

## Traditions of Maimonideanism

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# Traditions of Maimonideanism

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Carlos Fraenkel



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## INTRODUCTION

More than 10 years ago, Colette Sirat suggested in a provocative paper that it might be better to stop teaching and writing on Maimonides. What she deplored was, above all, the disproportionate attention paid to Maimonides in comparison to all other Jewish philosophers, but also the lack of interest in putting the study of Maimonides on a firm philological foundation. No critical edition of Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* had been prepared, although it is the *textus receptus* of Maimonides' chief philosophical-theological work, and the edition of the Arabic original still awaited substantive revision in light of the extensive new manuscript evidence that had become available since its publication in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

While neither the Arabic nor the Hebrew text of the *Guide* have come out in a new edition, the octocentenary of Maimonides' death in 2004 gave rise to a wide range of symposia, journals, and edited volumes showing that Colette Sirat's advice has not been heeded. Before I briefly introduce the present Maimonides volume, it may thus be worth to ponder for a moment, whether we have good reasons to continue teaching and writing on Maimonides.

Dr. Thomas Meyer recently brought a *Waschzettel* to my attention concerning Leo Strauss's *Philosophie und Gesetz* (1935). A *Waschzettel* is a paper slip that briefly describes a book's content and purpose and is added to other books for advertisement. The author, Meyer discovered, was Moritz Spitzer, Strauss's editor at *Schocken Verlag* where *Philosophie und Gesetz* was published. How did Spitzer try to pique the curiosity of potential readers? Let me quote what I think is the most interesting passage:

This work [i.e. *Philosophie und Gesetz*] is meant less as a historical contribution than as one of philosophical and contemporary importance [*philosophisch-aktuell*]: it intends to draw attention to Maimonides as a guide out of the current perplexity. [...] Returning to the older conception of Judaism as Maimonides developed it in its classical form is recognized as a way out of the current confusion [*Verlegenheit*].<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sirat (1997).

<sup>2</sup> See Meyer (forthcoming).

There is, of course, much disagreement on the value of Strauss's scholarship on Maimonides. I for one agree with the view that Strauss's interpretation was as stimulating as it was paralyzing.<sup>3</sup> But independently of one's stance on Strauss, the *Waschzettel* vividly expresses the sense that Maimonides' work remains more than a piece in the museum of the intellectual past—that one can learn from it something “of philosophical and contemporary importance” as Spitzer describes Strauss's motivation for writing *Philosophie und Gesetz*. Strauss is certainly not the only contemporary Maimonidean. Scholars as diverse as Leon Roth, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and David Hartmann have been described as such. Although their interpretations of Maimonides vary as much as their own philosophical projects, all of them bear witness to the fact that Maimonides belongs to the small group of philosophers from the past who are capable to speak to intellectual concerns of the present.<sup>4</sup>

A second reason for continuing teaching and writing on Maimonides that in some ways is related to the first, bears more directly on the present volume: Jewish philosophy after Maimonides unfolds to a large extent within a Maimonidean framework: Whether praising, criticizing or condemning him—the interpretations, appropriations, and transformations of Maimonides are a substantial part of Jewish philosophy from the thirteenth century onwards. Because of this foundational role, studying Maimonides remains indispensable for understanding later developments. This at least has been my experience: portraying Samuel ibn Tibbon as a critic of Maimonides, for example, required making a number of substantive interpretative commitments concerning Maimonides' philosophical-religious project. The same holds for my interpretation of Spinoza and Solomon Maimon. In each case I argued against scholars who understood Ibn Tibbon, Spinoza, or Solomon Maimon differently, because they understood Maimonides differently.<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

The main goal of the present volume is to shed light on a number of traditions of Maimonideanism that have hitherto been little explored. The essays in the first part examine aspects of Maimonides' work that certainly deserve greater scholarly attention. The method and

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<sup>3</sup> For two critical appraisals of Strauss's impact on the study of medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, see Harvey (2001) and Gutas (2002).

<sup>4</sup> See the account of contemporary Maimonidean projects in Harvey (1980).

<sup>5</sup> See Fraenkel (2006), (2007a), and (2007b).



historical influence of Maimonides' medical treatises in general, and of his work on gynaecology in particular, are discussed by Samuel Kottke, Lola Ferre, and Carmen Caballero-Navas. The contributions of Joseph Tabory and Stefan Reif focus on Maimonides' halakhic and liturgical work.

The volume's second part looks at how Maimonides was read, misread, and creatively reinvented in a wide range of contexts in the East and in the West—from medieval Cairo to Crown Heights in Brooklyn. Paul Fenton, Mordechai Friedman, and Tzvi Langermann explore different aspects of Maimonides' legacy in the Arabic-speaking Jewish communities of the Islamic world, i.e., in the geographic and intellectual context in which this legacy took shape. My own paper and the contributions of Esti Eisenmann and Angel Sáenz-Badillos examine the reception of Maimonides' work in the Jewish communities of Christian Europe, focusing on various contexts in Southern France and Catalonia from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Menachem Kellner describes the strategy of “creative misreading” used by the rabbinic establishment to deal with a distinctive challenge: Maimonides' views, the rabbis felt, were too important to be ignored, yet at the same time too unconventional to be accepted *tel quel*. Naftali Loewenthal's intriguing paper elucidates what at first might seem like a case of strange bedfellows: the portrait of Maimonides as embodying the ideals of Habad Hasidism! Finally, Yair Lorberbaum finds reason to doubt the scientific rigor of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and its Israeli heir, the *Mada'e ha-Yahadut*. Scholars, he argues, appropriated the tools used by Maimonides to purge the Bible and rabbinical texts from anthropomorphisms to prove a highly counterintuitive claim: that the rabbis did not represent God in anthropomorphic terms.

\* \* \*

The papers of the present volume are revised versions of presentations given at the conference “Maimonides—the Man and the Image” at the Institute of Jewish Studies in London in 2004. I am grateful to Mark Geller, the general editor of Brill's *IJS Studies in Judaica* for inviting me to serve as the volume's editor. When I accepted the editorship, the papers had already been read by Stefan Reif who also approved their academic content. I wish to thank Prof. Reif for all his efforts. The remaining task for me was to see to the volume's completion and to finally get it into print. In this I was greatly assisted by Jim Dingley, who took upon himself the arduous task of copy-editing the chapters.

Mr. Dingley and I have not imposed a uniform system of transliteration of Arabic and Hebrew words. Since transliterations can be done in different ways and some scholars prefer to quote the sources without transliteration we decided to leave this to the discretion of the authors. Finally, I would like to thank Michael Mozina and Jennifer Pavelko, the editors at Brill responsible for this volume, for their diligent help in bringing this project to a close.

Montreal, November 2008  
Carlos Fraenkel

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## THE IMAGE OF MAIMONIDES IN HABAD HASIDISM\*

Naftali Loewenthal

### *Joined in Paradox?*

This paper is an attempt to explore the question of possible influences of Maimonides on early Habad thought and the unusual focus on him in the contemporary Habad movement. The last Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994) presented the image of Maimonides as a paradigm of the ideals of Habad Hasidism. Our attempt is to define those features of both Maimonides and Habad which make this juncture possible.

