

לא כן עבדי משה בכל ביתי נאמן הוא *Rambam's Authenticity*

By: DAVID GUTTMANN

In an article published in *Hakirah* 31, pp. 107-149, Rabbi Betzalel Sochaczewski reviews Professor Marc Shapiro's *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: The Thirteen Principles Reappraised*, taking umbrage at Shapiro's apparent acceptance of the many contemporary academic's assumptions that Rambam's principles were directed to the masses and that he personally did not believe many of them. In this article, we focus on the fourth *Ikkar* (principle) and try to understand Rambam's position on the issue. This may shed light on some of the other issues people find with several other principles. Rabbi Sochaczewski and Professor Marc Shapiro in his book, referenced many of the important Rambam commentaries and scholarly researchers that discuss the issue, and we will not repeat them nor address them here but focus on Rambam's own writings and try to understand his position on the subject.

The principles are first presented in Rambam's introduction to the 11th *perek* in *Sanbedrin*, *Perek Helek*, as follows:

והיסוד הרביעי, הקדמות
והוא כי זה האחד האמור הוא קדמון בהחלט, וכל נמצא זולתו בלתי קדמון בְּפָרְכוֹ
אליו. וְהִרְאִיּוֹת על זה בכתבי הקודש רבות. והיסוד הרביעי הזה מורה עליו מה
שנאמר (דברים לג כז) "מִעֲנֶה אֱלֹהֵי קֶדֶם". ודע כי היסוד היותר גדול של תורת
משה רבנו, הוא היות העולם מחודש, המציאו ה' וּבְרָאוֹ אַחַר הַהֶעָדָר הגמור. וזה
שְׁתַּרְאֲנִי סוֹבֵב סְבִיב עֲנִי קְדָמוֹתוֹ על דעת הפילוסופים, הוא כדי שיהיה המופת על
מציאותו יתעלה מוחלט, כמו שבארתי ובררתי ב"מורה".
(*Perush ha-Mishnah* introduction to *Perek Helek* in *Sanbedrin*)

The last sentence is clearly a later addition, as pointed out by Rav Kapach, ז"ל, considering that Rambam refers to the *Moreh HaNevukhim* ("Moreh"). He finished his *Perush ha-Mishnah* when he was thirty years old, as he himself writes at the end of his *Perush* on *Tabarot*, while the *Moreh* was published in his later years after he finished *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* and *Mishneh Torah*. The fact that he felt the need to clarify this issue indicates that he was aware that there were questions about what he thought, and what his real intention was in the above statement. But first, let us analyze the statement about the *Ikkar*.

David Guttman, a businessman, lives in Flatbush.

The Fourth Fundamental Principle is that the One is absolutely Primary, and all existents besides Him are not primary when compared to Him. Proofs are many in the Holy Scriptures.

The word *Kadmon*, primary, can be understood as primary in time, meaning that before G-d decided to create anything else He was alone. It can also be understood that He is primary ontologically, namely eternal in time, but the cause of everything including another eternal existent—*materia prima* as Plato saw it. In fact, as we read on, the second possible understanding seems to be the one Rambam was thinking of as he continues:

This fourth principle is pointed to in the verse "מְעִנָּה אֱלֹהֵי קֶדֶם". This verse is discussed at length in *Moreh* 1:70 as follows:

In like manner the uppermost sphere, by the rotation of which everything moveable is set in motion, is moved by God, who is separate from the sphere, and is not a power in it. In *Bereshit Rabbah* we read that in commenting on the Divine words, "The eternal God is a refuge" (lit., a dwelling, מְעִנָּה אֱלֹהֵי קֶדֶם, Deut. 33:27), our Sages said, "He is the dwelling of His world, the world is not His dwelling." This explanation is then followed by the remark, "The horse is secondary to the rider, the rider is not subservient to the horse; this is meant by 'Thou wilt ride upon thy horses' " (Hab. 3:8). Consider and learn how they described the relation of God to the sphere, asserting that the latter is His instrument, by means of which He rules the universe.

Here we are not talking about a Creator but the Cause and the Mover, the First Cause, and the Rambam uses that verse as proof for the Fourth Principle! No wonder he felt the clarification was necessary. Before we analyze the later addition, we will explore some of the things Rambam wrote on the subject in the intervening years.

In *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:1, Rambam writes:

The foundation of foundations and firmest pillar of all wisdom is, to know that there is a First Existent, that He caused¹ all existents to be, and that all existents from heaven and earth, and from between them, could not be save for the truth of His Own Existence. Thus, supposing that He is not, no one else could have been called into existence. Conversely, supposing all other existents, save He alone, are non-existent, His Existence alone remains; for, He does not

¹ I thank Heshy Wein for pointing out the translation should be "causes" not "caused." The First Cause is constantly causing existence to be according to all three opinions.

cease to be because of their non-existence, as all existents are dependent upon Him, but He, blessed is He! is not dependent upon them nor upon a single one of them; therefore, the truth of His Existence is incomparable to the truth of any other individual Existent.

Here again we read a description that can be interpreted as G-d being the ontological Prime Cause rather than Creator *ex nihilo*. G-d is the cause of all existence but both He and that existence could be eternal in parallel.

In *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:7 where he enumerates the *minim* he writes:

Five are called *minim*—one who says that there is no G-d and the world does not have a driver, מנהיג.

Again, we see no mention of Creation *ex nihilo*. That explains also the fact that these two ideas, the existence of G-d and G-d is the mover of the world, are counted as one. Aristotle, too, held that there was a God, but his God has no volition. He believed that both the God and the universe were eternally in existence together, unchanging. Defining God, Rambam adds that one must accept that God has volition, He is a “driver,” and not Aristotle’s God. He is therefore a Creator but not *ex-nihilo* necessarily.

In the same halakhah, Rambam writes another definition of *min*:

וכן האומר שאינו לבדו הראשון וצור לכל.

Likewise, one who says that He alone is not the First Cause and the source of all.

The word "ראשון" is used for both ontological Prime and for temporal First.² Rambam, however, uses the additional word וצור. It is clear that he had in mind the ontological meaning. In *Moreh* 1:16, Rambam explains the word צור as follows:

It is in the latter sense that the Almighty is called “rock,” He being the origin and the *causa efficiens* of all things besides Himself. Thus we read, “He is the Rock, His work is perfect” (Deut. 32:4); “Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful” (Deut. 32:18); “Their Rock had sold them” (Deut. 32:30); “There is no rock like our God” (I Sam. 2:2); “The Rock of Eternity” (Isa. 26:4). Again, “And thou shalt stand upon the Rock” (Exod. 33:21), i.e., Be firm and steadfast in

² In the *Hakirah* article p. 126 n. 42, R. Sochaczewski argues that “Rishon” is temporal, referring us to *Moreh* 2:30. He misreads Rambam, missing the crucial statement ראשון גם כן על זה הענין שהוא – ראשון which translated means that ontological prime is also referred to sometimes as ראשון. See Rav Kapach edition for clearer language.)

the conviction that God is the source of all things, for this will lead you towards the knowledge of the Divine Being. We have shown (chap. 8.) that the words “Behold, a place is with me” (Exod. 33:21) contain the same idea.

Again, we see that Rambam does not expressly declare in MT that the world was created from nothing but rather that G-d is the Prime Cause of everything.³

Turning to *Moreh*, in the introductory chapter to Rambam’s discussion of Creation Rambam lays out the possible explanations for the existence of the world:

Among those who believe in the existence of God, there are found three different theories as regards the question whether the Universe is eternal or not.

