Act Sci Soc (2011) 33: 177–208

Maimonides' Intellectual Portrait
A Critique of Simplistic Approaches

Tamás Visi*

Abstract The characteristics of Maimonides' thought, works, and career can be understood in the context of the new social and intellectual challenges that medieval Jewish communities in the Mediterranean basin had to face during the twelfth century. The disintegration of traditional Jewish culture in Andalusia, a new type of Islamic polemic against Judaism, and the decrease of rabbinic authority all contributed to Maimonides' conviction that Judaism was experiencing a profound crisis in his time. Much of Maimonides' oeuvre can be seen as a series of attempts to overcome this crisis. Adopting the Aristotelian concept of mental language, Maimonides attempted to establish a new culture of reading traditional Jewish texts. Adopting philosophical theories of good life, he proposed a new ideal for the future Jewish religious leadership.

Keywords Moses Maimonides, Jewish philosophy, medieval philosophy, Abraham Ibn Ezra

Eight hundred years ago, on 13 December 1204, one of the greatest personalities of human history passed away.[1] Virtually all of his Jewish contemporaries in the Islamic world immediately recognized the importance of this loss. The text for the reading of the *haphtarah* was changed in many synagogues to the first chapter of the book of

* Kurt and Ursula Schubert Centre for Jewish Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, Palacky University, Olomouc, Czech Republic.
e-mail: visi.tamas@gmail.com

[1] The first version of this paper was read on 13 December 2004 at the conference of the *Magyar Hebraisztikai Társaság* commemorating the 800th anniversary of Maimonides' death. I would like to express my gratitude to the audience of this conference for their most relevant comments on the topics and especially to Gyöngyi Hegedűs and Gábor Buzási for their criticism and encouragement. I am most grateful to Judith A. Rasson for proofreading an earlier version of this paper. All mistakes are mine. I dedicate this article to the memory of Dávid Oláh (d. 05.08.2003), an unforgettable friend and colleague.

Joshua, which starts with the sentence "And after the death of Moses, the servant of God…" Needless to say, these words were meant to evoke the memory of the great deceased, Moses Maimonides.

The anniversary of Maimonides' death is a good occasion to rethink his manifold contribution to human civilization in a broad perspective. Such an investigation can at least partly answer the question of how this man achieved such a high reputation among his contemporaries – one that endures to this day.

In the following paragraphs I will select some of the aspects of his life and works that are not properly understood, in my opinion, by present-day scholarship. In other words, my intention here is to challenge "the common wisdom" of present-day Maimonidean scholarship on a number of questions.

The Date of Maimonides' Birth

Shlomo Dov Goitein proved, on the basis of Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah, that Maimonides was born in 1138 rather than in 1135. It makes no sense to question the authenticity of the document or the correctness of Goitein's interpretation; we can take it as a fact that Maimonides was indeed born in 1138 as far as medievalists can take anything as a fact. In the cases of many other medieval personalities, the accepted dates are based on much weaker evidence than that brought forward by Goitein.[2]

In spite of that, the date 1135, accepted in earlier scholarship, stubbornly reappears in recent publications including the latest editions of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. This practice should be abandoned; 1135 is simply the wrong date, whereas 1138 is the correct one.

Maimonides' Cultural Background

It is often taken for granted that Maimonides was one of the last representatives of the so-called "Golden Age" of Spanish-Jewish culture. A simple consideration can demonstrate that the situation is far more complicated. The greatest representatives of the "Golden Age," such as Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Bahya Ibn Paquda, Judah ha-Levi, Moses Ibn Ezra, and Abraham Ibn Ezra, were all great and famous poets; many of them were excellent philosophers, but none of them contributed anything significant to Talmudic studies.

Poetry played an eminent role in the social life, culture, and education of Jewish intellectuals in eleventh-century and early twelfth-century Muslim Spain. This was partly due to the influence of Muslim courtly culture on the elite of Jewish society and partly due to theological and spiritual considerations. Jews serving at the courts of Muslim emirs could hardly avoid partaking in the culture of the ruling elite at least to some degree. Moreover, Muslim theologians of the age referred to the poetic beauty of the Koran and the Arabic language in general as proofs for the divine origin of Islam. For those Jews whose mother tongue was Arabic and were educated according

[2] Shlomo D. Goitein: „Moses Maimonides, Man of Action: A Revision of the Master's Biography in Light of Genizah Documents," in *Hommage à Georges Vajda*, ed. Gérard Nahon and Charles Touati (Louvain: Peeters, 1980), 155–167.

to the norms of the courtly culture, these claims must have sounded extremely persuasive. "Don't you see with your own eyes," they might ask themselves, "how beautiful the poems of the Arabs are?" To develop poetry of similar quality *in Hebrew* (and also theories about biblical poetry and Hebrew as the primordial language) was the only efficient way of sustaining and defending the Jewish faith of these people. The competition between Judaism and Islam was enacted as a competition between Hebrew and Arabic language and poetry. Hebrew poetry in Muslim Spain was not just a matter of pleasure and artistic taste. It was also a means of restating and reviving Jewish identity.

On the other hand, the Talmudic heritage of Judaism could play only a limited role in defending Judaism. The Talmud was a key element of the *rabbinic* identity as opposed to the Karaite dissidents. However, Karaism was never particularly strong in Spain. Consequently, there were hardly any significant Talmud scholars in Spain during the period except Rabbi Yitzhak al-Fasi, himself a refugee from Fez, Morocco, and Ibn Migash, his student, who became a "spiritual grandfather" of Maimonides. The "Golden Age" of Spanish-Jewish culture was definitely not a golden age of Talmudic studies.[3]

Maimonides himself hardly wrote a single line of poetry, but was one of the greatest giants in Talmudic scholarship in any age.[4] This fact shows that his education and socialization probably followed different patterns than that of Judah ha-Levi or Abraham Ibn Ezra. Moreover, as I will argue later, outside the borders of Spain an important change took place in Maimonides' philosophical approach in the years following the completion of his commentary on the Mishnah (1168). The Maimonides of *Mishneh Torah* (cc. 1180) and *The Guide of the Perplexed* (cc. 1190) was not the same personality as the young man who left Spain or Provence with his family around 1159.

Spanish Jewry in Crisis: The End of the Golden Age

Some of the classical writers of the Golden Age themselves recognized that their culture was about to meet new intellectual and social challenges arising from the Muslim and Christian environment. Judaism in Spain became less resistant to Muslim and Christian propaganda than it had been before. A certain Samuel, an important member of the community in Fez, converted to Christianity in Toledo in 1085 and addressed an epistle in Judeo-Arabic to no less a personality than the aforementioned

[3] On the low level of Talmudic education in Spain see Ephraim Kanarfogel: *Jewish Education and Society in the High Middle Ages* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 64–65; Mordecai Breuer: "Le-heqer ha-tipologiya shel yeshivot ha-maarav bimei ha-beinayim" (On the typology of the western *yeshivot* in the Middle Ages), in *Studies in Jewish Society in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods Presented to Jacob Katz on his 75th Birthday*, ed. E. Etkes and Y. Salmon (Jerusalem: Magness Press, 1980), 45–48.

[4] As far as I know, Maimonides' only contribution to Hebrew poetry is a couple of lines at the very beginning and end of his *The Guide of the Perplexed.* These short verses consist of verbatim quotations from the Bible. Cf. the appendix in the second volume of Michael Schwartz's Hebrew translation of the Guide: *More nevukhim le-rabbenu Moshe ben Maymon* (Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed: Hebrew translation and commentary), tr. Michael Schwartz (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Press, 2002).

Rabbi Yitzhak al-Fasi (known also as Rif) arguing vehemently that the exile of Israel would not be over until all the Jews followed his example.[5] The apostasy of the great philosopher, Abu-l-Barakat al-Baghdadi[6] and Yitzhak Ibn Ezra, the son of Abraham Ibn Ezra must have been an even greater shock and scandal. The young Ibn Ezra was no less talented in poetry and philosophy than his famous father. He followed Abu-l-Barakat al-Baghdadi, his master in philosophy, to Baghdad, where they traveled in order to meet Muslim philosophers from the school of Avicenna. In Baghdad both of them converted to Islam. We do not know why; however, it is quite probable that the new type of philosophical learning they acquired was instrumental in their decision. Hebrew poetry and old fashioned speculations about the "mysteries" of the Hebrew language could no longer defend Jewish identity from the new intellectual weapons of the Muslims: Aristotelian logic and natural philosophy. It is possible that the character of "the philosopher" appearing in the first pages of Judah ha-Levi's *Cuzari* was partly inspired by Abu-l-Barakat and Yitzhak Ibn Ezra.[7]

The challenge also had a spiritual aspect. A very significant eleventh-century Muslim writer's sentences on friendship document the moral decline of the political elite in the decades following the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate in 1031.[8] Solo-

[5] The Judeo-Arabic original is no longer extant, as far as I know. It was translated into Latin by Iacobus Bonhomius OP in 1339 in Paris. The Latin text is edited in *Patrologia Latina* 149: 333–368. However, it seems to me that a manuscript in Florence, BML, Plut. III, 7 contains better text than the one printed in the *Patrologia*. This manuscript identifies the author as "Rabbi Samuel Israelita ordinis de civitate Fethet Regis Marrochietani" and the addressee as "Rabbi Isaac magistrum Synagogae qui est in sublimi Regno predicto" – from this description it is obvious that the addressee could hardly be anyone else than Rabbi Yitzhak al-Fasi. The same manuscript names the translator "Iacobus Bonhomius" who dictated the text to a certain "Alphonse brother." The *Patrologia* calles the translator "Alphonsus Bonihominis." This might be a mistake due to the confusion of the names of the author and the scribe. The relevant excerpts from the manuscript are printed in Antonio Maria Biscioni: *Bibliothecae Ebraicae Graecae Florentinae, sive Bibliotheca Mediceo-Laurentianae Catalogus* (Florence: Ex Imperiali Typographio, 1757), 111–113. Note that this text was very popular in the Middle Ages and some scholars believe it is a forgery. See Ora Limor, "The Epistle of Rabbi Samuel of Morocco: A Best-Seller in the World of Polemics" in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics Between Christians and Jews*, ed. Ora Limor and Guy G. Stroumsa (Tübingen; J. C. B. Mohr, 1996), 177-194.

[6] On this person see Colette Sirat: *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 131–140.

