
BEYOND DISPUTE

DEBATES THAT SHAPE JEWISH LIFE

UNIT 7

DOES THE TORAH CONTAIN EVERYTHING WE NEED TO KNOW? THE MAIMONIDEAN CONTROVERSY

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I. MOSES OR ARISTOTLE: WAS THE WORLD CREATED FROM NOTHING OR IS IT ETERNAL?

1. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Volume II, Chapter 25, ed. and trans. Shlomo Pines: 114-117

II. RESPONSES TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL WORK OF MAIMONIDES

2. Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, *Epistle of the Debate*, ed. and trans. Steven Harvey: 17-21
3. Judah Alfakhar, *Letter to David Kimhi*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Saperstein: 531-533
4. Solomon ibn Adret (Rashba), *Bans on the Study of Philosophy*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Saperstein: 535-536
5. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*: 84-85



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I. MOSES OR ARISTOTLE: WAS THE WORLD CREATED FROM NOTHING OR IS IT ETERNAL?

1. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Volume II, Chapter 25 ¹

Also known as Rambam (acronym for “Rabbi Moses ben Maimon”), Maimonides was a halakhic codifier (Mishneh Torah), philosopher (Guide of the Perplexed), and communal leader (Spain and Egypt, 1135–1204).

It should be clearly understood that our reason for rejecting the eternity of the world is not to be sought in any text of the Torah which says that the world is created....The method of allegorical interpretation is no less possible or permissible in the matter of the world being created than in any other.

[But we don’t explain the texts allegorically for two reasons:]

The eternity of the world is not conclusively proved. It is therefore wrong to reject the texts and interpret them allegorically because of preference for a view the opposite of which might be shown to be preferable for a variety of reasons.

If...we believed in the eternity of the world according to the principles laid down by Aristotle—that the world exists by necessity, that the nature of no thing ever changes and that nothing ever deviates from its customary behavior—this would destroy the Law from its very foundation and belie automatically every miracle, and make void all hopes and fears the Law seeks to inspire...

[He concludes:]

If it were proved that the world is created...all the objections of the philosophers to us would fall to the ground. If, on the other hand, they would succeed in providing a proof for its eternity according to Aristotle’s view, the Law in its entirety would fall to the ground and other manners of thinking would take its place, for I have made clear to you that the whole of it hangs on this one point. Give it, therefore, your most earnest consideration.

¹ Ed. and trans. Shlomo Pines (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963 and 1995), Vol. 2, 114–117.

II. RESPONSES TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL WORK OF MAIMONIDES

2. **Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, The Epistle of the Debate** ²

Shem Tov ibn Falaquera was a philosopher, poet, and commentator (Spain, 1225–c. 1290).

The SCHOLAR said: I shall ask you to make known to me what you see in my ways that you decree me to be among the rebels, and what wrong you find in me that you suspect me among the infidels.

The PIETIST replied: Far be it from me to attribute wrong to your actions and Heaven forbend that I should call the perfection of your deeds imperfect. I see you humble and wholly without imperfection. You are of the disciples of Aaron—pursuing peace and loving peace, loving people, and bringing them close to the Torah. You are meticulous about every commandment, the light one as well as the weighty one. However, there is one fault which putrifies the aroma of your integrity and one sin which destroys your good. It seems likely to me that this sin will cause you to lose your place in the world that is forever long, and will place you in Tophet which is prepared for the wicked.

The SCHOLAR replied: O Pietist, how you multiply your words against me! In your mercy inform me of this sin, and if it is as you say, I will confess it after I abandon it. And I will beseech you to teach me in what its atonement consists, and what the sacrifice is for its being committed wantonly and for its being committed through error, whether a ram or a lamb of the first year.

The PIETIST replied: I will show you, O Philosopher. You mix the words of the Epicureans and the heretics with the right words of the Torah, and you engage in the study of the irreligious books and the compositions of the Greek philosophers. What greater sin could you pursue? The words of all these are a stumbling-block to those who read them and a snare! Are they not what make humans go astray from their God and give the lie to the covenant of the Law, and cause them to cry out against Heaven and to be a heretic?

The SCHOLAR replied: Far be it from me to consider any of their words that go against our Torah, let alone to believe that which contradicts our faith. Rather, I believe of their words only that which I see to be true and in agreement with our religion. I eat the fruit of the pomegranate and throw away the peel.

