
JEWISH PHILOSOPHY
in the Middle Ages



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JEWISH PHILOSOPHY in the Middle Ages



Raphael Jospe
רפאל ישפה

Boston
2009

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jospe, Raphael.

Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages / Raphael Jospe.

p. cm. — (EMUNOT: Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-934843-09-3 (hardcover) — ISBN 978-1-934843-27-7 (pbk.)

1. Philosophy, Jewish—History. 2. Philosophy, Medieval—History. I. Title.

B755.J675 2009

181'.06—dc22

2009024458

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Foreground:

Statue of Maimonides by Amadeo Ruiz Olmos (1964) in the Plaza de Tiberiades in

“la Judería” (the Jewish Quarter) of Cordoba, Spain, near the medieval synagogue.

Photograph kindly provided by Israel Ronen of the Open University of Israel.

Background:

A bifolio, dismembered from a manuscript (14th-century, Spain), containing the first page of *Perush Ha-Millot Ha-Zarot* (1213), a glossary by Samuel ibn Tibbon, appended to his Hebrew translation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. The bifolio was reused in 1713 as a cover of a register of the series “Giusdicenze.” Hebrew Fragment 520.1 in the State Archive of Modena, Italy, kindly provided by Prof. Mauro Perani of the University of Bologna.

Book design by Ivan Grave

ISBN 978-1-934843-09-3 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-934843-27-7 (pbk.)

Published by Academic Studies Press in 2009

28 Montfern Avenue

Brighton, MA 02135, USA

press@academicstudiespress.com

www.academicstudiespress.com

To my sisters
Susanne and Naomi

אמור לחכמה אחותי את
(משלי ז:ד)

Say to wisdom, you are my sister
(*Proverbs 7:4*)

and to
Elihu Davison

קנה לך חבר
(אבות א:ו)

Acquire for yourself a friend
(*Sayings of the Fathers 1:6*)

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PREFACE

This book is a condensation of a three-volume series in Hebrew, *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages: From Sa'adiah Ga'on to Rambam*, published by the Open University of Israel. My sincere thanks to the Open University for its support and for permission to use that material as the basis for this English volume.

Besides the obvious difference of language, the three volumes in Hebrew (totaling some 1650 pages) include extensive text analysis important for the Hebrew reader, since one of the explicit goals of the books was to familiarize the reader with medieval Hebrew philosophical terminology and expression. This important aspect of the original books is not relevant to the reader in other languages. Nevertheless, I have attempted to include in the discussion, at least parenthetically, Hebrew and Arabic terms, which may prove useful or interesting to the reader.

On the other hand, this book has a new concluding chapter (Chapter Eleven) on “The Controversy over Philosophy and Rambam” that was outside the scope of the original Hebrew books.

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to my friend and colleague (and occasional co-author), Professor Dov Schwartz of Bar Ilan University, editor of the series in which this book is being published, for his constant friendship, encouragement and support over the years. I also wish to express my thanks to Dr. Igor Nemirovsky of Academic Studies Press for supporting this project.

Above all, I wish to express my loving gratitude to my wife Darlene; to our children Deena, Ilan, Calanitte, Tamar, Yaron, Uri and Keren; and to our happily growing family of grandchildren.

INTRODUCTION

Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages presents an overview of the formative period of medieval Jewish philosophy, from its beginnings with Sa'adiah Ga'on to its apex in Rambam (Maimonides). This period constitutes a discrete and unique cultural phenomenon, in which Jews living in Islamic countries and writing in Arabic were the first to develop a conscious and continuous tradition of Jewish philosophy.

