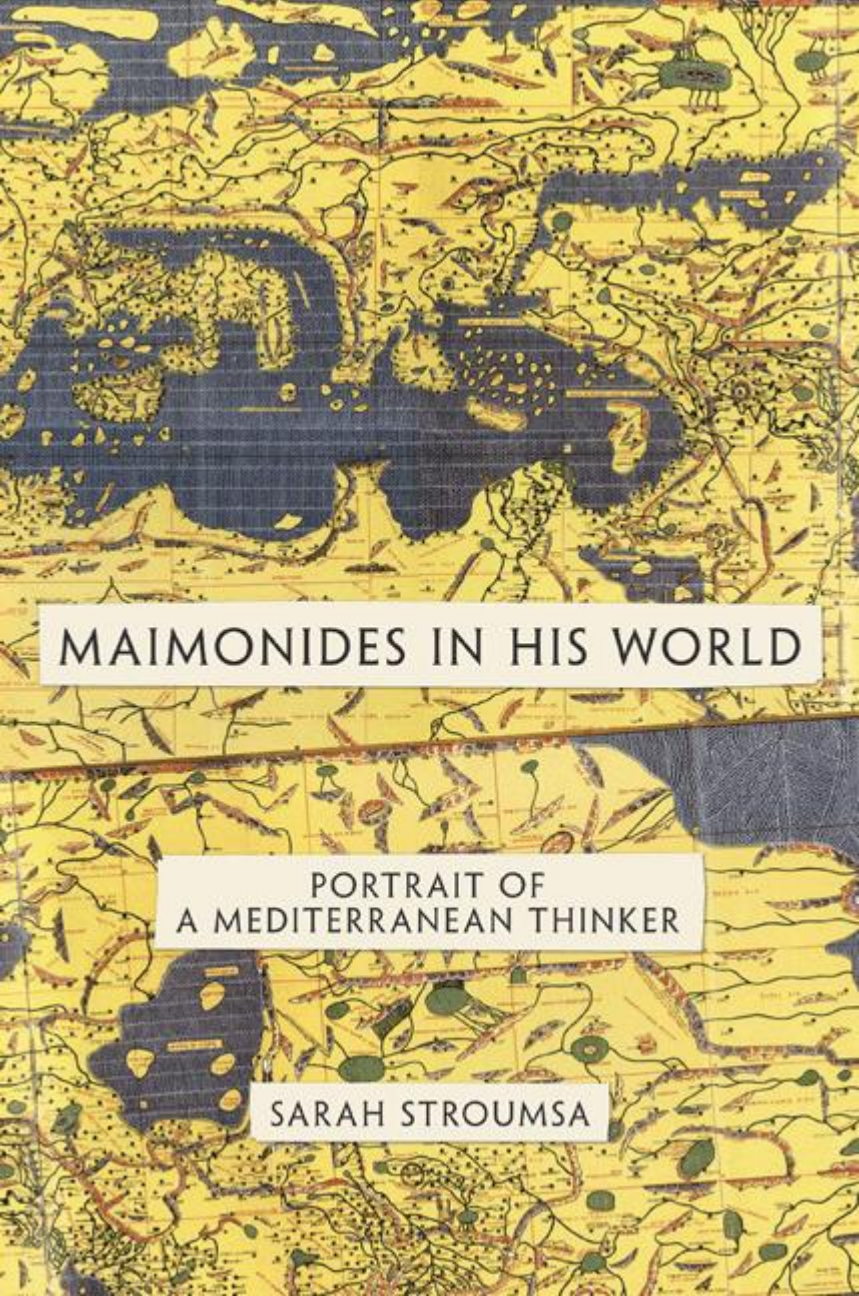

MAIMONIDES IN HIS WORLD

PORTRAIT OF A MEDITERRANEAN THINKER

SARAH STROUMSA

Maimonides in His World

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PORTRAIT OF A MEDITERRANEAN THINKER

Sarah Stroumsa

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In loving memory of my parents

