



Maimonides' Empire of Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief

Ralph Lerner

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Much of the writing of and about the twelfth-century rabbi, philosopher, and theologian Moses Maimonides is addressed to an elite audience of philosophers and intellectuals. Here, Ralph Lerner's exploration of Maimonides' popular writings reveals that the education of the common man was one of the great teacher's chief concerns.

Lerner describes the brilliant and sometimes wily ways in which Maimonides sought to break through the despair and superstition that gripped the Jewish people's minds, without sacrificing the dignity and core of his message. These writings--presented here in uncommonly accurate, mostly new translations--also reveal that Maimonides was willing to risk the scorn of his contemporaries to enlighten both his own and future generations. By addressing the writings of Maimonides' disciples, including Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera in the mid-thirteenth century and Joseph Albo in the fifteenth century, Lerner shows how this technique was passed on.

In striking contrast to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Maimonides' enlightenment is premised on the inequality of understandings and other differences between the elite and the common people. Instead of scorning the past, Lerner shows, Maimonides' enlightenment invests it with a new and ennobling dignity. A valuable reference for students of political philosophy and Jewish studies, Lerner's elegantly written book also brings to life the richness and relevance of medieval Jewish thought for all those interested in the Jewish tradition.

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