**U-Madua Lo Yeresem**

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In the past year a Rabbinic ban was placed on works of Jewish scholarship that attempt to reconcile Torah with modern scientific discovery. The ban has been accompanied by attacks on a rationalistic approach to Jewish hashkafa while demanding allegiance to a mystical approach. This mystical approach is most clearly articulated in the works of Ramban, while the approach that is to be rejected is that of Rambam. The thesis of this article is that Ramban was no less a rationalist than Rambam and that, were he alive today, he would be at the forefront of opposition to this ban.

> We are told of Moshe, 'he is firmly established in all my house,' that is his knowledge of all that makes up My universe is correct and firmly established. (Moreh Nevuchim 1:54)

**Do You Believe In Magic?**

The Fifth fundamental [of faith] is that it is Him, The One On High alone whom it is proper to serve and elevate and publicize His greatness. And we do not do this to any that is below Him in existence from the angels and stars or spheres or elements or anything composed from them, for all of them act only by means of their nature and have no power and no choice but to do the will of Him On High, and they may not be made intermediaries to approach Him, but only directly to Him should all thoughts turn and all else should be abandoned. This is the prohibition of

idol worship, and most of the laws of the Torah come to protect against it. (Rambam’s Commentary to Mishnah, Introduction to 10th chapter of Sanhedrin)

Rambam’s very definition of *avoda zara* differs from that of Ramban, who describes it as a prohibition against “attributing אלקות, G-dliness, to anything but G-d” (*Hagahos* to *Sefer Hamitzvos - Lo Saaseh 5*). According to Rambam, it is much more. Just as the purpose of *avodas Hashem* is to bring man to a certainty of G-d’s existence and thus draw him close to His Creator, the prohibition of *avoda zara* is intended to stop man from creating obstacles to that connection. Rambam explains, as well, that no intermediary, no supernatural being or process, has any power to grant one’s requests. Belief in witchcraft “is false, and it is that which idolaters used to fool the peoples of the world so that they would follow after them. It is not proper for Israel who are wise to be drawn after this nonsense and to imagine that there is any efficacy in it.”

Belief in idolatry spread due the work of charlatans who were able to convince the gullible masses by the use of tricks that supernatural powers existed that could be harnessed for human advantage.
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וְלִשְׁתִּירֵהוּ יַעֲשֵׂה הַגָּדוֹל וְיַגְּדוֹל בְּעִצְרֵיהוּ הַגָּדוֹל וַיַּעֲשֵׂה הַגָּדוֹל וְיַגְּדוֹל בְּעִצְרֵיהוּ הַגָּדוֹל וַיַּעֲשֵׂה הַגָּדוֹל וְיַגְּדוֹל בְּעִצְרֵיהוּ הַגָּדוֹל וַיַּעֲשֵׂה הַגָּדוֹל וְיַגְּדוֹל בְּעִצְרֵיהוּ הַגָּדוֹל וַיַּעֲשֵׂה הַגָּדוֹל וְיַגְּדוֹל בְּעִצְרֵיהוּ Hillel in the Talmud (Gittin 59a)...

(See also Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:2 - סנהדרין חטיאי

However Rambam tells us that his evaluation of the efficacy of idol worship and witchcraft was not widely held.

Ramban is among the majority of his age who disagree with Rambam’s ridicule of the supernatural. He refers to Rambam’s opinion and rejects it as follows.

Ramban’s major objection to Rambam’s stance is the evidence of the science of his day. In an era when scientific understanding of physical phenomena was weak, observation seemed to confirm the power of the supernatural. Rambam’s position is, in the opinion of Ramban, “pious” denial, an unwillingness to accept the powers of witchcraft and the benefit that could be gained by idolatrous worship linked with these practices, merely because the Torah prohibited it.

On this issue, Ramban is adamant. While, according to Rambam, the chartumei mitzrayim were charlatans, probably possessing some scientific knowledge that aided them in their tricks, Ramban considered them masters of the ancient wisdoms and he consulted...
with the previous sentence when trying to analyze why their predecessors felt that they had seen גנים אלקים when was produced.

Many believe that the powers of witchcraft existed in Biblical times but disappeared with the decline of גנים זרה. However, this is not Ramban’s position. Ramban is convinced of this belief because he sees that in his own time these powers still exist. He concludes that the use of שדים is permitted, even though other types of occult practices are prohibited in the Torah because he knows it is common practice among Jews to use שדים.

But Ramban is insistent in his stand, not only because the מיקרא seems to support it and because he has scientific evidence to back it up, but also because belief in the supernatural is philosophic proof to back up ברייה השעילה.
According to Ramban, the Egyptian sorcerers were an honest and educated group, much to be preferred over the philosophers of Greece, who were evil. The sorcerers were much closer to the truth for they had command over the science of the supernatural and thus understood that the world came into being through creation. Ramban, here, will not even allow himself to mention the name of Aristotle -

According to Rambam, it was the soothsayers who were the liars, while Ramban held that it was Aristotle who was the liar, denying what everyone knew and what Ramban himself has witnessed personally. It seems that Ramban sees as Aristotle's motivation for his falsehood, the goal of divorcing the earth from any supernatural power and hence from the Creator. Aristotle can't admit to magic because that opens the door to belief in a Creator.