In ancient Alexandria, Egypt, Philo was probably the first pioneer (at least the first whose works have survived) in Jewish philosophy, but his works, written in Greek, were unknown to Jews in the Middle Ages, and there was a gap of some eight centuries between Philo and the first medieval Jewish philosophers. Jewish philosophy as a discrete cultural tradition thus begins in the Middle Ages with the period covered by this book. Subsequent Jewish philosophy generally was developed in a Christian-European cultural context, and was written in Hebrew or (in more recent centuries) in European languages. In the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, and even in modern times, much of Jewish philosophy was shaped by or in reaction to the thought of Rambam, and was also reflected specific issues arising in the Jewish-Christian encounter, and was affected by European historical developments. An introduction to Jewish philosophy culminating in Rambam, therefore, sets the stage for these later developments, and is justified historically, thematically, and pedagogically.¹

Why is yet another introduction to medieval Jewish philosophy necessary in the English language? Isaac Husik's *History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (1916) gives the student a convenient outline of the thought of diverse thinkers, and is accessible to undergraduate students, but it does so with little discussion of the cultural frameworks and ideological schools of thought in which these philosophies evolved and to which they are responding, nor does it engage

¹ For this reason, Colette Sirat's latest, French version of her history of medieval Jewish philosophy is divided into two separate volumes, *La Philosophie Juive Medievale en Terre d'Islam* and *La Philosophie Juive Medievale en Pays de Chretiente* (1988), although her earlier English *History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (1985) presents both periods in one larger volume.

in extensive analysis of the thought itself. Julius Guttman's *Philosophies of Judaism* (German, 1933; revised and expanded in Hebrew, 1951; English translation of the Hebrew version, 1964) engages in analysis and in discussion of Greek and/or Arabic sources, but does so without introducing the student systematically to these sources, background and schools of thought. Guttman's sophisticated analysis (in many respects still unrivalled, certainly in terms of scope), is a valuable and essential reference for scholars and advanced graduate students, but frequently is not helpful to undergraduates and to the general reader. Colette Sirat's *History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (1985) contains a great deal of valuable information, especially on many previously ignored secondary thinkers and works (in some cases, works that still only exist in manuscript), but the book is encyclopedic in character, and as such invaluable for reference purposes, but it does not always present overviews and comparative analyses of the thought of the various thinkers, nor of the schools of thought influencing them. The comprehensive *History of Jewish Philosophy* (Routledge History of World Philosophies, Vol. 2) (1997) includes many important discussions of the historical, social and cultural contexts of Jewish philosophy, and areas and issues previously unexplored. However, as an anthology of presentations by some thirty-five authors, it cannot have overall consistency, including comparisons among the thinkers and ideas, and accordingly it often also lacks systematic overviews of the philosophy of a given thinker.

None of this is meant as criticism of these important books, which I constantly use in my own research, and recommend to my students. It simply means that different books are written for different purposes, which complement each other, and do not compete with each other.

My *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* does not deal with all the thinkers and issues covered by the other books, and is not intended to be a comprehensive history. Instead, I have attempted to do something different (although of course there is inevitable overlap with the others), by focusing on selected thinkers, representing important philosophical schools of thought and literary genres, including comparative cross-references.

Among the book's distinctive features are a general introductory survey, "What is Jewish Philosophy?" in which a wide range of opinions is presented and analyzed. The book includes didactic charts and tables, for example, presenting schemes of cosmology, emanation and comparative terminology for the categories and for the faculties of the soul, which become clarified by such graphic presentation. The various chapters of the book also present the Greek and/or Arabic schools of thought, such as the Kalam, Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism, including surveys of the major thinkers and themes representative of these schools of thought, prior to the discussion of the Jewish philosophers who were influenced by these ideas and how they responded to

them. Whenever feasible and pertinent, the discussion also includes surveys of major scholarly opinions on various questions of interpretation of the medieval thinkers.

It is my hope that these features of the book will render it useful as an introduction to major themes and thinkers in the history of the formative period of Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages, the period which continues not only to interest but to shape Jewish thought in our day.

Isaac Husik concluded his pioneering history, nearly a century ago, with the pessimistic observation that “there are Jews now, and there are philosophers, but there are no Jewish philosophers and there is no Jewish philosophy.”

