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The Jewish Calendar: A Scientific Perspective

William Gewirtz

The purpose of this succinct introduction to the Jewish calendar is to provide the essential scientific knowledge that was, to varying degrees, available and likely used in the calendar's establishment. Despite Rambam's assertion that this topic can be taught to minors in a few days, the dearth of commentary on these sections of his writings would seem to belie that claim. This summary is intended to help fill that lacunae.

The Metonic Cycle

Following the period during which the sanctification of a new month was based on the testimony of two witnesses who observed a "new" moon, a fixed calendar was introduced. The calendar was established with two major goals in mind. First, given that the Torah mandates that Pesah occur during the springtime, Pesah had to begin after the spring equinox. Second, the Jewish month had to begin, in perpetuity, approximately when the new moon could first be seen.

To accomplish the first goal, the Rabbis used what is known as the Metonic cycle, named for Meton, a 5th-century BCE Greek astronomer. The Metonic cycle equated 19 solar years with 235 lunar months. Were each of the 19 solar years to have only 12 lunar months, a 19-year period would be missing 7 months (19 x 12= 228 months.) Thus, during every 19-year cycle, 7 additional months had to be added, or "intercalated." The calendar continued an earlier tradition that had added an extra month of Adar, among other reasons, to ensure that Pesah occurred in the springtime. The additional month added during those 7 years was also a second month of Adar, delaying the start of the month of Nissan by an additional month in those years.

The Lunar Month

Before resuming our discussion of the Metonic cycle, we must first discuss the length of a lunar month, a number that would enable the Rabbis to accomplish their second goal of beginning each month at the approximate time when the new moon could first be seen. Even the ancients knew that while solar years were equal in length, lunar months were not. The precise astronomical beginning of each month is called a "conjunction" and occurs when the moon moves between the sun and earth. The midpoint of the month, when the earth moves between the sun and the moon and when the moon is at its fullest, is called an "opposition." If we measure the length of a month as the period between conjunctions (or oppositions), the maximum variation between the lengths of different months (from a little more than 29 days to slightly less than 30) amounts to about 18 hours. Fortunately, the ancients also knew that only at a "perfect" conjunction can we witness a solar eclipse and only at a "perfect" opposition can we witness a (more frequent) lunar eclipse.

By carefully measuring the length of time between such "perfect" events, the ancient Babylonians, well before the Greeks and Romans, were already estimating the average length of a month. The Rabbis used this average to determine the "*molad*"; that is, even though the

term "*molad*" ostensibly refers to the actual astronomical conjunction, in practice, the *molad* used and announced in synagogues is set by adding the length of an average month to the previous *molad*. Despite variation in the length of a lunar month, the difference in time between the *molad* and that month's actual conjunction, summed over any substantial number of consecutive months, remains close to zero. Goal two was now accomplished.

The Rabbis determined that the average length of a lunar month from which *moladot* were calculated is 29 days, 12 hours, and 793/1080^{ths} of an hour. Expressed as a decimal, that determination is accurate to the 6th decimal place.

Employing the Metonic relationship as a precise equation, the Rabbis used that average length of a lunar month to determine the duration of a solar year. This is the basis for what is known as *tekufot de-Rabbi Ada*, as opposed to the less accurate *tekufot de-Shmuel*, which align with the Julian calendar then in use, utilized in other, less critical, halakhic contexts (such as determining the recitation of "*ve-ten tal u-matar li-vrakhah*" outside of Eretz Yisrael, as well as determining the recitation of *Birkhat ha-Hamah*). More precisely, *tekufot* refer to the spring and fall equinoxes and the summer and winter solstices, the four quarter-points of the solar year.

Additional Considerations

Before describing the accuracy of the fixed calendar and providing an assessment of what minor refinements might have been made given current scientific knowledge, we need to better understand the events surrounding a new month, as well as some additional details that were introduced before the final emergence of the calendar in use.

First, around an actual conjunction, when the moon passes between the sun and the earth, the "old" moon disappears before a "new" moon appears at some later point. The moon is not visible for around 60 hours, with an approximate variation of 24 hours in both directions. (The period without a visible moon is not exactly equal before and after a conjunction.) Since a "new" moon is only visible for a brief period after sunset, yet another day may pass before a "new" moon can be observed. Second, as implied earlier, the *molad* or "average" conjunction can differ from the actual conjunction by as many as 9 hours in either direction. Third, a new moon is not necessarily visible everywhere on earth at the same time. If the moon is on a particularly southerly track, its visibility around the latitude of Jerusalem may be further delayed.

Taken *in toto*, these three factors explain why the *molad* can precede the visibility of a new moon by up to several days. Note that neither this mode of division into exactly these three factors, nor the various lengths of time involved, is to be assumed when reading the Rabbinic literature. Various Talmudic passages do not reflect current scientific knowledge.

Regardless, the *molad* as defined is indirectly critical to establishing the first day of any given month; the relationship is indirect since only the *molad* of Tishrei matters in deciding on Rosh Hodesh for the remaining months of that year. The *molad* announced every Shabbat when *Birkhat ha-Hodesh* is recited has nothing whatever to do with the day or days when Rosh Hodesh will occur.

Finalizing the Calendar

We are now prepared to explain some additional details that played a role in finalizing the calendar.