In ancient times, continues Ramban, none doubted the power of the supernatural. Moshe Rabbenu learned the 49 wisdoms and "Gdolei Malkh Shamay echel vetashkef (הגדת רבי צבי פרוש החכמה של משיח)" Shlomo Hamelech was expert in the magic of Egypt and the nichush of the East (Ramban's Introduction to Commentary on the Torah). Ramban considers magic the superior science, the "spiritual" wisdom.

Even the philosophers, claims Ramban, believe to some extent in the power of the supernatural. Indeed, Ibn Ezra rejects sorcery but believes in astrology as science - just as Isaac Newton did - and hence sees the Urim Ve'Tumim as a quasi-scientific device capable of divining truth. (See Ibn Ezra, Pirush Ha'Aruch, Shemos
But not all philosophers of the time were so inclined. Rambam knew even then that astrology is a false science and tzuros do not capture וודבור רוח.

Aristotle, according to Ramban, was ignorant of the ancient “spiritual” sciences. He came from a nation lacking a mesora of the wisdom of Adam and Noach and only dealt with what was concrete. היונים קמווכאשר חכמה נחלוшлаוחדש עם הם, בא bahçe of time in that place and in every "ב"ר" לא הא营商 ופלספורה מתפיש.

As bad as the apikoresim of past generations had been, none was so evil as to deny the power of magic. Because Aristotle did so, he is considered to be particularly evil. Aristotle is truly not wise, for true wisdom is that of the spiritual sciences. The sciences of operated on such a high plane that they had been largely lost by Ramban’s days (Droshas Toras Hashem Temimah, pg 149) but the sciences that had a more concrete element still held sway.
There certainly is validity in studying the conduct of birds to predict weather and ascertain other physical phenomena, and the study of a person’s facial expressions as well as his body language will yield psychological insight to those who are properly trained. But these things are indeed matters of the occult and do not involve רוחות שריים. The study of נסרוטין, if defined as palm reading, crosses the line into the occult and hence the real and the imagined wisdoms are all contained within the same category in the mind of Ramban. (Perhaps נסרוטין could be handwriting analysis and if so Rav Sherira Gaon refers only to real wisdoms that were perhaps highly developed in ancient times.) Rambam himself (see Moreh Nevuchim II:37) allows that a person with perfection of the imaginative faculty but not the intellectual faculty can rise to the level of a קוסם, which apparently involves the intuitive or perhaps ESP powers that some scientists now believe in. It is indeed difficult to draw a line between the end of science and the beginning of the occult.

The primary value of other wisdoms - the concrete sciences, says Ramban, in agreement with Rambam (see introduction to Moreh Nevuchim) - is to be a vehicle, a ladder to the understanding of חכמה אלקית. But we see that in this they are a dismal failure.
Were Ramban alive today, his assessment of what the study of the natural sciences has to yield would certainly be different. From the days of Aristotle until his own, Ramban had seen little progress in the growth of human knowledge. But, as man unlocks the secrets of the atom and the human genome and grasps the vastness of outer space, we begin to understand what Rambam meant when he said:

Understanding the true sciences gives man some understanding of the genius of Creation and forms a link to the Creator. To Rambam the Torah’s prohibition of *avoda zara* and magic, was meant to prevent what was bad for the soul and also bad for the body. When he was queried by the scholars of Montpelier about the value of astrology, he responded as follows:

This is what lost us our kingdom and destroyed the Bais Hamikdash, and brought us to our present condition. Our forefathers sinned and thus vanished, because they found many books pertaining to the matters of astrology - which is at the heart of *avoda zara* as we explained in the laws of *avoda zara*. They erred and followed after it, believing that they were magnificent sciences, with great utility, and thus they did not involve themselves with learning the military sciences and principles of conquest but chose to believe that the astrology would suffice [for their protection]. This is why the prophets called them ignorant and foolish. Indeed they were fools, following after that which has no
Belief in the supernatural and the superstitions is belief in falsehood and thus harmful to the soul. Acting according to these beliefs is foolish and self-destructive. Rationality is an essential element of the Torah's teaching and the rejection of superstition is in itself a means of bringing Israel and the world closer to G-d, while also advancing their material prosperity. In fact, the advancement of material prosperity was an important factor in Rambam’s religious vision.

In the days of Moshiach ... nothing will change in nature from how it is now, except that kingship will return to Israel, and in the words of the Chachamim ‘there is nothing between this world and the days of Moshiach but the servitude to other kingships,’ and in those days there will still be the weak and the strong, but man’s parnassah will come much more easily, until the point that when a man does a minor task it will produce major results and this is what they meant by saying ‘The land of Israel is destined to bring forth cakes and silk garments.’ (Pirush Hamishnayos, 10th chapter Sanhedrin)

Chazal and Rambam foresaw the technological revolution that would accompany the unlocking of the secrets of nature. The utopian world of ימי המשיח will be facilitated by the scientific progress that will allow man to spend most of his time in study. (See also Hilchos Teshuva 8:6.) But so long as man looked to the “spiritual” sciences, so valued by Ramban, to fulfill his needs, he was doomed to stagnation in both the spiritual and material realm.
Hashgacha and the Laws of Nature

Ramban elaborates on this science of the supernatural of which he is so convinced:

According to Ramban, G-d only forbade us to use the wisdom of astrology because of the Torah’s command  "You should be whole with the L-rd your G-d,” which he held was a principle that constituted one of the 613 mitzvos. (See Hagahos to Sefer Hamtizvos, added Aseh 8.) Even though G-d made what we consider the supernatural part of nature, governed by its own set of magical rules, nevertheless, Israel was not to avail itself of it. The stars and constellations govern the rest of the world but G-d took Avraham and offered him the alternative of being governed directly by G-d. (See Perush HaRamban Al Hatora, Breshis 17:1.) For Israel, all the natural laws and supernatural laws would be suspended and G-d’s salvation or destruction would come according to their merits. In fact:
No man has a portion in the Torah of Moshe Rabbeenu unless he believes that all that happens to us is miraculous with no presence of the rules of nature at all, both in the case of the community and the individual. 

