



Persecuting Ideas: The Case of Maimonides

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His many articles, essays, and reviews have appeared in such journals as *Harvard Theological Review*, *Modern Judaism*, *Political Theology*, *Jewish Political Studies Review*, *Journal of Religion*, and *First Things*. He is a contributor to the *Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* and to *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*. Dr. Mittleman's two most recent books are *Does Judaism Condone Violence? Holiness and Ethics in the Jewish Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 2018) and *Holiness in Jewish Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2018). His current book is forthcoming in 2023 from Cambridge University Press and is called *Absurdity and Meaning in Contemporary Philosophy and Jewish Thought*.

Dr. Mittleman is the recipient of an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Research Fellowship and served as guest research professor at the University of Cologne (1994 and 1996). He has lectured widely in Germany in the course of more than 50 trips to that country. Dr. Mittleman also received a Harry Starr Fellowship in Modern Jewish History from Harvard University's Center for Jewish Studies (1997). He was a fellow of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem and is a current recipient of grants from the Theology of Joy and the Good Life project at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, and from the Jack Miller Center. He has served on the advisory boards of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the John Templeton Foundation. He currently serves on the academic board of the Ethikon Foundation.

Dr. Mittleman has been an active participant in interfaith dialogue throughout his career, and has been interviewed by *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*, among others. He was also part of a leadership delegation that met with Pope John Paul II, and he has lectured at the Gregorian University in Rome. During the bicentennial of the US Constitution, Dr. Mittleman spoke on the meaning of religious liberty for American Jews in the chambers of the US Senate. In 2007, he was visiting professor of religion at Princeton University.

I. From Maimonides' Introduction to the *Guide for the Perplexed*

A. Thus, Solomon meant to say, “just as apples of gold in silver filigree with small apertures, so is a word fitly spoken (Prov 25:11).”

See how beautifully the conditions of a good simile are described in this figure! It shows that in every word which has a double sense, a literal one and a figurative one, the plain meaning must be as valuable as silver, and the hidden meaning still more precious: so that the figurative meaning bears the same relation to the literal one as gold to silver. It is further necessary that the plain sense of the phrase shall give to those who consider it some notion of that which the figure represents. just as a golden apple overlaid with a network of silver, when seen at a distance, or looked at superficially, is mistaken for a silver apple, but when a keen-sighted person looks at the object well, he will find what is within, and see that the apple is gold. The same is the case with the figures employed by prophets. Taken literally, such expressions contain wisdom useful for many purposes, among others, for the amelioration of the condition of society; e.g., the Proverbs (of Solomon), and similar sayings in their literal sense. **Their hidden meaning, however, is profound wisdom, conducive to the recognition of real truth.**

B. There are seven causes of inconsistencies and contradictions to be met with in a literary work... Seventh cause: It is sometimes necessary to introduce such metaphysical matter as may partly be disclosed, but must partly be concealed: while, therefore, on one occasion the object which the author has in view may demand that the metaphysical problem be treated as solved in one way, it may be convenient on another occasion to treat it as solved in the opposite way. The author must endeavor, by concealing the fact as much as possible, to prevent the uneducated reader from perceiving the contradiction.

II. Maimonides on Allegorical Interpretation, *Guide II* :25

WE do not reject the Eternity of the Universe, because certain passages in Scripture confirm the Creation; for such passages are not more numerous than those in which God is represented as a corporeal being; nor is it impossible or difficult to find for them a suitable interpretation. We might have explained them in the same manner as we did in respect to the Incorporeality of God. We should perhaps have had an easier task in showing that the Scriptural passages referred to are in harmony with the theory of the Eternity of the Universe if we accepted the latter, than we had in explaining the anthropomorphisms in the Bible when we rejected the idea that God is corporeal. For two reasons, however, we have not done so, and have not accepted the Eternity of the Universe. First, the Incorporeality of God has been demonstrated by proof: those passages in the Bible, which in their literal sense contain statements that can be refuted by proof, must and can be interpreted otherwise. But the Eternity of the Universe has not been proved; a mere argument in favor of a certain theory is not sufficient reason for rejecting the literal meaning of a Biblical text, and explaining it figuratively, when the opposite theory can be supported by an equally good argument.

