

David Berger

## Polemic, Exegesis, Philosophy, and Science: On the Tenacity of Ashkenazic Modes of Thought

### Rationalist Philosophy

The presumed absence or near-absence of what we usually call rationalism in medieval Ashkenaz raises a series of questions large and small: If rationalism is in fact absent or largely absent, what accounts for this, especially in light of recent scholarship demonstrating that Ashkenazic Jews were exposed to the works and culture of Sephardic Jewry to a greater degree than we had thought? Should the evidence of such exposure lead us to conclude that philosophical rationalism was in fact present among northern European Jews, an approach that would greatly diminish the cultural contrast between Ashkenaz and Sepharad? Indeed, the assertion that new evidence diminishes that contrast served as the basis for one of Elisheva Carlebach's arguments against Gerson Cohen's thesis that differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazic messianism are linked to different approaches to rationalism.<sup>1</sup> If we insist that the contrast is real, should we assume in light of the new scholarship that Ashkenazim were in fact fully aware of rationalist ideas but refrained from utilizing or even addressing them out of motives that they had articulated clearly and consciously, at least in their own minds? Thus, as we shall see, several outstanding scholars have accounted for the absence of philosophical arguments or interpretations in specific Ashkenazic texts or intellectual endeavors such as anti-Christian polemic and biblical exegesis by positing local explanations relevant to those discrete areas or even to particular figures. Is this the appropriate approach to account for what appears to be a large, more or less consistent cultural phenomenon? Finally, should science and rationalist philosophy be treated separately or as two aspects of the same discipline or mode of thought?

Let me begin with a working definition of rationalism (or rationalist) that I formulated a decade ago in a footnote apologizing for the use of this "admittedly imperfect term:" "By rationalist I mean someone who values the

1 Elisheva Carlebach, *Between History and Hope. Jewish Messianism in Ashkenaz and Sepharad*. Third Annual Lecture of the Victor J. Selmanowitz Chair of Jewish History, New York 1998, 3f. See footnote 16 there for references to studies that have pointed to the interaction between the cultures.

philosophical works of non-Jews or of Jews influenced by them, who is relatively open to the prospect of modifying the straightforward understanding (and in rare cases rejecting the authority) of accepted Jewish texts and doctrines in light of such works, and who gravitates toward naturalistic rather than miraculous explanation." I hastened to add that "I do not regard this as a rigid, impermeable classification."<sup>2</sup>

If we work with this understanding of rationalism, we will find it very difficult to endorse a fundamental reassessment affirming Ashkenazic openness to the philosophical culture characteristic of medieval Sephardic thinkers. Yes, a paraphrase of Saadya's philosophical work influenced a certain sector of Ashkenazic Jews. Yes, as Ephraim Kanarfogel notes in this volume, opposition to anthropomorphism characterized this and arguably other sectors of Ashkenazic Jewry, and one might be inclined to describe such opposition as a reassessment of the straightforward understanding of accepted texts. Yes, one can find references or figures here and there that evince familiarity with philosophical works and may even allude to characteristically rationalist positions. But the instinct that tells us that the rationalist inclinations delineated in this definition are for the most part alien to Ashkenaz is not an antiquated scholarly prejudice. Exceptions remain exceptions; allusions remain allusions; rejection of anthropomorphism is not in itself rationalism; and the reading of a few books does not necessarily alter deeply entrenched modes of thought.

Ashkenazic culture was initially formed in a northern European Christian environment largely innocent of a philosophical tradition, at least of the sort that fits the model that we have been utilizing. As Christian Europe became exposed to that tradition, it began to change, although even then the dominant expression of scholastic thought remained considerably more conservative than the strongly rationalist strain of Arabic and Jewish philosophy. The major figures of Ashkenazic Jewry are very unlikely to have read Latin, and so the inner workings of nascent and even mature scholasticism were largely closed to them. More to the point, whatever exposure Ashkenazic Jews may have had to the philosophical works of Sephardic Jews in Hebrew translation came after their cultural profile had been largely formed.

