Yitzhak Y. Melamed

"Let the Law Cut through the Mountain": Salomon Maimon, Moses Mendelssohn, and Mme. Truth

▸ Haskalah, Maskilim, Mendelssohn ▸ Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezerich, Hasidic ▸ Rabbinisch ▸ Wolffians ▸ Zohar

> "Eternal truths have nothing to do with the majority of votes, and least of all where the truth is of such a nature that it leaves all expression behind."[1]

Introduction

Moses Maimonides was a rare kind of radical. Being a genuine Aristotelian, he recommended following the middle path and avoiding extremism. Yet, within the sphere of Jewish philosophy and thought, he created a school of philosophical radicalism, inspiring rabbis and thinkers to be unwilling to compromise their integrity in searching for the truth, regardless of where their arguments might lead. Both Spinoza and Salomon Maimon inherited this commitment to uncompromising philosophical inquiry. But of course, such willingness to follow a philosophical argument to any length is a fine prescription for getting into trouble with both community and political leaders. In this paper I trace the story of one such collision that took place between the radical philosopher Salomon Maimon and the bourgeois Enlightenment politician, Moses Mendelssohn.

Maimonidean Radicalism

In order to grasp the scale of the scandal of Maimonides' philosophical radicalism, let me quote from a letter by Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776), written more than five centuries after Maimonides' death. This rather late perspec-

1 Solomon Maimon, An Autobiography, trans. J. Clark Murray with an introduction by Michael Shapiro, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press 2001, p. 232.

tive can help us to understand Maimonides' reputation in mainstream Rabbinic thought:

"I do not deny speaking critically of the 'Guide of Perplexed' — which I believe was never composed by Maimonides, the one who wrote the 'Code' [*Yad ha-Hazaka*] whom we pride ourselves in (or perhaps there were two Maimonides? Yet, even the 'Book of Science' contains some of the mistaken opinions of the 'Guide of the Perplexed') … I cannot conceive how such a misshape could come out of the hands of this great Jewish man, great in Torah and deeds, as the famous Rabbi Moses…and though there is in the book some piety, some support for faith and remedy against anthropomorphism, and this may save the entire book, yet the honey is sunk in much poison and the remedy in the destructive vanity of philosophy."[2]

Emden was no fanatic. Many scholars consider him the precursor of the Haskalah.[3] His autobiography, "Megillat Sefer", is quite a bold and daring text, and he rarely shied away from challenging traditional opinions, such as the antiquity of the "Zohar", the canonical text of the Kabbalah. Indeed, Moses Mendelssohn, the godfather of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, referred to Emden as his own rabbinic authority.[4] Against this context, one can appreciate Emden's astonishment and embarrassment at the radical claims of Maimonides' "Guide" and "Book of Science"; an astonishment that made him suggest that perhaps there were two writers named "Maimonides."

I will not dwell here on the critical reception of Maimonides' philosophical radicalism or the series of "Maimonidean controversies" that dominated the late Jewish Middle Ages.[5] I do wish, however, to unfold the story of one modern transformation of such a controversy, a controversy that arose not over any particular claim of Maimonides, but rather over one person's intellectual duty to examine philosophical arguments according to their validity and soundness, not the political and religious reputation of their author. Speaking of the author in question, Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677), let me suggest that Spinoza himself belonged to the "great chain" of Maimonidean radicals, not because he adhered to Maimonides' philosophy (Spinoza was highly

2 Rabbi Jacob Emden, *Iggeret Purim*, 30v in: Jacob J. Schacter, Rabbi Jacob Emden's *Iggeret Purim*, in: Isadore Twersky (ed.), Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1984, vol. 2, p. 445. The translation from the Hebrew is mine.