First Theory—**Those who follow the Law of Moses**, our Teacher, hold that the whole Universe, i.e., everything except God, has been brought by Him into existence out of non-existence. In the beginning God alone existed, and nothing else; neither angels, nor spheres, nor the things that are contained within the spheres existed. He then produced from nothing all existing things such as they are, by His will and desire... This is the first theory, and it is undoubtedly a fundamental principle of the Law of our teacher Moses; it is next in importance to the principle of God’s unity. Do not follow any other theory. Abraham, our father, was the first that taught it, after he had established it by philosophical research. He proclaimed, therefore, “the name of the Lord the God of the Universe” (Gen. 21:33); and he had previously expressed this theory in the words, “The Possessor of heaven and earth” (ibid. 14:22).⁴

Rambam introduces the idea of Creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothingness, by referring to it as the theory of *Those who follow the Law of Moses, our Teacher*. This implies that it is not a provable theory but rather a religious belief. The significance of this classification will become clearer as we continue to explore Rambam’s approach. Rambam continues presenting the two other theories:

³ In *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 1:3, when describing how Avraham Avinu came to recognize G-d, Rambam writes: וּלְבוּ מְשׁוּטְטִים וּמְבִינֵי עַד שֶׁהִשְׁיִיג דְּרַךְ הָאֱמֶת וְהִבִּין קוֹ הַצִּדִּיק מִתְּבוּנָתוֹ הַנְּכֻנָּה. וַיַּדַּע שֶׁיֵּשׁ שָׁם אֱלֹהִים אֶחָד וְהוּא מְנַהֵיג הַגְּלִגָּל וְהוּא בְּרָא הַכֹּל וְאִין בְּכֹל הַנִּמְצָא מִמֶּנּוּ. אֱלֹהִים חַוִּץ מִמֶּנּוּ. The term בְּרָא is equivocal too. It could mean from nothingness or from something. See *Moreh* 2:30 and *Moreh* 3:10. In Yemenite texts we read וְהוּא הָאֵל instead of הַכֹּל וְהוּא בְּרָא. (See Rav Kapach edition *Avodah Zarah* 1:10 note 19.)

⁴ *Moreh* 2:13.

Second Theory.—The theory of all philosophers whose opinions and works are known to us is this: It is impossible to assume that God produced anything from nothing, or that He reduces anything to nothing; that is to say, it is impossible that an object consisting of matter and form should be produced when that matter is absolutely absent, or that it should be destroyed in such a manner that that matter be absolutely no longer in existence....They therefore assume that a certain substance has coexisted with God from eternity in such a manner that neither God existed without that substance nor the latter without God...Plato holds the same opinion. Aristotle says in his *Physics*, that according to Plato the heavens are transient. This view is also stated in Plato's *Timaeus*. His opinion, however, does not agree with our belief: only superficial and careless persons wrongly assume that Plato has the same belief as we have. For whilst we hold that the heavens have been created from absolutely nothing, Plato believes that they have been formed out of something.—This is the second theory.

Third Theory.—viz., that of Aristotle, his followers, and commentators. Aristotle maintains, like the adherents of the second theory, that a corporeal object cannot be produced without a corporeal substance. He goes, however, farther, and contends that the heavens are indestructible. For he holds that the Universe in its totality has never been different, nor will it ever change: the heavens, which form the permanent element in the Universe, and are not subject to genesis and destruction, have always been so; time and motion are eternal, permanent, and have neither beginning nor end.

Rambam is explaining that these are the only three possibilities for understanding the existence of the world; (i) the Jewish approach, Creation *ex nihilo* (ii) what we will refer to as Plato's theory, Creation from *materia prima*, and (iii) Aristotle's theory, unchanging, non-volitional eternal existence.

In *Moreh* 1:71, in his introduction to the chapters in which he proposes to prove the existence of God and after rejecting the proofs presented by the various Muslim theologians, Rambam states as follows:

I have examined this method and find it most objectionable. It must be rejected, because all the proofs for the Creation have weak points and cannot be considered as convincing except by those who do not know the difference between a proof, a dialectical argument, and a sophism. Those who understand the force of the different methods will clearly see that all the proofs for the Creation are questionable, because propositions have been employed which have never been proved. I think that the utmost that can be accomplished by believers

in the truth of Revelation is to expose the shortcomings in the proofs of philosophers who hold that the Universe is eternal, and if forsooth a man has accomplished this, he has accomplished a great deed! For it is well known to all clear and correct thinkers who do not wish to deceive themselves, that this question, namely, **whether the Universe has been created or is eternal, cannot be answered with mathematical certainty; here human intellect must pause.**

An intellectual proof must be based on reality. The proof for the existence of G-d is provable by the human intellect⁵ while even Creation cannot be proven—never mind the theological belief of *ex nihilo*. One therefore must not base an intellectual proof on a theological belief which is not provable either way⁶ by the human intellect.

