

COLETTE SIRAT, *TEACHING AND STUDYING PHILOSOPHY IN JEWISH CULTURE DURING THE MIDDLE AGES*, BREPOLS, TURNHOUT 2025 (STUDIES ON THE FACULTY OF ARTS: HISTORY AND INFLUENCE), 134 PP., ISBN: 9782503614915.

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In *Teaching and Studying Philosophy in Jewish Culture during the Middle Ages*, Colette Sirat offers a work of remarkable clarity. Modest in length yet wide in chronological and geographical scope, this volume, published by Brepols in the series *Studies on the Faculty of Arts. History and Influence*, accomplishes something that has long been needed but rarely attempted: a synthetic account of philosophical pedagogy within medieval Jewish culture. Rather than rehearsing once more the doctrines of great thinkers in isolation, Sirat asks how philosophy was actually taught, transmitted, appropriated, and contested from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. The book represents the mature fruit of reflections she has developed over several decades, during which the theme of education in medieval Jewish contexts surfaced repeatedly in her scholarship and gave rise to a number of focused studies.¹ These are now gathered, further developed and integrated into

¹ COLETTE SIRAT, « Entering the Field of Philosophy: Provence, Mid-Fourteenth Century », in GEORGE J. BROOKE, RENATE SMITHUIS (eds.), *Jewish Education from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Studies in Honour of Philip S. Alexander*, Brill, Leiden 2017 (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, 100), p. 398–411; EAD., « *Studia of Philosophy as Scribal Centers in Fifteenth-Century Iberia* », in JAVIER DEL BARCO (ed.), *The Late Medieval Hebrew Book in the Western Mediterranean*, Brill, Leiden 2015 (Études sur le judaïsme médiéval, 65), p. 46–69; EAD., « Le cursus des études et le cadre institutionnel et intellectuel chez les juifs », in COLETTE SIRAT, SARA KLEIN-BRASLAVY, OLGA WEIJERS (eds.), *Les méthodes de travail de Gersonide et le maniement du savoir chez les scolastiques*, Vrin, Paris 2003 (Études de philosophie médiévale, 86), p. 18–32; EAD., « L'enseignement des disciplines dans le monde hébreu », in OLGA WEIJERS, LOUIS HOLTZ (eds.), *L'enseignement des disciplines à la Faculté des arts (Paris et Oxford, XIIIe–XVe siècle). Actes du colloque international*, Brepols, Turnhout 1997 (Studia artistarum, études sur la faculté des arts dans les universités médiévales, 4), p. 495–509; EAD., « La philosophie et la science selon les philosophes juifs du Moyen Âge », in REIJO TÖRINOJA, ANJA INKERI LEHTINEN, DAGFINN FOLLESDAL (eds.), *Knowledge and the Sciences in Medieval Philosophy: Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy (S.I.E.P.M.), Helsinki 24–29 August 1987*, vol. I, Philosophical Society of Finland, Helsinki 1990 (Acta philosophica Fennica, 48), p. 250–260.

a concise yet substantial volume that serves both as a thorough introduction to the subject and, potentially, as a handbook for students engaging with the growing field of Jewish educational history. Although interest in the history of Jewish education has increased in recent years,² no previous study has systematically addressed Jewish philosophical education in the Middle Ages. In this respect, Sirat's contribution is both timely and foundational.

The introduction establishes the very broad framework within which Sirat situates her inquiry. She sketches the early formation of what she calls the 'religions of the Book', whose predominance divided much of the known world into overlapping yet distinct cultural spheres. Jewish communities lived in both Christian and Muslim polities, negotiating their intellectual and social existence between majority cultures while preserving their own textual traditions. In the early Middle Ages, education centered primarily on the transmission of religious texts. Rabbanite sages accepted the Talmud as Oral Torah, whereas Karaites rejected it, and these divergent attitudes toward authority already implied distinct intellectual temperaments. Sirat is attentive to the importance of vernacular languages and to the plurality of linguistic registers in which Jewish life unfolded. This sensitivity to language becomes crucial once philosophy enters the picture. In the introduction, however, one would expect a meta-reflection on what counts as (philosophical) teaching in a Jewish Medieval context. Do our contemporary concepts of teacher, classroom, students still apply, as they might do in the case of the *yeshivot*, or do we need other frameworks to conceptualize Jewish philosophical pedagogy in its broadness? And does translation of philosophical texts, as a deliberate and creative act of knowledge transfer, already qualify as a form of philosophical instruction?