3 See, for example, David Sorkin, Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press 1996, p. 157.

4 See Alexander Altmann, Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America 1973, pp. 217–218.

5 For a helpful survey of the Maimonidean controversies, see Haim Hillel Ben Sasson/Raphael Jospe/Dov Schwartz, Maimonidean Controversy, in: Encyclopedia Judaica, 2nd ed., Detroit, Thomson Gale 2007, vol. 13, pp. 371–381.

critical of many of Maimonides' claims), but rather because he adopted the same iconoclastic attitude that motivated Maimonides' battle against anthropomorphism and idolatry.[6] Spinoza frequently refers to Maimonides, both explicitly and implicitly. Since one of the main features of Spinoza's writing is its polemic nature, it will come as no surprise that these references are almost always critical. Indeed, Spinoza rarely refers to authors with whom he agrees. But his recurrent responses and allusions to Maimonides make it clear that Maimonides was a significant interlocutor in his thought. In terms of philosophical positions, Spinoza considered himself a critic of Aristotelianism.[7] Indeed, in one of the very rare moments in which he bestows praise on a predecessor, he commends Rabbi Hisdai Crescas, an anti-Aristotelian and anti-Maimonidean of the late 14th century, for his unequivocal rejection of the Aristotelian ban on actual infinity.[8]

The Knight from Suchowyborg and Lady T.

Salomon Maimon's life story is as fascinating as it is hard to believe. Growing up in traditional Jewish surroundings in Lithuania, Maimon developed a deep interest in medieval Jewish philosophy in his early teens, and Maimonides' "Guide of the Perplexed" had an enduring influence on him. Maimon's attachment to Maimonides — both personally and philosophically — ran throughout his life.[9] Even Maimon's own name was adopted as an expression of respect for this teacher (Before taking the surname 'Maimon', he was called after his father: *Shlomo* [Salomon] *ben* ("son of") *Joshua*). The uncompromising and iconoclastic spirit of medieval Maimonideanism struck a deep chord in his psyche and launched him on an obsessive, life-long search after the truth. Upon hearing about the supposed appearance of "Lady Truth" in the

6 For an excellent discussion of the Maimonidean elements in Spinoza's thought, see Warren Zev Harvey, Portrait of Spinoza as Maimonidean, in: Journal of the History of Philosophy, 20 (1981), pp. 151–172. For Spinoza's critique of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, see my "Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline", in: Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, Justin Smith (eds.), The Rationalists, Kluwer – New Synthese Historical Library 2010, pp. 147–166.

7 See Spinoza's preface to the "Theological Political Treatise" (Geb. III/9), as well as Chapter Thirteen (Geb. III/168).

8 Spinoza, Ep.12 (Geb. IV/62/1).

9 Maimon dedicated ten (!) chapters of his autobiography to an elucidation of Maimonides' "Guide" (see Zwi Batscha (ed.), Salomon Maimons Lebensgeschichte, Frankfurt a. M., Jüdischer Verlag 1995, pp. 240–315. These chapters are omitted in the existing English translation.)

emerging Hassidic movement, Maimon rushed to the court of the leader of the movement, the *Maggid* of Mezerich (Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezerich, 1710(?)–1772),[10] but was disappointed to find out that the Lady had just left the place (or at least so the rumor said). Then came the idea that perhaps Berlin, the city of the *Aufklärer*, was the Lady's new place of residence (alas, had he only known …), and in 1777 Maimon packed a small bag of food and some manuscripts (including an early commentary on the "Guide"), said goodbye to his wife and young children and departed for Berlin. He then began an odyssey of 10 or 12 years, in which he succeeded, among other things, in being kicked out of the shelter of the Jewish community in Berlin due to his engagement with Maimonides' "Guide",[11] learning and pursuing the delicate art of beggary,[12] returning to Berlin and becoming a protégé of Mendelssohn,[13] getting into a quarrel with Mendelssohn (on account of Maimon's unhidden Spinozism, and his frequent visits to certain not-so-respected houses, as we shall shortly see), leaving Berlin to go to Amsterdam (for it was said that Lady T. was fond of a certain local Benedict),[14] being stoned in the open street by the children of the Jewish community in Amsterdm, attending a Gymnasium at Altona at the age of 30,[15] and finally landing back in Berlin shortly after Mendelssohn's death. Then, the Lady was glimpsed again between the lines of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason".[16] Well, this story is only beginning, and I invite you to consult other books — such as Maimon's own "Lebensgeschichte" (1792/3) — if you wish to find out the end of this obsessive affair. Let me just warn you not to expect a happy ending. I turn now to examine Maimon's encounter with Moses Mendelssohn more closely.

