

BRIEF REVIEW OF AN ARTICLE ON KARAISM AND MAIMONIDES

Over the Sabbath I read “Maimonides and the Karaites: From Critic to Cultural Hero” by Daniel J. Lasker, who is a professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, from 2007.

The article charts two amazing progressions. The first is an apparent change in the thinking of Maimonides about the Karaite heresy.

The Karaites rejected rabbinic contributions to Judaism that in any way went beyond the literal statements in the Torah. In doing so, they denied the basic tenet of Judaism that when Moses promulgated the written Torah, he also disseminated an oral Torah, which came to be memorialized eternally in the Talmud and its associated writings.

Maimonides early thinking on this subject, before he came to live in Egypt, was a fairly radical position in which he ruled that Karaism was a capital heresy. This was probably before he had ever met any Karaites. How the death penalty was to be enforced, and who was to enforce it was unclear, but he does give a thirdhand report that in Andalusia such a sentence was actually carried out.

However, after having come into contact with a large and well-integrated community of Karaites in Egypt, Maimonides apparently, perhaps, changed his prescription to one which recommended patient principled dialogue toward the goal of persuading the Karaites to return to the fold.

What is remarkable and paradoxical was that historically the Karaites did come to be persuaded to become Maimonideans, if not exactly Rabbanite Jews. The Karaites effected a complete transformation in which within several hundred years they found a way to adopt the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide of the Perplexed* as sacred Karaite texts.

Prof. Lasker tells this incredible story well. Part of that story, which appears to be consonant to his own views, is that the Karaites read into Maimonides’ words a secret commitment to Karaite ideology.

My problem with Prof. Lasker is that he, like so many others, is an adherent of the sect of academics who are Neo-Straussians. This sect finds ingenious ways to read non-Jewish and anti-religious doctrines that Maimonides did *not* hold into a secret doctrine that they assert he did hold. I have written about this problem, especially in my *Commentator’s Preface* to my commentary called *The Guide: An Explanatory Commentary on Each Chapter of Maimonides Guide of the Perplexed* (now finished through the beginning of volume II):

“My chief idea was to start from the premise that Maimonides was what we now call an Orthodox Jew. In other words, Maimonides believed in the principles and practices of Judaism that he codified in the Mishneh Torah. This may not strike you as a surprising claim; but trends in academic interpretation have made Maimonides fit a completely different picture. While it is rare to find portrayals of Maimonides as a proto-Reform Jew, an agnostic, and even an atheist, I have heard such claims. More significantly, he has been made out to be a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a Pyrrhonian sceptic, and an anti-cabalist. Others, uncomfortable with his professed views, have him opposing the

restoration of the sacrificial rite in a restored Temple. They would like to portray Maimonides as an opponent of creation ex nihilo, the power of prayer and the particular providence promised to observant Jews. I reject such claims. Unfortunately, it will not be easy to dissuade those who think that Maimonides concealed antireligious notions in the Guide. They prefer to think that he secretly held views more palatable to secularists.”

Now he is a secret Karaite. When will this end?

Strauss and the neo-Straussians did not invent this pernicious line of interpretation. At the very time of the emergence of Maimonides’ writings, his translator, R. Shmuel Ibn Tibbon, and the so-called Radical Maimonideans of Provençal, were the first to try to assert that Maimonides had a secret doctrine. They did not believe his explicit rejection of Aristotelian eternalism but argued that he was a secret opponent of creationism.

One bad result of this premodern deconstructionism was to inflame the rabbinic anti-Maimonidean reactionaries. They collaborated in the consignment of his writings to the fires of the *auto-da-fé*.

But we can add to the list of secrets that Maimonides allegedly did not let the masses in on that he was a closet Karaite. This paradoxical result resulted in the demoralization of Karaism. This has led to the historical diminution of the movement to the point where there are barely 50,000 Karaites left in the world, and their rapprochement with rabbinic Judaism continues apace. It did not happen quite the way Maimonides would have expected it to happen, though.

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