Elukin knows how to tell a good story. He has condensed one thousand years of Jewish life in Christian Europe into a short, readable narrative. He is certainly correct that a history of European Jewry which takes into account only the negative aspects of its condition is misleading and simplistic. Jews and Christians shared the same public space and many of the same private concerns about health and livelihood. These neighbors interacted as neighbors are wont to do: sometimes sharing celebrations, sometimes commiserating with each other in times of tragedy, sometimes having disputes and rivalries. Jewish and Christian intellectuals often had more in common with each other than with their less educated coreligionists. Whatever the adversities, European Jews survived and often thrived. Indeed, Elukin is correct that the denouement of the Jewish experience should not be used to gainsay the positive aspects of Jewish life in Europe. Yet the insights provided by subsequent events should not be denied in comprehensive historical judgments of this period.

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Despite Harry Wolfson’s magisterial book on Spinoza in the 1930s,¹ and more recent studies by Zev Harvey, Heidi Ravven, Carlos Fraenkel, and others,² Spinoza’s relationship to Maimonides has never really received the attention it deserves. This is most unfortunate, not only because it is

an extremely rich, complex, and fascinating philosophical relationship, but also because some crucial aspects of Spinoza's philosophy cannot possibly be understood except against the background of medieval Jewish rationalism, with which we know he was familiar. This is true of both the metaphysical/epistemological/moral ideas in the *Ethics* and the religious/theological/political ideas in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP).

Thus, Catherine Chalier's new book is a most welcome addition to the literature. Chalier's stated goal is to study the political dimensions of Spinoza's critique of Maimonides in the TTP, especially the question of freedom of thought in a state that owes no fealty to any religious authority. Spinoza's argument for a complete separation of the political and the theological (but not the political and the religious), she insists, provides the necessary context for a proper understanding of his criticisms of Maimonides. At the same time, Chalier rightly argues that Spinoza's "rude" dismissal of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, especially its views on the interpretation of Scripture, should not lead us to ignore the profound importance of Maimonides to Spinoza. The fundamental question she asks—one that takes into account both Spinoza's great intellectual debt to Maimonides and his rough treatment of him—is this: Why does Spinoza's theologico-political project lead him to treat so harshly, to dismiss with "*un dédain violent et une ironie mordant*," someone with whom in fact he has philosophically much in common?

In chapter 1, Chalier begins with Spinoza's critique of Maimonides' rationalist approach to the Bible and the relationship between *sens* and *verité*. For Spinoza and Maimonides take opposing views on the question of whether images and words (which, for Spinoza, are a product of the imagination), particularly those of Scripture, can ever lead to adequate ideas and truth. Chalier argues that Spinoza's almost exaggerated exasperation with his medieval predecessor's attempt to link the search for truth with what, for Spinoza, should be a purely semantic inquiry into the biblical authors' intended meaning stems from his recognition of the political use theologians make of the Bible to undermine political positions to which they are opposed.

But the real beauty and strength of Chalier's approach, in this and other chapters, lie in its nuances. For her, the relationship between Maimonides and Spinoza is neither one of simple influence nor one of critical contrast. Rather, her sensitivity to the similarities between the two thinkers provides her analyses of their differences with great subtlety. For example, Chalier notes the parallels between the ways in which, for both Maimonides and Spinoza, the ambiguities of biblical texts need to be studied within their own textual contexts. Even more illuminating is her discussion of the ways in which Maimonides and Spinoza differ
from “les talmudistes” (and their rabbinic devotion to the indefinite openness of meaning) by insisting that there really is only one true reading (univocité) of any biblical verse, although for Maimonides that reading is to be found through an appeal to reason and philosophy, whereas for Spinoza it is to be found in the proper textual/historical/linguistic study of the book itself. Moreover, Chalier is not averse to evaluating Spinoza’s interpretation of Maimonides, and she often finds it wanting as Spinoza (mis)reads Maimonides in ways that facilitate his attack.

In chapter 2, Chalier turns to God and some paradoxes at the heart of the Maimonides/Spinoza opposition. While one might take issue with Chalier’s claim that Maimonides’ God (unlike Spinoza’s Deus sive Natura) is still the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (p. 72), her analysis nonetheless starts from the obvious fact that the two thinkers oppose anthropomorphism about God, grounded as it is in the sensory prejudices of the ignorant. They also agree that, in some sense, God’s actions or ways are identical to the course of nature (although they do not mean the same thing by this claim). But they differ on the question of whether or not God (in particular, his essence) is knowable. Thus, for Chalier, there is a paradox: “Le philosophe le plus soucieux de refuser au langage biblique le moindre force de révélation dans l’ordre de la vérité, Spinoza, défend la thèse d’une révélation vraie, grâce à l’idée adéquate de Dieu dont le sage est capable,” while Maimonides, the philosopher who regards the Bible as the word of the living God, transmitted by the prophets to the Jewish people and their descendants, “défend au contraire la cause de la negation et même du silence… quand il s’agit de parler de Dieu” (p. 66).

