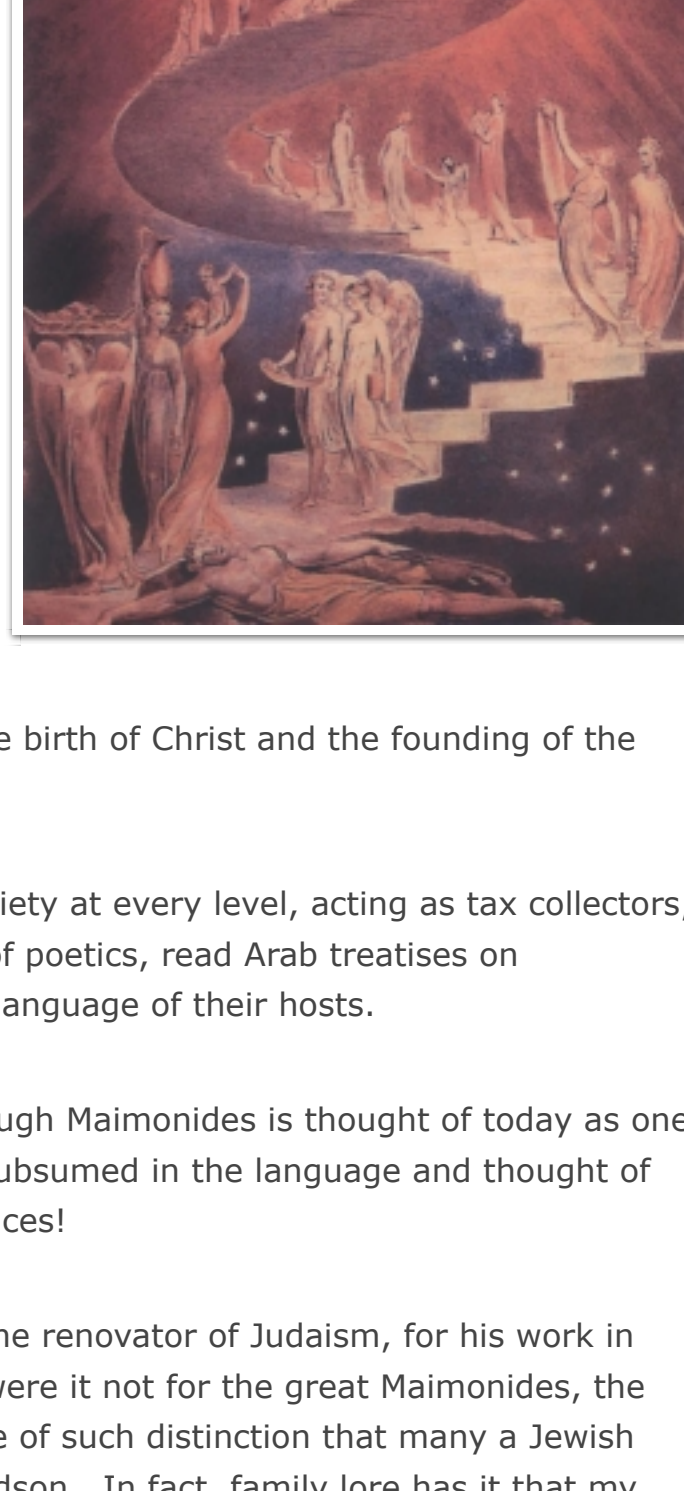


Moses Maimonides and the Sufis of Islam

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History is one of the first casualties of war. Not all history, of course - facts that stoke enmity and help exacerbate tensions between combatants are "uncovered" by political leaders and media outlets and used to justify hostilities. It is only the chronicles of better days between warring peoples that are deemed unnecessary, perhaps vaguely unpatriotic. The current Palestinian/Israeli situation is certainly no different, with each side pointing to negative aspects in their shared history, either recent or far off, to rationalize the ratcheting up of propaganda, odium and hostilities.



