The Battle for the Jewish Mind: Book Review by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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Sina Kahen, the Founder of Da'at Press, has recently published a very important volume: "*The Battle for the Jewish Mind: The Maimonidean Controversies and Why They Matter Today.*" Sina works in the Medical Tech and AI industries, and has been publishing a series of books that foster a grand religious vision. Born in Iran, Sina lives in London with his wife and two children. He is one of the leaders in Habura, a group that promotes a Judaism based on the "Geonic-Sepharadi tradition," and even more specifically the "Geonic-Andalusian tradition."

Maimonides (1138-1204) is the great exemplar of this tradition. He was a brilliant Talmudist and halakhist, and his *Mishneh Torah* continues to be a foundational work in Jewish law. Aside from his mastery of rabbinic sources, he was highly regarded for his medical and scientific works. Like others in the Geonic-Andalusian tradition, he valued philosophy and general knowledge. His classic *Guide for the Perplexed* offered an intellectually rigorous approach to Judaism: how to read the Bible, how to reconcile biblical texts with philosophic and scientific truths, how to seek reasons for the commandments, how to understand revelation, prophecy, messianism etc. In short, Maimonides was a proponent of a thinking Judaism that drew on the best teachings of our rabbis and the best wisdom available from beyond Jewish sources.

Maimonides' commitment to philosophy was so great, he included basic philosophic principles about God in the opening chapters of his code of Jewish law. He stressed that a knowledge of physics and metaphysics was essential to a proper religious life.

While his approach was well within the Geonic-Andalusian tradition, many religious traditionalists advocated a very different view of things. They sought all truth in the Torah and rabbinic texts; they thought that philosophical inquiry could lead the masses away from religious observance. They taught a kabbalistic/midrashic Judaism that demanded *emunat hakhamim,* reliance on the opinions of sages who were not tainted by wisdom from the general world. They not only denigrated the philosophical approach of Maimonides, they strove to ban his books. What emerged was a century and more of "the Maimonidean controversies." The anti-Maimonides group went so far as to denounce Maimonides heresies to Dominican monks who set fire to Maimonides' books in a public demonstration in Paris in 1233. The horror of this event caused some anti-Maimonists to repent their ways.

But the basic controversies did not disappear…and are still raging in religious Jewish life today. The Maimonidean approach to philosophical quest is highly discouraged among much of Orthodoxy today. Sina Kahen asks: "Why is the worldly tradition—the one that treated the sciences as servants of Torah, that saw rigorous and rational inquiry as a form of worship—not the mainstream?" (p. 75). Why is so much of Orthodoxy today steeped in kabbalistic/midrashic Judaism, rather than the intellectually sophisticated Judaism espoused by Rambam and the Geonic/Andalusian tradition?

Sina Kahen pointedly notes: "The question is not whether Jews "should" engage with the sciences—as though one were choosing between a safe path and a risky one. The question is whether a Jew who refuses to look at the world God made can be said to know the God who made it. The tradition we have followed through these pages answered: he cannot. Not fully. Not with the depth that Torah demands" (p. 80).

Sina Kahen has written a remarkable volume that not only provides the historical context of "the Maimonidean controversies," but demonstrates how those controversies persist today. While, happily, there are those within modern Jewry espousing an intellectually vibrant Judaism open to the sciences, humanities and arts—there are others who strive to narrow intellectual pursuits to the four cubits of Torah as they understand it.

Sina Kahen’s book is available through Da’at Press: https://www.daat.press/product-page/the-battle-for-the-jewish-mind-the-maimonidean-controversies-sina-kahen

I recommend it very highly.