

Michael Katzman is a first-year student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. He is pursuing a Masters degree in Talmud at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies.

MAIMONIDES' REJECTION OF ASTROLOGY

Michael Katzman

It is clear that Maimonides rejected the pseudo-science of astrology. His rejection of astrology shows intellectual courage, since astrology was a pervasive and widely accepted theory of his time, both in the Jewish and non-Jewish world. Maimonides argued that astrology was contradicted by the scientific knowledge of his time. Additionally, he maintained that a belief in astrology necessarily involved the acceptance of notions that were idolatrous and other ideas that were contrary to Judaism. Therefore, Maimonides rejected astrology for both religious and scientific reasons.

Before an understanding of Maimonides' rejection of astrology is explored, it is important to explain the basic medieval conception of the astral influences. The influences of the heavenly bodies upon the sublunar world were universally accepted by medieval thinkers. Existence, generation, and corruption were phenomena that were presumed to be dependent upon the celestial influences. Maimonides also accepted the idea that the existing order of things in the sublunar world is dependent on forces that emanate from the spheres. He quotes the Sages who say that "there is no single herb without its corresponding star above, that beats it and commands it to grow."¹ Since these celestial influences were universally recognized by medieval thinkers, astrologers argued that their art had a basis in natural philosophy.

Like nearly all medieval philosophers, Maimonides held that the bodies of the planets were the *efficient* causes that blended the four sublunar elements.² He based this element of his understanding of the celestial influences upon Aristotle.³ Aristotle pointed to the manifest influence of the sun, and argued that the sun is

¹ *The Guide for the Perplexed* 2:10, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover Publications M. Friedlander 1904), 164. This translation will be used for the rest of this paper.

² Gad Freudenthal, "Maimonides' Stance on Astrology in Context: Cosmology, Physics, Medicine, and Providence," in *Moses Maimonides; Physician, Scientist and Philosopher*, eds. Fred Rosner, M.D., and Samuel S. Kottek, M.D. (Northvale, NJ: Ktav, 1993), 78.

³ *Guide* 2:4.

accountable for the mobility of the four sublunar elements. This movement of the four sublunar substances caused the constant growth and decay of living beings.⁴ Aristotle had also mentioned the sublunar effects of the moon.⁵ The medieval Aristotelians and astrologers extended this theory to the planets. All the planets were presumed to affect the sublunar elements. The *logos* (ratio of the four elements) of each sublunar substance was dependent upon the celestial bodies.⁶

Maimonides held that the *formal* cause informing sublunar matter was the Active Intellect. The Active Intellect was one of the separate Intelligences. The Active Intellect possesses pure form and instills form upon matter.

The Active Intellect had to possess pure form to allow it to inform matter. “For whatever passes from potentiality into actuality, requires for that transition an external agent of the same kind as itself.”⁷ Therefore, in order for matter to pass from potentiality to an entity with form, it had to be informed by an external agent that possesses pure form. The external agent that informs sublunar matter is the Active Intellect.

Maimonides shared this conception of matter with his contemporaries. It is an extension of Aristotle’s theory of matter. Aristotle’s matter is passive in that it does not automatically become a form based on its *logos* (ratio of elements). Thus, the Peripatetics explained that the sublunar substances are given a form by an external agent. This agent that informs matter is the active intellect and is called by Avicenna, the “Giver of Forms.”⁸

Thus, the form is a result of the interplay of the efficient and formal causes. The efficient causes produce in matter a mixture characterized by a specific *logos* (ratio) of the elements. Thereafter, the *formal* cause “Giver of Forms” “imprints upon the *mixtum* a form *suitable to its material composition*.”⁹ The sum total of the efficient and formal causes was conceived to be that of God’s general providence.¹⁰

Maimonides also identifies the sum total of the celestial influences, the efficient and formal causes, to be that of God’s general providence. Maimonides in *Guide* 2:11 writes:

⁴ Aristotle, *De gen anim.* IV. 10, F. Solmsen, Aristotle’s System of the Physical World (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1960), 377-379 as cited by Gad Freudenthal, *Maimonides’ Stance on Astrology in Context: Cosmology, Physics, Medicine, and Providence*, 78 and *Guide* 3:17.

⁵ Aristotle *De gen. anim.* IV. 10, 777b26ff as cited by Gad Freudenthal, *Maimonides’ Stance on Astrology in Context: Cosmology, Physics, Medicine, and Providence*, 78.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Guide* 2:4.

⁸ H. A. Davidson, “Alfarabi and Avicenna on the Active Intellect,” *Viator* 3(1972): 109-178 as *Guide* 2:1 as cited by Freudenthal, “Maimonides’ Stance on Astrology in Context,” 79.

