

Introduction into Jewish Philosophy

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Jewish philosophy is traditionally largely connected to the Jewish religion. Until the era of enlightenment, the major emphasis in Jewish education laid on the study of the Talmud and Torah. The Hasidic philosophy (חסידות) used the Jewish vernacular languages, such as Yiddish, as language of instruction and later as literature language for Ashkenazi Jews. With the growing influence of the Enlightenment in Europe, a counter-philosophy called Haskalah (השכלה), often named “Jewish enlightenment” grew into being, emphasizing the Hebrew language and classical liturgy. Most interestingly, it were not in the places where Jews had liberal rights such as in Great Britain or the Netherlands, but in Germany and Russia where enlightened ideas rised, and where Jews were mostly persecuted (Raisin, 1913; Akadem, without year). The Hasidic branch developed in medieval Western Germany at around the 12th century, but later was reborn in Poland-Lithuania and Russia, and thus called ‘modern Hasidism’. The latter one was founded by Israel ben Elieser right after the Jewish pogroms in Eastern Europe during the Polish-Cossack War from 1648-57. Hasidic traditions emphasize mystical traditions and faith. People shall gather in the communities on Sabbath – known as shabes in Yiddish’ – to pray and chant together and come closer to God through extasis. In addition, the Rabbi – known as Rebbe in Yiddish – tells stories and parables to teach morality, virtue and a righteous life. The community life stands in the foreground and thus Orthodox Jews mainly lived assimilated from the rest of the population, while the Maskilims – followers of Enlightenment – suggested integration and reason as highest priority (cp. Leber, without year).

While the Hasidic and Haskalah tradition came into being in the New Age, there were several Jewish philosophical schools in the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, philosophy was not subjected to reasoning, but a helping tool for religion (Rembaum, 2007). Despite influences from Graeco-Roman philosophy, Islamic influences also can be found. The Egyptian philosopher Saadia Ben Joseph founded a Jewish school of the Kalam (an Early Islamic philosophical school) in the 9th century, being the first Jew after Philo to bring Biblical sources and Ancient Greek sources in harmony (ibid.). Saadia assumes that God is created out of nothing and thus created everything. As such he did not have any benefit in creating the world but just did so because he wanted to, and by creating it he could make people obey him and benefit them for good behavior (Rembaum, 2007: 60). It shares the thought

with Islamic Kalam philosophy which states that the universe was created out of nothing and therefore it must be created out of something greater: God (Craig, 2000: 149). The rational idea behind it is that everything which begins has a cause and the universe began to exist somewhere, so it must have a cause. If nothing existed before the universe then the cause must be God (cp. Craig, 2000; Craig & Moreland, 2009).

Jewish Neo-Platonism was founded by Solomon ibn Gabirol in the 11th century. The Spanish-Jewish philosopher who wrote in Arabic had the image of God that God is not graspable by physical senses and therefore is hidden to us. Anyways, he has to be there since he is the source of the world (Rembaum, 2007: 61). Everything goes back to a First Author which equals the world of the Ideas, and every final cause must have part of this first author, and therefore share a part of the idea. Like Plato, he writes dialogues, though Solomon uses to set it between master and disciple as can be seen in his *Fons vitae*. Concerning the nature of the soul, he suggests “The soul is lofty, discriminating, pervading all and perceiving all. It pursues and comprehends all things by its potencies that permeate all. (The Master continues) In view of this, I suggest that you first study the science of matter and form, because this first division of philosophy is prior to the two subsequent ones” (Solomon, 2005:12). In addition, Solomon defines knowledge as the goal of life, including knowledge of oneself and other things. As such, knowledge shall lead to deeds which separate the soul, as life force, from things harming it. Therefore, there is a certain connection between knowledge and soul. In addition, man is reasonable and has to strive for reason as will of the Sublime One, which is God. Solomon speaks through “The Master”: “Since to know is the most excellent of all the functions of man, what he most of all needs to seek is knowledge; and the most necessary knowledge is to know himself so that in the light of this he can understand all that exists apart from himself; for his nature encompasses and permeates all things and all are subject to his supremacy.” (Solomon, 2005: 5). Like Plato, Solomon proposes a tripartite soul, which shall go back to a Higher World, and thus it needs knowledge. Knowledge shall purify the soul to bring it back to a higher stage – therefore, closer to God.

Moses bin Maimon (called Rambam) is a 12th century Aristotelian philosopher in the Jewish tradition. The difficulty between Aristotelianism and Judaism is the creation of the universe which Aristotle explains with an unmoved mover and thus an unawareness and unintentional creation which contradicts Biblical accounts. To solve this problem, Moses bin Maimon simply comes to the conclusion that Aristotle could be wrong with this point (Rembaum, 2007: 63 f.).

These influences of Jewish philosophy kept the main inspiration for Jewish community life, since traditionally people did not pay attention to individuals but the collective will counted, until Moses Mendelssohn – the “Socrates of Berlin” – declared Kant as maxime of all philosophy. Mendelssohn wanted to find the Promised Land in Germany and thus rejected a Jewish State as proposed by the forerunners of Zionism. In annotation to Plato’s *Phaedo*, Mendelssohn published his own *Phaedo* in 1767. Unlike previous Jewish philosophers who stayed mainly within Jewish intellectuals, Mendelssohn received attention from a non-Jewish audience.

His core teaching is the idea that there is a difference between imagination and reality and therefore we can be misled. We have to avoid this misleading through reason. Anyways, we can never find the thing-in-itself as only God knows it (a Platonic remark on the Ideas).

Rationality before religion paved the way to a Jewish secularization. Through this attempt, not religious laws stood in the foreground but moral ethics which shall lead to a societal integration. The Maskilims therefore stood in a clear opposition with the Hasidic philosophers. Paradoxically, the Maskilims who sought integration used the religious language Hebrew and strived for its revival, while the Orthodox Jews preferred Yiddish as daily language rather than the religious Hebrew. Anyways, since Hebrew was not alive for many centuries and just used for liturgical purposes, Yiddish as well as other Jewish languages, such as Ladino in Spain, Italy and Greece; Judeo-Arabic in North Africa and the Middle East; Jewish-Persian (such as Judeo-Bokhari and Judeo-Tat), as well as Judeo-Georgian, became not only languages for daily communication, but also community languages for instructing religious studies. As such, the Maskilim saw the different Jewish languages a kind of imitation of a source language that degenerated due to isolation, and Hebrew as prestige language of the Jews should be used instead. However, as Hebrew was not a daily spoken language, the messages in Hebrew could not really reach the masses leading to the fact that the Maskilim instrumentalized Yiddish for their purposes.

To put it in a nutshell, modern Jewish philosophy has three epochs, the first starts in the Middle Ages, using influences from surrounding religions such as Islam, Christianity, but also classical philosophy (Platonism and Aristotelianism) and try to bring these schools in harmony with Judaism. The Jewish Kalam emphasize that God is the creator who created the universe *ex nihilo* and his creation can be observed and studied (through holy texts). God is a perfect undivided Being unreachable for man. Jewish Platonism is a two world concept. As such, all things in the perceptual world share a part of the ideal world, but in the perceptual world everything is made of matter and form which can be

found everywhere and nothing is without matter and form as it is created, and this goes back to the first author. The second era is the era between Hasidic and enlightened philosophy. The Hasidic tradition continues religious interpretations and focusses on internal matters of the Jewish community, based on understanding the faith; while Secular Jews strive for societal integration and secular science. The third phase starts in the end of the 19th century with the rise of Proto-Zionism, which is neither really secular, nor in a religious continuation, but a try to reform Judaism by seeking the promised land and go back to Biblical beginnings. In contrast to these, Jewish philosophers also engaged in Socialism and anti-monarchical activities. The second and third phase mainly existed parallel. Anyways, to put it short, the three phases of Modern Jewish philosophy are 'Middle Ages wisdom-seeking' (c. 800-1400), the dispute between Hasidics and Maskilim (1770-1880), and Zionism vs. diaspora dispute (c.1860-1950).

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