

**The Rational Ideal and its Opponents:  
Medieval Jewish Thought in Context**

CG-JTHT-519

Tuesday 11:30 am – 1:00 pm

Dr. Barry Mesch, Instructor

bmesch@hebrewcollege.edu

Fall, 2014-2015

In this course we are going to focus on the writings of four of the most influential thinkers and writers of the Middle Ages. They are Saadya Gaon, Yehuda Halevi and Moses Maimonides (Rambam), and Moses ben Nachman (Ramban - Nachmanides). Saadya and Rambam were rationalists who believed in the ultimate importance of reason and its relevance to religion and to Judaism. Halevi, the poet and thinker, taught something different. While reason is important and useful it is not essential for achieving the ultimate goal and purpose of religion. Ramban was critical of the rationalist position but was the first Jewish theologian who advocated for a pluralist position and urged the opposing sides in the controversy to respect each other and each other's positions.

We will begin our study by engaging the world of rationalism and the values that inform that world. Ancient, medieval and modern philosophers have held up reason as the most important human faculty and that knowledge and understanding were the most important activities for human beings to undertake. Plato and Aristotle championed not only the activity of reason to understand the world but also the activity of reason as what makes a human being truly human. We will consider this attitude at the beginning of the course and see how that approach is brought into the world of Jewish ideas and traditions. How do Jewish thinkers integrate the worlds of the philosophers and the worlds of Jewish tradition or do they maintain that the worlds are essentially incompatible. These questions are not inconsequential for our world today and we will be considering these questions not only historically but also philosophically.

We are going to study these four individuals from two vantage points:

First -- We will try to understand the basic concepts and frameworks that each writer proposes. We will take their ideas seriously, try to uncover the truth claims that they make and see if they stand up to rational inquiry. From this vantage point we will all be philosophers and examine their ideas and claims as philosophers.

**Second--.** We will also be reading these thinkers as religious leaders and professional Jews who felt great responsibility for sustaining and educating the Jewish community, They believed that the world of ideas and religious ideology was crucial both to the future of the Jewish community and to the future of the Jewish individual. They had a clear spiritual and intellectual vision for their community and they tried to convince their readers of their position and that views which differed from theirs were to be rejected. We will spend some time getting an understanding of the communities in which they

lived and the political and religious challenges they faced. We will also look at how they approached the religious needs of the community and how they sought to integrate the spiritual and intellectual growth of their fellow Jews with the importance of adhering to traditional halakhah. I have been speaking here of all three of the philosophers we are studying this semester although Yehudah Halevi is a kind of anti-philosopher. Halevi is a fascinating figure who is not a leader in the usual way we think of that term. He was a man with a mission who tried to oppose many of the ideas of writers like Saadya and Aristotelians like Maimonides (who came after him). But in his anti-philosophic writings he argues eloquently and rationally for his positions. He was, of course, also a great poet and liturgist and was a bona fide celebrity wherever he traveled. Another aspect of our study has to do with the idea of “convivencia” the existence side by side of Jews, Muslims and Christians. The term “Golden Age of Spain” relates directly to the period of “convivencia” when Jews were able to serve as important figures in government and to publish works of poetry and theology influenced by the surrounding culture. There is a lot of controversy today as to how “golden” the golden age was but there is no doubt that Jews and Muslims as well as Christians created a special environment of mutual respect for at least a short period of time in Spain.

Toward the end of the course we will take a look at some of the writings of Ramban both in terms of his opposition to pure rationalism and in terms of his commitment to a certain form of pluralism. We will also look at what he said when he was forced into a public debate with Christianity in Barcelona and how he responded to the needs of the Jewish community there.

### **Requirements**

You will be asked to write several short papers during the course related to the authors we are studying. The final paper will ask you to reflect on the vision of religious leadership espoused by any one of the thinkers discussed in the course. Are there any parallels to contemporary leadership issues that you see. In place of the rational (or mystical) ideal discussed by our authors what might contemporary leaders see as the ultimate purpose of Judaism and living the Jewish life. What might be your own vision of this ideal.

### Required books

**Three Jewish philosophers, Philo, Saadya Gaon and Jehudah Halevi** ed. Lewy, Heinemann and Altman  
Ralph Lerner, **Maimonides' Empire of Light**, University of Chicago Press, 2000

Other materials will be posted on this web site or found on the site **Ebrary** accessible through the Hebrew College Library website.