

# Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Preface	ix
Introduction	xi

## PART ONE

<b>Libraries of the Jewish People</b>	<b>1</b>
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1. Golden Libraries in the “Golden Age,” Tenth–Twelfth Centuries: The Library of Rabbi Samuel Ha-Nagid	3
2. Nahmanides and His Library	41
3. From Manuscript to Printing Press: The Library of Leone Modena	70
4. The Modern Period: The Library of Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch	97
5. The Library of Professor Harry Austryn Wolfson	127
6. The Contemporary University Library	161

## PART TWO

<b>From Text to Success: Salient Ideas and Values and Their Influence</b>	<b>185</b>
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Introduction	187
7. Respect for Precedent and Critical Independence	192
8. Logical Reasoning and Pursuit of Truth	218

9. The Primacy of Education	245
10. A Purposeful Life—The Pursuit of Perfection	268
11. Summary and Conclusions	286
 Note on Translations	 302
Appendix: Maps	303
Illustration Credits	309
Notes	312
Index	355
Authors' Biographies	367

# List of Illustrations

## Text Illustrations

Figure 1.	Timeline	xix
Figure 2.	Manuscript of Nahmanides' <i>Commentary on the Pentateuch</i> , fifteenth century	53
Figure 3.	Babylonian Talmud; 2d edition; Printed by Daniel Bomberg, Venice, 1525–1539	75
Figure 4.	Azariah de' Rossi's <i>Me'or Enayim</i> , printed in Mantua, 1574	78
Figure 5.	Leone Modena	79
Figure 6.	Funeral of Sholem Aleichem in New York City, May 15, 1916	124
Figure 7.	The Jews of Spain and Portugal 1000–1497	303
Figure 8.	The Jews of Germany 500–1000	304
Figure 9.	The Jews of France 800–1500	305
Figure 10.	The Jews of Italy 1000–1600	306
Figure 11.	The Jews of Eastern Europe and Russia's Westward Expansion 1772–1815	307
Figure 12.	The Jewish Death-Toll 1939–1945	308

## Inset

Figure I.	The Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain
Figure II.	Title page of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi's <i>Book of Laws</i> , printed in Pressburg, 1836
Figure III.	Page from a manuscript of the second book of Maimonides' <i>Mishneh Torah</i> , fourteenth century

- Figure IV. Page from an illuminated manuscript of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, Spain, 1348
- Figure V. Manuscript of Rashi's commentary on the Pentateuch, France, early thirteenth century
- Figure VI. James I of Aragon receives from the bishop and jurist Vidal de Canellas the compilation of the *Fueros de Aragón* (Laws of Aragon), c. 1247
- Figure VII. *Sefer Hasidim*, Frankfurt am Main, 1724
- Figure VIII. *Zohar*, Mantua, 1558
- Figure IX. Page from Deuteronomy, *Gutenberg Bible*, mid-fifteenth century
- Figure X. Painting by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim (1800–1882), depicting an imagined meeting in the Berlin home of Moses Mendelssohn
- Figure XI. The Volozhin Yeshiva, Belarus
- Figure XII. Manuscript from the Cairo Genizah, T-S NS 158.10
- Figure XIII. Manuscript from the Cairo Genizah, T-S NS 197.13

# Preface

Several years ago, one of us (Alan Kadish) lectured to groups of college students about a series of principles concerning the primacy of education and the importance of living a purposeful life. The major sources of these principles were lessons derived from Biblical and rabbinic texts. He realized that these concepts may have broad usefulness and appeal and thus began to conceive of this book, tracing the development of a “Jewish intellectual tradition” that began in antiquity and evolved into a complex and diverse history of accomplishments that we believe are rooted in core precepts. We propose that adopting these ideas and precepts can lead to both a more successful and rewarding intellectual and spiritual life.

