

## “ALL THINGS EXCELLENT ARE AS DIFFICULT AS THEY ARE RARE”

By Rabbi Tom Heyn, June 2015

About a month ago, GableStage at the Biltmore staged a performance of *New Jerusalem*. I know many in our community saw it. There were at least five Temple members present the night I was there. The play was about the interrogation of Baruch Spinoza, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish philosopher whose unorthodox ideas put him at odds with the religious establishment of his time. It was sad to see such a brilliant man accused of heresy and excommunicated from the family and people he loved, but his idealism and ideals are still inspiring.

Although Spinoza was Jewish and his philosophy was consistent with Jewish values, his life and teachings have been important to both Jews and non-Jews, especially those who regard themselves as secular. His integration of theology, philosophy and science over 350 years ago represents a way of thinking that most secular Jews would find appealing even today. In fact, Spinoza's work paved the way for rationalists and progressive theologians over the past few centuries, including such influential rabbis as Mordechai Kaplan (1881-1983) and Roland Gittelsohn (1910-1995).

About a week after the show's final performance, New York Times columnist David Brooks came to Miami to promote his most recent book, *The Road to Character*. When he wrote it, Brooks wasn't sure he would be able to follow his own advice, he admitted, but he “wanted at least to know what the road looks like and how other people have trodden it.” Those people, whom he cites in his book, are exemplars of spiritual maturity; people who embody self-mastery, graciousness, steadiness and a concentrated sense of purpose. Spinoza wasn't on his list, though he would have been a worthy addition.



Although David Brooks is Jewish, most of the heroes in his book are not, which makes his road to character appealing to Jews and non-Jews alike, especially those who are secular. I notice in his work, and in Spinoza's as well, that their moral philosophies are influenced by a Jewish religious framework but not limited by it. I think this observation also describes Temple Israel of Greater Miami and its membership.

Many of our Temple's activities, and its members, are not overtly religious. We know that there is something that connects us more than our Jewish ethnicity, but it is a little hard to define. The truth is, we are drawn together by similar values which ultimately transcend the distinction between 'religious' and 'secular.' What makes Temple Israel unique is that the boundaries between 'religious' and 'secular' are less defined than they are elsewhere. That's because, for us, religion is less about honoring the past than it is forging a path to our future.

At Temple Israel, we view and practice religion as a means for integrating theology, philosophy and science. We study the teachings of progressive thinkers, like Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and others who were

profoundly influenced by Spinoza. We practice meditation as well as communal prayer, following the research which indicates that people feel and function better when they engage in these practices on a regular basis. Our ongoing focus on health and wellness has enabled us to appreciate the role of 'spiritual health' in overall wellness and the technologies designed for cultivating it. And our study and practice of *mussar* has helped us to see that religion must ultimately serve as a road to character.

The boundaries between 'religious' and 'secular' have led to tension and strife in Israel and around the world, but Temple Israel is making important contributions by expanding the boundaries and integrating what many have seen as opposites. We are located in the center of Miami geographically, but we are also in the center of different ideological dispositions. We are a meeting place for people who are gay and straight, liberal and conservative, Jewish and not Jewish; people who are passionate about spirituality and people who are just as passionate about social action; those who are religious and those who are completely secular; those who are serious and those who just want to have a good time.

This kind of integration has long characterized our congregation. It's not accidental but, instead, is the product of nurturing and support. I hope you are as proud as I am to be associated with Temple Israel, and I hope you will join me in building upon this foundation of progressive and inclusive values.

Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated at the age of 23, and died at the age of 44. Toward the end of his short lifetime, he asked the following question: "How is it possible, if salvation were easily achieved, that it should be neglected by almost everyone?" He concluded that "all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."

Temple Israel is remarkable and unique as a religious institution; perhaps even rare. Consequently, the work involved in our pursuit

of excellence is difficult at times.

In a similar way, the road to character is often challenging, which is why it is not a road that everyone chooses to take. But when we join together in integrating our religious and secular interests in a way that makes us a better congregation, as well as better people, I know we will succeed. And, I know, the outcome will be excellent!