

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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MAIMONIDES ON RECONCILING RABBINIC AND PHILOSOPHIC SCHEMES

A Letter to Chasdai ha-Levi

INTRODUCTION

In the concluding portion of a Letter to Chasdai ha-Levi, Maimonides discusses three doctrinal beliefs: miracles, prophetic visions, and resurrection. He grounds the three religious principles on the notion of Creation which he allegedly supports philosophically.¹ Once we accept the theory of *creatio ex nihilo*, Maimonides contends the possibility of miracles, prophetic visions, and resurrection follows as a logical consequence. For *chidush*, the concept of the creation of the world, unlike the theory of eternity, provides for an occasional suspension of the laws of nature² which involves miracles. Prophetic visions³ and resurrection⁴ are considered miracles by Maimonides, which in turn are derivatives of the main proposition of Creation.

Since we assume that the admission of many of the doctrinal hypothesis into the framework of religious affirmation is conditional upon their being a logical consequence of some philosophical proposition, we should examine closely Maimonides' attitude regarding some apparent discrepancies that may appear between the Hebraic and philosophic disciplines. Surely, if philosophy is based upon demonstrated proof, one may legitimately inquire whether there can be a contradiction between one scheme and another. Accordingly, Maimonides argues that every consideration must be given to resolve the dilemma either by means of discerning areas of agreement or by an analysis of the text in either discipline revealing apparent and not real differences.

As an example of the first resolution of dichotomies consider the sixth chapter of *Shemonah Perakim* expounding upon the question as to who is the superior — the saintly, perfect man devoid of any evil inclinations or the man of self-restraint who subdues his evil psychic disposition. The philosophers unanimously agree that the former is superior . . . while the Rabbis consider

From the Pages of Tradition

the latter more praiseworthy. Maimonides resolves the apparent contradiction in the following manner. He says: "At first blush, by a superficial comparison of the saying of the philosophers and rabbis, one might be inclined to say that they contradict one another. Such, however, is not the case. Both are correct and are not in disagreement in the least as the evils which the philosophers term such . . . are rational laws which all people commonly agree on such as the evils of the shedding of blood, robbery, fraud . . . When however, the rabbis maintain that he who overcomes his desire has more merit and a greater reward (than he who has no temptation) they refer to laws that are ceremonial prohibitions . . . such as dietary laws, wearing clothes of wool and linen and unlawful marriages."

Thus Maimonides has discovered a *modus vivendi* for the elimination of an apparent contradiction between the two disciplines.

Maimonides' second approach is reflected in his attempt to justify his theory of creation by pointing out "that Aristotle was well aware that he had not proved the Eternity of the Universe . . . He knew that he could not prove his theory and that his arguments and proofs were only apparent and plausible. They are the least objectionable according to Alexander, but according to the same authority, Aristotle could not have considered them conclusive, after having himself taught us the rules of logic and the means by which many arguments may be refuted or confirmed" (*Guide* II:15).

He goes on to say that by advancing his theory of the Eternity of the world which is based on opinion and argument and not on proof or demonstration, "Aristotle only desires to show that his theory is better than those of his opponents, who hold that philosophical speculation leads to the conviction that the heavens are transient, but have never been entirely without existence. or that the heavens have had a beginning but are indestructible . . . In this he is undoubtedly right, for his opinion is nearer the truth than theirs" . . . (*Guide* II:15).

Maimonides seems to indicate that only late philosophers (the Kalamists) assumed that he had conclusive proof of the eternity of matter but his authentic commentators like Alexander Aphrodesias and Themestius were aware of the inconclusiveness of his proof. Hence we have our theory of creation without fear of contradiction from the philosophers. For indeed both disciplines were congruous.

A similar approach to an analysis of the text of the Bible and Rabbinics by Maimonides reveals the differences to be only superficial. A good example of this is the eighth chapter of Part Two in the *Guide*. Maimonides cites a difference of opinion that appears to exist between the Torah and the Sages on the one hand

TRADITION: A Journal of Orthodox Thought

and Aristotle on the other regarding a widespread belief that the motions of the spheres produce sound. The sages describe the mighty sound produced by the sun in its daily circuit in its sphere as one of three noises audible from one end of the world to the other. Aristotle rejects this notion and holds that they produce no sounds (*De Caelo* 2:19).

