ON BEING A RATIONALIST AND A MYSTIC

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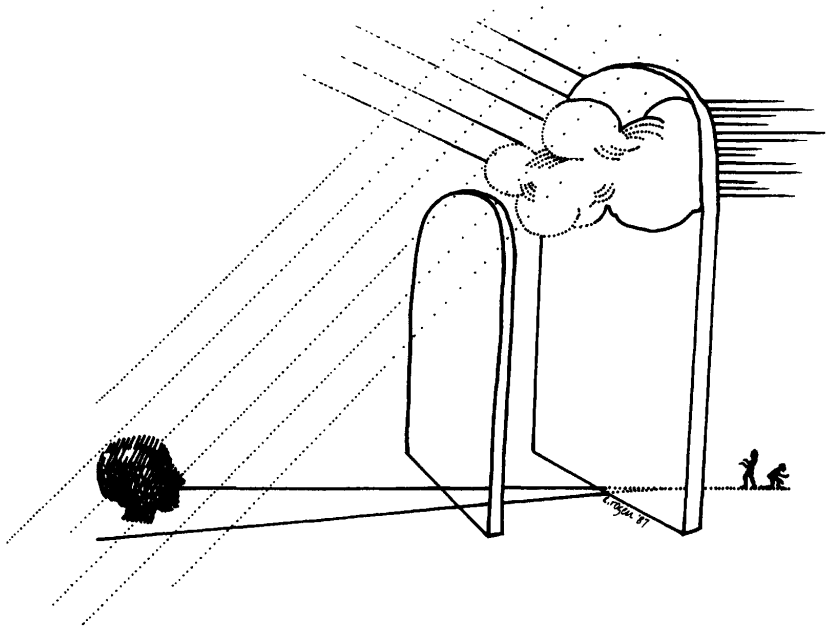
Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) stands as the greatest and most influential leader to have emerged out of medieval Jewry. His authority as a halakhist, particularly through his monumental, groundbreaking code, the *Mishneh Torah,*[1] has increased over the course of centuries. His stature as a communal leader has resulted in the ongoing study of, and reverence for, his various epistles.[2] And most germane to the purposes of this essay, the impact of his primary philosophical tract, *The Guide of the Perplexed,*[3] is so great as to be difficult to measure. He transformed the nature of Jewish discourse on metaphysical themes so that no subsequent Jewish thinker has been able to ignore him.

By consensus, Maimonides is regarded as a rationalist, as having subjected traditional Jewish belief to a rigorous examination based upon the assumptions of medieval neo-Aristotelian philosophy. His works led to a rupture in many Jewish communities after his death, when more traditional authorities began to object to such things as his apparent denial of God's governance of individual human affairs, his near-equation of the philosopher with the prophet, and his assertion that Jews who believe that God is corporeal are idolators who forfeit their share in the world-to-come.

For Maimonides, Torah study and the observance of the mitzvot were not sufficient as a way of achieving the rewards promised by the Torah. He believed that it is the duty of Jews to go beyond the study and practice of the Torah to a study of logic, mathematics, the natural sciences, and metaphysics. The mastery of these disciplines was necessary in order to pursue what he called "the science of the Law in its true sense." That is, it is our duty to acquire true conceptions of the laws of the created universe, for only through a true understanding of God's "actions" can we know God at all. Thus, Maimonides understood Torah study and the system of mitzvot as a pedagogical means to the true end. Learning and observance are necessary parts of our religious quest, but if they do not lead to the desired goal, they are not sufficient to achieve such things as divine providence and the immortality of one's soul.

Part of what makes contemporary scholarly discussions of Maimonides so interesting and controversial is that he wrote simultaneously for a number of different audiences. As a communal authority he wrote letters that were aimed at Jewish communities as a whole. As a halakhist he wrote his code, a guide to halakhic observance, in the simplest possible Hebrew style, so that it could be used widely. *The Guide,* by contrast, is written in Arabic, and he clearly states that he intended to write it as an esoteric work, so that those unprepared to understand the true meaning of his arguments and conclusions would not have access to it.

Thus, scholars have long debated the true meanings of the secrets of *The Guide* and have also differed in their proposals for reconciling those secrets—intended for a sophisticated, philosophical elite—with his assertions in other non-philosophical works. With few exceptions,



however, they have all agreed that Maimonides was a rationalist —that he viewed the ultimate human perfection as the acquisition of true intellectual knowledge. As a result, Maimonides' emphasis on noncognitive, spiritual experience has been largely ignored.

This ignoring of Maimonides' mystical side is unfortunate. Contemporary Jews often find themselves split between the demands of rationalism and religious feeling. They desire, rather, to integrate scientific thinking with spiritual experience. We do not have so many models of Jews who have bridged the split that we can afford to ignore as prominent a paradigm as the Maimonidean one.

Why then have scholars tended to portray him as a pure rationalist, giving scant attention to his comments about communion with God? The answer is complex.

Scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy such as Harry A. Wolfson sought to place Maimonides in his proper setting in the history of philosophic ideas. Wolfson did this by examining Maimonides' language very carefully and by probing him very thoroughly for consistency of doctrine. He did not, however, deal with religious experience in the Maimonidean system. Philosophy, for Wolfson, was not rooted in religion and religious experience.

I cite Wolfson only as an example of the anti-mystical myopia widespread among the scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy. The tendency can be understood as emerging out of the nineteenth-century rise of Jewish scholarship (the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*). From the outset, Jewish scholars sought to demonstrate and emphasize the rationality of Judaism, and hence its compatibility with modernity. Those aspects of a Maimonidean text–or any other—that reflected the nonrational thus came to be seen as a lapse that was best ignored.

Mysticism

The rationalistic overemphasis by the *Wissenschaft* scholars came under criticism by Gershom Scholem and his followers. They documented the development of Jewish mysticism, opposing the assumption that the mystical is not worthy of study. However, Scholem also accepted the portrait of Maimonides as a rationalist, ignoring the fact that Maimonides' faithful Yemenite followers read him as a mystic and that kabbalists also claimed *The Guide* as their own. For Scholem, mysticism had to be dramatic, full of myth and pathos—rooted not in systematic rational thought but rather in the manipulation of mythic symbols and in intense experience.

Maimonides' mysticism has none of that. The black and white of knowledge fades gently into the gray of contemplation and then into the lighter shades of post-intellectual piety. It has been beyond the scholars of philosophy and mysticism.

George Vajda, my revered teacher, was the first to express the overlap of medieval philosophy and mysticism. Heschel, too, understood this but did not pursue it in a systematic way. More recently, Moshe Idel and Paul Fenton have demonstrated the debts owed to Maimonides by the early kabbalists and by the whole eastern tradition of Maimonidean interpretation. In *Understanding Jewish Mysticism II* (KTAV, 1982) and elsewhere, I have tried to put forth similar arguments.

How could Jews close to Maimonides in time have understood this rationalist as a mystic? To understand this requires that we put aside our modern dichotomy of intellect and spirit. One need only think of the way Mordecai Kaplan has been characterized unfairly as a dry rationalist to be reminded of this dichotomy. It is not the case that one's devotion to reason automatically means that one is not interested in matters of spiritual experience. For while it is true that *The Guide* is overwhelmingly devoted to the resolution of philosophical questions by rational means, the key question, however, is what Maimonides saw as the ultimate purpose of conceptual development.

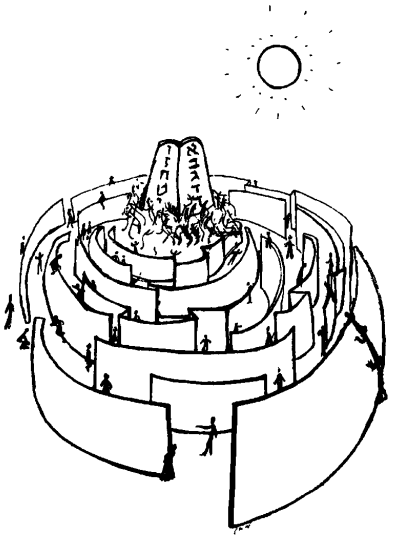
Avodah

To convey his teaching on the subject of religious experience as the goal of study and deeds, Maimonides interprets several terms in the biblical-rabbinic tradition in a special way, using neo-Aristotelian and Sufi terms and concepts. The key term is *avodah* (worship) as it is interpreted in *The Guide* (3:51).

At its lower levels, *avodah* refers in Maimonides' usage to the cultic aspects of worship (observance of commandments, sacrifices, and prayer) and to the Middle Way—the philosophical-medical program that he prescribes for seeking the golden mean. He also uses the term to refer to the "work of the mind"—rational, systematic thought about God. In this sense, he associates worship with *ahavah,* the *intellectual love* of God that occurs when one perceives "all of reality as it really is . . . contemplating His wisdom in it."

But there are two more senses of *avodah* (worship) that occur at yet higher levels. First, the ultimate activity of the mind, though intellectual, goes beyond systematic thinking. It is more than intellectual contemplation of God; it is "bliss," "passionate love."

> [The] 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, you can do so. . . . The result is that when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, *bliss* over this apprehension and *passionate love* for the object of apprehension become stronger.[4]



The relation of "bliss" to "intellectual love" can be seen in Maimonides' discussion of *ḥeshek* (passionate love) and *ahavah* (intellectual love). *Ḥeshek* refers to intellectual passion for Torah, for the Intelligences, and for God. *Ḥeshek* (passionate love) is more than *ahavah* (intellectual love) "for the excess of love is such that there remains no thought of any other thing except this beloved."

Passionate Love

In other words, passionate love (*ḥeshek*) is a *quantitative increment* of intellectual love (*ahavah*); it grows out of, but is more than, rational thought; it is an aspect of intellectual-contemplative worship. Similarly, Maimonides uses *simḥah* to mean "bliss," a *quantitative increment* of intellectual joy.

