

REVIEW ESSAY

Maimonides Contra Kabbalah: *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* by Menachem Kellner

Reviewed by James A. Diamond

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Meorot 6:2
Mar_heshvan 5768
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A Publication of
Yeshivat Chovevei Torah
Rabbinical School

Maimonides Contra Kabbalah: *Maimonides' Confrontation With Mysticism* by Menachem Kellner (Portland, Oregon, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006, 343 pp.)

By James A. Diamond

Menachem Kellner's latest book might be considered a mirror-image sequel to his previous provocative study, *Must a Jew Believe in Anything*.¹ *Must a Jew* faulted Maimonides for introducing into Jewish thought and *halakhab* a foreign theology of creed and doctrine—matters with which, Kellner claimed, normative Judaism never concerned itself. He thereby charged Maimonides with opening the door to the kind of religious schism and fragmentation that is the current malady of Jewish orthodoxy, where belief is dogmatized and *imposed* and insurmountable barriers are thereby erected between insiders and outsiders. The introduction of halakhically mandated beliefs allows for sharp lines of separation between those who defer to *ex cathedra*-like theological pronouncements of halakhic sages² and those who, though supported by ample sources in the variegated course of Jewish intellectual history, might veer from the official doctrine of the day. On the other hand, *Maimonides' Confrontation* is an ode to the same Great Eagle, who laid down the gauntlet against a regnant rabbinic and popular theology, systematically arguing for what a Jew must decidedly *not* believe. As a foil to Kellner's previous work, *Confrontation* could have easily been entitled, *What a Jew Must Not Believe*. In what

follows I will attempt to go beyond mere review and both engage and bolster an intriguingly compelling argument whose implications extend from the academy to the yeshiva and radiate out to the religious community at large.

If there is an archenemy, it is Judah Halevi.

Kellner's thesis is that Maimonides' intellectual and halakhic oeuvre is distinguished by a systematic purging from Judaism of the proto-kabbalistic features that had seeped into and permeated its culture. If there is an archenemy in this book it is Judah Halevi (d. 1141), whose "mystical" weltanschauung Maimonides exerted every effort to suppress.

This phenomenon threatened what he considered to be the purpose for which the entire Jewish normative edifice had originally been constructed—preserving the unity and absolute transcendence of God. Maimonides' conception of many of the mainstays of Jewish thought and law such as "holiness" (*qedushah*) and ritual states of purity and impurity (*taberah, tumeh*) profoundly challenged then current perceptions of these categories as somehow essential or

¹ M. Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe in Anything* (Portland OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2nd ed., 2006)

² Resorting to such notions as *da'at torah* in *halakhic* decision making breaks down an essential distinction between Judaism and Christianity. A. Altmann nicely captures this distinction in terms of the *Sanhedrin* in contrast to the Church: "The *Sanhedrin* is not a 'sacral authority' like the church...It is rather...*halakhic* agency, receiving its sanction only through the single fact of being appointed by the Torah, but not through an actual pneumatic relation to the word of God." See "*What is Jewish Theology?*" in *The Meaning of Jewish Existence: Theological Essays, 1930-1939* (Hanover NH: Brandeis Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 46-56; quotation from p. 46).

ontological states of reality. Kellner demonstrates methodically and convincingly that these categories do not describe existing reality, as suggested by a mystically inclined worldview. Rather, they constitute a social reality (p. 13). They are conventional and in many cases even arbitrary institutional constructs intended to assist Jews in perfecting their humanity, something we shall see Jews share in common with all other human beings.

By juxtaposing Maimonides' view with an antithetical approach that would be familiar to many of *Meorot's* readers, we can bring Maimonides' project into sharper focus. A prime contemporary proponent of such an approach is R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (d. 1993), who views the Jewish command structure as an *a priori* system through which the "man of *halakhab*" approaches and comprehends the empirical world much like a mathematician.³

R. Soloveitchik's construct of "halakhic man" can be taken as a frontal assault on what he himself already understood as Maimonides' "religious instrumentalism."⁴ The socio-anthropological rationale for the *mitsvot* that Maimonides offers in Part III of the *Guide* views them as historically contingent and, therefore, potentially subject to alternative formulation had circumstances been different—or even the same. R. Soloveitchik's *a priori* model of *halakhab* as something transcending science, history and sociology admits of no such possibility. The Sinaitic normative legacy could not be any other way. Although R. Soloveitchik attempts to salvage some of Maimonides for his own theology by bringing to bear the very different Rambam of the *Mishneh Torah*, which is more accommodating of the *ish ba-halakhab*, Kellner demonstrates that Maimonides' "instrumentalism" is thoroughgoing and that the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah* are consistently

aligned. Although not without its own problems, this approach is far more fruitful than attributing all inconsistencies between the juridical Rambam and the philosophical Maimonides to a kind of split personality.