Our experience in teaching has suggested to us that there is a real and pressing need for a book of this nature. As the distractions of the Information Age proliferate, more young people avoid traditional methods of learning and seem to question life’s purpose. The rise in suicide rates among the young, lower educational achievement in the United States despite serial attempts at education reform, and lower rates of personal satisfaction strongly indicate that a reevaluation of “life and learning” is much needed. Although the book was written well before the challenges of 2020—including the Covid-19 pandemic and the long overdue reevaluation of racism in America—the increased stress facing us currently underscores the vital need for better grounding of our lives in core principles.

Although we are both affiliated with Touro College and both observant Jews, we come to this project from different academic backgrounds—one a physician, scientist, and administrator, and the other a rabbi and Jewish studies scholar—that provide complementary perspectives on the Jewish intellectual tradition. We also did not conceive of

this as a purely academic work. Although richly sourced, the work portrays imagined historical events based on well documented references and part 2, in particular, draws inferences regarding the Jewish intellectual tradition that contain some elements of speculation. Nonetheless, we believe that the lessons that culminate in a series of suggestions for a more productive and rewarding life described in chapter 11 are well supported by the history of the Jewish intellectual tradition. Finally, and perhaps surprisingly, this work is not really meant to celebrate Jewish achievement or talent. The major thesis is that a tradition based on the core principles of respect for prior work while encouraging creativity, intellectual honesty, the primacy of education, and the ethos of living a purposeful life provides wise counsel that can be universally applied in education and in life.

Joining us at the writing and editing sessions was Dr. Simcha Fishbane, who provided feedback, critique, and insightful advice.

A number of individuals must be credited for their invaluable contributions to the volume: Dr. Moshe Sherman, who masterfully authored most of chapter four; Ben Bond and Dr. Zev Eleff, who expertly reviewed, edited, and contributed to chapters of the book; Malka Fleischman and Yehudah Meth, who meticulously reviewed the manuscript to achieve a uniform and enhanced style while providing perceptive editorial comments; Connie Kadish, Michael Rapoport, and Linda Shmidman, who carefully read and sagely commented upon drafts of the book; Elaine Goldberg and Karen Rubin, who skillfully and assiduously typed and formatted many sections, and Abbie Auster, whose superb technical assistance with formatting issues is much appreciated.

Finally, it has been a personal pleasure to work with Kira Nemirovsky of Academic Studies Press and her expert staff, especially Alessandra Anzani, Ekaterina Yanduganova and Matthew Charlton, on the production of this volume.

# Introduction

One might picture Rabbi Samuel ibn Nagrela ha-Nagid, vizier of Muslim Granada, eagerly anticipating his return home after being away for months while commanding the forces of the Granadan Muslim army against those of Arab Seville. After such activities, Rabbi Samuel would have longed to spend hours basking in the serenity of his personal library. No other Jewish library of the mid-eleventh century matched his collection of Hebrew and Arabic language manuscripts—documents which would have provided someone of his intellectual curiosity with continual inspiration.

A scholar-statesman, Rabbi Samuel authored a legal masterpiece, *Sefer Hilkheta Gavrata* (The Book of Major Jewish Laws). One might imagine R. Samuel, after hours of study and writing, pausing to compose an elegant Hebrew-verse letter to his poetic protégé, Solomon ibn Gabirol. It was likely difficult for R. Samuel to abstain from composing poetry for any significant period of time. Even during a military campaign, at a battle near the Sengil River, he formulated a ten-line Hebrew poem entitled “See Me in My Distress Today,” which petitioned for divine assistance in the heat of battle. Exempt during battle from the obligation to recite the afternoon prayers, he offered this hastily authored—yet skillfully structured—poem in its place.

See my distress today; listen to my prayer, and answer it. Remember Your promise to Your servant; do not disappoint my hope. Can any hand do me violence, when You are my hand and my shelter? You once made me a pledge and sent me good tidings with Your angels. Now I am passing through deep waters—lift me out of my terrors. I am walking through searing fire—snatch me from

the flames. If I have sinned—what am I, what are my sins? I am in danger, and cannot pray at length. Give me my heart's desire; oh, hasten to my aid. If I am not deserving in Your eyes—do it for the sake of my son and my sacred learning.

