

## *Maimonides on the Messianic Era: The Grand Finale of Olam Ke-Minhago Noheg*

By: JAMES A. DIAMOND

Moses Maimonides's vision of the messianic era expresses a universal utopian ideal toward which in a certain sense his entire philosophical, theological, and halakhic oeuvre aims at realizing. Within that vision, politics on the particular plane of Jewish national existence play a central role in achieving that ideal. Particularly significant is its relevance on a micro-level to contemporary questions related to the reestablishment of a modern Jewish state, and on a macro-level for humanity as a whole spiritually, culturally, and last, but not least, physically. Among the medievals, Judah Ha-Levi is most associated legendarily with the return to Zion,<sup>1</sup> while Nahmanides, as opposed to Maimonides, famously counts settling the land of Israel as a formal mitzvah.<sup>2</sup> However, it is Moses Maimonides, thinking, leading, and writing in twelfth-century Egypt, geographically so

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Norman Stillman's assertion that "[t]he Kuzari was a glorification of rabbinic Judaism and an unabashed statement of nationalism, very much in the modern sense of the word," in *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> See Nahmanides's glosses to Maimonides's tabulation of the commandments, *Hasagot ha-Ramban in Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, ed. Shabse Frankel (New York: Cong. Benei Yosef, 1995), where he enumerates it as one of the positive *mitzvot* that Maimonides omitted. See the list compiled at p. 418, and also Nahmanides's commentary to Num. 33:53 where he asserts that the verse *And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it* constitutes a positive commandment.

---

James A. Diamond is the Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Chair of Jewish Studies at the University of Waterloo. His principal areas of study include biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, medieval Jewish thought and philosophy, Maimonides, and rabbinics. He has published widely on various areas of Jewish thought. His most recent books are *Jewish Theology Unbound*, published by Oxford University Press, and *Reinventing Maimonides in Contemporary Jewish Thought*, co-authored with Menachem Kellner (Littman Library).

close, yet so far, from the land of Israel,<sup>3</sup> who remains substantively far more critical to any such discussion. His systematic project of “demythologizing” Judaism, and draining it of what he considered superstitious and pagan incursions extend to, and culminate in, his messianic vision.<sup>4</sup> His messianic construct is inextricably tied to the “ingathering of the oppressed Jews,”<sup>5</sup> a primary aspiration of modern-day Zionism. Although the messianic era in Maimonides’s thought is a vast topic vigorously debated by both academic scholars and rabbis throughout the ages,<sup>6</sup> I wish here only to offer some further exploration of how Maimonides textually promotes an activist agenda regarding what he views as the essential accomplishments the messianic era will herald for Jews as a people.

The messianic leader is charged with the mission of restoring the monarchy, rebuilding the Temple, and reinstating a rule of Torah law, yet it is the political goal of returning Jews who have been subject to oppressive foreign regimes to the security and freedom of their own sovereign state that forms a centerpiece of Maimonides’s messianic vision. Aside from the repeated emphasis on this strictly historical dimension of the messianic period,<sup>7</sup> Maimonides’s formulation of its belief, among the thir-

---

<sup>3</sup> Puzzlingly, this flies in the face of his categorical ruling in his Code that prohibits settling in Egypt and his description of it as the most corrupt country in the world in *Mishneh Torah (MT), Kings*, 5:8. See Isadore Twersky, “Maimonides and Eretz Yisrael: Halakhic, Philosophic, and Historical Perspectives,” in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 257–290, note 2 at pp. 257–8.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Seeskin aptly characterizes Maimonidean messianism as “deflationary” while Menachem Kellner considers it a component of Maimonides’s programmatic “disenchantment” of the world. See Seeskin, *Jewish Messianic Thoughts in an Age of Despair* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 179–186 and Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation With Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2006), p. 294.

<sup>5</sup> *MT, Kings*, 11:1. ומקבץ נדחי ישראל.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Jacob Dienstag compiled a vast bibliography on the subject which is already outdated by some four decades! See his *Eschatology in Maimonidean Thought: Messianism, Resurrection, and the World to Come* (New York: Ktav, 1983), pp. 242–271. In the interim, scholarship has grown extensively and I apologize to all those who have contributed importantly to the topic but I have not been able to cite here within the limited scope of this article.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to that mentioned in note 5 see also 11:4 that lists it as one of the necessary accomplishments establishing his messianic legitimacy, אם עשה והצליח, ונצח כל האומות שסביביו, ובנה מקדש במקומו וקבץ נדחי ישראל – הרי זה משיח בוודאי; בימי המלך המשיח כשתתיישב ממלכתו ויתקבצו אליו כל ישראל, *Kings*, 12:3; also Jesus’s failure to achieve this goal, and even causing further misery and dispersion for Jews, is proof positive against his messianic credentials שכל הנביאים דיברו שמישיח

teen foundational principles he developed as Judaism's credo, concentrates entirely on this facet of return and political sovereignty while remaining silent about the rebuilding of the Temple and forcible imposition of Torah law. Rather, nation building is critical, for "sovereignty will be re-established in, and there will be a return to Israel... and the center of the kingdom will be in Zion." That national project toward independence and sovereignty is to be realized in a wholly natural way, for "there will be no change in reality from the way it is at present except that there will be sovereignty in Israel." As is not uncommon for Maimonides,<sup>8</sup> he carves out his own creative account of the messianic period. This endorsement of just one Amoraic opinion entailed rejecting the literal sense of all the extraordinary and apocalyptic upheavals anticipated by the prophets and reading such prophecies as *The wolf shall dwell with lamb* etc. (Isa. 11:6–8)... and similar matters written regarding the messiah as parables (*meshalim*).<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere Maimonides admits that though he does not have any rabbinic authority in support of this metaphorical reading, reason which dictates "harmonizing the Law with what is intelligible and to regard all things as following a possible natural order" unless something is explicitly characterized as a miracle, compels him to champion a non-literal interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

---

(ibid.) גואל ישראל ומושיעם, ומקבץ נדחיהם ומחזק מצנתן; וזה גרם לאבד ישראל בחרב. Also, in *Iggeret Teiman*, "a descendant of Solomon who will gather our nation and our exiled people." Maimonides's naturalistic and historically incrementalist messianism underpins modern religious Zionism in all its various camps as Menachem Kellner states, "The messianic activism made possible by the naturalistic conception of the messianic advent is explicitly adopted by religious Zionism[.]" in "Messianic Postures in Israel Today," *Modern Judaism* 6:2 (1986), pp. 197–209, at p. 202.

<sup>8</sup> For Maimonides's creative ways of demythologizing halakhah throughout his Code, see Marc Shapiro, "Maimonidean Halakha and Superstition" in his *Studies in Maimonides and His Interpreters* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> *MT, Kings and Wars*, 12:1. Although Maimonides cites the opinion in 12:2 that *there will be no change in reality from the way it is at present except that there will be sovereignty in Israel* in the name of the "sages" אַמְרוּ חֲכָמִים אֵין בֵּין הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה לְיָמֵי הַמְּשִׁיחַ אֵלֶּיךָ "אֶמְרוּ חֲכָמִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים" (חֲכָמִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים). See also R. Joseph Karo's puzzlement regarding this in his *Kesef Mishneh*. Furthermore, Rava is surely on firm rabbinic authority in his repudiation of this metaphorical reading of the prophetic messianic prognostications. For a good survey of rabbinic sources pre- and post-dating Maimonides which oppose and struggle with his position, see B.Z. Benedict, "Aḥalta d-Geulah l-Or Mishnat ha-Rambam," (Heb.) *Torah She-be-al Peh* 30 (1969), pp. 81–91.

