

Medieval Israel Class #5: The Rationalists: Maimonides and the Maimonidean Controversy

Timeline

- 1099 Crusaders take Jerusalem
- 1138 Maimonides born in Cordoba Spain
- 1148 Almohade Muslims take Cordoba, Maimon family forced to flee
- 1165 Maimon family arrives in the land of Israel and then continues to Egypt
- 1169 Maimonides' brother David drowns in the Indian Ocean
- 1185 Maimonides becomes doctor to the royal house of the Sultan
- 1180s First wave of the Maimonidean controversy
- 1187 Saladin defeats the Crusaders
- 1191 Richard the Lion Heart takes back parts of Israel
- 1194 Nachmanides born in Gerona Spain
- 1204 Maimonides dies in Egypt, is buried in Tiberias
- 1230s Second wave of controversy, centered in Provence, Nachmanides writes to northern French rabbis
- 1232 Dominicans in Provence burn Maimonides' books
- 1242 Talmud burned in Paris
- 1267 Nachmanides arrives in the land of Israel
- 1270 Nachmanides dies in Akko
- 1291 end of Crusader kingdom
- 1300 -06 Third wave of controversy
- 1313 Eshtori HaParchi arrives in the land of Israel

From Spain to Morocco, On the Run From the Almohades

It behooves the victim for the sake of his religion to escape and flee to the desert and wilderness, and not to consider separation from family or loss of wealth. For they are a slight sacrifice and a paltry offering due to God, King of kings, possessor of all things, the Lord thy God, whose Name is glorious and awful. God may be trusted to compensate you well in this world and in the world to come.

We have noted that godly and pious folk who are animated by a desire to get acquainted with the truth and those who are engaged in its pursuit, rush to the divine religion and, wend their way from the most distant parts, to the homes of scholars. They seek to gain increased insight into the law with the concomitant hope that God will amply reward them. How much more is it one's duty to go into exile, if the question of observing the whole Torah is at stake. (Iggeret HaShmad)

Arriving in the Land of Israel

...And on the first day of the week, the ninth day of the month of MarCheshvan, I left Jerusalem for Hebron to kiss the graves of my forefathers in the Cave of Machpela. And on that very day I stood in the Cave and I prayed, praised be G-d for everything. And these two days, the sixth (when he prayed on Temple Mount in Jerusalem) and the ninth of Mar-Cheshvan I vowed to make as a special holiday and in which I will rejoice with prayer, food and drink. May the Lord help me to keep my vows.

You Think You're Busy?

I live in Fostat, and the Sultan lives Cairo. The distance between them is 4000 cubits [a mile and a half]. My duties to the Sultan are very heavy. I must see him every morning to check on his health. If one day he doesn't feel well, or one of the princes or the women of his harem doesn't feel well, I cannot leave Cairo that day.

It often happens that there is an officer or two who needs me, and I have to attend to healing them all day. Therefore, as a rule, I am in Cairo early each day, and even if nothing unusual happens, by the time I come back to Fostat, half the day is gone. Under no circumstances do I come earlier. And I am ravenously hungry by then. When I come home, my foyer is always full of people – Jews and non-Jews, important people and not, judges and policemen, people who love me and people who hate me, a mixture of people, all of whom have been waiting for me to come home.

I get off of my donkey, wash my hands, and go out into the hall to see them. I apologize and ask that they should be kind enough to give me a few minutes to eat. That is the only meal I take in twenty-four hours. Then I go out to heal them, write them prescriptions and instructions for treating their problems.

Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes – I swear to you by the Torah – it is two hours into the night before they are all gone. I talk to them and prescribe for them even while lying down on my back from exhaustion. And when night begins, I am so weak, I cannot even talk anymore.

Because of all this, no Jew can come and speak with me in wisdom or have a private audience with me because I have no time, except on Shabbat. On Shabbat, the whole congregation, or at least the majority of it, comes to my house after morning services, and I instruct the members of the community as to

what they should do during the entire week. We learn together in a weak fashion until the afternoon. Then they all go home. Some of them come back and I teach more deeply between the afternoon and evening prayers.

