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THE GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED BY MAIMONIDES: TRANSFIGURATIONS OF A BOOK

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the metamorphoses of a book: The Guide for the Perplexed by Moses Maimonides. The receptions of the book from the time of its publication (1191), and especially his translation into Hebrew (1224) were diverse and went through many changes during the last eight centuries. From its publication the book caused a storm among Jewish thinkers and rabbis, and was accused of being a profanation, was banned, and even burned. These facts are particularly intriguing taking into account the authoritative role of Maimonides in the Jewish world, who was considered as the second Moses, was named the "great eagle", and his book Mishneh Torah, a comprehensive code of Halakhah (Jewish law) is a canonical book since then. Acceptance and rejection of this book can be observed in the Jewish world till today. The book was understood as the source for very different philosophical and theological approaches. Therefore, it has a sense to talk about 'many Guides for the Perplexed'. The article is concentrated particularly, on modern times: Haskalah and Zionism.

KEYWORDS

Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed, Judaism, mysticism, Haskalah, Zionism

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Introduction

In this article I would like to present the metamorphoses of the book: *The Guide for the Perplexed* by the medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides. The text itself, from the time of its publication (1191), and especially its translation into Hebrew (1224) by Iben Tibbon, who consulted the translation with Maimonides himself,[1] has not gone through any changes; however the reception of it was changed during the last eight centuries. From the time of its publication, the book caused a storm among Jewish thinkers and rabbis, and was accused of being a profanation, it was banned, and even burned. These facts are particularly intriguing taking into account the authoritative role of Maimonides in the Jewish world. He was considered to be the second Moses, and his book *Mishneh Torah* (Repetition of the Torah), a comprehensive code of Halakha (Jewish law) is, till today, the canonical interpretation of the Jewish sacred books (*Mishnah* and *Talmud*), and every orthodox Jew is obliged to follow it. Acceptance and rejection of Maimonides philosophical book can be observed in the Jewish world till today. Each era, and each Jewish movement, read and interpreted it differently. The book was understood as the foundation for very different philosophical theories, even opposed to the intention of Maimonides himself, like Spinozistic Pantheism[2] or modern secularism.[3] Therefore, it has a sense to talk about 'many Guides for the Perplexed', the many metamorphoses, or various faces, of this one book.

[1] M. Halbertal, *Maimonides*, Jerusalem 2009, pp. 65–66.

[2] Regarding comparison of Maimonides and Spinoza's philosophies see: S. D. Breslauer, *Prophecy, Ethics, and Social Involvement: Moses Maimonides, Baruch Spinoza, Abraham Heschel*, "Modern Judaism" 2011, No. 31 (3); I. Dobbs-Weinstein, *The Ambiguity of the Imagination and the Ambivalence of Language in Maimonides and Spinoza*, [in:] *Maimonides and His Heritage*, eds. I. Dobbs-Weinstein, L. E. Goldman and J. A. Grady, State University of New York 2009; C. Fraenkel, *Maimonides' God and Spinoza's Deus sive Natura*, "Journal of the History of Philosophy" 2006, No. 44 (2); H. D. Frank, *The Politics of Fear: Idolatry and Superstition in Maimonides and Spinoza*, [in:] *Judaic Sources of Western Though: Jerusalem's Enduring Presence*, ed. J. A. Jacobs, Oxford 2011, pp. 177–189; Z. Levi, *Al ktivatam ha'izoterit shel Harambam ve Spinoza*, "Aley Si'ach" 1981, No. 10–11.

[3] The secular-Zionist thinker Ahad Ha'am saw in Maimonides the precursor of secularist thought because he gave priority to reason on blind faith. See: D. Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 144.

Background

Moshe Ben Maimon known as Moses Maimonides was born in 1138 in Cordoba, Spain. When he was ten years old his family had to escape after the Almohade conquest of the town. From then on, for long years, he lived a nomadic life. In 1159 he settled in the city of Fez in North Africa, which was under the Almohade domination as well, and eventually ended his wandering, and reached the state of rest and security in 1165 when he settled in Fostat near Cairo.[4]

Moses Maimonides is the most influential Jewish theologian and philosopher in the last 800 years, and it will not be an exaggeration to say that also Judaism today is shaped, in its core, by his thinking. He is still relevant to Jewish thinking today as ever. His philosophical work was, and still is, a source for disputes inside Judaism, and in some circles it was and still is considered to be controversial and heretic. We have here a very interesting case in which a respected Halakhic authority is also a controversial thinker.

