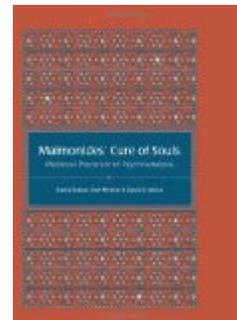




David Bakan, Daniel Merkur, David S. Weiss. *Maimonides' Cure of Souls: Medieval Precursor of Psychoanalysis*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. xviii + 183 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-2745-4.



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This book is a genuine collaborative effort of three people, although their authorship differs. Mainly this book was authored by the late David Bakan, an influential psychoanalyst and student of psychology and religion, who devoted over two decades to the study of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and *Eight Chapters* with his chavruta partner, David S. Weiss, a rabbi-psychologist in Toronto. In 2000 Bakan asked Daniel Merkur—a psychoanalyst in private practice who authored several books on comparative religion—to assemble his notes about Maimonides into a book manuscript. After the initial draft was prepared, Bakan asked Merkur to become his coauthor. In 2004 Bakan passed away and Merkur prepared a second draft of the book on the basis of notes and comments that have accumulated since the first draft was made. The second draft was read by Rabbi Weiss who offered many suggestions and also composed a few original passages that included views that Bakan had expressed to him orally during their meetings over the years. The design of the book, the editing, and the final for-

mulation of the arguments are all done by Merkur but the approach to Maimonides is Bakan's. For the sake of convenience, I will treat the book as if it were authored by one person, Bakan, even though it is a project of three collaborators.

The thesis of the book is that “Maimonides was concerned, above all, with ‘the healing of the soul and its activities’ (*Eight Chapters*, p. 38) and Freud was indebted to Maimonides’ distinctively psychological version of intellectual mysticism” (p. x). This argument is both historical and phenomenological. Historically the book seeks to prove a causal relationship between Maimonides’ philosophy and the emergence of psychoanalysis, but the evidence for this historical link is to be found in the phenomenological similarity between Maimonides’ and Freud’s interpretation of dreams. Indeed Bakan argues that “Freud’s understanding of dreams was the key to the understanding of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*” (ibid). There seems to be certain circularity here: on the one hand, Freud’s theory of dreams is utilized to interpret Maimonides “correctly,” and on

the other hand, the teachings of Maimonides are presented as the historical sources and indeed the cause of Freud's psychoanalytic theory about dreams. Let us look at Bakan as interpreter of Maimonides and as a historian of psychoanalysis.

Bakan is definitely a serious, devoted student of Maimonides, who correctly understands the significance of Maimonides in the history of Judaism. Yet Bakan is not a specialist in medieval Jewish philosophy and his knowledge of the relevant literature is somewhat uneven, giving the book a certain autodidactic quality. Of the long list of scholars who have written extensively on Maimonides during the last four decades Bakan privileges just a few (e.g., Herbert Davidson and David Blumenthal) and as a result his treatment of complex philosophical issues is either incomplete or inadequate. The lack of expertise is even more evident in the treatment of Maimonides' Greek, Hellenistic, and Arabic sources. Bakan is not fluent in the relevant literature on Aristotle's psychology and ethics and his interpretation of Maimonides' Arabic sources (especially Alfarabi and Avicenna) is somewhat dated. Specialists in Maimonides who are informed about the ongoing debates in the field will not find the book especially innovative, although the book has many interesting insights about specific sections of Maimonides' *Guide*. The main argument of the book, namely, that Freud's interpretation of dream is necessary to make sense of Maimonides' view of prophecy, is not persuasive to experts on Maimonides. The other three claims of the book—that Maimonides was concerned about the cure of souls (i.e., that his project was a “program of psychotherapy” [p. 1]), that he was an intellectual mystic, and that he wrote esoterically—are true, although the scholarly evidence adduced for them is somewhat problematic.