That is my daily schedule. And I've only told you a little of what you would see if you would come. (Maimonides in a letter to Shmuel ibn Tibbon)

An Advocate Throughout the Jewish World

Therefore you shall pray, "Our God" and "God of our fathers," because Abraham, peace be with him, is *your* father. . . . There is no difference whatever between you and us. You shall certainly say the blessing, "Who has chosen us," "Who has given us," "Who have taken us for Your own" and "Who has separated us": for the Creator, may He be extolled, has indeed chosen you and separated you from the nations and given you the Torah. For the Torah has been given to us and to the proselytes, as it is said, "One ordinance shall be both for you of the congregation, and also for the stranger that sojourns with you, an ordinance for ever in your generations; as you are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord" (Num. 15:15). Know that our fathers, when they came out of Egypt, were mostly idolaters; they had mingled with the pagans in Egypt and imitated their way of life, until the Holy One, may He be blessed, sent Moses our Teacher, the master of all prophets, who separated us from the nations and brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence, us and all proselytes, and gave to all of us one Law.

Do not consider your origin as inferior. While we are the descendants of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob, you derive from Him through whose word the world was created. As is said by Isaiah: "One shall say, I am the Lord's, and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob" (Is. 44:5). (Maimonides Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte)

You mention that a certain man in one of the cities of Yemen pretends that he is the Messiah. As I live, I am not surprised at him or at his followers, for I have no doubt that he is mad and a sick person should not be rebuked or reprovved for an illness brought on by no fault of his own. Neither am I surprised at his votaries, for they were persuaded by him because of their sorry plight, their ignorance of the importance and high rank of the Messiah, and their mistaken comparison of the Messiah with the son of the Mahdi [the belief in] whose rise they are witnessing. But I am astonished that you, a scholar who has studied carefully the doctrines of the rabbis, are inclined to repose faith in him. Do you not know, my brother, that the Messiah is a very eminent prophet, more illustrious than all the prophets after Moses? Do you not know that a false pretender to prophecy is liable to capital punishment, for having arrogated to himself unwarranted distinction, just as the person who prophesies in the name of idols is put to death, as we read in Scripture "But the prophet that shall speak a word presumptuously

in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die." (Deuteronomy 18:20). What better evidence is there of his mendacity, than his very pretensions to be the Messiah.

How odd is your remark about this man, that he is renowned for his meekness and a little wisdom, as if these were indeed the attributes of the Messiah. Do these characteristics make him a Messiah? You were beguiled by him because you have not considered the pre-eminence of the Messiah, the manner and place of his appearance, and the marks whereby he is to be identified. (Epistle to Yemen, c 1172)

Why Write the Mishneh Torah?

In this age, with afflictions mightily intensified, the pressure of the hour weighing heavily upon everybody, when the wisdom of our wise did perish and the prudence of our prudent was hid, all commentaries, treatises, and responsa which the Gaonim compiled and considered by them as clear text are preplexities in our day and only a select few comprehend the subject matter thereof, not to speak of the Talmud itself, both the Babylonian and the Jerusalemean, the Sifra, Sifre and Tosefta, which require a broad understanding, a soul endowed with wisdom and lengthy reflection whenafter one may find the right path therein, to ascertain the things which are forbidden and the things which are permitted, or to fathom the how and why of the other laws of the Torah.

Therefore, have I, Moses son of Maimon, of Spain, girded up my loins, and, supporting myself upon the Rock, blessed be He! made a comprehensive study of all those books and minded myself to construct out of all these compilations a clear summary on the subject of that which is forbidden or permitted, defiled or clean along with the other laws of the Torah, the whole scope in pure language and concise style, so that the Oral Torah be entirely methodical in the mouth of everybody, without query and without repartee, without the contentious thus of one and such of another, but clear text, cohesive, correct, in harmony with the law which is defined out of all these existing compilations and commentaries from the days of our Holy Master till now;

