

## Maimonides' "True Religion": For Jews or All Humanity?

Menachem Kellner

**Abstract:** According to Maimonides all humanity will adopt *Dat ha-Eemet* (the true religion) by the time the messianic era reaches fruition. The *dat* in question can refer either to the Torah of Noah, to the Torah of Abraham, or to the Torah of Moses. Chaim Rapoport maintains it refers to the Torah of Noah; I argue here that it refers to the Torah of Moses. I approach the issue philosophically, asking which position coheres best with Maimonides' overall view of Torah and humanity. I show that Maimonides, who believed that *all* human beings are equally created in the image of God and that our godliness is our ability to reason, could not hope for a messianic era in which Jews and Gentiles remain distinct. For Maimonides Jewish ethnicity is accidental, not essential, to Judaism. This reading accords well with Maimonides' dogma-centered notion of what constitutes Jewish identity. Chaim Rapoport provides a final short response.

**Biography:** Menachem Kellner is a Professor of Jewish Thought at the University of Haifa. His most recent book is Maimonides' *Confrontation with Mysticism*, published by Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006).



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# Maimonides' "True Religion": For Jews or All Humanity?<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In the first *halakhah* of the last chapter of the *Mishneh Torah*,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 as<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>) all human beings will worship God from a position of absolute spiritual equality.<sup>7</sup> Whether Gentiles will convert formally to Judaism,<sup>8</sup> they will be

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> "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).

<sup>3</sup> Hebrew: *mashal ve-hiddab*. Sara Klein-Braslavi shows that Maimonides uses the Hebrew word *hiddab* as a synonym for *mashal*, allegory. See "Maimonides' Commentaries on Proverbs 1:6," in Moshe Hallamish (ed.), *Alei Shefer: Studies in Literature and Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexandre Safran* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990) (Hebrew), pp.121-132, p. 123 n.10.

<sup>4</sup> Following Makbili's text; printed editions and some manuscripts read: "with."

<sup>5</sup> אל יעלה על דעתך שבימות המשיח יבטל דבר ממנהגו של עולם, או יהיה שם חידוש במעשה בראשית, אלא עולם כמנהגו הולך. וזה שנאמר בישעיה נג' זאב עם פֶּבֶשׁ וְנֶמֶר עִם גְּדִי יִרְבֹּץ מִשַׁל וְחִידָה. ענין הדבר, שיהיו ישראל יושבין לבטח עם רשעי אומות העולם המשולים כזאב ונמר, שנאמר זאב עֹרְבוֹת יִשְׁבְּדֵם נֶמֶר שׁ' קָדַעַל עֲרִיקֵם (ירמיהו ה', 6), ויחזרו כולם לדת האמת, ולא יגזלו ולא ישחיתו, אלא יאכלו דבר המותר בנחת כישראל, שנאמר וְאַרְיֵה פִּקְקֹר יֵאָכֵל תְּבֹן. כל כיוצא באלו הדברים הכתובים בענין המשיח משלים הם, ובימות המלך המשיח יודע לכל לאיזה דבר היו משל ומה ענין רמזו בהם

<sup>6</sup> 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-beseab 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.

<sup>7</sup> *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); "Chosenness, Not Chauvinism: Maimonides on the Chosen People," in Daniel H. Frank (ed.), *A People Apart: Chosenness and Ritual in Jewish Philosophical Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993): 51-76, 85-89; "Overcoming Chosenness," in Raphael Jospe, Truman Madsen, Seth Ward, eds., *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism* (Fairlawn: Associated Univ. Presses, 2001): 147-172; "Was Maimonides Truly Universalist?" *Trumab: Beitrage zur juedischen Philosophie 11 (Festgabe zum 80. Geburtstag von Ze'ev Levy)* (2001): 3-15.

<sup>8</sup> As I argue in *Maimonides on Judaism*, pp. 39-58.

absorbed into Israel in some other fashion, or that the distinction will become in some way less important than it is now<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> Rather, I read him as a messianic universalist.<sup>12</sup>

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*The distinction between Jew and Gentile will disappear*

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This needs clarification. Let us distinguish between the Torah, as it were, of Noah, the Torah, as it were, of Abraham, and the Torah of Moses.<sup>13</sup> As I will point out below, the Torah of Noah includes neither the affirmation of God's existence nor the obligation to worship God. The Torah of Abraham can be seen as building on the Torah of Noah, but

<sup>9</sup> Ya'akov Blidstein, *Eكرونot Mediniyim Be-Mishnat Ha-Rambam* 2nd ed. (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2001), pp. 245-248. I will cite this book below as Blidstein, *Eكرونot*.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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 "Atem Qeruyim Adam," in Avraham Shapira, ed., *Al ha-Migra ve-Al ha-Yabadut: Qovets Ketavim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984): 55-67, and, in the same collection, "Erekb ha-Adam ba-Migra" (pp. 13-23). See also "Mankind, Israel, and the Nations in the Hebraic Heritage," in J. Robert Nelson, ed., *No Man Is Alien: Essays on the Unity of Mankind* (Leiden: Brill, 1971): 15-40. In a wholly non-apologetic plane, for the Bible see, Jon D. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," *In Ethnicity and the Bible*, edited by Mark G. Brett (Leiden: Brill, 1996) pp. 143-69 and Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007). For rabbinic Judaism, see Gerald Blidstein, "A Note on Rabbinic Missionizing," *Journal of Theological Studies* 47, no. 2 (1996): 528-31; and Menachem Hirshman, "Rabbinic Universalism in the Second and Third Centuries," *Harvard Theological Review* 93 (2000): 101-15 and Hirshman, *Torah le-Khol Ba'ei Olam: Zerem Universalim be-Sifrut ha-Tana'im ve-Yabaso le-Hokhmat be-Amim* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meuhad), 1999. For medieval views, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation With Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006) (cited henceforth as *Confrontation*). For Maimonides' geonic background, see David Sklare, "Are the Gentiles Obligated to Observe the Torah? The Discussion Concerning the Universality of the Torah in the East in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," in Jay Harris, ed., *Be'erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005): 311-346 (and the other studies cited there). R. Rapoport himself, with typical intellectual honesty, cites several medievals who read Maimonides in "my" universalist fashion and other figures who, independently of Maimonides, adopt the view of the messianic era that I find in his writings. If nothing else, this proves that my interpretation of Maimonides is not outlandish. Indeed, I hope to convince readers of this essay that my view of Maimonides is closer to the peshat and context of his writings than is that of R. Rapoport.

<sup>13</sup> R. Joseph Albo may have been the first to posit a series of divine Torahs. See *Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, I, chs. 13 and 14. On Albo's impact, see A. Melamed, "Natural, Human, Divine: Classification of the Law among Some 15th and 16th Century Jewish Thinkers," *Italiab* 4 (1985): 59-93.

adding the affirmation of God's existence and the obligation (and, I would add, the privilege) of worshipping God. This Torah is meant for all human beings. The Torah of Moses can be seen as either a special boon to the Jewish people, or as a concession to their primitive

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*All humanity will accept and observe the  
Torah of Moses*

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character (as evidenced by the episode of the golden calf).<sup>14</sup> A radical reading of Maimonides would see him as envisioning a messianic era in which all humans, including the people of Israel, would observe the Torah of Abraham, and not the Torah of Moses. A more conservative but still universalist reading of Maimonides would see him as envisioning a messianic era in which all human beings observe the Torah of Moses. Particularist readings of Maimonides would have him envision a messianic era in which Jews observe the Torah of Moses and Gentiles observe either the Noahide laws or the Torah of Abraham. On my understanding, Maimonides is a conservative universalist: all humanity will accept and observe the Torah of Moses by the time that the messianic era reaches fruition.<sup>15</sup>

My friend and colleague, R. Chaim Rapoport, is convinced that my understanding of Maimonides is mistaken. On his reading of the

relevant texts, Maimonides claims that in the messianic era Jews will observe the Torah of Moses while Gentiles will observe the Noahide laws. R. Rapoport paid me the compliment of writing a detailed refutation of my position and I would like now to offer my response to his critique.<sup>16</sup>

### **Part One: Statement of R. Rapoport's Thesis and My Initial Reply**

R. Rapoport generously began his discussion by seeking to strengthen mine. I would like to repay his kindness by also trying to strengthen his position. His overall conclusion is that:

The expression “religion of truth” (*“dat ha-emet”*) refers to the “religion of Moses,” encompassing both “the Law of Israel” and the “Law of the Noahides”; both of them were “commanded by God in the Torah”—the one Torah—given to us through Moses our Teacher at Mount Sinai.

The words *“dat ha-emet”* mean “the religion truly given by God” or “the religion that shows us the way of truth” or (combining the two) “the religion truly given by God, which shows us the way of truth.” The words may also refer to the true belief, which is the foundation of religion.

Whatever the case may be, the expression *“dat ha-emet”* is used to describe the entire Torah and all the commandments revealed

<sup>14</sup> For sources which support this interpretation, see *Confrontation*, pp. 140-148 and 152-154.

<sup>15</sup> It is certainly not inconceivable that Maimonides might have adopted the radical universalist view of the messianic era, in which all humanity observes “only” the Torah of Abraham. As I will note below (fn. 22), Nahmanides adopts a structurally similar view, according to which the Torah as we know it will not be observed in the messianic era. However, I take Maimonides’ claims about the permanence of the Torah literally, not only because he says so, but because he holds that the Messianic era will someday end (Introduction to *Helek*, Sheilat edition [Jerusalem, Ma’aliyot, 1992], pp. 138-139), at which point one assumes that the Torah of Moses will once again play a necessary role in the education of humanity. For arguments to the effect that Maimonides distinguished between the historical explanations of why commandments were given on the one hand, from their permanent validity on the other, see *Confrontation*, chapt.2, notes 21 and 125, ch. 4, note 57, and chapt. 7, note 63. I have written a (Hebrew) essay in which I compare Maimonides and Nahmanides on the permanence of the commandments, proving (to my complete satisfaction) that Maimonides adopted a much more conservative stance than did Nahmanides. I hope to publish that essay soon.

<sup>16</sup> After writing several drafts of this essay, I had the pleasure of reading Howard Kreisel, “Maimonides on Divine Religion,” in Jay Harris, ed., *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007): 151-166. Professor Kreisel arrives at the same conclusion I do, although he largely takes a different route. I will cite this essay henceforth as “Kreisel.”

by God through Moses our Teacher (parts of which had already been given via the prophets who preceded the giving of the Torah at Sinai). That religion includes “the ways of truth” (*darkhei ha-emet*) discovered by Abraham our Father and proclaimed by him throughout the world as well as the commandments issued to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, etc.; and it is the religion that was bolstered by the righteous kings of the House of David over the years and that will be exalted by the King Messiah, may he speedily be revealed, may that be God’s will.

