



Micah Goodman. *Sodotav shel Moreh ha-Nevukhim (Secrets of the Guide of the Perplexed)*. Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2010. 383 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-965-517-834-0.

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Mymonides and Hismonides: Reading Rambam in Israel Today

For eight centuries Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* has been a prime example of Churchill's riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. For these eight centuries Judaism's best and brightest have sought to crack the code of a book whose author informed us explicitly in his introduction that he wrote it esoterically. Interpretations range from those who see Maimonides as a kabbalist, as an eastern European-style yeshiva head, all the way through to those who, like Leo Strauss, were convinced that Maimonides was an Aristotelian *epikoros*. In his new book, *Secrets of the Guide of the Perplexed*, Micah Goodman joins the list of creative readers of Maimonides. His book also serves as a window into important aspects of contemporary Israeli spirituality, and it is on that facet of the book that I will focus in this review.

The mysteries surrounding the *Guide of the Perplexed* are surprising, since Maimonides (1138-1204) is the best known (and the least known) of all major Jewish figures. Here in Haifa where I live, the largest hospital is named for him, the grade school my children attended is named for him, and there is a grandiosely named (but inactive) Maimonides Research Institute—all this only in Haifa, a relative backwater in the Jewish world. Any person half-literate in the Jewish tradition will know that Rambam, as he is known in Hebrew (*Rabbi Moses ben Maimon*), is the author of the only authoritative statement of Jewish dogma. Maimonides' statement is so authoritative that in his attempts to get Habad/Lubavitch ruled heretical and excluded from the Orthodox world, David Berger, dean of Yeshiva University's graduate school of Jewish stud-

ies, relies entirely on Maimonides—as do the Lubavitchers themselves in their arguments concerning the “messianic” stature of their late rebbe. There is a very large Jewish bookstore in a New Jersey shtetl called Lakewood, boasting a huge section devoted entirely to Rambam (by which they mean *only* his code, *Mishneh Torah*). Sitting on my desk as I write these words I have a cake of “Rambam Soap” (“natural hypoallergenic soap, made of medicinal herbs, according to the teachings of Maimonides”). In bus and train stations across Israel one can purchase special “Rambam rings” with all sorts of wondrous properties. Jews who like to visit the graves of the righteous flock to the (alleged) tomb of Maimonides in Tiberias. In the decade leading up to the 800th anniversary of his death (1204-2004) over five hundred academic books and articles were published on Maimonides.

On the other hand, very few of those rabbis who exclude others as heterodox on the basis of Maimonides' “Thirteen Principles” have ever read the full text of the Principles (let alone in the original Arabic)—especially not in its Aristotelian context. Anyone who practices “Maimonidean medicine” today would be dismissed as a charlatan by Maimonides himself. Judaica Plaza in Lakewood stocks a variety of editions of the *Mishneh Torah* and scores of commentaries upon it, but keeps the few copies of the *Guide of the Perplexed* that it stocks, in a section called “Kabbalah” (of all things!). Nor is it likely that we will ever see Artscroll editions of the *Guide* (or others of Maimonides' not strictly halakhic works, since many of them are considered “too hot to handle” in the

yeshiva world). I would rather leave poor Maimonides in peace than even begin to wonder how he would react to Rambam soap and rings.

There is something amazing about Maimonides: few have read him, fewer have understood him, and yet everyone wants him in his or her camp, from the Rebbe of Lubavitch to the Rebbe of (Yeshayahu) Leibowitz. Why is that? Maimonides is one of those rare Jewish figures whose stature is such that if he can be shown to have held a position, then that position is considered Jewishly legitimate. He is also one of those rare figures without whom Judaism as we know it would be different. Aside from R. Judah the Prince, editor of the Mishnah, it is indeed hard to think of any figure from the time of Moses of Egypt to the time of Moses ben Maimon, who lived in Egypt, about whom this could be said. Indeed: "From Moses to Moses, there arose none like Moses!"

