

Shubert Spero is Irving Stone Professor of Jewish thought at Bar Ilan University, and rabbi emeritus of the Young Israel of Cleveland, Ohio.

MAIMONIDES AND THE SENSE OF HISTORY

The thought of Maimonides (1135–1204), recognized as the leading philosophical figure of the late Jewish Middle Ages,¹ has been characterized as “consciously unhistorical.”² This judgment, on its face, is rather disturbing. For, if we are correct that the concept of history is central to Judaism, then it would appear that Maimonides and perhaps most of medieval Jewish thought badly misunderstood the biblical and rabbinic heritage! We must therefore attempt to identify those aspects of Maimonides’ thought that might justifiably be characterized as unhistorical.

It is, of course, correct that Maimonides declared “the reading of books found among the Arabs describing historical events, the government of Kings and Arabs generally, is a waste of time.”³ It is also true that Aristotle, of whom Maimonides was an appreciative follower, articulated a basic dichotomy between universal concepts, which are the proper subject matter of human understanding, and the awareness of particular things such as historical events, which are epistemologically inferior. Thus, Maimonides’ priorities in terms of Judaism would be the universal concepts of philosophical theology, the generalizations of science, and then the rules and principles of the Halakhah, which include morality.⁴ On this view, historical narrative is important only for the few general principles which can be inferred from it for human conduct or knowledge of God.⁵

However, in order to penetrate the thought of Maimonides it is necessary to consider not only the basic assumptions of Scholastic and neo-Aristotelean philosophy, but also the main thrusts of the biblical and rabbinic tradition, which almost compel its explicators to deal with history at various points. Thus, faithful to an ancient tradition, Maimonides prefaces his major work on the Halakhah with an historical chronology of the transmission of the Torah

tradition in which he enumerates forty generations of teachers from Moses to R. Ashi, who presided over the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud.⁶ A great many halakhic questions in themselves are dependent upon historic elucidation, such as the occurrence of the sabbatical (*shemithah*) years, the events surrounding Chanukkah, and the special rabbinic enactments of the Second Temple period. For most of these matters, Maimonides relied upon aggadic material in the Talmud and midrashim.

Another task which turned Maimonides' attention to history was his method of researching the reasons for the commandments. He was convinced that the commandments were aimed primarily at correcting various practices associated with idolatrous beliefs, popular from the time of Abraham.⁷ While Maimonides' conception of history from the periods covered by the Bible and the Talmud closely approximate the traditional view, the important question remains: How does he deal with the period beyond that?

It has been noted that "Maimonides has little to say about the five centuries from the rise of Mohammed to his own birth."⁸ Be this as it may, we shall attempt to show that implicit in Maimonides' understanding of the belief in the Messiah is a view of the purposes and mechanisms of historical development which leads to an overall conception of the redemption. This conception is realistic, activist, and relates the processes within history to the restorative and utopian conditions which will appear at its "end."

Maimonides' understanding of Providence or God's involvement in human history derives essentially from his deep conviction that man's uniqueness resides in his capacity to make free moral choices, a gift from God which He is not about to rescind or compromise. Accordingly, we note a number of instances in which God wishes to bring about certain goals in history, but adjusts the means to the psychological conditions of the people. Maimonides claims that an examination of nature and Torah reveals that God achieves His ends through "successive and gradual development."⁹ It is against the nature of man "to go suddenly from one extreme to the other," or "suddenly to discontinue that to which he has been accustomed." Therefore, God did not demand of Israel a completely new form of worship, but simply adapted to His service the customary forms of Temple, animal sacrifice, incense, fasting, and prayer. There was thus achieved by indirect and gradual means the Divine aim of blotting out traces of idolatry, and of establishing the principles of the existence and unity of God. Similarly, we are told that after the Exodus, God did not lead the people via the originally intended, direct road to the Land of Israel because He feared that they would be unable to handle the hardships they would encoun-

ter.¹⁰ God therefore used another route, longer and more devious, in order to arrive at the original goals.

What is clear from all of this is “that the nature of man is never changed by God by way of miracle.” Not, says Maimonides, that it is impossible for God to do so, but “it has never been His will to do this, and it never will be.”¹¹ The entire mission of the Prophets—the giving of the Law and the holding out of reward and punishment—is based upon the premise that God wishes man to come to Him voluntarily, from the exercise of free choice. In short, God as the consummate pedagogue works *around* the principle of man’s freedom. In designing the Torah and guiding history, God seeks to achieve His goals by adapting the means to fit man’s range of responses. This often results in the use of means which are circuitous and appear contrary to the spirit of the goals. For example, God utilizes primitive forms of worship such as temples and animal sacrifices to wean people away from paganism and train them in the service of the one God.

