

INTRODUCTION

Moshe ben Maimon (known in Hebrew by the acronym “Rambam” and in English as Maimonides) attempted to bring about two far-reaching and profound transformations in the Jewish world. The first pertained to the *halakhah* (Jewish law, broadly construed) which he sought to change, in a fundamental way, from a fragmented and complex system to one that was transparent and unambiguous. In his great code *Mishneh Torah*, he consolidated the array of halakhic rules and norms and set them in an orderly, unified, and accessible structure. This brilliant work represented a mighty effort to extract the *halakhah* from the thicket of Talmudic discussions, marked by frequent disagreement and tangled debate. Maimonides set out to create a systematic structure, arranged by subject, from the randomly presented Talmudic material, in which a given issue might be dealt with in various places and diverse contexts. In his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides created an unambiguous, comprehensive, and exhaustive halakhic text; he did so by omitting the halakhic give and take, the disagreements, and the minority opinions that appear in earlier halakhic writings. This transformation of Jewish law was unprecedented in the world of *halakhah*, as Maimonides himself declared:

I have been preceded by *Geonim* and great scholars who compiled treatises and issued rulings, in Hebrew and in Arabic, on matters that are known. But not since our holy Rabbi [R. Judah the Prince, the editor of the *Mishnah*] and his holy associates has anyone resolved halakhic matters regarding the entire Talmud and all the laws of the Torah. (*Iggerot*, pp. 439–440)

In truth, even the *Mishnah* as edited by R. Judah the Prince at the beginning of the third century is not really a precedent for *Mishneh Torah*, for it retains unresolved disputes and minority opinions. A code such as *Mishneh Torah*—comprehensive, exhaustive, accessible, and unambiguous—had never been written before Maimonides’ time and has not been written since.

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The second transformation that Maimonides sought to accomplish was a substantive shift in Jewish religious consciousness. That far-reaching and penetrating transformation, in turn, had three main components.

First, there was the struggle against anthropomorphism, against seeing God as a personality possessed of a body and emotions. Maimonides gave new meaning to the biblical struggle against idolatry. As he saw it, that struggle goes beyond merely shattering the idols found in pagan sanctuaries; it extends to a confrontation with the internalized image of God envisioned by the person worshipping Him. A worshipper who envisions God as a merciful grandfather seated on a throne is worse than one who worships statues. A person worshipping a statue may see the statue as nothing more than a symbolic representation of the exalted God, but a worshipper of God who imagines Him as a human body internalizes the statue and the image into his own consciousness. Maimonides thus turned the biblical iconoclastic fervor toward the shattering of the mental image. Because the tradition itself, both biblical and midrashic, describes God in terms of a human body and attributes to it such emotions as anger, jealousy, love, and mercy, Maimonides is compelled to offer a systematic reinterpretation of Jewish religious language and of religious language in general.

The *second*, no less radical, element of the transformation in religious consciousness was the placement of the natural and causal order at the center of the divine revelation and presence. God's wisdom, as revealed in nature, was to be seen as the highest expression of His revelation—a position very much at odds with the conventional view that God's presence in the world was expressed primarily through the extraordinary and the miraculous. This fundamental change in religious sensibility away from miracle and toward causality, or, as Maimonides formulated it, from *will* to *wisdom*, required Maimonides to reinterpret some of Judaism's basic concepts, such as providence, creation, prophecy, and revelation, all of them seemingly based on a revelation of divine will and a fracturing of the normal causal order.

Third, the change in religious consciousness entailed ending the distinction between what was within the tradition and what was outside of it. In all his writings, halakhic as well as philosophical, Maimonides saw philosophy and science as the medium for attaining the heights of religious experience—love and awe of God. In his scientific and philosophical worldview, Maimonides belonged to the school of Aristotle and his Muslim interpreters, al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). Maimonides

accepted the insights offered by these scientific and philosophical streams as substantively true; accordingly, where they conflicted with Jewish tradition, he saw a need to reinterpret the tradition to reconcile it with these truths. But philosophy, in Maimonides' world, was more than a critical method of use in drawing conclusions about the world, conclusions to which traditional views had to be conformed. Beyond that, it was considered to be a spiritual discipline and way of life, a stance taken within the world, a system dealing first and foremost with how a person's life should be lived. Through philosophy and science, whose sources of information would appear at first blush to be outside the Jewish tradition, a person can reach the pinnacle of religious life and realize his perfection as a human being. Philosophy does more than criticize; it serves a redemptive purpose as well.

Any one of these three elements of the Maimonidean religious transformation could shake the entire Jewish tradition; occurring all at once, they could be devastating. Accordingly, instilling the new religious sensibility into the heart of Judaism required a new and comprehensive interpretation of the tradition. Moreover, in an effort to ground the basic insights of the religious transformation as binding and authoritative Jewish perspectives, Maimonides integrated them into his code, *Mishneh Torah*. He thereby rendered his spiritual and religious positions binding status, and he turned his halakhic treatise into a model of integration between philosophy and *halakhah*. To be sure, historically speaking, he did not succeed in bringing about the change in religious consciousness that he hoped for. Nevertheless, once Judaism had passed through the refining blaze of Maimonidean interpretation, it acquired a different and distinctive voice that offered a genuine alternative to the then conventional understanding. This distinctive Maimonidean voice shook the rafters in its day and posed a lasting challenge to all later Jewish thought.