Sirat *does* specify what she means by 'Hebrew philosophy': she does not just refer to works composed in Hebrew, but rather to philosophy used by Jews and embedded in Jewish intellectual networks. Many philosophical texts circulated in Arabic, sometimes in Hebrew characters; others were translated into Hebrew from Arabic or, more rarely, from Latin. These translations formed part of a vast movement of knowledge transfer that characterized the Abbasid world and, later, Christian Europe. Furthermore, Sirat underscores the instability of Hebrew philosophical vocabulary in this period: there was no fixed technical lexicon, and terms fluctuated according to translator, region, and context. Sirat's attention to this point offers a new perspective to the growing research on Jewish Medieval

² For instance, BARRY CHAZAN, ROBERT CHAZAN, BENJAMIN M. JACOBS, *Cultures and Contexts of Jewish Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2017; KARINA MARTIN HOGAN, MATTHEW GOFF, EMMA WASSERMAN (eds.), *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, SBL Press, Atlanta 2017 (Early Judaism and Its Literature, 41); GEORGE J. BROOKE, RENATE SMITHUIS (eds.), *Jewish Education from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Studies in Honour of Philip S. Alexander*, Brill, Leiden 2017 (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, 100).

philosophical vocabulary,³ not as merely linguistic developments, but as traces of contact, of groups of students, of schools and of transmission between teacher and student.

The introduction also offers a brief overview of the Islamic world between the ninth and twelfth centuries, that carefully delineates the intellectual currents that would also later shape Jewish pedagogy. Indeed, two rationalist tendencies flourished within Islam and found echoes in Judaism. The first, *kalām*, was adopted by Rabbanites as well as by Karaite scholars, often referred to as *mutakallimūn* well into the modern period. The second current was rooted in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and the sciences inherited from the Greeks and transmitted by Christian and Muslim scholars. This latter trend was frequently regarded as ‘external sciences’ and aroused suspicion in both Jewish and Islamic circles. Yet from the twelfth century onward, especially after the Almohad persecutions in Spain prompted migrations to Christian kingdoms and more tolerant Muslim regions, Jewish intellectuals increasingly engaged with Aristotelianism in sustained and creative ways. Arabic remained a major literary language for Jews even after their relocation, and philosophical study in Hebrew blossomed particularly in Provence, Spain, and Italy between 1200 and 1600. However, in Ashkenaz, as Sirat underlines, resistance to philosophical study was more pronounced; there, the Talmud and its commentaries dominated the curriculum, and the dialectical style known as *pilpul* flourished.

Sirat’s first chapter, devoted to the twelfth century, traces the ‘discovery’ of science from Spain and southeastern Italy. The Tibbonid family emerges as central in this process, translating Arabic works into Hebrew and composing original treatises for a cultivated audience. Sirat rightly insists on the sociological dimension of this development. Philosophy was not merely an elite pastime; it generated popular enthusiasm and heated controversy. The translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* by Samuel ibn Tibbon proved decisive in opening the work of Maimonides to Jews in Christian Europe. Yet it also triggered a bitter dispute culminating in excommunications in 1232.

The second and third chapters, treating the thirteenth century, form the heart of the book. Sirat situates the growth of philosophical study within specific urban and social contexts. Towns in Provence and Italy, characterized by relative

³ For instance, REIMUND LEICHT, GIUSEPPE VELTRI (eds.), *Studies in the Formation of Medieval Hebrew Philosophical Terminology*, Brill, Leiden 2020 (Studies in Jewish History and Culture, 57); SANDRA DEBENEDETTI STOW, « Il giudeo-italiano dal medioevo al primo Rinascimento: Caratteristiche, metodologia, studi e sviluppi », *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 82/2–3 (2016), p. 257–284; GIANCARLO SCHIRRU, « Particolarità grafiche e fonetiche nei testimoni del glossario trecentesco di Yəhudah Romano », in LAURA MINERVINI, BERNARDINO PITOCHELLI (eds.), *Studi sui testi giudeo-italiani del medioevo e della prima età moderna*, Éditions de linguistique et de philologie, Strasbourg 2025, p. 61–96.

material ease and more relaxed relations among religious communities, fostered a middle class receptive to science and philosophy. Philosophical ideas entered Jewish culture not only through formal treatises but also through scriptural exegesis, poetry, and polemics. Sirat is particularly attentive to the production of encyclopaedias, introductions, and glossaries designed to assist students unfamiliar with Arabic sources. Some of these were composed by scholars without knowledge of Arabic, who relied on oral transmission and partial access to Latin learning; others were written by scientists fully trained in the Arabic sciences, producing genuine encyclopaedic syntheses.