How does Maimonides see the overall task of history? He accepts the implication of Genesis that originally man was monotheist. Gradually, however, over a period of time, errors were made, belief became corrupted, and idolatry made its appearance.

In the days of Enosh people committed a grievous error. Enosh and his associates among the sages of that generation reasoned that, since God had created the stars and the spheres to guide the world and placed them in a high position as servants doing his will, they must be worthy of praise and reverence. It undoubtedly is his will that people pay homage to those whom he had elevated, just as an earthly king regards it as a tribute to himself when his counselors are honored. Thereupon they began building temple to the stars, offered to them and exalted them in prayers, all in order to comply with what they erroneously thought to be the will of God. “And this was the very core of idolatry.” After a time there arose among them false prophets, who demanded in the name of God that there be erected an image and that the entire people with its women and children worship in front of it. So they invented images of stars, caused their erection in temples, under trees and on mountain tops, and persuaded the people that these idols were capable of helping or harming them. Still later, there began arising other liars who announced that that very star, sphere or angel had spoken to them and asked that it be worshiped in such and such a fashion. In the course of time different rituals devoted to the worship of many such idols originated in various parts of the world. Soon the name of God himself was forgotten and the populace knew only those images of wood and stone and those temples built of stone in whose worship it had grown up. Their scholars and priests finally believed that there actually was no god but the stars and spheres for whose sake those images had been made. There remained but a few select individuals, such as Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Shem and Eber, who still recognized the one and only God. These men (although not prophets in the technical sense, because never recipients of direct orders from God) served as teacher and guides for their few associates.¹²

Maimonides, as did the rabbis before him, sees the history of man up until Abraham as a slow decline into idolatrous paganism.

The entire thrust of the Biblical account beginning with Abraham is the effort to reinstate the kingdom of God by first creating a single community of believers in whom knowledge of the one God would be reflected in their beliefs, morals, and entire way of life.¹³ This second period of history, which is partially covered by the biblical account, consists of the gradual education of Israel through the observance of the *mitzvot* and their own historical experience. The Jewish people thus become not only the secure repository of the knowledge of God on earth, but also the dynamic means by which knowledge of God is disseminated to the rest of mankind. But just as the decline into idolatry was gradual, so the regaining of the knowledge of the one God will be gradual. And just as the education of Israel was achieved by God utilizing methods which respected her freedom, so the education of mankind with respect to its freedom. The picture that emerges is very similar to that rabbinic schema of history which views it as consisting of three two-thousand year segments.¹⁴ The degeneration into idolatry corresponds to the "two thousand years of chaos," the renaissance of monotheistic belief and its enshrinement in the community of Israel are the "two thousand years of Torah," while the world-wide spread of monotheism can be identified as "two thousand years of the days of the Messiah," a period in which developments will bring closer the coming of the Messiah and the universal redemption.

However, Maimonides maintains that during these last two periods of history a negative dynamic continues to operate.¹⁵ Those individuals, groups, and institutions which have learned to exploit the idolatrous beliefs of people and have become attached to pagan values are not willing to leave the field to the forces of God. Maimonides sees Israel's subjection to the Four Kingdoms not merely as punishment, but as repeated efforts by the forces of idolatry to conquer the minds of men and defeat the efforts of those who would propagate the knowledge of God. In the past, the forces of paganism attempted to do this either by military conquest and persecution of the people of Israel or by engaging the representatives of monotheism intellectually in an attempt to refute their beliefs by reason or by ridicule.

In surveying recent history, Maimonides observes a new phenomenon. Instead of being confronted by world empires representing various secular cultures, the Jew finds himself subject to "kingdoms" which are predominantly religious in character. The heirs of the Roman Empire had become an arm of the Christian Church while the great lands of Mesopotamia, North Africa, and the Iberian Peninsula have fallen to the Moslems. What does this change signify? According to Maimonides, this is just a new and desperate tactic on

the part of the forces of idolatry. Realizing they have no future in their original form, these purveyors of paganism concoct two religions which appear monotheistic but contain admixtures of paganism, and which are designed to compete with and draw people away from Judaism, the true monotheism. Here we have an exquisite instance of the dialectic of history; of how men exercising their freedom and ingenuity in the pursuit of selfish and evil ends, unwittingly carry forward the providential goals of history. In spite of their flawed character, both Christianity and Islam represent advances over earlier idolatrous beliefs and constitute progress in the education of mankind toward the kingdom of God. The “daughter” religions help to familiarize half the population of the planet with the basic concepts and values of the “mother” Judaism.