⁹ Freudenthal, “Maimonides’ Stance on Astrology in Context,” 79.

¹⁰ See *Guide* 3:17 where Maimonides explains the ultimate source of everything and providences has its ultimate origin in the most perfect intellect which is the intellect of God.

The ruling power emanates from the Creator, and is received by the Intelligences according to their order; from the intelligences part of the good and the light bestowed upon them is communicated to the spheres, and the latter, being in possession of the abundance obtained of the Intelligences, transmit forces and properties into beings of this transient world.

Furthermore, he explains in *Guide 2:6* that ultimately formative power has its origins in God. “All Forms are the result of the influence of the Active Intellect, and that the latter is an angel (the Active Intellect).”¹¹ The Active Intellect, like that of the nine other Intelligences, is an angel of God, and serves as the medium for God’s providence or influence upon the world. Maimonides states that this medium that Aristotle calls the Intelligences are identical with the angels.¹² They are the means by which God interacts with the material universe.¹³

The Astrologers agreed with this general conception of the heavenly influences. This allowed the astrologers to claim that their science was based on science that was subscribed to by nearly all medieval thinkers. However, the astrologers differed in their understanding of the role of the Giver of Forms. Unlike Maimonides and the Peripatetics, they held that the “Giver of Forms” was not a transcendent intellect. The Giver of Forms was an influence that emanated from within the planets.¹⁴

Even though Maimonides believed in the aforementioned celestial influences, he held astrology to be utterly false. Maimonides states in his *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles* that truth can only come from three sources:

First, rational proof as in mathematical sciences; secondly, the perception by one of the five senses; . . . and thirdly tradition from the prophets and the righteous. It is accordingly incumbent upon every wise person to investigate his doctrinal beliefs and classify them according to one of the three basic sources from which they are drawn, namely, tradition, sensation or rational insights. One however who grounds his beliefs in any other but one of these guiding principles scriptures refers to him as “the simple believeth every word.”¹⁵

According to Maimonides, astrology did not base itself upon any of these three categories of truth. It could be rejected by the words of the prophets, perception and science.

Maimonides acknowledges that there have been many books written about astrology that claim that this art is based on knowledge and science. Yet he vig-

¹¹ *Guide 2:6*.

¹² *Guide 2:7*.

¹³ *Guide 2:4*.

¹⁴ Freudenthal, “Maimonides’ Stance on Astrology in Context,” 79.

¹⁵ *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles*, trans. Leon D Stitskin, 119.

orously denies that any of these books has any truth in it and disregards them all as vanities. Maimonides maintains that people have wasted their time reading astrology books. The source of these books' errors and the errors of those who believe in their contents is that people assume that whatever is written in books, especially if ancient is necessarily true.¹⁶ The numbers of books have consistently increased because each one based itself upon the authority of the earlier ones.

Furthermore, according to Maimonides' understanding of the limits of human knowledge, astrology was a futile pursuit. Even if astrological theories were true they were beyond the scope of human understanding. Shlomo Pines writes that according to Maimonides, "Aristotelian verities and certainties in so far as they do not concern the terrestrial world are regarded in the Guide as beyond the scope of the human understanding: in other words, metaphysics, celestial physics, and astronomy are beyond these limits."¹⁷ Astrology based itself upon these three branches of knowledge.

The art of the astrologers depended upon an understanding of the influences and nature of the Intelligences and spheres. Maimonides states that the nature of the incorporeal Intelligences and their influence upon the world are well beyond the intellectual capacity and perception of humans. The sole exception to this rule was Moses who was given this knowledge as a "gift" from God.¹⁸ Even an understanding of the corporeal spheres was "veiled" from the perception of humans.¹⁹ Therefore, astrology was dependent upon realms of knowledge well beyond the capacity of humans.

Maimonides associated religion with truth. This meant that the ideas of religion cannot be left as mere dogma. Religious truths must be able to stand their ground against dispassionate rational science. In this context, one can understand why Maimonides ruled that the Torah's prohibition of astrology did not only involve the practice of astrology, but even a belief in it.²⁰ He understood astrology to be among the superstitious practices which were prohibited in Deuteronomy. Maimonides writes in the *Mishneh Torah*:

Whoever believes in these and similar things [astrology, sorcery] and thinks in his heart that they are true and scientific and only forbidden by the Torah is nothing but a fool, deficient in understanding. . . . Sensible people, however, who possess sound mental faculties, know by clear proofs that all of these practices which the Torah prohibited have no scientific basis but are chimerical and inane; and that only

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Shlomo Pines, "Maimonides and Philosophy," in *Moses Maimonides*, eds. Shlomo Pines and Yovel Yimmerzan (Jerusalem: Martinus Nishoff Publication, 1986), 6.