Zvi Avraham Wallach
Zoshka Wallach née Ludmer

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PREFACE

The present book is dedicated to one major medieval thinker, Moses Maimonides (d. 1204), and to the examination of his thought in its historical and cultural context. The description of Maimonides as a thinker (rather than a philosopher, for instance) follows from his own definition of thinking:

> Thought (*fikra*) is one of the properties of a human being that are consequent upon his form.[1]

As these carefully chosen words indicate, for Maimonides thinking in itself is not identical with human perfection, nor does it guarantee the achievement of this perfection. Thinking is relevant at all levels of the theoretical as well as the practical domain, and it can even be corrupted and turned to vile things.[2] When the process of thinking is interrupted "at first thought" (*bi-awwal fikra*) it is likely to produce unripe, erroneous, or harmful ideas.[3] When, however, it is used as befits the human form, it prepares the human being to become human in all endeavors: individual or collective, corporeal or intellectual. Maimonides wrote on philosophy and on theology, on medicine and on Jewish law, and he was a community leader and a practicing physician. In all these activities he was driven by the same yearning to think correctly, and to direct his thoughts upwards. To understand him, we must therefore approach his thought in its entirety, as reflecting different aspects of one and the same thinker.

This book does not provide a full picture of Maimonides' thought, nor does it aspire to do so. There are many books that offer a synthesis of our knowledge regarding Maimonides: some are the fruit of joint efforts, presented as collections of articles; others are monographs; and some of them are impressively learned and penetrating. A huge literature exists also on specific important questions in Maimonides' thought. His positions on such fundamental philosophical and religious issues as creation ex nihilo, prophecy, or predestination have been analyzed and debated, with new and interesting studies still appearing. The present book touches on these issues only occasionally and briefly. It is also not a book dedicated

[1] *Guide* 3.8 (*Dalāla,* 313:5–6; Pines, 434–35).
[2] On the human being's ability to "direct his thoughts" (*an yattajiha bi-fikrihi*) to both sublime and mean objects, see *Guide* 1.10 (*Dalāla*, 24:13–14; Pines, 36).
[3] *Guide* 1.26 (*Dalāla*, 37:20–22; Pines, 434–35).

to one particular subfield of Maimonidean scholarship: philosophy, or law (*halacha*), or science. On each of these topics, there exists a vast and rapidly growing literature. Furthermore, only a fraction of this scholarly literature appears in the notes to the present book. The footnotes are meant to acknowledge my intellectual and scholarly debt, and to point to the diversity of possible interpretations. This book does not aspire to summarize Maimonides' place in any of these subfields, nor does it purport to update Maimonides' biography or intellectual biography. Instead, it seeks to offer what one might call "a cultural biography":[4] Maimonides' interaction with his multifaceted historical and cultural legacy, and how this cultural context affected him and shaped his thought.

This approach has also determined my use of sources. Whereas some modern Maimonides scholars tend to evaluate non-Jewish sources as secondary, auxiliary, or irrelevant sources,[5] these sources are taken here to be of primary importance for appreciating Maimonides' work. Their intrinsic value is judged, as is that of the Jewish sources, according to the topic at hand and the quality of each particular source.

Moreover, regarding Maimonides' own sources, some scholars adopt a rigorous approach, which is in effect a minimalist one. For them, suggestions that Maimonides might have had access to a specific non-Jewish source encounter resistance and are expected to be accompanied by a positive proof that this was indeed the case.[6] My own working hypothesis is that Maimonides, who only rarely cited his sources, read all he could find, and that he had no qualms about perusing the theological or legal works of non-Jews, and even less so when he respected their author. A priori, therefore, and until proven otherwise, my assumption is that he was generally familiar with major books of his period, both those that circulated in the West and those he could read in Egypt. As the following pages will show, this assumption in itself allows us to uncover places where Maimonides' statements indeed reveal his familiarity with these works.

That, with the exception of Philo, Jewish systematic philosophy emerged under Islam, and the crucial importance of the Islamic context for understanding the flourishing of Judaeo-Arabic philosophy, have long been

[4] I am indebted to Mark Silk for suggesting this term.

[5] See, for example, H. A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides, The Man and His Works* (Oxford 2005), 17–18, and 517n137 (regarding Ibn al-Qifṭī).