There is another history concerning Muslims and Jews, however, just as true as some of the tales of hatred, though completely ignored, that paints a very different picture of relations between these two Biblical cousins. Hardly a peripheral affair, this tale has been willfully ignored in the cacophony of suicide bomb explosions and strafing retaliations. But it is stories such as this, with its tale of mutual respect and admiration between Muslims and Jews, which can help facilitate the first tentative steps towards a current peace.

This tale began nearly a millennia ago, in the bosom of one of the most multi-cultural societies in the history of humankind. For a few hundred years in medieval Islam, from about 850-1200, Jews, Christians and the host Muslims enjoyed a flowering of culture, society and religion in southern Spain that was previously unknown among these monotheistic religious brethren. And Jews themselves enjoyed a Jewish Golden age, thriving in the most open-minded culture they were to live in between the birth of Christ and the founding of the United States.

During this era, when 90% of Israel lived under Muslim rule, Jews threaded themselves into Muslim society at every level, acting as tax collectors, policemen, secretaries of state and even prime ministers to Muslim caliphs. They copied Arabic forms of poetics, read Arab treatises on everything from astronomy to medicine, studied the Koran and Arabic grammar and spoke fluently the language of their hosts.

Born into this open-minded milieu was one of Judaism's greatest thinkers, Moses Maimonides. And though Maimonides is thought of today as one of the most important and quintessential Jewish thinkers of all time, the reality is more complicated. Subsumed in the language and thought of his Islamic surroundings, much of Maimonides thought and ideas actually stemmed from *Muslim* influences!

Moses Maimonides was probably the most important Jewish thinker in the past millennia. Considered the renovator of Judaism, for his work in fusing philosophical and mystical aspects of the ancient religion, one recent scholar even averred that were it not for the great Maimonides, the Jewish religion itself would have fractured irrevocably into its various constituent parts.^[1] He is a figure of such distinction that many a Jewish grandmother the world-over traces her lineage back to Maimonides - and forward to her very own grandson. In fact, family lore has it that my great-grandmother herself would proudly announce at gatherings and cocktail parties that she, too, was descended from the great Eagle of the Synagogue!

Living in this fecund time for relations between Muslims and Jews, quite unlike our own epoch, Maimonides created bridges of understanding between the two cultures of which we would do well to take note. The great master built much of his seminal Jewish thought on a foundation of earlier Islamic religious and spiritual thinkers. In the story of this great Jewish master's attraction to and inspiration by the Sufis, or Islamic mystics, perhaps we can appreciate a little better the profound and positive historical relationship that has existed between Jews and Muslims - and see how far contemporary politics has dragged these two peoples from their shared mystical roots.

Moses Maimonides was born in 1135, into a well-respected family in Cordoba, in al-Andalus, Spain. The Maimonides clan traced its lineage back through a series of religious leaders to Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi (2nd and 3rd century), a well-known historical figure and a patriarch of Judea. A well known historical figure, ha-Nasi was a patriarch of Judea and compiler of the *Mishnah*, which is the general designation of the Oral Law. He was venerated not only by his contemporaries, but also by later generations of Jews, and regarded as a savior of Israel. "His wisdom, sanctity, and humility, as well as his wealth and close ties with the Roman emperor, became the subject of numerous legends."^[1]

Moses felt keenly the weight of this family history, and became determined to continue, and even best, the works of his far-off ancestor. Indeed, Moses himself played the same role for the Jews a millennia later - it was his preeminent achievement to unite the various streams in Jewish thought into a single, mighty river.

What has become lost in the story of Moses Maimonides, however, was how very radical were some of his innovations in the interpretation of Jewish life and law - and from where many of these novelties actually stemmed. For Maimonides based many of his interpretations of Jewish life and law on the illumination provided by the *Sufis*!