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existence and unity.*

In a sense one can say that for Maimonides all those religious notions that were traditionally accepted as inherent in the world, and that continue to be thought of as such in contemporary Jewish religious culture, must in fact be jettisoned in order to safeguard God's existence and unity. It may come as a shock to all who subscribe to Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith that their credo is belied by belief in a divine presence (*shekhinah*) or glory (*kavod*) having spatio-temporal dimensions and not regarded simply as practically oriented metaphors. The concretization, however limited, of an utterly transcendent, ontologically unique, unknowable, and indescribable Being is tantamount to what Maimonides would consider *kefirah* (heresy).

A prime example of Maimonidean iconoclasm pertains to the sense in which we are to understand the Hebrew language as "holy" (*leshon ha-qodesh*). If *qedushah* is a quality that inheres in something, then Hebrew defies any linguistic commonality with other languages. Each stage of creation is initiated by divine words spoken in Hebrew such as *Let there be* or *And He called*. Animal life emerges as a consequence of a divine command *Let the earth bring forth*. If the beginning of Genesis is taken literally, Hebrew is God's native tongue, must therefore pre-exist the world, and is the tool by which the creation materializes.

³ *Ish ba-Halakhab*" (Heb.), *Talpiot* 1:3-4 (1944) pp.651-735 at pp.663-64; English trans. by L. Kaplan, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Pub. Soc. of America, 1983). *Halakhic Man*, "draws near the world with an *a priori* relation. His approach begins with an ideal world and concludes with a real one" (id., p. 19). Ultra-orthodox antagonism toward the *Rav* has always puzzled me. If that world had actually bothered to examine his *Ish ba-Halakhab* or other essays that develop his philosophy of *halakhab*, they would be made mandatory reading in every *yeshiva*. His views on *halakhab* are far from "progressive" or "liberal." Perhaps their mistake is an assumption that literacy is somehow incompatible with *frumkeit*.

⁴ *The Halakhic Mind: An Essay on Jewish Tradition and Modern Thought* (Ardmore PA: Seth Press, 1986), p. 93.

God's declaration "Let there be light" effectuates light's existence, lending the language some innate creative power. For Maimonides, however, Hebrew's "sanctity" lies in its lack of sexually explicit terms for genitalia or coital acts. It is lofty, in other words, because it is a prudishly expurgated language that resorts to euphemism for anything that smacks of eroticism (*Guide*, III:8; Pines pp. 435-6). A fundamental principle that underlies much of Maimonides' *Guide* and, particularly, the first section with its lexicon of Hebrew terms and their meanings, is the conventionality of Hebrew; like any language, it evolves and reflects the particular socio-cultural milieu in which it is spoken. In one fell swoop, as was most probably his intent, Maimonides undermines a core legacy of the mystical— or, in his view, superstitious—tradition that reifies Hebrew.

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The point has many important implications for current Jewish belief; I will confine myself to three of them. First, Hebrew, and, consequently, the Torah, lose the kabbalistic hyper-significance that reduces sentences to a string of characters and allows meaning to be teased out of individual words, letters, numerical values of letters (*gematria*), shapes of letters, and even blank spaces.⁵ Secondly, Hebrew divine names (*sheimot*) merely reflect the types of heavenly governance that are observable in the world. In other words they are derivative of the world and do not capture any divine essence (*Guide*, I:61; Pines, p. 149); one would not find a *kami'a* (amulet inscribed with divine names) in Maimonides' synagogue.

Thirdly, books belonging to the mystical sacred canon such as *Sefer Yetsirah*, a treatise traditionally

Thirdly, books belonging to the mystical sacred canon such as *Sefer Yetsirah*, a treatise traditionally attributed to Abraham and conspicuously ignored by Maimonides, would be included in any Maimonidean list of banned books. Its notion of Hebrew characters as both generative forces and building blocks of the very structure of the cosmos⁶ flies in the face of a linguistic theory of Hebrew as conventional; it regards Hebrew not simply as a mode of communication but as a supernaturally imbued force and transforms the Torah from a teaching conveyed through its language to a conjurer's tool that resonates with magical powers. Had R. Joseph Karo, halakhist supreme *cum* mystic, been open to the Maimonidean perspective, he would never have been perplexed by Maimonides' failure to quote a *baraita* (*Sanhedrin* 21b) that speaks of the king being required to hang his exclusively mandated second Torah scroll around his neck "like an amulet" (*Kesef Mishneh*, MT, *Hilkebot Tefillin u-Mezuzah*, 7:2). According to Maimonides, the king's extra Torah scroll acts as a reminder of its content, not as a magical protective shield.

