

## *Farteicht un Farbessert* (On "Correcting" Maimonides)

MENACHEM KELLNER

**Abstract:** Maimonides' universalism is both striking and, to many of his readers, surprising. So surprising are they that passages in his writings have been modified over the generations to pull the sting of their universalism and make them accord with more widely accepted notions of Jewish separateness and superiority. Examples of this phenomenon are examined here; it is also suggested that copyists and editors 'corrected' texts before them to what they were sure Maimonides 'must have' meant.

**Biography:** Menachem Kellner is a Professor of Jewish Thought at the University of Haifa. His recent books include *Maimonides' Confrontation With Mysticism* (Littman, 2006), which is reviewed in this edition of *Meorot*, *Must a Jew Believe Anything*, 2nd edition (Littman, 2006) and *Maimonides' Book of Love* (Yale, 2004).



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# *Farteicht Un Farbessert* (On “Correcting” Maimonides)<sup>1</sup>

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As a general rule, it seems to me that the absence of clear and straightforward Hebrew equivalents for terms in other languages suggests that those terms reflect a non-Jewish ambience. Even so, some such turns of phrase can enhance our understanding of Jewish thinkers and streams of thought. As one example, consider the terms “universalist” and “particularist,” which originate in the Christian theological debate between those who believed that all humans could be saved and those who believed *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“there is no salvation outside the Church”). In that technical sense, the terms have no relevance to Judaism, which long ago concluded that righteous gentiles have a place in the world to come.<sup>2</sup> In a more general sense, however, the distinction between universalism and particularism can be quite useful to comparing certain texts, streams, and thinkers within the Jewish tradition. In that context, I understand a particularist stance to be one that regards the Jew, *qua* Jew, as enjoying some personal, religious, spiritual, or value-based superiority over the gentile *qua* gentile. That advantage is tied to some essential, immanent element within the Jew, an element of his or her “hardware,” not of his or her software.<sup>3</sup> A universalist stance, in contrast, denies any

claim to the superiority of Jewish “hardware” and sees the distinction between Jew *per se* and gentile *per se* as entirely a matter of “software.”

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The tension between universalism and particularism has been a characteristic of Judaism throughout its history. On the one hand, Judaism is grounded on a single fundamental insight: one God created the entire universe and all the people within it, and He created those people in His image. This insight gave rise to the idea that God “takes an interest” in the fate of all people, without distinction. On the other hand, a single Creator implies that there is but one proper way to draw near to Him, that all other ways are invalid, and that one who follows those other ways is likewise acting invalidly. The tension generated by this dualism is voiced both in Scripture and in rabbinic writings,<sup>4</sup> and it becomes a central motif in medieval Jewish thought.

<sup>1</sup> Yiddish for “translated and improved,” referring to the famous joke—or actual event?—involving a Yiddish translation of Shakespeare’s works that so described itself on its title page. This article appeared originally in Hebrew as *Farteicht un Farbessert*: Comments on Tendentious ‘Corrections’ to Maimonidean Texts, B. Ish Shalom (ed.), *Be-Darkei Shalom: Iyyunim be-Hagut Yehudit li-Shalom Rosenberg* (Jerusalem: Bet Morasha, 2006): 255-263. Translated from the Hebrew by Joel Linsider.

<sup>2</sup> *Tosefta, Sanbedrin* 13:1—“There are righteous heathens who have a share in the world to come.” See also Maimonides’ ruling in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Melakhim* 8:11 (cited below).

<sup>3</sup> For the use in this sense of the distinction between “hardware” and “software,” I thank my learned friend, Prof. Daniel Lasker.

<sup>4</sup> See Leon Roth, “Moralization and Demoralization in Jewish Ethics,” in his *Is There a Jewish Philosophy: Rethinking Fundamentals* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999), pp. 128-143; Menachem Kellner, “On Universalism and Particularism in Judaism,” *Da`at* 36 (1996): v-xv.

