
Rhyme and Reason

Mitzvot in Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim*

Michael Teitcher

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YESHIVA UNIVERSITY
TORAH MITZION
KOLLEL OF CHICAGO 

Overview of the life of Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon - Rambam

1135(8)	Born in Cordoba, Spain. Father R. Maimon was a great scholar, <i>dayyan</i> (rabbinic judge), and student of R. Josef Ibn Migash.
1148	Family forced to leave Cordoba at age 13, fleeing Almohad persecution.
1158	Writes <i>Milat Higayon</i> (on logic) and <i>Ma'amar Halbur</i> (on the Jewish calendar). Begins to write <i>Commentary to Mishnah</i> .
1160-5	Settles in Fez (Morocco). Here Rambam studied under the great rabbinic scholars of Fez, including R. Judah ha-Kohen ibn Susan. Also studies medicine with physicians in North Africa. Writes <i>Igeret Hashmad</i> (Letter on Forced Conversion) and <i>Igeret Kidush HaShem</i> (Letter on Sanctifying God's Name).
1165	Leaves Fez for Eretz Yisrael, landing in Acco. After a short stay in Eretz Yisrael, settles in Cairo, Egypt. Reason for leaving Fez unclear.
1168	Completed <i>Commentary to Mishnah</i> . The first extensive commentary focused solely on the Mishnah. In Egypt, Rambam was constantly involved in communal affairs of the Cairo Jewish community.
1172	Writes <i>Igeret Teiman</i> , a letter providing guidance to the Yemenite Jewish community. Yemen was dealing with the rise of a false Messiah that had led Jews away from a Torah way of life. The letter transforms the community and helps preserve traditional Torah Judaism in Yemen. Yemenites add a prayer of praise for Rambam in their Kaddish, a custom that continued for generations.
1174	Began practicing medicine.
1180	Completes <i>Mishneh Torah</i> , the systematic codification of the entire corpus of Jewish law. Includes some exposition of Torah philosophy and ethical concepts. The comprehensive nature and meticulous organization of this work was unprecedented in the history of Jewish law. Its enormous impact on Jewish law is palpable to this day. This was the only work of Rambam to be written in Hebrew.
1185	Appointed royal physician to the vizier of Emperor Saladin in Egypt.
1190	<i>Moreh Nevuchim</i> (Guide for the Perplexed) completed. Landmark philosophical work was addressed to a single student. Written in Arabic to allow access to wider readership.
1204	Translation of <i>Moreh Nevuchim</i> into Hebrew completed by Samuel b. Judah Ibn Tibbon, with approval from, and under guidance of Rambam himself.
1204	Death. Rambam is buried in Tiberias, Eretz Yisrael.

I. The purpose of the *Guide* and the intended readership

1. Rambam's Introductory Letter to *The Guide for the Perplexed*

INTRODUCTION

[*Letter of the Author to his Pupil, R. Joseph Ibn Akinin.*]

In the name of GOD, Lord of the Universe.

To R. Joseph (may God protect him!), son of R. Jehudah (may his repose be in Paradise!):--

My dear pupil, ever since you resolved to come to me, from a distant country, and to study under my direction, I thought highly of your thirst for knowledge, and your fondness for speculative pursuits, which found expression in your poems. I refer to the time when I received your writings in prose and verse from Alexandria. I was then not yet able to test your powers of apprehension, and I thought that your desire might possibly exceed your capacity. But when you had gone with me through a course of astronomy, after having completed the [other] elementary studies which are indispensable for the understanding of that science, I was still more gratified by the acuteness and the quickness of your apprehension. Observing your great fondness for mathematics, I let you study them more deeply, for I felt sure of your ultimate success. Afterwards, when I took you through a course of logic, I found that my great expectations of you were confirmed, and I considered you fit to receive from me an exposition of the esoteric ideas contained in the prophetic books, that you might understand them as they are understood by men of culture. When I commenced by way of hints, I noticed that you desired additional explanation, urging me to expound some metaphysical problems; to teach you the system of the Mutakallemim; to tell you whether their arguments were based on logical proof; and if not, what their method was. I perceived that you had acquired some knowledge in those matters from others, and that you were perplexed and bewildered; yet you sought to find out a solution to your difficulty. I urged you to desist from this pursuit, and enjoined you to continue your studies systematically; for my object was that the truth should present itself in connected order, and that you should not hit upon it by mere chance. Whilst you studied with me I never refused to explain difficult verses in the Bible or passages in rabbinical literature which we happened to meet. When, by the will of God, we parted, and you went your way, our discussions aroused in me a resolution which had long been dormant. Your absence has prompted me to compose this treatise for you and for those who are like you, however few they may be. I have divided it into chapters, each of which shall be sent to you as soon as it is completed. Farewell!"

Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed - מורה הנבוכים להרמב"ם

Unit 1: Approaching the Study of Esoteric Concepts

<p>2. Devarim 30:11-14</p> <p>(11) For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not too [wonderous] for thee, neither is it far off. (12) It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say: 'Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?' (13) Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say: 'Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, and make us to hear it, that we may do it?' (14) But the word is very [near] unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.</p>	<p>2. דברים ל:יא-יד (פרשת נצבים-וילך)</p> <p>(יא) כִּי הַמְצִיחַהּ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא יִפְלֵאת הוּא מִמֶּךָ וְכֹל רְחוֹקָה הוּא:</p> <p>(יב) לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחֶנָּה לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂהָ:</p> <p>(יג) וְכֹל מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר לָנוּ אֶל עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶנָּה לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂהָ:</p> <p>(יד) כִּי קְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתָּהּ: ט</p>
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<p>3. Rambam, Introductory verse to the Guide</p> <p><i>In the name of God, Lord of the Universe!</i></p> <p>Bereishit 21:33</p> <p>And [Abraham] planted a flowering tree in Beer-sheba, and called there in the name of the Hashem, Lord of the Universe.</p> <p>Bab. Talmud, Sotah 10a-10b</p> <p>And he planted a [flowering] tree in Beer-sheba. Resh Lakish said: It teaches that he [Abraham] made an orchard and planted in it all kinds of choice fruits. R. Judah and R. Nehemiah [differ in this matter]; one said that it was an orchard and the other that it was an [inn]. It is right according to him who said that it was an orchard, since it is written 'and he planted'; but according to him who said that it was an [inn], what means 'and he planted?' — It is similarly written: And he shall plant the tents of his palace, etc. And he called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. Resh Lakish said: Read not 'and he called' but 'and he made to call', thereby teaching that our father Abraham caused the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, to be uttered by the mouth of every passer-by. How was this? After [travellers] had eaten and drunk, they stood up to bless him; but, said he to them, 'Did you eat of mine? You ate of that which belongs to the God of the Universe. Thank, praise and bless Him who spake and the world came into being'.</p>	<p>3. כותרת לספר מורה נבוכים:</p> <p>בשם ה' אל עולם.</p> <p>בראשית כא:לג</p> <p>(לג) וַיִּטַע אֲשֶׁל בְּבְאֵר שֵׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם בְּשֵׁם יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהִים:</p> <p>תלמוד בבלי, סוטה י' עמוד א - עמוד ב</p> <p>ויטע אשל בבאר שבע - אמר ריש לקיש: מלמד, שעשה פרדם ונטע בו כל מיני מגדים. רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה, חד אמר: פרדם, וחד אמר: פונדק. בשלמא למ"ד פרדם, היינו דכתיב ויטע; אלא למ"ד פונדק, מאי ויטע? כדכתיב: (דניאל יא) ויטע אהלי אפדנו וגו'. ויקרא שם בשם ה' אל עולם - אמר ריש לקיש: אל תיקרי ויקרא אלא ויקריא, מלמד, שהקריא אברהם אבינו לשמו של הקב"ה בפה כל עובר ושב, כיצד? לאחר שאכלו ושתו עמדו לברכו, אמר להם: וכי משלי אכלתם? משל אלהי עולם אכלתם, הודו ושבתו וברכו למי שאמר והיה העולם.</p>
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4. Introduction, *Guide*, (M. Friedlander), p. 2

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.

II. The Problem with Esoteric Torah Study

5. *Mishna Chagiga 2:1*

One should not expound on the subjects of immoral relationships to three [or more students], nor the acts of creation to two, nor of the "chariot" to one; unless he is wise and can understand on his own.

Bab. Talmud, Chagiga 13a

"And not of the chariot to one." R. Chiyya taught: **But** we can give him (an average student) chapter headings.

5. משנה, חגיגה א:ב

אין דורשין בעריות בשלשה, ולא במעשה בראשית בשנים, ולא במרכבה ביחיד, אלא אם כן היה חכם ומבין מדעתו. כל המסתכל בארבעה דברים רתוי [ראוי] לו כאילו לא בא לעולם: מה למעלה, מה למטה, מה לפניו, ומה לאחור. וכל שלא חס על כבוד קונו – רתוי לו שלא בא לעולם.

תלמיד בבלי, חגיגה יג.

ולא במרכבה ביחיד. תני רבי חייא: אבל מוסרין לו ראשי פרקים.

6. רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה פרק ב

(ה) ובמה יפרדו הצורות זו מזו והרי אין גופין...

(יא) דברים אלו שאמרנו בענין זה בשני פרקים אלו כמו טיפה מן הים הם ממה שצריך לבאר בענין זה, וביאור כל העיקרים שבשני פרקים אלו הוא הנקרא מעשה מרכבה.

(יב) צו חכמים הראשונים שלא לדרוש בדברים אלו אלא לאיש אחד בלבד והוא שיהיה חכם ומבין מדעתו ואחר כך מוסרין לו ראשי הפרקים ומודעין אותו שמץ מן הדבר והוא מבין מדעתו וידע סוף הדבר ועומקו, ודברים אלו דברים עמוקים הם עד למאד ואין כל דעת ודעת ראויה לסובלן...

רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה פרק ד

(א) ארבעה גופים הללו שהם אש ורוח ומים וארץ הם יסודות כל הנבראים למטה מן הרקיע....

