

GOD IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

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INTRODUCTION

As Judaism transitioned from the Rabbinic period to the Middle Ages, it carried forward an unsystematic conceptualization of God. While legal traditions had to an extent been organized with the development of Mishnah, Tosefta and the Talmuds, no similar process had emerged with regard to the non-legal traditions of the Midrash. It remained atomistically grounded in individual Biblical passages and organized according to the order of Scripture rather than any human-designed rational structure. Consequently, God, as perceived by pre-medieval Sages, emerged as a multi-faceted Deity with contradictory attributes. Rabbinic Judaism was unwavering in its monotheism and its absolute rejection of the notion that there were multiple divine entities in heaven. However, it did recognize the existence of angels and other spiritual entities that mediated between God and the world. And, while the God of the Rabbis was not material and not pantheistic, Rabbinic Judaism did tolerate midrashic and mystical notions that depicted God in very anthropomorphic ways.

Over the course of the first two Muslim centuries (ca. 650-850) Islamic thinkers began to absorb and integrate into their religious ideology principles of Greco-Roman philosophy and science. In so doing, they also opened the door for the introduction of Classical ideas and systems into Jewish thought. As a “daughter” monotheistic faith, Islam demonstrated that classical philosophy (long ignored by the rabbis as an expression of pagan culture and, hence, taboo) could offer new insights into metaphysical concepts and demonstrate the reasonableness of Scripture and Jewish beliefs. And so pious Jews began to read and interpret the likes of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, and systematized and rationalized notions of God and God’s relationship to the world emerged.

We will see that the work of these thinkers represents a new departure in the way that Jews thought about God. We may also find their work challenging. It is complex, elevated and technical in its tone. As we read these thinkers today we need to understand that they operated in a culture which was radically different from our own. In the Middle Ages, culture was organized around the community rather than the individual. Status, class, livelihood and belief were all externally defined. The idea of individual autonomy, which was to take hold after the Enlightenment, had not yet appeared. Philosophy, regarded as “the handmaiden of religion”, was called into service to help prove that Judaism was rational and reasonable – an honorable and noble tradition, to be respected and admired. Philosophical terminology and ideas were wedded to previously multi-faceted or contradictory Jewish theology in order to make – or to attempt to make – a coherent whole.

With this in mind, we can look at four of the leading Jewish thinkers of the period. They wrote their philosophical works in Arabic, not only because it was the idiom of expression of their day, but also because Arabic provided them with the technical language and the formulation of concepts they needed to present their thinking.

SAADIA BEN JOSEPH – KALAM

Saadia ben Joseph (Sa’id ibn Yusuf or Sa’adya al-Fayyumi, 882-942) was born in the Fayyum district of Egypt. A rabbinic Renaissance man who contributed in a wide range of cultural areas (law, polemics, Bible translation and commentary, grammar and linguistics, poetry, liturgy and philosophy), Saadia served as Gaon of the great academy of Sura in Iraq. The impact of his work was felt over the centuries, and his philosophical magnum opus, *Kitab al-‘amanat wal-i’tikadat* (*Sefer ha-emunot v’ha-deot* in Hebrew, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*) served as a paradigm for subsequent generations of Jewish thinkers who sought to harmonize reason and revelation. Saadia’s eclectic philosophy draws upon key elements of Greek thinking as filtered through Islamic Kalam theology, especially that of the Mutazilite

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school with its emphasis on affirming the unity of God and divine justice. In this way, Saadia attempts to demonstrate the rationality of Judaism. It is commonly noted that he was the first Jewish thinker since Philo of Alexandria (1st century C.E.) to develop such a harmonization of Judaism and Classical philosophy. In the *Kiṭab* Saadia intersperses his logical inferences and reasoned conclusions with frequent references to the Bible, quoting more than 1300 passages, seeking thereby to also demonstrate the rationality of scripture.

Like the Mutazilites, Saadia argues that the fact the world was created from nothing (*ex nihilo*) proves the existence of God. God, he says, is the Creator of all things. As Creator He is one and has no associate with him. God is an eternal being and not subject to form, quality, dimension, limit, place or time. God is immune to pain, unaffected by action and not subject to accidents. God does no injustice. Why, Saadia asks, did God create the world in the first place? He had no motive, since, as opposed to people, he had no benefit by creating. Saadia responds: It was an act of free will on God's part, to reveal and make manifest His wisdom and to benefit his creatures so they could obey him and be rewarded.

