

CHAPTER ELEVEN

COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT IN A JEWISH KEY: ANTI-MAIMONIDEANISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ORTHODOXY

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One of the rubrics for this volume is the ways in which Maimonides served as “an encouragement for Jewish thinker(s) to accommodate secular knowledge.” This has contemporary political relevance insofar as this accommodation is “the quintessential opposite of fundamentalism.”

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, members of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Maskilim*) appealed to Maimonides to justify their novel social and educational agenda. In response, Orthodox opponents penned attacks on Maimonides. I have long been interested in critics of European Enlightenment such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Johann Georg Hamann. Exploring these Orthodox critics of Maimonides gives occasion to treat Counter-Enlightenment thought in a Jewish key.¹

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on two Orthodox thinkers—Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865) and Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888). While there are significant ideological differences between them, they share the conviction that participation in non-Jewish cultural and intellectual life is compatible with firm adherence to halakhah. Yet Luzzatto and Hirsch have grave doubts about the ethical trajectory of enlightened European society.² I will argue that while

¹ Shmuel Feiner suggests reading Luzzatto as a Counter-Enlightenment thinker, though he does not discuss Luzzatto’s treatment of Maimonides in detail. See Shmuel Feiner, “A Critique of Modernity: S. D. Luzzatto and the Anti-Haskalah,” in *Samuel David Luzzatto: The Bi-Centennial of his Birth*, eds. R. Bonfil, I. Gottlieb, and H. Kasher (Jerusalem, 2004), pp. 151–153.

² In accounting Luzzatto and Hirsch “Orthodox,” I follow Jacob Katz who defines “Orthodoxy” as those who “oppose . . . the relinquishing of traditional Jewish customs” in conscious “awareness of other Jews’ rejection of tradition.” See Jacob Katz, “Orthodoxy in Contemporary Perspective,” in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, ed. Peter Medding (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 3–4. Similarly, these thinkers would be considered “Orthodox” according to Aviezer Ravitzky’s definition of “Orthodoxy” as Jews who are skeptical

criticizing the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) these Orthodox critics in fact identify with many of its ideals. But for them it is authentic Judaism rather than rationalism that provides the best means to actualize these ideals, hence their criticism of the “arch-rationalist” Maimonides. This shows how the dichotomy between *Haskalah* and Orthodoxy is not as great as is sometimes assumed.³

Samuel David Luzzatto was one of the most distinguished figures of nineteenth-century Italian Jewry. A man of immense learning and humanistic spirit, he corresponded with many of the leading exponents of the Science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) including Marcus Jost, Abraham Geiger, and Solomon Judah Rappaport. Luzzatto wrote voluminously producing tracts on Biblical grammar, Talmudic historiography, philosophy, theology, a complete Bible commentary, as well as original poetry.

In 1838, Luzzatto penned a famous attack on Maimonides. Luzzatto’s criticisms center on Maimonides’ intellectualism and moral system, which Luzzatto takes to be at odds with authentic Judaism. Scholars have pondered why Luzzatto evinces such rancor towards Maimonides. Jay Harris seeks to anchor these criticisms in nineteenth-century intellectual life arguing that in criticizing Maimonides, Luzzatto’s real target is Kant and his nineteenth-century Jewish adherents.⁴ Harris’s arguments are, however, unconvincing.⁵ While I agree that it is fruitful to

of the modern valuing of change and progress. See Aviezer Ravitzky, “Introduction: On the Boundaries of Orthodoxy,” in *Orthodox Judaism: New Perspectives*, eds. Y. Salmon, A. Ravitzky, and Adam Ferziger (Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 1–18. For a more restrictive definition of Orthodoxy, see Moshe Samet, “The Beginnings of Orthodoxy,” *Modern Judaism* 8 (1988), pp. 249–250.

³ Feiner in particular tends to paint this dichotomy brightly. See Shmuel Feiner, “Mendelssohn and Mendelssohn’s Disciples: A Re-examination,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 40 (1995), pp. 135–138; idem, “Towards an Historical Definition of *Haskalah*,” in *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, eds. S. Feiner and D. Sorkin (London, 2001), pp. 206–207, 219; idem, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 2004), p. 13 and part II generally.

⁴ See Jay Harris, “The Image of Maimonides in 19th Century Jewish Historiography,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 54 (1987), pp. 121–123.

⁵ In claiming that Luzzatto uses Maimonides as a proxy to attack Kant, Harris focuses on Luzzatto’s criticism of Maimonides’ supposed denial of the resurrection of the dead. In this, Harris takes Luzzatto to be criticizing Kantian ethics, which denies moral value to actions performed for eudemonistic ends. For Luzzatto supposedly equates Maimonides’ denial of resurrection with Kant’s denial of moral value to actions done with the intention of being rewarded. In the same vein, Harris points to a letter from Luzzatto to Zunz where Luzzatto notes that K-A-N-T spelled backwards yields T-N-A-K (Hebrew Bible) which Harris takes to indicate that for Luzzatto, “Kantian