

Jewish Philosophy

Fall Semester (I) Sept. 95 - Jan. 96 Prozdor/FHJC, Rabbi Gary Karlin

Josh Mohrer's Mid-Term Examination 5756/1995-96

Saadia Gaon, Yehudah HaLevi, Moses Maimonides, Moses De

Leon and Isaac Luria

Part One: Answer **all** these questions with short answers:

1. Of the thinkers that we studied this semester, which were rationalists?

Characterize the others briefly.

Saadia Gaon and Maimonides were both rationalists. They used reason to guide their philosophies. Because of his book, *The Zohar*, Moses De Leon is clearly a mystic. Isaac Luria was as well. He helped people understand creation with his theory about *OgCMYC* and *OYLkH TRYBw*. The remaining philosopher, Yehudah Halevi was different from the rest in the way that he based much of his philosophy on history.

2. Which thinker, in your view, had the most in common with modern Zionist thought? Briefly explain your answer.

Expressing his thoughts through his poetry, Yehudah HaLevi had the most in common with modern Zionist thought. He believed that the Jews couldn't live meaningful lives in Spain and that they should all move to Israel.

3. Briefly define the Lurianic concepts of *OgCMYC* and *OYLkH TRYBw*.

OgCMYC is said to be the first action of creation when God withdrew from the universe. Luria came up with this theory because if the Ayn Sof was infinite, then it filled everything and left no room for further creation. OYLkH TRYBw or *the breaking of the vessels*, is the hebrew term for when it is believed that too much divine light from the Ayn Sof poured into the *Sefirot* or *vessels* causing them to break. This mixture of divine light and pieces of the vessels are what Luria believed the evil of the world was created from.

Part Two: Answer any **two** of these questions in the space provided.

- b. If, according to *Rambam*, the Torah understands God in human terms (anthropomorphism), and these descriptions are not to be taken literally, how do you think he might have interpreted the Torah's accounts of God's speech or God's words?

The phrase RMAL HwM`LA 'H RbDYW or *And God spoke to moses saying*, appears countlessly in the Torah. According to *Rambam* though, it should not be taken literally. He explains in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, one should not fully accept the human characteristics, applied to God in the Torah. God is purely spiritual and the comparing of him to human-like characteristics is just a simile and if one does in fact take it literally, it will ruin his conception of God. The exact same thing applies to speech. Neither us nor *Rambam* can know how God communicated with Abraham, Moses, or the Prophets. And in order for humans to understand it can be put into human concepts, but I believe that *Rambam* wanted people to know that they should not limit there understanding of a biblical event to these concepts.

- c. How does De Leon interpret the words OYQLA ARB TY\$ARB in Genesis

As opposed to the literal translation - *In the beginning God created* - Moses De Leon's *Zohar* interpreted it in an unusual way. In his book,

De Leon said that creation started with a flame, or the mysterious aspect of God. He called this the TYwAR (beginning). He played with the words and changed OYQLA to the object of the verb ARb. He also changed the word OYQLA to YM HLA. By interpreting it this way he rearranges the whole meaning to *The beginning (divine light) created God*.

Part Three: Answer any **one** of these questions (100-200 words on a separate sheet, attached):

B. Were the earliest thinkers that we studied — Saadia, HaLevi, Maimonides and DeLeon — primarily Sefardi or Ashkenazi? What is the significance of this fact and the reason for it?

Saadia Gaon, Yehudah HaLevi, Moses Maimonides, and Moses DeLeon were all Sefardi. Coming from the same background, all of these philosophers were competing with the Muslim and Christian communities. Many of their philosophical ideas may have been to justify Judaism to the other cultures. The ideas of these early thinkers may be compared to today's advertisements, in that they were trying to

prove that Judaism made sense and was an equal to the Muslim and Christian faiths.

The main reason that the first Philosophers came from Spain was because of the religious diversity, and leaders who tended to favor a certain religion. At the time, Spain was where religions were being explored and questioned and this left much room for philosophers. These may not have been the only philosophers in existence, but perhaps the only ones that were being listened to because of general religious peace in other parts of the world.