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*Maimonides’ notorious claim is that parts of the Torah are concessions to the primitive character of the Israelites*

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If I may rephrase R. Rappoport's position in terms which I hope he will be willing to accept, he tells us that the term *dat ha-emet* in our text in the Mishneh Torah refers to true divine revelation. Such divine revelation encompasses two types of believers: Noahide Gentiles and Jews. The first group is bound to obey the

Seven Noahide Laws, while the latter group is bound to obey the Torah of Moses. In the messianic era *dat ha-emet* will be accepted universally but practiced in two different ways: by Jews through the 613 commandments of the Torah, and by Gentiles through the 7 Noahide Laws.<sup>17</sup>

This certainly seems to be a position congenial to Maimonides,<sup>18</sup> and it accords with the broad contours of his history of religions as outlined in the first chapter of “Laws of Idolatry.”<sup>19</sup> On this account, Abraham taught monotheism to descendents of Noah, without imposing any commandments upon them.<sup>20</sup> The obligation of circumcision was, however, imposed upon Abraham and his descendents. The parallelism here is attractive: in the messianic era the descendents of Noah will “practice” Abrahamic monotheism, while the descendents of Abraham will fulfill the commandments of the Torah.<sup>21</sup>

As much as I would like to help my friend R. Rapoport, I fear that this suggestion is of little value in supporting his case. It ignores Maimonides’ notorious claim to the effect that parts of the Torah as we have it are concessions to the primitive character of the

<sup>18</sup> I suspect that some of the reasons that I find it congenial to Maimonides might appeal less to R. Rapoport. Maimonides as I understand him sincerely held that the secrets of the Torah were pretty well captured in Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. Kabbalists, as I will have occasion to note below, agree with Maimonides that the Torah has a deeper meaning which underlies the commandments (and gives them much of their significance); they disagree with Maimonides about the nature of that deeper meaning.

<sup>19</sup> For the text and discussion, see: *Confrontation*, pp. 77-83 and the sources cited there. See now also the very interesting discussion in Alex P. Jassen, "Reading Midrash with Maimonides: An Inquiry into the Sources of Maimonides' Account of the Origins of Idolatry," *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 21 (2007): 170-200.

<sup>20</sup> Further on the distinction between Abraham and Moses, see *Guide of the Perplexed* II:39. Citations from the Guide will be from the translation of Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

<sup>21</sup> Often ignored in this context is the point that the obligation devolves upon all of Abraham's descendents (excluding Ishmael and Esau), including the offspring of Keturah who, according to Maimonides, are today's Arabs. See Laws of Kings, X.8 and Hannah Kasher, "Maimonides' View of Circumcision as a Factor Uniting the Jewish and Muslim Communities," in Ronald Nettler, ed., *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations* (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995): 103-108. Thus, the Jews have 613 commandments; the Noahides, 7; and the Arabs, 8. This seems to weaken the parallelism between Abrahamic and messianic times I am trying to draw here in order to strengthen R. Rapoport's thesis.

Israelites leaving Egypt.<sup>22</sup> On this view, Mosaic legislation is a concession on God's part to the primitive, pagan nature of the Jews who left Egypt.<sup>23</sup> Taking R. Rapoport's thesis to (admittedly) extreme lengths, one might even be led to suggest that Noahide monotheism is thus superior to Mosaic legislation, since it seems to follow that in the messianic era on this view the Noahides will follow a more refined religion than the Jews!

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*There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles on the level of "hardware"*

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Further, the Torah of Moses may be a concession, but coming from God, it is also good for those to whom it was revealed (as Maimonides explains in detail in the latter half of the third part of the *Guide*) and will remain good for them in the messianic era. The Torah is a tool for perfecting us *as human beings*,<sup>24</sup> as such, how could it be restricted, in the messianic era, to descendents of Abraham?

But perhaps the Torah is a tool for perfecting Jews only? This is a view certainly rejected by Maimonides and I will devote most of my efforts in this essay to showing why this must be so. Here, I will present the point in a cursory fashion, developing it more fully below.

Maimonides' position is "forced" upon him because, unlike R. Simeon bar Yohai as reported in the Talmud,<sup>25</sup> and unlike a host of medieval interpreters of Judaism, Maimonides takes very seriously the implications of the Torah's unambiguous statement that all human beings are created in the image of God. Gentiles are no less created in God's image than Jews. There is simply no difference between Jews and Gentiles on the level of what my friend Professor Daniel J. Lasker calls "hardware."<sup>26</sup> On this issue, with tongue slightly in cheek, we might call Maimonides a biblical fundamentalist. But at this point, another question must be addressed: in what way are humans created in the image of God? Maimonides adopts a definition of humanity most famously associated with Aristotle<sup>27</sup>:

<sup>22</sup> To traditional Jewish ears this position sounds shocking. Indeed, Maimonides himself wrote about it: "I know that on thinking about this at first your soul will necessarily have a feeling of repugnance toward this notion and will feel aggrieved because of it" (*Guide*, III: 32, p. 527). But the fact of the matter is that in structural terms, Maimonides is making a claim very similar to that made by Kabbalists; when they make it, it sounds very "*frum*," yet when Maimonides makes it, it sounds shocking. There is an important strand in Kabbalah, expressed openly by Nahmanides, among others, that the Torah as we have it exists in its corporeal form only because of the sin of Adam and Eve, and will cease to exist in the form in which we know it in the messianic era. While I recognize its great difference in tone, I have a hard time understanding how that differs in structure from Maimonides' position. Indeed, I wonder if Maimonides' insistence on the permanence of the Torah (in the ninth of the 'Thirteen Principles' and, in an explicitly messianic context, in *Laws of Kings* XI:2) might be aimed, not only at Christians and Muslims, but at what I have called (in *Confrontation*) proto-Kabbalists as well.

<sup>23</sup> I have come to realize that Maimonides is not making an historical claim here, so much as explaining the human condition, just as his account of the Garden of Eden in *Guide of the Perplexed* I:2 is not meant to be taken as history; rather, it is an allegory explaining the nature of humanity. For support for this latter point from a traditionalist perspective, see R. Kafih's commentary to *Laws of the Sabbath*, V.3. I treat of the broader point in an article I am writing with my student and friend Oded Horetzky.

<sup>24</sup> On the view (of the students of R. Yishma'el) that the Torah is ultimately meant for all humanity (*kol ba'ei olam*) and not just for the Jews, it is obviously a tool for human, and not only Jewish, perfection. For details, see the book and article by Hirshman, cited above in note 11.

<sup>25</sup> Taking literally R. Simeon bar Yohai's statement (*Yevamot* 60b-60a) that only Jews are called *adam*. This statement has generated a huge amount of commentary (starting with *Tosafot ad loc.*). Whether or not R. Shimon considered Gentiles as fully human, the Talmud reports several statements attributed to him that betray, to put it mildly, lack of sympathy for the Gentile world: *Sifri Num.* 69; *Shabbat* 33b; *Mekhila be-Shallah* 2.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel J. Lasker, "Proselyte Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Thought of Judah Halevi," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 81 (1990): 75-91.

<sup>27</sup> This view was already attributed to Aristotle in the ancient world, but my friend Moshe Grimberg and I have not been able to find any place where he actually says so in as many words. There can be little doubt that Aristotle agrees with the definition (see, for example, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, viii, 1179a24-30), but he never stated it explicitly.

Human beings are rational animals, and it is by virtue of our rationality, as Maimonides emphasizes in the opening chapters of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, that we are said to be created in God's image. Further in an Aristotelian vein, Maimonides saw rationality as a potential with which humans are endowed at birth. In his eyes, very few human beings, whether Jew or Gentile, rabbi or layman, actualize that potential. Here Maimonides' notorious intellectualist elitism kicks in: God's image is present in all human beings, but to different degrees. "Aha!" says the reader—"Maimonides can sneak preference for Jews over Gentiles into the equation in this fashion." Hardly: for Maimonides, thanks to the Torah, more Jews than Gentiles will actualize their humanity to the greatest extent possible. But that is a relative advantage: humans who live lives governed by the Torah *are more likely* to achieve intellectual perfection than those who don't. But a Gentile philosopher nevertheless enjoys more divine

providence, and has a greater share in the world to come, than a saintly and learned Talmudist who knows no science.<sup>28</sup>

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*Humans who live by the Torah are more likely to achieve intellectual perfection than those who do not*

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All this being so, and it most certainly is, on what grounds could Maimonides expect or want that the distinction between Jew and Gentile could have any relevance or significance in an era when, as he puts it in the very last *halakhab* in the *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of Kings XII:4):

...there will be<sup>29</sup> neither famine nor war, neither jealousy nor strife. Good things will be abundant, and delicacies as common as dust. The one preoccupation of the whole world will be only to know the Lord. Hence [they]<sup>30</sup> will be very wise, knowing things now unknown and will apprehend

<sup>28</sup> This is the way that the parable of the palace in *Guide* III:51 is usually read (see Shem Tov *ad loc.*); for my alternative interpretation, see *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 15-33. For Profiat Duran's account of what medieval Jewish philosophers affirmed on this, see pp. 770-774 of Dov Rappel ed., "*Haqdamat 'Sefer Ma'aseh Hoshev le-Profiat Duran*," *Sinai* 100 (Anniversary Volume) (1986-1987), pp. 749-795. In my book I cited Duran as cited by Shem Tov in his commentary *ad loc.* In a private communication the late and lamented Isadore Twersky later made me aware of the original source.

<sup>29</sup> Hebrew: *lo yihyeh sham*. This Arabism calls to mind the very first paragraph of the *Mishneh Torah*, a text addressed to all human beings.

<sup>30</sup> On the textual issues here see: Simon-Raymond Schwarzfuchs, "*Les lois royales de Maimonide*," *REJ* 111 (1951-52): 63-86. On pp. 81-82, Schwarzfuchs shows that many printed editions and manuscripts add the word "Israel" here. Makbili has it in the first printing of his edition, with a note that Sheilat excludes the word from his text (*Ha-Rambam ha-Meduyaq*). Makbili informs me that the word will be excluded in subsequent editions. On literary grounds alone it appears clear that the word is an emendation since the prooftext from Isaiah speaks of the entire earth. See also the next note.

knowledge of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind,<sup>31</sup> as it is written: "For the land<sup>32</sup> shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."<sup>33</sup> (Isaiah 11:9).<sup>34</sup>

Let us follow this a little bit further. Why should the distinction between Jew and Noahide be preserved in the messianic era? Why should not all humans be Noahides, or all followers of the Torah of Moses? If Maimonides were Judah Halevi, were he the author (or authors) of the *Zohar*, were he Maharal, were he the author of the *Tanya*, were he almost any post-medieval Jew, the answer would be simple: there is an ontological difference between Jews and Gentiles such that in one of many ways, it "makes sense" for the Jews to the fulfill the 613 commandments and

makes no sense for Gentiles to do so. Since the distinction between Jew and Gentile is part of the very fabric of the universe, they say, it will be maintained in the messianic era.

Maimonides, however, is not Judah Halevi, he did not write (or even know of) the *Zohar*, he is not Maharal, and he is certainly not the *Ba'al ha-Tanya!* He denies that there is any ontological difference between Jew and Gentile. It is that denial which forms the basis of my discussion here.

## Part Two: The Term *Dat Ha-Emet*—Our Positions Restated

As noted above, the expression in debate between R. Rapoport and me is found in the first *halakhab* of the last chapter of the *Mishneh*

<sup>31</sup> On this expression, and many of the issues raised here, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "To the Utmost of Human Capacity": Maimonides on the Days of the Messiah," in Joel Kraemer (ed.), *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1991), pp. 221-256. It must be recalled that in this context the intellectual perfection to which Maimonides refers here is relative, not absolute. Human beings, even in the messianic era, achieve intellectual perfection to different degrees. When Maimonides says here that humans will come to know God *kifi ko'ah ba-adam* he means, to translate him literally, "according to human abilities" and not "according to human ability." The latter reading would involve a miraculous change in human nature.

