

The

PHILOSOPHER-KING

in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought



ABRAHAM MELAMED

Edited and with a Foreword by Lenn E. Goodman

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The
Philosopher-King
in Medieval
and Renaissance
Jewish Thought

SUNY series in Jewish Philosophy

Kenneth Seeskin, editor

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*For my parents,
Bluma and Isaac Melamed
of blessed memory*

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Foreword

The publication of Abraham Melamed's *The Philosopher King in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought* brings to fruition a project with which I was involved since the early 1990s, when my old friend Menachem Kellner of Haifa University brought this important study to my attention. The work was written in Hebrew, and the process of its translation, editing, and final preparation for the press has involved great efforts on all sides. Throughout that process of reading, rereading, reviewing, Englishing, and ordering this major contribution, I was a believer. Melamed's text surveys primary texts in their original languages to follow the Jewish medieval history of the idea of the philosopher king from its roots in Greek philosophy to the Arabic commentaries and Hebrew writings of creative thinkers who made the idea at home in their own political and philosophical environments and put it to work within the context of their philosophical and political thinking. As a result, this book affords readers a Cook's tour of Jewish political philosophy during a period when most scholars have been led to suppose that all such life forms were extinct.

Comparative in method and interpretive in perspective, Melamed's study makes use of materials that are seldom read, let alone studied, by modern authors. Some survive in manuscript or are little known and cited by prior researchers. With his translations and transcriptions from the original Hebrew and Italian texts of these primary sources, Melamed has made their thought accessible to a wide range of modern readers and thinkers. In doing so, he has added a bright new chapter to the history of political theory and enriched our understanding of Jewish intellectual life and political ideals in one of the richest periods of Jewish intellectual history, the period that extends from the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. Warm appreciation is due to Menachem Kellner, for championing this book, and to James Peltz and Kenneth Seeskin for welcoming it into the SUNY Series in Jewish Philosophy. I take modest pride in Abraham Melamed's achievement here. I am confident that readers will long profit from his substantive and probing researches.

Lenn E. Goodman

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Preface

1

This book deals with the great encounter between the Jewish political tradition and Platonic political philosophy. This encounter is examined by means of the basic idea of Plato's political thought, the theory of the Philosopher King. The first stage took place in Hellenistic-Roman times, when Philo of Alexandria identified the principles of Plato's political philosophy in the Torah, and described the ideal figure of Moses in terms of the Philosopher King theory. In the Middle Ages the encounter between Jewish thought and the Platonic political tradition was renewed from the tenth century or thereabouts, following the penetration of that tradition into the Muslim cultural world, which, in turn, influenced Jewish thought. This book deals with the renewed encounter from its beginnings until its rejection and disappearance from Jewish culture in Western Europe on the eve of the Enlightenment.

The history of this intellectual motif, as this book will interpret it, shows clearly, in microcosm, the complex reciprocal influence exerted between Jewish culture and that of the majority cultures in which it functioned for centuries: Hellenistic-Roman, medieval Muslim and Latin-Christian from the late Middle Ages, through the Renaissance, up to the beginnings of the modern period. Every culture exists and develops through the reciprocal influences of others. This is even truer for minority cultures like the Jewish, one that persisted throughout its history in the midst of changing majority cultures. Jewish culture never existed in a vacuum. As in every other intellectual sphere, also, in this case, Jewish culture functioned within a complex framework of reciprocal influences. It can be properly understood only in the intellectual, cultural, and historical context in which it operates, which affects it and on which it exerts its own reciprocal influence.

An examination of the stages through which Platonic political philosophy first penetrated medieval Jewish thought affords a good example of this complex process. First of all, Jewish thought like every other culture, was not affected by outside influences in a random fashion. Effective influences were

those that fitted its needs and served its purposes. One of the central findings to be discussed in this book is the fact that Jewish thought absorbed Platonic and not Aristotelian political philosophy—*The Republic* and not the *Politics*. The opposite might have been anticipated, given that in all other areas of philosophy and science, Jewish thought based itself massively on the Aristotelian tradition. As will be shown later on, this did not happen by chance, but rather because the Platonic political world view fitted in better with the political theology of Islam and of Judaism, both in essence holistic, than did Aristotle's *Politics*, which was better suited to the dualistic political theology of medieval Christianity. Hence, it is no coincidence that Christianity based itself on the *Politics* and not on *The Republic*, in marked contrast with both Islam and Judaism. Neither is there any coincidence in the rejection of the Platonic political tradition and its disappearance from Jewish culture just before the Enlightenment. That was a direct result of the internal needs of the culture when it came under modern influences and went through gradual secularization processes that undermined the holistic framework of traditional Rabbinic Judaism.

