Ever since a 1904 conference in Breslau where such figures as Jacob Gutmann, Ignaz Goldziher and Louis Ginzberg called for a new interpretation of Maimonides’ work, a proliferation of Maimonideanisms have run through twentieth-century philosophical discourse. Like many of the philosophers who would follow them, participants at this conference saw the medieval thinker as a symbol of the compatibility of reason and revelation, of the universal significance of Jewish texts and teachings and of the centrality of ethics within Judaism. Furthermore, selecting a medieval as opposed to a modern figure was itself a meaningful gesture, possibly a response to the Enlightenment picture of reason and religion as eternally opposed forces. The most influential

1 For a brief account of the Breslau conference, whose goal was to lay the groundwork for new trends in Jewish studies, see the heavily annotated translation of Hermann Cohen’s Ethics of Maimonides by Almut Sh. Bruckstein (Madison, 2004).

2 Herbert Davidson describes how many medieval Jewish philosophers understood the religious significance of their philosophical work in his “The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation,” in Religion in a Religious Age, ed. S. D. Goitein (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), pp. 53–68. Davidson attempts to describe how “medieval Jewish rationalists went about rethinking three essential elements in their religion, with the aid of philosophy: belief in the existence of God, love of God, and the religious duty of study” (p. 55); “The appearance of philosophy allowed them to rethink their religion in a form more satisfactory for them, from a strictly religious viewpoint” (p. 55). Davidson does this through the interesting but frustrating device of establishing a “composite” figure composed of elements of Maimonides, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Saadia, and other figures. Importantly for Davidson’s “composite” thinker, the question of what belief itself means had to be clarified—belief had to be understood as something more than the statement “I believe.” The belief in God, after the introduction of Greek thought, had to be augmented by the certain knowledge of God’s existence. We are then operating in the mode of the philosophical explication of religious tradition. The verse Jer 9:23 as read in the medieval period would support this: “Glory only in this, in intellectual understanding and knowledge of God.” The scientific belief in God’s existence was thus called for by scripture itself. Further, love of God seemed to necessitate some version of knowledge of God—for how could one come to love something one did not know? “The emotional duty of loving God thus opens up into a wide-ranging
articulation of the views discussed at the conference would not emerge until a few years after the conference itself: the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, a great authority in both philosophical and German-Jewish circles, was recruited as a sort of outside consultant for the group and his “Ethics of Maimonides” appeared in 1908 as part of the Breslau group’s continued collaboration. Cohen’s revolutionary reading of Maimonides in the key of idealism, which made Maimonides a Platonist rather than an Aristotelian, was thus in harmony with the Breslau group’s original intellectual vision.3

Cohen’s interpretation of Maimonides as a Platonist who believed in the transcendental status of both the religious and the philosophical Good would find philosophical heirs in diverse areas of Jewish thought, including Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Strauss, Steven Schwarzschild and Emmanuel Levinas. However, in intellectual history the phrase “philosophical heir” often serves to gloss over important distinctions between thinkers. This short list, for example, includes two philosophers who put Maimonides to strikingly different uses. In this essay I will explore how Strauss and Levinas understood their philosophical projects as Maimonidean: both were committed to understanding the relationship between religion and philosophy, and committed as well to a model of transcendental reason in keeping with Cohen’s Platonic reading of Maimonides. Despite these similarities, however, Strauss and Levinas’ philosophical aims and their visions of philosophy’s social role were sharply opposed, and for both to adopt the label of Maimonidean is thus quite striking. In fact, the incongruities between their interpretations of Maimonides only demonstrate his availability for radically different readings in the twentieth century.

cognitive obligation, the obligation to acquire true and certain knowledge not only of the existence of God, but also, as far as possible, of the nature of God” (p. 60).

3 It is worth mentioning that Cohen’s posthumously published Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism (1919), which famously argues for an understanding of Judaism as “ethical monotheism,” was originally issued as a volume in the series overseen by the original Breslau group.


3 The list is offered by Almut Sh. Bruckstein in her aforementioned translation of the Ethics of Maimonides.