<sup>10</sup> See Hillel Fradkin's translation in Ralph Lerner, *Maimonides' Empire of Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000),

Finally, one of the primary goals of achieving Jewish sovereignty according to Maimonides, is freedom from foreign subjugation, “*the great advantage of that time is that we will be relieved of the oppression of wicked regimes.*”<sup>11</sup> Any discussion of the role of Jewish national sovereignty within the Maimonidean framework, or any Jewish intellectual framework for that matter, should pay heed to Isadore Twersky’s warning when he cautiously approached the same topic some two decades ago: “The attitude towards Eretz Israel raises fundamental problems concerning Jews’s national consciousness and historical image, and consequently demands maximum caution and meticulous analysis. It is no easy task to free oneself of the preconceived notions or deep-seated predilections, which do not necessarily stem from conclusions of disciplined study and scholarship.”<sup>12</sup> It is a daunting task indeed, and how successful one can ever be in neatly bifurcating “deep-seated predilections” from “disciplined study and scholarship” is a vexing question, especially when approaching such a profoundly existential issue, but it is particularly incumbent upon scholars to earnestly try.<sup>13</sup>

While the nationalistic component of Maimonides’s messianic conception is crucial to the geopolitical environment as a means toward the loftier end of nurturing a utopian climate of universal peace and harmony, the essence of its role is always vulnerable to being overcome by unbridled religious fervor and zealousness. Maimonides’s profound messianic vision anticipates elements which seem to be endemic to the collective human condition that might threaten its materialization such as vicissitudes of politics, conflict, secularism, technological advance, unbridled messianic

---

pp. 154–177, at p.167, and *Iggerot ha-Rambam* (Arabic and Hebrew trans.), ed. Yitzhak Sheilat (Ma’ale Adumim, Israel: Maaliyot Press, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 319–374, at pp. 360–361.

<sup>11</sup> “Introduction to *Perek Helek*,” in *Hakdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, ed. and Hebrew trans. Yitzhak Sheilat (Ma’ale Adumim: Maaliyot Press, 1992), p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> See his “Maimonides and Eretz Yisrael,” *supra*, p. 260. Ironically, Twersky’s very choice of the phrase *Eretz Yisrael*, considering its religiously loaded connotations, itself betrays certain predilections.

<sup>13</sup> For a good overview of the various causes of bias in historical scholarship as well as an argument “that personal bias can be largely overcome by a commitment to standards of rational historical inquiry,” see C. Behan McCullagh, “Bias in Historical Description, Interpretation, and Explanation,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 39:1 (Feb., 2000), pp. 39–66. For an empirically based scientific analysis that demonstrates the presence of ideological bias in what is purportedly objective scholarship, see Adam S. Chilton and Eric A. Posner, “An Empirical Study of Political Bias in Legal Scholarship,” *Coase-Sandor Institute for Law and Economics Working Paper no. 696*, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2478908>.

passions, and theologically driven supremacist currents. It thus provides a check on theological-political impulses lapsing into petty religious and ethnic chauvinism or otherworldly metaphysical utopianism.<sup>14</sup>

Since it culminates in a detailed messianic agenda, the overarching thrust of Maimonides's code of law, the *Mishneh Torah*, needs to be taken into account when examining his historical/political/philosophical/theological view of the messianic era. As a whole, the *Mishneh Torah* is far more than simply a stripped-down digest of all of Jewish law culled from its biblical and rabbinic antecedents. Isadore Twersky emphasized this feature of the Code, which weaves into its texture "the thread of intellectualization and spiritualization" evident in all his writings in a project that went far beyond a simple code of law bringing about "the unity of practice and concept, external observance and inner meaning, visible action and

---

<sup>14</sup> A good example of this stance that is diametrically opposed to the Maimonidean naturalist vision is espoused by R. Zvi Yehudah Kook (1891–1981), son of the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi, R. Abraham Isaac Kook, and leading exponent of religious redemptionist Zionism, who perceives the State of Israel as divine, a notion that extends to all facets of it including its military. The following assertion could not be more opposed to Maimonides's conception: "Part of this redemption is the conquest and settlement of the land. This is dictated by divine politics and no earthly politics can supersede it." As quoted by Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. M. Swirsky, J. Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), at p. 131, and see generally his discussion of messianic religious Zionism in ch. 3, pp. 79–144. Of course, in line with the *longue durée* of engagements with Maimonides in Jewish thought, that did not deter R. Kook and others from appropriating Maimonides in support of their positions. See, for example, Dov Schwartz, "Maimonides in Religious-Zionist Philosophy: Unity vs. Duality," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 385–408 and my "A Kabbalistic Reinvention of Maimonides' Legal Code: R. Abraham Isaac Kook's Commentary on *Sefer Ha-Mada*," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 11 (2012), pp. 345–384. There is an abundance of scholarship in Hebrew on the issue. For a good overview and references to much of the Hebrew scholarship, see Ella Belfer, "BeTzippiyat ha-Yeshuah ha-Shelemah: The Messianic Politics of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook and Rav Zvi Yehudah Kook," in *Tolerance, Dissent, and Democracy: Philosophical, Historical, and Halakhic Perspectives*, ed. Moshe Sokol (Northvale: Jason Aaronson, 2002), pp. 311–361. For a recent discussion that engages much of the scholarship that preceded it on this phenomenon of chauvinist, ontologically essentialist, religious messianism, see Shai Held, "What Zvi Yehudah Kook Wrought: The Theopolitical Radicalization of Religious Zionism," in *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism*, eds. Michael Morgan, Steven Weitzman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015) pp. 229–255.

invisible experience, *gufe Torah* and their foundations.”<sup>15</sup> The *Mishneh Torah* presents a hybrid of idealism and realism in its conception of the world, which in the end acknowledges the fruition of the national aspirations of a particular people as a medium of achieving universal ends.<sup>16</sup> Aside from a comprehensive and systematic presentation of halakhic statutes, it offers a grand jurisprudential/philosophical/political/social conception of Judaism and humanity in general<sup>17</sup> which, among other dimensions, recognizes Jews as constituents of both a global and a national village.

The *Mishneh Torah* opens with an assertion of a universal ideal, decidedly not a parochial law or a norm, of that which lies at the heart of all knowledge, “The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all science.”<sup>18</sup> There is neither a Jewish nor a Torah “foundation,” and no Jewish “science.” That foundation, or the ultimate truth in the universe, is

<sup>15</sup> See his *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 371. The question of how to classify the *Mishneh Torah* as a text in relationship to law has been recently incisively canvassed by Moshe Halbertal, but his introductory remarks are apropos my assertion that it is far more than a halakhic compendium: “Every line of the work is indeed a spectacular model of clarity, but the work overall is affected, from the outset, by a profound ambivalence that allows for strikingly varied understandings of its nature.” See “What Is the *Mishneh Torah*: On Codification and Ambivalence,” in *Maimonides After 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence* (Bethesda: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2007), pp. 81–111, at p. 82.

<sup>16</sup> For the idea of a “two-tiered system” consisting of ideal and real in the realm of halakhah, see Gerald Blidstein, “‘Ideal’ and ‘Real’ in Classical Jewish Political Theory: From the Talmud to Abarbanel,” in *The Quest for Utopia: Jewish Political Ideas and Institutions Through the Ages*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), pp. 41–66. Blidstein focuses on the wide discretionary powers allowed the judiciary and the monarch in ensuring an orderly society. For example, see a list of those in *MT*, *Sanhedrin* 24: 10–16. All those powers must be utilized only to promote the general ideals that the judiciary is meant to uphold, *ibid.* 24:17. A prime biblical illustration of ideal vs. real is the law of the king as stipulated in Deut. 17 and the “*mishpat ha-melekh* (practice [law] of the king)” outlined by Samuel in I Sam 8. On this topic, see Moshe Greenberg, “Biblical Attitudes toward Power: Ideal and Reality in Law and Prophets,” in *Religion and Law*, eds. E.B. Firmage et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pp. 101–112.