Hasidism in general is understood as a movement embracing both tradition and spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Maimonides is central both to the halakhic tradition leading from the Talmud to the Code of Law, and also to the stream of rationalist and philosophical thought in Judaism, which makes him a paradoxical and sometimes controversial figure.<sup>2</sup> Spirituality and rationalism are generally understood as sharply differing, if not opposite directions. However, we claim that the centrality of the image of Maimonides in Habad has aided this movement to define and communicate its identity and ideals, both at the earlier period of the movement and in the twentieth century. Habad has its own paradox

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\* A number of colleagues have been of assistance in this area of research, particularly Drs Ada Rapoport-Albert, Joanna Weinberg, Allan Brill, Rabbis Shmuel Lew, L.Y. Raskin and Mr M. Negin. The errors remain my own.

<sup>1</sup> This was the finding of Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer in her *Hasidism as Mysticism, Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*, trans. from the Hebrew by Jonathan Chipman (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ., The Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1993). Early Hasidism exhibited intense quietistic elements, but was also markedly conservative and generally remained within the bounds of tradition.

<sup>2</sup> For an extreme formulation of the paradoxical position of Maimonides the thinker in his contemporary social context see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). The division between the philosopher and the halakhist has fascinated many scholars. See for example Yakov Levinger, *HaRambam kePhilosof ukhePhosek* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1990). Attempts to unify these dimensions are seen in David Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and philosophic quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976) and Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides, the man and his works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

of mysticism and rationalism, which became the further paradox of mysticism and modernity. We suggest that the Habad paradox is in some way mediated by the image of Maimonides.

Employment of a depiction of Maimonides in order to substantiate and define one's own position is not a new phenomenon in Jewish history. Jay Harris has described three different images of Maimonides in nineteenth-century Jewish historiography: Shmuel David Luzatto saw him as the controversial halakhist who 'fixed' Jewish law against the otherwise freewheeling Rabbinic pattern; Nachman Krochmal saw him as the rescuer of rationalism in Jewish culture; Geiger and Graetz depicted him as one who found ways to accommodate Judaism to contemporary life.<sup>3</sup> Here we will attempt to add a fourth image in which the central feature is the ability to bring spirituality down to earth, in the framework of a halakhic perspective on Judaism. This seems to encapsulate the image of Maimonides in Habad Hasidism.

The key feature of Habad which leads towards Maimonides in this way concerns the nature of the Habad spiritual quest. This is its endeavour to discover spirituality *in* the world rather than beyond it, what Habad terms the 'lower unity' rather than the 'higher unity'. The more obvious mode of any kind of spirituality is the 'higher unity', the step beyond the world, defined in acute terms by Habad teachers in a manner which has been termed 'acosmism', the denial of the reality of existence. Although this is very striking, and has justly attracted the attention of scholars,<sup>4</sup> an even more intriguing form of Hasidic mysticism is the 'lower unity' in which the world remains world and yet is perceived as Divine. The espousal of this paradoxical form of consciousness has bearing on the Habad endeavour to combine spirituality with Reason, hasidic mysticism with certain aspects of modernity, traditional Judaism and philosophy of science. The theme of the 'lower unity' also helps us explore some of the ways in which the Habad image of Maimonides is constructed and has its effect.

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<sup>3</sup> See Jay Harris, "The Image of Maimonides in Nineteenth Century Jewish Historiography", in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, LIV, 1987, 117–139.

<sup>4</sup> See Louis Jacobs, *Seeker of Unity—the Life and Works of Aaron of Staroselje* (London, 1966); Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent to G-d, The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green, (State University of New York Press: New York, 1993).

*Maimonides and Mysticism*

This topic at least tangentially broaches the issue of the relationship between Maimonides and Jewish mystical thought. Alexander Altmann explored this in an article published in German in 1936 which subsequently appeared in English,<sup>5</sup> and there have been a number of other studies, including that of Moshe Idel.<sup>6</sup> The latter's comprehensive examination of responses by kabbalists to Maimonides presents two ideas particularly germane to our discussion. One is the fact that despite the criticism by many kabbalists of Maimonides' rationalist stance (mitigated by the story that he had changed his views towards the end of his life)<sup>7</sup> the ecstatic kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (b. 1240) saw two different ways of reading the *Guide*, one a more simple level, the second a mystical level.<sup>8</sup> Following the second path, Abulafia understood the *Guide* as being a real manual of spiritual teaching, leading to intense spiritual experience. Idel declares that in terms of the ecstatic kabbalah "Maimonides' *Guide* can be regarded as a principal positive catalyzer of Jewish mysticism."<sup>9</sup>

A second point presented by Idel relevant to our study is the way the leading exponent of kabbalah for the early modern period, Rabbi Haim Vital (1542–1620), declared in a passage about the transmigrations of his own soul that he had a special affinity ("*shaykhut vekurvah*") to Maimonides, and that in a previous incarnation he had been Rabbi Vidal of Toulouse (14th cent.), author of the *Maggid Mishneh* commentary on the *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>10</sup> Idel suggests that R. Haim Vital felt that he was spiritually repairing both Vidal's and Maimonides' rationalism. Be that as it may, Idel's idea that the image of Maimonides functions a) as

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Altmann, "Das Verhältnis Maimunis zur jüdischen Mystik", *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 80 Jahrgang, Sonderabdruck, Berlin, 1936, 305–330. The English version, "Maimonides's Attitude towards Jewish Mysticism", was published in A. Jospe, ed., *Studies in Jewish Thought: an anthology of German Jewish scholarship* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981) 200–219.

<sup>6</sup> Moshe Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah", in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Studies in Maimonides* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) 31–81.

<sup>7</sup> Concerning the history of this claim see Gershom Scholem, "Mehoker limekubal (agadat hamekubalim al haRambam)" *Tarbiz* 6 (3) (1935) 90–98.

<sup>8</sup> Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah", 54–70.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 67. Idel points out the irony that Abulafia reached his mystical interpretation of the *Guide* by employment of the technique of repeated recitation of Divine Names, a form of quest for mystical experience which was ignored or even eventually attacked by Maimonides (*ibid.*, 69).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

that of a rationalist driving the kabbalists towards mysticism and b) as a direct source of mysticism, and finally c) as having a special affinity with the leading exponent of the Lurianic kabbalah, provides a suitably ambiguous introduction for investigating the image of Maimonides in the later Habad school.

A more pragmatic approach to Maimonides' image as a spiritual guide is provided by Paul Fenton's studies of the teachings of Rabbi Abraham, the son of Maimonides (1186–1237), which, like those of Gotein before him, show a definite mystical path. Rabbi Abraham saw himself as following an interpretation of his father's own teachings, and it is likely that his interpretation was somewhat closer to their overt meaning than that of Abulafia.<sup>11</sup>

A further perspective is provided by David Blumenthal, exploring the linguistic context of the terminology used by Maimonides in the *Guide* when describing relationship with the Divine.<sup>12</sup> Examining the *Guide* III: 51 he lists Maimonides' Arabic terms for "worship of G-d", "love of G-d", "turning wholly towards G-d" "being/standing with G-d", "total devotion to G-d", "G-d's closeness", "being in G-d's presence", "solitude", "joy of experiencing G-d", "passion for G-d".<sup>13</sup> Blumenthal asks the provenance of these terms. He claims they do not seem to have come from the "philosophers"—the Kalam, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina or Al-Ghazali. Then he says:

Some of them occur in normal Arabic usage, and Maimonides may be giving special connotations to ordinary words by using them in this special way. On the other hand, the distinctly religious sense of these terms indicates that they may have been drawn, directly or indirectly, from some religious milieu. And indeed, these terms do occur in the Sufi traditions. . . .<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Paul B. Fenton "Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237) founding a mystical dynasty", in Moshe Idel, Mortimer Ostow, eds., *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998) 127–154; S.D. Gotein "Documents on Abraham Maimonides and his Pietist Circle", *Tarbiz* 33 (1963), 181–197.