[6] See, for example A. Ivry, "Maimonides' Relation to the Teachings of Averroes," *Sefunot*, n.s. 8 (2003): 62; and Pines, "Translator's Introduction: The Philosophic Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed,* trans. by Pines (Chicago and London 1963), cviii (regarding Ibn Rushd's independent works); and, see, chap. 2, note 3, below; and chap. 3, note 85 ff.

acknowledged. As already stated succinctly by Shlomo Pines, "in the sphere of philosophical literature . . . Jewish thinkers had recourse primarily to the books of their Moslem counterparts," whereas "rare and of secondary significance is that relationship to the teaching of their Jewish predecessors."[7] This assessment has been fully adopted in this book. Moreover, its adoption in the realm of philosophy also entails a change of perspective in other domains. A philosopher who was so fully immersed in Islamic philosophy and used it to shape his own could not disengage himself from Islamic culture when he delved into other kinds of intellectual activity, be it exegesis, theology, or polemics. My assumption is therefore that, in writing on Jewish law, for example, Maimonides was not only toeing the line of Rabbinic, Gaonic tradition, but also bringing to bear the influence of his non-Jewish cultural context.

Tracing influences is often frowned upon in modern scholarship. Many feel that *Quellenforschung*, which highlights the separate components of a given system, devalues the originality of this system and diverts scholarly attention from contents and ideas to the history of their transmission. When the previous life of ideas must be recognized, scholars nowadays prefer to concentrate on the mechanisms of their appropriation, and the word "influence" is often placed, with a skeptical grin, between quotation marks. The present study regards the detection of hitherto unrecognized direct influences as an indispensable tool for the historian of ideas and of mentalities. The identification of influences is critical in our attempt to gauge the depth of a thinker's attachment to his milieu. It enables us to transform this milieu from a scenic background into the pulsating world in which the thinker lived. In the case of Maimonides, far from obfuscating his originality, the identification of influences allows us to flesh out the person, his way of thinking, and his creative genius in recognizing the potential of the available crude material and in using it.

A central idea informing this book is the belief in the capital importance of the multifocal approach to intellectual history in the world of medieval Islam. An examination that focuses on the output of only one religious community, with an occasional dutiful nod to the rest of the religious puzzle, is similar to examination with a single eye, and is likely to produce a flat, two-dimensional picture. Reading Jewish and Muslim intellectual history together is a sine qua non condition if we strive to achieve a correct, well-rounded picture of this history. Generally speaking, for a truly three-dimensional picture, what is required is actually a trifocal approach that also takes the Christians into account. Although in the intellectual history of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) the role played

[7] Pines, "Scholasticism after Thomas Aquinas and the Teachings of Ḥasdai Crescas and his Predecessors," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities* 1.10 (1967): 1.

by Christians was relatively marginal, they nevertheless represent a crucial piece in the puzzle of the development of this culture. One should emphasize that, for a correct application of the multifocal approach, a parallel but separate study of the different communities will not suffice. Furthermore, in this complex intellectual world the ideas flow into each other, brazenly oblivious to communal barriers. The flow of ideas was never unilateral or linear, but rather went back and forth, creating what I propose to call a "whirlpool effect," where, when an idea falls, like a drop of colored liquid, into the turbulence, it eventually colors the whole body of water. In order to follow the course of these ideas, and to see how a particular thinker contributed to their flow, a full picture must be obtained.

This whirlpool metaphor may also convey some of the difficulties involved in our approach. It is much easier to trace the course of neatly divided currents and trends than to reconstruct the way in which they contributed to the whirlpool. When first thinking of this book, I had planned to treat the material that fed into Maimonides' thought according to its origin in different communities. This would have implied, for example, writing a separate section on Muslim *kalām*, another on Jewish *kalām*, and yet another on Christian theology. The original plan, however, proved impossible to carry out: Maimonides' attitude to Jewish *kalām* cannot be treated separately from Muslim or Christian *kalām*.