Maimonides' demystification of Hebrew ties into his essential understanding of the nature of God and the Torah's content. How would Maimonides respond to the biblical account of divine speech as a creative force and therefore of Hebrew as somehow innately potent? As with all anthropomorphisms, the operative rule here the Talmudic rubric, "the Torah speaks in the language of human beings" (e.g., *Nedarim* 3a-b; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkebot Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:12; *Guide* I:26), which demands that any attribution to God of human characteristics be taken metaphorically. God does not possess a mouth, lips or vocal chords and His sole activity is thought; accordingly, He did not speak. Maimonides leaves no doubt whatsoever about the equivocal sense of Divine speech in the first chapters of Genesis as a metaphor for "will" (*Guide* I:65, Pines, p. 159). As a result all magical or theurgic use of Hebrew is preempted. One can

⁵ As Bernard Septimus notes kabbalistic critics fought Maimonides vigorously to restore "the centrality of the Sacred Tongue to the fundamental order of all things, terrestrial and divine," in his "Maimonides on Language," in *The Heritage of the Jews of Spain*, ed., Aviva Doron (Tel Aviv, Levinsky College of Education, 1994) pp.35-54 at p.54. The most prominent of those critics was Nahmanides who caustically argues that if Maimonides were correct *hazal* should have called it a "modest language" rather than a holy one (Commentary, Exod.30:13, Chavel, 1:519)

⁶ On this see Moshe Idel, "Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Language*, ed., Steven Katz (NY, Oxford Univ. Press, 1992) pp.42-79.

master Hebrew and combine letters in any way one wishes in an effort to gain mastery of nature, and possibly even of God. However; the effort will be for naught, since God's primal will is inscrutable.

In this instance, as in others in the book, what Maimonides challenged has become so commonplace in current Jewish Orthodoxy that it would now be considered integral to mainstream Judaism rather than a mystical quirk. To take but one example, no less a brilliant twentieth century *poseq* than R. Moses Feinstein (d. 1986), when canvassing the complexities of a law dealing with oaths (*nedarim*), takes it as a given that Hebrew is wholly distinct from other languages in its being "the essence of speech, not a product of human convention, as through it was the world created and the Torah given."⁷ Since this is an integral part of his legal rationale, it has normative implications, bearing on our understanding of both a biblical prescription dealing with oaths and its Talmudic overlay.

Another fundamental of mystical theurgy and, *ipso facto*, of popular folk religion that Maimonides saw a need to address involves angels. Alongside God's names on the *kami'ot* that adorn many synagogues to this day are those of a myriad of angels. There would be no sense in appealing to or calling on figments of the imagination. For Maimonides this would make even less sense, since they are the boorish fantasies of ignorant minds. Maimonides' world is indeed populated by "angels" because they are metaphorically representative of all causal forces in nature. Since the Hebrew term *mal'akh* simply means "messenger," all of nature can be said to operate via angels since nature was initially activated by God and therefore is ultimately an expression of God's will. Angels are the elements, what propels animals, the catalysts for all physical functions, the inspiration of mental activity, and indeed "all forces are angels." (*Guide* II:6; Pines, pp.262-3).

By having angels represent everything, they represent nothing, so thoroughly subverting the term as to drain it of all meaning. Angelology is much more attractive for public consumption than science because it relieves human beings of the rigorous intellectual undertaking required to truly understand the world. Angels reassuringly qualify everyone as a scientist, when in fact such a worldview amounts to surrender to "the blindness of ignorance" (*Guide* II; Pines, p. 263).

This "confrontation" has sweeping consequences theologically, halakhically and exegetically. For Maimonides, the ultimate goal in life is to know God, and the sole means by which one can do so is through knowledge of His creation. In fact, the very pinnacle of human knowledge—and, consequently of perfection—is typified by Moses

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at the top of the mountain; Moses' glimpse of God's "back" constitutes an all encompassing apprehension of what "follows necessarily from My will- that is, all the things created by Me." (*Guide* I:38; Pines, p. 87). This comprehension entails the mutual connections among all existing things (I:54, p. 124) and can emerge only from the painstaking curriculum of what today would be termed the "outside" knowledge Maimonides expected of his true disciples (*Guide*, Epistle Dedicatory; I;34; Pines, pp. 3, 73-77).