Standing on the highest rung of the ladder of knowledge, the idea of the Creator is the most abstract notion, the subtlest of all things knowable and the most exalted. It is impossible fully to fathom God's character. What can be said is that God transcends the physical universe and has no body. He is one – living, omnipotent and omniscient – and nothing resembles him. Nor does he resemble any of his creations. The aforementioned three qualities – vitality, omnipotence and omniscience – are, in fact, not separate, as God cannot be said to have multiple attributes. God is absolute oneness. We are compelled to express this oneness by using multiple terms because of the inadequacy of human speech. Were God to have a multiplicity of qualities, He would be subject to change and mutation; but God is, by definition, not subject to such effects. Both reason and Scripture affirm these conclusions. And, any statement in Scripture that is contrary to sound reason is meant to be taken in a figurative sense and not literally.

Saadia observes the suffering that humans experience and addresses the age-old question: How could a just God allow this condition to exist? He suggests that God granted the human species gifts that no other species have: profound knowledge and free will. As a result of the gift of knowledge, humans can create things of beauty, establish societies and comprehend sublime truths. But this gift also gives God the right to subject people to commandments and prohibitions, rewards and punishments, which are also for their benefit because they induce them to “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19) and “depart from evil” (Job 28:28).

Saadia recognizes that humans, because of their very physicality, are weak and suffer from a variety of ailments. He notes, however, that along with a frail body, humans have an amazing soul, which gives them the capacity to attain knowledge of things material and spiritual. But could not a just God have created them without their susceptibility to pain and suffering? On one level Saadia implies that this is the nature of existence, and people have to learn to cope. Saadia adds, however, that this is actually also to man's benefit, because by coming to an understanding of pain and its effects, a person will appreciate the meaning of God's punishments and will be motivated to follow God's commandments to avoid such punishments.

Continuing, Saadia asserts that God gave man the “power and ability to execute what He had commanded him and to refrain from what He had forbidden him,” that is – free will. Because God is innately just, He refrains from intervening in human decision-making. God's foreknowledge of human decisions does not move Him to act on that knowledge. There is no compulsion on God's part; humans remain accountable for their choices. God does not revel in punishing the rebellious; rather, He prefers that people choose to follow his commands. In keeping with rabbinic doctrine, Saadia tells us that God welcomes penitent sinners and offers them and the righteous amazing rewards in the world to come and at the time of the resurrection.

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SOLOMON IBN GABIROL – NEO-PLATONISM

As the premier exponent of Jewish Neo-platonic philosophy in the Middle Ages, the Spaniard, Solomon Ibn Gabirol (c. 1020-1058), expressed his philosophy in both technical philosophical writing and in poetry, the writing of the latter being his major means of financial support. The summary of his philosophy that follows is culled from two of his major works. One is the *Yanbu al-hayat* (“Fountain of Life”), the Arabic original of which is lost. It is called *Fons vitae* in the 12th century Latin translation and *M’kor hayyim* in a 13th century Hebrew translation of selections from the book. Since the *Fons vitae* contains no references to the Bible or the large corpus of Rabbinic works, Jewish authorship of this book was unknown until it was identified as Ibn Gabirol’s work in the mid-1840’s. It did not circulate widely in Jewish circles; in its Latin form, however, it did influence European Christian thinkers, who assumed the author was a Christian.

The second work is Ibn Gabirol’s Hebrew poetic magnum opus, *Keter malkhut* (“Royal Crown”), where we find Ibn Gabirol’s Neo-Platonism cast in Jewish terms and merged with Biblical and Rabbinic ideas. As Gershom Scholem has noted in his *Origins of the Kabbalah*, through Ibn Gabirol’s widely read *Keter malkhut*, his Neo-Platonism had an impact on Medieval Jewish thought, especially that of the 12th and 13th century Kabbalists of Southern France and Spain.

Neo-Platonism uniquely focuses on the question of how a single, infinite, indivisible spiritual God – the One or the “First Author,” as the Creator is called in the *Fons vitae* – could bring into existence the multifaceted and finite material world in which we live. It posits that the Deity emanated an intermediate entity, which in turn emanated another intermediary and so on, until, finally, as a result of the activity of the last of a chain of emanated intermediaries, our material world came into existence. In this system each succeeding intermediary is further removed from the pure spirituality of God and approaches materiality.

For Ibn Gabirol God is the First Author, the sublime, perfect and holy origin of all beings, who is not caused and who, alone, created the world from nothing. There are intermediary substances between the First Author and the final effect, without which there could be no union between the First Author and the final effect, and absent that union the final effect would not exist.

The nature of God, who is the hidden power and secret foundation of existence, is ultimately unknowable. God is the sustainer of world, the source of light, eternally living, all being having been created from the shadow of His light. The power of God is in all beings and nothing can exist without Him. He dispenses the abundance he has with him, and He is the source that maintains, envelops, and comprehends everything that is.

God exists but cannot be grasped by physical senses or by rational inquiry, and the depth of His secret cannot be discovered. God exists and has existed from before time and with no place. The power of the holy God penetrates all things, exists in all things and acts in all things beyond time. The essence of the First Author is infinite, and it is, therefore, not united with any one of the simple finite substances.

God is God of gods and Lord of lords, ruling in heaven and on earth. God’s unity is absolute, there being no distinction between His divinity and His oneness, His pre-existence and His existence – for all is one secret, the difference in the names of the attributes notwithstanding. The First Author is the true unity in whom there is no multiplicity. The First Author does not comprise anything, is not mingled with anything and is not conjoined to anything. There is no accident in the essence of the First Author. God is the unknowable One, whose oneness can be neither increased nor diminished nor counted nor changed nor imagined.

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God is wise, and His wisdom, which is the source of life, flows from Him. Compared to His wisdom, all other wisdom is folly. God is wise and more ancient than all primal things. God acquired His wisdom from no other entity, and from His wisdom God, like an artist, emanated a ready will that was prepared to draw the extant out of nothingness, drawing it from the source of light with no vessel – hewing, cutting, cleansing and refining, splitting the nothingness and fixing the extant, and hammering out the world, setting forth the heavens and the spheres. The First Author, sublime and holy, knows all things and all things exist in His knowledge.

God is the highest light, visible to the pure souls but obscured by sin from the eyes of sinners. God is light that is hidden in this world but visible in the world on high. God is light eternal, for which the intellect yearns, though it can see only its extremities and not its totality.

JUDAH HALEVI

Born in Tudela, Spain, Judah Halevi (1075-1141) was a practicing physician, a sometimes businessman, and with Ibn Gabirol, one of the most important of the medieval Hebrew poets and an exponent of rationalistic Jewish thought. He was a proto-Zionist ideologue, for whom the Land of Israel and Jerusalem had an almost mystical capacity to generate a spiritual connection between God and the Jewish people. In fact, his Zionism flows out of a melding of classical Jewish ideas with certain notions that are embedded in the Greek science he studied.

While considered by many to be a philosopher, it is hard to fit Halevi into any specific philosophical school. His influential *Kitab al-khazari* (*Sefer ha-kuzari* in Hebrew, *Book of the Khazar* or *The Kuzari*) is composed as a dialog between the King of the Khazars, who converts to Judaism, and a rabbi – a structure reminiscent of Plato's *Dialogs*. In it Halevi draws on elements of various systems to argue, among other points, that philosophy, an intellectual endeavor initiated by human beings, is not the true pathway to God, but rather revelation, initiated by God and received and responded to by prophetically inspired people, is. For Halevi God is not known – God is experienced.

This approach is in evidence at the very beginning of the *Kuzari*. As opposed to the philosopher, the Christian scholar and the Muslim scholar, whom the Khazar king first queries regarding proper religious behavior, the rabbi does not begin with a statement about the nature of God. Instead, he declares: “I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles...who sent Moses with his law and subsequently thousands of prophets....” The rabbi tells the king that 600,000 men standing at Mount Sinai witnessed God's revelation of Torah, and this is far more conclusive evidence of the truth of Judaism than are the arguments of the philosophers for the truth of philosophy. The latter disagree among themselves as to which system is correct; 600,000 witnesses do not.

