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THE PURSUIT OF SCHOLARSHIP AND ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY: REVISITING MAIMONIDES' COMMENTARY TO *PIRKEI AVOT*

INTRODUCTION

Readers of Maimonides' commentary to *Pirkei Avot* cannot fail to notice his long excursive remarks on the Mishna in the fourth chapter,

R. Tsadok said, "Do not make [the words of Torah] into a crown in which to glorify oneself, and not into a spade with which to dig." Similarly Hillel said, "One who abuses the crown will be lost." And so you learn: one who derives personal benefit from the words of Torah removes his life-force from the world.

In his commentary to this Mishna, Maimonides denounces the professionalization of the rabbinate, and offers an ardent condemnation of Torah scholars who are not economically self-sufficient.¹

In this article I contend that Maimonides' attack is directed at structured systems of communal support and is not a condemnation of all financial arrangements that enable scholars to pursue their studies. In part I of this article, I address this distinction in Maimonides' writings and explore his attitudes toward the pursuit of scholarship and economic self-sufficiency. In part II, I present Geniza documents that demonstrate the relevance of Maimonides' comments in light of the economic realities of Egypt in Maimonides' day.

I.

A careful reading of Maimonides' commentary to *Pirkei Avot* shows that Maimonides is not opposed to an individual's decision to assume rabbinic responsibilities, nor is he necessarily lambasting individual scholars who

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forgo a mundane profession and rely on the financial support of others. Rather, Maimonides is only protesting realization of these lofty goals through the imposition of *communal* taxes or the depletion of *communal* funds.² However, a scholar who is supported by the generosity of individuals acting as private citizens is not the subject of Maimonides' ire.³ Only he who imposes on the community, and relies on structured communal remunerations, is the subject of Maimonides' critique.

This distinction between communal support and individual private support is bolstered by the fact that Maimonides himself was supported during the writing stage of the *Mishneh Torah* by his merchant brother, R. David Maimonides, until the latter's untimely passing at sea.⁴ That Maimonides would author such an impassioned condemnation of relying financially on others, and then brazenly defy his own charge, is unlikely.⁵

Indeed, Maimonides worded his commentary to *Pirkei Avot* with the utmost care, and clearly addresses his adversaries:

*They have established laws*⁶ for individuals and communities. *They* have caused people to think with utter foolishness that [supporting Rabbis and scholars] is *obligatory*. . . . This is all incorrect and is not supported by the Torah or the words of our sages.

Who are these adversaries? What “established laws” are they responsible for? Clearly he is not referring to people who privately support Torah scholars, but rather to those who advocate structured communal systems that *require* the financial support of citizens.⁷

Certainly Maimonides endorses an individual dedicating himself to a life of Torah study and refraining from pursuing a profession, *so long as such activity does not require burdening the general population*. This is expressed in his famous comments at the end of *Hilkhot Shemitta ve-Yovel* (13:13):

Not only the tribe of Levi but every single individual from among the world's inhabitants whose spirit moved him and whose intelligence gave him the understanding to withdraw from the world in order to stand before God to serve and minister to Him, to know God, and he walked upright in the manner in which God made him, shaking off from his neck the yoke of the manifold contrivances which men seek—behold, this person has been totally consecrated and God will be his portion and inheritance forever and ever. God will acquire for him sufficient goods in this world just as He did for the Priests and the Levites. Behold, David, may he rest in peace, says: “Lord, the portion of my inheritance and of my cup, You maintain my lot” (Psalms 16:5).⁸

This passage has been quoted as a contradiction of Maimonides' remarks in his commentary to *Pirkei Avot*.⁹ However, it may be that no contradiction exists. Maimonides here is addressing the fact that the tribe of Levi was not granted a portion in the land of Israel, nor were they allowed to partake in the spoils of military conquest. Rather, their charge was to "withdraw from the world" and shake-off "contrivances which men seek," that is, to shun luxury and embrace abstemiousness. Through dedication to God's work they were afforded a heightened level of divine assistance in the sphere of material survival. Maimonides is not discussing what the members of the tribe of Levi are *entitled* to, but on the contrary, what they must *forgo* in order to fulfill their role as ministers of God.¹⁰

Maimonides' agenda is elucidated in the paragraph that precedes the above quoted excerpt (*Hilkhot Shemitta ve-Yovel* 13:12):

Why did the tribe of Levi not acquire a share in the land of Israel and in its spoils together with their brothers? Because this tribe was set apart to serve God and to minister to Him, to teach His straight ways and righteous ordinances to the multitudes, as is written: They shall teach Jacob your ordinances and Israel Your law" (Deut. 33:10). Therefore, they were set apart from the ways of the world; they do not wage war like the rest of Israel, nor do they inherit land or acquire anything for themselves by their physical prowess. They are rather the army of God, as is written: "Bless, Lord, his substance" (Deut. 33:11). He, blessed be He, acquires (goods) for them, as is written: "I am your portion and your inheritance" (Numbers 18:20).