Maimon, Mendelssohn, and Spinoza's Specter

Maimon's second visit to Berlin, between 1780 and 1783, seemed to have been a success story. During this visit he made the important acquaintance of Mendelssohn and succeeded in making his way into some circles of the Jewish Enlightenment. It was probably in this period that Maimon first came across Spinoza's writings. In his autobiography, Maimon describes this discovery:

10 Maimon, Autobiography, pp. 151–175.
11 Ibid, pp. 193–196.
12 Ibid, pp. 197–199.
13 Ibid, pp. 210–216.
14 Ibid, pp. 245–252.
15 Ibid, pp. 258–264.
16 Ibid, pp 279–283.

"As a man altogether without experience I carried my frankness at times a little too far and brought upon myself many vexations in consequence. I was reading Spinoza. His profound thought and his love of truth pleased me uncommonly; and as his system had already been suggested to me in Poland by the Kabbalistic writings, I began to reflect upon it anew and became so convinced of its truth, that all the efforts of Mendelssohn to change my opinion were unavailing. I answered all the objections brought against it by the Wolffians, raised objections against their system myself, and showed that if the *Definitiones nominales* of the Wolffian ontology are converted into *Definitiones reales*, conclusions of the very opposite of theirs are the result.[17] *Moreover, I could not explain the persistency of Mendelssohn and the Wolffians generally in adhering to their system, except as a political dodge and a piece of hypocrisy* [*politische Kniffe und Heuchelei*], by which they studiously endeavored to descend to the mode of thinking common in the popular mind; and this conviction I expressed openly and without reserve."[18]

It is worth noting that Mendelssohn himself expressed deep appreciation for Spinoza in his early "Philosophische Gespräche" (1755). In this work Mendelssohn attempted to domesticate Spinoza's radicalism and suggested that Spinoza's philosophy was not that different from Leibniz's orthodox view, although he held that Spinoza had gone somewhat astray. Thus, claimed Mendelssohn, we should appreciate Spinoza as having cleared the way for the appearance of Leibniz.[19] It is not hard to tell what Mendelssohn's sincere view of the relationship between the philosophies of Spinoza and Leibniz was. Mendelssohn praised Leibniz for being "not merely the greatest, but also the most careful [*behutsamste*] philosopher."[20]

"If Leibniz had openly confessed that he borrowed the essential part of his harmony from Spinoza, tell me, would these people not have believed from the outset that that found in the reference to Spinoza's name, the basis for refuting this doctrine? Quite certainly."[21]

17 Kant seems to make a similar point in his lectures on metaphysics: "If I derive the existence [*Dasein*] of the *ens realissimum* from its concept, this is the path to Spinozism" (AA 28:786). Cf. my "'*Omnis determinatio est negatio*' – Determination, Negation and Self-Negation in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel," in: Eckart Förster, Yitzhak Y. Melamed (eds.), Spinoza and German Idealism, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2012, pp. 182–183.

18 Maimon, Autobiography, pp. 219–220 = Lebensgeschichte, pp. 156–57. Italics added.

19 "Before the transition from the Cartesian to the Leibnizian philosophy could occur, it was necessary for someone to take the plunge into the monstrous abyss lying between them. This unhappy lot fell to Spinoza. How his fate is to be pitied! He was a sacrifice for the human intellect." (Moses Mendelssohn, Philosophical Writings, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 106).

20 Mendelssohn, Philosophical Writings, 104 = Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe, Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt, Frommann Verlag 1971, vol. I, p. 12.