At this point, it is worth turning to the controversy surrounding a book to whose fundamental insight I subscribe even as I remain uncertain about its concrete theses. In 1985, Charles Radding published a study entitled *A World Made by Men* that aroused a brief but vigorous tempest. His essential argument was that Europeans in the early Middle Ages thought and acted on

2 David Berger, *Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times*, in: *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures. Rejection or Integration?*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter, Northvale, N. J./Jerusalem 1997, 57–141, 62f.

a moral level that corresponds not to that of modern adults but to one or another of the levels that Jean Piaget ascribes to children. Inter alia, he noted that they disregarded intent in evaluating the seriousness of a crime. Some of his critics argued that it is simply impossible for early medieval Christian legislators to have dismissed the significance of intent since they read and revered the Bible, where intent is an important element in determining the gravity of a crime and its appropriate punishment. Moreover, as Radding himself pointed out, Augustine and other patristic figures whom the medieval legislators considered authorities also ascribed significance to intent.

It seems to me, however, that this argument, which affirms that people who believe in certain books will necessarily internalize the values in those books, does not accord with psychological reality. Peoples that developed certain modes of thinking during a lengthy formative period do not quickly undergo a fundamental transformation because they embraced a belief in a text that reflects a different perspective. It is much easier to adopt a new doctrine than a new conception of reality, of the world order, and of modes of thinking and arguing. To the degree that Radding succeeded in pointing to data demonstrating that the *mentalité* of pre-twelfth-century Europeans really exemplified the moral perception that he attributes to them, the fact that this perception is not consistent with that of the Bible or of Augustine does not undermine his thesis.

If this point is correct with respect to Christian works that were seen as transcendentally authoritative – and I realize that I have essentially asserted the point rather than proven it – it follows that we should not resist the possibility that Ashkenazic Jews could have been exposed to Sephardic philosophical texts, nodded in agreement with some though surely not all of their arguments, and continued to think along lines that remained entirely alien to the spirit of those texts. I note in passing the even more far-reaching argument by Haym Soloveitchik that at least in their pietistic mode, *hasidei Ashkenaz* somehow managed to remain unaffected by the most basic concepts of the midrashic worldview that permeated the liturgy and the essential construction of collective Jewish identity.<sup>3</sup> To return to our concerns, a highly instructive case in point emerges in two articles by the preeminent scholar of the medieval philosophical debate between Jews and Christians on the nearly complete absence of philosophical polemic in Ashkenazic works preceding the end of the thirteenth century.

3 Haym Soloveitchik, *The Midrash, Sefer Hasidim and the Changing Face of God*, in: Rachel Elior/Peter Schäfer (eds.), *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought. Festschrift in Honor of Joseph Dan on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, Tübingen 2005, 165–177.

## Philosophical Polemic

In the first of these articles, Daniel Lasker sets forth the evidence for the absence of such polemic while simultaneously demonstrating that some anti-Christian philosophical arguments were known to Ashkenazic authors even in the early period. Thus, the paraphrase of R. Saadya's work was available, but its philosophical arguments against Christianity leave no trace at all.<sup>4</sup> *Sefer Nestor Hakomer* (The Book of Nestor the Priest) was mined, but its philosophical material, to which we shall return, usually was not. In his first article, Lasker explained the phenomenon with a formulation that I endorse:

"Most Ashkenazic Jews were not familiar with 'Greek wisdom'; even the intellectuals among them were generally not fluent in philosophy. There is no reason to believe that a polemicist, who addressed his book to a Jewish audience which itself was not philosophically sophisticated, would use arguments which even he would regard as foreign."<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the article, he succinctly captures what I see as the key point, although I am uncomfortable with the level of familiarity with philosophical arguments that he ascribes to Ashkenazic Jews. "The lack of a Sephardi style full-scale philosophical critique of Christianity in Ashkenaz was not a function, then, of Ashkenazi ignorance. It was a result of a totally different intellectual outlook."<sup>6</sup> I do not think that Ashkenazim had the knowledge needed to launch a full scale philosophical critique, but I do think that their distinct intellectual outlook accounts for the almost total absence of philosophical arguments.<sup>7</sup>

4 Upon reading the typescript of this article, Yehuda Galinsky remarked in an email message, "A trace there is, even if barely," pointing to R. Moses of Coucy's *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*, positive commandment no. 2, where we find a citation from Saadya of a philosophical argument against multiplicity in God. When I brought this to Daniel Lasker's attention, he was grateful for the reference but noted that the passage cited is not among Saadya's more sophisticated arguments. I would add that R. Moses of Coucy, unlike the vast majority of Ashkenazic rabbis, spent significant time among Sephardic Jews. In any event, the passage is surely of interest, but, as Galinsky's careful formulation indicates, it does not change the larger picture.

