

**God's Plurality within Unity:  
Spinoza's influence on Benamozegh's Thought**

*by Gabriel Abensour*

**Abstract**

*Elijah Benamozegh (Livorno, 1823-1900) was a highly-respected Italian rabbi of Moroccan heritage. He was well-versed in Kabbalah, the study of Jewish mysticism and, in his works, connected Kabbalistic and philosophic sources to delineate his conception of God. He argued, inter alia, that Torah and science are in complete harmony, and his religiously tolerant model called for the legitimacy of diversity of faiths and worships.*

*In this paper, I aim to show that Benamozegh's conception of the Divine – and thus his philosophy and theology – was based on a reading of Kabbalistic sources about God that was heavily influenced by Baruch Spinoza's philosophy on the nature of the Divine, and in particular, by the Spinozist-inspired concept of "God's attributes." This comparison between Benamozegh and Spinoza will enable us to better understand Benamozegh's bold argument in favor of religious tolerance, but also how and why he succeeded in challenging the traditional concept of heresy, all while using terminology provided by traditional Jewish sources and from within the rabbinic paradigm.*

**Introduction**

**Spinoza and Judaism in the 19th Century**

**Background to Benamozegh's Position**

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**Benamozegh's Model of Religious Tolerance**

**Idolatry: Misconception or Heresy?**

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*La kabbale a chanté ses dogmes, tandis que Spinoza les a démontrés...  
La première a révélé des pensées à la manière des poètes,  
avec leurs libres allures, leurs élans et leurs hardiesses,  
et la seconde les a exposées à la manière des géomètres.<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Elijah Benamozegh (Livorno, 1823-1900) was an Italian rabbi of Moroccan heritage who taught theology at Livorno's rabbinical school. Alongside a strong secular and religious education, Benamozegh was initiated while still a teenager into the mysteries of the Kabbalah by his uncle, Rabbi Yehuda Coriat.<sup>3</sup> This early initiation influenced the entirety of Benamozegh's theology.<sup>4</sup>

In his works, Benamozegh connected Kabbalistic and philosophic sources to delineate his conception of God. He argued, inter alia, that Torah and science are in complete harmony, and his religiously tolerant model called for the legitimacy of diversity of faiths and worships. In this paper, I aim to show that Benamozegh's conception of the Divine – and thus his philosophy and theology – was based on a reading of Kabbalistic sources about God that was heavily influenced by Baruch Spinoza's philosophy on the nature of the Divine, and, in particular, by the Spinozist-inspired concept of "God's attributes."

The diversity of Benamozegh's writings has aroused interest among a number of scholars. Alessandro Guetta has published a captivating book on Benamozegh's thought<sup>5</sup> and, more recently, Clémence Bouloque devoted her PhD thesis to Benamozegh's intellectual biography.<sup>6</sup> Spinoza barely features in such works, although Guetta does discuss – rather briefly – the connection between

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<sup>1</sup> Elijah Benamozegh, "Spinoza et la Kabbale," *L'Univers Israélite* 19 (1864): 373.

<sup>2</sup> I am deeply grateful to Prof. Mareen Niehoff, the Max Cooper Professor of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who prompted me to write this paper and provided me good advices and generous help.

<sup>3</sup> Clémence Boulouque, *Elia Benamozegh (1823–1900): Kabbalah, Tradition, and the Challenges of Interfaith Encounters*, (Diss. New York University, 2014), 25-32.

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Idel, "Kabbalah in Elijah Benamozegh's Thought" (Hebrew), *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 74 (1998): 87-96.

<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Guetta, *Philosophie et Cabbale: Essai sur la pensée d'Elie Benamozegh*, (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Boulouque, *Elia Benamozegh*.

Benamozegh and Spinoza, focusing on Benamozegh's rejection of Spinoza's pantheism.<sup>7</sup> To date, Leonardo Amoroso appears to be the only scholar who has discussed the connection between Spinoza and Kabbalah in Benamozegh's works.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, several researchers have each turned their attention to one particular aspect of Benamozegh's multifaceted thought, writing on: Kabbalah in Benamozegh's works;<sup>9</sup> his approach to other faiths<sup>10</sup>; his vision of nationalism and universalism<sup>11</sup>; and his tendency towards the conciliation of traditional Judaism and modernity.<sup>12</sup>

Besides his article "Spinoza et la Kabbale,"<sup>13</sup> published in *l'Univers Israélite* in 1864, this paper will focus mainly on three writings of Benamozegh: his commentary of the Pentateuch *Em Lamikra* ("Matrix of Scripture"),<sup>14</sup> his pamphlet *Tzori Gilaad* ("The Balm of Gilead")<sup>15</sup> and his signature work, *Israël et l'Humanité* ("Israel and Humanity"). The first was published in 1863 and

<sup>7</sup> Guetta, *Philosophie et Cabbale*, 55-9.

<sup>8</sup> Leonardo Amoroso, *Scintille Ebraiche*, (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2004), 123-36.

<sup>9</sup> Idel, "Kabbalah in Elijah Benamozegh's Thought," 87-96.

<sup>10</sup> Alessandro Guetta, "Qabbalà e Cristianesimo nella filosofia di Elia Benamozegh," *La rassegna mensile di Israel* 63/3 (1997): 21-8; Yehoyada Amir, "New Paths Towards Christianity and Islam in the Thought of Nachman Krochmal and Elijah Benamozegh," in *Die Entdeckung des Christentums in der Wissenschaft des Judentums*, ed. Gorge Hasselhoff (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 227-38; Meir Seidler, "A Nineteenth Century Jewish Attempt at Integrativeness: Rabbi Eliahu Benamozegh's Multicultural Approach to Polytheism," *Yosef Da'at; Studies in Modern Jewish History in Honor of Yosef Salmon*, ed. Yossi Goldstein (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 11-23.

