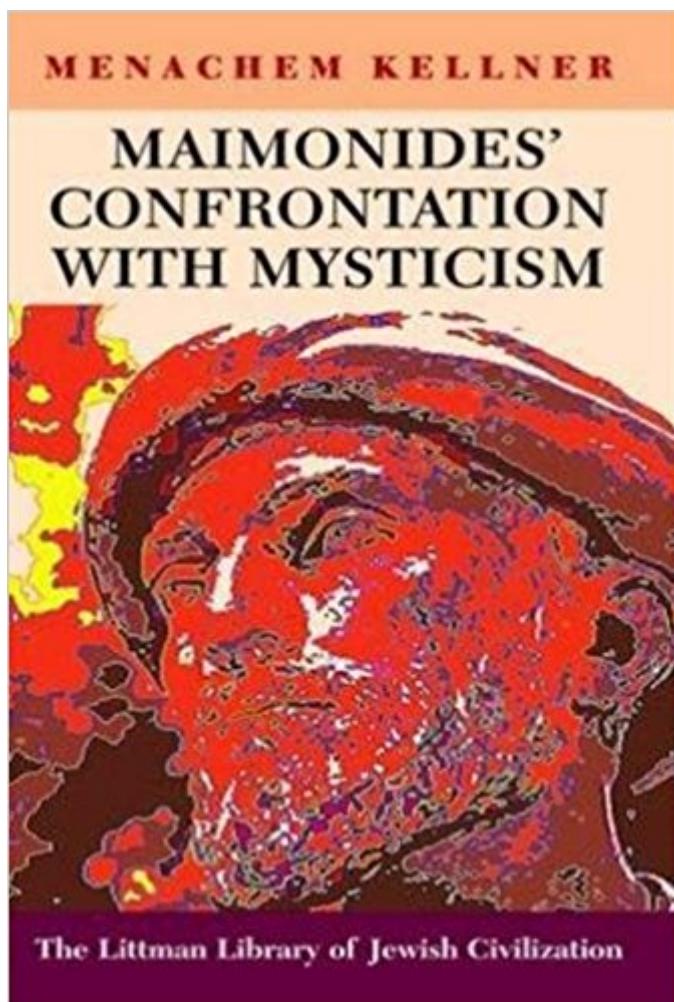


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# Maimonides' Confrontation With Mysticism (Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization)



## Synopsis

Many books on Maimonides have been written and still more will appear. Few present Maimonides, as Menachem Kellner does against the actual religious background that informed his many innovative and influential choices. He not only analyses the thought of the great religious thinker but contextualizes it in terms of the 'proto-kabbalistic' Judaism that preceded him. Kellner shows how the Judaism that Maimonides knew had come to conceptualize the world as an enchanted universe, governed by occult affinities. He shows why Maimonides rejected this and how he went about doing it. Kellner argues that Maimonides' attempted reformation failed, the clearest proof of that being the success of the kabbalistic counter-reformation which his writings provoked. Kellner shows how Maimonides rethought Judaism in different ways. It is in highlighting this and identifying Maimonides as a religious reformer that this book makes its key contribution. Maimonides created a new Judaism, 'disenchanted', depersonalized, and challenging; a religion that is at the same time elitist and universalist. Kellner's analysis also shows the deep configuration of Judaism in a new light. If, as Moshe Idel says in his Foreword, Maimonides was able to 'reform so many aspects of rabbinic Judaism single-handedly, to enrich it by importing such dramatically different concepts, it shows that the profound structures of this religion are flexible enough to allow the emergence and success of astonishing reforms. The fact that, great as Maimonides was, he did not overcome the traditional forms of proto-kabbalism shows that the dynamic of religion is much more complex than subscribing to authorities, however widely accepted.'

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'One of the most important books on Maimonides to be published in the last thirty years and quite possibly one of the most important in the field of Jewish philosophy. The writing is clear and crisp, and the scholarship is impeccable. The book explains not just how radical Maimonides's dissatisfactions with the Judaism of his day was, but how radical his opinions are for most Jews today.' Kenneth Seeskind, AJS Review 'Impressive ... lucid ... that rare scholarly study that manages not to compromise on academic rigour while daring to state strongly-held convictions that are so relevant in times troubled by the many irrational surges" of political, military, and religious fundamentalism.' Allan Nadler, Forward 'Kellner has contributed a study of great value not only for an academic audience but for lay and yeshivish audiences as well. The book is a welcome addition to the samizdats currently circulating within the underground yeshiva counter-culture.' James A. Diamond, *Meorot* 'A spirited, highly stimulating work that reads fluently and fully engages not only with the mind but also the reader's Jewish soul.' Haim Chertok, *Midstream* 'Interesting and important ... extremely valuable in the way that it roots both Maimonides' legal code and his philosophy in the thought-world and social and religious practices of his own time, and dramatizes the ways in which some of his most characteristic formulations function as critical responses to what prevailed in his own culture and environment.' Aryeh Botwinick, *Philosophy East & West* 'One of those rare combinations of erudite scholarship and accessible style, treating an issue that is not only perennially meaningful, but also particularly salient today-features that characterize a number of his works . . . Throughout the book, Kellner devises a series of easy-to-follow dualities to structure his argument ... many books have been written about Maimonides. What Menachem Kellner's book does uniquely is to isolate the ways in which Maimonides bumps against the mystical and mythical strains that run through ancient and medieval Jewish thought like a river. While any educated Jew knows that Maimonides stands out as a leading rationalist, Kellner presents us with a compelling portrait of the multi-faceted ways in which Maimonides expunges these mystical and mythical veins from the Jewish mine.' Joel Hecker, *The Reconstructionist* 'Kellner has refocused Maimonidean studies in a new way. In addition, he has done so in a very learned manner: his footnotes cover a vast area of Jewish scholarship; his summaries of scholarship are very concise; and his bibliography is very full ... a very important book. It formulates clearly and comprehensively the hyperrationalist reading of Maimonides which is widely held by scholars of Jewish philosophy. It also

offers a new proposal on the subject of the opponents against whom Maimonides wrote. Kellner's erudition has made this so, and his willingness to engage the present and the future has projected the issue beyond medieval philosophy.' David R. Blumenthal, *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 'The strengths of this book lie in its didactic and ideological clarity ... For those interested in the medieval roots of a major dispute within modern Orthodox Judaism this is an extremely useful book packed with detailed examples of contentious topics.' Michael Fagenblat, *Speculum* 'A thought-provoking study that deals with rather more than its title suggests.' Jeremy Adler, *Times Literary Supplement* 'Perhaps no author in the last couple of decades has made Maimonides' theology more relevant for contemporary Orthodox dialogue than Menachem Kellner. His works on dogma, belief, rabbinic authority, and other central topics have generated significant debate and even his biggest detractors acknowledge the substantive and stimulating nature of his work ... This is an extremely thought-provoking work that deserves serious attention, debate, and discussion.' *Tradition Online*'Intellectual tour de force . . . On the one hand, Kellner, in a work of objective scholarship, insightfully decodes what he takes to be two opposing religions that have contended for recognition as the Orthodox expression of Judaism from ancient to modern times. On the other hand, Kellner, as an engaged modern Orthodox thinker who has a stake in this conflict, applies wide learning, critical skills, and expansive control of traditional Jewish sources, intellectual history, and analytic philosophical tools in a sustained argument . . . Menachem Kellner's study of Maimonides and the mystics will endure not because it explicates an antiquarian medieval debate; his study talks to moderns who struggle with ideas and ideals, who are both intellectually modern and Jewishly religious.' Alan J. Yuter, *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*

Menachem Kellner is Professor of Jewish Thought at the University of Haifa. He is the author of *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* and *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* and translator of Isaac Abravanel's *Principles of Faith*, all published by the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. He is also the author of *Maimonides on Human Perfection*, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*, and *Maimonides on the 'Decline of the Generations' and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority*. His translations of Gersonides' *Commentary on Song of Songs* and Maimonides' *Book of Love* appeared in the Yale Judaica Series. Professor Kellner's critical editions of the original texts of Abravanel's *Principles of Faith* and of Gersonides' *Commentary on Song of Songs* were published in Hebrew.