Had Maimonides not created the first systematic and only comprehensive code of Jewish law (*Mishneh Torah*) it is not likely that his successors in that project, R. Jacob ben Asher, author of the *Arba'ah Turim*, and R. Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, would have had the vision and courage to embark on what would have been, if not for Maimonides, a revolutionary innovation. Had Maimonides not placed Judaism on a firm dogmatic footing (with his "Thirteen Principles"), it would not be possible to speak of Jewish *orthodoxy* (*orthos* + *doxos* = straight beliefs) in any technical sense of the term. Had not Maimonides thrown the massive weight of his considerable authority behind the project of integrating science and Judaism there would have been little room in the medieval Jewish world and in the Orthodox world today for rationally oriented Jews—without Maimonides' authority it would be next to impossible to carve out a normative Jewish niche for those convinced that God gave human beings brains to use in an independent and rational fashion. Had Maimonides not sought to lower messianic fervor by treating messianism in the most naturalistic way possible, as a process which takes place in *this* world, without overt divine intervention, and with no violations of natural law, religious Zionism of the Rabbi Kook version would be impossible—for good or for ill, depending on your perspective. It takes a Maimonidean understanding of messianism to see draining swamps, building a secular state, establishing an army, etc., as stages in the *athalta de-ge'ulah* (beginning of redemption). Finally, had Maimonides not enunciated a universalist vision of Judaism it is likely that almost all Jews today would be even more particularist than they are.

My wife once pointed out to me that Maimonides' writings are like a Rorschach test: the way a person interprets Maimonides tells us a lot about that person. The late Rabbi Joseph Kafih, perhaps the twentieth century's pre-eminent Maimonidean, said much the same thing: Maimonides is like a mirror—people look into his writings and see themselves. Micah Goodman's new book, *Secrets of the Guide of the Perplexed*, adds a new dimension: the popularity of books about Maimonides tells us much about the societies in which they are popular.

Goodman's new book may be the most hyped book ever published on Maimonides; it is also probably the most successful, remaining week after week on Israeli best-seller lists, no mean accomplishment for a book which makes considerable demands upon its readers. There are many reasons for this success: Goodman himself is well known in intellectual circles in Israel; he appears often on television; a charismatic teacher, he founded and runs the Israel Academy for Leadership (a pre-army institute for both observant and secular youths in a settlement between Jerusalem and Jericho). The book itself is extraordinarily well-written: clear, full of the arresting plays on words and vivid contrasts to which Hebrew lends itself so well, dramatic, and plotted like a novel—Goodman builds up expectations, only to smash them. He is also willing to take risks, presenting Maimonides in ways guaranteed both to delight his readers and at the same time raise the eyebrows of his colleagues in academia.

Who is the Maimonides presented by Goodman? He is a Maimonides who has no "grand narrative," a Maimonides for whom God is the greatest threat to religion, a Jewish thinker for whom the Torah comes to serve as therapy—the main aim of the Torah according to Goodman's Maimonides is to heal human beings, not to grant them philosophic certainty, since there can be no certainty about the central doctrines of religion (the nature or even existence of God, creation, providence and human suffering, among others). For Goodman's Maimonides the Torah is only divine in the sense that Moses understood the nature of reality better than any previous human. For the Midrash, God looked into the Torah in order to create the world, while for Goodman Moses, as it were, looked into the mind of God in order to write the Torah.

The upshot of all this is to place human beings firmly at the center of philosophic attention (the culmination of a process which began with Descartes' *cogito*—which is one of the many reasons I have trouble reading Mai-

monides in the same way that Goodman does). Goodman's Maimonidean *hero* inherits all the roles traditionally ascribed to God, *designing* his/her own life, world, and consciousness. This heroic (Nietzschian?) human also takes control of the Torah, the text of which is no longer authoritative, since the interpreter takes control of the text. For Goodman, Maimonides no longer guides the reader out of perplexity; rather, he *accompanies* the reader on the route to perplexity (since only the philosophically unsophisticated individual can confront God and the cosmos without perplexity). Only the self-deluded think they have achieved certainty, and self-delusion is the greatest sin; hence, one assumes, for Goodman's Maimonides—and quite clearly for Goodman himself—enlightenment of a certain type (acknowledging what Albert Camus would have called the absurd nature of the universe) is the highest virtue. Maimonides, who single-handedly created Jewish dogmatics, is presented as the greatest opponent of what Goodman calls the “dogmatic trap” (thinking you know what you cannot know).

