“And Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.’” Mark 6:4

Spinoza expired in his tiny apartment in The Hague on February 21, 1677. He died a widely reviled man in both the Christian and Jewish communities of his day, associated with the refusal to accept the existence of a supernatural God, free will, human immortality, and many other concepts that remain hallowed by the peoples of Abraham. Surely, more Dutchmen of his day associated him with the Devil than with God, despite all of Spinoza’s efforts to proclaim his love for the divine.

While he walked the earth, then, Spinoza was indeed “without honor,” and not merely in his own community. But does that make Spinoza anything less than a prophet? Not to me. The afore-mentioned verse from the Book of Mark has its greatest resonance when it is construed to refer to a prophet’s reception over time. Forward thinkers may indeed be ignored, even derided, by the “luminaries” of their era. In some instances, it takes years before their brilliance is widely appreciated, and in the case of Spinoza, it took roughly a century. Thanks to Goethe, Lessing, Mendelssohn, Schiller, Shelling and others, Spinozism became all the rage among much of the intelligentsia in late 18th century Germany. Across the pond, in the fledgling republic known as the United States of America, Spinoza’s fans included a man named Thomas Jefferson.

I have taken us back a bit through memory lane because I believe we are witnessing yet another renaissance in the relevance and appreciation for Baruch Spinoza. Increasingly, people are beginning to realize that he was not only ahead of his time but of ours. This is why Spinoza has been adopted by so many academics, in field after field, who are attempting to bridge the gaps in conventional modern thinking, only to recognize that Spinoza was mining their same ore centuries in the past.

To me, that makes Spinoza the kind of prophet whom we in the 21st century can honor as such. By “prophet,” I do not mean a recipient of supernatural messages from an omnibenevolent, yet inscrutable Cosmic Will. Spinoza, for one, has debunked the belief in such prophesy, and for that matter, anything else that could be called “supernatural.” Rather, I am referring to a genius whose ability to see ahead of his time in critical respects can enlighten the paths of those of us who are mired in darkness. Speaking as such a traveler, I am fortunate to be able to lean on Spinoza when it comes to metaphysics, theology, ethics, psychology and politics. But what shocks me even more than how useful I personally find his writings is to witness his reception among those who are truly experts in their fields. More than three centuries after his death, Spinoza is seen not only as having anticipated modern trends, but in some cases, as holding the keys that can unlock the doors of our present ignorance. I have witnessed such testimonials every time I have attended an academic conference on Spinoza, and I have attended these conferences on multiple occasions and concerning a wide range of topics. The latest was at the Madeline
As someone who is sick and tired of seeing “prophets” treated like superhuman objects of perfection, I adored the way the Symposium began. The first speaker, McGill University professor Hasana Sharp, addressed the so-called “Black Page” of Spinoza, which also happened to be the final thing the man wrote in his final (albeit unfinished) book, Political Treatise. The Black Page is a term used by feminist thinkers to refer to Spinoza’s argument that women should not be able to serve in government with men. For all of us who love Spinoza, it remains a rare blot on his legacy. But I have learned to appreciate it in spite of its falsity, for it reminds us who would tend to lionize the man excessively that he is, indeed, no “prophet” in the conventional sense of the word but rather a flesh-and-blood mortal who, failing supernatural assistance, becomes the product of his own limited mind and experiences. Arguably, Spinoza’s upbringing in an Orthodox Jewish community, combined with the sexual repression he likely experienced as an adult, convinced him that, if men were forced to serve with women in government, they would likely find themselves more and more frustrated sexually, and less and less efficient administratively. At least that is my speculation.

After confronting the Black Page, the Symposium was off to the races with one tribute after another to Spinoza’s seminal ideas. He was presented first by Professor Sharp as an early feminist—notwithstanding that one page. Then, my friend Paola Grassi, an Italian philosopher, explained how Spinoza has inspired some of the greatest literature our species has known, in the form of the works of the Great Goethe. Goethe, Paola said, essentially turned Spinozism into a private religion—one that celebrates nature over the imaginary “supernatural” realm, recognizes the transformative value of self-awareness, and appreciates that such self-awareness requires grappling with both one’s intellect and one’s emotional faculties. Indeed, as I learned later in the Symposium from James Blair, of the National Institute of Mental Health, and Heidi Ravven, a renowned Spinoza scholar from Hamilton College, emotions are truly at the heart of any efforts to think rationally. The next time someone tells you that Spinoza was a stoic, just shake your head. No less than his disciple Goethe, and no less than the rabbis who taught him, Spinoza knew that to be human is to be the product of one’s emotions, and he developed neurobiological theories that have stood the test of time. As any Spinozist could tell you, contentment consists of understanding our own unique emotions and ensuring that the ones that dominate us are as wholesome as possible. When we attempt to will our emotions away—when we repress them—we end up espousing stupid stuff. For example, we say things like women have no business serving with men in government…or in combat…or as rabbis…or…well, you get the idea.

Other speakers at the Symposium included Sarah Donovan of Wagner College and Karen Houle of the University of Guelph. They reminded me that Spinoza can be invaluable in addressing the most contemporary of public policy debates—such as how our culture should deal with post-partum depression or what kind of moral standing should be extended to non-human entities (i.e., animals, plants, ecosystems). These two academics would surely laugh if someone referred to philosophy as mental masturbation or as some sort of “impractical” discipline. In fact, I have long known that philosophy could and should be the most practical discipline in any university. Classically, it was the discipline that asked us how we can live the good life. In other words, philosophy did not merely explore morality (which asks the meaning of what we “ought” to do)
but also ethics (which asks the meaning of what we, who wish to lead the good life, “might” freely choose to do if given all the possibilities available to us). It is no coincidence that Spinoza, who in the 17th century was viewed as an enemy of freedom, has come to be understood as a thinker whose moral and political philosophy is primarily devoted to the pursuit of liberty. And what did he call his masterpiece? What else but “The Ethics.”

I have described the Symposium in such detail to give you an idea of the extent to which this man has the power to inspire and to educate. But Spinoza is not alone. Surely, similar symposia could be, and have been, devoted to other “prophets,” people like Darwin, Shakespeare, Muhammad, Aristotle… the list goes on. Not very far, but it does go on. We can all take pride in such individuals, and particularly in the knowledge that, as great as they were, they remain mere examples of our own tragically flawed, and yet incredibly advanced species. We have such potential, both as individuals and collectively. Now, with the help of Spinoza, let us just remind ourselves of our obligations to use that potential primarily as nurturers, and not exploiters, of our precious common resources.

Before signing off, I wish to leave you with an example of a Spinoza-inspired verse, which was prominently featured in the Symposium. It is the verse by which Goethe concluded his Faust. On the surface, its subject relates to the topic of the Symposium, that of feminism. But do not fool yourself. Like everything Spinoza inspired, and like every thing Goethe learned from his mentor, the true subject of this verse is the Subject of Subjects, the Name of Names. Or as it is said in the Qur’an, “the Eternal, Absolute, who begetteth not, nor is he begotten, and there is none like unto Him.”

So here you have the ending of Goethe’s Faust:

“Everything that can be perceived is only a symbol; the imperfect, which cannot be realized, here makes itself reality; that which cannot be described, here finally completes itself. It is the eternal feminine, always attracting us to the higher.”