

CHAPTER THREE

R. MOSES BEN MAIMON (MAIMONIDES) *THE GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED*

Introduction

“From Moses [the prophet] to Moses [Maimonides], none arose like Moses [Maimonides]”. This well known epigram reflects the exceptional stature Maimonides (1138?-1204) attained in Jewish history. He was born to an important rabbinic family in Cordova, Spain. Having to flee his native land at an early age as a result of the Almohad persecution, he eventually settled in Fustat, Egypt after a lengthy period of wandering. There he became a court physician and the head of Egyptian Jewry. While his careers as physician and political/religious leader were exceptional in their own right, their significance was greatly overshadowed by the literary works he penned. These works revolutionized Jewish thought and law. Medieval Jewish philosophy reached its zenith in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.¹ Due to the profundity of the work, together with the unique status of the author, it exerted an enormous impact on subsequent thinkers through the ages, including its opponents. Maimonides was also one of the greatest Jewish legal authorities of all time. His great legal compendium, the *Mishneh Torah*, written prior to the *Guide*, was a groundbreaking work. It was the first complete code of Jewish law. Despite attacks on it from various quarters, it quickly achieved widespread acceptance. Its utility, coupled with the vast erudition displayed by its author, made it a nigh indispensable work.²

¹ All English citations in this chapter are from Shlomo Pines’ translation of *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963). Page numbers refer to this edition unless otherwise indicated. The Arabic edition of the *Guide* utilized is that of Joseph Kafih, *Moreh HaNevukhim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1972).

² For the most thorough scholarly study of Maimonides’ code see Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University,

The relation between Maimonides the philosopher, steeped in the Aristotelian tradition, and Maimonides the great jurist, completely at home in the vast sea of Jewish legal writings, has been for many scholars through the ages a source of perplexity. The apparent fundamental incompatibility between these two areas has led them to wonder how he could dedicate himself to both. Where they saw two areas separated by an unbridgeable chasm, he saw two complementary fields of endeavor. Aristotle and his followers were great monotheists who taught the true view of the nature of divine unity. They did not deny all "contact" between God and the world, but saw in God the source and foundation for all existence. The world did not "come about" and operate by accident in the orderly manner it did, a view associated with the philosopher Epicuros. An intellectual principle guides its workings. In the world order, all species have their own *telos* or final goal. The ultimate purpose of human existence is the perfection of the distinctly human faculty, the intellect. In Maimonides' view, philosophy and Jewish law taught the same essential truths, and aimed at the same goal. They simply operated on different planes. His attempt to inculcate the notion of the complementary nature of these two areas, and the necessity of both, is evident in his legal compendium as well as in his philosophical treatise.

Maimonides' literary activities can best be appreciated from the perspective of his role as public leader/educator. His two major works represent a two-pronged attempt to strengthen Judaism in the goal of leading its adherents to human perfection, while preserving the fabric of Jewish society. One attempt is through the vehicle of law, the other by way of rational argumentation. The former addresses itself to Jewish society at large, the latter to the intellectual elite in its midst. Maimonides as a philosopher was concerned with a wide range of issues. First and foremost, he should be viewed as a political philosopher. His

1980). Maimonides' discussion of prophecy in the *Mishneh Torah* is found in the first section of the first book, *The Book of Knowledge*. All translations from the *Book of Knowledge* are my own based on the critical edition of J. Cohen, M.H. Katzenelenbogen, S. Lieberman (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1964).

primary concern was to implement the principles of political philosophy in the context of Judaism.³

The political philosophy of Maimonides largely follows the Platonic model of the philosopher-king as developed by Alfarabi. Plato's philosopher-king became in the philosophy of Alfarabi the individual of perfect knowledge of the theoretical sciences who attains revelation. As a result of this attainment, he lays down an ideal law for society. True religions are those that represent philosophical truths in a figurative manner. The actions they mandate are those designed to lead their adherents to true human felicity within a social context to the extent of each person's capacity. Ultimate perfection is the perfection of the intellect and its conjunction with the Active Intellect. Immortality is limited to those attaining this state. Alfarabi at times attempts to blur the implications of his thought. He treats the ability to attain perfection in a more "democratic" manner. Nevertheless, it is clear that in his view eternal felicity is limited to exceptionally few individuals, if it is attainable at all. The ideal society exists to aid the gifted few to attain human perfection, or at least not to interfere with their pursuit. As with all societies, it also has the task of preserving its inhabitants.⁴

Maimonides could justly be labeled a disciple of his great Islamic predecessor.⁵ His reading of Alfarabi influenced his thinking on a host of philosophical issues. Most important, it provided him with the key for what he understood to be the meaning of Judaism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Maimonides, in the guise of a great legal authority, assumed the

³ For a more detailed discussion of this issue see my, *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law and the Human Ideal* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999): 1-61, 189-223.

⁴ Alfarabi's political philosophy has been the subject of numerous studies. See in particular Miriam Galston, *Politics and Excellence* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1990).

⁵ See L.V. Berman, "Maimonides, the Disciple of Alfarabi", *Israel Oriental Studies*, 4 (1974): 154-178. The importance of Alfarabi's philosophy for the understanding Maimonides' political thought has been strenuously argued by Leo Strauss, beginning with his *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin, 1935) [F. Baumann, trans., *Philosophy and Law* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987)]. See also Joel Kraemer, "Maimonides on the Philosophic Sciences in his Treatise on the Art of Logic", in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, Joel Kraemer ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991): 77-104; and my *Maimonides' Political Thought* [index: Alfarabi].

Prophecy

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