In the history of Jewish thought, it is difficult to find anyone more aptly described as a “universalist” than Maimonides. Among other things, Maimonides can be associated with the following positions:

- There is no difference in essence between Jew and gentile, and the Jew *per se* enjoys no superiority over the gentile *per se*. The difference between Jew and gentile is grounded solely in the Torah: A Jew who observes the commandments thereby has an advantage over an ordinary gentile; but a moral and learned gentile certainly has an advantage over a coarse, ignorant Jew.<sup>5</sup>
- Israel’s election is the result of a historical accident, plain and simple: it was Abraham the Hebrew who discovered God. Had a Navajo Indian been the first person to discover God following the decline in humanity after the generation of Adam’s grandson Enosh, that person’s tribe would have become the chosen people; the Torah would have been given in the Navajo language; the historical parts of the Torah would have dealt with Navajo history; and the Promised Land,

presumably, would have been in Nevada.<sup>6</sup>

- Israel’s Torah, when all is said and done, is meant for all humanity;<sup>7</sup> it was given to Israel to preserve (and observe) until messianic times, when all will be ready to accept it. At that time, all people will worship God “with one consent,”<sup>8</sup> as equals in all respects.
- The Jew, *per se*, has no quality of the sort referred to in various quarters as “noble soul,” “closeness to God,” or “*der pintele yid*” that distinguish him or her from the gentile *per se*.
- There is no difference in essence between a Jew by birth and a proselyte. Halakhic differences between the two result from legal technicalities and ascribe no essential superiority to the Jew by birth.
- There is no doubt that one who observes the commandments enjoys a huge advantage over one who does not, but that advantage is relative, not absolute. Man’s purpose is the perfection of his intellect; that perfection cannot be attained without

<sup>5</sup> I have marshaled evidence in support of these arguments in the following works: *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991) “On Universalism and Particularism in Judaism,” *Da`at* 36 (1996): v-xv; “Chosenness, Not Chauvinism: Maimonides on the Chosen People,” in Daniel H. Frank, ed., *A People Apart: Chosenness and Ritual in Jewish Philosophical Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993): 51-76, 85-89; “Overcoming Chosenness,” in Raphael Jospe and Seth Ward, eds., *Revelation and Redemption in Judaism and Mormonism* (Fairlawn: Associated University Presses, 2001): 147-172; “Was Maimonides Truly Universalist?” in *Trumah: Beiträge zur jüdischen Philosophie 11 (Festgabe zum 80. Geburtstag von Ze’ev Lev)* (2001): 3-15. Much of the argumentation of these articles is synthesized in my *Maimonides’ Confrontation With Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006) (henceforth: ‘*Confrontation*’).

<sup>6</sup> I recognize that some readers may find this argument shocking. But—to use a phrase I normally dislike—what can we do? This is the position implied by Maimonides’ words in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Avodah Zarah*, chapter 1; cf. also *Guide of the Perplexed* II:39, III:24, and III:29 and consider as well with Maimonides’ well known comments on the historical reasons for (and consequently conditional nature of) many of the Torah’s commandments in general and the sacrificial cult in particular. For further elaboration, see *Confrontation*, pp. 33-84.

<sup>7</sup> On the Sages’ view of this matter, see the instructive book by Menachem Hirschman, *Kol ba’ei olam: z'erem universalim be-sifrut ha-tanna'im ve-yahaso le-hokhmat ba-amim* [All humanity: a universalist stream in tannaitic literature and its attitude toward gentile wisdom] (Tel-Aviv, Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uhad, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Whenever he discusses messianic times, Maimonides cites Zeph. 3:9—“For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent” (OJPS trans.).

being restrained, self-disciplined, and highly moral; and there is no better, more effective, and more tested way of attaining moral perfection than by observing the commandments. But observance of the commandments is not the sole way to attain moral perfection, and one who does not observe them can still attain perfection as a creature made in God's image—though it will be more difficult for him or her to do so.<sup>9</sup> The Jew *per se*, then, has no advantage over the gentile with respect to anything related to prophecy, providence, or achieving a share in the world to come.

What led Maimonides to adopt these universalist positions? The question is flawed in

its premise that we need to explain Maimonides' decision to take a universalist stance; in fact, Maimonides saw himself simply continuing on the path set in the Torah, and there is nothing to explain. All people were created—in principle<sup>10</sup>—in the image of God.<sup>11</sup>

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Maimonides, to be sure, understands the nature of that image in Aristotelian terms,<sup>12</sup> but that is a detail that in no way vitiates the Jewish/biblical essence of his position.<sup>13</sup> For Maimonides, the essence of man is his reason;<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> As much he might want to, Maimonides has no way of excluding from the world to come morally and intellectually perfected Jews who do not observe the commandments. Professor Daniel J. Lasker disagrees with me – see our discussion in *Confrontation*, p. 239, note 63.

<sup>10</sup> The qualification here reflects Maimonides' view that creation in God's image is a challenge, not a given; as a practical matter, only a few actualize their intellectual powers to the point of attaining the status of "created in God's image." Moreover, not every person is born with the physical and mental qualities needed to attain intellectual fulfillment. See *Guide* I:34; Pines trans., pp. 76-79. (References to the *Guide* are to Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. and with an Introduction and Notes by Shlomo Pines [Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963].)