<sup>11</sup> Gitit Holzman, "Universalism and Nationalism, Jews and Gentiles in the Thought of Elijah Benamozegh" (Hebrew), *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 74 (1998): 104-30; Clara Kraus, "Elementi Di Una Religione Universale Nell'Ebraismo Secondo 'Israël et l'Humanité' di Elia Benamozegh," *La rassegna mensile di Israel*, 22/2 (1956): 65-71.

<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Guetta, "Un kabbaliste à l'heure du progrès: le cas d'Elie Benamozegh," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 208/4 (1991): 415-36; Eliahu Zini, "Due Maestri del Nostro Tempo: I Rabbini Elia Benamozegh e Avraham Itzhak Hacoheh Kuk," *La rassegna mensile di Israel* 63/3 (1997): 67-78; José Faur, "The Hebrew Species Concept and the Origin of Evolution: R. Benamozegh's Response to Darwin," *La rassegna mensile di Israel* 63/3 (1997): 43-66.

<sup>13</sup> Elijah Benamozegh, "Spinoza et la Kabbale," *L'Univers Israélite* 19 (1864): 36-42, 130-8, 181-7, 274-81, 364-74.

<sup>14</sup> Elijah Benamozegh, *Em Lamikra – Commentary on the Pentateuch*, (Livorno: Benamozegh & Co. Publications, 1862).

<sup>15</sup> Elijah Benamozegh, "Tzori Gilaad," *Kvod Halevanon*, supplement to *Halevanon* (1871). Issues 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 32, 36, 42, 43. This pamphlet was published in different parts. Therefore, in order to simplify the notes, I will refer to the most recent edition of the pamphlet, published by Itshak Shouraqui in *Jewish Heritage in Modern Times* (Hebrew), (Tel-Aviv: Maskil, 2009), 25-46.

combined traditional and scientific approaches. Not everyone appreciated it, thus the conservative Sages of Aleppo condemned his commentary for applying critical tools to the Torah and burned his books.<sup>16</sup> In response, Benamozegh published the pamphlet *Tzori Gilaad*, in which he discussed the connection between theology and philosophy, and argued in favor of religious tolerance. Likewise, *Israël et l'Humanité*, released posthumously in 1914, further clarifies these ideas in a deeper and more philosophical manner.

### Spinoza and Judaism in the 19th Century

In this paper, I argue that Benamozegh's philosophical approach is based on a Spinoza-inspired reading of Kabbalistic sources. By this I mean that Benamozegh was familiar with Spinoza's thought, adhered to his conception of God, and tried to adapt and attribute this conception to Jewish mystical thought. But above all, Benamozegh's interest in Spinoza's thought has to be apprehended as a part of the new reception of Spinoza's thought within the European Jewish and non-Jewish intellectual milieus of his time.

Although the immediate post-Spinoza period was marked by a Jewish tendency towards de-Judaizing and distancing Spinoza, the end of the 18th century signaled his comeback within the very core of the European Jewish intellectual world. In the first instance, a multi-confessional debate in Germany raged between Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Moses Mendelssohn, and other prominent scholars on the question of pantheism and Enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> Although this debate, known as "the pantheism controversy," involved many prominent Jewish scholars, the main point of contention was not an internal religious-theological one, but rather a general philosophical one. A few decades later, a similar controversy set up in opposition to each other two

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<sup>16</sup> Among the rabbis' objections was their accusation that Benamozegh contested the divine origins of some biblical customs by attributing them to pre-Mosaic peoples. Likewise, the rabbis condemned Benamozegh's comparison between some mythological stories and Kabbalah. This notwithstanding, auto-da-fé was an exceptional act among oriental Rabbis. In order to explain the fanatic reaction of the Aleppo rabbis to Benamozegh's books, Yaron Harel pointed out that during an earlier incident, in 1862, a reform community, led by Rafael Katsin, tried to emerge in Aleppo. In this sensitive climate, Benamozegh's book acted as a trigger to awaken the rabbis' zealotry. See Yaron Harel, "The Edict to Destroy *Em Lamikra* – Aleppo 1865" (Hebrew), *Hebrew Union College Annual* 64 (1993): xxvii-xxxvi.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre-Henri Tavoillot, *Le crépuscule des Lumières: les documents de la "querelle du panthéisme" (1780–1789)*, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1995).

prominent Italian Christian theologians: Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) and Vincenzo Gioberti (1801-1850)<sup>18</sup> (Benamozegh esteemed the latter, making no secret in his *Israël et l'Humanité* of his admiration for “the powerful Italian thinker” Gioberti and his thought).<sup>19</sup> In a time of *risorgimento*, both Rosmini and Gioberti were convinced of the necessity of a confrontation with Spinoza’s thought, in order to rethink the relationship between philosophy and religion. Unfortunately, both accused each other of adhering to the very pantheism they aimed to fight.<sup>20</sup>

However, in the middle of the 19th century, a Jewish internal discussion emerged among the circle of the *maskilim*, the enlightened Jews. In 1845, poet and Galician *maskil* Max Letteris published a laudatory biography of Spinoza, in the *Bikurei ha-‘Itim ha-Hadashim* journal. In his text, Letteris claimed *inter alia* that Spinoza’s thought was “not heretical” and “in accordance with the pure faith.” In a note following Letteris’s article, Isaac Samuel Reggio, a famous Italian Rabbi and the journal’s editor, explicitly noted his disagreement with Letteris.<sup>21</sup>

Samuel David Luzzatto, a contemporary and colleague of Reggio’s, teacher at the rabbinical college at Padua and Benamozegh’s greatest interlocutor and opponent,<sup>22</sup> offered a more complete and harsher critique of Spinoza’s philosophy. In his commentary on the Torah, *ha-Mishtadel*, published in 1846, Luzzatto accused Spinoza of being an entirely unemotional philosopher, devoid of pity and compassion. For him, this personality trait corrupted all of Spinoza’s

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<sup>18</sup> Guetta has already stressed the influence of Gioberti on Benamozegh’s thought. See his “Un kabbaliste à l’heure du progrès,” 421-429. See also Boulouque, *Elia Benamozegh*, 80-83.