Based on the Metonic cycle, 7 additional lunar months were added during every 19-year cycle in the 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th, and 19th years. Months normally alternated between 29 and 30 days; those with 30 days celebrated both the last day of that month in addition to the first day of the next month as Rosh Hodesh. The month of Tishrei always had thirty days; as opposed to all other 30-day months, it had two days of Rosh Hodesh (also Rosh Hashanah) on the first and second days of the month. *Except for the postponements described below, the first day of Tishrei coincided with the molad.* Once Tishrei was set, all the remaining months normally alternate between 29 and 30 days, Tishrei always being 30 days.

To this system a few additional rules, each postponing Rosh Hashanah from the day of the *molad*, were added. The most famous rule, referred to as "*lo aleph/daled/vav* (pronounced *ADU*) *rosh*," postpones Rosh Hashanah if it were to fall on the first, fourth, or sixth day of the week. The Talmud explains that the basis for this rule is two-fold. First, there was a desire to avoid a lengthy period during which a dead body would remain unburied, as would happen if Yom Kippur occurred the day before or after Shabbat; this is prevented by disallowing Rosh Hashanah to begin on Wednesday or Friday. Second, there was a desire to avoid Hoshanah Rabbah occurring on Shabbat, which would result in the omission of the willows ceremony, which would give support to Sadducee claims about the nature of that ceremony. The Rabbis prevented this by not allowing Rosh Hashanah to begin on Sunday.

A second rule, a *molad zaken*, a so-called "old *molad*," required that the *molad* occur before noon. When it occurred after noon, the start of Tishrei would be postponed by one day. Many diverse reasons were given for this postponement, nominally explaining the one given in the Talmud. Attempts to explain the logic behind this postponement has itself generated a large body of literature, which lies beyond the scope of our discussion.

Two other rules were highly technical, resulting from a restriction of the length of a thirteen-month year to 383, 384, or 385 days, and a twelve-month year to 353, 354, or 355 days. These technical restrictions caused two complex rules for the postponement of the first day of Tishrei and affected the usual lengths of the months of Heshvan and Kislev as well.

At most two of the postponements can occur in a given year, delaying the start of Rosh Hashanah by two days. Historical documents indicate that the four rules governing postponements to the first day of Rosh Hashanah were finalized over a lengthy period. Their order of finalization is unclear, though the order in which they have been described above is plausibly the historical order of their finalization.

In the intervening years, our scientific knowledge has advanced. The length of the average month is now known more precisely, to 8 decimal places; the number the Rabbis used is less than ½ a second too long each month. At that rate, the time of the *molad* moves ahead by almost six seconds a year, one minute every ten years, and one hour every 600+ years. In a few thousand years this may become consequential. For purists, the sum, over an extended period, of the differences between the *molad* and the actual conjunction no longer averages to zero. While that arithmetic result is a tad inelegant, it is not troubling, and could be easily corrected if needed.

The length of the year suffers from two issues. Given a very slightly longer assumed length of the month, the resulting inaccuracy in the length of the year would be entirely inconsequential. More consequential is the imprecision that results from the slight inaccuracy in the Metonic equation. (The length of 19 years equals slightly ***less*** than the length of 235 average months.) That inaccuracy results in the solar year being approximately six minutes short on average over the course of a Metonic cycle. That adds up much more rapidly: one hour every ten years and just under one full day every 240 years. Instead of occurring towards the beginning of the spring, in about 10,000 years Pesah will be celebrated towards the middle of the spring. (Note that something similar happened even when the calendar was set by a *beit din* when they added an additional month in successive years.) Well before that, in some 5,000 years, the Rabbis will have to convene and agree to drop the 13th month of some designated year.

If we were willing to choose a longer than 19-year cycle, we could do better. Computer scientists have created a near-perfect cycle, over 6,000 years in length. However, while our method is not absolutely precise, for the time being, we are doing just fine.

Rav Soloveitchik *zt"l* delivered many *shiurim* describing the halakhic basis for the calendar now in use. In various contexts, he implied that precise alignment with astronomical reality takes a second seat to acceptance by Jewish practice. He further stressed that the courts and rabbinic leaders were acting not in their own right, but as representatives of the Jewish people ("*Keviat Moadim al pi Reyiah Ve-heshbon*" in *Kovetz Hidushei Torah*; *Shiurim Le-zekher Aba Mari z"l, "Keriat ha-Torah Ba-moadim"*). Our adherence to this remarkable Rabbinic calendar, not absolute cosmological precision, is its ultimate basis for legitimacy.

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Mysticism and its Alternatives: Rethinking Maimonides[1]

David Fried

Introduction

For many, the name Maimonides (1138-1204) is synonymous with rationalism: an alternative vision of Judaism for those who did not connect with the mysticism that became popular in many Jewish communities in subsequent centuries. A thorough look at Maimonides' writings, however, along with some recent scholarship, reveals that the reality is far more complex.