<sup>11</sup> For a recent and exhaustive analysis of this idea, see Yair Lorberbaum, *Zelem eloqim: halakhab va-aggadah [Image of God]* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 2004). For the Maimonidean connection, see Hannah Kasher, "*Hariv ha-adam*" [Beloved is man], *Da'at* 41 (1998): 19-29.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., "For being a rational animal is the essence and true reality of man" (*Guide* I:51; Pines, p. 113); see also *Guide* I:52, II:48; III:8; III:12.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, particularists within the Jewish tradition have the burden of confronting the Bible's extremely clear view that all humans were created in the image of God. They have done so in various ways, some of them hair-raising. See, for example, Maharsha (R. Samuel Eliezer Eidels, 1555-1631), *Hiddushei halakhot va-aggadot* on *Sanhedrin* 37a. The mishnah there states that humanity began with one individual to teach the principle that "one who destroys a single [Jewish] person is regarded by Scripture as if he had destroyed the entire world and one who saves a single [Jewish] person is regarded by Scripture as if he had saved the entire world" (see below, fn. 16, on the reason for bracketing the word "Jewish"). Maharsha comments: "he took pains to say 'a single Jewish person' because the image of man, who was created as one individual, is the image of the One on high, the Unity of the world. And the image of Jacob is His image, as the Sages say in the chapter *Hexgat ha-batim* [Bava Batra, chapter 3]. But gentiles [the Hebrew reads *kuttim*, the people settled by the Assyrian king in Samaria after he exiled the ten tribes; that is presumably the result of censorship] are not the image of man but are, rather, like other creatures, and one who destroys one of them does not destroy an entire world nor does one who saves one of them...[save an entire world]." Similarly, Maharal (R. Judah Loew of Prague, 1525-1609) writes (*Sefer derekh hayyim* 3:14) that "In any case, the nations of the world have the human form, but they do not have the essence of the human form; that image is to be found among the other nations, but it does not count for anything, and that is why it is not said that 'Israel is beloved because they were created in the image of God.' Moreover, Adam and Noah possessed this attribute even though they were called 'Israel,' but once God, may He be blessed, chose Israel, this image was diminished within the other nations. Still, the divine image pertains to man insofar as he is man, as is explained." See also *Nezab yisra'el*, chapter 11. To my dismay, such examples abound.

<sup>14</sup> Although Maimonides professed universalism, by no means did he profess egalitarianism; he was elitist to his core. But despite his disdain for the masses, he was patient with them; it may truly be said of him that he suffered fools gladly. For an instructive example, see Paul Fenton, "A Meeting with Maimonides," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 45 (1982):1-5.

he reiterates this idea over and again, from his earliest writings to the *Guide*.<sup>15</sup>

Without doubt, many Jews have found it difficult to deal with Maimonides' universalist positions. Reacting to a history suffused with destruction, persecution, pogroms, expulsions, and—worst of all—the Holocaust, Jewish tradition developed a range of defense mechanisms; among them was the claim that the Jew *per se* has greater spiritual and personal value than the non-Jew. In Maimonides' view (and my own), that stance does not accurately represent the Torah's position, but it cannot be denied that it has taken deep root among Jews and finds expression in some of its most central and important texts. Maimonides understood this problem and formulated his positions carefully—not because he was afraid to be more blunt, but because of his profound sense of *noblesse oblige*. He saw no need to wield an ideological hammer and beat the heads of simple people when the result of doing so was likely to be confusion rather than instruction.

But Jews found Maimonides' positions so difficult to digest that, over time, pious Jews “corrected” his words to conform them to the Judaism they knew.<sup>16</sup>

I am convinced that these people did not act with malice; on the contrary, they were no

doubt certain that they were correcting real errors that had cropped up in the texts of the great sage's writings. (There also are instances in which changes were introduced by the censor's hand; the best known and most obvious appears in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Melakhim* 11:4.<sup>17</sup>)

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In this brief article, dedicated with affection and esteem to Shalom Rosenberg, a man who has contributed greatly to the understanding of Jewish philosophy in general and Maimonidean thought in particular, I want to consider several Maimonidean texts that did not fall victim to censorship but that were, rather, “corrected” by well-intentioned copyists who meant to remedy what to their eyes were defects.