5 Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics in Ashkenaz*, in: Ora Limor/Guy Stroumsa (eds.), *Contra Iudæos. Ancient and Medieval Polemics between Christians and Jews*, Tübingen 1996, 195–213, 197 f.

6 *Ibid.*, 212.

7 I made a briefer version of the argument in the preceding paragraphs (beginning with the discussion of Radding) in: *Ha-Meshihyyut ha-Sefaradit ve-ha-Meshihyyut ha-Ashkenazit bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim. Behinat ha-Mahloket ha-Historiografit* [Sephardic and Ashkenazic Messianism in the Middle Ages. An Examination of the Historiographical Controversy], in a forthcoming Festschrift.

Several years later, however, Lasker extended a greater level of generosity to Ashkenazic polemicists, and here the tendency to assume that familiarity with texts must penetrate an individual's psyche leads to a position that grants the authors of these works a greater philosophical orientation than I think they had. In the second article, he reiterated some of the evidence surveyed in the first, but this time he argued that it was primarily the Ashkenazic *audience* that had "a totally different intellectual outlook from that of Sephardic Jews." Because of this different outlook,

"the Jewish polemicists felt that their audiences would not have responded well to the same type of philosophical argumentation that appealed to the Sephardic Jews [...] The classics of Ashkenazic polemic [...] all play down any possible philosophical critique of Christianity. To a great extent, it was the audience, and not so much the author, which determined that fact."<sup>8</sup>

In light of my view that deep structures of thought are not readily undermined by exposure to a few books, I do not see convincing evidence for this distinction. The Ashkenazic polemicists and their audience inhabited the same cultural world, and very little in it resonated with Sephardic-style philosophical argument. It is far from clear that an intellectual chasm separated the composers of polemical works, who stood a cut or more below the intellectual elite of Ashkenaz, from their literate readers, and some members of that audience stood above them. Moreover, numerous passages in Ashkenazic polemical works make it clear that the authors were not writing solely to bolster the morale of their Jewish readers. To a significant degree, they were providing manuals to be used by Jews in real confrontations. A Jewish polemicist would have to think twice or thrice before depriving the most capable segment of his audience of arguments that would have the greatest effect in an actual exchange with Christians. Our first assumption should be that the philosophical arguments in question did not resonate with the authors any more than with their audience.

An examination of one of the few examples of Ashkenazic philosophical polemic before the fourteenth century will, I think, reinforce this assumption. The author of *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan* (The Nizzahon Vetus), working with an argument reflecting the direct or indirect influence of *Nestor Hakomer*, addressed the question of whether Jesus was the incarnation of just one person of the trinity or of all three. Nestor and other Jewish polemicists objected to the possibility that all three persons were incarnated by insisting either that this would constitute an impermissible separation in God – as

8 Daniel J. Lasker, *Popular Polemics and Philosophical Truth in the Medieval Jewish Critique of Christianity*, in: *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999), 243–259, here 254f.

suming the *partial* incarnation of each of the three – or, in the event of the complete incarnation of all three, that it would mean that God is limited.<sup>9</sup> For the last argument from the infinitude of God, the *Nizzahon Yashan* substitutes the almost amusing question, “Who was in heaven all that time?” supplemented by “Who ran the world during the three days when they were buried and none of them was either in heaven or on earth?”<sup>10</sup> I suppose that one could argue that the author intentionally changed the argument because he did not believe his readers would understand the point that the incarnation of all three persons would limit God. This is not, however, such an intellectually challenging argument; a Tosafot passage of average difficulty is considerably more daunting. I am much more inclined to assume that the author himself, who shows no signs anywhere in his lengthy work of thinking in philosophical terms, naturally shifted into language that was more congenial to his instinctive pattern of thought.

