

Killing Off Maimonidean Jewish Humanism Once and for All

We have just witnessed White Jewish Supremacist Bret Stephens' attack on Sephardic Jews – among others – in his disgusting article “The Secrets of Jewish Genius”:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/Davidshasha/kyX5EqjLwY8>

The article – quickly censored with a firm disclaimer from the paper's editors – contained a positive reference to an academic paper on Ashkenazi IQ written by White Racists:

<https://web.mit.edu/fustflum/documents/papers/AshkenaziIQ.jbiosocsci.pdf>

I discussed the Stephens Ashkenazi “Genius” racism and the “Idiot Sephardim” in the following article:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/Davidshasha/vCcR0JR62JA>

But Stephens, even with his very prominent media perch, is just the tip of the Anti-Sephardi iceberg.

It is perhaps even more important to see how badly the Sephardic heritage is faring in both academic and religious circles.

The following citation from the very popular book on [Jewish Law](#) by Chaim Saiman opens up a much wider window into the ways that Ashkenazim have sought to erase Maimonidean Jewish Humanism:

Surveying the tradition cumulatively, we see the following compromise emerge: regarding the sections of the Talmud practiced “in these days,” the trend runs strongly in favor of Rif/Maimonides, as even the competing Ashkenazi views were assimilated into the framework developed by the Geonic and Sephardic codifiers. But when it came to thinking about what the Talmud is and how it ought to be studied, the balance shifts toward Tosafot. Despite Maimonides’ massive influence, few followed his attempts to eliminate Talmudic reasoning; all of the later codifiers show their work and justify their rulings via talmudic citations and argument.

Indeed, Tosafot’s adoption of the Talmudic approach would come to dominate not only how the Talmud is read but how all significant halakhic texts, including the Rif’s *Halakhot* and even [Maimonides’] *Mishneh Torah* were processed. No sooner had *Mishneh Torah* attained authoritative status, than a network of commentaries developed around it, forcibly pulling Maimonides’ lean and oracular text back into the dialectical chaos typical of the Talmud. For many later halakhists, *Mishneh Torah* was less a definitive code of halakhah than evidence of how Maimonides interpreted the Talmudic sugya. Perhaps the ultimate irony emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when some of the most extreme

expressions of devotional *talmud Torah* were published as commentaries, no less, to Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*...

As a result, though Maimonides remains one of the most influential halakhists, who worked mightily to replace to the Talmud's convoluted dialogue with crisp rules of law, in the long run of Jewish history his project largely failed. (p. 157)

Saiman's complex discussion of the Jewish legal tradition boils down to one basic fact: Maimonides' philosophical rationalism and the effort he made in setting out scientific study of the rabbinic tradition was antithetical to "authentic" Judaism and was "properly" rejected by the Ashkenazim.

It is a theme that we encounter repeatedly in contemporary Judaic scholarship; a field devoid of traditional Sephardim.

Indeed, Saiman's book, a product of The Tikvah Fund and a best-seller at the Yeshiva University Seforim Sale, is essentially a love letter to the 19th century Ashkenazi Yeshivah tradition, as we will see in more detail below.

Sephardic Jewish Humanism is identified with the cosmopolitan tradition of Maimonides and the many rabbi-poets of the Andalusian school, as I have discussed in my article "Sephardic Judaism and the Levantine Option":

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvvXVFhBSjh3eVdIU0E/view>

I have therefore prepared this special newsletter to provide further detail on Maimonides and the current movement to obliterate Jewish Humanism.

In this introduction I break down the Anti-Maimonideans into four categories: The Neo-Pagan, the Neo-Christian, the Neo-Orthodox, and the Neo-Hasidic.

Each will be discussed below.

The Neo-Pagan Anti-Maimonideans: Michael Wyschogrod and Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

The tradition of Maimonides is one that takes great pains to de-mythologize and de-anthropomorphize the Biblical text.

The late Michael Wyschogrod took the very opposite position in his 1983 book *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Body-Faith-God-People-Israel/dp/1568219105>

I have presented Wyschogrod's atavistic Jewish primitivism in a special newsletter:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/Davidshasha/ji2Eeun1BHg/KDGI4mpIBgAJ>

Wyschogrod believed that God has an actual physical body, because that is what was literally written in the Hebrew Bible.

He thus rejected the entire tradition of rationalistic Jewish Bible interpretation, beginning with the Aramaic translation of [Onkelos](#) and cresting with Maimonides' magnum opus *The Guide of the Perplexed* which sought to remove the pagan encrustations from Scripture.