<sup>19</sup> Elijah Benamozegh, *Israël et l’Humanité : Étude sur le Problème de la Religion Universelle et sa Solution*, (Paris: E. Leroux, 1914), 405. See also *Ibid.*, 354, 525; Boulouque, *Elia Benamozegh*, 80-82.

<sup>20</sup> Cristina Santinelli, “Rosmini et Gioberti, lecteurs de Spinoza: Considérations en marge d’une polémique,” in *Spinoza au XIXe siècle: Actes des journées d’études organisées à la Sorbonne les 9 et 16 mars, 23 et 30 novembre 1997*, eds. André Tosel, Pierre-François Moreau, Jean Salem (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2007), 363-76. For an extensive discussion on the reception of Spinoza’s works by modern Italian scholars, see Cristina Santinelli, *Spinoza in Italia: Bibliografia degli Scritti Italiani su Spinoza dal 1675 al 1982*, (Urbino: Università degli Studi di Urbino, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Fischel Lachover, *Between Old and New*, (Jerusalem: Bialik Foundation, 1951), 113-114. There is no proof that Benamozegh read Letteris’s article. However, we know that Benamozegh was aware of Reggio’s publications and even printed Haviv Toledano’s pamphlet voicing strident opposition to Reggio’s works. See Haviv Toledano, *Troumat Hakodesh*, (Livorno: Benamozegh & co Press, 1861).

<sup>22</sup> Benamozegh published his correspondence with Luzzatto in 1890. See Elijah Benamozegh, *Lettere dirette a S. D. Luzzatto da Elia Benamozegh*, (Livorno: Benamozegh & co Press, 1890).

philosophical work, especially its ethical part. More importantly, for Luzzatto, Spinoza's ethical project stood in direct contradiction to Jewish ethics; hence Spinoza's thought and Judaism were not reconcilable.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding, Luzzatto's critique did not succeed in stemming the Haskalah's growing passion for Spinoza. In 1849, Russian *maskil* Senior Sachs provided an important contribution regarding the Jewish roots of Spinoza's thought,<sup>24</sup> followed in 1856 by Solomon Rubin's first Hebrew translation of Spinoza's texts.<sup>25</sup> With this, the processes within the Haskalah movement of Spinoza's reintegration into Judaism reached a point of no return.<sup>26</sup>

### Background to Benamozegh's Position

In positing a connection between Spinoza and Kabbalah, Benamozegh was preceded by several philosophers, Christian and Jewish alike. For example, in 1699, German philosopher Johann Georg Wachter wrote his *Der Spinozismus im Judenthumb*, arguing that Spinoza was a secret kabbalist whose pernicious influence represented a threat to philosophy. He maintained his claim in a second book, *Elucidarius Calisticus sive Reconditae Hebraeorum Philosophiae Brevis et Succincta Recencio*, published in 1706. A few years later, in 1710, the notion of kabbalistic inspiration for Spinoza's metaphysics was accepted by the great Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in his *Theodicy*.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Samuel David Luzzatto, *ha-Mishtadel*, (Vienna: Francesco Nobile di Schmid, 1847), Introduction. Cited by Lachover, *ibid.*, 115-117.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-120.

<sup>25</sup> Solomon Rubin, *Moreh nevukhim he-hadash*, (Vienna: Joseph Haltsvarta Press, 1856).

<sup>26</sup> For further developments on Spinoza and Haskalah see: Nahum Sokolow, *Baruch Spinoza and His Time*, (Paris: Voltaire, 1928), 86-99; Meir Seidler, "Baruch Spinoza: The Designer of the Image of Judaism in European Enlightenment" (Hebrew), *Daat* 54 (2004): 20-45; Svetlana Natkovich, "Ben Abuya, Spinoza and Acosta. From Liminal Figures to Exemplary Heroes of Jewish Enlightenment" (Hebrew), *Zehuyot* 2 (2012): 55-71; Elhanan Yakira, "La pensée politique juive face à Spinoza," in *Spinoza au XIXe siècle: Actes des journées d'études organisées à la Sorbonne les 9 et 16 mars, 23 et 30 novembre 1997*, eds. André Tosel, Pierre-François Moreau, Jean Salem (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2007), 473-487.