so that all laws be open to young and old, whether they be laws concerning each and every commandment or whether they be laws concerning matters instituted by scholars and prophets. The main object of the matter being, that no man shall have a need of any other compilation in the world for any law of the laws of Israel, but this compilation shall be a cyclopedia of the whole Oral Torah together with a code of the statutes, customs and edicts which were enacted since the days of Moses our Master until the close of the Talmud, even as they were interpreted for us by the Gaonim in all their compilations which were compiled by them since the Talmudic era. Therefore, have I named this compilation Mishnah Torah; for, when one studies Holy Writ first and thereafter reads this Work, he obtains herefrom a complete knowledge of the Oral Torah, having no need to

read any other book in between them. (Maimonides, Introduction to the Mishneh Torah)

And Why Some Thought He Shouldn't Have Written It

He intended to improve but did not improve, for he forsook the way of all authors who preceded him. They always adduced proof for their statements and cited the proper authority for each statement, this was very useful for sometimes the judge would be inclined to forbid or permit something and his proof was based on some other authority. Had he known there was a greater authority who interpreted the law differently, he might have retracted. Now therefore I do not know why I should reverse my tradition or my views because of the compendium of this author. . .why should I rely upon his choice when it is not acceptable to me. . . (Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquierres AKA the Raavad)

Rabbi Avraham Ben David Disagrees

The World to Come harbors neither body nor aught of a concrete form, save only the souls of the righteous divested of body as are the ministering angels. Inasmuch as it harbors no concrete forms there is no need there for eating, drinking, or other of the bodily necessities of the sons of man in this world; neither will any of the many things which happen to bodies in this world come to pass there, as, for instance, sitting down, standing up, sleep, death, sadness, mirth or the like. (Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuva 8:2)

The World to Come harbors neither body nor aught of a concrete form etc.

This man's words are in my eyes nigh to such who assert that there is no resurrection to body but the souls alone. But, by the life of my head, this was not the opinion of our sages, may their memory be blessed! (Hasagot HaRaavad)

There are five categories of atheists;¹⁰ *Minim*. G. (1) he who says that there is no God and no Omnipotence; (2) he who says that there is an Omnipotence but that there are two or more such; (3) he who says that there is One Lord; but that He is corporeal and has a form; (Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuva 3:7)

He who says that there is One Lord but that He is corporeal and has a form.

Why does he call such one an atheist? Many greater and better than he followed this opinion according to what they saw in phrases, and more particularly in the texts of the Agadot (legends of the Talmud) which misdirect opinions. ! (Hasagot HaRaavad)

Greek Wisdom VS Torah

In the war of Titus they also decreed upon the crowns of brides, and they decreed that a person should not teach his son Greek.

And is Greek wisdom prohibited? But didn't Rav Yehuda say that Shmuel said in the name of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel: What is the meaning of that which is written: "My eye affected my soul, due to all the daughters of my city" (Lamentations 3:51)? There were a thousand children in my father's house, the princes' household. Five hundred of them learned Torah, and the other five hundred learned Greek wisdom,

The members of the house of Rabban Gamliel are different, as they were close to the monarchy, (Sotah 49)

Nachmanides Steps in But the Damage is Done

The entire country of France, its rabbis and princes. . .all of them have agreed to ban and to excommunicate every man who will lift up his hand to meditate in the book of Moreh Nevukhim and in the Sefer HaMada. . .this is the essential formula of your words, condensed to a little from much, a spark from a great fire which shall not be quenched.. .

You have not shown honor to the great Rabbi. . .he raised up the desolate house of our Talmud. . .how many dispersed of faith has he gathered. . .to how many hungry for wisdom is his bread given, his water sure! How many atheists who have put our Talmud to shame has he answered correctly!

If you [in France] are in the bosom of faith, soundly planted in the courtyards of tradition, will you not pay heed to those that dwell in the outermost parts? Was it for you, majesties of the Talmud, that [Maimonides] wearied himself? . . . Have you heard their [Greek philosophers'] words? Have you come astray by their proofs?

. . . When the books of our wisdom were lost in the destruction of our homeland, and it became necessary to study these [sciences] from the books of the Greeks and various peoples, hearts were attracted to apostasy. They began with glory and ended with disgrace. The Rabbi has made his books as a shield against punishment. . .to raise up those who are drowning. . . (Nachmanides' letter to the French rabbis, c 1238)

Maimonides and the Commandments

THERE are persons who find it difficult to give a reason for any of the commandments, and consider it right to assume that the commandments and prohibitions have no rational basis whatever. They are led to adopt this theory by a certain disease in their soul, the existence of which they perceive, but which they are unable to discuss or to describe. For they imagine that these precepts, if they were useful in any respect, and were commanded because of their usefulness, would seem to originate in the thought and reason of some intelligent being. But as things which are not objects of reason and serve no purpose, they

would undoubtedly be attributed to God, because no thought of man could have produced them. According to the theory of those weak-minded persons, man is more perfect than his Creator. For what man says or does has a certain object, whilst the actions of God are different; He commands us to do what is of no use to us, and forbids us to do what is harmless. Far be this! On the contrary, the sole object of the Law is to benefit us. Thus we explained the Scriptural passage, "for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is this day" ([Deut. 6:24](#)). Again, "which shall hear all those statutes (ḥuḳḳim), and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (ibid. 4:6). He thus says that even every one of these "statutes" convinces all nations of the wisdom and understanding it includes. But if no reason could be found for these statutes, if they produced no advantage and removed no evil, why then should he who believes in them and follows them be wise, reasonable, and so excellent as to raise the admiration of all nations? But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners or to warn against bad habits. All this depends on three things: opinions, morals, and social conduct. We do not count words, because precepts, whether positive or negative, if they relate to speech, belong to those precepts which regulate our social conduct, or to those which spread truth, or to those which teach morals. Thus these three principles suffice for assigning a reason for every one of the Divine commandments. (Guide to the Perplexed, 3:31)

the custom which was in those days general among all men, and the general mode of worship in which the Israelites were brought up, consisted in sacrificing animals in those temples which contained certain images, to bow down to those images, and to burn incense before them; religious and ascetic persons were in those days the persons that were devoted to the service in the temples erected to the stars, as has been explained by us. It was in accordance with the wisdom and plan of God, as displayed in the whole Creation, that He did not command us to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service; for to obey such a commandment it would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used; it would in those days have made the same impression as a prophet would make at present if he called us to the service of God and told us in His name, that we should not pray to Him, not fast, not seek His help in time of trouble; that we should serve Him in thought, and not by any action. For this reason God allowed these kinds of service to continue; He transferred to His service that which had formerly served as a worship of created beings, and of things imaginary and unreal, and commanded us to serve Him in the same manner; viz., to build unto Him a temple (Guide to the Perplexed, 3:32)

Nachmanides and the Purpose of the Torah

We have yet another mystic tradition⁴⁹ *Zohar Yithro 87a*: “The whole Torah is the Name of the Holy One, etc.” See also my Hebrew commentary, p. 6 for a broader discussion of this matter. that the whole Torah is comprised of Names of the Holy One, blessed be He, and that the letters of the words separate themselves into Divine Names when divided in a different manner, as you may imagine by way of example that the verse of *Bereshith* divides itself into these other words: *berosh yithbare Elokim*. This principle applies likewise to the entire Torah, aside from the combinations and the numerical equivalents of the Holy Names. Our Rabbi Shlomo [Rashi] has already written in his commentaries on the Talmud⁵⁰ *Sukkah 45 a*. concerning the manner in which the Great Divine Name of seventy-two letters is derived from the three verses: *And he went*,⁵¹ *Exodus 14:19*. *And he came*,⁵² *Ibid., Verse 20*. *And he stretched out*.⁵³ *Ibid., Verse 21*. It is for this reason that a Scroll of the Torah in which a mistake has been made in one letter’s being added or subtracted is disqualified [even though the literal meaning remains unchanged], for this principle [that the whole Torah comprises Names of the Holy One, blessed be He], obligates us to disqualify a scroll of the Torah in which one letter *vav* is missing from the word *otham* — of which there are thirty-nine fully-spelled ones in the Torah — [despite the fact that the same word appears many times without a *vav*], or if he [the Scribe] were to add a *vav* to any of the other deficient ones [that is, words which could be written with an additional *vav* but are not so written]. So it is in similar cases even though it matters not one way or another on cursory thought. (Nachmanides Introduction to his Torah commentary)

