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Comments on Yitzhak Melamed, “Salomon Maimon and the Failure of Modern Jewish Philosophy”

Yitzhak Melamed’s challenging, provocative paper argues that, “[Salomon] Maimon is the *only* modern Jewish *philosopher* worthy of the title.” For Melamed, to be a Jewish philosopher one must satisfy three criteria: (i) be a philosopher, that is one who articulates “original and precise analyses of fundamental concepts and phenomena”; (ii) have “knowledge of the subject matter” of Judaism; and (iii) “*attempt to provide a well-argued and informed account of Jewish religious and cultural beliefs and practices* (emphasis Melamed’s).”

Central to Melamed’s thesis is his conception of the “subject matter” of Judaism. For Melamed, while modern Jewish philosophers have often seen the Bible as the central text of Judaism, in fact it is the Talmud, which is Judaism’s most important text.

On the basis of his criteria, Melamed demotes the canonical figures of modern Jewish philosophy. Moses Mendelssohn, Nahman Krochmal and Joseph Soloveitchik were poor philosophers and Benedict Spinoza and Hermann Cohen lacked sufficient Talmudic knowledge. Melamed says little about other canonical modern Jewish philosophers such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Strauss, Emil Fackenheim and Emmanuel Levinas, but one suspects that he regards them as neither as particularly good philosophers nor as especially well-versed in Jewish texts. The only modern Jewish philosopher left standing is Salomon Maimon who was both a profound philosopher and an excellent Talmudist.

For Melamed, neglecting the Talmud in favor of the Bible was an innovation of German Jews. He observes that, “traditionally, it was quite rare for Jews to *study* the Bible…one could easily be a Talmid Chochom without knowing the order of the Kings, Priests, or even Prophets of Israel.” Referring to the recently publishing *Jewish Study Bible,* Melamed writes that such a book “would appear completely ridiculous in a traditional setting” where studying the Bible was for children and individuals “with limited intellectual capacities.”

Melamed’s paper is very helpful in challenging us to rethink common assumptions about what constitutes modern Jewish philosophy from an angle that is rarely addressed. But I do not see things his way.

To begin with, the idea of a Jewish Study Bible is not new. Its called the *Mikraot Gedolot* and it was not composed for children. I would venture that one would be hard pressed to find a Jewish child today who could easily make his way through commentaries in the *Mikraot Gedolot* such as Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides let alone Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel.

While Melamed claims that one need not know much Nevi’im and Ketuvim to be a Talmid Chacham, Rashi and Hazal would disagree. In his commentary on Exodus 31: 18 sv. *Kekhalto*, Rashi cites a midrash that appears in Midrash Tanhuma and Yalkut Shimoni Shir Hashirim, which reads as follows: “Rav Huna said in the name of Resh Lakish, just as a bride adorns herself with twenty-four ornaments [see Isaiah 3:18-24--MG] so a Talmid Hakham must be an expert [*Baki*] in twenty-four books [that is the twenty-four books of the Bible-- MG].”
 Rashi’s comment is not a throwaway. The Talmudic rabbis were clearly very well versed in the *entire* Bible. Bible study was likewise clearly important in medieval Ashkenaz and Sefarad. How else does one explain the brilliant Bible commentaries of Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, Abravanel and many others? In Sephardic circles, the Bible has always been a crucial component of the educational curriculum for advanced students as well as for beginners. Shlomo Dov Goitein has demonstrated that this was also true of Mediterranean communities. Italian schools traditionally taught a broad range of texts with the Bible occupying an important place in the curriculum. It was only in Ashkenaz beginning in the late twelfth century that the Talmud begins to overtake the rest of the curriculum. In sixteenth century Poland and Germany, studying the Talmud and legal codes using various analytic methods (*pilpul*) came to dominate the curriculum even for children and Bible study was neglected or even rejected. The increasing Ashkenazi neglect of the Bible was not without controversy eliciting criticism from famed Rabbis such as R. Judah Loewe (Maharal) and R. Jacob Emden.

I believe that Melamed’s understanding of what constitutes the subject matter of Judaism reflects a contemporary Haredi perspective. The contemporary Haredi educational system tilts the curriculum for males heavily towards Talmud and marginalizes intensive Bible study assuming this has been the Jewish way of learning among all communities since time immemorial. Melamed’s debt to contemporary Haredi thinking is likewise evident in his defining the subject matter of Judaism as a textual tradition studied by elite males. Why don’t texts studied by non-elite males or women or the social practices of everyday Jews count when considering the subject matter of Judaism?

While Melamed generally focuses on what qualifies one to be a Jewish philosopher, he also addresses the broader question of what makes one a modern Jewish thinker. He observes that, “treatments of ‘Modern Jewish Philosophy’ or ‘Modern Jewish Thought’ often reveal striking omissions” not including important thinkers such as “R. Yoel Teitelbaum, R. Welwale Soloveitchik, R. Meir Simcha ha-Kohen of Dewinsk, the Steipeler, R. Aharon Kotler, and R. Shimon Shkop.” Melamed choice of these figures is striking. He might have also mentioned other Talmudically trained thinkers who are regularly omitted from discussions of modern Jewish thought such as the Nazir (R. David Cohen), Shmuel David Luzzatto, R. Elijah Benamozegh, or David Weiss Halivni. What unites the figures on Melamed’s list is that contemporary Haredim revere them as eminent authorities (*Gedolim*).