Second, in keeping with the general process of cultural transfer, we do not find that outside influences are simply adopted and copied, but rather they are extensively adapted and transposed to meet the needs and characteristics of the receiving culture. It is a gradual process, beginning with the translation of relevant texts, and ending with their adaptation and application. In the first stage of the transmission of the Philosopher King theory, one finds simply a Hebrew translation of the relevant Platonic texts from the Arabic, along with medieval Islamic commentaries. We are well aware, of course, that no translation can be more than commentary filtered through a cultural prism. In the second stage, we find application, with extensive adaptation of both the translated works of Plato and their Muslim commentaries to meet the developing needs of Jewish culture.

Third, we have before us a clear example of the process of repeated reciprocal influence. Herein lies the important contribution of medieval Jewish political thought to the history of western political thought in general. In this instance, as in so many others, Jewish scholars functioned as transmitters of culture—texts and ideas—from the Greek—Muslim cultural world to the Latin-Christian of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This was their most important contribution to the Platonic political tradition in the west, and to the history of western political thought as a whole; scholars to this day are barely aware of this influence. The main expression of this contribution lies in the transmission of the influence of Ibn Rushd's important commentary on Plato's *Republic*, first through the fourteenth-century Hebrew translation, which influenced Jewish political thinking in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Then the Hebrew was translated—twice—into Latin for the consumption of Christian readers, and had considerable impact on the renewal of

the Platonic political tradition during the Renaissance. The Hebrew translation of Ibn Rushd's commentary on *The Republic* is of great significance, since it constitutes the only surviving evidence of this commentary: the Arabic original has disappeared. Up to this time, scholars dealt only with the renewal of the Platonic political tradition in the west during the Renaissance following the transmission of the Platonic dialogues, in the original Greek, from Byzantium to Italy in the first half of the fifteenth century, after the Ottoman conquest of Byzantium. They were unaware of the parallel transmission channel via Muslim culture, by means of Latin translations of Ibn Rushd's commentary on *The Republic* in Hebrew, and through contemporary Jewish scholars' contacts with the Platonic-Muslim political tradition, as absorbed into Jewish thought of the later medieval times. Ernest Barker once maintained that Plato's *Republic* disappeared completely from European culture for a thousand years, until rediscovered in the Renaissance. He was unaware of the totally opposite situation prevailing in Jewish and Muslim cultures: Aristotle's *Politics* had disappeared, while Plato's *Republic* with its Arabic commentaries in Hebrew translation continued to serve as a basic political textbook throughout the Middle Ages. James Hankins' important work, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden 1991) is obviously unaware of it, so completely ignores the parallel Jewish channel through which the Platonic political tradition entered Renaissance culture. My book, *Philosopher King*, is designed to make up for this lack, documenting in detail the Jewish contribution to the Platonic political tradition in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

2

The study of medieval Jewish political philosophy is still a comparatively neglected field, especially in comparison with the amount of research in other branches of medieval Jewish philosophy, such as ethics and metaphysics. This state of affairs is perhaps natural and even justified by the very fact that political philosophy is only "wisdom's little sister," as the Italian Jewish scholar of the fifteenth century, Moses of Rieti, phrased it nicely in his *Mikdash Meat*.

This assessment is basically still valid, despite Leo Strauss' heroic attempt to interpret the whole body of medieval Muslim and Jewish thought as Platonic political philosophy disguised in monotheistic theological garb.

Still, for the medieval mind, or for its Greek predecessor, political philosophy is no queen of the sciences but a by-product of the basic premises of ethics, metaphysics, and theology. Unqualified acceptance of Strauss' bold thesis might have provided a wonderful justification for the scholarly value of our field of study (that is, if justification is needed at all!). Alas, I do not think that an objective assessment of medieval thought can validate such an extreme

claim. Political philosophy is still wisdom's little sister, but like most little sisters, it is a very special one indeed.

The study of medieval Jewish political philosophy was pioneered by Strauss, whose contribution to the field is, of course, invaluable to this day, even if one does not accept all his conclusions. In his footsteps came E. I. J. Rosenthal, S. Pines, R. Lerner, and L. V. Berman, whose fruitful work in this particular field was regrettably cut short by his untimely death. My research owes a special debt to all of them.

Still, the present state of research in medieval Jewish political philosophy does not yet permit the writing of a comprehensive history of the subject, as was attempted by E. I. J. Rosenthal in medieval Muslim political philosophy, and by R. W. Carlyle, E. Lewis, W. Ullmann, and others, in medieval Christian political philosophy. Much research must still be done on particular problems like the one I have undertaken to deal with in this work. Especially needed are the study and reinterpretation of primary sources, many of which are still in manuscript form, like Isaac Ibn Latif's *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* and Yohanan Alemanno's *Hai ha-Olamim*, which are discussed in this study.

