



Jewish Scholarship
in the Middle
Ages

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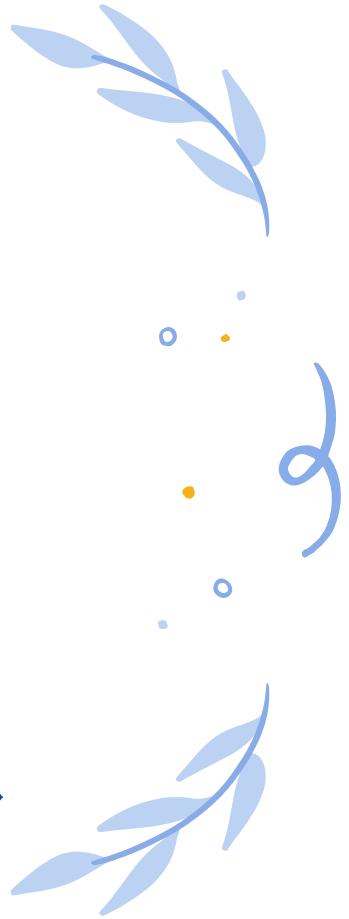
Session Outline



- Historical context: migration and dispersion
 - Jewish scholarship in the Islamic world
- Judah Halevi and the 'golden age' of Spanish Jewry
 - The life and work of Moses Maimonides

The Historical Context: Migration and Dispersion

- By the time of the Babylonian Talmud's publication (c. 500 CE), the Jewish world – in terms of population, prominence and influence – had moved to Babylonia.
- By the Middle Ages, the Jewish population of Israel had diminished considerably.
- Jewish migration to lands in the West, and to Muslim territories in North Africa and Spain particularly, increases greatly during this period.



The Historical Context: Migration and Dispersion



The Historical Context: The Islamic World



Jewish Scholarship in the Middle Ages

- Rabbinic academies (*yeshivot*) established across Europe and North Africa.
- The academies of Babylonia lose their hold on the Jewish scholarly world.
- Jewish scholarship now shaped by the ideas and personalities of individual scholars (as opposed to the collective authority of the rabbis).
- This was especially true in the fields of Hebrew poetry, Talmudic interpretation, and Jewish philosophy.

Jews in the Islamic World

- Under the Fatimids (909–1171), Jewish life in Egypt flourishes. Yeshivah established in Cairo by end of 10th century.
- Fez also comes to prominence, producing one of the most important Jewish scholars of the period, Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103).
- However, it is in Umayyad Al-Andalus (Spain) that the Jewish community attains the greatest level of achievement.
- Cordoba becomes an important centre of Jewish civilization, attracting poets, grammarians, and yeshivah students from across the Jewish world.

The Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba c. 1000





The 'Golden Age' of Spanish Jewry

- ❖ Renewed emphasis on the Hebrew language, instigating a 'golden age' of Hebrew poetry.
- ❖ Moses Ibn Ezra (c. 1055-1135)
- ❖ Solomon Ibn Gabriol (1021-1153)
- ❖ Judah Halevi (c. 1075-1141)



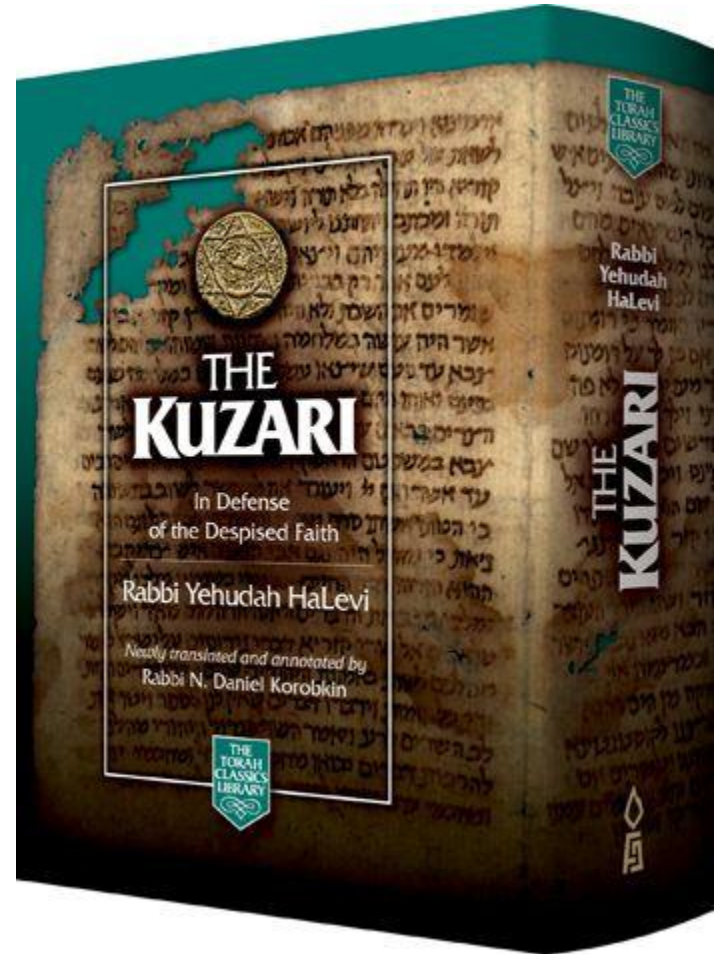
‘My Heart is in the
East (*Libi ba-Mizrah*)’
— Judah Halevi



‘My heart is in the east, and I in the
uttermost west.
How can I find savour in food? How
shall it be sweet to me?
How shall I render my vows and my
bonds, while yet
Zion lies beneath the fetter of Edom,
and I in Arab chains?
A light thing would it seem to me
to leave all the good things of Spain -
Seeing how precious in mine eyes
to behold the dust of the desolate
sanctuary.’

Judah Halevi

- ❖ *The Kuzari: The Book of Argument and Proof in Defence of the Despised Faith* (c. 1140)
 - ❖ Halevi's philosophical masterpiece.
- ❖ Based on the legend of the Khazars' conversion to Judaism in the 8th century.
 - ❖ Stresses the importance of revelation and prophecy. Logic and reason cannot provide a convincing defence of God's existence.
 - ❖ Revelation has been given to the Jews.



The End of the Golden Age

- In the middle of the 12th century, the Almohads, a conservative Berber Muslim dynasty, displace the ruling Almoravids.
- The Almohads begin to persecute the Jewish community.
- Jews forcibly converted to Islam and many academies and synagogues closed down.



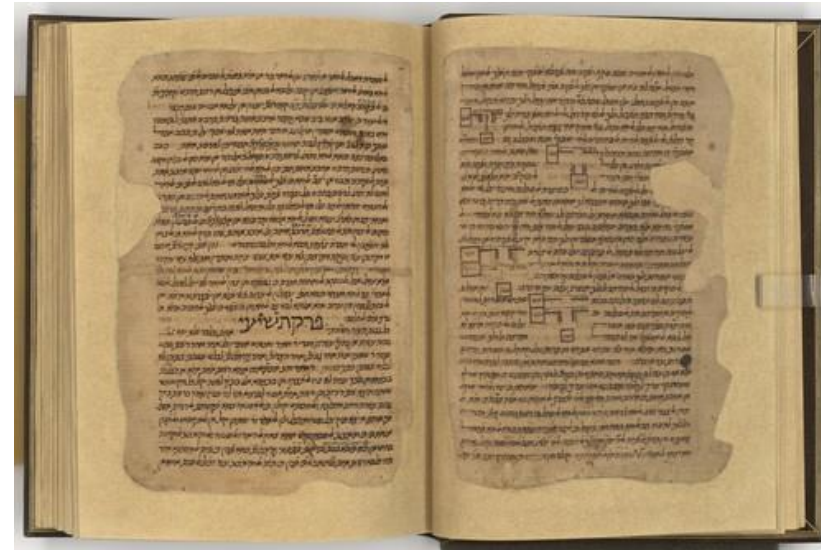
Moses Maimonides (c. 1135-1204 CE)



- ❖ RaMBaM – Rabbi Moses ben Maimon
- ❖ Philosopher, physician, and Jewish community leader. Regarded as one of the greatest authorities in matters of *halakhah*.
- ❖ Born in Cordoba but fled to North Africa during the Almohad persecution. Eventually settled in Cairo.
- ❖ One of the most revered figures in the history of Judaism: the ‘second Moses’.

Maimonides' Halakhic Work: Commentary on the Mishnah

- Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah written when he was still a young man.
- Includes his famous, '13 Principles of the Jewish Faith'.
- These 13 Principles summarize the essential tenets of Judaism.



The 13 Principles of the Jewish Faith (The Nature of God)

1. I believe with perfect faith that God is the Creator and Ruler of all things. He alone has made, does make, and will make all things.
2. I believe with perfect faith that God is one. There is no unity that is in any way like His. He alone is our God — He was, He is, and He will be.
3. I believe with perfect faith that God does not have a body. Physical concepts do not apply to Him. There is nothing whatsoever that resembles Him at all.
4. I believe with perfect faith that God is first and last.
5. I believe with perfect faith that it is only proper to pray to God. One may not pray to anyone or anything else.

The 13 Principles of the Jewish Faith (The Nature of Revelation)

6. I believe with perfect faith that all the words of the prophets are true.

7. I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moses is absolutely true. He was the chief of all prophets, both before and after him.

8. I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that we now have is that which was given to Moses.

9. I believe with perfect faith that this Torah will not be changed, and that there will never be another given by God.

The 13 Principles of the Jewish Faith (Eschatology)

10. I believe with perfect faith that God knows all of man's deeds and thoughts. It is thus written (Ps. 33:15): 'He has moulded every heart together, He understands what each one does'.

11. I believe with perfect faith that God rewards those who keep His commandments, and punishes those who transgress Him.

