
The “Rambam Revival” in Early Modern Jewish Thought: Maskilim, Mitnagdim, and Hasidim on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*

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What “Rambam Revival?”

There is an assumption in the title of this paper that begs the following question: Was there in fact a significant and sustained “Rambam Revival” in the modern period? The very notion of a modern Jewish Maimonidean renaissance implies that there had been an extended historical period during which Maimonides was not of widespread interest and his works not studied in the Jewish world, a deficiency that was subsequently addressed and remedied by this alleged “Rambam revival.”

In evaluating the history of the reception of Maimonides from the period immediately following his death, through to the early modern period with which we are presently concerned, a fundamental distinction must first be drawn between “Rabbenu Moshe Ben Maimon,” the revered rabbi and authoritative halakhist, and Maimonides, the Aristotelian philosopher, scientist, and medical authority.

From its appearance in the late 12th century, the *Mishneh Torah*, the masterful Jewish legal code authored by the Rambam, the “Great Eagle,” remained the foundational text of Jewish jurisprudence until its normative status was eclipsed by the *Shulhan Arukh* in the 16th century. Despite fierce quarrels with it that erupted early on among some medieval European rabbinic critics – most famously by Provençal Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres¹ – at no point in Jewish history was the *Mishneh Torah* in need of

¹ The fullest treatment of Rabad’s criticism of Maimonides’ code is Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquieres* (Cambridge, 1962), chapter 3, pp. 128–197.

revival. It was not only the most frequently consulted and respected source of halakhah throughout the centuries; it was the most widely studied and analyzed rabbinic work in the history of Rabbinic literature.²

Even after the codification of the *Shulhan Arukh*, which overrode the legislative authority of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides' code was consulted and studied widely, especially in the hard cases to be found throughout the responsa literature. Moreover, the *Mishneh Torah* was mined widely for many centuries as a source of Talmudic pilpul, the most common practice of which was finding the Rambam's sources and reconciling any apparent discrepancies between his halakhic decisions and the implications of the corresponding Talmudic *sugya*, or textual unit. "Erleydigen a Shveren Rambam" (resolving a difficult passage from Maimonides' code) is the common Yiddish expression for this highly developed genre of rabbinic study. Ironically, the pilpulistic industry generated by the *Mishneh Torah*, which became so popular in the Yeshivas of Eastern Europe, actually served to undermine its author's original intent in composing his code: namely, to simplify access to rabbinic law and eliminate the convolutions of Talmudic reasoning.

This Rambam, the rabbinic master of halakhah was certainly never ignored, let alone forgotten, and one cannot therefore speak of any revival of interest in him or his *Mishneh Torah* and his other authoritative rabbinic works in the modern period.³

But "Dr. Maimonides," the medieval rationalist philosopher of Judaism and author of the stunning – and, in the view of many traditionalists, subversive, even heretical, work – *Guide of the Perplexed*, was indeed largely ignored and suppressed (to the point of having been banned several times and even handed over once by the Spanish rabbis to the Dominicans for public burning!) and was for the most part hidden away for many centuries. The philosopher, Maimonides, who intimated that had the Greek philosophers proven that the world is eternal, he would have been forced to abandon the traditional understanding of the Torah's creation narrative;⁴ the Maimonides who suggested that silent intellectual contemplation is a superior form of worship to prayer, which is in turn superior to the Biblical regimen of sacrificial

2 On the history of the reception of the *Mishneh Torah* and its enduring influence, see Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven, 1980), Epilogue, pp. 515-537.

3 Still, it has been argued that the intense systematic study of the *Mishneh Torah* reached new heights, or depths, in the so-called "Brisker" school of the Lithuanian Yeshiva movement, inaugurated by Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik. On this method, see Norman Solomon, "Anomaly and Theory in the Analytic School of Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik and his Circle," in *Jewish Law Annual* 6 (1987): 126-147. See also, the discussions of the uses of the *Mishneh Torah* in Norman Solomon, *The Analytic Movement in Rabbinic Jurisprudence: Hayyim Soloveitchik and His Circle* (Atlanta, 1993).

4 *Guide of the Perplexed*, II: end of chapter 25.

rites;⁵ the Maimonides whose allegorization of the Torah's most important historical narratives and prophecies and whose rationalist philosophy of Judaism spawned a series of bitter disputes from the 13th through the 16th centuries;⁶ the Maimonides whose philosophy was blamed for the catastrophes that befell Spanish Jews from 1391 until their expulsion in 1492;⁷ the Maimonides whose influence was accused of softening the resolve and faith of those Spanish Jews who succumbed to conversion during the century of Christian persecution, that led up to the expulsion⁸ – this Maimonides, the frighteningly rationalist “*Baal Ha-Moreh*,” was indeed the beneficiary of a stunning revival in the early modern period. And it is to the revival of interest – after centuries of neglect – primarily in Maimonides' great synthesis of reason and religion most famously articulated in the *Guide* that we now turn.

There was, in particular, a noticeable renaissance in the publication, study, and dissemination of the long neglected and oft-suppressed *Guide of the Perplexed*, beginning in the latter decades of the 18th century, a period that coincided with the inception of the Haskalah, the European Jewish Enlightenment.

There are numerous ways to document the renewed interest in Maimonidean rationalism that coincided with the emergence of the Haskalah. The simplest quantitative measure of this “Rambam revival” is a bibliographic survey of the publication history of the Hebrew translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. While such a bibliographical overview tells us almost nothing about the underlying reasons for the “Rambam revival” or its intellectual con-

5 *Guide of the Perplexed*, III: 32.

6 On the Maimonidean controversies, see Joseph Sarachek, *Faith And Reason* (Williamsport, 1935); D.J.Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy* (Leiden, 1965). On the general cultural and intellectual background to the Maimonidean controversy, see Bernard D. Septimus, *Hispanic Jewish Culture in Transition* (Cambridge, 1982). See also Septimus' unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Meir Abulafia and the Maimonidean Controversy*, Harvard University, 1975.

7 This is the central theme of the anti-Maimonidean polemic by the Spanish exile, R. Joseph Yaavetz, *Or Ha-Hayyim* (Zolkiew, 1912 edition, with the commentary *Maayan Ganim*, by R. Zevi Elimelekh of Dinov). Many post-expulsion kabbalists, most notably the Spanish exile and kabbalist R. Meir ibn Gabbai, held Maimonidean influence responsible for undermining the faith of Spanish and Portuguese Jewry – leading so many to convert under duress – as the source of the divine wrath that resulted in the tribulations of Iberian Jewry. See, in particular, Ibn Gabbai's introduction to *Tolaat Yaakov* (Constantinople, 1560). In the 19th century this very theme was transposed to the Hasidic criticism of the Haskalah in the remarkable commentary to Yaavetz's *Or Ha-Hayyim* by Zevi Elimelekh of Dinov. See on this work, Mendl Peikarz, “Al Meh Avdah Galut Sefard: Kelekeh Kelapei Ha-Haskalah Be-Mizrah Eyropa; ha-Hasidut Be-Eyeni R. Zevi Elimelekh mi-Dinov” in *Daat* 28 (1992): 105–111. See my discussion of Zevi Elimelekh of Dinov below.

8 See Solomon Alami, *Iggeret Ha-Mussar* (Constantinople, 1510). This highly influential work was re-issued fifteen times between 1510 and the critical edition by Abraham Meir Haberman, Jerusalem, 1950. Just as Zevi Elimelekh of Dinov used Yaavetz's *Or Ha-Hayyim* as a textual basis for his attack on the Haskalah, the 20th-century Hasidic rebbe, Henokh Ha-Kohen of Alexander, published a commentary to Alami's *Iggeret Ha-Musar* that transposed its critique of Maimonidean philosophy onto the Haskalah and Reform Judaism of his day. See the Pietrókov, 1912 edition of *Iggeret Ha-Mussar*.

tent, it reveals much about the extent of renewed interest in Maimonides' most controversial philosophical magnum opus.⁹

The *Guide* was first published in Rome in 1480, and subsequently in Lisbon in 1497, just on the eve of the expulsion of Portuguese Jewry. The next two editions were published in Italy: Venice, 1551 and Sabionetta, 1553. The Jews of Renaissance Italy were in this respect, as in so many others, atypically advanced relative to the rest of the world Jewry. In fact, Italian was the first spoken language into which the *Guide* was ever translated, by Yedidiya ben Moses Recanati in 1583.¹⁰

Some one hundred and ninety years were to elapse before a Hebrew edition of the *Guide* would again see the light of day.