How does Rambam reconcile the difference? He analyzed the Talmudic text and discovered that it must be linked logically with the general theory of the motion of the stars in a fixed sphere in which case "it is distinctly stated that the philosophers have defeated the wise men of Israel." The Rabbinic passage referred to deals with the question whether the sphere is stationary and only the planets in it are in motion or vice versa. And since the rabbis abandoned their assertion in favor of Aristotle that the constellations are stationary while the spheres moved, it follows that the stars produced no sounds inasmuch as they have no motion, and the motion of spheres alone, all agreed do not produce any sound. Rambam concluded that our sages have abandoned their own theory; "for in speculative matters one must . . . accept only that which is established by proof" (B. *Tal. Pesakhim* 9, 46).

In another instance regarding a discussion by our sages on the end of the world, he discounts the rabbinic assertion that "the world remain six thousand years and thousand years it will be waste (B. *Tal. Rosh Hashanah* 31a) in favor of the scriptural reference "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9), by stating that the former represented "the individual opinion of one Rabbi . . . while the latter expressed the general opinion of our sages" (*Guide* 11:29). This is another indication how an analysis of the text helps to resolve dilemmas in that the apparent dichotomy is frequently as a result of a minority opinion and should not be considered decisive in preference to a contrary speculative judgment.

What follows is my translation of the second part of Maimonides letter to Chasdai ha-Levi. The first part appeared in the Fall 1969 issue of this journal.

LEON D. STITSKIN

PART II

You asked about miracles. I have already written and demonstrated with proofs in my *magnum opus*, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, all that can be said on the subject. Essentially, there are miracles which operate within the natural order and those that

From the Pages of Tradition

defy nature such as when the rod turned into a serpent and water into blood,⁶ etc. The authenticity of miracles is grounded in our basic assumption that the world is not eternal but a result of a created act as we read: "Between me and the children of Israel it shall be a sign forever for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and on the seventh day he rested and ceased from his work" (Exodus 31:17).

As I have indicated already in the *Guide* the account of Genesis (*ma'aseh bereshit*) does not necessarily have to follow the Aristotelean assumption of an eternal universe. On the contrary, the theory of creation is a much more plausible doctrine especially when we take into account the fact, as I have established, that Aristotle himself made no claim to absolute evidence and conclusive proof for his theory.⁷ Moreover, one should always hold on to the principle that no scientist or philosopher can demonstrate conclusively anything beyond the natural order although we may assume that nothing is obscure from them within the frame of the terrestrial sphere. For this reason the Psalmist asserted "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord but the earth has he given to the children of man" (Ps. 115). I have accordingly expounded at length in the *Guide* on the Aristotelean notion of the eternity of the world, refuting its contention that the universe is a necessary consequence of the First Cause and at the same time marshalling supporting evidence for *Creatio ex nihilo*.⁸ In this context it should be noted that when any theory cannot be supported by conclusive demonstration, it is desirable to follow the proposition that evokes the least rejections.

7. You inquired about the meaning of the verse in Isaiah (6:7), "And he touched herewith upon my mouth and said, 'Lo, this hath touched thy lips.'" Does not this allude to something corporeal coming into contact with another material object? This statement may appear obscure unless we realize that every prophetic utterance stresses a specific gradation in the scale of values. When he says: "Then flew unto me," this represents an advanced gradation; "one of the seraphim," a lower degree; "and he touched herewith upon my mouth and said, 'Lo, this hath touched thy lips,'" this reflects the lowest level.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

