

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

Leon D. Stitskin

THE METHODOLOGY OF MAIMONIDES

The Last Will and Testament of Maimonides

Part Two

INTRODUCTION

In the first part of his Last Will to his son Abraham,¹ Maimonides formulated a manual of intimate personal morality grounded in the metaphysical and psychological views expounded in his other works. The second part of this testament deals primarily with methodology which, to Maimonides, was most crucial to any religio-philosophic enterprise. Without a proper orientation in methodology, he argued, a religious Jew cannot embark upon philosophic speculation lest he be suspected by the masses of heretical views or, what is worse, lest such a pursuit might engender perplexities in the hearts of fellow believers whose faith was weak. The methodology which Maimonides formulated in his introduction to *Moreh Nebukhim* in the form of a letter to his pupil R. Joseph ibn Aknin as well as in this letter to his son Abraham was *sitrei Torah* — esoteric teaching of the Torah. Biblical terms have a double meaning — literal and figurative, public and concealed. The literal was meant for the public and the figurative for the intellectually elite; the literal, for the projection of proper conditions of human societies, and the secretive for the knowledge of the truth.

In his introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides makes this distinction explicit when he interprets the verse in Proverbs (25:11) "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in vessels of silver" in the following manner: "It shows that in every word which has a double sense, a literal one and a figurative one, the plain meaning must be as valuable as silver . . . and the hidden meaning still more precious; so that the figurative meaning bears the same relation to the literal one as gold to silver . . . The same is the case with figures employed by prophets. Taken literally, such expressions contain wisdom useful for many purposes, among others for the amelioration of the condition of society . . . Their hidden meaning, however, is profound wisdom conducive to the recognition of real truth."²

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Concealed truth is the real truth disclosed only to philosophers. The subject matter of this truth, according to Maimonides, are the esoteric teachings in the Bible pertaining to *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah* identified respectfully with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. Hence a Jewish philosopher must apply the method of probing beneath the exterior words of Biblical terminology, episodes, parables to the inner meaning which constitute the secret teachings and the real truth of the Bible.³

In his pursuit, Maimonides projects as his model Abraham Ibn Ezra and admonishes his son in the following testament to study exclusively his interpretations of Scriptures which coincide with his. He quotes Ibn Ezra's interesting interpretation on the Biblical verse "Behold, I send an angel before thee" (Exodus 23:20), comparing the angel to the sun which in turn is similar to the divine intelligence illuminating the rational faculty of man like the sun's overflowing radiance illuminates the moon.

This allegorical interpretation of an angel constitutes for Maimonides a key to the secret teaching of *ma'aseh merkavah*. The aim of the secret teaching of the Bible is not to indulge in some mystical, elusive, fanciful flights of the imagination about some supernatural notions, but precisely the opposite, namely, to find a rational basis for those concepts which would relate them to a teleological-centered orientation with emphasis upon man's supreme perfection. Such a methodology which is identified with a peculiar "connatural" perfection and is personalistic in character is the basic motif of classical philosophy.

Considering this motivation, we can more readily appreciate his bitter antagonism and the utter contempt he expresses for the exponents of Judaism in France and other communities, despite his earlier admonition to his son in the same letter calling for patience and tolerance. In this concluding section, Maimonides is concerned with the philosophic enterprise designed to spur the attainment of real truth and profound wisdom. The methodology leading to this truth was current only among "his own loving brethren of Spain, known as Andalusians, who alone possess wisdom, understanding and lucid minds." In the first part of this testament, however, Maimonides directed his son's attention to the ethical and religious imperatives as well as religious studies which are shared by all groups and are designed to ameliorate the personal and social conditions of man.

The distinction Maimonides draws in the treatise between King Saul as symbolic of the heart's imaginings and King David as reminiscent of the rational faculty influenced by the overflow radiation of the active intelligence as symbolized by the prophet Samuel, is another case in point. King David, in the light of this interpretation, was endowed with all the qualities of a Platonic

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Philosopher-King. The king, like the prophetic lawgiver, was not merely a supreme statesman but a philosopher of the highest order sufficiently equipped to receive the overabundance of illumination which is forever present for the actualization and perfection of man's highest potential.