The exponentially increasing publications of books in Jewish philosophy, in Israel and abroad, in Hebrew and in other languages, of original thought and of scholarly analysis, prove that Husik’s conclusion was exaggerated, premature, and ultimately far off the mark. His own work helped start the revival of a field for which he—like nineteenth century scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*—mistakenly thought he was writing an epitaph.

In recent years we have been witness to expanding study of Jewish philosophy, not only among Jews, but also among non-Jews; not only in Israel and in other countries with large Jewish communities, but also in countries with few Jews (or few surviving Jews). For many of these students of Jewish philosophy, it is not only of academic interest, but also of existential importance. It is my hope that this book, like my others, will also contribute, however modestly, to these welcome developments, and will constitute yet another link in the ongoing and ever growing chain of Jewish philosophy.

Raphael Jospe רפאל יוספה

Jerusalem

Adar 5769 / February 2009

Section I

FOUNDATIONS



WHAT IS JEWISH PHILOSOPHY?

[I.1] WHAT IS JEWISH PHILOSOPHY?

It may appear obvious to some what is meant by the term “Jewish philosophy,” but any attempt to construct a curriculum, course, textbook or history in “Jewish philosophy” forces us at the outset to deal with this seemingly elementary point, both for theoretical and practical reasons. On the practical level, which philosophers should be included in the discussion? The only philosopher produced by the Jewish people who is routinely included in histories of western philosophy is Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza, but many treatments of Jewish philosophy exclude Spinoza, and paradoxically, in the Jewish National and Hebrew University Library in Jerusalem, his books are to be found on the shelves of the general reading room, and not in the Judaica reading room together with those of other Jewish philosophers. What place, if any, should be assigned to Jews in the Middle Ages who converted to Islam, like Abu’l Barakat (Netanel) Al-Baghdadi, or to Christianity, like Abner of Burgos (Alfonso of Valladolid)? Should we treat these thinkers and their works as Jewish until the time of their apostasy, or in light of their subsequent conversion, retroactively as non-Jewish? In the modern period, shall we include under the rubric of “Jewish philosophy” the work of such figures as Henri Bergson, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Weiss or Karl Marx?

Reversing the question, we face the same problem. When a philosopher, such as Levi ben Gershom (Rabag; Gersonides) whose philosophy is generally recognized to be “Jewish” also engages (sometimes in the same book) in such “general” sciences as astronomy and mathematics, is that philosophy (or book, or even chapter) an appropriate subject for presenting as “Jewish?”

As we shall see, these questions force us to deal with our conceptions not only of Jewish philosophy, but our very conceptions of Judaism and philosophy.

[I.1.a] WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Our frame of reference for discussion “what is philosophy” is the world of medieval Jewish philosophy, and the Islamic philosophy which served as the context for the formative period of Jewish philosophy until Rambam (Maimonides; Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, d. 1204). For our purposes, what Plato and Aristotle may have actually said may often be less significant than what Muslim and Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages thought they said, sometimes on the basis of pseudepigraphical works like the Neoplatonic *Theology of Aristotle* (which, in fact, has nothing to do with Aristotle, but is an Arabic abridgement and paraphrase of Plotinus’ *Enneads*).

We diverge today from the classical and medieval understanding of philosophy when we distinguish it from the natural sciences and routinely assign philosophy a place among the Humanities in universities. In the Middle Ages, however, philosophy was understood by Muslim, Christian and Jewish philosophers to be a scientific method of inquiry, indeed as the “mother of the sciences,” and our dichotomy between philosophy and science would have been totally alien to them. It is, however, precisely this categorization of philosophy as one of the humanities, and not as an empirical, natural science, that renders philosophy subject to particular cultural influences and forms of expression, as are history, literature and the arts, and thus makes possible our historical and cultural question, “What is Jewish philosophy?” The classical and medieval view, however, was different, because in their own mind, they were not engaging in historical or cultural questions, but in the universal quest for truth, transcending particular national cultures and religions.