[7] The chronology of the events is not clear. It is usually assumed that Abraham Ibn Ezra left Spain in 1140 after having heard of his son's apostasy (which thus must have taken place before 1140). However, Yitzhak Ibn Ezra wrote a laudatory poem about his master, Abu-l-Barakat on the occasion of the latter's finishing a biblical commentary (on Ecclesiastes) in 1143. Some scholars infer from this fact that the apostasy of both master and student must have taken place after 1143. On the basis of geniza-documents, Goitein argues that Yitzhak Ibn Ezra was actually the son-in-law of Judah ha-Levi, and they traveled together from Spain to Egypt in 1140. Cf. Shlomo Dov Goitein: *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1971), 302–303. Judah ha-Levi wrote the *Cuzari* circa 1138–1140

[8] Ibn Hazm (994-1064): *Al-akhlāq wa-l-siyar* (Morals and behavior), 120–154; esp. 125, 129, and 134–137. English translation: *In Pursuit of Virtue: The Moral Theology and Psychology of Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi,* tr. M. Abu Laylah (n. p.: TA-HA Publishers, 1990).

mon Ibn Gabirol, the greatest Hebrew poet of the mid-eleventh century, refused to follow the practice of his colleagues, namely, to serve a rich and powerful Jewish family or individual as a "courtly poet." Ibn Gabirol chose poverty and freedom; he was highly critical of the leaders of the Jewish community and in his philosophical *opus magnum* he developed a private spirituality having no specific reference to any Jewish sources.

It is possible to see in Ibn Gabirol only an idiosyncratic ("arrogant" or "non-conformist") individual. However, later developments show that other Jewish intellectuals were not content with the moral and religious conduct of Spanish Jewry either. Bahya Ibn Paquda attempted to revitalize Jewish spiritual life by adopting certain elements from Sufi mysticism. Judah ha-Levi in the *Cusari*, besides defending the Jewish faith, also criticized his Jewish contemporaries and urged them to take religion more seriously. Ironically enough, he pointed to the martyrs of Christianity as positive counter-examples of the negligence of his coreligionists:

> [The Khazari:] Christians do not glory in their kings, heroes, and rich people, but in those who followed Jesus all the time, before his faith had taken firm root, who were expelled or who hid themselves or were killed wherever one of them was found, suffering dreadful humiliations and slaughter for the victory of their belief: these men they regard as worthy of conferring blessing; they revere the places where they lived and died, and they build churches in their names. In the same way, the supporters of the founder of Islam bore many humiliations, until they succeeded; but in these their humiliations and martyrdom they glory – not in the princes who excelled by wealth and power; no, in those who were clad in rags and fed scantily on barley. Yet, O Rabbi, they lived so in utmost solitude and devotion to God. Should I see the Jews acting in a like manner for God's sake, I would place them above the kings of David's house, for I am well aware of what thou didst teach me concerning the words '(I am) with the contrite and humble spirit' (Jes. 57: 15), viz. that the light of God enters only into the souls of the humble.
>
> [IV. 23] The Rabbi: Thou art right to blame us: our degradation has not yielded any result! […][9]

By the time Judah ha-Levi wrote these lines, Sunnite Islam had elaborated a new paradigm that synthesized religious law, traditional scholarship, the latest developments in philosophy, and Sufi mysticism into a coherent unity. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) showed in an encyclopedic summary how the observance of the traditional laws of Islam leads to a spiritually rich life. The title of the work, *Ihyā' ulūm ad-dīn*, "The Revitalization of Religious Sciences," speaks for itself. This book

[9] Judah ha-Levi: *Cuzari* IV. 22–23; tr. Isaak Heinemann in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, ed. Hans Lewy, Alexander Altmann, and Isaak Heinemann (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 120. The continuation of the quotation is one of the most beautiful and famous passages of the *Cuzari*: the rabbi compares Israel to a seed thrown to field, where it apparently disappears among earth, water and dung. However, the case is the opposite, earth, water, and dung will be transformed into the plant growing from the seed. This is how Judaism transforms the life of other people – Christians and Muslims – although apparently it is rejected by the later religions. Now the plant bears a fruit – this is the Messiah – in which the seed will reappear in its original form (*Cuzari* IV. 23).

was to become an important source of inspiration and model for Maimonides in writing his *Mishneh Torah*. In another work (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, "The Incoherence of Philosophers") Ghazzali defined and defended Islamic orthodoxy against the doctrines of Arab Aristotelians. In his *Munqidh min al-dalāl*, "Delivery from Error," Ghazzali described his own spiritual development and argued for the orthodoxy of Sufism. Maimonides' *Dalālat al-hā'irīn* ("The Guide of the Perplexed") can be read partly as a reply to Ghazzali's criticism of philosophers and partly as a Jewish adaptation of some of his arguments. It is possible that the title itself was also inspired by Ghazzali's *Munqidh*.

Ghazzali's ideas inspired a new religious movement in North Africa. The so-called *Muwahhidūn* ("those who confess the unity of God"), better known as Almohads, introduced religious reforms to implement the ideals of the new spirituality in the territories where they gained control. In their eyes, social reality had to conform to the prescriptions of the holy texts rather than the texts be interpreted in accordance with social reality. This resulted in a new wave of religious intolerance and led to the formation of a "persecuting society." The ten-year old Maimonides and his family (together with many other Jews and Christians) had to leave Cordoba in 1148 due to the Almohad reforms after conquering the city.

To sum up, Jewish intellectuals in the middle of the twelfth century had to face a many-faceted crisis. From an intellectual point of view, Muslim philosophers could offer new methods and theories to explain the broad structure of reality. Hebrew poetry, philology, biblical exegesis, and mysticism as practiced by previous generations could not compete with them any longer. From a spiritual point of view, both Muslims and Christians offered attractive alternatives to those Jews who were disappointed with the corrupt social life of the political elite. From a social point of view a new type of intolerance and persecution threatened the Jewish communities of Muslim Spain.

The crisis ended the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. Cultural life changed dramatically in order to avoid the disintegration of rabbinic Judaism. Two great personalities – Judah ha-Levi and Abraham Ibn Ezra – left the country when Maimonides was about two years old. Judah ha-Levi's *Cuzari* and Ibn Ezra's scientific and exegetic works written in the Christian West were the last homage to the old culture. Judah ha-Levi emphasized the importance and the value of the Talmud in Jewish spirituality, but he was unable to create a synthesis comparable to Ghazzali's concerning religious law – although the *Cuzari* could compete in every respect with Ghazzali's apologetic writings. Judah ha-Levi was probably a late beginner in Talmudic scholarship at the best lacked the necessary educational background for advanced studies. From this point of view, Maimonides was from a different planet.

Maimonides' Education: The Talmud

The fact that elderly Yitzhak al-Fasi succeeded in creating a school of Talmudic studies in the late eleventh century evidences the growing interest of Spanish Jews in the laws of their ancestors. The reason for this was probably the emerging need for spiritual renewal – besides the personality of the master, Yitzhak al-Fasi. He composed an epitome of the Talmud that facilitated its study and its popularization. It probably served as a basic textbook in the young Maimonides' education as well – in

his old age he wrote with unconditional respect about "the Rav of blessed memory's" compendium.[10]

Al-Fasi's most important disciple in Spain was Joseph Ibn Migash, who also attracted a number of students – the father of Maimonides among them – and wrote important commentaries on the Talmud. Maimonides' principal teacher was his own father, who transmitted to him the tradition of the Al-Fasi school. His rabbinic education was by no means superficial, but rooted in the tradition of excellent scholars of three previous generations.

Thus, unlike Judah ha-Levi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and many others, the young Maimonides not only felt the necessity for a spiritual return to the Oral Torah, but also had the intellectual means to use rabbinic sources extensively in an original and creative way for addressing both theoretical and practical problems. Diligence in Talmudic studies was the first corner stone of Maimonides' religious culture. This statement might seem self-evident for the modern reader. However, it is a rather surprising fact considering what has been written *supra* about the cultural milieu of early twelfth-century Spain. Maimonides might have been the last great representative of the Golden Age, but he was definitely not typical.

It is possible that R. Maymun ben Joseph, the father of Maimonides, and other pupils of Ibn Migash were critical of the life-style and intellectual orientation of the classical representatives of the Golden Age, and that by studying the Talmud they wanted to create a sort of counter-culture against the dominant trends. This hypothesis could account for the remarkable nonconformism of the mature Maimonides as well. However, I am not presently aware of any clear proof of this.

Maimonides' Education: Astrology and the School of Ibn Bajja

"Astrology was the first science I learned" – confesses Maimonides in his *Letter on Astrology*, a work of old age.[11] This fact shows well the persistence of the old educational paradigm. Astrology was intimately connected to neo-Platonic metaphysics and mysticism. For example, Abraham Ibn Ezra perceived Judaism as a mystery religion offering salvation from astrological fate. Besides astrology Maimonides probably also studied philosophical and mystical texts inspired by neo-Platonic thought, such as the *Sefer Yetsira*, the *Shiur Qoma* and their recent commentaries. He probably shared the mystical outlook of these texts in his youth. In this respect Maimonides' educational background was no different from that of Abraham Ibn Ezra and many other contemporaries.

We have to reckon with a new factor, however, already in this early period. In the *Guide* he mentions the fact that he studied astronomy together with the Muslim disciples of Ibn Bajja.[12] We do not know whether the young Averroes (born also in Cordoba ten years before Maimonides) was also among them as a student or instructor. In any case, it is certain that both Averroes' and Maimonides' version of Aristotelianism is very much indebted to the school founded by Ibn Bajja (d. 1138) in Muslim Spain. As a contrast we can refer to Maimonides' older contemporary and

[10] Mose ben Maimon [Maimonides]: *Epistulae*, ed. D. H. Baneth (Jerusalem, 1946), 68.
[11] Cf. Isadore Twersky (ed.): *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1972), 463–473.
[12] GP II, 9; tr. Pines, 268–269.

compatriot, Ibrahim Ibn Daud (Abraham ben David), whose Aristotelian philosophy follows the footsteps of Avicenna's school.

Ibn Bajja's fame was due to his ability to interpret Abu Nasr al-Farabi's works. According to a contemporary source practically no one was able to understand philosophical texts in the Muslim West before the publication of Ibn Bajja's comments on Farabi's logical works and other subjects.[13] The ideas of Avicenna – the most influential Aristotelian writer in the period – were often criticized by the members of Ibn Bajja's circle. They thought that Avicenna had corrupted Aristotle's original teachings and pointed to Farabi as the authentic interpreter of Aristotle. Strong respect for Farabi's philosophical writing was also a characteristic of the mature Maimonides.

Mental Language

Aristotelian logic and the Aristotelian idea of science can be considered the second corner-stone of Maimonides' religious culture. Aristotle as interpreted in Ibn Bajja's school taught Maimonides how to reorganize Talmudic law and Jewish theology. The last chapter of one of his first writings, the *Treatise on Logic* (written around 1158 in Christian Spain or in Provence), can be read as a philosophical manifesto.[14] Following the footsteps of Farabi, the young Maimonides declares the existence of mental language (*an-nutq ad-dakhīl* – inner speech) the grammar of which is Aristotelian logic. External languages such as Hebrew or Arabic are subordinated to the universal mental language. In order to understand a sentence, one has to be able to translate it – so to speak – from the natural to the mental language. The later is the true language of knowledge and the sciences. Maimonides outlines the Aristotelian system of sciences and emphasizes the role of logic as their "*organon*."[15]

As far as we know today, Maimonides was the first Jewish writer who wrote about Aristotelian logic. Ibn Daud and Abraham Ibn Ezra certainly read Avicenna and used his metaphysical ideas; however, neither of them proclaimed the priority of mental language and a strictly Aristotelian system of sciences. On the contrary, the idea of Hebrew as the primordial and perfect language whose mysteries teach philosophical and theological doctrines is central in Ibn Ezra's thought. The young Maimonides' ideas concerning the priority of the *mental* language over any *natural* languages (including Biblical Hebrew) started a completely new approach not only in philosophy but also in biblical exegesis and Talmudic scholarship.

