

NEW JERUSALEM,
THE INTERROGATION OF
BARUCH DE SPINOZA AT
TALMUD TORAH CONGREGATION:
AMSTERDAM, JULY 27, 1656

ACT ONE

BARUCH/BENTO

Scene 1

The audience enters the theatre under this inscription in Hebrew and English: "IN THE GREATNESS OF YOUR MERCY I WILL COME INTO YOUR HOUSE."

Valkenburgh, a prosperous city patriarch, alone onstage. Morning light. There is a closed carved wooden cabinet upstage of him. We are in the meeting house of Talmud Torah Congregation.

WALKENBURGH. *(To us.)* Shut the doors. The rest will have to stay outside. Quiet, please. Quiet. *(He waits for silence.)* There is an evil abroad in our city. I am here to stop it. I should say we are all here to stop it, because your community is the source of it. The monster we seek is one of you. He'll be here this morning. All of you know the man. Many of you do business with him. No doubt some of you are fond of him. But Baruch de Spinoza has become a public menace. He is a threat to the piety and morals of this entire city and he and his ideas must be stopped. Our city must be

purged. The regents of Amsterdam have nothing against the Jewish community. We live in the most beautiful city in the world, and the most tolerant. Your parents and grandparents came here from Spain and Portugal to escape the mass conversions, the killings and public burnings of the Catholic Inquisition. We have none of that here. I am honored to be in your place of worship. The God of Israel and the God I worship are one and the same God. The King of Kings hath made Holland a glorious new Jerusalem for all of us. But the times are fraught. The war with Spain goes on. Peace with England is fragile. The plague is at large again. There are those who say that this man is the cause, infecting the republic with his ideas. There are people in this city, Christians and Jews, who believe that this year of our Lord 1656 will see the coming of the Messiah. The end of things. The Final Judgment. Let us look therefore to our souls, and cast away any man that stands in the way of salvation. The city's regents send you this message: Abide by our laws, adhere to the regulations governing your community, or face the consequences. Stop this man, or we will stop him. *And you.* We are tolerant, but we have our limits. Like the God of Israel, we can smite. And with a vengeance. *(Lights change as the scene shifts to Valkenburgh's house, the evening before. Mortera and Ben Israel enter. They are dressed much like Valkenburgh, except that Mortera and Ben Israel wear skull caps.)* Your leaders met with me last night and we are at one.

MORTERA. I don't believe it.

VALKENBURGH. Rabbi, I have proof.

MORTERA. I can't believe it. I don't believe it. I won't believe it.

BEN ISRAEL. It's impossible.

VALKENBURGH. We have copies of Spinoza's correspondence and his journal. Our spy has given us the notes on a book he's writing. Would you like to see them?

MORTERA. No. No.

VALKENBURGH. Rabbi Mortera, Spinoza's name is now known from London to Leipzig. His ideas have come to the attention of the Estates General and the consistory of the Dutch Reformed Church. The city council has spoken. Spinoza must be silenced, and the Jews must do the silencing.

MORTERA. I will not let you use Baruch Spinoza as a scapegoat. I will not let you make him a sacrificial victim to frighten my people.

VALKENBURGH. Frighten them why?

MORTERA. Must I rehearse to you the history of the Jews?

seeded my mind. Implanting so many questions and ideas ... What am I to do with all these thoughts? And I must carry them with me, inside me, whether Bento is here or elsewhere, whether he's with me or no. His ideas are like a child that I as a good believing Christian cannot raise up. God won't let me have these ideas. And when Bento is gone, when you've banished him — *if you banish him ...* What am I to do with all these thoughts? What am I to do with these ideas? Oh, God, God, help me, please. Please. Please.

MORTERA. Some water for her. (*Simon brings her a glass.*) Drink, child.

BEN ISRAEL. Rabbi, how far do we let him speak? This man is an atheist. Isn't that "clear and distinct" already?

SPINOZA. I maintain that God is the highest good and must as such be loved. How can I be an atheist?

BEN ISRAEL. You're poisoning me. And you're poisoning the minds and faith of everyone here. You're not a Jew and you're not worthy to stand in this house. You're not worthy to wear this on your head! (*Rips the skull cap from Spinoza's head.*) Damn you, Baruch! *Damn you!* Baruch Spinoza is not a good citizen. He is not a good Jew. This is our only question here. For my part, I say we should go back to the days of Uriel da Costa. I say this man should be publicly stripped and whipped and forced to lie down in the doorway of this synagogue so that everyone may walk over his body as we leave. Even if it means he goes home and puts a bullet in his brain. God forgive me.

