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# What is Jewish Philosophy? A View from the Middle Ages\*

Keynote Lecture at the Grand Opening of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies on 29 October, 2015

My late teacher Professor Sidney Morgenbesser often taught his students the ‘laws’ of Jewish Philosophy or, more specifically, of Jewish logic, Jewish epistemology, Jewish metaphysics, and so on. For example, the laws of general logic are tautologies like ‘If p, then p’ or ‘If it is the case that if p, then q, then not-q, then not-p.’ The first law of Jewish Logic is: ‘If p, *why not* q (spoken with a Yiddish accent)?’<sup>1</sup>

The question—What is Jewish Philosophy?—is typically answered by describing Jewish philosophies, i.e. the books, theories, and doctrines of canonical Jewish philosophers, such as, Saadiah Gaon, Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides), Judah Halevi, Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides). Indeed the distinguished scholar of Jewish philosophy, Julius Guttman, entitled his classic history, *Philosophies of Judaism*.<sup>2</sup> But Jewish philosophy is more than a sequence of doctrines or books. Like all philosophy, it is an activity, something one ‘does.’<sup>3</sup> For some it is an intellectual exercise that solves theoretical puzzles. For others these exercises are practices that constitute a way of life, practices that give central place to the intellect and reasoning but aim at a practical end, the achievement of happiness or a harmonious life in which one’s Judaism and intellect are in sync.<sup>4</sup> In either case, philosophy is a pursuit in which one engages, not only a subject matter or the results of the pursuit.

The name of the subject ‘Jewish Philosophy’ first emerged in Germany in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century when we find the first histories of philosophy—and the very idea that philosophy has a history. The earliest histories are in the doxographical tradition, portraying certain historical figures as paradigms of what was then considered to be philosophical wisdom. Slightly later histories were developmental

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\* Many thanks to Michael Fagenblat, Zev Harvey, and David Shatz for very helpful conversations and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1 And of Jewish epistemology: ‘Your mother always knows best.’

And of Jewish metaphysics: ‘To be is to be in *tzures* (“pain, suffering”).’

And of Jewish aesthetics: ‘Beauty is for the *goyim*.’

2 But only in the English translation which was not authorized by him; the title of the German original uses the singular: *Die Philosophie des Judentums*.

3 See Mark Steiner, “Rabbi Yisrael Salanter as a Jewish Philosopher,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (2000): 42–57.

4 On philosophy as a way of life, see Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002) and his collection of essays, idem, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). On Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* as a guide to a way of life, see Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

narratives that aimed to show that the past is at most of historical interest and of no contemporary philosophical value. It is in these histories that the category of Hebraic, Mosaic, scriptural, or prophetic and finally ‘Jüdische Philosophie’ (first coined by Brucker in the 1740’s) was introduced, and ironically in some of these books to specifically *exclude* the Jewish tradition (as well as ‘barbarian philosophy’) from the history of philosophy that traces its origins to Greece. Later in the nineteenth century, historians and philologists of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* appropriated the term ‘Jewish Philosophy’ in order to claim a field of scholarship of their own in order to legitimate their academic respectability.<sup>5</sup> In short, it is only relatively recent that engagement with ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophers became a historical discipline, creating the history of philosophy. Jewish philosophy is a special case or byproduct of this phenomenon. Unlike the physical world that exists independently of and prior to the scientific discipline ‘Physics,’ the domain ‘Jewish Philosophy’ was the creation of the academic discipline, the ‘History of Jewish Philosophy,’ an artifact *made* by an academic discipline as much as the discipline *studies* it.

What was it, then, that those thinkers and authors were doing—and I will concentrate now on the medieval case since that is what I know best—that we scholars nowadays refer to as ‘Medieval Jewish Philosophy’? Well, the simple answer is: Philosophy! However, stating what philosophy is, say, in a definition, or through necessary and sufficient conditions, is no easier than spelling out what *Jewish* philosophy is. Instead I will sketch two examples of different conceptions of philosophy in which two seminal medieval Jewish philosophers were engaged, Saadiah Gaon and Maimonides. But, first, you might reasonably ask: ‘If it was simply philosophy they were doing, why label it *Jewish* philosophy?’

## What Jewish Philosophy is *Not*

Let me first tell you what Jewish philosophy is *not*. It is not philosophy composed or studied in a Jewish language, say, Hebrew.<sup>6</sup> We do speak of medieval *Arabic* philosophy and medieval *Latin* philosophy, meaning medieval philosophy written in Arabic or in Latin, but we cannot describe the full gamut of medieval Jewish philosophy as medieval

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5 I am indebted to Dirk Westerkamp’s rich and insightful “The Philonic Distinction: Germanic Enlightenment Historiography of Jewish Thought,” *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 533–559, for the history of the origins of the term ‘Jewish philosophy’ and of the fields of Jewish philosophy and the history of Jewish philosophy. See also Daniel Frank, “What is Jewish philosophy?,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2004): 1–8. On the emergence of the academic study of the history of philosophy in general, and on varieties of ways of doing the history of philosophy, see Michael Frede, “The History of Philosophy as a Discipline,” *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 666–672.

6 Jacob Klatzkin, the author of the famed *Ošar ha-Munaḥim ha-Filosofiyim* (*Thesaurus Philosophicus Linguae Hebraicae*) (reprinted New York: Feldheim, 1968), makes a claim to this effect.

Hebrew philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Leaving aside Philo of Alexandria in the first century who wrote in Greek, works written in the Islamic empire (e. g., by Saadia, Maimonides, Judah Halevi, and many others) were all composed in Arabic or Judeo-Arabic (Arabic in Hebrew characters). Only after 1148 do medieval Jewish philosophers in Christian Europe compose and read works in Hebrew. And, of course, for modern Jewish philosophy after the Enlightenment, the relevant languages include German, French, and English.

Moreover, it is not self-evident that everything philosophical written or read in Hebrew should necessarily count as Jewish philosophy. Many Aristotelian and Arabic philosophical texts were translated into Hebrew, and some only survive in their medieval Hebrew translations. Is this sufficient for them to count as Jewish philosophy? To complicate matters, many medieval Jewish thinkers composed supercommentaries in Hebrew on commentaries originally written in Arabic but then translated into Hebrew (say, Gersonides' supercommentaries on Averroes' Arabic commentaries) on Greek classics by Aristotle. *If* these supercommentaries are part of medieval Jewish philosophy—and why shouldn't they be?—should the Hebrew-translated Arabic commentaries on which they are super-commentaries, or the original Greek texts translated into Hebrew, also cross the boundary? Maybe it would more accurate to say that there is no boundary. In any case, language alone cannot settle the question.

Second, you don't have to be Jewish to do Jewish philosophy and, by the same token, not just any kind of philosophy composed by a Jew, i. e., someone of Jewish descent or confession, need be Jewish philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Some medieval Jewish philosophical texts were composed after their author's conversion to Islam (e. g., Abu'l-

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7 Note that some Islamic (Arabic?) philosophy, such as Avicenna's *Danishnamah-yi 'Ala'*, was composed in Persian.