III. Rashba's Ban on Philosophy for Students Under Twenty-Five*

In July 1305, Rashba [Rabbi Solomon ben Adret, 1235-1310] finally agreed to assist Abba Mari by promulgating a model Catalanian excommunication. On Tisha be'Av (July 29) 1305, in an assembly of the entire community on the Sabbath in synagogue, the elders of the Barcelonan Jewish community, where Rashba was the acknowledged leader, proclaimed the following ban (*Minhat Qena'ot*, p. 723):

וגזרנו וקבלנו עלינו ועל זרענו ועל הנלוים עלינו בכח החרם לבל ילמוד איש מבני קהלנו בספרי היונים אשר חברו בחכמת הטבע וחכמת האלהות בין המחוכרים בלשונם בין שהועתקו בלשון אחר מיום ועד חמשים שנה, עד היותו בן חמש ועשרים שנה. ושלא ללמד איש מבני קהלנו את אחד מבני ישראל בחכמות האלו עד השיהו בני עשרים וחמש שנה, בן ימשכו אותו החכמות ההם אחריהם ויסירו אותו מאחרי תורת ישראל, שהיא למעלה מן החכמות האלו.

We have decreed and accepted upon ourselves and our progeny and those who are joined to us [in fellowship], with the force of a ban, that no individual from among the members of our community should study the works of the Greeks that they composed on natural science [physics] and divine science [metaphysics]—whether they were written in their [own] language, whether they were translated to another language, from this day forward for the next fifty years—until he has reached twenty five years of age; and no member of our community should teach one of the children of Israel these sciences until they are twenty-five years old, lest those sciences entice him to follow them and cause him to depart from behind the Torah of Israel, which is above all of those sciences.^[34]

Rashba Requests Languedoc [Southwestern France] Issue a Parallel Ban

Rashba did not intend for his proclamation to have legal force outside of Catalonia, Rashba's own community. Thus, in an appended document, he implores the scholars of Languedoc in the most forceful and urgent terms to enact a parallel decree (*Minhat Qena'ot*, p. 730).

ואתם אילי הצדק, אם טוב הדבר בעיניכם, כתבו לכם כמנו ושאו ידיכם קדש, לקדש את השם, וכתבו לכם כטוב בעיניכם, כי לא טוב הדבר אשר הם עושים ולא טובה השמועה מעבירים עם ה'. וחלילה פן יחלק העם לשנים ויתחלל על ידיהם חס ושלום שם שמים.

You mighty ones of righteousness [in Languedoc]! If the matter is fitting in your eyes, write for yourselves as we [in Barcelona have written]. Raise your hands in holiness to sanctify the Lord. Write for yourselves as you see fit. For that which they [the philosophic allegorical interpreters in Languedoc] are doing is not good. Lest—far be it!—the [Jewish] people are split in two, and at their hand—heaven forefend—the Name of Heaven is profaned.

Rashba argues that a ban on philosophic study is the only way to halt the abuse of philosophic allegory in Languedoc.^[35] While implicitly acknowledging the independence of the Languedocian scholars, Rashba suggests that, were they to refrain from enacting a ban on philosophic study, the Languedocian scholars would risk responsibility for a schism between traditionalists and allegorists, as well as the continued heresy of the allegorists.

Rashba Excommunicates the Languedocian Allegorists

In a second appended document, Rashba directly excommunicated the Languedocian allegorists and their interpretations, without regard for the jurisdiction of the Jewish scholars of Languedoc (*Minhat Qena'ot*, pp. 734-5).