Generally, then, a vision may be delineated as a spiritual entity which when the subtle, simple mind apprehends it first as a pure concept and then upon its descent, its extension increases and thickens until converted into a physical object.⁹ It is similar to a cloud of vapor which initially appears to have no bodily properties but as it changes to drops of rain it assumes a physical form. Thus, in symbolic form, the prophet describes this process of a vision. He begins with the statement: "Then flew unto me," symbolizing an entity completely devoid of any bodily properties. Then he proceeds: "And he touched therewith upon my mouth," indicating that he came in contact with another object outside himself, a physical one in order to cleanse the prophet of his corporeality which might impede the implementation of his mission. The phrase, "one of the seraphim," refers to a combination of the incorporeal and the material. For the terms "one" connotes a spiritual unit and "seraphim" denotes corporeality implying the destruction of the material element in a body.¹⁰ In a similar vein the scriptural phrase "and cast it at his feet" (Exodus 4:26), does not imply a contact with its essence but with a physical object which is the meaning "at his feet." And since the allusion in this instance is to God, we may surely apply a similar implication to an angel in the prophetic discourse. For the prophetic vision was experienced in such a variety of gradations.

8. Your objection to an apparent contradiction in my interpretations of the scriptural saying: "behold the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12), should not be difficult to resolve. You ask why in the first part of my work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, chapter fifteen, I interpret the phrase to refer to the prophets, whereas in the second part, chapter ten, I maintain that the reference is to the natural elements? You should know, that a completed vision must contain both the revealed and the hidden.

In my reference to the elements I had in mind those simple natural elements that are necessary to exert an impact upon the prophets. When, for instance, the element of fire is preponderant in the body of the prophet, he is in a state of ascendancy. By the same token when the element of earth overpowers him, he

descends. For the innate propensity of fire is to rise to a state of conceptualization while the cold, dry earth tends to make him descend to passivity until he will ascend again never to return like Elijah who ascended in a chariot of fire.

When I made mention of the apt expression of "ascending" preceding the term "descending," I had in mind that reference here is to man created of earthly matter whose lowly position as a creature of dust from earth requires that he ascends before proceeding to descend.¹¹

9. You asked about Resurrection. I maintain that resurrection is also one of those miracles that defies nature like the rod turning into a serpent and water into blood. Just as the Creator creates at will something out of nothing, so he can defy the natural process and at the proper time effect a change in the nature of existence as well as if he chooses to annihilate it completely. Those, however, who maintain that nature operates with eternal necessity deny resurrection for in their view God functions only within the framework of physical necessity.

We, however, who follow the Torah of Moses, our teacher, do not accept or admit the authenticity of the eternalists, keeping in mind that they do not advance any conclusive proofs for their theory and that our evidences for our position are more weighty and abundant than theirs, especially when we can count on the prophetic corroboration which is superior to all other speculative schemes. Indeed, the philosophers likewise asserted that if the universe were created it would be subject by the same token to destruction and complete annihilation through the will of the Creator. Also Plato admitted that. He also granted that the world was created but argued that there was a primary stuff out of which it was created. We, however, maintain that there was no primary matter or form but that everything came into being through God *creatio ex nihilo*. Notwithstanding several contrary Aggadic observations like those of R. Eliezer ha-gadol, the consensus of the collective body of Israel favors the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and there are many midrashic statements in Genesis Rabbah to support this.

10. You ask about the nature of Resurrection. Know that in as much as we cannot apprehend the reality of the Holy One we

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

are unable to probe the intentions of His thoughts. We are ignorant of the processes of His cognitive faculty as He is the Knower and the Known. Hence we are not in a position to expound upon God's cognition and to elucidate what is known to Him and what is not. Otherwise we would have attained to his degree of knowledge. Let it therefore not occur to you that there ever was or there is at present one who apprehends the authentic nature of these profound mysteries as Hannah exclaimed: "for a God of knowledge is the Lord, and by Him are actions weighed" (Samuel 1: 2:3).

The Lord, may He be blessed and exalted, is my witness, that because of my affection for you is very strong, I consented to bring you up to this point although I am troubled day and night by a critical illness that befell my son, Abraham. For three days we despaired of his recovery but with the help of the Almighty he got on his feet again. If not for my sincere admiration for you, I would not have had the patience to even read your letter. But as it was, I wrote down what I could and asked that it be rewritten and forwarded to you. Should you ever come to Egypt I shall be glad to discuss with you personally these matters and add much that should be augmented.

May your well-being and the soundness of your knowledge grow and develop in accordance with your wishes and those of your brethren.

NOTES

1. Maimonides argues that his theory of creation is no less supported by demonstrated proof than the Aristotelean concept of the eternity of the world. Both depend on argument and opinion for validation.

