MAIMONIDES’ “TRUE RELIGION”: FOR JEWS OR ALL HUMANITY?1

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Introduction

In the first halakhah of the last chapter of the Mishneh Torah,2 Maimonides writes:

Let it not enter your mind that in the days of the Messiah any aspect of the regular order of the world will be abolished or some innovation will be introduced into nature; rather, the world follows its accustomed course. The verse in Isaiah, *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid* is an allegory and metaphor.3 Its meaning is that Israel will dwell in security with the wicked nations of the earth which are allegorically represented as wolves and leopards, as it says (Jer. 5:6): *the wolf of the desert ravages them. A leopard lies in wait by their towns.* Those nations will all adopt the true religion [*dat ha-emet*]. They will neither rob nor destroy; rather, they will eat permitted foods in peace and quiet as4 Israelites, as it says, *the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw.* All similar things written about the Messiah are allegories, and in the days of the messianic king everyone will understand which matters were allegories, and also the meaning hinted at by them.5

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1 In addition to individuals thanked at specific points below, I would like to thank Avi Kadish, Avram Montag, and David Gillis for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2 *Laws of Kings and Their Wars* XII:1. Here and below translations from the *Mishneh Torah* are taken from the Yale Judaica series translations, heavily emended to make them more literal and to match the text in Yohai Makbili’s one-volume edition of the work (Haifa: Or Ve-Yeshu’ah, 5765).


4 Following Makbili’s text; printed editions and some manuscripts read: “with.”

5 *אלא יעלה על דעתך שב ומת את השמיים בבש קרב מנה גו נמליגו של גול, ואחרי שיתידעו*.

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What does the expression *dat ha-emet* mean in this context? In a number of places I have argued that Maimonides means that in the messianic era (or, more accurately, by the time it reaches fruition since it is, after all, a process and not an event) all human beings will worship God from a position of absolute spiritual equality. Whether Gentiles will convert formally to Judaism, they will be absorbed into Israel in some other fashion, or that the distinction will become in some way less important than it is now is open to question. What is clear, I maintain, is that the distinction between Jew and Gentile will disappear by the time that the messianic process has reached completion. In making this claim, I stand opposed to those who interpret Maimonides in a more particularist fashion, according to whom even at the end of days for Maimonides the Jews will remain God’s chosen people, especially beloved, and distinct from the mass of humanity. I also stand opposed to those who might want to read Maimonides in a pluralist fashion, as if he holds that in the messianic era many different paths will lead equally to God. Rather, I read him as a messianic universalist.

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6 This is an important point, not only because it makes Orthodox Zionism possible. While Maimonides rarely specifies the precise stages of the messianic process, reading him as if everything happens at once, *be-heseah ha-da’at* (Sanhedrin 97a), as it were, is radically to misunderstand him. He expects the messianic process to unfold within nature as we know it. Further on the connection between Maimonides’ messianism and Orthodox Zionism, see my “Messianic Postures in Israel Today,” Modern Judaism 6 (1986): 197–209 [http://www.jstor.org/view/02761114/ap050017/05a00060/0]; reprinted in: Marc Saperstein, ed., *Essential Papers on Messianic Movements in Jewish History* (N.Y.: New York University Press, 1992): 504–519.


8 As I argue in *Maimonides on Judaism*, pp. 39–58.


10 It is not clear to me that Maimonides himself addressed this question self-consciously; it may have been among the things he expected to be clarified after the coming of the Messiah—see Laws of Kings, XII.1.

11 Raphael Jospe points to Netanel ibn al-Fayyumi (Yemen, c. 1165) as a medieval Jew who held a pluralist view of religious revelation. This is surely a case of an exception proving a rule. For sources and discussion, see the debate between Jospe on the one hand and Jolene and Menachem Kellner on the other in the forthcoming, *Jewish Theology and the Religious Other*, Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn, eds. The philosopher cited by Halevi at the beginning of the Kuzari might be cited as an example of a medieval religious pluralist, but that is surely a mistake: his pluralism consists in saying that all religions are equally false, not equally true.

12 There is no dearth of apologetic writing on biblical and rabbinic universalism. Moshe Greenberg often (but not always) succeeds in going beyond apologetics; see his