

An Introduction to Medieval Jewish Philosophy

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How can a certain concept be truly philosophical and simultaneously Jewish in its essence? . . . When one posits certain 'values' which are found in Jewish sources, then one of two conclusions must be valid: if the value has philosophical meaning, its Jewish origin is merely of historical interest: if it contains meaning that is uniquely Jewish, it ceases to be philosophical as the term is generally defined.

Z. Levy, *Between Yafeth and Shem: On the Relationship Between Jewish and General Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 101.

The Jewish people did not begin to philosophise because of an irresistible urge to do so. They received philosophy from outside, and the history of Jewish philosophy is the history of the successive absorptions of foreign ideas which were then transformed and analysed according to specific Jewish points of view. J. Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, tr.. D. W. Silverman (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 3.

There is no favour or dislike in [the nature of] God, because He is above desire and intention. A desire intimates a want in the person who feels it, and not till it is satisfied does he become (so to speak) complete. If it remains unfulfilled, he lacks completion. In a similar way He is, in the opinion of philosophers, above the knowledge of individuals, because the latter change with the times, whilst there is no change in God's knowledge. He therefore does not know thee, much less thy thoughts and actions, nor does he listen to thy prayers, or see thy movements. If philosophers say that He created you, they only use a metaphor, because He is the Cause of causes in the creation of all creatures, but not because this was His intention from the beginning. He never created man. For the world is without beginning, and there never arose a man otherwise than through one who came into existence before him, in whom were united forms, gifts, and characteristics inherited from father, mother, and other relations, besides the influences of climate, countries, foods and water, spheres, stars and constellations . . .

In the perfect person a light of divine nature called Active Intellect is with him . . . This degree is the last and most longed for goal for the perfect man whose soul, after having been purified, has grasped the inward truths of all branches of science. . . Thus the soul of the perfect man and that Intellect become one . . . If thou hast reached such disposition of belief, be not concerned about the forms of thy humility or religion or worship, or the word or language or actions thou employest. Thou mayest even choose a religion in the way of humility, worship, and benediction, for the management of thy temperament, thy house, and [the people of thy] country, if they agree to it. Or fashion thy religion according to the laws of reason set up by the philosophers, and strive after purity of soul. In fine, seek purity of heart in which way thou art able, provided thou hast acquired the sum total of knowledge in its real essence.

Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, tr. H. Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken books, 1964). I: 1, 36-9.

. . . [I]ts purpose is to give indications to a religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief – such a man being perfect in his religion and character, and having studied the sciences of the philosophers and come to know what they signify. The human intellect having drawn him on and led him to dwell within its province, he must have felt distressed by the externals of the law Hence he would remain in a state of perplexity and confusion as to whether he should follow his intellect, renounce what he knew concerning the terms in question, and consequently consider that he has renounced the foundations of the Law. Or should he hold fast to his understanding of these terms and not let himself be drawn on together with his intellect, rather turning his back on it and moving away from it while at the same time perceiving that he had brought loss to himself and harm to his religion.

Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) Introduction, pp. 5-6