Maimonides, Spinoza and Us: A Significant New Book Review

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Maimonides, Spinoza and Us: Toward an Intellectually Vibrant Judaism, by Marc D. Angel, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, 2009

Reviewed by Francis Idris

Rabbi Dr Marc D Angel's *Maimonides, Spinoza and Us* sits in a very specific intellectual tension that most books avoid on purpose. Published in 2009 by Jewish Lights Publishing, it does something slightly risky in plain sight. It puts Maimonides and Spinoza in the same room and refuses to let either behave like a museum piece. One is the rationalist inside tradition. The other is the excommunicated heretic who still somehow keeps influencing modern religious thought. That pairing alone already feels like a conversation that should not be polite.

And yet the tone is not academic distance. It reads more like a living argument that refuses to end. Reason and revelation are not treated as opposing camps to be safely labeled. They are treated like two people who keep interrupting each other mid-sentence. There is a quiet insistence underneath it all, that a thinking Jew should not have to amputate intellect to remain faithful. That line alone. It lands hard. Especially in rooms where questioning is already frowned upon.

What stands out, almost uncomfortably, is how direct the book is about superstition and authority. It does not whisper around the edges of religious discomfort. It names the problem of blind veneration and irrational belief without flinching. And coming from Rabbi Marc D Angel, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, founder of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, that critique carries weight that is not theoretical. It comes from inside the system it is questioning. That is not a safe position. It never was.

There is something almost ironic here. A Sephardic rabbinic leader born in Seattle, with nearly forty books behind him, writes one of the clearest defenses of intellectual honesty in modern Judaism, and yet the book itself ends up living in a very narrow corridor. Too philosophical for casual religious readers. Too religious for pure academic philosophy shelves. It ends up in that strange middle space where thinking people quietly find it, and quietly pass it to someone else. No noise. Just transfer.

And that detail matters. Because the book is not abstract theory. It is aimed directly at the kind of reader who feels spiritually homeless while still wanting to remain inside tradition. That specific tension, loving Torah but refusing to turn off the mind, is not a broad audience. It is a very particular kind of discomfort. The kind that does not advertise itself. It just sits there. Quiet. Persistent.

There is a line in the work that essentially exposes the entire paradox. The idea that the Torah path is narrow, with fire on one side and ice on the other. That image is almost too precise for modern religious discourse. Not poetic decoration. A warning about balance that assumes constant intellectual pressure. Most readers do not realize how rare it is to see Spinoza and Maimonides used together without one being treated as an enemy of the other. Here they are collaborators in argument. Strange alliance. It works.

But here is the part that feels almost absurd. A book that explicitly validates the thinking religious reader, the one who refuses both extremism and silence, is still largely discovered by accident. Even though it is already praised by scholars like Menachem Kellner and Neil Gillman, it does not consistently reach the very people it describes. The ones sitting inside congregations thinking privately, am I allowed to think like this. Yes. But they never see the answer sitting nearby.

That gap is where my attention goes. Not changing the argument. Not reshaping the theology. Just making sure the book is not waiting in the wrong shelf space

while the exact readers it was written for keep assuming they are alone in the question. Because right now, intellectual honesty in Judaism is being searched for in fragments, while this text already holds it in a structured form that feels almost unreasonably calm about difficult questions.

And there is something unfinished about that. A book about ideas that transcend time and space, still sitting slightly outside the line of sight of the very minds it was written to steady… almost like it is waiting for someone to notice it is already speaking their language before they even finish forming the question.

(The book can be ordered from Barnes and Noble: https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/maimonides-spinoza-and-us-turner-publishing-company/1126846314?ean=9781683361848)