---

[13] Cf. Muhammad Saghir Hasan al-Ma'sumi: "Ibn Bājjah," in M. M. Sharif (ed.): *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 509. The quotation is from Ibn al-Imam, a disciple of Ibn Bajja.

[14] Herbert Davidson has recently questioned the authenticity of this work; cf. his *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 313–322. Davidson's arguments are very strong, though his opinion has not been universally accepted yet. If Davidson is right, the analysis proposed above demands fundamental revision.

[15] Cf. Maïmonide [Maimonides]: *Traité de logique*, ed. and tr. Rémi Brague (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1996), 94–103 [Arabic part: 30-34].

Systematizing *Halakha*

In the mature Maimonides' vision, Talmudic law (*halakha*) forms a coherent and meaningful unity. To decide a halakhic problem correctly is not simply a matter of interpreting the relevant Talmudic discussions (*sugyot*). One has to see the inner structure of the entire halakhic system. You cannot understand properly the *halakhot* concerning Shabbat if you are not familiar with the laws of the Sanctuary or of Levitic purity. The great halakhic works of Maimonides, the commentary on the Mishnah (completed in 1168 in Egypt), the *Book of Commandments*, and the *Mishneh Torah* (completed around 1180) all attempt to exhibit the entire corpus of Jewish religious law as an interconnected and well-organized system. Talmudic exegesis is not a matter of ingenious interpretation of certain loci in the text, but of discovering the intellectual structure on which all the particular *halakhot* are dependent.

In other words, the real Talmud is written in Aristotelian mental language. However, it is covered by a great number of confusing statements expressed in natural languages (Rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic). The task of the interpreter is to remove the veil of the natural languages and to disclose the coherent message of the Oral Torah written in the mental language.

Consequently, the interpreter has to find those ways of expression in natural languages that hide the structure of the mental language to a lesser extent. For example, commenting on the Mishnah offers a better opportunity to understand the entirety of Jewish law than a commentary on the Babylonian Talmud or other texts. A summary of the Torah in 613 commandments provides the reader with an overall vision of what *halakha* is about, whereas a series of complicated analyses concerning the possible implications of certain Talmudic *sugyot* will fail to do so. The genre best fitting Maimonides' intentions was found, or rather invented, only when he started to compose the *Mishneh Torah*. Thus, Maimonides in his major *halakhic* works proclaimed and realized a fresh, innovative, and provoking program in Talmudic studies.

Criticizing the *Yeshivot*

Maimonides was able to diagnose the roots of the spiritual decline of rabbinic Judaism: The Talmud was not studied properly in contemporary *yeshivot*. Professors and students wasted their energies on exegetical investigations of local textual problems instead of trying to understand *halakha* as a system. The result was a complicated and verbose literature treating irrelevant questions and false problems. This practice was to be blamed for the unpopularity of Talmudic studies. Once the living source of Jewish spirituality – the Torah itself – did not find its way to contemporary people it was no great wonder that a dramatic decline was experienced in almost every aspect of Jewish life.

Maimonides went a step further. The reason for the improper methodology of Talmudic education lay in the fact that the institutions responsible for education – the *yeshivot* – did not function in the spirit of the Talmud either. The great *yeshiva* in Baghdad and its leader, the *gaon*, used Talmudic education as a pretext for collecting

taxes from the people and exercising power over them. That example was followed in many other countries including Spain.[16]

Furthermore, once the Talmud became a source of income for certain social groups they were interested in monopolizing Talmudic studies. They developed an overcomplicated version of Talmudic methodology difficult for most people to grasp. Moreover, the *yeshivot* were ruled by an authoritarian spirit; promotion was not dependent on the students' intellectual and spiritual progress but on their family background or on their readiness to serve the interests of powerful persons.

All this was contrary to both the letter and the spirit of the Talmud according to Maimonides. The Talmudic rabbis taught everybody for free. They earned their livelihood from their own civil professions. They explicitly forbade accepting money for teaching the Torah (*Mishnah*, *Avot* 4: 5). Commenting on this passage Maimonides sharply criticizes the *geonim* who:

> fixed for themselves monetary demands from individuals and communities and caused people to think, in utter foolishness, that it is obligatory and proper that they should help sages and scholars and people studying Torah […] all this is wrong. There is not a single word, either in the Torah or in the sayings of the [talmudic] sages, to lend credence to it […] for as we look into the sayings of the talmudic sages, we do not find that they ask people for money, nor did they collect money for the honorable and cherished academies.[17]

Mishneh Torah as Social Action: Strategy and Influence

Maimonides' response to the situation was simple and witty. The root of the spiritual decay was the monopolization of Talmudic studies. Consequently, Talmudic scholarship should be de-monopolized. This was the mission of his ambitious halakhic summary: the *Mishneh Torah*. The purpose of the book, as he himself states in the introduction, was to enable the reader to learn and understand the entirety of Jewish religious law without consulting any other book – not even the Talmud. In a letter to his beloved pupil, Joseph ben Judah (*not* Judah Ibn Aknin), he explains that the intention of the *Mishneh Torah* was to liberate people from the necessity of consulting difficult Talmudic commentaries (*al-perushin u-ferushe ta'qīdāt al-gemara*). In the same letter he also expressed his hope that future generations would consult the *Mishneh Torah* solely, except for that minority who preferred to trouble themselves with useless studies and irrelevant problems – the allusion is probably to the Talmudic methodology of the *yeshivot*.[18]

---

[16] A good introduction to the history of the gaonate is Robert Brody's *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), esp. 19–82. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 2, 1–20 and 195–205 is also very illuminating though less exact in details.

[17] English translation is taken from Hillel H. Ben-Sasson, "Maimonidean Controversy," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Corrected edition, vol. 11 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1996 [cc. 1972–1974]): 745–746.

[18] Mose ben Maimon [Maimonides]: *Epistulae*, ed. D. H. Baneth (Jerusalem, 1946), 52 and 68-69. A good English translation: Rayond L. Weiss and Charles E. Butterworth: *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 113–123.

The liberating effect of the *Mishneh Torah* was already being felt in Maimonides' lifetime. Due to the relatively high rate of literacy among the Jews in the Islamic countries and the spread of paper, a new and cheap writing-material, Maimonides could address an independent and wide public.[19] In the aforementioned letter, he describes how Samuel ben Ali, the *gaon* of Baghdad, became more and more frustrated by the fact that Maimonides' book was becoming popular in Baghdad.[20] Seemingly, the *gaon* had no means to influence the spread of the *Mishneh Torah*.

In a letter written around 1200, Sheshet b. Isaac of Saragosa reports the opposition of local rabbis to judging according to the *Mishneh Torah*. Sheshet b. Isaac notes that the opposition is motivated by the fact that, thanks to Maimonides' code, people are less dependent on rabbinical authority – they are able to understand the law by themselves. Before the copies of the *Mishneh Torah* reached Spain people had no choice but to obey the rabbis since the vast majority were ignorant of the Talmud.[21]

A book can change social reality. *Mishneh Torah* was an ingenious assault on the power of the traditional rabbinic elite.[22]

Conflict with the *Gaon* of Baghdad

Due to the spread and influence of his great halakhic works Maimonides became more than simply an internationally known scholar. He became the symbol of a new mentality. Letters asking for halakhic instruction came to him from many countries, often addressing him as *gadol ba-dor,* "the greatest of the generation." Earning his livelihood as a physician rather than as a teacher of the Torah, Maimonides himself became the prototype of the spiritual leaders whom he depicted when he contrasted the Talmudic rabbis with the corrupted practice of the *geonim*.

These developments aroused the anger of traditional leaders, first and foremost Samuel ben Ali, the *gaon* of Baghdad. He and his son-in-law, Zechariah ben Berakhel, openly criticized Maimonides' halakhic decisions and even questioned his orthodoxy on the question of resurrection. Maimonides defended his position in both halakhic and theological matters but tried to avoid escalating the conflict.

However, in a letter to his favorite pupil, Joseph ben Judah, written in Cairo around 1191, he depicted his opponents in an openly sarcastic way:

> How could my son not know that such moral habits would be found in someone brought up from his childhood to believe that no one like him exists in his generation? Moreover, he has been encouraged [in that belief] by his old age, standing, ancestry, and by the absence of discerning men in that area. His need

[19] Cf. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1, 81 and vol. 2, 171–185; Colette Sirat: *Du scribe au livre: Les manuscrits hébraux au moyen age* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1994), 69–72.

[20] Maimonides, *Epistulae*, ed. Baneth, 55.

[21] Cf. Alexander Marx: "Texts by and about Maimonides," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 25 (1934/35): 371–428; esp. 427–428.

[22] For a further elaboration of this point and more detailed analysis of the relevant sources see my "Maimonides és a bagdadi gáon" (Maimonides and the gaon of Baghdad), in *Széfer József: Essays in Honor of Joseph Schweitzer*, ed. József Zsengellér (Budapest: Open Art, 2002), 161–199.

> of the people is such that he implants in their souls the abominable concoction that all of the people should seek to know about every matter coming from the *judicial academy*[23] or every honorific title it confers – besides those foolish things that naturally occur to them. How could my son imagine that he would reach such a level of recognition of the truth that he would admit his incompetence *and uproot his honor as well as the honor of his father's house*?[24]

These words can be read as Maimonides' diagnosis of the reasons for the moral decline of Jewish leadership. In the verdict on the *gaon*'s son-in-law, Zechariah ben Berakhel, the Talmudic methodology of the *geonim* is Maimonides' target:

> As for this Master Zechariah, he is a very foolish man. He has studied by himself and toiled over those investigations and commentaries. He supposes himself to be unique in his time and to have already reached the highest perfection. <My esteemed son knows, by the living God, that my evaluation of the great wise men of Israel is based on my determining the rank they deserve according to their own words. It was they who said: "The work of Abayya and Rabba is a small thing."[25] If this is a small thing in my sight, >[26] why should I pay attention to a truly miserable old man, who is ignorant of everything and whom I view indeed as *an infant one day old*?[27] Still, he is forgiven due to his ignorance.[28]

At the same time, Maimonides urged his disciple to avoid direct confrontation with the *gaon* and his supporters. He advised him that the significance of the conflict should not be overestimated. The envy of contemporaries would not survive the present generation, whereas the *Mishneh Torah* would be read again and again in the future.[29] Maimonides was right: these persons – no matter how powerful they were in the late twelfth-century – are but footnotes in Maimonides' biography today.