Maimonides firmly believed that Scripture was revealed by God in the primitive language of the ancient Israelites to fit their understanding of the world, and it required constant philosophical "translation" to make it live in new circumstances.

Wyschogrod refused such "translation" and demanded a literalist reading of the Hebrew Bible.

One of Wyschogrod's most devoted followers is Rabbi Meir Soloveichik of the formerly-Sephardic Congregation Shearith Israel:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ytYVvsu-He-LACFKWcSsYGguR5uX33u9/view?ths=true>

Soloveichik wrote his doctoral thesis on the vexing subject of Jewish Election in the thought of Wyschogrod. It is an argument that reflects Bret Stephens' racism, but does so in a distinctly Anti-Maimonidean Orthodox manner.

The idea is to reject the Greco-Arabic philosophy of Maimonides' *Guide* and restore a Neo-Pagan understanding of God that was anathema to the Sephardim and all rational Jews.

The confluence of Wyschogrod, Soloveichik, and Stephens in their White Jewish Supremacy is characteristic of The Tikvah Fund and its debased Neo-Con politics. It refuses the enlightened approach of the classical Sephardic tradition and Maimonidean Jewish Humanism in no uncertain terms.

The Neo-Christian Anti-Maimonideans: Daniel Boyarin, Christine Hayes, and Rabbi Richard Hidary

I would confidently say that it is impossible today to do any work in academic study of rabbinic literature without engaging the scholarship of Berkeley Professor Daniel Boyarin:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/davidshasha/n7vS2aoQkao/4ZeTMvY5AAAJ;context-place=msg/davidshasha/n7vS2aoQkao/4ZeTMvY5AAAJ>

Boyarin first made his name in academic Judaic Studies by attacking the Jewish Post-Modernism of Jose Faur and Susan Handelman in his 1990 book *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Intertextuality-Reading-Midrash-Biblical-Literature/dp/0253209099>

In my article on the three reactionary Berkeley professors I also included Robert Alter, whose 1987 New Republic article “Old Rabbis, New Critics” aggressively pressed forward on the rejection of Jewish Post-Modernism as an anachronism:

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvXeFJDdkdrYmVVQUk/edit>

Alter set the standard in the field of Judaic Studies by refusing continuity in the rabbinical system; a fact that remains critical to the “German” tendencies of its historical understanding.

Following this lead, Boyarin soon dominated the field by writing positively about Christianity in his books *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity*, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Jewish Identity*, and the popular summation *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*.

The common thread throughout these books and the rest of his work is to show how rabbinic Judaism is belated, and that Jewish Apocalyptic, the non-canonical books that were rejected by the Jewish Sages but accepted by the Church, represented a more “authentic” form of Judaism than the Talmud and Midrash.

The aim is to turn Midrashic polysemy and its literary ambiguity into doctrinal univocality and semantic certainty, as is demanded by Christian absolutism.

Boyarin’s scholarship, pace the Christian exegetical model, is thus grounded in doctrine and theology as opposed to the Open Text of the rabbis and its hermeneutical dimension. Morality and ethics are not part of his religious weltanschauung.

Indeed, we can see how this process works in Boyarin’s discussion of Daniel 7 and its throne vision:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvXbmt4dmNVSEotUXM/view?ths=true>

As well as in his discussion of the Logos tradition critical to Christian theology:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvXNmE5elVBekRkSFU/view?ths=true>

He sums up his Platonically Christianized view of Judaism in his article on the “Two Powers” (Hebrew, *Shetei Reshuyot*) dualistic theology:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RJKYDB8z4MzcTaVN8ojqZkf-nZ9CL4Pj/view?ths=true>

Unsurprisingly, Boyarin has been a strong proponent of the Jewish Jesus movement:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/davidshasha/9MqbrjcWyKo/Hv3Ntg7ggcoJ;context-place=forum/davidshasha>

While we have seen how Neo-Cons like Dennis Prager have embraced Evangelical Christianity from a Trumpist angle, Boyarin has given an academic imprimatur to the same basic idea, as he provides more “nuance” in his debasement of the Talmud and the rabbinic heritage.

One of Boyarin’s most devoted disciples is Yale Professor Christine Hayes, whose 2015 book *[What’s Divine About Divine Law?](#)* is an excellent example of the literalist reading of rabbinic texts, which ultimately shows them to be corrupt and incoherent relative to the absolutist Christian tradition.