The study of rabbinic literature flourished in the Jewish community of Muslim Spain. Hebrew poets had “burst forth in song,” and a synthesis of classical Hebrew literature and works in Arabic on poetry, to say nothing of the entire scope of liberal arts and sciences, was well on its way to fruition. At peace in the sanctuary of his athenaeum, one can see R. Samuel completing his letter to ibn Gabirol and contemplatively gazing at the volumes surrounding him on all sides. Examining his library, he may have wondered what directions these holdings provided for future creativity and innovation, for productive synthesis ... or for potential conflict?<sup>1</sup>

Such musings would certainly have echoed those of ibn Nagrela's predecessors and presaged those of future rabbis and prominent Jewish thinkers. This scholastic posture—typified by the constant investigation of the points of convergence and departure between the Jewish and secular worlds—characterized the Jewish intellectual tradition for centuries to come. The most respected of the Jewish community's thinkers, philosophers and leaders would perpetually engage the liminality of their existence as Jews living in predominantly non-Jewish societies.

A thousand years later, Dr. Robert Aumann, the 2005 Nobel Laureate in Economics, might be walking to his office library at the Center for the Study of Rationality. The library was located at the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where Dr. Aumann served as Professor of Mathematics. One might picture Professor Aumann eager to prepare for a colloquium scheduled at the Center; his recent essay on “Risk Aversion in the Talmud,” published in the *Journal of Economic Theory*, would be discussed by distinguished representatives of the numerous academic disciplines that interacted within the multi-disciplinary framework of the Center in a pioneering effort to apply the tools of game theory in explanation of the rational basis of decision-making.

Rising from his desk, Professor Aumann could select handsomely bound copies of Talmudic tractates from a bookcase adorned with



gold-embossed titles of rabbinic literature. From other shelves, he could choose any number of volumes from his extensive collection of research materials concerning the application of game theory tools to real-life situations. Settled in front of his computer monitor, he could pause for a moment to reflect upon the fact that—evidenced by the volumes juxtaposed on his desk—the literary traditions that had first fascinated him more than half a century earlier at Manhattan’s Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva, where he studied, and later at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, still remained fountains of wisdom and sources of inspiration to the present day. What novel dimensions of knowledge were yet to be revealed through the lens of these classic works?<sup>2</sup>

## THE JOINT INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

Rabbi Samuel and Dr. Aumann were separated not just by a millennium in time, but by gigabytes in technology. Nevertheless, their accomplishments were part of the same great literary tradition. Each of their works combined extensive use of a library with both an enormous respect for the accomplishments of prior generations of scholars, as well as a sense of creativity that allowed them to overstep the bounds of what might have seemed possible. Samuel ibn Nagrela ha-Nagid, a medieval scholar immersed in the traditional thought of an ancient religion, was able to successfully combine the best of that tradition with literary, philosophical and intellectual input from the multi-dimensional culture of medieval Spain to produce remarkable works of not only jurisprudence but also poetry. His accomplishments are all the more remarkable because he combined them with an active political and military career.

Professor Robert Aumann certainly owed his accomplishments to an inherited cultural tradition. Understanding the role of game theory in economic decision-making required a unique blend of mathematics, psychology, economics, and political theory. Although game theory was initially developed by others, like John Nash (the character portrayed in “A Beautiful Mind”), Aumann extended this approach both theoretically and practically to the common case in which individuals make repeated game theory choices (i.e., when they are faced with the same situation over and over again).

At first blush, it would seem improbable that an ancient religious tradition, which appears to be rigid, with an unyielding philosophy, could have catalyzed or even coexisted with the remarkable creative advances of Rabbi Samuel ha-Nagid and Dr. Robert Aumann. However, that superficial characterization of the literary Jewish intellectual tradition would betray a misunderstanding about what makes that heritage unique. The Jewish intellectual tradition encompasses an almost reverential respect for precedent while concurrently encouraging individual creativity. It cultivates a precise, albeit unique, logical system among its students and amplifies the value of human accomplishment. It venerates written works and elevates intellectual achievement to enormous heights, valuing intellectual attainment as a commandment and as a precept for a meaningful life in a way that encourages achievement. What else could explain the unusual intellectual accomplishments of its members in both the past and in the current generation?