21 Ibid.

Maimon's openness in these matters brought him trouble rather than appreciation. In his "Lebensgeschichte" Maimon tells us about the response of his fellow young Jewish *Aufklärer*:

"My friends and well-wishers, who for the most part had never themselves speculated on philosophical subjects, but blindly adopted the results of the systems prevailing at the time as if they were established truth, did not understand me, and therefore also were unable to follow me in my opinions."[22]

The young, liberal, *maskilim* with whom Maimon used to pass time in Berlin complained to Mendelssohn that Maimon was spreading "dangerous opinions and systems" (referring ostensibly to Maimon's Spinozism).[23] Mendelssohn summoned Maimon and asked him about this and other rumors he had heard about Maimon's all-too-free behavior.[24] Maimon responded to the "charge" of Spinozism by insisting that,

"[T]he opinion and systems referred to are either true or false. *If the former, then I do not see how the knowledge of the truth can do any harm. If the latter, then let them be refuted.* Moreover, I have explained these opinions and systems only to gentlemen who desire to be enlightened, and to rise above all prejudices."[25]

Understanding that his presence in Berlin had become a burden, Maimon bade Mendelssohn farewell, and left the city.[26]

Maimon was not expelled from Berlin by an edict of a dark fanatic rabbi, but rather through the endeavors of his liberal, enlightened friends, and with the quiet support of the Enlightement's saint and paragon of tolerance, Moses Mendelssohn. The real importance of this story lies in what it tells us about the nature of the Berlin Haskalah, its notion of tolerance, and its intellectual qualities.

Epilogue

Both Spinoza and Maimon owed a great debt to the author of the "Guide of the Perplexed". For both, the experience of reading the book seems to have played a formative role, though both grew and developed into genuine and in-

22 Maimon, Autobiography, p. 220 = Lebensgeschichte, p. 157.
23 Ibid, p. 240 = Lebensgeschichte, p. 172.
24 Ibid, pp. 238–240 = Lebensgeschichte, pp. 171–172.
25 Ibid, p. 240 = Lebensgeschichte, p. 172. Italics added.
26 For a detailed study of Maimon's engagement with Spinoza, see my "Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism", in: Journal of the History of Philosophy 42, January 2004, pp. 67–96.

dependent philosophers. While the mature Spinoza and Maimon could not be described as Maimonideans, insofar as they did not strictly adhere to his doctrines, they do render much of the iconoclastic spirit of their old master. More than anything else, they affirmed uncompromising commitment to pursue philosophical arguments regardless of where they might lead. This kind of commitment is precisely what the mediocrity of the liberal bourgeoisie — in 18th-century Jewish Berlin, or anywhere else — could never swallow.

Abstract
Maimon, Mendelssohn und Mme. Truth

Maimonides war ein Radikaler von seltener Art. Als überzeugter Aristoteliker empfahl er den Weg der Mitte und die Vermeidung von Extremen. In der jüdischen Philosophie jedoch begründete er eine Schule des radikalen Denkens, die bei der Suche nach Wahrheit keinerlei Kompromisse zulässt, egal, wohin sie einen führt. Sowohl Spinoza als auch Salomon Maimon übernahmen diese Selbstverpflichtung zur unnachgiebigen philosophischen Erkundung. In meinem Artikel zeichne ich die Geschichte der Kollision zwischen dem radikalen Philosophen Salomon Maimon und dem bürgerlichen Aufklärungspolitiker Moses Mendelssohn nach.

Yitzhak Y. Melamed is a professor in the Department of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. He holds an M. A. in philosophy and the history of science and logic from Tel Aviv University, and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale University (2005). He has been awarded the Fulbright, Mellon, and American Academy for Jewish Research Fellowships. Recently, he also won the ACLS Burkhardt (2011), NEH (2010), and Humboldt (2011) fellowships for his forthcoming book on Spinoza and German Idealism.