(Perush HaRamban Al Hatora, Shemos 13:16)

Man, on the personal level, can choose to reject nature altogether:

אני הрапא - I am The L-rd your healer - therefore the saints in the days of prophecy, when they would fall sick because of their sins, would not seek out doctors but prophets. (Perush HaRamban Al Hatora, Vayikra 26:11)

This is Ramban’s concept of hashgacha, Divine Providence. The ideal is for man to live outside the laws of nature, under G-d’s constant hashgacha.

The cornerstone of Ramban’s philosophy is his attitude toward כשוף and欢快 is evidence that the concrete laws of nature are pliable (see above), and that man has the power to uproot these laws, but, nevertheless, is prohibited from using these mechanisms. There is a pure order, that is G-d’s will, and an unnatural order. The Torah commands us to maintain the pure order of things.
However, just as the pure order can be changed by interacting with the mezolot, for the descendants of Avraham it will be changed by interacting with G-d.

We are to work with תפלה and מצוות to control our fate, and our destiny is not governed by the rules of nature. Therefore, Ramban comments on the ideas of Rambam.

The Torah commands us not to consult with those who foresee with נחוש even though there is accuracy in these forecasts and they could protect us from danger. The gentiles are permitted to use it because it is not אודה צורה but we are expected to live on a higher plane:

Even those predictive sciences which are not specifically prohibited in the Torah, such as astrology, are still under a general
ban because of the mitzvah. One should not seek out what they have to say, but if a person should inadvertently become aware of impending doom by their means, the solution is prayer for it has the power to reverse what nature would normally bring. It has the power to change the rules of nature.

But if astrology indicates that a day is dangerous, an individual should follow the advice it gives.

Though Rambam is very strict regarding all forms of dependence on the occult, Ramban believes that we should interpret more leniently in these types of issues.

Ramban considers prohibiting the use of the supernatural altogether as too strict a position and a very serious imposition on the masses. The fact that the Torah prohibits us from using all these "spiritual" sciences, which Ramban considers the higher sciences, demonstrates that the Creator's expectation of us was that we reject the dominion of the laws of nature.

But as we noted above, Rambam sees in these laws of nature that Ramban asks us to reject, the key to drawing close to the Creator.

What is the path to coming to love and fear Him. When a man gives deep thought to His magnificent and
tremendous creations and discerns from them His genius that cannot be measured. (Mishnah Torah Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah 2:2)

Of G-d’s hashgacha Rambam explains:

Divine hashgacha in this lowly world only applies to the species of mankind ... and all the good and evil that befalls him is in accordance to what is fitting for him as it says ‘All his paths are judgment.’ (Devarim 32:4) But with regard to other living creatures and certainly growing things and the like, my view is like that of Aristotle. I do not believe that a specific leaf fell via an act of hashgacha, nor that a specific spider attacked a certain fly due to a Divine decree and due to His specific will ... but all this transpired by chance as Aristotle said. Divine Providence is connected, in my opinion, to Divine intellectual influence and to the species which is the recipient of that intellectual influence thereby becoming an intellectual being. Only such a being can be accompanied by Divine Providence, with all events of his life being a function of reward and punishment. Whereas the sinking of a ship with all aboard and the collapse of a roof on all inside a house is an act of nature, nevertheless it is the choice of the individual that will govern whether he will enter that house. This determination will be made according to the desires of the Divine, and consistent with the judgment due the individual. (Moreh Nevuchim III:17)

Man, made in the image of G-d, is capable of prophecy, of knowing the Divine Will, and even man who has not attained to that level still gains Divine guidance.

The degree of hashgacha that each individual attains is commensurate with the degree of Divine intellectual influence that he has attained. (Moreh Nevuchim III:18)

While Ramban believes that G-d changes nature day by day and moment by moment to accommodate the merits of His saints (see Ramban’s introduction to his commentary on Iyov), Rambam explains that all men maintain a connection to G-d constantly and will attain his guidance, hear His message, according to their
individual merit. But in this hashgacha, the laws of nature are not violated (Moreh Nevuchim III, 51).

Tefilla

Just as the understanding of Rambam and Ramban towards the supernatural is pivotal in determining their attitude towards hashgacha, so too does their understanding of hashgacha, in turn, determine their attitude towards tefilla.