Menachem Kellner was completely successful in his objective to share through this book a clear view

of Maimonides though on Judaism, his world-view is cleared descripted and his neutrality as scientist is unquestionable. The book provides full understanding about what kind of Judaism Maimonides believed, lived and teached. For those who love the works of the Great Eagle, this book is a must read about it.

## Good background to the Philosophy of Rambam

In Maimonides' *Confrontation with Mysticism*, author Menachem Kellner presents a cogent argument showing that Maimonides didn't subscribe to the normative religious ("proto-kabbalistic" or mystical) view of his day. In other words, Maimonides didn't view the world through what Kellner refers to as an ontological/essentialist perspective, like his predecessor, Judah HaLevi (the Kuzari). Rather than viewing Judaism through a mystical lens (which had esoteric reasons for everything), Maimonides was grounded in reality, relying on reason and science to decipher the meaning of Torah and the commandments. The difference in perspective between Maimonides and the prevalent religious thought of his day includes (among many examples Kellner lays out) the role of the sacrificial cult in Judaism and the Hebrew language. For Maimonides, the sacrificial cult/system is an allowance that the Torah makes taking into account Israel's historical circumstance. In other words, the Torah allows sacrifices as a means of weening Israel from neighboring idolatrous practices (which have their own versions of religious sacrifice), with the goal for spiritual perfection. This is contrast to what would be considered proto-kabbalistic thought, which sees the sacrificial cult as essential - with intrinsic value, able to effect changes upon the supernatural - without regards to the historical or social circumstance in which the commandments regarding the sacrificial cult were given. The second example is the Hebrew language, which Maimonides views as conventional (and not that different from other languages), with the exception that it is called the "holy tongue" since it does not contain vulgar words or refer directly to human functions, but uses euphemisms to convey a point. Maimonides doesn't ascribe a magical function to the Hebrew language, in which one can effect change in the material and supernal worlds using the various mystical names of G-d. The proto-kabbalist view does ascribe such a magical function to the Hebrew language. The gulf between Maimonides' perspective and the normative religious perspective of his day was significant as these two examples suggest. This is not surprising since he viewed the normative religious viewpoint as having been tainted with superstitious and erroneous beliefs, and his goal was to rectify these errors by championing a vision of Judaism that would lead the individual to a true understanding of the Torah and hence, spiritual perfection.

Very dense to read, but highly cogent and extremely thorough. Kellner makes his case strongly and irrefutably. The only criticism I have is that Kellner's excellent analysis is kept isolated in the context of its time period, and his discerning ideas are not developed into how the fundamental clash of ideologies developed over time, particularly how that clash manifests itself today.

Its interesting and well written. I feel like Kellner did not back up his assertions enough. He makes sweeping assertions about Maimonides and his rationalism which he equates with anti-mysticism rather than anti-Platonism. He does not back it up sufficiently. All his books suffer from the same deficiency.

Dr. Kellner has done a fabulous job putting Rambam's writings into historical context. It is quite interesting how Rambam's attempts at combating mysticism and Kaballah fueled Moshe De Leon's publishing of the Zohar, and all mystics afterwards. Dr. Kellner is quite thorough in discussing the major points of contention with regards to Rambam and mystic mythology in areas such as God vs. Man, Jew vs. Non-Jew, the land of Yisrael, Prophecy, the Hebrew language, etc. The footnotes were quite interesting and provide a springboard for future reading and education. I appreciate Dr. Kellner's openness to discussing other researcher's thoughts and opinions and where he agrees and disagrees with them. I was introduced to Dr. Kellner by way of Rabbi Israel Drazin's books and comments. I plan on reading more of Dr. Kellner's books. As an Orthodox Jew, I am quite excited and encouraged that other Jews believe as I do, see science and mathematics as a means of understanding creation and HaShem's ways (I'm an engineer), and value logic and reasoning as the way to live life while pursuing moral perfection through the Torah. Thank you, Dr. Kellner. Kol HaKavod!

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