A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO JEWISH THOUGHT

LESSON 2: How did Jewish Medieval philosophy enter Judaism?

TEXT 1: TALMUD (Sukkah 28a)

They said of R. Johanan b. Zakkai that he did not leave [unstudied] Scripture, Mishnah, Gemara, Halachah, Aggada, details of the Torah, details of the Scribes, inferences a minori ad majus, analogies, calendrical computations gematrias, the speech of the Ministering Angels, the speech of spirits, and the speech of palm-trees, fullers’ parables and fox fables, great matters or small matters;

‘Great matters’ mean the Ma’aseh merkabah, ‘small matters’ the discussions of Abaye and Raba;

TEXT 2: MAIMONIDES, LAWS OF FOUNDATIONS OF THE TORAH (chapter 4, law 13)

The topics connected with these five precepts, treated in the above four chapters, are what our wise men call pardes, as in the passage, “Four went into pardes” (Chagigah 14). And although those four were great men of Israel and great Sages, they did not all possess the capacity to know and
grasp these subjects clearly. Therefore, I say that it is not proper to wander in the *parde* till one has first filled oneself with bread and meat; by which I mean knowledge of what is permitten and what forbidden, and similar distinctions in other classes of precepts. Although these last subjects were called by the Sages “a small thing”—when they say, “A great thing, Ma'aseh Merkavah; a small thing, the discussions of Abaye and Rava”—still they should have the precedence.

**TEXT 3: RABBENU NISSIM (Nissim ben Reuven Girondi fourteenth century, Spain)**

The discussions of Abaye and Rava are only referred to as a “small thing” by the Talmud, in comparison to the “Scripture, Mishnah” mentioned at the beginning.

Maimonides wrote what he wished here, but if only it had not been written.

**TEXT 4: RITVA (Rabbi Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, Thirteenth to fourteenth century, Spain)**

The debates of Abaye and Rava are greater matters than all of the pagan sciences; this is the true interpretation, and not as others have interpreted, may G-d forgive them.
TEXT 5: MAIMONIDES, EIGHT CHAPTERS

Hear the truth from whoever says it.