences. He uncovers stories that his Jewish teachers found him difficult and had trouble early on answering his questions. He was intrigued by mysticism for a time. He would often speak with other Jews wondering if a Jew converted to Catholicism, was he still a Jew? Would his soul be damned for this? This sort of talk made the rabbinical authorities act quickly to quell any sort of trouble he might stir up. Buruma never speculates on what it might have been like for Spinoza to be cut off at such a tender age from all he had ever known? Buruma shows no sympathy for his subject nor condemnation; and his evenhandedness at times can be irritating. We wonder how his family reacted. Was he allowed to see his father and siblings? Was there someone in the group he was close to that he had had to cut ties with? Did he challenge the rabbis, or beg them to reconsider? We are left only to imagine his isolation in our own minds; and once again he is alone.

In his new life, he became entranced by Renes Descartes' thinking, and his new friend Van den Enden taught him Latin as well as introducing him to the work of Descartes, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and Niccolò Machiavelli. Buruma speculates how exciting it must have been for him to see how much more there was to the world than what he had been shown. In an unusual burst of enthusiastic imagining, Buruma writes about how Spinoza must have thought to himself "Why should the Jewish people have a monopoly on God? Was it necessary to stick to all of those dietary restrictions? Wasn't it possible to break away from Jewish orthodoxy and still be a Jew?"

And in what feels like a flash of insight, we realize that perhaps this is what Ian Buruma has been struggling with? What did it mean to be a Jew in Spinoza's time when there was only one way of doing so? What does it mean today? How does he feel about how he has led his life as a Jew who seems to have lived without the restraints of traditional Jewish belonging? Does he feel any sense of regret or guilt about this? Does he sometimes think he has strayed too far from the fold? What does Buruma think about as he watches the nightly news and sees antisemitism

exploding on every continent of the globe? Does he feel targeted as a Jew moving through the world? How must it have been for Spinoza?

Perhaps a clue to his thinking is revealed in another one of his masterful works, the memoir “Their Promised Land: My Grandparents in Love and War.” Buruma speaks about growing up in Holland and visiting his German-Jewish maternal grandparents in England every Christmas to attend their lavish celebrations. They would all eat, drink, and be merry as the music of Richard Wagner played in the background. His grandparents left Germany for England in the 1880s and prided themselves on being more British than the British. There was always an enormous beautifully Christmas decorated tree in the foyer and stockings hung by the fireplace. He insists, perhaps too emphatically, that his grandparents never denied their Judaism but didn’t make too much of a fuss over it either. His grandfather served as a doctor in both world wars and when he returned their joyous life picked up again as if the world had not just barely won a war against the Jews whom they were determined to eradicate. There was no such talk of such things. His grandmother would kvell about Winston Churchill and speak derogatorily about the new Jewish immigrants arriving from Russia and settling in London’s East End.

Which brings us back to Spinoza and what seems to this reader like Ian Buruma’s reticence to drop his mask as a neutral observer and jump into the messy fray that surrounds Jewish life; both in Spinoza’s time and in our own. It saddens me that Buruma feels so thwarted that he seems unable to speak boldly about the troubles we Jews have always had, whether living a religion-bound life, or one that travels beyond the gates of observance. Buruma has said in interviews that he is not a confessional person and when writing his family memoir, he was cautious not to offend any living relatives who might have held a different picture of what transpired in the past. But being a Jew, any kind of Jew at all, no longer gives us the luxury of such restraint. We must be willing to speak our truths, and his resistance to get into the muck of his own family’s contradictions, or Spinoza’s, is in essence the same thing. It’s just not enough.