<sup>27</sup> See Henry Walter Brann, "Spinoza and the Kabbalah," in *Spinoza: Context, Sources, and the Early Writings*, ed. Genevieve Lloyd (London: Routledge, 2001), 185-8. See also Miquel Beltrán, *The Influence of Abraham Cohen de Herrera's Kabbalah on Spinoza's Metaphysics*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 83-119; Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 155-156. Contemporary scholars have specifically stressed that Spinoza was influenced by Abraham Herrera. See Giuseppa Saccaro Del Buffa, "Abraham Cohen Herrera et le jeune Spinoza – entre Kabbale et scolastique: À propos de la création 'ex nihilo,'" *Archives de*

To a lesser extent, a few decades prior to Benamozegh, as part of Spinoza's reintegration into Judaism, some Jewish scholars had already begun to make the connection between Spinoza and Kabbalah. In 1791, during the pantheism controversy mentioned above, Salomon Maimon published a Hebrew commentary on Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* and stated: "In the not too distant past there emerged a Sephardic scholar, Baruch (Benedictus) Spinoza, who shook the world with his deep reflections, far from the popular mind. [...] He agreed with kabbalists on the subject of *tzimtzum*."<sup>28</sup> Likewise, Senior Sachs, mentioned above, provided an important contribution regarding the connection between Spinoza and Kabbalah. Following in the footsteps of his pantheist master, Friedrich W. Schelling, and in the context of the rediscovery of Sephardic medieval philosophers, Sachs essayed to create a thread of continuity between Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra, the kabbalists, and Spinoza.<sup>29</sup>

### Benamozegh on Spinoza

In line with this intellectual fermentation around Spinoza's works, especially within the *Haskalah* milieu, Benamozegh composed, in 1864, an entire article about Spinoza's supposed kabbalistic sources – "Spinoza et la Kabbale," published in *l'Univers Israélite*.<sup>30</sup> Both Amoroso<sup>31</sup> and Guetta<sup>32</sup> have pointed out the apologetical purpose of this article, through which Benamozegh hoped to

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*Philosophie* 51 (1988): 55-73; Brann, "Spinoza and the Kabbalah," 185-8; Beltrán, *The Influence*; Johan Aanen, "The Kabbalistic Sources of Spinoza," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 24/2 (2016): 279-99.

<sup>28</sup> In Lurianic Kabbalah, *tzimtzum* is a term used to refer to the contraction of God's infinite light during the process of creation, in order to allow for a "conceptual space" in which finite could exist. Maimon probably wished to draw a parallel between the Kabbalistic *tzimtzum* and the pantheism of Spinoza. See his *Giv'at Hamoreh – Commentary on the Guide for the Perplexed*, (Berlin: Officina Scholae Liberae Judaicaem 1791), 100b. In his *Bet Yehudah*, published in 1837, Russian *maskil* Isaac Baer Levinsohn assumed the same comparison between Spinoza and the kabbalist notion of *tzimzum*, but it seems he borrowed it from Maimon without attribution. See: Isaac Baer Levinsohn, *Bet Yehudah* (Vilna: Menahem Man and Simha Zimel edition, 1837), 343-44; cited in Lachover, *Between Old and New*, 111-2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-20. Solomon Rubin presented the same view in his pamphlet against Luzzatto. See Solomon Rubin, *Teshuvah nitzahat*, (Lemberg: Stauropigianische Instituts-Druckerei, 1859), 19, note 8.

<sup>30</sup> Benamozegh, "Spinoza et la Kabbale." See also Amoroso, *Scintille Ebraiche*, 123-36.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-6.

<sup>32</sup> Guetta, *Philosophy and Kabbalah*, 38.

defend the supreme importance of Kabbalah and its universal impact. In this article, Benamozegh put forward two main claims concerning the connection between Spinoza and Kabbalah: firstly, that Spinoza was influenced by Kabbalistic sources when he stated that substance thinking and substance extended belong to the same unique substance;<sup>33</sup> and secondly, that Spinoza misunderstood these sources, an error that led him to pantheism.

As support for these claims, Benamozegh focuses first on the note in *Ethics* II, proposition VII:

Before going any further, I wish to recall to mind what has been pointed out above –namely, that whatsoever can be perceived by the infinite intellect as constituting the essence of substance, belongs altogether only to one substance: consequently, substance thinking and substance extended are one and the same substance, comprehended now through one attribute, now through the other. [...] This truth seems to have been dimly recognized by those Jews who maintained that God’s intellect and the things understood by God are identical.<sup>34</sup>

In this note, Spinoza claims the fundamental unity of all the different attributes, which are basically different understandings of the same unique substance. “What has been pointed out above” alludes to *Ethics* I, proposition 10, where Spinoza demonstrates that attributes are perfectly real and epistemologically independent from one another, and yet, in spite of that, may belong altogether to only one substance. Here, Spinoza himself attributes this explanation to “those Jews” whom Benamozegh identifies as ancient kabbalists.<sup>35</sup>

According to Benamozegh, Spinoza alludes to three Kabbalistic terms: *Sefer*, *Sofêr* and *Sippur* – literally “book,” “scribe” and “story” – which might respectively correspond to the unique substance, the substance thinking and the substance extended. He writes:<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, 7, note.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, II, prop. VII, note.

<sup>35</sup> Benamozegh, “Spinoza et la Kabbale,” 134.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-2. See also Guetta, *Philosophy and Kabbalah*, 37-8.