Menachem Kellner authored an entire book on the topic of Maimonides' relationship with mysticism.[2] Kellner argues that not only did Maimonides' philosophy differ fundamentally from that of the mystics, but he was also consciously polemicizing against the nascent mystical trends of his day. On issue after issue (holiness, ritual purity and impurity, the Hebrew language, and Jews and non-Jews), he demonstrates how Maimonides sought to replace enchanted, mystical understandings of these notions with rational, social-halakhic conceptions. His argument can be summed up in a line he quotes from the late Isadore Twersky, who asserted that Maimonides expressed "consistent opposition to hypostasized entities endowed with intrinsic sanctity."[3] Kellner lays out the philosophical basic for this view as follows:

> Maimonides sought for a universe with as few entities as possible. Indeed, as he says in the second chapter of the *Mishneh Torah*, everything in the created universe can be resolved into one of three classes of entities: those composed of matter and form and subject to generation and corruption, those composed of matter and form and not subject to generation and corruption, and those composed of form only. This tripartite division leaves no room for the multifarious denizens of the universe so beloved of ancient Jewish mysticism: angels and demons, forces, powers, occult properties (*segulot*), all those aspects of the cosmos which we today would lump together under the rubric 'supernatural'. For Maimonides, there is God and nature and nothing else…
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> Maimonides' economical universe is not simply a matter of philosophical temper; rather, it is an important religious position as well. Judaism, Maimonides was convinced, 'depopulated the heavens,' and he was committed to battling efforts to repopulate them. But not just the heavens; Maimonides fought against a tendency to

[1] I wish to express gratitude to two people with whom I had short conversations in 2007 while studying in Yeshivat Har Etzion: first, to Rabbi Ezra Bick for introducing me to the idea of intellectual mysticism, and second, to Rabbi Menachem Leibtag for explaining the difference between a mystical worldview and an enchanted one. Their words stayed with me and no doubt influenced my desire to research this topic.

[2] Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006).

[3] Kellner, 2.

> attribute existence on some objective ontological plane to notions which, he was convinced, were best understood as names, not entities.[4]

Maimonides, thus presented, emerges as a somewhat tragic figure. As Moshe Idel writes:

> The rationalistic reconstructions of Judaism prompted, in turn, a powerful reaction wherein an amalgam of older traditions, including the same mystical, mythical, and magical elements, came to the surface in more overt and crystallized forms.[5]

Remarking on this, Kellner writes:

> Maimonides' failure to purify Judaism is, ironically, further demonstrated by the fact that it was his project which apparently brought about the crystallization of everything which he opposed in the form of kabbalah.[6]

I have no doubt of the correctness of Kellner's analysis that Maimonides was vehemently opposed to an enchanted view of the universe. This, however, cannot suffice as a thorough study of Maimonides' relationship with mysticism. While the enchanted universe was certainly a popular belief among Jewish mystics, it is hardly the only feature of mysticism, nor even a necessary one.[7] The first definition that Merriam-Webster offers for mysticism is "the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics."[8] Thus, if one has a mystical worldview (as opposed to one who may occasionally seek out mystical experience), the most essential feature is not an enchanted or magical view of the universe, but the idea that one can have a direct experience of the divine, and that such an experience represents the ultimate human perfection. To fully explore Maimonides' relationship with mysticism, then, we must address his beliefs about experiencing the divine.

Maimonides and Communion with God

For those of us who have been trained to view rationalism and mysticism as wholly different approaches to religion, our first instinct is to say that direct experience of Maimonides' utterly transcendent God would be impossible. We would assume that it is the philosophical understanding of God (or of what God isn't - see *Guide* 1:58-59), not the direct experience, which, for Maimonides represents the ultimate human perfection. Upon closer examination of Maimonides' words, though, it becomes evident that this assumption is not correct. To be

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[4] Kellner, 12.

[5] Quoted in Kellner, 8.

[6] Kellner, 18. This would create an interesting parallel with Maimonides' failure in the halakhic realm, where his attempt to homogenize Halakhah ironically led to even greater debate and divergence of opinion.

[7] Why those of a mystical bent often seem to be drawn to an enchanted worldview remains an open question. It may be mere historical accident, based on the particular circumstances in which these groups emerged. It may also be that the difficulty of cultivating direct mystical experience with a transcendent God led people seek out more relatable avenues that could induce mystical experience.

[8] "Mysticism." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mysticism.

sure, knowledge of God is the "Foundation of foundations and the pillar wisdom."[9] But it is the beginning, not the end, of human perfection. In *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, Maimonides writes:

> In what manner does one come to love and be in awe of Him [God]? When a person meditates upon His great and wondrous deeds and creations, and sees therein His great wisdom, which is without measure or bound - immediately he will come to love, praise, and glorify, and to desire a great desire to know the great Name,[10] as David said, "My soul thirsts for God, the living God." And as he thinks further about these things, immediately he will recoil backwards in awe and fear, realizing that he is but one small creation, lowly and dark, standing with his limited knowledge before the One who is of perfect knowledge. (2:2)

Human perfection begins with the intellectual knowledge of God, but the higher goal is not the knowledge itself but the experience of love and awe[11] brought about by meditation and reflection upon that knowledge. David Blumenthal refers to this as "intellectual mysticism."[12] It is intellectual in that rational philosophical study is a prerequisite for the love of God. One cannot meditate upon the idea of God if one does not know what God is. Or, as Maimonides himself writes, "in accordance with the knowledge, so is the love."[13] It is mystical, though, in that its ultimate goal is not intellectual but to meditate upon the idea of the divine; it is the experience produced by the knowledge, not the knowledge itself.