It is remarkable how conscious Maimonides was of the future reception of his book. He probably had enough historical information at his disposal about the fate of previous writers and their books – for example, Solomon Ibn Gabirol a century before – to form an analogous statement about his own case. His expectations concerning the would-be success of the *Mishneh Torah* determined his strategy in the conflict with the *gaon*. The *gaon* and his son-in-law would not be taken seriously in the future, so why should they be taken seriously in the present? Maimonides was developing long-term strategies, and thus he tried to minimize confrontation with the *gaon*.

---

[23] I.e. the *yeshiva* in Baghdad.

[24] Tr. Rayond L. Weiss and Charles E. Butterworth, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, 116-117. Italics are in the original. The italicized part of the last sentence is a quotation from the Babylonian Talmud (*Horayot* 14a). Arabic text: Maimonides, *Epistulae*, ed. Baneth, 54.

[25] Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 28a. "The work [perhaps "argumentations" would be a better translation] of Abayya and Rabba" refer to the notoriously complicated discussions of these Talmudic rabbis that are often considered to be the peak of Talmudic dialectics.

[26] This passage is attested only in the so-called "Neofiti" [Hebrew] translation of the text. See on this Baneth's introduction to his edition of the text: Maimonides, *Epistulae*, 31–49; 56.

[27] Italiced words are taken from Babylonian Talmud, Sota 22a.

[28] Tr. Rayond L. Weiss and Charles E. Butterworth, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, 117-118. Italics are in the original. Arabic text: Maimonides, *Epistulae*, ed. Baneth, 56.

[29] Maimonides, *Epistulae*, ed. Baneth, 52.

A Jewish Saint Francis of Assisi?

In the same letter, Maimonides authorized Joseph ben Judah to open a school (*midrash*) in Baghdad to promote the study of the *Mishneh Torah*. At the same time, he admonished his beloved student not to accept any form of payment for his teaching activity but to finance the school from the incomes he earned as a merchant and physician: "So far as I am concerned, one dirhem as a wage for tailoring, carpentry, or weaving is preferable to the [tax] income [*reshut*][30] of the Exilarch."[31]

Studying the Torah should be consistently separated from the political and economic realm. Taxes collected by the exilarch of Babylonia – whose authority Maimonides fully accepted and codified in the *Mishneh Torah* and who probably supported Joseph ben Judah's attempts in Baghdad – should not be used for the purposes of the planned school.

This insistence on the independence of the spiritual realm resembles the evangelic movements in the contemporary Latin West. Maimonides' program of returning to the ideal lifestyle of the Talmudic rabbis is analogous, to a degree, with the Christian idea of evangelic poverty – although poverty in itself is usually not counted as a virtue in Jewish sources. It is possible that Maimonides was actually influenced by Christian spirituals in his youth when his family was wandering in Christian Spain and possibly also in Provence. It is more convenient, however, to analyze the phenomenon in a larger context.

Adherents of scriptural religions facing complex social, economical, political, and intellectual problems are likely to look for the answers in their holy books and to announce a program of returning to the "original" ideals formulated by the sacred texts. As long as they find a medium with which to get their message to the public and as long as the public is able to understand them, charismatic individuals can exercise tremendous influence on their society even if they have very little social or political power. The twelfth century produced the prerequisites of this mechanism: the spread of literacy, the emergence of an educated public, and a sufficient number of economic, social, and political crises. The career of a Ghazzali or a Maimonides, or an Abelard or a Saint Francis of Assisi a bit later, can be characterized by this pattern. They were all non-conformists believing strongly that reality should be adjusted to the message of authoritative texts rather than that the texts be interpreted in accordance with reality.

Moreover, their activity prepared the way for the emergence of "persecuting societies,"[32] attempting to enforce their ideas on those segments of the society that were not necessarily persuaded by them or interested in them – Maimonides being no exception to this. A couple of decades after his death Maimonides' followers issued bans against anyone who dared to criticize the Master's person or teaching. It is possible to see in the "Maimonidean controversies" of the 1230s and 1300s a Jewish

[30] On the meaning of this word see Simha Assaf: "Qovets shel iggerot R. Shmuel ben Ali u-vnei doro" (A collection of letters by R. Samuel ben Ali and his contemporaries), *Tarbiẓ* 1 (1929): 102–130; esp. 117–120; Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia*, 39, 59, and 72-73.

[31] Tr. Rayond L. Weiss and Charles E. Butterworth, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, 122. Arabic text: Maimonides, *Epistulae*, ed. Baneth, 68.

[32] On this concept see R. I. Moore's influential book: *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

analogue of what scholars call "persecuting society" in the context of Western Christian civilization.[33]

Maimonides on *Shiur Qoma*: A Change of *Episteme*?

In the commentary on the Mishnah, Maimonides enumerates the *Shiur Qoma*, a classic of early Jewish mysticism in the holy literature of Judaism.[34] However, in a precious Oxford manuscript (Bodleian, MS Pococke 295 [Neubauer 404]) – that was in all likelihood Maimonides' personal copy of the commentary on the Mishnah and served as the master copy for further manuscripts[35] – the sentence concerning *Shiur Qoma* is crossed out with a "bold stroke of deletion."[36]

This is not surprising in itself. Maimonides happily admitted that he revised his halakhic decisions a number of times and changed the text of his previous works accordingly.[37] With the *Shiur Qoma*, however, the situation is more complicated. In a *responsum* written many decades after completing the Mishnah-commentary, Maimonides denies the fact that he ever considered the *Shiur Qoma* authentic:

> I never thought that it was one of the works of the Sages of blessed memory [Talmudic rabbis], and far be it from them that this [book] should have come from them. It is but a work of one of the Byzantine preachers, and nothing else. Altogether, it is a great *mitsva* to delete this book and to eradicate the mention of its subject matter; "and make no mention of the name of other gods" (Exodus 23: 13), etc., since he who has a body [*qomā*] undoubtedly is [to be classed among] "other gods."[38]

---

[33] The best introduction to the history of the Maimonidean controversies is Hillel H. Ben-Sasson's article in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica,* vol. 11, 745–754.

[34] Introduction to the commentary on *Pereq Heleq* of tractate Sanhedrin: "The circle would have to be extended to include a discourse on the forms which the prophets mentioned in connection with the Creator and the angels; into this enters the *Shiur Qoma* and its subject matter. For [a treatment of] this subject alone, even if shortened to the utmost degree, a hundred pages would be insufficient…" English translation is quoted from Alexander Altmann, "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomā,*'" in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1967), 231.

[35] On the concept of the "personal copy" see Colette Sirat: *Du scribe au livre: Les manuscrits hébraux au moyen age* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1994), 54–59.

[36] Cf. Alexander Altmann, "Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on *Shi'ur Qomā,*'" in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1967), 225–280; the relevant discussion is on pages 231–232. A facsimile edition of the manuscript: Solomon D. Sassoon (ed.), *Maimonidis Commentarius in Mischnam* (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1956). Most of the medieval manuscripts do not contain the passage about *Shiur Qoma*; however, four further manuscripts do contain it – their ancestors were probably copied from MS Pococke 295 *before* Maimonides deleted the sentence.

[37] Cf. Maimonides, *Epistulae*, ed. Baneth, 50-51. Cf. also Sirat, *Du scribe au livre*, 54.

[38] Tr. Alexander Altmann, "Moses Narboni's Epistle…" 231–232. Arabic original: Maimonides: *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. Joshua Blau, vol. 1. (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1957), 200–201 [nr. 117].

Despite Maimonides' claim, the Oxford manuscript of the commentary on the Mishnah clearly testifies that Maimonides did accept the authenticity of *Shiur Qoma*, at least at the time when he composed the commentary (1168). However, Maimonides' later estimation of this mystic text was so different that he was apparently even unable to admit the fact that he had ever considered it worthy of reading. This is very unusual in Maimonides' *oeuvre*.

I will argue below that Maimonides' changing evaluation of the *Shiur Qoma* signified a profound change in his overall philosophical approach.

Besides the Aristotelian philosophy of Ibn Bajja's school, the young Maimonides probably also read Jewish and/or non-Jewish philosophical works inspired by the neo-Platonic tradition. *Sefer Yetsira* was commented on by a number of prestigious Jewish authors in the neo-Platonic spirit. The *Shiur Qoma* was interpreted similarly by Maimonides' elder contemporary, Abraham Ibn Ezra (see next section). The *Treatise on Logic* evidences the young Maimonides' attraction to numerology, which is not surprising if we suppose that he was instructed in neo-Platonic philosophy.[39] This educational background accounts for the young Maimonides' appreciation of the *Shiur Qoma.*

It is my hypothesis that Maimonides' shift to a more strictly Aristotelian position in philosophy did not take place before he completed the commentary on the Mishnah. By the time Maimonides wrote his *responsum* condemning the *Shiur Qoma* he was even unable to take seriously numerological speculations concerning divine names and other phenomena of Jewish neo-Platonism. This was not simply changing his position in some specific philosophical problem. Between the acceptance and the condemnation of the *Shiur Qoma* Maimonides moved to a different philosophical galaxy.

Analyzing Peter Lombard's theological and Gratian's juridical works, Alain Boureau applied Michel Foucault's concept of *episteme* to model the emergence of scholastic thought in the twelfth century. According to Boureau, Peter Lombard and Gratian invented new ways of formulating and solving problems. They described the many-faceted phenomena of reality by the application of "veridical fictions" substituting for the phenomena themselves. As a result they were able to propose coherent theories with a degree of subtlety unprecedented in previous scholarship.[40]

Perhaps a similar change of *episteme* took place in Maimonides' life as well. In his youth he might have applied "mysterious objects" (numbers, Plotinian universals; see the next section) to understand the ultimate structure of reality as did his older contemporaries, first and foremost, Abraham Ibn Ezra. However, as a mature philosopher he applied the principles of Aristotelian logic more consistently; he rejected "mysterious objects" and adopted "veridical fictions" instead, similar to Peter Lombard's and Gratian's practice.

[39] Cf. Brague's introduction to his edition of the work: *Traité de logique*, 12–13.

[40] Alain Boureau, "Droit et Théologie au XIIIe siècle," *Annales* 47 (1992): 1113–1125. I am grateful to Piroska Nagy for calling my attention to this article.

Abraham Ibn Ezra on *Shiur Qoma*: Plotinian Universals

In the Long Version of Ibn Ezra's commentary on Exodus 33: 21 we find brief remarks concerning the *Shiur Qoma* that highlight – in my opinion – the type of philosophy that Maimonides rejected after composing his commentary on the Mishnah:

> And behold, Moses turned into a universal. That is why God said, 'I know you by name' (Exodus 33:12). For He alone knows the individuals and their parts in a universal way.
> Now the noblest on earth is man – hence the form of the cherubim. And the noblest among men is Israel – hence the issue of the [divine] phylactery.
> And that is why it is written in the *Shiur Qoma*, "God is the Creator of all the bodies and all that are nobler than the bodies." And what is more debased than body is the accident.
> And 'Rabbi Ishmael said, whoever knows the measure [*shiur*] of the Former of Creation [*yotser bereshit*] it is guaranteed to him that he belongs to the world to come, and I and Rabbi Akiva are giving our words for this.' And this is [the meaning of] 'Let us make man according to our image and likeness' (Genesis 1: 26).[41]

These words might sound quite enigmatic to the modern reader, and Ibn Ezra definitely meant them to be enigmatic. In order to decipher their meaning we have to recall Plotinus' teaching concerning the universals. The first sentence ("Moses turned into a universal [*Moshe shav kelali*]") is absurd if we take the term "universal" to mean an Aristotelian universal. However, with *Plotinian* universals the sentence makes perfect sense.