¹⁸ *Guide* 3:17.

¹⁹ *Guide* 2:19.

²⁰ *Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah* 11:16.

those deficient in knowledge are attracted to these follies and, for their sake, leave the ways of truth.²¹

Astronomy, like augury and other superstitions, was forbidden because of its falsehood. The Torah forbids these superstitious ideas in order to eradicate falsehood and spurious beliefs.

According to Maimonides, one of the Torah's goals is a "campaign of truth," which it accomplishes by prohibiting acting upon superstitions and believing in superstitions that are appealing to man. Maimonides writes in his Commentary to the Mishnah, *Avodah Zarah* 4:8, that the Torah "forbids that which is false."²² He insists that the Torah forbade astrology just like it forbids in general that which is false. The same motivation lies behind the Torah's prohibition of sorcery, augury, and necromancy.

Maimonides says that there have been "many good and righteous people from our Torah that think that these things [superstitious practices] are true, but they are still forbidden by the Torah. They do not know that these matters are null and lies which the Torah forbids, just like it forbids that which is false."²³ Many believed that these are real yet forbidden forces. They assumed that the forces which made these superstitious practices work were impure or evil forces.

Maimonides admits that there are statements of the sages in the Talmud that support astrological ideas. The presence of these statements in the Talmud does not dissuade Maimonides from the veracity of his argument against astrology. In the *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles* he says: "This [the astrological statements of the rabbis] should not disturb you."²⁴

Marc Shapiro writes that Maimonides offers a "three-pronged defense" to deal with the astrological statements of the rabbis.²⁵ This "three pronged defense" is elaborated in the *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles*. The first prong is that the truth may have eluded an individual sage. Second, the sage's statement which appears to support notions of astrology may be allegorical. Third, the statement may have been necessary for the particular time and place. This means that the statement was not an expression of the true beliefs of the sage, but means to achieving a just end. Maimonides writes in *Guide* 3:28 that similar methods are used by the Torah to establish morality and justice.

²¹ *Mishneh Torah Avodah Zarah* 11:16. As cited by Y. Tzvi Langerman, "Maimonides' Repudiation of Astrology," in *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (New York: Yeshiva University Press 1991), 127.

²² *Maimonides' Commentary to the Mishnah*, ed. David Kafach (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Cook, 1965). I will be using this edition for all references.

²³ *Maimonides' Commentary to the Mishnah. Avodah Zarah* 4:7.

²⁴ "Letter to the Jews of Marseilles," Stitskin, 127.

²⁵ Marc Shapiro, "Maimonidean Halakha and Superstition," *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1991), 65.

Maimonides was a systematizer, always trying to organize and classify information. Through systematizing he sought to bring clarity and objectivity onto the subject matter at hand. One can see this pattern in his logical arguments in the *Guide* and his innovative organization of the whole corpus of *halakha* in *Mishneh Torah*. Also, in his *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles*, Maimonides uses this method to objectify his arguments against astrology by insisting that truth can only come from three sources (rational proof, perception of the five senses, and statements of the righteous).

However, if we consider Maimonides' three categories from which truth may be derived in the context of his "three-pronged" defense against astrology, then objectivity in interpreting the statements of the Rabbis is lost. Maimonides' system to handle and interpret the words of the Rabbis allows for extreme subjectivity. Whenever one finds a statement of the Rabbis that contradicts the philosophic outlook of the interpreter, they may use one of the tools of Maimonides' "three-pronged" approach. The interpreter may say the statement is allegory, a mistake of an individual sage, or that it was just said in a particular context to achieve a lofty goal. As a result, the message of Judaism and the Rabbis may become culturally relative and could potentially lose all sense of counter-culturalism.²⁶

Maimonides' approach to interpret the words of the Sages that contradicted contemporary science, philosophy, and logic was not without precedent. One can see that this mode of interpretation had its antecedents in the Geonim. Like the cultural milieu of Maimonides, science in the time of the Geonim denied the existence of demons and that evil forces caused one to become ill. Therefore, the Geonim interpreted the *sugyot* in the Talmud which talk about demons allegorically.²⁷

Additionally, the medical advice which is stated by the sages in the Talmud is ignored by the Geonim. In fact, R. Sherirah Gaon and R. Hai Gaon ruled in their responsa that it is forbidden to follow the medical advice of the Sages.²⁸ Like Maimonides, the Geonim attributed the sage's faulty medical advice to the science that the rabbis had available to them.