### Wisdom, Torah, and *Ratio*

We turn now to a very recent article regarding biblical exegesis by one of the towering scholars of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry where I think we encounter an unwarranted reluctance to adopt a straightforward explanation of a phenomenon rooted in the traditionalist rabbinic mentality of that culture. Avraham Grossman has argued that Rashi’s commentaries to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job 28 evince a striking, tendentious commitment to understand “wisdom” (*hokhmah*) as Torah.<sup>11</sup> This is the case, he says, even though the plain meaning generally points to straightforward human wisdom. Since Rashi’s approach presumably requires explanation, Grossman suggests two possibilities. The first begins with the contention that Rashi’s familiarity with the works of Sephardic grammarians makes it difficult to assume that

9 For an excellent survey and analysis of these arguments, see idem, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages*, Oxford/Portland, Oreg., 2007, 121–125.

10 David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzaon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Philadelphia 1979, English section, 137. See too my discussion in Appendix 5 (“Who Was Incarnated?”), 366–369.

11 Avraham Grossman, *Ha-Metah bein Torah le-‘Hokhmah’ be-Perush Rashi le-Sifrut ha-Hokhmah she-ba-Miqra* [The Tension between Torah and ‘Hokhmah’ in Rashi’s Commentary to the Wisdom Literature in the Bible], in: Moshe bar Asher et al. (eds.), *Teshurah le-Amos. Asufat Mehqarim be-Parshanut ha-Miqra Muggeshet le-Amos Hakham* [Teshurah le-Amos. Collected Studies in Biblical Exegesis Presented to Amos Hakham], Alon Shevut 2007, 13–27.

he was not also familiar with the ideas of Sephardic thinkers and those Babylonian Geonim who engaged in speculative pursuits, even though such familiarity is not attested in France until the works of Rashbam and especially of Bekhor Shor. Thus, Rashi may have been attempting to guide his readers away from such philosophical rationalism. The second explanation, which Grossman considers more plausible, is that Christians, at a time when polemic had reached one of its peaks, were beginning to use arguments from reason in their exchanges with Jews, and Rashi wanted to keep his readers away from an enterprise that could lead them to religious doubts.

For Grossman, the reason for preferring the second explanation is not because of any deficiency in the first. Rather, it follows from the emphasis in the uncensored version of Rashi's commentary on Proverbs on the dangers of Christianity, which he identifies as the seductive woman who appears so frequently in that work. Since the commentary focuses so often on this danger, and since wisdom understood as Torah is presented as the antidote to the blandishments of the seductress, it is reasonable to assume that concern with the Christian appeal to *ratio* is what motivated Rashi's insistence, in the face of the plain meaning of the text, that wisdom in fact refers to Torah with absolute consistency.

Grossman of course points to Anselm as the prime example of a contemporary of Rashi who utilized dialectic in a theological context, but the example that he supplies illustrating the polemical appeal to reason by Christians is the assertion that the exile demonstrates that the Jews have been rejected in favor of the True Israel. There is really nothing particularly new about this, and if I were to argue for the late-eleventh and early twelfth-century utilization of *ratio* in a specifically anti-Jewish polemical context, I would be more inclined to cite Odo of Tournai's (or Cambrai's) *Disputatio contra Judaeum Leonem nomine de adventu Christi filii Dei*, which reports what is likely to be a real exchange in which Odo argued for the logical necessity of Jesus' sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin.<sup>12</sup> This work, virtually alone, provides a serious evidentiary base for the self-conscious, explicit appeal to *ratio* by a Christian polemicist in France who engaged in actual exchanges with Jews more or less contemporary with Rashi.