While his thesis is already evident in *Mishneh Torah*, Blumenthal's primary proof text is 3:51 of *Guide for the Perplexed*. There, Maimonides presents his famous palace metaphor in describing seven levels of human perfection. The sixth is that of individuals who have mastered the study of metaphysics. For those who have attained this penultimate level, Maimonides exhorts them to strive for the ultimate achievement in human perfection:

> …to concentrate all their thoughts in God. This is the worship peculiar to those who have acquired a knowledge of the highest truths; and the more they reflect on Him, and think of Him, the more are they engaged in His worship.

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[9] *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, 1:1. All *Mishneh Torah* translations are my own.

[10] That the desire mentioned here is an end in itself and not merely an impetus to greater philosophical study will be demonstrated clearly by the passages we will quote from the *Guide for the Perplexed*.

[11] Love and awe in this context are two sides of the same coin: the constant to and fro of seeking out communion with God leads one to realize the gulf that lies between the human and the divine. Maimonides describes Shir Ha-Shirim as an allegory for this experience. See *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 10:3.

[12] David Blumenthal, "Maimonides: Prayer, Worship, and Mysticism," in *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006), 96-114, available at http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/MaimMyst.html. Blumenthal analyzes the Arabic language carefully, looking for parallels with Islamic Sufi mysticism. Whether he is right in these claims is immaterial to our subject. The human perfection Maimonides describes in the sections Blumenthal addresses is clearly mystical in nature, regardless of whether or not the language is borrowed from or shares commonalities with other forms of mysticism.

[13] *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 10:6.

He later elaborates:

> You must know that even if you were the wisest man in respect to the true knowledge of God, you break the bond between you and God whenever you turn entirely your thoughts to the necessary food or any necessary business; you are then not with God, and He is not with you: for that relation between you and Him is actually interrupted in those moments.[14]

Indeed, the path that Maimonides advises to ascend from the sixth level to the seventh is clearly meditative, a training of the mind to dwell exclusively on God,[15] and not merely intellectual study:

> The first thing you must do is this: Turn your thoughts away from everything while you read Shema. Or during the *Tefillah*, and do not content yourself with being devout when you read the first verse of Shema, or the first paragraph of the prayer. When you have successfully practiced this for many years, try in reading the Law or listening to it, to have all your heart and all your thought occupied with understanding what you read or hear. After some time when you have mastered this, accustom yourself to have your mind free from all other thoughts when you read any portion of the other books of the prophets, or when you say any blessing; and to have your attention directed exclusively to the perception and the understanding of what you utter.[16]

According to Blumenthal, all this points "to the existence of a post-cognitive level of worship, one which could not be achieved without intellect but one which was 'after' it, which transcended it."

Even though Maimonides describes this seventh, and ultimate, level as that of the prophets, we should not think of it as something that requires divine intervention to achieve. Let us recall that for Maimonides, prophecy is the natural result of the perfection of the human intellectual, moral, and imaginative faculties. To be sure, God might withhold prophecy from one who is otherwise worthy, but it is the withholding of the prophecy in that case that Maimonides views as miraculous, not the prophecy itself (*Guide* 2:32). It is thus clear that while philosophical understanding is crucial for Maimonides, the higher goal is to be in a

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[14] Translations from the *Guide for the Perplexed* are taken from M. Friedlander, republished (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004).

[15] The idea of having our thoughts dwell exclusively on God is already described by Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 10:3.

[16] See Nahmanides' commentary on Deuteronomy 11:22, where he describes a similar process of training oneself to have one's thoughts dwell on God at all moments in order to fulfill the command to cling to God. In Chavel's footnotes to the *Torat Hayyim* Humash (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1993), 98, note 63, he quotes Ritva, who associates this view of Nahmanides with the opinion of Maimonides that we presented here. It is important to note, however, that Nahmanides does not mention mastery of metaphysics as a requirement to achieve this sort of mystical experience, which likely indicates a more intellectually democratic view of mysticism not reserved for the philosophical elites.

constant state of love and awe[17] of the divine. This experience would certainly meet the definition of mystical.

Maimonides and Mystical Union

Gideon Freudenthal goes a step beyond Blumenthal, contending that for Maimonides, the experience of the divine is not merely one of love and awe, but true *unio mystica*, mystical union with the divine.[18] According to Freudenthal, this notion, which is so controversial that Scholem and Idel debate whether any Jewish mystic actually believed in it,[19] has been hiding in plain sight the whole time in the words of Maimonides, the arch-rationalist.

This argument requires piecing together evidence from various places, but is rather straightforward. In *Guide* 1:68, Maimonides discusses his general theory of knowledge. An intellect that is not actively cognizing is merely a potential intellect. However, when one actively cognizes the form or essence of a thing, the form enters one's mind, and the intellect can be said to exist in actu, not merely in potential. Thus, Maimonides writes:

> Man, before comprehending a thing, comprehends it in potentia; when, however, he comprehends a thing, e.g., the form of a certain tree which is pointed out to him, when he abstracts its form from its substance, and reproduces the abstract form, an act performed by the intellect, he comprehends in reality, and the intellect which he has acquired in actuality, is the abstract form of the tree in man's mind. For in such a case the intellect is not a thing distinct from the thing comprehended.

