CHAPTER SIX

NO PERPETUAL ENEMIES: MAIMONIDEANISM AT THE BEGINNING OF THE FIFTEENH CENTURY

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We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.

Henry Lord Palmerston (1784–1865)

Because of historical circumstances, adherents of Maimonideanism in late-fourteenth- and early-fifteenth-century Christian Iberia faced an impressive array of ideological difficulties. In the face of these difficulties, attitudes among Jewish thinkers changed toward Maimonidean principles, and in particular toward the acceptance of so-called foreign sources of knowledge. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Hasdai Crescas attacked Maimonidean philosophy and its reliance on Aristotle, and, while less radical than Crescas in their criticism of philosophy, the fifteenth-century Iberian Jewish intellectual leadership tended to adopt philosophical systems more religiously conservative than those in the fourteenth century.¹ Some of these elements drove a similar shift in one individual, Profiat Duran, a Catalan Jew who lived through the early transitional period and was involved personally in the historical events and ideological battles of the day. He is usually considered to have the same antagonistic stance toward philosophy as Hasdai Crescas, but his position turns out to be somewhat more ambivalent, if not frankly eclectic.

Two pre-existing controversies are involved. The first is between, on the one hand, adherents of rational philosophy under the banner of Maimonides and, on the other hand, “traditionalists” opposed to the central place of Greco-Arabic philosophy in Jewish intellectual life. The second is between Jews and Christians. The controversy between rationalists and traditionalists over the legacy of Maimonides was of long standing, having commenced at the beginning of the thirteenth century in a debate over the validity of science. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, however, at least regarding the importance of scientific and philosophical knowledge in religious life, it would seem that the rationalists had won the field. In general, most fourteenth-century Jewish scholars in Christian Iberia supported the study of philosophy and science and their use in the interpretation of the Bible. The widespread acceptance of philosophy, its common use in biblical commentaries, and its penetration even to the level of popular sermons all testify to the integration of the rationalist ideal in Iberian Jewish culture.

Amid the heightened inter-religious tensions of the late fourteenth century, however, this ideal began to look deeply problematic. From then into the fifteenth century, “philosophy” came again under bitter criticism by, for example, the kabbalist Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov (c. 1390–c. 1440) and others, for having contributed to a failure of Jewish faith and cultural solidarity. Solomon Alami (c. 1370–1420), Solomon Bonafed (fl. 1413–1415), Isaac Arama (1420–c. 1495), Hayyim ibn

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