This study covers roughly the period from the tenth to the eighteenth century. It begins when the theory of the philosopher king reemerged in Jewish thought as an integral part of medieval Jewish philosophy. This resulted from the renewed encounter between Jewish theology and Greek philosophy and science, via Arabic intermediaries. The study traces the development of this theory in medieval Jewish philosophy. It follows the route by which this idea was transmitted from Arabic adaptations of the original Greek theory, transformed and re-adapted in the milieu of Jewish thought, as its scholarly centers gradually shifted from a Muslim to a Latin-Christian environment beginning in the late twelfth century. One of my major findings is that despite this development, Jewish political philosophy remained essentially anchored in the Platonic-Muslim philosophical milieu practically until the seventeenth century. The influence of Christian philosophy was, at best, marginal, much less than on any other branch of late medieval Jewish philosophy. This will be explained by cultural as well as theological and halakhic considerations. The Jewish attachment to an essentially Platonic-Muslim frame of reference was shattered only as a result of the reverberations of the fierce Machiavellian onslaught upon the whole medieval world view in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here we shall find the theory of the philosopher king finally rejected and sadly laid to rest.

Thus, my book starts with the very beginnings of medieval Jewish philosophy and ends with the very beginning of modern Jewish philosophy in the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Although I share the widely accepted opinion that Jewish philosophy was by and large "medieval" in its essence, at least until the late sixteenth century, a proviso must be added here.

From the late fifteenth century on, a clear and ever-growing influence of Renaissance culture is evident. Jewish thinkers like Yohanan Alemanno, Isaac Abravanel, and Simone Luzzatto would be grossly misunderstood if the Renaissance were not taken into account when we consider their thought. It is true that the Renaissance is not as strong in Jewish as in Christian thought, but it would be misleading to disregard its influence altogether, especially on Jewish political thought.

This is a study in the history of ideas; it follows the traditional methodology of this field, striving to follow a single idea in its context, to find out how and why this particular idea entered Jewish thought at a given time, was transmitted, adapted, further developed, and applied to Hebrew sources and Jewish history, until it was finally rejected and allowed to drop out of sight.

Often the distant origins of a work can be traced back to a doctoral dissertation. In my case it was *The Political Thought of Jewish Thinkers in the Italian Renaissance* (in Hebrew, Tel Aviv University, 1976), supervised by Professor J. G. Sermoneta. In this dissertation, the subject of the present book was a minor topic, one among many others. One of the then new findings was the elaborate political discussion in Yohanan Alemanno's magnum opus *Hai ba-Olamim*. This discussion caps a long-standing Jewish adaptation of the Platonic-Averroist theory of the philosopher king. As a doctoral student, I was conscious only of the Plato—Ibn Rushd—Alemanno connection. Many intermediary stages in the development of the theory were still unknown to me. Chronologically, I started almost at the end of the process. In the years that followed, I gradually traced back what I consider now to be almost the complete unfolding of this intellectual tradition in medieval and Renaissance Jewish thought. This study is the consummation of that effort.

For Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and Italian texts, which are available in English translations, I have followed the appropriate translation in the body of the work, as indicated in the notes. On certain occasions, I found it advisable to make changes in existing translations. Any such instance is indicated in the notes. Medieval Hebrew texts not yet available in English translation, some still in manuscript form, were translated by me. Likewise with the passages from Simone Luzzatto's two Italian works. The appendix includes all the lists of the ideal ruler's virtues in the Hebrew original, for the sake of comparison. In the body of the text these lists appear separately in English translation. The system of transliteration employed generally follows that of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

I wish to express my thanks, first of all, to my teacher, Professor J. B. Sermoneta, who introduced me to medieval Jewish texts and those of Italian Jewish thinkers of the Renaissance in particular. Professor Sermoneta died when I was in the final stages of writing this book. His guidance has been a lasting influence on my work. I would also like to thank Dr. R. Jospe, who was kind

enough to read attentively an early draft of the whole manuscript and make many useful comments, which I took into careful consideration, and which helped to make this study a better product. Special gratitude goes to my friend and colleague Professor M. Kellner, without whose encouragement, assistance, and friendship throughout the whole long process of making this book never would have seen the light in its present form. Many thanks to Mr. M. Rave and Mr. A. Goldstein who diligently and tastefully translated the text into English. Finally, I wish to thank Professor L. E. Goodman, who followed closely the whole project, for the careful reading of the manuscript and the many improvements he suggested in style as well as content which were essential in making this book a better product.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation and to the Wolfson Chair of Jewish Thought and Heritage at the University of Haifa for grants which made the completion of this book possible. My thanks also to the staff of the Research Authority at the University of Haifa and to the staff of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, for their expert technical assistance and cooperation. Special thanks to Danielle Friedlander and Heather Kernoff, Chantal Asher, and Angela Greenson for their heroic struggle to decipher my elaborate notes. On the home front, I would like to thank my wife Paula, who, despite never totally understanding the point or content of the intellectual gymnastics involved in my work, always supported it, and my children, Noa, Yonatan, and Tamar, who let me disappear into my study to tend my intellectual offspring. Finally, I want to acknowledge my late parents, Bluma and Isaac Melamed, to whose memory this study is dedicated. They taught me the value of hard work and of pursuing my calling diligently; and they made it clear what it means to love books and cherish learning.