The best known example of the phenomenon I want to discuss appears in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkebot Melakhim* 8:11 (Twersky,\* p. 221, except for boldface insertion):

A heathen who accepts the seven commandments and observes them scrupulously is a “righteous heathen,” and

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., *Milot ha-biggayon*, chapter 10: “And speech [*dibbur*; intellectual capacity] is the distinction in man, for it differentiates the human species from others. And that ‘speech’ is the power by which he can depict the intelligibles; it establishes man's true nature” (*Milot ha-biggayon*, trans. from Arabic to Hebrew by Moses Ibn Tibbon, ed. Moses Ventura [Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1969], p. 53; see also *Guide* III:8).

<sup>16</sup> The phenomenon is familiar from other contexts. A particularly well known example, alluded to in fn. 13 above, is presented by *Mishnah Sanbedrin* 4:5, which states “accordingly, only one man was created, to teach that one who destroys a single [Jewish] person is regarded by Scripture as if he had destroyed the entire world and one who saves a single [Jewish] person is regarded by Scripture as if he had saved the entire world.” As Ephraim Elimelekh Urbach has shown, the word *mi-yisra'el* (“Jewish”) is a relatively late insertion into the text of the *mishnah*. See E. E. Urbach, *Mei-olamam shel hakhamim: Qovez mehqarim* [World of the Sages] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), pp. 561-577. Through a series of coincidences, I discovered what is apparently the earliest textual witness to the correct text: Koran 5, 27-32! See my note on the subject, *Tarbiz*, 75 (2006): 565-566.

<sup>17</sup> See the analysis by Leah Naomi Goldfeld, “*Hilkebot Melakhim*,” *Sinai* 96 (1984): 67-79. See also A. M. Hershman, “Textual Problems of Book Fourteen of the Mishne Torah,” *JQR* 40 (1950): 401-12.

\* Except as otherwise noted, excerpts from the *Mishneh Torah* are taken from the translations in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (West Orange NJ: Behrman House, 1972). Departures from those translations needed to present the textual issues raised here are in boldface.

will have a portion in the world to come, provided he accepts them and performs them because the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded them in the Law and made known through Moses our Teacher that the observance thereof had been enjoined upon the descendants of Noah even before the Law was given. But if his observance thereof is based upon a reasoned conclusion he is not deemed a resident alien or one of the pious of the Gentiles, but **[printed Hebrew versions: nor]** one of their wise men.

Typographically, the difference between the two versions is miniscule. (In the Hebrew, they read, respectively, אלא (“but”) and ולא (“nor”); omitting half of the letter *alef* transforms it into a *vav* and changes one word into the other.) Substantively, the difference is vast: is a person who observes the seven Noahide commandments on the basis of “a reasoned conclusion” and without any reference to the Torah—indeed, without even having heard of Torah, as in the case of Aristotle—considered a wise man or not? And if we recall that wisdom constitutes the entry pass into the world-to-come,<sup>18</sup> the difference becomes even greater.<sup>19</sup> It is hard to imagine that the original version read ולא (“nor”) and that some copyist “corrected” it to אלא (“but”) so as to make Maimonides’ words more universalist. Given the medieval ambience, that possibility strikes me as extremely remote.

This text has been extensively studied by both traditional and academic scholars, and there is no need to cover that ground again here.<sup>20</sup> Taking account neither of textual studies of manuscripts and printed editions nor of philosophical and religious arguments, it seems

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to me that the considerations noted above demonstrate that the original reading must be אלא (“but”). Moreover, there is a further argument, beyond the learned ones already adduced, that lends support to that conclusion. The patriarch Abraham, of course, was not a Jew; indeed, he began as an idolater and had no knowledge of the Torah. By “reasoned conclusion” alone he came to recognize the Creator. Later, he approached his contemporaries (actual Noahides—descendants of Noah) and persuaded them, by rational proofs, to accept God. Clearly, Maimonides did not deny that Abraham and those persuaded by his rational arguments were wise men. This, it seems to be, is a compelling argument in support of reading “but,” not “nor.”

*Hilkhot Melakhim* offers a second example of such a change, this one at the very end of the *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:5; trans. at

<sup>18</sup> For discussion of the pertinent texts, see M. Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* 2nd ed. (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), pp. 149-163.