The first Arab philosopher, Abu Yusuf Ya‘qub ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi (Iraq, 9th century), defined philosophy in his pioneering work *On First Philosophy* (“first philosophy” = metaphysics), as “the most noble” art, aiming at knowledge of “the true nature of things.” The philosopher seeks, therefore, on a theoretical level, to know the truth, and on a practical level, to act truthfully.¹ Since philosophy aims at “the true nature of things,” and the truth cannot be limited to one particular nation or religious community, Al-Kindi teaches us that we should accept the truth from anyone, regardless of nation, race or religion. “For the seeker of truth, nothing takes precedence over the truth.”²

A generation after Al-Kindi, Abu Naṣr Al-Farabi (870–950) described philosophy as reaching the Greeks from Semitic sources in Iraq, via Egypt. The Greeks called “the scientific state of mind philosophy, by which they meant the quest and love for the highest wisdom . . . The called it the science of sciences, the mother of sciences, the wisdom of wisdoms, and the art of

¹ *Al-Kindi’s Metaphysics*, translated by Alfred Ivry (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1974), p. 55.

² *Al-Kindi’s Metaphysics*, pp. 57–58.

arts.”³ For Al-Farabi, as for Al-Kindi, philosophy has a practical as well as theoretical, scientific component, because it involves moral and religious responsibility. Religion is, in effect, an “imitation of philosophy,” because what philosophy studies by scientific demonstration, religion teaches to the masses by persuasive methods; what philosophy knows intellectually, religion imitates through imagined images.

Rambam’s contemporary, Abu’l Walid Muḥammad Ibn Rushd (Averroes; 1126–1198) took these arguments further. The study of philosophy, including that of the non-Muslim ancients, is not merely permitted, it is a religious obligation, “regardless of whether this other one shares our religion or not.” Philosophy is “the door by which the law summons them to knowledge of God.” To forbid the study of philosophy because of its foreign source is like denying a person water, so that he dies of thirst, just because some people have choked on water.⁴

These views were echoed receptively by Jewish authors. Rambam, whose *Guide of the Perplexed* cites by name various Greek and Arab authors, but not any of the earlier Jewish philosophers,⁵ prefaces his *Eight Chapters on Ethics* by stating explicitly that he borrowed “from the words of the philosophers, ancient and recent, and also from the works of various authors, as one should accept the truth from whoever says it.”⁶

Similar sentiments were expressed in the late 13th century by the philosopher, Hebrew translator of Arabic philosophy, and defender of Rambam in the controversy over philosophy, Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Falaquera. In his Hebrew encyclopedia of the sciences, *The Opinions of the Philosophers (De ‘ot Ha-Pilosofim)*, Falaquera equates the philosopher with the Hebrew *ḥasid*,

³ Al-Farabi, *The Attainment of Happiness* #53–55, translated by Muhsin Mahdi, in *Al-Farabi’s Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 43–44. The passage may also be found in Arthur Hyman and James Walsh (eds.), *Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (2nd edition, Indianapolis, 1983), p. 227, and in Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (eds.), *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 76.

⁴ Ibn Rushd’s “Decisive Treatise Determining What the Connection Is Between Religion and Philosophy” was published as *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, translated by George Hourani (London: Luzac, 1961), pp. 46–49. Abridged versions may be found in Arthur Hyman and James Walsh (eds.), *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, and in Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (eds.), *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*.