Says Maimonides:¹⁶

Daniel long ago prophesied about Jesus of Nazareth, who imagined he was the messiah and was killed by a court of law. As it is said: “And men of violence among your own people shall elevate themselves to establish a vision, but they shall fail.”¹⁷ Is there any failure greater than this? All the Prophets declared that the Messiah will redeem Israel, save them, gather their dispersed, and strengthen their [obedience to] the commandments. But the [Jesus] caused Israel to perish by the sword and to have their remnant scattered and degraded. He replaced the Torah and led astray most of the world to serve a god besides the Lord.

However, man does not have the power to grasp the thoughts of the Creator of the world, for our ways are not His ways and our thoughts are not His thoughts. All those words of Jesus of Nazareth and of this Ishmaelite who arose after him are only to make straight the paths for the messianic king and to prepare the whole world to serve the Lord together. As it is said: “For then I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech so that all of them shall call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.”¹⁸

How will this take place? The whole world has already been filled with words about the Messiah, the Torah, and the commandments. These words have spread to distant islands and among many peoples with uncircumcised hearts. They discuss these words and the commandments of the Torah. Some say these commandments were once true, but now have become void and are not to be followed in all generations. Others say that they contain secret meanings and are not to be understood according to their plain sense, that the Messiah has already come and revealed their secrets. [But] when the messianic king truly arises and he has success and is elevated and exalted, all of them will return at once and know that their fathers inherited a lie and that their prophets and their fathers led them astray.

In Maimonides’ letter to the Jewish community of Yemen, which sought his advice in regard to a certain messianic pretender, Maimonides speaks of the historic task of the Jewish people to resist the various attacks of the Kingdoms. He reminds them of the prophetic promise that no instrument wielded against Israel will succeed. To those who would destroy the Jew physically the response

must be survival, even if it means forsaking lands and domiciles long lived in. Those who would engage us in debate must be met with logic and counterargument. In order to do this Judaism must be understood philosophically and formulated in a manner which permits rational demonstration. Those who would force us to exchange our faith for the counterfeit beliefs of other religions must be resisted with life itself. By thus remaining steadfast and loyal, the Jewish people becomes a powerful demonstration to the world that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, is One unlike other unities, that Moses is His true prophet and that the Torah in its entirety is spoken by God. To thus suffer and sacrifice for the Torah is the equivalent of "offering oneself as a whole offering on the altar of God" which is truly the glory and honor of the Jew.¹⁹

Here Maimonides uses language that is very similar to that found in the Book of Yossipon in connection with the martyrdom of certain Jews during the period of the Second Temple. What Maimonides appears to have done is to have raised the concept of martyrdom as self-sacrifice to a theological principle and applied it as the historic posture of the Jewish people in exile, as a whole. In this manner the Jew by his very suffering becomes a powerful force moving the world ever closer to the vision of the Prophet: ". . . and the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea."²⁰

In light of the above one is compelled to take issue with Gershom Scholem, who claims that Maimonides nowhere recognizes a causal relationship between the coming of the Messiah and human conduct.²¹ If there are forces operative in history that are "making straight the path for the messianic king and preparing the whole world to serve the Lord together," then a causal relationship *is* being affirmed. Furthermore, almost all of the conditions that will obtain during the messianic age (which, according to Maimonides, will not be miraculous or supernatural) can easily be conceived as developing gradually through natural means: "Sovereign rule will return to Israel"; "the scattered ones of Israel will be gathered together in Palestine"; "Israel will live in security with the wicked men of the world"; "there will be neither hunger nor war, neither envy nor rivalry"; "livelihood will come much easier to people"; "duration of life will increase."²² Indeed, some of these "utopian" conditions are well on their way to realization in our own times. Surely, if the messianic age is to be characterized by a world wide dissemination of the knowledge of God, then everything Maimonides has taught us about the ways of Providence should lead us to expect much of this to happen gradually and by natural means.