In *Moreh* 2:16 Rambam further clarifies that even Creation is not provable:

In this chapter, I will first expound my view on this question, and then support it by argument—not by such arguments as those of the Mutakallemim, who believe that they have proved the Creation of the world. I will not deceive myself and consider dialectical methods as proofs; and the fact that a certain proposition has been proved by a dialectical argument will never induce me to accept that proposition, but, on the contrary, will weaken my faith in it, and cause me to doubt it. For when we understand the fallacy of a proof, our faith in the proposition itself is shaken. It is therefore better that a proposition which cannot be demonstrated be received as an axiom, or that one of the two opposite solutions of the problem be accepted on authority. The methods by which the Mutakallemim proved the Creation of the world have already been described by me, and I have exposed their weak points. As to the proofs of Aristotle and his followers for the Eternity of the Universe, they are, according to my opinion, not conclusive; they are open to strong objections, as will be explained. I intend to show that the theory of the Creation, as taught in Scripture, contains nothing that is impossible; and that all those philosophical arguments which seem to disprove our view contain weak points which make them

⁵ והוא אמרם "אנכי ולא יהיה לך" - מפי הגבורה שמעום" - רוצים בזה שהם *Moreh* 2:33 See *Moreh* 2:33 הגיעו אליהם כמו שהגיעו ל'משה רבינו' ולא היה 'משה רבינו' מגיעם אליהם. וזה ששני אלו השרשים - רצוני לומר מציאות האלוה והיותו אחד - אמנם יושגו בעיון האנושי; וכל מה שיודע במופת משפט הנביא בו ומשפט כל מי שידעהו - שזה אין יתרון; ולא נודעו שני השרשים האלה מצד הנבואה לבד - אמרה ה'תורה' "אתה הראת לדעת וגו'". אמנם שאר ה'דברות' הם מכת המפורסמות והמקובלות לא מכת המושכלות.

⁶ I say "either way" because a theological belief that contradicts reality cannot be true either, as we will see further.

inconclusive, and render the attacks on our view untenable. Since I am convinced of the correctness of my method and consider either of the two theories—viz., the Eternity of the Universe, and the Creation—as admissible, I accept the latter on the authority of Prophecy, which can teach things beyond the reach of philosophical speculation. For the belief in prophecy is, as will be shown in the course of this treatise, consistent even with the belief in the Eternity of the Universe. When I have established the admissibility of our theory, I will, by philosophical reasoning, show that our theory of the Creation is more acceptable than that of the Eternity of the Universe; and although our theory includes points open to criticism, I will show that there are much stronger reasons for the rejection of the theory of our opponents.

Rambam here further argues that the three possible explanations for existence, Creation (Plato), Creation *ex nihilo* or eternal existence (Aristotle), are not provable by the human intellect. He therefore has to accept the explanation given by revelation, revelation being acceptable according to each of the three theories, that existence was created *ex nihilo*.

What is the basis for the theological belief that G-d created the world *ex nihilo*? In *Moreh* 2:25 Rambam writes that it is not based on the Torah. The Torah does not explicitly tell us whether it was created out of nothingness or out of a *materia prima*. In fact, if we were pressed, we could interpret the text to agree with Eternity of the Universe although as he explains later it would make it difficult to accept certain dogma and historical occurrences recorded in the Torah:

We do not reject the Eternity of the Universe, because certain passages in Scripture confirm the Creation; for such passages are not more numerous than those in which God is represented as a corporeal being; nor is it impossible or difficult to find for them a suitable interpretation. We might have explained them in the same manner as we did in respect to the Incorporeality of God. We should perhaps have had an easier task in showing that the Scriptural passages referred to are in harmony with the theory of the Eternity of the Universe if we accepted the latter, than we had in explaining the anthropomorphisms in the Bible when we rejected the idea that God is corporeal.