Sufism, the mystical core of Islam, is an open-minded belief system positing that all the great religions and mystical traditions share the same essential truths. Developing under the umbrella of Islam, Sufism burst into prominence in the 8th-10th centuries as their Islamic brethren marched across North Africa and into southern Europe. While subsumed in the tenets of the Muslim faith, Sufis viewed their parent religion as a vessel to the hold their mysticism - a decidedly non-traditional worship that led to a deeper understanding of the true reality of life and the world. Following an ecstatic path that often uses the language of lovers and poets, Sufi masters attempt to find spiritual union with God - and then "return" to the everyday world to enlighten and help others.

Driven from the Iberian Peninsula in 1148 by the marauding Almohads, a Taliban-like sect of Muslim fundamentalists, Maimonides eventually settled in Fustat, Egypt in 1165. In Fustat, Maimonides found himself in a very unusual environment, one that allowed him to get to know the Muslim customs in a warm and open-minded environment. Unlike the bilious world of damning *fatwahs* and occupation politics today, in medieval Egypt, Jewish and Muslim holy men enjoyed convivial relations, sharing ideas and literature between them. Maimonides, respected in both the Jewish and Muslim communities, was no different, becoming acquainted with the Sufis through these easy interrelations. These adepts grew to influence the direction of Maimonides' thought in ways that are finally coming to light, seeding his great works on Jewish life and law with the beautiful ideas of his Sufi contemporaries.

For instance, in the introduction to his *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides stated, "One should accept the truth from whatever source it proceeds,"^[1] especially, it seemed, the Sufis. Being that he spoke fluent Arabic, studied with famous Muslim scholars and cited Arab authorities frequently in his works, it seems only natural how deep the Sufi influences would run. Ultimately, this Jewish theologian's singularly open-minded approach to Islamic mysticism helped to usher in a new chapter in the development of Jewish spirituality - the *Jewish/Sufi*.

It is not difficult to trace the specific Sufi influence in Maimonides' work - indeed Sufism gently permeates many of the bases of his Jewish thought, leading him to reinterpret some Hebrew terms and metaphors against the background of the Sufi beliefs that surrounded him.^[2] His *Guide for the Perplexed*, far from representing a point on the continuum of Jewish theology, actually marked the first turn away from traditional Jewish belief and movement towards the Islamic mystics. Not only did it develop and convey to the general Jewish population ideas which had been occupying the Arab mind for centuries,^[3] it for the first time used what would become the typical Jewish/Sufi device of attaching innovative, Sufi-inspired ideas to the far-off Jewish Biblical and Talmudic Jewish past, thereby legitimizing them for his contemporary co-religionists.

He laid down a scrim of Sufi images in the introduction to this masterpiece, through which his tale of Jewishmysticism would unfold. In the introduction to the *Guide*, he states:

"We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes again and again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. There are others between whose lightning flashes are of greater or shorter intervals. It is in accord with these states that the degrees of the perfect vary."^[4]

This image represented the mystical enlightenment of God-consciousness that comes to the searcher in greater or lesser degrees. The idea of the lightning flashes as representing this experience of God seems to be drawn from the Islamic philosophers Ibn Sina (d. 1037)^[5] and al-Ghazali (d. 1111). According to al-Ghazali, perceiving something of the light of truth was much like the experience of seeing due to the momentary blast of a lightning flash, which provided a fleeting illumination of the surroundings. The Sufi term for these moments of illumination was *awqat*. At the very best, a mystic could attain a period of extended, or even permanent, illumination^[6] - a station that Maimonides alludes that he might have reached, in his aforementioned statement.

From the idea of the "lightening flash" of mystical clarification came other, subsequent Sufi ideas concerning enlightenment. For instance, in Sufism, the primordial "light" of God operates as the medium of prophecy - it represents the divine spirit that God breathed into Adam. Ultimately, through Maimonides, this idea helped shape the Jewish theory of a "created light," which became of central importance to Maimonides as he worked to quantify ideas of prophecy and mystical inspiration.^[7]

Maimonides' hybrid work was such a beautiful expression of the open-minded times in which he lived, that it was studied closely and even taught by his contemporary *Muslims*, to both Jewish and Muslim students.^[8] In fact, medieval Jews sought out Muslim teachers for Maimonides' *Guide*, because Jewish audiences were less familiar with the scientific thinking of the time, and therefore the Muslim teachers could better interpret Maimonides' work!