Because of the great influence of Maimonides as a halakhic decisor and because he chose to include philosophical elements in his halakhic work *Mishneh Torah*, his views of the Messiah and the messianic age have always been widely known and accorded special importance. With the same boldness with which Maimonides decided between conflicting views of talmudic rabbis in Halakhah, so did he carefully select from the variety of different teachings on the redemption, a very clear approach, consistent with his basic philosophic outlook on the nature of God and destiny of man, as well as with the stated eschatological promises of the Torah. Thus the messianic idea as such became one of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Jewish faith. At the same time he rejected apocalyptic and supernatural elements and instead ruled in accordance with those talmudic rabbis whose views were purely naturalistic.

The Messiah himself will not have to perform signs or miracles, nor will the messianic age introduced by the Messiah be characterized by changes in the natural course of the world. Maimonides accepted the view of Shemuel: "The only difference between this world and the days of the Messiah is the subjection of Israel to the nations" (which will be broken).²³ Scholem sums up Maimonides' views as follows: "Negatively, the Messianic age brings about freedom *from* the enslavement of Israel and positively, freedom *for* the knowledge of God. But to this end it is necessary to abrogate neither the law of moral order (Torah) nor the law of natural order. Neither creation nor revelation need undergo any kind of change. The binding force of the law does not cease and the lawful order of nature does not give way to any miracles."²⁴

According to Maimonides, therefore, the entire messianic transformation will take place *within* history and the age that follows will continue indefinitely *within* history. The ultimate criterion for the legitimacy of the Messiah is historical success: whether he fully carries out his endeavors.

Another factor that focuses attention on actual historical conditions is the thoroughgoing skepticism which Maimonides encourages. There is no way of knowing with certainty whether any particular events are unerring "signs" of the coming of the Messiah, nor is there any way of knowing with certainty whether any particular messianic pretender is indeed the Messiah until the very end of the process. Thus, although a particular leader may be a bona fide Davidic descendant who persuades Israel to obey the Torah and to follow him, and who begins to wage the battles of the Jewish people, his Messiahship is still only presumptive (*be-hezkat she-hu mashi'ah*) until all of the requirements, including his rebuilding the Temple and his universal recognition, become fact.

Because of Maimonides' emphasis on the centrality of the personal Messiah ("... if there arise a king from the House of David who studies and practices the Torah . . .") it would appear that nothing in history can be regarded as messianic unless it begins with the appearance of a person who claims to be the Messiah. This, however, is not correct. A close reading of Maimonides reveals that he leaves room for all sorts of interesting historical possibilities.

Concerning all these things (wars of Gog and Magog and the coming of the Prophet Elijah) and others like them, no one knows how they will come about until they actually happen . . . since the words of the Prophets on these matters are not clear. Even the sages have no tradition regarding them. . . . In any case the *order* and *details* of these events are not religious principles. . . .²⁵

Since no one knows the *order* of these messianic events, it is entirely possible that such things as the ingathering of the dispersed of Israel, or great wars launched by the nations against the Jewish people in the land of Israel, may occur prior to the appearance of the Messiah himself. Because we are not clear about the "details," it is possible that the tradition concerning the appearance of a "Prophet" who will prepare the hearts of the people to receive the Messiah may be fulfilled by a widespread religious revival triggered by a number of prophet-like, charismatic teachers. It is true that Maimonides is explicit in stating that the ingathering of the dispersed is one of the accomplishments which constitute a test of the authenticity of the Messiah. However, this is because in Maimonides' day the ingathering was considered so difficult and improbable that it would undoubtedly remain undone until the coming the Messiah. There is nothing in the text or logic of Maimonides' views that would preclude the identification of unusual events in recent history, particularly those associated with *Eretz Yisrael*, as being *potentially* or *possibly* messianic. If the only issue is the *order* of events, then there are ample views in rabbinic literature that envision even the establishment of the Sanhedrin or even the rebuilding of the Temple as independent of the Messiah.

It is wrong to ascribe to Maimonides the view that "repentance will come simply as a sudden eruption by Divine decree."²⁶ While he does refer to the talmudic view that Israel is destined to repent prior to the coming of the Messiah, this implies neither that it will be "sudden" nor by "decree." On the contrary, Maimonides has assured us that "the nature of man is never changed by God by way of miracle."²⁷ It is reasonable to suppose that even as knowledge of God increases—including awareness of His power, His moral nature, and His love for man—so will the inclination of man to repent. And perhaps with the beginning of the fulfillment of the conditions of the

redemption, gratitude to the God of history will take the form of a return to His values.