<sup>12</sup> David Blumenthal "Maimonides' Intellectualist Mysticism and the Superiority of the Philosophy of Moses", *Studies in Medieval Culture* 10 (1977), 51–68 (reprinted in David R. Blumenthal, ed., *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 1, Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984, 27–52).

<sup>13</sup> Blumenthal, "Intellectualist Mysticism" (1977), 34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

This approach has been partially and cautiously followed by Steven Harvey,<sup>15</sup> who points out that according to Georges Vajda, Saadia was the first Jewish thinker to describe an “intellectual love” of the Divine, followed by Bahya. However, both of these draw back from using the erotic term *ishq* for love of the Divine, while Maimonides himself does so, something which is suggestive of the mysticism of the Sufis, and philosophers influenced by them such as Ibn-Sina and Al-Ghazali. Of course, the Jewish sources, particularly Psalms, which Maimonides quotes constantly in his more “spiritual” passages, do indeed use intense erotic language in relation to the Divine, as does the Song of Songs, which Maimonides understands as a parable for love of G-d.<sup>16</sup>

What these ideas lead to is the suggestion that Maimonides was providing some kind of teaching of direct spirituality (not just, as in Idel’s account of Abulafia, an esoteric interpretation of an overtly rationalist work). In terms of this we can now consider his image for the Eastern European Hasidim some six centuries after the writing of the *Guide*.

#### *Devekut*

Hasidism arose in the Ukraine in the middle of the eighteenth century and can be seen as a movement of kabbalists who felt that they must turn to the people to communicate a version (or several versions) of inspirational thought and teaching. They were countered by the Mitnaggedim, some of whom—like the Gaon of Vilna—were themselves kabbalists who believed that mystical thought should be preserved for a small elite.<sup>17</sup> At this period a number of leading rabbinic figures such as Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697–1776) and the Vilna Gaon himself<sup>18</sup> were severely critical of Maimonides’ philosophical writings. What was the attitude of the Hasidim?

<sup>15</sup> Steven Harvey, “The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judeo-Arabic Thought and Some Remarks on the Judeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides”, in Norman Golb, ed., *Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations, Judeo-Arabic Studies, Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judeo-Arabic Studies* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997) 175–196. See also Georges Vajda, *L’amour de Dieu dans la théologie juive du moyen âge* (Paris: Vrin, 1957), chapter on “Moïse Maïmonide (1135–1204)”, 118–145.

<sup>16</sup> See *Mishneh Torah*, Hil. Teshuvah, 10:3.

<sup>17</sup> See Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim, Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997) 48–9.

<sup>18</sup> See the Vilna Gaon’s comment #13 to *Shulhan Arukh* Yoreh De’ah, 179:10.

Following an earlier study by S.A. Horodecky,<sup>19</sup> Yakov Dienstag wrote a survey of references to Maimonides' philosophical writings in the works of a number of hasidic leaders.<sup>20</sup> He suggests that the Hasidim were less concerned than the kabbalists before them with the problem of the paradoxes of Maimonides. Although they generally accepted the claim of Maimonides' "conversion" to kabbalism at the end of his life, this was not the focus of their attention.<sup>21</sup> Thus Dienstag presents a number of instances in which Hasidic leaders and teachers cite ideas from the *Guide*, although they might omit the name of the book, instead referring to "the books of the early scholars".<sup>22</sup> Sometimes the Hasidim employed the phrase *pirkei hanhagat hamitboded* ("chapters on the path of the contemplative") based on Ephodi, with reference to the concluding chapters of the *Guide*.<sup>23</sup>

An important exception to this rule of a generally benign attitude to Maimonides the philosopher is the case of Rabbi Nahman of Braslav (1772–1810). Rabbi Nahman vigorously warned his followers against the dangers of Jewish philosophical writers of the past, and especially the *Guide*, which they should never dip into. He claimed he "could see on a person's face" if he had done so.<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Nahman also ridiculed the *Guide*'s explanations of the Commandments and the sacrifices: "how can anyone imagine giving such worthless reasons for the sacrifices and the incense?"<sup>25</sup>

However, Rabbi Nahman's contemporary and friend, Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk (d. 1810), writing a public letter from the Holy Land which promotes 'simplicity'—*devarim peshutim*—rather than seeking exalted

<sup>19</sup> S.A. Horodecky, "HaRambam ba-kabbalah uva-hasidut", *Moznayim* vol. 3, 1935.

<sup>20</sup> Y.Y. Dienstag, "Maimonides, The *Guide for the Perplexed* and the *Book of Knowledge* in Hasidic Literature" [Hebrew], *The Abraham Weiss Jubilee Volume* (New York: 1964) 307–330.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 307. See n. 7 above. Evidence of the attitude of the contemporary Hasidim is an article by B. Shahar (presumably a pen-name), "Moreh Hanevukhim lehaRambam beTorat haHasidut" in the pan-hasidic publication *Olam HaHasidut*, no. 14, Tevet 5756, 36–39.

<sup>22</sup> See Dienstag, "Maimonides in Hasidic Literature", 314.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 326, citing Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730–1788) and the later R. Avraham of Slonim (1802–1884). See the beginning of Ephodi's commentary to *Guide* III 51.

<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Nathan Sternhartz, *Hayei Muharan* (Jerusalem, 1962), Part II 'Shivhei haRan', Lehitrahek mehakirot sec. 3, 19b.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, sec. 5, 19d.



heights,<sup>26</sup> actually quotes almost verbatim a passage from the *Guide*, as noted by Zweifel over a century ago.<sup>27</sup> The passage links cleaving to G-d, *devekut*, with Divine Providence and is obviously drawn from the *Guide* III 51, although its source is stated to be “the books of the early scholars”.<sup>28</sup>

Joseph Weiss believed that the *Guide* III 51 was actually a *source* of the Hasidic theme of *devekut*, mystical cleaving to G-d,<sup>29</sup> an idea reiterated by Louis Jacobs.<sup>30</sup> *Devekut* is one of the most important ideas in early Hasidism, especially in its more advanced form. While a person might attain a spiritual or ecstatic transport which takes them beyond ordinary worldly consciousness, the idea of ultimate *devekut* is that the most intense spirituality can be experienced *in the world*, while eating, working, and talking with people. Thus Maimonides says:

And there may be a human individual who, through his apprehension of the true realities and his joy in what he has apprehended, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned towards Him, may He be exalted, so that in his heart he is always in His presence...while outwardly he is with people...<sup>31</sup>

Maimonides presents this as pertaining to Moses and the Patriarchs, and, following the two meanings of the original pointed out by Shlomo Pines, either disclaims this rank for himself or disclaims his ability to guide others to reach it (an ambiguity retained in Ibn Tibbon's translation). Weiss describes the efforts of Rabbi Nahman of Kosov, a contemporary

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<sup>26</sup> The full text is printed in the collection of letters appended to the HaMosad leHotza'at Sifrei Musar vaHasidut edition of R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, *Pri Ha-Aretz* (Jerusalem, 1974), 54–57.