2. Cf. *Guide For the Perplexed* (Part II:29). "We have thus clearly stated and explained our opinion, that we agree with Aristotle in one half of his theory. For we believe that this Universe remains perpetually with the same properties with which the Creator has endowed it, and that none of these will ever be changed except by way of miracle in some individual instances, although the Creator has the power to change the whole Universe, to annihilate it, or to remove any of its properties. The Universe, had, however, a beginning and commencement, for when nothing was as yet in existence except God, His

From the Pages of Tradition

wisdom decreed that the Universe be brought into existence at a certain time, that it should not be annihilated or changed as regards any of its properties, except in some instances; some of these are known to us, whilst others belong to the future, and are therefore unknown to us. This is our opinion and the basis of our religion." It is interesting to note, however, that in the same chapter Maimonides quotes some sages from *Bereshit Rabba* and *Midrash Kohalat* who maintain that the miracles are to some extent also natural.

3. *Ibid.*, ch. 32.

4. Maimonides, *Treatise on Resurrection*, p. 25.

5. *B. Tal. Yoma*, 20b

ת"ר שלש קולות הולכין מסוף העולם ועד סופו ואלו הן, קול גלגל חמה . . .
(יומא, כ"א).

6. Cf. *Guide*, II:29: "When I, however, said that no prophet ever announced a permanent change of any of its properties, I intended to except miracles. For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, the pure and noble hand into a leprous one, without the existence of any natural cause that could effect these or similar phenomena, these changes were not permanent, they have not become a physical property. On the contrary, the Universe since continues its regular course. This is my opinion; this should be our belief."

7. *Ibid.*, ch. 15: "I mean to say that he himself knows that he possesses no demonstration with regard to this point, and that the arguments and proofs were only apparent and plausible. They are the least objectionable, according to Alexander."

8. *Ibid.*

9. It should be noted that this formula of emanistic development recorded here as well as in Bar Hiyya's *Hegyon ha Nefesh*, although neo-platonic, follows the physical scheme of natural processes. God is the absolute universal and according to a law of formal logic concepts become poorer in contents as their extension increases. This point of view according to which the universal is regarded as the higher reality while the particular is a derivative product from the more general—a view which resulted from hypostatizing the syllogistic methods of Aristotle—was expressed by Porphyry in his exegesis of Aristotle's categories.

10. More than one denotes corporeality for it implies a multiplicity by its divisibility. Unity, however, excludes any form of multiplicity from the one God which also excludes corporeality. Cf. *Guide*, I:35:

כי אין יחיד כי אם בהסרת הגשמות כי הגשם אינו אחד אבל מורכב מחומר וצורה, שנים בגדר והוא גם כן מתחלק מקבל החלקה.

11. This statement by Maimonides confirms the personalistic position that the apparent dichotomous Biblical description of man as a child of God, on the one hand, and as a creature of dust of the earth, on the other, does not represent an ontologically dialectical description of man. The delienation of man as a lowly creature has only a psychological significance depicting man's potentiality to rise to a state of actuality by shedding the lowly corporeal animalistic aspects of man in order that he may acquire a pure spiritual existence in everlasting

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

life. As Rambam points out here, it is for the purpose of ascend that we must keep in mind our lowly origin and renounce our corporeal trappings that tend to drag us down to the animalistic abyss of dissolution. In this sense our awareness of our lowly origin make us realize the tremendous potentialities we possess for spiritual edification. Just like a tiny, insignificant seed when put in the ground has the potential to grow into a fruitful plant, so man, creature of dust, can rise to the celestial heights of radiant splendor and intellectual perfection.

That is why the Psalmists invariably draws a parallel between the glorification of God and the edification of man by comparing the latter's state to God's exaltation and condescend: "who is like unto the Lord our God, that dwelleth so high; that looketh down so low upon the heaven and the earth?"; Cf. Saadia *Emunot ve'Deot* Treatise 5:5: "True penitence consists in the renunciation of this world which remind him of his state of frailty, wretchedness . . . and decay of his body" . . . ; Cf. Moses ibn Ezra *Arugat ha-Bosem*, p. 121.