Finally, the highest level of worship is post-intellectual "devotion" or "closeness" to God. It follows *after* the previous level. It is beyond bliss, beyond passionate love. It is ineffable.

> This kind of worship ought only to be engaged in *after intellectual conception* has been achieved. If, however, you have apprehended God and His acts in accordance with what is required by the intellect, you should *afterwards* engage in *totally devoting yourself to Him* [and] endeavor to *come closer to Him*. . . . Now we have made it clear several times that love is proportionate to apprehension. *After love* comes *this* worship . . . [in] his endeavor to apprehend Him *and* his endeavor to worship Him *after apprehension* has been achieved.[5]

This final state requires extra "effort," he repeats seven times. Its logic is silence.

Silence is better than speech, because the danger of incorrect doctrine and hence heresy is thus avoided, but more importantly, because nonverbal contemplation is integral to Maimonides' concept of *avodah,* worship. The spheres, incorporeal entities above humankind, practice this form of worship (2:5). Silence is also the command of the "pious

ones" (1:50) and the "perfect ones" (1:59).

In advocating his negative theology, Maimonides also expounds upon the utter impossibility of "intellecting" God and commends silence to us (1:59):

> Apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the ultimate apprehension of Him. All the philosophers say, "He has dazzled us by His beauty and He is hidden from us by the intensity of His brightness," as the sun. . . . "Silence is praise to You" [Ps. 65:2], which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to You is praise. Accordingly, silence is preferable . . . just as the perfect ones have enjoined and said, "Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still" [Ps. 4:5].[6]

Here, Maimonides paraphrases sayings and uses images from Islamic mystical literature to indicate that God lies beyond rational thinking and even beyond intellectualist contemplation. God is ineffable in every sense.

Death by a Kiss

At the end of 3:51, Maimonides touches briefly on the subject of immortality and its relationship to his philosophic piety. He writes:

> The result is that when *any* perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, bliss at this apprehension and a passionate love for the object of the apprehension becomes stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of pleasure. The Rabbis have indicated with reference to the deaths of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that the three of them died by a kiss. . . . The purpose of this was to indicate that the three of them died in the pleasure of this apprehension due to the intensity of passionate love. . . . "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" [Song 1:2]. . . . After having reached this condition of enduring permanence, the intellect [*of any person*] remains in one and the same state . . . and he [or it] will remain permanently in that state of intense pleasure.[7]

Death by a "kiss" is beyond most people, but death in the throes of intellectualist-mystical ecstasy is not! Maimonides therefore concludes this beautiful chapter by urging the reader to "multiply those times you are with God or striving to approach Him."

All of this evidence leads to two conclusions. First, far from exalting the intellect above all else, Maimonides proposed as the summit of his religious philosophy a distinctively *post-cognitive piety*. This piety is built on the development of the intellect in rational and cognitive thought, but is posterior to such thinking. He did teach rational intellectualism for the educated elite, but to the upper range of that elite he offered an esoteric teaching that transcended reason.

Second, this post-cognitive piety was divided into two levels: an intellectual yet more-than-intellectual contemplation of God that entailed "passionate love" and "bliss"; and a post-intellectual "devotion" or "closeness" to God that transcended all rational roots—beyond attribution, beyond metaphor, ineffable, inarticulate, non-verbal.

In light of all of this, it seems fair to call Maimonides a philosophic mystic.

Maimonides as Model

For those in our day who seek to combine devotion to the life of reason with an acknowledgment of, and experience of, the transcendent dimension of existence, Maimonides stands as a model. The two *can* be integrated, giving the lie to those who create false and unnecessary dichotomies. As our teacher Mordecai Kaplan taught:

> For *God must not merely be held as an idea; He must be felt as a presence, if we want not only to know about God but to know God.* "Taste and see that the Lord is good," says the Psalmist. Religious souls have never been satisfied with an awareness of God merely as an intellectual concept. They always craved a religious experience in which the reality of God would be brought home to them with an immediacy akin to our awareness of objects through the senses, and with an overpowering emotion that stirred every fibre of their being . . . [an] experience of God as beatitude and inner illumination.[8] ■

NOTES

1. The code has been translated into English in the multi-volume Yale Judaica Series. Excerpts are available most readily from Isadore Twersky's *A Maimonides Reader* (Behrman House).
2. See, for example, the recently published volume *Crisis and Leadership*, in which three of his important letters have been newly translated by A. S. Halkin and discussed by David Hartman (Jewish Publication Society, 1985).
3. The best translation is by Shlomo Pines, *A Guide of the Perplexed* (University of Chicago Press, 1963). All subsequent references to this work will refer to pages in the Pines translation.
4. Based on Pines, pp. 621, 627; emphasis added.
5. Pines, p. 620f.; emphasis added.
6. See Pines, p. 139f.
7. See Pines, p. 627f.; emphasis added.
8. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, (Reconstructionist Press, 1962), pp. 244, 261.