<sup>32</sup> On the question of what this land is (and for more on the textual issues) see Blidstein, *Egronot*, p, 246, n. 56. Ridbaz to Laws of Kings, XII:1 understands the term as referring only to the Land of Israel. Maimonides' use of the verse in *Guide* III:11 would seem to preclude Ridbaz's reading. The text there reads:

...If there were knowledge, whose relation to the human form is like that of the faculty of sight to the eye, they would refrain from doing any harm to themselves and to others. For through cognition of the truth, enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished. It holds out this promise, saying, *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid*, and so on. *And the sucking child shall play*, and so on (Isaiah 11:6-8). Then it gives the reason for this, saying that the cause of the abolition of these enmities, these discords, and these tyrannies, will be the knowledge that men will then have concerning the true reality of the deity. For it says: *They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea* (Isaiah 11:9). Know this.

Warren Ze'ev Harvey has pointed out that this chapter of the *Guide* is a kind of poetic and philosophical rendition of the last paragraph of the *Mishneh Torah*, glossing it in the way Maimonides meant it to be read. See pp. 23-24 in Harvey, "Averroes, Maimonides, and the Virtuous State," in *Iyyunim bi-Sugyot Philosophiyot... Likhvod Shlomo Pines* (Jerusalem; Israel Academy of Sciences, 1992), pp. 19-31. Pushing Harvey's insight one step further, I think that the next chapter in the *Guide* also glosses the last paragraph in the *Mishneh Torah*.

<sup>33</sup> The verse from Isaiah recalls Genesis 6:13:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְנֹחַ חַן נָחַן כָּל בְּשָׂר בָּא לִפְנֵי כִי מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ חָמָס מִפְּנֵיהֶם וְהִנְנִי מִשְׁחִיתָם אֶת הָאָרֶץ׃

I am tempted to say that just as that verse surely relates to humans *simpliciter*, and not to Jews, Maimonides uses the parallel verse from Isaiah in the same way. The prophet is surely alluding to the difference between the messianic and antediluvian eras through the use of the expression *ki male'ah ba-aretz*; it is a safe bet that if I noticed it, Maimonides certainly did.

<sup>34</sup> R. Jeffrey Bienenfeld pointed out to me that the meaning of the word "sea" here is "seabed" and that just as water spreads to cover every part of any enclosure in which it is placed, seeping into every nook and cranny, so too will the knowledge of God extend to and seep into every nook and cranny of the world, and, hence, into the hearts of all human beings. Here is the Hebrew of our passage:

ובאותו הזמן לא יהיה שם לא רעב ולא מלחמה, ולא קנאה ותחרות, שהטובה תהיה מושפעת הרבה, וכל המעדנים מצויין כעפר, ולא יהיה עסק כל העולם אלא לדעת את ה' בלבד, ולפיכך יהיו חכמים גדולים ויודעים דברים הסתומים וישיגו דעת בוראם כפי כח האדם, שנאמר [ל' א' ירעו וְל' א' יִשְׁחִיתוּ בְּכָל הָרָקְדָשׁ] כִּי מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ דָּעָה אֶת ה' בְּיָמָיו לְיָמֵי מְכֹסִים (ישעיהו יא, 9).

*Torah*. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides is usually the soul of precision. When translating the second volume of the *Mishneh Torah* into English,<sup>35</sup> I was struck by how rarely I came across ambiguous passages. But this paragraph is full of problems and ambiguities:

First, with whom will Israel dwell securely: the wicked *among* the nations of the earth, or are all the Gentile nations wicked? The latter seems to be the case, since the next sentence says "Those nations will *all* adopt the true religion," implying that *all* the Gentile nations are (or were?) wicked. Second, what does *va-yahzzeru* (translated here as 'adopt') mean? Third, what does *dat ha-emet* mean? Fourth, what are the "permitted foods" which the (erstwhile, according to me) Gentiles will eat? Does it mean kosher, tithed food as I maintain, or does it mean food permitted to Gentiles as Rabbi Rapoport maintains? Fifth, what does "as Israelites" mean?

I will paraphrase the paragraph in a manner consistent with my interpretation; before I do so, however, some linguistic issues must be addressed. First, the root *h-z-r* does not always mean "return" or "revert" in Maimonides' Hebrew; it often means "change."<sup>36</sup> For a good example of this usage, see "Laws of Repentance," III:9, where Maimonides explains that an apostate concerning the whole Torah is a person who *hozer* to Gentile<sup>37</sup> religions during a period of religious persecution.<sup>38</sup> It makes little sense to see this text as referring to a Jew who *reverts* to a Gentile religion; rather, its clear meaning is a Jew who opportunistically *changes*

religions. The use of the term *datei* here confirms that. In Maimonidean usage the term *dat* usually means what we today would call "religion."<sup>39</sup> Thus, for example, we find Maimonides talking about the beautiful captive in the following fashion (Laws of Kings, VIII:5):

What is the law with regard to an Israelite and a captive woman? If after the first coition, while she is still a Gentile, she undertakes to enter under the wings of the Shekhinah, she is immediately immersed for the purpose of conversion. If she is unwilling, she remains in his house for thirty days, as it is said: *She shall bewail her father and mother a full month* (Deut. 21:13). She weeps also for her *religion [datah]* and he may not stop her.

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*It makes little sense to see this as referring to a Jew who reverts to a Gentile religion*

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I thus translate *h-z-r* in our passage as "adopt" and not as "revert" and translate *dat* as "religion." Having clarified these meanings, I can now paraphrase the text in dispute between R. Rapoport and myself:

Let it not enter your mind that in the days of the Messiah any aspect of the regular order of nature will be abolished or some innovation will be introduced into the world of nature; rather, the world follows its accustomed course. The verse in Isaiah,

<sup>35</sup> *Book of Love* by Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*, vol. 2) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> For details, see Mordechai Akiva Friedman, *Maimonides, the Yemenite Messiah, and Apostasy (Ha-Rambam, ha-Masbiah be-Teiman, ve-ha-Shemad)* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2002), pp. 2 and 72. See also Blidstein, *Ekeronot*, p. 247, note 60. I was not aware of this linguistic fact when I wrote *Maimonides on Judaism*; hence my mistaken discussion on p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> Although the term *goy* in the *Mishneh Torah* usually refers to idolaters, here the apparent meaning is any Gentile. See Blidstein, "On the Status of the Resident Alien in Maimonides' Thought," *Sinai* 101 (1988): 44-52 (Hebrew), pp. 44-45.

<sup>38</sup> *Ve-hameshummad lekhol ha-Torah, kegon ha-hozer le-datei ha-goyim be-sha' ah she-gozrin shemad...* . See also Responsum 149, cited below near footnote 94.

<sup>39</sup> See Blidstein, *Ekeronot*, p. 106, note 29, and, of course, R. Rapoport's discussion of the term. Note also James Diamond, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers: Maimonides and the Outsider* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 254, note 32.

*The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid* is an allegory and metaphor.<sup>40</sup> Its meaning is that Israel will dwell in security with [those who were] 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. [In consequence,] they will neither rob nor destroy; rather, they will eat permitted foods in peace and quiet as Israelites, as it says, *the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw.*<sup>41</sup> 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.

R. Rapoport, on the other hand, would have to paraphrase it more or less as follows:

Let it not enter your mind that in the days of the Messiah any aspect of the regular order of nature will be abolished or some innovation will be introduced into the world of 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. 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 revert to the true [Noahide] religion. [In consequence,] they will neither rob nor destroy; rather, they will eat foods permitted to Gentiles in

peace and quiet as Israelites [will eat food permitted to them], as it says, 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.

These two paraphrases obviously express very different understandings of Maimonides' conception of the messianic era. Can one be shown to be textually superior to the other? I do not believe so. I obviously think that my interpretation of the passage is closer to the meaning of the Hebrew original and closer to the spirit of Maimonides, but, as R. Rapoport's spirited and learned analysis shows, I really can not prove that to be the case on textual grounds alone.

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*To state it simply, Maimonides is inconsistent in his use of this term.*

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Let us turn now to an examination of the crucial term in this discussion, *dat ha-emet*. To state it simply, Maimonides is inconsistent in his use of this term. In one version of the text that originally sparked this whole discussion, Maimonides' letter to R. Obadiah the Proselyte, he uses it to mean the religion taught by Abraham, which is certainly not the Torah of Moses.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, in one version of his "Letter on Astrology" to the rabbis of Marseilles, he explicitly refers to "adherents of the *dat ha-emet*, it being the religion of Moses our teacher (*dat Mosheh Rabbenu*)."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Sara Klein-Braslavi shows that Maimonides uses the Hebrew word *hiddah* as a synonym for *masbal*, allegory. See Sara Klein-Braslavi, "Maimonides' Commentaries on Proverbs 1:6," in Moshe Hallamish (ed.), *Alai Shefer: Studies in Literature and Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexandre Safran*. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990 (Hebrew), pp.121-132, p. 123 n.10.

<sup>41</sup> Note that according to this proof-text, the lion and the ox eat the *same* food. But note R. Rapoport's alternative reading of this at his note 79.

<sup>42</sup>See "Laws of Character Traits," I:7, where the middle way between character extremes is called *derekh ha-shem* and is presented as the religion taught by Abraham.

<sup>43</sup> This is the text as presented by R. Sheilat on p. 485; other versions have: "*ve-anahnu, ba'alei ha-torah ha-amitiit.*"

One thing is pretty clear, however: the expression *dat ha-emet* in our passage from Laws of Kings can not mean the seven Noahide laws, as R. Rapoport suggests, since the point of the messianic era, as Maimonides affirms towards the end of chapter XI, is to “correct<sup>44</sup> the whole world to worship the Lord with one accord, as it is written: *For then I will turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent* (Zeph. 3:9).” The worship of God is not one of the seven Noahide laws, as Maimonides makes clear in Laws of Kings, IX:1 After there listing the seven Noahide laws, he goes on to state that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob each added one prayer-service and one commandment to the seven, thus making clear that divine worship is not included among them.<sup>45</sup> On this technical ground alone, R. Rapoport's reading must fail.

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*The worship of God is not one of the seven  
Noahide laws*

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That R. Rapoport's specific reading of our passage fails does not necessarily mean that mine is correct. The real issue here—what sort of messianic era Maimonides expected—can not be settled on textual grounds alone. But can it perhaps be settled on *contextual* grounds? As my friend R. Shalomi Eldar pointed out to me, our text follows immediately upon the notorious passage, censored from printed editions of the *Mishneh Torah*, in which Maimonides grants a messianic role to Christianity and Islam. At the conclusion of that passage, Maimonides writes:

All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite [Mohammed] who came after him, only served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the

whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written, For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent (Zephaniah 3:9). Thus the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become familiar topics—topics of conversation (among the inhabitants) of the far isles and many people, uncircumcised of heart and flesh. They are discussing these matters and the commandments of the Torah. Some say, “Those commandments were true, but have lost their validity and are no longer binding”; others declare that they had an esoteric meaning and were not to be taken literally; that the Messiah has already come and revealed their occult significance. But when the true King Messiah will appear and succeed, be exalted and lifted up, they will forthwith recant and realize that they have inherited nothing but lies from their fathers, that their prophets and forbears led them astray.