This book explores how the salient ideas and values of the Jewish intellectual tradition have not only stood the test of time but also—perhaps more importantly—have played a critical role in the shaping of traditional religious practices and customs, while also profoundly influencing contemporary non-Jewish Western culture. Thus, the purpose of this book is not to celebrate Jewish intellectual accomplishments or to dabble in dubious theories of intellectual superiority, but rather to unpack the underlying values and principles that have fostered those accomplishments and thus be able to apply them to life, society, and education in general.

The Jewish intellectual tradition has a long and complex history that has resulted in significant and influential works of scholarship. Despite many centuries of persecution and suppression, Jews have appeared to demonstrate an aptitude for generating expansive ideas and texts. Even during the most nomadic, uprooted, or oppressed stretches of their national narrative, Jewish people's scholarship has built upon itself to form a seemingly endless dialogue that speaks across the generations. Not all of that scholarship has been theological in nature. On the contrary, a wide range of disciplines have been positively and meaningfully impacted by this intellectual tradition. In this book, we suggest that there is a series of common principles that can be extracted from the Jewish

intellectual tradition that have broad, even life-changing, implications for individual and societal achievement.

These principles include

- 1) respect for tradition while encouraging independent, often disruptive thinking;
- 2) a precise system of logical reasoning in pursuit of the truth;
- 3) universal education continuing through adulthood; and
- 4) living a purposeful life.

*The main objective of this book is to understand the historical development of these principles and to demonstrate how applying them judiciously can lead to greater intellectual productivity, a more fulfilling existence and a more advanced society. We posit that the application of these principles to daily life can make a real and profound difference in education, productivity, and personal happiness.*

Chapter 11, the concluding chapter of the volume, will include eleven specific recommendations—with relevant examples—for robust universal implementation of the above principles, including, among others: grounding creativity and innovation in mastery of prior research; debating ideas with rigorous logical argumentation and intellectual honesty; displaying respect and love for scholars, mentors, and the written word; insisting upon high standards of both formal and informal education, and living with the belief that your determined actions can ennoble and elevate yourself and society.

The struggle to discover “meaning” in life has been an age-old and universal challenge. However, there is significant evidence described in chapter 10 (“A Purposeful Life—The Pursuit of Perfection”) to support the view that purposeful living leads to greater productivity and increased happiness. While the traditional Jewish view is that the purpose of life is to actualize God’s will, the idea of engaging in intellectual activity, not just as an end in itself, but as a means of building a better world both physically and spiritually, does not necessarily depend on theism. We suggest that some of the unique productivity described in chapters 1–6 is a result of the ingrained desire to fulfill the mission of building the world and that this yearning can be expressed in everyone’s life, not just

the lives of those who choose to embrace Judaism or any other religion. Focusing on that purpose will allow continued achievement and happiness, even in challenging times such as those that the world faces today.

The history of Jewish education is alluded to in chapters 1–6 and discussed in detail in chapter 9 (“The Primacy of Education”). A great deal of effort has been devoted to education reform in the last few decades. A cursory look at the landscape would suggest that those efforts have been largely ineffective. Common core, expanded testing, and raised academic expectations have met with resistance—in some cases, at least, well founded—and have failed to result in improved achievement. At the university level, and to some extent on the K-12 level, instructors have recognized the potential advantages of group projects among students, presaging much of the “team-based approach” that many newer companies utilize. The idea of a team-based approach in the Jewish intellectual tradition is a venerable one, going back at least two thousand years. In chapter 9, we review the data concerning how team-based approaches and cooperative learning can improve outcomes, after tracing the history of the development of this kind of pedagogical approach in chapters 1–6.

The ideologically and geographically diverse writers whose works are featured in chapters 1–6 were all engaged in the quest for truth. How does one pursue truth? Chapter 8 (“Logical Reasoning and Pursuit of Truth”) explores the nexus between logical reasoning, intellectual honesty, and pursuit of truth from the Talmud and post-Talmudic rabbinic thinkers to noted twentieth-century Jewish academicians.

