

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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MAIMONIDES' APPROACH TO DOCTRINAL BELIEFS

A Letter to Chasdai ha-Levi

INTRODUCTION

Scholars are baffled by the apparent inconsistencies in Maimonides' approach to doctrinal beliefs. In matters of Halakhah, Maimonides consistently maintains the inviolability of traditional law. Rabbinic laws drawn from Biblical sources, religious practices, and ritual observances must be pursued undeviatingly on the grounds of "an inheritance of the community of Jacob."

By the same token, Maimonides approaches philosophic speculation as a scientific discipline without engaging in any presuppositions or preconceived notions. Like his philosophic master, Aristotle, Maimonides insisted that metaphysical notions be grounded in rational analysis and demonstrated proof. He was prepared even to abandon the concept of *creatio ex-nihilo* if the Aristotelian proofs for the eternity of the universe had been scientific rather than dialectical.¹ Likewise, his rejection of all anthropomorphism, his allegorical interpretation of Scriptural and Talmudic expressions as well as his uncompromising espousal of the pure spirituality of God, were the product of a mind attuned to scientific objectivity, philosophical inquiry and metaphysical truth.

However, when we come to basic Jewish dogmas, theological hypotheses, and doctrinal beliefs, we are faced by a paradox. The position that Maimonides takes in the *Guide* or his *Code* is not always the same position he propounded earlier in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* or later in his *Letters*. In the Letter to Chasdai ha-Levi which follows, Maimonides argues that metaphysical truths are beyond scientific proof. Only prophecy can validate creation, God's existence, etc. Once we establish the authenticity of the prophet, we need no further evidence for the prophetic assertions. We must accept them in good faith.

On the other hand, in his *Guide*, he laid down the dictum "*ki ein emunah ela achar tziyur*" — "For there is no belief except after an apprehension." "Belief," he continues, "is the affirmation that what has been apprehended is outside the mind just as it has been apprehended in the mind" (*Guide*, I:50). Moreover, in the

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sixty third chapter he interprets the Biblical phrase "I shall be what I shall be" (Exodus 3:14) in a manner that corresponds to the Aristotelian proof for the existence of God which is based upon the concept of necessary existence. Before accepting the charge to speak to the people of Israel, Moses insisted on a philosophic frame of reference to prove God's existence. "God taught Moses how to teach them and how to establish amongst them the belief in His existence namely by *ehye asher ehye* . . . God exists but not in the ordinary sense of the term; in other words, He is the existing Being who is the existing Being, that is the Being whose existence is absolute. The proof which he was to give consisted in demonstrating that there is a Being of absolute existence."²

Similarly, in his Commentary on the Mishnah, Maimonides lists the resurrection of the dead among the basic Jewish dogmas while in his *Code* or in his *Guide* no mention is made of this dogma. In these works, *hashorat ha-nefesh*, eternal bliss of the individual soul, becomes the central theme of his eschatology, overshadowing the belief in resurrection.

Any student of Maimonidean thought must rule out the notion that Maimonides in his later major works repudiated some of the ideas propounded earlier in his Commentary on the Mishnah. There is no evidence for this position especially when we consider that in most of his "Letters," he invariably reiterates his belief in the basic Jewish dogmas as enunciated in his Commentary. The letters were written in the main either during or after he had completed his major works, for he constantly makes reference to them.

However, we must consider the possibility that many of the letters were written by his students, especially Ibn Akin. The latter was highly sensitive to the criticism and charges of heresy levelled against his master and skillfully attempted to clear Maimonides by reverting to the original formulation of basic dogma as propounded in the Commentary.³ In the letter that follows, written most likely by his student Ibn Akin, we find the kind of apologetics which would support this view.

He writes: . . . "My revered teacher (Maimonides) abjured me in the strictest terms not to expose or hand over his manuscript to anyone nor to have it transcribed . . . Inasmuch, however, as I am not at liberty to convey to you the exact wording of my revered teacher, I shall attempt to alter the language but retain as much as possible the content in order that you may apprehend the basic concepts of the responses."