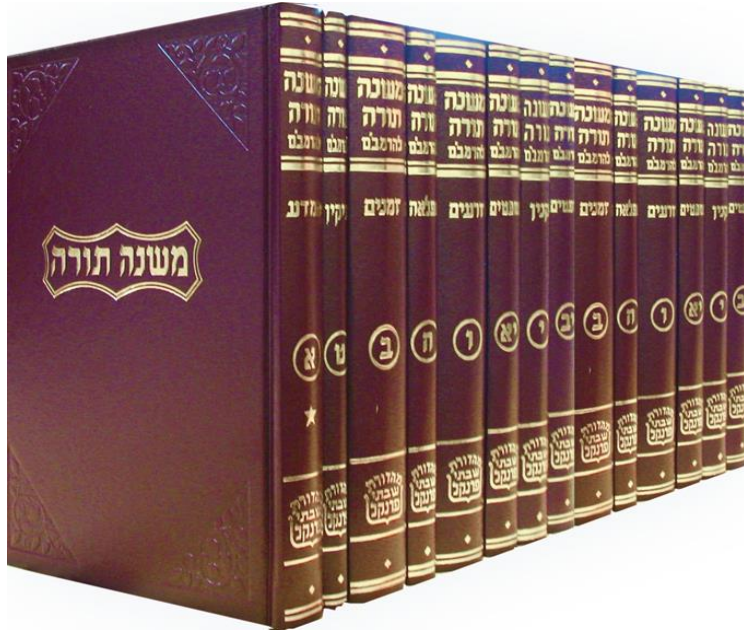
12. I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah. No matter how long it takes, I will await his coming every day.

13. I believe with a perfect faith that the dead will be brought back to life when God wills it to happen.

The 13 Principles of the Jewish Faith

- The 13 Principles composed for three primary reasons:
 1. As a Jewish scholar, Maimonides wished to outline the essential tenets of Judaism.
 2. Maimonides hoped that the Principles would help to strengthen faith and encourage uniformity of belief.
 3. Maimonides desired to define Judaism over against Christianity and Islam.
- The *Yigdal*

Maimonides' Halakhic Work: The *Mishneh Torah* (c. 1170-80)



- Aka *Sefer Yad Ha-Hazaqah* ('Book of the Mighty Hand')
- A comprehensive code of Jewish Law, written in a clear and lucid style.
- Purpose: to make sense of Jewish Law and provide the average Jew with an adequate knowledge of the Law.

Maimonides' Halakhic Work:

Sefer Ha-Mitzvot

- Maimonides also renowned for his listing of the mitzvot.
- In his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* ('Book of the Commandments'), he enumerates and explains the 613 mitzvot in the Torah
- 248 positive commandments and 365 negative.



Maimonides' Philosophical Work

- *The Guide for the Perplexed* (*Moreh Nevukhim*) published c. 1190.
- Background: *halakhah* vs. Aristotelian rationalism. Jewish thinkers acquainted with the philosophical classics of ancient Greece through Arabic translations.
- Purpose: to justify the Jewish faith from an intellectual perspective. Aimed at those struggling to reconcile revelation and reason.
- Attempts to apply the approach of the classical philosophers to religious matters.

The Guide for the Perplexed

‘The object of this treatise is to enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy Law, who conscientiously fulfils his moral and religious duties, and at the same time has been successful in his philosophical studies. Human reason has attracted him to abide within its sphere; and he finds it difficult to accept as correct the teaching based on the literal interpretation of the Law, and especially that which he himself or others derived from those homonymous, metaphorical, or hybrid expressions. Hence he is lost in perplexity and anxiety...For this reason I have called this book Guide for the Perplexed...In my larger work, the *Mishneh Torah*, I have contented myself with briefly stating the principles of our faith and its fundamental truths, together with such hints as approach a clear exposition. In this work, however, I address those who have studied philosophy and have acquired sound knowledge, and who while firm in religious matters are perplexed and bewildered on account of the ambiguous and figurative expressions employed in the holy writings...I feel assured that those of my readers who have not studied philosophy, will still derive profit from many a chapter. But the thinker whose studies have brought him into collision with religion, will, as I have already mentioned, derive much benefit from every chapter. How greatly will he rejoice! How agreeably will my words strike his ears!’

– from the introduction to *The Guide*

The Guide for the Perplexed

- A synthesis of Jewish theology and Aristotelian philosophy.
- Emphasis not only on the power of prophecy and revelation but also on the ability of human beings to attain knowledge through logic – we come to know God through a combination of revelation and reason.
- Only the person who has reached the highest level of intellectual attainment can be near the throne of God.
- But intellectual attainment not in itself sufficient. Beyond the limits of intellect, the only true guide is revelation, mediated by tradition.

The 'Maimonidean Controversy'

- While welcomed and celebrated by some, Maimonides' philosophical approach was condemned as heretical by others.
- Copies of *The Guide* publicly burned in Montpellier in 1232.
- Maimonides' attempts to unite Aristotle and Torah had a profound influence on his Christian contemporaries (e.g. Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas).
- Despite the controversy generated by his philosophical work, Maimonides is still considered one of the chief authorities on halakhic matters.



Summary

- Sizeable Jewish communities in Europe and North Africa from late Antiquity.
- A flourishing of Jewish scholarship in the Islamic world.
- The skills and virtues associated with the ‘golden age’ of Spanish Jewry embodied in the figure of Judah Halevi, particularly.
- ‘From Moses to Moses, there was none like Moses’.