His statements are preposterous. They “heal the great hurt superficially. . . . Furthermore, this will not cure the perverse Egyptian concept but will rather enhance it. The wicked Egyptians worshipped Aries and Taurus (ram and bull) because they ascribed to these animals special powers, and therefore did not eat them. Now if they are offered up as sacrifices to God, this would bestow the highest honor and distinction, and this is what they actually do. . . . In order to counteract that distorted idea it would be more proper to eat to one’s delight the very animals they consider forbidden and abominable

Behold, when Noah and his three sons came out of the ark – there were no Chaldeans or Egyptians in the world – he offered up sacrifices which pleased God as the Torah states “And the Lord smelled the sweet savor” (Gen. 8:21), and as a result He said in his heart, “I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake”. Similarly: “And Hevel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and the fat parts thereof. And the Lord had respect to Hevel and to his offerings” (Gen. 4:4), although at that time there was no trace of idolatry in the world. . . . Moreover, the sacrifices are described as: “My sacrifice, my bread for my offering made by fire, for a sweet savor to me” (Num. 28:2). It is unthinkable that

they lack any benefit or purpose other than the elimination of idolatry from its foolish followers.

A more acceptable rationale is the one set out as follows: Seeing that human conduct is expressed in thought, speech and action, God instituted that a person who has committed a transgression and offers a sacrifice, shall place his hands on it – symbolizing the deed, make a confession – as a reminder of the misused power of speech, and burn with fire the bowels and kidneys – which are the organs of thought and lust, and the legs – symbol of the human hands and feet, instruments which serve man in all his activities. And the blood shall be sprinkled on the altar – representing his life-blood. All this should make him realize that having sinned against God with his body and soul, he would deserve to have his blood spilled and his body burned. However, God in his infinite mercy, accepts this substitute for an atonement, and its blood in lieu of his, its main organs in place of his, the portions (of the sacrifice eaten by the priests) so as to sustain the teachers of the Torah that they may pray for him. Accordingly, the daily sacrifice is offered up because of the masses who are constantly caught up in the web of sin. This explanation is plausible and appeals to the mind even as the expositions of the Aggada. However, in the context of (mystical) truth, the sacrifices contain hidden mysteries... (Nachmanides commentary to VaYikra 1:9)

Eshtori HaParchi Escapes Persecution and Finds Controversy

Now I will arise with the assistance of God who protects me. With his help I will reveal in this generation – those who don't know the land of Israel – the borders of the tribes and their cities, as long as God helps me, as I stated at the start of my book. My purpose is that we should know where miracles took place so we can thank God for them.

I will mention locations in their Hebrew and Arabic names if they're known, since the names have changed slightly over the years.

This quest is more important to me than the mapping of the skies. Truth is, it's a similar task. Everybody knows there are 12 constellations in the heavens and 28 stages of the moon, and 8 forms – altogether 48 forms like the number of prophets, and also 7 spheres parallel to the number of women prophets. The spheres go round and round and the same stars pass over us repeatedly but there are few people who can recognize them. Similarly, there are towns in Eretz Yisrael and people pass through them and visit them but don't know them.

Therefore, I your humble servant, have come to relate to my brothers and my people what I have discovered in this matter. This is not due to my superior intelligence over those who don't dabble in these matters, but in the fact that I have researched and travelled more than other people. I have spent two years

in the Gallil seeking and investigating and an additional five years in the lands of the Tribes. I have not wasted any time during my spying of the land. Blessed be the Facilitator. (Kaftor VaPerach)