Theologically, every replacement of natural causality with an angelic entity is a step further away from God and human perfection, since it egregiously misperceives the creation, the singular route toward knowledge of God and, thereby, intimacy with Him.⁸

⁷ *Iggerot Mosheh, Yoreh De'ah* vol. 5, ed. S. Rappoport (Jerusalem, 1996), p. 209.

⁸ The first four *mitsvot*, as formulated in the *Mishneh Torah*—to know God's existence and His unity, to fear Him, and to love Him—are grounded in "knowledge" and "understanding" of the world, which virtually mandates the study of science and philosophy for their fulfillment. See *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 1:6, 7; 2:2; 4:13; *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:6; *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:11,12. On this see Herbert Davidson, "The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation," in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S.D. Goitein, (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974), pp. 53-68.

Belief in angels can also seriously undermine halakhic observance. The widespread practice of inserting angelic names in *mezuzot* was harshly condemned by Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah*. His criticism is instructive, for it reflects an overarching conception of *mitsvot* that courses through all the subjects in Kellner's book. More than simply a useless gesture to fictitious entities, inserting angelic names expresses a self-centered degradation by "asinine" people (*tipschim*) of a "paramount mitzvah geared toward the unity of God and the love and worship of Him" into "an amulet (*kami`a*) for self-gratification" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Tefillin u-Mezuzah*, 5:4). An apotropaic view of *mezuzah* as a kind of religious house and health insurance is far worse than simply nonsense; it transforms a God-directed action into one of narcissism. As Kellner notes, the holiness of *mezuzah* (as well as of *tefillin* and *tsitsit*) lies in its religious *utility*, not its *ontology* (p. 120). Maimonides' theology would preclude any attempt to blame human fortune and misfortune on the *kasbrut* of a *mezuzah*, regarding the effort as defeating the very *raison d'être* of the *mitsvah*.

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humankind to shape its own destiny.*

Hilkebot Tefillin u-Mezuzah then concludes with a characteristic demystification of a talmudic text (*Menahot* 43b) that can be and has been taken to endow these ritual objects with a power to generate angels. Here is a prime example of the symbiotic relationship between the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah*, belying the view of those who prefer a diagnosis of schizophrenia. In a manner perfectly consistent with the naturalization of angels espoused by the *Guide*, these prescribed items are seen in the *Mishneh Torah* as instrumental in their role as "reminders" for correct thought and conduct; thus, "these are the angels which save him from sinning" (6:13). Note the telltale referent of "these." In Maimonidean language this means that the ritual objects serve as

reminders that instigate physical and psychological impulses which in turn trigger movements and thoughts that result in moral behavior and theological integrity. The strength of the mystical tide against which Maimonides swam is evidenced by the tortuous homiletics resorted to from medieval times to today to reconcile him with some essentialist notion of the *mezuzah's* intrinsic protective powers.⁹

Maimonides' view here extends to biblical exegesis and can critically reinvent popularly understood *midrashim*. The *midrash* portrays Judah's solicitation of Tamar (whom he thought to be a prostitute; see Genesis 38) as having been compelled by "an angel in charge of lust" whom God had commissioned to overcome Judah's natural inclination to pass by (*Bereshit Rabbah* 85). Maimonides, however, understands that same angel as a metaphor for the physical forces of sexual excitement (*Guide*, II:6; Pines, p. 264). And Maimonides' reinterpretation has important substantive implications. The *midrash* interposes an angelic force into this drama in order to absolve a saintly biblical personage of unseemly conduct, transforming his behavior into a positive act in the unfolding of a divine plan. However, by naturalizing this angel, Maimonides accomplishes the very opposite, saddling Judah with personal responsibility for this incident as a result of his inability to control his sexual urges.

More importantly, Maimonides' reinterpretation makes this biblical episode emblematic not of divine intervention but of the overall course of natural history, whose operative principle is *olam ke-minbago nobeg* ("the world goes forward in its usual manner"). In a world governed by angels that are no more than symbols of natural causation, Judah is accountable for his actions. Perhaps the allure of a world populated by angelic and demonic entities that Maimonides sought to suppress is precisely in its offer of relief from individual responsibility. For Maimonides, the only divine plan is that which allows humankind to shape its own destiny.

⁹ See, for example, *Iggerot Mosheh, Yoreh De`ah*, vol.2, p. 239. See also Joseph Kafih's comments in his edition of the *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Abavah*, p. 370; Kafih categorically dismisses the possibility that Maimonides attributed any apotropaic dimensions to the *mezuzah*.