There are many other specific instances of Sufic inspiration on his work. For instance, Maimonides echoed an Islamic *hadith*,^[9] ascribed to Abu Bakr (d. 634), a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, which was common currency in Egyptian Sufi circles. The Muslim saying states: "Apprehension (of God) is the inability to attain apprehension," which signified that realization of God took place beyond understanding. Maimonides' immediate Sufi inspiration appeared to have been culled from a saying by the Sufi Dhu al-Nun (d. 859). This Sufi master stated: "The more one knows God, the more perplexed he is (by Him), just as one gets closer to the sun, the more dazzled he is by the sun, until he gets to the place where he is not 'he' anymore."^[10]

Maimonides borrowed this idea, stating, "Thus all philosophers say: 'We are dazzled by His beauty, and he is hidden from us because of the intensity with which he becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes to behold it.'" Of course, "all philosophers" referred to the Sufis.^[11] This sentiment, that "the more one knows God, the more perplexed he is (by Him)," which expressed the idea that true faith began beyond the limits of apprehension - acted as the basis for the title of Maimonides' seminal work, *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Maimonides ideas about prophecy, as well, became enmeshed with the Sufi inspirations that surrounded him. And it is important to note here just how vital were the ideas of prophecy to Moses Maimonides and his contemporaries; at the end of the 12th century, when Maimonides was working, "prophetic" souls were hardly buried deep in Judaism's past. Indeed, Maimonides and his contemporary Jews believed themselves to be fast approaching the time of the Messiah (Maimonides himself was said to have even speculated on a specific date for the return of the Savior^[12]), an epoch during which prophetic souls would be sorely needed.

Moses mixed ideas from Jews' far-off Biblical past in with recent Sufi conceptions of the Prophet Muhammad to develop a hybrid vision of this crucial role. He based his conception of the prophetic "flight of understanding" on the story of Jacob's Dream (Genesis 28:10 -15),^[13] where we read that "the (Jacob) dreamed, and beheld a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it." This passage, representing the "Ladder of Ascent," had long been for Jewish mystics the symbol of prophetic inspiration.

However, Maimonides reinterpreted this symbol in light of Sufi ideas, who had spent the last few centuries adorning the imagery in Jacob's Dream with Muhammad's *Mir'aj*, or "Night Flight," when, legend had it, the Prophet himself had had an experience similar to that of Jacob and traveled to the celestial heights to commune with the Divine. The Maimonidean interpretation of Jacob's Dream, and prophecy in general, reflected the newer Sufi concepts of a "spiritual ladder" along the "straight path" by which saints moved towards their rapturous revelations.^[14]

Maimonides was clearly a bit uncomfortable with his practice of "borrowing" from his Islamic mystical brethren. As such, he based his usage of Sufi ideas on reading them *backward* into Jews' Biblical past - finding "precedent" for the Sufi inspiration in passages from the Jewish Bible! In his introduction to the second part of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides claimed that he had "rediscovered" esoteric doctrines of ancient Israel, which he was then imparting to a new generation of Jews.^[15] Of course, he was really injecting Jewish lore with the innovations of the Islamic mystics.

Maimonides also gently turned ideas of Jewish prayer away from his contemporary Jewish practice and towards the Sufi ideals. He raised silence in importance in the pantheon of Jewish meditation methods, based on this Sufi mystical ideal. The Prophet Muhammad had said, "The first stage of worship is silence," and this method had come to represent for the Islamic mystics a complete dedication to quietude as a necessary precursor to divine understanding and, ultimately, prophecy. Maimonides, influenced by the devoutness of his contemporary Sufis, ultimately sounded Sufic himself in his explication of the importance of silence:

"Silence is praise to you,' which interpreted signifies: Silence with regard to You is praise. Accordingly, silence is preferable - and limiting oneself to the apprehension of the intellects - just as the perfect ones have enjoined and said, 'Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still.'"^[16]

"Silence" as a method of approaching God, a practice known as *khalwa* to the Sufis, was an especially noteworthy innovation, as it ran directly counter not only to the practice of 12th century Egyptian Jews, but to the Jewish tradition of the *community of prayer*. In the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70, the most significant religious-social framework of mainstream Judaism was the community, whose focus was the synagogue. Common prayer was transformed into the center of religious life; it required the assembling of ten men (a *minyan*) as an essential precondition for the performance of many of its most important components.^[17] While Judaism certainly had a history of solitude among its prophets and saints, it was just that: A sacred history. The contemporary practice of 12th-century Jews saw the binding of the community of Israel as taking precedence over personal salvation; medieval Jewish practice rejected tendencies towards individual worship.

Maimonides also advocated a "joyous equanimity in the face of the vicissitudes of life,"^[18] a term that was known as *hishtavvut* to the Sufis and was central to the Islamic mystical quest. For Sufis, the attainment of disinterest in what other people thought of oneself became a vital rung on the ladder of spiritual attainment. Even though this idea ran counter to millennia of Jewish tradition, the Sufi ideal of mystical attainment was so respected by Moses Maimonides that he told the story of a *Sufi* adept to illustrate its importance! This tale, which was taken up by later Jews to represent this new *Jewish* mystical ideal, was originally swept into the Jewish mystical stream in a letter from Moses Maimonides to Rabbi Ibn Hasdai:

"And it happened once that a sage and a great philosopher were traveling on a ship and sat in the place of the refuse, until one, that is, one of the people of the ship, came and urinated on him on the place of the refuse, and he lifted his face and laughed. And they asked him: 'Why do you laugh?' He answered them: 'Because is it now absolutely clear to me that my soul is on the highest level, because I did not at all feel the disgrace of this thing' . . . And the philosophers have said that it is very rare to find a man whole and complete in both ethical qualities and wisdom, and if he is to be found, he is called a divine man, and certainly such a one as this is on the highest level."^[19]

The story was originally told about the Islamic mystic Ibrahim Ibn Adhem Ibn Mansur Abu Ishaq (d. 777).

Maimonides' *Mishnah Torah*, or *Code*, which was the only work that he wrote in Hebrew (as opposed to his first language, Arabic), presented an analysis of the Jewish religion that was remarkable in line with that of another great scholar/mystic - the Sufi al-Ghazali (d. 1111), in his *Jhya'ulum al-Din*.^[20] Indeed, much like al-Ghazali, who was known as the "renovator of Islam" for his work in fusing the mystical ideas of Sufism with the more rigid practice of mainstream Islam, Maimonides hoped that his *Guide for the Perplexed* would effect reconciliation between reason and revelation.^[21]

Ultimately, as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* points out, "the influence of Maimonides on the future development of Judaism is incalculable. No spiritual leader of the Jewish people in the post-Talmudic period has exercised such an influence both in his own and subsequent generations."^[22] What this illustrious tome fails to mention, however, is how inspired by Sufi ideas was the Maimonidean philosophical legacy - and how this began a series of events that would lead, in the ensuing centuries, to a comprehensive shift in the direction of Jewish mysticism.

In light of the current events taking place between Muslims and Jews, perhaps we would do well to look at this Jewish master in a fresh light, and heed his respect for the Muslim faith. At the time that he worked, he fused Jewish and Muslim mystical beliefs - and was held in high esteem by the greatest thinkers of all three monotheistic religions. Although clearly out of step with today's geopolitics, the story of this Sufi-inspired Jew is perhaps even more salient today than when it unfolded, nearly a millennia ago.