<sup>17</sup> A contrast with Joseph Karo’s *Shulhan Arukh*, the comprehensive code of Jewish law that usurped Maimonides’s *MT* in terms of acceptance and authority to this day, highlights this feature. As Isadore Twersky points out, the former is marked by an “austere functionality” in its “virtually complete elimination of ideology, theology and teleology,” that are endemic to the *MT*. (In “The Shulhan ‘Arukh: Enduring Code of Jewish Law,” *Judaism* 16:2 [1967], pp. 141–158, at p. 153.)

<sup>18</sup> *MT*, *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 1:1 יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות. Notably the Tetragrammaton is embedded in the *roshei teivot* of this formulation.

identified neither by the Tetragrammaton (*YHWH*), nor by *Elokim*, nor by any other divine epithet or cognomen that might denote a special, or worse, exclusive, relationship with one particular people, or even one that manifests its existence in the natural world or within history. It is a “*motzui rishon*,” a Prime Existent, an abstract formulation that is neither personally experienced nor worshipped in the traditional sense. Rather, it is universally accessible through reason, granted in whatever limited way, to the human, not Jewish, mind. As such it addresses the human “image of God,” identified at the beginning of Maimonides’s philosophical treatise *Guide of the Perplexed* as the human, not Jewish, intellect whose cultivation is an act of *imitatio dei* demanded of all human beings.<sup>19</sup> It is the Necessary Existence on whose existence all of existence depends, yet who exists independently of all of being.<sup>20</sup> In this way, its relationship to the world is defined cosmically, and not in terms of any limited geography that is part of that cosmos. It is not an object of what is traditionally considered pious devotion, but a ground of knowledge for all peoples who exercise that which constitutes their humanness.<sup>21</sup> Maimonides’s rendition of Adam’s experience vis-à-vis this knowledge in the Garden of Eden at the opening of his *Guide of the Perplexed* concerns the human, not Jewish, condition.

Maimonides’s universalist posture is evident by the striking shift first from the title of this first section in the “Book of Knowledge” (*Sefer ha-Mada*), *The Laws of the Foundations of the Torah*, not to what one might anticipate as some statement relating to precisely that parochially chosen for its heading, “Foundations of the Torah,” but rather to the ethnically, religiously, textually neutral *foundation of foundations*. Secondly, there is a prominent shift from the abridged listing of commandments that prefaces this first section, as every other, which identifies the object of the command “to know” as *eloha*, to the surprising object of “to know” in the very first sentence as *motzui rishon*.<sup>22</sup> It is not until the sixth paragraph that Maimonides normativizes this knowledge as a *mitzva*, or a particular norm binding

<sup>19</sup> See the edition of S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) hereinafter cited as *GP*, I:1, (p. 23), where the human endeavor of intellectual apprehension “is likened unto the apprehension of the deity.”

<sup>20</sup> On this conception of Necessary Existence, see Fazlur Rahman, “Ibn Sina’s Theory of the God-World Relationship,” in *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, ed. David Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), pp. 38–52.

<sup>21</sup> See *GP*, I:1 on the definition of “image of God (*tzelem*).”

<sup>22</sup> לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון vs לידע שיש שם אלוה.

only on a specific people.<sup>23</sup> Thus the content of this knowledge constitutes the core aim of philosophy qua philosophy, while at the same time its juridically sanctioned formulation transforms the act of philosophizing into a legal obligation for Jews qua Jews. All humanity qua humanity must acknowledge the final end of that which constitutes humanness, while that same end constitutes Jewishness only insofar as it is a norm. In other words, for pragmatic reasons, what is an abstract truth that must attract all human minds in its pursuit, needs to be anchored first in a narrower concrete framework of prescribed conduct incumbent on one people, in order to preserve and promote what should be a common human enterprise throughout history.

This dual human/Jewish enterprise that operates on both universal and national planes, carries through to Maimonides's own reconstructed *Heilsgeschichte* of biblical history. History rapidly follows a path of decline from its origins in the truth of monotheism to a point of near irreversible intellectual darkness until the advent of the patriarchal age. Abraham re-discovers monotheism but not as a retrieval of some ancestral religious cult. He reintroduces a lost philosophical truth that has been corrupted, obscured, promoted, and exploited precisely by religious cults and their priests. Importantly, Abraham arrives at these truths *sui generis*, “without a teacher, and without anyone to instruct him in anything.”<sup>24</sup> Abraham's philosoph-

---

<sup>23</sup> This observation sharpens what has previously been noted that “Israel” is absent from the initial four chapters of the code, appearing first only in chapter five since the subject matter of the first four chapters is rationally accessible to all human beings. See, for example, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, “Ha-Rambam: Ha-Adam ha-Abrahami,” (Heb.) *Be-Terem* 211 (1955), pp. 20–22, published in English as “Maimonides: The Abrahamic Mind,” *Judaism* 6:2 (1957), pp. 148–154. My point is that even though the account of physics and metaphysics in the first four chapters are universal subjects of knowledge, the normative obligation to pursue that knowledge is binding only on Jews.

<sup>24</sup> *MT, Idolatry*, 1:3 ולא היה לו מלמד ולא מודיע דבר. As an archetype Abraham assumes many other guises in the Maimonidean corpus, but all shaped in this mold—as a prophet exemplifying the highest levels of prophecy short of Moses (*GP*, II:45, pp. 401–402); as the paradigmatic “lover” of God whose love is constituted by knowledge (*MT, Repentance*, 10:2); as a philosopher arriving independently at universal truths and teaching them universally (*GP*, II:38; *Iggeret Teiman*, 147); as an ethical model of the golden mean (*MT, Ethical Traits*, 1:7); of supererogatory nature (*MT, Mourning* 14:2); and the “father of all nations” and therefore of all converts (*MT, First Fruits*, 4:3). See Masha Turner's survey of all these Maimonidean variations of Abraham, “The Patriarch Abraham in Maimonidean Thought” (Heb.), in *The Faith of Abraham in Light of Interpretation Throughout the*

ical journey of discovery is completely divorced from familial, tribal, ethnic, or national loyalties; in other words, he had no *mesorab*. It was an unadulterated truth lost to the collective human mind, “so that the truth perished from their minds,”<sup>25</sup> and it was just such a truth he had autodidactically retrieved, “until he had attained the way of truth.”<sup>26</sup> Like the statelessness of his intellectual efforts and achievements, his mission to disseminate that truth recognized no borders, neither local nor international, “traveling, declaring, and assembling a nation from city to city and country to country.”<sup>27</sup> The new Abrahamic nation was a pot that melted its kaleidoscopic populace into a unity of philosophical truths.

However, it is critical to note that in Maimonides’s view of history and the devolution of monotheism into polytheism, politics is inextricably bound up with what moderns consider religion. “False prophets” (*nevei sheker*) who “fabricate” (*bada mi-libo*) and “priests” (*komrin*) who invent rites, and other charlatans (*kozvim aherim*) who speak in the name of heavenly bodies, hijack religious worship. They shore up their authority by ensuring that no one else can be privy to these “prophetic communications.” Though, ostensibly, the general public’s meager spiritual qualifications bar its access to them, in reality it is the chimerical nature of those “prophecies” that does so. Thus, the democratizing trend of a reason-based religion centered objectively on the fount of all truth is reversed toward its monopolization by shamans centered on their own self-declared unassailable authority to pontificate regarding “truths” to which they alone have access.

Abraham’s mission then of a truth that transcends borders attracts governmental ire because its message is politically subversive. Reasoned demonstration becomes overpowering, threatening the stability of the established regime by challenging the soundness of its official pagan ideology. Only state-sanctioned violence can quell its influence, and so like Socrates, “Once he wins over people by demonstration the king wants him dead.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the Abrahamic experiment in universalism ends up, because of political factors, constricted to its own geographical locale in Canaan in order to pursue its agenda, however practically limited in scope—“gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he came to the land

---

*Age*, ed. Moshe Hallamish, Hannah Kasher, and Yoḥanan Silman (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003), 143–154.