The key point here is that the abstract form and the intellect actively cognizing it are one and the same.

We can now take Maimonides' general theory of knowledge back to 3:51, upon which Blumenthal based so many of his ideas. As we noted earlier, the ultimate goal is not merely to achieve an intellectual understanding of God, but to have one's thoughts actively dwell upon Him at every moment. This makes a great deal of sense in light of Maimonides' theory of knowledge as presented in 1:68. The intellect that understands the idea of God, but is not actively cognizing it, knows it only in potential. True knowledge occurs only during the moments when one is actively cognizing. It further follows that just as when we cognize the form of a tree our intellect becomes identical with the form of the tree, so too when cognizing the idea of God, our intellect becomes identical with Him. What more powerful expression of *unio mystica* could there be? Additionally, there is a key difference between

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[17] The aspect of awe is not emphasized in the *Guide* the way it is in *Mishneh Torah*. This might reflect the fact that the *Guide* was written for a more philosophically trained audience, who were likely to experience less of a sense of distance in their communion with God.

[18] Gideon Freudenthal, "The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon," in *Maimonides and His Heritage*, ed. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein et al. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 113-152.

[19] See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (New York: Schocken, 1941), 122-123; and Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 59-73. See also Scholem, 141, where he acknowledges a level of union with the divine present in the writings of Abraham Abulafia, yet goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Abulafia's view was rejected by all later Kabbalists. Even here, Scholem is very hesitant to call Abulafia's mysticism full *unio mystica*, insisting that, "to a certain extent, as we have seen, the visionary identifies himself with his Master; complete identification is neither achieved nor intended."

cognizing trees and cognizing God. Obviously, when cognizing the form of a tree, our intellect does not become a tree, for a physical tree is not the same as the ideal or form of the tree. Physical objects consist of matter that can reflect form only to greater or lesser degrees. God, on the other hand, does not consist of matter, and therefore the idea of God is not separate from the essence of God, as Maimonides said, both in *Guide* 1:68 and in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, "He [God] is the knower, He is the known, and He is the knowledge itself" (2:10).

Freudenthal uses the idea that when cognizing God (assuming, of course, a correct understanding), our intellect enters into a state of mystical union with the divine, to explain several other key ideas in Maimonidean thought. In *Guide* 3:17, Maimonides outlines his basic theory of divine providence, namely that each individual human being experiences divine providence proportionate to his or her level of intellectual perfection. In 3:51, he clarifies further that even one with a high degree of intellectual perfection experiences providence only during the moments when one is actively cognizing God. Based on what we have said, we can understand that providence is not an external reward that God gives to a human who has perfected himself or herself, but the natural result of an intellect in a state of mystical union with the divine.[20]

Freudenthal also uses this idea to explain Maimonides' theory of prophecy. As we said above, Maimonides views prophecy as a natural result of the perfection of the human intellectual, moral, and imaginative faculties. The intellect that is in a state of mystical union with the divine is able to apprehend certain truths that would not have been known through the senses alone. This purely intellectual prophecy was achieved only by Moses (*Guide* 2:35). Others, however, receive prophecies through the medium of an angel or the Active Intellect[21] (*Guide* 2:35; *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 7:1). Freudenthal refers to this as "an expression of the tension between the religious ideal and philosophical insight into the limitations of the human intellect."[22] For Maimonides, the angels, like the Active Intellect, are not independent beings with wills of their own. They are emanations, or Intelligences, of varying degrees, through which human beings can relate to the divine. Since the true essence of God is unknowable, the states of mystical union that we can achieve will naturally have degrees and levels that vary with our levels of comprehension. These avenues of experiencing the divine based on our different levels of comprehension are expressed through the language of angels or Intelligences.[23]

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[20] Freudenthal, "The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon," 120, 123. See also David Blumenthal, "Maimonides' Philosophic Mysticism," in *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion*, (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006), 128-151, available at http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/Maimonides'%20Philosophic%20Mysticism.htm. Blumenthal also connects providence with the mystical experience brought about by continuous contemplation of God.

[21] Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:3-8 and *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:6) explains that one of the uses of the term "angel" is the forms or intelligences, the most proximate to the human mind being the Active Intellect. This is the angel that he says merges with the mind of the prophet during a prophetic vision. I will thus use the terms angel and Intelligence interchangeably in discussing prophecy.

[22] Freudenthal, "The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon," 123-124.

[23] Elaborating further on this point, there is a tension in the *Guide* between describing God as the pure self-knowing intellect (1:68) and the more transcendent notion that nothing can be known of God's essence

A History (and Future) of Mystical Interpretations of Maimonides

Both Blumenthal and Freudenthal point out that mystical interpretations of Maimonides are nothing new. They abounded in the centuries immediately following Maimonides' death, before the practitioners of *Wissenschaft* forced on us the false dichotomy of mysticism versus rationalism.[24] Scholars of mysticism, starting with Scholem, missed the mysticism of Maimonides for similar reasons from the opposite side of the same false dichotomy. Scholem describes Abulafia's affinity for Maimonides as "astounding" and the notion of writing a mystical commentary on the *Guide* "curious."[25] This leads Blumenthal to comment:

(negative theology; 1:58-59). For an analysis of the roots of these two conceptions of God and their tensions within Islamic philosophy, see Sarah Pessin, "The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. (Spring 2016 Edition) available at https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/maimonides-islamic/.