Out of the box thinking has resulted in a number of advances in a variety of fields, some quite surprising. Most recently, entire industries, such as the internet (Google), telephones (Apple), and the retail industry (Amazon) have been completely upended by creative disruptive thinking. Historically, long-held physical principles, such as Newton’s laws, were overturned by taking a fresh look at the nature of reality. So how is it that the creative thinking described in chapters 1–6, and focused on in chapter 7 (“Respect for Precedent and Critical Independence”), could emanate from an ancient tradition that is highly text-based and by some measures quite rigid? One example, which may be familiar to some readers, is a segment of Biblical exegesis present in the *Haggadah*—the text

read at the Passover *Seder*. The readings recount the Exodus of the Jewish People from Egypt through textual analysis. Just before the meal, when the *matzah* (unleavened bread), which forms the centerpiece of the *Seder*, is eaten, a discussion ensues about the number of plagues visited on the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds (some translate as Red Sea). For the moment, we will leave aside the question of why this would provoke such a lively discussion and why including it in the Passover service is important. Let us, instead, focus on the entire method of analysis. The discussion begins with the idea that ten plagues, as the Bible narrates, occurred just prior to the Jews exiting Egypt. Subsequently, the Egyptians chased the Hebrews and drowned while catching up to them at the Sea of Reeds. There is no mention of any number of plagues occurring at the Sea of Reeds, nor any reason to think that this would even be an issue. However, a text-based argument develops concerning whether there were fifty, two hundred, or two hundred and fifty plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds. The entire analysis is based on a comparison between, first, the Hebrew term for “finger” used when Scripture talks about Egypt and “hand” used in the scene at the Sea of Reeds, and then the different terms describing the events at the Sea of Reeds. It is easy to become entangled in the details of what is seemingly an arcane discussion, but the big picture that one might glean from this is that the entire topic and debate represent creative out-of-the-box thinking. Nothing suggests that one should count the plagues at the Sea of Reeds. There is no specific analogy between the plagues in Egypt and the number of plagues at the Sea of Reeds. And no reason that any simple or even complex reading of the text would lead to this entire, seemingly esoteric, discussion. The point is that the method of analysis described here encourages thinking that is unusual, out of the box and potentially disruptive. While no one suggests that this particular argument has enormous practical implications for the world at large, the idea that one may take a concept or a text and view it in a completely disruptive way certainly presages some of the unusual and creative thinking that forms part of the Jewish intellectual tradition.

