MAIMONIDES’ DISPUTED LEGACY

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1. Introduction

Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) expressed a vision of Judaism as a remarkably naturalist religion of radical responsibility; a religion in which concrete behavior serves the needs of abstract thought; and a religion in which that abstract thought is to be understood as the deepest layer of the Torah and is a system which, at least in Maimonides’ day, could be most clearly and accurately expressed in the vocabulary of the Neoplatonized Aristotelianism which Maimonides accepted as one of the highest expressions of the human spirit. This Judaism was at one and the same time deeply elitist and profoundly universalist. Maimonides was brought to crystallize and express this vision of Judaism because the Jewish world in his day was, in his view, debased and paganized.

Moreover, Maimonides hated clutter. He was not only a consummate systematizer and organizer (as we see in the Mishneh Torah), he also disdained what might be called the metaphysical clutter of ancient Jewish mysticism, which posited a pleroma full of entities occupying the space, as it were, between God and humanity. One of his main goals was to use an Ockhamist razor to shave that space clean.

In other words, Maimonides was a religious reformer. Was he a successful reformer? On balance, the answer must be: No. The Maimonides whose impact on Judaism is apparently so vast that the octocentennial of his death in 1204 brought forth a flood of symposia, journals and collected volumes (including this one), is a sanitized Maimonides, a Maimonides forced to fit accepted (and hence acceptable) patterns of thought.1

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1 It is well-worth noting that while the academic world “celebrated” the anniversary in all the ways just noted, so far as I could tell the “Lithuanian yeshiva world” allowed the anniversary to pass in almost total silence. I suspect that is actually a sign of health in a world in which Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah is studied intensively every day; arbitrary anniversaries make very little sense in such a context. But in the Hasidic world, with
There are at least two areas in which the Maimonidean reform succeeded. But even his successes are hardly full-fledged. Maimonides convinced Jews that God is radically incorporeal. I do not believe that there is a literate Jew alive today who does not at least pay lip-service to that claim. But even while affirming it in principle, many deny it in practice. For Maimonides, divine incorporeality means absolute, radical simplicity. A composite God is not incorporeal. Jews who affirm the kabbalistic doctrine of sefirot as an account, even poetic, of processes internal to divinity are, I have no doubt Maimonides would hold, sectarians who have no share in the world to come, no matter how loudly they sing the third stanza of the synagogue hymn Tūgdal, or with what enthusiasm they declaim the third verse of the poem Ani Mā‘āmin. Similarly, Jews who attribute divinity, no matter how attenuated, to beings other than God (such as deceased wonder-working rabbis from Brooklyn), or who seek to propitiate through charms and talismans beings other than God (such as the evil eye), all fail to pass Maimonidean muster as believers in the unity and incorporeality of God.

Maimonides also convinced Jews that the Torah has a theology which may be summarized in thirteen normative, authoritative, obligatory dogmas. But for every hundred Jews who can tell you that Judaism has thirteen principles of faith, probably fewer than a dozen can tell you what they are, and of that dozen, vanishingly few have ever actually read them in the way in which Maimonides set them down. Of that tiny minority, how many have actually worked through them in the way in which Maimonides thought proper? Maimonides demanded that Jews understand the arguments which made acceptance of the principles a rational necessity. Far from establishing Judaism on a firm philosophical basis, his principles were pried from their theoretical framework and turned into a literary trope. Indeed, given the dramatic changes in natural science since Maimonides’ day, and the concomitant


2 Let alone in the language, Arabic, in which they were written. Even those who pay lip-service to the principles have felt free through the generations to reject or modify them. See Marc Shapiro, The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised (Oxford: Littman Library of Civilization, 2004).