From the vantage point of negative theology, pure intellect would need to be taken as an emanation of God, not the essence of God. Freudenthal could be reasonably critiqued for overemphasizing the former (God as pure intellect) at the expense of the latter (negative theology). If mystical union is a result of the identity of the intellect with the conceived object of knowledge, and even Moses could not conceive the true essence of God (*Guide* 1:54), then mystical union would seem to be impossible. Freudenthal answers this critique as follows: "since the Active Intellect is an emanation of God, closer to Him than anything terrestrial," it remains valid to talk about *unio mystica*, whether it is "unification with Him or with His proximal emanation" (Freudenthal, "The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon," 124). Whether or not one accepts the argument that this is still a legitimate expression of *unio mystica*, negative theology can still be consistent with powerful mystical communion. Maimonides writes, "each additional negative attribute you advance toward the knowledge of God, and you are nearer to it than he who does not negative" (*Guide* 1:59). Based on this, the continuous contemplation or meditation upon the idea of God described in 3:51 would consist of removing from a person's mind every possible intelligible one could possibly conceive. This process would be similar to what other mystics refer to as a meditation upon nothing, except that it is not nothing qua nothing, but the nothing who is the root of all being.

[24] Blumenthal refers to the "anti-mystical myopia" (Blumenthal, "Maimonides: Prayer, Worship, and Mysticism," note 2) of the *Wissenschaft* scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy. In another article, he elaborates:

> The reason for this curious omission [of mysticism from the scholarship on Maimonides] may lie in the image of Maimonides projected by the presuppositions of past scholars. Maimonides, for nineteenth century German Jewry, was the rationalist par excellence, a kind of pre-Kantian Kant. On the other hand, "mysticism" was medieval, the antithesis of the Enlightenment. (David Blumenthal, "Maimonides' Intellectualist Mysticism and the Superiority of the Prophecy of Moses," in Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times, David Blumenthal, ed. (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 27-52, note 2. Available at http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/intellectualist%20mysticism.htm.)

Similarly, Freudenthal writes:

> But the objections to reading the Rambam as we have are based not on a refutation of what we have said but on the tacit assumption that Maimonides, as a rational philosopher, cannot be a thinker whose philosophy culminates in mysticism, the supposed opposite of rationality (Freudenthal, "The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon," 114).

As an example, he cites Hermann Cohen, who despite acknowledging the "magnificent climactic chapters of the *Guide*," nevertheless writes of "Maimonides' principal aversion not only to asceticism but to mysticism" (ibid.).

[25] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism,* 126.

> For Scholem, mysticism had to be dramatic. Merkavah mysticism had its hundreds of angels, its magic names, its celestial hymns, and so on... All of this is very dramatic, powerful. It has myth and pathos. Maimonides' mysticism has none of that. The black and white of knowledge fades into the gray of contemplation and then into the lighter shades of post- intellectual piety. There is no high drama here. Perhaps, too, Scholem's resistance to philosophic mysticism as a category ultimately stemmed from his rejection of the rationalism of the Reform and the Enlightenment in favor of a re-mythicization of Jewish life in a Zionist and supra-rational mode.[26]

Contrary to Scholem, Adam Afterman maintains that Abulafia was legitimately building off Maimonides' philosophical system. In his recent book on the language of mystical union in Judaism, Afterman notes that Maimonides played a crucial role in the development of various mystical practices in early Kabbalah.[27] While, unlike Blumenthal and Freudenthal, Afterman declines to call Maimonides a mystic,[28] at the very least he gives lie to the notion presented by Kellner[29] and Idel that the relationship between Maimonides and the mystics was entirely antagonistic. That the most explicit description of *unio mystica* that Idel can find among Jewish mystics is in Abraham Abulafia's commentary on *Guide for the Perplexed*[30] should therefore come as no surprise.

Bringing our argument full circle, then, whether or not Freudenthal's arguments regarding *unio mystica* are convincing, I would contend that the evidence Blumenthal presents from *Guide* 3:51 suffices to legitimately term Maimonides a mystic. With this recognition, we may even suggest that the hidden views to which Maimonides refers in his *Introduction* may have been areas regarding which he agreed with the mystics. This would open many new possibilities in the understanding of Maimonides.

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[26] Blumenthal, "Maimonides: Prayer, Worship, and Mysticism," note 2.

[27] Adam Afterman, *"And They Shall be One Flesh": On the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 109.

[28] Afterman defines a mystic as one who actively promotes pursuing states of mystical union with God in this world. Thus, for him, Blumenthal's arguments do not qualify one as a mystic because they deal with communion with God rather than union. He rejects Freudenthal's claims as well because: a) Maimonides may have believed mystical union with God was only possible after death, and b) even if he believed mystical union with God was possible in this world, he did not actively promote its pursuit. For our purposes, I believe pursuing experiences of communion as well as union can both be considered mystical, and I am interested in showing that Maimonides' beliefs on ultimate human perfection were mystical in nature, whether or not he actively promoted their pursuit.

[29] The only reference Kellner makes to Blumenthal's arguments is in a footnote, where he writes, "I would like to avoid being drawn into a discussion of the extent to which Maimonides' intellectualism shades off into intellectualist mysticism" (Kellner, 89, note 10). It is astonishing that, in a book about Maimonides' relationship with mysticism, Kellner wants to avoid a discussion of such a key aspect of that relationship. In Blumenthal's review of Kellner's book, he writes, "In his rush to turn Maimonides into a hyper-rationalist, Kellner has missed addressing the religious, spiritual dimension of Maimonides' worldview" (David Blumenthal, "M. Kellner, Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism," Reviews in Religion and Theology, 14:2 (2007) 253-257, available at: http://www.js.emory.edu/BLUMENTHAL/Kellner.htm).

[30] Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 62.

Epilogue: Alternatives to Mysticism - Rethinking Ha-Levi

If even Maimonides is a mystic, are there any medieval precedents for a non-mystical view of Judaism? Ironically, the most non-mystical understanding of religion might be found in Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's *Kuzari*.

This assertion surely comes as a surprise to anyone who has read Kellner's book, wherein he repeatedly uses *Kuzari* as a paradigm of proto-kabbalistic, pre-Maimonidean Jewish mysticism. Kellner is by no means the first to interpret *Kuzari* in this fashion, but Kellner's is a fundamentally flawed understanding of the work. To be sure, *Kuzari*'s understanding of the nature of things, such as the holiness of the Jewish people or the Land of Israel, was more enchanted than that of Maimonides. This, as stated, was the major thrust of Kellner's book, so it makes sense that he sees Ha-Levi as a mystic. *Kuzari*'s ideas on this topic, however, have always struck me as more "biologistic" than enchanted, to borrow a phrase from Steven Schwarzchild.[31] For example, *Kuzari* famously compares the potential for religious achievement (when combined with human effort) in the Land of Israel to the potential for certain fields to grow better grapes.[32] This analogy makes it sound as though he is describing a natural property of the land, not a supernatural one. Regardless, as discussed, the enchanted worldview is not the essential feature of mysticism, nor the essential feature of the philosophy of *Kuzari*. As we did with Maimonides, we must look for *Kuzari*'s view on mystical experience.

Afterman points out[33] that *Kuzari* does contain a powerful description of the idea of mystical union:

> In the perfect person a light of divine nature, called Active Intellect, is with him, and its Passive Intellect is so closely connected therewith that both are but one. The person [of such perfection] thus observes that he is The Active Intellect himself, and that there is no difference between them.[34]

The problem with using this passage to call Ha-Levi a mystic is that it appears in the words of the philosopher, not the words of the Rabbi! Ha-Levi seems to see philosophy and mysticism as fundamentally intertwined, which makes sense, as he lived before the two began to be perceived as dichotomous.[35] His view on mysticism is essentially the same as his view on

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[31] Steven Schwarzchild, "Proselytism and Ethnicism in R. Yehudah HaLevy," in *Religionsgesprache im Mittelalter*, eds. Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewohner (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 27-41.

[32] *Kuzari* 2:10-14.

[33] Afterman, *"And They Shall be One Flesh": On the Language of Mystical Union in Judaism*, 107-108.

[34] *Kuzari* 1:2. Translations from *Kuzari* are from the Hartwig Hirschfield translation, 1905, available at: https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_Kuzari?lang=en. Slight changes have been made to make the English less archaic.

[35] A parallel may be found in Bahya Ibn Paquda's *Hovot ha-Levavot*, which begins with rational philosophical explanations of the unity of God and ends with language about mystical communion with God clearly borrowed from Islamic Sufi mystics. (See Afterman, *And They Shall be One Flesh,* 99-101.) In the eleventh century, this would not have been perceived as contradictory.

philosophy: it's a nice effort to try to come close to God for those who do not benefit from revelation, but now that we have revelation, we have no need for it. This is evident from the fourth section of the book. After explicating the meaning of the mystical *Sefer Yetzirah*, he writes:

> …this was Abraham's point of view when divine power and unity dawned upon him prior to the revelation accorded to him. As soon as this took place, he gave up all his speculations and only strove to gain favour of God, having ascertained what this was and how and where it could be obtained.[36]

The overall message of revelation, a superior source of truth to speculative philosophy or speculative mysticism[37], for *Kuzari*, is best summed up in the content of the king's dream: "Your way of thinking is pleasing to God, but not your way of acting."[38] Revelation teaches us that God cares more about how we act than what we think or feel, or, as Schwarzchild puts it, "The primacy of practical reason - that the world ought to be changed rather than merely understood, that philosophy is the search for virtue more than the search for truth, and that God's law rather than His quiddity is the concern of Judaism."[39] There could not be a more powerful rejection of the mystical approach to Judaism. Those looking for a non-mystical medieval Judaism would be wise to take another look at the *Kuzari*, while those whose souls crave mysticism, especially of the intellectual variety, would do well to reexamine Maimonides.

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[36] *Kuzari* 4:40.