The PIETIST replied: This path is not straight, for since [the philosophers] deny the Torah, it is improper to engage in the study of their books or to look into their words at all.

² In *Falaquera's "Epistle of the Debate": An Introduction to Jewish Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Steven Harvey (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for Judaic Studies, 1987), 17–21. Some of the translation has been changed to reflect contemporary sensibilities.

3. Judah Alfakhar, Letter to David Kimhi, c. 1232 ³

Judah Alfakhar was a leader in the Jewish community of Toledo and physician to Ferdinand III of Castile (Spain, d. 1235).

...Maimonides says in the *Guide [of the Perplexed]*, Book 2, chap. 25], discussing the eternity of the world, that if he had found in Aristotle a proof for eternity [of the world] that was cogent according to the rules of logic, he would have been able to reinterpret the verses concerning creation in a manner different from their simple meaning, making them fit the doctrine of eternity [i.e., that the world always existed]. This would be similar to what he did with the “image” and “likeness” [in Gen. 1:26: see *Guide*, 1:1], which appear to indicate corporeality [of God]. According to this approach, wherever a philosophical proof contradicts a biblical verse, we abandon the [straightforward meaning of] the biblical verse.

But clearly, there is no analogy to be made between the doctrine of eternity [of the world] and the doctrine of corporeality [of God]. With regard to corporeality, many verses contradict each other. One verse says, “And they saw the God of Israel” (Exod. 24:10), while another verse says, “For humans shall not see Me and live” (Exod. 33:20)....

But regarding the doctrine of creation, *all* the verses bear witness to the same thing, raising their voices in praise of the One who brought the world into being with the divine word. Therefore a proof from Greek philosophy cannot uproot them Furthermore, even according to the philosophers themselves, the establishment of a perfect syllogism requires extremely careful investigation. For sometimes something misleading may be incorporated into it, something from the discipline of deception called in Greek “sophistics.” The result will be a false conclusion. Therefore we have learned that one cannot fulfill one’s obligation by relying on Greek philosophy in matters of Torah, especially with regard to the proof for eternity, which would undermine the reason for the Sabbath.

Maimonides’ basic purpose was to refrain from deviating from the natural order of the world, because he wanted to make the Torah and Greek science cohabit under one tent. He imagined that they were like “two fawns that are twins of a gazelle” (Song of Songs 4:5). But the union is, in reality, mourning and moaning. The earth cannot bear their dwelling together like sisters....

You [David Kimhi] should know that those who walk in darkness, clutching the *Guide for the Perplexed*, thinking that they are wise while they despise the word of the Lord and attain little wisdom, are indolent and unable to make up their minds. They think that they have the best of both, but in reality they have neither the light of Torah nor the reputation of true philosophers.... You consider the *Guide* to be a wonderful teacher; we view it as opening the door to rebelliousness.

³ In *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Saperstein (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2016), 531–533. Some of the translation has been changed to reflect contemporary sensibilities.

I admit that the *Guide* is not all of one piece. Some of it is pleasant, some is destructive. Attracted by its good parts, one is seduced by its bad. Would that this book had never come into being, never been translated, and never read....The hand of Samuel ibn Tibbon⁴ was the first in this treachery. Not knowing what would be its bitter end, he began to be a stumbling block for the people of your country. He gave them the Guide as righteousness (*tzedakah*), but it turned out to produce an outcry (*tze'akah*, cf. Isa. 5:7).

4. Solomon ibn Adret, *Bans on the Study of Philosophy, 1305*⁵

Also known as Rashba (acronym for “Rabbi Shlomo ben Avraham”) and El Rab d’España (“The Rabbi of Spain”); banker and leading rabbinical authority in Barcelona (Spain, 1235–1310).

Woe to humanity because of the insult to the Torah!
 For they have strayed far from it.
 Its diadem have they taken away; its crown have they removed.
 Every person with censer in hand offers incense
 Before the Greeks and the Arabs.
 Like Zimri they publicly consort with the Midianites (cf. Numbers 25:6–15)
 And revel in their own filth!
 They do not prefer the older [Jewish teachings]
 But surrender to the newer [Greek learning] the prerogatives due their Jewish birthright.
 They turn not back, but act like strangers [to their own teachings],
 And like satyrs, at the head of all the streets,
 They dance to these [foreign ideas], and even teach them to their children.
 Therefore, when we saw the fowler’s snare even in the remote parts of the earth,
 And the dove [the Torah] compelled to make her nest in the sides of the pit’s mouth,
 We trembled and said: “The disease [heresy] is spreading!”
 So now we have risen and made a covenant with the Lord and the Torah of our God,
 Which we and our ancestors have accepted on Sinai,
 Not to let anything alien come among us,
 Nor let the nettle and the thistle [heretical ideas] spring up in our palaces.
 Servants are we, servants of the Lord!
 The Lord, He has made us. We are His.