In sum, in this letter of moral instruction to his son, Maimonides crystallizes his entire mode of intellectual discourse as embodied in his major works: The *reverence* for God as articulated in our ethical and religious pursuits and the *understanding* and *love* of God as apprehended in the philosophic enterprise. Both are predicated upon a search for the essence of man's perfection⁴ realizable in a certain way of life — the religio-ethical — and a certain science — the speculative philosophical (*ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah*).

The former is literal Torah — public teaching; the latter *sitrei Torah* — secret teaching. No wonder Maimonides concludes his *magnum opus* — the *Guide for the Perplexed* with an exposition on Man's Perfection.

What follows is my translation of the concluding part of Maimonides' letter of instruction to his son.

LEON D. STITSKIN

MAIMONIDES' LETTER OF MORAL INSTRUCTION TO HIS SON ABRAHAM

Part Two

Know, my son Abraham, that the first commandment to Israel by the Creator, blessed be He, through his authentic prophet Moses, our teacher, was in regard to the observance of the day of Sabbath which He established as a covenant with his people and said: "Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath to observe the Sabbath throughout their generation, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day He ceased from work and rested" (Exodus 31:16-17).

This commandment is first of all designed to make the Sabbath a day of rest enjoining us to desist from the harassment of

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labors of the mundane world, which deprive us of apprehending God and of consecrating ourselves to His service. Accordingly, He exhorts us, in a symbolic way, to substitute service to Him for servitude to Pharaoh, King of Egypt as He said: "And thou shalt remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God brought thee out thence by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the Sabbath day" (Deut. 5:15).

Another reason for the observance of Sabbath is found in the previously quoted statement "for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day He ceased from work and rested." The basic tent here is that you sanctify yourselves through involvement in my activities marking the day when I completed my work of creation as the day for the perfection of your souls by cessation from worldly affairs, movement and work in order to serve me and perceive me. This constitutes the most perfect and authentic form of repose. Hence, rest on the Sabbath day is of a twofold nature: physical and spiritual.

This double meaning of the Sabbath corresponds to the double meaning of the covenant of circumcision which at one time is referred to as the circumcised foreskin of the heart and at another as the circumcision of the foreskin of the flesh. The first is identified with Moses, the second with Abraham. The twofold nature of the covenant as implicit in the Sabbath is further confirmed in Scriptures when the term "holy" with reference to the Sabbath is alternately attached to God and to the people of Israel. Compare: "The seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord thy God" (Exodus 20:10). "Ye shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy unto you" (Exodus 31:14). Similarly we read: "But on the seventh day, there shall be to you a holy day" (Exodus 35:2). One who grasps the deeper meaning of the laws governing Sabbath and scrupulously reflects upon them will realize why its observance was initiated with the eating of manna as we read, "And Moses said, eat that manna today, for today is a Sabbath unto the Lord" (Exodus 16:25).

It behooves you to know, my son, that figuratively Pharaoh, King of Egypt, has reference to the *yetzer ha-ra* — the evil inclination; the people of Israel considered as one unit stands for

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human wisdom. This may be derived from the meaning of the term and its composition. Moses our teacher symbolically represents divine wisdom and the Egyptian people as a whole, the human body, that is an organic body consisting of dominant and subsidiary organs; the land of Goshen, as the place of the heart. You should know that the wicked Pharaoh's domination and enslavement extended only to the people of Israel but not to Moses with whom neither he nor his people had any relationship nor did they exercise any power over him. Incidentally, Moses and Aaron constitute one concept in this context, although Moses represents the stimulator of "forms" and Aaron as that of matter.

Know, also, my son, that the term "death" mentioned in relation to the prophets, refers to the severance of contact between the latter and the source of their inspiration due to the preoccupation of man's rational faculty with corporeal desires. However, do not probe more into this matter than I revealed to you. The same holds true of another subject. I drew your attention to it in a passage of *The Guide for the Perplexed* with reference to a woman of valor that is symbolic of a very significant matter as is the concept of the land of Israel, Jerusalem and the Holy Temple. Likewise, the heart is the seat of the human rational faculty and Zion represents a choice place in the brain embodying the Active Intellect. The Kings of the House of David whom Scripture characterizes as "having done righteously in the eyes of the Lord" symbolize the rational faculty actualized by God's overflowing illumination; while the opposite — the wicked Kings — refers to man's disposition of turning toward physical lust which inevitably precipitates the appearance of a belligerent king among the nations; the latter undoubtedly alluding to the evil inclination — the *yetzer ha-ra*.