Rambam states:

The concept of tefillah (תפילה) is described in the Torah as avodah, worship. The avodah of the sacrifices constitutes that avodah which primarily engages the components of the body, including the emotions. Tefillah is a higher form of worship because it is done via speech which is the expression of one’s “heart” which means a person’s essence, soul, intellect, that which makes him a אלizophל - “the image of G-d” (see Moreh Nevuchim III:32). Rambam, in his Sefer Hamitzvos lists tefillah as the fifth of the positive commands preceded only by the mitzvos of ידיעת ה', ייחוד ה', אהבת ה', and יראת ה'. The fulfillment of these first four mitzvos is humanity’s goal and man was created and the Torah was given so that man might fulfill them. Rambam’s placement of tefillah immediately after these four mitzvos is an expression of the centrality of this mitzvah to Judaism. This is the indispensable mitzvah for transforming man into an עבד ה', servant of G-d. The mitzvos of Yedias Hashem, Yieud Hashem, Ahava and Yirah are states of being for which we strive. Tefillah is the central vehicle for getting there.

While to Rambam this mitzvah is the most important action that the Torah commanded us to do, to Ramban there is no such mitzvah in the Torah.

The whole issue of tefillah is not an obligation at all, but it is the quality of the mercy of the Creator May He Be
Blessed that He listens and answers whenever we call to Him. (Hagahos on Sefer Hamitvos, mitzvos aseh 5)

Ramban does agree, however, that the Torah’s command of “When you go out to war in your land against the enemy who torments you, blow with your trumpets and be remembered before the L-rd your G-d” (Bamidbar 6:10) constitutes “a mitzva to respond to every calamity that befalls the community by crying out before G-d in prayer and to blow trumpets” (ibid). Rambam also lists this mitzvah, i.e., responding to specific hardships with זהקה by crying out. But he considers this a completely different mitzva which serves as the basis for the concept of fasting, and the description of this mitzva constitutes the introduction to Hilchos Taanis, The Laws of Fasting. We must recognize when calamity befalls us that it is a result of our actions. The calamity must spur us to evaluate how we came to this point and we must turn to G-d, begin a process of repentance, and ask for G-d’s forgiveness (Mishna Torah Hilchot Taanis 1:1-4).

According to Rambam, the mitzva of taanis applies in time of calamity; while the mitzva of tefillon is to be performed “every day.” Just as the most fundamental of the sacrifices is the המז - the sacrifice that is brought every day, so too is constancy the essential element of tefillon, the avoda of the heart. The tefillon morning, afternoon, and evening is meant to connect man to G-d, so that he will arrive at a state of כנני: I consider G-d always in my presence (see Moreh Nevuchim III, 51).

Ramban contends that tefilla is for one’s personal benefit, because G-d in His mercy responds to one’s prayers. The that guide human destiny in general, and Israel’s destiny specifically, is a direct function of tefilla and mitzvos (see quote above). But, Rambam never once in Hilchos Tefilla speaks of G-d answering prayers. In Hilchos Taanis Rambam says that man’s cries will lead to teshuva and bring about the removal of suffering because when man changes and draws closer to G-d the added hashgacha he receives will guide him to salvation. In Hilchos Tefillah even this statement is absent. Tefillah is avoda not merely בקשת, request. Like the avoda of sacrifices, tefillon is selfless dedication and devotion to G-d. The first bracha of bakasha indicates how tefilla transforms us. In it we ask for היות, wisdom. With this growth in understanding we draw closer to the Creator and hence His hashgacha upon us grows, and a byproduct of our avoda is our salvation. (This section is taken from the
introduction to *Encountering the Creator*, a study of divine providence and prayer in the works of Rambam. For a fuller understanding of these concepts, the reader is directed to that work.)

**Who is Right?**

Rashba was asked by a wise man of Montpelier whether he could make a lion of metal for the purpose of רפואה, and he permitted it - שלג מורה הרבทดลอง משה בר מחמם של היה מתרי תעשה ואין לו דוד ממננו במעיים. But when challenged on this *pesak* by a חכם from that place, he responds that he is out of his depth on this issue. He knows that Rambam forbids it and Ramban permits it.

The statement of Rambam that requires his analysis comes from the *Moreh Nevuchim*.

And to distance ourselves from all types of witchcraft we were warned against adopting any of the practices of the idolaters, even things connected with agriculture and cattle raising and the like. The prohibition includes all that they say helps which in fact does not make sense rationally, and that only works with להסגו, and this is included in חכמים call it הרשב - because it is a branch of magic since logic does not dictate it, and these practices lead to the performance of witchcraft which in turn is dependent on the stars, and hence demands the elevation of the stars and their worship. *Chazal* distinctly say ‘whatever is used as medicine’ is not included in הרשב - meaning, whatever rationality is accepted is permitted and all else is prohibited.... and do not question me because *Chazal* permitted the nail from a gallows and the tooth of a fox, for in those times they thought they had
been proven to be effective via their experimentation, and they used them as cures just as the hanging peony is used in the treatment of an epileptic, and dog dung for a swelled throat, and the vapors of vinegar and marcsa for hard swellings. For all things that have been proven to work via experimentation as these, even thought logic would not have suggested them, qualify as cures. (Moreh Nevuchim 3:37)

What Rambam is telling us is that since we have not plumbed the depths of medical understanding, we need not know why a cure works as long as study and experimentation prove that it does. He also tells us that the fox’s tooth was a valid cure in ancient times when “they thought” it worked. Clearly he implies that in his time, when knowledge of medicine was more sophisticated, it could no longer be used. In earlier times, faulty experimentation seemed to confirm the efficacy of something that was, in fact, useless. Likewise, what was acceptable in Rambam’s day, such as the “hanging peony,” would be rejected in modern days as superstition and categorized as הרמוארי. The supernatural is rejected and anything that claims to work via סגולה is unacceptable, including the metal lion.