In this context, Maimonides adds that if an individual of another tribe is moved to similarly dedicate himself to God's work, he too must adopt a spartan lifestyle, but will be blessed, in return for his austerity, with divine assistance and spiritual elevation. This is Maimonides' intent when he declares (*Hilkhot Shemitta ve-Yovel* 13:13):

Behold, this person [who dedicated himself to God] has been totally consecrated, and God will be his portion and inheritance forever and ever. God will acquire for him sufficient goods [i.e., enough to sustain himself] in this world just as He did for the Priests and the Levites.

Maimonides is not stating that this individual, who has dedicated his life to God, can rely on financial support from the community; rather Maimonides is stating that such an individual can also sustain himself on less and will reap the benefits of heightened spirituality and increased divine assistance.¹¹

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Indeed, this ideal of material abstinence, and reliance upon God's assistance, is precisely the attitude Maimonides advocates in his commentary to *Pirkei Avot*. After decrying those who mistakenly rely on the community he states:

When we look into the words of our sages we do not find that they requested money from others, they did not receive money for the lofty and precious institutions, nor for the Exilarchs, the judges, the teachers of Torah, the great ones, nor for any individual of the nation. Rather we find that in every generation, in all the communities, that there were some who were poor to the poorest degree, and others rich to the richest degree. And Heaven forbid should I suspect those generations that they were not people of good deeds and charitable, for if a pauper would extend his hand—they would fill his house with gold and jewels. However they did not want it, for *they sufficed with the work that they did to support themselves—whether it be much or little*. . . . We do not find any scholar from among the poor scholars that condemned the people of his generation for not providing them with wealth. Heaven forbid it! *Rather, they on their own were pious individuals who believed in truth, and they believed in God and the Torah of Moses, through which man inherits eternal life*, and they did not permit themselves to ask for money from mankind.

Additionally, in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, chapter 3, where Maimonides addresses the issue of Torah scholars receiving communal handouts,¹² the structure of Maimonides' discussion also highlights the centrality of this ideal to Maimonides' worldview. After denouncing the pursuit of Torah at the expense of community charity and championing Torah scholars who engage in a profession, Maimonides immediately declares,

The words of Torah do not abide with one who studies listlessly, nor with those who learn amid luxury and high living, but only with one who mortifies himself for the sake of Torah, constantly enduring physical discomfort and not permitting sleep to his eyes nor slumber to his eyelids.¹³

Maimonides' intention is clear: if one wishes to experience scholastic excellence and complete devotion to God's Torah, the proper path to follow is to adopt a modest, if not frugal, lifestyle. Life's necessities should be provided for through one's own sweat and toil, but ultimately, the Torah scholar will succeed legitimately only if austerity and moderated asceticism¹⁴ are practiced.¹⁵

One line in *Hilkhot Shemitta ve-Yovel* might erroneously be taken to imply that individual scholars may avail themselves of communal financial support. Maimonides writes, “God will acquire for him sufficient goods [i.e., enough to sustain himself] in this world just as He did for the Priests and the Levites.” However, this is a reference to the fact that the Priests and Levites were charged to sustain themselves on less, and is not a reference to the actual *mattanot* (benefaction) the Priests and Levites were once entitled to. Maimonides is addressing contemporary society and advocating a life of Godly dedication in a time where the actual *mattanot* were no longer available, even for biological Priests and Levites. Moreover, note the end of Maimonides’ excursus in *Pirkei Avot* where he outlines communal policies. There he enumerates privileges that he feels *are* appropriate to grant to Torah scholars and rabbinic leaders. These are certain rights in the marketplace, special investment opportunities, and freedom from certain taxes.¹⁶ He concludes: “These are the laws established by God, just as He established *mattanot* for the Priests and tithes for the Levites.” Just as in *Pirkei Avot* the *mattanot* are a paradigm for various privileges, but not the right to financial support, so too in *Hilkhot Shemitta ve-Yovel* the model of *mattanot* does not imply a right of financial support.¹⁷

II.

Despite initial hesitations, Maimonides says that the subject matter at hand is so important it must be discussed.