The first chapter of this book serves as an introduction: it discusses the notion of the designation "Mediterranean" and its applicability and usefulness for the study of Maimonides. It also presents a "Mediterranean biography" of Maimonides, setting the ground for the following chapters, which can be seen as case studies touching upon cardinal points in Maimonides' thought. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the world of theology as Maimonides lived it: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim orthodox theology on the one hand, and heresies on the other. Chapter 3 focuses on the particular brand of theology that was the backdrop for the formative period of Maimonides' life: the Almohads, and their unacknowledged but immense impact on Maimonides's thought in all realms. Chapter 4 examines Maimonides' approach to religion: beginning with his analysis of the Sabians and idolatry, continuing with his view of the history of Islam, and concluding with his attitude to the various shades of popular religiosity. Chapter 5 studies Maimonides' scientific approach as it is reflected in his medical practice, on the one hand, and in his attitude to pseudo-science, on the other. Chapter 6 endeavors to examine various aspects of Maimonides' vision of human perfection: beyond this life (in the world to come or after the resurrection) or, within it, as part of society. The conclusion will briefly present the implications of these case

studies for the study of Maimonides in particular and of Jewish and Islamic thought in general.

The present book grew, as books do, out of my work over several years, both in teaching and in writing. While some of the material it contains is published here for the first time, parts of it are based on previous publications. These publications treated specific aspects of Maimonides' thought, and the picture they offered was necessarily limited in scope. By their integration into a full portrait I hope to show that the traits they point to in Maimonides' thought were not just episodes, moments, or flashes in Maimonides' thinking. This was indeed his world.

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The decision to write the present book was made in 2006, when I was enjoying a sabbatical year as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. The CAJS provided ideal working conditions, a supportive staff, and a wonderful group of colleagues. Without all these, this book would have waited seven more years, if not more. In particular, I wish to thank the Center's Director, Professor David Ruderman, for his kind support; Etty Lassman, whose resourcefulness and dedication allowed me to move, with my antique files, into the twenty-first century; and the library staff—in particular, Dr. Arthur Kiron, Dr. Seth Dershowitz, Judith Halper, and Joseph Gulka—who painstakingly retrieved books and articles and shared my enthusiasm for their content.

A previous Sabbatical allowed me to spend, in 2000, a wonderful six months in Madrid. The scholars of the *Instituto des Estudios Arabes* at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas welcomed me, with their customary warmth, to the world of al-Andalus, and shared with me their erudition. For this experience of true *convivencia* I am grateful to them, and in particular to Maribel Fierro, Mercedes García-Arenal, and Cristina de la Puente.

If I count the landmarks in the production of this book in terms of sabbaticals, this is due to the liberality of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In a world where the patience for academic *scholē* is growing thin, the Hebrew University continues to recognize the importance of scholarly mobility and international exposure and to support it generously. My foremost debt to the Hebrew University, however, is for the constant experience of intellectual challenge it provides. As a member of two of its departments (the Department of Arabic Language and Literature and the Department of Jewish Thought) I was introduced to a double share of its intellectual riches. I wish to take this opportunity to thank my friends at the Hebrew University—teachers, colleagues, and students—for their erudition, intellectual curiosity, friendly criticism, and kind encouragement that have inspired and sustained me over the years.

In writing about Maimonides, the memory of two of my teachers accompanies my every word: my high school teacher Yaacov Meir, whose classes vibrated with the moral and intellectual relevance of the *Eight Chapters*; and Shlomo Pines, the unassuming mentor, the critical thinker of philosophy in context. For the privilege of their inspiration I am forever grateful.

I wish to thank Fred Appel, the Senior Editor in Religion and Anthropology at Princeton University Press, for his gentle coaching and professional advice. I am grateful to Jon Munk, who copyedited the manuscript, and to Heath Renfroe, the production editor, for their competent and forthcoming help. The two anonymous readers have been extremely generous with their time and scholarship, and I am thankful for their meticulous reading and detailed, penetrating comments.

The etiquette of acknowledgments requires that family be relegated to the end, so it is at the end that I put Guy first: he was the first to suggest that I write this book, and as always, accompanied this book and me with relentless criticism and boundless encouragement. His friendship surpasses the one that the protagonist of the present book valued as perfect.[1]

[1]See Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna*, *Neziqin*, 411–12 (commentary on *Avot* 1.6).