The Guide for the Perplexed

The *magnum opus* of Moses Maimonides *The Guide for the Perplexed* was published in 1191. The book's mission was to interweave philosophy, in its Aristotelian approach, with religious' revelation, as it is illustrated in the Hebrew Bible. The target of the book were young, educated, familiar with the Islamic philosophy of that time, confused Jews, whose philosophical studies might led them to doubts, and even to abandon religious life and faith. As Maimonides wrote:

> The object of this treatise is to enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy Law, […] and at the same time has been successful in his philosophical studies. Human reason has attracted him to abide within its sphere; and he finds it difficult to accept as correct the teaching based on the literal interpretation of the Law […]. Hence he is lost in perplexity and anxiety. If he be guided solely by reason, and renounce his previous views which are based on those expressions, he would consider that he had rejected the fundamental principles of the Law; and even if he retains the opinions which were derived from those expressions, and if, instead of follow-

[4] J. Guttmann, *The Philosophy of Judaism*, Northvale 1988, p. 153.

> ing his reason, he abandon its guidance altogether, it would still appear that his religious convictions had suffered loss and injury. For he would then be left with those errors which give rise to fear and anxiety, constant grief and great perplexity.[5]

For the perplexed people Maimonides wrote his book to show that there is no contradiction between Torah – the Jewish law – and philosophy. The book is written in the form of letters addressed to his pupil Joseph son of Jehudah. It is presented as the continuation of an individual educational process, that was ended when Joseph the son of Jehudah had to return to his hometown. What derives from the style of writing, and from Maimonides words, is that the book is not designated to the masses but only to the perplexed few. Maimonides did not hide his strict elitist intentions. Masses are not capable to understand and accept the truth, they only become disorientated and lost by it. He objected massive distribution of the book, because he knew that readers who are not philosophically prepared can understand it as a negation of the dogmas of belief. Maimonides was not mistaken, when the book was spread away, a few years after his death, there where riots in Provence (1223) where copies of it were burned.[6]

The enigmatic character of the book triggered various ways of reading. Halbertal writes about four different interpretations, which shed different lights on Jewish tradition: skeptical, mystic, conservative and philosophic.[7] These various readings show that the book leaves open before the reader alternative comprehensions. Perhaps that was Maimonides intention: to show the perplexed that he does not have to give up neither religion nor philosophy, but, in fact, with the right interpretation, one should understand that they are one, and there is no need to be torn between them.[8] This is the seed, sowed by Maimonides himself, for different receptions and contradictory interpretations of his book during the last eight centuries.

The book's essential claim is, that philosophy and religion are not two opposite domains which have to be reconciled but, as Julius Guttmann read Maimonides, they are two identical spheres. "Philosophy is

[5] M. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander, Dover Publications 1956, p. 3.

[6] M. Halbertal, op. cit., pp. 63–64.

[7] Ibidem, pp. 299–302.

[8] Ibidem, pp. 301–302.

rather a means, in fact the sole means, for the internal appropriation of the content of revelation. […] Philosophy not only has religion as its object, but it is the central element of religion itself, the royal road that leads to God."[9] Nevertheless, only that road, namely philosophy, can express some assertions, concerning matters like thought, belief, truth, but not about its goal – God. According to Maimonides, philosophy, human language, and human comprehension, can say nothing about God, no affirmative assertions can be expressed neither about God nor about the supernatural, and what is beyond the world is also beyond our understanding.[10] Maimonides' theology is known also as *via negativa*. *Via negativa* namely, all the assertions concerning God "refer only to his actions and are negative in character (merely denying imperfection in him)."[11] We cannot assert what God is, but only what God is not. This negative theology opened the way to many contradicting understandings of Maimonides' philosophy. All of them concerning disputes about which assertions can be relate to God, and which are in the frame of idolatry. The polemics regard also the true conception of God, and the Maimonidean successful or unsuccessful solution for this issue. In addition, there were also various accusations of heresy. Another claim was that Maimonides left so little in his concept of God, that, in fact, there is no God there at all.

In the second part of the introduction for the *Guide* named: "directions for the study of this work" Maimonides wrote the following enigmatic words:

> I adjure any reader of my book, in the name of the Most High, not to add any explanation even to a single word; nor to explain to another any portion of it except such passages as have been fully treated of by previous theological authorities; he must not teach others anything that he has learnt from my work alone, and that has not been hitherto discussed by any of our authorities. The reader must, moreover, beware of raising objections to any of my statements, because it is very probable that he may understand my words to mean the exact opposite to what I intended to say.[12]

These are puzzling words. Maimonides wrote that his book can be understood in different ways. In order to hide his real intention he put

[9] J. Guttmann, op. cit., p. 155.
[10] Ibidem.
[11] Ibidem, p. 156.
[12] M. Maimonides, op. cit., p. 8.

contradicting views and assertions in the work. All that make that book highly challenging, and it gives the ground for different readings and contradicting understandings.