<sup>27</sup> See J.G. Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, ed. D. Goldstein, (Oxford: The Littman Library, Oxford University Press, 1985) 159, and 168 n. 10, citing Eliezer Zweifel's *Shalom 'al Yisrael* (Vilna, 1873) 3:17–18. See also Dienstag, “Maimonides in Hasidic Literature”, 314–6.

<sup>28</sup> Before he became a hasid Rabbi Avraham had been a disciple of the Vilna Gaon, and it is unlikely that he was unaware of the provenance of the passage.

<sup>29</sup> J.G. Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* 39 n. 3, reprint of an article originally published as J.G. Weiss “A Circle of Pneumatics in Pre-Hasidism”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 8 nos. 3–4, 1957, 199–213.

<sup>30</sup> Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (London: The Littman Library, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) 72.

<sup>31</sup> *Guide* III 51, from Shlomo Pines' translation, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) vol. 2, 623.

of the Baal Shem Tov, to maintain something like this form of *devekut* himself, and also to demand it of others. *Toledot Yakov Yosef*, the first Hasidic work to be printed, gives a humorous report of this:

I heard in the name of R. Nahman Kossover that he rebuked people who do not maintain “I put G-d always before me” (Ps. 16:8) even when they are occupied with business. And should you say, how is this possible? Behold, when a person is in the synagogue praying he is able to think of all kinds of business affairs, so the converse must also be possible.<sup>32</sup>

These ideas continue in the Hasidic movement, as we see for example in a text from the Habad school around 1820, which does not refer to Maimonides, but describes an ideal variety of *devekut* which can be maintained during worldly activity. The text states that there are two forms of *devekut*. The first can only be maintained during spiritual activities like contemplation and prayer. The second kind is a more exalted level and persists whatever one is doing:

... even if he is deeply and intensely involved in business nonetheless this does not separate him in any way from the *devekut* (cleaving) of his soul to G-d, not even a hairsbreadth... ‘even though he walks here and there in the realms of *nogah* [i.e. “unholiness”], [the Divine] Visage remains with [him]’<sup>33</sup>

#### *Maimonides and Early Habad*

Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s *Tanya* (1796), a tract compiled in order to provide spiritual guidance for the author’s followers, quotes several times with approval Maimonides’ presentation of the nature of Divine Knowledge—“He is the one who knows, He is that which is known and He is Knowledge itself”<sup>34</sup>—and also attempts to justify this idea in terms of kabbalistic thought. Further, R. Shneur Zalman discusses in similar terms to the *Guide* I 69 the [false] idea that the world can exist independently of G-d,<sup>35</sup> although the *Guide* is not cited here by

<sup>32</sup> See J.G. Weiss, “The Beginnings of Hasidism” [Hebrew], *Zion* 15 (1951), 61, collected in A. Rubenstein, *Studies in Hasidism* [Hebrew], (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Centre, 1978) 137, quoting *Toledot Yakov Yosef* (Koretz, 1780) 17d.

<sup>33</sup> R. Dov Ber Shneuri, the Mitteler Rebbe (1773–1827), *Shaarei Teshuvah* (Jerusalem, 1972) I 9d. See Zohar II 114a.

<sup>34</sup> Hil. Yesodei HaTorah 2:10, see also Hil. Teshuvah 5:5, Shemoneh Perakim ch. 8, and *Guide* I 68. See *Tanya* Part I ch. 2, fol. 6a, ch. 48, fol. 68b; Part II ch. 7, fol. 83a.

<sup>35</sup> *Tanya* Part II ch. 2, fol. 77a.

name. Nor indeed is it mentioned in the whole of *Tanya*. In *Likkutei Torah*,<sup>36</sup> the collection of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's discourses edited by his grandson Rabbi Menahem Mendel the Tzemah Tzedek, there is a discussion of knowledge of the Divine by means of negative attributes, citing Maimonides as the source of this concept.<sup>37</sup> A note by the editor Rabbi Menahem Mendel provides a reference to the *Guide* I chs. 57–60. As we will see below, Rabbi Menahem Mendel the Tzemah Tzedek assiduously studied the *Guide* and wrote discussions of it.<sup>38</sup>

Rabbi Shneur Zalman lived through a number of controversies, most notably that with the Mitnaggedim, who ceremoniously burnt his *Tanya*. In a letter referring to this incident he compares it with the burning of Maimonides' works in North France.<sup>39</sup> This is the first tangible step within Habad of the view of the image of Maimonides as somehow expressing that of the Habad leaders themselves.

However, a more general issue concerns the Habad system of contemplation, which gives the movement its name. As described by R. Shneur Zalman and repeated by subsequent leaders, this entails three general steps.<sup>40</sup> This "classical" Habad form of contemplation is not just a style or a mode of contemplation, but a process.

The first step is termed *Hokhmah*, Wisdom, focussing on an "idea". This idea may comprise theosophical elements, such as kabbalistic concepts, or it may be some other intellectualist formulation of a theme, for example, that G-d created the world and continuously maintains it in existence.

<sup>36</sup> *Likkutei Torah* was first printed in Zhitomir in 1848. It is the second volume published by Rabbi Menahem Mendel the Zemah Zedek collecting Rabbi Shneur Zalman's discourses, the first being *Torah Or* (Kopys, 1837). The altered name was to evade government restrictions on the publication of hasidic works. The second volume includes many interpolations by R. Menahem Mendel, generally providing sources and parallels in the teachings of R. Shneur Zalman and elsewhere in Jewish literature. The editions of *Torah Or* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2001, 21st edition) and *Likkutei Torah* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1999, 17th edition) are in square letters and have several useful appendices.

<sup>37</sup> *Likkutei Torah* Pekudei, 6d.

<sup>38</sup> See Dienstag, "Maimonides in Hasidic Literature", 323–5.

<sup>39</sup> See S.B. Levin, *Iggrot Kodesh... Admur HaZaken etc.* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1980) 89–90. However, here too he does not mention the *Guide*, just "the first book of the *Yad*".

<sup>40</sup> See *Tanya*, Part I, ch. 3 fol. 7a–b. See Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* 82–92; Roman A. Foxbrunner, *Habad, the Hasidism of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1992) 178–194; Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to G-d* (n. 4 above) 159–165.

The second stage is called *Binah*, Understanding. This signifies a process of contemplation of the idea, *hitbonenut*, exploring its ramifications, and leads to heartfelt emotion of love and fear of the Divine. The emotional aspect of one's relationship with G-d, expressed in inspired prayer and *devekut*, is ubiquitous in the Hasidic movement. What is peculiar to Habad is the linking of intellectualist *contemplation* to the quest to gain this emotional state.