The theological basis for Creation in general, whether from nothingness or from *materia prima* and at the same time rejecting Aristotle's position that the world is eternal, is that it would contradict basic Jewish dogma that G-d has volition and choice. In passing, Rambam

sets down a very important rule that has been ignored by many a religious thinker: belief cannot contradict intellectual proof.

For two reasons, however, we have not done so, and have not accepted the Eternity of the Universe. First, the Incorporeality of God has been demonstrated by proof: **those passages in the Bible, which in their literal sense contain statements that can be refuted by proof, must and can be interpreted otherwise.** But the Eternity of the Universe has not been proved; a mere argument in favor of a certain theory is not sufficient reason for rejecting the literal meaning of a Biblical text, and explaining it figuratively, when the opposite theory can be supported by an equally good argument.

Intellectual proof trumps belief and even text. It is incumbent on us to verify whether what we are taught to believe, even when written in the Torah, does not contradict our intellectual reasoning. If it does not then we accept it, otherwise we must reject it as is and interpret the belief or the text in a way that conforms with the intellect. In our case the three theories about Creation are just that—theories. The two, the Jewish belief of Creation *ex nihilo* and the Platonic theory of Creation from *materia prima* do not contradict intellectual reasoning nor do they contradict the general beliefs that Jewish religion teaches us and are at the core of our way of life; we therefore can accept either one. On the other hand, Aristotle's understanding that the universe is eternal in parallel with G-d, one cannot exist without the other. Will or choice cannot be attributed to G-d, the basic underpinnings of our religion would be negated. We therefore must reject Aristotle's theory.

Accepting the Creation, we find that miracles are possible, that Revelation is possible, and that every difficulty in this question is removed. We might be asked, why has God inspired a certain person and not another? Why has He revealed the Law to one particular nation, and at one particular time? Why has He commanded this, and forbidden that? Why has He shown through a prophet a certain particular miracle? What is the object of these laws? And why has He not made the commandments and the prohibitions part of our nature, if it was His object that we should live in accordance with them? We answer to all these questions: He willed it so; or His wisdom decided so. Just as He created the world according to His will, at a certain time, in a certain form, and as we do not understand why His will or His wisdom decided upon that peculiar form, and upon that peculiar time, so we do not know why His will or wisdom determined any of the things mentioned in the preceding questions. If we assume, however, that the Universe has the present form as the result of fixed laws, there is occasion for the above questions;

and these could only be answered in an objectionable way, implying denial and rejection of the Biblical texts, the correctness of which no intelligent person doubts. Owing to the absence of all proof, we reject the theory of the Eternity of the Universe; and it is for this very reason that the noblest minds spent and will spend their days in research. For if the Creation had been demonstrated by proof, even if only according to the Platonic hypothesis, all arguments of the philosophers against us would be of no avail. If, on the other hand, Aristotle had a proof for his theory, the whole teaching of Scripture would be rejected, and we should be forced to other opinions. I have thus shown that all depends on this question. Note it.

Having shown that the belief of Aristotle that the world is eternal would contradict everything the Torah tells us, both the historical and the legislative, Rambam is faced with two choices: accept Plato or accept the Jewish belief that G-d created the world after nothingness. He therefore argues that as there is no more reason to accept Plato than Creation *ex nihilo* from a philosophical perspective, and revelation is real and acceptable to all three theories, revelation teaches Creation *ex nihilo*, we therefore must accept that latter position.