The book adopts the now-standard academic dating of Christian and rabbinic texts pioneered by Jacob Neusner and [David Weiss-Halivni](#) that effectively prioritizes the Gospels and Pauline epistles as formally pre-dating the static rabbinic canon, thus making them more “Jewish” than the purportedly Jewish texts which are seen as derivative and lacking doctrinal coherence.

In fact, what we see is that Judaism and Christianity are not different at all. Christian dogmas such as the Incarnation and Divine Logos and Sonship are all “Jewish” ideas and values. In fact, Hayes sees Paul of Tarsus as more authentically Jewish than Philo of Alexandria!

In a truly fascinating manner, she explicitly imposes an alien intellectual-academic grid on the rabbinic material, and occasionally remarks how the material actually resists her imposition. In her analysis the rabbis always come up short.

It is a startling formal admission that proves how these academics are confronting the rabbinic corpus with ideas and values with which the corpus is not conversant or can address in any accurate way which might serve to validate the critical methodology.

More recently, Rabbi Richard Hidary of the Brooklyn Syrian Jewish community has added his voice to the strident Boyarin chorus.

In his article “Why Are There Lawyers in Heaven? Rabbinic Court Procedure in Halakha and Aggada,” cited extensively by Hayes in her deeply offensive book, Hidary maintains the literalist doctrinal reading of rabbinic texts against the Maimonidean figuration that has long been normative in the classical Sephardic heritage:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvVXVG9jVmolaHg2Unc/view?ths=true>

Hidary's idea is to criticize rabbinic authority and expose its logical inconsistencies, rather than affirming the genius of its flexibility and the way it constructs an open system that allows for revision and hermeneutical ethicality, as opposed to Christian dogma rooted in Greco-Roman absolutism, which is closed and oppressive in its totalizing tendencies.

This tendency was confirmed in his 2017 book [*The Rabbis as Greco-Roman Rhetors*](#), eventually re-titled *Rabbis and Classical Rhetoric: Sophistic Education and Oratory in the Talmud Midrash*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Rabbis-Classical-Rhetoric-Sophistic-Education/dp/1107177405>

The Boyarin school seeks to subvert the rabbinical tradition by relegating it to secondary status below Christianity and Greco-Roman civilization, thus forcing a negative re-evaluation of its authoritative place in Judaism.

In this context Maimonides is a less-than-authentic Jew who explicates in a “foreign” manner a less-than-authentic belated Talmud.

The Neo-Orthodox Anti-Maimonideans: The Lithuanian Yeshivah Tradition in the Work of Chaim Saiman

As I stated at the beginning of this introduction, Chaim Saiman's 2018 book *Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law* has become an important addition to the Anti-Maimonidean canon of Ashkenazi Supremacy and its irrational atavism:

<https://www.amazon.com/Halakhah-Rabbinic-Library-Jewish-Ideas/dp/069115211X>

It is a very significant book because it essentially writes Sephardim out of contemporary Jewish religious life.

With the exception of the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, whose SHAS party has ultimately become willing partners of the Haredi Yeshivah world, Saiman is exclusively focused on the Lithuanian world of Brisk and its environs; a world that is central to the Yeshiva University Modern Orthodox system that Saiman proudly espouses.

The lengthy citation from the book presented above reflects a larger disdain for the cosmopolitan ethos of Andalusian Judaism. While Sephardic Jews prized system and order and the aesthetics of poetry and belles-lettres, the Ashkenazi Yeshivas were solely focused on an atavistic reading of the Talmud at the expense of all else, as they closed themselves off from the larger society.

Saiman resolutely ignores Ashkenazi Jewish Humanists like Moses Mendelssohn and Emmanuel Levinas, whose Jewish thinking exists outside the enchanted world of the hermetic Lithuanian Yeshivas.

We must recall, as I write in my Huffington Post articles on Maimonides and the Anti-Maimonidean tradition included in this special newsletter, that the Ashkenazim not only rejected Maimonides' philosophy and science, but went so far as to attack his systemization of the Talmudic system with its disdain for PILPUL casuistry, as Saiman duly notes.

Indeed, as Saiman also affirms, Maimonides' massive legal code the *Mishneh Torah* was ultimately rejected for its methods and conclusions, as the Ashkenazim preferred a less pragmatic and more "Platonic" understanding of the Talmud that was about abstract ideas rather than actual legal principles, "Da'as Torah" authoritarianism rather than rationalistic ethics.

In my article on Samson Raphael Hirsch included in this special newsletter I provide more detail on the conflict between Maimonides and the Ashkenazim who attacked him.