Similarly, Maimonides felt that certain sayings of the Sages which support notions of astrology can be attributed to the limited scientific knowledge that existed in the time of that sage. In describing the astronomical knowledge of the Sages, he writes in the *Guide*, "Mathematics were not fully developed in those days; and their statements were not based on the authority of the prophets, but

²⁶ I am not saying that this occurred in the in the works of Rambam, but this methodology leaves room for such a possibility.

²⁷ Mordechai Levine, *Otzar Hageonim* (Hebrew University Press, 1952). See *Berakhot* 6a and *Hagigah* 3b. I would like to thank Dr. Yaakov Elman for pointing me to where I could find these allegoric interpretations.

²⁸ "Sayings on the Interpretations of the Rabbis," *Milhamot Hashem*, ed. Rabbi Reuven Margaliyot (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1953), 95.

on the knowledge which they either themselves possessed or derived from contemporary men of science.”²⁹ Therefore, one is not bound by the words of the Sages which are dependent upon scientific data.

Maimonides makes a distinction between the authority of the statements of the Sages which have been derived through “tradition” and prophecy and that which is just based on their logical inferences. The *Meor Einayim* aptly points out that when one considers the statements of Sages in this context, the authority of the rabbis on religious matters is not negated.³⁰ In the Maimonidean treatment of the Sages, they are the ultimate authority in religious matters, but are subject to objection in matters outside of the religious domain.

Maimonides’ son, R. Avraham, explicitly make this distinction between the authority of the Rabbis in scientific and rabbinic matters in *Ma’amar al Odot Derashot Hazal*. He states:

The superiority of the Talmudic Sages and the completeness of their qualifications in the exposition of the Torah, its details and the integrity of its statements in general and in detail—all this does not imply that we must defend and uphold their statements in matters of medicine, natural science, and astronomy, and to believe them as we believe them concerning the exposition of the Torah, where they have ultimate wisdom.³¹

Thus, it can be seen that R. Avraham championed the methodology by which his father used to determine the authoritative nature of Rabbinic literature on normative human conduct. The Sages possessed unquestionable authority upon religious matters, which did not extend to their opinions in scientific matters.

One must consider the possibility that the Sages’ statements which support demonology and astrology are neither allegorical, nor necessary claims, nor just sayings of individual rabbis. However, this possibility apparently was not tenable to the Geonim or Maimonides. They could not believe that the Sages believed in things which in their minds were completely absurd in light of contemporary science and philosophy.

The likelihood that the majority of the sages believed in astrology and demonology is reinforced when one considers Babylonian society in which the sages lived. In Babylonia the veracity of demons and astrology were not notions of mere metaphysical speculation. They were an accepted “scientific fact” like the existence of viruses and bacteria to modern day society as a source of sickness.³²

Maimonides’ categorical rejection of astrology is very surprising because it has no clear basis in Rabbinic literature. In fact, while there are many statements

²⁹ *Guide* 3:14.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Yehuda Levy, “The Sciences as ‘Maid-servants of the Torah’ in Maimonides’ Writing,” in *Moses Maimonides: Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher* (London, 1993), 103.

³² Yaakov Elman, personal interview. December 22, 2004.

in Rabbinic literature that clearly support notions of astrology,³³ there are no statements of the Sages that reject astrology categorically.

Several scholars have cited the statement of Rav and Rabbi Yohanan “*ein mazal le-Yisrael*” (there are no planets for Israel) as a rejection of astrology (*Shabbat* 156a).³⁴ However, this is clearly an apologetic use of this text to justify Maimonides’ position on astrology. The simple reading of this text is that according to Rav and Rabbi Yohanan the finality of the influence of *mazal* is limited to non-Jews. Rashi explains that Rav and Rabbi Yohanan argue that “through merit and prayer *mazal* can be changed” by Jews.³⁵ Rav and Rabbi Yohanan merely limit the power of *mazal*, but do not deny its influence upon individuals and events. Rabbi Yohanan cites Jeremiah Chapter 10 as a proof to his claim. Rabbi Yohanan says: “Thus says God, towards the ways of the nations you shall not learn and from the signs of heaven you shall not fear;’ for the nations must fear from them [signs in heaven]. *They* must fear, but not Israel.”³⁶ Additionally, there is a series of four stories cited after these statements as evidence to the truth of the claim of Rav and Rabbi Yohanan. All of these stories say that a certain person was pre-destined by the stars towards a certain detrimental event or to have a negative trait. Then, the person escapes this pre-destined event or trait because he is a Jew who performs a righteous act.

Therefore, it appears that in the subject of astrology Maimonides must either ignore or re-interpret the words of the Sages in order to make them fit into his theological and scientific beliefs.³⁷ One of the major reasons that Maimonides rejected astrology is that he felt that it was based on faulty scientific logic. He presents a clear scientific argument against astrology in his *Commentary on the Mishnah, Avodah Zarah* 4:7. Maimonides contends that astrologers claim that certain spheres are “good” and some are “bad.” He goes on to assert that they claim that certain spheres match or correspond to one another. Maimonides states that these two postulates are clearly wrong, since the men of science all agree that the spheres are homogenous in form and composition.³⁸

Additionally, in the *Guide* 2:12 Maimonides contends that astrologers believe in false astrological theory because of their confusion over the term *fayid* (emanation) and to what objects *fayid* is applicable. He criticizes the astrologers for

³³ See *Sukah* 29a, *Shabbat* 156a, *Makkot* 29a, and *Berakhot* 10a for a few examples.

³⁴ See “Letter to the Jews of Marseilles,” trans. Leon D Stitskin, in *Letters of Maimonides* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1977), 115.

³⁵ *Shabbat* 156a.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ This is not only true of astrology. Many would claim that the same can be argued about Maimonides’ understanding of the attributes of God, demons, and angels. In all of these cases he re-interprets the words of the Bible and the sages contrary to the simple reading of the text.

³⁸ *Commentary on the Mishnah, Avodah Zarah*, 4:7.

ascribing the attribute of *fayid* to describe the astral forces. Maimonides states in *Guide* 2:12 that *fayid* can only be applied to “God and to the intelligences or angels.”³⁹ Only God and the Intelligences can act by emanation. This emanation is an incorporeal force not restricted by distances.

Even though Maimonides uses the term *fayid* to describe the influence of the stars, he insists that more accurately, the forces of the stars should be described as forces (*quwwat*), which are restricted by the rules of physics. These forces are limited by time and distance. They diminish over time and distance, since these astral forces have their origins in the corporeal bodies of the spheres. As opposed to *fayid*, which is efflux (called an emanation by Friedlander), i.e. a non-corporeal force that is not restricted by the laws of physics.

Maimonides contends that the spheres are to be viewed strictly as corporeal bodies whose influences obey the laws of Aristotelian physics. The rules of physics dictate that in order for a corporeal body to influence another body, it “must either be directly in contact with it, or indirectly through the medium of stars.”⁴⁰ Unfortunately, as Tsvi Langerman points out, the physical nature of the astral forces are not substantiated by Maimonides. He merely insists that the stellar influences can be described as the result of the action of bodies on one another.⁴¹

Maimonides acknowledged that the acceptance of the influence of the spheres could easily lead to astrology. He writes, “. . . the spheres are corporeal, and the stars, being corporeal, only act at certain distances, i.e., at a smaller or greater distance from the center, or at a distance from each other, a circumstance which led to astrology.”⁴² People including himself described this interaction of the celestial bodies as *fayid*. And since the bodies act upon one another at smaller or greater distances the astrologers assumed that the term *fayid* is being used in the technical sense. Maimonides says that this is a mistake. The influences or interactions of the stars with other bodies must be understood in corporeal terms. They are limited in their ability to affect other bodies by distance. These celestial bodies vary in the distances in which they are able to influence other bodies.

It was well known in the ancient world that one could use a piece of glass to make fire when the sun was bright. Additionally, there is a perceived difference in the warmth on Earth when the sun is up. These are easily detectable stellar influences in the world. One can hypothesize that Maimonides and the Greek philosophers who believed in the physical nature of the influence of the stars based their assumption of the physical nature of the stellar influences on these well-known stellar influences. Since these stellar influences are physical, it was a logical conclusion that all other stellar influences should be physical and bound by the laws of physics.

³⁹ *Guide* 2:12.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 169.

⁴¹ Langerman, “Maimonides’ Repudiation of Astrology,” 127.

⁴² *Guide* 2:12.

A further scientific argument against the astrologers was an epistemological one. Maimonides wrote in his *Treatise on Asthma*:

Therefore those who rely upon experience lack logical reasoning and err. For sometimes things work out for them, and sometimes not. I therefore state; he who submits himself to a physician who has experience but does not understand the rules of logical reasoning is like someone setting out to sea who submits himself to the blowing of the winds. For they [the winds] do not proceed according to reasoning; sometimes they blow in accordance with the wish of the seafarer and in line with this purpose, and sometimes they [lead to] his drowning and the denial of his purpose. I have called this to your attention because many people perish as a result of treatment [which is based solely] on experience. It is by chance that one survives or perishes from [that type of treatment].⁴³

He insisted that scientific theories must provide “some causal account of the phenomena, especially with regard to efficient causes, and that this account has the rigor of formal demonstration.”⁴⁴ Scientific theory cannot be completely dependent upon repeated experience. Experience is a necessary part of the scientific process, but the experiences must be buttressed by an account and further proofs of what is observed. Since astrology did not have a formal theory and proofs of the phenomenon that it claimed to exist, he rejects it in *Guide 2:12* as a product of the imagination.