Before proceeding, let me note that the issue before us, as I hope we shall see, has considerable methodological significance beyond its specific context. Moreover, historians in the last several decades have ascribed many cultural practices and literary phenomena in late antique and medieval Jewry to the influence of the Jewish-Christian confrontation. These range

12 See On Original Sin and A Disputation with the Jew, Leo, Concerning the Advent of Christ, the Son of God. Two Theological Treatises by Odo of Tournai, translated with an introduction and notes by Irven M. Resnick, Philadelphia 1994.

from midrashic passages to significant elements of the Passover Haggadah to the evolution of life-cycle rituals to the motivation of *peshat* exegesis as a whole to specific exegetical observations, and the assessment of these assertions has in some cases produced a mini-literature.<sup>13</sup> Avraham Grossman's œuvre is generally a paradigm of caution and sober judgment, and his essay on the influence of the Christian context on Joseph Kara's commentaries is one of the most convincing and insightful studies in this scholarly genre.<sup>14</sup> To the degree that my reservations about his position in our case are persuasive, they may serve as a salutary reminder of the need to keep one's skeptical faculties at a high level of alert in the face of the seductive attractions of a valuable scholarly approach whose siren song, precisely because it is often on target, can sometimes lead even the greatest and most responsible historians astray.

It seems to me that in evaluating a thesis proposing an extraneous motive for a particular exegetical position, we need to begin with two fundamental questions. First, how compelling is the argument for seeking such a motive? Put differently, can the exegetical position be accounted for without undue strain by straightforward considerations emerging out of the exegete's culture and approach to text? Second, how persuasive is the extraneous motive? These considerations work in tandem. If the proposed motive is highly plausible, we may entertain it seriously even if there is little reason to seek it. If it is not particularly persuasive, we may decide that internal considerations suffice even if we began with a sense of dissatisfaction that sent us searching for external motivations.

In our case, I am not inclined to go far afield. With respect to the first question, Rashi's position can be explained to my satisfaction on the basis of traditional Ashkenazic *mentalité* without recourse to other considerations. With respect to the second question, I am not persuaded that Rashi was likely to have been motivated by concern about Sephardic *hokhmah* or Christian *ratio*.

Is Rashi's emphasis on *hokhmah* as Torah really problematic? It indeed stands in some tension with what moderns and even some Jewish medievals considered *peshat*. Rashbam (or the commentary to Job that incorporates material from Rashbam) pointedly comments that according to the *peshat*, the term *hokhmah* in Job 28:12 refers to *hokhmah mammash* (literal wis-

13 I have commented on some of that literature in: A Generation of Scholarship on Jewish-Christian Interaction in the Medieval World, in: Tradition 38 (Summer 2004), no. 2, 4–14.

14 Avraham Grossmann, Ha-Pulmus ha-Yehudi-Nozri ve-ha-Parshanut ha-Yehudit la-Miqra be-Zarfah ba-Me'ah ha-Yod-Bet (le-Parashat Zikato shel Ri Qara el ha-Pulmus) [The Jewish-Christian Polemic and Jewish Biblical Exegesis in Twelfth-Century France (On the Attitude of R. Joseph Kara to the Polemic)], in: Zion 51 (1985/86), 29–60.



dom) and not to Torah.<sup>15</sup> For Rashi, however, whose immersion in the world of midrash was deeper and in large measure taken for granted, we need to ask whether there were powerful enough reasons in the text itself to impel him toward other interpretations.

First we need to consider the weight of the midrashic tradition. Grossman refers to Midrashim that understand *hokhmah* as Torah in Proverbs and elsewhere, but he argues that Rashi could have chosen other Midrashim. This is a familiar and often valid argument, but in this case, even a casual look through the midrashic and other rabbinic materials reveals that the equation of Torah and *hokhmah* is simply overwhelming. It made its way into the liturgy and is treated as virtually self-evident.

Moreover, key passages in Proverbs discuss Torah, commandments (*mitzvot*), and wisdom (*hokhmah*) – as well as the righteous and the wise – in closely linked contexts. “The mouth of the righteous produces wisdom (*hokhmah*)” (Prov. 10:31). One especially instructive example is 7:1–5.

“My son, heed my words, and store up my *mitzvot* with you. Keep my *mitzvot* and live, my Torah, as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your mind. Say to Wisdom (*hokhmah*), ‘You are my sister,’ and call Understanding a kinswoman. She will guard you from a foreign woman whose talk is smooth.”