In the first chapter of *Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Avodah Zarah*, Maimonides portrays Abraham's discovery (more accurately, recovery) of monotheism and "true religion," and it is there, more than anywhere else in his intellectual and legal corpus, that he draws an incisive line in the sand between his theology and that which he opposed. In Kellner's apt formulation, Maimonides stands the traditional notion of divine election on its head by having Abraham choose God rather than vice versa. Maimonides stands the traditional notion of divine election on its head by having Abraham choose God rather than vice versa.

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God plays no active role whatsoever in Abraham's forging of a relationship with Him. That relationship is the natural outcome of decades of intellectual angst, inquiry, search and investigation leading to Abraham's rejection, at the age of forty, of everything he had grown up with in favor of a single Creator-God. Maimonides' Abraham then assumes the Socratic mantle as a purveyor of truth at any cost, including his own personal safety, by "sowing doubt," "engaging in debate," "informing," "overpowering with demonstration," "accumulating a following," informing each follower "in accordance with his capacity," and ultimately leaving a textual legacy by "authoring treatises."¹⁰ At its very inception Judaism is rooted in enlightenment rather than mystery, in the demonstrable grasp of universal truths over esoteric parochial traditions, in the primacy of self development over submission to authority, and in reason over magic.

Although Kellner notes it only parenthetically (p. 79, n.114), it is worthwhile exploring a seemingly

trivial point of contention raised against this Abraham by Maimonides' most prominent medieval halakhic critic, Ra'abad of Posquieres (d. 1198). Ra'abad takes him to task for diverging from a midrashic tradition (*Nedarim* 32a) that calculates Abraham's age of discovery as three. What is so contentious about this minor detail as to draw Ra'abad's ire, especially when there are other midrashic sources perfectly consistent with Maimonides' characterization?¹¹ For Ra'abad—himself mystically inclined and the father of R. Isaac the Blind, a seminal thirteenth-century kabbalistic exponent—this minor detail underpins a profound disagreement between the kabbalistic and the rationalistic theological schools. What for Maimonides is a purely natural if painstaking process of maturation and intellectual discovery is for Ra'abad something divinely orchestrated and revelatory. Ra'abad's model is akin to that of Christianity and Islam, which trace their origins to miraculous intrusions into the course of history. Whether it is a man's aid to be born of a virgin (Jesus), an illiterate said to have been the medium for the most exquisite literary masterpiece known to man (Mohammad), or a toddler who independently achieved revelation (Abraham), the founding fathers of their respective faiths are essentially unique human beings and therefore inimitable. Maimonides, on the other hand, anchors his Judaism in a philosophic quest sustained by natural human endeavor, something that can be feasibly replicated.¹² One can aspire to be an exceptional human being but not to an ontologically distinct one. A relevant model toward which one can aim interests Maimonides far more than an unattainable myth.

Abraham paves the way, not for Judaism, but for a "nation that knows God" (*ummah she-bi yoda'at et ha-shem*.) Whereas Halevi's nation is distinguished by some inherent godly gene called the "divine thing" (*inyan elohi*), Maimonides' coheres through knowledge. As a result, Halevian—and, later, Zoharic—humankind is stratified by a genetic

¹⁰ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Avodat Kokhavim*, 1:3. For a parallel passage in the Guide see II:39, Pines, p. 379, where Abraham is described as having "assembled the people and called them by way of teaching and instruction to adhere to the truth that he had grasped...attracting them by means of eloquent speeches and by means of the benefits he conferred upon them."

¹¹ *Beresheet Rabbah* 30:8; 46:2

¹² Joseph Karo, firmly within the mystical camp and yet a staunch defender of Maimonides against Ra'abad's onslaught, steers a brilliant compromise between the two positions: Abraham's his intellectual journey began when he was three but culminated at the age of forty. (*Kesef Mishneh, Hilkebot Avodah Zarah* 1:3) JQR (1990) 81, 75-91.

hierarchy that resists even conversion.¹³ In contrast, I would go as far as to argue, Maimonides' letter to Obadiah the proselyte establishes the convert as the *only* authentic Jew: "While we [native-born Jews] are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you [Obadiah the proselyte] derive from Him through whose word the world was created."¹⁴ The convert's motivations like those of his archetypal predecessor, Abraham, are not subject to challenge since he arrived at the essential truths of Judaism by reason. Tradition and upbringing played no role in his acquisition of the truth of God's existence and oneness. Therefore his relation to God is direct and free of extraneous cultural and social factors. In stark contradiction to the kabbalistic tradition that has informed Jewish religious culture to this day, Maimonides regarded the lack of ethnic pedigree as actually superior to its presence. Only the convert who arrives at the ultimate truth in spite of his tradition rather than because of it truly emulates Judaism's founding father, Abraham.