<sup>25</sup> שאבד האמת מדעתם.

<sup>26</sup> שהשיג דרך האמת.

<sup>27</sup> והיה מהלך וקורא ומקבץ העם מעיר לעיר ומממלכה לממלכה.

<sup>28</sup> כיון שגבר עליהם בראיותיו ביקש המלך להורגו.

of Canaan.”<sup>29</sup>

Statelessness and political subjugation to foreign powers according to the *Guide*, however, cause “languor and sadness,” which hamper intellectual clarity and block prophetic inspiration.<sup>30</sup> They cause a precipitous loss of whatever advances were made both scientifically and ethically during its period of national cohesion and integrity.<sup>31</sup> The implication is that, due to the exigencies of human nature, universal goals can only be achieved through particularistic means. Since Abraham’s mission to propagate truths was scuttled by political intrigue, the future reinstatement of that mission requires a political corrective for its success.

Abraham’s mission could not escape its political overtones since its universal message served to consolidate what paganism had fragmented by the variegated evolving cults that segregated peoples from each other rather than unifying them: “so different modes of worshipping figures became widespread throughout the world.”<sup>32</sup> Abraham’s truth reversed that political current, ultimately forging, not a religion, but a “nation that knows God,”<sup>33</sup> that is a polis bound by knowledge of that which is the foundation of all knowledge. But this historical interlude in the Code chronicles an ensuing phase of a seemingly inevitable collapse once again into paganism. The abstract universalism that held together Abraham’s polis lapses into that which it sought to remedy. The failure of the Abrahamic experiment necessitates the new Mosaic approach of prophecy, “once Moses exercised his prophetic functions,”<sup>34</sup> which promoted national particularism, “God chose Israel as His heritage,”<sup>35</sup> exclusive religious norms, “he crowned them with precepts,”<sup>36</sup> singular worship, “showed them the way to worship Him,”<sup>37</sup> and normative barriers distinguishing between those who are accepted members of the community and those who are excluded from it, “and how to deal with idolatry and those

---

<sup>29</sup> עד שהגיע לארץ כנען.

<sup>30</sup> GP, II:36, p. 373.

<sup>31</sup> GP, I:71, p. 175; II:11, p. 276.

<sup>32</sup> ופשט דבר זה בכל העולם לעבוד את הצורות בעבודות משונות זו מזו.

<sup>33</sup> ונעשית בעולם אומה שהיא יודעת את ה'.

<sup>34</sup> כיון שנתנבא משה.

<sup>35</sup> בחר ה' ישראל לנחלה.

<sup>36</sup> הכתירן במצות.

<sup>37</sup> הודיעם דרך עבודתו.

who go astray after it.”<sup>38</sup> History then mirrors precisely the structure of the Code’s initial formulation, which introduces a universal object of knowledge that is then grounded in a particularistic commandment. Likewise, intellectual history, and its political complement, evolved from an Abrahamic universalism, blind to private divine communication, exclusive norms, and national difference, to a Mosaic particularism consisting of commandments and divergent national interests. All we have just examined—philosophy, theology, history, jurisprudence—appears in what purports to be a legislative code!

The very end of the Code precisely parallels this pragmatic blend of universal idealism and religio/political particularism in its vision of the messianic era.<sup>39</sup> There are five overarching principles, which essentially inform that vision.

- 1) **The first is political.** The sole distinction between the messianic era and the historical continuum leading up to it is the relief from political oppression by the establishment of an autonomous Jewish state recognized as such by the community of nations; “there is no difference between This World and the Days of the Messiah except subservience to the kingdoms of the world alone.”<sup>40</sup>
- 2) **The second is ontological.** There will be no change in the natural order of the world nor any disruption of the laws of physics: “It should not occur to you that during the days of the Messiah a single thing from the ‘ways of the world’ will be canceled nor will there be something novel in the Creation. Rather, the world will continue in its customary way (*Olam ke-minhago nobeg*).”<sup>41</sup>
- 3) **The third is the political counterpart to this natural ontology,** conditioning the accomplishments of the messianic leader purely on political successes including the ingathering of oppressed Jews and explicitly ruling out the supernatural as a sign of his legitimacy: “It

---

<sup>38</sup> מה יהיה משפט עבודת כוכבים וכל הטועים אחריה. See *GP*, II:39, p. 379, which parallels this account whereby Abraham did not impose norms or *mitzvoth* but rather “assembled the people and called them by way of teaching and instruction to adhere to the truth he had grasped.”

<sup>39</sup> For a recent analysis of Maimonides’s “messianic universalism,” and especially on the symmetry between the beginning and end of the *MT*, see the final chapter of *Maimonides the Universalist: The Ethical Horizons of the Mishneh Torah*,” Menachem Kellner, David Gillis (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2020), at pp. 278–281.

<sup>40</sup> אין בין העולם הזה לימות המשיח אלא שיעבוד מלכיות בלבד.

<sup>41</sup> אל יעלה על הלב שבימות המשיח יבטל דבר ממנהגו של עולם או יהיה שם חידוש במעשה בראשית אלא עולם כמנהגו נוהג.

should not occur to you that the King Messiah must bring wondrous signs or perform marvels or invent new things or revive the dead or anything like what the fools say.”<sup>42</sup>

- 4) **The fourth is exegetical scepticism.** No interpretation of the meaning of biblical verses relating to the messianic period can be definitively determined until it actually materializes: “In the days of the King Messiah everyone will understand these parables and to what these matters were compared and to what was hinted.”<sup>43</sup>
- 5) **The fifth is theological/halakhic.** Because of its inherent indeterminacy the exact parameters and elements of this period do not constitute a fundamental principle of belief: “But regarding all these matters and similar, no one knows how it will be until it will be. For these matters were unclear to the Prophets. Even the Sages themselves did not have a Tradition regarding these matters and only could attempt to understand the verses. Thus, there were disagreements in these

<sup>42</sup> אל יעלה על דעתך שהמלך המשיח צריך לעשות אותות ומופתים, ומחדש דברים בעולם, או MT, *Kings and Their Wars*, 11:3. מהיה מתים, וכיוצא בדברים אלו שהטפשים אומרים. However, in his *Letter to the Jews of Yemen (Iggeret Teiman)*, Maimonides considers the performance of miracles an essential criterion of a messianic leader’s authenticity. This is a prime example to my mind of Haym Soloveitchik’s profound distinction between Maimonides’s responsa and letters as works informed by rhetoric and his Code of law which is a statement of ideal law in the abstract. See the debate between David Hartman and Haym Soloveitchik, and others dealing with inconsistencies between Maimonides’s responsa and his Code in H. Soloveitchik, “Maimonides’s ‘*Iggeret ha-Shemad*’: Law and Rhetoric,” in L. Landman (ed.), *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume* (New York, 1980), 281–319 and D. Hartman, “The Epistle on Martyrdom: Discussion,” in *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*, trans., Abraham Halkin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), pp. 46–90. See also Arye Strikovsky, “*Iggeret ha-Shemad la-Rambam: Halakhab o Retorika*,” in I. Varhaftig (ed.), *Minba le-Isb: Sefer Yovel for Rabbi Dolgin* (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 242–275.