VALKENBURGH. I think you've just lost your case, Mr. Spinoza.

SPINOZA. Not yet. Not until Rabbi Mortera says so.

VALKENBURGH. I give you three minutes to finish.

SPINOZA. Three minutes...!

VALKENBURGH. Or I will dissolve this assembly and bring in the city guard. You will be put in prison and this meeting house will be shut.

SPINOZA. So you're *ordering* the parnassim to condemn me? You with your respect for the law?

VALKENBURGH. You've pushed me long and far enough, young man. Don't push me a hair farther.

MORTERA. Give him time.

VALKENBURGH. I give him three minutes.

SPINOZA. By what right are you here in the first place?

VALKENBURGH. The purpose of the state, Mr. Spinoza, is to keep the peace.

Turning your back on your people and their God, you have put us into this man's hands.

SPINOZA. I haven't turned my back on anyone. I love this city and I love my people.

MORTERA. Good. Then you must love what they believe.

SPINOZA. No, I must help them believe better, believe a greater truth.

MORTERA. Why are you forcing my hand?

SPINOZA. I'm not forcing your hand —

MORTERA. Yes, you are forcing my hand. You are *making* me expel you. I can say to the parnassim, cast this young man into darkness. And the parnassim will obey. Do not make me do that. About the city agreements, I understand. I disappointed you. I made you angry. Now you make me beg. And I beg you, my child, do not put this burden on me. Do not make me destroy you. You know what awaits if this proceeding goes against you.

SPINOZA. Excommunication.

MORTERA. Excommunication. With all that that entails. You say you love your people? Then think about them. Think what might befall our community if you stir this city up. If you love this republic, think: Where you will go without it? What country can give you half of what you enjoy here? And what will you be without us? Without your friends, without your family, without the Jews? A stranger wandering the earth. A shadow. Not to be buried beside your father and mother when you die? And what am I if you are cast into darkness? Will you make me a shadow, too?

SPINOZA. I'm sorry.

MORTERA. What have I done, Baruch, to turn you against me, against the Jews? No learned answers. No philosophy. What have I done, what has any of these people done, one by one, to make you disavow your nation and put your brethren at risk?

SPINOZA. I tell you I haven't disavowed —

MORTERA. Yes, yes, yes, Baruch, you *have*. This meeting here today is the proof. Look — look at these confused faces, these accusing eyes. They're all the evidence you need. What did we do, how did we anger you so?

SPINOZA. I'm not angry.

MORTERA. Oh, yes, I can see that. How did we do that, how did we cheat you of whatever it was you needed? Perhaps I coddled you. Perhaps I loved you too much.

REBEKAH. What, I should go into business with Gabriel? That washrag? That apple core? Send you away? They should send *him*. The heartless dogs! Pardon me, Rabbi. I was overcome for a moment.

MORTERA. (*Indicating Clara.*) And this young lady, Baruch? This golden soul? I say it though she is not a Jew. You would give her up, too?

SPINOZA. If I must.

MORTERA. Miss van den Eenden? Have you any wisdom?

CLARA. Send him away.

SPINOZA. Clara ...

CLARA. Send him away from me. Send him away from me. Send him away. — God bless you, Bento. (*Clara exits.*)

MORTERA. I don't think the parrassim need to confer. I will pronounce a judgment that I see as fitting. Sound the shofar. (*We hear a shofar as he opens the Ark, revealing the scrolls of the Torah. Ben Israel produces a black candle and lights it. Mortera hands Ben Israel one of the Torah scrolls and takes the black candle.*) The Lords of the council, having heard of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, have endeavored to turn him from his evil ways. But having failed, and having heard trustworthy witnesses, they have decided that the said Spinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel. We ordain that no one may communicate with him by speech or in writing, nor show him any favor, nor stay under the same roof with him, nor be within four cubits of him, nor read anything composed or written by him. By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse, and damn Baruch de Spinoza, with the consent of God, blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the six hundred and thirteen precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with all the castigations that are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night. Cursed be he when he lieth down, and cursed be he when he riseth up. Cursed be he when he goeth out and cursed be he when he cometh in. The Lord will not pardon him. The wrath and fury of the Lord will be kindled against this man, and bring down upon him all the curses which are written in the Book of the Law. And the Lord will destroy his name from under heaven. And, to his undoing, the Lord will cut him off from all the tribes of Israel, with all the curses of the firmament that are written in the Book of the Law.

REBEKAH. Jew hater!

⊖ VALKENBURGH. (*To Simon, at first:*) Do you think I wanted any part of this? That I wanted to come here today? Or to involve you? And do you know what I had at my back? Men of greater power than I, men who *would* destroy this community. Who would more than shutter this synagogue, who would burn it down and salt the ashes. But out of respect for this man (*Indicating Mortera.*) — with whom I have stood side by side forging with my own hands a way for Jews and Christians to live together, I *volunteered*. In an effort to save my friend and these people a great deal of suffering indeed. To save the Jews from the men at my back. From the people begging the city to do something about this philosophical termite eating away at our foundations. To save them from a city of very frightened people. People frightened of the English, and of the plague, people who think that the last trumpet is about to sound and that *that* man is the Antichrist. There are men of power who would have had Spinoza taken away in the night and thrown into a pit. I have that power, too. I could do it. But I chose to respect our system and follow our laws. And now I am in the midst of it. And you accuse me of intolerance?

SPINOZA. You see? You had no choice ... and a cause for that cause, and a cause for that cause ...

VALKENBURGH. What was I to do? What *am* I to do? Will someone tell me that?

MORTERA. We were speaking about Scripture. Perhaps that will give us some guidance, my friend.

VALKENBURGH. Unbelievable. Unbelievable!

MORTERA. Miss van den Eenden, has Spinoza spoken with you about the miracles in the Bible?

CLARA. He doesn't believe them. He says the miracles are just fables.

MORTERA. Mere fables. Why does he say that?

CLARA. Because Nature cannot depart from its own laws.

SPINOZA. No, no, no. Clara? What is Bento's Rule?

CLARA. Nature, which is to say God, cannot depart from its laws.

SPINOZA. Thank you.

MORTERA. Wait a moment, Baruch. "Nature, which is to say God."

SPINOZA. That's right.

VALKENBURGH. Do we really need to inquire further? This is pantheism. It's paganism!

MORTERA. "*Nature, which is to say God ...*" And I sense we're getting to the heart of things here.

REBEKAH. This is heresy! You heard him yourself!

SPINOZA. We *must* ponder, and we must speak what we have pondered, or what is speech for?

MORTERA. In this state and city, my son, we cannot speak whatever we want.

SPINOZA. The Jews can't speak because the Jews have agreed to be silent.

MORTERA. Yes. In order to obtain our liberty.

SPINOZA. You taught me to speak and now you would gag my mouth? You would stopper my brain?

MORTERA. So as not to endanger our liberty!

SPINOZA. Was it liberty to agree that there would be no public Jewish weddings? No public Jewish funeral processions? Of course. We wouldn't want to offend our Christian brethren. We wouldn't want to be blamed for causing a disturbance. What else did the Jews decide in collusion with the city? That Jews would not speak about religious matters with Christians because this might "disturb the liberty we enjoy." Is this liberty? One of our rabbis has agreed not to publish in Dutch, so that he doesn't risk "infecting the Dutch with Jewish ideas." Is that liberty? To agree to shut one's mouth about what one believes in? Are these the acts of a Chosen People? Or the acts of collaborators?

MORTERA. Collaborators ...

SPINOZA. Yes. Collaborators.

VALKENBURGH. So there's fire under all that ice after all.

MORTERA. I grant you, Baruch, the agreements with the city are flawed.

SPINOZA. *You were one of those who made the agreements.*

MORTERA. Because I had no choice. The Jews had no choice.

SPINOZA. Who needs an Inquisition in Amsterdam? The Jews provide it for themselves!

MORTERA. I see, I see. How long have you felt this way?

SIMON. Bento — I just want to say you're not helping your case.

SPINOZA. Who are you to tell me how to act? I should take lessons from a traitor who'd sell out his friend? Or public toadies? Or inheritance chasers?

VALKENBURGH. So this is your tractable disciple? Rabbi Mortera, you promised me his silence!

SPINOZA. I see. You fed me to the lions before I even got here.

MORTERA. You fed yourself to them, and all of us along with you.

Turning your back on your people and their God, you have put us into this man's hands.

SPINOZA. I haven't turned my back on anyone. I love this city and I love my people.