Rashba suggests an alternate explanation to רדר סגולה תומא הרמוארי שלוש הסכנות. We are told to avoid all use of סגולה תומא הרמוארי of the gentiles for gaining any advantage because of תומא הרמוארי. Rather we should feel that through doing mitzvos we will be protected from harm. But should we be struck with disease, then all manner of cure, including those that work סגולה תומא הרמוארי are to be used with the caveat that in all means of cure שיא בלא שיפור וידע ספקות וassertInstanceOf תומא הרמוארי לא דא רוח ספקות 새로운 תומא הרמוארי לחתן אוספי ספקות וידע תומא הרמוארי לעת תומא הרמוארי חסידת ספקות וידע תומא הרמוארי לעת תומא הרמוארי. This conceptualization is similar to that of Ramban. A Jew must attempt to work on a higher level and expect his good health be secured by the performance of mitzvos, as a literal translation of the second parsha of Shema promises. But when illness strikes he must not eschew the cures that G-d put into nature even if these cures work סגולה תומא הרמוארי, unless he is a tzaddik who feels confident that G-d will save him. Ramban, was in fact a doctor, and in his medical practice used the wisdom of astrology. (See Azharas Shemiras Habrius, Kisvei HaRamban vol 1, pg 385.)
Rashba suggests, further, that it is not only for curing illness that we may use the forbidden arts but that if information is gained by the use of מט ifndef מט then it can be utilized when this information forecasts a state of danger from causes other than illness (ibid).

Rashba, again following the teachings of Ramban, leans towards the understanding that the supernatural workings of these “spiritual” sciences are philosophically akin to G-d’s supernatural salvation that is related to the performance of mitzvos.

Although one cannot use verses of Torah as a סגל and not even for רפואה, it is permitted to do so for protection from danger. Rambam, however, quotes this Gemara somewhat differently.
The שמות have supernatural powers greater than magic, but they work in irrational ways, just as magic does. However, Rambam rejects the concept of magical powers in the שמות as well. The concept of שמות with 42 and 72 letters represents various understandings of ייחוד השם. There are no magical powers in names but there is great spiritual growth in understanding what these various names tell us about the Creator (Moreh Nevuchim 1:62).

Rashba closes pretty much as he started, in a state of uncertainty. But, then in a postscript, he tells us what he considers the flaw in Rambam’s position and this, rather than the many Gemaras he quotes, is what moves him towards the position of Ramban. Rashba knows that Rambam will be able to answer any proofs that he has from the Gemara. Rambam explains that the statements of individual Chachomim which imply that there is truth to astrology have deeper interpretations (see Igros HaRambam, Shelot p. 488).
Rashba claims that there is really no difference between the rationality attached to the physical sciences and what Rambam would consider the occult. He proves this by looking at the magnet, the compass, and the philosopher's stone. Their workings are beyond human comprehension, based on a principle that the most brilliant of men cannot unravel. Its workings are those of the physical sciences and no different from the “spiritual” sciences in their rationality. This assessment would never be made by Rashba today now that electromagnetism is understood. Rambam recognized that magnetism belonged firmly in the grouping of the natural sciences and discussed (Moreh Nevuchim II:12) the science behind it. He understood that there is a clearly defined area called the natural sciences that are true and comprehensible, and a clearly defined area called the occult that the Torah banned, and is, in fact, nonsense. Nevertheless there is, between these two groups, a gray area that cannot be so easily identified, and only as science progresses can we progress in identifying where the line between the occult and science lies.

But to Rashba the distinction between real science and the occult was totally blurred, and even the most fundamental of scientific principles, magnetism, was viewed as the occult. To him, there was only one clearly defined grouping, not two. His evaluation was based upon the misapprehensions of his time and only because of this he sided with Ramban. Rashba was a rationalist, but...
in 13th-century Europe rationalism led one to believe in the occult. The Ralbag, as well, highly respected not only for his Torah, but for his scientific knowledge, felt compelled to explain that the workings of magnetism are dependent on סגלה. (See The Jews and the Sciences in the Middle Ages, Y. Tzvi Langermann, VI, Gersonides on the Magnet and the Heat of the Sun.) Four centuries later, Sir Isaac Newton was still trying to convince his fellow scientists that it is not “occult qualities” within individual objects that make them produce unique processes, but that general laws, with rules common to all matter, govern the workings of nature.

And the Aristotelians gave the Name of occult Qualities not to manifest Qualities, but to such Qualities only as they supposed to lie hid in bodies, and to be unknown causes of manifest effects: Such as would be the causes of gravity, and of magnetick and electrick attractions, and of fermentation, if we should suppose that the forces or actions arose from qualities unknown to us and incapable of being discovered and made manifest. Such occult qualities put a stop to the improvement of natural philosophy, and therefore of late years have been rejected.

To tell us that every species of thing is endowed with an occult specific Quality, by which it acts and produces manifest effects, is to tell us nothing: But to derive two or three general principles of motion from phenomena, and afterwards to tell us how the properties and actions of all corporeal things follow from these principles would be a very great step in philosophy. (Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light. 1704. Sir Isaac Newton. pp. 375-8)

Ramban, too, was a rationalist committed to the scientific method. When faced with the problem of determining what were the indications of an טמא עוף, he writes:
Ramban rejects the opinions of the senior scholars of Ashkenaz because his experimentation in zoology had proven them to be incorrect. We must accept what our eyes tell us, he concludes.

