

Jewish History 10

Rabbi Daniel Levine

DLevine21@gmail.com

1000 CE: Jewish Center Moves to Europe (predominantly Spain)







Maimonides Letter to a friend

I live in Fostat, and the Sultan lives in Cairo. The distance between them is 4000 cubits [a mile and a half]. My duties to the Sultan are very heavy. I must see him every morning to check on his health. If one day he doesn't feel well, or one of the princes or the women of his harem doesn't feel well, I cannot leave Cairo that day.

It often happens that there is an officer or two who needs me, and I have to attend to healing them all day. Therefore, as a rule, I am in Cairo early each day, and even if nothing unusual happens, by the time I come back to Fostat, half the day is gone. Under no circumstances do I come earlier. And I am ravenously hungry by then. When I come home, my foyer is always full of people – Jews and non-Jews, important people and not, judges and policemen, people who love me and people who hate me, a mixture of people, all of whom have been waiting for me to come home.

I get off of my donkey, wash my hands, and go out into the hall to see them. I apologize and ask that they should be kind enough to give me a few minutes to eat. That is the only meal I take in twenty-four hours. Then I go out to heal them, write them prescriptions and instructions for treating their problems. Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes – I swear to you by the Torah – it is two hours into the night before they are all gone. I talk to them and prescribe for them even while lying down on my back from exhaustion. And when night begins, I am so weak, I cannot even talk anymore. Because of all this, no Jew can come and speak with me in wisdom or have a private audience with me because I have no time, except on Shabbat. On Shabbat, the whole congregation, or at least the majority of it, comes to my house after morning services, and I instruct the members of the community as to what they should do during the entire week. We learn together in a weak fashion until the afternoon. Then they all go home. Some of them come back and I teach more deeply between the afternoon and evening prayers.

Introduction to Guide to the Perplexed

The object of this treatise is to enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy Law, who conscientiously fulfils his moral and religious duties, and at the same time has been successful in his philosophical studies. Human reason has attracted him to abide within its sphere; and he finds it difficult to accept as correct the teaching based on the literal interpretation of the Law, and especially that which he himself or others derived from those homonymous, metaphorical, or hybrid expressions. Hence he is lost in perplexity and anxiety. If he be guided solely by reason, and renounce his previous views which are based on those expressions, he would consider that he had rejected the fundamental principles of the Law; and even if he retains the opinions which were derived from those expressions, and if, instead of following his reason, he abandon its guidance altogether, it would still appear that his

religious convictions had suffered loss and injury. For he would then be left with those errors which give rise to fear and anxiety, constant grief and great perplexity...

The thinker whose studies have brought him into collision with religion, will, as I have already mentioned, derive much benefit from every chapter. How greatly will he rejoice! How agreeably will my words strike his ears! Those, however, whose minds are confused with false notions and perverse methods, who regard their misleading studies as sciences, and imagine themselves philosophers, though they have no knowledge that could truly be termed science, will object to many chapters, and will find in them many insuperable difficulties, because they do not understand their meaning, and because I expose therein the absurdity of their perverse notions, which constitute their riches and peculiar treasure, “stored up for their ruin.” God knows that I hesitated very much before writing on the subjects contained in this work, since they are profound mysteries: they are topics which, since the time of our captivity have not been treated by any of our scholars as far as we possess their writings; how then shall I now make a beginning and discuss them?

But I rely on two precedents: first, to similar cases our Sages applied the verse, “It is time to do something in honor of the Lord: for they have made void thy law” (Ps. cxix. 126). Secondly, they have said, “Let all thy acts be guided by pure intentions.” On these two principles I relied while composing some parts of this work. Lastly, when I have a difficult subject before me—when I find the road narrow, and can see no other way of teaching a well established truth except by pleasing one intelligent man and displeasing ten thousand fools—I prefer to address myself to the one man, and to take no notice whatever of the condemnation of the multitude; I prefer to extricate that intelligent man from his embarrassment and show him the cause of his perplexity, so that he may attain perfection and be at peace.

Maimonides: Foundations of the Torah:

The foundation of foundations and firmest pillar of all wisdom is, To know that there is a First Being, that He caused all beings to be, and that all beings from heaven and earth, and from between them, could not be save for the truth of His Own Being...

This Being is the God of the universe, Lord of the whole earth, who guides the sphere with an infinite force, a force of perpetual motion; for the sphere revolves continuously, which would be impossible without some one causing it to revolve; and it is He, blessed is He! Who causes it to revolve without hand and without body.

To know this matter is a mandatory commandment, saying: "I am the Lord thy God" (Ex. 20,2); therefore, whosoever supposes that there is another god besides This One, (1) violates a prohibitive commandment, saying: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ibid. –3), and is an atheist, denying the great principle upon which everything depends.

This God is One God; He is neither two nor more than two but One to whose Unity there is no comparison among the individual units in the universe; not like the unit of a genus which embraces many individual units, nor like the unit of a body which is divisible into parts and particles, but a Unit to Whose Unity no other unit in the universe is like. Supposing that there are many deities is equivalent to an admission that they are corporeal, because like individual beings do not differ save in chance traits characteristic of bodies and material things only. Thus supposing the Creator to be corporeal and material would force a

conclusion that He is finite, for, it is impossible to imagine a body which does not end in dissolution; but our God, blessed is His Name! beholding that His power is infinite and uninterrupted, for lo, the universal sphere continues to revolve forever. His power is positively not a physical power. And, because He is Incorporeal, none of the chance traits, characteristic of bodies, so as to be divisible or an offshoot of another being, can be attributed to Him. Therefore, the impossibility for Him to be but One. And, the knowledge of this doctrine of Monotheism is a mandatory commandment, saying: "The Lord our God is One God" (Deut. 6.4)....

If so, wherefore is it written in the Torah, "And there was under his feet" (Ex. 24,10), "Written with the finger of God" (Ex. 31,18), "The hand of the Lord" (Ex. 9,3), "The eyes of the Lord" (Deut. 11, 12), "The ears of the Lord" (Num. 11,18) and more like expressions? All such terminology is in accordance with the conception of sons of man who cannot recognize aught but corporeal things, and the words of the Torah is like human speech, but they are all attributes; for example, it is said: "If I whet My glittering sword," (Deut. 32. 41.); Hath He a sword, or doth He slay with a sword? But it is a metaphor, so is all metaphorical. As testimony thereto, one prophet says that he saw the Holy One, blessed is He! "His raiment was as white snow" (Dan. 7,9), and another saw Him "With crimsoned garments from Bozrah" (Isa. 63,1); Moses our Master himself saw Him at the Red Sea "as a hero engaged in battle," (Ex. 15.3) and upon Sinai as "a garbed minister of a congregation (Ex. 19.19.), to say: He hath neither form nor image, but all is a vision of prophecy and a mirage, the absolute truth of the matter no human mind comprehends or is able to fathom it or penetrate it. It is even this what it says in Scripture: "Canst thou find out the deep things of God? Canst thou attain unto the purposes of the Almighty?" (Job. 11,7).

Now, since the matter is so, all such and other similar expressions in the Torah and in the words of the Prophets are merely proverbial and figurative; for example, it is said: "He that sitteth in heaven laugheth" (Ps. 2,4), "They have provoked Me

with their vanities" (Deut. 32,21), "As the Lord rejoiced" (Ibid. 28, 63), and like verses. Concerning all these the wise men said *Berakot*, . "The words of the Torah is like human speech". It is, moreover said: "Do they provoke Me" (Jer.7,19), whereas it has been said: "For I the Lord change not" (Mal. 3,6 6); if He could sometimes be angry and sometimes mirthful, He would be subject to changes. Indeed, such and all kindred attributes are not present in any save in darkened, lowly bodies, inhabitants of houses of clay, whose origin is of dust; but He, blessed is He! in blessings is exalted above all this.

Guide 1.59

Know that when you make an affirmation ascribing another thing to Him, you become more remote from Him in two respects: one of them is that everything You affirm is a perfection only with reference to us, And the other is that He does not possess a thing other than His essence ...

Mitzvot all have logical reasons

The result of all these preliminary remarks is this: The reason of a commandment, whether positive or negative, is clear, and its usefulness evident, if it directly tends to remove injustice, or to teach good conduct that furthers the well-being of society, or to impart a truth which ought to be believed either on its own merit or as being indispensable for facilitating the removal of injustice or the teaching of good morals. There is no occasion to ask for the object of such commandments: for no one can, e.g., be in doubt as to the reason why we have been commanded

to believe that God is one; why we are forbidden to murder, to steal, and to take vengeance, or to retaliate, or why we are commanded to love one another.

But there are precepts concerning which people are in doubt, and of divided opinions, some believing that they are mere commands, and serve no purpose whatever, whilst others believe that they serve a certain purpose, which, however, is unknown to man. Such are those precepts which in their literal meaning do not seem to further any of the three above-named results: to impart some truth, to teach some moral, or to remove injustice. They do not seem to have any influence upon the well-being of the soul by imparting any truth, or upon the well-being of the body by suggesting such ways and rules as are useful in the government of a state, or in the management of a household. Such are the prohibitions of wearing garments containing wool and linen; of sowing divers seeds, or of boiling meat and milk together...

I am prepared to tell you my explanation of all these commandments, and to assign for them a true reason supported by proof, with the exception of some minor rules, and of a few commandments, as I have mentioned above. I will show that all these and similar laws must have some bearing upon one of the following three things, the regulation of our opinions, or the improvement of our social relations, which implies two things, the removal of injustice, and the teaching of good morals

Nature runs its course (not everything happens for a reason)

My opinion on this principle of Divine Providence I will now explain to you. In the principle which I now proceed to expound I do not rely on demonstrative proof, but on my conception of the spirit of the Divine Law, and the writings of the Prophets. The principle which I accept is far less open to objections, and is more reasonable than the opinions mentioned before. It is this: In the lower or

sublunary portion of the Universe Divine Providence does not extend to the individual members of species except in the case of mankind. It is only in this species that the incidents in the existence of the individual beings, their good and evil fortunes, are the result of justice, in accordance with the words, "For all His ways are judgment." But I agree with Aristotle as regards all other living beings, and à fortiori as regards plants and all the rest of earthly creatures.

For I do not believe that it is through the interference of Divine Providence that a certain leaf drops [from a tree], nor do I hold that when a certain spider catches a certain fly, that this is the direct result of a special decree and will of God in that moment; it is not by a particular Divine decree that the spittle of a certain person moved, fell on a certain gnat in a certain place, and killed it; nor is it by the direct will of God that a certain fish catches and swallows a certain worm on the surface of the water. In all these cases the action is, according to my opinion, entirely due to chance, as taught by Aristotle. Divine Providence is connected with Divine intellectual influence, and the same beings which are benefited by the latter so as to become intellectual, and to comprehend things comprehensible to rational beings, are also under the control of Divine Providence, which examines all their deeds in order to reward or punish them. It may be by mere chance that a ship goes down with all her contents, as in the above-mentioned instance, or the roof of a house falls upon those within;

Sacrifices were a concession to human needs - not divine will

It is impossible to go from one extreme to the other suddenly. Therefore man - according to his nature - is not capable of suddenly abandoning that to which he was deeply accustomed.... As it was then the deeply ingrained and universal practice with which people were brought up to conduct religious worship with animal sacrifices in temples... G-d in His wisdom did not see fit to command us to completely reject all these practices - something that man could not conceive of

accepting, according to human nature which inclines to habit. It would have been comparable to a prophet appearing today, calling for the service of G-d, declaring that G-d now commands you not to pray to Him, not to fast and not to seek His help in time of distress, but your service of Him should be in meditation without any deeds whatsoever.* He therefore allowed these practices to continue but transformed them from idolatrous associations... that their purpose should be directed toward Him. Thus, He commanded us to build a sanctuary for Him with an altar to His name and offer sacrifices to Him....

In this way idolatry was blotted out and the great foundation of our faith - the existence and oneness of G-d - was established. This was accomplished without confusing people's minds by prohibiting the worship they were accustomed to and with which alone they were familiar.... G-d does not choose to change man's nature with a miracle.... As sacrificial worship is not a primary intention... only one Temple has been ordained... and in no other place is it allowed to sacrifice... to limit such worship within bounds that G-d did not deem it necessary to abolish it.... because of this the prophets often declared that the object of sacrifices is not very essential and that G-d can dispense with them....

Guide 3:28

Scripture further demands belief in certain truths, the belief in which is indispensable in regulating our social relations: such is the belief that God is angry with those who disobey Him, for it leads us to the fear and dread of disobedience [to the will of God].in other cases, that truth is only the means of securing the removal of injustice, or the acquisition of good morals; such is the belief that God is angry with those who oppress their fellow-men, as it is said, "Mine anger will be kindled, and I will slay," etc. (Exod. xxii. 23); or the belief that God hears the crying

of the oppressed and vexed, to deliver them out of the hands of the oppressor and tyrant, as it is written, "And it shall come to pass, when he will cry unto me, that I will hear, for I am gracious" (Exod. xxii. 25).