<sup>19</sup> This text is widely taken as dealing with the pious gentile’s place in the world to come, but that reading is erroneous. At issue in this *halakhab* and the preceding one are very different questions: Who is considered a pious gentile? Under what circumstances may a gentile reside in the Land of Israel when it is under Jewish sovereignty? It is mistaken, therefore, to think that Maimonides here rules that a gentile who observes the Noahide commandments on the basis of reasoned conclusion will not enter the world to come; that subject is simply not under consideration. I develop and support this claim more broadly in *Confrontation*, pp. 241-250. My friend Prof. Ze’ev Harvey has pointed out to me that the term “gentile sages” (*hakhmei ummot ha-olam*) (rendered in the extract in the text as “their wise men”) refers to a clear talmudic classification. At *Berakhot* 58a, the Talmud establishes that the blessing “Who has given of His wisdom to flesh and blood” is to be recited upon seeing a gentile sage; there is no such blessing to be recited on seeing a pious gentile.

<sup>20</sup> I consider these studies in my discussion in *Confrontation* cited in the preceding footnote.

Twersky, pp. 225-226; bracketed insertions by the present author). The most common printed editions read as follows:

In that era [the messianic age] there will be neither famine nor war, neither jealousy nor strife. Blessings will be abundant, comforts within the reach of all. The one preoccupation of the whole world will be to know the Lord. Hence Israelites will be very wise, they will know the things that are now concealed [var.: the concealed and profound things will be known to all] and will attain an understanding of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind, as it is written, “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Is. 11:9).

Another version, however, reads as follows:

In that era [the messianic age] there will be neither famine nor war, neither jealousy nor strife. Blessings will be abundant, comforts within the reach of all. The one preoccupation of the whole world will be to know the Lord. Hence they will be very wise, they will know the things that are now concealed [var.: the concealed and profound things will be known to all] and will attain an understanding of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind, as it is written, “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Is. 11:9).

The difference, of course, is that according to the second version, the whole world “will be very wise, they will know the things that are now concealed”; the first version reserves that

destiny to Israelites (“Israel” in the Hebrew). The passage has a complicated textual history, as evidenced by collection of variant readings included in Shabbtai Frankel’s edition, and he cites additional minor differences, having no bearing on the meaning, between the manuscripts and printed versions.<sup>21</sup>

I would add only three observations:

1. As in the previous case, if Maimonides had written “Israel” and someone else later deleted the word, we would have an emendation tending toward greater universalism—a result unable to withstand rational analysis.
2. Maimonides here asserts that in messianic times, the exclusive “preoccupation of the whole world” will be to know the Lord and that in those days (may they arrive speedily!) someone—Israel or all the world—“will attain an understanding of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind.” He begins by speaking of “the whole world” and ends by speaking of “the human mind”; it seems quite unlikely that he would insert “Israel” in the middle, as a specification between two generalizations.
3. The verse from Isaiah with which Maimonides concludes both this *halakbab* and the entire *Mishneh Torah* (which reads, in full, “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord,<sup>22</sup> as the waters cover the sea”) refers to all humanity, not only Israel.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For discussion, see Simon-Raymond Schwarzfuchs, “*Les Lois royales de Maimonide*,” *REJ* 111 (1951-52): 63-86, pp. 81-82.

<sup>22</sup> According to Maimonides, this knowledge is attained through human (that is, rational) instrumentalities, not through specifically Jewish ones.

<sup>23</sup> Maimonides concludes the *Mishneh Torah*, as he begins it (*Hilkbot Yesodei ha-Torah*, chapters 1-4) with a discussion applicable to humanity in general. For a fuller discussion of this point, see my *Maimonides on Judaism* (above, n. 5), p. 41.

Clearly, we have here another particularistic “improvement” of Maimonides. The copyist(s) could not believe that the master meant to conclude his halakhic magnum opus by teaching of a messianic era in which gentiles, no less than Jews, will be great sages; will abandon jealousy, war and strife; will enjoy abundant blessings and comforts; will engage solely in the effort to know God; and, accordingly, will attain knowledge of God, each in accord with his own ability.

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“improvement” of Maimonides.*

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Nor is the phenomenon limited to the *Mishneh Torah*. Another instructive example, in Maimonides’ Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte, shows not only how Maimonides’ text was emended during the Middle Ages but also how scholars today read that text.

Rabbi Yitzhak Shilat<sup>24</sup> was faced with several versions of Maimonides’ letters to Obadiah the Proselyte. One of them contained the following passage, as cited in Blau’s edition of Maimonides’ letters (no. 293, p. 549); words that are the subject of the textual variants discussed below appear in boldface.\*

The reason for this is, that Abraham our father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true **religion** [*dat*] and the unity of God; he rejected the idols and abolished their adoration; he brought many...under the wings of the Divine Presence; he gave them counsel and advice and ordered his sons and the members of his household after him to keep the ways of the Lord...as it is written, “For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that

they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19). Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and **confesses the unity of the divine name, as it is written in the Torah—they are all disciples of Abraham our Father, peace be with him, and members of his household, and he turned them to righteousness.**

In the same way as he turned his contemporaries through his words and teaching, so does he turn all who will convert in the future through the testament he left to his children and household after him. Thus Abraham our Father...is the father of his pious posterity who walk in his ways, and the father of his disciples **and every proselyte who converts.**

Rabbi Shilat, however, published the following as his primary version:

The reason for this is, that Abraham our father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true **way** [*derekh*] and the unity of God; he rejected the idols and abolished their adoration; he brought many...under the wings of the Divine Presence; he gave them counsel and advice and ordered his sons and the members of his household after him to keep the ways of the Lord...as it is written, “For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19). Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and **confesses the unity of the divine name, as written in the Torah [var. adds: and all who enter into the religion of Moses our teacher, the religion of truth and righteousness<sup>25</sup>]**—they are disciples of

<sup>24</sup> See Yitzhak Shilat, ed. and trans., *Iggerot ha-Rambam* (Letters of Maimonides) (Jerusalem: Ma`aliyot, 1987), p. 234.

\* The translation is adapted from that appearing in Twersky, pp. 475-476; changes have been made to capture the Hebrew more literally in order to show the differences between the Blau and the Shilat Hebrew editions.

<sup>25</sup> R. Shilat cites this variant, from another ms., in a marginal note.



**Abraham our Father and members of his household, and he turned all of them to righteousness.**

In the same way as he turned his contemporaries through his words and teaching, so does he turn all who will convert in the future through the testament he left to his children and household after him. Thus Abraham our Father...is the father of his pious posterity who walk in his ways, and the father of his disciples, **they being every proselyte who converts.**

The variations pertinent to our discussion may be summarized in the following table:

Blau Edition	Shilat Edition
1. ...revealed to them the true religion ( <i>dat</i> )	...revealed to them the true way ( <i>derekh</i> )
2. ...whoever confesses the unity of the divine name, as it is written in the Torah—they are all disciples of Abraham our Father, peace be with him, and members of his household, and he turned them to righteousness.	whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the divine name, as written in the Torah [var. adds: and all who enter into the religion of Moses our teacher, the religion of truth and righteousness]—they are disciples of Abraham our Father and members of his household, and he turned all of them to righteousness
3. Thus Abraham our Father...is the father of his pious posterity who walk his ways, and the father of his disciples and every proselyte who converts	Thus Abraham our Father...is the father of his pious posterity who walk in his ways, and the father of his disciples, they being every proselyte who converts

What is the significance of these differences?

In the first item, the Blau edition tells that Abraham taught his contemporaries *the true religion*; the Shilat edition speaks of *the true way*. Abraham clearly did not teach the Torah to the gentiles of his time, half a dozen generations before the Torah was given at Sinai, and the meaning of the Blau version therefore must be that before the giving of the Torah, there were gentiles who followed the true religion—the religion that Abraham taught them. The Shilat version, meanwhile, implies that there is a true way to serve God that is not necessarily identical with Israel’s Torah.

In the second case, Rabbi Shilat took pains to include within his text a variant that substantially moderates what he appears to have regarded as an excessively universalistic message.<sup>26</sup> According to the version that appears in Blau’s edition, anyone who confesses the unity of the divine name as it is written in the Torah is considered a disciple of Abraham and a member of his household; recall that this is Maimonides’ position as expressed in *Hilkehot Melakhim*, chapter 8. Rabbi Shilat’s intellectual integrity precluded him from disregarding this version, but he cites as well another version, which he finds more congenial, according to which only one who converts (“enter[s] into the religion of Moses our teacher, the religion of truth and righteousness”) is considered a disciple of Abraham and a member of his household. It is inconceivable, in what appears to be his view, that a gentile who recognizes God and the Torah but still remains a gentile could be considered a disciple of Judaism’s founder and a member of his household.

In the third case, Blau’s text describes Abraham as father to (1) his pious posterity who walk in his ways;<sup>27</sup> (2) his disciples; and (3) every proselyte who converts. It follows that Abraham has disciples who are neither his descendants nor converts—in other words, that there are gentiles who are considered

Abraham's disciples. According to Rabbi Shilat's text, however, Abraham is father to (1) his pious posterity who walk in his ways and (2) "his disciples, they being every proselyte who converts." It follows, according to this version, that there are no gentiles who are considered disciples of Abraham.

In the three instances we have examined, Maimonides' words were altered in order to blur their universalistic message. But emendations of this type have been used to temper other Maimonidean religious positions, unrelated to the question of universalism, that seemed deviant. Prof. David Henshke has recently examined a striking instance of this, and I will conclude here with a brief review of that case.<sup>28</sup>

Maimonides writes as follows in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Me'ilah* 8:8 (trans. in Twersky, pp. 145-146, modified by insertion of the words in boldface and deletion of the words in braces {}):

It is fitting for man to meditate upon the laws of the holy Torah and to comprehend their full meaning to the extent of his ability. Nevertheless, a law for which he finds no reason and understands no cause

should not be trivial in his eyes. Let him not "break through to rise up against the Lord lest the Lord break forth upon him" (Ex. 19:24); nor should his thoughts concerning these things be like his thoughts concerning profane matters. Come and consider how strict the Torah was in the law of trespass [*me'ilah*; misappropriation of property dedicated to sacred use]! Now if sticks and stones and earth and ashes became hallowed by words alone as soon as the name of the Master of the Universe was invoked upon them, and anyone who comported with them as with a profane thing committed trespass and required atonement even if he acted unwittingly, how much more should man be on guard not to rebel against a commandment decreed for us by the Holy One, blessed be He, only because he does not understand its reason; or to heap words that are not right against the Lord; or to regard the commandments in the manner he regards ordinary affairs.

Behold it is said in Scripture: "You shall therefore keep all my statutes [*huqotai*] and all Mine ordinances [*mishpatai*], and do them" (Lev. 20:22); whereupon our sages

<sup>26</sup> Instructive evidence of Rabbi Shilat's method in Maimonidean exegesis appears in his article "*Segulat yisra'el—shitot ha-kuzari ve-ha-rambam*" [Israel's special quality—the approach of the *Kuzari* and of Maimonides], in *Ma'aliyot* 20 (Maimonidean studies and interpretations) (Second decennial volume by Yeshivat Birkat Moshe, Ma'aleh Adumim), ed. A. Samet and A. Fleischer (Ma'aleh Adumim: Ma'aliyot, 1999), pp. 271-302. In that article, Rabbi Shilat strives mightily to square the views of R. Judah Halevi and Maimonides by making the latter more like the former. I respond to some of his arguments in my article "Was Maimonides Truly Universalist?" (above, n. 5).

<sup>27</sup> Note that Maimonides here suggests that a descendant of Abraham who is not pious or does not walk in his ways (which may be the same thing) thereby loses his relationship to Abraham. That position is articulated forcefully in Maimonides' epilogue to his Thirteen Principles (trans. in Twersky, p. 422):

"When a man believes in all these fundamental principles, and his faith is thus clarified, he is then part of that "Israel" whom we are to love, pity, and treat, as God commanded, with love and fellowship. Even if a Jew should commit every possible sin, out of lust or mastery by his lower nature, he will be punished for his sins but will still have a share in the world to come. He is one of the "sinners in Israel." But if a man gives up any one of these fundamental principles, he has removed himself from the Jewish community. He is an atheist, a heretic, an unbeliever who "cuts among the plantings." We are commanded to hate him and to destroy him. Of him it is said: "Shall I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?" (Ps. 139:21).

For a full discussion of this passage, see my *Must A Jew Believe Anything?* (above, n. 18). In a different context, Maimonides considers another sort of impious descendant of Abraham—the progeny of Abraham's concubine Qeturah. See *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Melakhim* 10:7-8.

<sup>28</sup> See David Henshke, "*Li-she'eilat abdut baguto shel ha-rambam*" [On the unity of Maimonides' thought], *Da'at* 37 (1997): 37-52.

have commented that “keeping” and “doing” refer to the “statutes” as well as to the “ordinances.” “Doing” is well known, namely, to perform the statutes. And “keeping” means that one should be careful concerning them and not imagine that they are less important than the ordinances. Now the “ordinances” are commandments whose reason is obvious, and the benefit derived in this world from doing them is well known; for example, the prohibition against robbery and murder, or the commandment honoring one’s father and mother. The “statutes,” on the other hand, are commandments whose reason is not known. Our sages have said: My statutes are the decrees that I have decreed for you, and you are not permitted to question them. A man’s impulse pricks him concerning them and the Gentiles reprove us about them, such as the statutes concerning the prohibition against the flesh of the pig and that against meat seethed with milk, the law of the heifer whose neck is broken, the red heifer, or the scapegoat.

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How much was King David distressed by heretics and pagans who disputed the statutes! Yet the more they pursued him with false questions, which they plied according the narrowness of man’s minds, the more he increased his cleaving to the Torah; as it is said: “The proud have forged a lie against me; but I with my whole heart

will keep Your precepts.”(Ps. 119:69) It is also said there concerning this: “All your commandments are faithful; they persecute me falsely, help You me” (*ibid.* 119:86).

All the (laws concerning the) offerings are in the category of statutes. The sages have said that the world stands **even** because of the service of the offerings; **inasmuch as** {for} through the performance of the statutes and the ordinances the righteous merit life in the world to come.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the Torah puts the commandment concerning the statutes first; as it is said: “You shall therefore keep My statutes, and Mine ordinances which if a man do, he shall live by them” (Lev. 18:5).

In the final paragraph of this passage, Maimonides alludes to the *mishnah* (*Avot* 1:2) that states: “Simon the Righteous was one of the last of the Great Assembly. He would say: the world stands because of three things, the Torah, the service of the offerings, and acts of kindness.” He interprets that *mishnah* in a manner consistent with his view of the temple cult: the world stands *even* because of the sacrifices, for they provide an example of the Torah’s statutes, the performance of which enables the upright to attain the life of the world to come.<sup>30</sup> But it appears that Maimonides’ copyists were troubled by these words, and most printed editions (including the one evidently reflected in the unemended translation above) read “Accordingly, the sages said that the world stands because of the service of the offerings....”<sup>31</sup> These copyists evidently could not swallow the fact that, according to Maimonides, the sacrifices had no immanent role of their own and, in a better world, would not have had to be ordained<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Note that Maimonides shifts the discussion from what the world stands on to what a person should do to merit a share in the world to come.

<sup>30</sup> This is not the place to consider whether this text represents a retreat from Maimonides’ consistent position that true key to the world to come is an understanding of the intelligibles. In my view, this text can be readily interpreted in light of Maimonides’ well known position on the matter, but that exercise is not relevant here. On Maimonides’ position, see Hannah Kasher, “‘Torah for Its Own Sake’, Torah Not for Its Own Sake, and the Third Way,” *JQR* 79 (1988-89): 153-63.

<sup>31</sup> Henshke provides a broad treatment of the textual issues.

To support my view that Maimonides' wording was here "improved" in a way untrue to his actual stance, let me cite his commentary on the pertinent passage in *Avot* (translated here into English from the Hebrew translation of Rabbi Shilat): "He means to say that through wisdom, i.e., the Torah; and through virtuous attributes, i.e., acts of kindness; and through performance of the Torah's commands, i.e., the sacrifices—one perpetuates the improvement of the world and arranges the universe in the most perfect possible way." The *mishnah* states that the world stands on three things; one of them is the sacrificial service. In Maimonides' interpretation, however, the sacrifices are not themselves one of the three things on which the

world stands; rather, they exemplify the commandments overall.

It is noteworthy as well that Maimonides transforms "the world stands" (that is, continues to exist) into something much more prosaic: improvement of the world.<sup>33</sup>

Anyone teaching Jewish thought today has had the experience of presenting some text by Maimonides to which a student reacts by excitedly insisting that "Maimonides could not have said such a thing!" I have tried to show here that this sort of reaction is not a new one and has produced efforts (not conscious, I am convinced) to "improve" Maimonides' words.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Nahmanides' sharp critique of Maimonides' position (in the former's commentary on Lev. 1:9) is well known: "But these words are mere expressions, healing casually a severe wound and a great difficulty, and making the table of the Eternal polluted [as if the offerings were intended only] to remove false beliefs from the hearts of the wicked and the fools of the world..." (Nahmanides, *Commentary on the Torah – Leviticus*, trans. Charles B. Chavel, [New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1974], p. 19). (The phrase translated by Chavel as "mere expressions" might be more accurately if less gently rendered as "nonsense."—*trans.*) For discussion of the critical response to Maimonides' view, see Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments (Ta'amei Ha-Mitzvot)* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> On Maimonides' concept of improvement of the world (*tiqqun olam*), see M. Lorberbaum, "Rambam al tiqqun olam" [Maimonides on *tiqqun olam*], *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 65-82. As Mr. Jacob Avikam has pointed out to me, Maimonides in his commentary also changes the *mishnah*'s sequence of terms, reversing the order in which sacrifices and acts of kindness are mentioned.

<sup>34</sup> I am greatly indebted to Prof. Hannah Kasher for her wise comments on an earlier version of this article. My thanks as well to my friend, Mr. Eliezer Zitronbaum, who did a wonderful job of "*Farteicht un Farbessert*" with respect to the original version of this essay.