8 See, however, Raphael Jospe, *What is Jewish Philosophy?* (Ramat Aviv: Open University, 1988): 28–29: 'A philosopher's Jewish identity is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition, for determining whether his philosophy is, indeed, a Jewish philosophy [...]. Jewish philosophy cannot be developed by a non-Jew. A non-Jew cannot write Jewish philosophy.' See also p. 6 where Jospe claims that Aristotle and Al-Farabi, for all their influence on Jewish philosophy, 'have no share in [it] for the simple reason that they were not Jews.' No argument is given, but even if one agrees that a Jewish philosopher (meaning someone who is both a Jew and a philosopher) must be Jewish, it does not follow that Jewish philosophy must be written by a Jew. That would be no different than requiring that feminist philosophy be written only by women. Notwithstanding the counterexamples I mention in the text, of course, the fact—contingent fact of course—is that (almost all?) Jewish philosophy has been written by Jews. But this fact, at least in the past, can be easily explained by historical, sociological reasons (access to languages, training, ethnic divisions). The same was true for at least a thousand years about rabbinics—and for the simple reason that non-Jews (apart from Jewish converts to Christianity) did not have the education or training to do serious rabbinics. Today, however, with the proliferation of academic Jewish studies, we now have extremely well-trained *non-Jewish women*, not to say men, engaged in serious rabbinics. (And if one does not draw an arbitrary line between the academic study of rabbinic texts and non-academic or 'traditional' study of rabbinic texts, then both are part of one tradition that is arguably all part of the continuation of the tradition of 'Oral Torah.') I see no principled reason not to expect that the same will ultimately be true of Jewish philosophy, *mutatis mutandis*.

Barakat al-Baghdadi) or Christianity (Profiat Duran, Joshua Lorki, Abner of Burgos [=Alfonso of Valladolid] who considered himself a Jewish philosopher even while he was a Christian bishop!). Likewise, whether one regards the medieval sectarian movement, the Karaites, as inside or outside Judaism, philosophy and theology written by Karaites is also generally considered part of the repertoire of medieval Jewish philosophy. And if one looks at modern figures, Henri Bergson, Ernest Nagel, and Saul Kripke are all Jewish (and identify as Jews) and they are all philosophers but their works are not Jewish philosophy. Once again, we cannot define Jewish philosophy using the religion or ethnic identity of the philosopher who composed it.

Is Jewish philosophy something like English, French, or American philosophy—something like a school or style of philosophy? Just as Early Modern empiricist or materialistic philosophy (Hobbes, Locke, Hume) is sometimes labeled ‘British empiricism’ or just as Early Modern rationalist philosophy (Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza and Leibniz) is identified with France or the continent,<sup>9</sup> is there one philosophical orientation or movement or style that marks medieval Jewish philosophers or philosophy? Again, No. The standard histories of medieval Jewish philosophy identify Saadia as a Mu’tazilite dialectical theologian; Abraham ibn Daud, Maimonides, and Gersonides as Aristotelians, or Neo-Platonized Aristotelians; Bahya ibn Paquda as a theologian and Neo-platonist; Ibn Gabirol and Judah Halevi as Neo-platonists. No one school or orientation characterizes medieval Jewish philosophy or philosophers.

A final suggestion is that Jewish Philosophy is the Philosophy of Judaism or, as we would say nowadays, the ‘Philosophical Foundations of Judaism.’<sup>10</sup> This idea is more promising but it immediately raises two thorny questions: ‘What is Judaism?’ and ‘How such a conception of Jewish philosophy differs from Jewish theology,’ i.e., the systematic study of the doctrines, practices, and culture of Judaism as a revealed religion, a question that generally makes contemporary scholars of Judaism anxious because of an acquired allergy to theology, perhaps in reaction to its sophisticated development in Christianity with its creedal core. But it has not always been that way, especially if we take theology to be *natural* theology, human reasoning about the nature of God and divinity. Thus one of the most influential texts on medieval Jewish thought was the Neo-platonic *Theology of Aristotle*, the Arabic annotat-

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, by ‘American philosophy,’ we mean either Thoreau and Emerson, so-called American Transcendentalists, or Peirce, James, Dewey, pragmatists. And Continental Philosophy is, if not a school, then a style of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers living on the European continent. Is ‘Jewish philosophy’ a euphemism for some school like this? Michael Fagenblat (p.c.) has suggested that we might indeed think of Jewish philosophy as the philosophy (or philosophies) of (the) Jews; the question is whether we are interested simply in knowing what philosophy or philosophies Jews have professed (a sociological question) or whether such a category marks out a philosophically interesting kind.

<sup>10</sup> See Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 9–10; Alexander Altmann, “Judaism and World Philosophy,” in *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western*, vol. 1, ed. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952): 76; Leon Roth, “Is there a Jewish Philosophy?,” in *Jewish Philosophy and Philosophers*, ed. Raymond Goldwater (London: Hillel Foundation, 1962): 10–11; Eliezer Berkovits, “What is Jewish Philosophy?,” *Tradition* 3.2 (1961): 120–122.

ed and expanded edition of central books of Plotinus' *Enneads*. We shall return to philosophical theology, or theological philosophy, in our discussion of Saadiah, but rather than attempt to distinguish the two, let me simply stipulate for now what I mean by this conception of Jewish Philosophy. Understood as the Philosophy of Judaism, it takes Judaism, primarily manifest in its canonical texts, as the *datum* on which it analytically reflects—exploring its presuppositions, making distinctions, articulating its possible claims and concepts, exposing ambiguities and imprecise beliefs, laying out arguments and evaluating their truth and validity—no different from the philosophy, or what we nowadays call the philosophical foundations, of biology, physics, mathematics, or economics. Although Jewish philosophy of this kind may have originated in polemical contexts, its content does not adopt a stance defending or advocating Judaism. And while the philosopher may be *committed* to the claims he is philosophizing about, this commitment need be no more than the kind of authority the philosopher of biology or physics assigns to the biological or physical facts about which he is philosophizing. That is, the philosopher does not challenge the data—of either biology or a religion—when he does not understand them, not because they are metaphysically privileged but because they are the given about which he is philosophizing. As Maimonides says in the name of Themistius, he shapes his theory according to the world rather than makes the world fit his theory (*Guide* I:72). The aim of such a Jewish philosophy is to achieve a critical understanding of the foundational beliefs, assumptions, logical structure, and implications articulated in the data, thus taking the texts and practices of Judaism as given.<sup>11</sup>

Two caveats: First, we must be careful not to adopt an essentialist preconception of Judaism, taking Judaism to be pre-determined, 'an invariable "given," prior to and transcending changing philosophies.'<sup>12</sup> Historically, the Judaism that Jewish philosophy philosophizes about has in part been changed as a result of its philosophical scrutiny. Perhaps the best example is Maimonides' conception of Judaism or, more precisely, his conception of *Talmud Torah*, or the study of Torah. Maimonides' seminal code of rabbinic law, the *Mishneh Torah*, opens with four chapters that provide a streamlined exposition of Aristotelian metaphysics, cosmology, and physics, philosophy which Maimonides identifies with the subject matter of two classical rabbinic terms for esoteric knowledge, 'the Account of the Beginning,' i. e., the rabbinic interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis, and 'the Account of the Chariot,' the rabbinic interpretation of Ezekiel's and Isaiah's prophetic visions of a divine chariot. He then subsumes these two Accounts under another rabbinic heading, *Pardes* (alluding to a famous talmudic story) which he describes as the most noble and sub-