Here, Sirat's methodological commitment becomes evident. Because Jewish medieval philosophy was not institutionally organized at the communal level, she relies on manuscript evidence: the number of extant copies, their scripts, marginalia, and personal annotations. « The only incontestable testimony of reading is writing » (p. 19), she observes, and this principle guides her meticulous descriptions of codices. Variants and glosses testify to oral transmission and to the lively discussions that accompanied textual study. The examples appended to the volume, namely *London, British Library, Add. 14763* (a 1242 copy of the *Guide*) *Paris, BnF hébr. 956* (with the title *Shushan ha-Limudim*, i.e., *The Lys of the studies*, possibly a manual of philosophy used in the middle of the 14th century by the circle of scholars studying philosophy in Provence), and *Paris, BnF hébr. 1005*⁴ (an elementary philosophical compendium), are integral to her argument. Through them, she reconstructs circles of scholars, for instance, the so-called *me'ayyenim* of Provence, and glimpses the intellectual formation of students who moved from introductory manuals to the middle commentaries of Averroes.

The fourth chapter highlights the fourteenth century in Provence and Spain as a period of extraordinary vitality. The number of scientist-philosophers is indeed remarkable. The Hebrew translations of the Ibn Tibbon family and many others had rendered many texts accessible. Especially the commentaries of Averroes on Aristotle became foundational texts, with the 'short commentaries' crucial for Jewish students in Provence, Spain and Italy. A more-or-less regular philosophical cursus emerges, including Al-Farabi's classification of sciences, the 'short' commentaries of Averroes, Maimonides's *Guide* and other works. Jewish students first absorbed Jewish traditions, often through the commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra, before turning to science. Astrology, integrated into medicine and coloured by Neoplatonic motifs, flourished. Knowledge of Latin among Jews increased, and Christian logic began to circulate within Jewish milieus. The curriculum described in the *Shushan ha-Limudim* (*Paris, BnF hébr. 956*, cited above), where works of Averroes and al-Ghazali are copied and commented, as part of 'metaphysics' to be

⁴ Sirat addresses this manuscript and its contents more in detail in SIRAT, « Entering the Field of Philosophy ».

studied at the very end of the *cursus* of sciences, illustrates a manual of philosophy used at the end of the thirteenth and first half of the fourteenth century. Yet, not all students proceeded to metaphysics, and those who did formed relatively small scholarly circles devoted to speculative inquiry, called *me'ayyenim* ('searchers').

The fifteenth century, marked by the Disputation of Tortosa and the expulsions from Iberian territories, presents a more precarious landscape. Jews were excluded from Christian universities, yet they modelled their own institutions on university structures. *Yeshivot* incorporated philosophical and scientific texts alongside traditional study, with the *yeshivot hokhmot hitzoniyyot* as schools of philosophy and science next to the more traditional *yeshivot talmudiot*, where Talmud and religious matters were studied. The existence of *yeshivot hokhmot hitzoniyyot*, or, as Sirat calls them, 'yeshivot of philosophy', is well attested in at least nine manuscripts, and they provide information on the texts studied there – philosophical texts such as Averroes's commentaries and Maimonides's *Guide* and other Jewish philosophical texts, and some scientific books. Also the spread of printing, the growing knowledge of Latin, and the diffusion of Kabbalah transformed intellectual horizons in the fifteenth century. Sirat concludes by contrasting the defensive posture of Spanish thinkers, who erected barriers around the Torah in response to external pressures, with the openness of Italian scholars to the new currents of thought that heralded the Renaissance. In this context, Jewish thinkers can no longer be confined within a narrowly 'medieval' frame; they actively participate in the broader cultural ferment of the Quattrocento.

Among the great merits of Sirat's book is her provision of scholarly tools. She directs readers to resources such as Jacob Klatzkin's *Thesaurus philosophicus linguae hebraicae*, Giuseppe Sermoneta's Hebrew-Italian philosophical glossary,⁵ and the list of glossaries compiled by her student Jean-Pierre Rothschild.⁶ She offers clear classifications of the sciences and concise yet informative portraits of major thinkers, always attentive to their geographical and intellectual environments. Her discussion of Maimonides's *Guide* is particularly lucid, and offers a great

⁵ GIUSEPPE SERMONETA, *Un glossario filosofico ebraico-italiano del XIII secolo*, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Roma 1969.

⁶ JEAN-PIERRE ROTHSCHILD, « Remarques sur la tradition manuscrite du glossaire hébreu-italien du commentaire de Moïse de Salerne au *Guide des égarés*. En appendices : note sur les glossaires médicaux hébreux, liste des manuscrits hébreux contenant des glossaires », in JACQUELINE HAMESSE, DANIELLE JACQUART (eds.), *Lexiques bilingues dans les domaines philosophique et scientifique (Moyen Âge - Renaissance)*. Actes du Colloque international organisé par l'École Pratique des Hautes Études-IVe section et l'Institut de Philosophie de l'Université Catholique de Louvain (Paris, 12-14 juin 1997), Brepols, Turnhout 2001 (Textes et études du Moyen Âge, 14), p. 49-88.

overview and summary of its main points, picked up by other Medieval Jewish teachers.