Medieval Jewry had its share of great thinkers and halakhists, but Maimonides was the only one who attempted to bring about, simultaneously, two such profound and far-reaching transformations, one in the domain of *halakhah* and the other in that of philosophy. For that reason, none of them had such a complex set of relationships, comprising both esteem and polemic, with his contemporaries. The oft-stated comparison between Moses son of Maimon and Moses our Teacher (that is, the biblical Moses)—a comparison involving his self-perception and the way in which he was perceived by his contemporaries and by succeeding generations—is

no exaggeration and contains more than a kernel of truth. In his life and oeuvre, Maimonides belonged to the rare and unique species of religious reformers—even, one may say, of religious founders.

Maimonides' efforts to bring about these transformations lacked the institutional backing that might have provided him social and political support. He was not a "prince," as was R. Judah the Prince, the third-century editor of the *Mishnah*, and he did not lead either of the Babylonian yeshivas that saw themselves as heirs to the great court of Jerusalem of old. Born in Cordoba, Andalusia, in 1138, Maimonides at a young age became a refugee and an émigré following the rise of the Almohads, a radical Muslim movement that shattered the Judeo-Arabic culture of Andalusia. After years of wandering and persecution in North Africa, he reached Egypt in 1166. Following inner communal political struggles, he attained a position of leadership in the Egyptian Jewish community, serving as its head, and his stature continued to grow until his death in 1204. In no way, however, did his position provide an institutional framework that could legitimate the transformations he attempted to bring about. Moreover, Maimonides claimed no divine revelation that might have afforded his words a quasi-prophetic standing. He did not attribute his writings to pseudepigraphal ancient authorities, as did the authors of the *Zohar*, who ascribed their works to R. Simeon ben Yoḥai; and he did not presume to be the custodian of some received and authoritative secret tradition, transmitted to him through the generations, as did R. Moses Nahmanides a generation later (though he claimed that through his power of reasoning he had managed to revive such an old, lost tradition). In his effort to bring about vast changes, Maimonides, the refugee from Andalusia, relied on his own great ability, his prodigious halakhic and philosophical learning, his linguistic and literary Midas touch, and his profound inner certainty and sense of mission.



In this book, I will present the range and depth of the changes Maimonides sought to bring about, the nature of his oeuvre, and his self-perception and its relationship to his biography. The first chapter, "Moses the Man," is devoted to Maimonides' self-image and how it developed in response to the events of his life. From there, the book takes up Maimonides' teachings, treating them in the order in which his books were completed. Chapters 2 and 3 consider the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and the *Book of*

Commandments written in the third decade of his life, between the ages of twenty-three and thirty. These chapters consider whether these youthful works represent the efforts of a novice writer who has not yet found his unique and brilliant voice or are better seen as prefiguring the great works yet to be written, manifesting early stages of the lines along which their author would later develop.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 deal with *Mishneh Torah*, which Maimonides wrote in Egypt over a ten-year period while he was in his thirties, from 1168 to 1177. Chapter 4 considers the goal of *Mishneh Torah* and two different readings of the work: its character as a treatise and its status as an authoritative source in the eyes of its author. The fifth chapter analyzes the philosophical elements included in this great halakhic treatise, while the sixth is focused on Maimonides' concept of *halakhah* and how it informs the organization of *Mishneh Torah* and its halakhic rulings.

Chapters 7 and 8 take up the *Guide of the Perplexed*, a work that Maimonides began to write at the age of forty-eight and completed at the age of fifty-three, between 1186 and 1191. Maimonides himself affirmed that he had concealed the *Guide's* deeper meanings from the reader; hence, it is not surprising that the greatest work of Jewish thought through the ages is also the most enigmatic. The discussion here will offer the reader four possible readings of the book, differing substantively with regard to the key questions that preoccupy Maimonides. These chapters are meant not to determine the true meaning of the *Guide*, but only to present four possible understandings that close readings through the ages have identified. The concluding chapter will describe the common kernel shared by all the readings of the *Guide*, reflecting the religious transformation Maimonides tried to engender.

No one in the history of Jewish thought and philosophy has received more detailed attention than Maimonides. Intensive exegesis of his writings began while he was still alive, and generations of scholars and critics have gone through those writings with the most fine-toothed of combs. The greatest halakhists have repeatedly examined the sharply worded formulations in *Mishneh Torah* as a basis for halakhic rulings, and the treatise eventually gave rise to a mountain of interpretive literature—a literature that treated *Mishneh Torah* as an endless resource for understanding Talmudic passages and *halakhah* overall. Modern scholarship in the field of Jewish thought has carried on the tradition of the medieval interpretation of the *Guide*: it has attempted to determine the enigmatic meaning

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of the treatise, it has examined the Arab and Greek influences on Maimonides' thinking, and it has sought to parse the complex relationships between *halakhah* and philosophy in Maimonides' teaching and personality. Throughout the book I will avoid supplementing my arguments with detailed footnotes, which might interrupt the flow of the presentation and its clarity. It goes without saying, however, that the positions I take in this book are based on those of interpreters, scholars, and teachers who have come before me, from whose learning and wisdom I have greatly benefited. To fill the gap in acknowledgments, at least in part, I have included at the end of the book a bibliography of the works related to each chapter, identifying those that I have relied upon and whose positions I consider, directly or indirectly. The bibliography begins with a listing of abbreviated citations to the various editions and translations of Maimonides' writings used.

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