1

Philosopher, King, Prophet

1

Medieval Muslim thinkers based their political discussions on Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, not on Aristotle's *Politics*. They did so despite being acquainted with most of Aristotle's extant writings, except for the *Politics*, and being markedly influenced by the Aristotelian tradition.¹ The bias might have been the result of pure chance—the manuscript of the *Politics* simply did not reach them. Perhaps, as R. Walzer supposes, late Hellenistic philosophy simply preferred Plato's *Republic* to Aristotle's *Politics* as a basic textbook on politics. The fact is that we do not have even one commentary on Aristotle's *Politics* dating from that time.² Muslim thinkers inherited the same manuscripts to which late Hellenistic philosophy inclined and adapted them to their own philosophical and theological world view. They also continued the accepted practice in late Hellenistic philosophy of seeking to unify Plato's different texts and, what is relevant for us, his political writings, especially *The Republic* and the *Laws*, and to blur the differences among them. The Neoplatonic philosophers like Plotinus and Proclus, who held that the philosopher must shun human society and strive for divine perfection, leaned toward the *Parmenides* and the *Theaetetus*. Muslim philosophy, by contrast (with the exception of Ibn Bajja), emphasized the social obligation of the philosopher and favored *The Republic* and the *Laws*, read through Neoplatonic modifications and the influence of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. These two Platonic dialogues became the foundation of Muslim political thought. E. I. J. Rosenthal justly titled the second part of his magnum opus on Muslim political thought, which treats political philosophy, "The Platonic Legacy."³

Whatever the reason for the Muslims' bias toward Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics*, *The Republic* undoubtedly suited their theological and

philosophical world view better. In qualifications and definition of functions, the Platonic philosopher king nicely paralleled the lawgiver-prophet of the Muslim tradition. As Ibn Rushd remarks in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, translated into Hebrew by Samuel ben Judah of Marseilles: "Consequently, these terms, that is, Philosopher, King and Lawgiver, are as it were synonymous; so also is 'Priest.'"⁴ The superimposing of the Platonic philosopher king on the lawgiver-prophet of the Muslim tradition is clearly reflected in the medieval discussion on the virtues of the ideal ruler.

This identification was facilitated by the Farabian-Platonic world view, which established an exact parallel between philosophy and politics, with philosophy dealing with right beliefs and politics with right actions. Each of these two spheres reflects and is conditioned on the other. Without the attainment of perfection in one, perfection in the other is not possible. When philosophy is political, then, the philosopher may, indeed must be, the statesman. al-Farabi (following Aristotle) defines political wisdom (as Falaquera translates it in his *Beginning of Wisdom [Reshit Hokhmah]*) "the perfect kingly art," the most noble philosophical domain. Whoever attains knowledge of this sort, must apply it in right actions. Thus, if the sciences of religious law and of theology (*fiqh, kalam*, translated by Falaquera in the same place as "the art of jurisprudence" and "the art of dialectical theology") are made ancillary to the science of politics, the philosopher, who is also king, may at the same time also be lawgiver and prophet, and perhaps even priest.⁵

2

Medieval Jewish thought, like Muslim thought, followed Plato's *Republic*. Christian thinking, in contrast, founded its political philosophy on Aristotle's *Politics* from the time the work was translated into Latin in the thirteenth century. Even R. Klibansky, who emphasized the continuity of the Platonic tradition in medieval Christian culture, stressed that this influence was exerted through such dialogues as the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*. There is no vestige of *The Republic* in medieval Christian sources in the West. Thus, Ernest Barker, who completely ignored the Muslim and Jewish traditions and dealt with the Christian tradition alone, stated bluntly, "Compared with the *Politics*, *The Republic* has no history. For a thousand years it simply disappears." Jewish thought, however, was hardly aware of the *Politics*.⁶ The first direct quotation from the work is found in *Sefer ha-Ikkarim (The Book of Principles)*, written by Joseph Albo toward the end of the Middle Ages, and this reference was mediated by the influence of Latin-Christian culture.⁷ All other areas of Jewish philosophy, however, were based squarely on Aristotle.

Beyond the casual fate of manuscripts, did the theological differences between Judaism and Islam on the one hand and Christianity on the other dictate which text they chose to adopt? This study argues that the differences in the textual traditions do reflect qualitative theological differences. Albertus Magnus, for example, commissioned the translation of the *Politics* into Latin in the thirteenth century, clearly because he felt the relevance of the work to the political context of Christian theology. In all three religious cultures, the theology preceded the appearance of a particular work and its concomitant influence. The text, whether it simply chanced to find its way into the scholars' hands or was deliberately selected, was singled out for the purposes of commentary and the ongoing development of historic theological tenets.