From the Sabionetta edition of 1553 until the Jessnitz edition of 1742, the *Guide* was never re-issued. Moreover, the Jessnitz *Guide* was a straight reprint of the Venice edition that added no new commentaries, beyond those of Crescas and Efodi that were already included in the Italian editions. Nor did it add any other textual emendations or supplements. It took almost another half century before a new, revised version of the *Guide* was finally published, when significant volumes appeared in Berlin between 1791 and 1796, with new commentaries to the *Guide* by two of the leading East European Maskilim: Solomon Maimon (1753–1800), whose commentary was to part I of the *Guide*, and Isaac of Satanow (1732–1804), whose commentary covered parts II and III.¹¹

There was, in other words, but a single new Hebrew version of the *Guide of the Perplexed* published over a period of almost 250 years after the publication of the Sabionetta edition.¹² In the 100 years following the ground-

9 The following bibliographical survey of the history of the printing of the *Guide of the Perplexed* is based on the following bibliographies of Maimonides' writings:

- M. Friedlander, "The Moreh Nebuchim Literature," in the preface to his translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (London, 1928), pp. xxvii-xxxviii.
- Zechariah Fishman, found at the end of the volume, *Rabenu Moshe Ben Maimon: Hayav, Sefarav, Pe'ulotav ve-Deotav*, edited by Rabbi Yehuda Leib Ha-Kohen Fishman (Jerusalem, 1948).
- Josef Isaac Gorfinkle, *A Bibliography of Maimonides* (New York, 1932).
- Eliezer Raphael Malachi, *Bibliographia Shel Ha-Rambam*, published serially in *Ha-Rofeh ha-Ivri*, 1954–1955, vol. 27, pp. 145–156; vol. 28, pp. 145–156.

10 See Friedlander, *ibid.* p. xxxi.

11 On Satanow's publishing work and his commentary to the *Guide*, see Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 2004), pp. 322–327.

12 During this long period, there were a few partial commentaries to individual chapters or limited sections of the *Guide*. Most notable were Yosef Halevi's *Givat Ha-Moreh* (Prague, 1611) and *Ikkarei Ha-Moreh im Hasagot R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller* (Prague, 1614). For a full description of all of the commentaries written to the *Guide* from its first appearance until the late 19th century, see the bibliographical study by Moritz Steinschneider, *Die Hebraischen Commentare zum "Fuhrer" des Maimonides*. In *Berliner Festschrift* (Frankfort, 1903), pp. 345–363, and Friedlander, *op. cit.*, *passim*. Aside from the aforementioned Italian translation, the *Guide* was translated into Latin largely for use by Christian Hebraists, about which see Friedlander, *op. cit.*, pp. xxx-xxxii.

breaking Jessnitz 1791 edition, by contrast, the *Guide* was published in six different Hebrew editions with a number of new commentaries written by Maskilim from both Western and Eastern Europe. During this period, there were also German, French, and Hungarian translations of the *Guide* issued by central European Jewish scholars.¹³

It is also notable that during this “revival” period, Moses Mendelssohn, the “father of the Haskalah,” issued the first commentary on Maimonides’ philosophical lexicon, *Milot Ha-Higayyon* (Frankfort an Oder, 1784), a work whose publication history closely mirrors that of the *Guide*. After its publication in the Northern Italian city, Cremona in 1566, *Milot Ha-Higayyon* was not re-issued until the Berlin edition of 1766 – exactly two hundred years later.¹⁴

This publishing revival of the *Guide* and the newly written Haskalah commentaries to it quite clearly testify to a renewed interest in medieval Jewish scholasticism in general and the philosophy of Maimonides in particular towards the end of the 18th century. While a very circumscribed number of rabbinical scholars in 16th century Poland – most famously R. Moses Isserles and R. Mordecai Jaffe – exhibited an interest in the *Guide*, they were roundly censured for this, and the *Guide* was never widely taught nor was it commonly cited in rabbinical literature throughout the 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries.¹⁵

Maimonides as Ancestor of the Haskalah

The renewed publication of the *Guide* had the historic effect of exposing many curious young Jews, especially from Eastern Europe, to rationalist philosophy for the first time, and thus preparing the paths that led them eventually to the Haskalah. We know from their memoirs and essays that it was the *Guide* in particular that ignited the rationalist interest of such leading Maskilim as Mendl Lefin, Menasseh of Ilya, Solomon Maimon, Isaac Satanow, Kalman Shulman, and, most significantly, the “Russian Mendelssohn,” Isaac Ber Levinsohn (1788–1869), who was the founder of the Eastern European Haskalah. The leading Israeli historian of the Haskalah, Shmuel Feiner, has gone so far as to make the bold claim that were it not for the re-publication of

¹³ On these non-Hebrew Jewish translations, see Friedlander, *op. cit.*, pp xxxi-xxxii.

¹⁴ On the circumstances that led Mendelssohn to write his commentary to *Milot Ha-Higayon*, see Shmuel Feiner, pp. 63-64.

¹⁵ One volume of R. Mordecai Yaffe’s *Ten Levushim*, entitled *Levush Pinat Yikrat*, is a partial and idiosyncratic commentary to the *Guide*’s philosophy. On this work, as well as a full analysis of the rancorous exchanges between R. Moses Isserles, R. Solomon Luria and other 16th-century Polish rabbis regarding the legitimacy of medieval Jewish rationalism, see Lawrence Kaplan’s doctoral dissertation, *Rationalism and Rabbinic Culture in 16th-century Eastern Europe: Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe’s Levush Pinat Yikrat*, Harvard University, 1975.

the *Guide* in the 18th century, it is doubtful that Moses Mendelssohn would ever have emerged as the founder of the Jewish enlightenment.¹⁶

But what was at the root of the initial interest that led to this revival? On the most elementary level, Maimonides was seen by many of the early Maskilim as a model for the rational and worldly Jews they wished to cultivate among the European Jewish masses. This Arabic writing doctor and philosopher was admired as a precursor for their own attempts to modernize Jewry and broaden Jewish education. Maimonides, the philosopher who read Aristotle, wrote in Arabic, practiced medicine at the Sultan's court in Cairo, and whose rational approach to Judaism was condemned by his obscurantist Rabbinic enemies was, in the imagination of the Maskilim, their forebear in all of these respects. The Maskilim, like Maimonides some six centuries earlier, perceived themselves to be struggling against the primitive, narrow-minded Talmudic rabbis of their day to widen the horizons of Europe's Jews by introducing to them the study of foreign languages and the sciences, and, like him, they suffered from those rabbis' bitter denunciations.

The most significant and dramatic example of this Maimonidean inspiration among the early Maskilim is to be found in the life and works of Solomon Maimon (c. 1753–1800), who was so inspired by the personality and life of Maimonides, that he changed his name from Shlomo ben Yehoshua Yezhvitser to Solomon Maimon. He writes passionately about the overwhelming impact of the Rambam upon him:

My reverence for this great teacher went so far that I regarded him as my ideal of the perfect man. I looked upon his teachings as if they had been inspired with Divine wisdom itself. This went so far, that when my passions began to grow, and I had sometimes to fear lest they might seduce me to some action inconsistent with these teachings, I used to employ as a proved antidote the abjuration: "I swear by the reverence which I owe my great teacher, Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, not to do this act." And this vow, so far as I can remember, was always sufficient to restrain me.¹⁷

The reader of Maimon's *Geschichte des Eigenen Lebens* will be struck by how much attention the author paid not only in tribute to Maimonides and his seminal influence on his life, but as well by Maimon's detailed, multi-

¹⁶ See Shmuel Feiner, p. 47.

¹⁷ I have relied here on the translation of this citation from Maimon's autobiography in David Yellin and Israel Abrahams *Maimonides* (London, 1903), pp. 158–159 (from chapter XII, on "The Influence of Maimonides"). My reading of Maimon's long and detailed analysis of the *Guide* is based on the Yiddish edition, *Shloime Maimon's Leybensgeschikhte* (Vilna, 1927), vol. II, pp. 239–360.

chapter synopsis, comprising almost 150 pages, on the content of each part of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. While the rest of Maimon's autobiography is clearly modeled after Rousseau's *Confessions*, this extended digression – a long series of chapters elucidating in detail the content of a work of medieval scholasticism – is completely out of character for an Enlightenment memoir.