Criticizing Plato's theory of Forms, Aristotle claimed that universals have no separate existence outside of the mind. The term "animal" refers only to individual animals in the extra-mental world. The term is applied on the basis of the existence of certain properties in the referents, such as life, ability of locomotion, and sense-perception. In other words, if an x object has the properties "life," "ability of locomotion," and "ability of sense-perception," then x is an animal.

Now the same x can be called a "horse" (or "snake" or "man") if further properties are added to its description such as "four-legged" (or "having no legs" or "two-legged"). The more properties that are added to the description the smaller the number of individuals to which the term refers. Using the modern cocepts "intension" and "extension," it is possible to say that there is a sort of inverted relation between the intension and extension of Aristotelian universals.

The properties that distinguish the species of a genus are called "differences" in Aristotelian terminology. These differences cannot be included among the properties defining the genus itself. For example, "four-legged" cannot be a property of "animal," because that would mean that every "animal" is four-legged and consequently a sub-group could not be distinguished by this property from the rest of the animals. Therefore, Aristotle says, the differences must come "from the outside," i.e. outside of the genus.

---

[41] Cf. the English translation by Alexander Altmann, "Moses Narboni's Epistle…" 268 based on a slightly different interpretation.

This is the point where Plotinus launches his attack on Aristotle's theory. What is this "outside" whence the differences are added to the genus? Having four legs is a characteristic of *animal* life (a table can have "four legs" only in a different sense of the word) just like having two legs or moving without any legs. In Plotinus' vision, Animal is not only a human abstraction but a dynamic force of reality that restates itself through a series of mutually exclusive differences. Therefore, it is more logical to assume that the differences come from within the genus. They are all contained in an original and mysterious unity within the Form Animal, having a separate existence in the extra-mental world.[42]

A modern reader can compare Animal, having all the animal properties in an obscure unity, to the color white, which contains all the colors of the rainbow and has a homogenous quality at the same time. The process through which white light is fragmented by a prism and the colors inherent in it become visible corresponds to what Plotinus calls emanation: from the Animal having all animal properties together the individual animals proceed in making the hidden differences manifest. Consequently, the relation between intension and extension is direct: The more general a Plotinian universal is, the more properties are inherent in it.

Aristotle would object that Plotinus' Animal is self-contradictory, for it is four-legged and two-legged and has no legs at the same time. Claiming the existence of such objects violates the principle of non-contradiction – the "most certain principle of all" for Aristotle.[43] However, for Plotinus this only proves the limited validity of the principle of non-contradiction. The more subtle subjects of human speculation cannot be perceived unless the principle of non-contradiction is suspended. Plotinus and his followers constructed "mysterious objects" that can have mutually exclusive properties and used them extensively for describing the metaphysical realm.[44]

The ultimate source of emanation is God – which means that God's essence contains everything in an obscure, mysterious unity. This is why Ibn Ezra calls God *ha-kol* "the Everything" in a number of places. This idea is also the kernel of the neo-Platonic theory of divine knowledge and providence: God knows only His essence, but His essence is a Plotinian universal containing everything in an obscure unity, so God knows everything and his providence governs everything.[45]

Consequently, human individuals are also contained in God's essence as Plotinian universals. This is the "universal way" in which God knows us referred to in Ibn Ezra's text. Our Plotinian universal in the divine essence can be perceived as a sort of guardian angel having our personality in a condensed form and pleading for us in the presence of God. The key quest of human life is to acquire the ability to receive emanation from our own Plotinian universals/guardian angel. The closer we get to the

---

[42] I follow the interpretation of A. C. Lloyd: *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 81–90. The key texts are: Plotinus, *Eneads* VI, 2, 5–6 and 13–14.

[43] Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Γ. 3. 1005b 15–20.

[44] Cf. Plotinus, *Eneads*, III, 16–17. Syrianus, the master of Proclus, commenting on Metaphysics B.3. 998b 22 argues that in fact the Peripatetics cannot avoid positing the existence of such objects either. Cf. *Syriani in Metaphysica Commentaria*, Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca, ed. Guilelmus Kroll, vol. 6/1 (Berlin, 1902), 32.

[45] Cf. Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne: Livre I*, ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1968), 69–77; esp. 74–75 [I, 15]. Cf. also Ibn Ezra's famous formula *ha-kol yodea kol heleq al derekh kol ve-lo al derekh heleq* in his short commentary on Genesis 18: 21.

source of our existence, the more blessing is poured over us. Moses managed to join his Plotinian universal completely – "Moses turned into a universal" – and thereby he entered the Divine Presence. This is related in Exodus 33 according to Ibn Ezra.

The *Shiur Qoma* ("Measurement of the Body") itself describes God's body as consisting of angels bearing mysterious divine names and gives the "measurements" (*shiur*) of every member of the divine body. The mystical vision ends with mentioning the fact that there is a phylactery [*tefillin*] on the divine head with the inscription "Israel."

For Ibn Ezra the semantic key to understanding the text was exactly the theory of divine essence consisting of Plotinian universals (corresponding to the divine body consisting of angels). Israel's position on the divine head conforms nicely to the idea of Israel's election – the universals of the Israelites must have a privileged status within the whole structure. Rabbi Ishmael's statement makes also perfect sense in this interpretation: "knowing the measurements of the Creator" must mean entering the divine essence as Moses did – and what else could be the "world to come"? Finally, the famous sentence about God creating man according to his "image" and "likeness" refers to the process of emanation: our human essences are all contained in the divine essence and all proceed from there – this is how we are created according to God's "image and likeness."

Ibn Ezra infers from the *Shiur Qoma*'s statement about God creating "all the bodies and all that are nobler than bodies" that the "accidents" being less noble than the bodies are not created by God. By "accidents" Ibn Ezra means something different from Aristotle's "accidents." The former accidents have a very negative connotation: they are the misfortunes that reach humans in the lower world. They do not add anything to our essence as Aristotelian accidents do. They rather decrease our essence, for they come from nothing. Salvation is to get rid of the "accidents" and to regain the original richness of our essence – "to turn into a universal" – in both Ibn Ezra's and Ibn Gabirol's philosophy. Accidents are the evil of the lower world; that is why they cannot be created by God, for God creates nothing evil; and evil is nothing but the privation of good. This is again a profoundly neo-Platonic *sujet.*

Ibn Ezra's numerology is also based on the concept of Plotinian universals. His famous sentence, "each number is in the One *potentially* and [the One] is in each number actually" (*kol mispar hu ba-ehad be-koah ve-hu be-kol mispar be-maase* – Long Commentary on Exodus 3: 15), means that the One is a Plotinian universal for all the numbers. The relationship between the One and the numbers models the relationship between God and creation.[46]

[46] Modern scholars are usually unaware of the importance of Plotinian universals in understanding Ibn Ezra's thoughts. It seems to me that a nineteenth-century Galician philosopher and cabbalist, Nachman Krochmal was more sensitive to this aspect of Ibn Ezra's thought than contemporary historians of philosophy (though his attributing cabbalistic doctrines to Ibn Ezra is certainly wrong). Cf. his *More nevukhe ha-zeman*, in Simon Rawidowicz (ed.): *Kitvei Nachman Krochmal* (The Works of Nachman Krochmal) (London: Ararat, 1961 [1924]), 313–321. Cf. also Hermann Greive: *Studien zum jüdischen Neuplatonismus: Die Religionsphilosophie des Abraham Ibn Ezra,* Studia Judaica 7, (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), 22.

Maimonides' Rejection of "Mysterious Objects"

For Ibn Ezra numbers and universals are mysterious objects. They are ambiguous by their natures. Their function is not simply to describe a reality independent of them. They also "embody" the ambiguous energies of reality within themselves and are often believed to have magical efficiency. In a sense they form the highest grade of reality that is outside of the reach of human mind. Mysterious objects resist clear definitions and coherent theories. You have to contemplate them and to speculate about them again and again, and the speculation will often lead you to paradoxical and confusing results. The correct way of transmitting this kind of knowledge is not to write a summary displaying a well-formed system of premises, arguments, and conclusions, but to pronounce enigmatic statements – often as comments on sacred texts, divine names, etc. – the implications of which should be unfolded in the process of meditation. Consequently, the reader is expected to *meditate* on the mysteries of the text and to accept the mysteries on authority rather than to judge them by applying critical methods.

Maimonides' halakhic program was based on a different culture of reading. In this culture the author is expected to provide the reader with clear and unambiguous statements that are open to public debate. The merits of a text are not dependent on the profundity of the meditation the reader performs as a response to the text but by the capacity of its content to resist refutation by the public. Such a culture of reading could not tolerate the existence of mysterious objects within scholarly discourse. Once these norms were applied to philosophical literature as well, Maimonides could no longer take seriously the assumptions of neo-Platonic mystics, in spite of the fact that probably he himself had shared some of them in his youth. In *The Guide of the Perplexed* (cc. 1190) Maimonides writes with open contempt about the mystical and magical speculations concerning the divine names:

> […] do not let occur to your mind the vain imaginings of the writers of charms or what names you may hear from them or may find in their stupid books, names that they have invented, which are not indicative of any notion whatsoever, but which they call [divine] names and of which they think that they necessitate holiness and purity and work miracles. All these are stories that it is not seemly for a perfect man to listen to, much less to believe.[47]
>
> […] When wicked and ignorant people found these texts, they had great scope for lying statements in that they would put together any letters they liked and would say: this is a [divine] name that has efficacy and the power to operate if it is written down or uttered in a particular way. Thereupon these lies invented by the first wicked and ignorant man were written down, and these writings transmitted to good, pious, and foolish men who lack the scales by means of which they could know the true from the false. These people accordingly made a secret of these writings, and the latter were found in the belongings left behind them, so that they were thought to be correct. To sum it up: *A fool believes everything*. (Prov. 14: 15)[48]

[47] Moses Maimonides: *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 149 [I, 61] – hereafter "GP; tr. Pines" (e.g. GP I, 61 tr. Pines, 149).

[48] GP I, 62 tr. Pines, 152.

A Disciple of Farabi?

It is a common-place in present day Maimonidean scholarship that Farabi was the most important source and authority for Maimonides on a number of philosophical questions.[49] This statement is correct in one sense but false in another. Maimonides himself pointed to Farabi as the best available interpreter of Aristotelian logic.[50] *The Guide of the Perplexed* contains a number of explicit and implicit quotations from Farabi. However, I will argue in the following paragraphs that Maimonides probably did not accept and possibly did not even understand an important aspect of Farabi's thought. It is possible that he systematically misread Farabi's theory of emanation in order to adjust it to his own ideas.