Common to the three cultures was an underlying political philosophy that dealt with the principles and essence of every human society. This philosophy was based on writings from the world of classical pagan culture. The differences among these cultures lay in political theology, which assigned a particular political significance to the revelation of each faith. In their political theology there is a good measure of proximity between Judaism and Islam; Christianity, is qualitatively different.

Judaism and Islam were both fashioned in the desert, where law was absent. It was vital to present these revelations as law, an exclusive, divine law: there was no other. Christianity, on the other hand, developed within an existing civilization. It did not manifest itself as law, but as *religio*. It recognized the legitimacy of other laws and conceded the sphere of the law to the temporal authority. Christianity focused on beliefs and opinions. Thus, there is no distinction between law and faith in Judaism and Islam, but such a distinction is vital to Christianity.

Christianity conceived revelation as a source of religious dogma. Following the theory of the two swords, which sharply separated temporal from spiritual authority and was influenced by Roman law, medieval Christianity inclined, as did Aristotle in the *Politics*, to see the political sphere as separate and independent, concerned with human laws and temporal rule. This sphere was largely isolated from divine law and affairs of spiritual authority, which were deemed nonpolitical or supra-political.

By contrast, Judaism and Islam, as Strauss has pointed out, laid distinct stress on the political quality of the revelation as divine law. The founding prophet was also a lawgiver and political leader. Therefore, Judaism did not develop a systematic division between the powers, such as grew up in Christianity. In this context, the Platonic teaching, which so emphasized the spiritual dimensions of politics, and hence identified the philosopher as the perfect political leader, was extremely relevant. The prophet-lawgiver of the Jewish and Muslim traditions could easily—in theory, at least—be identified with the Platonic philosopher king. Christianity, however, generally identified, and differentiated,

its founder as one who wholly detached himself from the political life to enter the pure, spiritual sphere. Thus, Moses and Muhammad may be depicted in the form of the Platonic philosopher king, an idea that sheds light on the nature of their activity. For the image of Jesus, the philosopher king was much less relevant. Medieval Christian thought, following Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, generally did not consider the possibility of actualizing the ideal community here and now: It was a matter for the hereafter. In this world, Christian thought sought no more than seemed attainable. In this sense the *Politics*, which set only temporal political goals, suited it better. Judaism and Islam, however, did pursue the ideal community in this world. For both, the *civitas temporalis*, too, could and must become—indeed—a perfect community. The Jewish state that would arise after the coming of the Messiah, like the ideal Platonic state, was expected to be such a state. Thus, Plato's dialogue had much appeal for Jewish thinkers as a basic political text.

In this respect, I cannot agree with R. Lerner and M. Mahdi's assertion that "Jewish political philosophy was, by and large, divided into Judaeo-Arab and Judaeo-Latin branches." Our sources show us only one branch: Platonic with Islamic influences, which subsequently was somewhat touched by the Aristotelian-Latin philosophy. Jewish political philosophy continued to follow Plato's *Republic*, not Aristotle's *Politics*, despite the *Politics*' influence upon Christian political philosophy. Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd, not Saint Thomas Aquinas, dominated Jewish political philosophy until the beginning of modern times.⁸

For all the differences in political theology among them, the three medieval religious traditions held the same broad philosophical position, influenced by the same classical writings, chiefly those of the other Aristotle, he of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Metaphysics*. All concurred that the supreme purpose of human existence was not in the area of practical intelligence, but in the sphere of theoretical intelligence—recognizing and loving the intelligible.

3

Jewish thought in the Middle Ages absorbed the Platonic political tradition through the agency of two Muslim sources, Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd, who concerned themselves with the ideal state and employed abstract terms suitable for any existing society. Since the two philosophers deliberately eschewed narrowly Islamic terms, it was easy to apply their theories in the realm of Jewish thought. The philosopher king was supposed to hand down a law based on philosophical principles, but phrased in figurative language suited to the understanding of the common folk. In the Muslim context, this role is

assigned to Muhammad, who received the Qur'an. In the Jewish context, it belongs to Moses, who gave the Torah.⁹

The first influences of the Platonic theory of the philosopher king in Judaism mediated through Islam may be found in Saadya Gaon and Judah Halevi. Maimonides certainly acquired his knowledge of the doctrine through Al-Farabi, but qualified the philosopher-king theory for halakhic and theological reasons. Many Jewish thinkers—among them Samuel Ibn Tibbon, translator and first commentator of the *Guide to the Perplexed*, Joseph Ibn Caspi, Efodi, and Joseph Shemtov Ibn Shem Tov—tended toward the governance of the solitary, along the lines of Ibn Bajja, and found little of interest in the philosopher-king theory. It fully penetrated Jewish thought only in the generation after Maimonides, beginning with Isaac Ibn Latif and Shemtov Ibn Falaquera in the first half of the thirteenth century. It was reflected chiefly in the philosophical current that followed Al-Farabi, Maimonides, and Ibn Rushd in emphasizing the political responsibility of the philosopher