ABBREVIATIONS

Works of Maimonides

Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates, = *Moshe ben Maimon: Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates*, ed. Suessmann Muntner, Hebrew trans. Moshe Ibn Tibbon (Maimonides, *Medical Works*, III) (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1961).

Commentary on the Mishnah = *Mishnah ʿim Perush Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon*, ed. J. Kapaḥ (Jerusalem, 1965).

Dalāla = Mūsā ben Maymūn, *Dalālat al-ḥāʾirīn*, ed. S. Munk and I. Yoel (Jerusalem, 1931).

Epistulae = Moshe ben Maimon, *Epistulae*, ed. D. H. Baneth (Jerusalem, 1946).

Epistles = *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. I. Shailat, 2 vols (Jerusalem: *Maʿaliyot*, 1987–88).

The Guide of the Perplexed: References to the *Guide* indicate part and chapter, with a following reference, respectively, to Munk-Joel's edition of the Judaeo-Arabic text (page and line) and to Pines's English translation. For example, *Guide*, 3.27 (*Dalāla,* 371:17; Pines, 510), indicates *The Guide of the Perplexed,* Part 3, chapter 27 (page 371, line 17, in Munk-Joel's edition; page 510 in Pines's translation).

Letters = Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, *Iggerot: Letters,* ed. and trans. J. Kafih (Jerusalem, 1987).

Medical Aphorisms = Maimonides, *Medical Aphorisms*, Treatises 1–5 *(Kitāb al-fuṣūl fīʾl-ṭibb*). ed., trans. and annotated by Gerrit Bos (The Medical Works of Moses Maimonides) (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2004).

Medical Aphorisms (*Pirqei Moshe*), ed. Seussmann Muntner (Jerusalem, 1959).

Mishneh Torah = Moshe ben Maimon, *Mishneh Torah* (Jerusalem, 1965).

On Asthma = *Maimonides On Asthma* (*maqāla fīʾl-rabwi*), ed., trans. and annotated by Gerrit Bos. (The Complete Medical Works of Moses Maimonides, vol. 1) (Provo: Brigham Young University 2002).

Pines = Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Trans. with an Introduction and Notes by Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

Responsa = Moshe ben Maimon, *Responsa*, ed. J. Blau. 4 vols. (Jerusalem, 1986).

Sefer ha-mitzvot = Moshe ben Maimon, *Sefer ha-mitzvot*, ed. J. Qafīḥ (Jerusalem, 1971).

Treatise on Resurrection = *Maimonides' Treatise on Resurrection* (*Maqāla fī teḥiyyat ha-metim*), ed. J. Finkel *PAAJR* 9 (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1939).

Other Works

BT	Babylonian Talmud
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
EI	*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden, Brill, 1986–2002).
IAU	Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ*. ed. Nizār Riḍā (Beirut: *Maktabat al-ḥayāt*, n.d.).
IOS	*Israel Oriental Studies*
IQ	Ibn al-Qifṭī, *Taʾrikh al-ḥukamā*, ed. I. Lippert (Leipzig, 1903).
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JSAI	*Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*
PAAJR	*Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*
ZDMG	*Zeitschrift der Morgendländer Gesselschaft*

Citations in Arabic or in Hebrew are in italics. Citations in Judaeo-Arabic are in italics, with the Hebrew words in bold characters. Translations from the Arabic or Hebrew, when no other translation is indicated, are my own.

Maimonides in His World

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Chapter One

Maimonides and Mediterranean Culture

From the many honorific titles appended to Maimonides' name, "The Great Eagle" has come to be identified as his particular, personal title. This biblical sobriquet (from Ezekiel 17: 3) was meant, no doubt, to underline his regal position in the Jewish community. At the same time, the imagery of the wide-spread wings does justice not only to the breadth of Maimonides' intellectual horizons, but also to the scope of his impact, which extended across the Mediterranean, and beyond it to Christian Europe.