For Micah Goodman, Maimonides' philosophy is in many ways an expression of his biography (just as God introduces the Decalogue with the highlights of His biography). Maimonides also comes across as a bit like Stalin, who, it said, used to wander the halls of the Kremlin shouting to one and all, “I am Ben-Gurion! I am Ben-Gurion!”—i.e., as a megalomaniac who places himself on a chain starting with the first Moses, continuing through R. Judah the Prince to Maimonides himself, and culminating with the Messiah.

Throughout this stimulating book Goodman uses language which, I fear, misleads many of his readers. He uses terms such as *eros*, *sod*, *pardes*, *maskil*, and expressions, such as the “redemptive character of knowledge,” and “spiritual journeys,” all of which mean very specific (and limited) things in a Maimonidean context, but which to a contemporary reader carry with them heavy overtones of Kabbalah. I am confident that Goodman does not mean to mislead, and equally confident that that is precisely what happens—and reading Maimonides in this mildly Kabbalistic key may be part of the explanation for the book's success.

So, what sort of Maimonides does Goodman present to his reader? Simply put, a postmodernist, anti-Leibowitzian Maimonides (it is only after two-thirds of the book have passed that Goodman lets this cat explicitly out of the bag, insisting that his book is meant to save the true Maimonides from what one might call the hypermodernist reading of Yeshayahu Leibowitz). Lei-

bowitz (1903-94), Israel's most prominent public intellectual during the last third of the twentieth century, attributed to Maimonides (with some degree of justification) a Judaism in which God is entirely at the center, the Torah does not at all serve the needs of human beings (since it fundamentally involves a demand to live a holy, God-centered life, and has no binding theology). In Goodman's presentation, we have a Maimonides for whom “the quest for certainty”—which, according to Abraham Joshua Heschel, motivated R. Sa'adia Gaon and subsequent medieval Jewish philosophers (emphatically including Maimonides)—is replaced with a quest for perplexity. In reading Maimonides in this fashion Goodman understands and presents him in terms appropriate to much of the contemporary *weltanschauung*. This is certainly one of the reasons for the book's great success.

But there is more going on here than this. Sitting in shul this week I noticed a young man, recently married (and who has chosen to defer army service to spend more time in yeshiva), reciting the *amidah* prayer with his tallit over his head (rare in our circles) and with every indication of profound involvement in his prayer. Looking up from reading Micah Goodman's book during the recitation of *An'im Zemirot*, one of the most “spiritual” passages in the liturgy, I noticed that this young man was also reading—a volume of Talmud. It struck me that standard Israeli Orthodoxy has no answer for a person seeking spiritual fulfillment: it is not that Orthodox Jews are necessarily spiritually unfulfilled, but that the spiritual fulfillment they find would be unrecognizable to anyone who looks for sublimity in mystically inspired poems like *An'im Zemirot*, rather than in abstruse Talmudic discussions.

Anyone familiar with Israel today is struck by the huge variety of alternative “spiritualities” on offer. These reflect a deep yearning for meaning on the part of many Israelis. Some satisfy this need by dropping out in Southeast Asia; others through adoption of Jewish Orthodoxy, including the eccentricity of Bratzlav; and yet others through the many varieties of non-standard religions which now dot the Israeli landscape. Indeed, my own university (Haifa) is running a huge conference (for the third year in a row) on new religious phenomena in Israel. Goodman's Maimonides—skeptical, almost agnostic, latitudinarian in consequence if not in intent, and therapeutic—taps into this yearning. Micah Goodman's Maimonides is not my Maimonides, but his Maimonides certainly demonstrates the perennial significance of the Great Eagle for Jews (and perhaps, for Judaism).

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