More difficult is the attempt to establish the causal connection between Maimonides' philosophy and Freud's psychoanalysis. The last chapter of the book shifts the focus from the interpreta-

tion of Maimonides' ideas to intellectual history in an attempt to establish Freud's access to the teachings of Maimonides either through translations of his works into European languages or through actual teachers. Bakan highlights the fact that the curriculum of the liberal Jewish school in Vienna presented “the prophets and Maimonides as precursors of Lessing, Kant, Schiller, and Goethe” (p. 140), and he considers the tutelage of Samuel Hammerschlag, who supervised Jewish education in Vienna, to be central to Freud's access to Maimonides. When Freud became a student at the University of Vienna, he was introduced to the philosophy of Aristotle, Maimonides' main source, when he studied philosophy under Franz Brentano, a leading neo-Aristotelian. However, mere familiarity with Maimonides or Aristotle does not in itself establish the indebtedness of Freud to Maimonides or to Aristotle, although both are relevant to establish Freud's wide-ranging education. We should recall that in 1958, Bakan published *Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* in which he argued that kabbalah, or the Jewish mystical tradition more broadly, was the source of Freud's psychoanalysis. In the book under review, Maimonides is the primary intellectual source of psychoanalysis, although his ideas were transmitted to Freud through the venue of “the general, nonspecific heritage of kabbalah, Renaissance esotericism and German Romanticism” (p. 137). The current study offers relatively little support for this claim, while adding yet another source to the list of potential channels for the dissemination of Maimonides--Hasidism and especially the Hasidism of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav. The fact that Freud's father, Jacob, was immersed in Hasidism, which he had finally abandoned upon his “second marriage in a Reform Jewish ceremony to Malke Amalie Nathanson” (p. 138), is adduced as evidence to the fact that Freud could have access to Bratzlav Hasidism at home. The degree to which Hasidism incorporates Maimonidean epistemology deserves elaboration as does a reference to other scholars who worked

painstakingly on Freud's intellectual biography (e.g., the late Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi).

How would Maimonides, kabbalah, Hasidism, Renaissance esotericism, and German romanticism all relate to each other as sources of Freud's psychoanalysis? The answer lies in the category of "intellectual mysticism," or "rational mysticism." According to Bakan, psychoanalysis is "rational mysticism" and Maimonides is the major Jewish example of it. ("Rational mysticism" and "intellectual mysticism" are used interchangeably throughout the work.) The term "intellectual mysticism" was coined by scholars of medieval Muslim philosophy (e.g., George Vajda and Blumenthal) to highlight the unitive aspect of prophecy in which the human intellect conjoins with the Active Intellect. Since Maimonides subscribed to this cognitive theory, labeling him an "intellectual mystic" is appropriate. What is missing in the analysis of intellectual mysticism, however, is the attention to the various readings of Aristotle's cognitive theory either by his Hellenistic interpreters, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themestius, or by the Muslim sources of Maimonides, Alfarabi and Avicenna. Maimonides' cognitive theory cannot be understood without dealing with his complex relationship to Alexander of Aphrodisias, and without recognizing that Maimonides may have concealed his indebtedness to Avicenna. Bakan oversimplifies matters when he presents Avicenna as an "illuminist," namely, a person who understood knowledge to be the result of divine illumination, a position that Maimonides presumably rejected. Had Bakan been more conversant with medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophy his interpretation of Maimonides would have been more accurate. Because Bakan is keen to present the Active Intellect psychoanalytically, a position that can be traced to Philip Merlan's *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoplatonist and Neoplatonic Tradition* (1969), he claims that the Active Intellect as well as "the rational and the imaginative faculties were credited with unconscious operations in

Maimonides' system" (p. 159). Is this a correct interpretation of Maimonides' philosophical anthropology? Not entirely, because this reading fails to take into consideration the function of the Active Intellect in the cosmology of Maimonides. The Active Intellect is not just a mental function (as it was for Aristotle and his Hellenistic commentators or medieval Christian readers and their twentieth-century scholars), but a Separate Intelligence that functions as the source of all processes in the sublunar world. Bakan diminishes the cosmological function of the Active Intellect because he wants to present Maimonides as a precursor to Freud. The circularity is inevitable: if one is to show that Maimonides was the source for Freud, one needs to interpret the Active Intellect as manifestation of the unconscious. Once that claim is made, it is just an easy step to the next argument that for Maimonides "the unconscious and its manifestations are inalienably sexual" (ibid.). The Active Intellect was indeed in charge of the processes of generation (which is sexual) but also of all intellectual processes that are not sexual, although they can be discussed by using sexual metaphors. In short, the historical evidence adduced by Bakan to prove the link between Maimonides and Freud is suggestive but not compelling.

The desire to identify the origins of psychoanalysis in Maimonides has led Bakan not only to see the traces of Maimonides in divergent intellectual traditions, but also to commit some of the fallacies that Quentin Skinner has already identified as the pitfalls of the history of ideas: the fallacy of "anticipation" and the fallacy of "influence."^[1] Bakan fails to show direct causal relationship between the ideas of Maimonides and psychoanalytic theories, although he is insightful in showing "similarities" and "convergences" between Maimonides and Freud, in regard, for example, to the privileging of latent dream thought over dream content in Freud's and Maimonides' privileging of words over images. Indeed the gist of the attempt to read Freud in light of Maimonides is to present

Freud as a person who “wished to reform Judaism” and psychoanalysis as an emancipatory project through which Jews will be once and for all liberated from the negative and repressive tyranny of Moses and the childish fantasies of Judaism taken literally (p. 162). Put differently, Freud intended to do for modern Judaism what Maimonides has partially accomplished for medieval Judaism, that is, articulate a Judaism that is “fit for adults,” a philosophy that cures the soul from mistaken, imaginative fantasies.

Bakan sees psychoanalysis as “rational mysticism” whose therapeutic power lies in the phenomenon of intuition and its interpretation of dreams. According to Bakan, Freud saw “a close proximity between psychoanalysis and mysticism” because “like psychoanalysis, mysticism can provide increased access to the hidden sources of emotional life” (p. 156). But if the emotional (as opposed to the intellectual) life is at stake, it is even more questionable to present Maimonides and his theory of the Active Intellect as a precursor to Freud. Be this as it may, presumably if modern Jews endorse psychoanalysis through the prism of Maimonides, they could reach a more sophisticated, adult version of Judaism and renounce the anthropomorphic Judaism they receive from undereducated and ill-equipped teachers in supplementary schools. But can psychoanalysis (whether it originated in Maimonideanism or in kabbalah) really make contemporary Jews practice Judaism, however intellectualized? Given the inherent secularity of psychoanalysis, this is highly problematic. Psychoanalysis was intended as a replacement of Judaism and indeed of all religions, but Maimonideanism, which solidified the Jewish rabbinic tradition, is fundamentally contradictory to psychoanalysis. The heart of Maimonidean Judaism is not the *Guide* but the *Mishneh Torah*, a text that Bakan has not studied with the same alacrity and which he could not treat as an esoter-

ic text, or present as a precursor to psychoanalysis.

Maimonides' Cure of the Soul, then, is not simply a study about Maimonides or about Maimonides and Freud, but an attempt to anchor Bakan's own approach to psychoanalysis as “rational mysticism” in Jewish sources in order to prove that “psychoanalysis was a profoundly Jewish innovation” (p. 140). Bakan is absolutely right to remind all readers of the Jewish settings within which Freud (who was a member of the Bnai Brith Society in Vienna) developed his ideas and the predominantly Jewish audience of his early lectures. But even if psychoanalysis was a Jewish innovation, why should committed Jews today turn to psychoanalysis to articulate an intellectually sophisticated Judaism? Jews who wish to intellectualize Judaism could read Maimonides without the prism of psychoanalysis and rethink it in light of contemporary science or philosophy of science. Bakan's project of reading Maimonides through the lens of Freud or Freud through the lens of Maimonides is suggestive, but it falls short of the real intent of the book, namely, “to create a meaningful and unified understanding of Jewish spirituality and provide the multitude of perplexed Jews with the foundation insights to help them out of their perplexity” (p. xii). It is very plausible, by contrast, that for Judaism to survive and continue to evolve, perplexity must remain, inviting Jews over and over again to address it through interpretation, using all cultural tools at their disposal. There is no compelling reason to privilege psychoanalysis as the best solution to contemporary perplexity.

Note

[1]. See Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3-53.

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