MORTERA. Good. Then you must love what they believe.

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SPINOZA. I'm not angry.

MORTERA. Oh, yes, I can see that. How did we do that, how did we cheat you of whatever it was you needed? Perhaps I coddled you. Perhaps I loved you too much.

SPINOZA. I don't know, Rabbi. I don't know. I just don't know ...
MORTERA. Do you think I don't have doubts, Baruch? I, too. Still! There are nights when it seems that light will never come again. When the dark of night is inside my head and heart and soul, not outside of them. When God is nowhere, nothing. When a prayer for help seems like senseless gibberish. King David himself cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Their Messiah called this out from his cross. A man of deep faith. Sometimes I think God doubts, too, and that's the source of evil in the world. God fluctuates a moment and evil enters in.

SPINOZA. Maybe God picked up the habit from us.

MORTERA. I'm dying, Baruch. No, I don't mean literally. Why did I say that...? What I mean is — I have a congregation, Baruch. A thousand souls are in the hold of my ship and I must see them all to safety. You too are in my hold. You stand at the wheel now, as pilot.

SPINOZA. Rabbi, what am I to do?

MORTERA. I can go to Valkenburgh and quietly say that you've agreed. No one will blame you. No one will accuse you. Your people will embrace you. And life will go on.

SPINOZA. Cut a deal and live happily ever after.

MORTERA. What is human life but a deal? And a *good* deal. That's your answer. Say that you've agreed — and then pray, Bento.

— SPINOZA. I never told you this. My father once sent me to collect a debt from an old woman who owed him sixty stuivers. I won't name her. She was of the congregation. A woman of well-known piety. She counted out the money on her table but said, "Baruch, let us pray together before you go." So we bowed our heads at her table and prayed. When we had finished she scooped up the coins and poured them into my hand. "Put these in your pocket and go with God," she said. I did not put the coins in my pocket. I counted them instead — and found that sixty stuivers had turned into thirty. Ever since then I can't see people praying without thinking they're trying to swindle me.

MORTERA. Did you make her pay the full sixty?

SPINOZA. Yes. It was my task, at my father's bidding.

MORTERA. Did you tell your father what she'd done?

SPINOZA. No. It would have pained him.

MORTERA. And you're a gentleman. A gentleman, Baruch, does not inflict pain or suffering on others but takes it upon himself. On

SPINOZA. Of course. Mustn't God logically be active in every thread and grain of the universe? If God were not somehow active in this chair, wouldn't this chair lie outside of God's power and vie with God for divinity?

MORTERA. Almighty God must lie beyond mere matter. Beyond a lowly chair.

SPINOZA. Why "mere" matter? Who says this chair is lowly? Why can't this chair be part of God, along with our bodies, and the moon and stars? Otherwise, how could your immaterial God interact with *any* physical matter?

MORTERA. How do we have non-physical ideas in a physical world? How is there a mind inside a body?

SPINOZA. The mind isn't inside the body.

MORTERA. Oh, no? Where is it?

SPINOZA. What if ... and I'm still working this out ... what if the mind and the body are the same thing? One thing seen from two different angles, the physical and the mental. The mind the idea of the body, the body the object of the mind. *(They all stare at him blankly.)* Okay ... *(Taking Mortera's book.)* These pages and the words printed on them aren't two separate things. The pages need the words and the words need the pages for this to be what it is. A book. We, too, are books — also made up of words and pages, only we call them thoughts and bodies. You can look at me from the aspect of my mind or the aspect of my body, but it's only when you put them together that you have me, the unified book that is Baruch Spinoza. I like that. That's good. Let's take this further. What about the world? The world ... and I didn't quite see this before ... yes, similarly, the world must be made up of truths (i.e., words) extended in things (books, bodies, chairs). The order of things moving with the order of ideas, and vice versa. Once you see that, everything's pretty simple. If you see what I mean ...

VALKENBURGH. *(Doesn't see at all.)* Yes ... What else did he say to you, Miss van den Eenden? About spirits, let's say. Well?

CLARA. He says there are no such things.

VALKENBURGH. No spirits. No angels either, I suppose?

SPINOZA. Excuse me, but we're not going to argue about angels, are we? What will we move onto after angels? The unicorn? Shall we hold a séance? The Sadducees didn't believe in spirits, and they weren't declared heretics. Why didn't the Sadducees believe in them? Because the Torah says nothing about them. Rabbi?