It is apparent from Maimonides’ writings that he was motivated by science to repudiate astrology. However, the nature of his scientific objections to the postulates of the astrologers is not explained explicitly. They only can be deduced from places where these objections are raised as a tangent to another subject and by implication. The one exception to this is the aforementioned argument in his commentary to *Mishnah Avodah Zarah 4:7*. Here, he only explains one scientific objection and the objection is explained rather tersely. Therefore, it is worthwhile asking why he does not elaborate on his scientific objections.

Furthermore, Gad Freudenthal states that it may be asked why there is no extensive scientific explanation by Maimonides for his repudiation of astrology. He says that one may conjecture, that this intimates to the fact that Maimonides had an esoteric position on astrology. He asks, “Could it be that the reason for this silence is that while Maimonides regarded astrology as a dangerous doctrine, he was not all that certain of its falsity?”⁴⁵ This question is especially relevant if one accepts the opinions of Shlomo Pines,⁴⁶ Alexander Altman⁴⁷ and

⁴³ Langerman, “Maimonides’ Repudiation of Astrology,” 137.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 127.

⁴⁵ Freudenthal, “Maimonides’ Stance on Astrology in Context,” 86.

⁴⁶ Shlomo Pines, “Maimonides and Philosophy,” in *Moses Maimonides*, eds. Shlomo Pines and Yovel Yimmerzan (Jerusalem: Martinus Nishoff Publication, 1986), 1-15.

⁴⁷ Alexander Altman, “The Religion of the Thinkers: Free Will and Pre-destination in

others who contend that Maimonides sometimes actually holds esoteric views that are not stated explicitly in his writings.⁴⁸

In spite of this, it is not very tenable to argue that Maimonides had an esoteric position on astrology based on his lack of explicit scientific arguments in his writings. As Freudenthal points out, one must consider the intellectual and social context in which he lived. The Muslim philosophers of the East, including al-Farabi and Ibn Sina had explicitly rejected astrology. Maimonides writes in the *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles*:

All of these words (about the truth of astrology) are not words of wisdom at all, they are stupid and I possess many proofs without fault to nullify all of the assumptions of the astrologers. And they did not deal with it (astrology) at all and none of them wrote treatises on the subject; not one from amongst the Greek wise men. . . .⁴⁹

One can see that according to Maimonides the scientific proofs were so clear and already proven that he did not feel compelled to restate them.

Additionally, one must consider the character of the writings where Maimonides presented his views on astrology. It is not surprising that in a work like the *Guide* he did not explicitly elaborate his scientific objections. He says:

It was not my intention when writing this treatise to expound natural science . . . but my intention was, as has been stated in the introduction, to expound Biblical passages which have been impugned, and to elucidate their hidden and true sense, which is above the comprehension of the multitude.⁵⁰

Also, when he elucidates his position on astrology in his *Epistle to Yemen* and *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles*, he is being asked this question as a religious authority. His audiences are not necessarily scientists or interested in the scientific debate on the issue.

In addition to Maimonides' scientific reasons for rejecting astrology, he had theological motivations for denying the claims of the astrologers. One theological reason for objecting to astrology was that according to astrology the destiny of man is dictated by the stars. This goes against what to Rambam is a fundamental belief of Judaism: free will. Maimonides defends free will in the *Guide*, *Shemoneh Perakim*, and in the *Mishneh Torah*. In his defense of free will in the

Saadia, Bahya, and Maimonides," in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S.D. Goiten (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 22-51.

⁴⁸ Altman, "The Religion of the Thinkers," 22-51. The fact that Maimonides' writings, especially the *Guide*, are sometimes esoteric is quite obvious and not under contention. The question is the extent of his esoteric views. Some scholars question whether Maimonides was truly a rabbinic/traditional Jew.

⁴⁹ Altman, "The Religion of the Thinkers," 22-51.