However, the most plausible resolution to the seemingly incongruities in Maimonidean theology is the notion that Maimonides, consistent with his general methodology, projected a two-fold mode of discourse. Just as in his interpretation of Scriptures

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he projected a methodology based on a two-fold scheme of "sitrei-Torah" and "Torah," concealed knowledge and literal Torah, so in his approach to doctrinal beliefs he pursued two methods: One, an inherited dogma, to be accepted on the grounds of tradition; the other, a dogma to be accepted only as part of one's own religious consciousness. The first catered to the credulous; the second, to the select, inquiring mind. The ideal end is for man to grow and mold his beliefs of inherited dogma into a religious consciousness grounded in intellectual excellence and scholarship.

In one of the most absorbing chapters in his first book of the *Guide*, Maimonides asks why people generally are not concerned with metaphysical notions. He quotes Alexander Aphrodisius to the effect that arrogance and vanity, subtlety of the subject matter and lack of capacity to comprehend are the causes preventing man from engaging in philosophical inquiry. Maimonides, however, offers a fourth reason which is crucial: *ha hergel v'halimud* — habit and traditional training. He then goes on to say: "For men by nature and inclination love that to which they are accustomed . . . This happened to the multitude with regard to the belief in His corporeality and many other metaphysical truths . . . All this is due to people being habituated to and brought up on texts . . . whose external meaning is indicative of the corporeality of God and of other imaginings with no truth in them, for these have been set forth as parables and riddles" (*ibid.* 31).

One may accordingly approach doctrinal beliefs as an inherited dogma, but the true religionist strives to develop his religious hypothesis into rational concepts acceptable to the inquiring, speculative mind. Even some of the *mitzvot* which may appear to be arbitrary decrees, possess inherent reason that tend to intellectualize faith as is indicated in the following letter and in his other works.

With regard to the voice of God that Moses heard, Maimonides offered two explanations in the letter to Chasdai. There is first the sophisticated, personalistic explication, which is implicit in his *Guide*, namely, that Moses' intellectual potential had been sufficiently actualized as to be able to come into communion with God. Then there is the traditional doctrine of an especially created voice for the occasion as repeated in Scriptures that came through a Divine cloud, which represents the emanation of God's goodness that becomes manifest in the Divine admonitions for the benefit and goodness of man.

Thus we find that even in his letters, where the tendency was to project religious belief as an inherited dogma, a rational explanation for a traditional doctrine is set forth with clarity and boldness. One then cannot speak of an early Maimonidean ideo-

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logical scheme, repudiated by a later Maimonidean intellectual world view. We should rather assume that Maimonides set forth two modes of discourse and that the crucial point of departure is for each individual to transcend himself from one mode unto the other.

The following letter to Chasdai ha-Levi is a most significant one. It deals with ten crucial doctrinal beliefs addressed by Chasdai to Maimonides. The answers in most instances represented both modes of discourse. Maimonides asked one of his students to write the letter in his name.

Chasdai ha-Levi of Barcelona was an exponent of Maimonidean philosophy. He took part in the struggle between the followers and opponents of Maimonides and severely arraigned the anti-Maimonists for their fanaticism and blind faith. He translated several philosophical works from Arabic into Hebrew.

What follows is my translation of the first part of a letter to Chasdai. The second part of the letter will appear in a subsequent issue of TRADITION.

LEON D. STITSKIN

A MAIMONIDEAN LETTER TO R. CHASDAI ha-LEVI

A Student of Maimonides writes:

Part I

I wish to assure you at the outset that my revered teacher (Maimonides) abjured me in the strictest terms not to expose or hand over to anyone his manuscript nor to have it transcribed . . . I accepted his admonition, but in deference to your erudition and because of my affection for you as a scholar, in whom one may confide concealed knowledge as well as philosophic notions, I decided not to refuse your request. Inasmuch, however, as I am not at liberty to convey to you the exact wording of my revered teacher, I shall attempt to alter the language but retain as much as possible the content in order that you may apprehend the basic concepts of the responses.

May the Almighty, blessed be He, enlighten us with the light of His Torah!

Here then is, in essence, his reply to your inquiry about the

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The Divine speech heard by our teacher Moses was surely an especially created voice, a creation of nature. Others maintain, however, that it was no physical speech or voice, but that the soul of Moses, having been actualized by its grasp of the highest intellectual concepts, had become sufficiently attuned to apprehend and even "hear," as it were, the truth which constitutes Divine knowledge. To be sure, the process of this apprehension we can never fathom.

I would most certainly agree with this view, if Scripture had not repeated consistently the statement "And he heard the voice speaking to him" (Numbers 7:89). Moreover, the portion dealing with the giving of the second scrolls does not confirm this notion, which leads us to the conclusion that the speech was an especially-created voice emanating perchance from the clouds, since God always appeared to Moses in a cloud, as we find in *Ki Tisa* (Exodus 33:9). The cloud represented the Divine goodness emanating from the Divine. When this Divine Presence abided with Moses he formulated the words in accordance with the voice he heard. (The words thus formulated were always of a salutary nature) for only goodness comes from God, as we say, "It pleases the Lord for the sake of his righteousness to magnify the Law and make it strong." This is generally the case with the righteous that their merits abide with their offspring. The greatest good that can come to the righteous is when benefits accrue through them to others.

By the same token, all heavenly works are totally salutary and the entire Torah is actually a code of ethics designed to safeguard the human soul. Consequently, every *mitzvah* has a reason and purpose. The very fact that our sages posed the question, "why the Torah has not revealed the reasons for the *mitzvah*" (Tal. B. *Sanhedrin* 21), is an indication that all *mitzvot* have reasons, but they were not disclosed. The rabbis also maintained that King Solomon discovered the reasons for all commandments save for the ritual of the red heifer. Consider further the statement by Moses in Deuteronomy (4:6), "For this is your wisdom and your understanding before the eyes of all nations that shall hear all these statutes. And they shall say, 'nothing but a wise and understanding people is this great nation'." If the *mitzvot*

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were simply decrees devoid of any rational explanation or purpose, what kind of Divine wisdom will the nations of the world find inherent in those commandments?⁴

4. You asked a question concerning parents and children: Why do we maintain that the good fortune of children depends upon the meritorious acts of the parents? Furthermore, what benefit can accrue to the parents by virtue of their offsprings' good deeds considering that during the former's lifetime the attachment to the latter was only of a physical nature? To be sure, this relationship constitutes an unfathomable mystery. For in some fashion the seeds will always retain some imprint of their forebears. This is what we find in reference to Adam, that when he sinned, he brought death to the world.⁵

5. You inquired about the status of the nations of the world. You should know that the Almighty requires only a compassionate heart. The intent of the heart is crucial. Accordingly, our sages declared "The pious of the nations of the world will inherit a portion in the hereafter" (*Tosefta*, San. 13), provided they apprehend what is possible to apprehend of the knowledge of the Creator and that they perfected their souls by means of ethical excellence. There is no doubt that one who perfects his soul in the pursuit of ethical conduct and Divine knowledge will gain immortality as the rabbis further point out. "Even a pagan who studies the Torah of Moses may be considered in the category of a high priest" (*Tal. B. B. Kama* 38). The essence of the matter is that the whole object of the Torah is the perfection of the faculty of the soul to apprehend the Creator. As David said, "I have always set the Lord before me, that being at my right hand, I might not be moved" (Psalms 16:8).

No wonder that the highest praise bestowed upon Moses was that "the man Moses was very humble" (Num. 12:3), for humility is the ultimate quality in the soul's realization.⁶ Compare also the assertion of our sages "Be exceedingly humble in spirit" (*Aboth* 4:4).

