

**Maimonides' Cure of Souls: Medieval Precursor of Psychoanalysis**, by D. Bakan, D. Merkur, and D. Weiss. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. 183 pp. \$35.00.

This book is fascinating. For those of us for whom the study of Maimonides has been rooted in history of thought or in systematic philosophy and theology, this book provides a psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic reading of Maimonides. And, for those of us for whom study of Freud has been rooted in history of psychoanalysis, this book provides an insight into an important source for some of Freud's most radical ideas. It is Merkur's continuation of the work of Bakan, who died before its completion.

The choice of Maimonides was a good one for several reasons. First, Maimonides' *The Eight Chapters*, his work on psychology, and his *The Guide for the Perplexed*, existed in translations in Freud's time. Second, Maimonides was a "cultural hero" for assimilating Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries who read Maimonides as a "scientist" and "rationalist," creating for themselves a kind of "Jewish Kant." Third, as a modern "cultural hero," Maimonides was almost surely the subject of lectures and conferences at the Vienna lodge of B'nai Brith that Freud attended regularly and in which he also gave lectures. Finally, as Merkur shows, Freud, while not himself observant or even religious in a theological sense, came from an educated Jewish family in which the works of Maimonides would likely have been available.

Chapter One argues that Maimonides saw his chief task as a healer of body and soul. His therapy is composed of two parts: first, practice the opposite virtue or vice until one has reached the golden mean of balanced behavior, and second, believe that sin can be corrected. *Teshuva* (repentance), in its intellectual as well as its actional dimensions is, thus, Maimonides' cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Chapter Two presents Maimonides' "intellectualist mysticism," which is "an 'aha' experience of creative inspiration . . . when someone 'gets' an idea . . . when 'the penny drops.'" Then, "through engaging in a certain specified intrapsychic process," it is possible to create "the possibility of radical reform of the condition of human experience." Merkur identifies this process as "meditation" (*hitbonenut*). It is accomplished by careful reasoning and is followed by "practicing the presence of God," i.e., "a cognitively rich and varied process of inspiration that he [Maimonides] identified with biblical prophecy . . . engaging God in a prophetic dialogue." Bakan and Merkur call the whole "rational mysticism."

As I read Maimonides in his 12<sup>th</sup> century context, I find that he teaches that there is a "post-philosophic" experience of "being in the presence of

God." Bakan and Merkur, however, dispute my claim and propose that there is nothing "post"-philosophic at all. Rather, that "the bliss is never postrational or nonrational . . . indicate[s] that a cognitively limited or seemingly empty experience was emphatically not the content of Maimonides' contemplative experience." I think Bakan and Merkur, by denying the **extramental** existence of the Intelligences and the intellect, a belief that was common in medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophical theology, have distorted Maimonides and, therefore, also his understanding of the ultimate religious experience. However, others scholars share Bakan and Merkur's reading of Maimonides, and they may be right. Nonetheless, I suspect that the denial of the postrational is a projection of modern sensibilities and conceptualities.

Chapter Three argues that, for Maimonides, imagination is central to prophecy, but imagination is also the source of sin in that it allows humans to imagine that evil is good. Thus, imagining a bad act to be good induces one to actional sin, and imagining God to be anthropomorphic induces one to theological sin. Maimonides handled theological sin by making all prophecy (except that of Moses) a metaphor, i.e., a dream or a vision. Freud must have been fascinated by this "book on dreams and visions" in which the images of the imagination can cause illness / sin.

Chapter Four argues that Maimonides openly admits that sacred texts, as well as his own text, use exoteric-esoteric methods of teaching; the interpretation is always the true meaning, never the surface imagery.

Chapter Five argues that there were three categories of secret teaching in rabbinic Judaism: matters pertaining to sexuality, the creation story, and the interpretation of the vision of Ezekiel. Merkur does not deal with the first except to suggest that its inclusion among the secrets of the law might suggest that the other two also had sexual content. As to creation, Merkur reads Maimonides' dichotomies of heaven and earth and Adam and Eve as referring to form and matter respectively, with form being active and matter being receptive. Citing *Guide* 1:46 that "we have no intellectual cognition of our bringing somebody other than us into existence except through sexual intercourse," Merkur goes on to propose that the union of form and matter suggests the ultimate sexuality of creation and, that "creation out of nothing" can **only** be envisioned by sexual imagery. The use of sexual imagery to expound the doctrine of creation is Maimonides' secret teaching. Freud would have been struck powerfully by this.

The vision in the first chapter of Ezekiel known as "the account of the chariot" was the most secret of all teachings. Maimonides, strictly following the rabbinic prescriptions, does not expound this directly but gives only hints and contradictory statements. Merkur interprets the image that is the center

of Ezekiel's vision as the key metaphor for God, noting that it is fire from the waist down and *hashmal* from the waist up. Ezekiel's description of God in his vision is, thus, another of Maimonides' "paired ideas" and hence, as Merkur sees it, contains a sexual teaching. Maimonides reads *hashmal* (a color in the original) in its rabbinic sense of "rapid" and "cutting" (actually, "circumcising"). This, Merkur takes to indicate that the figure is "engaged in coitus, sawing back and forth in his seat," a sexual metaphor for God. Freud would have been struck powerfully by this, too.

I doubt Maimonides had this in mind, though it is not impossible if the true "secret" here is the permissibility and pervasiveness of sexual imagery—only as a metaphor, not as a theological assertion about creation and certainly not about God. Given Bakan and Merkur's Freudian reading of Maimonides' reading of Ezekiel's vision, I wonder how they missed the obviously homoerotic dimension of the imagery. This would fit well with the pervasive sexuality of the "secret" but also with the rigorously androcentric view of reality that is the core of rational thinking. Such a reading was not unknown in later kabbala.

Chapter Six reviews very concisely the therapeutic method of Maimonides. Here, Merkur admits that Maimonides' cognitive-behavioral therapy is only supportive; it does not provide "resolution of mental conflict, leading to increased psychic integration."

Chapter Seven lists convergences between Maimonides and Freud: (1) Both believed that imagination projects imagery on the concept of God. (2) Both admitted that the primary impulse for knowledge was preconscious, and that it was imagination and thought that gave form to that primary impulse / emanation. (3) Both admitted the reality of fantasy / imagination that creates a true reality of its own. Further, both admitted that the reification of this imagination was the source of error. (4) Both understood that dreams (and visions) were the result of mental and imaginative work; that dreams had exoteric and esoteric levels of meaning; and that dreams used various techniques to conceal their inner meaning. (5) Both privileged the hidden levels of dreams and especially the place of sexual imagery. This is the fundamental "secret" teaching. (6) Both believed that "resistance" (the inability to recognize the wrongness of one's deeds or thoughts because of denial and repression) was the cause of wrong / sinful behavior, and brought therapy to a halt. For both, inappropriate thoughts, desires, and deeds need to be admitted as part of therapy. (7) Both recognized that behavior and belief could become compulsive / that God punished sinners by cutting them off from Him, i.e., by hardening their hearts. Hence, freeing / recovering one's will through critical autobiographical work—and, for Maimonides, through behavioral change—was crucial to therapy. (8)

Both understood that religion rests on science and provides a framework for social-religious teaching of proper behavior; further, that Judaism was a development out of more primitive religions. (9) Both shared an androcentric view of the world. Finally (10), both were preoccupied with Moses and saw themselves as teachers of a definitive saving truth. A great chapter that shows two great minds at work, the one likely an influence on the other.

So much has been written on Maimonides and so much has been written on Freud. This book is a definite contribution to that effort.

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