Modern biblical scholars will say that Torah here and elsewhere in the Wisdom Literature refers to the teaching of the sage and the *mitzvot* to his directives. But to medieval Jews – including rationalists – Torah is Torah and *mitzvot* are *mitzvot*. Ralbag on this passage writes as follows:

“‘My son, heed my words’ in your heart. These are the stories of the Torah and the commandments of the Torah. Put them away with you to observe them. ‘Keep my *mitzvot* and live:’ The *mitzvot* of the Torah, so that you will attain eternal life. And keep my Torah as you keep the apple of your eye. It is, moreover, not sufficient that you keep the *mitzvot* in your heart; you must bind them on your fingers to do them.”

Now it is true that when Ralbag comments on the next verse about wisdom he does not continue to speak of Torah, but the connection between the two in this passage is so intimate that we can hardly expect Rashi to have felt a *peshat*-driven impulse to seek a different interpretation. Thus, when the passage proceeds to speak of how wisdom protects against a foreign woman, it is more than natural for Rashi to identify this wisdom as Torah.

And so we come to two revealing passages that Grossman cites. Prov. 2:10–16 asserts that wisdom can save its bearer from an alien woman. Rashi affirms that the foreign woman is

15 Sara Japhet, *Perush Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam) le-Sefer Iyyov [The Commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) to the Book of Job]*, Jerusalem 2000, passim.

"a gathering of idolatry, i.e. heresy. It is not plausible that the verse speaks of an adulteress literally understood, for how is it the praise of Torah [...] that it protects you from a foreign woman and not from a different transgression? Rather, this refers to heresy and idolatry, which constitutes throwing off the yolk of all the commandments."

Similarly, on Prov. 6:24, which says, "It will keep you from an evil woman, from the smooth tongue of a foreign woman," Rashi remarks,

"The Torah will keep you from an evil woman [...] We must conclude that Solomon was not speaking of an evil woman but rather of heresy, which is as weighty as everything. For if you will say that this refers to a prostitute in the literal sense, is this the entire praise and reward of Torah that it protects against a prostitute and nothing else?"

There is, however, a key distinction between the passages. In the first case, the verses speak of wisdom, but in the second they speak of Torah. The verse preceding 6:24 reads, "For the mitzvah is a candle, and Torah is a light," which of course even Ibn Ezra and Ralbag understand in accordance with what any medieval Jew would have considered the *peshat*. It is also noteworthy that Ibn Ezra, though he understands Torah here as Torah, inserts a reference to wisdom without any textual basis. The Torah, he says, gives light, while the fool walks in the dark; thus, the way of life refers to wisdom. In this passage, at least, Torah and *hokhmah* are intertwined, virtually identified with one another, even for Ibn Ezra. Even more striking is a passage in Ralbag's commentary where, as Richard Steiner noted to me, the rationalist exegete tells us that wisdom in a series of verses (Prov. 3:15–18) that the Rabbis had famously utilized in their encomia to the Torah very likely means precisely what the Rabbis assumed.<sup>16</sup>

Two highly relevant points emerge from this discussion. First, the parallels between passages on wisdom and on Torah are so close that an exegete with a strong predisposition to follow rabbinic precedent would have little reason to seek an understanding of wisdom different from that of the Rabbis. Second, it is extremely revealing that in his comment on the passage in chapter 2 where the biblical text speaks of *hokhmah*, Rashi demonstrates that the foreign woman is idolatry or heresy, using the same argument that he does when the text speaks of Torah: "Is this the praise of Torah," he asks, that it saves you from a harlot? But you do not prove something on the basis of an interpretation that itself requires proof unless you have so internalized that interpretation that you simply take it for granted. It appears that Rashi did not even consider the possibility that the reader might say, "Wait a moment. How do you know that the verse here is referring to Torah?" Rashi's

16 Steiner also notes that the identification of wisdom and Torah is already present in Ben Sira 24.

assumption could result in part from the similarity between chapters 2 and 7; as we have seen, 7:2 refers to "my Torah," which Rashi would have taken in the traditional sense. Still, for Rashi, the equation of wisdom with Torah appears to have been foundational, not just ideologically but psychologically. If this is true, as I think it is, we need to be very hesitant about assuming that he rejected the non-Torah explanation in an exegetical campaign inspired by external concerns.<sup>17</sup>