Indeed, according to Chalier, it is precisely because Spinoza denigrates (as he does with other “faux biens”) the physical text of the Bible and the status of its words that he can insist that one must transcend them in pursuit of a philosophical knowledge of God based on reason and adequate ideas; while Maimonides, wed as he is to Scripture as a source of theological knowledge, is committed to finding truth about God in Scripture but also recognizes that it provides the tools only for a “negative” understanding of him.

In her chapter on providence, Chalier once again begins with a convergence between Maimonides and Spinoza: Both stand opposed to the view of providence which requires a personal, even emotional God’s actively

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3 “Spinoza, the philosopher most concerned with refusing biblical language the slightest force of revelation in the order of truth, defends a thesis of true revelation in the form of an adequate idea of God which the sage is capable of attaining.”

4 “defends, on the contrary, the cause of the negation and even of silence… when it comes to talking about God.”
taking care of individuals by rewarding their good deeds, punishing their sins, and warding off evils. However, Chalier finds there to be a substantial difference between the two thinkers that is of great significance when considering their respective positions on providence: This is the fact that Maimonides allows for the creation of the world and the possibility of miracles (understood as divine interventions in the course of nature)—or, better, for the ultimate contingency of nature—whereas Spinoza does not. Equally important, Maimonides, but not Spinoza, believes that the true (philosophical) account of providence is to be found in the words of Scripture, properly interpreted. However, it is unclear how deep these differences go, and Chalier appreciates the extent to which Maimonides and Spinoza agree on the nature of providence, understood as the natural consequences of intellectual understanding and the kind of “reward” it brings to the virtuous person. She insists that Spinoza himself, blinded by what he sees as Maimonides’ continued devotion to Scripture as a source of truth in these matters, fails to take his medieval predecessor’s view of providence with all due philosophical seriousness and recognize their doctrinal affinities. Once again, in Chalier’s view, the real issue here is the philosophical relevance of the Bible.

La fixation du texte sur une univocité statique à découvrir par un travail généalogique visant à mettre à jour ce que ses auteurs croyaient et à libérer la quête philosophique de la nécessité de le lire encore (Spinoza) et l’ouverture du texte, grâce à la plurivocité des mots, rendant licite et imperative une exégèse qui, parce qu’elle pose des questions théoriques aux versets, débouche sur une vérité philosophique (Maimonide), constituent deux theses irréductibles. (p. 124)

Everything, it seems, is infected by this fundamental disagreement between Maimonides and Spinoza over the relationship between Scripture and philosophy.

Turning to the question of prophecy—another domain where there is a clear connection between Spinoza’s views and those of Maimonides—the issue is whether or not the prophetic writings hold any value in the pursuit of philosophical knowledge and, ultimately, our felicity, or must they be abandoned simply to nourishing the irrational, unthinking theological prejudices of the vulgar? For Spinoza, contrary to Maimonides, it is

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5 “[For Spinoza,] the fixation of the text on a static univocity discovered through genealogical work seeks to update that which those authors believe and to liberate philosophical inquiry from having to read it again… [whereas for Maimonides] the openness of the text, thanks to the plurivocity of the words, makes exegesis admissible and even imperative because it poses theoretical questions to the verses uncovering philosophical truth… [these] constitute two irreducible theses.”
not that the prophets can be compared (unfavorably) with philosophers with respect to their grasp of the truth; rather, it is that truth has nothing whatsoever to do with the prophetic vocation, grounded as it is in the imagination rather than in reason. But, Chalier argues, Spinoza’s deflationary analysis of biblical prophecy is not motivated only by his political project, as he tries to undermine the usurpation of secular power by theologians who rely on the authority of prophetic texts. While he certainly is concerned with the political danger of regarding the prophets as philosophers, his account of prophecy, like his account of providence, is also intimately related to his philosophical/moral project focused on “la vie heureuse.”

As Chalier further pursues her analyses through chapters on divine and human law, the election of the Hebrews, theocracy and democracy, and the love of God and salvation, the contrasts between Maimonides and Spinoza and the puzzles they generate become more profound. Coming finally to the most important of all topics, she speaks of “l’antagonisme [insurmontable] entre les deux philosophes.” For Maimonides, truth and happiness are achieved through obedience to the Law and the close study of Torah; for Spinoza, they come through philosophy alone, with no need for Scripture and with human laws’ providing only the basic conditions of material well-being and political security that make the life of reason possible. For Maimonides, human (Mosaic) law is also divine and offers the path to ultimate felicity; for the latter, the distinction between human law and divine law is clear, and only theologians seeking to usurp political power are interested in conflating the two.

One of the finer aspects of Chalier’s book is the virtual dialogue that she creates between Maimonides and Spinoza. We have Spinoza’s critiques of Maimonides, of course, but she offers compelling responses to these on Maimonides’ behalf, as well as Spinoza’s possible counterresponses. Moreover, even when Spinoza does not explicitly mention Maimonides (for example, in his discussion of the Law), Chalier effectively brings out the way in which Maimonides is implicitly the target of Spinoza’s account. In all these respects, this book is not just good intellectual history, it is good history of philosophy. It is also a book long overdue. Readers may not find all of Chalier’s analyses and conclusions persuasive. But there is no denying the importance of her task or the skill with which she pursues it.

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