With regard to the rainbow he feels compelled to explain its nature based on the teaching of the Greeks, for he finds their evidence indisputable.

With regard to how a child is formed, Ramban feels it worthwhile to quote the opinions of the Greeks, even though they contradict those of Chazal.

Were Ramban alive today his eyes would tell him that Rambam’s views of the wisdoms were correct. (The Vilna Gaon’s [1720-1797] opinion on this matter (see Yoreh Deah 179:13) and the relevance of the Zohar will be the subject of a future essay.) As Rambam pointed out in his letter to the scholars of Montpelier, following the belief in the “spiritual” science of witchcraft is what held ancient societies back. Over time, as the Torah has succeeded in freeing the Western world from belief and reliance on the occult, a new age of progress has been ushered in and man is being drawn closer towards the coming of Moshiach. Rambam’s vision of והארץ והעיר והארץ ולכל הארץ is being fulfilled.

Rambam, somewhat astonishingly, says that the primary purpose of most the prohibitions of the Torah is to uproot אבדת.Zara. (See opening quote from Pirush Hamishnayos, and Moreh Nevuchim
III:29.) On the other hand he writes (Sefer Hatmitzvos, Aseh 187) that זרה was uprooted with the defeat of the Canaanites. Nevertheless, so many other mitzvos are necessary to remove the subsidiaries of avoda zara. These include belief in the occult and superstitions that Rambam lists in Hilchos Avoda Zara. Their hold has considerably lessened over the years but they still have strength, not only in the gentile world but in the Orthodox Jewish world as well. In recent years a story of a talking fish swept the religious world. Ramban, the doctor, the scientist would not have been amongst those believers. The story of a woman possessed by a dybbuk then held sway and many, many believed. Ramban the genius, in the 21st century, would not have been amongst those believers. Ramban, the rationalist, like Rambam, would have told us that these beliefs were rooted in avoda zara and damaging to the soul.

**Chazal and the Natural Sciences**

In telling us that in the days of Moshiach חlesai, Chazal speak of a future in which knowledge of the sciences will have blossomed, and ushered in great technological progress. The implication is obvious. They recognized that their knowledge of the natural sciences was limited and man’s knowledge in this area would grow with time and this growth in knowledge was integral to the coming of Moshiach. Rambam is quite explicit about this.

Do not ask of me to reconcile everything that they (Chazal) stated from science with the actual reality, for the science of those days was deficient, and they did not speak out of traditions from the prophets regarding these matters. *(Moreh Nevuchim 3:14)*

It is one of the ancient beliefs, both among the philosophers and other people, that the motions of the spheres produced mighty and fearful sounds... This belief is also widespread in our nation. Thus our Sages describe the greatness of the sound produced by the sun in the daily circuit in its orbit. The same description could be given of all heavenly bodies. Aristotle, however, rejects this, and holds that they produce no sounds. You will find his opinion in the book The Heavens and the World. You must not find it strange that Aristotle differs here from the
opinion of our Sages. The theory of the music of the spheres is connected with the theory of the motion of the stars in a fixed sphere, and our Sages have, in this astronomical question, abandoned their own theory in favor of the theory of others. Thus, it is distinctly stated, “The wise men of other nations have defeated the wise men of Israel.” It is quite right that our Sages have abandoned their own theory: for speculative matters every one treats according to the results of his own study, and every one accepts that which appears to him established by proof. (Moreh Nevuchim 2:8)

In fact, when Rambam says “they did not speak out of traditions from the prophets,” he implies that in the days of the prophets, there was a greater knowledge of science than in the days of Chazal. Therefore he explains:

Thus, there is agreement between Rambam and Ramban that there was an earlier period of advanced knowledge in the true sciences but they argue as to what these sciences were. Throughout history there were rises and declines in the state of learning and knowledge, and the state of learning varied in different areas of the world. For example, the building of the pyramids required advanced scientific knowledge that did not exist anywhere in the world in later centuries. But the analyses of the early Greeks were the beginning of a path of rediscovery that was destined to lead to the grasp of science that exists today, which is unprecedented and has the potential to bring with it the utopian vision that Chazal and Rambam saw. Our
prayers (shemona esrei) begin with a request for knowledge and end with the coming of the Moshiach and the building of the Bais Hamikdosh. This is the order that must be followed for Jewish destiny to be fulfilled. This contrasts with Ramban who, consistent with his thought, sees in the utopian days of Moshiach literal fulfillment of lions and lambs lying together in peace as a miraculous power of harmony takes hold (see Drosbas Toras Hasbem Temimah, p. 154).

Rambam foresaw (although he warns that no one can truly know what will happen in those days) the reestablishment of the Sanhedrin and semicha preceding the coming of Moshiach, and this, in turn, implies the reversal of the process that Chazal saw when they proclaimed תורת ישראל תשעתה תשכח. This is the environment that must exist before the Moshiach will come. Man’s growth in understanding via his scientific knowledge will be a stepping stone to this state, for a thorough understanding of the workings of the world are a prerequisite for prophecy.