Considering that Creation *ex nihilo* is a theological belief based on prophetic writings, which can be interpreted as agreeing with Plato, how can one be declared a heretic if one accepted for whatever reason the platonic explanation of Creation? A *min* is only one who accepts Aristotle's theory. However, Jewish *mesorah* teaches Creation *ex nihilo* and that is Rambam's position. Indeed, if Plato was the real position of Rambam, why not say that it is his belief? What compelled him to even mention *ex nihilo* at all and furthermore insist that it is so? As Shapiro shows, many other *rishonim* and great Orthodox thinkers had no compunction in accepting Plato without suffering any repercussion.⁷

⁷ Interestingly, in Chapter 26, immediately following the chapter where he tells us that Plato can be interpreted consistently with the text, he quotes Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol who seems to accept a platonic Creation. Rambam, however, cannot accept that R. Eliezer would deny *ex nihilo* though he does not find a sufficient explanation for it. In 2:30 he quotes Rabbi Yehudah ben R. Simon who seems to imply that time existed before Creation and Rav Avhu who says that HKB"Y created worlds and destroyed them. Rambam wonders that such an opinion is like Aristotle who believed in the world's eternity and as Rambam explained in chapter 25 that cannot be consistent with religion. He therefore compares it to Rabbi Eliezer's statement, namely, Plato's opinion that cannot be interpreted literally.

We now can understand the language Rambam used in the introductory paragraph to this discussion “**Those who follow the Law of Moses**, our Teacher, hold that the whole Universe, i.e., everything except God, has been brought by Him into existence out of non-existence.” We also understand his comment in the fourth principle:

ודע כי היסוד היותר גדול של תורת משה רבנו, הוא היות העולם מחדש, המציאו
ה' ויבראו אחר ההקדמור. וזה שתראני סובב סביב ענין קדמותו⁸ על דעת
הפילוסופים, הוא כדי שיהיה המופת על מציאותו יתעלה מוחלט, כמו שבארתי
ובררתי ב"מורה".⁹

Know, that the most important fundamental principle of Moshe our Teacher's Torah, is that the world is created, God brought it into existence and created it from absolute nothingness.

Although Rambam, when he established this *Ikar* years ago, used a language that could be interpreted as both, Creation *ex nihilo* and Creation from *materia prima*, he is now clarifying that he believes and expects all Jews to believe that creation was *ex nihilo*. It is “the most important fundamental principle.”

When you see me circling around the idea of the world being eternal (whether Plato's eternal *materia prima* or Aristotle's eternal universe), that it is because I want God's existence to be a proof that cannot be disproved as I explained in the *Moreh*.

Rambam is explaining that he has been avoiding taking a position on Creation because he wants to show that the proof of God's existence is provable by all three possible explanations for existence. Accepting Creation *ex nihilo*, that proof is obvious. Even if we were to accept Plato's Creation, which allows for eternal physical existence and even if we were accepting Aristotle's eternal universe, God's existence is definitively provable and cannot be disproved. However, as he explained in *Moreh*, Aristotle's understanding negates the Torah, Plato's does not. In the *Ikar* he uses the term *מהחדש*, which covers both Plato and the *mesorah* understanding. In the *Moreh*, written for the more educated, he proves God's existence even according to Aristotle.

The *min* is one who rejects either the Platonic or the theological understanding that G-d has choice and created the world notwithstanding from what, *materia prima* or nothingness. This was misunderstood even

⁸ The word *Kadmuto* refers to the world and covers both Plato and Aristotle. The word *Mechudash* refers to the world and covers Plato and *Torat Moshe*.

⁹ Rabbi Asher Benzion Buchman's article in this issue shows that Creation *ex nihilo* is included in another principle in MT. Thus, Rambam never accepted Plato but reorganized the principles.

during Rambam's lifetime, and he felt it important to explain that he believed in Creation *ex nihilo* because it is the basic position of תורת משה רבנו. However, when proving the existence of God he could not base it exclusively on either Plato or the believers in Torat Moshe Rabbeinu because that would be basing a proof on an unproven axiom.

Clearly, Rambam did not have an esoteric and an exoteric position on this subject. ❧