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<sup>11</sup> An excellent example of a contemporary work on the philosophical foundations of Judaism of the sort I have in mind is Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). See also Steiner, "Rabbi Yisrael Salanter;" Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); and David Shatz, *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies and Moral Theories* (Brighton, Mass.: Academic Studies Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Jospe, "What is Jewish Philosophy?"

lime part of Talmud, the classic rabbinic activity of interpreting the Torah. Through these identifications of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics with rabbinic categories, Maimonides radically rewrites our very conception of Torah, its study, and the core of Judaism. He makes the study of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics a subject of Talmud, hence, a religious obligation. Furthermore, philosophy is not just *a* subject of Torah, it is now the *apex*, the *most* noble subject in the study of Torah. Finally, Maimonides makes normative beliefs and knowledge (of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics) rather than pious performance of the practical commandments the most important part of Judaism. Here the Philosophy of Judaism radically recasts our very conception of Judaism.

My second caveat is that the religion of Judaism has never been the exclusive subject matter, or datum, of Jewish Philosophy. No different from ancient and medieval philosophy in general, medieval Jewish philosophy included both the subjects we call metaphysical, epistemological, and moral philosophy nowadays (including topics unrelated to classical Judaism, such as substance, matter and form, causation, the theory of intellects, the nature of motion) *and* natural philosophy: physics, biology, astronomy, cosmology, astrology, mineralogy, meteorology, mathematics, geography, the science of dreams and the physiology of sensation. Medieval Jewish philosophy was inseparable from the sciences regardless of their connection to Judaism.<sup>13</sup> Hence, any restriction of Jewish Philosophy to religious or theological topics will not cut the subject at the right joints.

## Judaism before Philosophy

For the remainder of this paper, I want to illustrate through two examples what the thinkers engaged in what we now call ‘Medieval Jewish Philosophy’ were doing. This approach takes our opening question ‘What is (Medieval) Jewish Philosophy?’ as an interpretive or explanatory question about an empirical phenomenon: how should we describe and explain the activity of certain canonical thinkers and the works they produced when they were engaged in what is now called ‘Medieval Jewish philosophy’? On my view, as I mentioned earlier, they were simply doing philosophy, although these episodes also exemplify two different conceptions of philosophy in its first encounters with Judaism. But what will also emerge from these two examples is a proposal concerning how we might be able after all to reconstruct a sense in which these thinkers were engaged not only in philosophy but also in *Jewish* philosophy, a sense that avoids the criteria we criticized in the previous section.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Maimonides wrote a treatise on mathematics, Gersonides was an original creative astronomer, and many more were active in astrology, medicine, and logic. Of course, one might object that this simply shows that Jewish philosophers were *also* scientists. However, this misrepresents the way the medieval figures themselves viewed the sciences as integral to their philosophy, instead projecting backwards a historically anachronistic modern view of their relation.

First, however, in order to appreciate the effect of its encounter with philosophy on Judaism, let me say a word about the religion of the Bible or Israel and of the Rabbis *before* its contact with philosophy and how it treated matters of belief or doctrine or reasoning.

The core of both Biblical and classical rabbinic Judaism is normative *actions* and *practices*, the correct performance of the Mosaic commandments as elaborated by the rabbis in Halakhah. These commandments primarily concern the Temple, sacrifice, agriculture, purity and impurity, and ‘holiness’ (whose original meaning is connected to separate and to be separated) practices that served to distinguish Israel or the Jews as a people from other nations, among others, dietary laws, dress codes, and the Shabbat. The rabbis expanded the range of practices to cover all aspects of ordinary life, actions that can be performed by any individual, not just priests, in any place, not only in the Temple. But for all their differences, both Israelite biblical religion and rabbinic Judaism are primarily focused on how to *act*.

To be sure, it was also assumed that there are general beliefs shared by all Israelites and Jews, e. g., that there is one God who created the world, who gave Israel the Torah and its homeland, who chose Israel and sends prophets, whom one must love and serve, and so on. However, these beliefs—especially compared to the commanded actions which are thick and dense in rabbinic detail—are thin. They are never systematically organized or justified like a science. Most often, they are mentioned only within narratives or non-legal Aggadah or as terse, epithet-like interpretations of scriptural verses in sermons or exegetical contexts. Unlike the prescribed actions, neither the Bible nor the rabbis attempt to legislate belief or demand explicit, official acceptance of a catechism, confession, or creed—although they do have their red lines, and exclude those who deny various beliefs (concerning God, the Torah and prophecy, or reward and punishment) as heretics and sectarians.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the rabbis celebrate sophisticated, abstract theoretical study of Torah, according to relatively well-defined rules of reasoning (or interpretation). This intellectual activity not only becomes a primary mode of religious worship for the rabbis. They are also clearly well aware that the body of law they are creating is the creative product of their own natural reason and reasoning—notwithstanding their repeated attempts to ground their autonomous human creativity on divine foundations. Yet what is almost exclusively studied is normative law, Halakhah, governing behavior, not philosophy, theology, or ethics. Rather than ask ‘What is the Good?’ the rabbis probe under exactly what circumstances must one perform one or another good act (e. g., saving a life, returning a lost article). Instead of asking ‘What is prayer and in what sense does God hear our prayers?’, they ask ‘How many blessings should we make in our prayers and can and when should we interrupt our prayers?’ The ab-

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<sup>14</sup> On this question of dogmas and obligatory beliefs, see Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999) and David Berger’s review in *Tradition* 33.4 (1999): 81–89.

sence of analysis and argument for theological and philosophical doctrines stands in sharp contrast to the detailed, subtle, abstract legal argumentation concerning normative behavior.<sup>15</sup> The heart of biblical and rabbinic Judaism is orthopraxis, right action, rather than orthodoxy, right belief.

We find traces of Hellenistic philosophical influence on the rabbis, e. g., in their conception of the soul, creation, or innate knowledge, and we assume that representatives of Hellenistic philosophical schools (e. g., Stoicism, Platonism, Epicureanism, and even scepticism) were present in Palestine and Asia Minor.<sup>16</sup> However, the little we actually possess are popular versions of philosophical positions, not sophisticated, advanced, nuanced expositions, no sustained or detailed argument for one side or another, or extended debate of a single theme. No doubt there must have also been polemical exchanges with non-Jews and heretics, also known as philosophers, and, like Christians against pagans, or Muslims against Christians, the rabbis would have employed philosophical arguments against their philosopher rivals. But when it came to recording these discussions, the rabbis eschew philosophical terminology and never engage with philosophical dialogue and interrogation. In short, the rabbis seem both uninterested in and simply not curious about philosophy—it is alien to them—not necessarily because they did not know what it was but probably because they did.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, we find suspicion of philosophy, theosophy, and theology. The rabbis prohibit public teaching of certain quasi-philosophical subjects, such as the ‘Accounts of the Beginning’ and ‘of the Chariot’ mentioned earlier. In the enigmatic talmudic story of *Pardes*, about four rabbis who entered a garden of theosophical speculation, we sense the dangers of philosophy—one rabbi dies, one goes mad, one becomes a heretic, and only one escapes in peace. We do not know exactly what the rabbis meant by any of these titles (the ‘Accounts of the Beginning’ and ‘Chariot’ or *Pardes*), but they do suggest caution toward, even anxiety about, speculation on God, nature, and metaphysics.<sup>18</sup>

