

Shalem College
Humanities Program

**Maimonides and the Other: A Look at Maimonides' View of
Gentiles in the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah***

Final Assignment

Introduction to Jewish Thought III: Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages

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24 February, 2021

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, in *Kitab al Khazari*, claimed that Jews are superior, spiritually, not only to gentiles but to proselytes as well. Halevi wrote, “any Gentile who joins us unconditionally shares our good fortune, without, however, being quite equal to us.”¹ In stark contrast with Halevi, Maimonides’ view of gentiles and proselytes seems to be inclusive, universal, and equal. In the following paper, I will present a brief outline of Maimonides’ view of the “outsider,” specifically comparing his complementary claims in the *Guide of the Perplexed* and in the *Mishna Torah*. To do this, I will present the perspectives I found fit from experts Menachem Kellner, Micah Goodman, and Lawrence Kaplan - through their standpoints I will offer a definition of Maimonides’ view of the “outsider” – on both non-Jews and proselytes. To gain the best conclusive general understanding, I will present an outline of Maimonides’ stance on non-Jews first from the *Guide*, before I survey the afore mentioned scholars’ convictions of the same subject as found in the *Mishneh Torah*.

In my opinion, it appears that Maimonides endorses a solely theological, or “actual,” difference between Jew and gentile – emphasizing a person’s beliefs and actions, not his origins. Ergo, according to Maimonides, all men are potentially equal, yet only those that have achieved the highest philosophical goal – i.e. prophetic fulfillment and knowing of God – are actually and spiritually superior. Jews are included in these criteria, but in no way are they to be exclusive. The *Guide* will give insight on the universally philosophical side of this approach, while the *Mishneh Torah* will provide perspective of the particular Jewish to themselves as chosen, to proselytes, and to other gentiles.

Background²

Born in 1135 in Spain, Maimonides and his greater family enjoyed lenient freedom under Islamic rule, until the Almohads arrived in 1148, forcing the Jews a choice: convert or die. Under the nose of the hostile rule, Maimonides continued to study science and Judaism in private, for eleven consecutive years. However, the rule being too tough to bear, the family traveled and settled in Egypt. Shortly after, Maimonides was forced to take care of his family after the tragedies of his brother and father’s death, as well as the loss of the family fortune with his late brother at sea. To cope, Maimonides became a practicing physician to the Sultan Saladin, a Muslim military leader, and to his son.

Working from Egypt, Maimonides, 33 years old, published a commentary of the entire Mishna (*Kitab al Siraj*), an impressive project clarifying individual words and phrases, citing archaeology, theology and science, and containing introductory essays on various philosophical

¹ Book 1: 27, from: Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, *Kitab al Khazari, Part I*. Trans. Harwig Hirschfeld, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1905). Accessed February 21, 2021. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/khz/khz01.htm>.

² B. Zion Bokser, “Moses Maimonides.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Accessed: December 9, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Moses-Maimonides>.

issues. Included in these essays are the clarification of Thirteen Principles of Faith – principles that set a structured system of beliefs, eventually to become the orthodox understanding of faith in Judaism. Not less famous are the Eight Chapters, an introduction to the *Tractate of the Fathers (Mishna Avot)*, that incorporate numerous aspects of Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics as part of the worthy way to a complete and moral life.

After another ten years, Maimonides produced the *Mishna Torah*: a complete codification of all of Jewish Law in a systemized method, organized per subject in 14 books. This was the first work of its kind, and it notably set a precedent for similar halakhic works to come. Also published in this period of Maimonides' life were the *Book of the Commandments (Kitab al Faraid)*, as well as the *Jerusalem Laws (Hilkhot ha-Yerushalm)*.