Even though I decided that I would not speak about this charge for it is clear, and [furthermore] that I surmise that my words will not be accepted by most great Torah scholars, and perhaps not by *any* of them, I [nonetheless] reneged from my decision and I will speak about it, disregarding those before me and my contemporaries.

Why was Maimonides so concerned with this issue? Why did he feel so compelled to pen an extended discussion specifically on this issue?

Prof. Isadore Twersky suggests that Maimonides’ strong pronouncement expressed his aversion to the protocols of the Babylonian Gaonate. After the fruitful and laudatory tenure of the early Gaonic leaders of the Babylonian academies, the title and position of Gaon was exploited and granted to undeserving individuals who used bribes in

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place of scholarship and piety as a means to acquire the honorific title. Maimonides blamed the societal acceptance of allocating *communal* funds for scholars and rabbis on the structural corruptions of the Gaonate in Babylonia.

Fully conscious of the fact that his forthright criticism would be uncongenial to most scholars, he repudiated the hierarchic-dynastic structure of the Gaonate and denounced their managerial methods, i.e., the maintenance of a retinue of scholars at public expense by relentless importuning for contributions. Oblivious of predecessors or contemporaries, he challenged the conventional proofs and values on which the system rested.¹⁸

Hence, Maimonides' sharp words were an impassioned manifestation of his disregard for the Gaonate, and served to disenchant his contemporaries of their authority.

In light of Geniza documents, another explanation of Maimonides' passion regarding the allocation of communal funds to support scholars and rabbis is forthcoming, and reveals an additional element in Maimonides' intentions when composing his commentary to *Pirkei Avot*.

Geniza documents include communal records from Fustat, Egypt in the late 12th century, contemporaneous with Maimonides' tenure in that city. These include financial accounts of the *kodesh* (the pious foundations) and contain meticulous documentation of its expenditures. The *kodesh* provided a wide range of services, including maintenance and repairs for communal property, the acquisition of oil and other needs of the synagogues, charity for the needy, and other financial responsibilities. The need to set priorities implicit in the accounts, as well as the resultant economic realities of 12th century Fustat, sheds light on Maimonides' passion.

In a document¹⁹ labeled "Accounting for Elul and Tishri 1181," the total expenditure for the *kodesh* of Fustat totaled 409 dirhems. Of that amount, 42 dirhems were allocated for repairs and maintenance (10%), 35 for taxes and municipal expenses (8%), 41 for synagogues (10%), 201 for scholars and officials (49%), and only 90 as actual charity for orphans (22%). While half of the *kodesh* funds were used for scholars and officials, only a quarter were used for actual charity. In the next record,²⁰ "Accounting for Marheshvan 1181," out of 412.5 dirhems listed as expenditures only 50 dirhems, or 12%, were allocated for orphans.

Prof. Moshe Gil's findings²¹ of fifteen financial records of the *kodesh*, spanning twenty years, yields the following totals for aggregate expenditures of 4100 dirhems:²²

Repairs and Maintenance	1212 dirhems	29.6%
Taxes and Municipal Expenses	441 dirhems	10.8%
Synagogues	328 dirhems	8%
Scholars and Officials	1867 dirhems	45.5%
Charity	251 dirhems	6.1%

Prof. Mark Cohen also notes the relatively low amount of *kodesh* funds granted to the poor: ²³

The vast majority of the income supported stipends or salaries for scholars or officials . . . this contrasts sharply with late medieval and early modern European Jewish communities, where the needs of the poor, particularly the sick poor, took priority. . . . ²⁴

It seems likely that when Maimonides arrived in Egypt he was appalled by the conditions he encountered vis-à-vis the allocation of communal funds, and therefore felt compelled to denounce the status quo. In his commentary to *Pirkei Avot* Maimonides stresses that communal funds should rightfully be granted to true charitable sources, such as crippled individuals and the infirm elderly. Such individuals, who are *unable* to work and provide for themselves, are the proper recipients of communal funds, writes Maimonides. This pronouncement is especially pertinent and timely in light of the Geniza documents' attestation to the relatively insignificant amounts of funds allotted to charity.

Knowledge of the Egyptian milieu might also account for Maimonides' change of heart cited previously: "Even though I decided that I would not speak about this charge . . . I [nonetheless] reneged from my decision and I will speak about it." It seems possible that Maimonides overcame his initial hesitation *after* arriving in Egypt. Upon arrival in Fustat and witnessing what he considered to be a gross perversion of the proper societal infrastructure, Maimonides rescinded his decision and expressed his condemnation.