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**15** To be sure, many legal, or halakhic, analyses in the Talmud and rabbinic literature rest on definite metaphysical and epistemological, not to say ethical, presuppositions, e. g., about causality, individuation and identity, determinism, time, and more. In recent years there have been a number of fascinating attempts to work out these metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions of the rabbis by analytically trained philosophers. See, for example, papers by Mark Steiner, Eli Hirsch, Dani Rabinowitz, and Aaron Segal. Moshe Halbertal has also argued that ethical reasoning shaped rabbinic ‘revolutionary’ interpretations of scriptural laws that the rabbis found morally upsetting and unacceptable. Nonetheless, it seems more accurate to say that there is much philosophy to be found in rabbinic literature rather than that the rabbis were philosophers doing philosophy.

**16** Stoic motifs: the soul fills the body like God fills the world, that God has created and destroyed worlds, that the soul is estranged in and from this world. Platonic: Knowledge before birth that is re-discovered (Torah, not forms), God created the world by contemplating, or looking at, the Torah or language.

**17** I owe this observation to Zev Harvey.

**18** Perhaps the best example of the differences between the ideas and thought of pre-philosophical biblical and rabbinic Judaism and philosophy—and no other beliefs conflict as much with philosophical wisdom—is their respective conceptions of God. The Bible repeatedly describes God in anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language: God has a physical form, body, emotions, affect, and person-

## The Encounter between Medieval Judaism and Philosophy

Philosophy entered early medieval Judaism through two main avenues, both during the Islamic period (roughly from 750–1300) and both essentially involving Muslim thinkers. The first was through the *kalam* which literally means ‘speech’ or (like the Greek *logos*) ‘word,’ ‘argument,’ or ‘reason,’ and nowadays is translated as ‘Islamic dialectical or rational theology.’ (A practitioner of *kalam* is a *mutakallim*, pl.: *mutakallimun*.) I will return to this description in a moment.

*Kalam*, according to our best sources, originated in two ways. First, disagreements over the interpretation of the normative beliefs of Islam led to systematic general accounts of theological doctrine based on reason as well as the Qur’an and oral tradition which were taken to complement rather than contradict each other. Thus Ibn Khaldun (fourteenth century) writes: ‘argumentation formed by the intellect (*al-aql*) began to be used in addition to the evidence derived from tradition, and in this way the science of *kalam* originated.’

Second—and here our source is Maimonides (*Guide* I:71.73–75) who left us one of our few systematic descriptions of *kalam* and its origins—early Muslims were forced to develop a rational theology to defend Islam against Syriac Christians, just as even earlier church fathers had been forced to turn to reason to justify and defend Christianity against pagan philosophers.

Thus *kalam* developed out of the impulse to use reason to systematize, conceptualize, and thereby understand the beliefs of Islam and to defend it against rationally based critiques. Among these beliefs, two topics were special foci: (1) the Unity of God which had to be reconciled with the existence of divine attributes and (2) God’s unlimited power which had to be reconciled with divine justice and human freedom. But, more generally and more important for us, throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, the ‘spirit’ of *kalam*, best represented by the dominant Mu‘tazila,

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ality. The philosophers, in contrast, teach that God cannot have a body on pain of being divisible, hence not a unity or one simple God. He cannot have emotions because He cannot be affected in any way. But it is not merely that their two doctrinal stances are contradictory. Even while the Rabbis are aware that God must be transcendent to be Creator, Providential Governor, and the absolutely authoritative giver of the Torah, they also believe that their God wears phylacteries and dons a prayer shawl, that He studies Torah and that He must in order to master it, that He sheds tears when His people suffer even when He also causes that suffering, and that He is exiled when they are. Likewise, He is intertwined with His own law. The rabbis teach that a person blind in one eye need not make a pilgrimage to the Temple because just as the pilgrim must be seen by God with *His* two eyes, so must the pilgrim be able to see God with two eyes—presupposing that God is no less of a pilgrim bound by His own laws! In other words, the rabbis’ God is not only a rabbinic Jew, He is one of us, the rabbis, a member of the rabbinic community of Israel, not just a personal god but a person in the fellowship. Like Homer’s Greek gods, God is a god, i.e., a rabbinic hero. This is a radically different stance toward the deity in which He serves a certain function for the community. The challenge for the philosophers will be to create a God that satisfies their own desiderata—necessary existence, unity, omnipotence, omniscience, perfection—but also meets these communal and personal demands.

was the view that reason is necessary in order to establish the basic tenets of Islam which otherwise would be based on imperfect grounds of authority and tradition. This conception of the role of reason in religious belief deeply influenced our first Jewish figure, Saadia.

The second avenue through which Judaism encountered philosophy was via the *falasifa* ('philosophers') and *falsafa* ('philosophy'), the Arabic terms reserved specifically for the movement that saw itself as the heir and continuation of Aristotle whose works were translated into Arabic and in many cases interpreted through Neo-platonic lenses.<sup>19</sup> In this sense of the term, philosophy began in Islam with the translation of the corpus of Greek philosophical and scientific works into Arabic (in the East) in the ninth and tenth centuries. This herculean task was one of the great achievements of Islamic civilization in the Middle Ages: it involved painstaking learning of Greek or Syriac, collection and establishment of manuscripts, and development of an Arabic style and philosophical terminology that combined accuracy with elegance. Works of all kinds were translated, from the natural sciences (mathematics, astronomy, physics, and biology) to metaphysics, logic, and ethics, including the entire Aristotelian corpus and its Hellenistic commentators. So, unlike the situation in the West, almost the whole of Aristotle and Greek science, grammar, and medicine were available to the Muslim philosophers and scientists—and if not for them, may not have survived. The *falasifa* in turn saw themselves continuing, commenting on, and expanding the Aristotelian or Greek heritage. In the case of metaphysics, this elaboration also involved a project to understand and interpret Islam as a philosophical religion in light of Aristotle. And this led to original philosophical works by figures such as Al-Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), and Averroes (Ibn Rushd)—and, I would add, our second Jewish figure, Maimonides.

In short, both *kalam* and *falsafa* used reason to construct sciences, or systematic bodies of belief and knowledge, either to justify and defend religion or, more generally, to understand nature and metaphysics. In a broad sense of the term, both *falsafa* and *kalam* can be called schools of 'philosophy'—even though, as I mentioned earlier, *kalam* is often translated as '(dialectical) theology.' But the term 'theology' for them did not have the exclusionary sense from 'philosophy' that it has for us—notwithstanding the hostile attitude of the *falasifa* to the *mutakallimun* whom the former depict as opportunistic defenders of their religion who will employ any means at their disposal to defend it, including distorting the empirical facts to fit their doctrines.<sup>20</sup> The main difference between them is that the *falasifa* saw themselves as (justifiably) importing a foreign Hellenistic perspective into Islam, and their allegiance was owed primarily to Aristotle, while *kalam* promoted a much more indige-

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<sup>19</sup> Some of these were in fact Neo-platonic works of Plotinus and Proclus that were falsely attributed to Aristotle.

<sup>20</sup> Thus, one of the most important Neo-platonic philosophical texts was the *Theology of Aristotle*. Maimonides' negative presentation of *kalam* was strongly influenced by Al-Farabi, who himself was persecuted by the *kalam*, but he is right to claim that *kalam* has a significant apologetic component.

nous Islamic point of view, based on Arabic language (and grammar) and the Qur'an, *hadith*, and their interpretation as a religion. And *kalam* is 'dialectical' in that its logic or reasoning employs Stoic dilemmas rather than the Aristotelian syllogistic and its writing a dialogical style ('if he says [...], then he should be answered') that reflects dialectical techniques employed in polemical exchanges.

## Saadia Gaon: Jewish *Kalam*

With this background, let's turn to our first major Jewish thinker, Saadia ben Joseph Gaon (b. 882, Fayyum, Egypt; d. 942, Sura, Iraq [Babylonia]) whom modern scholars often refer to as 'the first medieval Jewish philosopher.'<sup>21</sup> This is a correct description insofar as Saadia was a philosopher in the broad sense (just mentioned) who used reason to justify and understand his beliefs, including the revealed beliefs of Judaism. But he was not a *falasif*. Not that he was unaware of or entirely unfamiliar with the translated Aristotelian literature; sometimes he adopts Aristotelian and Platonic positions. The crucial point is that he did not see himself as someone continuing, commenting on, or expanding the Aristotelian or Greek heritage. Instead Saadia's conception of 'philosophy' was that of Mu'tazilite *kalam*.<sup>22</sup> Although part of his motivation was apologetic and polemical, Saadia's deeper philosophical goal, and his view of the role of reason in religion, was to render revelation as rationally understandable as possible, to use reason to render revealed belief understood and thereby believed or known with certainty. He opens his theological summa, *The Book on Beliefs and Opinions* (932), with a description of his generation as people 'sunk in a sea of doubt and covered by the waters of confusion.' The aim of his treatise is to bring them to certainty, to make doubt vanish, and to turn 'the believer who blindly relies on tradition' into 'one basing his belief on speculation and understanding.'

*Beliefs and Opinions* is organized along classic *kalam* lines, dealing first with universal questions of theology (creation and a proof of the existence of a divine creator, the unity of God and attributes, prophecy and revelation, command and prohibition and free will) followed by six chapters that address themes and problems more specific to Judaism: reward and punishment, the afterlife, and eschatology. In *kalam* fashion, for each topic he lists competing theories but he does not merely survey actual positions which he had to refute in practice; he considers every *possible* position on a given question, eliminating all but one, which not surprisingly turns out to be the doctrine of Judaism. This is a method of achieving knowledge through a process of argumentation modeled on the purification of metal through the elimination of impurities.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Gaon' is the title given to the heads of the great Babylonian *yeshivot*, or talmudic academies.

<sup>22</sup> Thus the twelfth-century Neo-platonically inclined Spanish bible commentator and grammarian, Abraham ibn Ezra, referred to Saadia as 'chief among speakers (*medabbrim*) everywhere,' i.e., chief among *mutakallimun*.

As a system builder, Saadiah sees human reason as a divinely-given instrument to enable humans to achieve both a true understanding of the world and a sound interpretation of Scripture. One must accept the Torah and believe its revealed truths on divine authority, but, as with the Christian philosopher Augustine, through reason one can transform mere acceptance on authority into understanding and thereby knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Thus Saadiah argues, using a design-like argument, that contemplation of the world reveals its created nature, hence, the existence of a creator. Reason, he also argues, can establish that the world was created *ex nihilo*. From the plurality and multiplicity in the world, reason demonstrates that its creator must be one. Following the Mu'tazilites, Saadiah argues that God is benevolent and good—and in the same sense in which these moral evaluative terms apply to humans. And because these divine virtues are good in themselves, humans should also be benevolent, good, and grateful—the core moral traits identified by Saadiah. In each case, Saadiah uses reason, as a tool subordinate to revelation, as far as it can be pressed into service to justify, confirm, and thereby render understandable the revealed Torah. But Saadiah also recognizes limits to reason. In his seminal systematic explanation of the Mosaic commandments, he distinguishes two classes of laws: 'rational' commandments (*sikhliyyot, aqli'at*) that can be given intelligible, utilitarian, or moral reasons and 'heard' or 'obeyed' laws (*shimi'ot, sam'iat*), that vary over and are conventionally adopted by societies and are not rationally necessary or universal but can be given ad hoc reasons given that they are commanded.

Saadiah was also the first to endow Jewish philosophy with a strong hermeneutical dimension. His commentaries on various books of the Hebrew Bible, which he was also the first to translate into Arabic, were the first to constrain the interpretation of Scripture to reason: in verses where Scripture contradicts what reason or science has established—e.g., where God is, contrary to reason, described in corporeal and anthropomorphic terms—reason trumps Scripture which we then re-interpret figuratively—though the particular figurative interpretation we adopt must also conform to our historical knowledge of the language and its metaphors at the time of the Bible.<sup>24</sup>

Saadiah's *Book of Theodicy*, his commentary on the Book of Job, was also the first to treat a scriptural text as a work of philosophy. He identifies Job and his comforters as representatives of different schools of *kalam*. For each speech, Saadiah identifies a main thesis for which he constructs a *kalam* argument out of the highly elliptic verses. A general introduction gives a thematic unity to an apparently rambling set of speeches, transforming the core of Job into a philosophical dialogue, while recasting the supernatural, mythical frame in the spirit of naturalistic reason and science. Satan turns out to be, not an angelic divine rebel, but simply Job's human adversary

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<sup>23</sup> This understanding of the role of reason is very similar to Augustine's (and others in the Augustinian tradition such as Anselm of Canterbury) for whom reason converts belief, an act of assent to a proposition, into understanding.

<sup>24</sup> Among these commentaries is a seminal Neo-platonic commentary on the enigmatic *Sefer Yeširah* ('Book of Creation') (931). Time prevents me from discussing it.

(philologically derived from the Hebrew word *sitnah* for ‘enmity’); the ‘children of God’ (*benei elohim*) are human nobles and judges, the mythical beasts Leviathan and Behemoth nothing more than frightening exotic animals, a hippopotamus and alligator. This naturalistic approach to the Bible is emblematic of Saadiah’s general use of reason, including our best scientific knowledge of nature, to understand and justify revealed texts. Moreover, according to Saadiah, the problem addressed by the Book of Job is not the metaphysical justification of evil—on this Saadiah has much to say in his *Beliefs and Opinions*, views that he repeats in the commentary on Job—but rather a phenomenological problem: it shows, through ‘the record of Job’s trials [...] what is in the hearts of people when they reach the limits of endurance in a trial.’ That is, Saadiah reads Job as a phenomenology of suffering, what it feels like to endure the deepest suffering. This is a remarkably original conception both of the task of philosophy and of the kinds of genres of writing employed by philosophy—using a commentary on a biblical narrative whose surface looks nothing like philosophy!