Our passage follows immediately upon this text. Thanks to Christianity and Islam, Gentiles had become accustomed to discussing divine commandments, even if they now misunderstand and misrepresent them. But after the true King Messiah appears, succeeds, is exalted, and is lifted up, they will realize that they had been misled, and therefore “will all adopt the true religion,” a true religion of commandments properly understood.

Contextualizing our passage in this fashion surely lends support to my interpretation of it. But context is a tricky thing, and perhaps we should read our text in its larger context. My student David Gillis proposed that I do precisely that. What subjects are covered in Laws of Kings immediately before the last two, messianic, chapters? Those chapters treat the

<sup>44</sup> *U-letaqqen olam*; on this expression in Maimonides, see Menachem Lorberbaum, “Maimonides on Repair of the World,” *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 65-82 (Hebrew).

<sup>45</sup> This is noted by Blidstein, *Ekeronot*, pp. 245-246. I hasten to explain that I am not equating worship with prayer (this is denied by Maimonides in *Guide*, III.32), only trying to show that there is no obligation of worship or prayer in the Noahide laws.

status of the Noahide laws in particular and of non-Jews in general in a Jewish state. Recalling that Maimonides insists:

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,

We might be led to say that this is a contextual indication that there will be Noahides and perhaps also Gentiles in the messianic kingdom. Contextualizing our passage in this fashion supports R. Rapoport's reading of it.

But context, again, is a tricky thing, and perhaps we should read our text in an even larger context? The *Mishneh Torah* opens with four chapters on physics and metaphysics, chapters addressed to all human beings, and it closes with two chapters on the messianic era—again, I suggest, addressed to all human beings. This way of looking at things gains support if we look at the exact mid-point of the *Mishneh Torah*, the famous text at the end of Laws of the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee.<sup>46</sup> In this passage Maimonides promises that any human being who devotes himself or herself to God will become as sanctified as the holy of holies. Following immediately upon this text we find the eighth book of the *Mishneh Torah*, the "Book of [Temple] Service (*Avodah*)" which itself opens with Laws of the Temple. The Temple, we have seen, will be rebuilt by the Messiah.<sup>47</sup> Contextualizing our passage in this fashion, it seems clear, supports my reading of it, not R. Rapoport's.

Context is indeed a tricky thing. If we read our passage in light of the parallel discussion in the *Guide* (III:11),<sup>48</sup> my reading of Maimonides is strengthened, and R. Rapoport's is weakened. Analyzing the afflictions from which humans suffer (most of which are self-inflicted, or inflicted by other humans), Maimonides discovers that the vast majority are the result of ignorance, ignorance which the prophet Isaiah promises will be overcome in the future. Let us recall the last sentence in the chapter:

...the cause of the abolition of these enmities, these discords, and these tyrannies, will be the knowledge that men<sup>49</sup> will then have concerning the true reality of the deity. For it says: *They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea* (Isaiah 11:9). Know this.

It is all human beings, and not just Jews, who will understand the truth of God's nature and who will therefore behave well on God's holy mountain; the whole world, and not just the Land of Israel, will be full of the knowledge of God. As I understand this passage, Maimonides teaches here that the whole Earth will be God's holy mountain. But, I must admit, R. Rapoport could reply that one short chapter in the *Guide of the Perplexed* is not the appropriate context for determining the meaning of a passage in the *Mishneh Torah*. Alternatively, he might admit the relevance of the passage, while contesting my reading of it.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, our search the meaning of *dat ha-emet* in its context founders on the question of what that context is. We must look further to solve our problem.

<sup>46</sup> On my literal (and hence universalist) reading of this text see my: "Each Generation and its Maimonides: The Maimonides of R. Aharon Kotler," in U. Ehrlich, H. Kreisel, D. Lasker (eds.), *By the Well: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakic Thought Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press) (Hebrew), pp. 463-486.

<sup>47</sup> See the fuller discussion of this point in *Maimonides on Judaism*, pp. 73-75.

<sup>48</sup> I cite the text above, note 31.

<sup>49</sup> The Arabic here is *al-nas*, which means human beings as such (cognate to the Hebrew *enosh*).

<sup>50</sup> And, indeed, this seems to be the point of his footnote 70.

### Part Three: Interpreting Maimonides: Why I Interpret Him the Way I Do—Humans as Rational Animals

It turns out that R. Rapoport and I each interpret certain Maimonidean texts: he in one direction, I in another. This, I believe, is unavoidable. There *are* inconsistencies in Maimonides' writings.<sup>51</sup> The only way to arrive at a consistent reading of his works is to interpret some in the light of others. Thus, while admitting that in some places in Maimonides' writings the term *dat ha-emet* refers to "Judaism," and while admitting that there are other medieval authorities who apparently support my universalist reading of Maimonides in *Laws of Kings*,<sup>52</sup> R. Rapoport feels constrained to apply harmonizing exegesis to the passages in Maimonides' writings that do not accord with his understanding of what Maimonides must have meant to be teaching about the messianic era. I, in turn, do the same thing, but in the opposite direction. As I have

already stated, I do not believe that the issue can be settled textually. Rather, the question between us is not over how to read this or the other specific text, but why it is that my Maimonides looks forward to a messianic era characterized by universalism, while R. Rapoport's Maimonides does not. I will not presume to answer on R. Rapoport's behalf, and will devote the rest of this essay to showing why it makes sense to read Maimonides as I do.

Maimonides is deadly serious when he defines human beings as rational animals and sees in their rationality the element that makes them creatures formed in God's image. In consequence of this definition, he is locked into a view of human perfection as intellectual.<sup>53</sup> This, in turn, forces him to accept the idea that the key to survival after death is cognition of the intelligibles. This view of what constitutes our humanity deeply affects Maimonides' understanding the nature of

<sup>51</sup> This, of course, is a huge issue. See my discussion in *Confrontation*, pp. xi and 15-16. R. Yehonatan Simhah Blass, *Mi-Nofet Zuf: Iyyunim ba-Moreh ha-Nevekhim* (Neveh Zuf, 5766), 2 vols., finds 136 contradictions in Maimonides' writings. Here, I do not have in mind the sorts of contradictions beloved of the Straussians, but, rather, contradictions of the following sort. The eleventh of Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles" is divine reward and punishment. (Maimonides' ignores this issue in his restatement of the Principles in the third chapter of *Laws of Repentance* but that is easily explained.) In every place but one, Maimonides' accounts of divine reward and punishment can be easily made to accord with the philosophical view, according to which there is no actual reward for the fulfillment of the commandments or actual punishment for their violation; rather, the only true reward is survival of the intellect after death, a consequence of intellectual perfection, not a reward for obedience to the commandments. For a discussion of this view, see my *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), pp. 149-164. But in one place, his commentary on *Mishnah Makkeot* III:17, Maimonides explicitly states that it is a foundation of faith in the Torah that if one fulfills any single one of the six hundred thirteen commandments "appropriately, as they ought to be fulfilled, without associating with this fulfillment any this-worldly goal at all, but fulfilled the commandment for its own sake (*li-shemah*), out of love, as I have explained to you," that person will merit a share in the world to come. Of course, I have no trouble interpreting this text according to the philosophic view (especially with its mention of obedience to commandments out of love, since Maimonides regards love of God as a function of intellectual perfection; for details, see the introduction to my translation of *Book of Love*, above, note 31), but it is still an interpretation. Another example of the sort of contradiction I have in mind is between *Guide* III:17 (and elsewhere), where providence is presented as attaching only to individuals and being consequent upon intellectual perfection, on the one hand, and, on the other, *Treatise on Resurrection* (*Sheilat*, p. 370), the one place in his writings where Maimonides affirms special providence over the nation of Israel. A third example relates to the question of miracles in the messianic era: in *Laws of Kings* Maimonides denies that there will be any; in "Epistle to Yemen" he affirms that there will be. As Maimonides tells in *Guide* II:25, the gates of interpretation are never closed, and one can certainly solve these contradictions, but it involves what I would call the exegesis of Maimonides' texts, in one direction or another.

<sup>52</sup> The text cited by R. Rapoport from RaN is particularly telling. Given his use of the verse from Zephaniah, which shows up in a crucial (and censored) point in Maimonides' discussion, it is likely that RaN interpreted Maimonides as I do.

<sup>53</sup> Maimonides' position is actually more nuanced than often thought. For details, see M. Kellner, "Is Maimonides' Ideal Person Austerely Rationalist?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76 (2002): 125-143.

For an important study of Maimonides' unusual attitude towards proselytes (spiritual descendants of Abraham), see Diamond, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers*, chap. 1.

Torah and *mitsvot*. Jews are humans who happen to be descended from Abraham (biologically or spiritually),<sup>54</sup> while it is Abraham who happened to be the first human who realized, following the loss of world-wide monotheism during the time of Enosh, that the world had to have a Creator and Guide.<sup>55</sup> The Torah brought by Moses to Abraham's biological and spiritual descendents is ultimately meant for all humanity.<sup>56</sup> One consequence of these positions is that Maimonides can have no reason to think that the distinction between Jew and Gentile will endure beyond the point at which all human beings have achieved the highest level of understanding possible to them. That, in brief, is why I read his vision of the messianic era universally.

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*I am far from convinced that religious pluralism would make sense to Maimonides*

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Let me make a number of assumptions clear. I assume, first, that everyone reading this essay is convinced that the cultural, ethnic, national, and linguistic matrices in which we are raised or with which we choose to identify are indissoluble parts of our personalities. It is hard for me to see how such an idea could have made sense to a twelfth-century neo-Platonically Aristotelian rabbi such as Maimonides. I also assume that most of the people reading this essay can at least make sense of a pluralist notion of "different strokes for different folks" even in matters of religion. I would be surprised if many readers of this journal would adopt the position on religious matters, but would expect them to understand it. I am far from convinced that religious pluralism of any sort would make sense to

Maimonides. For him, truth is one, unchanging, absolute and universal. While he would certainly understand a notion of different levels of understanding the one truth, I doubt that he would be happy with talk of different paths to that one truth.

There is any number of reasons why one might want to reject my universalistic approach to Maimonides:

1. It takes his philosophical concerns seriously
2. It commits us to reading the *Mishneh Torah* in the light of the philosophy Maimonides accepted
3. It leads to imputing to him a thorough-going universalism, denying any essential difference between Jew and Gentile as such
4. It leads to aligning him with R. Yishma'el *vs* R. Akiva on the question of whether the Torah was given to all humans or just to the Jews?
5. It leads to imputing to him an instrumental view of the commandments; on this reading, the *mitsvot* of the Torah are tools which enable us to reach our true perfection, which is constituted by understanding the cosmos and its Creator to the greatest extent possible
6. This in turn leads to the denial of any concrete reward for fulfillment of the commandments or punishment for violating them; the only true reward is survival of the intellect after the death of the body, but this is a *consequence* of certain actions, not a *reward* for them<sup>57</sup>
7. In a very real sense enjoying divine providence and surviving the death of the

<sup>54</sup>For an important study of Maimonides' unusual attitude towards proselytes (spiritual descendents of Abraham), see Diamond, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers*, chap. 1.