Know, my son, may God blessed be he, protect you, that Samaria over which ruled wicked, lustful kings, is symbolic of cursed, gross matter as we find in the Book of Proverbs with reference to an adulterous harlot⁵ You should moreover, probe the genuine reason for Saul's hatred of David and you will then not be deluded and the adversary will not be able to assume the role of the accuser against you as was the case with Saul. For

the latter operated at times with his rational faculty but when he exercised his vegetative faculty⁶ he slipped into moral turpitude and began to despise David. Consider carefully how Saul pursued David to a place called *Sechu* (I Samuel 19:22), which is a metaphor for the heart as we read in Psalms 73:7, "They have exceeded their hearts (*maschios*) imaginings," or in Job 38:36, "who giveth wisdom to the heart?" Reference is undoubtedly made here to the banishment from the mind of corporeal imaginings and the resultant purification and cleansing of the thought-processes illuminated by intellectual concepts derived from Samuel, who represented the Separate Intelligences.⁷ The seat of the intellectual faculty is in the brain, alluded to here as *Nayoth ba-Ramah*, the term *Ramah* meaning "on high."

Accordingly, the implication of this episode is that when Saul went to *Sechu* — symbolic of the hearts imaginings — he did not find David there and he was told symbolically: go to the "brain" (apply your mental faculty) which alone will prevail in securing the Kingdom over them! Saul proceeded to the place of the "brain" where he found Samuel and was indeed chastened, for he discovered that he obviously cannot prevail over David, as the spirit of Samuel which initially was with him, now passed on to David. Accordingly, he was told that David was at *Benoyot Ramah*, undoubtedly referring again to the "brain" which embodied the divine intellect symbolized by Samuel. Alas! Saul could not prevail over him, as we are told David fled before him while Saul stripped his clothes, the latter alluding metaphorically to lust as we read "Take away the filthy garments from him" (Zach. 3:4), "Let thy garments always be white" (Eccles. 9:8).

Know my son Abraham, may God blessed be he, have mercy on you that allegorically the Tabernacle and its vessels are symbolic of choice matter. Scripture begins with the Ark that undoubtedly represents the heart which is also the principle of matter. In the Ark are the holy scrolls, symbolic of human wisdom. When we read "And the cherubim shall spread out their wings on high" (Exodus 25:2), reference is to the safeguarding of our health. The "table" refers to man's liver. The Candelabrum to the spleen; the sacrificial altar about which we read: "Fire

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shall be kept burning on the altar continually” (Lev. 6:6), is symbolic of our natural heat and the altar of incense is man’s intuitive illumination.

How true and authentic are the interpretations of the wise scholar Abraham Ibn Ezra, of sainted memory. I learned that he wrote a commentary on the Torah which reveals profound, essential, esoteric truths comprehensible only to his intellectual equals who alas, are few in number summoned by God. Thus in the Biblical assignment of *Mishpatim* on the verse: “Behold, I send an angel before thee” (Exod. 23:20), he made a most penetrating observation concerning the sun and the moon. His words are well-chosen and are not apparent to the average reader. This is what he says there, and I shall disclose to you only a portion of his comments: Know that the sun refers to divine wisdom, and the moon to human wisdom. The latter draws its illumination from the former just as the moon which has no light or transparence save from the sun draws from the latter.

As for you, my faithful son, I exhort you not to pay attention or divert your mind with commentaries, treatises and books other than those of Ibn Ezra’s. For they are meaningful and profitable to all who study them with intelligence, understanding and deep insight. They are distinguished from the writings of other authors, for Ibn Ezra was in spirit similar to our patriarch Abraham. It behooves you, therefore, to read all his works and the symbols he alludes to with thoughtful reflection concentrating penetratingly upon his words with clear understanding and lucid insight. For the aforementioned scholar feared no one, flattered no one. He traveled extensively, tarrying one day in one place, the next day in another, frequently engaged in the service of kings.

Verily, my son, I too cast my lot with the profession of words and writing despite my ailments due to heavy government and domestic burdens as well as unjust enemies who recently increased in number and became more militant. And as if that were not enough, my daughters aggravated my wretched condition preventing me from engaging in profound reflection. Know my son that poor man has no rest in this lowly mundane world and blessed is he whose life terminates quickly without

the banishment of his soul!