## What Medieval Jewish Philosophy Is

We said that Saadiah is often designated as ‘the first medieval Jewish philosopher.’ Chronologically, he was not first.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, there is an important sense in which Saadiah is truly the first figure in what I would call ‘Medieval Jewish Philosophy.’ And now I want to say more about how we ought to understand that heading. I argued earlier that we should not characterize Jewish philosophy as a *branch* or *domain* of philosophy, distinguishing it by its language, the (ethnic and religious) identities of its authors, its subject matter, or approach or method. What Jewish philosophers do is nothing but philosophy—in one of its senses or forms but none of them specific to Judaism. However, what does make a set or series of individual philosophers into what we might call *a philosophy*, like *Jewish philosophy*, is their shared discourse, who they address and cite, who they support, criticize, or comment on, who influences whom or who is influenced by whom. That is, Jewish philosophy, in Myles Burnyeat’s words, ‘is a tradition, a succession of thinkers whose thought is conditioned in one way or another by a knowledge of their predecessors in the line,’ whose ‘conditioning’ can include both constructive development of thoughts at earlier stages and critical reactions to them.<sup>26</sup> These relations which are a matter of pos-

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<sup>25</sup> Apart from Philo of Alexandria in the first century (who had a deep influence on the church fathers but none on medieval Jewish thinkers), the Neo-platonist Isaac Israeli (d. c. 932) and the *mutakallim* al-Muqammas (9<sup>th</sup> c.) both preceded Saadiah.

<sup>26</sup> Myles Burnyeat, “Introduction,” in idem, *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983): 1. On the idea of influence, see also Avishai Margalit, “Wittgenstein’s Knight Move: Hacker on Wittgenstein’s Influence on Analytic Philosophy,” in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P.M.S. Hacker*, eds. Peter M.S. Hacker, Hans-Johann Glock, and John Hyman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

itive and negative ‘influence,’ have an important *causal* element, which it is possible to identify often only *post facto*. But where a group of individual philosophers are inter-connected in this way, they inhabit their own sphere of discourse—sharing certain assumptions, speaking a common language, living in one intellectual space. Thus, what marks off medieval Jewish philosophy from the rest of philosophy or from general medieval philosophy is that it is its own tradition. A tradition need not be exclusive, its boundaries can be permeable. The tradition of early medieval Jewish philosophy is embedded in and grows out of the tradition of Islamic philosophy and its Greek sources, while later medieval Jewish philosophy is rooted in a world of Christian, scholastic philosophy. It is not always clear how to distinguish when the Jewish philosophers are talking *to* Muslims or Christians or simply talking *about* them. (Likewise, it may not always be clear when a Christian author, like Aquinas, is simply talking *about* R. Moses and when he is talking *to* him; in the latter case, we may want to claim Aquinas for Jewish philosophy.)

In sum, where we find a continuous dialogue and a succession of exchanges of this sort, we might refer to a distinctive tradition of causally influencing and influenced thinkers as medieval Jewish philosophy—even though what the figures in the tradition are doing is simply philosophy! Without a common methodology and with no linguistic, ethnic, national, or religious conditions for citizenship, what makes the tradition ‘Jewish’? No one feature but *causal* relations to many: either Jewish texts or events that triggered philosophical questions, the Jewish identities or languages of its participants that somehow causally affect their philosophizing. So, although being Jewish or written in Hebrew (or in Hebrew characters) or being about Judaism are not individually essential, neither necessary nor sufficient conditions to count as Jewish philosophy, one could allow them as defeasible diagnostic tools, i. e., superficial identifiers of a Jewish philosophical tradition.<sup>27</sup> These causal impacts can also be extremely indirect. Thus a passing comment about meteorology in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* while explaining the story of creation in Genesis led Samuel ibn Tibbon to translate Aristotle’s *Meteorology*; this was the first Hebrew translation of an Aristotelian work—a translation that played a central role in subse-

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27 Another diagnostic is the use of prooftexts or verses from Scripture or rabbinic literature. Of course, scriptural verses are no proof that the philosophical work belongs to Jewish rather than Christian philosophy, but it is also important to keep in mind the use of the verses. Sometimes the verses are cited as authorities which, in virtue of their identity, are meant to justify a claim. Sometimes the verses are being explicated and explained, say, as a parable. And sometimes, especially when the Jewish philosophical text is a ‘translation’ or paraphrase of a Greek or Arab text, the scriptural or rabbinic prooftexts are added neither as evidence nor as justification nor as an *explanandum* to be interpreted and explained, but in order to ‘Judaize’ the original work. (See e. g., Chaim M. Neria, “*It Cannot Be Valued with the Gold of Ophir*” (*Job 28:16*): Rabbi Joseph B. Shem-Ṭob’s Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. *Sources and Analysis* [Chicago: PhD typescript, 2015]: 180 and 182.) Likewise, the use of rabbinic terms for Aristotelian notions—see Neria, “*It Cannot Be Valued with the Gold of Ophir*,” 201 ff., 205: on ‘*ones raḥman petirah*, and 217: the use of Hebrew names in examples are attempts at ‘Judaization.’

quent discussions of Genesis, providence, and prophecy, hence, arguably, an important text in medieval Jewish philosophy—even though it is a scientific work by Aristotle, not by a Jew, not originally in Hebrew, and not directly about Judaism.<sup>28</sup>

Some will see my proposal as a deflationary ‘definition’ of ‘Medieval Jewish Philosophy.’ Others will object that really I am denying that there is such a thing as ‘Medieval Jewish Philosophy.’ However, that conclusion underestimates the importance of particular discourses or traditions in the history of philosophy in general.

From the perspective of founding a tradition, Saadia was the first medieval Jewish philosopher—because he initiated a discourse and conversation to which others added and responded, in which he was addressed by later parties, beginning with Bahya ibn Paquda and Maimonides. As we turn to the second encounter, I will try to develop this theme in more depth.