The first stage of the transmission of this tradition into Jewish thought saw an almost literal translation of Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd. Ibn Latif was the first to summarize several chapters of Al-Farabi's *The Virtuous State* (*Al-Madina al-Fadila*), which he did in his essay, *Gate of the Heavens* (*Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*). Falaquera presented an exposition of the philosopher-king's virtues in two works. In his encyclopedia of the sciences, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (*Reshit Hokhmah*), his statements are based on Al-Farabi's *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, while in the *Book of Degrees* (*Sefer ha-Ma'alot*), the subject is discussed as presented in Al-Farabi's *The Virtuous State*.¹⁰ In the fourteenth century, Samuel ben Judah of Marseilles translated into Hebrew Ibn Rushd's commentary on Plato's *Republic*. This translation acquires prime importance, since the Arabic original is lost. The Hebrew translation is our sole evidence for the existence of Ibn Rushd's commentary.¹¹

Thus, the first detailed entry of the tradition into Jewish thought contains hardly any comment on the applicability of the subject to the problematics and sources of Jewish thought and no significant changes in the enumeration of the ideal ruler's qualities. On this foundation, at the second stage, we find the list of virtues applied to the Jewish political tradition in various ways. Some philosophers base themselves on Al-Farabi's version (whether using Ibn Latif's and Falaquera's translations or otherwise), while others rely on the translation of Ibn Rushd's commentary on *The Republic* by Samuel ben Judah of Marseilles.

The discourse on the virtues of the ideal ruler is adapted to the requirements of Jewish thought in two ways. The first way is by adding virtues to those indicated by Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd and introducing modifications and additions to the familiar virtues that are meant to suit a philosopher King of Israel. For example, Isaac Polkar adds a thirteenth virtue to the twelve listed

in Al-Farabi's text in order to match the traditional concept of the thirteen divine attributes that the perfect man is supposed to imitate. Yohanan Alemanno augments the qualities defined in Ibn Rushd's version with the four special virtues halakhically expected of the King of Israel.

The second way of adapting to Jewish thought is by applying in detail the virtues taken from one of the sources to the historical paradigm of the Jewish ruler. Usually these virtues are found in Moses; sometimes in Abraham, King Solomon, or others. Such accounts seek to prove that these leaders express the highest realization of the virtues of the ideal ruler in human history. A purely apologetic aspect is revealed here that accompanies Jewish thought from the Hellenistic period to the Enlightenment: an attempt to prove, in the circumstances of the diaspora, the cultural and even political primacy of Judaism. Polkar, for example, shows how every virtue listed by Al-Farabi is found in Moses. Alemanno seeks to prove that with one exception all the leaders of Jewry, even Moses, failed to attain the perfection of the philosopher king; the sole exception, surprisingly, is Abraham, whom Alemanno presents as the ideal philosopher-prophet-king.

In the third stage of the unfolding discussion, the philosopher-king's virtues are applied liberally to Hebrew sources to meet the developing needs of Jewish thought, without undue adherence to the classical models of Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd. Cases of this kind appear only toward the end of the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance. The more time that passes, the wider the distance grows from the classical exemplars. Isaac Abravanel applies the concept to Moses, David, and Solomon; Alemanno also applies it to Solomon. In Joseph Albo's comparative analysis of the kingly attributes of Saul and David, the discourse is far removed from the classical model.

Simone Luzzatto and Benedict Spinoza reject the philosopher-king theory and bring its history in Jewish thought to an end. The rejection results from Machiavellian influence, direct and indirect. Machiavelli, who dislodged the Platonic political tradition as he did the medieval world view as a whole, presented the Hebrew patriarchs, as well as the leaders of Greece and Rome, in a new light: not as ideal founders and perfect leaders, but as flesh and blood rulers.

Yet long after Luzzatto and Spinoza laid the philosopher king to rest, Moses Mendelssohn still voiced an echo of nostalgia for the ideal of sole rulership by a prophet-statesman—even as he acquiesced to existing circumstances and fervently supported the division between religion and state. Nevertheless, he derives quite modern conclusions from the new situation. At this point our discussion ends.

Plato, then, founded the ideal of the philosopher king. Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd used it as their foundation to construct the second story, involving Muslim theological philosophy. Jewish thinkers added the third story, applying the two foregoing levels to the needs of Jewish thought.