True to the tradition of Jewish philosophy, however, Halevi has the rabbi explain to the king how one cannot read the Bible's anthropomorphic references to God and God's attributes literally. All names and qualities used in the Bible to refer to God, with the exception of the Tetragrammaton (YHVH), are one of three varieties of metaphors: “creative,” that allude to the results of how God acts in the world (e. g. merciful, just), “relative,” that speak of God with reverence (blessed, glorified) or “negative,” that negate their opposites (e. g. living, first). Such terms do not imply that there is any kind of plurality in God, in no way contradict the notion of God's unity and do not touch on the divine essence. The Tetragrammaton is associated with terms that refer to God as Creator, who creates without any natural intermediaries and does so by His will alone. We may, however, refer to God's intelligence, says the rabbi, because that is not an attribute: “He is the essence of intelligence, and intelligence itself.” The philosophical language in this discussion is most evident.

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God's influence on the world is universal, but it is expressed in a unique and powerful way with regard to the people whom God imbued with the spirit of prophecy, the Jewish people, especially in the Land of Israel where the People Israel can most perfectly express that spirit. Halevi calls this concentrated flow of divine influence *al-amr al-ilahi* (Hebrew: *ha-inyan ha-elohi*, the Divine Entity). The rabbi explains to the king that when one reads in the Bible of the blessings God bestows upon the Israelites in the Holy Land when they live according to the Torah, the instrumentality of that bestowal is this Entity. Similarly, when the Biblical prophets receive communication from God it is through the same means. And, says the rabbi, they can act as receivers of this spiritual transmission because they have a trace of the Divine Entity within them. Further, says the rabbi, when Israel is once again in its land, living according to Torah, with the Temple rebuilt and the sacrificial system in operation, the Divine Entity will be drawn toward it and the blessings from God set forth in Scripture will flow down upon the people once more. Herbert Davidson has demonstrated that in this presentation Halevi is actually giving a spiritual interpretation to an Aristotelian view of the operation of the Active Intellect in the earthly realm. Halevi is thus using a philosophical notion to make a distinctly non-philosophical point, a process that is typical of his methodology.

The superiority of the prophet over the philosopher is most profoundly expressed when the rabbi teaches the king that the philosophers, through reason and speculation, comprehend *Elohim* (God) as guide and manager of the world. The souls of the prophets, however, through intuition and the power of prophecy, are penetrated by God's light, and they experience *Adonai* (the Eternal). They come in contact with angelic beings and are imbued with a new spirit. "It is thus," he says, "that man becomes a servant, loving the object of his worship, and ready to perish for His sake, because he finds the sweetness of this attachment as great as the distress in absence thereof." With these words Halevi has, seemingly, crossed the line from philosophy into mysticism.

MOSES BEN MAIMON – ARISTOTELIAN

Though not the first Jew to accept Aristotle as the primary voice of ancient Greek philosophy, Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, Rabbeinu Moshe Ben Maimon – Rambam, 1135-1204), who was born in Spain, became the great Jewish interpreter of Aristotelian thought. But he was more than a philosopher who wrote a major book of philosophy. He was a rabbi who served a major Jewish community – to all intents and purposes he was the Chief Rabbi of Egypt. The Rambam earned his living as a physician who treated the Vizier to the *Khalif* of Egypt and wrote a number of medical treatises; he was a Jewish legal scholar who compiled a major law code, wrote a commentary to the Mishnah, and prepared numerous responsa and pastoral letters on Jewish legal and spiritual matters; he was an ethicist who prepared a significant tractatus on Aristoteleian-Jewish ethics; and, in his younger years, he dabbled in logic and astronomy.

