Part I
Background and Context

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1 Introduction to the study of medieval Jewish philosophy

Philosophers sometimes argue that there are particular expressions that are so frequently fought over that they are best characterized as "essentially contested concepts." The concept of Jewish philosophy is just such a concept. There has always been a lot of controversy about what it is, and whether it is anything at all. This is not a problem for Jewish philosophy alone, of course, but affects all philosophies that are described in religious and ethnic terms, and familiar issues of definition then enter the discussion. Is Jewish philosophy philosophy by Jews? That is not such a simple question either, since the whole issue of who is a Jew is complex, and although at the time of the Third Reich the Nazis thought they had a neat definition of the Jewish race, we would probably hesitate to call Catholic priests Jewish thinkers merely on the basis of the fact that they had one Jewish grandparent. On the other hand, it would be wrong to define as a Jewish philosopher only those Jews who had a commitment to Judaism itself, since we know that many people feel themselves to be Jewish and are ethnically Jewish without sharing any religious beliefs at all with their more observant coreligionists. Yet they may have interesting views on religion and philosophy and it seems wrong to disqualify their work as potentially being Jewish philosophy. On the other hand, perfectly observant Jews may write on topics in philosophy that have nothing to do with Judaism, and it would be strange to classify what they do as Jewish philosophy. We seem to be getting back to the idea of Jewish science, a doctrine popular with racists but without much to be said for it otherwise. There is also a good deal of Jewish thought that is close to philosophy (theology, law, discussions of ritual) which is not philosophy, although it is capable of philosophical interest. One would not want to draw the boundaries

of Jewish philosophy too restrictively, yet a wide definition that allowed in all sorts of linked but distinct disciplines is not likely to be productive.

In fact, when we look at the different traditions of philosophical activity that have been called Jewish philosophy, we see much debate over the nature of Jewish philosophy, but not much disagreement about who the Jewish philosophers were. The main characters form a distinct group ranging from Philo right up to contemporary figures such as Levinas. What makes them all Jewish philosophers? One explanation is the nature of the issues they considered, issues that are both philosophical and that treat seriously the view of the world that can be extracted from the Jewish texts. (Actually, on such an account we can justify calling the early work of Levinas philosophy, and his later work Jewish philosophy.) This is reasonable as a starting position, and avoids the suggestion that Jewish philosophy has to accept what might be taken to be the principles of Judaism itself.

What is wrong with this presupposition? There are at least two problems with it. One is the issue as to whether there are principles of Judaism at all, something that has been very controversial in Jewish history. Some thinkers do argue for a set of basic principles, although there is then much discussion about what this set actually contains, but others argue that there is no such set at all, that Judaism is quite open when it comes to basic principles. This is not the more important problem, though. That is the difficulty of combining the universality of philosophy with the particularity of a religious faith. If it is the case that a philosopher was restricted in her work due to the imposition of a religious straitjacket, as it were, then we should hardly call what she did philosophy. Much of the scholarship that has taken place in the field suggests that this is in fact the precise model we should accept of Jewish philosophy. Individual thinkers are committed both to general philosophical principles of one kind or another (depending on where they live, what is in fashion at the time) and also to Judaism, and then they have to reconcile what might seem to be inconsistencies between these two sorts of commitment.

The medieval period is one in which the debate between philosophy and religion is regarded as having dominated the cultural atmosphere of the times. The main arena of intellectual life was the

Iberian peninsula, and especially al-Andalus, the Islamic territories on the peninsula, with its large and well-integrated Jewish community. This is often referred to as a Golden Period in which the three religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism flourished and regarded each other with mutual toleration, but this is a wide exaggeration of the reality. In fact the Middle Ages in the Iberian peninsula were marked by constant strife and interreligious conflict, with occasional periods of relative peace, and intellectual life was difficult even within each religious community, let alone between the different communities. For example, one of the main problems for Jews was the internecine conflicts within the Islamic world, and the changes of regime in al-Andalus had an impact on the lives of the other communities, even the *kitabi* (monotheistic) ones. The conflict between the Christians and the Muslims led to the Jews sometimes being courted as useful allies, but sometimes being persecuted by both sides as dubious elements in the state. One also assumes that then as now large numbers of Jews were converted to other religions, and assimilated thoroughly into the larger and more powerful communities that surrounded them, and in fact it is the debate between the religions that was much more important for Jews in the medieval period rather than the debate within Jewish philosophy. After all, Jewish philosophy was only available to a relatively small part of the community, those who were both sufficiently educated to participate in intellectual debates and who were interested in the particular sort of issues that arise in philosophy as compared with the other theoretical pursuits of Jews, such as the Bible, Talmud, and so on. On the other hand, from the fact that so many translations were made into Hebrew from Arabic and Judeo-Arabic during the medieval period, and well after into the Renaissance, we have to conclude that there was a fairly wide interest in philosophy within a Jewish context, and many individuals within the wider Jewish community must have felt the need to be aware of the sorts of debates that went on in the philosophical world.

One danger we should not fall into is that of treating medieval Jewish philosophy as though it was regarded at the time as just like a subdivision of philosophy itself. It was not, because at the time the concept of philosophy as a discrete academic discipline did not exist. In Arabic the word *hikma* was used far more for philosophy than the specific term *falsafa*, and similarly in Jewish philosophy

the subject was more identified with "wisdom" in its widest sense than with something more specialized. While the educated individual might have wished to know something about philosophy, he would also have wanted to know about science (the first book of Aristotle to be translated into Hebrew is his *Meteorology*) and about a range of other secular types of knowledge. He would have been interested in ideas, the sort of ideas he did not find explicitly mentioned in Jewish works like the Bible and Talmud, and he would have wished to show his sophistication by displaying this interest and a degree of competence at operating with these ideas. It is within this cultural context that Jewish philosophy features in the medieval period.

What are the chief contributions of medieval Jewish philosophy to philosophy itself? Historically there are two important contributions that should be mentioned here. One is that Jewish philosophy played the role of intermediary between Islamic philosophy, and the Greek philosophy it incorporated, and the Christian world. The Jews were the intellectual intermediaries, and often the translators, who made the cultural transmission that played such an important role in the creation of the Renaissance and eventually the Enlightenment possible. Ethnic groups that are international often play this role, since they have the linguistic skills and the transnational links that make it feasible.

The other contribution is not to philosophy as a whole, but to Jewish thought. Due to the influence of Maimonides (d. 1204) philosophy really did enter the Jewish intellectual world in a firm manner, and although many Jews determinedly turned their back on this cuckoo in the nest, the status of Maimonides as a legal thinker imported philosophical ideas into Judaism, albeit rather surreptitiously, through the form of his legal ideas. And although the Jewish community throughout the world has never been large, it has had a large effect on the development of culture in general, through the overrepresentation (in relation to absolute population numbers) of Jews in public and intellectual life, so medieval Jewish philosophy has been significant in the history of ideas.

From a philosophical point of view medieval Jewish philosophy is based on two main principles. Neither principle is original to it, but became definitive. The first principle is that one should pay a lot of attention to the different ways of speaking and of expressing

truth. That is, the rules of theology are different from the rules of political speech, and the rules of prophecy are different from the rules of philosophy. The implication of this thesis is that the idea of truth is far more complex than might appear superficially. This is not an original discovery of Jewish philosophy but comes from al-Farabi, and he developed this thesis after thinking about Aristotle. Yet it is an idea that was turned into a major theme by Maimonides and by many other Jewish thinkers.

The other main point shared by most medieval Jewish philosophers is the issue of theological realism, an issue they felt had to be addressed, and in the case of Maimonides quite decisively so. Maimonides argued against realism, interpreting (some would say reinterpreting) Scripture so that it would fit in with his naturalistic understanding of the character of the universe and its creator. It is often said that we should distinguish between Maimonides the philosopher and Maimonides the Jewish thinker, but nothing could be further from the truth. His philosophical attention is directed almost exclusively on the texts of Judaism, and his religious works are replete with his philosophical views. The challenge of medieval Jewish philosophy is whether a role can be found for God that makes a real difference or whether the name "God" is merely a way of referring to a range of natural events and their organization that has no place for the autonomy of a particular individual.

Linked to this issue, and often less directly addressed, is the significance of being a member of a particular religion, in this case the Jewish religion. Does being Jewish make a real difference, or is it as Christians and Muslims claim stubbornly resisting later revelations that incorporate Judaism and make Judaism redundant? This is a related topic since it might be argued that if there were no real difference between the Jewish understanding of the facts that underlie reality and the interpretation of other faiths, since realism in theology is ruled out, then the point of adhering to a particular faith is difficult to grasp. After all, it is not as though that faith represents the facts accurately, as compared with other competing faiths. On the contrary, we are told that the facts themselves are not important, what is important is what is made of them. This was taken up enthusiastically by Maimonides' opponents, who suggested that, if Maimonides were right in his interpretation of the Bible, then one might as well change from being Jewish when this became inconvenient. After all,

being Jewish is just seeing the world from a particular point of view, and if that point of view is not solidly based on fact, more solidly based than other points of view, then one might as well abandon Judaism if being Jewish is no longer propitious. As we know, many Jews then and indeed today follow the logic of this to abandon their religion, although they find it much harder to change their ethnicity. This argument for conversion is certainly not one Maimonides himself adopted; on the contrary he argued for the preservation of one's faith regardless of the political and personal consequences. But it is an implication of much of his metaphysical system that this is at the very least a question that demands to be asked. What distinguishes being Jewish from adhering to a different religion is the character of Judaism, its many excellences, and its important role in the history of the world, but not for Maimonides a particularly close connection with the truth. This rather subtle argument for a faith, based on its internal rather than external features, did not find universal favor in the Jewish intellectual community, but again it set an agenda, and the question of the grounds of faith had to be discussed and defended in one way or another.

Perhaps a more minor offshoot of this theme was the discussion as to whether there are principles of Judaism, something that came to be energetically argued since the Middle Ages. Given his orientation towards the coherence of Judaism it is hardly surprising that Maimonides stressed the significance of what he took to be the central principles of the faith (and indeed these have entered the liturgy of the synagogue through the hymn "Yigdal elohim hai"). Although this issue is certainly mentioned in earlier rabbinic literature, it was possibly the frenetic marketplace in conversions that led to the need to define the bases of Judaism, so that potential waverers would know what the principles of their faith were and thus how they could defend the faith more efficiently.

This brings out a feature of philosophy of which we should remain constantly aware, and that is how different its pursuit was in the Middle Ages than is the case today. Philosophy was not an academic discipline alongside other disciplines to be chosen or not by a variety of students. It was a set of doctrines, and most importantly techniques, that were intimately tied in with natural science, theology, law, medicine, and intellectual life in general. Thinkers could reject philosophy, but to reject it they had to use it to show why it

should be set aside, something with which we are familiar in Islamic philosophy in the cases of al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya. Philosophy was part and parcel of the increasingly desperate attempts of Islam and Christianity to overwhelm and incorporate the Jewish remnant into their ranks, and became a part of the resistance also. After all, philosophy represents at its purest the rules of argument, and these were vital in the conversion process. (One might be cynical and suggest that most conversions had nothing to do with argument, but were either due to compulsion or to the perceived self-interest of the target group itself. On the other hand, from historical reports it seems that great attention was paid to producing strong arguments for one faith and against others, so one must assume that argument played more than just a cosmetic part in the process.) Argument remains significant for any individual who is aware of a variety of possible interpretations of the facts and the texts that represent those facts, and the increasing sophistication of the Jewish community led to its inevitable involvement in the study of the principles of interpretation themselves. There is a lot of evidence that, even in the rabbinic literature of the Talmud and Mishnah, Greek philosophy plays a role. It is hardly surprising in the Middle Ages, when philosophy came to take on such a large role in intellectual life as a whole, that Greek-inspired thought should come to have an important place again in the Jewish community.

Let us now consider some of the strategies that were employed in dealing with these key issues, and the implications of those strategies.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TECHNIQUE

When philosophy first entered the Islamic world in the ninth century, a debate arose about the respective merits of Greek-inspired thought versus the local Arabic disciplines of grammar, law, theology, and the other Islamic sciences. This debate would have been familiar to Plato, who saw himself as part of a struggle against the sophists in the Greek world. The sophists also thought that they had available to themselves a range of techniques that were appropriate for settling any theoretical and indeed practical issues that might arise. And the advantage of these techniques, of course, is that they were local, they were part and parcel of the local culture

and so embodied the view of that culture on any problems that arose. Now, there is a great temptation within any culture to come to such a view, and the temptation certainly arose within Jewish culture, which also had an extensive and rich tradition of religious sciences and techniques to resolve any and every problem as it arose. In fact, when one looks at the Talmud one sees discussions of problems that reflect issues of relevance when the Temple was operating! So the idea that the local theological sources of understanding how to behave and act, and generally how to understand the world around us, are insufficient for the tasks at hand seemed wrong to many Jews, as it had to many Muslims, and no doubt to many Greeks also.

To naturalize philosophy a number of approaches may be adopted. One is to claim that philosophy is in fact the descendant of religion, and there were stories to that effect, although it is difficult to know how seriously they were expected to be taken. The more plausible approach is to show how valuable philosophy is when applied to religious and other issues, since philosophy is capable of distinguishing clearly between different ways of looking at an issue and adjudicating between those ways. Now, when one looks at religious texts this is far from the case. When one looks at the Talmud, for instance, it is often very difficult to tell what view is the view one should accept or that has the greater plausibility. That is one of the delights of Talmud, that one may construct a wildly unlikely argument out of the sources available in the text, and other sources one may argue are linked to the text, and construct a thesis that at the same time looks as though it should be accepted while obviously being unacceptable. It is just this sort of approach that philosophy will attack, since it will link texts to each other not in terms of weak connectors such as allusion, analogy, and propinquity between passages, but between the logical relationships between terms. It was this conceptual strength of philosophy that made it so significant in various cultures despite its apparent foreignness and the potential danger of allowing rationality to peer into areas that might be better left in the dark, in the view of many. Like Pandora's box, once the ideas are out in the open, it is difficult if not impossible to put them back again, and this happened with philosophy. Once the ideas are out, the only way of getting them back is to use other ideas to carry out the operation, which defeats the whole purpose of the exercise.

The realization that there are many different kinds of writing, and so different techniques need to be applied to assess them, is of major importance. It implies that there is a range of ways of expressing the truth, and that it is only if one understands the range that one will grasp the nature of the different forms of expression. This point was emphasized by Aristotle, and taken up with alacrity in Islamic philosophy by al-Farabi, whose works were much admired by Jewish philosophers, and especially by Maimonides. When the latter goes through the terms in the Torah that he finds problematic and then analyzes them in accordance with his theory of naturalism, he has to explain why the Torah uses words that imply that God is a person and that he is literally an agent. He suggests that these different forms of expression are there to represent truths vividly to an audience that on the whole is not able to recognize those truths unless they are represented imaginatively and figuratively. There is nothing wrong with presenting the truths in this way; on the contrary, this is the right way to present them to a general audience. It follows that the language in the prayer book, and by commentators in the rabbinic literature, replicates this sort of language, although often with greater sophistication, and the more one studies it the more one appreciates the variety one finds within it. This enables the intelligent reader to ask questions about what is not said as well as about what is said. For example, Maimonides thinks it is significant that in the book of Job, Job himself is never called "wise," which Maimonides argues is a signal to readers that he is not taken to be wise, and so his early complaints are to be seen as a reflection of his lack of wisdom. The question then arises: If Job is to be seen as not wise, why did not the text make this clear? Perhaps because his words are not to be seen as so obviously foolish that they are not worth considering. Indeed, they are worth thinking about like everything else in the Bible, but the more alert reader will understand that the intelligence of Job's critique of divine justice masks the underlying shallowness of his presupposition, that God's justice must replicate our notion of justice. This approach to the text, whatever one thinks about its credibility in this particular instance, has radical implications for how to look at texts as a whole. It was not present in any definite way before Maimonides, but it became a firm part of the agenda of Jewish philosophy ever since his works became well known and influential.