The first modern historian of ideas to consider this subject was L. Dukes, the mid-nineteenth-century scholar of Jewish *Wissenschaft*. He noted that the twelve virtues of the philosopher king listed in Falaquera's *Book of Degrees* seem to follow Al-Farabi's *The Virtuous State*. Leo Strauss traced the unfolding of this tradition, and he made the Plato-Al-Farabi-Falaquera connection.¹² Strauss, however, did not know of the earlier rendering by Ibn Latif, the parallel version of Ibn Rushd, or the ongoing development of the theme in Jewish thought of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. The purpose of the present study is to continue, and perhaps complete, what was begun by Dukes and Strauss. As always, according to the old saying that has a long history of its own in medieval and Renaissance Jewish thought, we stand on the shoulders of the scholars who preceded us and, therefore, we can see further.¹³

4

In Jewish tradition monarchy is usually identified as a halakhic norm; however, the biblical sources provide no unequivocal statement on the matter. The form of government established by Moses on the advice of Jethro (Exod. 18; Deut. 1) was not essentially monarchical. The regime was deemed by medieval and Renaissance commentators—some favorably, some negatively—to be an amalgam of the Aristotelian Polybian type: a combination of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, with a strong theocratic component.¹⁴

Nowhere in the Torah is kingship set forth as an imperative. Monarchy is presented in Deuteronomy 17 as a hypothetical possibility, not an obligation: "And thou shalt say, I will set a king over me" (v. 14). Indeed monarchy is portrayed as undesirable in principle. The wish to set up a king is depicted as a human urge, not the expression of the divine will. It reflects a desire to be "like all the nations that are round about me" (v. 14), a desire consistently portrayed in a negative light. Although the Torah permits the elevation of a king over Israel, such rule is subjected to strict limitations. The monarchy is made constitutional, and subordinate to the Torah, which is binding upon the king. The role of the king is defined as obedience to the laws of the Torah and concern for the public good, terms that greatly limit the king's status and powers. The biblical text is replete with strictures imposed on the king (negatives like "not" and "be not" appear ten times in the six verses devoted to the subject). Clearly great fears were associated with kingship.

A similar approach informs the account of the people's request to Samuel to place a king over them (1 Sam. 8). The request is described twice as the people's wish to be "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 6 and 20). Furthermore, it is portrayed as an open revolt against the rule of Heaven, a continuation of the

sinful and idolatrous practices of the Children of Israel since the exodus. Monarchy is defined forcefully by Samuel as despotism

The entire history of relations between kings and prophets, from Saul and Samuel to the destruction of the First Temple, is marked by persistent struggles and the leveling of sharp criticism by the prophets against the institution of the monarchy. The biblical authors showed a marked suspicion of kings and derived no comfort from their schemes. Scripture fluctuates continually between the ideal desire of the direct kingdom of heaven, as evinced in Gideon's refusal to rule over Israel: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you" (Judg. 8:22–23)—and fears that the absence of strong, centralized, temporal rule may lead to anarchy, as expressed in the last verse of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25).

The Sages tended to favor the monarchy, for the independence of Jewry in its own land was traditionally linked with the House of David. The era of David and Solomon was the lost golden age of the ancient Hebrew state, which would revive with the coming of the anointed son of David. The messianic concept was invested in the idea of monarchical rule. The Sages, too, however, vacillated throughout the period from the Tannaim to the Amoraim and the later Midrash over the halakhic qualifications for kingship. Among the Tannaim, R. Judah in particular held that the Torah commanded the appointment of a king. But R. Nehora'i, for example, asserted that the call for a king was "a disgrace to Israel."¹⁵ Despite all the disputes, the Mishnah, ultimately assumes that there is a king in Israel.

Although the Sages adopted monarchy as a halakhic norm, it was presented, as in Deuteronomy 17, as a constitutional authority. The halakhic norm presumed a division of political, legal, and ceremonial powers, thus restricting the monarchy and making it dependent on other sources of authority, as expressed in the principle of the Three Crowns (*ketarim*): Torah, Priesthood, and Kingship. Possession of the three crowns by one man according to certain sources was forbidden even to Moses; how much more so to ordinary kings.¹⁶ In all events, the crown of kingship is explicitly subordinated to the crown of Torah.¹⁷

Acceptance of limited monarchy did not end the debate. Medieval Jewish thought—halakhic, philosophical, and exegetical—continued to be exercised by the problem of kingship. When Maimonides determined that monarchy was a halakhic obligation (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 1.1: "Three commandments—to be carried out on entering the Land of Israel—were enjoined upon Israel: [one of these was] to appoint a king, as it is said, 'Thou shalt in anywise set him king over thee'"), he was taking a stand on an issue still fiercely in dispute. The question of monarchy had been a major bone of contention between the Geonim of Babylonia and the Exilarchs. The

Geonim—Saadya, Samuel ben Hofni, and Samuel ben Ali—all took exception to the claim that it was a halakhic imperative to establish a monarchy. Maimonides, in viewing this as a halakhic obligation, sided with the Exilarchs, the successors of the monarchy, in their historic debate with the Geonim of Babylonia. The argument against monarchy, that it was not a halakhic requirement at all, was advanced firmly by Saadya and, later, Abraham Ibn Ezra. More moderate critics conceded that there was a halakhic norm, but that it was limited to times of emergency and did not apply in normal circumstances.¹⁸ All agreed that even in an emergency the monarchy was clearly limited and subject to the spiritual authority.