## Maimonides: Judaism and *Falsafa*

The second encounter between medieval rabbinic Judaism and philosophy began when Jewish thinkers met *falsafa*, Arabic Aristotelian philosophy. Unlike their exposure to *kalam*, which led to their appropriation of human reason and reasoning to justify, conceptually systematize, and understand revealed truths, the encounter with *falsafa* was more like a collision between two competing authorities, Moses and Aristotle, and two canonical texts, the Torah, and its rabbinic legal (halakhic) and non-legal (aggadic) interpretation (the so-called Oral Torah), on the one side, and the Aristotelian corpus including its Hellenistic and Arab commentators, on the other. This encounter was a confrontation between two different conceptions of human perfection: piety achieved through the performance of the commandments versus intellectual perfection achieved through science and knowledge; between a transcendent God who is the necessarily existent cause of the motion and being of the eternal cosmos and a voluntaristic personal God (often described anthropomorphically and anthropopathically) who created the world *ex nihilo* and who intervenes in history and changes nature miraculously; and between two ways of life, each with its own education or training leading to its own brand of happiness: a rabbinic education based on laws governing the Mosaic commandments and the Aristotelian curriculum that goes from logic through the natural sciences to metaphysics. The challenge in this encounter was not merely whether and how to use reason to understand and thereby render certain beliefs held on the authority of revelation. This was a confrontation between two rival authorities and two entirely different, and often opposed, intellectual cultures and conceptions of truth. Our best witness

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<sup>28</sup> For this fascinating story, see Aviezer Ravitzky, “Aristotle’s Meteorology and the Maimonidean Modes of Interpreting the Account of Creation,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990), The Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume, Part 2: 225–50; reprinted in idem, *Maimonidean Essays* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 2006): 139–156; English translation in *Aleph* 8 (2008): 361–400.

to this encounter is Moses Maimonides (b. 1138, Cordoba, Spain; d. Fustat, Egypt 1204), arguably the greatest rabbinic thinker of the Middle Ages, both in matters of law and philosophy, and there is no better description of the intense tension of the encounter than his description in his *Guide of the Perplexed* of perplexity as a mental tug-of-war between the ‘external sense’ of the Torah and the demands of the intellect, namely, philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

We first see the impact of this second encounter in Maimonides’ monumental halakhic compositions that integrate philosophy with classical rabbinic law; indeed Maimonides reconceives Judaism as a philosophical religion. Recall that classical rabbinic Judaism focused almost exclusively on how to *act* according to the Torah, with relatively little to say about what one should *believe*. Maimonides radically shifts this focus. He lays down thirteen foundational principles—about God, prophecy and the Torah, reward and punishment, the messiah and resurrection—that everyone in the community of Israel *must* believe *regardless of how they act*, beliefs that are both necessary and sufficient to belong to the community of Israel or, in classic rabbinic terms, to ‘have a share in the world to come.’ As we mentioned earlier, his Code opens with an exposition of Aristotelian metaphysics, cosmology, and natural science, whose study he makes a religious obligation and even the summit of the rabbinic curriculum.<sup>30</sup> And throughout his Code, Maimonides complements detailed legal discussions with philosophical rationales and conceptualization. This blending of philosophy and Halakhah, or law, created a new Judaism, a philosophical religion the core of whose worship of God is not through praxis but by correct belief and the acquisition of scientific and philosophical knowledge.

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**29** Maimonides’ given Arabic name was Musa ibn Maymun, but he is best known by his Hebrew name *Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon*, or the acronym *RaMBaM*. Maimonides was a product of the great Judeo-Arabic culture of Andalusia, although he and his family were forced to flee when the Almohades invaded in 1148, and he lived most of his mature life in Fustat, Egypt, where he served as the rabbinic and political head of the Jewish community and as a physician in the court of the Fatimid and then Ayyubid sultans, most notably Saladin’s son and his vizier. Apart from living this extremely active life, Maimonides was prolific to a degree that it is difficult for us even to imagine. He wrote three main works in his lifetime, any one of which would have been sufficient to earn him a place in the world to come of Jewish literature:

1. *Commentary on Mishnah* (1158–1168), the first running commentary on the canonical rabbinic anthology of legal opinions;
2. *Mishneh Torah* (1168c-1178), the first and to this day the only comprehensive code of rabbinic law, covering obligatory beliefs, rituals, festivals and the Shabbat, marriage, torts, property, purity and impurity, sacrifices and the Temple, and laws governing the polis and messianic monarchy;
3. *Guide of the Perplexed* (1185–1190), the seminal work of Jewish philosophy.

**30** This by way of identifying the contents of the enigmatic rabbinic ‘Account of the Beginning’ and ‘Account of the Chariot’ with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics, respectively, and including them both under the enigmatic rabbinic title *Pardes* which in turn is taken to be the apex of the activity of study of the Oral Torah that Maimonides calls ‘Talmud.’ See *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws concerning the Foundations of the Law,” chapters 1–4 and especially 4, x-xiii, and “Laws concerning Study of the Torah,” chapter 1, xi–xii.

Maimonides' philosophical masterpiece, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, set the agenda for all subsequent Jewish philosophy up to the present day. If we think of Jewish philosophy as a causally-intraconnected discourse, or conversation, what I called a 'tradition' within philosophy, then Maimonideanism is a sub-tradition within the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition. The *Guide* generated a tradition of commentaries and treatises that stretches over at least three centuries either elaborating and applying Maimonides' program, interpreting his enigmatic, puzzle-like work, supporting his views by reference to Muslim or Greek authorities, or criticizing him.<sup>31</sup> In a letter to his Hebrew translator, Samuel ibn Tibbon, Maimonides directed him to his Arabic and Hellenistic sources—which in turn produced translations over the following centuries from Arabic into Hebrew that made the Aristotelian corpus and its commentaries accessible to Jews outside the Arabic-speaking world, and in turn produced a significant philosophical literature in Hebrew, including authors like Gersonides (Levi ben Gershon), Ḥasdai Crescas, and Joseph Albo, whose interests go beyond theology to logic, physics, astronomy, and the sciences, written either in the genre of commentaries or supercommentaries or in distinct treatises or encyclopedias. This full range of shared discourse and conversation, triggered by Maimonides' *Guide*, comprises much of what we call 'Medieval Jewish Philosophy.'

One of the central topics in this tradition, or conversation, is the very relation between philosophy, aka Aristotle, and the Torah, which, according to many, also shaped the way in which the *Guide* is composed. Maimonides tells us that he conceals his own beliefs from the popular reader by dividing and scattering topics to create an appearance of *disorganization* and by employing deliberate contradictions. Instead he hints at his own true beliefs for philosophers using 'chapter headings' and parables. Maimonides' thirteenth and fourteenth-century disciples and commentators<sup>32</sup> and, in the past century, Leo Strauss picked up on this unique literary form of Maimonides' treatise, producing the influential view that the *Guide*—and, by analogy, its predecessors in the tradition of writing to which it belongs, from the Torah itself through rabbinic writing as well as Plato—is written on multiple levels of meaning: with a revealed, exoteric meaning for the consumption of the community at large and a concealed, esoteric meaning addressed to a philosophical elite. The precise relation between these different levels is, however, a matter of endless controversy.

In the spirit of many medieval thinkers who, facing contradictions between competing authorities, tend to gloss their differences and harmonize the two rather than conclude that one is right and the other wrong—one view is that the *Guide* aims to

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31 Cf. Shlomo Pines' comment in the "Introduction" to his translation that Maimonides does not mention any previous Jewish philosophers since he had no recourse to a 'Jewish philosophical tradition'; see Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963): xxxiii. Even if this is true, which is arguable, by initiating a tradition, Maimonides ipso facto belonged to it.