To the extent that the quantity of scholarly studies about an author is a criterion for either importance or fame, Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) stands among the most prominent figures in Jewish history, and certainly the most famous medieval Jewish thinker.[1] The continuous stream of publications dedicated to Maimonides is, however, often characterized by overspecification. Following what appears to be a division in Maimonides' own literary output, scholars usually focus on a particular section of his work—philosophy, medicine, religious law, or community leadership—complementing it by forays into other domains. Each such subject creates its own context: the intellectual or historical environment that we reconstruct in our attempts to understand Maimonides' treatment of a certain topic.

The prevalent tendency to overemphasize disciplinary partitions within Maimonides' own work reinforces, in turn, another already existing tendency: to overemphasize the distinction between Maimonides the Jewish leader and Maimonides the Islamic thinker.[2] Although Maimonides, like many great thinkers, defies categorization, we are prone to search for familiar tags, convenient pigeon-holes in which we can neatly classify his

[1] To illustrate this point, one example may suffice: a search in RAMBI, The Index of Articles in Jewish Studies, published by the Jewish National and University Library at Jerusalem (http://jnul.huji.ac.il/rambi/) lists, as articles with "Maimonides" as a key-word in the title, 243 entries published between 2000 and 2007 (and this number does not include Hebrew articles in the same category). On the inflation in Maimonidean scholarship, see also P. Bouretz, "A la recherche des lumières médiévales: la leçon de Maïmonide," *Critique* 64 (Jan-Feb. 2008), 29. Several comprehensive books on Maimonides came out when the manuscript of the present book was already completed, and could not be cited extensively.

[2] For an example of such a distinction, see chap. 5, below, *apud* notes 18–20.

work. The ensuing scholarly result does not do justice to Maimonides. The image it paints resembles Maimonides' famous, very late portrait: imposing and yet flat and two-dimensional. In particular, it depreciates Maimonides' participation in the cultural world of Medieval Islam. In the realms of philosophy and science, and in these realms alone, Maimonides' connection to the Islamic world has been duly and universally recognized. Most (although by no means all) of the scholarly works treating his philosophy are based on his original Arabic works, which are analyzed in the context of contemporary Muslim philosophy. Even in the study of philosophy, however, where Maimonides is recognized as "a disciple of al-Fārābī,"[3] his contribution is seldom fully integrated into the picture of medieval Islamic philosophy. Studies that offer a panoramic view of a particular philosophic issue in the medieval Islamic world would thus, more often than not, fail to make use of the evidence provided by Maimonides. In the study of other aspects of Maimonides' activity, it is mostly the Jewish context that is brought to bear, whereas the Islamic world recedes into the background. Maimonides' legal works are thus studied mostly by students of Jewish law, many of whom treat their subject as if it can be isolated from parallel intellectual developments in the Islamic world. Even the study of Maimonides' communal activity, based on his (usually Judaeo-Arabic) correspondence, tends to paint the Muslim world as a mere background to the life of the Jewish community (rather than seeing it as the larger frame of which the Jewish community was an integral part). At the same time, all too often this Judaeo-Arabic material remains ignored by scholars of Islamic history and society.[4] Maimonides is thus widely recognized as a giant figure of Jewish history, but remains of almost anecdotal significance for the study of the Islamic world.

The aim of the present book is to present an integrative intellectual profile of Maimonides in his world, the world of Mediterranean culture. This world, broadly defined, also supplies the sources for the book. Only by reading Maimonides' own writings *in light of the information gleaned from other sources* can we hope to paint a well-rounded profile, and to instill life in it.[5]

[3] L. Berman, "Maimonides the Disciple of al-Fārābī," *IOS* 4 (1974): 154–78.

[4] In this context one can understand Mark Cohen's earnest plea, "The time has arrived to integrate the Cairo Geniza, alongside Islamic genizas, into the canon of Islamic studies"; see M. C. Cohen, "Geniza for Islamicists, Islamic Geniza, and 'the New Cairo Geniza,'" *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 7 (2006): 141.

[5] Compare, for example, Davidson's approach, for whom "the only way to assess [Maimonides'] training in rabbinics and philosophy, and for that matter in medicine as well, is to examine his writings and discover through them the works he read, studied and utilized." See H. A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford 2005), 80; and