The very richness of Sirat's synthesis, however, invites further reflection. What, precisely, counts as 'philosophical teaching'? The emphasis throughout the volume falls predominantly on metaphysics and the sciences that support it. Ethics, although present in the sources and undeniably central to thinkers such as Maimonides, appears less foregrounded in the reconstruction of curricula. One might ask whether the ethical formation implicit in scriptural exegesis, homiletics, and communal instruction should be considered part of philosophical pedagogy. A more substantial issue concerns Ashkenaz. Sirat presents it largely as a monolithic bastion of Talmudic traditionalism opposed to philosophy. While this portrayal corresponds to dominant narratives of medieval Jewish intellectual history, recent scholarship suggests a more nuanced picture.⁷ The study of Aristotelian science formed a recognized, if limited,⁸ current in late medieval Central Europe, especially in and around Prague, where Jewish readers encountered Hebrew translations of southern philosophical works. Though many Ashkenazic scholars regarded philosophy with suspicion, fearing its impact on halakhic reasoning and traditional exegesis, philosophical motifs nonetheless entered religious discourse by the late fourteenth century. A small circle of scholars engaged systematically with Aristotelian texts, discussed their compatibility with tradition and Kabbalah, and even sought to disseminate philosophical learning more broadly. Philosophy remained marginal rather than dominant, yet it was neither wholly absent nor entirely alien to Ashkenazic culture. A final, minor reservation concerns a few editorial oversights that escaped proofreading, including the inadvertent repetition of a paragraph.

These reservations, however, do not diminish the achievement of the book. On the contrary, they raise questions that stimulate future research. By foregrounding pedagogy, Sirat compels us to reconsider the social and material

⁷ MILAN ŽONCA, « Menahem ben Jacob Shalem and the Study of Philosophy in Late Medieval Prague », in OTA PAVLIČEK (ed.), *Studying the Arts in Late Medieval Bohemia: Production, Reception and Transmission of Knowledge*, Brepols, Turnhout 2021 (Studia Artistarum, 48), p. 27–47; TAMÁS VISI, « The Emergence of Philosophy in Ashkenazic Contexts: The Case of Czech Lands in the Early Fifteenth Century », *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts*, 8 (2009), p. 213–243.

⁸ DAVID BERGER, « Polemic, Exegesis, Philosophy, and Science: On the Tenacity of Ashkenazic Modes of Thought », *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts*, 8 (2009), p. 27–39; against Ephraim Kupfer who proposed a too systematic and widespread use of philosophy amongst Ashkenazi Jews: EPHRAIM KUPFER, « Li-demutah ha-tarbutit shel yahadut Ashkenaz we-ḥakhmeiha ba-me'ot ha-14–15 (Concerning the Cultural Image of Ashkenazic Jewry and its Sages in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries) », *Tarbiz*, 42 (1973), p. 113–147.

conditions under which philosophy lived within Jewish communities. She demonstrates that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries prepared the way for the fourteenth-century efflorescence of philosophical study, and that the fifteenth century, far from representing mere decline, integrated Jewish thinkers into the wider transformations of the Renaissance. In doing so, she confirms insights advanced by scholars such as Giuseppe Veltri regarding the under-studied role of Judaism in Renaissance culture.⁹

Sirat's volume is thus both a synthesis and an invitation. It provides a coherent line through diverse writings and contexts, highlights the versatility of Jewish teachers, and opens a window onto a period that has too often « figured scarcely in the cartography or chronology of the history of Jewish thought ».¹⁰ By attending to manuscripts, glossaries, curricula, and controversies, she invites to view the lived reality of philosophical learning. The book stands as an instructive starting point for further research on the education of Jewish philosophy in the later Middle Ages.

⁹ GIUSEPPE VELTRI, *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb: Foundations and Challenges in Judaism on the Eve of Modernity*, Brill, Leiden 2009 (Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 8); GIUSEPPE VELTRI, *Il Rinascimento nel pensiero ebraico*, Paideia, Turin 2020 (Biblioteca di Cultura Ebraica Italiana, 3).

¹⁰ JEAN-PIERRE ROTHSCHILD, *Moïse b. Sabbataï, lecteur juif du Livre des causes et adversaire de la Kabbale, en Italie, vers 1340*, Brepols, Turnhout 2018 (Philosophy in the Abrahamic Traditions of the Middle Ages, 2), p. 1.