<sup>55</sup>Laws of Idolatry, chapter one.

<sup>56</sup> For rabbinic background to this idea, see the studies by Hirshman, above, note 16.

<sup>57</sup> Me'iri well understood this distinction. See his *Hibbur ha-Teshuvah* (New York, 5710) pp. 441 and 541. My thanks to Marc Shapiro for drawing my attention to these passages. For a full discussion of the issue, see my *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* 2nd ed., pp. 149-163.

body on this view result from intellectual attainments, not from obedience to the commandments of the Torah in particular

8. It is a deeply elitist view

Let us assume for a moment that Maimonides indeed defines human beings as rational animals and that the various consequences listed above do indeed follow from that position. On what grounds might we reject the

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*Is it un-Orthodox to acknowledge that our tradition has a history, that there are serious debates about the nature of Torah and that rabbis like Maimonides could have been influenced by "outsiders" like Aristotle and Alfarabi?*

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definition and the consequences that follow from it? We might, of course, simply say that no good rabbinic Jew could conceivably hold the positions here attributed to Maimonides and leave it at that.<sup>58</sup> We might take a more responsible approach and try to show how the texts on which these interpretations of

Maimonides are based can and ought to be read differently.<sup>59</sup> We might propose that Maimonides says the things here attributed to them, but read him "politically," i.e., affirm that he did not mean them.<sup>60</sup> We could say that Maimonides indeed defines human beings as rational animals, but that he was unaware of or uninterested in the consequences of that position. Or we might say that he was simply inconsistent.

For reasons which would take a book to explain,<sup>61</sup> I reject these various approaches to reading Maimonides and insist that we pay him the courtesy of taking what he says seriously. I do not mean to imply, of course, that R. Rapoport treats Maimonides discourteously. What I mean, rather, is the following. We can decide that Maimonides fits seamlessly into the rabbinic tradition as it developed before him and continued to develop after him.<sup>62</sup> If we adopt this view, we will be forced to ignore or explain away those passages in Maimonides which do not fit with the interpretation advanced here.<sup>63</sup> There is a sense in which for many Orthodox Jews this is the only possible approach to our issue (and I do not mean for one moment to include R. Rapoport in this

<sup>58</sup> I am reminded here of a story my late father, ז"ל, told me. In the 1930's he served as a rabbi in Miami, Florida, then a Jewish backwater. Unusual for an Orthodox rabbi, and under the influence of my American-born and raised mother, ז"ל, my parents kept a pet dog. Their home in Miami was a small bungalow and my father told me that once he was sitting in the front room when a hungry *meshulach*, looking for a kosher meal, walked up to the door. My father told me that he overheard the following soliloquy: "I know this to be the home of Reb Avraham Kellner, whom I know to be an *ehrlliche yid*. But I see sitting here on the front stoop, looking very much at home, what appears to be a dog, something which is inconceivable in the home of an *ehrlliche yid*. So, either Rabbi Kellner is not an *ehrlliche yid*, or this is not a dog. But Rabbi Kellner is well known to be an *ehrlliche yid*, so this must not be a dog!" At which point our hungry *meshulach* knocked on the door. Many people have said: "No *ehrlliche yid* could possibly hold the positions academics like Menachem Kellner attribute to Rambam; ergo, Rambam does not hold those positions."

<sup>59</sup> R. Yehonatan Blass (above, note 51) attempts to read Maimonides as if he fit well into the mainstream of what might be called standard contemporary rabbinic theology. To my mind, his attempt is, to put it mildly, unsuccessful. My attention was drawn to this work by a review of it *Jewish Action* 68.3 (Spring, 2008), pp. 93-96 by Professor Yehudah Gellman. I thank Prof. Gellman for his kindness in sending me an advance copy of the review.

<sup>60</sup> This is basically the view I find in Responsum 45 of Rivash (R. Isaac Bar Sheshet Perfet, 1326-1408). See M. Kellner, "Rabbi Isaac Bar Sheshet's Responsum Concerning the Study of Jewish Philosophy," *Tradition* 15 (1975): 110-118.

<sup>61</sup> I did so in *Confrontation*.

<sup>62</sup> Of course what we take to be the main contours of that tradition is itself a matter of debate, as pointed out in the first and last chapters of *Confrontation*, but we can leave that aside for the moment.

<sup>63</sup> There is, of course, a long history of doing just that. See, for example, "Each Generation and its Maimonides," cited above in note 46.

category): adopting what is essentially a static view of Torah,<sup>64</sup> they feel that it is somehow un-Orthodox to acknowledge that our tradition has a history, that there are serious and profound debates about the nature of Torah within the tradition, and that great rabbis like Maimonides could have been influenced in their understanding of Torah by “outsiders” like Aristotle and Alfarabi.<sup>65</sup> As I understand him, Maimonides played a pivotal role in effecting change in the history of the Jewish tradition (by placing it on a firm dogmatic footing);<sup>66</sup> he rejected mystical understandings of the nature of Torah to such an extent that he might have been tempted to agree with the late Yeshayahu Leibowitz and condemn as

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*What does it mean to affirm that Maimonides defines human beings as rational animals?*

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heretics all Kabbalists (including, emphatically, Nahmanides); and he preached a Torah influenced by Greeks and Muslims (not that he was aware of that—he was convinced that the Greeks and Muslims from whom he learned were teaching doctrines originally taught by the Torah and forgotten by the Jews).<sup>67</sup> (Readers who find these views wholly unacceptable are probably best off stopping right now—the rest of this essay will only distress them.)

So, the task before me becomes to show:

1. That Maimonides did define human beings as rational animals

2. That such a definition leads to the universalist positions I attribute to him

3. That among these positions is the claim that all humans will worship God from a stance of complete religious equality by the time that the messianic era reaches its fruition

What does it mean to affirm that Maimonides defines human beings as rational animals? In terms of our genus, we are animals. Our specific difference, that which distinguishes us from all other members of the animal kingdom, is our rationality. Everything that is not a direct reflection of rational thought—hopes and fears, love and hates, desires, needs, passions—is a consequence of our animal nature. In his earliest work, *Treatise on Logic*, Maimonides wrote: “Rationality we call man’s difference, because it divides and differentiates the human species from others; and this rationality, i.e. the faculty by which ideas are formed, constitutes the essence of man.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, a person born of human parents is not human just by virtue of that birth; rather, “It behooves him who prefers to be a human being in truth, not a beast having the shape and configuration of a human being, to endeavor to diminish all the impulses of matter—such as eating, drinking, copulation, anger, and all the habits consequent upon desire and anger, to be ashamed of them, and to set for them limits in his soul” (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:8, pp 433-434).

The *Guide of the Perplexed* is replete with consequences of this position. The very first

<sup>64</sup> On static vs. dynamic views of Torah in rabbinic thought, see Menachem Fisch, *Rational Rabbis: Science and Talmudic Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and Yohanan Silman, *Kol Gadol ve-Lo Yasaf: Torat Yisrael bein Shelemut Ve-Hishtalmut* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1999).

<sup>65</sup> I cite these two in particular because of Maimonides’ comments in his introduction to his “Eight Chapters” as elucidated by Herbert A. Davidson in “Maimonides’ *Shemonah Peraqim* and Alfarabi’s *Fusul Al-Madani*,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 31 (1963): 33-50.

<sup>66</sup> This is argued in my *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<sup>67</sup> For the history of this notion, see Abraham Melamed, *Al Kitfei Anaqim: Toledot ha-Pulmus Bein Aharonim le-Rishonim be-Hagut ha-Yehudit bi-yemei ha-Beinayim u-ve-Reishit ha-Et ha-Hadashah* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>68</sup> *Treatise on Logic*, trans. I. Efron (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1938), pp. 51-52. For the controversy surrounding the authorship of this work, see *Confrontation*, p. 57, note 61.

chapters of the work make no sense unless one understands Maimonides to define humans as rational animals. Humans are there said to have been created in the image of God only because of “the intellect that God made overflow unto man and that is the latter's ultimate perfection” (I:2, p. 24). It is in consequence of this view of the divine image—which humans can, through much effort, actualize in themselves<sup>69</sup>—that Maimonides writes in I:51 that “being a rational animal is the essence and true reality of man” (p. 113)<sup>70</sup> How does one do this? By “knowing everything concerning all beings that it is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection” (III:27, p. 511). This perfection is purely intellectual; as Maimonides continues: “It is clear that to this ultimate perfection there do

not belong either actions or moral qualities...”<sup>71</sup>

Maimonides has little occasion in his non-philosophical writings explicitly to affirm the definition of human beings as rational animals.<sup>72</sup> But in these writings he consistently affirms an important consequence of that definition: to the extent that humans achieve immortality,<sup>73</sup> it is due solely to their intellectual achievements.<sup>74</sup> All that survives death is what we have learned. This is a position that Maimonides espouses in all his major writings, including the *Commentary on the Mishnah*,<sup>75</sup> the *Mishneh Torah*,<sup>76</sup> and the *Guide of the Perplexed*.<sup>77</sup> Viewing existence in the world to come in these terms, it is no surprise that Maimonides made fulfillment of the commandments of the

<sup>69</sup> Maimonides thus sees being created in the image of God as a challenge, not an endowment.

<sup>70</sup> See Michael Schwartz's note in his Hebrew translation of the *Guide* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), p. 116, note 7. Tel Aviv University Press is to be commended for its decision to make this magnificent contribution to Jewish and human culture available on the internet [http://press.tau.ac.il/perplexed/]. See further *Guide* I:52 (pp. 114, 116), II: 48 (p. 422), III: 8 (p. 432), III:12 (p. 444), and III:14 (p. 458).

<sup>71</sup> Given that Maimonides defines humans as rational animals (i.e. humans belong to the genus ‘animal’, and to the species ‘rational’), it follows that if language is a property by which humans are distinguished from all other animals, it must be intimately connected to rationality. Thus, it is no surprise that in Tibbonian Hebrew (following Arabic precedents) the term ‘rational animal’ is translated *hai medabber* (literally, speaking living being); see, for example, Samuel ibn Tibbon's translation of the *Guide* I:51, I:52, III:48, and III:12. Ibn Tibbon makes this explicit in his *Peirush ha-Millot ha-Zarot, alef* (s.v. *ma'amorot-gader*), *heb* (s.v. *bigayon*), and *kaf* (s.v. *koah medabber*).

<sup>72</sup> An exception is his explicit statement of the claim toward the end of the Introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*. Sheilat, p. 57.

<sup>73</sup> There is considerable debate among Maimonides' contemporary academic interpreters over whether or not humans can actually achieve immortality (“a share in the world to come”) or not. Shlomo Pines denies the possibility in “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides,” in Isadore Twersky (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979): 88-109. His view was criticized by Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides on the Intellect and Metaphysics,” in *Von Der Mittelalterlichen Zur Modernen Aufklaerung* (Tuebingen: Mohr, 1987): 60-91 and Herbert A. Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992-93): 49-103. For further discussion, see Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), pp. 142-43 and 242-43 and Alfred Ivry, “Maimonides' Relations to the Teachings of Averroes,” *Sejunot* 8 (2003): 61-74.

<sup>74</sup> Other consequences of Maimonides' view of human perfection that find expression in the *Guide* are that providence and prophecy depend upon intellectual perfection. For discussion see my *Maimonides on Judaism* (above, footnote 8), chap. 4.

<sup>75</sup> *Sanhedrin*, Introduction to *Pereq Heleq*, in the dual-language (Arabic/Hebrew) edition of R. J. Kafih (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), vol. 4, p. 204.

<sup>76</sup> Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, IV:9, Laws of Repentance, VIII:2-3, and Laws of Phylacteries, VI:13.

<sup>77</sup> I:30 (p. 63), I:40 (p. 90), I:41 (p. 91), I:70 (p. 174), I:72 (p. 193, implicitly), I:74 (p. 220), III:8 (pp. 432-33), III:27 (p. 511), III:51 (p. 628), and III:54 (p. 635).

Torah in particular and moral behavior in general only prerequisites for achieving a share in the world to come, not guarantors of it.<sup>78</sup> One must be a decent and disciplined human being to achieve any level of intellectual perfection. The Torah is the best, but not the only, route to achieve such decency and discipline.

Our issue is not entirely absent from Maimonides' rabbinic writings. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 17a) states: "In the world to come there is no eating, drinking, washing, anointing, or sexual intercourse; but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the divine presence." Maimonides glosses this text on a number of occasions. In his commentary to *Helek* he explains: "The [rabbinic] expression, 'crowns on their heads' signifies the existence of the soul through the existence of that which it knows, in that they are the same thing, as the experts in philosophy have maintained..." He repeats the point in Laws of Repentance VIII:2. It is, I believe, worth citing the full text:

In the world to come there is nothing corporeal, and no material substance; there are only the souls of the righteous without bodies, like the ministering angels. And since in that world there are no bodies, there is neither eating there, nor drinking, nor aught

that human beings need on earth. None of the conditions occur there which are incident to physical bodies in this world, such as sitting, standing, sleep, death, sadness, joy, etc. So the ancient sages said, "in the world to come there is no eating, drinking, washing, anointing, or sexual intercourse; but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the divine presence" (*Berakhot* 17a). This passage clearly indicates that there is no corporeal existence there, since there is no eating or drinking there. The phrase, "the righteous sit" is allegorical and means that the souls of the righteous exist there without fatigue or labor. The phrase, "their crowns on their heads" refers to the knowledge they know, by virtue of which they merited life in the world to come, which knowledge exists with them. This is their "crown"... And what is the meaning of "enjoying the radiance of the divine presence"?—that they know and apprehend of the truth of the Holy One, blessed be He, what they did not know when in their murky and lowly body.<sup>79</sup>

Maimonides' point here is to insist that the world to come (i.e., the world that comes immediately after death to those who earn it) is entirely incorporeal. The righteous exist there without bodies, as do the angels;<sup>80</sup> there is therefore no eating or drinking in the world to

<sup>78</sup> For Maimonides moral perfection is a necessary, but not sufficient, pre-requisite for intellectual perfection. For sources, see *Guide* I:34 (pp. 76-77, where Maimonides writes: "the moral virtues are a preparation for the rational virtues, it being impossible to achieve true, rational acts—I mean perfect rationality—unless it be by a man thoroughly trained in his morals and endowed with the qualities of tranquility and quiet"), I:62 (p. 152), III:27 (p. 510), and III:54 (p. 635) and *Commentary on the Mishnah, Hagigah* II:1. For discussion, see Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection*, 26-28; id., "Is Maimonides' Ideal Person Austerely Rationalist?" and Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, pp. 160, 238, 317. Charles Manekin suggests the following analogy: "To be a physicist one has to know mathematics. Without knowing mathematics, no matter how much physics one has managed to learn, one is not a physicist. And yet, knowing math is not part of being a physicist *per se*; it is not what distinguishes physicists from, say, mathematicians. In Maimonides' (and Gersonides') world, there can be no "Nazi scientists", although there can be Nazis who practice science. For true science entails morality. Morality is not something one can shed; if one does, one loses one's knowledge." My friend Avram Montag (a true physicist—as opposed to metaphysicist) disagrees with this analogy, since, he says, without knowing significant amounts of math, one can know very little physics. He prefers Jacob Bronowski's argument in *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) that a certain level of honesty, integrity, and even morality is required if one is to make progress in science. Bronowski claims that nothing came out of the Nazi's horrible experiments on prisoners.

<sup>79</sup> Based upon the translation of Moses Hyamson, *The Book of Knowledge by Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1974), p. 90a-b.

<sup>80</sup> Maimonides' angels are a far cry from the common understanding of them. See *Confrontation*, chap. 8 and *Diamond, Converts*, pp. 214-218.

come. Nothing that pertains to bodily existence, such as sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness or joy, occurs there; it against that background that Maimonides cites the Talmud in *Berakhot*. The Talmud there cites the dictum as “a favorite saying of Rav,” while Maimonides cites it in the name of the “Early Sages,”<sup>81</sup> conveying the impression that it is the generally accepted view of the Sages.<sup>82</sup> The text states:

In the future world there is no eating nor drinking nor propagation<sup>83</sup> [nor business nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition,]<sup>84</sup> but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the divine presence [as it says, *And they beheld God, and did eat and drink*].<sup>85</sup>

This text presents problems for Maimonides. First, the passage states that the righteous *sit* in the world to come. Maimonides explains that to mean that they exist without any effort. Second, the passage says that the righteous have crowns on their *heads*. This, Maimonides explains, means: the knowledge that they knew,

*because of which* they merited life in the world to come, remains with them, and is their crown.

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*Only human beings who actualize their potential to know achieve a share in the World to Come*

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This passage is one of many examples from his rabbinic writings in which Maimonides accepts what came to be known as the theory of the acquired intellect. The technical philosophical issues need not detain us here; it is enough to say that according to this theory all human beings are born with a potential to know and that only those who actualize that potential are fully and truly human and achieve a share in the world to come.<sup>86</sup>

Defining human beings the way he does, Maimonides has no way of distinguishing Jews from Gentiles on any level but that of history, belief, and behavior. Since the Middle Ages various Jewish thinkers have sought ways to distinguish Jews from Gentiles in some

<sup>81</sup> The standard term for *Haʿazal* in Maimonides' writings.

<sup>82</sup> This is not the only place where Maimonides adopts this tactic; he does the same thing when he attributes to the generality of the Sages the view of the *amora* Samuel that the only difference between this world and the next is political subjugation. Isaac Abravanel takes him to task for this in his *Yeshu'ot Meshiho*, Part II, *Iyyun* 3, Chapter 7 (Bnei Brak: Me'orei Sefarad, 5753), p. 157.

<sup>83</sup> Maimonides has *tashmish*, our standard texts have *piryah ve-reviyah*.

<sup>84</sup> These words are missing from Maimonides' text.

<sup>85</sup> Ex. 24:11. These words are missing from Maimonides' text. I follow the Old Jewish Publication Society (1917) translation [NOTE: That's the translation used in the Soncino Humash] here, with minor emendations. Given Maimonides' attitude towards the Elders of Israel referred to in this verse, it is not surprising that he leaves out this part of the Talmudic text. See *Guide of the Perplexed* I:5, *Confrontation*, pp. 52-54 and Shaul Regev, "The Vision of the Nobles of Israel in the Jewish Philosophy of the Middle Ages," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1984-85): 281-302 (Hebrew) and Michelle Levene, "Maimonides' Philosophical Exegesis of the Nobles' Vision (Exodus 24): A Guide for the Pursuit of Knowledge," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 11 (2003): 61-106. Isaac Abravanel wrote a whole book, *Ateret Zeqenim*, defending the Elders from Maimonides' strictures.

<sup>86</sup> For a fuller discussion see *Confrontation*, pp. 223-229. Isaac Abravanel and Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, both opponents of the theory, had no problem attributing it to Maimonides; see *Confrontation*, p. 226, note 29.

ontologically significant way. Judah Halevi asserted that only Jews had what he called *al-amr al-ilabi*, which meant that it was possible only for native-born Jews to aspire to prophecy. The *Zohar* teaches that the souls of Jews derive from a higher, more spiritual level of the *sefirot* than do the souls of Gentiles.<sup>87</sup> The Maharal of Prague thought that with the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the image of God in Gentiles was diminished.<sup>88</sup> The founder of Habad held that the souls of Gentiles were cruder than those of Jews.<sup>89</sup> One could multiply these unfortunate examples without end.<sup>90</sup>

As noted above, Maimonides will have none of this, and, given his philosophical anthropology, he can have none of it.

We may now turn to the third point I promised to discuss above. Let us assume that all that I have written here is correct. Why must that entail the claim that all humans will worship God from a stance of complete religious equality by the time that the messianic era reaches its fruition? In other words, why can't Maimonides define humans as rational animals, reject the notion that there is any essential difference between Jew and Gentile, and yet continue to maintain that Jew and Gentile will remain distinct in the messianic era? In

principle, there is no reason why Maimonides could not maintain such a position. The position is not incoherent and is lucidly explained by R. Rapoport, but, I suggest, it simply makes no sense in a world in which Jews and Gentiles are all ruled by the same wise and exalted king, a world in which there is no essential distinction between Jew and Gentile and that fact is acknowledged by all, a world in which Gentiles admit that the Torah is true and its commandments are divine, a world in which the closing peroration of the *Mishneh Torah* is realized:

In that time there will be neither famine nor war, neither jealousy nor strife. Good things will be abundant, and delicacies as common as dust. The one preoccupation of the whole world will be only to know the Lord. Hence [they] will be very wise, knowing things now unknown and will apprehend knowledge of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind, as it is written: For the land shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9)

In that world one can be a follower of the Torah,<sup>91</sup> the one full, complete and true religion, or, according to R. Rapoport, one can settle for a pale, thin, stripped-down and

<sup>87</sup> See Moshe Hallamish, "The Kabbalists' Attitude to the Nations of the World" in Aviezer Ravitzky, ed., *Joseph Baruch Sermonetta Memorial Volume* (=Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 14) (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 1988): 289-312 (Hebrew) and Elliot Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Yehudah (Jerome) Gellman has recently examined the issue with sensitivity and sophistication in "Jewish Mysticism and Morality: Kabbalah and Its Ontological Dualities," *Archiv fuer Religionsgeschichte* 9 (2008): 23-35. It is unfortunate that Gellman published this important (and for a person like me, deeply disturbing) study in so obscure a journal.

<sup>88</sup> *Derekh ha-Hayyim* III:14 (end), Gur Aryeh on Ex. 19:22, *Netsah Yisra'el*, ch. 3 (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1997), p. 305 (see p. 458 n. 1 for references to other particularist expressions in the writings of the Maharal), and *Tiferet Yisra'el*, ch.32.

<sup>89</sup> *Tanya*, end of I:1.

<sup>90</sup> Even R. Samson Raphael Hirsch held that Jews occupy a higher rung of humanity than Gentiles. See Mordechai Breuer, *Modernity Within Tradition*, tr. Elizabeth Petuchowski (New York, 1992), p. 27, cited by Marc B Shapiro, "Torah im Derekh Erez in the Shadow of Hitler," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 14 (2006-07), pp. 84-96, p. 96, note 15.

<sup>91</sup> I hesitate to use the word "Judaism" here, not only because it is anachronistic vis-à-vis Maimonides, but because of its intimate connection to the Jewish people. It is my claim here that in the messianic era the link between Torah as *dat ha-emet* and the Jewish people as ethnic entity will be severed – all humans, whatever their ethnos, will adopt the *dat ha-emet*.

essentially spiritually empty<sup>92</sup> set of Noahide laws.<sup>93</sup> In a world in which all humans achieve knowledge of the Creator to the greatest extent possible to them, a world in which all humans live on God's holy mountain, a world from which evil and violence are banished because the knowledge of God fills the earth as the waters cover the sea, why would any person alive settle for less than the true and complete *dat ha-emet*?<sup>94</sup> Let us also recall that Maimonides held an unusually positive attitude, not only towards proselytes, but even towards *proselytizing* (responsum 149).<sup>95</sup> In that light, one can assume that in the messianic world he would expect the Jews to mount missions to any remaining Gentiles—Gentiles, who, it will be recalled, accept the truth of Torah in any event.

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*Why would any person settle for less than the true and complete Dat ha-Emet?*

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As long as I have brought up the issue of conversion,<sup>96</sup> note should be taken of an issue to which I originally drew attention in my book, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (pp. 42-43). In two places (*Yevamot* 24b and *Avodah Zarah* 3b) the Talmud states:

Our Rabbis taught: proselytes are not accepted in the days of the Messiah, just as proselytes were not accepted either in the days of David or in the days of Solomon.

Maimonides relates to this in the *Mishneh Torah* as follows (Laws of Forbidden Intercourse, XIII:15):

Therefore, throughout the days of David and Solomon, the court accepted no converts—in David's time because [the convert] might have been motivated by fear, and in Solomon's time because [the convert] might have been motivated by the benefits and grandeur of the Israelite kingdom." It is reasonable to suggest that in the messianic era—when the whole world will be ruled by King Messiah and the truth of the Torah will be evident to all—one might be led to suspect the sincerity of converts. Nevertheless, Maimonides refuses to accept as authoritative a rabbinic statement ruling out the possibility of conversion to Judaism in the messianic era. My explanation for that is that he expected (all) Gentiles to convert during the messianic era.

This brings up another point, to which R. Hanan Balk of Cincinnati kindly drew my attention. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 58b-59a) teaches that a Gentile may not study Torah (other than the seven Noahide commandments)—on pain of death. Maimonides codifies this as law in Laws of Kings, X:9. In his responsa (no. 149) he was asked if this is indeed the law, and that a Jew is forbidden to teach any but the seven Noahide commandments to a Gentile. He answered:

<sup>92</sup> Technically, as Kreisel points out (p. 161), a Noahide is forbidden to perform idolatry, but need not even be a theist!

<sup>93</sup> Consider further: the punishment for the violation of any of the Noahide laws is execution ("Laws of Kings" IX:14). On the view that messianic Gentiles will be Noahides we would have a situation in which a Jew who steals must return the stolen item and pay a fine while a Gentile who steals even something of trifling value will be executed! I take this one fact to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea that in Maimonides' messianic world Gentiles will remain Noahides and not adopt the full range of the Torah.

<sup>94</sup> Kreisel (p. 153) makes the same point very well: "Why would Gentiles settle for anything less than the one true divine legislation, if they have come to realize the true purpose of life, and the role played by Mosaic law in attaining that purpose...and finally have no other religious option, at least no other complete religious law that can be considered divine?"

<sup>95</sup> See Diamond, *Converts*, ch. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Actually, R. Rapport brings it up in footnote 71. He bases his discussion there on an alleged inconsistency in Maimonides. But, in point of fact, the inconsistency is not within Maimonides, but between Maimonides and the Talmud. I hope that the reader will find my discussion here more convincing than that of R. Rapoport.

It is the law without a doubt. When the hand of Israel is uppermost over them, we restrain him from studying Torah until he converts, but he is not to be killed if he studied Torah..."

And then, notoriously, Maimonides goes on to add:

It is permissible to teach the commandments to Christians and attract them to our religion, but none of this is permissible to Muslims.

Maimonides explains that, unlike Muslims, Christians accept the divine origin of the Torah, and it is therefore it is more likely that they will turn to the good way (*yahzeru lamutan*). The Talmud relates to the study of Torah by Gentiles in another context: *Hagigah* 13a teaches that it is forbidden for a Jew to teach Torah to a Gentile. Unlike the prohibition in *Sanhedrin*, which Maimonides codifies as law, this prohibition is simply ignored in the *Mishneh Torah*. This odd state of affairs has led to considerable discussion on the part of Maimonides' traditionalist interpreters.<sup>97</sup>

Pulling together the points about conversion discussed here, it seems obvious that if Maimonides expected the Gentiles to convert in the messianic era, he could hardly have forbidden teaching them Torah now—and he could not very well forbid it now before the coming of the Messiah and permit it after his coming. That must be the reason why he permits teaching Torah to Christians in the pre-messianic world.

Further considerations support my claim that for Maimonides, all humanity in the messianic

era would accept the Torah fully. Maimonides was severely criticized for his account of the reasons for the commandments, an account which boils down to the claim that the commandments of the Torah serve one of two ends: to improve moral and social relations, or to correct philosophical mistakes. Maimonides says this quite explicitly in *Guide*, III:27. The

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*Torah commandments have a relative, not an absolute, advantage over other systems of ethics and philosophy.*

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commandments of the Torah, therefore, have a relative, not an absolute, advantage over other systems of ethics and philosophy. But that relative advantage is great, since the commandments were ordained by God (Who obviously knows our creaturely natures far better than any human legislator or philosopher).<sup>98</sup> Maimonides is also quite explicit in his repeated claims that one cannot achieve intellectual perfection unless one antecedently achieved a high level of moral perfection—no physicists like Einstein (who abandoned his first family) or philosophers like Heidegger (who never expressed regret for his support of the Nazis) for Maimonides!<sup>99</sup> One of the commandments which play a direct role in the achievement of moral perfection is circumcision.<sup>100</sup> As Maimonides says in *Guide*, III:49 (p. 609):

Similarly with regard to *circumcision*, one of the reasons for it is, in my opinion, the wish to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as

<sup>97</sup> For discussion, see David Novak, *Maimonides on Judaism and Other Religions* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1997).

<sup>98</sup> All these claims are supported in *Confrontation*, chapter two.

<sup>99</sup> For texts and discussion, see *Confrontation*, p. 63, note 71 and above, note 71.

<sup>100</sup> See Josef Stern, "Maimonides on the Covenant of Circumcision," in Michael Fishbane, ed., *The Midrashic Imagination* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 131-54 and "Maimonides' Parable of Circumcision," *Sevara* 2 (1991):35-48. My thinking here was stimulated by reading Shaye J. D. Cohen's *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005), chapters 6 and 7.

possible. ... In fact this *commandment* has not been prescribed with a view to perfecting what is defective congenitally, but perfecting what is defective morally. ... violent concupiscence and lust that goes beyond what is needed are diminished.

If all humans are going to devote themselves to the knowledge of God when the messianic era reaches its fruition, how could Maimonides possibly expect that Gentiles would remain uncircumcised, and thus at a disadvantage in curbing their passions, which, in turn, leaves them at a disadvantage in seeking to know God?

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*Would Gentiles be left at the tremendous disadvantage of being called upon to fulfill only the Noahide commandments?*

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Furthermore, circumcision for Maimonides is, as Shaye Cohen aptly puts it, “a sign of membership in the covenant of Abraham, the league of those who believe in the unity of God” (p. 152).<sup>101</sup> Since all humans in the messianic era will be members of that league, does it make sense to think that Maimonides would not expect them to bear the mark of that covenant? It should also be borne in mind in this context that in Laws of Kings X:7 Maimonides writes that “he alone is a descendent of Abraham who holds fast to his religion and honest way, and they alone are obligated to be circumcised.”<sup>102</sup> If Arabs in the pre-messianic world are obligated to perform circumcision, how much more so will all humanity in the messianic world be so obligated, a world in which all human beings will hold fast to Abrahamic monotheism?

As my friend and student Yisrael Ben-Simon pointed out to me, this argument ought to be generalized. The commandments of the Torah are the best way for human beings to achieve their full potential as human beings in that they are the best route to preparing us to perfect ourselves intellectually. It is simply inconceivable that in a world in which all human beings strive to perfect their knowledge of God (and thus reach the highest possible level of human perfection to which each person can separately aspire)<sup>103</sup> that Gentiles would be left at the tremendous disadvantage of only being called upon to fulfill the Noahide commandments.

### Conclusion and Final Reflection

According to Maimonides all humanity will adopt *dat ha-emet* by the time the messianic era reaches fruition. The *dat* in question can refer either to the Torah of Noah, to the Torah of Abraham, or to the Torah of Moses. R. Rapoport thinks it refers to the Torah of Noah; I am convinced that it refers to the Torah of Moses. He and I both agree that Maimonides did not mean the Torah of Abraham. Because text and context are not conclusive R. Rapoport cannot prove his position textually any more than I can. Therefore, we must approach the issue philosophically and ask which position coheres best with Maimonides' overall view of Torah and humanity? I have shown here that Maimonides, who believed that *all* human beings are equally created in the image of God and that the part of us which is Godlike is our ability to reason, could not and would not hope for a messianic era in which Jews and Gentiles remain distinct.

<sup>101</sup> See further, Hannah Kasher, "Maimonides' View of Circumcision as a Factor Uniting the Jewish and Muslim Communities," In *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations*, edited by Ronald L. Nettler (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995): 103-08.

<sup>102</sup> המילה נצטוה בה אברהם וזרעו בלבד, שנאמר אתה וזרעך אחרריך, יצא זרעו שלישמעאל שנאמר כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע ויצא עשו, שהרי יצחק אמר ליעקב ויתן לך את ברכת אברהם לך ולזרעך מכלל שהוא לבדו זרעו שלאברהם המחזיק בדתו ובדרכו הישרה, והם המחוייבין במילה.

<sup>103</sup> If details are needed, one can consult my *Maimonides on Human Perfection*.

I am aware of the fact that according to this reading of Maimonides, all humans in the messianic era will obey the commandments of the Torah (including the holidays marking events in Jewish history) despite that most of them will have no personal Jewish memory or identity. To rephrase in modern terms, for Maimonides Jewish ethnicity is accidental, not

essential, to Judaism. Although this may sound surprising to some of my readers, it actually accords well with Maimonides' dogma-centered notion of what constitutes Jewish identity, and with the positions put forward in his letter to Obadiah the Proselyte. That Maimonides adopts surprising positions should not, after all, be surprising.

## Chaim Rapoport Responds

1) According to Professor Kellner, Maimonides envisaged a messianic epoch in which all of humanity will (ultimately) become an indistinguishable part of the Jewish People (presumably residing in the Land of Israel), study the entire Torah, and observe all of its commandments.