If as maintained by *via negativa* nothing positive can be said about God, how a Jewish believer should read the Hebrew Bible, which is full of positive assertions about Him, which is saturated with anthropomorphism? Maimonides' reading the language of the Hebrew Bible is figurative. The right approach to read it is hermeneutic.

> Such is, e.g., the case with the vulgar notions with respect to the corporeality of God, […] It is the result of long familiarity with passages of the Bible, which they are accustomed to respect and to receive as true, and the literal sense of which implies the corporeality of God and other false notions; in truth, however, these words were employed as figures and metaphors.[13]

The reason to the figurative language of the Hebrew Bible is the fact that this text is directed to two different audiences, the masses and the intellectual elite. The masses could not understand abstract language, so it was necessary to turn to them with metaphors. Conceptual language could have lead the masses to heresy, but audience which has metaphysical knowledge can understand the abstract and metaphoric meaning of the text.[14] If we accept this attitude that the language of the Holy Book is metaphoric, then Maimonides opens before the readers a diversity of different ways to read, to understand, and to interpret the Hebrew Bible.

I would not like to discuss the *Guide* in details, many important philosophical works did it already,[15] but only to point to the fundamental argument of Maimonides, which was the starting point for a variety of different understandings. His negative theology, the strict

[13] Ibidem, pp. 41–42.

[14] M. Halbertal, op. cit., pp. 249–250.

[15] From the thousands of works only a few: H. A. Davidson, *Maimonides the Rationalist*, Oxford 2011; M. Gudman, *Sodotav shel more nebukhim*, Tel-Aviv 2010; D. Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophical Quest*, Philadelphia 2009; A. J. Heschel, *Maimonides. A Biography*, New York 1982; S. Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides as Biblical Interpreter*, Boston 2011; S. Maimon, *Givat hamore lish-lomo Maimon*, Shmuel Hugo Bergman and Nathan Rotenschtreich eds., Jeruslaem 1966; M. Narbonne, *Beur lesefer moreh nebokhi*, Jerusalem 1961; L. Roth, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, London 1948; A. Ravitzky, *Al. Da'at Hamaqom: mehkarim bahagut hajehudit uvetoldoteha*, Jerusalem 1991.

rejection of anthropomorphism (which was against the traditional literal understanding of the Hebrew Bible and the primordial intuition of every traditional Jew), the equation of religion with philosophy which contributed enormously to the rationalization of Judaism – all these elements explain, on the one hand, the great rejection of the book by traditional Jews and on the other hand, the zealousness in which it was accepted by Jews who were familiar with Islamic philosophy of the middle ages and Aristotelianism.[16]

Interpretations

Reactions after his death

In the *Guide* Maimonides did not hide the twofold faces of the book. The exoteric language to the masses and the esoteric meaning for the outstanding few. He also asked those few not to reveal his true thought. This fact was the source for a variety of interpretations. The esoteric interpreter, as Ravitzky (1991) showed, gave the absolute significance to Maimonides declarations about the various ways for understanding. The esoteric reading ascribed the *Guide* radical theological views. The more radical the esoteric reading is the more emphasized is the concealed aspects of Maimonides opinions, and the gap between his philosophy and the common religious views. In fact, the esoteric interpretation of the *Guide* is also esoteric in itself. The esoteric reading began already during Maimonides life, and it became more radical in the 14th century when Jewish Aristotelianism became more widespread. Then there was no need for strict esoteric language and Jewish theology could become more philosophical and radical. For instance, it was said that Maimonides did not believe in the creation of the world but in its eternity.[17]

The *Guide* spread over rapidly in the Jewish world, and apart from the Jewish-Arabic world it became known through its Hebrew translation in the eras of today's north of Spain, south of France and Italy. Rejections of Maimonides's philosophy were expressed already during his lifetime, and with greater vigor after his death. Again, it is important to note that even his great opponents respected Maimonides

[16] J. Guttmann, op. cit., pp. 183–185.
[17] A. Ravitzky, op. cit., pp. 144–149.

the Halakhic man of *Mishneh Torah*, but they rejected Maimonides the philosopher of the *Guide*. The dispute become stronger after Maimonides death, and in 1303 in Barcelona the rabbinic establishment declared a ban against studying the *Guide* before the age of thirty, and only after studding the Torah in the traditional way, namely, in literally and not figuratively understanding.[18] The followers and the opponents of Maimonides shuddered the Jewish world and both groups were excommunicating each other.[19] The relative acceptance, or real interest in the *Guide's* opinions emerged from the mid of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, even among kabbalists who appropriated Maimonidean views to their approach.[20]