⁵ See the discussion of this in Shlomo Pines’ Introduction, “The Philosophic Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” to his English translation of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

⁶ My translation. The *Eight Chapters* are the introduction to Maimonides’ commentary to the Mishnah Avot. Cf. *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics*, translated by Joseph Gorfinkle (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), pp. 35–36. An abridgement may be found in *A Maimonides Reader*, edited by Isadore Twersky (New York: Berhman House, 1972).

emphasizing the view he shared with other Jewish and Muslim philosophers, that philosophy is a moral and religious, and not merely an intellectual, undertaking:

Therefore, according to them, the true philosopher is one whose intention is to attain knowledge of the truth and to do the righteous and true act, one who intends that all his actions attain for him these two types of perfection, and whose entire effort in life is to attain them as perfectly as is humanly possible. The term “philosopher” refers to this notion, according to them, and the term *hasid* (“righteous”) refers to this notion in our language; he is one who has acquired the moral and rational virtues. But since a common person (*‘am ha-areẓ*) lacks the rational virtues, even though he has acquired the ethical ones, the rabbis said, “A common person cannot be righteous.” (Mishnah Avot 2:6)⁷

The ultimate object of philosophic knowledge being God, the philosopher is thus also a religious personality:

The ethically perfect person is one who studies all existing things, and tries to know them. He is distinguished from the rest of humanity in order to attain and cleave to his Creator. In Greek, he is called “philosopher,” i.e., the lover of wisdom.⁸

Therefore,

a person should learn whatever he is capable [of learning] from those who speak the truth, even if they are non-believers, just as one takes honey from a bee . . . For a person cannot know by himself everything he needs of these things, as the ancients said. It makes no difference whether these ancients were of our faith or not. When the speculation is correct and perfect, [free] from any defect, we do not notice whether these people are of our faith.”⁹

Many of the common folk who are empty and devoid of wisdom [find it] very difficult when an author brings a proof from the words of non-Jewish philosophers, and they regard their words as worthless. They say that it is not proper to accept them. These ignorant fools never remember, nor understand, nor do they ever consider, that it is appropriate to accept the truth from any person, even if he is on a lower level than oneself or from another nation . . . It is not proper to look at the speaker, but rather at what is said.”¹⁰

⁷ Falaquera, *De‘ot Ha-Pilosofim*, ms. Parma f. 4a, ms. Leyden f. 106b, cited in my *Torah and Sophia: The Life and Thought of Shem Tov ibn Falaquera* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1988), p. 127.

⁸ Falaquera, *The Book of the Seeker*, p. 102.

⁹ Falaquera, *Epistle of the Debate*, p. 13. Cf. Steven Harvey, *Falaquera’s Epistle of the Debate: An Introduction to Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 19.

¹⁰ Falaquera, *The Book of Degrees*, pp. 11–12.

Finally, in the Introduction to his encyclopedic *Opinions of the Philosophers*, Falaquera states:

It is not proper for an intelligent person who seeks to know the truth to reject many things which were revealed to the philosophers, which they explained by a true proof, and which are indubitable, as they said, just because they are not of our people. Rather, he should listen to the truth from the one who says it, and he should not look at the speaker but rather at the truth of what he says.”¹¹

[I.1.b] WHAT IS JEWISH PHILOSOPHY:
A MODERN QUESTION

Our interest is to define Jewish philosophy. And yet, the passages cited above from medieval Muslim and Jewish sources are noteworthy for the fact that they all deal exclusively with the general question, “what is philosophy?” and none of them deals with the question of what is Jewish philosophy (or Islamic philosophy, as the case may be). So far as I know, the question we are asking, what is Jewish philosophy, is never discussed by the medieval Jewish philosophers (nor the parallel question of Islamic philosophy among the medieval Arabs).¹²

Since, evidently, our question did not interest philosophers in the Middle Ages, who are the subject of this book, why should it interest us?

By their own self-definition, the philosophers were “lovers of wisdom” in the sense that they sought to attain whatever rational truths humans are capable of attaining. The medieval philosophers recognized and insisted, despite their loyalty to a particular religious doctrine (Jewish, Christian or Muslim), that one can and should learn the truth from any person, and not only from members of one’s own community. Jewish philosophers, therefore, did not, and could not, restrict their philosophizing to Jewish sources, by the very universal nature of philosophy. To the contrary, their task was to defend their right, indeed their duty, to learn the philosophic truth from any source, since the truth respects no national or religious borders.