32 These include Samuel ibn Tibbon, Shem-Tov Falaquera, Moses of Narbonne, Isaac Abravanel, Profyat Duran (Efodi), and Joseph ibn Kaspi.

harmonize, or synthesize, revelation and reason, the Torah with Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Thus Maimonides accepts both exoteric and esoteric meanings, and gives arguments in the latter that rationally support the revealed views of the former. A second group claims that the secret of the *Guide*, hidden by its literary form, is that reason and revelation, or Aristotle and the Torah, are insurmountably incompatible and that Maimonides' own true beliefs are on the side of reason or philosophy as opposed to the Torah. Thus, Maimonides really believes in eternity rather than creation and in the God of the philosophers, not of Scripture. The Torah is at best a kind of popular philosophy by means of which the philosopher can found and control a community, and Maimonides (like the author of the Torah) wrote the *Guide* in his secretive way to control the dissemination of philosophical truth and prevent it from reaching the wrong ears.

Yet, a third class of medieval readers thinks that the secret of the *Guide* is that Aristotle is *identical* with the Torah according to its concealed, esoteric meaning. That is, the true but hidden meaning of the Torah is philosophical truth. The Torah describes God exoterically as a body, in anthropomorphic and corporeal terms, only in order to accommodate the general reader or multitude. But the true meaning of those descriptions is that God is a perfect immaterial, transcendent, necessarily existing intellect. This last approach led to a long tradition of Maimonidean philosophical scriptural exegesis, deepening the hermeneutic dimension introduced by Saadia, but now decoding or translating scriptural terms and claims into Aristotelian categories and doctrines by establishing semantical equivalences between words or concepts: e.g. 'woman' is matter, 'image' is Aristotelian form. The point is to show that the true meaning of the Torah is nothing but Aristotle; hence, the one can be translated into the other. Its rich development of this genre of philosophical scriptural commentary, exegesis as a way of doing philosophy, is one of the great contributions of medieval Jewish philosophy to the history of philosophy.<sup>34</sup>

Underlying all these approaches is the assumption that the Torah, or Mosaic revelation, and Aristotle, or Aristotelian reason, are distinct insofar as they are the sorts of things that can be (or cannot be) harmonized, made mutually consistent, or identified. But there is a fourth way to read the *Guide* that aims to work out how Maimonides might have read the Torah as a unique work with its own unique philosophy. On this reading, the Torah and rabbinic literature are philosophical works, but not works of Aristotelian philosophy. Instead they emerged from what Maimonides sincerely believed was a rich indigenous ancient Israelite philosophical world containing competing schools, schools roughly parallel to all those he knew from his contemporary Arabic philosophical literature—including Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicureans,

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Al-Farabi's *Harmonization of the Opinions of Plato and Aristotle*.

<sup>34</sup> For examples, see the commentaries of Kimḥi, Kaspi, Gersonides, Nahmanides, Abravanel—and, in a sister genre, the sermons of Nissim of Gerona and Isaac Arama.

sceptics, and various Islamic schools of *kalam*.<sup>35</sup> The philosophical arguments found in the *Guide* for and against Aristotle and the *kalam* are not borrowed to philosophically understand or legitimate the Law, nor are they a key to decipher Scripture. Rather they provide a *context* for original philosophical positions that Maimonides finds expressed, especially in parable form, in the Torah, the text he takes to be *the* exemplary philosophical work of all time. To be sure, the Torah and rabbinic literature do not ‘look like’ a typical philosophical text, and much of the challenge of reading scriptural literature (and the *Guide*) is seeing through its outer form to its inner philosophical wisdom. But rather than think of Torah *and* philosophy, Maimonides thinks of the two as one: *Torah/philosophy*. If there are tensions, they are not between two separate domains but within one body. And if the Torah is itself a distinctive philosophy, that in turn implies that Moses, the prophets, and the rabbis were themselves philosophers, the native philosophical sages of ancient Israel and Judaism. On this view, medieval Jewish philosophers were simply continuing, in part by re-discovering and reconstructing, the philosophical tradition of their ancestors.

What is the distinctive philosophy of ancient Israel that Maimonides finds in the Torah that he, in turn, elaborates in the *Guide*? The first three approaches we surveyed took Maimonides to be primarily concerned with a *meta*-philosophical problem: the problem of the relation between philosophy and Torah. On this last approach, the *Guide* is primarily addressed to a classical *philosophical* problem: In what does human perfection and true happiness consist? Is it material or intellectual or something else? Are perfection and happiness realizable by humans or unachievable ideals? And how does one negotiate the competing, conflicting demands of being a complex, composite, hylomorphic human being—composed of both intellect and body, form and matter?

The distinctive philosophy of ancient Israel—which Maimonides presents in the *Guide*—takes the *ideal* human perfection to be intellectual—the acquisition of all possible knowledge and constant, exclusive engagement in intellectual activity—but it also takes that ideal to be humanly *unrealizable* because of limitations on the intellect imposed by the human’s body and bodily faculties, like the imagination. It is neither possible for a human to achieve all knowledge and, in particular, knowledge of cosmology, metaphysics, and God and it is not possible for an embodied human to engage exclusively and constantly in intellectual apprehension and contemplation as if she were disembodied. Thus Maimonides takes a sceptical stance at least with respect to human scientific knowledge of metaphysics and God. Neither the author of

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35 This view should be distinguished from another position, found in authors as diverse as Judah Halevi and Falaquera, that the Jews discovered philosophy from whom it was then stolen by the Greeks or others. According to Maimonides, philosophy would seem to be a natural development of the use and perfection of the human intellect that would arise in any culture independently of any other. Philosophy was not stolen from the Jews but lost, as a result of its originally oral character, the various restrictions on its dissemination within the community, and the difficulties of continuous transmission because of persecutions and exile.

the Torah, rabbis, nor Maimonides have the kind of understanding of metaphysics that could be expressed in the explicit, axiomatic form of a science; instead they employ semantically multi-leveled texts like parables that give us momentary glimpses or insights of the truth that reflect their own incomplete, partial understanding of metaphysics. Thus, on this view, the function of the parable is not to control the *dissemination* of truths fully grasped by the prophet, sage, or philosopher, but to *express* their merely *partial* knowledge and *incomplete* understanding. Finally, Maimonides shifts our focus away from fully demonstrated and intellectually known *doctrines* whose grasp is the stuff of the happy, perfected intellectual life to a way of life cultivated through exercises and practices—including scientific inquiry and other intellectual activities—that minimize our bodily impulses and train us to engage ourselves with as much concentration as is humanly possible in intellectual activity.<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, we have now surveyed two ways in which philosophy and Judaism, or the Jews, first came into contact in the Middle Ages—through the use of reason to understand and justify beliefs and in a confrontation between two authoritative bodies of knowledge. In both cases, the individuals in question were simply doing philosophy—giving and evaluating arguments, exposing presuppositions, drawing distinctions—on classic philosophical problems. What united them under one umbrella, *Jewish* philosophy, was nothing more than a variety of causal relations among themselves of influence, positive and negative, somehow connected to Judaism or the experience of the Jews, by which they came to constitute a tradition. Being causal, this notion of a tradition is in part sociological but it proved extremely productive philosophically, not just for Judaism but also by yielding philosophical insight into classical problems of (or that ought to be of) interest to all philosophers: the ultimate cause of being, the nature of human happiness, the character and scope of human knowledge. This is why medieval Jewish philosophy is both philosophy, Jewish, and a rich and distinctive contribution to the traditions of philosophy.

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<sup>36</sup> For further discussion of this last conception of Maimonides' philosophical stance, see Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).