It is the Kabbalistic *Sefer* that Spinoza claimed to identify with the indicated supreme substance. Substance thinking and substance extended belong to it and form one substance with the former.<sup>37</sup>

For Benamozegh, Spinoza's unique substance corresponds to Kabbala's *Sefer* from which the *Sofer* and *Sippur* emerge. In the same way, Benamozegh identifies Spinoza's substance thinking with the kabbalistic concept of *Sofer* but claims that Spinoza misunderstood the true meaning of *Sippur*:

If the kabbalists bestowed upon *Binah*, upon the Kabbalistic *Sippur*, the traits of the extension, it was not in the literal and natural sense of the word, but in a purely metaphorical sense, in order to express the intellectual object, the logical thing. In a word, to express the ideal mater, possessing the same qualities as the corporal mater, the true extension.<sup>38</sup>

For Benamozegh, the *Sippur* does not correspond to the material extension but only to the idea of extension.<sup>39</sup> By conflating the ideal mater with the material one, Spinoza concluded that extended substance belongs to the unique substance and therefore identified God with Nature. Benamozegh was aware that Kabbalistic sources might cause confusion about the union of God and Nature and stated: "their union is closer in this [Kabbalistic] system than it is in any other Hebraic system. So close, that some accuse it of pantheism."<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, from his point of view, Kabbalah makes a distinction between them while Spinoza conflated them entirely.<sup>41</sup>

To conclude this part, the assumed purpose of "Spinoza et la Kabbale" was to establish Spinoza's Kabbalistic sources in order to enhance the value of the latter. If, on the one hand, the great Dutch philosopher was a kabbalist, one can conclude that all contemporary philosophical systems were indirectly inspired by Kabbalah. On the other hand, by criticizing Spinoza's pantheism and by establishing that Kabbalah was not, in fact, pantheism, Benamozegh paid his dues to the "pantheism controversy" and established the superiority of the Kabbalah over Spinoza's thought. In other words, his basic claim was that all of

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<sup>37</sup> Benamozegh, "Spinoza et la Kabbale," 132.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Guetta, *Philosophy and Kabbalah*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Benamozegh, "Spinoza et la Kabbale," 135.

<sup>41</sup> Amoroso, *Scintille Ebraiche*, 130-1.

Spinoza's "good" thoughts sprang from Kabbalah while all his "bad" thinking ensued from his misinterpretation of it.

The truth is, though, that more than succeeding in demonstrating the influence of the Kabbalah on Spinoza's work, Benamozegh's article reveals the clear Spinozist bias of the author's own understanding of Kabbalah; and particularly his Spinozist conception of the "unique substance," namely God. In the remainder of this essay, this latent bias will be explored. We will see that often without naming him, Benamozegh's conception of the Divine was heavily influenced by Spinoza's philosophy on the nature of the Divine.

### **Benamozegh's Model of Religious Tolerance**

I will begin with a preliminary comment on Benamozegh's translation of Kabbalistic concepts into Spinozist ones. This clearly appears in the following excerpt from his *Israel and Humanity*:

But how could an image be contrived for the unique Being whose infinite attributes are infinite in number, as Spinoza says, or whose ministers and angels are without number, to use the language of the Bible (which expresses, we believe, the same thoughts)?<sup>42</sup>

Benamozegh is not the first Jewish scholar who tried to explain biblical concepts in a philosophical manner. Great Jewish authorities such as Philo, Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, Gersonides and others preceded him in trying to reconcile the biblical God with Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, his approach is unique in the link he attempts to make between the Bible and an immanent conception of God. This approach is emphasized in the following excerpt from *Israel and Humanity*:

It is a matter of a superior unity, and plurality within that unity, which in no way differentiate Himself from it; a unique God and his attributes, which are to a greater or lesser extent realized in the universe, beings compared one to another, ideas in relation to God who is the Being of

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<sup>42</sup> Elijah Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 82.

beings, the Consciousness of consciousnesses, who, when He speaks to them, does not leave His own self.<sup>43</sup>

Here, Benamozegh's discussion of God paraphrases Spinoza's words. God's "plurality within that unity" is parallel to Spinoza's definition of God as "a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality."<sup>44</sup> The substance by definition is, "in itself and is conceived through itself,"<sup>45</sup> in the same way that Benamozegh's God "does not leave His own self." Similarly, Benamozegh defines God's attributes as "beings compared to one another," which means that these have their own autonomous reality. Moreover, God, the Perfect One, doesn't "differentiate Himself" from this plurality which composes Him. Similarly, earlier in his text, Benamozegh described God as "the only God, who relies on a wonderful synthesis, the plurality of His attributes."<sup>46</sup>

In light of this Spinozist paradigm, we can now explain both Benamozegh's exegetical approach and his defense against the accusation of heresy, which brings us to his model for the legitimacy of diversity of faiths and worships. In his biblical commentary, Benamozegh tried to reconcile textual criticism and traditional interpretive approaches to the Torah. According to Jewish tradition, the Bible was given by God to humans and is therefore supposed to be perfect. In contrast, textual approaches employ historical and philological tools, which emphasize the sources and mutual influences of biblical texts, as well as the relatability of the Bible to the beliefs held and rituals practiced in the ancient Near East. Nevertheless, rather than questioning biblical authority, Benamozegh proposes to reinterpret the traditional concept of revelation, in order to reconcile it with the claims of biblical criticism.<sup>47</sup>

In the core of his claim, Benamozegh draws a parallel between religious Revelation and the notion of spontaneity of species found in the theory of evolution:

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<sup>43</sup> Benamozegh, *Israël et l'Humanité*, 183. This text does not appear in the English translation. Cited by Alessandro Guetta, *Philosophy and Kabbalah: Elijah Benamozegh and the Reconciliation of Western Thought and Jewish Esotericism*, translation: Helena Kahan (NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 55.

<sup>44</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, part I, definition VI.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, part I, definition III

<sup>46</sup> Benamozegh, *Israël et l'Humanité*, 183.

<sup>47</sup> Regarding this ambitious project, see Guetta, *Philosophy and Kabbalah*, 92-100.