⁵⁰ *Guide*, 2:1, Friedlander, 155.

seventh chapter of *Shemoneh Perakim* he warns the reader against believing in the theory of the astrologers. The astrologers contend that that the position of the stars determines whether a person will be a good or bad person. He says:

The matter is clear from our Torah and the Greek philosophers, as they have proved with claims (proofs) of truth: that the deeds of man are handed to him, they are not compelled in them, and do not bring him—except himself—at all, that lead him to the lofty or to that which is lacking, unless he was prepared with a mixture (nature) alone, as we have explained: that would make the matter easy or hard for him; but that it should obligate him, or make it impossible—this is impossible.⁵¹

Maimonides does admit that some people may have physical pre-dispositions to act in a certain way. However, humans still have the ability to do good. People can change their natural tendencies and perfect themselves through habit and learning.⁵²

Furthermore, any notions of rigid determinism or pre-destination delegitimize human responsibility. If man's actions are determined by the stars, how can man be held accountable for his actions? What is the point of the commandments? Maimonides writes that if pre-destination exists “that precepts are perfectly useless, since the people to whom the law is given are unable to do anything; they can neither do what they are commanded nor abstain from what they are forbidden.”⁵³ If pre-destination exists, any notions of reward and punishment in relation to the commandments are arbitrary. In order to allow people to “earn” reward and punishment they must be able to choose to do good as well as bad.

Maimonides contends that human volition is distinguished from other ensouled beings, the spheres and animals. Human volition is different from an animal's volition in that they act according to their imagination. The imagination of animals conceptualizes objects as good or bad. Animals act on their instinct or desire in relation to the object. Based upon the animal's conception of the object, it will either seek or avoid the object.

Maimonides acknowledges that certain people possess inherent tendencies. The tendencies of people are determined by their composition (the specific ratio of the four elements). He says that certain people have a composition which can make them have bad or good tendencies.⁵⁴ The composition of people, like that of all terrestrial beings, is determined by the stars. However, even if one has a physical tendency towards sin he can overcome it. Maimonides explains in *The*

⁵¹ “*Shemoneh Perakim*,” the *Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1961), 202-203.

⁵² “*Shemoneh Perakim*,” cap. 8.

⁵³ *Guide*, 2:16.

⁵⁴ *Guide*, 2:40.

Laws of Knowledge 1:1-2 that the tendencies of people due to their make-up are not so powerful that they cannot overcome them.

Humans, like the spheres, can act according to the intellect or reason. Any act which is not one of seeking or avoiding is an act of volition based upon the intellect. In the *Guide* Maimonides argues that the orbs move because of an intellectual choice to continue their specific motion.

However, man's intellectual choices are different from the orbs in that man makes his intellectual choices in constantly changing circumstances. Additionally, man chooses to make different movements, unlike the orbs who choose to make one repeated movement.⁵⁵

Thus, one can see how in the Maimonidean understanding of human volition that humans possess free will and can "earn" reward and punishment. God gave people the ability to act different than animals who can only act according to desires and instinct.⁵⁶ Humans can choose to ignore or go against the imagination which at times draws them to do that which is bad. They have the power to restrict the effects of desire and instinct upon their actions.⁵⁷ Human beings can intellectualize stimuli which are affected by the *logos* of the person and the stimuli which is a result of the person's environment. Additionally, the make-up of humans which causes them to have tendencies can be overcome. The volition of humans is not rigidly tied to the celestial influences.

Human exercise of free will is, however, limited by the laws of nature and the limited number of choices that circumstances present. In this context one can understand why Arthur Hyman argues that the terminology "freedom of choice" is a more accurate description of the character of Maimonides' conception of human volition than "free will". This terminology is more accurate because what humans possess is really a freedom to choose and not the ability to choose to do whatever they desire to accomplish.⁵⁸

An additional, theological motivation for Maimonides' rejection of astrology was that astrological ideas eliminate the possibility of divine justice. If humankind's destiny and events were determined by the stars there could not be divine justice in relation to the actions which people choose. Maimonides says that the "possessors of truth," those of the religion of Moses, know that there is divine justice. In his *Letter to the Jews of Marseilles*, he writes that the Torah testifies to the reality of God's justice and that this justice is a result of human actions. Maimonides writes, "All of his ways are just" (Deuteronomy 32:4), and the prophet explains, 'your eyes observe all of the ways of man to give to them according to their ways and according the fruit of their action (Jeremiah

⁵⁵ *Guide*, 2:4.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 2:6.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 3:8.

⁵⁸ Professor Arthur Hyman, lecture, *Philosophy of Maimonides*, Yeshiva University, 4 January 2005.

32:19).⁵⁹ God observes his creatures and rewards and punishes them according to their deeds.