For a recent reassessment of this debate, see Yair Lorberbaum, Haim Shapira, “Maimonides’s Epistle on Martyrdom in Light of Legal Philosophy,” *Dine Israel* (2008), 123–169. In this case, I believe that Soloveitchik’s characterization of the *Iggeret ha-Shemad* as a rhetorical work is equally apt for the letter to Yemen. Howard Kreisel expresses a similar opinion when he describes Maimonides’s stance in the *Iggeret Teiman* as constructed “to meet a severe social religious challenge... [and] provides an instructive example of how the change in the focus of Maimonides’s discussion of a topic in different contexts affects how he formulates his position” in his *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> ובימות המלך המשיח יודע לכל לאי זה דבר היה משל ומה ענין רמזו בהן.

matters. Nevertheless, neither the order that these events will occur nor their details are fundamental to the religion. Thus, a person must never busy himself with the Aggadot and not dwell on the Midrashim regarding these matters or similar issues. He must not make them dogma.”<sup>44</sup>

By excluding the precise nature and order of the unfolding and realization of the messianic era as a theoretical subject of contemplation whose particular details (הַנִּיחַ דְּבָרִים אֱלוֹ וְלֹא דְקְדוּקִיָּהוּ) constitute neither a fundamental principle of belief (עֵיקַר בְּדַת), nor an accepted tradition (קְבֻלָּה), nor are ascertainable by the normal rules of biblical interpretation (לְפִי הַכְרַע הַפְּסוּקִים), Maimonides brilliantly restricts the visionary focus purely on its natural, empirical, experiential, political dimensions. He thereby diverts anticipatory messianic longings toward the purely natural and political revolution that must precipitate it. For what other possible means could practically realize that vision?

Here it is important to note three opposing arguments against the view that Maimonidean messianism provides the ideological impetus for activist religious Zionism from across the spectrum of modern Jewish thought and why Maimonides resists their interpretations—an academic historian, a philosopher, and a rabbinic leader. The first is the renowned historian David Berger’s insistence that “despite the reasonableness of that position they are far from Maimonides’ position himself. Rambam counseled the readers of his works to wait.” He further states categorically

---

<sup>44</sup> כל אלו הדברים וכיוצא בהן לא ידע אדם איך יהיו עד שיהיו שדברים שתומין הן אצל הנביאים גם החכמים אין להם קבלה בדברים אלו אלא לפי הכרע הפסוקים ולפיכך יש להם מחלוקת בדברים אלו ועל כל פנים אין סדור הויית דברים אלו ולא דקדוקיהן עיקר בדת.

Ironically, Maimonides’s messianic skepticism provoked the proliferation of its adversarial view. As Gerson Cohen asserts, it “gave renewed stimulus to the traditionalists to add to the corpus of Spanish eschatological literature” (in his “Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sephardim,” in *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991], pp. 271–297, at p. 285). This is another example of how Maimonides’s rationalism was in a sense responsible for the growth of what it was opposed to such as mystical literature whose “masters of Jewish esoteric lore were incubated in the shadows of the great eagle” fueled as they were by opposition to Maimonides’s extreme naturalism. See Elliot Wolfson, “Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah,” in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204)—His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts*, ed. G. K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), 209–237, at p. 210.

that “messianic activism—even a measured kind—plays no role whatsoever in Maimonides’ thought...”<sup>45</sup> Too much emphasis however is placed on Maimonides’s phrasing that one should just “wait and believe in what we have generally explicated about it” (אלא מחכה ויאמין בכלל הדבר כמו) (שבארנו). Firstly, the Hebrew term “to wait” (חכה) has a wider semantic range than simply passivity or inactivity. Anticipate, or look forward to, rather than “wait” in the sense of sit back and do nothing, better captures its nuance in this context.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Maimonides directs that advice in opposition to all the various forms of theoretical thinking about the messiah, including delving into *aggadot* and *midrashim* about it, since they “contribute neither to the fear nor to the love of God.” Love and fear are in fact, according to Maimonides, those commandments that *are* grounded in theoretical thought and scientific understanding of the world.<sup>47</sup> He precisely formulates his prescription in order to avoid the theoretical that exclusively constitutes the commandments of fear and love of God, in favor of anticipating the national revival “we have generally explicated” in relation to the messianic period.

It is simply impossible for Maimonides’s natural account of the messianic period to ever materialize without the human efforts required to achieve it. His account assumes activism. It is difficult to imagine what other purpose Maimonides’s account would have if not to inspire some form of activism. Thus, on the subject of messianism, as with many others, Maimonides’s activist model is strikingly different than its counterpart represented by Judaism’s second most prominent medieval thinker (*rishon*), Moses Nahmanides. While in Maimonides’s model “the range of human responsibility is extensive,” the Nahmanidean one shifts the messianic catalyst to divine “cataclysmic intervention,” the final in a series of “discontinuous ruptures in history.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, what Maimonides

<sup>45</sup> See his “Some Ironic Consequences of Maimonides’s Rationalistic Messianism,” (Heb.) *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991), pp. 1–8 at p. 7 and p. 8, note 19.

<sup>46</sup> Marcus Jastrow translates this term which appears in the very Talmudic passage which considers both human and divine “waiting” for the messiah, as “anxiety,” i.e., we are *anxious* for the messiah, in his *Dictionary of the Talmudim, Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1971), p. 461. It is also important to note that the single biblical instance of this grammatical form (Isa. 30:18) (*yehakeh*) is interpreted by the medieval exegete David Kimhi as a transitive verb (*po’el yotze*) that takes an object, כלומר יבטיחכם שתחכו, לו לחננכם שעוד יחון אתכם, יחכה פעל יוצא.

<sup>47</sup> See *MT, Yesodei ha-Torah*, 2:2 and *Repentance*, 10:2.

<sup>48</sup> See David Hartman in “Maimonides’ Approach to Messianism and its Contemporary Implications,” *Da’at* 2–3 (1979), pp. 5–33, at p. 31, 33.

has done is to inspire political activism, the heart of which is state building, rather than mere thought and belief.<sup>49</sup>

Maimonides ensures this kind of engagement with the notion of a messianic age when he emphasizes its exclusively natural status precisely in that section of the Code where he discusses the ultimate reward of “life in the World to Come.” Enjoyment of the latter by those who qualify is perpetual and lacking nothing, while “the days of the messiah are *part of this world (olam ha-zeḥ)* and the world acts in its customary way except for the restoration of kingship to Israel.<sup>50</sup> Maimonides emphasizes the this-worldly nature of the messianic era because he is cognizant of the dangers of lapsing into quietism, when discussing future reward for present conduct that views the “World to Come” as the ultimate consequence of the good life. On its own, that wholly incorporeal world poses the danger of encouraging a life of pure contemplation, or that which most approximates “incorporeal” living in this world. He therefore accentuates the distinction between the “World to Come,” that exists independently of the natural world, and the messianic period which is an integral stage in the historical evolution of the natural world. One can only trustingly wait for the former, steeped in the ethereal contemplative realm that will merit it, while the concrete physical establishment of a viable Jewish polis must galvanize the latter.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> What I present here is in stark contrast to the clear delineation Aḥad Ha-Am draws between Maimonides the rationalist who grants the intellect a place of preeminence and the Maimonides who allocates no space for nationalism, asserting categorically that “he did not recognize any value to the principle of nationhood in the thought of Judaism” (כי לא היכיר יסוד הלאומי בתורת היהדות). I agree with Lawrence Kaplan who corrects this caricature of Maimonides’s thought, stating that the national motif in Maimonides’s thought “forms an integral and coherent part of his political philosophy and is ultimately of a piece with Maimonides’s philosophical commitment to the rule of reason” in “Shilton HaSekhel,” *HaShiloah* 15, issue 85–90 (1904), reprinted in English in *Basic Writings of Aḥad Ha-Am: Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic*, ed. Hans Kohn (New York: Herzl Press, 1962), pp. 228–288. See “Maimonides on the Singularity of the Jewish People,” *Da’at* 15 (1979) pp. v–xxvii, at p. xxvii, note 40.

<sup>50</sup> הטובה האחרונה שאין לה הפסק וגרעון הוא חיי העולם הבא אבל ימות המשיח הוא העולם הזה *MT, Repentance*, 9:2.