In Chaim Saiman's world there are only Lithuanian Yeshivas and no Sephardim – and no Maimonidean Jewish Humanists. Maimonides is thus marked in no uncertain terms as a "failure" whose intellectual values have no place in the Torah world of our time.

The Neo-Hasidic Anti-Maimonideans: Rav SHAGAR and Yakov Nagen

Where Zionism was founded as a non-religious, even anti-religious, nationalist movement, over time the Religious Zionists have accrued a good deal of power in Israel and America. In the Jewish Settlements of Judea and Samaria there has been a resurgence of Hasidic mysticism dangerously coupled with a militant eschatological messianism that has often turned violent in its racism against the Palestinian Arabs.

An important contribution to the intellectualism of the Settlers has been the late Rav SHAGAR and his duplicitous take on Jewish Post-Modernism:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/Davidshasha/de-xEWk9-XE/nQhx3c1CBwAJ>

SHAGAR's book *Faith Shattered and Restored: Judaism in the Postmodern Age* presents us with a very tricky iteration of Settler life and its Neo-Hasidic understanding of Judaism:

https://www.amazon.com/Faith-Shattered-Restored-Postmodern-Classics/dp/1592644643/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1568613191&sr=1-1

SHAGAR is not a Jewish Post-Modernist at all, but an eclectic New Age thinker rooted in Ashkenazi Jewish atavism whose work is quite the antithesis of Derrida and Jabes and their deeply linguistic-hermeneutic concerns; what Derrida called "[Grammatology](#)."

SHAGAR's work would probably be better classified with the **attacks** on Post-Modernism coming from the Christian Fundamentalists, who share a literalist religious ideology with the Settlers:

https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/Davidshasha/grfD1_Pchf8

SHAGAR and his followers make use of the term Post-Modernism largely for cosmetic purposes, while at the same time promoting the vision of Settler Zionism and its messianic tendencies that are even more accurately articulated by his devoted disciple Yakov Nagen in his book *Be, Become, Bless: Jewish Spirituality Between East and West*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Be-Become-Bless-Yakov-Nagen/dp/1592645275>

In point of fact it is Nagen's book that makes the Neo-Hasidism that is implicit in SHAGAR's vision come to full fruition.

In a series of essays on the weekly Pentateuchal Synagogue readings, Nagen lays out the Settler ethos as a New Age liturgy that completely ignores the Sephardic heritage of Jewish Humanism and its roots in the Arab-Muslim world, bringing us straight to Indian mysticism in what has become the Israeli fashion:

<https://www.jpost.com/Jerusalem-Report/Mother-India-573686>

Rabbi Alan Brill has followed this Settler trend closely:

<https://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/11/30/rishikesh-israelis-chabad-and-theology/>

SHAGAR and Nagen present us with a White Jewish Supremacy that has become common in the West Bank Synagogues and Yeshivas and which chooses to ignore the wider arc of Jewish History and adopt a form of existentialism that is rooted in the primitive and the occult.

It is this primitivism that has become the common denominator of all the Anti-Maimonideans.

Whether or not they are promoting Christianity in the academy, visiting India and killing Arabs in the West Bank, doing the PILPUL shuckling in the Lithuanian academies, or seeing God as a body who has elected the Jews to be the master race, the Anti-Maimonideans have all rejected the cosmopolitan Jewish Humanism of the classical Sephardic tradition and the careful way in which it has balanced the sacred texts and traditions of Judaism with the compelling needs of Humanistic philosophy and the scientific heritage.

It doesn't matter if these Anti-Maimonideans deploy Hegelian German Historicism or Religious Fundamentalism; their absolutist dogmas remain opposed to the pluralistic culture of the Sephardim and the noble tradition of Jewish Humanism. They continue to

remain locked in the past and refuse to accept the ongoing development of human civilization in the Arts and Sciences.

Ironically, Maimonides famously called the study of history a “waste of time,” and yet his Jewish process demands that we fully understand the nature of ancient paganism and see the Hebrew Bible and its laws in that temporal context.

It is the contemporary scholars, who remain compulsive when it comes to the dating of texts, that neglect the complex dialectics of history and the important inter-connections and continuities that put into question any attempt at isolating specific texts and moments as discrete, “pure” doctrinal entities removed from the give-and-take of real life and how we as human beings draw from our historical cultures in the present moment.