There is an anecdote about a philosopher who was sailing on a ship and accidentally sat down on a dunghill. A sailor came along and urinated on him. The philosopher lifted his head and laughed. "Why do you laugh?" asked the sailor. "Now I am con-

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vinced,” the philosopher replied, “that my soul has attained the highest degree of perfection inasmuch as I was completely immune to any embarrassment.” Our sages likewise declared: “While wisdom has established symbolically a crown for the head, humility has created, as it were, a heel for the shoe” (Tal. J. *Shabbat* 1:3), for the latter constitutes the ideal of all virtues.

Some philosophers maintain that it is rare to find a person who has attained moral excellence and ultimate wisdom. Such a person, if we should find one, would be referred to as a saint by virtue of possessing these superior qualities. This is actually the aim of our Torah and the reason for the mitzvot — to perfect the soul with ethical demands and faith in the Creator. Compare the Scriptural assertion, “Nothing but a wise and understanding people is this great nation” (Deut. 4:6).

There can be no doubt that the patriarchs, as well as Noah and Adam, although they did not observe the Torah imperatives, were not consigned to Purgatory (*gehenom*) but ascended to the highest degree of virtue for having attained what is necessary for perfection. This stage of perfection cannot be consummated by the practice of fasting, prayer and outcry alone without knowledge and faithfulness in truth as we read in Scripture, “Thou art near in their mouth and far from their reins” (Jer. 12:2).⁷ The underlying principle of all existence is that nothing endures everlastingly, save the Creator.

NOTES

1. *Guide* II:15.

2. This proof based upon necessary existence has the advantage of not being dependent upon the Aristotelian notion of external matter. It runs as follows: There is no doubt that there are existing things, as things perceived by the senses. Now there are only three alternatives conceivable. Either all are without beginning and without end or all are subject to genesis and decay or some are and some are not. The first hypothesis is obviously inadmissible as we see things coming into existence and are subsequently destroyed. The second case is likewise inadmissible for if everything has the possibility of destruction, the species being constant, the causes of the destruction are the

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same in the first moment of its existence as at any other moment for "that which is enunciated of a whole class of things as possible is necessarily actual." (That is to say, for an individual, destruction is possible but not necessarily actual, because it depends on external causes. But that which is predicated of a whole species must be conveyed by generic terms or abstract generalizations which denote the sum of the properties common to all individuals of the same class, and is therefore not only possible but actual.) Consequently, nothing whatever would exist. But as we see things existing and find ourselves in existence, we conclude that since there are undoubtedly beings of a temporary existence, there must also be an eternal being that is not subject to destruction and whose existence is real and not possible (See *Guide*, II:1. Friedlander note 3) and Aristotle's "On the Heavens" (Bk. I:10) "Suppose that the world was formed out of elements which were formerly otherwise conditional than as they are now. Then (1) if their condition was always so and could not have been otherwise, the world could never have come into being (2) and if the world did come into being then, clearly, their condition must have been capable of change and not eternal."

This proof is traced to Aristotle by practically all his commentators in their interpretation on the *Metaphysics*.

3. See *Tradition*, vol. 5, No. 2, for translation of "A Letter of Maimonides to T. Joseph Ibn Akinin," by L. Stitskin. Maimonides comments on his pupil's sensitivity to the insults levelled against Rambam. "I am generally inclined to forgive and pardon insults heaped upon me. My student, however, enraged by a youthful hot temperament, cannot endure such vituperations."

4. Ibn Daud in *Emunah Ramah* (I: p. 4) quotes this Biblical verse to point out that Judaism is not just a regimen of *mitzvot* but a philosophy.

5. Cf. Abraham Bar Hiyya, *Hegyon ha-Nefesh* (p. 32) who maintained that the acts of the children have no effect upon the deceased parents except in two instances: learning of Torah and returning the debts of the deceased.

6. Cf. *Shemonah Perakim* (ch. 4). Maimonides mentions the quality of humility as the mean between arrogance and self-abasement. Abraham Bar Hiyya in *Hegyon ha-Nefesh* quotes the rabbis as holding up the quality of humility which the Almighty selected for the people of Israel in order to remove them from mundane matters of this world and become attached to the splendor of the world to come.

7. Cf. *Guide* (1:50). Rambam quotes similar Scriptural verse to define true meaning of belief.