

MODERNIZING MAIMONIDES

I appreciated both the content and tone of David C. Flatto's review of Joel L. Kraemer's new biography of Maimonides. I agree that the volume is a valuable and timely contribution to Maimonidean studies. It is the first new historical biography since the 1930's (A. J. Heschel's German biography is from 1935, translated into English in 1982; Yellin and Abraham's English biography is from 1903), and the first to make serious use of documents from the Cairo Genizah. Kraemer skillfully guides the reader through those documents, making thoughtful judgments about many of the still contentious issues of Maimonides' youth, his travels, and the politics of Abbuyid Egypt. I especially appreciated his mini-travelogues of Cordova, Fez, Acre and Old Cairo (Fustat).

Where Kraemer fails is with Maimonides' contributions to the history of ideas. I agree with Mr. Flatto's conclusion that Kraemer "perpetuates the dichotomy" between the religious and the philosophical sides of Maimonides' character. It may be too much to expect of a modern academic to balance these two sides fairly, since the modern academy finds it so difficult to accord significant merit to religious thought. When Kraemer, allegedly in Maimonides' voice (with no reference given), says, "religion is an imitation of philosophy," he tells us more about his own view than he does about Maimonides' view.

Kraemer is at his worst in his chapter about the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides' great contribution to the history of ideas.

We expect a good historian to show that the Islamic *Falasifa* influenced Maimonides views in *Guide*, but we also expect him to show how Maimonides found his own way. The *Falasifa* tended to reinterpret divine actions as natural actions. Kraemer identifies Maimonides with the *Falasifa*, especially with Al-Farabi. If Maimonides were merely writing the *Guide* as a sort of Jewish version of Farabian philosophy, there would be no reason to accord the *Guide* more importance than as a footnote to Al-Farabi.

Kraemer takes this philosophic stance because he is an adherent of the Straussian party in Maimonidean interpretation. For all of his many virtues, Leo Strauss might not always be the best guide to the *Guide*, although his views are far more nuanced and ambiguous than the reified version of Strauss that appears in the writings of the Straussians.

Critical in this regard is the issue of the creation or eternity of the universe. Kraemer, speaking for the Straussian party, denies that Maimonides means what he says when he holds that God created the universe *ex nihilo*. In light of the recent exemplary work of Kenneth Seeskin to prove that Maimonides actually did mean what he said (*Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, Cambridge, 2005), it is hard to understand Kraemer's contrary position (he footnotes Seeskin, but to no effect).

Worse yet are Kraemer's insistent if risible attempts to identify Maimonides with Baruch Spinoza, who lived four centuries after Maimonides, and who, in Strauss's eyes, represented the major break with the classical tradition of Maimonides.

These problems do not show up as much in Kraemer's treatment of Maimonides' famous legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, but Kraemer attempts to make Maimonides more of a modern thinker than he was. In this regard, witness Kraemer's anachronistic and patronizing attempt to make Maimonides a champion of women's rights, which overstates the case.

Just because a medieval thinker does not conform to modern social expectations should not reduce him in our thought, indeed, we may find that we can learn thing or two from him.

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