It can be said that Rambam's life's goal was to bring harmony to a world that he viewed as chaotic and beleaguered by evil forces that could rend Jewish society and prevent Jews from achieving a state of blessedness in this world and the next. Thus, in his Commentary to the Mishnah he sought to harmonize Rabbinic Judaism with principles of contemporary philosophy, thereby demonstrating that Rabbinic Judaism was, indeed, a rational tradition. In the introduction to his great law code, the *Mishneh Torah*, he tells the reader that the chaos of the time has resulted in a Jewish legal tradition that is so confused that Jews cannot find religious guidance and instruction. His carefully organized and beautifully written Hebrew code achieved its goal, even though it did not become the last word in Jewish law as its author had intended. And the *Dalalat al-ha'irin* (*Moreh nevukhim* in Hebrew, Guide of the Perplexed), his philosophical magnum opus, was written for the student of Torah and philosophy who was confused by the apparent contradictions between the two. Rambam attempted to show that, in essence, the Biblical Moses and Aristotle were expressing the same ideas – all of which had their origin in the mind of God, albeit expressed in different ways. The student of both systems, thus harmonized, would achieve the pinnacle of human existence – the bliss of profound understanding of God and of cleaving to Him.

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In the first book of the Guide Rambam addresses the language of the Bible, where we frequently find God described in very stark human and physical terms. All this anthropomorphic terminology, he says, it to be interpreted figuratively. The Biblical authors wrote this way because their audience would otherwise have difficulty with the absolute abstraction of a disembodied deity. God is a purely simple essence, not comprising any attributes and not subject to accidents. Therefore, the only statements we can make about God that can be taken literally are those that describe the results of God's actions, which Rambam terms "attributes of action." So it is that we can say that God acts wisely, but we cannot say that God is wise or that God has wisdom, because then God's unity would be compromised. And, if we cannot literally describe what God is, we can state what He is not. We cannot say that God is powerful, but we can say that God is not weak. Thus, Rambam negates his predecessors, noted above, who defined "essential attributes," qualities that were not superadded to the Divine Essence but were integral to that essence. Following the lead of Aristotle, Rambam holds that logically "essential attributes" imply a compositeness to God's nature which would compromise the principle of God's absolute unity and oneness.

In Book 2 Rambam turns to the matter of God as creator of the world. According to Aristotle, God is the unmoved mover; that is, God is unaware of, uninvolved in and unmoved by any action beyond himself. This being the case, according to Aristotle, God is not a Creator, and the universe could not have been created. Rather, it has been eternally static, the way it is now. This is a big problem for people who believe in the religion of the Bible, beginning, as it does, with God's creation of the universe. And it is a problem for Rambam; not so much because of the language of Genesis, but because of the implications the idea of God as non-creator would have for the truth of Torah. Rambam argues that, in fact, Aristotle never claimed to have proved this point. Since he did not, we can accept the words of the prophets who tell us that God did create the world. The issue for Rambam is this: If God did not create the world because it is not in His nature to change how the world runs, then God, similarly would not have intervened in the goings on to reveal Torah to Israel. If God does not create, then, for the same reason, He does not reveal. Rambam says if Aristotle had indeed proven that the universe was eternal and there was no creation, then this proof "undercuts the law at its root". Rambam, however, argues forcibly that God did create the world and, by the same token, revealed the Torah to Moses.

With regard to another aspect of God's involvement in the world, however, we see another side of Rambam's theology that views God's direct intervention as being more limited than the Bible or the Midrash would have it. The notion of divine providence, through which God intervenes in events to save or provide wonderful blessings for people, is a fundamental belief of traditional Judaism. Yet, here Rambam is more circumspect, seemingly trying to project the Aristotelian notion of a disengaged God. In Book 3 of the Guide he tells us that God emanates power from his intellect down to the human realm. But he then informs us that it is up to the human intellect to grasp that emanation and apply it for human benefit. People with more developed intellect will derive greater benefit, and those with less intelligence will derive less. In this way God is removed from the actual realization of the providence, and God cannot be directly held accountable for what transpires on earth. At the end of the Guide, however, Rambam suddenly, and surprisingly, reverses himself and presents God as an accessible model for human emulation. He declares that once the person of intelligence has gained the profound insight into God that is the culmination of metaphysical speculation, he realizes that the dominant component of God's nature is compassion, and this is the attribute the philosopher should make his own.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, these four thinkers express their ideas about God in a very technical way. Because they are philosophers their relationship with the texts of our tradition is very different from that of their predecessors; because they consider the texts to be holy and true, they are at pains to prove their truth and their continued validity for people of intelligence. As we read the work of Jewish medieval philosophers today the scope and significance of their endeavor becomes clear. Their attempt to wed Judaism to philosophy demonstrates the depth of their loyalty to their tradition and the fundamental truths it contains.