Far more significant than the mere fact that Maimonides was the formative and most powerful personal influence in the life of the young Solomon Maimon is the actual use of Maimonides by Maimon in his commentary to the first part of the *Guide*, *Givat Ha-Moreh*, published in 1791. The student of *Givat Ha-Moreh* discovers almost immediately that, while the author may have revered the image of Maimonides and admired the *Guide* for what it tried to accomplish in its day, he did not adhere in any meaningful way to any part of the actual philosophical teachings of Maimonides or the other Jewish Averroists who followed in his wake. As Shmuel H. Bergman and Natan Rotenstreich observed in the introduction to their critical edition of Maimon's commentary: "*Givat Ha-Moreh* is only partially a genuine commentary to the *Guide*, and partially an extended disputation with Maimonides, emerging from the development of Maimon's own, post-Maimonidean philosophy."¹⁸

Indeed, there is not a single theoretical Maimonidean position that is upheld fully by Maimon. This will come as no surprise to historians of philosophy, given the fact that Maimon was essentially a post-Kantian idealist. His commentary demolishes Maimonides' physics, astronomy, and cosmology; he disputes the validity of Maimonides' lengthy refutation of the atomism of the Islamic theologians of the Kalām school, and entirely dismisses the relevance of Maimonides' very lengthy, earnest consideration of the Aristotelian theory of the eternity of the universe. At the end of the day, Maimon leaves no part of Maimonidean doctrine unscathed by his modern critique.

If, in fact, Maimon disagreed almost totally with Maimonidean physics and metaphysics (and even with the very inadequate distinction drawn between these two fields by the Aristotelians), why then did he bother at all with Maimonides? The answer to this question offers the key to understanding the very essence of the modern "Rambam Revival," and the limited and often paradoxical nature of the Haskalah's enchantment with Maimonides.

As I have suggested, Maimonides is admired more biographically – as a virtuous symbol of the ideal Jew/philosopher – than philosophically. His life

¹⁸ See Solomon Maimon, *Givat Ha-Moreh*, new edition with notes and indexes by S.H. Bergman and N. Rotenstreich (Jerusalem, 1965), p. 5. A close reading of Maimon's own introduction, as well as the appendix to the work that provides his synoptic history of philosophy, demonstrates the degree to which Maimon considered Maimonides' philosophy to be entirely archaic. For an insightful discussion of the complicated and tense relationship between Solomon Maimon's philosophy and that of Maimonides, see Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 241-243.

furnishes a romantic model for the early Maskilim, even as the actual content of his philosophy is found to be archaic and unacceptable. So even if the medieval doctrines found in the *Guide* are no longer of much use to late-18th and early 19th-century German enlighteners, the hagiographic image of Maimonides developed in Haskalah literature served as a powerful source of inspiration.

In *Givat Ha-Moreh*, what Maimon did with the problematic aspects of Maimonidean philosophy can best be described as allegorical commentary; that is, he applied the Maimonidean approach to problematic parts of Scripture to the *Guide* itself. He saw the *Guide* speaking to the level of the men of Maimonides' medieval time, just as Maimonides saw the Torah speaking to the level of the ancient, unwashed Israelites in the desert. Just as Maimonides' motto justifying his allegorical approach to Scripture was *dibra torah kilshon benei adam*, (the Torah spoke in the conventional language of the men of its time),¹⁹ Solomon Maimon seems to be saying *diber Ha-Rambam kilshon benei adam* (Maimonides spoke in the language of the men of his day).

I will mention only two other Maskilim – both from Galicia – among the very many of the following two generations who came under the spell of the Haskalah's romance with Maimonides. Both appropriated evocative Maimonidean nomenclature in the titles of their major writings, while eschewing his philosophy in those very works. Whereas Solomon Maimon actually took as his surname that of the Rambam, the Galician Maskilim Nachman Krochmal (1785–1840) and Salomon Rubin (1823–1910) borrowed the title of his philosophical magnum opus. Krochmal called his most important work, which articulated an original modern philosophy of Jewish history, *Moreh Nevukhay Ha-Z'man*.²⁰ Rubin, even more audaciously, called his tribute to Spinoza, *Moreh Nevukhim he-Hadash*.²¹ Needless to say, neither of these books articulate anything resembling a Maimonidean philosophy of Judaism, although Krochmal was inspired to a degree by Maimonides' historicism in explaining many of the commandments and by the historical sensitivity inherent in the aforementioned principle, *dibra torah kilshon benei adam*.

19 *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:26.

20 Much has been written about Nachman Krochmal's *Moreh Nevukhay Ha-Z'man*. See the treatment of this work in Jay Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (Albany, 1991). See, also, the provocative discussion by Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History*, pp. 243-247, and Ismar Schorsch, "The Philosophy of History of Nachman Krochmal," *Judaism* 10 (1961): 237-245. Simon Rawidowicz edited a critical edition of Krochmal's book with a valuable introduction in *Kitvei R. Nachman Krochmal* (Hebrew) (Waltham, 1961).

21 Rubin's works on Spinoza are: (1) *Spinoza und Maimonides: Ein Psychologisch-Philosophisches Antitheton* (University of Vienna doctoral dissertation, 1849); (2) 18. *Moreh Nevukhim ha-Hadash*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 1856-57); (3) *Teshuvah Nitzehet* (Lwow, 1859; a response to Shadal's criticisms); (4) *Heker Eloha in Torat Ha-Adam* (Vienna, 1885; Hebrew translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* with a lengthy introduction); (5) *Hegyonei Spinoza 'Al Ha-Elohut, Ha-Tevel, Ve-Nefesh Ha-Adam* (Podgurze-Krakow, 1897); (6) *Dikduk Sefat 'Ever* (Podgurze-Krakow, 1905; Hebrew translation of Spinoza's Hebrew

Rubin, a lifelong passionate Spinozist, was certainly not unaware of Spinoza's devastating critique of the entire scholastic approach, particularly his attack on Maimonides' allegorical method of biblical interpretation.²² Still, Maimonides remains a heroic figure for Krochmal and Rubin, and the *Guide* a title worthy of borrowing, to some extent despite the details of its teachings.

But let us step back for a moment, to the founding fathers of the Enlightenment: Hartwig Wessley, Moses Mendelssohn, and the *Measfim*.²³ Already with them we see a similar phenomenon: Mendelssohn and his closest colleague, Hartwig Wessley, clearly admired the Rambam for the person he was and the life he led, while disagreeing with many central features of his philosophical system. The first Haskalah journals, beginning with *ha-Meassef*, are filled with panegyrics to Maimonides, ranging from worshipful hagiographies of the saintly rationalist philosopher, medical doctor, and enlightened Rabbi, to fantasies of him cavorting in heaven with Moses Mendelssohn.

Even before his arrival in Berlin and his collaboration with Mendelssohn and the *Measfim*, Wessley was involved with a group of enlightened Jews in Amsterdam during the late 1860s, who used to meet together weekly, to study and discuss Maimonides' *Guide*.²⁴

The old adage *Mi-Moshe ad Moshe lo kam ke-Moshe*, from the Biblical Moses to Moses Maimonides there arose none like Moses, was transposed in time and becomes, "from Moses Maimonides to Moses Mendelssohn there arose none like Moses." Even the Hebrew acronym for Mendelssohn, Rabbenu Moshe ben Menachem (Ramban) seemed designed to associate the memory of the Rambam with that of Mendelssohn.

But in fact, the philosophies of Maimonides and Mendelssohn were almost entirely incompatible, not only in detail (as we have seen with Solomon Maimon) but at their very foundations. Maimonides' goal was, after all, the synthesis of Judaism with rational philosophy. Mendelssohn, in his major Judaic work, *Jerusalem*, strove to achieve the very opposite: the strict separation

grammar with introduction); (7) *Barukh Spinoza be-Rigshay Ahavat Elohim* (Amor Dei Intellectualis) (Podgurze-Krakow, 1910).

On Shadal's critique of Rubin's Spinozism, see: Rivka Horowitz, "Shadal U-Shpinoza" in *Barukh Shpinoza – 300 Shanah Le-Moto: Kovetz Ma'amarim* (Haifa, 1978), pp. 167–186 and Aryeh Motzkin, "Shpinoza, Luzatto, Filosofia ve-Dat," in *Barukh Shpinoza: Kovetz Ma'amarim 'Al Mishnato*, ed. Menahem Brinker (Tel Aviv, 1978), pp. 135–44. A rich discussion of the debates between Luzzatto and the Galician maskilim is to be found in Menahem Dorman, *Vikkuhay Shpinoza Mi-David Nieto 'Ad David Ben Gurion* (Tel Aviv, 1987), ch. 7, pp. 97–152. For Klatzkin's critique, see *Barukh Shpinoza: Hayyav, Sefarav, Shitato* (Leipzig, 1923), 59–88.

²² On Spinoza's rejection of the philosophical allegorization of the Bible, see Samuel J. Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (London, 2002).

²³ The following discussion of Mendelssohn's relationship to Maimonidean philosophy owes much to the study by James Lehmann, "Maimonides, Mendelssohn and the *Guide*" in *Leo Baeck Yearbook* 20 (1975): 87–108.