<sup>51</sup> There is tension between the dangers of both messianic passivism and activism expressed in Maimonides’s letters. In his *Iggeret Teiman*, he warns of the harm done to Jewish communities by messianic activism while in *Iggeret ha-Shemad* he deems an excessive passivity expressed as a defeatist acceptance of the status quo until the appearance of the Messiah “evil hearted, a vitiation of religion and commandments, and a great harm [or prohibition in another variant].” For a list of catastrophic messianic failures, see the former in *Iggerot ha-Rambam* (Arabic

The second is the philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz's opposing view, notable for two reasons. Firstly, he is one of the leading and influential Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, and secondly, I believe his position on this subject is a sophisticated example of "preconceived notions or deep-seated predilections" coloring one's conclusions, precisely what Isadore Twersky, cited at the beginning of this article, warned against. Because of his deep disdain for what he viewed as the current sacralization, and thus "idolization," of the political state by religious Zionists, he cites this precise source as proof that Maimonides's "vision of messianic redemption is not essential for his religion and faith."<sup>52</sup> He went as far as to draw its inessentiality's logical extreme conclusion that would vitiate a future historical messianic reality altogether, asserting, "The Messiah is essentially he who always will come, he is the eternal future. The Messiah who comes, the Messiah of the present, is invariably the false Messiah."<sup>53</sup> Firstly, however, the very structure and content of the Code militate forcefully against diminishing the messiah's importance for Judaism. Addressing the messianic vision initially in the *Laws of Repentance* and then returning to it a second time at the very end of the *Mishneh Torah*, or the Code's culmination, devoting two entire chapters to it, speaks volumes to the contrary, and attests to its utmost importance and essentiality. In fact, why would he even include anything related to messianism, a subject totally devoid of halakhic consequences in a halakhic code, when it could

---

and Hebrew trans.), ed. Yitzhak Sheilat, *supra*, vol. 1, pp. 161–162 and the latter, *ibid.*, p. 58. See Aviezer Ravitzky's discussion in his "To the Utmost Human Capacity: Maimonides and the Days of the Messiah," in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, *supra*, pp. 221–256, at pp. 240–241 and his insight that this wariness of both extremes expresses itself in the *MT* as well, "emphasizing the contingent factor within historical processes and negating any certain guarantees of Messianic success in advance of the fact" (p. 241). For an overview of various messianic pretenders throughout Jewish history preceding and subsequent to Maimonides's list, see Harris Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and especially his examination of the excerpt from *Iggeret Teiman* which enumerates various messianic failures in his time and previously at pp. 65–67.

<sup>52</sup> See *Ha-Rambam: Ha-Adam ha-Abrahami*, *supra*. See also Haim O. Rechnitzer, "Judaism and the Idea of the Law: Leo Strauss and Yeshayahu Leibowitz's Philosophical and Ideological Interpretations of Maimonides," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 79 (2008), pp. 165–191, esp. 188–191.

<sup>53</sup> See "Lishmah and Not-Lishmah" in Eliezer Goldman, ed., *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, trans. Goldman, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 73–74, originally published in Hebrew as Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Yahadut, Am Yehudi u-Medinat Yisrael* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1979).

easily have been dispensed with as it was by R. Joseph Karo's *Shulḥan Arukh*. Secondly, Leibowitz continues to argue in the very same breath that, although the two primary commandments of loving and fearing God seem to require only contemplation, it is clear to him that the world of action consisting of *mitzvot* and *halakhab* are of paramount concern to Maimonides and "only this type of worship binds man to true reality."<sup>54</sup> He bases this conclusion on the "fact" that it never escapes Maimonides "for an instant" that man "is not a separate intellect but rather an intellect that exists in matter and as a material existence he is destined to [a life of] conduct and action."<sup>55</sup> By this very same reasoning, one could forcefully argue for Maimonides's advocacy of an activist messianism. That is, it cannot solely be theorized about, but as a "material existence," human beings must bring about the messianic period by their own efforts. Contemplation alone can never succeed in realizing the messianic era envisioned at the end of the Code. That is precisely what Maimonides alludes to by excluding it from every area of pure speculation.<sup>56</sup>

The third is the Hasidic leader R. Yoel Teitelbaum, a Satmar Rebbe, who is another prominent example of a learned sage whose "predilections and preconceived notions" Maimonides provoked, particularly when Maimonides's explicit statements and halakhic rulings contraindicated his own positions. As a seminal rabbinic advocate of a passive supernatural messianism with respect to reestablishing sovereignty in Israel, R. Teitelbaum arguably penned the most detailed and intricate rabbinic polemic against messianic activism in its current form of Zionism.<sup>57</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I have no interest in evaluating the cogency of his

---

<sup>54</sup> רק עבודת אלקים זו קושרת את האדם למציאות האמיתית.

<sup>55</sup> ואינו שוכח אף לרגע שהאדם אינו "שכל נפרד" אלא "שכל נמצא בחומר" וכישות מטריאלית הוא נידון לפעולה ועשייה.

<sup>56</sup> For a good analysis of Leibowitz's article see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Maimonides in the Crucible of Zionism: Reflections on Yeshayahu Leibowitz's Negative Theology," in *Maimonides and His Heritage*, eds. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Lenn Goodman, James Grady (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), pp. 181–192, where he considers this article to "construct the scaffolding of all Leibowitz's subsequent writings on Maimonides," and at the same time acknowledging that its provocative thesis, "was born of an ideological agenda, or rather a theological posture that bore a political sting," at pp. 184–185. See also in Hebrew Warren Zev Harvey's lucid explication of this groundbreaking article, "Leibowitz on the Abrahamic Person, Faith and Nihilism," in Moshe Hallamish, Hannah Kasher, Yoḥanan Silman, eds., *The Faith of Abraham: In the Light of Interpretation throughout the Ages* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), pp. 347–352.

<sup>57</sup> "Essay on the Three Oaths," in *Va-Yoel Moshe* (Brooklyn, 1959). On this whole subject see Aviczer Ravitzky, "'Forcing the End': Zionism and the State of Israel

argument, which is indeed backed by a prodigious mastery of rabbinic sources in all their forms, and restrict my focus narrowly on R. Teitelbaum's engagement with Maimonides. Given what Maimonides actually states explicitly, including his natural historical account, one would have expected R. Teitelbaum to offer some reasoned rebuttal to Maimonides's formulations on the subject. Yet Maimonides's rabbinic stature and authority are so powerful as to elicit often desperate attempts to enlist him in support of one's theological aims and halakhic rulings, despite all evidence to the contrary. In addition, what Maimonides does not say at all, and his glaring omission in his *Misneh Torah* of the central peg in R. Teitelbaum's argument which rests on an aggadic passage depicting God admonishing and adjuring Israel with oaths not to precipitate its own forceful return to Israel, is surely an insurmountable problem.<sup>58</sup> Yet he overcomes this formidable Maimonidean obstacle (not to mention the philosophical problem that a God that "adjures" militates against a Maimonidean definition of God that is immune to anthropomorphisms of any kind whatsoever)<sup>59</sup> by the claim that Maimonides's silence precisely points to that oath's importance so elementary and foundational to Jewish law and theology that it goes without saying. As he asserts, "The oath not to instigate the redemption independently is far more stringent than the oath taken when receiving the Torah."<sup>60</sup> Thus, Maimonides's omission of a crux of R. Teitelbaum's argument, patently demonstrating its insignificance and irrelevance, is turned on its head and deemed proof of how overwhelmingly foundational it is!<sup>61</sup> The tortuous circular logic of this argument merely speaks volumes about what is, in fact, its very antithesis—Maimonides's *endorsement* of messianic activism, particularly with respect

---

as Antimesianic Undertakings," in *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era: Metaphor and Meaning*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and particularly the literature he cites on the three oaths in fn. 53, p. 64.

<sup>58</sup> For the oaths see b*Ketubot* 110b–111a.

<sup>59</sup> This obstacle which space does not allow me to deal with extensively is that a literal understanding of God adjuring an oath would be impossible for Maimonides's God who cannot tolerate any anthropomorphism whatsoever. In fact, to believe this literally would be idolatrous, which is why when Maimonides specifically alludes to this midrash in his extralegal *Letter to Yemen*, he qualifies it as a metaphor. See *Epistles of Maimonides*, supra, p. 130

<sup>60</sup> *Va-Yoel Moshe*, p. 140: שאותה השבועה לא ליקח גאולה מעצמם הוא חמורה הרבה יותר מהשבועה שהיה במתן תורה. See sections 78–81, pp. 139–147. See also Zvi Jonathan Kaplan, "Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, Zionism, and Hungarian Ultra-Orthodoxy," *Modern Judaism*, 24:2 (2004), pp. 165–178.

<sup>61</sup> Also at p. 139: "For the punishment and recompense related to an oath is more severe than all the other transgressions of the Torah."

to reestablishing Jewish sovereignty over Israel.

Maimonides's messianic *realpolitik* is always tempered by the universal ideal, not just on the international stage, but intra-nationally in the very way Maimonides constructs the ancient tribal makeup of the Jewish nation. Though all the tribes participated in the military campaigns and political organs of the Jewish state, the Levites were exempt from virtually everything one would associate with the political and economic life of a polis. They remain “*separated from the ways of the world—they don’t wage war like the rest of Israel, they don’t colonize the land, and they do not acquire anything via physical power.*”<sup>62</sup> Their lives were wholly dedicated to the ideal of pursuing the ultimate truth in the world unencumbered by the duties that accompany any national and territorial loyalties. They are living testaments to the universal ideal that transcends land and nation by the very fact that their existential model is open to anyone, Jew and gentile alike, “*to all who enter the world,*” who opts for the ideal existence they represent.<sup>63</sup>

This tribal ideal links up perfectly with the last remaining legacy of the universalistic Abrahamic experiment described initially at the beginning of the Code. The Levites were the sole torchbearers of the Abrahamic teachings as the society around them devolved once again into a morass of confused theology and philosophy. Jacob, the Levites's founding father, secured his own father's legacy by designating them his missionary successors, so to speak, assigning them the task of perpetuating the universal truths of the “way of the Lord”: “*separated Levi and appointed him head master, and established him in a seat of learning where to instruct in the path of the Name and in the observance of the charges of Abraham. He, moreover, commanded his sons not to interrupt the succession of the sons of Levi to the presidency of the school so that the learning be not forgotten.*”<sup>64</sup>

Embedded in the realism of independent nation states which will never be overcome in “this world,”<sup>65</sup> is the Levitical kernel of the legacy that bridges Abraham's pioneering universalism with the messianic political leader who proves himself as the philosopher king that can instruct Jews and non-Jews in that same “way of the Lord.” He will, therefore,

---

<sup>62</sup> *MT, Sabbatical and Jubilee Years*, 13:10, לא עורכין מלחמה כשאר ישראל, ולא נוחלין, ולא זוכין לעצמן בכוח גופן.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, ולא שבט לוי בלבד, אלא כל איש ואיש מכל באי העולם.

<sup>64</sup> והבדיל לוי ומינהו ראש והושיבו בישיבה ללמד דרך ה'.

<sup>65</sup> For Maimonides, intellectual perfection must be preceded by physical perfection, which includes politics: “the governance of the city and the well-being of the states of all its people, according to their capacity” (GP, III:27).

“teach the whole people and point out to them the Lord’s path, and all nations will come to listen to him.”<sup>66</sup> The sense is that it is not simply his intellectual acumen that will attract a universal following but his political ingenuity and success in accomplishing what no other politician prior to him has—the eradication of that age-old hatred Maimonides himself experienced and that became resurrected in the modern world in its racial iteration as anti-Semitism. The return to Zion, the particular national vehicle of Jewish aspirations and fulfillment, is the enabling historical factor for that universal return to the Levitical teaching.

At this juncture it is appropriate to focus on another important aspect of Maimonides’s messianism that has not been afforded its full due to date. There are a number of differences between Maimonides’s portrait of the messianic leader drawn in the *Laws of Repentance* and that in the *Laws of Kings*, but one in particular is quite striking. In the former, he will embody a near unrivalled prophetic and intellectual prowess, “possessed of wisdom greater than Solomon and an outstanding prophet nearly on par with Moses.”<sup>67</sup> Isaiah’s vision (2:2–3), echoed by Micah (4:1–2), captures this notion of the messianic leader’s universal acclaim by the international consensus to ascend to “the Mount of the Lord’s House” at the time when it is destined to “stand firm above all the mountains.”<sup>68</sup> What is significant about the image of the Temple becoming the fount of philosophical wisdom is that, in Maimonides’s view of biblical history, its location originally ignited jealousy, conflict, tension, and violence—precisely all those divisive forces that any messianic regime must overcome to vindicate its mission and authority. According to Maimonides’s *Guide*, the Bible actually refrained from disclosing its exact location because:

- 1) “nations should hold fast to the place and fight for it with great violence knowing as they do that this place is the final purpose of the Law on earth”;
- 2) “lest those who then owned the place ravaged and devastated it to the limits of their power”;
- 3) “lest every tribe should demand that this place be *within its allotted portion* and should seek to conquer it, which would lead to conflict and sedition...”<sup>69</sup>

The messianic leader’s transformation of what was initially a place signifying every single political malaise that fragments peoples into one

---

<sup>66</sup> *MT, Laws of Repentance* 9:2, ויבואו כל הגוים לשומעו.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:2.

<sup>68</sup> נכון יהיה הר בית ה' בראש ההרים.

<sup>69</sup> *GP*, III:45, p. 576.

that unites them represents a subversion of everything peoples mistakenly conceived as the purpose of religion. Internationally, any violence exerted to conquer the Temple Mount could only have been incited by a fundamental misconception of the purpose of the Law which aims at “the welfare of the states of people in their relations with each other through the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing,” and “correct opinions.”<sup>70</sup> Wrestling possession by violence of a center that symbolizes the goals of peaceful coexistence and knowledge can only be motivated by a corrupt view of the Law, reminiscent of that prevalent during the pre-Abrahamic pagan decline. Tribal conflict expresses that very same corrupt view intra-nationally. This is precisely why the Levites maintain their isolationist existence, as a monastic ideal and antidote to this kind of attitude toward religion and the Law. Identifying the Law as an instrument of power gained by resort to violence is an exercise in self-defeat. The accomplishments of the messianic king as both the perfect teacher and politician render him the living embodiment of the two perfections at which the Law aims. The *House of the Lord* then mirrors those perfections as a symbol of political stability and philosophical truth.

However, the tangible political reality of a reconstructed Temple also belies its pristine origins during the Abrahamic monotheistic campaign.<sup>71</sup> During that ideal period of statelessness the Temple was also marked by its concealment, by its absence, by its placelessness, whose “place is not stated explicitly when mentioned in the Torah.”<sup>72</sup> Its actual location could only be identified and its construction carried out once a firm political regime was in place—in this case it is the king, defined by the acute diplomatic talents that “would be qualified to give commands and quarrels would cease.”<sup>73</sup>

The real messianic king also stands for a kind of an ideal non-king. According to Maimonides, rabbinic messianic longings arose “... not in

---

<sup>70</sup> *GP* III:27, p. 511. As Seeskin points out regarding Maimonides’s view of the Temple and sacrificial offerings, “these activities have no inherent power to influence God or bring about atonement. They are designed to influence us by bringing about a re-evaluation of the lives we live.” See his *Jewish Messianic Thoughts*, supra, p. 191.

<sup>71</sup> Amos Funkenstein describes Maimonides’s conception of history as a “growing process of monotheization of the entire world,” where the “messianic age crowns a didactic and dialectic process which began with the modest establishment of a monotheistic community by Abraham...” in *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 148–149.

<sup>72</sup> *GP*, III:45, p.576.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

order to rule the entire world, and not so that they would subjugate the nations, and not so that the nations would exalt them... but in order that they would be free to pursue Torah and its wisdom.”<sup>74</sup> What will nurture this intellectual freedom and curiosity is an environment in which all the social, economic, and geopolitical factors normally necessitating a king are absent, for “in that time there will be no hunger and no war and no jealousy or rivalry, goodness will be abundant and all luxuries will be as common as earth.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, in the messianic era, the king ideally can virtually be dispensed with. I do not mean here that the world will pass into a phase of unadulterated libertarian anarchism during the messianic period, but only that the ideal king is one who presides over a kingdom in which religio/philosophical concerns predominate over all political concerns. The very political reality of a monarch and a cultic center bears witness to the ideal of their redundancy in a world where “knowledge, wisdom, and truth” are the overarching concerns.<sup>76</sup> Thus the meaning of Maimonides’s prognostication that it is “not unimaginable that his reign will endure for thousands of years,” is not that there will be an inordinate longevity to the king’s rule but that there is a possibility that the messianic state might ultimately lapse once again.<sup>77</sup> The implication is that the global environment will reach a point of such coexistence where there is one aim for which all human beings strive, eliminating all forms of tension and conflict—that in fact the messianic *dynasty* will indeed end, but not the messianic *community* that the kingship cultivated.

---

<sup>74</sup> *MT, Kings* 12:4, לא נתאוו החכמים והנביאים ימות המשיח לא כדי שישלטו על כל העולם, ולא כדי שירדו בגוים ולא כדי שינשאו אותם העמים ולא כדי לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח אלא כדי שיהיו פנויין בתורה וחכמתה.

<sup>75</sup> *MT, Kings* 12:5, ובאותו הזמן לא יהיה שם לא רעב ולא מלחמה ולא קנאה ותחרות שהטובה, תהיה מושפעת הרבה וכל המעדנים מצויין כעפר ולא יהיה עסק כל העולם אלא לדעת את ה' בלבד.

<sup>76</sup> *MT, Teshuvah* 9:2, הדעה והחכמה והאמת, Menachem Lorberbaum, via a different analysis, arrives at the same conclusion, that Maimonides’s utopian and messianic visions work in tandem in the sense that “only through the complete success of politics can politics be overcome... The ideal polity’s goal is to one day bring about its own overcoming.” See his discussion in *Politics and the Limits of Law: Secularizing the Political in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 77–89, at pp. 88–89.

<sup>77</sup> *Introduction to Perek Helek*, supra, p. 139. Here I disagree with Joel Kraemer’s interpretation that this implies the possibility “that even the messianic virtuous community would decompose,” in his “Maimonides’ Messianic Posture,” p. 112. I would correct Kraemer’s conclusion that “Maimonides accentuates rather the permanence of King Messiah and the indestructibility of the kingdom of Israel,” to the affirmation simply of the indestructibility of the global messianic community, not of the Israelite kingship or kingdom.

Significantly, Isa. 11:9, the verse that, for Maimonides, typifies the utopian intellectual atmosphere that will pervade the entire globe, extends these Temple representations to the country of Israel as a whole. The full verse reads, “In all of my *sacred mount* nothing evil or vile shall be done, for the Land will be filled with the knowledge of God as water covers the sea.” As Ibn Ezra and the modern *Jewish Publication Society* translation point out, the phrase “sacred mount” is a synecdoche for the entire land.<sup>78</sup> Everything that human beings perceive as evil, including natural and human manifestations of them, according to Maimonides, are really “privations” associated with the deficient nature of matter. Human evils inflicted on each other result from “tyrannical domination” rarely on an individual scale, and more commonly, on a national scale, “in the course of great wars.”<sup>79</sup> The Temple Mount ultimately is a beacon toward its own origins of placelessness, representing intellectual focus away from falsehood signified by idolatry and toward truth signified by monotheism. Abraham manifested those truths concretely by designating the Temple Mount as the landmark by which the spatial coordinates of worship are oriented.

So does the land of Israel as a whole act in terms of politics. It is a state that ultimately veers the global community away from everything that divides states geopolitically since it projects globally the message of the unsituated Temple that “through cognition of the truth, enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished”(GP III:12, p. 441).<sup>80</sup> Occurrences of evils are a result of an inverted order of priority in the human constitution where matter dominates over form since “all man’s acts of disobedience and sins are consequent upon his matter and not his form” (GP, III:8, p. 431). The human form, which for Maimonides is intellect, has the potential to quell the material inclinations that cause sin by “power, dominion, and control over matter in order that it subjugate it, quell its impulses and bring it back to the most harmonious state that is possible” (ibid., p. 432). In other words, form can assert itself and subvert precisely those desires of “domination” that are at the root of human evil, harnessing them in the service of the truth rather than self-gratification. The political upheaval necessitated by the establishment of an independent Jewish state initiates a process, which practically involves violence in a world that “runs its natural course.” Yet it anticipates a utopian vision toward the ultimate banishment of the will

---

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Exod. 15:17; Ps. 78:54.

<sup>79</sup> *GP*, III:12, p. 444.

<sup>80</sup> See also *GP*, III:33, p. 532, where ignorance is the cause of “mutual envy, hatred, and strife, aimed at taking away what the other has,” all those sources of conflict which will disappear in the messianic period.

to power first between individuals and then between states.

National sovereignty provides the free environment of *this world*, in which anti-Judaism and its various mutations under the general rubric of anti-Semitism have germinated for so long and seem to have become integral to the natural socio-political order. Political independence is conducive to the “calm” (וימצאו להן מרגוע) and the “increasing wisdom [science]” (וירבו בחכמה) that “qualifies one for the life of the *World to Come*” (כדי שיוזכו לחיי העולם הבא). What is perhaps paradoxically Maimonides’s favorite rabbinic maxim, “the world runs its natural course” (*olam ke-minhago nobeg*), characterizes the process and the newly initiated messianic environment. There will be no fundamental change in the laws of nature nor will the messianic leader effect the transition by any non-natural means. In other words, there is no role for divine intervention or metaphysical utopianism in this fulfillment of history.

Maimonides’s natural programmatic account of history unfolding toward its ultimate fruition safeguards against a relapse into a mythic view of the world he considered fatal to achieving human perfection and, ipso facto, to the whole philosophical enterprise. Maimonides’s core messianic teaching is an outgrowth of his entire religious perspective, which eschews divine intervention and promotes human initiative.<sup>81</sup> Although this is a vast subject, for our purposes here, I only summarize an overarching goal of Maimonides’s thought. His entire philosophical project aims at distinguishing God from anything in the world so consummately as to render it impossible to actually say anything about God without violating His uniqueness and oneness. He thus constructed an impenetrable philosophical barrier between God and the world that would curtail both individuals and states from exercising the limitless power that accompanies beliefs in being uniquely endowed with divine power. As Kenneth Seeskin states, “If the line separating the divine from the human is sacrosanct, then there is no possibility of crossing it. Every human being and every institution is finite.”<sup>82</sup> Maimonides’s conception of the messianic era is the final act in his naturalistic view of the world that assigns God and the world to radically distinct realms of being that can never be traversed. It exquisitely conveys the notion that only the road of finitude, of *olam ha-zeh*, whose operative principle is the material *olam ke-minhago nobeg*, can lead to the realm of infinitude, of the ethereal *olam ha-ba*.<sup>83</sup> ❧

---

<sup>81</sup> Seeskin, on this, articulates it best when he asserts that, “In the world of mythology, the line separating the divine from the human is thin. Humans become gods and gods become humans.” See *Jewish Messianic Thoughts*, supra, p. 50.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>83</sup> See *MT, Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 8:3–6.