It is true that Maimonides, writing in the Middle Ages, did not articulate a systematic “progress theory” of history. Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that had he been able to catch a glimpse of human development up to our times, he would have had no difficulty in grafting the pattern of later events onto his clearly enunciated principles, and thus fashion a recognizable progress theory of history.

The view of Maimonides that we have outlined here constitutes not only a “realistic” view of messianic development—redemption which will grow out of conditions developing in history—but one which can be characterized as “activistic.”²⁸ By this we mean that all is not dependent on God alone but that the human being can by certain activities hasten the coming of the Messiah.

Of course, to the extent that repentance was always considered a necessary and to some a sufficient condition of the redemption, it was evident that the Jew could hasten the end by study and observance of the Torah, sincere prayer, moral living, and acts of lovingkindness.

But Maimonides goes further and opens a tantalizing window of activist opportunity by his special rulings regarding the renewal of the *semihah* (ordination), which is the juridical basis for the reestablishment in Israel of proper course of law and even of the Sanhedrin itself.²⁹

It appears to me that were all the wise men in *Eretz Yisrael* to agree to appoint judges and ordain them, then they would be properly ordained with all the powers accruing thereunto, including the power to ordain others. And I believe that the Sanhedrin will be restored before the revelation of the Messiah and, indeed, this will be one of the signs [of his coming], as it is written “And I will restore your Judges as before.”³⁰

Here we have a perfect instance of Maimonides’ activism. Instead of viewing the renewal of the Sanhedrin as a restorative element to be brought about by the Messiah, Maimonides reverses the relationship. When the Jewish people and their leaders will reach a certain level of spiritual sensitivity, they will feel impelled to exercise the halakhic powers at their disposal and renew the process of ordination, which will help prepare the way for the Messiah. “This will undoubtedly come about when God will prepare the hearts of the people and they will multiply good deeds and their desire for God and His Torah will grow and their righteousness will increase.”³¹

Taken together, these aspects of Maimonides’ thought strongly suggest a conscious sense of history no less profound and no less comprehensive than that of the Prophets or the sages. But Maimon-

ides has brought their historical sense up to date by adding a very perceptive appreciation of the major new development of his time: world domination by nations and empires characterized by fanatical adherence to the new religions of Christianity and Islam.

To be able to see them as hostile forces which constitute an immediate threat to the existence of the Jewish people and their message, and, at the same time, to recognize their contribution to the increase in knowledge of the one God in the world as making straight the path for the Messiah, remains a tribute to the steady historic vision of Moses Maimonides.³²

NOTES

1. Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York, 1964), p. 152.
2. Salo W. Baron, "The Historical Outlook of Maimonides," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. VI, 1934-1935, p. 11.
3. *Commentary on the Mishneh*, Sanhedrin 10:1.
4. *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (London, 1942), pp. 384-5.
5. *Ibid.* pp. 380-84.
6. Baron, "Historical Outlook," pp. 96-98. See also footnotes 185-190.
7. See discussion in Amos Funkenstein, *Teva, Historyah, u-Meshiḥi'ut etzel ha-Rambam* (Israeli Ministry of Defense, 1983).
8. Baron, "Historical Outlook," p. 82.
9. *Guide*, pp. 322-3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 324; Exodus 13:7.
11. *Guide*, p. 325.
12. *Mishneh Torah, hilkhot avodah zarah* 1:1,2.
13. *Avot* 5:2, 3.
14. Sanhedrin 97a.
15. Epistle to Yemen.
16. *Mishneh Torah, hilkhot melaḥim* 11:4 (uncensored text).
17. Daniel 11:4.
18. Zephoniah 3:9.
19. Epistle to Yemen.
20. Isaiah 11:19.
21. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), p. 31.
22. *Commentary on the Mishneh*, Sanhedrin 10:1.
23. Sanhedrin 91b.
24. Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, p. 30.
25. *Hilkhot Melaḥim 11:4* (uncensored text).
26. Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, p. 31.
27. *Guide*, p. 325.
28. Funkenstein, *Teva*, pp. 68-69.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-67.
30. *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 4:11, *Commentary on the Mishneh*, Sanhedrin XX.
31. *Commentary on the Mishneh*, Sanhedrin I. It was this "activist" view of Maimonides which provided the basis for the proposal of Jacob Berab in sixteenth-century Safed to revive ordination, and which triggered the controversy with Levi ben Habib.
32. Similar views were expressed by Yehuda Halevi and Bachya Ibn Pakuda.