Let us now turn very briefly to the proposed external concerns. There is little or no evidence that Rashi was sufficiently aware of Sephardic rationalism for him to have provided a tendentious interpretation of *hokhmah* in order to protect his readers, who probably needed no such protection, from its baneful influence. What then of the dangers of the Christian use of *ratio*? Despite Odo of Tournai, the evidence that the recent introduction of this category into the lexicon of Christian polemicists had come to Rashi's attention is tenuous at best. Even the later Ashkenazic polemics do not address *ratio* as a category. When the author of the *Nizzahon Yashan*, writing two centuries after Anselm, addresses the Christian explanation for the incarnation, he deals only with the antiquated ransom theory in apparent blissful ignorance of the satisfaction theory in *Cur Deus Homo*?<sup>18</sup> Moreover, when Jews in Spain and Provence did confront arguments from *ratio*, they usually took the offensive, maintaining that it was precisely Christian dogmas that were unreasonable; it is not clear why a Jew who was the product of an often assertive Ashkenazic culture would choose to react to the challenge not by utilizing the category but by fleeing from it.

This Ashkenazic assertiveness and self-confidence – akin to the self-image noted in the title of Haym Soloveitchik's study of the laws governing the taking of interest<sup>19</sup> – may well play a role in the larger phenomenon that we are examining. Limited exposure, perhaps even substantial exposure, to books representing alternative ways of thinking would not easily transform the psychic world of people confident about their mode of understanding God and the world. Indeed, it is by no means clear why we should take for granted that they *should* have adopted the new approach. Are the workings

- 17 None of this means that Rashi was unaware of the fact that the plain meaning of the word *hokhmah* is wisdom and that it sometimes signifies nothing more than that. Thus, he is unprepared to rely on an overarching introductory observation and instead points out to his readers on repeated occasions that their untutored instincts embracing this understanding are incorrect.
- 18 See David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages*, English section, 195 f., and see the remarks in Appendix 2, 353.
- 19 Haym Soloveitchik, *Halakhah, Kalkalah ve-Dimmuy Azmi. Ha-Mashkone'ut bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim* [Pawnbroking. A Study in the Inter-Relationship between Halakhah, Economic Activity and Communal Self-Image], Jerusalem 1985.

of the Active Intellect really so intrinsically plausible that anyone who hears about them should nod in automatic assent? Setting this last point aside, I suspect that the self-confidence that characterized Ashkenazic Jewry played a role in its resistance to the absorption of non-Ashkenazic works and influences in the realm of Torah as well. The Jews of southern France were more receptive – perhaps one should say more vulnerable – than northern European Jewry to Sephardic rationalism for various reasons. First, their self-image in the area of halakhic observance studied by Soloveitchik was less secure, and this may mean something for their overall self-confidence as well. Second, the culture of Provençal Christian society during the formative period of the region's Jewry was itself marked by greater sophistication than that of the North, so that the Jews of the South may have developed a somewhat more open cultural orientation, at least *in potentia*. Most important, with the immigration of Sephardic Jews into Languedoc in the second half of the twelfth century, Provençal Jewry was exposed not just to books but to people. Sustained interaction with human beings is far more powerful than reading alone. You cannot set aside people the way you can set aside books.

### Science and Philosophy

Finally, a word about science that will return us to the subject of *hokhmah* in medieval Ashkenazic exegesis. A decade ago, I wrote a piece on the understanding of Solomon's wisdom by Jewish exegetes.<sup>20</sup> In their comments on the passage in Kings describing that wisdom, both Rashi and R. Joseph Kara gave pride of place to Solomon's command of the sciences and only then went on to mention a "midrash haggadah" that understands the king's discourses on trees, birds, and fish as halakhic discussions. I noted that in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, traditionalist commentators routinely identified wisdom with Torah, but in this instance there were powerful textual reasons to marginalize this understanding. Let me add here that if Rashi really had a driving ideological motive for avoiding an understanding of wisdom as human understanding, he should have avoided it in Kings as well as in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes despite the fact that the local context of the passage about Solomon militated against the identification of wisdom with Torah. Indeed, the very fact that Rashi does regard the identification of So-

20 David Berger, "The Wisest of All Men." Solomon's Wisdom in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Book of Kings, in: Yaakov Elman/Jeffrey S. Gurock (eds.), *Hazon Nahum. Studies in Jewish Law, Thought and History presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, New York 1997, 93–114.

lomorphic wisdom with mastery of halakhah as a viable possibility makes his primary interpretation all the more difficult to explain if he had an overriding concern with preventing his readers from understanding *hokhmah* as human wisdom.