Alas, if I had only been aware of the many observations made by the aforementioned scholar, Abraham Ibn Ezra, of blessed memory, before I wrote my commentary to the *Mishnah* and the books I called *Mishneh Torah* and *Moreh Nebukhim*, I would have drawn your attention to the esoteric knowledge contained in his treatises and books. I admonish you now not to exercise your rational faculty and precious soul on any other treatise but ours and his for the latter will endure the limits of time while the other works are worthless and inconsequential.

Beware especially of the many books authored by the people of France who seem to think that an awareness of God's presence may be inspired only by the intake of animal meat dipped in vinegar and garlic which they call *Salsola*. When the vapors of vinegar and the smoke of garlic penetrate the brain, they maintain, they become divinely intoxicated and begin to sense His nearness to them perpetually in their prayers, in their petitions and in their Talmudic studies as well as in learning the other writings of the heads of the Yeshivot. In addition, they destroy the divine image with their tongues when they consistently invoke God in anthropomorphic terms when in reality the Creator transcends without measure any of the attributes ascribed to him in their works. In vain do they take out the scrolls of the Law for their congregants to pronounce a blessing over them. It may be that for this reason, as an act of compensation, they have a custom of making donations during the reading of the Torah of one *draham* (*dinar*) or one *pashut* (small coin). Moreover, every one of them generally marries two wives so that their thoughts are continually obsessed with nothing else but sex, food, drink and other sensual pleasures, but amazingly they still have faith that the Almighty is nigh unto them and hearkens to them.

This, however, is not the way nor the motivation that draws one nigh unto the Blessed One! Worship their God and observe their Torah but stay at a distance from them and have no association with them! As a matter of fact do not befriend intimately any group except our own loving brethren of Spain who are known as Andalusians,⁸ for they possess wisdom, understanding

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and lucid minds. Be cautious of other people such as some of the inhabitants of the West who are called Alzirabi, located in the uplands of Berbera,⁹ for they are generally confused and naturally crude. Be cautious especially of the people living in places between Tunis and Alexandria of Egypt as well as the mountain dwellers of Berbera for, to my mind, they are the most ignorant of all, although they hold fast to their faith. The Lord is my witness and judge when I compare these people to the Karaites who repudiate the Oral Law and who are devoid of clarity of mind in all their studies of the Torah, Scriptures, Talmud and their exegetical interpretation of Haggadah and Halakhah. It is interesting that some of their judges follow the same practice with regard to a menstruant woman as the people of Magi of the Ishmaelites¹⁰ who are prohibited from looking at her or her clothes; conversing with her or treading the same path she does during that period. They also do not eat the last quarter of an animal and pursue many other grotesque practices about which one can discourse at length.

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NOTES

1. The first part of the Maimonides letter appeared in a previous issue of *Tradition*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Spring, 1968.
2. See *Moreh Nebukhim*, Introd. p. 4, (Friedlander edition).
3. For a thorough discussion of the essential nature of Maimonides' *Guide*, see Leo Straus "The Literary Character of the Guide of the Perplexed" in *Essays on Maimonides*, edited by S. W. Baron, (Columbia University Press, 1941), pp. 27-91.
4. Al Farabi in his treatise *On the Philosophy of Plato* maintains that Plato started his philosophical inquiry with the question concerning the essence of man's perfection or his happiness. The original treatise was edited and translated into Latin by F. Rosenthal and R. Walzer and is titled *Alfarabius De Platonic Philosophia*, London, 1943.
5. Cf. *Guide*, Introd. p. 7, Maimonides quotes Proverbs 7:6-26 which compares sensual pleasures to an adulterous harlot.
6. Maimonides refers to the first faculty of the Soul which he calls here the earthly faculty.
7. In the Platonic system, which Aristotle used and Maimonides adopted, each sphere was operated by a "Separate Intelligence" which endows the heavenly spheres with their motion.
8. More than any other the Andalusian Jews had accepted the teachings of the philosophers and philosophic teachings, which were part of the tradition of the Maimonides family. Cf. Strauss *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 52.
9. Somaliland, on Gulf of Aden.
10. Cf. *Guide* III: 47.