His final work, taking 15 years to complete, was primarily philosophic: *The Guide for the Perplexed (Dalalat al-hairin)*. It appears to have been written as a private letter, the recipient his favorite student, Joseph ibn'Aunin. The work became a three-part philosophical masterpiece, apparently with the goal to assist his student in answering the question of whether he should study religious law, or rather pursue philosophy. Among other subjects in the *Guide*, Maimonides comments on biblical terms that appear to ascribe physical attributes to God, critiques the Kalam movement, and gives a systematic definition of creation, prophecy and providence. In addition, Maimonides held that the prophets, holding great intellectual ability, were in reality qualified philosophers with excellent imagination. Most important was Maimonides' definition of prophecy, as it was the highest human achievement one could arrive at.³

The Guide

Essential to understanding Maimonides' attitude towards gentiles in the *Guide* begins with chapter 54 of the third part, in which Maimonides concludes the *Guide* by clarifying by what means humans actualize their humanity. The fourth, highest, and final duty is philosophic: "The fourth species is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues - I refer to the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things."⁴ The highest form of actual perfection is through "the conception of intelligibles" – i.e. metaphysical knowledge. Maimonides in effect refers to all of mankind, not just Jews. Through these duties, humans as humans realize their humanity.

This is clear in the Allegory of the Palace, placed three chapters earlier in chapter 51. In it, Maimonides describes a hierarchy of different peoples that are trying – with a few exceptions – to

³ Kenneth Seeskin, "Maimonides", Ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2021. Accessed February 21, 2021.

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/maimonides/>.

⁴ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed, Part III*. Trans. Shlomo Pines, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 635.

reach the inner rooms of the palace. It is apparent from the parable that Jews are not the only people allowed to reach the king – they are not even a category. Where the king resides is symbolic of man’s highest goal in life: ultimate knowledge of God. In the Allegory, Maimonides classifies the different people by what level they have reached in their knowledge of God. Especially notable are those seek the palace but never reach it, and those that succeed in arriving at the inner chambers. The first are described as “the ignoramuses who observe the commandments.”⁵ In other words, presumably Jews, perhaps halakhic experts, who are completely faithful to their practice, but have no knowledge beyond that.

The key is the sort of knowledge necessary to be worthy of the king. According to the allegory, whoever reaches the king has “achieved perfection in the natural things and ... understood divine science...” Maimonides describes them as “the rank of the men of science,”⁶ and “the rank of the prophets.”⁷ Although he continues to give those near the king their own classifications, it is apparent that whoever reaches the ruler’s throne does not have to be of the chosen people. He needs perfected knowledge, “true knowledge,” of physics and metaphysics. The highest goal of all, reaching God and knowing him, is not exclusive to the Jews.

Menachem Kellner points out another source in the *Guide* that suggests spiritual equality between Jew and gentile on another level. In chapter 11 of part three, Maimonides claims that the reason that there is evil in the world is an effect of the lack of knowledge, of ignorance.

For all of them derive from ignorance, I mean from a privation of knowledge. Just as a blind man, because of absence of sight, does not cease stumbling, being wounded, and also wounding others, because he has nobody to guide him on his way, the various sects of men - every individual according to the extent of his ignorance - does to himself and to others great evils from which individuals of the species suffer.⁸

Kellner notes that the chapter emphasizes strife between all people, and that there seems to be no inference whatsoever that the Jewish people are the subject of terror and strife in the world.⁹ Conflict is common to all, as is ignorance. Furthermore, Maimonides’ brings a quote from Isaiah pointing to the end of strife in general, “And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and so on. And the cow and the bear shall feed, and so on. And the sucking child shall play, and so on”¹⁰ The abolition of all wrongs in the world will be “the knowledge that men will then have concerning the true reality of the deity.”¹¹ There is no mention of the Jewish people, or of a particular solution related to a particular people. Rather, the resolution only will come with

⁵ Ibid., 619.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 620.

⁸ Ibid., 440-441.

⁹ מנחם קלנר, גם הם קרויים אדם: הנכרי בעיני הרמב"ם, (רמת גן: אוניברסיטת בר-אילן, 2016), 155-167.

¹⁰ *The Guide*, 441. Isaiah 11: 6-8

¹¹ *The Guide*, 441.

the highest awareness of all people – the kind that allows one to see the king of the palace (chapter 51), and realizes one’s true humanity (chapter 54).