²⁴ On this group, see Feiner, p. 26.

of the realms of religion and philosophy from each other. Following far more in the footsteps of Spinoza than those of Maimonides, Mendelssohn's enterprise required removing all philosophical content from normative Judaism, and re-constructing Judaism as "revealed legislation" rather than "revealed truth." Nothing could be further from Maimonides' aims. Mendelssohn strove to construct a Judaism that could be limited to the ritual practices in the privacy of the Jewish home and synagogue and would not impinge on the Jews' entry into European society. To achieve this he was required to reject much of the medieval Jewish scholastic tradition.²⁵

Perhaps the strongest indicator of this fundamental asymmetry between Maimonides and Mendelssohn is the question of Jewish theological doctrine, or dogma. As is well-known, Maimonides insisted that Judaism not only commands beliefs, but mandated the philosophically correct version of those beliefs; that is, Judaism encompassed a well-defined creed.

It was Maimonides who crafted the most extensive and most famous Jewish catechism: the thirteen principles of faith, the so-called *anee maamins* [each beginning with "I believe..."] of Judaism that have been liturgically canonized with their inclusion in most editions of the daily Siddur. It was he who insisted that a Jew who does not adhere to a rather well-defined understanding of those belief requirements is in violation of halakhah, Jewish law. The opening book of Maimonides' code, the *Mishneh Torah*, consists largely in framing these basic theological doctrines in normative halakhic terms.²⁶

Mendelssohn and the Maskilim moved in precisely the opposite direction, insisting that Judaism is a religion of legal praxis and not at all one of theological dogma; that halakhah commands no beliefs; and that this is precisely what distinguishes it from Christianity. Just as the synthesis and harmonization of the Torah with rational philosophy was the foundation for Maimonidean philosophy, the separation of these two realms was the foundation for the modernization of the Jews that lay at the center of the Maskilim's agenda, beginning with Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, where he coined the famous term describing Judaism's essence as consisting in "revealed legislation."²⁷

25 For an excellent, concise summary of the main arguments of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, see the introduction by Alexander Altmann to the English translation of *Jerusalem* by Allan Arkush (Waltham, 1983), pp. 3-29.

26 See Isadore Twersky, "Some Non-Halakhic Aspects of the Mishneh-Torah," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 95-119.

27 It is quite remarkable that more than two centuries since Mendelssohn's denial of the centrality of dogma to Judaism, the controversy over this issue still rages. For a sense of the current polemics surrounding the question of whether Judaism commands theological principles, see J. David Bleich, *With Perfect Faith: The Foundations of Jewish Belief* (New York, 1983); Menachem Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything* (Oxford, 1999). Bleich upholds the normative halakhic status of Maimonides' 13 principles of faith, while Kellner challenges that view, insisting that Judaism has no obligatory theological creed beyond a basic monotheism and belief in the Torah's divine revelation. Most recently, the quasi-

Interestingly, Solomon Maimon's very first communication with Moses Mendelssohn – which succeeded in sparking the latter's interest and inaugurating their friendship – came in the form of a letter detailing his philosophical critique of Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith. Maimon reports in his autobiography on the manner in which he first turned to Mendelssohn "about whom he had heard so much" but had not yet dared to approach:

All the thirteen articles of faith laid down by Maimonides I attacked with philosophical arguments, with the exception of one, namely that on reward and punishment, to which I conceded philosophical relevance as the necessary consequence of freely-willed action. I sent this dissertation to Mendelssohn, who was quite amazed that a Polish Jew who had scarcely got so far as seeing Wolff's *Metaphysics* was so soon able to penetrate into their depth to the point of questioning their conclusions to the point of a correct ontology. He invited me to call and I accepted the invitation....²⁸

Beyond these basic differences in approach to the respective roles of Torah and philosophy, there are numerous specific incongruities between Maimonides' approach and that of the Maskilim. Of several Maimonidean postures that were very problematic for Mendelssohn and the later Maskilim, one is particularly worthy of mention: Maimonides' Jewish ethnocentrism and elitism.

The spirit of universalism and individualism, so central to the ideology of the Enlightenment, both inspired and animated the early Maskilim who worked hard to present Judaism in such a way as to neutralize those religious sources of social divisiveness and prejudice between Jews and Christians. Maimonides' negative assessments of non-Jews, most notoriously his attack on both Christianity and Islam in his most famous letter, *The Epistle To Yemen*, which betrayed a harsh medieval religious chauvinism, could hardly be endorsed by Mendelssohn.²⁹

Even more troubling was the way in which Maimonides in the *Mishneh Torah*, defined the "righteous gentiles" when legislating regarding which non-Jews merit a portion in the world to come. In his discussion of the Seven Noachide Laws, whose observance by gentiles is the criterion set by the Talmud

canonical status of Maimonides' creed has been challenged in a striking fashion by Marc S. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised*, (London, 2004).

²⁸ See Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia, 1973), pp. 361-362.

²⁹ An excellent annotated English translation of the *Epistle to Yemen* is included in *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, translated and annotated by Abraham Halkin with discussions by David Hartman (Philadelphia, 1985); see David Hartman's discussion of Maimonides' assault on Christianity and Islam, pp. 187-190.

for meriting eternal life, Maimonides rules that this reward applies only to those who observe the Noahide commandments based on their acceptance of the Torah's legal authority. Gentiles who coincidentally arrive at their observance of the Noahide laws as a consequence of a rational cognition of correct, moral behavior are dismissed as "neither wise nor righteous" and therefore unworthy of eternal life.³⁰ Mendelssohn was deeply troubled by this exclusionary legal positivism – one that was entirely at odds with his own conviction that the highest human perfection for Gentiles was by way of reason, which they shared with all of humankind, and not "revealed legislation," or the rituals of halakhah that remained unique to the Jews and Judaism. Maimonides' insistence that the Gentiles must accept the revelatory-legal basis for the universally binding Seven Noahide Laws ran contrary to the essential spirit of the Haskalah's universalism.

Mendelssohn engaged in a fascinating correspondence about the implications of Maimonides' disturbingly restrictive definition of the "righteous gentile" with the ultra-conservative and famously anti-Maimonidean Rabbi Jacob Emden. Ultimately there was no way to reconcile Maimonides' religiously chauvinistic position regarding the Gentiles with Mendelssohn's ecumenism and the generally universalistic direction of the emerging Haskalah ideology.³¹

But despite their radically different approaches to Jewish theology, Maimonides remained a hero for the Maskilim, again less for his teachings than for the drama of his life, which furnished a powerful and largely symbolic inspiration. The medieval Maimonidean controversies were, moreover, seen as previews of the bitter disputations between the Maskilim and their rabbinic, and later, even more bitter Hasidic opponents.³² Moreover, it has

30 See *Mishneh Torah*, "Hilkhot Melakhim", 8:11. The standard rabbinical version of this passage, that proved so troubling for Mendelssohn, concludes as follows:

"Anyone who accepts the seven laws and is careful to obey them is one of the righteous of the nations of the world and has a portion in the world to come. But this is on condition that he both accepts and obeys them because they have been commanded by God in the Torah and it has been conveyed through Moses our teacher that the sons of Noah are obligated to observe them. However, if one observes them as a result of rational conviction, he is neither a licit resident [of the Land of Israel], neither is he one of the righteous of the nations of the world, **nor one of their wise men.**" Earlier versions of the same text conclude with the words "**but is one of their wise men.**"

31 The exchange between Mendelssohn and Emden on Maimonides' definition of the "righteous gentiles" is discussed in Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, pp. 294-295. A related problem was Maimonides' general philosophical elitism, which resulted in his esoteric style in the *Guide*, as well as his often contemptuous disregard for the uneducated masses, which was entirely alien to the Haskalah's goal of educating the widest possible population of European Jewry in Western languages and modern sciences, philosophy in particular. This problem is explored fully in James Lehmann's article, cited above, note 23.

32 As we shall see below, many Hasidic leaders identified in precisely the same way with Maimonides, comparing the medieval rabbis' criticisms of the *Guide* with the Mitnagdim's attacks on Hasidic theology.

been argued by historians of the Haskalah that the very methodology of the *Guide*, namely its incorporation of the most recent scientific and philosophical knowledge into a Jewish worldview, both inspired and emboldened the early *Maskilim* to engage the modern European world.

Which leads me to one final illustration of the lionization of the Rambam in Haskalah literature: the satire *Siha Be-Eretz Ha-Hayyim* [Discussions in Heaven] by Aaron Wolfsohn of Halle.³³ Wolfsohn's satire imagines Maimonides encountering the recently deceased Moses Mendelssohn and a stereotypical traditional Eastern European rabbi in heaven, cleverly named *P'loni*, a play on the Hebrew words for anonymous (*Ploni*) and Polish (*Polani*).

Before Moses Mendelssohn's arrival in heaven, Maimonides is depicted as being engaged in a frustrating, protracted debate about the Haskalah with *P'loni*, whom he clearly finds to be an annoying and distasteful character. Maimonides emerges in this dispute as a radical maskil, often expressing views far more liberal than anything Mendelssohn ever wrote. *P'loni* is portrayed as a typical Polish rabbinic obscurantist and opponent of any advancement in either Jewish thought or social norms. Hounding Mendelssohn in heaven, as the traditionalist rabbis did during his earthly sojourn, *P'loni* nonetheless insists that he is a true and devout follower of Maimonides, having composed elaborate rabbinical commentaries, in the pilpulistic style, to the *Mishneh Torah*. The problem is that Maimonides has neither interest in, nor patience with, this man and his convoluted commentaries, which he finds contrary to the entire purpose of the *Mishneh Torah*, which sought to simplify and clarify the study of rabbinic law. In fact, he cannot even understand *P'loni's* convoluted and archaic use of the Hebrew language.

Only when Maimonides notices Moses Mendelssohn wandering in the heavenly distance, does he break free of his oppressive rabbinic interlocutor in order to enjoy the company and conversation of his genuine soul-mate, the father of the Haskalah. Together, Maimonides and Mendelssohn engage in a withering assault on the backwardness of *P'loni's* ideas and the archaic nature of his rabbinical writings.

This satirical denigration of the traditional rabbinical approach to the *Mishneh Torah* as a source of extended interpretation stands in sharp contrast to the regnant Rabbinic view of Maimonides, which distinguished carefully between the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah*, and which ignored, to the full extent possible, the former work.

³³ This satire was originally serialized in the Haskalah journal, *Ha-Meassef*, 1794–1797. A full, critical edition of the text of *Siha Be-Eretz Ha-Hayyim*, along with a lengthy analytical introduction can be found in Yehuda Friedlander, *Perakim Ba-Satirah Ha-Ivrit* (Tel Aviv, 1979), pp. 123–181. For a general evaluation of Wolfsohn's satirical writings, see Bernard D. Weinryb, "Aaron Wolfsohn's Dramatic Writings in Their Historical Setting," in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 58 (1957-58): 35-50.

The most extreme articulation of this traditional rabbinical stratagem for dealing with the “two Rambams” can be found in Rabbi Jacob Emden’s work, *Mitpachat Sefarim*, where he suggests that it is not possible that the holy rabbi who wrote the *Mishneh Torah* could possibly be the author of the dangerous, heretical *Guide*. Emden concludes, therefore, that the *Guide* is a pseudepigraphy written by some mischievous heretic and had falsely become attributed to Maimonides.³⁴

The *Guide* Comes to Vilna: Maimonides and the Mitnagdim

Other traditionalists of the same generation, from Eastern Europe, adopted a more nuanced, if often self-contradictory view regarding the dichotomy between the image of Rabenu Moshe ben Maimon and the philosopher, Maimonides, simply by ignoring, or even suppressing the *Guide* while revering the *Mishneh Torah* as an authoritative halakhic work. However, as the *Guide* became increasingly available in print, it became terribly difficult simply to ignore it by compartmentalizing Maimonides in this fashion.

One of the earliest Polish Maskilim to come under the *Guide*’s influence was Naftali Hirtz Schulman, who championed the reform of Jewish education in White Russia and actively curried the favor of Tsar Alexander I in order to establish modern Jewish schools in the Russian Empire.³⁵ Schulman’s career path as one of the earliest champions of the modernization of East European Jewry began with his study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* while still a youth in his birth town of Sary-Bychov. As a teenager, Schulman went to Vilna to earn his living as a Hebrew tutor for the children of wealthy families and it was there, in the early 1790s, that he fomented a public controversy by offering *shiurim*, or public tutorials, in the *Guide*.

According to the traditional biographies of the Gaon of Vilna, the city’s communal leaders were so upset by the public instruction in this dangerous work that they went to the Gaon in the hopes that he would banish Schulman from Vilna. But the Gaon disappointed them, largely as the result of his reverence for Maimonides. He is alleged to have replied: “The Rambam wrote this book, so how can I prohibit it? May I only merit sitting next to him in paradise.”³⁶

34 Jacob Emden, *Mitpachat Sefarim* (Altona, 1769), p. 80. See on this source the comments of Jacob Dienstag in “Ha-Rambam Ve-Hakhmei Ha-Kabbalah” in Simon Federbush, ed. *Ha-Rambam: Torato Ve-Ishiyuto* (New York, 1957).

35 On Schulman, see David Fishman, *Russia’s First Modern Jews* (New York, 1995), pp. 64-73.

36 See Dov Eliach, *Sefer Ha-Gaon* (Jerusalem, 2002), vol. II, p. 590. Eliach discusses the Gaon’s complicated attitude to Maimonidean philosophy on pp. 587-593. Unfortunately, his rendering of the primary texts is not always reliable.

It is instructive that nowhere here does the Gaon of Vilna endorse the *Guide* or encourage its study; it is in fact questionable whether the Gaon ever opened the text himself, since the only references to the *Guide* in his entire oeuvre are based on citations from later secondary sources. Quite the contrary, his tone is one of resignation. One can almost hear him sighing to himself: “What can I do? We are stuck with the fact that this dangerous book (i.e., the *Guide*) was written by the great author of the *Mishneh Torah*, the *Nezer Ha-Kadosh* (Holy Eagle), the Rambam. Had it been written by a lesser man, maybe I could ban it. But we are dealing here with the Rambam.”

Although some traditional scholars have attempted to portray the Gaon’s complicated attitude to Maimonides apologetically, and in almost glowing terms, it is quite clear that he had no use whatsoever for the *Guide of the Perplexed*.³⁷ Indeed, it is known that the Gaon of Vilna was a bitter opponent of the entire scholastic enterprise (of which the *Guide* is the most important work) which he associated with the rationalism of the Haskalah that he so opposed.³⁸ Denunciations of rational philosophy and biting critical remarks regarding Aristotle and his disciples are found scattered in about a dozen of the Gaon’s writings. The most widely cited of these is the Gaon’s critique of Maimonides’ denial that mystical incantations (*lehashim*) can ever help heal the sick. Commenting on an aside remark in the *Shulhan Arukh* that permits the use of incantations to heal one who has been bitten by a scorpion, “even though they do not really help,” the Gaon enters into a rather extensive critique of such skepticism regarding the use of magical cures:

This [doubt regarding the efficacy of incantations] is based on the Rambam in his *Commentary to the Mishna* to [tractate] *Avodah Zara*, but all who came after him disagreed, since many incantations are mentioned in the Gemara . . . and Zohar. . . . However, he [Maimonides] was drawn away by philosophy and that is why he wrote that magical spells and the uses of God’s names, incantations, demons, and amulets are all phony. But he has already been hit on the head on this account; for behold we have seen many stories in the Talmud that testify to the power of magic and Holy names and

37 See the richly informative, but apologetic, essay by Jacob Dienstag, “Ha-im Hitnagged Ha-Gra le-Mishnato ha-Filosofit shel ha-Rambam?” in *Talpiyot* 4 (1949): 253-268.

38 The attitude of the Gaon and the Mitnagdim to the Haskalah has long been a matter of debate among scholars. For the most recent evaluations of this complex issue, see the second chapter of Immanuel Etkes, *Yahid Be-Doro: Ha-Gaon Mi-Vilna Demut ve-Dimui* (Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 44-83. For a traditional perspective on this issue, see Dov Eliach, op. cit. vol. II, pp. 594-639. A broader discussion of the attitude of the Mitnagim to the Haskalah can be found in Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mitnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore, 1997), chapter 6 (“The Mitnagdim and the Haskalah”), pp. 127-160.

the like.... So too amulets and spells are mentioned many times there and in the Zohar. . . .

But the powerful teachings of philosophy led [Maimonides] to misinterpret the Talmud figuratively and to uproot the plain truth of its words. Now, God forbid, I do not believe them [i.e., the philosophers] and the rabble who follow them, for all that is written in the Talmud must be accepted in accordance with the plain meaning. Of course, in addition, there are interior [or esoteric] meanings. **But not the so-called deep meanings of Philosophy, that are external [to the Torah] but rather those of the Kabbalists.**"³⁹

A debate ensued in subsequent generations between the Vilna Maskilim (who claimed the Gaon as a forebear) and the direct mitnagdic disciples of the Gaon.⁴⁰ The former alleged that these texts were not authentic and did not really issue from the pen of the Gaon himself. The traditionalist Mitnagdim insisted they were indeed the words of the Gaon, and this division is still reflected in the critical modern scholarship on this question. However it seems clear to me that the traditional Mitnagdim, opponents of the Haskalah, were deeply opposed to any attempt to rationalize tradition through an allegorical or figurative reading of her sacred texts from Torah through Midrash and Talmud. But precisely such a reading was, of course, the very hallmark of Maimonidean biblical and midrashic exegesis.

An interesting traditionalist strategy for dealing with the *Guide*, employed by many Mitnagdim, was excusing Maimonides for his indulgence in philosophy based on the fact that he did not have access to the true Kabbalah, which was revealed only in later generations after the "re-appearance" of the Zohar, well over a century after Maimonides' death. The suggestion is that had Maimonides been exposed to Kabbalah, he would have had no use whatsoever for rational philosophy. In that spirit, the renowned 19th-century Mitnagdic rabbinical scholar and Kabbalist, R. Yitzhaq Isaac Haver, credits

39 Emphasis added. *Biur Ha-Gra al Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 179:13. This passage is cited by Eliach, *ibid.*, p 588, who renders the final paragraph rather imaginatively by replacing the term *she-hem hitsonim* ("that they are external") with *she-zorkim otam le-ashpa* ("that they are thrown in the garbage"). What exactly the Gaon meant by the use of the expression *she-hem hitsonim* is a fair subject of debate. The two most obvious possibilities is that he is associating philosophy with the rabbinical classification of *sefarim hitsonim* [non-canonical texts], or – more harshly – that he is using the term in the kabbalistic sense of *hitsonim*, that is, demonic forces. Either way, Eliach takes liberties in his citation of this critical text that are unacceptable.

40 For an overview of the 19th-century debate about the legacy of both the Gaon and R. Israel Baal Shemtov, the founder of Hasidism, vis-à-vis the Haskalah, see Allan Nadler, *Rationalism Romanticism Rabbis and Rebbes* (New York, 1992)

Maimonides for not having been corrupted and distanced from Torah despite his indulgence in rational philosophy:

Behold how great the virtue and holiness of Maimonides! Despite the fact that he engaged extensively in philosophy, this did not corrupt his soul nor did it distance him whatsoever from the holy Torah. On the contrary, it is even possible that it helped him in refuting the arguments of heretics that were based on philosophical speculation.⁴¹

Many of the students of the Gaon, particularly those who continued the Lithuanian school of Kabbalistic study, continued in this vein, admiring Maimonides not only despite his philosophical Achilles' heel, but precisely on account of it: To their minds, the fact that Maimonides could study Aristotle unscathed by his system and remain whole in his faith proves that he was even greater than many of the Kabbalists who might not have endured such a challenge to their faith!

On the other hand, there were Mitnagdim like R. Phinehas of Polotsk (1745–1822) who were generally hostile to Kabbalah and came under the positive influence of many aspects of Maimonides' philosophical rationalism, albeit in an unsystematic and often paradoxical fashion. Phinehas of Polotsk was one of the few people who had regular contact with the Gaon and was handpicked by him to tutor his grandchildren. He fully shared the Gaon's hostility to the Haskalah, and his major work, *Keter Torah*, consists of a double-edged polemic against both Hasidism and the Haskalah that Phinehas viewed as the two main threats to traditional Judaism in his day.⁴²

Despite his clear antipathy to the Haskalah, which he considered a modern-day manifestation of medieval Jewish rationalism, Phinehas cited the *Guide* numerous times in his biblical commentaries and incorporated many of its doctrines into his sermons. A couple of examples will suffice to illustrate how a determined mitnagged and vocal opponent of the rationalist Jews of his own day was profoundly influenced by Maimonides' theories and rationalist biblical allegories, particularly those conducive to his determined anti-Hasidism.

The influence of several of the *Guide's* most important rationalizations of biblical theology can be seen throughout Phinehas' writings, particularly his commentary on the biblical book of Job, where he endorses Maimonides' restriction of God's providential involvement in mundane human affairs in the

41 Yitzhak Isaac Haber, *Sefer Magen Ve-Tsina* (Yohannisburg, 1855), p.5b. See also, Eliach, op. cit., p. 589.

42 On Phinehas of Polotsk generally, see Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim*, pp. 7–10. On Phinehas' critique of the Haskalah, see pp.134–142.

course of his discussion of theodicy. Elsewhere, Phinehas adopts Maimonides' theory of miracles, which limits them to the biblical era, by maintaining that the miracles pre-ordained on the eve of the primordial Sabbath of creation have been exhausted. Put more simply, Phinehas endorses Maimonides' denial of the possibility of miracles in his own times. These strict rationalist limitations to the possibility of supernatural phenomena clearly served the purpose of undermining the audacious claims to miraculous powers on the part of the Hasidic masters, and also countered Hasidism's panentheistic beliefs against which Phinehas and his fellow mitnagdim were waging a relentless battle. This utilitarian use of Maimonides in the service of his anti-Hasidic agenda notwithstanding, the fact remains that Phinehas studied, accepted, and preached publicly some of the most radical sections of the *Guide of the Perplexed*.⁴³

In Phinehas of Polotsk's collection of seventy sermons, which remain unpublished,⁴⁴ I have found even more Maimonidean philosophical influence, largely on such subjects as miracles, dreams, and soothsaying. Here again, the target is clearly the outlandish claims to divination being made by Phinehas' Hasidic nemeses; but the adoption of Maimonidean theories regarding these subjects is often quite striking.

It is in his sermon on the very first *parasha* of the Torah, the narrative of the "Fall" of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in particular, that Phinehas most dramatically betrays the conflicted attitude to Maimonides and the paradoxical uses of the *Guide of the Perplexed* typical of traditionalists during the modern period. Phinehas cites verbatim from Maimonides' explanation of the precise nature of "knowledge" acquired by Adam and Eve after having eaten from the forbidden tree of knowledge.⁴⁵ Phinehas then uses the Maimonidean paradigm to launch a relentless attack not only on the Haskalah of his day, but upon rationalist philosophy in general. Phinehas is relentless and aggressive in his delegitimation of the entire enterprise of seeking out rationales for the commandments of the Torah, to which Maimonides devoted the greater part of the third section of the *Guide*:

For after the sin of Adam it is impossible for humans to attain insight into the Eternal One, not at least until after death. As it is written, 'for no man can see me and live.' Not until after he dies

43 See Nadler, *ibid.*, pp. 132–134, for a fuller discussion of these themes.

44 I discovered the manuscript of these sermons, entitled *Peulati ha-Sheminit: Derashot*, at the Institute for Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg. The following discussion is based on my work with the manuscript.

45 See *Guide*. I:2, where Maimonides distinguishes between rational knowledge of truth and falsehood, and moral knowledge that allows humans to discern between good and evil. This distinction is cited verbatim by Phinehas in his sermon.

and escapes from his earthen corporeal vessel, that is That is what is meant by the verse “Precious in the eyes of God is the death of his righteous believers.” For only through death can one attain cognition of matters eternal. . . .

So, the Tree of Life refers to the body of Torah about which it is written, ‘it is a tree of life to those who grasp it.’ But, the tree of Knowledge of good and evil is a tree in which the powers of holiness are intermingled with the external powers of impurity. And those who grasp this tree empower the external, unholy forces to take hold and they bring about unclean influences and desecrate all that is holy. **This is the tree of the philosophers and so-called wise men of our generation**, for they want to understand everything according to human reason, and whatever is not in accord with their reasoning they reject⁴⁶

Phinehas continues in this vein at great length in what constitutes a major attack on the very enterprise of philosophy of religion, reserving particular venom for the work of those who engaged in *Taamei ha-Mitzvoth*, the attempt to discover the rational underpinnings for the biblical commandments, a major passion of Maimonides.

The renewed publication of Maimonides’ *Guide* made it widely available to Jews by the early 19th century. It once again became part of what is known in contemporary Israel as the *aron ha-sefarim ha-Yehudi*, the accepted, traditional Jewish canon, after centuries of neglect. Since it was written by the Rambam, it could neither easily be dismissed nor ever again suppressed. And so a variety of approaches to reconciling its teachings with traditional rabbinic faith were engaged.

The Guide of the Perplexed in the Hasidic Imagination

By far the most imaginative, at times outrageous, uses of the *Guide* in the early modern period can be found in Hasidic literature.

For most of its history, and for the overwhelming majority of its masters, Hasidism eschewed study of the *Guide*, fearing that its dangerously rationalist approach to Judaism would undermine the distinctly anti-rationalist mystical faith upon which Hasidic piety is founded.

The most famous Hasidic antagonist of Maimonides and the *Guide* was, without any doubt, R. Nachman of Bratslav (1722–1810), who is said to

⁴⁶ Phinehas of Polotsk, *Peulati ha-Sheminit: Derashot* (undated ms.), Folio, 5a.

have condemned the medieval rationalist enterprise as nothing less than total heresy. The writings of R. Nachman, as recorded by his faithful disciple and scribe Nathan of Nemirov, are replete with anti-Maimonidean sentiments, of which the following is fairly typical:

Whosoever wishes to guard himself [from evil] must distance himself as much as possible from the analytical writings that some of the earlier authorities composed, in particular the *Milot Ha-Higayon* and the *Moreh Nevukhim* of the Rambam, for it is a major prohibition to study those books for they cause blemishes and confuse our holy faith.⁴⁷

R. Nachman, who went so far as to declare that “anyone who studies the *Guide* certainly forfeits his Divine image and loses his holiness,”⁴⁸ was representative of the anti-rationalist tendency that characterized a majority of Hasidic sects, whose leaders championed a total, naive faith in God’s immanence and in the supernatural powers of the *Tsadik*, beliefs entirely incompatible with Maimonides’ rationalist approach.⁴⁹

A dramatic example of the Hasidic perception of the dangers of Maimonidean rationalism is the commentary by the Galician Hasidic master, R. Zevi Elimelekh of Dinov (1783–1841) to R. Joseph Yaavetz’s anti-Maimonidean polemic, *Or Ha-Hayyim*. Yaavetz’s book, written in the aftermath of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, largely blamed the corrupting effects of Maimonidean rationalism for the disasters that befell Iberian Jewry. In his commentary to *Or Ha-Hayyim*, R. Zevi Elimelekh of Dinov transposed Yaavetz’s critiques of Maimonides onto the Maskilim of his own day, thereby drawing a direct analogy between the danger of Maimonides’ medieval rationalism with that of the Haskalah.

This anti-Maimonidean posture endured well into the twentieth century. The leader of the largest Hasidic sect in interwar Poland, R. Abraham Mordecai Alter of Gura Kalwaria, the revered *Gerer Rebbe* (1866–1948), warned his followers against so much as looking at the *Guide* and generally opposed reading any of the works of medieval Jewish rationalist philosophy.

47 From *Hayyei Moharan*, Part II, as cited in Zvi Meir Rabinovits, “Yahas Ha-Kabbalah Veha-Hasidut Leha-Rambam,” in Yehuda Leib Fishman, ed., *Rabenu Moshe Ben Maimon* (Jerusalem, 1948).

48 *Likkutei Moharan* (Ostrow, 1808), Part II, p. 47.

49 Hillel Zeitlin viewed R. Nachman of Bratslav and Maimonides as representing diametrically opposing approaches to Jewish faith, seeing in Rabbi Nachman the archetype of Jewish anti-Maimonideanism. See the discussion of Zeitlin’s characterizations in, Shraga Bar-Sela, *Beyn Saar Li-Demama: Hayav U-Mishnato Shel Hillel Zeitlin* (Tel Aviv, 1999), pp. 154–171. The Maskilim despised R. Nachman precisely on account of his deep anti-rationalism. For a bibliography of Haskalah polemics directed against R. Nachman of Bratslav, see David Assaf, *Bratslav: Bibliographia Mueret* (Jerusalem, 1998), chapter 7, pp. 124–129.

R. Abraham Mordecai Alter testified to his own fears when he felt compelled to consult the *Guide*:

For at those times when I absolutely must have a look at the *Moreh Nevukhim* because it has been cited by someone else regarding an important issue (and only then!), I pray to the Creator of heaven and earth that I will not falter on account of it.⁵⁰

Most Hasidic masters, when not explicitly banning the *Guide*, simply ignored it, and one can safely generalize that the medieval Jewish rationalist tradition had almost no impact whatsoever on the lion's share of Hasidic thought and literature. But there were two very notable exceptions: the intellectualistic Hasidic schools of Habad in Belorussia and Przysucha-Kotsk-Izbica in Poland. What emerged finally was a clear split within the Hasidic world regarding the status of the *Guide*, between the advocates of simple faith and piety, uncorrupted by philosophical speculation and scientific rationalization, and those who advocated a more intellectual approach to understanding the roots of Hasidic mysticism, with which they tried to harmonize Maimonidean philosophy. The former approach was mostly represented in the conservative Hasidic sects that spread throughout Ukraine, Galicia, Hungary, and Rumania, while the latter were found mostly in Poland and Belorussia.

Already in the second generation of the Hasidic movement, one of its major leaders identified deeply with Maimonides' personal legacy in much the same way as did the early Maskilim, although coming from opposite ends of the religious-ideological spectrum. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi (1745–1841), the founder of the Habad Hasidic dynasty, responded to the Mitnagdim's sustained assault on Hasidism by comparing their criticisms to the attacks that followed the publication of the *Guide* in the Middle Ages. Writing to console his followers in Vilna following the Mitnagdim's alleged burning of the first published Hasidic work, R. Jacob Joseph of Pollnoe's *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* (1780), R. Shneur Zalman declared:

Remember the days of yore: for who has been like unto the Moses of his generation, namely the Rambam, of blessed memory who was raised up to great fame and a good name in his country of Spain and his reputation grew greatly, to such an extent that during his own lifetime they would insert the following in their version of the Kaddish: "in your days and in the days of our great teacher and rabbi Moses, and the lives of the entire household of Israel;" for they saw the extent

⁵⁰ Cited by Mendel Piekarz in *Hasidut Polin* (Jerusalem, 1990), p. 110.

of his honor, his holiness, and his piety. However, in the distant lands, where they neither heard nor perceived his honor, they considered him a heretic and a denier of our holy Torah and they burned his books, including the first section of the *Yad*, in the public square. These men, who were wise in their own estimation, despite having seen what the Rambam wrote in the section on the Laws of Repentance, did not pause to consider subjugating their opinions to his [i.e., the Rambam] for they could not understand the depths of his meaning. . . .⁵¹

The tendency to harmonize Maimonidean philosophy with Hasidic mysticism can be seen in numerous passages of R. Shneur Zalman's writings,⁵² and has continued in subsequent Habad intellectual history to this very day. One of the most bizarre and idiosyncratic commentaries to the *Guide*, since the 13th-century attempts by Abraham Abulafia to interpret the *Guide* in accordance with his own brand of ecstatic Kabbalah,⁵³ is the two-part 19th-century Hasidic discourse on Maimonidean philosophy *Derekh Emunah: Sefer Ha-Hakirah*,⁵⁴ written by R. Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789–1866) (grandson of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, and third Lubavitcher rebbe who is revered in Habad circles as the *Tsemah Tzedek*, after the title of his major rabbinical works). This work represents an intensive, deeply learned, but equally convoluted, attempt to connect the doctrines of the *Guide* with the entire history of Jewish mystical theology. A work hitherto unmentioned by any scholars and ignored within contemporary Habad circles, it is a fascinating example of the lengths to which some 19th-century Hasidic authorities went in order to “re-habilitate” the *Guide* by placing it within the kabbalistic tradition through the use of highly imaginative, if not tortuous, hermeneutics. I would argue that the fact that R. Menachem Mendel was engaged in a lifelong battle with the Haskalah⁵⁵ served as a major incentive for his attempts to “rescue” Maimonides from the clutches of the Maskilim who revered him as a role model, and explain his tortured efforts to harmonize some of the *Guide's* most radically rationalist theories with Hasidic mystical piety.

51 See Abraham Samuel Heilman, *Beit Rabi* (Brooklyn, 1966), Vol. I, p. 22a. This passage has been cited widely by subsequent scholars.

52 See, for instance, the discussion in *Likkutei Amarim: Tanya*, Part I, p. 6a & Part II, p. 83a, for examples of R. Shneur Zalman's tendency to harmonize the *Guide* with his own radically mystical theology.

53 Moshe Idel has written extensively about the medieval kabbalists' interpretations of the *Guide* as a work of mysticism concealed in the garb of philosophical language. See, most recently, Moshe Idel “Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and The Kabbalah,” *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 197-226.

54 *Derekh Emunah: Sefer Ha-Hakirah* (Poltava, 1912).

55 See Joseph I. Schneerson, *The Tzemah Tzedek and the Haskalah Movement* (Brooklyn, 1975).

According to internal Hasidic traditions, not only was Maimonides' *Guide* not banned from the courts of Przysucha-Kotsk-Izbica, the text was actively studied and even taught to advanced students in organized classes, or *shiurim*. Of course, their approach to the *Guide* reflected the long-standing belief that its deeper esoteric meaning reflected the truths of the Kabbalah that were concealed by Maimonides in Aristotelian language. This approach, inaugurated in the 13th-century commentaries to the *Guide* by Abraham Abulafia, reached its climax in the writings of R. Gershon Henokh Lainer of Radzin (1814–1891), the grandson of the first Izbicer Rebbe, R. Mordecai Joseph Lainer (d. 1854).

In a manner strikingly similar to that of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi cited above, R. Gershon Henokh – considering himself surrounded by enemies, including Hasidim, Mitnagdim, and Maskilim – personally empathized with Maimonides, specifically on account of the many attacks he endured on the part of the critics of his own radically mystical, almost antinomian theology. After an extensive analysis of the *Guide*, intended to prove that the text represents a partial and esoteric rendering of the Kabbalah, which is disguised in the language of medieval scholasticism, R. Gershon Henokh waxes personal regarding his identification with Maimonides:

I have gone to some length [in explicating the *Guide*] for the sake of the honor of our master, the Rambam, of blessed memory. In truth, I am no closer to him than I am to his critics. Nonetheless, I am his partner in suffering terrible denunciations and persecutions rooted in baseless hatred. Those who have compassion for the persecuted will be compassionate with him [Maimonides] and care also for me, and will be merciful in comforting us both. Yet this is not the primary reason for my defense [of the Rambam]. The truth is that his critics simply did not penetrate the deep secrets of his mind and I have come in this place in order to justify the righteous one [i.e., Maimonides] and to shut the mouths of those who speak ill of him . . . in the name of the true Kabbalah.⁵⁶

R. Gershon Henokh is particularly critical of the conservative Hasidim who followed in the footsteps of R. Nachman of Bratslav in rejecting all forms of philosophical inquiry. Clearly, R. Gershon Henokh's interest in the *Guide* far transcended a vague personal association with the trials and tribulations of Maimonides' life, since he considered the *Guide* to be an

⁵⁶ Gershon Henokh Lainer of Radzin, (ed.) *Sefer Beit Yaakov* (Warsaw, 1890), "Hakdama," pp. 13–14. Lainer's discussion of the "secrets" of the *Guide* is found on pp. 9–15 of this text.

important, if partial and imperfect, work of true Kabbalah. His lengthy introduction to his father's commentary to the Torah, *Sefer Beyt Yaakov*, presents a Hasidic version of the history of the Kabbalah, beginning with God's first revelation to Abraham and culminating with the Baal Shem Tov. Maimonides is seen as one of the most important figures in this history, as he kept the chain of kabbalistic transmission during the medieval period when rationalism eclipsed mysticism, by couching the secrets of the latter in the language of the former. The introduction has been published as a separate book entitled, *Sefer Ha-Hakdama Veba-Petiha*.⁵⁷

It is clear that, like R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi before him, R. Gershon Henokh viewed the *Guide of the Perplexed* as a work of Kabbalah, one that ought to be studied in tandem with the Zohar, the writings of Hayyim Vital and the teachings of the Besht, that is, one to be synthesized with the later classics of Jewish mystical lore.⁵⁸

Obviously, taken at face value, the philosophy of Maimonides is completely incompatible with just about every aspect of Hasidism, from the latter's radical notion of Divine immanence and constant miraculous interventions to the magical, supernatural powers claimed by its leaders, the Hasidic Rebbes. Everything about Hasidism – from its theoretical teachings to its tales of miracle working Tsadikim – flies in the face of the entire Maimonidean system. But did this stop the Hasidim from reclaiming Maimonides as one of their own? Of course not. They simply re-wrote Maimonides' biography and transformed the *Guide* from a work synthesizing Aristotelian philosophy with the Torah into a masterpiece of Kabbalistic esotericism in which the doctrines of the Zohar are hidden under a rationalist garb.

Another important disciple of R. Mordecai Joseph of Izbica who developed a deep interest in synthesizing Maimonidean rationalism with Hasidic mysticism was the enigmatic R. Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin (1823–1900), in whose works one finds numerous discussions of the *Guide* integrated into a uniquely intellectualist version of Hasidic spirituality.⁵⁹

57 Gershon Henokh Lainer, *Sefer Ha-Hakdama Veba-Petiha*, (New York, 1959). My references to this work are to the version found in the original Warsaw 1890 edition of *Sefer Beit Yaakov*.

58 Just a few weeks after I presented the lecture upon which this paper is based, a full scholarly treatment of the mystical theology of R. Gershon Henokh Lainer of Radzin was published, Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison, 2003). Magid devotes a long chapter to the analysis of R. Gershon Henokh's kabbalistic approach to Maimonides' philosophy, entitled "Recircumcising the Torah: The Synthesis of the Zohar and the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Hasidic Reconstruction of Esotericism," pp. 40-71. In the introduction to his book, Magid also places R. Gershon Henokh's efforts at a kabbalistic reconstruction of the *Guide* in the context of Hasidism's struggles against the Haskalah's appropriation of Maimonides as a role model.

59 On the uses of the *Guide* in the writings of R. Zadok Ha-Kohen, see Alan Brill, *Thinking God: The Mysticism of Rabbi Zadok of Lublin* (Hoboken, 2002), pp. 62-74, 102-111.

To justify their transformation of Maimonides into a mystic and the *Guide* into a work that is harmonious with *Shivhei ha-Besht* and the *Tanya*, the Hasidim relied heavily on a classical myth dating back at least to the early 15th century. Numerous Hasidic sources cite this legend, which was endorsed by no less a person than the august Spanish rabbi and exile, Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437–1508), and which was later promulgated by the Renaissance Italian Kabbalist, R. Joseph Ergas (1685–1730):

It has been heard that Maimonides wrote an epistle towards the end of his life that included the following confession: “at the end of my days a man visited me and taught me things that, had I not learned them at the end of my life, and were it not for the fact that my works had already been spread throughout the world, I would have recanted them.”⁶⁰

In Hasidic lore regarding Maimonides, this “epistle” became the historical justification for their reconstruction of the *Guide* into a kabbalistic text. So it was that for the Hasidim, Maimonides – at least on his deathbed – was no longer a rationalist philosopher but a committed kabbalist. Still, those Hasidic masters who actually studied the *Guide* remained unsatisfied with relying on this legend, for it implied that Maimonides’ magnum opus did not reflect fully the secret mystical insights conveyed to him, since its composition pre-dated his alleged kabbalistic epiphany. So they engaged in a radical, though highly idiosyncratic, unsystematic and arbitrary, re-reading of the *Guide*, seeking to transform its doctrines into kabbalistic teachings. The assumption underlying these kabbalistic reconstructions of the *Guide* is that even before the overt revelation of mystical secrets to him, Maimonides had intuitive insights into their truths, however fragmentary and obfuscated they remained because of the influence on him of Aristotelian philosophy.

The Hasidic masters who chose not to ignore or reject the *Guide* tried in this manner to wrest his legacy from the Maskilim who claimed him as their own forbear. This required many imaginative leaps, both hermeneutic and historical. I have collected dozens of remarkable, often amusing renderings of passages from the *Guide* by Hasidic rebbes, beginning with citations from the very first published Hasidic text, *Toledot Yaakov Yosef* (1780) by R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoe, and ending with the highly imaginative uses of the *Guide* in the late 20th-century anti-Zionist writings of Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe (1888–1982), *Va-Yo’el Moshe* (Brooklyn, 1960), and *Al He-Geulah*

60 Isaac Abrabanel, *Nahalat Avot* (Brooklyn, 1953), p. 209.

Ve-Al Ha-Temurah. (Brooklyn, 1968). A proper analysis of this collage of sources is well beyond the scope of the present survey. But I will conclude with the following, typically paradoxical Hasidic tale, according to which Rabbi Phinehas of Koretz – an associate of the Baal Shem Tov – was a great scholar of the *Moreh Nevukhim*. It is alleged that he studied the *Guide* day and night and had mastered it completely.

The *Guide* was so near and dear to him that he studied it from cover to cover more than a thousand times. He refused to depart from this book and would never lend it to any man, since he believed that having the *Moreh Nevukhim* in the house was a magical protection that preserved one's fear of heaven. (In Yiddish: *s'iz a segule far yiras shomayim*.)⁶¹

How ironic that *The Guide of the Perplexed*, a book that reconciled the laws of nature with Judaism and rejected all superstitious beliefs – specifically condemning the reliance on *segulot*, or magical amulets, as idolatrous – should be cherished by its devoted Hasidic reader, who claimed to have read it more than a thousand times, in such a perversely superstitious, talismanic fashion.

61 Cited from a manuscript of *Sippurim Yekarim*, in A.J. Heschel, *In The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov* (Chicago, 1985), p. 4, fn. 17.

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