Therefore have we decreed and accepted for ourselves and our children, and for all those joining us, that for the next fifty years, under threat of the ban, no one in our community, unless they be twenty-five years old, shall study, either in the original language or in translation, the books which the Greeks have written on religious philosophy and the natural sciences.

⁴ The translator of the *Guide* into Hebrew from Arabic.

⁵ In *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Sourcebook, 315–1791*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus and Marc Saperstein (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2016), 535–536. Some of the translation has been changed to reflect contemporary sensibilities.

It is also forbidden for any member of our community to teach any Jew under twenty-five years of age any of these sciences lest they drag them away from the law of Israel, which is superior to all these teachings. How can a human being not be afraid to judge between the wisdom of human beings, who build only on analogy, argument, and guesswork, and the wisdom of the Supreme Being, between whom and us there is hardly any comparison? Can human beings, who inhabit but a perishable body, think of sitting in judgment on God, who created them, by saying—God forbid—“This God can do, and this God cannot do?” This, certainly, would lead one to complete heresy and from this, indeed, may every student of the Torah be delivered!

We have, however, excluded from this our general prohibition the science of medicine, even though it is one of the natural sciences, because the Torah permits the physician to heal.

Over the scroll of the Torah and in the presence of the whole community, we have agreed, on the Sabbath of the [Torah] portion “These are the words” (*Devarim*, Deut. 1:1) in the year 5065 [1305], to ban these things.

5. Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel*⁶

Michael Wyschogrod was a Jewish German-American philosopher, theologian, and activist for Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue (United States, Europe, and Israel, 1928–2015).

We cannot overlook a basic contradiction. The God of the Bible is a person. He is one of the characters who appears in the stories told in the Bible. He has a personality that undergoes development in the course of the story. He creates man with certain expectations, which are apparently disappointed, and he is then sorry that he has created him. He is subject to the emotions of anger and jealousy, among others. He is also filled with burning love, particularly toward Abraham and his descendants. He desires certain things and detests others. He is faithful in the sense of keeping his promises, even when for long periods of time it seems that he has forgotten them and has no intention of keeping them. Those who trust in him are not disappointed, especially if they are patient. At this stage, our purpose is not to draw any sort of character portrait of God but to point out that there is a personality in the Bible who is God and who interacts with the other characters in the biblical narrative.

Against this simple fact, Jewish philosophy has marshaled all of its resources. The personality of God had to be demythologized. How could God have human failings such as emotions and how could his actions have unexpected results? If God could not foresee the consequences of his actions, then he is not omniscient and a perfect God must be omniscient. The attribution of emotions to God was particularly unacceptable to Maimonides, who was firmly convinced that even properly rational men were ruled exclusively by reason rather than emotion. What was true of philosophers could hardly not be true of God. The biblical portrait of God had to be reinterpreted. The simple, human words the Bible attributed to God were to be

⁶ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 84–85.

understood in a sense different from common understanding. Perhaps it was appropriate for common people to take the Bible “literally,” but it was not appropriate for intellectuals, who had to be taught, if they could not figure it out for themselves, that the truth about God was far removed from the simple picture that the common people were offered. Maimonides’ full energy is expended on this enterprise of demythologization, of showing that the words of the Bible do not mean what they seem to be saying but something quite different. Maimonides perfects this deliteralization of the Bible, but he is not, of course, the first to make the attempt: Philo preceded him by many centuries. And gradually the philosophic God comes to permeate Jewish consciousness. The real God whom Adam feared and loved fades, to be replaced by a philosophical principle. The real estrangement between God and man has begun.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Halbertal, Moshe. *Maimonides Life and Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
2. Schweid, Eliezer. "The Maimonidean Controversy," in *The Classic Jewish Philosophers: From Saadia through the Renaissance*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008.
3. Seeskin, Kenneth. *Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed*. West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1996.