I believe that religious Revelation, as an expression of the spontaneity of the species, as a revelation of the species to the Individual, must contain something that always transcends the sphere of individual reflection, since all that which humanity or the species could reach in its long trajectory of development must have been contained in that germ.<sup>48</sup>

Even during its most primitive period, humanity may have accessed Revelation, not in a cognitive form but in a spontaneous or intuitive one. In other words, according to Benamozegh we should assume that primitive humanity was much more monotheistic than subsequently was the case. Nevertheless, this primitive monotheism was not a reasoned one and was lost when people adopted a more analytical way of thought. The features common to Judaism and polytheism may have their roots in this early period of primitive and universal monotheism.<sup>49</sup>

As noted earlier, Benamozegh's daring approach provoked harsh criticism from the Sages of Aleppo. Among the rabbis' objections was their accusation that Benamozegh placed scientific wisdom on an equal footing with Jewish wisdom, reducing the latter to the level of the former. Moreover, by attributing some biblical customs to pre-Mosaic peoples, Benamozegh contested the divine origins of those customs. Finally, these rabbis alleged that Benamozegh's comparison between some mythological stories and Kabbalah combined the pure and the impure in a sacrilegious manner.<sup>50</sup>

Benamozegh responded to the rabbis of Aleppo in a pamphlet, *Tzori Gilaad*, written in a rabbinical style which was markedly different from the philosophical tone he adopted previously. He did so not only because the Aleppo rabbis did not share his knowledge of modern philosophy, but presumably also because it would have been both ironic and self-defeating to use a European language and quotes from philosophers to defend and prove his total devotion to traditional Judaism. Nevertheless, I maintain that even in this pamphlet, the underlying basis of Benamozegh's approach is a Spinozist one. In Benamozegh's view, philology, history, philosophy, and Kabbalah are different perceptions of the same divine substance. This idea is expressed at the very beginning of his pamphlet:

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<sup>48</sup> Elijah Benamozegh, *Teologia Apologetica e Dogmatica*, (Livorno: Tipografia di F. Vigo, 1877), 268. Cited in Faur, "The Hebrew Species Concept and the Origin of Evolution," 43-66.

<sup>49</sup> Benamozegh expresses the same idea in his *Israël et l'Humanité*, 122-3, 308.

<sup>50</sup> Benamozegh, *Tzori Gilaad*, 25. See also Guetta, *Philosophy and Kabbalah*, 88-90.

With regard to the accusation of mixing, I wish to say: who can deny that our Savior, our Rock who gives us our Torah, He is also the creator of the whole world [...]? So how is it possible that God contradicts His own words? Why can't both natural science and divine science live in peace as two sisters? How dare we separate the unity to take away the close relatives [...]?<sup>51</sup>

Since everything is related to the same unique substance, Benamozegh rejects the possibility of competition or contradiction between the different wisdoms. Natural and religious sciences often seem to be in conflict, but are really two perceptions of the same substance, two attributes of the same unique God. Benamozegh does not claim that Torah and sciences are epistemically the same, but they are substantially similar. Therefore, one cannot contradict the essence of the other, and they can and should “live in peace as two sisters.”<sup>52</sup>

Accordingly, since God consists of infinite attributes, no one can claim perfect knowledge of Him or understanding of His will. In the same way, the Torah, which is the Word of God, is “far away from all knowledge and ideas.”<sup>53</sup> However, only a person who has “climbed one step after the other”<sup>54</sup> on the ladder of wisdom can pretend to understand something about God. Moreover, the more divine attributes a person apprehends, the more he or she can hope to perceive the essence of God. This is why knowledge not based on Jewish sources is not only accepted but even required for anyone who wishes to understand the word of God.

Regarding the second and third accusation of similarities between Judaism and pagan rituals,<sup>55</sup> or between mythology and Kabbalah,<sup>56</sup> the same Spinozist

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> While Benamozegh formulates this idea in Spinozist fashion, the rejection of the antagonism between rational and revealed wisdoms already had important antecedents among medieval Jewish philosophers. For example, the *mutakallimun*, chief among them Saadia Gaon, proclaimed that Reason and Revelation are supplementary to each other. See Abraham Heschel, “Reason and Revelation in Saadia’s Philosophy,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, 34/4 (1944): 394; see also Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15-55.

<sup>53</sup> Benamozegh, *Tzori Gilaad*, 26.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> For example, in his commentaries on Genesis 38:19 and 41:55. See Holzman, “Universalism and Nationalism,” 109-10, 112-4.

paradigm leads Benamozegh to oppose two different strands of thought. On the one hand, he rejects the “heretics’ opinion,” namely the higher criticism contesting the divine source of the Mosaic Law.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, he opposes Maimonides’ approach,<sup>58</sup> whereby the Torah condemns every interaction between Judaism and polytheism.<sup>59</sup> In his letter to the sages of Jerusalem, Benamozegh downplays the radical nature of his approach, and merely cites a number of Talmudic and Kabbalistic sources that clearly assert that some knowledge may be found outside Judaism. Moreover, in his *Israel and Humanity*, he stresses this idea in a philosophical way:

This theological idea leads us to understand the dual aspect of the local God of Palestine and the universal God. The God of Palestine is the One, the source of life in general, the particular contribution of the Semites to the religion of humanity. But He becomes the universal God by virtue of the emanation of His attributes, each of which is personified in a god adapted to each nation. This god is true, so much so that we consider him as a particular aspect of the Divine, who remains in constant relation with the unity that the Jewish faith knows. However, one errs when the link with monotheism, and thus with all the other aspects of the Divine which constitute the different forms of worship among peoples, is broken.<sup>60</sup>

Spinoza stated that God is an absolutely infinite being who is perceived through His attributes. For Benamozegh, these attributes can also be identified with pagan gods or even with YHWH, the Jewish god. Therefore, every Jew and polytheist perceives a different attribute of God; each religion or people perceives

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<sup>56</sup> For example, in his commentary on Genesis 23:6 where he compares Joseph to the Egyptian God Serapis and Abraham to Brahma. See Holzman, “Universalism and Nationalism,” 110-1.