Though Maimonides' attack may have been partially motivated by the degeneration of the Babylonian Gaonate, it was also a contemporary reaction to contemporary flaws in the economics of Egyptian Jewish society. Maimonides' obsession reflects his concern for contemporary life and his passion to influence his surrounding for the betterment of society.

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CONCLUSION

Maimonides' extended discussion in his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* is understood properly only within the larger context of Maimonides' writings, personal behavior, and realities of his day. While Maimonides' commentary to *Pirkei Avot* does indicate disapproval of a system that requires the community to support Torah scholars, the tone is also a reflection of the Egyptian milieu, and must be viewed as such.

The primary object of Maimonides' disapproval is structured communal support for rabbinic figures and Torah scholars. He does not condemn those who forgo a mundane profession to dedicate themselves to spiritual and intellectual growth. However, such individuals must realize this lofty goal only through a life of moderation and a willingness to sacrifice material luxuries.

NOTES

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1. Maimonides' stringent opposition to the financial support of rabbis and Torah scholars encountered heavy opposition from many later scholars. See for example R. Yosef Karo's *Kesef Mishna (Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, chapter 3) and most notably, R. Shimon b. Tsemah Duran's *Magen Avot* where he presents a lengthy defense of the practice and demonstrates a talmudic and rabbinic tradition that justifies the allocation of communal funds for such purposes.
2. Maimonides was vigorously opposed to an individual becoming a ward of society, and used passionate language when broaching the subject. See for example, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Matnot Aniyyim* (10:18).
3. Although not the subject of Maimonides' ire, such behavior may not be ideal according to Maimonides. Maimonides' approach here must be squared with his statements in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (3:10) where he seemingly contends that a profession is a necessary ingredient for the balanced spiritual health of even the greatest scholars. An additional indication that Maimonides did not consider forgoing a profession as an ideal may present itself in a letter Maimonides wrote to his student R. Joseph b. Judah concerning the latter's interest in teaching Torah in Baghdad. Maimonides advises against teaching as a profession. Unlike Yitshak Shilat (*Perush ha-Rambam le-Avot* [Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot Publishing, 1994], 74), I do not believe that enough details of the financial arrangements and realities of that particular case are known with certainty to determine the

impact of Maimonides' response on our discussion. However, what does emerge is ambivalence on Maimonides' part—on the one hand he is not willing to prohibit the arrangement, but at the same time he counsels against it. This ambivalence may indicate that he viewed such an arrangement as less ideal, even though financial support was provided by individuals and did not constitute a burden on the community.

Further analysis is needed to decipher Maimonides' true ideal, for some passages indeed admit a reality of Torah study to the exclusion of a profession. See for example *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Tefilla* (6:8) and also the implication of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (3:9).

4. The exact arrangements of this financial situation are unknown. Did R. David actually provide for Maimonides with his own money, or did R. David merely invest and manage Maimonides' personal money on his behalf? Y. Shilat correctly notes (*Iggerot ha-Rambam* [Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot Publishing, 1987], 229) that Maimonides' implies the latter in a letter to R. Yefet ha-Dayyan lamenting the death of R. David.
5. Even if one would wish to argue that receiving financial support from a family member is a special situation and does not establish his approbation of all private financial arrangements, the fact remains that Maimonides' financial arrangement with his brother proves that he was not categorically against scholars receiving monetary support to further their studies.
6. The italics in all quoted statements of Maimonides are mine.
7. One may argue that in light of Maimonides' understanding of the Talmud's prohibition against receiving payment for *teaching* the Oral Law (see *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:7 and *Perush ha-Mishnayot Nedarim* 4:3), it should be prohibited for a scholar to receive financial support in any context, whether private or public. However, if this prohibition would also prohibit an individual scholar from receiving financial support for pursuing his studies, even private support, then Maimonides comments in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 3:11 would be most peculiar. In *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 3:11 Maimonides states that one who receives financial support for studying Torah desecrates God's name and disgraces the Torah. If the prohibition in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:7 indeed prohibits receiving any financial support, then such a statement in 3:11 would not only be superfluous, but also inaccurate. Clearly, Maimonides' comments regarding teaching the Oral Law in 1:7 is not relevant to our discussion (it is very doubtful to suggest that Maimonides' comments in 3:11 address only one who studies the Written Law!).

Perhaps the distinction is between teaching as a profession and individual study and scholarship. The context in 1:7 is a father's responsibility to procure a *teacher* for his child - this teacher may not be paid for teaching the Oral Law. However, in 3:11 Maimonides deals with the individual scholar seeking the "crown of Torah" through dedication to individual study and growth, and such activity is not included in the prohibition of 1:7.