Rambam not only foresaw the progress that would take place in the Western world but he was a major catalyst in making it happen.
In the Jewish world his impact was immediate, and while he writes that his views of rationality had almost no adherents in his day, Ramban, a generation later, refers to the “many” (רבים מהתחרונים) who promote this view. In the world, at large, Rambam’s influence was immense. “His position as one of the medical giants of history is indelibly recorded [and] the heritage of his great medical writings is being more and more appreciated.” (Rosner, F. (1965) Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). *Annal. Int. Med.* 62:373-375) Thomas Aquinas acknowledges the influence that “Rabbi Moshe” had upon him, and the Western world learned to balance faith and reason. (See for example, Jellinek, *Thomas von Aquino in der Jüdischen Literatur*, Leipsic, 1853; Haberman, Jacob *Maimonides and Aquinas: A Contemporary Appraisal*, KTAV Publishing House 1979.) Maimonides was a major influence on thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke whose work, in turn, served as the major influence in the philosophy of America’s founding fathers. (See *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis*, Leo Strauss; University of Chicago Press, 1996; *Living as Jews in Christian America*, Daniel Lapin, Jewish Action, Winter 2004.) The freedom and moral values of America is what made possible the great advances of the modern world, and these values are the values of the Torah, taught to the world most prominently by Rambam.

**Ramban and the Cherem**

In the years following Rambam’s death, a dispute between the Maimunists (mostly of Province) and anti-Maimunists (centered in France) ignited throughout Europe with each side placing a ban on the other. Incredibly, perhaps the most central issue over which Rambam was attacked was his insistence on G-d’s incorporeality and his proclamation that those who do not accept this are heretics. This should serve to remind us that while many people believe to this day that Rambam’s philosophy is tainted by Greek influence, it is his philosophy that is accepted by all practicing Jews when it comes to defining the fundamentals of our faith. His intellectual input in defining the nature of Judaism is profound. Those who argued with him in the 13th century, and apparently made up the majority of Jewish scholars, would have harnessed us with the mainstream view that G-d, *chas vesholom*, has a body. (But see Rav Kasher, *Torah Shlema*).
It is Ramban who rose up to defend Rambam’s works, and Rambam himself, from these attacks.

The great Ravad upon examining this book (Sefer Mada) has made no such comment that it be hidden. On the contrary, scholars who study it do not want to part with it. Ravad has written certain comments upon certain words of Rambam, but never has he charged him with disbelief in, or misstatement of any of the principles of the Torah. And if complaints are directed against Rambam’s teachings of incorporeality of G-d, this has a long line of tradition in the teachings of the prophets and Sages, Gaonim and Rabbis. You will find this view clearly set forth also in a work written by Rabbi Eleazar ben Yehuda of Worms. (Kisvei HaRamban vol. 1, pp. 331-351)

At first, Ramban called only for moderation and discussion. He suggested that a third party (the rabbis of Spain), although perhaps inferior in learning to the warring parties, be called upon to hear both sides and render a judgment. Ramban’s comments in his first letter, asking that a fair hearing of the views of both sides be presented before any cherem is proclaimed, were echoed in the calls made this past year when the works of Rabbi Nosson Slifkin were slapped with the accusation of heresy. While Ramban’s letter quieted matters for a while, the trial never came to pass and so Ramban wrote a second letter to the rabbis of France in an attempt to have them rescind their ban on the study of the Moreh Nevuchim and Sefer Mada.

Although Ramban is, in fact, the embodiment of the teachings of the Baalei Tosfos of France ("ᯭᯯᯮ ⓐ𬍤 ⓕ ويم") and although it is on the basis of his mystical bashkafah, that the followers of Rambam’s rationalist teachings are attacked now, it is he who rises up to defend Rambam and his works.

Do write me for what reason you have rendered your decision ... I have seen the clear decision of your holy gathering - the Rabbis and leaders of all of France - declaring the ban upon every person who dares contemplate upon the words in the books of Moreh
Nevuchim and Sefer Mada, your intention being that these books be hidden forever. But why have you declared the ban upon all communities, considering them all of one category, thus failing to give honor to the great Rabbi (Moshe ben Maimun) who built a fortress around the Talmud - a mighty fortress for the glory of G-d. It is he who has closed up the breach of the Sanctuary, and has restored it to its former glory. He has helped and defended the entire exile, beginning with Spain and other lands of the west, even to the east and the Land of Israel. How much knowledge which lay scattered he has gathered! How much learning he has increased! How much food he has given to the hungry, and counsel to the needy! ...

You (of France) have been taught reliance upon tradition from infancy; you have always been planted firmly in the house of the L-rd. But because of this, will you not recognize that it is he (Rambam) who has brought back the dwellers in the far ends of the earth to the fortress (Torah)? Were it not for his words and the teachings of his books by which they live, they would have long ago faltered on the path. Is it for you, O masters of the Talmud that he has toiled? What he did was to prepare a haven of refuge where one might flee for protection from the storms of the Greek philosophers, to save them from Aristotle and Galenus. Have you heard of their teachings? His books were not intended for you, O our masters. (ibid)

The words here issued by Ramban are almost identical to the statements made in defense of Rabbi Slifkin’s works, which seek to reconcile science and Torah, and which are aimed at the secularly educated, baalei teshuva and potential baalei teshuva. Rabbi Slifkin’s views, as he himself explains, are in fact based on the principles, and sometimes on the actual words of Rambam. Consequently thus those who have risen in his defense are in large measure followers of the thinking of Ramban. (Since the authors of the ban did not explain explicitly the heresies in Rabbi Slifkin’s work, we cannot be certain that there is no heresy in his work. Rabbi Slifkin, in fact, states his openness to the possibility that he may have made mistakes and stated things that should be removed. However, those defending the ban have made statements that contradict the philosophy of Rambam, and clearly imply that these are the issues which
precipitated the ban. It is these statements that are addressed in this article.