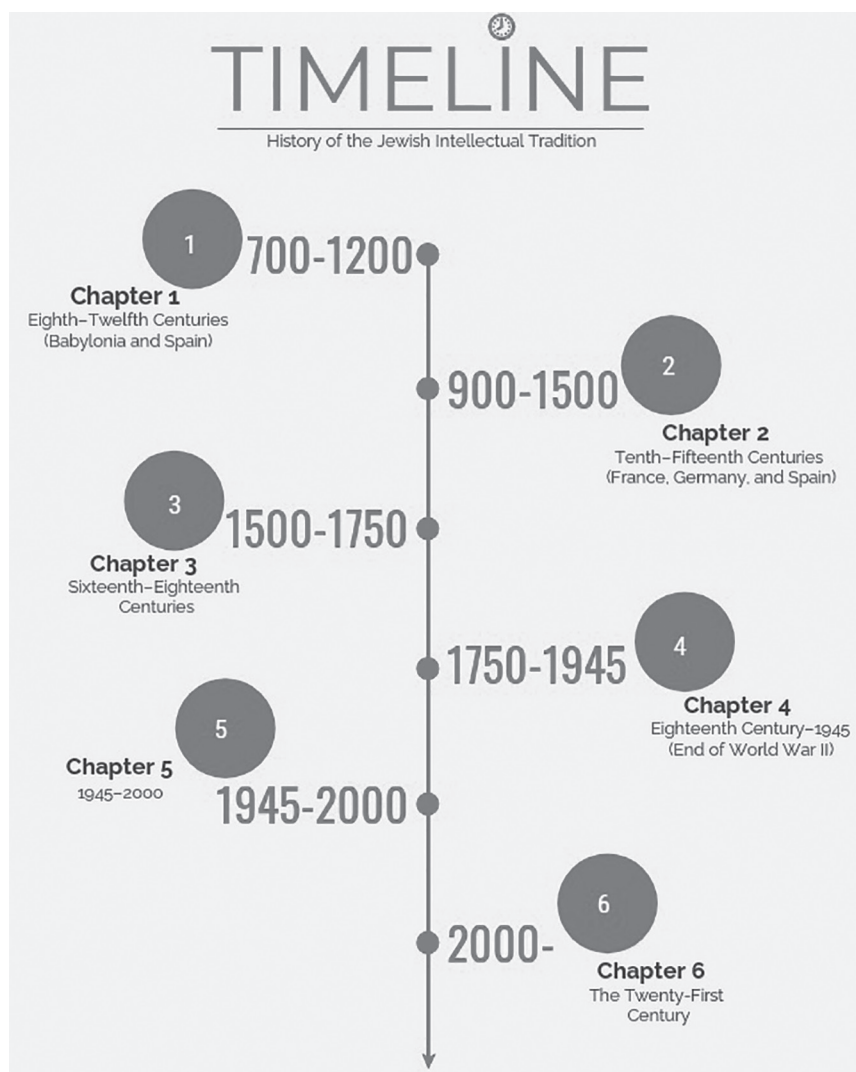
To properly understand the four salient facets of the Jewish intellectual tradition enumerated above, the first part of this book (chapters 1–6)

will consider the text-based development of this tradition and familiarize the reader with its literary contours and historical contexts. The tradition is ancient, multi-faceted, and complex, and summarizing involves the choices often required of a synopsis. Other works (often multi-volume) have described the political, economic, social, and intellectual history of the Jews from a variety of perspectives, but this book uniquely focuses upon the intellectual history of the Jewish people with the express goal of extracting the essential characteristics of the tradition and highlighting the exciting potential for universal application of those features.<sup>3</sup>

One key feature of this history is a unique reverence for the written word. Observant Jews who, until the late 1600s, were the sole bearers of this intellectual tradition, regard the Bible as divinely written. As such, they recognize each sentence, word, letter, and even each crown (a feature of Hebrew calligraphy that embellishes written letters) as containing nuanced meaning. This unusual respect for the word (oral and/or written) created a tradition heavily invested in the details of reading and writing in a way that overpoweringly influenced its development.

Accordingly, the first part of this volume utilizes a unique literary tool to achieve its purpose: an imagined guided tour of recreated, representative libraries of Jewish intellectuals at formative historical epochs. The Jewish intellectual tradition was emblemized in the creation and preservation of libraries, along with a genuine immersion in these archives by the men who understood the value of their apparatuses. Our reconstructed libraries, like those of Rabbi Samuel ibn Nagrela ha-Nagid and Professor Robert Aumann, serve as a vehicle toward better understanding the Jewish intellectual tradition, as well as the influential ideas that it fostered, inculcated, and transmitted. A careful reconstruction of the contents of these repositories of learning assists in determining the ideas and values that informed the consciousness and behavior of the educated Jews of those eras. They also can illuminate the creative directions presented by the interaction among the diverse values and genres of literature represented in these collections. Our expedition includes Jewish libraries in tenth- and eleventh-century Spain and Germany, thirteenth-century Spain, sixteenth-century Italy, eighteenth-century Germany, and twenty-first-century America and Israel.<sup>4</sup>

In the second part of this book, we use the library-based history of the Jewish intellectual tradition to elucidate what we believe are the four seminal guiding principles behind this tradition—principles that are responsible for its unique success. Subsequently, we suggest that these precepts can lead to a series of recommendations for education and intellectual achievement that can catalyze success for all, regardless of religious or ethnic affiliation.



**Figure 1.** Timeline





# Part One

## **Libraries of The Jewish People**



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