

Back to Maimonides' Sources: The Thirteen Principles Revisited

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Abstract

Over the years, scholars have offered various explanations for Maimonides' decision to compose his thirteen principles of Jewish belief and to treat them as incumbent upon every Jew to accept in order to be considered part of the Jewish community and to earn a portion in the World to Come. In this article, I lend further support to Lawrence Berman's suggestion that political-pedagogical considerations were the dominant factor in Maimonides' thought and that he was influenced primarily by the political philosophy of Alfarabi. After showing why the other explanations—metaphysical, polemical and legal—were at best secondary considerations for Maimonides, I analyze a passage in Alfarabi's *Aphorisms of the Statesman*, a treatise well known by Maimonides at the time of his formulation of the principles, which I argue holds the key to understanding Maimonides' decision. I also discuss the question of the extent of Maimonides' philosophic knowledge in this earlier period of his life. I conclude the article with some observations about the relevance of Maimonides' list of principles in the contemporary period.