[37] Yohanan Silman (*Bein Pilosof Le-Navi* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan, 1985), quoted in Michael Berger, "Toward a New Understanding of Judah Halevi's Kuzari." *The Journal of Religion*, 72:2 (1992): 210-228, available at: https://www.htf.cuni.cz/HTF-86-version1-Jehuda_ha_Levi_a_Kuzari.pdf.) argues that *Kuzari* shows evidence of an evolution of Ha-Levi's attitude towards philosophy. Parts that he wrote earlier seem to take a more enthusiastic view of the possibility of using philosophy to discover religious truths, whereas later parts seem to show greater skepticism about philosophy and reliance on history and revelation as greater sources of truth. Berger argues that Ha-Levi's growing antipathy to philosophy has to do not with not with an epistemic rejection of the use of reason but with the historical context of Jews in Spain devaluing religious observance in favor of the contemplative lifestyle. This would underscore the point we are making here that the essential feature of Ha-Levi's religious system is action and observance.

[38] *Kuzari*, Introduction.

[39] Schwarzchild, "Proselytism and Ethnicism in R. Yehudah HaLevy," 36-37.

Rav Hayyim and the Love of *Lernen*

Nati Helfgot

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In the decades before World War I, and more prominently in the interwar decades of the 1920s and 1930s, Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik's analytical method of Talmud study captured the imagination of students throughout the over thirty Lithuanian yeshivot. Rav Hayyim was one of the longtime heads of the Etz Hayyim Yeshiva in Volozhin. Marked by its emphasis on Rambam's codes, Rav Hayyim's revolutionary method of Talmud study came to be known as the "Brisker method," owing to Rav Hayyim's tenure in Brisk (today Brest in Belarus) during the last 25 years of his life.

All of this is well-known to modern day students of Talmud. However, it is somewhat challenging to gauge the enthusiastic reception of Rav Hayyim's intellectual Talmud revolution. Rav Hayyim did not publish anything in his lifetime. The impact of his teaching was due to the spread of his Torah and methodology by key students who later emerged as *roshei yeshiva* in various institutions during this period. Many of his insights were transmitted orally from one generation of students to the next and spread throughout the yeshiva world, creating a living tradition that extended far beyond Rav Hayyim's demise.

In addition, in the interwar years, groups of advanced students from leading yeshivot such as Slabodka near Kovno, Mir and Kletsk and Kaminetz began attending a special learning circle in Brisk led by Rav Hayyim's son, Rabbi Yitzhak Zev Soloveitchik. The so-called Brisker Rav assumed the mantle of his father's rabbinate. These prominent students would spend a few months studying with the Brisker Rav, imbibing the methodology and many Torah expositions of his distinguished father. Then, they would returned to their home institutions to share and disseminate the Torah of Brisk.

It was in the aftermath of those experiences that various yeshiva students began transcribing short Torah essays in Rav Hayyim's name. These were eventually replicated by mimeographed stencils and spread throughout the yeshiva world. These short bits of Torah were recorded from memory, unauthorized by the Soloveitchik family at the time, and, though they gained wide dissemination in yeshiva circles, may have contained errors of transmission. (In the Brisker yeshivot of Jerusalem, the practice is not to use these writings.)

In the years after Rav Hayyim's death, his family and prominent students such as Rabbi Boruch Ber Leibowitz, the Rosh Yeshiva in Kaminetz, began the process of publishing an authorized edition of Rav Hayyim's novellae on the Talmud and the Rambam. On April 7, 1927, Rabbi Leibowitz sent a letter in elegant rabbinic Hebrew to Rabbi Aharon Teitelbaum, secretary of the Central Relief Committee (an Orthodox organization founded during WWI

to provide aid to individuals and yeshivot). In the letter, Rabbi Leibowitz requested that the committee allocate $600 to enable the Brisker Rav and his brother, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, to publish their father's novellae which were by then ready for publication.

Towards the end of the letter, Rabbi Leibowitz departed from his prose, waxing poetic—suffused with biblical and rabbinic allusions—over his excitement over the possibility that his master's teachings will see the light of day. Below is Rabbi Leibowitz's words and my translation of the short poem:

כי אז תהיה אורה ושמחה ליהודים
כל השערים המצוינים בהלכה יאירו ויפתחו לרווחה
וכל סתום וחתום וכל קשר תעודה יותרו
כאיל תערוג על אפיקי מים כן תערוג נפש תלמיד על רב. ישיש עם צורב
ששה יתכסו בטלית אחד לשמוע דברי תורת רבינו זיע"א
לדור דורים בנים אשר יולדו ממקור ישראל כולם
גם עוברים במעי אמן יפתחו פיהם כבשירה על הים
כדבש מסלע ישבעו מתורת רבינו דים

For then there will be light and joy to the Jewish people
All the illustrious gates of Halakha will shine and open wide
All that is hidden and secret and every bound source will be unlocked
As a deer longs for running streams, so does the soul of the student long for the master. The nation seared with pain shall rejoice
Six people will come under a single cloak to hear the words of our master, may his merit protect us, amen
For eternity, all Jewish children
Including even fetuses in the wombs of their mothers, will open their mouths as if to sing the song at the sea
As honey from the rock they will satiate themselves fully from the teachings of our master.

In 1936, Rav Hayyim's sons published the volume known to the Torah world as *Hiddushei Rabbeinu Chaim ha-Levi al ha-Rambam*. At the dedication of the new building for Rabbi Leibowitz's yeshiva in Kaminetz that took place a short while later in 1936, he reportedly led the parade in dancing while grasping his freshly minted copy of his beloved teacher's work in his bosom.

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