Ramban’s description of the claims of the attackers of Rambam matches, practically verbatim, the words of modern day machrimim.

It appears to you that in this sefer (Moreh Nevuchim), in its chapters and sections, for the purpose of רחוקים קרוב he diverged from the straight path, and in the footsteps of philosophy he followed and knocked on the door of science, and you find it difficult to accept how he attempts to refute his enemies with mere straw (ibid.)

One signatory of the Slifkin ban, HaRav HaGaon Rav Elya Ber Wachtfogel explains, “And he also writes that Chazal Hakedashim can err chas vesholom in worldly matters chas vesholom.” As we have seen above, it is certainly the position of Rambam that Chazal can err in matters of science and clearly Ramban would not disagree on this point. Harav Hagaon Rav Moshe Sternbuch takes issue, most explicitly, with the claim that the world may be greater than 6000 years old as scientific evidence suggests. Many people have claimed that this is not incompatible with the words of our Rabbis, since the first days of Creation - certainly the days before the sun and moon were put into rotation - were unlikely to have been actual 24-hour days. Rambam would certainly go along with evidence produced by modern scientists, for he states (Moreh Nevuchim 2:25) that he would have accepted Plato’s interpretation of העולם הקדומים had it been proven since it does not contradict any of the 13 ikarei haemunah. He would have interpreted parshas Breishis to be compatible with Plato if there was real proof for his position. Although Ramban claims the original days were 24 hours long, what we know about Ramban’s allegiance to scientific truth would lead us to believe that he too would have done as he always did, that is, accept the evidence of his own eyes. Rav Sternbuch says that the views among the Rabbis that support Rav Slifkin are “minority views that have been rejected or ignored.” In fact, these views are certainly those of Rambam, and those of any true student of Ramban.

Rav Sternbuch’s essay begins with the famous quote of Ramban, “A person does not have a portion in the Torah of Moshe unless he believes that everything that happens in this world is
miraculous.” In Rav Sternbuch’s view, because of this principle, all who try to explain the Torah so as to be compatible with scientific belief fall into Ramban’s category of non-believers. He sees evidence of this heresy in the desire to minimize the miraculous nature of events. In this statement, however, Rav Sternbuch is in direct contradiction to Ramban. Ramban states that although G-d constantly does things miraculously, it is G-d’s way to minimize miracles. For this reason Noach had to build as large an ark as he could, even though at the end, it would not be large enough to contain all the animals without the aid of a miracle. 

Since Ramban (see below) did not consider Rambam, the rationalist, to be without a “portion in the Torah of Moshe” we should understand (see Toras Hashem Temimah p. 154) that he considered Rambam’s view of hashgacha, which only operates on the actions of man, compatible with his view that all is miraculous. (See Ramban’s introduction to Sefer Iyov, Kisvei Ramban, vol. 1, p. 19, where he implies this.) And more than that, had Ramban lived in our time and seen, as Rambam did, the full evidence that magic is false and science is true, he would have, in all probability, accepted the thinking of Rambam, and he, too, would have been "למרעセット והדבר המברך המברך".

Ramban and Rambam

As we have seen, modern day attacks on religious scientists and rationalists are, in fact, attacks on the work of Rambam, and the general defense presented today is that of the Ramban. But Ramban differs from his modern day defenders in his character and in his confidence born of immense knowledge. We see this clearly as his defense of Rambam proceeds. Although Ramban begins his letter with great humility before the elders of France רדסו אומר ... וארי כנמלאו ואיני בושי ממלע" and at this time he is 37 years of age, this does not stop him from proclaiming later on:

ולמה פפילים צדק לא תחרו ממה על ספריך ולא תשלה רך
עונותל על פי אמריך לכל אמרות עבר כה
כאמרות ובאו אמור ויהי מילין ולא נשמע
לדעת כל קהלות דומע חמדן.
הרצאתם נחקי פleccion דבורים והראים לקנא אימא ושתאת נאמרין.

אמור לאשמע 앗 כי לאאמר והכלה שכנלכ远洋.
שכתתאת אפירת על היהיה הקודש וההוא, בכל גולת עירת
וספרה לא קס כמות.
המורדה בשור,深い כמות מורה.
בכל מימי חכמה יכק, וכל ספרי יכק...
ולא ברחרדג בכונה בעבד ולואוזים.
ואחרך לעיניכם כי לא אשא פrico איש, הלושב על הזה אפריר
וא urząd.
ואל אם לא אכתב אל הנגן וומרה אכון.
מדוע את הרב מאעשהו ופרוית עיזר תרשיםי,
ולהא שאלאה לעבר דרכ.
המאוריכים לשת, המפילים מליין, הנשיאים משל בער.
בוהלא הריב גنجاح, בכיעל תריסי.
בוחקל אמונתי, בועצם עםנותה, בגדלה יהוזי, בגדבה כפי.
במעשים הנפלאים, בדלי הנוראים.
בחייתו היראת אלהים דבק ווישק, בתצליח נישק.