8. R. Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 139. Maimonides' formulation here is often quoted by those wishing to garner rabbinic support for the establishment of *kollelim*. As we shall demonstrate, such utilization of this Maimonidean passage is debatable.

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9. See for instance the self-titled commentary of R. David b. Zimra (Radvaz) or R. Mas'ud Rakah's *Ma'aseh Rokah* commentary on *Hilkhot Shemitta ve-Yovel* (13:13).
10. Or in another construction: Maimonides' stress is on what *God* will provide for them, and that they therefore do not need to rely on the community.
11. See the commentary of Radvaz and R. Mas'ud Rakah mentioned above where a similar reconciliation is suggested. R. Rakah also suggests that perhaps the individual addressed in *Hilkhot Shemittah ve-Yovel* has financial support from elsewhere, such as independent wealth, and therefore does not pose a burden on the community. Others suggest that the end of *Hilkhot Shemitta ve-Yovel* represents Maimonides' *thought* concerning "an elevated state of utopian existence for a God fearing Jew, rather than an operative point of law," (from R. Steven Weisberg's essay *An Enigmatic Passage from the Rambam's Mishneh Torah* on the Maimonides Heritage Center website <http://maimonidsheritagecenter.org>) and similar to the concluding segments of many of Maimonides' books in *Mishneh Torah*, these words are meant to be philosophic speculations and not legal instructions. This approach is also found in R. Isadore Twersky's *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 330.
12. We should note that Maimonides quotes many scriptural sources to support himself in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, chapter 3, and this is no doubt due to his realization that his position is against the traditional view, as he notes in his prefatory remarks to his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, "I surmise that my words will not be accepted by most great Torah scholars, and perhaps not by *any* of them."
13. *A Maimonides Reader*, p. 68. See also earlier in chapter 3 of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, where Maimonides states regarding the Torah scholar: "He must not aim at acquiring Torah as well as riches and honor at the same time. This is the way for the study of the Torah. A morsel of bread with salt you must eat, and water by measure you must drink; you must sleep upon the ground and live a life of hardship, while you toil in the Torah."
14. For Maimonides' opposition to extreme asceticism, see *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De'ot*, chapter 3.
15. According to our presentation, Maimonides' statements in chapter 3 of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* such as "A morsel of bread with salt you must eat . . . ," should be understood as an admonishment against receiving communal support and not as an imperative to suffer, nor to sustain an uncomfortable existence while studying Torah.
16. Maimonides specifically mentions the *jizya*, the famous poll tax established by the Muslim authorities, required of all *dhimmi* (non-Muslims) residing in Muslim lands.
17. I later found in R. Yehudah b. Mano'ah Seid's commentary on Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* titled *Ner Mitsva* (11:55) a similar insight, that Maimonides' reference to *mattanot* in *Hilkhot Shemitta ve-Yovel* is not intended as an allowance for Torah scholars to collect communal handouts, but must be understood in the light of Maimonides' direct reference to *mattanot* in his commentary to *Pirkei Avot*. See also Maimonides' letter to

- R. Efraim of Tyre in *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 193-194.
18. *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, 82-83
19. Moshe Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza* (Netherlands: Brill, 1976), Document 80, p. 327.
20. *Ibid.*, Document 81, p. 330
21. *Ibid.*, p. 117. Gil's numbers are slightly different from mine as he seemingly grouped financial support for orphans of rabbinic families in his category for "Scholars and Officials" and not as "Charity." I have chosen to group such allocations as charity, and yet the imbalance between funds allocated to scholars and officials and funds allocated for charity (including orphans of rabbinic families) is still overwhelmingly significant.
22. Gil concludes his analysis with the following insight:
- The relatively high proportion going to scholars and officials, as against charity, is confirmed not only by the data of our accountings, but also by a glimpse into the mind of a donor. Joseph b. Abraham of Aden wishes a share of his profits to be distributed for pious purposes. He asks one of his friends in Fustat to pay 10 dinars to the Head of the yeshiva; 14 to several scholars and judges he specifies; 10 to the synagogue of Dammuh; 20 to the poor.
23. Mark R. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 202. Cohen partially attributes this to the influence of Islamic society, and on pages 202-203 writes, "The middle eastern Jewish pattern was doubtless reinforced by the example of the Islamic *waqf* in its role as an instrument for building and supporting mosques and schools and for subsidizing scholars."
24. Cohen does, however, identify other communal institutions that were solely dedicated to providing for the poor. See his discussion subtitled, "*Tambui*, *Quppa*, and Foreign Poor," in *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt*