

# Introduction

JAMES A. DIAMOND AND MENACHEM KELLNER

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MOSES MAIMONIDES was the most eminent authority of rabbinic law and Jewish thought in the medieval Jewish world, proficient in all its canonical sources up to his time. In a broader sense, he was also a master of the scientific/philosophical corpus of his day, as demonstrated not only by his writings, but by his rise to a position of official physician at Saladin's royal court in Egypt. As a result, what he had to say on matters crucial to Jewish existence and the practice of Judaism has seminally influenced the evolution of Jewish thought, worship, and observance ever since. Without this potent combination of both rabbinic expertise and philosophical acumen, Maimonides could easily have been ignored by devotees of either school, and thus would not loom as large over the development of Jewish thought as he does, or indeed even be the subject of the present book. Maimonides was the quintessential Jewish sage, at home in all rabbinic disciplines. He perfectly fits the rabbinic model of the *talmid hakham* (scholar) who is 'proficient in Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, *halakhot*, and *agadot*'.<sup>1</sup>

He augmented—or, as Menachem Kellner describes it, encumbered<sup>2</sup>—Judaism with the Thirteen Principles of faith, a pioneering fundamental credo which quickly became sacrosanct. Despite a long history of scepticism towards its authoritativeness by the elites of rabbinic law, it is still safe to characterize it as having achieved canonical status in Judaism.<sup>3</sup> He also compiled the first comprehensive code of Jewish law in the history of Judaism. Though Joseph Karo's *Shulḥan arukh* superseded its practical authority from the sixteenth century on, Maimonides' *Mishneh torah* nevertheless became the third prong of the rabbinic academic canon, alongside the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Joseph Karo indeed thought of himself as a successor to Maimonides, whom he considered the most central and authoritative figure in halakhah even centuries after his death.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Shir hashirim rabah* 5: 13.

<sup>2</sup> Kellner depicted aspects of the Maimonidean legacy as encumbering Judaism in *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*

<sup>3</sup> Shapiro, *Limits of Orthodox Theology*. Shapiro's work developed in response to a spirited assertion of the Principles' canonical status by Yehuda Parnes in 'Torah u-Madda'.

<sup>4</sup> As Mor Altshuler states, Karo 'aspired to become Maimonides' successor and the mediator

The Rambam of the *Mishneh torah* was canonized almost immediately. His slightly older contemporary, Rabad (Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières, c.1125–1198), wrote a series of caustic glosses on the work during Maimonides' lifetime. While people often focus on the criticisms in the glosses, the fact that an authority of Rabad's stature saw fit to write them shows clearly how important he thought the book was.<sup>5</sup> Whether examined in critical academic or devotional rabbinic settings, it is arguably the most microscopically studied text in all the halls of Jewish learning to this day. A renowned contemporary scholar of Jewish history and jurisprudence, who also happens to be the son of one of the central figures examined in this book, assessed the *Mishneh torah* as 'the rarest of things—a book of law, a work of sequitur, discursive reasoning that is, at the same time, a work of art'.<sup>6</sup>

Maimonides' philosophical magnum opus, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, remains the most important and influential synthesis of science and the Jewish tradition. No serious attempt to broach this issue can do so without some dialogue with that work, even today when both sides of the science–faith equation have been radically revamped or, worse, debunked. It is difficult to find such 'serious' attempts in current times, considering the abysmal deterioration in the level of discussion in certain Orthodox rabbinic circles. Maimonides explicitly acknowledges that the interpretation of the Torah must coincide with demonstrated scientific truths since 'the gates of figurative interpretation' are always available for that purpose.<sup>7</sup> If vigorous debates can persist in modern times over whether the age of the universe is short of six thousand years, then we suspect Maimonides would be quite happy to have his name omitted from the conversation.<sup>8</sup>

While the *Mishneh torah* soon achieved canonical status, the fate of the *Guide of the Perplexed* was very different. Indeed, to a great extent, students of the *Mishneh torah* often were ignorant of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, while students of the latter were rarely expert in the former. Yet even his most fervent opponents could not shunt him aside. The raging debate over Maimonidean thought that ensued for centuries after his death, and indeed until the present day, would never have transpired had Maimonides only authored the *Guide of the Perplexed*.<sup>9</sup>

between the medieval *Mishneh torah* and his own times'. See Altshuler, 'Rabbi Joseph Karo', and Twersky, 'The *Shulhan 'Arukh*'.

<sup>5</sup> On Maimonides' 'heroic' stature, see Twersky, 'Some Reflections'.

<sup>6</sup> Soloveitchik, 'Mishneh Torah'. Compare Gillis, *Reading Maimonides*, 12–20.

<sup>7</sup> See *Guide* ii. 25 (pp. 327–8); page numbers in parentheses refer to Pines' translation.

<sup>8</sup> See for example R. Dr Natan Slifkin's 'Rationalist Judaism' blog that deals with this issue (as well as others in the conflict between what is often thought to be Jewish dogma and science), at <[www.rationalistjudaism.com](http://www.rationalistjudaism.com)>.

<sup>9</sup> As Silver notes in his account of the medieval Maimonidean controversy, 'It was not

This schizophrenia over Maimonides' legacy reaches its climax in statements emerging out of the heart of the rabbinic world and of the scholarly world that are mirror images of each other. On one hand, a leading eighteenth-century rabbinic authority, Rabbi Jacob Emden, suggested that the *Guide* was a forgery and could not possibly have been penned by the author of the *Mishneh torah*.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, one of the most renowned twentieth-century scholars of Jewish thought, and in particular of Maimonides, could demote the *Mishneh torah* to simply an avocation, or a minor distraction from Maimonides' philosophical project.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, every path in Jewish thought and law from the twelfth century onwards bears some imprint of Maimonides. So formidable was his intellectual legacy that even the particular crystallization of kabbalah, a trend in Jewish theology absolutely inimical to the general thrust of his rationalism,<sup>12</sup> would have been unimaginable without his work.<sup>13</sup> A quick glance through the index of virtually any current scholarly or rabbinic study, be it on a modern, Renaissance, or medieval topic in Jewish studies, is certain to reveal multiple entries under his name. His thought evoked adoption, opposition, revision, or reinvention, but never indifference.

In light of this overwhelming Maimonidean shadow, cast over Jewish thought since the twelfth century, it is worthwhile to consider the following thought experiment: what would Judaism look like today had Maimonides not lived?

- Had Maimonides not created the first systematic and comprehensive code of Jewish law (*Mishneh torah*), would his successors in that project, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, author of the *Arba'ah turim*, and Rabbi Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulḥan arukh*, have had the vision and courage to

Maimonides' theological ingenuity, but his rabbinic omnicompetence and genius which made his philosophic work a *cause célèbre*.' Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> See J. Schacter, 'Rabbi Jacob Emden's "Iggeret Purim"'. See further Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 421–2.

<sup>11</sup> In his doctoral dissertation Aviezer Ravitzky explained that, after Maimonides' death, his legacy was debated by two kinds of Maimonideans: those who emphasized the *Guide* at the expense of the *Mishneh torah* and the reverse. See Ravitzky, 'The Thought of R. Zerahiah'. The late Professor Shlomo Pines is an example of a 'philosophic' Maimonidean. On p. xxvii of his magisterial introduction to his translation of the *Guide* he calls Maimonides' halakhic work an 'avocation'.

<sup>12</sup> For a full-length study of this opposition, see Kellner's *Maimonides' Confrontation*.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Wolfson, 'Beneath the Wings', which states categorically that the entire spiritual-intellectual landscape of the 'masters of Jewish esoteric lore [was] incubated in the shadows of the great eagle' (p. 210). Compare Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 253, and Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation*, 7–9.

embark on what would have been, if not for Maimonides, a revolutionary innovation? Might Judaism still be a religion of law without a legal code?

- Had Maimonides not defined Judaism as a belief system (with his Thirteen Principles), would it be possible to speak of Jewish *orthodoxy* (*orthos* + *doxos* = ‘straight beliefs’) in any technical sense? Would Judaism today be a religion without defined and obligatory beliefs, a religion of orthopraxy?
- Had Maimonides not thrown the massive weight of his considerable authority behind the project of integrating science and Judaism (in *Guide of the Perplexed*), how much room would the Jewish world have made for rationally oriented Jews in the Middle Ages and today? Would we have had a ‘modern orthodoxy’, or an institution of higher learning like Yeshiva University which integrates Torah with the advances of the modern age?
- Would the Zohar, the kabbalistic tradition, and ultimately *ḥasidut* have been possible without the provocation of Maimonides’ rationalism?
- What would modern messianic theologies and aspirations have looked like without Maimonides’ vision of the messianic era? Maimonides sought to lower messianic fervour 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. Ironically it is this approach to the messiah that makes possible both the mystical religious Zionism of the followers of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and the this-worldly hasidic messianism of Habad-Lubavitch—for good or for ill, depending on your perspective.
- Finally, had Maimonides not enunciated a universalist vision of Judaism, would almost all Jews today be even more particularist than they are?

This thought experiment allows us to understand why James Diamond has argued that ‘at virtually every critical turn in Jewish thought, one confronts Maimonidean formulations in one way or another’. In *Maimonides and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon* Diamond set out to prove that the collected works of Maimonides, alongside the Bible, Talmud, and Zohar, ‘comprise the core spiritual and intellectual canon of Judaism’.<sup>14</sup> This view received unexpected support when, within weeks of each other, two very different people commented in the popular press about the Jewish canon. In a joint interview with

<sup>14</sup> Diamond, *Shaping of the Jewish Canon*, 266.

the Israeli *Makor rishon* newspaper in January 2017, the sons of Rabbi Adin Even-Yisrael Steinsaltz, one of the most outstanding Jewish educators and talmudists of our time, were asked which books their father hoped to finish expounding. They answered: the standard Jewish canon—Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, Rambam. In the *Jewish Press* a few weeks later (24 February 2017), Rabbi Marc Angel was asked what was the best book on Judaism he had ever read; he answered: ‘The primary sources are best: Tanach [Bible], Talmud, Rambam.’

The Steinsaltz brothers come from a world infused with Habad hasidism, and Rabbi Angel from the world of Sephardi spirituality. Both, when asked to define the Jewish canon, included ‘Rambam’. Now the Steinsaltz brothers meant Rambam of the *Mishneh torah* (which their ‘family firm’ is indeed publishing with a commentary), not the Maimonides of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Rabbi Angel, on the other hand, certainly alluded to both figures: Rambam/*Mishneh torah* and Maimonides/*Guide of the Perplexed*. The very fact that two distinctly different expositors of Maimonides in the latter half of the twentieth century, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902–94), and Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–94, facetiously called the ‘Leibowitzer Rebbe’), could each present himself as *the* authoritative spokesperson of Maimonides in our world speaks volumes about his ‘canonical’ status.

The essays in this book cumulatively demonstrate that Maimonides’ legacy remains vibrantly alive and well into the twenty-first century. They appear in the following order. We start with the work of Rabbi Naftali Tsevi Yehudah Berlin (1816–93), the well-known ‘Netsiv of Volozhin’. He is the only one of our figures not to have actually lived in the twentieth century, but in many ways he is as much a figure of the twentieth century as of the nineteenth. He remained the dean of the renowned Ets Hayim yeshiva in the Lithuanian town of Volozhin, the Harvard equivalent of all eastern European rabbinic academies, for forty years until its closure in 1892. The list of those enrolled in his yeshiva during his tenure includes some of the most central Jewish figures in the early part of the twentieth century. He also influenced almost all the other figures with whom we deal; indeed, several of the other figures treated in this book were tied to him directly or indirectly.

Netsiv is followed by his great-great-grandson, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Russia, Berlin, Boston, and New York (1903–93). Rabbi Soloveitchik carried on the family tradition of deep engagement with Maimonides (in his case, primarily the Maimonides of the *Mishneh torah*, but, unlike his forebears, also the Maimonides of the *Guide of the Perplexed*). Netsiv was an Old World yeshiva head, and his descendant an Old World-trained head of a

yeshiva in the New World. Rabbi Soloveitchik was deeply influenced by the book *Nefesh haḥayim*, written by another ancestor of his and teacher of Netsiv, Rabbi Hayim Volozhiner (1749–1821). Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), whom we treat next, was himself a student of Netsiv. He is reported to have said, after his one meeting with Rabbi Soloveitchik, that the experience of speaking with the young Rabbi Soloveitchik reminded him of his earliest years when he was a student attending the lectures of Reb Hayim Brisker (Rabbi Soloveitchik's grandfather) at the Volozhin yeshiva, and that 'the power of genius of the grandfather now resides with the grandson'.<sup>15</sup> Rabbis Kook and Soloveitchik are further related by their connections to Orthodox Zionism. Rabbi Kook was the first chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, whose theological legacy towers over modern religious Zionist thought. Rabbi Soloveitchik became an active exponent of religious Zionism, which he viewed as a stage in Jewish history that ended the divine hiddenness (*hester panim*) characteristic of the long period of Jewish exilic existence. While Rabbi Kook brought the traditions of eastern Europe to what became the modern State of Israel, Rabbi Soloveitchik, rabbinically shaped by eastern and central Europe, brought both traditions to the United States.

We then turn to rabbis Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943) and Elhanan Wasserman (1874–1941), who eminently represent the last testament of east European hasidic and mitnagdic intellectual traditions and who never left their homeland. Their murders reflect the total annihilation of eastern European Jewry and all its cultural, social, and intellectual institutions. However, the murderers failed to annihilate Rabbi Shapira's and Rabbi Wasserman's own intellectual legacies. Their voices still resonate loudly in the contemporary halls of Jewish learning through the written work they left behind.

Fleeing the Nazis, Rabbi Aharon Kotler (1891–1962), one of the exceptions to the rule of genocide that dominated the years between 1939 and 1945, escaped and brought those same traditions to the United States. Preserving the Old World in the New, he sought to re-create the yeshivas of eastern Europe on the soil of the *goldeneh medinah* of America (which he saw as anything but golden). In addition to many interconnections between them, Rabbis Wasserman and Kotler both appear to have been unable to read Maimonides as anything other than an east European yeshiva head. Rabbi Shapira, a hasidic *rebbe*, was similarly constrained to read Maimonides in line with his own kabbalistically infused tradition.

Finally, we close with the other new world, that of modern Israel, of

<sup>15</sup> Saks, 'Rabbi Soloveitchik Meets Rav Kook'.

rebirth, of Zionism, completing the connective thread spun by Netsiv and the Hovevei Tsiyon movement, of which he was a leader. In Israel we deal with the Maimonides of Rabbi Joseph Kafih (1917–2000) and of Rabbi Shlomo Aviner (born 1943). Rabbi Kafih was born in Yemen and Rabbi Aviner in France. Both were close to Rabbi Tsevi Yehudah Kook (1891–1982), son of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, but ended up in very different places vis-à-vis Maimonides. Rabbi Kafih became one of the twentieth century's foremost scholars of Maimonides, translating his works from the Arabic, and annotating almost all of them. Rabbi Aviner's devotion to Rabbi Kook, and through him to Judah Halevi, led him to adopt a restrained appreciation for Maimonides. Conversely, Rabbi Kafih's Maimonidean temperament led him to say many caustic things about Halevi.

When writing the chapters of this book we certainly were not trying to ignore non-Orthodox thinkers, nor did we intend to scant the work of academic scholars of Maimonides. We followed our interests independently and were surprised to discover, after the fact, how well they intersected with each other. What has resulted from this confluence is a study of how Orthodox rabbis read Rambam over the course of the twentieth century. One of the greatest twentieth-century philosophers famously asserted that the entire European philosophical tradition 'consists of a series of footnotes to Plato'.<sup>16</sup> The studies in this book combine to reinforce an equally apt characterization of all of Jewish thought since the Middle Ages as a series of footnotes to Maimonides.

<sup>16</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 39.