<sup>57</sup> In his *Israël et l’Humanité*, 118, Benamozegh explicitly attributes this opinion to Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Not a Bible studies scholar, Spencer was rather a prominent sociologist who extended the Darwinian conception of evolution into realms of sociology and ethics. Benamozegh probably refers here to Spencer’s *Principles of Sociology*, which was published in 1876-1896 and translated into French in 1878-1898. See George H. Smith, “Spencer, Herbert (1820–1903),” in *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism*, ed. Ronald Hamowy, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2008), 483–5.

<sup>58</sup> See Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, part. III, chap. 30. See also Maimonides, “Laws of Idolatry,” *Mishneh Torah*, 11:1.

<sup>59</sup> In his *Israël et l’Humanité*, 118, Benamozegh attributes this opinion to Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693-1755).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

God in its own particular way and in accordance with its perception.<sup>61</sup> Then, for Benamozegh religious tolerance is a theological idea considering that each faith or religion has some truth. Therefore, rather than combating each other, it follows that contact between different religious groups may be a source of enrichment and mutual exchange, for Jews and gentiles alike.<sup>62</sup>

### **Idolatry: Misconception or Heresy?**

As we have seen, Benamozegh’s model is based on the Spinozist conception of a universal God as the unique substance of the world, who is perceived in His many different attributes by different peoples. These attributes are equivalent to one another, and therefore each person may increase his own knowledge of God through another’s knowledge. Up to this point, Benamozegh seems to promote a very radical pluralistic position in which no one can claim complete possession of the truth and no faith can assert its superiority over the other. Benamozegh further adds that a misconception of God can also occur, when one separates the local god from the universal God. Notably, error in faith is not the belief in the pagan gods, but the belief that such a god represents the truth in its totality:

The divine idea in humanity is a light which is refracted through a prism. Each nation reflects one of the rays and Israel stands in the middle: from him [i.e. Israel] the rays irradiate, toward him they converge, therefore he ensures their unity.

But how does the truth differ from error? In taking into account the unity which united all these rays into one beam. Pagans were ignorant of it and therefore they were polytheists. In contrary, Jews preached it and thus preserved monotheism.<sup>63</sup>

Again, this mild description of the falseness of the belief in pagan gods seems to derive directly from Spinoza’s conception of God and His attributes.<sup>64</sup> People

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<sup>61</sup> In his *Israël et l’Humanité*, 125-6, Benamozegh explicitly attributes this idea to Spinoza.

<sup>62</sup> As Seidler noted it, this claim has no traditional Jewish precedent. See Seidler, “A Nineteenth Century Jewish Attempt at Integrativeness,” 15-6.

<sup>63</sup> Benamozegh, *Israël et l’Humanité*, 269.

<sup>64</sup> Maimonides preceded Spinoza in claiming that falsehood has no positive content. See his *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:2; 3:12 ; 3:13. Since Maimonides and Spinoza share the same view on this subject, either or both could have inspired Benamozegh. See Warren Z. Harvey, “Maimonides

possess a true understanding of the local god, their own conception of the Divine, precisely when this god directly connects to the universal God. In Spinozist terminology, “a true idea must correspond with its ideate.”<sup>65</sup> But Benamozegh’s real innovation lies in his understanding of falsity or error. Spinoza claims that “there is nothing positive in ideas which causes them to be called false,”<sup>66</sup> and therefore, “falsity consists solely in the privation of knowledge involved in ideas which are fragmentary and confused.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Benamozegh affirms that even in paganism there is no false positive idea, only absence, an imperfect conception of divinity as a whole. In other words, paganism is the consequence of an imperfect perception of the essence of the substance by the intellect.<sup>68</sup>

This line of reasoning leads us to a radical religious conclusion: Benamozegh rejects the concept of religious heresy, since heresy cannot exist in the absence of any positive false ideas. Sometimes humans may be wrong or may have made a mistake, but misconception is not heresy. Reading Kabbalistic sources in accordance with a Spinozist paradigm, Benamozegh constructs a Jewish model of broad religious tolerance: Not only is it possible to learn something from a person with mistaken understanding, but in fact, no one can claim to live entirely free of false understandings. Furthermore, falsehood has no positive content, but is only a lack of knowledge; thus, the very possibility that heresy exists or even can exist is renounced by Benamozegh.

### Challenging Rabbinic Authority from Within

Now we can consider the question of authority. The rabbis of Aleppo burned Benamozegh’s books before he could defend himself. From their point of view, the comparison between Torah and the sciences, and between religious and natural laws, was an attack on divine authority. Nevertheless, it seems that history has vindicated Benamozegh. Indeed, after his pamphlet was published, even the most Orthodox rabbis did not think to burn Benamozegh’s books, nor did they deem him unorthodox. In fact, Benamozegh is considered one of the

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and Spinoza on the Knowledge of Good and Evil,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 22/2 (1978): 167-85.

<sup>65</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part. I, axiom 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II, prop. 33.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II: 49, note.

<sup>68</sup> See also Boulouque, “Elia Benamozegh,” 343-53.



best defenders of Jewish Orthodoxy in his time.<sup>69</sup> This is all the more remarkable, given the fact that Benamozegh's theological model in favor of tolerance challenged the existence of any compelling authority on earth, as we saw above.

I want to argue that this acceptance is due not only to the content of Benamozegh's arguments, but also to the form of his answer to the Aleppo rabbis, which ultimately served to convince the Jewish traditional world. Ever since the Talmudic period, spanning the first centuries of the Common Era, controversy has stood at the core of rabbinic tradition. Throughout the centuries, rabbis have engaged in disputes about virtually everything, almost always without resorting to schism or excommunication. According to scholars of Hebrew law, two major elements separate a legitimate legal controversy from an illegitimate one: the attitude towards opponents and the attitude toward the rabbinic institution or tradition.<sup>70</sup> When Benamozegh chose to answer his Orthodox critics, he emphasized his respect and his desire to remain a part of the Orthodox world. Moreover, even more than the content itself, the redaction of his pamphlet in rabbinic Hebrew, his use of many Talmudic and rabbinic quotes, served to express that his challenge to the rabbinic tradition emerged from an internal point of view, as an Orthodox rabbi, and not as an outsider.

In other words, Benamozegh submitted himself not to traditional dogma but to rabbinical paradigm. Indeed, it was possible for him to contest traditional dogma precisely because he accepted the rabbinical point of view, because he argued as a rabbi rather than as a philosopher. According to the Talmud, the Torah was given to humans,<sup>71</sup> and therefore not God but the rabbis are the legitimate legislators. Thus, one can challenge the concept of divine authority but not rabbinic authority. This human authority does not forbid controversy, but requires the polemist to prove his basic acceptance of the rabbinic tradition through the form of his argumentation.

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<sup>69</sup> As evidence for this claim, it is enough to note that Benamozegh's books are published today in Hebrew by the strictly Orthodox Rabbi Eliyahu Zini.

<sup>70</sup> Hanina Ben-Menachem, Neil Hecht and Shai Wosner, *Controversy and Dialogue in Halakhic Sources* (Hebrew), Vol. 2, (Boston: The Institute of Jewish Law, Boston University School of Law, 1993), XLV.

<sup>71</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Metzia*, 59b. See also Ben-Menachem et. al, *Controversy and Dialogue*, 168-9.

Benamozegh and Spinoza differ precisely in this last point. Spinoza argued in favor of a philosophical discourse released from all dogma and religion. When Spinoza criticized the Bible, it was from an external point of view, as a philosopher rather than as a Jew. Correspondingly, when the Jewish community of Amsterdam decided to excommunicate him, Spinoza felt no need to explain himself within the rabbinic paradigm, as Benamozegh did. In adopting this attitude, Spinoza expressed his disinterest in the rabbinic tradition and its continuity. More than his ideas, it was this attitude that the Jewish community found unsupportable, I believe. Over time, Spinoza disappeared from synagogues, while Benamozegh's thought remains profoundly Jewish and still influences even the Orthodox world.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to show the significant effect that Spinoza's conception of the Divine had on Benamozegh's thought and writings. For Spinoza, the infinity of attributes is a necessary characteristic of God's nature and all of a substance's attributes themselves are independent realities, which are conceived as substances. Translating Spinoza into Kabbalistic language (while asserting and believing, that Spinoza had essentially translated Kabbalistic beliefs into philosophical language), Benamozegh claimed that there are infinite ways to perceive the divine substance, and these include even other gods and faiths, which Benamozegh describes as different attributes of the same substance.

Once we understand that Benamozegh was reading Kabbalistic sources through Spinozist spectacles, we can understand how and why he succeeded in constructing a model advocating religious tolerance and challenging the traditional concept of heresy, all while using terminology provided by traditional Jewish sources. However, this model for religious tolerance is not the only consequence of Benamozegh's Spinozist understanding of God as a substance composed of infinite attributes. For example, the legal dualism in Benamozegh's thought between Noachism and Hebraism, universal law and particular law, probably ensues from his conception of God, and must be compared to Spinoza's distinction between ceremonial law and divine law.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Benamozegh, *Israël et l'Humanité*, 494-5. Benamozegh explicitly attributes his dualism to Spinoza. See also Amoroso, *Scintille Ebraiche*, 85-104 (and especially 98-100). Amoroso emphasizes the connection between Benamozegh's conception of God and his legal dualism.

To conclude, I do not claim that Benamozegh was a convinced Spinozist. On the contrary, as discussed above, he sharply criticized the Dutch philosopher for having been, according to his own understanding, a pantheist.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, rather than a philosophical translation of Kabbalistic concepts, for Benamozegh Spinoza's thought was a deviation from the true system of Kabbalah.<sup>74</sup> But in Benamozegh's world, disagreement does not mean ostracizing the other. Conceivably, for him, some aspects of Spinoza's philosophy are incorrect; but others, such as his understanding of God's attributes, are undoubtedly true and useful in better explaining the universal figure of God of the Kabbalah. It can be concluded that Spinoza is certainly central to the understanding of Benamozegh's argument in favor of religious tolerance; but without a natural inclination to tolerance, Benamozegh would probably never have opened the Dutch philosopher's books. Thus, more than a source of inspiration, Spinoza was a tool for Benamozegh, a framework that enabled him to structure his Kabbalistic thoughts and to translate them into Western philosophical concepts.

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<sup>73</sup> Benamozegh concluded his article "Spinoza et la Kabbale" with the following sentence (p. 374): "No, Kabbalah is not the pantheism of Spinoza. It is more and better than the latter. It is its witness, its judge and its condemnation." See also *Israël et l'Humanité*, 120, 155. For more on Spinoza's pantheism, see John Dewey, "The Pantheism of Spinoza," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 16/3 (1882): 249-257.

<sup>74</sup> Benamozegh, *Spinoza et la Kabbale*, 372-4.