Divine judgment and providence is affected by one's intellectual perfection. "The greater the share is which a person has obtained of this Divine influence, on account of both his physical predisposition and his training, the greater must also be the effect of Divine providence upon him for the action of Divine providence is proportional to the endowment of intellect."⁶⁰ Therefore, Divine influence is not the same amongst all people. The greater the individual's perfection of the intellect, the greater one's benefit from Divine providence. "In the same proportion as ignorant and disobedient persons are deficient in that Divine influence, their condition is inferior, and their rank equal to that of irrational beings; and they are like unto beasts."⁶¹ Included among those who are ignorant and lacking in intellectual perfection would be the astrologers. People like the astrologers would necessarily lack the beneficence of providence.

Furthermore, Maimonides writes that if humankind does not acknowledge that all of the events which befall them are a result of divine judgment, then He will act upon them as though divine judgment does not exist. For a person who does not acknowledge God's influence over the events that occur to him, God will allow events to proceed casually. This would presumably be true for one who attributes his fate to the stars instead of God.⁶²

Maimonides strongly condemns astrology because of its historical link with idolatry. In the first chapter of *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhoh Avodah Zarah* he explains how astrology served as the medium by which idolatry was introduced into the world. He writes that in the generation of Enosh, Enosh himself together with other people made a great mistake. They assumed that since by God's will the stars and the spheres lead the world and were placed in a high and lofty place in the cosmic order, it is fitting to serve and honor them. The generation of Enosh thought that "this was the desire of the Holy One Blessed be He to raise and honor [the spheres and the stars] who He raised and honored, just as the king wants honor [given] to his servants and those who serve before him and this is the honor of the king."⁶³ Based on this assumption, (i.e. that God wanted the spheres and the stars to be honored), people began to serve them by offering sacrifices and bowing to them. Maimonides writes this was the beginning of *avodah zarah* (idolatry) in the world. He writes in *Hilkhoh Avodah Zarah* 2:1 that the essence of the prohibition of *avodah zarah* is not to serve anything besides

⁵⁹ "Letter on Astrology," 285.

⁶⁰ *Guide* 3:18.

⁶¹ *ibid.* They are like beasts in that they receive beneficence or providence only in regard to the species and not the individual. See *Guide* 3:17 for an understanding of the relationship between Divine providence and the intellect. Only humans possess intellect and thus can receive the beneficence of Divine providence.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhoh Avodah Zarah*, 1:1.

God Himself. Therefore, when Enosh served the spheres, he was committing an act of idolatry.

Initially, false prophets arose who claimed that God told them to serve these stars. These false prophets informed the masses of images of these stars that were revealed to them through prophecy. These images were worshipped under trees and in high places. These images became such an important part of humankind's worship that the name of God was lost. Next, various sects arose which claimed that there was no God except the stars and the spheres who had revealed to mankind the images that they served and God was only known to a few people: Noah, Methuselah, Shem and Ever.

Thus, we see the strong historical connection between astrology and idolatry. The worship and the study of the stars led almost inevitably the blotting out of God's name in the world. With this in mind, we can understand the harsh tone and clarity in which Maimonides repudiated astrology. Maimonides understood human history as a retreat from and return to monotheism. In his understanding of history, astrology played a crucial role in the introduction of paganism. The rejection of this belief was critical in keeping humankind on this retreat from paganism. If people once again engaged in astrology and believed in its efficacy the world could go along this slippery slope towards paganism.⁶⁴

Maimonides claims that astrology was used by false prophets to control the people and subjugate them to their will. In a fascinating insight into human nature, he explains that astrological preachers threatened people who did not worship the stars in the manner in which they proposed. The astrological preachers claimed that if one did not worship the stars according to their rules then a person's property would be lost. Eventually, a bad incident would occur to a person who did not listen to these prophets and the people would then think that the mystical astrological ideas that these false prophets taught were confirmed.⁶⁵

Maimonides is careful not to classify astrology as idolatry. However, it is clear that he felt that idolatry was almost an auxiliary to astrology. One sees this understanding of Maimonides in his explanation of the rationale of the second group of commandments which deal with magical practices. These magical practices lead to astrology, and then to star worship. These practices are integrally connected with astrology because "in all magical operations it is indispensable that the stars should be observed."⁶⁶ This mixture of magical practice and astrology inevitably leads to "a glorification and worship of the stars."⁶⁷

Maimonides was motivated by theological and scientific reasons to reject astrology. He argued that astrology was repudiated by science and all of the

⁶⁴ Langerman, "Maimonides' Repudiation of Astrology," 30.

⁶⁵ *Guide* 3:37.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

great thinkers. Additionally, astrology could lead to fatalism. Therefore astrology was a waste of time and had potential negative effects on the psyche of humankind. Maimonides believed that an acceptance of the veracity of astrology necessarily leads to heretical notions such as a denial of free will, a denial of divine justice, and the threat of idolatry itself.