Maimonides' decisive stance was accepted by most of the medieval sages who treated the subject—Moses of Coucy, Menahem Hameiri, Nissim Gerondi among others. Many, though, harbored reservations: The critics included Bahya ben Asher; Nahmanides, whose stance was markedly ambivalent; Joseph Ibn Caspi; and, of course, Isaac Abravanel, who was outspoken in his halakhical and philosophical rejection of a monarchical regime.¹⁹

The ambivalence and skepticism regarding the institution of monarchy in medieval Jewish thought are all the more striking since medieval political thought, in general, and Islamic and Christian thought in particular, viewed monarchy as the optimal regime. In Muslim and Christian realms, monarchy was the accepted form of government. Despite the disastrous experiences of Nahmanides and Abravanel, it was frequently the monarchy that protected the Jews from the rage of the mobs in Christian Europe. The intellectual fashions and historical reality that led Islam and Christianity to favor the institution of monarchy influenced medieval Jewish thinkers profoundly. However, utopian desires for the direct kingdom of heaven and the well-founded Biblical suspicion of despotism left many in strong opposition to a monarchical regime and many others ambivalent toward it. The theory of the philosopher king was not only monarchist but absolutist in essence. Jewish thinkers who were influenced by this theory were forced to reconcile it with their halakhic position.

The core of Platonic political theory that influenced Jewish thinkers was monarchical. As the soul rules the body and the rational faculty rules the soul, so government should be in the hands of one who has attained perfection of the rational soul, the philosopher king. Medieval thought translated this principle into theological language appealing to the unity of God, His uniqueness, and His absolute rule over creation. Bahya Ibn Pakuda, for example, ensconces this principle at the heart of his claims regarding the unity of God in the first part of his *Duties of the Heart*: "Among the signs of God's governance of his creation we see that rule can neither succeed nor be constant unless it lies in the hands of one who alone holds sway in word and deed, like a king in his kingdom, like the soul in the body. Aristotle said in

his discussions of unity that a plurality of rulers is not good—the real head is but one. The scriptures also say (Prov. 28:2): “For the transgression of a land many are the princes thereof.”²⁰

In medieval Jewish thought, we find many images of this sort in the theory of God and the theory of the soul. Thinkers like Abravanel, who rejected a monarchical regime in principle, also made much use of these images but refused to infer from the principle of divine rule the necessity for monarchical rule in human society. For them, the theological principle did not extend to government by a single human ruler; it actually called for the extension of the direct rule of God to the social order. Thinkers like Saadya who in principle affirmed a monarchical regime, albeit not necessarily for the people of Israel, or who affirmed it for the people of Israel, too, as did Maimonides, fully exploited Plato. The Platonic analogy ranged from the single rule in the cosmos and in the soul to the single wise rule in the perfect social order—for was it not a commandment for humanity to imitate God?

Support for a monarchical ideal did not necessarily mean complete acceptance of the Platonic theory, which identified the king with the philosopher, and, in the medieval theological context, added to this identity the prophet or even the priest. Maimonides, an avowed monarchist, had serious doubts about the Farabian-Platonic identification of the philosopher king with the prophet. Abravanel, a marked antimonarchist, had no reservations about this identification when he ascribed supreme human and political perfection to Moses and Solomon. The monarchist Maimonides restricted the Platonic theory with many qualifications because he supported the division of powers among the Three Crowns. The anti-monarchist Abravanel applied the theory in its entirety to Moses and Solomon on the assumption that they alone merited all the kingly epithets as a result of the direct and miraculous influence of the divine will. Other thinkers, such as Polkar and Alemanno, regarded monarchy as a halakhic norm; they fully accepted the Platonic theory of the philosopher king as adapted to the requirements of scriptural monotheism by the Muslim philosophers Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd.

To sum up, despite the parallelism of the Platonic philosopher-king theory and the Jewish tradition of the lawgiver-prophet, the two concepts conflict with each other in two respects. First, the Jewish political tradition posited a division of functions and powers, on the lines of the Three Crowns, at least for the period following the founding of the state by the prophet-lawgiver. This tradition makes for a clear-cut distinction between the prophet-lawgiver and the king. The Platonic stance, by contrast, preferred the combination of powers in a single individual. Second, the Platonic theory was essentially monarchical. By contrast, the halakhic posture viewed the monarchical regime with a large measure of suspicion and therefore, favored a restricted monarchy as distinct from the absolutism of the Platonic theory.

Thus, medieval thought that came into contact with Platonic theory through the agency of Islam had to contend with this serious tension. As in other areas of theology—for example, the problem of creation—medieval Jewish philosophy was hard pressed to deal with the Greek philosophical tradition. The philosophers we shall study coped with the problem in a variety of ways.

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