It seems to me that Farabi himself, writing in the first half of tenth century, understood Plotinian universals very well and employed them extensively. In his *Harmony of Plato's and Aristotle's Philosophy,* Farabi openly admits the existence of Platonic Forms *within* the divine essence.[51] A passage in another work, *The Aphorisms of the Statesman,* describes emanation as the realization of possibilities inherent in a species. In the case of certain species, for example, "sun" or "moon," one individual is able to realize all the inherent possibilities. Consequently, there is only one individual (the Sun or the Moon) belonging to each of these species respectively, for nature does nothing in vain. However, in the case of other species, such as "horse" or "snake" or "human being," many individuals are needed to realize all the inherent possibilities; this is why there are many horses, snakes, and human beings. Emanation is perceived as explication of what is hidden in a universal.[52]

Maimonides proposed a completely different version of the emanation theory. For him, emanation is bringing into actuality what was in potentiality before. The Aristotelian concepts potentiality and actuality are used extensively in the discourse. The Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa''āl*) does not bring forth what is inherent in itself but realizes the possibilities that are inherent in the recipients of its emanation. The translator of the following quotation, Shlomo Pines, uses the phrase 'overflow' for 'emanation:'

> The tenth intellect is the Active Intellect, whose existence is indicated by the facts that our intellects pass from potentiality to actuality and that the forms of the existents that are subject to generation and corruption are actualized after they have been in their matter only *in potentia*. Now everything that passes from potentiality to actuality must have necessarily something that causes it to pass and that is outside it. And this cause must belong to the species of that which it causes to pass from potentiality to actuality. For a carpenter does not build a storehouse *qua* a maker, but because there subsists in his mind the form of the storehouse. For it is the form of the storehouse subsisting in the mind of the carpenter that caused the form of the storehouse to pass into actuality and to be

---

[49] Cf. for example, Lawrence Berman, "Maimonides, the Disciple of Alfarabi," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 154–178.

[50] Cf. Marx, "Texts by and about Maimonides," 378–380.

[51] Cf. Fr. Dieterici (tr.), *Alfarabi's Philosophische Abhandlungen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1892), 43–47; esp. 46.

[52] Farabi, *Fusūl al-Madanī. Aphorisms of the Statesman*, ed. and tr. D. M. Dunlop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 59 [Arabic text: p. 147].

> realized in timber. In this way the giver of the form is indubitably a separate form, and that which brings intellect into existence is an intellect, namely the Active Intellect. Thus the relation of the Active Intellect to the elements and that which is composed of them is similar to the relation obtaining between every separate intellect particularly related to a sphere and that sphere. Furthermore the relation of the intellect *in actu* existing in us, which derives from an overflow of the Active Intellect and through which we apprehend the Active Intellect, is similar to that of the intellect of every sphere that exists in the latter, deriving its being in it from the overflow of a separate intellect – an intellect through which the sphere apprehends the separate intellect, makes a mental representation of the latter, desires to become like it, and, in consequence, moves.[53]

A modern reader can imagine this process as turning on the light in a dark room. What was not visible in the room before becomes visible thanks to the light coming from the bulb. However, the visible forms, colors, etc. themselves were never "hidden" in the light itself (unlike the colors of the rainbow in white light). Rather, they were hidden *"in potentia"* in the dark room itself. An anonymous thirteenth-century interpreter writing about Maimonides' theory of prophecy emphasizes the fact that the Active Intellect has no relation to the things produced by its emanation:

> […] the prophet is about to know the future concerning practical things and to teach his contemporaries good morals. But there is no relationship whatsoever between the Active Intellect – being the cause of prophecy – and these matters [i.e. telling the future and admonishing people]. All that happens is that an emanation coming from the Active Intellect reaches the intellectual faculty and teaches it the truth of reality in its entirety within a moment without premises and demonstrations. And this intellectual emanation emanates to the imaginative [fol. 13 r] faculty as well, so that it receives the emanation in order to know tremendous things about the future […] with the help of the Active Intellect and with the help of his own intellect on which [the Active Intellect] has worked.[54]

This version of the emanation theory presupposes the existence of recipients that ultimately receive the emanation from God and claims that the differences between created things are not due to the explication of the original differences hidden in God's nature but are rooted in the recipients themselves. The recipients are potentially different from each other; emanation brings these differences into actuality.

Needless to say, according to Maimonides the recipients themselves were created by God. However, creation is not the same as emanation. A theory of emanation can describe how God normally sustains the order of this world we are familiar with. Creation is a miracle, a unique event that no human mind is able to grasp. Creation cannot be compared to any normal process of the world.[55] This is a very important principle of Maimonides' philosophy and can be contrasted with Ibn Ezra's interpretation of Genesis 1: 26 as referring to a process of emanation.

---

[53] GP II, 4; tr. Pines, 257–258.
[54] *Ruah hen*, chapter 4. MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 62, fol. 12 v –13 r.
[55] Cf. GP II, 17.

Instead of using ambiguous concepts, such as "mysterious objects," Maimonides prefers to draw a clear demarcation line between those things we know and those things we do not know. The former should be described by coherent theories and models, whereas the later are declared to be unreachable by human knowledge. Whereas Ibn Ezra attempts to penetrate the ultimate mysteries of existence by using enigmatic language, Maimonides either proposes a clear and coherent account or remains silent:

> As everyone is aware that it is not possible, except through negation, to achieve an apprehension of that which is in our power to apprehend, and that, on the other hand, negation does not give knowledge in any respect of the true reality of the thing with regard to which the particular matter in question has been negated – all men, those of the past and those of the future, affirm clearly that God, may He be exalted, cannot be apprehended by the intellects, and that none but He Himself can apprehend what He is, and that apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the ultimate term in apprehending Him. Thus all the philosophers say: We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which He becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes that are too weak to apprehend it. This has been expatiated upon in words that it would serve no useful purpose to repeat here. The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms, *Silence is praise to Thee* (Ps. 65: 2), which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to You is praise. This is a most perfectly put phrase regarding this matter. For of whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, and on the other hand we perceive in it some deficiency. Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more appropriate – just as the perfect ones have enjoined when they said: *Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still. Sellah* (Ps. 4: 5).[56]

However, in the next section we shall see that Maimonides had to compromise his ideal to a certain degree.

The Spiritual Experience

Eliminating Plotinian universals from the emanation theory enabled Maimonides to formulate a strictly negative theology. There is no similarity whatsoever between the ultimate source of emanation (God) and its recipients. No words or concepts are capable of describing the essence of God. At best we can say what God is *not*, and we can understand (and even imitate) His actions in the world. But these actions never express or explicate the very essence of God.[57]

Maimonides believed that with the help of his negative theology he had managed to rediscover the original core experience of Jewish spirituality. By "spirituality" I mean a practice of self-transformation necessary for the attainment of certain types of truth. It was a common belief among medieval theologians that in

[56] GP I, 59; tr. Pines, 139–140. Italics are in the original.
[57] The principal treatment of the topic is in GP I, 50–60.

order to grasp the most important dimensions of reality it is not enough to be clever, diligent, or well-trained in arts and sciences; a transformation of the self is also required that can be attained, for example, by prayer, asceticism, celibacy, or observing religious law.[58] For example, Avicenna writes about prayer as an integral part of his philosophical methodology.[59] Syphilis destroying the brain of Adrian Leverkühn in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus,* enabling the composer to become a true genius (and also to see the devil), is a bizarre modern counterpart of this medieval idea of spirituality.

Maimonides instructs his favorite student, Joseph ben Judah, about how to acquire spiritual experience in the following lines:

> A call to attention. We have already made it clear to you that that intellect which overflowed from Him, may He be exalted, toward us is the bond between us and Him. You have the choice: if you wish to strengthen and to fortify this bond [i.e. the intellect], you can do so; if, however, you wish gradually to make it weaker and feebler until you cut it, you can also do that. […] Know that even if you were the man who knew most the true reality of the divine science, you would cut that bond existing between you and God if you would empty your thought of God and busy yourself totally in eating the necessary or in occupying yourselves with the necessary. You would not be with Him then, nor He with you. […] Know that all the practices of the worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the other commandments, have only the end of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, may He be exalted, rather than with matters pertaining to this world […]
>
> From here on I will begin to give you guidance with regard to the form of this training so that you should achieve this great end. The first thing that you should cause your soul to hold fast onto is that, while reciting the Shema prayer, you should empty your mind of everything and pray thus. […] When this has been carried out correctly and has been practiced consistently for years, cause your soul, whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed – the whole of you and your thought – toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading. When this too has been practiced consistently for a certain time, cause your soul to be in such a way that your thought is always quite free of distraction and gives heed to all that you are reading of the other discourses of the prophets and even when you read all the benedictions, so that you aim at meditating on what you are uttering and at considering its meaning. […] When, however, you are alone with yourself and no one else is there and while you lie awake upon your bed, you should take great care during these precious times not to set your thought to work on anything other than that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence in that true reality that I have made known to you and not by way of affections of the imagination. In my opinion this end can be

[58] On the concept and history of "spirituality" see Michel Foucault: *L'herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France (1981–82)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

[59] Cf. Dimitri Gutas: *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden, New York, København, etc.: E. J. Brill, 1988), 181–183.

> achieved by those of the men of knowledge who have rendered their souls worthy of it by training of this kind.[60]

For a spiritual experience one has to already be well trained in the principles of Maimonidean theology. The experience itself is the realization of this teaching. It is not enough to know in theory that God is not similar to anything. You have to realize this fact, at least in certain situations (for example, during prayer). You have to realize that God is not an old man with long white beard sitting on a throne somewhere in heaven. You have to realize that God is not some ghost flying in the air. You have to realize that no imagination can grasp God's essence. You have to realize that the presence of God cannot be limited by any human concept or name. You are in the presence of God and in the hand of God right now. He can judge you and take away your life at any moment. The fact that you are still alive is due to the infinite mercy of God. If a tremendous fear and feeling of gratefulness fills you at these moments, then you have managed to perform the spiritual exercise.

This experience results in a decision to live a better life. A better life according to Maimonides' definition of ultimate human perfection means "imitation of God's actions."[61] Consequently, you have to *understand* God's actions.

There are two great fields of divine actions according to Maimonides: Nature and the Torah. Knowledge concerning the actions of Nature and the action of the Divine Law leads human beings to understand the divine mercy, wisdom and justice inherent in them. This knowledge enables us to imitate God's actions and by this we can become better recipients of the divine emanation. As long as we are merciful, wise, and just, we ourselves become the means of divine mercy, wisdom, and justice. God's emanation will be realized through us.

The study of *halakha* and the study of philosophy are dependent on the program of spiritual transformation in Maimonides' opinion. This is why he insisted on the integrity of *halakha* as a system in opposition to many medieval (and modern) halakhic authorities, who codified only the practically relevant topics of Jewish law and skipped, for example, the laws concerning the Sanctuary. The point of studying the Talmud is not simply to get the necessary information about how to perform certain rites in the synagogue or elsewhere. What matters is understanding the actions of God. The spiritual experience is the ultimate corner-stone of Maimonides' thought.[62]

---

[60] GP III, 51; tr. Pines, 621–623. Spirituality is the central topic of the concluding chapters of the *Guide* (III, 51–54).

[61] Cf. GP III, 54, tr. Pines, 637–638.

[62] Isadore Twersky's *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 356–364 and 509 contains further relevant points concerning the "central vision of Maimonideanism." The concept of spirituality and the spiritual aspects of Maimonides' thought are usually ignored in present day scholarship. One of the few exceptions is David R. Blumenthal who – following the footsteps of Georges Vajda – proposes the concept of "philosophical mysticism" to describe what Maimonides is doing in the last chapters of the *Guide*. Cf. his "Maimonides: Prayer, Worship and Mysticism," in *Approaches in Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3, ed. David R. Blumenthal (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 1–16.

Technical versus Spiritual Knowledge

Meditation on God's actions, however, reintroduced a topic into Maimonides' thought that cannot be described properly by coherent theories. To realize the wisdom and the justice inherent in the movement of the stars or the laws concerning Shabbat is not the same type of intellectual activity as proposing an astronomical theory or deciding *halakhot*. Consequently, discussing this topic Maimonides cannot but use formulas resembling the words of neo-Platonists writing about mysterious objects. For example, in the introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed* we read about the "flaming" nature of spiritual knowledge. What we understand of God's actions during the spiritual experience – when we are in an elevated state of consciousness – we are sometimes unable to state in clear terms or even to remember properly once the experience passes:

> You should not think that these great secrets are fully and completely known to anyone among us. They are not. But sometimes truth flashes out to us so that we think that it is a day, and then matter and habit in their various forms conceal it so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first.[63]

Gyöngyi Hegedűs, in her masterful dissertation on Saadya *gaon*'s philosophy, proposes a distinction between "externalist" and "internalist" forms of knowledge within the *oeuvre* of the *gaon*. Some of the apparent self-contradictions of Saadya's two philosophical works that were written practically at the same time – namely, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* and the *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsira* – are due to the fact that Saadya chose different approaches to reality in each of them. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* shows "externalism" and "foundationalism," whereas the *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsira* can be characterized by "internalism" and "coherentism." These terms are taken from contemporary discussions about the nature of knowledge in the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition. Hegedűs emphasizes that Saadya worked with both types of knowledge at the same time.[64]

Perhaps a similar distinction should be made concerning technical and spiritual knowledge in Maimonides' thought. Philosophy, medical science, astronomy, and other sciences, just like *halakha*, formed first and foremost a body of technical knowledge for Maimonides. They are based on clear principles available for everyone and their results can be discussed and judged in public debate. However, these sciences have little value if their study does not result in spiritual transformation. Once the spiritual transformation is experienced the student will gain a different type of knowledge that cannot be properly displayed in public discourse. This spiritual knowledge consists of meditation on the mercy, wisdom, and justice of God's actions and about their imitation in one's personal life.

In my opinion the conflict between technical and spiritual knowledge gave rise to both the self-contradictions in Maimonides' *Guide* and his notorious "esotericism."

---

[63] GP, intr.; tr. Pines, 7. Cf. also GP I, 33; tr. Pines, 71.

[64] Gyöngyi Hegedűs: *Saadya Gaon: Philosopher or Apologist?* (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Institute of Philosophy, 2000), 67–76. On the externalism/internalism distinction see Laurence BonJour: "Externalism/ internalism," in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 132–136.

Moreover, the differences between technical and spiritual knowledge lie at the problem of "perplexity" to which *The Guide of the Perplexed* is meant to be a response. In order to grasp properly the social and intellectual dimensions of Maimonides' elitism and esotericism we have to outline his working conditions at the *bīmāristān* of Cairo in the second half of his life.

The *Bīmāristān*

After the tragic death of his brother in 1169, Maimonides had to use his medical knowledge, probably acquired in Morocco, to sustain his family. He worked at the *bīmāristān* of Cairo. The *bīmāristān* was a hospital and a place of instruction where Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Samaritan physicians and medical students worked together. The institution was an inter-faith workshop for medical sciences and possibly also for natural philosophy. The feeling of collegiality among the doctors was stronger than religious differences.

The *bīmāristān* was a place for elite people and elite studies. Applicants had to meet strict requirements in order to be admitted. They were expected to have learned the basic ideas of Hippocrates and Galen alone or with the help of a private tutor. They were also expected to have had some medical experience in the form of an apprenticeship to a practicing physician and to have a "Certificate of Good Conduct" (*tazkiya*) issued by the *wāli* – a sort of police captain in medieval Cairo. (Deserving the later document was not so much a matter of good conduct as of appropriate connections or presents given to the *wāli*.) Not many could afford all these expenses.[65]

On the other hand, the investment usually paid off. Entering the *bīmāristān* was often the beginning of a splendid career. Maimonides himself not only became a star physician celebrated sometimes in the poems of his grateful patients. He entered the service of the sultan Saladin and his court and thereby gained tremendous influence on social and political matters in the Jewish community as well, though, as far as we know, he never became the official leader of Egyptian Jewry.[66]

"Perplexity" and Elitism

Jewish physicians and students at the *bīmāristān* had to face intellectual and emotional problems that the rest of the population could easily ignore. Working at the hospital, they were exposed day after day to the fact that the fate of patients depended not on their religious merits but on the physical condition of their bodies. Hippocratic medical science and Aristotelian natural philosophy provided them with a general framework of interpreting these experiences. Aristotelian natural philosophy was verified every day in the practice of the *bīmāristān*; students and physicians had

---

[65] Cf. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 2, 240–272; esp. 247–253.

[66] Cf. Jacob Levinger: "Was Maimonides *Rais al-Yahud* in Egypt?" in Isadore Twersky, (ed.): *Studies in Maimonides* (Cambridge, Ma and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 83–93 and Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 54-64. Some researchers are reluctant to accept Levinger's conclusions, but no convincing refutation has been published so far to my best knowledge.

practically no reason to doubt the correctness of their scientific outlook – just as modern scientists do not question science itself even if it does not provide solutions to every problem.

Many of the scientific phenomena they witnessed clearly contradicted statements learned from the Bible and the Talmud and their traditional interpretations. For example, Aristotle's *Meteorology* taught that rainfall is dependent on natural factors rather than on prayer or the religious behavior of people.[67] Jewish students at the *bīmāristān* experienced a different sort of reality than the one they were accustomed to at home and at the synagogue within the Jewish community.

The *bīmāristān* was an inter-faith workshop for constructing a scientific reality independent of the presuppositions of the monotheistic faiths. For the Jews participating in this, it must have been difficult to join their coreligionists in "naïve" worship of the Biblical God. But this worship – prayers, blessings, rites, etc. – was an indispensable part of medieval Jewish life. "Perplexity" was a complex emotional and intellectual problem for those members of the Jewish elite employed at the *bīmāristān* or involved in similar activities. Today we would call it cognitive dissonance.

Moreover, Maimonides' systematic reading of virtually any type of literature – including the Bible, the Talmud, Aristotle, Farabi, Hippocrates, and Galen – sharpened the sense of contradiction. Confronted with the problem of anthropomorphic expressions in the Bible, Abraham Ibn Ezra, writing a few decades earlier, could simply refer to the good old Talmudic principle "The Torah speaks human language."[68] The problem of anthropomorphism needed no further comment. As for Maimonides, he could not avoid the Bible systematically looking for a coherent message that could be and should be translated into mental language. Anthropomorphic expressions in the Bible could not be explained away simply as metaphors. Maimonides had to consider seriously the possibility that Scripture teaches an anthropomorphic theory of God – an idea that could hardly be reconciled with negative theology and his vision of spirituality.

By "perplexity" Maimonides did not mean simply a conflict of reason and faith. The conflict was not between science and religion but between *religion* and religion. Philosophical considerations led Maimonides to a recognition of the "correct" form of spirituality. But was this spirituality the spirituality of Judaism? Philosophical religion and traditional Jewish religion were both well-organized and systematic discourses in the eyes of Maimonides by the time he worked at the *bīmāristān*. That is to say, if they are built on mutually exclusive premises then you cannot but *choose* between them. You are either a philosopher or a Jew.

Mutatis mutandis this was the way Ghazzali put the question when it occurred to him almost a century before Maimonides. Ghazzali's answer was to embrace Islam and to reject philosophy. He also pointed out that Farabi and Avicenna were necessarily inconsistent when they tried to be both Muslims and philosophers.

Maimonides was not convinced by the correctness of Ghazzali's arguments. Perhaps he had been taught in his youth by the members of Ibn Bajja's circle how to refute Ghazzali's *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. The mission of his philosophical treatise, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (completed around 1190), was not to improvise

---

[67] Cf. Shem Tov's commentary on Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed* II, 30, s. v. "*ve-im yillaqah lefi nistaro*" in [Maimonides:] *More nevukhim* […] *im shelosha perushim* […] (Warsawa: Yitzhak Goldman, 1872), 60a.

[68] Cf. his short commentary on Genesis 6: 6.

some *ad hoc* reconciliation of reason and faith but to show that philosophical religion and Jewish religion built up one systematic discourse. Maimonides wanted to prove that philosophical spirituality as he conceived it was identical with the original Jewish – Biblical and Talmudic – spirituality.

The key idea of Maimonides' solution was the application of the notion of mental language again. The introductory chapter of *The Guide of the Perplexed* starts with the following words:

> The first purpose of this Treatise is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy. Some of these terms are equivocal; hence the ignorant attribute to them only one or some of the meanings in which the term in question is used. Others are derivative terms; hence they attribute to them only the original meaning from which the other meaning is derived. Others are amphibolous terms, so that at times they are believed to be univocal and at other times equivocal.[69]

In other words, the Bible is written in a natural language (Biblical Hebrew) that is characterized by the use of homonymous and ambiguous words. For the correct understanding of the prophetic texts, homonyms and ambiguous terms must be identified and their senses must be classified. That is to say, the Bible has to be translated from Hebrew into the mental language. Such a translation will show that the Bible in fact does not say that God has an anthropomorphic body or any kind of body, that God has passions, or that God changes, etc. The true message of the Bible contains nothing absurd from the philosophical point of view, although it does not necessarily agree on every question with the doctrine of Aristotle and his followers. The first part of the *Guide* is mainly devoted to the analysis of Biblical Hebrew homonyms concerning God.

The second step was to show that Jewish religious practice revolves around the spiritual experience described by Maimonides. This philosophical spirituality is the very essence of Jewish religious observance. Maimonides explains to his "perplexed" readers that prayers, blessings, and other rites are completely justified from the philosophical perspective as well. Correctly practiced, the Torah indeed brings man into the presence of God. As we have seen (in the section on spiritual experience), Maimonides gave further guidelines on how to achieve this result.

