I received a 1000 dollar Berry Grant from the APA to start a philosophy reading within the Hadar neighborhood in Israel. Hadar is a unique mixed neighborhood in the city of Haifa. It is mixed in that its members come from distinct cultural and ethnic backgrounds: There are Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs, Druze, Bahai, Jews (secular and orthodox), Russians, and a strong LGBTQ community. There is really no other place like it in Israel. It is vibrant and artistic, but it is also impoverished, and has a high rate of crime, drug abuse, and has many slums. While the various communities have succeeded in tolerating one another, there is very little interaction between them.

I thought a philosophy-reading group would be excellent way to bring people of this neighborhood into dialogue and bring their various backgrounds to bear upon an exploration of enlightenment thought. The name “Spinoza-Circle” was chosen for the group because Spinoza holds a special place in Israeli thought, and his name and likeness adorns a famous public stairwell in Hadar, and Haifa is home of Spinoza’s own annotated edition of his Theological-Political Treatise [TTP]. We started, and never moved on from, a group reading and discussion of the TTP.

We met weekly on Wednesday’s starting on Dec 5th. From the fund, I purchased flyers and posters advertising the group, a dozen copies of Spinoza’s TTP in Hebrew, and provided refreshments. Tveria 15—a community center that serves Hadar, hosted our group. They requested 10 shekels (about three dollars) from each participant per meeting to cover heating, and cooling expenses. After a vote, we decided we would each cover this expense out of pocket so the expense was not included in our budget. We met 25 times for 2 hours, and we managed to read and discuss the book through chapter 12. My participation in the group ended after July 24th—At the end of July I left Israel and returned to the US—but the group will continue to meet, and will be led by Prof. Amihud Gilead, a retired philosophy professor. He (via Ran Litver, a regular participant) will use the remaining approximately 200 dollars in our budget to continue to provide refreshments to group meetings.

The diversity of participants in this group reflects the diversity of the neighborhood communities. Participants range in age from early 20’s to mid-seventies. We have a participant from the Druze community in Usyfia, another from the Christian Arab community of Wadi Nisnas, young secular Mizrahi Jews, an Arab medical doctor (and Marxist), various retirees from varying economic backgrounds and expertise, and a venture capitalist in high tech start-ups. One of most educated members is a well-respected scholar of the Haredi community: His situation in the group was unique: He would face some difficulties if his participation in the group were found out.

The diversity of the group was apparent in the diversity of viewpoints expressed in our discussions. Spinoza’s TTP deals with issues of faith and superstition, the
interpretation of Scripture, the status of Jews, and argues for freedom and toleration within a State. In Israel today, and amongst the participants of this group, these are not idle issues. And while I have taught Seminars on the *TTP* within the University setting, there was far greater freedom within the informal setting of this reading group to discuss the relevance of this text on both the contemporary situation of Israel and within the participant’s individual lives. Participants used their own experiences and backgrounds to both interpret and criticize Spinoza’s work, as argue about its import on contemporary issues and through it all, the participants wondered about whether the philosophy Spinoza articulates in our readings was compatible with their own faith or secularism, and whether he reaffirmed their own opinions or challenged them.

Establishing this reading group has been the most rewarding experience I have had as a professional philosopher. I learned quite a bit from the participants—not only about Hebrew, Scripture, and Christian, Islamic, and Jewish thought—but also about Spinoza’s *TTP* itself. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the reading group is that unusual friendships were formed, and that participants came to genuinely like one another despite their very different ages and backgrounds.

I include in this report a few written comments made by some participants:

Professor Brian Horowitz (One time visitor from Tulane University):
I attended the Spinoza Circle in fall 2018. It was a fantastic experience. I had never been part of a group in which lay people discussed, seriously engaged with, Spinoza's ideas. The discussion was wide ranging, but also focused. People brought to the table their personal understandings of concepts, but also related ideas to personal experience. There is also the terrific sensation of relating Spinoza to contemporary Israeli and American Judaism. What does Spinoza say to us now? The answer was surprisingly multifarious. In my own case I watched how others searched for God, searched for the words to represent God, and had awareness that even the words could not reach what they were searching to define. Daniel was a wonderful group leader; with patience and expertise, he offered advice to each and pulled all our opinions together.

Sultan Saluti (A regular):
I enjoyed attending the Spinoza’s circle and reading in Spinoza’s masterpiece - the *TTP*. The group was very friendly and joyful with Beer and Snacks making the atmosphere quiet calm after a hard day work! Meeting and talking with people from different ages and cultures about Spinoza’s philosophy is fantastic. The organizer was very nice and open-minded, he has given us the opportunity to express our thoughts and wonders about Spinoza’s Philosophy, and demonstrated a profound mastery of Spinoza’s thought. I support making a place for another groups as such in the future, where philosophy can gather people from across the entire social spectrum, and brings them into a conversation out of the academic circles.
Chaim [Last Name Withheld On Request, a regular] Translated from Hebrew by me:
The Spinoza Circle, that has been meeting for over 6 months in Tiberias 15, Haifa, is special in that it is composed of very diverse people. There are in the circle individuals young and old, religious and secular, Jews and Arabs, from all shades of the social spectrum in Israel. I am a regular participant in this circle and this is mainly due to the knowledge and experience of the circle facilitator, Daniel Schneider, who guides us through the texts and the generations of discussions and exposes us to the variety of opinions that expressed on various topics and points of our discussion. Daniel brings philosophy and academic debate into the strata of society that would not have been won without this circle. His way is pleasant and unobtrusive, helpful and enables a dialogue that contributes to all participants. For that, he shall be blessed.

Included Below:
Graphic from Poster, and English Translation of the Poster text:
Meetings Start: Wednesday Dec 5th, 7:00pm at Tverya 15

Q: What is this?
A: It is a philosophy reading and discussion group

Q: Why the name “Hadar Spinoza Circle”?
A: Baruch Spinoza was the most radical and controversial of all the early modern philosophers. His name and likeness adorns our neighborhood Spinoza stairs, and his famous *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) is one of the treasures of our city.

Q: What does the group do?
A: In the first few meetings we will read parts of Spinoza’s TTP and discuss the following questions:

What is difference between superstition and religion?
What the relationship between the state and religion?
What is basis of the rights or power of people?
What is the basis of the rights or power of the State?
Why should freedom of speech be protected?
How can our different histories, culture, and beliefs help us to live together in peace?