DRAFT

*Matters Great and Small: a Response to Yitzhak Y. Melamed’s “Salomon Maimon and the Failure of Modern Jewish Philosophy”*

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I enjoyed Professor Melamed’s great polemical blast against what we might call the Mendelssohn-Levinas canon of modern Jewish philosophy, and I am in agreement with his characterization of Solomon Maimon’s thought.[[1]](#footnote-1) In fact—and this will not surprise him since we have been discussing these matters for something like 15 years now—I agree with the general thrust of Melamed’s argument. But he paints with too broad a brush. In fact, though few if any philosophers of his generation have done finer, closer textual work, his erudite indignation sometimes so carries him away here that he seems to be painting with a spray can. Let me make a few local points before moving to the larger issue.

Although Melamed footnotes a remark of Zev Harvey about the Biblicism of medieval Jewish philosophers, he may underrate its import. In his ethical will the 14th- century Maimonidean Joseph ibn Caspi admonishes his son to learn Talmud as a basic prerequisite for a Jewish philosophical life—and he would have been unlikely to be satisfied with mere familiarity with the famous YA’AL KAGAM mnemonic. I imagine that minimally he would have expected his son to not only know the 6 sugyot in which Abbaye’s position won out but also the ability to read and reconstruct the arguments in each.[[2]](#footnote-2)

And yet in the same ethical will, Caspi also expresses contempt for those who only know Talmud and depicts rabbis as often being petty ritual tyrants. More importantly, he does not seem to regard rabbinic texts being central to philosophical thought. Not so the bible. In fact, Ibn Caspi’s work primarily consists in philosophical exegesis. Nor is this unique to Ibn Caspi. His master Maimonides frequently takes an instrumental or even deprecatory attitude toward rabbinic teachings, contrasting them with those of scripture and philosophy.[[3]](#footnote-3) There are many reasons for this, among them the belief that the biblical wisdom books reflected an ancient Jewish tradition of philosophy (represented by the great philosopher-king Solomon), but in any event the Biblicism of Jewish philosophy is much older than Mendelssohn. Moreover, like the Kabbalists, medieval philosophers never challenged rabbinic authority or the Babylonian Talmud, but they did regard themselves as representing a distinct and superior intellectual tradition. After all, as had been famously remarked in the Talmud itself (TB Sukka 28a, though the context is often forgotten), the disputes of Abbaye and Rava—that is halachic arguments—are “a small thing,” the mysteries of the Divine Chariot described in Ezekiel (which Maimonides and his followers understood to be a parable Aristotelian metaphysics) is “a great thing.”

1. Though I do wish that he had given us a close, illustrative reading of a particular philosophical claim that Maimon made with regard to Judaism or—in some ways just as interesting—a philosophical argument in which he deployed a classic Jewish text or figure to make a more general epistemological or metaphysical claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Incidentally, I would bet that Moses Mendelssohn would have met this requirement. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Three key passages in this regard: Introduction to the Mishneh Torah; the famous parable at the end of the *Guide of the Perplexed*; and *Shemonah Peraqim* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)