A third component of Maimonides' reply is a partial justification of popular beliefs. It was a widely circulated commonplace for many centuries before Maimonides composed the *Guide* that the messages of sacred books are often adjusted to historical circumstances and to the intellectual and moral level of the lower strata of society. That is to say, these texts sometimes teach a simplified version of truth or even "noble lies." It is obligatory for the vulgar to believe in these doctrines, whereas the elite may dispense with them in a number of ways, for example, by attributing an esoteric sense to the same words or by allegoric interpretation.[70] Maimonides was by no means the first who applied this notion to Judaism.[71] He definitely contrasts the

---

[69] GP, intr.; tr. Pines, 5.

[70] Cf. GP, intr.; tr. Pines, 5–14; and I, 31; tr. Pines, 66–67.

[71] Philo of Alexandria, more than a millennium before Maimonides, used surprisingly similar formulas. Cf. his *Quod Deus immutabilis sit,* 60–68.

beliefs of the simple-minded Jews with those of the elite, as in GP II, 32. However, the significance of such texts should not be overestimated. In my opinion this was not the most important facet of his elitism and esotericism.

Maimonides' Esotericism: A Critique of Leo Strauss

The real cause of both his esotericism and elitism is the difference between technical and spiritual knowledge. This difference has both theoretical and educational aspects and sometimes it turns into a real conflict.

As for the theoretical aspect, the results of technical and spiritual knowledge are not necessarily in harmony. For example, Maimonides harshly criticizes "the philosophers" for their restricting divine providence to the species in the sublunary world.[72] For Maimonides it was absurd to deny that God's providence reaches human individuals, not only humanity as a species. This conviction is probably derived from personal spiritual experience. Once you manage to perform the spiritual transformation, it will be obvious to you that God knows you and cares for you. However, from the point of view of technical philosophy it is difficult to maintain this position. Maimonides makes painstaking efforts to define a doctrine of individual providence and to show that its truth is at least not impossible. However, for a student who has never experienced spiritual transformation "the philosophers" account might be more persuasive.

Technical knowledge *can* be gained without any spiritual preparation. However, it *should* not be obtained so. Difficulties might lead the unprepared student astray. Failure to solve certain theoretical problems might result in a weakening of the religious faith or in an impatient rejection of philosophy as such. Thus, purely technical knowledge can harm its recipient. It is possible that Maimonides saw some negative examples of this at the *bīmāristān*.

On the other hand, technical knowledge is a prerequisite for achieving a true spiritual experience. Thus, a teacher of philosophy is in a difficult position: technical instruction must be preceded by spiritual readiness and spiritual instruction is inconceivable without technical preparation. It is not possible to invent an overall strategy for teaching philosophy. Every student is a different case; spiritual and technical aspects must be combined continuously and differently in each case.[73]

In the Talmudic ruling concerning the transmission of esoteric lore (*maase bereshit* "the issue of creation" and *maase merkava* "the issue of the chariot" cf. Mishnah, Hagiga 2: 1) Maimonides recognizes the traditional Jewish answer to this problem. He identifies *maase bereshit* with physics and *maase merkava* with metaphysics and tries to imitate the supposedly original methods of Jewish esotericism in his *Guide*. Thus *The Guide of the Perplexed* is formally a collection of letters to his beloved student, Joseph ben Judah, in accordance with the *halakha* that the secrets of creation are to be transmitted to only one student. Moreover, he emphasizes that his accounts of certain theories are often condensed and the reader is expected to find out

[72] Cf. GP III, 16; tr. Pines, 461. Maimonides' tone is unusually harsh in criticizing the philosopher's doctrine of providence.

[73] The principal discussion of the topic is in GP I, 31–35; tr. Pines, 65–79.

the implications alone. Maimonides' assumption is that only the well-prepared readers will be able to do so.[74]

To sum up, in *The Guide of the Perplexed* Maimonides compromises his general strategy of reading and writing to a great degree. Although some parts of it are remarkably well-organized and systematic, the philosophical *opus magnum* as a whole is a rather chaotic collection of commentaries on certain biblical verses and Talmudic passages, critical remarks on Muslim and Christian philosophers and theologians, and discussions of astronomical, physical, and metaphysical theories. The reader is expected to process this raw material and work out the system behind it alone. In this sense it is certainly justifiable to call the *Guide* an esoteric book.

The conflict between technical and spiritual knowledge has a further aspect: spiritual knowledge can be self-contradictory in technical terms. In other words, those propositions that we derive from our spiritual experience – and, needless to say, we cannot but accept them as long as we believe in the possibility of spirituality – might turn out to contradict each other.

For example, spiritual experience establishes the thesis that God has free will. Maimonides again harshly criticizes Aristotle and his followers for their claim that the world proceeds necessarily from the nature of God rather than being created by divine free will.[75] At the same time, God's existence is obviously implied in the spiritual experience as well. According to Maimonides the only conclusive proof for the existence of God is based on the eternity of the world. In Maimonides' opinion, however, eternity of the world implies the theory of necessary emanation and excludes the possibility of divine free will.[76] The implications of the spiritual experience cannot be reconstructed consistently in terms of technical knowledge. Maimonides would add the reservation that Moses and the other prophets and possibly even the Talmudic rabbis might have been able to eliminate the inconsistencies, though we no longer know how they did it.

The notorious "seventh cause" of the self-contradictions mentioned in the introductory chapter of the *Guide* addresses exactly this problem, in my opinion. Self-contradictions are simply unavoidable in speculation about "profound matters." Consequently, the philosopher has to conceal the fact of self-contradiction from the sight of the vulgar and unprepared students whose faith in God or trust in reason might be harmed by them. Yair Lorberbaum has argued convincingly that Leo Strauss fundamentally misunderstood the very text of the "seventh cause." Self-contradictions were not a means for Maimonides to hide his "true, esoteric" opinions but the very things to be concealed.[77]

---

[74] Cf. GP, intr.; tr. Pines, 6–9 and I, 32–33; tr. Pines, 68–72.

[75] GP II, 21; tr. Pines, 314–317 and GP II, 25; tr. Pines, 327–330.

[76] On this topic cf. my "Maimonides' Proof for the Existence of God: A Concealed Inconsistency," in *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU*, vol. 9, ed. Katalin Szende, Judith A. Rasson, and Marcell Sebők (Budapest:Central European University, 2003), 29–50.

[77] Yair Lorberbaum: "Ha-sibba ha-sheviit: al ha-setirot be-'More ha-nevukhim' – iyyun mehuddash" (The Seventh Cause: On Contradictions in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*), *Tarbiz* 69 (1999/2000): 211–237.

In my opinion, Leo Strauss' perception of Maimonides' esotericism[78] is far too narrow and misleading in many respects. The point for Maimonides was not so much to avoid persecution or to reveal his secret heresy (!), but to save the unprepared reader from the difficulties emerging from the difference between spiritual and technical knowledge.

The notion of "persecution and the art of writing" has explanatory force only concerning Maimonides' criticism of Islam. For example, in GP II, 40 he alludes to Aristotle's verdict concerning the disgraceful nature of the sense of touch (quoted already in a complicated sentence in GP II, 36); he points out that sexuality is based on the sense of touch, and he emphasizes that no true prophet can have a sexual life as long as he receives prophecy from God. The last words of the chapter admonish the reader that something more is implied in this line of argument.[79] The solution is easy: Muhammad had many wives and daughters even after receiving the supposed revelation from heaven; consequently, he could not have been a true prophet. Writing down this sentence explicitly would have been a violation of the Treaty of Omar, deserving capital punishment in Saladin's state. In this case esotericism was indeed about avoiding persecution.

However, from this it does not follow that the traditional image of Maimonides as an orthodox Jewish philosopher needs any revision. Unconditional loyalty to rabbinic Judaism was the alpha and omega of Maimonides' life and work.

The Maimonidean Program

In *The Guide of the Perplexed* Maimonides attempts to rediscover the lost theological doctrine of Moses and the prophets of ancient Israel. This doctrine was believed by Maimonides to have been an oral tradition among the Israelites for many generations and to be the true message of Scripture. It was also a widespread belief in the age that Plato and Aristotle learned their philosophies ultimately from Moses. However, Moses' original theology had been lost due to persecution; therefore, all we can do is attempt to reconstruct it on the basis of the Bible and Aristotle.[80]

The point for Maimonides is not so much to "reconcile" the Bible and Aristotle but to rediscover the lost Mosaic philosophy by using all possible historical evidence – including the Bible, Aristotle, and the writings of ancient pagans (the Sabeans). Apparent inconsistencies in Mosaic theology are due to our own failure to reconstruct the teachings of the "father of the prophets."

Jewish philosophers in subsequent generations continued Maimonides' attempts at rediscovering Mosaic philosophy. Inspired by Imre Lakatos' notion of a "scientific research program" Gad Freudenthal has proposed the term "Maimonidean research program"["*le programme de recherche maïmonidien*"] to describe this phenomenon.[81]

---

[78] Cf. his famous essay: Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980 [1952]), 38–94.

[79] Cf. GP II, 40; tr. Pines, 384–385.

[80] Cf. GP I, 71; tr. Pines, 175–176.

[81] Gad Freudenthal: "Gersonide, génie solitaire. Remarques sur l'évolution de sa pensée et de ses méthodes sur quelques points," in *Les méthodes de travail de Gersonide et le*

Biblical and Talmudic texts were read carefully again and again and their possible philosophic and scientific implications were pointed out. Maimonides' authority and influence was central but not exclusive. In both exegetical and metaphysical questions Abraham Ibn Ezra's writings were continuously consulted and they exercised tremendous impact on Maimonides' followers, especially during the fourteenth century.[82]

Conclusion

Judaism experienced a profound transformation during the life and in the works of Moses Maimonides. In my opinion, this transformation is still in adequately described and improperly understood in present-day scholarship. Many of the wide-spread notions of current Maimonidean scholarship, such as the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, Maimonides as a disciple of Farabi, the esotericism of *The Guide of Perplexed*, and "reconciliation of Reason and Faith," hinder our appreciation of Maimonides' significance.

maniement du savoir chez les scolastiques, ed. Colette Sirat, Sara Klein-Braslavy and Olga Weijers (Paris: J. Vrin, 2003), 291–317; esp. 292–295.

[82] The only monograph highlighting correctly the significance of Ibn Ezra's influence on post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy is Dov Schwartz's *Yashan be-qanqan hadash: Mishnato ha-iyyunit shel ha-hug ha-neoplatoni be-filosofia ha-yehudit be-mea ha-14* (The Philosophy of a Fourteenth Century Jewish Neoplatonic Circle) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute and Ben-Zvi Institute, 1996). See also my "Ibn Ezra, a Maimonidean Authority: The Evidence of the Early Ibn Ezra Supercommentaries," in James T. Robinson, (ed.), *The Cultures of Maimonideansim*, Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, 9 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 89-131.