Melamed presents German Jews’ interest in the Bible as an imitation of German Protestantism (Chukkas Hagoyim?) that betrays authentic Judaism. On Melamed’s account, not only did German Jews focus on the Bible, they “rejected the Talmud.” As Melamed puts it, “The modern German Jew exchanged the Talmud for the Bible because this was the manner by which one could become a respected citizen. The bizarre text of the Pharisees could not stand at the center of Jewish Protestantism. In order to imitate his Lutheran neighbor, the German Jew had to adopt his neighbor’s texts. If my neighbor studies the Bible, why can I not do the same?”

Melamed asserts that German Jews turned to the Bible and rejected the Talmud in imitation of German Protestants. They did this for purely social and political reasons, namely as a way of gaining social acceptance and political rights from German Protestants. Scholars generally agree that political and social equality was an important concern for German Jews and that one cannot understand the development of German Judaism without it. But they also generally agree that German Judaism cannot be *reduced* to this concern as German-Jewish thinkers by and large sought to vigorously defend Judaism and to instill a sense of Jewish pride. To be sure, most German-Jewish thinkers accepted the Protestant dichotomy between universal=good and exclusivist=bad and simply reversed the equation with Judaism being the true universal religion and Christianity being the exclusivist one. But it cannot be gainsaid that by and large German Jewish thinkers sought to uphold Jewish distinctiveness by asserting Judaism’s *superiority* over Protestant Christianity.

In my own research, I have not found that German Jews generally rejected the Talmud. What most German Jews decried was the *exclusive* curricular emphasis on the Talmud and the speculative, pilpulistic methods by which Talmud was studied. Many of the important eighteenth and nineteenth century German-Jewish thinkers had serious Talmudic educations and they well understood that Judaism was not a religion of the Bible, but rather of the Rabbis. Consider a few examples: (1) the founder of *Wissenschaft* Leopold Zunz called his programmatic statement on the aims of Wissenschaft *Etwas Über die rabbinsicher Literatur.* In this essay, Zunz noted that the proper study of Jewish *Wissenschaft* was post-Biblical literature, which he called rabbinic, or simply “*jüdische Literatur*”; (2) The most important book by Abraham Geiger, the founder of Reform Judaism, was his *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel*. Despite its title, this book is a brilliant study of rabbinic Judaism; (3) The most important work by Zacharias Fränkel, the founder of Positive-Historical Judaism (which when transplanted to America came to be called “Conservative Judaism”) was his *Darkhe Hamishnah* a groundbreaking study of rabbinic literature using historical-critical methods.

Indeed, Ahad Haam famously chided German-Jewish Wissenschaft scholarsfor being too focused on rabbinic literature and neglecting the Bible!

Lest I be misunderstood, I wholeheartedly agree with Melamed that familiarity with rabbinic texts is an essential desideratum for serious work in modern Jewish philosophy. The question is how much knowledge is needed. Let’s consider the (arguably) three most influential works of medieval Jewish philosophy-- Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed,* Saadya’s *Sefer Emunot veDe’ot* and Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari.* Maimonides describes the *Guide* as having two aims-- the first being to explain “certain terms occurring the books of prophecy” and the second aim as explaining “very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets.” The *Guide* is a book on the Bible. Of course, Maimonides frequently cites rabbinic literature in the *Guide,* but he cites the Bible much more often. Kafah’s index to his translation of the *Moreh* contains twelve pages of biblical citations and less than four pages of rabbinic citations. It goes without saying that Maimonides possessed breathtaking knowledge of the Talmud and rabbinic literature. But for the most part this learning is not evident in the *Guide.* Nearly all of his the citations to rabbinic literature refer to aggadata and midrashim—light stuff. The same is even truer of *Sefer Emunot Vede’ot* and the *Kuzari.* Saadya clearly had a vast knowledge of rabbinic literature, yet the overwhelming majority of his citations are to the Bible and not rabbinic literature (in the Rosenbloom edition—seventeen pages of citations to the Bible to less than two pages of citations to rabbinic literature). Similarly, the vast majority of citations in the *Kuzari* are to the Bible and unlike Maimonides and Saadya Halevi, Halevi apparently did not have a deep grasp of Talmudic halakhic discourse.

The level of rabbinic knowledge in the *Guide, Sefer Emunot Vede’ot* and the *Kuzari* approximates what one can acquire by learning *Ein Yaakov* and Chumash with Rashi. I agree that a modern Jewish philosopher should have knowledge of rabbinic literature. But it is not clear to me that they need to be able to carefully work through the talmudic debates between Abaye and Rava let alone dissect a Tosafos or a Reb Chaim.

Let’s return to Maimon. While Melamed considers Maimon “the *only* modern Jewish *philosopher* worthy of the title,” in fact Maimon does not satisfy Melamed’s own criteria for being considered a Jewish philosopher. For while Maimon was a deep philosopher and had an excellent grounding in Talmud, he never provided a “*well-argued and informed account of Jewish religious and cultural beliefs and practices*.” In a word, Maimon had no philosophy of Judaism.

Finally, there is a certain paradox in Melamed’s holding up Maimon as the paradigm of an authentic, Jewish philosopher. For “Protestant Jews” like Mendelssohn, Cohen, Buber, and Strauss never approached a pastor seeking to convert to Protestant Christianity. Maimon did.

Melamed has initiated an important conversation on modern Jewish thought and philosophy and its future. I look forward to a robust debate.