Exclusively Philosophic Interpretations

והקקי און בספריהם חוקקים וממלאים בתיהן כלים רקים, לאמר כי מבראשית עד מתן תורה הכל משל, ואברהם ושרה חומר וצורה, ושנים עשר בני יעקב שנים עשר מזלות. וארבעה מלכים אשר נלחמו את החמשה הם ארבעה יסודות וחמשה הרגשים.

They inscribe wicked inscriptions in their books and fill their homes with empty vessels saying: Every narrative from Creation to Revelation has an exclusively allegorical meaning. Abraham and Sarah are Form and Matter, the twelve sons of Jacob are the twelve constellations, and the four kings who battled the five kings are the four elements and the five senses.

Allegorizing Commandments

גם שמענו כי במצות שלחו ידיהם לאמר, כי האורים והתמים הם מלאכת האצטרולב. ובתפילין ותפלה נתנו תפלה,

We have heard that they even extended their hands against the Commandments [through allegory] saying: the Urim and Thummim are the mechanism of the astrolabe. They have rendered the phylacteries and prayer unimportant.

Torah is not from Heaven

ולא יראו לדבר גם במשה לאמר חס ושלום כי נימוס היה באומרים אין תורה מן השמים רק נימוסין והנהגות שעשה משה.

They have not feared to speak against Moses himself saying, heaven forbid, that [the Torah] is a nomos; saying the Torah is not from heaven, rather norms and customs that Moses decreed.

Utilitarian interpretation

עד שאמר אחד מהם דורש ברבים בבית הכנסת כמתמיה, מה ראה משה לאסור את החזיר? אם מחמת רוע איכותו, החכמים לא מצאו בו רוע איכות כל כד.

If it is on account of its poor quality [as food], the scholars have not found it to be of such poor quality. [This went] so far that one of them said, speaking publicly in the synagogue, in wonderment: Why did Moses see fit to prohibit the swine?

Allegorizing Tefillin

ואמר אחד מהם שאין הכונה במצות התפלין להניחם על הראש ועל הזרוע ממש, שאין החפץ בזה רק שיבין ויזכור את השם, שמקומות התפלין הרמוזים בראש כנגד המוח ובזרוע כנגד הלב, שהם כלי ההבנה והזכרון לרמוז שיבין ויזכור לא זולת זה.

One of them said: the intention of the phylacteries is not literally to wear them on the head and arm, because the intention of this commandment is solely to understand and remember the Lord. [This is the case] because the legislated place of the phylacteries—the head apposite the brain and the arm apposite the heart—as they are the instruments of understanding and memory—to intimate that one ought to understand and remember, and nothing more.

* This material was taken from an essay by Dr. Gregg Stern, “Allegorizers of Torah and the Story of their Prosecution in Languedoc,” in TheTorah.com. For the full article, see:

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/allegorizers-of-torah-and-the-story-of-their-prosecution-in-languedoc#>

Conclusion of Rashba's Ban

...מחוייבים כל ישראל להחרימם ולנדותם, ולא יכפר להם העון הזה עד ימותון, אש של גהינם כלה וגופם של אלו באש לא נפח, אש לא תכבה נתון

All Israel is required to excommunicate these sinners. Until their death, they shall not atone for this transgression. The fire of Gehinom will be extinguished, but the bodies of these [sinners] will not be consumed. Upon [their bodies] the flame will go never go out . . .

והספרים שחקקו אחת מאלה בתוכם, אנו דנין הבעלים כמין והספרים כספרי קוסמין, והרי הם והמחזיק בהם בנדוי בחרם כיוצא בהם, עד שישרפום ולא יזכרו עוד בשמם עד תמם כמצות התורה בפסילי אלהיהם לשרוף באש ולאבד את שמם, ואשר ישוב ונחם מן השמים ירוחם

Regarding the books that any one of those among them wrote, we judge its owner a heretic and the books as the books of the magicians. They and anyone who owns them stand in excommunication until they burn them completely and no longer mention their name [contents]. Following the commandment of the Torah regarding the statues of their gods, to burn with fire and erase their name [memory]. But one who repents and regrets will receive mercy from heaven....