We, however, face an entirely different challenge, as much as we may admire and identify with the universalistic and humanistic spirit that motivated these medieval philosophers. We are not dealing with philosophy itself, in the pure sense of the term, but rather with the history of Jewish philosophy. Jewish

¹¹ Falaquera, *De’ot Ha-Pilosofim*, ms. Parma, f. 3b, ms. Leyden, f. 106a.

¹² On the other hand, given Al-Farabi’s idea, which is reflected in medieval Jewish thought, that the Greeks learned philosophy from Semitic sources, one could argue that medieval Jewish thinkers, by engaging in universal philosophy, without regard to national origin, in a sense saw themselves as engaging in something that is ultimately Jewish.

philosophy did not develop in a vacuum, but was influenced, directly and indirectly, by different thinkers, representing a wide spectrum of philosophical and religious schools of thought in the Greek, Latin-Christian, and Arabic-Islamic cultures. Rambam, for example, cannot be understood without reference to such Greek philosophers as Aristotle and Muslim philosophers like Al-Farabi.

Nevertheless, philosophers like Aristotle and Al-Farabi, for all that they influenced the development of Jewish philosophy, do not belong to, nor do they share in, Jewish philosophy, for the simple reason that they were not Jews. Of course their influence was great—but it was an external, not internal influence. To reiterate: we are not here engaging in the pure philosophic quest for the abstract truth, whatever that may be. We are engaging in a historical quest for an understanding of how philosophy developed among the Jews. We must, therefore, ask the very question which is, from a philosophical perspective, invalid and illegitimate, but which is necessary and justified from a historical perspective: Who is the speaker? We must, despite what the medievals said so eloquently, look at the speaker, and not just at what he said.

At a certain point, we may wish to challenge and question the positions taken by various Jewish philosophers, to determine whether they were correct or incorrect, and whether from our perspective their philosophy was true or false. But we shall not have completed our task until we ask the additional and more fundamental question: were their philosophies Jewish? We may, for example, conclude that on a given point, a Jewish philosopher was wrong and a non-Jewish philosopher was correct. But, at least for the moment, we are not asking whether one was correct, but only an entirely different question, which was the Jewish philosopher? And what are our criteria for making this judgment?

Our question is modern, in two respects: philosophic and Jewish. From a philosophic perspective, we have already noted that the dichotomy between philosophy and the natural sciences is a modern one. In the Middle Ages, so long as philosophers were considered, and considered themselves to be, true scientists, it was impossible to distinguish the scientific truth of one nation from that of another, just as today we would not be prepared to categorize the truths of physics as “German” (even if many of the great physicists were products of German education). It is only in modern times, when philosophy came to be regarded as one of the Humanities, that one could speak of philosophy within the context of a particular culture, as philosophy flourished in, or was influenced by, different cultures. (We thus speak of continental rationalism versus British empiricism). Our historical-cultural approach to philosophy, therefore, is an approach that only became possible in modern times.

From a Jewish perspective, we again find that the problem is a modern one. For it is only in modern times that we no longer have a clear, uniform

and unequivocal answer to the question: “Who is a Jew?” (even, and especially, in the State of Israel). For with the obvious exception of the situation in modern totalitarian regimes, most clearly with the Nazi racial definition of the Jew, modern Jewish identity differs from that of previous eras precisely in its individualistic and voluntaristic quality, without reference to a binding community, system of law, or other historic norms. The Jew was now free to change, reform or totally negate his Jewish identity, and could effectively assimilate and opt out of Jewish identity without converting to Christianity or Islam.

As we asked before, how, shall we regard the apostates Abu’l Barakat (Neganel) Al-Baghdadi and Abner of Burgos? More significantly, how shall we regard Spinoza, who was excommunicated by his Amsterdam community, but who, like many Jews after him, never converted to another religion?