The natural-born Jew's faith is always suspect since one can never be certain whether adherence to the faith is not somehow motivated by familial allegiances.¹⁵ The *Mishneh Torah*, to be sure, preserves legal rulings that discriminate against the convert, but none are grounded in an essentialist view of the non-Jew as inferior to the biological one.¹⁶

Maimonides' wholehearted embrace of the convert is a function of his universalism, which is blind to race and color but not to creed. Throughout his philosophical works, he considers the nature of man and human perfection in terms of the human being qua human being, not of Jews vs. gentiles. Simply put, what distinguishes

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humankind from the animal kingdom is intellect, and perfection lies in its realization (e.g., *Eight Chapters*, 1; *Guide* II:4; III:27, 54). Ultimate *imitatio dei* consists of exercising the mind, which is the only faculty we have even remotely in common with God (I:1). A realized intellect is the only thing that survives the body. There is no specifically Jewish intellect and consequently no such thing as what later came to be termed a "goyishe kop" (a disparaging Yiddish term for supposedly inferior gentile intellect). For Halevi, however, and for the later Zoharic and kabbalistic traditions, Jews are inherently distinct from and spiritually superior to gentiles.¹⁷ This concept is virtually endemic to all the various strands of Hasidism, the popular avatar of the mystical tradition.¹⁸ For Maimonides, knowledge is the only criterion for calibrating human spirituality:

¹³ Halevi makes it quite clear in his *Kuzari*, XX I:27: "Anyone from the nations of the world who accompanies us and converts, may the Lord be gracious to him as He is to us, is not brought to our level." It is on this basis that Halevi disqualifies the convert from ever achieving prophecy, since "...he is not comparable to an Israelite from birth. For only an Israelite by birth is eligible to become a prophet" (I:115). For a discussion of the opposing schools, see Baruch Frydman-Kohl, "Covenant, Conversion and Chosenness: Maimonides and Halevi on 'Who is A Jew?'" *Judaism* 41/1, 64-79 (1992). For Halevi's position in particular see Daniel Lasker, "Proselyte Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Thought of Judah Halevi."

¹⁴ Maimonides, "Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte," trans. in *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (West Orange NJ: Behrman House, 1972), p. 476.

¹⁵ See my "Maimonides and the Convert: A Philosophical and Juridical Embrace of the Outsider," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11 (2003)pp. 125-146.

¹⁶ See e.g., *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkebot Ma'aser Sheini* 11:17; *Hilkebot Issurei Bi'ah* 12:17, 15:7; *Hilkebot Mattenot Aniyim* 8:17-18; *Hilkebot Melakhim* 1:4.

¹⁷ This offensive mode of thought pervades the mystical tradition. For a full treatment, see Elliot Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006) esp. chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁸ Out of countless examples I cite one from a *hasidic* master particularly known for love of his fellow man, R. Levi Yitshaq of Berditchev: "...and God forbid that a Jew should associate with a gentile or converse with him about mundane affairs for the gentile is in truth disgusting, despicable and impure" (translation and emphasis mine. *Qedusbat Levi* (Jerusalem, 2001) p. 289 (discourse for *Shavnot*). His love for his fellow man extends only to his fellow Jew; in his reputation for "love of Israel," the operative word is Israel.

“for His favor and wrath, His nearness and remoteness, correspond to the extent of a man’s “for His favor and wrath, His nearness and remoteness, correspond to the extent of a man’s knowledge or ignorance” (*Guide* I:54; Pines, p. 124). The difference becomes readily apparent if we juxtapose a statement that typifies much of mystical theology and one that does so for Maimonidean theology:

Zohar 1:46b-47a

“Let the earth bring forth every kind of souls of the living being (*nefesh hayab*): (Gen. 1:24). The ‘living being’ (*nefesh hayab*) refers to Israel, who are the souls of the supernal, holy living being; Cattle, crawling things and living creatures of the earth-[are the other nations who are not souls of the living being, but rather foreskin [demonic].”¹⁹

Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Shemittah ve-Yovel, 13:13

“Not only the tribe of Levi but every single individual from the world’s inhabitants whose spirit moved him and whose intelligence gave him the understanding to withdraw from the world in order to stand before God and minister to Him, to know God...is consecrated as ‘holy of holies’ and God will be his portion and inheritance forever.”

Another corollary of Maimonides’ confrontation with mysticism is the notion of ritual purity and impurity (*taberah* and *tume`ah*) to which Kellner devotes a chapter. Here again Kellner demonstrates that Maimonides made a conscious choice to reject the current in Jewish tradition that views these terms as denoting a real force ontologically inherent in the objects or people characterized by them. In his conception, they denote purely utilitarian legal categories that were ordained to accomplish certain moral and intellectual ends. For Maimonides, the halakhic status of ritual purity is relevant only vis-à-vis access to the Temple. From an ethical point of view, the entire regime of *taberah* and *tume`ah* is orchestrated to curtail access to the Temple so severely as to instill fear and humility (*Guide* III:47; Pines, p. 594). *Fear* of the Temple

constitutes a formal positive commandment; but Maimonides is emphatic, both in his *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* (*Book of Commandments*) and in the *Mishneh Torah*, that the object of that *fear* is not the Temple space or location but rather “Him who commanded that we fear it.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Bet Ha-Behirah* 7:1; *Sefer ha-Mitsvot* positive commandment #21) The Herculean efforts needed to meet the demands of purity required by *holiness* are all aimed at directing the mind toward the metaphysical truth that the Temple represents.

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Intellectually, ritual purity is bound up with Maimonides’ highly controversial rationale for the sacrificial cult. In short, sacrifice and Temple are concessions to human nature, whose well-being requires that change be gradual rather than abrupt and drastic. The ancient Israelite transition from idolatry to monotheism required the adoption of familiar idolatrous modes of worship (including animal sacrifice) and their subversion from within. For example, animals must be sacrifice upon an altar, but the altar must be built out of earth and not hewn stone since “the idolaters used to build altars with hewn stones” (*Guide*, III:45; Pines, p. 378).

For Maimonides, the entire regulatory edifice of sacrifice and Temple is geared toward restricting it to its bare minimum, in much the same way a drug addict is weaned off his addiction by gradual withdrawal facilitated by the use of another drug. The cult’s confinement to one particular location, one building and one officiating family (the *kohanim* [priests]) is part of an abolitionist strategy. The sacrifice is a remedial reaction, not an innovation. Though Kellner doesn’t formulate it this way, I would suggest that a ritual purity regime so all-pervasive as to render all but a handful of rare exceptions impure (*Guide*, III: 47; Pines, p. 594) is an essential part of the plan of

¹⁹Translation by Daniel Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, (Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford, Ca, 2004) vol.1, p.252

abolition. It serves to minimize rather than promote access and pilgrimage to the Temple, thus downplaying its significance in a manner consistent with its status as a divine accommodation of human needs. Temple, sacrifice, and ritual purity are all means toward realizing the objective of divine unity. To perceive *tum'e`ab* as an ontological state or sacrifice as an intrinsically effective spiritual medium is to confuse means with ends, for both are purely utilitarian tactics for the eradication of idolatry.

Finally, Maimonides mounted a programmatic assault against the kabbalistic notion that the terms *kavod* (divine glory) and *shekbinah* (divine presence) connote a palpable spatial presence. For Halevi, Nahmanides (d. circa 1270), and their kabbalistic successors, these are visually perceptible divine manifestations or—as Gershom Scholem formulated it—“a mythical hypostasis of divine immanence in the world.”²⁰

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Maimonides' methodical dismantling of these “hypostases” begins by vacating any literal connotations of *maqom* (place) when referencing God in favor of an exclusively metaphorical sense (*Guide*, I:8; Pines, p. 33). It continues by interpreting a verse such as “the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa. 6:3) as “the whole earth bears witness to His perfection” (*Guide*, I:19; Pines, p. 46). This plugs back into the notion that the sole means of knowing God is by understanding His creation. Since every aspect of that creation reflects on its creator, Maimonides is saying here that every advance in probing the

world and its structure metaphorically enhances God's “glory.” God's presence, whether as *kavod* or as *shekbinah*, inheres in humankind's endeavors to understand His world, “for the true way of honoring Him consists in apprehending His greatness.” (*Guide*, I:64; Pines, p. 157), and not in some geographical location. In an exquisite subversion of an all-pervasive misconception that something godly inhabits the Temple, Maimonides analogizes the meaning of “And the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle” (Exod. 40:34) to that of “the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa. 6:3): just as every aspect of the world reveals, once understood, God's greatness, so does the Sanctuary (*miqdash*) serve as a spatial focus for contemplating that greatness. The *miqdash* does not house; it prompts and stimulates. One need only consider the contemporary treatment of the Western Wall in Jerusalem—a place for delivering mail to God, a place to which prayer is directed, a place whose stones are kissed and demand prostration—to appreciate what Maimonides was trying to avert and to lament the failure of his project.