This may or may not be the case, and nowhere in my article do I *negate* this possibility (although I remain far from convinced that this was indeed Maimonides' opinion).<sup>1</sup> Whether or not Maimonides espoused such a belief, I reassert that nowhere does he state this in his published writings and certainly not in his *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Kellner disagrees. He maintains that Maimonides in *Hilkhot Melakhim* (HM) 12:1 (“*yahzeru kullam le-dat ha-emet*”) actually predicts the total conversion to Judaism of all gentiles and, consequently, their observance of the kosher dietary laws. Moreover, Professor Kellner argues that my reading of that text in HM is untenable.

<sup>1</sup> Professor Kellner's arguments in this regard are, I believe, speculative at best.

For example, Professor Kellner asks: Why, in a perfect world, would gentiles not circumcise themselves in order to bring about “a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question” or impress upon their bodies “a sign of membership in the covenant of Abraham, the league of those who believe in the unity of God”?

Even if we admit the force of this question, it does not make conversion a “logical imperative,” for two reasons. Firstly, as Professor Kellner himself states, according to Maimonides, gentiles may perform virtually all the commandments (including circumcision) on a voluntary basis.

Secondly, conversion to Judaism means that the observance of the commandments would become mandatory even in circumstances where they appear to be counter-productive; see Maimonides' discussion in *Guide* III:34. Gentiles may wish to avoid the “double bind.”

Finally, is it not possible that in a “perfect world” there will be alternative methods of reaching the goals of some of the commandments (e.g. sacrifices)? Jews are bound by the immutability of the laws of the Torah (see *Guide* *ibid.*) and will therefore have to fulfill these commandments in all times, though gentiles will not.

<sup>2</sup> It is, I believe, axiomatic to all scholars that Maimonides did not necessarily document all his beliefs and opinions in his written works; all the more so in his *Mishneh Torah*, which is essentially a “digest” of rabbinic teachings (as understood and “seasoned” by Maimonides) rather than a repository for all of Maimonides' exoteric and esoteric views.

<sup>3</sup> I believe that this reading of *dat ha-emet* fits neatly into all the Maimonidean passages in which it occurs.

Professor Kellner claims that I *interpret* certain passages in Maimonides' writings that do not accord with my understanding of what Maimonides must have meant to be teaching about the messianic era. I, on the other hand, do not consider any of my readings of Maimonides statements to be unduly forced.

<sup>4</sup> In Professor Kellner's terms one may say that the elements of the *dat ha-emet* that are critical for gentiles are the “Abrahamic Faith” and the “Noahide Practice.”

<sup>5</sup> This can hardly be described as settling for “a pale, thin, stripped-down and essentially spiritually empty set of Noahide laws”—a position that Professor Kellner attributes to me.

Allow me to let me briefly restate the primary components of my thesis that are relevant to this discussion.

In my initial article, I argued in favor of the following three positions:

A. The term *dat ha-emet* in *Mishneh Torah* is a generic term used to describe “divinely revealed religion” which includes, but is not restricted to, Jewish Law.<sup>3</sup> “*Dat ha-emet*,” means “the *dat* that is based on the belief in one God.” This *dat* comprises two systems of laws and rules, but both of these systems are, in a sense, secondary to the *essential doctrine* of the *dat*, namely the belief in the One and Only God. Accordingly, when a Noahide turns to belief in God *and* to the observance of the seven *mitsvot* He commanded them, one may say that he has turned to “*dat ha-emet*.”<sup>4</sup>

B. I concluded that the purport of Maimonides' statement in *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:1 is that non-Jews will, in the messianic era, “turn to the true and correct belief in one God”<sup>5</sup> and will “take upon themselves to

diligently observe all the commandments given to the children of Noah.” As a result, they will no longer plunder and destroy.<sup>6</sup>

C. As above: Maimonides does not negate the possibility of an en-masse conversion of the nations of the world, nor, however, does he predict this.

I now turn to Professor Kellner’s response, restricting myself to those of his arguments that may be seen to refute my understanding of Maimonides’ statements.

2) Professor Kellner states that:

‘The expression *dat ha-emet* in our passage from "Laws of Kings" can not mean the seven Noahide laws, as Rabbi Rapoport suggests, since the point of the messianic era, as Maimonides affirms towards the end of chapter XI, is to “correct” the whole world to worship the Lord with one accord . . . the worship of God is not one of the seven Noahide laws, as Maimonides makes clear in "Laws of Kings," IX:1 [where he lists them]. . . On this technical ground alone, Rabbi Rapoport's reading must fail’.

This argument does not convince me, for three reasons:

A. As Professor Kellner has himself suggested, in the Maimonidean scheme of things, the messianic prophecies will not necessarily all be realized simultaneously. If we accept the notion that the utopian era will unfold *gradually*, there is no contradiction between a “minimalist” reading of *HM* 12:1 (according to which the gentile nations are described as merely embracing the “seven *mitsvot* of the sons

of *Noah*”) and Maimonides’ earlier statement in *HM* 11:4 (according to which the whole world will worship God with one accord).

For in *HM* 11:4 Maimonides describes the *ultimate* “correction” of mankind, yet the harmonious co-existence of the nations--the subject matter of *HM* 12:1—is not contingent upon the fulfilment of the ultimate utopia. Rather, as soon as the nations will “accept the *dat ha-emet*” to the extent that they will observe the “seven *mitsvot* of the sons of *Noah*,” a radical change will occur: “they will neither plunder nor destroy.”

B. Although recognition of God is not one of the “seven *mitsvot* of the sons of *Noah*,” it is, arguably, a prerequisite to the proper observance of those commandments. The very notion of a commandment presupposes a commander and, arguably, gentiles who observe the *commandments* may be assumed to believe in and worship the Commander to Whom they feel obliged and accountable.

Moreover, as I mentioned in my original article, in *HM* 8:11 Maimonides is emphatic on the desideratum for *Noahides* to fulfill the seven commandments based on the belief in the Revelation at Sinai.

Commitment to the authority of Divine revelation as transmitted through Moses may not be one of the commandments *per se*, but it is the bedrock on which the commandments stand.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, even if one were to assume (the position that Professor Kellner attributes to me, namely) that Maimonides, in *HM* 12:1, merely meant that gentiles will return to

<sup>6</sup>This reading is compatible with the parallel text in *Guide* 3:11 according to which (as Professor Kellner quotes) “the cause of the abolition of these enmities, these discords, and these tyrannies, will be the knowledge that men will then have concerning *the true reality of the deity*.”

<sup>7</sup>The (presumably) correct reading of *HM* 8:11 asserts that even gentiles who observe the commandments based on logical conviction rather than as a response to a divine command earn the honorific appellation “wise gentiles.” Nevertheless, the fact remains that Maimonides clearly asserts that gentiles *ought* to observe the commandments based on the Sinaitic revelation.

observe the ‘seven *mitsvot* of the sons of *Noah*’, this could be seen to include the belief in and worship of God.

C. Ultimately, however, all the above is beside the point, for Professor Kellner’s attempt to refute my reading of *HM* 12:1 is based on an inaccurate reading of my own interpretation.

I never asserted that Maimonides statement to the effect that the nations of the world “will all accept the true religion [*dat ha-emet*]” means that that they will observe *no more* than the “seven *mitsvot* of the sons of *Noah*.”

My suggested reading of this Maimonidean text was (and here I quote from my original article), that the gentiles “*will turn to the true and correct belief in one God, take upon themselves and diligently observe all the commandments given to the children of Noah through Moses acting as God’s messenger.*”

Clearly, the “seven *mitsvot* of the sons of *Noah*” are a component of the *dat ha-emet*, but they are not the sum total of it—even as far as gentiles are concerned. As I explained in my article, and in great detail, *dat ha-emet* includes the entire gamut of religious ideals that are fundamental for gentiles/Noahides as well as Jews.

Maimonides tells us that long before the revelation at Sinai, Abraham our Father instructed mankind “that the entire universe had but one Creator and that Him it was right

to worship.” Since Maimonides employs the term *dat ha-emet* specifically in relation to the Abrahamic faith and practice, it is clear that the quintessential component of *dat ha-emet* is the belief in and worship of God. (Clearly, this universal element of the *dat* was supplemented, but never suspended, in favor of the seven *mitsvot* of the sons of Noah.)

Therefore there is no contradiction whatsoever between my reading of *HM* 12:1 and what Maimonides states in *HM* 11:4. On the contrary, the two texts predict one and the same thing.

3) Professor Kellner argues that the passage “*yahzeru kullam le-dat ha-emet*” in *HM* 12:1 should be read in context. I agree. However I suggest that it should be read in the *immediate* context of this phrase rather than in the context of the last section of the previous chapter (*HM*, chapter 11) or in the context of the universal thrust of the *Mishneh Torah* as a whole.

The context in which the expression “*yahzeru kullam le-dat ha-emet*” occurs in *HM* 12:1 is Maimonides discussion of the “parables and riddles” of the prophets, specifically the prediction of Isaiah that the “wolf will dwell with the lamb.” He says that means the erstwhile wicked nations will desert their beast-like behaviour and assume a docile demeanour, thus enabling peaceful co-existence between them and the Jewish people.

It is extremely unlikely that Maimonides would have chosen this context to make the far-reaching and somewhat controversial claim<sup>8</sup> that all gentiles will convert to Judaism. The conversion of the nations of the world to Judaism is not germane to this discussion. In a sense it even undermines the gist of Maimonides statement, for the thrust of the entire passage is that of the peaceful co-existence of two separate entities, not the

amalgamation of the two and their fusion into one.

Therefore, even if Maimonides anticipated the conversion of all mankind to Judaism, he does not state this, explicitly or implicitly, in his *Mishneh Torah*, or, for that matter, in any of his other works. Moreover, the phrase *yahzeru le-dat ha-emet* in *HM* 12:1 is best understood as a universal return to Abrahamic beliefs and Noahide ethical standards.

<sup>8</sup> In note 71 of my article I referred to a responsum of R. Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam (1904-1994) published in his *Divrei yatsiv* who wonders how Maimonides could forecast the conversion of all the gentiles in the messianic era (“*yahzeru kullam le-dat ha-emet*”) in face of the Talmud’s statement (*Yevamot* 24b) that we will not accept proselytes in the Days of the Messiah. R. Halberstam even suggests that there is an inconsistency in the *Mishneh Torah* in this regard. I wrote that in light of my own interpretation of “*yahzeru kullam le-dat ha-emet*” the problem is a *non-sequitur*, for Maimonides never made such a prediction. Professor Kellner rightfully points out that, in reality, there is no inconsistency in the *Mishneh Torah* even according to his reading of “*yahzeru kullam le-dat ha-emet*” because in Maimonides’ rendition of that Talmudic statement (*Hilkhot Issurei Bi’ab* 13:15), he does not mention the messianic era. Professor Kellner states that “Maimonides refuses to accept as authoritative a rabbinic statement ruling out the possibility of conversion to Judaism in the messianic era.” This may well be the case. However, I do not think that this means (as Professor Kellner suggests) “that he expected (all) gentiles to convert during the messianic era.” Yet, even if he did, I think that it is highly unlikely that he would have included such a landmark statement, *en passant*, in a passage designed to explain a scriptural parable which could adequately be explained without such novelties.