There is no clear consensus among Jewish philosophers and scholars of Jewish philosophy regarding the proper definition of the field. The approaches to our question are not all mutually exclusive, and, therefore, we find thinkers and scholars who may support more than one approach. The responses to “what is Jewish philosophy” include a denial of “Jewish philosophy” as an oxymoron; purely biographical or linguistic criteria; religious “philosophy of Judaism;” harmonizing Judaism and philosophy; essentialist message vs. method; and contextual criteria, including Jewish sources, motives, audience and impact. All of these approaches, in turn, raise further questions.

[I.1.c] JEWISH PHILOSOPHY: AN OXYMORON?

For some philosophers, including Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas, and for some scholars, like Joseph Sermoneta and Zev Levy, philosophy (at least when it deals with purely philosophical questions of logic, ethics, esthetics, epistemology and the like) is essentially a universal discipline, like physics, and therefore they regard “Jewish philosophy” as an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Like other scientific methods of inquiry, they argue that philosophy must be universal, transcending particular cultures, and thus cannot be “Jewish,” just as a Bulgarian who studies biology is not engaging in “Bulgarian biology.” If, as the medievals thought, and some believe today, philosophy is a true science, how can it be defined in national or religious terms? Levinas, for example, accordingly regarded his philosophical and his Jewish writings to be different and basically unrelated genres (although many of his interpreters and readers, Levy included, question that dichotomy in Levinas’ self-evaluation).

Historically, it is immediately evident that philosophy is not a Jewish invention or discovery (despite the view that the Greeks learned their wisdom from Semitic sources). In the passages cited above, we saw an open and honest awareness, among Arabs and Jews alike, of the Greek origins of

philosophy, and not merely an etymological understanding of the Greek term “philosophy.” The medieval Jewish philosophers freely acknowledged their own indebtedness to their Greek and Islamic sources, and their use of Arabic translations and original works. How, then, can such a foreign transplant be called “Jewish?”

However universal philosophy may be, it nevertheless seems that the expression “Jewish philosophy” is not a contradiction in terms the way “Jewish physics” would be, because there is no connection between physics and a particular culture. Some areas of philosophy, like logic, also have an affinity to such universal and precise sciences as mathematics. On the other hand, many other areas of philosophical inquiry do have some connection to their cultural and linguistic context, so at least in those areas philosophy resembles other Humanities, such as literature and art, which are not universal in their content or expression. So “Jewish philosophy” need not be a contradiction in terms the way “Jewish physics” would be. Even in the case of physics, there need not necessarily be a contradiction in terms. For example, when we say “Greek physics,” we are not describing the scientific content but the historical context of the discipline: the science of physics was first developed within the context of ancient Greek philosophy and science, and Aristotle’s *Physics* served as one of the foundations of western science, as well as philosophy, for centuries. (Indeed, to this day, Aristotle is called the “Father of Biology). By “Greek physics” we do not mean that physics belongs to Greek culture, but only the historical fact that the Greeks first discovered or invented a scientific system (physics), which is essentially universal, and which over the centuries became universal not merely in theory but in practice. So we can speak of “Greek physics” two thousand years ago, but not today.

[I.1.d] EXTREME FORMALISM IN DEFINING
JEWISH PHILOSOPHY:
BIOGRAPHIC AND LINGUISTIC CRITERIA

One way of resolving the issue is to resort to extreme formalism in defining Jewish philosophy, not in terms of the essence or content of the philosophy, but in formal terms of the Jewish identity of the philosopher, or the Jewish language in which the philosophy was written, regardless of its content. The criteria of Jewishness, in other words, have nothing to do with the content of the philosophy, but are a function of external, formal criteria, biographical and/or linguistic. It should be readily clear that a mere biographic fact—a philosopher’s Jewish identity—is not sufficient to determine that his philosophy is a Jewish philosophy, i.e., of a Jewish character, just as we would not deduce that a Jew playing football is playing Jewish football. Again, without getting involved in the controversial question of “who is a Jew,” we

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