To graphically illustrate Kellner's thesis, let me offer here the commandment of circumcision as but one out of a myriad of examples in which the Maimonidean-Kabbalistic divide can be clearly discerned. For Maimonides, the commandment is neither transformative nor does it create any special bond between the Jew and God. Its purpose is to physically diminish sexual pleasure and desire, initiate membership in a faith community, and signify commitment to a belief in the universal truth of divine unity (*Guide*, III:49, Pines pp. 609-11). It is a purely functional means for strengthening character, social cohesion, and ideological commitment; indeed, it is one that Jews bear in common with the descendants of Ishmael (*Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 10:8). Its legal classification under the rubric of the “Book of Love (*Sefer Ahavah*)” considers it of a kind with

²⁰ Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, trans. from the German by Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), p. 171

²¹ On this see chapter 6 of Shaye Cohen's recent study *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005) and Josef Stern, “Maimonides on Circumcision,” in *The Midrashic Imagination*, ed., M. Fishbane (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp.131-54. Stern concludes that circumcision is a natural sign that constitutes a relationship between people rather than between people and God (id., p. 142).

tefillin, *tsitsit* and *mezuzah*; in their absence, it serves “as a constant reminder” to direct one’s mind toward God (*Mishneh Torah*, Introduction, 1:21, Frankel edition, (Hotza’at Shabse Frankel, Jerusalem, 2001).²¹

Thus, circumcision is a prime example of Maimonides’ halakhic instrumentalism. In contrast, the mystical tradition perceives it as transformative, making the Jew Jewish and ontically distinguishing him from the Gentile. As the *Zohar* states, “from the eighth day onward Israel cleave to His name...the [other] nations do not cleave to Him ...the holy sign is removed from them and they cleave to the *sitra agra* [‘the other side,’ a mystical term for the forces of evil], which is not holy” (3:91a-b).²² Mystical circumcision is analogous to Christian baptism.

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Its significance is reflected in Nahmanides’ elation over the fortuitous timing of the divine command to Abraham regarding circumcision: it precedes Sarah’s becoming pregnant “so that [Abraham’s] seed could be holy” (Commentary to Gen. 17:4; Chavel, vol. 1, p. 100). Not only is circumcision transformative; it engenders an objective holiness that is programmed into the Jewish genetic code and biologically inherited. Many of the dichotomies discussed earlier—institutional vs. inherent holiness, Jewishness vs. gentleness, instrumentalism vs. essentialism, magic vs. utility, enlightenment vs. mystery—are crystallized in this *mitzva* in a way that presents a Jew with a very elemental choice. The Maimonideans and the mystically inclined may normatively practice the same religion but philosophically they subscribe to entirely different belief systems.

Since the perfect book is as elusive as the perfect human being, any review would be remiss if it did not include a criticism or two. Acknowledging its rare combination of rigorous scholarship, accessible, lucid and readable style, and topical relevance, I offer these as suggestions only to improve an already superb work for what is certain to be a second edition. For good reason, Maimonides’ arch-nemesis in this book is Halevi, but in view of Nahmanides’ relevance for contemporary Orthodox Jewish thought and practice, it might have been more instructive and enticing to have portrayed him as the quintessential anti-Maimonidean paradigm.

Nahmanides’ persona, especially within the *haredi* community where Halevi is virtually ignored, far overshadows Halevi’s. Though historically postdating Maimonides, he is the one medieval Jewish thinker who can measure up to Maimonides’ stature both in *halakha* and theology, much of which was anticipated by Maimonides. Additionally, Kellner’s afterword on “Contemporary Resistance to the Maimonidean Reform” could be expanded to encompass far more than its discussion of the doctrine of *da`at torah*. I suspect that Kellner has simply whetted our appetite on this score, paving the way for another deservedly full length treatment of a contemporary malaise. As Kellner formulates it, the choice is stark and fundamental: yours can be a Judaism of enchantment, in which you abdicate responsibility to rabbis and surrender thought to mystery, or a Judaism of empowerment

These minor suggestions for improvement in no way detract from my assessment that Kellner has contributed a study of great value not only for an academic audience but for lay and yeshivish audiences as well. The book is a welcome addition to the *samizdat*s currently circulating within the underground yeshiva counter-culture.

²² On circumcision as a physical inscription of the divine name, see Elliot Wolfson, “Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of an Esoteric Doctrine,” *JQR* 78 (1987), pp.77-112.