Micah Goodman, in his book, *Maimonides and the Book that Changed Judaism*, writes on Maimonides of the *Guide* that he does not seem to take any particular stance on the Jewish people, as opposed to Halevi. Goodman points out Ex. 20: 2, in which God proclaims “I am the Lord your God who took you out of the Land of Egypt”: this God, revealing himself of the Jewish people, is a particular and historical God, and Halevi extendedly expounds on this.¹² According to Halevi, God found qualities in the Jewish people that only they had. In addition, for Halevi, anyone can reach philosophy, but only Israel can reach prophecy. Because of this, the chosen people are the consequential mediator between God and mankind.¹³

Yet, Goodman continues, the God we meet in Maimonides’ *Guide* is of all of creation: relatively distant and mainly philosophic. And, unlike Halevi, Maimonides saw prophecy, the ultimate goal, as the inevitable extension of wisdom, i.e. philosophy. Prophetic perfection is only a combination of moral, qualities, intellect, and imagination.¹⁴ These being the criteria, ultimately any person, from any religion, could reach Maimonides’ prophecy. His criterion isn’t being Jewish; it’s being enlightened.

Whereas Halevi points to an innate essential difference between Jew and gentile, Maimonides does the opposite. This again resonates with the parable of the palace: While philosophers are inside, halakhic experts are outs. In Kellner’s words, we all have the same equipment, but “what differentiates us is the use to which we put that equipment.”¹⁵ All men are equal besides their intellectual self-realization. This seems to be Maimonides’ universal approach to humanity, as portrayed in the *Guide*.

Mishneh Torah

Although it is substantial that Maimonides’ method is such in his philosophical work, especially in comparison to Halevi’s *Kitab al Khazari*, the *Mishneh Torah* must also be examined to capture Maimonides’ halakhic lawful approach. In chapters 13 and 14 of *Hilkhot Isurei Bia*, Maimonides examines proselyte laws – how and in what circumstances can one convert to Judaism. It opens thus:

Israel entered the covenant [with God] with three acts: circumcision, immersion, and offering a sacrifice. Circumcision took place in Egypt, [before the Paschal sacrifice, of which Exodus 12: 48] says: “No uncircumcised person shall partake of it.” Moses our teacher circumcised [the people]. For with the exception of the tribe of Levi, the entire [people] neglected the covenant of circumcision

¹² Micah Goodman, *Maimonides and the Book that Changed Judaism: Secrets of The Guide for the Perplexed*, Trans. Yedidya Sinclair, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 140.

¹³ Ibid., 141.

¹⁴ Ibid., 142.

¹⁵ Menachem Marc Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*, (New York: New York Press, 1991), 15.

in Egypt. Regarding this, [Deuteronomy 33:9 praises the Levites,] saying: “They upheld Your covenant.”¹⁶

In other words, the children of Israel were essentially the first converts when they received the Torah. Kellner, in his book *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*, emphasizes this, stating that the fact that Maimonides opened his own codified collection of conversion laws with Israel’s own conversion is substantial.¹⁷ This is because *bnei yisrael* are then portrayed as converts to their own nation, bringing down in effect any ethnic or concrete borders between them and gentiles. It would seem that the only barrier between them and other nations is their choice to be who they are.

Kellner also notes that Maimonides allows Jews to actively proselytize Christians,

We do not teach him all the particulars lest this cause him concern and turn him away from a good path to a bad path. For at the outset, we draw a person forth with soft and appealing words, as [Hoshea 11: 4] states: “With cords of man, I drew them forth,” and then continues: “with bonds of love.”¹⁸

According to Kellner, this not only shows a positive attitude towards proselytization overall, but also further reveals a welcoming attitude towards gentiles. There is a stark difference between welcoming proselytes and encouraging them – the latter reflecting a very tolerant attitude of mutual respect for the fellow gentile.

Moreover, Kellner acknowledges Maimonides’ attitude towards sojourners and proselytes in *Hilkhot Deot*.¹⁹ In it, Maimonides remarks that loving the convert is de facto a fulfillment of two separate commandments: loving your neighbor as yourself²⁰, and loving the convert.²¹ The easiest explanation for this renewed perspective that Maimonides gives is, according to Kellner, because Jews are to love converts as they love themselves – they themselves are as converts.²²

Evidently, not only are converts equal with “regular” Jews, but so are gentiles. The reason that Kellner gives is that according to Maimonides, the difference between gentile and Jew is theological, not essential: “Software, not hardware.”²³ This is, so far, in accordance with the aforementioned analysis of the *Guide*, in plain contrast with Halevi’s ‘inherent’ approach.

¹⁶ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Kedushah: Issurei Biah, Chapter 13*, Trans. Eliyahu Touger, (Moznaim Publications, 1989), Accessed February 21, 2021.

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/960661/jewish/Issurei-Biah-Chapter-Thirteen.htm.

¹⁷ *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*, 52.

¹⁸ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Kedushah: Issurei Biah, Chapter 14*, Trans. Eliyahu Touger, (Moznaim Publications, 1989), Accessed February 21, 2021.

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/960662/jewish/Issurei-Biah-Chapter-Fourteen.htm.

¹⁹ *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*, 51.

²⁰ Leviticus 19: 18

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19: 34; Deuteronomy 10: 19

²² *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*, 55.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

In my opinion, the now pressing inquiry is then to know in what way Judaism is special. If Jews are entirely equal to gentiles, then why have Judaism? In what ways are they unique? Lawrence Kaplan, in his work, “Maimonides on the Singularity of the Jewish People,” claims that Maimonides’ asserts to two separate communities in the Torah that know God. The first is Abrahamic. In the beginning of *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah*, Maimonides describes Abraham who, by use of reason, comes to know God – realizing that the knowledge of God is the highest goal. As Abraham began to teach his message, Kaplan describes:

This process of teaching gave rise to a new community. This community was first comprised of the ‘members of the house of Abraham,’ then later of ‘the sons of Jacob and those who attached themselves to them’ until ‘there was formed in the world a people that knows God.’²⁴

A righteous group of individuals – that uses reason and knowledge of the one true God in service of Him, do not worship other gods, and to whom the highest goal of all is the knowledge of God – becomes the Abrahamic community. It is strictly spiritual – nonpolitical, not ethnic, and most importantly, not Israel.²⁵

The second group Kaplan names is the Mosaic community, its foundation being Moses’s prophecy:

But because of God’s love for us... He appointed Moses our master to be the master of all prophets and charged him with a mission. Once Moses began to prophesy and God chose Israel as an inheritance, He crowned them with commandments and informed them of the way of His service and what should be the judgement on idolatry and all those who go astray after it.²⁶

This, unlike the previous, is an ethnic-political group, direct descendants of Jacob and/or converts. It is exclusive, Israel only. In addition, God is the *active* leader of this community, and rules through divine and structured laws – the mitzvot.

Yet notably, both communities achieve knowledge of God. The question then stands, from a spiritual standpoint: Why have two? According to Kaplan, it seems that by Maimonides, the reasoning and basis for the existence of the Mosaic community lies in its ability to maintain its existence. Indeed the Abrahamic community can reach philosophical greatness, but, being that Maimonides shows that it did not survive generations in Egypt,²⁷ it cannot last indefinitely. During the trials of exile in Egypt, the Abrahamic community lost its ways and fled to idols. As a consequence of this, the Mosaic community was born. In other words, the Mosaic community exists out of necessity, because although knowledge of God is attainable to all, only within a divine structure of laws and a historically political frame, can said knowledge be *maintained*.²⁸

²⁴ Lawrence Kaplan, “Maimonides on the Singularity of the Jewish People,” *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1985): XI.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, XIV.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, XV.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, XVI.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, XX.

Goodman tackles a similar question, asking why, according to Maimonides, Judaism need mitzvot if knowledge of God – allowing entry into the palace – is attainable to all. As he puts it, Maimonides’ version of the Torah is as “a personal training program that is designed to bring us closer to moral and intellectual perfection.”²⁹ In other words, the Torah is a tool, particular to the Jews. It is not that Judaism is better, but rather that the Torah is “superior to any other body of teaching.”³⁰

Conclusion

Excerpts of two of Maimonides’ major works have been analyzed here to largely understand his take on “the other,” the non-Jew. In the *Guide* it has been shown that Maimonides’ view of humanity is through a common goal meant for everyone – the expulsion of evil by the expulsion of ignorance, in his Maimonides’ unique version of prophetic perfection. All are potentially equal. In the *Mishneh Torah* we have seen that Maimonides certainly maintains this all-inclusive approach, while also focusing on the uniqueness of Moses’ community in relation to the greater “Abrahamic” community. For Maimonides, Jewish people can reach philosophical greatness through Torah alone – because its only purpose is the perpetual maintaining of the grand philosophical goal that is in fact accessible to all. In this way, the particularity of the Jewish people lies in its shared universality.

²⁹ Goodman, 142.

³⁰ Ibid., 143.

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