(ו) כל הדברים האלו שדברנו בענין זה כמר מודלי הם ודברים עמוקים הם, אבל אינם כענין עומק פרק ראשון ושני, וביאור כל אלו הדברים שבפרק שלישי ורביעי הוא הנקרא מעשה בראשית, וכך צו החכמים הראשונים שאין דורשין בדברים האלו רבים אלא לאדם אחד מודעין דברים אלו ומלמדין אותן.

(יא) ...ולמה אין מלמדין אותו לרבים? לפי שאין כל אדם יש לו דעת רחבה להשיג פירוש וביאור כל הדברים על בורין.

III. Rambam's Answer: Methodology

7. Excerpt, *Moreh Nevuchim*, Introduction (Friedlander, pp 2-3).

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We also stated (Mishneh torah, I. ii. 12, and iv. 10) that the expression Ma'ase Bereshit (Account of the Creation) signified "Natural Science," and Ma'aseh Mercabah ("Description of the Chariot") Metaphysics, and we explained the force of the Rabbinical dictum, "The Ma'aseh Mercabah must not be fully expounded even in the presence of a single student, unless he be wise and able to reason for himself, and even then you should merely acquaint him with the heads of the different sections of the subject. You must, therefore, not expect from me more than such heads. And even these have not been methodically and systematically arranged in this work, but have been, on the contrary, scattered, and are interspersed with other topics which we shall have occasion to explain. My object in adopting this arrangement is that the truths should be at one time apparent, and at another time concealed. Thus we shall not be in opposition to the Divine Will from which it is wrong to deviate, which has withheld from the multitude the truths required for the knowledge of God, according to the words, "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him" (Ps. xxv. 14).

8. Tehilim 25:14

The secrets of Hashem is with them that fear Him; and His covenant, to make them know it.

Radak, R. David b. Joseph Kimhi (c1160-1235)

The secrets of Hashem are only revealed to those who fear him. For even someone who involves himself in wisdom will not have God's secrets revealed to him unless he has fear of Heaven and is complete in his mitzvah observance. The "covenant" is the promise Hashem makes with Man's soul: that Hashem will enlighten it and gather it into God's glory upon its separation from the body. As we find by Moshe...

8. תהילים כה:יד

(יד) סוד ה' ליראיו ובריתו להודיעם:

פירוש רד"ק שם

(יד) סוד ה' ליראיו. סוד ה' לא יגלה כי אם ליראיו, כי המתעסקים בחכמה אם לא יהיו יראי האל ושלמים במצותיו לא יגלה להם סוד האל. ובריתו להודיעם, להודיעם בריתו שגילה להם סודו. והברית היא שכורת עם הנשמה להשכילה ולאספה אל כבודו בהפרדה מהגוף. וכן קראה ברית באמרו למשה רבינו ע"ה (שמות לד, י): הנה אנכי כרת ברית נגד כל עמך אעשה נפלאות. והברית היא שחננו אור השכל ודבקות נפשו בעליונים. ואמר לו: נגד כל עמך, לומר: זה שעשיתי עמך הוא אות רוחני שלא יכיר אדם בו זולתך, אבל אות אחר גשמי אעשה עמך נגד כל עמך והוא קרית אור פניו. ומאות הגשמי יכירו כי אות רוחני חננתך:

9. Excerpt, *Moreh Nevuchim*, Introduction (Friedlander).

Directions for the Study of this Work.

... I adjure any reader of my book, in the name of the Most High, not to add any explanation even to a single word: nor to explain to another any portion of it except such passages as have been fully treated of by previous theological authorities: he must not teach others anything that he has learnt from my work alone, and that has not been hitherto discussed by any of our authorities.

...Should he notice any opinions with which he does not agree, let him endeavour to find a suitable explanation, even if it seem far-fetched, in order that he may judge me charitably. Such a duty we owe to every one. We owe it especially to our scholars and theologians, who endeavour to teach us what is the truth according to the best of their ability. I feel assured that those of my readers who have not studied philosophy, will still derive profit from many a chapter. But 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!...

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 honour of the Lord: for they have made void thy law" (Ps. cxix. 126). Secondly, they have said, "Let all thy acts be [for the sake of Heaven.]" 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.

10. Tehilim 119:125-6

I am Thy servant, give me understanding, that I may know Thy testimonies. It is time for Hashem to work; they have made void Thy law.

Rashi

...Our sages learned from here to override the rules of the Torah in order to make a boundary and build a fence to protect the Torah for Israel...

10. תהילים, פרק קי"ט

(קכה) עֲבָדְךָ אֲנִי הַבִּינֵנִי וְאֲדַעַה עֲדוֹתֶיךָ:
(קכו) עַתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת ה' הִפְרוּ תוֹרַתְךָ:

רש"י שם

...ורבותינו דרשו ממנו שטוצרין על דברי תורה כדי לעשות סייג וגדר לישראל...

11. Mishna, Avot 2:30

R. Yosi said: And you must adequately prepare to learn Torah, for it is not an inheritance for you. And may all your actions be for the sake of Heaven.

11. משנה אבות ב:ל

רבי יוסי אומר... והתקן עצמך ללמוד תורה שאינה ירושה לך. וכל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים.