

Elisha Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt; A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times*, Oxford, 2015

Introduction, p. 1-4

Introduction

In his polemical epistle of 1235 directed at the Jews of Provence—a number of whom had condemned his father’s philosophical writings and were rumored to have consigned them to the flames—Abraham, head of Egyptian Jewry and only heir of Moses Maimonides, chastised his European coreligionists for their own heretical beliefs in repudiating the monotheism of their ancestors. The alleged cooperation of the Provençal Jews with local Church officials in their anti-Maimonidean campaign came as no surprise, Abraham chided, “for the faith of these is not very different from the faith of those.”¹ As for the Jews living in Islamic lands, he observed with more than a little irony, they express not the slightest doubt in the strict monotheism advocated by Maimonidean rationalism. “There is no doubt as to all of this among any of the Jews living in the lands of Ishmael, from the farthest east to the foremost west.”² As if this pointed suggestion were not absolutely clear, Abraham then directed his readers to consider the religion of Islam on its own terms, so as to emphasize its strict adherence to pure and unadulterated monotheism.

The children of Ishmael have, for their part, adopted this [monotheistic] faith from the children of Israel and have built the foundation of their religion upon it. They have rejected the error and folly of their ancestors, who used to worship idols and did not affirm the unity and exaltedness of [God’s] name, as it is written, “Nations shall come to You from the ends of the earth and say, ‘Our ancestors have inherited lies, [vanity] that is of no avail’” (Jer. 16:19).³ This was also expressed by one of the prophets, “From the rising of the sun to its setting, My name is great among the nations” (Mal. 1:11). Because their worship is characterized by pure monotheism, scripture likened it to the sacrificial rite [in the Temple] offered for His name, as it is written, “And in every place incense and a pure offering are brought for My name” (ibid.). Whoever differs and asserts that the Creator, may He be magnified and exalted, has a likeness or image, a body or a circumscribed space, does not

¹ See *MH*, 55.

² See *MH*, 51.

³ The word “emptiness” (*hevel*), as cited from the verse, is missing from the manuscript, as indicated by Margalioth ad loc.

believe in the truth of his Creator by making [such] a comparison to [God]. He is, for this reason, a heretic and has no place in the world to come.⁴

Abraham Maimonides' remarks in his epistle to the Provençal Jews, full of disdain for his wayward coreligionists and respect for the core faith of the Islamic religion, call to mind many of the surprising turns of his remarkable career, and, what is more, encapsulate many of the themes at the heart of this book. The career of Abraham Maimonides (or, as he is frequently called in the medieval sources and throughout this book, the Nagid)⁵ came to dominate and define his generation, the twilight of the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt and, in a larger sense, the final chapter of what S. D. Goitein has dubbed both the classical Genizah period and the zenith of "the physical and educational symbiosis between Muslims and Jews" in the High Middle Ages.⁶ As we shall have cause to revisit on a number of occasions in this book, the Nagid was far from complacent with the religious and spiritual condition of his people, whether in Provence or (more frequently) in Egypt, and the urgency of his critique is on full display in this epistle. He was, if nothing else, an adamant reformer of the religious life of Egyptian Jewry in all its aspects. While his own community did not suffer from the alleged heresy of the Provençals, his rebuke bears all the characteristics of discontent with the faithful of his own religion in the light of the dominant faith of Islam, a major leitmotif of his controversial career.

The irony of Abraham's polemic in the epistle could not have been lost on his contemporaries. His comparison of the faith of his coreligionists in Christian Europe with that of the communities of the Islamic world, "from the farthest east to the foremost west," carried a double valence. Beyond the simple contrast of proper and misguided doctrine, Abraham's remarks bespeak the more basic contrast between the religion of Christianity and that of Islam in the eyes of Abraham and many of his Jewish contemporaries in the Near East. While Christianity was perceived, without exception, as idolatrous and polytheistic in essence, Islam was generally viewed as completely and uncompromisingly monotheistic, a view for which Maimonides, Abraham's father, was predominantly, though not exclusively, responsible.⁷ With this in

⁴ *MH*, 51–2.

⁵ For background to this term, the Hebrew equivalent of the Arabic *ra'īs al-yahūd* ("head of the Jews"), see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, II:23–40. On the origins of this office in Egypt, see the now classic study by Mark Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews, ca. 1065–1126* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3–49, and *passim*. On the use of the term Nagid in this book, see the discussion below pp. 16–17.

⁶ For Goitein's expression, "classical Geniza period," see Goitein, *Med. Soc.*, I:18–19 and 29. For his description of this period as one of "physical and educational symbiosis," see *Med. Soc.*, V:9, and see the discussion on symbiosis at the end of this introduction, pp. 30–9.

⁷ See the sources cited in my "Respectful Rival: Abraham Maimonides on Islam," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, ed. A. Meddeb and B. Stora (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), n. 4. For a comparative view of Maimonides'

mind, the full irony of Abraham's critique of the Jews of Christendom and praise of the Jews of Islam comes to the fore. In their current downtrodden state, as a result of generations of decline and degradation in exile, the Jews of his day were depicted as highly swayed and influenced by the dominant faith in their respective environments.⁸ If for the Jews of Christian Europe, he suggested, the influence had largely been a pernicious one, for the Jews of Islam it had had a remarkably salutary impact on the purity of their faith. "The misguided faith concerning these principles [of monotheism]," Abraham continued, "in the land of Shin'ar [Iraq] and the east, Syria and the Beautiful Land [Palestine], Egypt and the land of the west [Maghrab], is negligible for its scarcity. As soon as anyone [with this faith] would utter it in public, even in the company of the ignorant, such a one would be reduced to mockery, derision, and scorn."⁹ The implication is clear. In contrast with some of the greatest sages dwelling in the realm of Christendom, even the greatest ignor-amuses among the Jews of Islam are unwavering and unsullied in their commitment to monotheism. While the anti-rationalist scholars of Provence, as the Nagid acerbically hinted at the end of the passage in the epistle cited above, have been reduced to the status of heresy, the simplest Jew in the realm of Islam, thanks in large part to the salutary influence of their immediate environment, remain impeccable believers.

Here we are confronted with yet another leitmotif of Abraham Maimonides' legacy—intimately connected with the first—the role played by Islam in his effort to reform Jewish practice. Despite appearances to the contrary in the epistle, the Nagid found much to critique in his own community's practical observance and the general state of religious life in Egypt. As we shall soon see, not long after his rise to communal leadership, Abraham became embroiled in a number of communal controversies of various kinds and with varying degrees of tenacity and success. As the foremost authority over all administrative and religious matters affecting Egyptian Jewry, many of the Nagid's initiatives were laden from the beginning with controversy and polemic over the current state of affairs in his community. A number of these controversies involved internal disputes of Jewish practice and scholarship with no bearing on Islam, as was the case with his liturgical reforms. Others, such as his efforts to reintroduce long-defunct postures and rites into synagogue practice, bespeak the more delicate question of the appropriation of religious norms from the Islamic environment. This was all the more evident in the case of his

perception of Islam versus Christianity in light of previous attitudes, see D. Lasker, "Tradition and Innovation in Maimonides' Attitude toward Other Religions," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. J. Harris (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 167–82.

⁸ On the theme of spiritual and religious decline in exile in the thought of the Nagid and his colleagues, see the discussion on pp. 64, n. 85, 161, n. 13, 175, n. 67.

⁹ See *MH*, 54.

pietist revival, which engaged openly and intensively with the Sufi matrix of his day.

A consistent yet complex theme of his polemical writing, as we have already witnessed in the epistle, is the unique role—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—played by the image of Islam as the foil to the current spiritual malaise in the Jewish community. The epistle cited above makes a deliberate point of praising the unadulterated faith of Islam, with the not-so-subtle implication (articulated before and after this passage) that not all Jews, in particular those residing in Christian Europe, deserve such praise. For the discerning reader, however, the epistle includes an additional, more subversive, theme at play in the relationship between Judaism and Islam. The passage begins with the calculated observation that the monotheism of “the children of Ishmael” may be traced historically to the original influence of “the children of Israel,” thereby casting the dominant Islamic faith in a derivative position vis-à-vis its Jewish subjects. The purification of Jewish monotheism after the model of Islam is thus depicted as a return to its origins, ironically mediated by the faith of another.

It is here that the deeper implications of Abraham Maimonides’ campaign to reform Jewish faith and practice in his day emerges with greater clarity, albeit with a surprising twist. The undercurrent of reform can only be understood in light of the paradoxical interplay of Judaism and its host religion. The path to Jewish renewal for Abraham Maimonides and his circle, expressed as a conservative and straightforward appeal to tradition, was a circuitous one, with frequent stops through the spiritual byways of its most intimate rival. More so than at any other point in medieval Jewish history, under crescent or cross, Jewish tradition was explicitly and rather boldly recast through the looking glass of the majority religion. In its fervent call to revive the inner core and ancient traditions of Judaism, the call to religious renewal by Abraham Maimonides and his pietist circle found itself encompassed and thoroughly entangled in the embrace of Islam.