But my primary reason for citing this article is the following argument for distinguishing the attitude of Ashkenazic Jews toward science from their attitude toward philosophy:

"We should not wonder about the positive assessment of practical scientific knowledge expressed in [the] commentaries of the [Northern] French exegetes. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>21</sup> the pursuit of natural science could become the subject of controversy precisely in the Sephardic orbit, where it was caught up in the web of philosophy. If the natural sciences were part of the 'propaedeutic studies' leading to the queen of the sciences, they could be tainted by the unsavory reputation of the queen herself. Where they stood on their own, it is hard to imagine any grounds of principle for dismissing them or for failure to admire one who had mastered their secrets. The very indifference of Ashkenazic Jews to philosophical study liberated them to examine the natural world with keen, unselfconscious interest."<sup>22</sup>

In sum, I see no reason in principle for Ashkenazic Jews to have resisted an interest in science. But the rationalist spirit of Sephardic philosophy, with its questioning of the plain meaning of biblical texts and rabbinic haggadah, its valuing of philosophical inquiry as an enterprise at least on a par with traditional study of Torah, its suspicion of miracles, and its pursuit of the works of non-Jewish thinkers, was decidedly alien to the most deeply embedded instincts of Ashkenazic Jews. When we find an approach in an Ashkenazic work or series of works that accords with the traditionalist instincts of that culture, we need not look any further in an attempt to explain it.

21 Berger, *Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times*, 118 and 134, fn. 131.

22 Berger, "The Wisest of All Men." *Solomon's Wisdom in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Book of Kings*, 95.

## Preface and Acknowledgements

### Science and Philosophy in Early Modern Ashkenazic Culture – Rejection, Toleration, and Appropriation

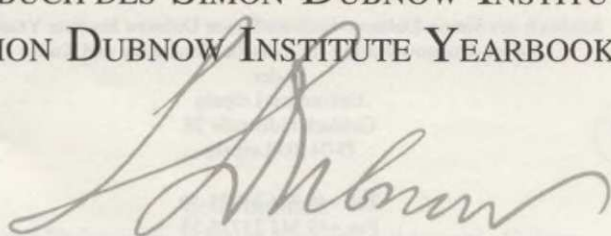
Herausgegeben von Gad Freudenthal

It is an immense pleasure for me to be invited to the first volume of the series "Traditions and Appropriation of the Jewish Sciences and Philosophy in Medieval and Modern Europe: Perspectives, Universal and National Aspects," in residence at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science, Hebrew University and directed by Professor Gad Freudenthal. The series provides a platform for the study of the history of Jewish science and philosophy in the early modern period. The volume is a collection of essays edited by Gad Freudenthal and is dedicated to the memory of the late Prof. Dr. Gad Freudenthal, who passed away on 15 January 2018, and is dedicated to the memory of the late Prof. Dr. Gad Freudenthal, who passed away on 15 January 2018. The volume is a collection of essays edited by Gad Freudenthal and is dedicated to the memory of the late Prof. Dr. Gad Freudenthal, who passed away on 15 January 2018, and is dedicated to the memory of the late Prof. Dr. Gad Freudenthal, who passed away on 15 January 2018. The volume is a collection of essays edited by Gad Freudenthal and is dedicated to the memory of the late Prof. Dr. Gad Freudenthal, who passed away on 15 January 2018, and is dedicated to the memory of the late Prof. Dr. Gad Freudenthal, who passed away on 15 January 2018.

Gad Freudenthal

Paris, December 2018

JAHRBUCH DES SIMON-DUBNOW-INSTITUTS  
SIMON DUBNOW INSTITUTE YEARBOOK



VIII

2009



Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht