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978-1-107-06334-1 - Maimonides and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon

James A. Diamond

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Maimonides and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon

Jewish thought since the Middle Ages can be regarded as a sustained dialogue with Moses Maimonides, regardless of the different social, cultural, and intellectual environments in which it has been conducted. Much of Jewish intellectual history consists of a series of engagements with him, fueled by the kind of “Jewish” rabbinic and esoteric writing Maimonides practiced. This book examines a wide range of theologians, philosophers, and exegetes who share a passionate engagement with Maimonides – assaulting, adopting, subverting, or adapting his philosophical and jurisprudential thought. This ongoing enterprise is critical to any appreciation of the broader scope of Jewish law, philosophy, biblical interpretation, and Kabbalah. Maimonides’ legal, philosophical, and exegetical corpus became canonical in the sense that many subsequent Jewish thinkers were compelled to struggle with it in order to advance their own thought. As such, Maimonides joins the fundamental Jewish canon alongside the Bible, the Talmud, and the Zohar.

James A. Diamond holds the Joseph & Wolf Lebovic Chair in Jewish Studies at the University of Waterloo. He is a leading authority on medieval Jewish thought and philosophy, and his studies have been published widely in all the prominent journals in the fields of Jewish studies, religious studies, and philosophy. His previous two books each garnered the Canadian Jewish Book Award for best scholarly book in the field of Jewish studies, and his last book, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers: Maimonides and the Outsider*, was chosen in 2008 as a Notable Selection by the Jordan Schnitzer Book Awards in the category of Philosophy and Jewish Thought for best book in the previous four years.

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Acknowledgments

Over the course of time researching and writing this book, I have come to appreciate far more profoundly how critical Jewish thought and philosophy have been for my life, from both a scholarly and an existential perspective. My formative years were spent in a setting where grandparents were conspicuously absent for those raised by parents who immigrated to North America after surviving the very darkest periods in Jewish history. As a result, when raising my own family, I considered myself a bridge between that unfathomable devastation experienced in the past by both my parents and the parents of my wife Florence, and the unlimited opportunities afforded by our welcoming liberal democracy to our children in the future. The sturdiness of the bridge hinges on the depth of the connection to the Jewish tradition that could never be superficial or uninformed.

After years of reflection on the various struggles to somehow come to grips with that which will forever remain beyond comprehension, I realized I could not cloud the next generation's future with the dismal theological and philosophical conclusions I had entertained. The prospects of the deaths of both God and civilization do not offer the best of ideational frameworks within which life could thrive. But more than that was the lived challenge of our parents whose own resistance to radical evil was to fulfill that 614th *mitzvah* of surviving as Jews. That meant ensuring their children's continuing commitment to Judaism and the Jewish nation. The possibility of frustrating their *qiyum hamitzvah* was never a viable alternative. This book could not have been written without their sacrifices and is in some small way a fruit of that *mitzvah*. It could also not have been completed without my wife Florence's inspiration, encouragement, and critical eye. My love for her is best captured as the חולי האהבה described by Maimonides in the concluding chapter of Sefer HaMada.

In my capacity as a bridge between my parents' generation and the future, I dedicate this book to my children Shimon, Yonah, and Nina, who are themselves

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the ultimate living testaments to their grandparents' devotion, will, and refusal to surrender to the forces that would have annihilated them, their heritage, and their people. Without them, and others like them, the Jewish canon I unfold in this book would become a relic consigned to some museum dedicated to an extinct culture that the murderers had so perversely conspired to erect. The rabbinic tradition attributes the childlessness of the biblical matriarchs and patriarchs to God's longing for their prayers in order to realize their aspirations. Children are thus a synthesis of a mutually invigorating relationship that sustains both humanity and the Transcendent. Their lives reflect both their parents' longing and the dependency of the Transcendent on the human voice and address.

I would like to thank the Social Sciences Humanities and Research Council of Canada for its gracious support of the research invested in this project. In addition, I extend my profound appreciation to Moshe Halbertal, Joseph Weiler, and the Tikvah Center for Law and Jewish Civilization at New York University for providing me the opportunity, the camaraderie, and the ideal environment within which to complete this book. The collegiality, encouragement, and constructive criticism I enjoyed during my year as a Tikvah Fellow immeasurably enhanced the quality of my work and the very experience of working it through to the printed page. Finally thanks to Miriam-Simma Walfish for her keen editorial skills and Lew Bateman and Shaun Vigil at Cambridge University Press for their gracious efforts in welcoming my work to the prestigious Cambridge catalog of Jewish scholarship.

Earlier versions of parts of this book have appeared in various publications, and I would like to express my gratitude for permission to reprint revised chapters of the following:

Chapter 5 from "Abarbanel's Exegetical Subversion of Maimonides' Akedah: Transforming a Knight of Intellectual Virtue into a Knight of Existential Faith," in *The Hebrew Bible in Fifteenth Century Spain: Exegesis, Philosophy, Literature, and the Arts*, eds. Jonathan Decter and Arturo Prats Olivan (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 75–100.

Chapter 7 from "Maimonides, Spinoza, and Buber Read the Hebrew Bible: The Hermeneutical Keys of Divine 'Fire' and 'Spirit' (Ruach)," *Journal of Religion* 91, no. 3 (2011): 320–43.

Chapter 8 from "Exegetical Idealization: Hermann Cohen's Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Maimonides," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2010): 49–73.

Chapter 10 from "A Kabbalistic Reinvention of Maimonides' Legal Code: R. Abraham Isaac Kook's Commentary on Sefer HaMada," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 11 (2012): 345–84.