The main arguments against the *Guide* were concerning the heretical character of the book. The most fundamental was the total rejection of the identification of religion with philosophy. For the opponents, there was a fundamental contradiction between philosophy, which is based on reason, and the Torah, which was given with the revelation of God, and therefore, uniting these two is the denial of the Torah.[21] Another issue was the total rejection of anthropomorphism. Maimonides wanted all the Jews to know that they should understand that no corporeality should be related to God, however, rabbis thought that simple believers who read the Hebrew Bible literally are entitled to hold these beliefs, and are full and committed Jews.[22] The demand of Maimonides was too high for the intellect of simple people who were true believers and, according to the rabbis, should not be accused of heresy. More detailed objections were connected to the fact that reading the *Guide* one could have serious doubts whether Maimonides held some essential beliefs of the rabbinic Judaism such as resurrection of the dead, the creation versus the eternity of the world, or the occurring of miracles.[23] Nevertheless, "the main object of the controversy was not the radicalism of certain conclusions, but the philosophic rationalization of Judaism as such."[24]

[18] E. Schweid, *Hafilosophim hagdolin shelanu*, Israel 1999, p. 314.

[19] J. Guttmann, op. cit., p. 184.

[20] M. Idel M., *Maimonides Guide for the Perplexed and the Kabbalah*, "Jewish History" 2004, No. 18.

[21] E. Schweid, op. cit., p. 316.

[22] Ibidem, p. 311.

[23] Ibidem, pp. 310–312.

[24] J. Guttmann, op. cit., p. 184.

From all what was said, it can be concluded that the main objection to Maimonides' philosophy was expressed by Jews who were living in Christian Europe, particularly in Provence. Jews who were not familiar with philosophical thinking as Jews in the Islamic world. Moreover, the objections came from the rabbinic establishment, perhaps because they were afraid of weakening their authority by people who would be exposed to different and not traditional ways of reading the Torah. Perhaps they also knew their flock, the simple members of their communities who were not able to hold Maimonidean views and remain believers, because they did not have the needed philosophical background.

Interesting is also the hermeneutic way to read the *Guide* following, paradoxically, the Maimonidean way to read the Hebrew Bible. The medieval kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (1240–(?)1291) read the book as a mystic kabbalistic theory hided in its philosophical and rational language.[25] Abulafia wrote three commentaries on the *Guide*, a fact the sheds a light on his continues interest in the Maimonidean thought, and moreover, Abulfia was responsible to the wide distribution of the *Guide* in his time, also by teaching it to many of his students in different Mediterranean towns.[26] Abulafia's approach to the *Guide* was not a rejection, but a dialectic reading, an *Aufhebung* of the Maimonidean views: to transcendent the *Guide* and to "integrated [it] into the more comprehensive path leading to ecstatic experience,"[27] to the mystical voyage. He saw in the *Guide* a mystical book, however, not so esoteric (i.e. inferior), as his own Kabbalah, although he grasped an affinity between the secrets of the *Guide* and his on mysticism.[28] In that respect, Hofer claims that Abulafia's reading the *Guide* offer an oppositional approach to the typical duality between philosophy and mysticism.[29] Abulafia asserts Hofer, by his way of reading, transformed the *Guide* into a mystical text, and "joins what we might typically call rational and non-rational, or discursive and intuitive, modes

[25] M. Idel, op. cit.

[26] N. Hofer, *Abraham Abulafija's "Mystical" Reading of the Guide for the Perplexed*, "Numen" 2013, No. 60; Idel, op. cit., pp. 205–206, 217–218.

[27] Ibidem, p. 203.

[28] Ibidem, p. 214.

[29] N. Hofer, op. cit.

of thought and experience."[30] If it true then this mystic kabbalist's enormous interest in the *Guide* might become clear.

A continuation of this tendency, i.e. reading the *Guide* with mystical eye, one can find in the thinking of some of the Hasidim who have not rejected Maimonides entirely, but interpreted his rational philosophy as hiding kabalistic views.[31] Gotlib examined the place of Maimonides thought among the members and the rabbis of Habad,[32] particularly its last leader Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994). What was, for Habad, the decisive argument to accept Maimonides' thought was the perception that although he was a rational philosopher he reached very high spiritual stage, and showed that a scholar and a philosopher can be also a great believer. They claimed that with his wisdom and intellectual investigations he reached almost the same level which members of Habad reach in mystical meditations. Maimonides' philosophy lost its actuality, but it was the right revelation of belief for its own time. Therefore, one should not reject it, but see it as a necessary stage of faith's revelation, after all the Jewish faith is such that it develops through generations.[33]

At this point I would like to shift to modernity, and to discuss two positive approaches to Maimonides' philosophy, two interpretations which accept the authority and the importance of the *Guide* and use it

[30] Ibidem, p. 254.

[31] A. Nadler, *The Rambam Revival in Early Modern Jewish Thought: Maskilim, Mitnagdim, and Hasidim on Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed*, [in:] *Maimonides After 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and his Influence*, ed. J. M. Harris, Cambridge 2007, pp. 253–256; J. Gotlib, *Skhaltanut bilvush hasidi: dmuto shel Ha'Rambam behasidut Habad*, Ramat Gan 2009, p. 205. Also in the middle ages there were attempts to relate to Maimonides hidden kabbalist propensities (M. Idel, op. cit., p. 204). Helpful for those kabbalists was the legend that later in his life he converted to Kabbalah and rejected his *Guide* and the philosophical sections in *Mishneh Torah*. There was also the view that he knew the *Zohar* or at least part of it. Of course something that a scholar cannot accept since the *Zohar* was written in the time when Maimonides was not alive any more. Examining similarities between the *Zohar* and Maimonides Shapiro conclude that the Zohar incorporated Maimonides' formulations (M. B. Shapiro, *Studies in Maimonides and His Interpreters*, Scranton 2008, pp. 86–93).

[32] J. Gotlib, op. cit. One of the largest Hasidic movement today, known as Lubavitch Hasidism, founded by Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745–1812), in the small town Lubavitch, Russia.

[33] Ibidem, p. 204.

for its own philosophical, social and even political agenda. The first from the 18th and the 19th century and the second from the 20th century.

Haskalah

Haskalah – the Jewish Enlightenment[34] (the end of the 18th century and the 19th), which its central cradle was Berlin, had the mission of modernizing the Jews, emancipating them, and making a synthesis between Jewish tradition and the values and thought of the European Enlightenment. It aimed at intellectual and spiritual renewal of Judaism, in the Maimonidean spirit of the rationalization of religion. No wonder then that Maimonides and his philosophy were so central in this intellectual and religious movement. He was the genuine prototype of the Jew who could harmonize Judaism with Philosophy and scientific knowledge. Of course the prevalent philosophy of the nineteenth century was not Aristotelian but Kantian, but still a philosophy of reason. Moses Mendelssohn was the central personality in this process – "renewing Judaism by using its textual heritage."[35]

The rediscovery of the *Guide* happened in Germany when Moses Mendelssohn's teacher Rabbi David Fraenkel initiated the publication of a new edition of the book in 1742. However, the fact that the book did not have rabbinic approbation is meaningful.[36] It followed by more editions and eventually a translation into German was published in 1838. The interest in Maimonides' philosophy in the 18th century is called a "Maimonidean revival."[37] Indeed since the 13th century the *Guide* was published only in Italy during the 15th and 16th century, and after about 250 years was published again in Germany. However, in the hundred years following the 1742 edition the *Guide* was published in six different Hebrew editions and also in translation into various

[34] About Haskalah see: S. Feiner, *Haskalah and History: the Emergence of a Modern Jewish Historical Consciousness*, Oxford 2002; idem, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, Philadelphia 2004; M. Pelli, *Haskalah and Beyond: the Reception of the Hebrew Enlightenment and the Emergence of Haskalah Judaism*, Lanham, Md. 2010.

[35] D. Sorkin, *The Berlin Haskalah and German Religious Thought: Orphans of Knowledge*, London 2000, p. 54.

[36] Ibidem, p. 43.

[37] A. Nadler, op. cit.

European languages.[38] The Jewish enlightenment revived the interest in Maimonides' philosophy. It must be underlined, however, that Maimonides, as the master of Halakhah, was never forgotten or ignored, it was the case only with his philosophy.[39]

The most important aspect in Maimonides' philosophy for the *maskilim*[40] was the combination of Judaism and rationalism and not his Aristotelian paradigm which was at that time obsolete. The most important aspect for them was the harmony they saw in the *Guide* between philosophical truths and religious beliefs.[41] The *Guide* opened the way, for many young Jews, for alternative beliefs to the traditional rabbinical convictions. It was the first step before reading the Kantian--Enlightened Jewish philosophy of Moses Mendelssohn and Salomon Maimon. Maimonides gave the legitimacy for the rationalization of Judaism, so in fact, what was important was not his actual philosophy, but his biography and personality, and his philosophical-religious program For the *maskilim* he was a great inspiration,[42] they, mainly, identified with him as being also rejected and persecuted by the rabbis.

The *Guide* was embraced also by the Jewish reform movement in Germany, the Haskalah' successor. Its members saw a great affinity between their ideas and those of the *Guide*. This affinity was in two points: the relation of the Hebrew Bible with philosophy – especially with ethics, and the historical context in which the text of the Hebrew Bible was created.[43] Interesting that at the same time when reform Jews saw in the *Guide* a reflection of their beliefs and thought, the leader of the Neo-orthodoxy in Germany Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch criticized the book severely as bringing to Judaism foreign thoughts, in particular, by making the knowledge of God the aim of it. Nevertheless, he argued, the core of Judaism is not the end – the knowledge of God – but the means to this end, namely, leaving according the commandments – the Jewish way of life of Torah and its precepts.[44] More-

[38] Ibidem, pp. 234–235.
[39] Ibidem, p. 232.
[40] Adherents of Haskalah.
[41] A. Ravitzky, op. cit., p. 149.
[42] A. Nadler, op. cit., pp. 236–238.
[43] Y. G. Kohler, *Maimonides and Ethical Monotheism*, [in:] *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. J. T. Robinson, Leiden 2009, p. 310.
[44] Ibidem, p. 311.

over, claimed Hirsch, what Maimonides built in *Mishneh Torah* he destroyed in the *Guide*. Similar rejections were also between *Hasidim*[45] and *Mitnagdim*[46] in Eastern Europe.[47] However, Hirsch's understanding of reform Judaism was not exact. He claimed that they follow the *Guide* by putting in the center the Knowledge of God. But the *Guide*, as has been shown, preferred *via negativa*, which leaves very little of positive knowledge of God, if at all. Representatives of reform-liberal Judaism like Manuel Joel and Davis Kaufmann held also the approach of *via negativa*. Joel claimed that if we say that God exists it means that his non-existence is impossible, if we say that he lives it means that he is not dead. Kaufmann understood Maimonides opinion as one that asserted that one cannot have *any* positive concept of God's essence, In fact, one cannot know anything about God.[48]

Interesting to see how different Jews at the same time and place read the *Guide* for their own religious purposes. For the Reforms, the book should be saved of oblivion because it was the proof that the combination of religion and philosophy, reason and religion is not alien to Judaism, but on the contrary, and they are the followers of one of the greatest authorities in Judaism. While for the Orthodox, Maimonides was a great authority in *Mishneh Torah* but the *Guide*, in their belief, was a dangerously heretic book. Jewish reform seminars in Germany were the centers of the revived interest in Jewish philosophy of the middle ages, and especially the philosophy of Maimonides. "Before the first World War more than a dozen of dissertation on Maimonides alone were produced in Breslau alumni."[49] Maimonides' philosophy, its strict rationalism and monotheism, were a tool in the "intellectual justification for the continued existence of Judaism in the modern era."[50] Maimonides' *Guide* helped reform Jews, particularly thanks to the interpretation of Hermann Cohen, the German-Jewish Neo-Kantian philosopher, to make Judaism modern, to show that it is not obsolete, and that Judaism and reason can live together, From their interpretation of the *Guide* emerged a rational ethical monotheism.[51]

[45] The members of the Jewish-religious movement – Hasidism.
[46] The common name for rabbinical opponents of the Hasidic movement.
[47] A. Nadler, op. cit., pp. 245–256.
[48] Y. G. Kohler, op. cit., pp. 311–315.
[49] Ibidem, p. 332.
[50] Ibidem, p. 333.
[51] Ibidem.

Ethical monotheism means that "the Jewish concept of God was considered the key to human morality."[52] Following the *Guide* Reform Judaism held that only the attributes of action can be relate to God, and they are actual positive attributes "because they represent the impact of God on the world in the form of appearance."[53] Actions means the way of operating in the world, which, in fact, is the sphere of ethics. One can see how the concept of God led those thinkers to the moral perception of Judaism. This is exactly the perception of Hermann Cohen. Cohen claimed that when Maimonides reduced the divine attributes to the attributes of action, he limited his concept of God to that of "the God of ethics", and for Cohen, God's actions are revealed as models for people's actions. Furthermore, God's knowable essence is exclusively ethical in nature, and it is not an object neither for philosophical interest nor for religious belief. Cohen presented Maimonides as holding "that the essence of God can only be thought of as the ideal of human action."[54] For Cohen, the right question should be "What concept of God could be arrived at when all we know of Him is how He acts in the word?"[55] Morality and Ethics were in the center of concern for liberal Judaism because it shifted the emphasis from the legal aspect of Judaism (*Halakha*, *mitzvoth*) to the social and universal aspects, for example – the moral teaching of the prophets. The concept of God as knowable only as the God of action was very helpful in that endeavor.

Israel and Zionism: the case of Yeshayahu Leibowitz

As opposed to the nineteenth century humanism and enlightenment, in its embodiment in reform Judaism, it seems that in the state of Israel and for the Zionist purpose, Maimonides and his *Guide* had to be read completely differently. In the thinking of the great Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz Maimonides was not any more a subtle modern philosopher, but a zealous and even ultra-traditional religious Halakhic Jew.

[52] Ibidem, p. 309.
[53] Ibidem, p. 320.
[54] Ibidem, p. 322.
[55] Ibidem.

In Leibowitz' opinion, Herman Cohen made a great mistake when he read Maimonides' philosophy with affinity to the ethics of Kant. Ethical monotheism is not Maimonides' view. This philosophy, claimed Leibowitz, is anthropocentric, it puts humanity in the center. However, for Maimonides, as Leibowitz read him, ethics and morality are not goals but means. A person has no value in himself but only in his knowledge of God. Morality only help to remove obstacles in the way to God's comprehension.[56] Therefore, according to Leibowitz, the Jewish enlightenment way of reading Maimonides as the harbinger of their world view, namely, that Judaism is in its essence an ethical monotheism, is an error. There is an abyss between the sacred and the profane in Maimonides thought, and sacred is only God, all in the human sphere, even the most elevated values are in the sphere of the profane. Leibowitz's reading of Maimonides does not allow any liberal-humanistic understanding of him.[57]

According to Leibowitz, Maimonides was, first and foremost, a man of a great faith, and the essence of his work was Halakha and not philosophy. His thinking, argued Leibowitz, was deeply philosophic, however, as opposed to the philosopher who yearns for knowledge, Maimonides yearned for the knowledge of God. Additionally, he belittled all that was connected to the world and human beings, since in comparison to God all lost its importance.[58] Only God is great, and in this light, all human values and achievements are relative.[59] If we take into consideration, claimed Leibowitz, the whole of Maimonides work and not neglect the fourteen volumes of *Mishneh Torah* then we should realize that Maimonides was not a philosopher, but Halakhic man. Philosophy for Maimonides was only a tool in his theological project. This project was the purification of the belief in God from any idolatry. Idolatry which can derive from misunderstanding of the Torah. God is one, not because there is no second God, but because he is unique, there is nothing that has some resemblance to God. Therefore, for Maimonides, philosophy is only an instrument to clarify the He-

[56] Y. Leibowitz, *Emunato shel Harambam*, Israel 1980, p. 45.

[57] Ibidem.

[58] Ibidem, pp. 9–13.

[59] P. Mendes-Flohr, *Maimonides in the Crucible of Zionism*, [in:] *Maimonides and his Heritage*, eds. I. Dobbs-Weinstein, L. E. Goldman, J. A. Grady, Albany 2009, p. 185.

brew Bible,[60] and not a goal for itself. Leibowitz claimed that the whole of the philosophical thinking of Maimonides had one aim: to know God, and to remove any anthropomorphism and personification from him. Therefore, religion is not a different kind, or parallel world, of philosophy, let alone, inferior to it, but philosophical meditation guides people toward the world of Halakha.[61]

Paul Mendes-Flohr sees in such an interpretation a view that has ideological-political agenda. He argues that Leibowitz wanted to

> […] conscript the prestige of Maimonides to advance his conception to the relation between religion and state […] to place religion in vigilant opposition to the state and the inevitable conceits of power. […] he sought to undercut the widespread image of Maimonides as a prototype of the modern Jew, a rational, liberal humanist.[62]

Essential for him was to erase from politics any religious rhetoric, and to desecrate all values that are connected to states, nations, patriotism. For Leibowitz, nationalism is the most appalling and contemptible human drive.[63] He was very worried concerning the morality of Israel's policy in the occupied territories. He claimed that when nation and its state power are considered superior values then, human actions, evil actions, cannot be restrained.[64] Therefore, ascribing the highest values, and even holiness, to anything which is part of the human sphere and the human world (and obviously, nations, lands, countries, are part of the human world), can lead to a catastrophe, and is, in Leibowitz' eyes the highest profanation. If only God is holy and holiness is removed to beyond, to the transcendence, than people might not murder and not commit atrocities in the name of earthy values. Mendes-Flohr points to similarities between the theology of Leibowitz and Karl Barth (a comparison that Leibowitz definitely and wrathfully rejected[65]) and claims that: "both men held radically theocentirc views anchored in negative theology, and both were alarmed by the frightful implications of a political ethics that failed to eschew the nostrification

[60] Y. Leibowitz, *Emunato...*, op. cit., p. 16.

[61] Ibidem, pp. 32–33.

[62] P. Mendes-Flohr, op. cit., p. 185.

[63] Y. Leibowitz, *Al olam umlo'o: sichot im Michael Shashar*, Jerusalem 1988, p. 63.

[64] Ibidem, p. 78.

[65] Ibidem, pp. 58–59.

of the divine and the consequent idolatry of politics."[66] Only God is holy, and therefore, treating states, lands, and nations as holy is blasphemy.[67] Doing so is the beginning of fascism.

In a secular age, thought Leibowitz, there is no place to the double strategy of Maimonides. Namely, that the truth is for the intellectual elite, and masses need metaphors and myths. There is an unbridgeable gap between the human sphere and the divine. "From this perspective, one should speak of Judaism as «pure monotheism», not «ethical monotheism» of nineteenth century liberalism, in which the human or 'ethical' category was primary and God had no other function than to serve as a guarantor of morality."[68] Leibowitz struggled against the subordination of religion to political aims.

Not only Leibowitz was a Zionist thinker who interpreted Maimonides's philosophy for his own intellectual agenda, other Zionists did it as well. Maimonides for them was the perfect example in the history of Judaism to combine what they wanted to do in their religious thinking: to combine conservativism in Halakha and openness to the modern world. Spanish Jewry of the 11th and 12th century, and Maimonides included, offered that combination of cultural progress and religious conservatism. Maimonides of *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide* was a perfect combination of these two elements.[69] For the prominent religious-Zionist thinker rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook Maimonides was an important thinker. Kook held a dialectical approach which accepted disputes inside Judaism. Therefore, in his thought the *Guide* could be considered as an essential part of Judaism without the necessity that it would be accepted by all Jews. Judaism does not need a total and monolithic overview, and a canon of "kosher" books and traditions. He believed that intra-national and intra-cultural disagreements are justifiable. For Kook the *Guide* was not an alien "Greek" book, but an integral part of Judaism.[70] For the religious-Zionist thought Maimonides was important because he was open to

[66] P. Mendes-Flohr, op. cit., p. 186.

[67] Ibidem, p. 188.

[68] Ibidem, pp. 189–190.

[69] D. Schwartz, *Maimonides in Religious-Zionist Philosophy: Unity vs. Duality*, [in:] *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. J. T. Robinson, Leiden 2009, pp. 385–386.

[70] Like Kook there were other Zionist-religious thinkers who adopted similar approach to Maimonides. Thinkers like Isaiah Aviad and Hayyim Hirschensohn. See: ibidem, pp. 392–399.

the surrounding world and culture, but was also a halahkaic man, and in this he was a model for imitation. For many religious-Zionist thinkers the *Guide* was distrustful because its commitment to medieval science and Aristotelian philosophy. This fact was a threat to the autonomy of Judaism, which means not to be tempted by alien way of thinking (Greek). Nevertheless, many reconciled with the thought that philosophy is a part of Judaism. As Schwartz concludes:

> Maimonides figure thus became a symbol representing the intersection of several qualities: leadership, halakhic greatness, creativity, as well as philosophical and cultural openness. This figure suited the pattern of the new (religious) man of the generation promoting a religious-national revival. As far as contents are concerned, most religious-Zionists found other thinkers far more appealing than Maimonides. As an expression of an overpowering, ideal religious pattern, however, there was no alternative to the Maimonidean figure.[71]

There was no alternative to Maimonides as a model for the mutual relation between the Jewish tradition on the one hand, and western culture and its philosophical foundations on the other hand, and religion-Zionist could not ignore both worlds.

Apart from the total rejection of the *Guide* as a pure profanation and heresy,[72] I believe that in the various interpretations and understanding of the *Guide* there are two main directions: On the one hand, those who gave the priority to its words and arguments and therefore, understood the book as a rationalistic understanding of religion, which means that philosophy and religion do not exclude each other. Naturally, each reading took in consideration the philosophy of its time (like Neo-Kantianism in Herman Cohen interpretation). But on the other hand, those who gave priority to Maimonides style and writing's method read him as a hidden mystical thinker who touched the esoteric dimension of reality, even a kabbalist in disguise. I suppose that these two main attitudes are going to be present in the reading of Maimonides also in the future. Maimonides writing style was so esoteric that it can be interpreted differently, and even in contrary ways. As if each interpreter had found in the *Guide* his/her own reflection.[73] Maimonides' *Guide* is like a mirror that each reader can see in it ones own image.

[71] Ibidem, pp. 406–407.

[72] This approach lasts also in modern times, and also in the thinking of some Zionist-religious thinkers. See the case of Zeev Jawitz: ibidem, pp. 387–388.

[73] J. Gotlib, op. cit., p. 10.

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