The great Nobel Laureate Elias Canetti addressed this scholarly paradox in his brilliant 1935 novel translated into English as *Auto-da-Fé*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Auto-F%C3%A9-Novel-Elias-Canetti/dp/0374518793>

Jose Faur has discussed Canetti’s idea of the Book in Western civilization in his seminal 1986 book [*Golden Doves with Silver Dots*](#):

In *Auto-da-Fé*, Elias Canetti examines the nature of books and the bookman in Western tradition. [Peter] Kien, the principal character of *Auto-da-Fé*, typifies the bookman. “For that was how I saw him,” said Canetti, “as a bookman, and so intensely that his connection to books was far more important than himself.” These books were written in a language foreign to Kien, these were books that he never read, that he could not read, whose very content was alien, inconsequential, and inaccessible to him and to the world in which he lived. These “books” were objects to be possessed and protected, not to be read.

The “bookman” is the punctilious Western academic scholar mired in “history” without understanding the context of history and the fluid manner in which texts evolve meaning and signification.

The end of *Auto-da-Fé* is a Kafka-esque nightmare that Canetti describes in the following manner:

Kien will not open. He stops his ears. He hides behind a book. It is on the writing-table. He wants to read it. The letters dance up and down. Not a word can he make out. Quiet please! Before his eyes it flickers, fiery red. This is the aftermath of his terrible shock, on account of the fire, who would not have been frightened; when the Theresianum burns numberless numbers of books go up in flames. He stands up. How can he possibly read now. The book lies too far off. Sit! He sits again. Trapped. No, his home, the writing desk, the library. All are loyal to him. Nothing has been burnt. He can read when he wants to. But the book is not even open. He had forgotten to open it. Stupidity must be punished. He opens it.

He strikes his hand on it. It strikes twelve. Now I've got you! Read! Stop! No. Get out! Oh! A letter detaches itself from the first line and strikes him a blow on the ear. Letters are lead. It hurts. Strike him! Strike him! Another. And another. A footnote kicks him. More and more. He totters. Lines and whole pages come clattering on to him. They shake and beat him, they worry him, they toss him about among themselves. Blood, Let me go! Damnable mob! Help!

Canetti, a Sephardic Jew and thus heir to Maimonides, deploys “reading” against the “reader”; the university professor Peter Kien is a well-respected Sinologist seen throughout the book as unable to negotiate the most basic elements of his own life.

The novel is a philosophical allegory of the epistemological corruption of a “value-free” scholarship that pretends to give us the “correct” reading, but which has no conception of the process of “reading” and its manifold complexities.

Indeed, Maimonides’ exquisite understanding of the Jewish literary heritage and its legal traditions was rooted in this complex network of “reading.”

It is for this reason that I proudly present an excellent paper on Maimonides’ *Guide* written in 1990 by Christopher Buck. The paper provides a wonderful introduction to the way that Maimonides “translated” the Greco-Arabic terminology into Jewish terms; a model that inspired the project of the great Emmanuel Levinas:

https://groups.google.com/forum/#!searchin/Davidshasha/levinas/davidshasha/gl4CAmM_i8c/MBCg-sw5AAAJ

Professor Buck has given us an expert detailing of how Maimonides constructed his philosophy along the lines of the Arabo-Islamic tradition of *Majaz*, figurative analysis of language and scripture.

When I came across the paper recently, I thought that it provided an excellent opportunity to re-present the robust thinking of Maimonides at a time of great peril for the Sephardic heritage.

I have added to Buck’s paper my Huffington Post articles on Maimonides and the Anti-Maimonideans, as well as my review of Herbert Davidson’s excellent 2005 study of *Maimonides*, and conclude with my essay on Samson Raphael Hirsch’s attack on Maimonides and Jewish Humanism in his book *The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel*.

It is my hope that these resources will aid the reader in better understanding Maimonides and what is at stake in the rejection of his profound understanding of Judaism, which continues to present us with a dynamic and enlightened way to bring Torah-fidelity into the constantly-changing circumstances of our lives.

David Shasha

Author Introduction: Christopher Buck

The Anatomy of Figuration: Maimonides' Exegesis of Natural Convulsions in Apocalyptic Texts (Guide II.29)

By: Christopher Buck

Moses Maimonides: Arab Jew, Religious Humanist

By: David Shasha

Killing Off Rational Judaism: The Maimonidean Controversy

By: David Shasha

Dangerous Mystic Motifs in Judaism

By: David Shasha

Review Essay: Unearthing Maimonides

By: David Shasha

Samson Raphael Hirsch, Modern Orthodoxy, and the Attack on Maimonidean Jewish Humanism

By: David Shasha