The third stage, termed *Da'at*, Knowledge, as in the phrase "and Adam knew Eve",<sup>41</sup> signifies a constant sense of attachment to the Divine. *Da'at* represents a level at which the contemplation is concretised in the inner life of the person. The fulfilment of *Da'at* is both a life devoted to Torah study and observance of the Commandments, as well as a spiritual perspective on life, indeed, a spiritual consciousness. *Hokhmah*, *Binah*, *Da'at* form the acronym Habad. The *Tanya* explains this system, and its second section, Gate of Unity and Faith, provides material to be used for contemplation, based on the verse from Deuteronomy 4:39: "you should know today and consider in your heart that the L-rd is G-d."

What is the source of this contemplative system? Roman Foxbrunner, writing on Rabbi Shneur Zalman, sees the central sources for the terms and concepts as *Hovot Halevavot*, *Sefer Hasidim*, *Sefer Roke'ah*, *Zohar*, *Ikkarim*, and the sixteenth century kabbalistic work *Reshit Hokhmah*. However, says Foxbrunner, "The basic framework is clearly Maimonidean".<sup>42</sup>

One example which suggests dependence on Maimonides' approach to the topic, even though the details differ, can be seen by comparing a passage from Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Tanya*, Part 1, chapter 3, with a passage in the Book of Knowledge:

Rabbi Shneur Zalman writes in *Tanya*:

When [one] contemplates and thinks very deeply about the greatness of G-d how He fills all worlds and surrounds all worlds and all before Him is considered as nothing,<sup>43</sup> there is born and aroused the quality of fear of [Divine] exaltation in his mind and thought, to fear and be ashamed before G-d's infinite greatness, and fear of G-d in his heart. Then again his heart will be enflamed with love strong as coals of fire, with yearning

<sup>41</sup> Gen. 4:1. See *Tanya*, Part I ch. 3, fol. 7b.

<sup>42</sup> Roman A. Foxbrunner, *Habad*, 178. Foxbrunner cites *Mishneh Torah*, Hil. Yesodei HaTorah 2: 1-2, Hil. Teshuvah ch. 10, *Guide*, I 39, III 28, 44 and especially 51; *Sefer HaMitzvot* Positive Commandments 3-5; Mishnah Commentary, Avot I:5.

<sup>43</sup> See Zohar I 11b (quoting Daniel 4:32).

and longing and desire, and a soul longing for the greatness of the *Ein Sof*... as it says... “my soul thirsts for G-d” (Ps. 42:3).<sup>44</sup>

We can compare this with Maimonides:

...When a person contemplates His works and His wondrous and great creations, and sees in them His incomparable and infinite wisdom, at once he will love, and laud, and praise, and desire a strong desire to know His great Name. As David said “My soul thirsts for G-d, for the living G-d.” (Ps. 42:3). And when he thinks about these very things, at once he retreats backwards, and is afraid, and knows he is a tiny low dark creature standing with a weak mind before the One who is Perfect of Knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

The contemplative process described in this passage in the *Tanya* focuses on theosophic knowledge, the kabbalistic theme of the Divine radiance filling all worlds and transcending all worlds and leads (in this example) first to feelings of awe and fear and then to yearning love. By contrast the intellectualist contemplation described by Maimonides focuses on the wisdom of the Divine in fashioning the universe, and it leads first to love and then to awe. Despite these differences, the similarities are striking.

It is interesting that both are describing a contemplative process in which love is transformed to awe, or vice versa. There is another shared aspect in the systems of contemplation which both are describing. As mentioned above, the Habad contemplation system describes a series of stages: Wisdom, Understanding and Knowledge. The passage from awe to love described above is a detail in the process of the second stage.

Is there anything comparable in Maimonides? Not just the movement from love to awe as quoted, but the sense of a general progression of stages of the contemplation process? In fact such a system is seen in the *Guide* III: 51, particularly as elucidated by David Blumenthal.<sup>46</sup>

The first stage is understood by Blumenthal to be based on knowledge of the ideas presented in the early chapters of *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah*, which Maimonides calls “Maaseh Merkavah” and “Maaseh Bereishit”. These constitute knowledge of the Divine, of the ranks of angels and so on, and knowledge of the nature of the universe.

<sup>44</sup> *Tanya* I ch. 3, fol. 7b.

<sup>45</sup> Hil. Yesodei HaTorah 2:2.

<sup>46</sup> See David R. Blumenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophical Mysticism” in his *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006), 128–151.

Maimonides describes the effect of this knowledge in the passage quoted above from *Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah* chapter 2, and also in a later similar passage in chapter 4 (sec. 12).<sup>47</sup>

In the *Guide* III: 51, after a passage disparaging those whose thought of the Divine is “without wisdom” and whose belief is based on what others have taught them, Maimonides gives instruction concerning the true path. This involves, first, knowledge of the Divine and His works through one’s intellect; then a second stage, in which the person gives himself over to the Divine and comes close to Him, leading to a quest for spiritual solitude; and third a higher stage, discussed earlier in this essay, in which the cleaving to the Divine is so strong that it can even be maintained together with social activity.

Let us consider some passages from this chapter, translating from its Tibbonite Hebrew, which is the way it would have been known to the Hasidim.

And it will be when you grasp [ideas about] G-d and His works, to the extent that your mind can understand, after that<sup>48</sup> you should begin to give yourself over to Him and try to come close to Him, and to hold firmly to the bond between you and Him, which is the intellect (*sekhel*).

At this point Maimonides quotes the verse “you should know today and consider in your heart” (Deut. 4:35), which also opens the second section of *Tanya*, Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s tract on contemplation entitled *Gate of Unity and Faith*. In the *Guide* this verse leads to explaining that after the love, which is a direct product of one’s knowledge of the Divine, comes a more intense “avodah”, the “service in the heart”. This leads to a constancy of intense love which for most people is expressed in solitude, keeping away from other people except when absolutely necessary.

Now Maimonides speaks of the difficulty of constantly maintaining this state of intense feeling, and elaborates on the opportunity for a sense of closeness to the Divine provided by prayer, Torah study and

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<sup>47</sup> Hil. Yesodei Hatorah 4:12: “When a person contemplates (*mitbonen*) these ideas and becomes cognisant of all the creations such as angel, sphere and man...and sees the wisdom of G-d in all that He has created...this adds love of G-d, and his soul will thirst and his flesh will yearn to love G-d, may He be blessed; and he will also feel awe and fear on account of his lowness and insignificance...”.

<sup>48</sup> Blumenthal stresses these words: the first stage is the kind of intellectualist knowledge described in Hil. Yesodei HaTorah; “after that” is the second which enters a deeper bond with the Divine.

performance of the Commandments. At such times the person's mind should be focused totally on the Divine, while at those times that "you eat or drink or bathe or talk with your wife and your small children, or while you talk with the common run of people" one's mind can be occupied with these "worldly things"—*milei d'alma*.<sup>49</sup> Maimonides then goes on to suggest that for some rare people it is possible to maintain a state of conscious devotion to the Divine even when going about the worldly activities of daily life, the theme of constant *devekut* which so fascinated the early hasidim.

This Maimonidean system of contemplation is not identical to that described in the opening chapters of *Tanya*, but the two schemes have strong similarities: both are presented as a series of stages in a process, and both commence with contemplation on ideas about the Divine. This leads to emotions of love and awe (or awe and then love), progressing to a sense of spiritual dedication to the Divine expressed through devoted prayer, Torah study, performance of the Commandments and ultimately all one's activity.<sup>50</sup> All this underpins Foxbrunner's statement that the Habad system of contemplation has a "basic Maimonidean" framework.

It is interesting that a transcript of an early discourse (prior to 1801) by Rabbi Shneur Zalman refers to Maimonides' theory of contemplation and comments on how it differs from that which is presented in the discourse. After describing how the process of contemplation activates and arouses "the yearning of the [Divine] spark" within the person's soul, there is a comment in parenthesis:

And Maimonides of blessed memory had an exalted soul, but he thought that the intensity of the [emotional] arousal is mainly because of one's contemplation and [intellectual] grasp. In truth it is not so, rather the intellectual ideas [*hasagot*] are just a cause which bring [the emotion of the inner spark] from concealment to revelation.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Pines, vol. 2, 623. Note that R. Shneur Zalman's *Tanya* also suggests that when a person is occupied with business, his mind is expected to be focused on this activity, to the extent that worrying about his spiritual inadequacies at that moment would be considered inappropriate (*Tanya*, Part 1, ch. 26, fol. 33b). However there is a higher Habad ideal in which the person is consciously joined with the Divine in all his or her activities, as mentioned earlier.

<sup>50</sup> The contemplation scheme described in the second section of *Tanya*, entitled *Gate of Unity and Faith*, provides more detail on the initial stages of the process, prior to the onset of an emotional response of awe and love of the Divine.

<sup>51</sup> *Ma'amarei Admur haZaken, Et-halekh Loznia* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1958), 75. See Moshe Hallamish, "The Theoretical System of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (its sources in

The comment may have been by Rabbi Shneur Zalman, in the original delivery of his discourse, or it may have been added by his grandson Rabbi Menahem Mendel, later to be the third Habad leader known as the Tzemah Tzedek, who transcribed the discourse, an idea suggested by the fact that the passage is in parenthesis. In either case the comment indicates that the early Habad leadership, at least in the third generation and possibly earlier, was aware both of the similarities and the differences between the Habad system of contemplation and that of Maimonides.

### *Tzemah Tzedek*

Some fifty years later, Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Tzemah Tzedek (1789–1866), transcriber of the above-quoted discourse, and the third generation Habad leader, wrote a remarkable work *Sefer HaHakirah—Derekh Emunah* with extended discussion of the *Guide* and other philosophical works such as *Hovot Halehavot*, Saadia, *Ikkarim*, Gersonides and an early Hebrew scientific book, *Nehmad veNaim* by David Gans (1541–1613), who met Tycho Brahe. In *Sefer HaHakirah* R. Menahem Mendel enters the philosophical discussions on their own terms, exploring issues such as creation and proofs for the existence of G-d. Yet he does this by incorporating also points from Habad hasidic teaching: for this author, philosophy, science and Jewish mystical thought meet.<sup>52</sup> The subtext of this book is the suggestion that in *this* world of rationality and scientific investigation the inner spiritual truths of Jewish teaching can be discovered. In another of his works R. Menahem Mendel defended Maimonides' piety:

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Kabbalah and Hasidism)", unpublished PhD submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University, 1976, 220. The editors state that the manuscript of this volume of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's teachings was copied from transcripts made by Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Tzemah Tzedek.

<sup>52</sup> Concerning this work, see N. Loewenthal, "'Reason' and 'Beyond Reason' in Habad Hasidism", in M. Hallamish, ed., *Alai Shefer, Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought presented to Rabbi Dr Alexandre Safran* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990), 109–126, particularly 123–126. An earlier work which sought to draw together the sciences and Jewish thought including the kabbalah was *Sefer HaBrit* by R. Pinhas Eliyahu Horowitz (Berlin, 1797). Concerning this see Ira Robinson, "Kabbala and Science in *Sefer ha-Berit*: a Modernization Strategy for Orthodox Jews" *Modern Judaism* 1987, 275–288.



the more that the Rambam grasped of the truth of G-d, the more he would be humble in his own eyes... achieving true *bitul* (self-abnegation) [ready] to cast away his life [if necessary], on account of his perception of G-d before his eyes...<sup>53</sup>

He then reminds the reader that in the sixteenth century Rabbi Moshe Isserlis had seen fit to begin his glosses on the Code of Law with a direct quotation from the *Guide* III 52, a passage encouraging continuous awareness of G-d.

R. Menahem Mendel was in open conflict with the Maskilim who were determined to transform the Jews and the Jewish education system in Russia.<sup>54</sup> For them the image of Maimonides and other figures of the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition meant full accommodation with the modern world, acceptance of a rationalist form of Judaism and welcome to secular knowledge. There is a Habad tradition that the compilation of *Sefer HaHakirah—Derekh Emunah* in its manuscript form was in connection with this conflict, although the rationale is not clear.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps R. Menahem Mendel was not willing to abandon the image of Maimonides and the medieval Jewish philosophers to the Maskilim, and his detailed discussions of their ideas formed part of a spiritual campaign of his own. Rabbi Menahem Mendel's halakhic works were printed in the 1870s and 1880s, not long after he passed away in 1866. Many other volumes of his works remained in manuscript and most of them were not printed till the second half of the twentieth century. However it is interesting that in 1912 Rabbi Menahem Mendel's book on philosophy was printed in Poltava. (The same printer, presumably,

<sup>53</sup> Rabbi Menahem Mendel, *Derekh mitzvotekha ve-hu sefer ta'amei hamitzvot* (Poltava 1911, 4th edition Brooklyn: Kehot, 1991), 8b.

<sup>54</sup> He took part in a series of meetings of a commission concerning the education of the Jews which was held in St Petersburg in 1843, together with, among others, the leader of Lithuanian Jewry, Rabbi Yitzhak ben Haim of Volozhyn, the German maskilic reformer Max Lilienthal and the Russian Minister of National Enlightenment, S.S. Uvarov. Rabbi Menahem Mendel's overt and openly stated goal during this commission was to resist the pressure of the government and the Maskilim, and to preserve the traditional Jewish system of education. See M. Stanislawsky, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 78–82.

<sup>55</sup> See Rabbi M.M. Schneerson, *HaYom Yom* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1943 and frequently since) entry for 28 Tevet, which suggests that the work was compiled in connection with the commission of 1843 (see previous note). This statement is based on the Habad historiography of Rabbi Joseph I Schneersohn (1880–1950), concerning which see Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism", in *Essays in Jewish Historiography, History and Theory*, Beiheft 27, 1988, 119–159.

had published in 1911 his very popular *Derekh Mitzvotekha*, which links Habad hasidic teaching with the halakhic dimension of Jewish thought.) It is probable that the publishers believed that his presentation of philosophy in a context of traditional Jewish thought would help to strengthen orthodoxy in Russia, which was beleaguered by the Haskalah, Socialism and secular Zionism.

*Rabbi Shalom Dovber*

Rabbi Menahem Mendel's grandson, the fifth generation Habad leader, Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn (1860–1920), known as the RaShaB, also claimed the image of Maimonides together with his rationalism, and to an extent other medieval Jewish philosophers, for the camp of tradition and Hasidism.

At the hasidic gathering with Rabbi Shalom Dovber in 1919 in Rostov-Don celebrating 19 Kislev<sup>56</sup> there were visitors from outside the hasidic fold. Among some latecomers were a “Rabbiner”, a government rabbi, from Tchernigov, and a number of his colleagues, including a student, “who had been at some convention”.

When they entered the room Rabbi Shalom Dovber turned to them and began speaking about a theme in Albo's *Ikkarim*, regarding the hierarchy of existence.<sup>57</sup> It seems that Rabbi Shalom Dovber adapted this into an appeal to ascend higher in the chain of being; while a person is exalted above the animals because of the power of Reason, even greater is the ability to transcend Reason and come closer to the Divine.<sup>58</sup> The moral is obvious: the “rationalist” rabbi and his friends should try to transcend their own limited, secular Reason.

Rabbi Shalom Dovber turned to the Rabbiner and said “Do you understand...? I have heard...that you are an intelligent man (*bar sekhel*)”. Then follows an apologue by Rabbi Shalom Dovber about the difference between Maimonides and Aristotle.

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<sup>56</sup> This date commemorates the release of Rabbi Shneur Zalman from Czarist prison in 1798. In addition, in 1901 R. Shalom Dovber declared that this day is the “Rosh Hashanah (New Year) of Hasidic teachings”. See his *Collected Letters* vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1982) 259.

<sup>57</sup> *Ikkarim* discourse 3, ch. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn, *Torat Shalom—Sefer HaSihot* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1992, 4th edition) 243. A footnote comments that the transcription of Rabbi Shalom Dovber's words differs somewhat from the text in the *Ikkarim*.

Maimonides would put the centre-point [*hanekudah*] first and after that made the circle, while Aristotle would make the circle and then wanted to arrive at the centre-point. Obviously, for Maimonides who set the centre-point first, the circle emerged in a good way, accurately round the centre, that means, that first he set the foundation, which is Faith, and after that he constructed the circle, meaning he was involved in rationality [*hit'asek bemuskalot*] but the circle was good, meaning that also his Reason would lead to the centre, but without the centre-point the circle might form in such a way that there is altogether no centre...without the centre point the intellect by itself might go who knows where.<sup>59</sup>

Having affirmed the piety of Maimonides' rationalism, Rabbi Shalom Dovber continues by linking the *Guide* with early Hasidism. Perhaps between the lines is also the suggestion that the rationalist Rabbiner and his friends are more likely to find satisfaction among the Hasidim than with their opponents, the Mitnaggedim. "One should not tell the Mitnaggedim," he said, "but the disciples of the Maggid of Mezeritch would study the *Guide*".<sup>60</sup> For the Mitnaggedim, Maimonides' philosophical works were an anathema, but in Rabbi Shalom Dovber's view, not so for the Hasidim. He continued by emphasising the need for rational appreciation of the Divine, citing the comment of sixteenth-century R. Yeshaya Halevi Horowitz in the *Shnei Luhot HaBrit*<sup>61</sup> on the verse "This is my G-d *ve-anvehu* [and I will make a dwelling for Him], the G-d of my father and I will exalt Him" (Ex.15:2).

This means, when He is 'my G-d', meaning that I intellectually grasp G-dliness myself, then *anvehu*, "*ani vehu*", I and He are together; but when He is 'the G-d of my father', meaning I only believe in Him without understanding, then 'I exalt Him', meaning He is remote from me.<sup>62</sup>

On another occasion, earlier in his career when he was struggling to counteract the influence of the Maskilic Movement (*Hevrah Mefitzei Haskalah*) which was engaged in opening schools for Jewish children in many parts of Russia, R. Shalom Dovber spoke of the great mystics of the past such as the Four who entered Pardes, and Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest, hero of the Merkavah literature. They ascended "by means of a Divine Name" to the kabbalistic world of *Yetzirah*, Formation. However, he said, Maimonides "through his pure intellect, just

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Asarah Maamarot, beginning of 1st Maamar.

<sup>62</sup> *Torat Shalom* 244.

with human intellect was able to grasp the World of *Yetzirah* without any Divine Names. That realm which was reached by the Four who entered Pardes by employing sacred Names, he was able to reach with his pure intellect even though it was human intellect.”<sup>63</sup>

For R. Shalom Dovber, giving this talk in 1905, to his students in the Tomkhei Temimim Yeshivah founded less than a decade previously, this idea was intended both to retain Maimonides as a latter-day guide for orthodox Jewry and also to demonstrate to his audience that to reach spiritual heights you do not need to employ Divine Names. Maimonides used his pure *sekhel*, and we have “the Divine *haskalah* (intellectual study) which [Rabbi Shneur Zalman] gave us” which will enable us too to rise to spiritual heights.<sup>64</sup> For R. Shalom Dovber the image of Maimonides the philosopher represents the transformation of intellectualization and rationalisation into pathways to G-d rather than the secular rationalist path of the contemporary *Hevrah Mefitzei Haskalah*.

*Contemporary Habad: Mishneh Torah, The Guide, Kabbalah*

It is in the open *Kulturkampf* waged by the contemporary Habad movement, attempting both to implant traditional Jewish values in modern, secular society and at the same time, and with the same goal, to deconstruct the enclave of the contemporary haredi community, that the image of Maimonides has become most prominent as a symbol with which the Habad follower seeks to identify.

This is due to a series of steps made by the seventh Lubavitch-Habad Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), through his talks which were widely publicised among his followers, and also by means of specific “campaigns”. The effect has been not only to claim Maimonides as an icon of Habad hasidic orthodoxy and spirituality,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 58. See also Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson’s talk in *Sefer HaSihot, Summer 5700* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1961) 41, a talk on Shabbat Hol-HaMoed Pesah in Lakewood. This describes Maimonides in somewhat similar terms, and also declares that “my grandfather [the 4th Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel Schneerson, 1834–1882] during one of his sessions with my father [R. Shalom Dovber] studying the *Guide for the Perplexed*, said that he has a tradition, Rebbe from Rebbe, back to the holy Baal Shem Tov that Maimonides was a great kabbalist”. An editorial footnote on the page discusses this statement in relation to the kabbalistic idea that Maimonides did not study kabbalah, or only did so at the end of his life (see n. 7 above). The more usual Habad approach to Maimonides is that he was a spiritual guide throughout his career.

<sup>64</sup> *Torat Shalom* 58.

but also to create a sense of a “special affinity” between Maimonides and the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe reminiscent of that mentioned above regarding Rabbi Haim Vital.

From the beginning of his leadership, effectively beginning with the passing of the sixth Rebbe, his father-in-law Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn in January 1950, transcripts were made of Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s talks, which have since been published.<sup>65</sup> Here we find very frequent references to the halakhic rulings of Maimonides cited or sometimes quoted at some length from *Mishneh Torah*.

Far more rare, but nonetheless present, are references to ideas in the *Guide*. In some cases Rabbi Menachem Mendel cited only “Maimonides”, but in others the *Guide* is mentioned explicitly. In 1952, when discussing the interpretation of a parable, the theme of parables in the introduction to the *Guide* is cited;<sup>66</sup> in 1954 there is discussion of the question addressed to Maimonides presented in the *Guide* I ch. 2, concerning the puzzling idea that punishment for Adam’s sin led him to increase his knowledge;<sup>67</sup> in 1958 there is discussion of the Aristotelian idea presented in the *Guide* II ch. 1 that “Supposing that there exists a thing composed of two things and that one of these two things exists separately outside this compound thing, it follows necessarily that the other thing also must exist outside the compound thing.”<sup>68</sup>

More extensive focus on a passage in the *Guide* took place at the hasidic gathering on Purim in 1962. After expounding the verse “or my hand upon the throne of the L-rd” (Ex. 17:16), Rabbi Menachem Mendel quoted the discussion of this verse in the *Guide* I ch. 9 which

<sup>65</sup> They were initially published in the original Yiddish, in typed form, in a series extending from January 1950 to the autumn of 1981. These are entitled *Sihot Kodesh*. A second series with the title *Hitva’aduyot... Admor Shelita* provided transcripts in Hebrew, from 1981 till February 1992, after which R. Menachem Mendel suffered a stroke from which he never recovered. A further publishing venture began in 1993, translating the Yiddish transcripts into Hebrew and also supplementing them with further transcripts which came to light in the possession of various followers. This series, still in progress, has the title *Torat Menachem Hitva’aduyot. Admor Menachem Mendel*. These are all “unedited” teachings of Rabbi Menachem Mendel. By contrast *Likkutei Sihot*, *Sefer HaSihot*, and *Torat Menachem Sefer HaMa’amarim Melukat* (kabbalistic discourses) were teachings edited by Rabbi Menachem Mendel for publication.

<sup>66</sup> *Torat Menachem Hitva’aduyot* vol. 5 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1996) 147 n. 33 (the note adds material from another transcript).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 10 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1998), 39. See Pines, vol. 1, 23–24.

<sup>68</sup> Pines vol. 2, 246; *Torat Menachem Hitva’aduyot* vol. 21 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2002), 148. Rabbi Menachem Mendel does not mention that this idea is cited in the *Guide* in Aristotle’s name.

explains that “throne” is not separate to the L-rd; it is merely the attribute of His greatness and sublimity. The *Guide* emphasises that one must not imagine they are two different things: the L-rd and His Throne. Rather “the throne is a thing inseparable from Him.”<sup>69</sup>

Then Rabbi Menachem Mendel continued “and a similar idea is found in books of Kabbalah... as is known that my father-in-law [Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak] said in a talk (which has been printed) that Maimonides was a great kabbalist.”<sup>70</sup>

Rabbi Menachem Mendel then cited a chapter from the sixteenth-century kabbalist Rabbi Meir ibn Gabbai’s *Avodat HaKodesh* claiming that this presents a discussion of the verse, similar to that of Maimonides in the *Guide* “although he did not cite the words of the *Guide* on this topic, even though elsewhere he does quote [the *Guide*].”<sup>71</sup> The import of the passage as explained by Rabbi Menachem Mendel, is that one might imagine that there are two different realms: the realm of the L-rd, and that of the Throne, meaning the realm of sanctity, and that of the profane. In fact both are one.

Now this is an important Hasidic idea which is here being located in a chapter in the *Guide*. The overt import is, of course, that the *Guide* is not merely an intellectual philosophical work, but a tract which carries possibilities of spiritual interpretation.

This idea is expressed not only in talks within the hasidic enclave (which have become accessible to us through the publication of transcriptions) but also in the edited tracts which were published and widely publicised. We find statements such as “there are many topics in *Guide for the Perplexed* which have a basis in Zohar and Kabbalah”<sup>72</sup> and the categorisation of the *Guide* as the “esoteric” writing of Maimonides, while the *Mishneh Torah* is his “exoteric” work.<sup>73</sup>

Moving to spiritual interpretations of Maimonides’ halakhic writings, a favourite theme of Rabbi Schneerson is the passage at the end of the Laws of Shemittah and the Jubilee in *Mishneh Torah*. This was quoted many times in his public talks, the first I have found being in 1953.<sup>74</sup> In its full form, as in a talk of 1964, this theme presents not so much

<sup>69</sup> Pines vol. 1, 35.

<sup>70</sup> *Torat Menahem Hitva’aduyot* vol. 33 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 2006). See above, n. 63.

<sup>71</sup> See Meir ibn Gabbai *Avodat Hakodesh* III ch. 41.

<sup>72</sup> *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 3 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1964) 761.

<sup>73</sup> *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 26 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1988) 27.

<sup>74</sup> *Torat Menahem Hitva’aduyot* vol. 9 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1998) 18.

an image of Maimonides, but rather the image Maimonides presents of the human being, Jew or non-Jew.

Not only the Tribe of Levi, but every single person of all inhabitants of the world, whose spirit prompts him...to separate [from worldliness] and to stand before G-d to serve Him...he becomes sanctified...and G-d will be his portion.<sup>75</sup>

Rabbi Menachem Mendel stresses that this means a non-Jew as well as a Jew, for a “hasid of the nations of the world” also attains the World to Come.<sup>76</sup> In a lengthy discussion he interprets this passage as denoting a path of personal spirituality and dedication with relevance for all humanity.

Another prominent discussion by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of the spiritual dimension of *Mishneh Torah* was presented in December 1974 at the hasidic gathering of 19 Kislev. This links the opening words of *Mishneh Torah*—“The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdoms is to know that there is a First Existence”—with the conclusion of the entire work which speaks of the way in the time of the Messiah all Israel “will grasp the Knowledge of their Creator, according to the capability of man”, presenting an intensely spiritual or even mystical interpretation of the nature of the Divine and of the possibilities of human consciousness.<sup>77</sup>

Thus one kind of treatment of Maimonides by Rabbi Menachem Mendel is to take his teachings whether from the *Guide* or *Mishneh Torah*, or elsewhere, as embodying a spiritual teaching of some kind. Sometimes one might consider this to be the literal meaning, and sometimes it is a more free interpretation, expressing a typical Hasidic approach to textual sources. However in this case, rather than Scripture or even Talmud or Midrash, here the “text” expounded is a passage by Maimonides.

Another aspect of Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s discussion of Maimonides is to compare him with Rabbi Shneur Zalman.<sup>78</sup> As we have seen, Rabbi Shneur Zalman himself did this, concerning the

<sup>75</sup> Talk on 12 Tammuz 5724 (1964), in *Sihot Kodesh 5724* (Brooklyn, 1994) 470, sec. 9.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. 471–2. See Maimonides, *Yad*, Laws of Kings 8:11.

<sup>77</sup> *Hadran al hathalat vesiyum Sefer Mishneh Torah*, (Brooklyn: Kehot, 11 Nisan, 1985). This was printed and distributed at the *siyum* of the first cycle of annual study of the *Mishneh Torah*, on 11 Nisan 1985.

<sup>78</sup> See *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 26, 26–39.

ceremonious burning of his book. Y.Y. Dienstag does the same: both figures, he said, were similar in that each wrote a halakhic work and also a tract dealing with subtle questions, meaning the *Guide* in the case of Maimonides and the *Tanya* in the case of Rabbi Shneur Zalman.<sup>79</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel makes the same point and draws a number of further comparisons, such as, significant for mystics, the close proximity of their Yahrzeit (Maimonides, 20th Tevet and 24th Tevet, R. Shneur Zalman). Rabbi Menachem Mendel presents the *Guide* as a spiritual manual, like the *Tanya*, but with an important difference: the *Tanya* was written for everyone, and the *Guide* was compiled only for a small elite.<sup>80</sup>

*The Bursting Forth of the Wellsprings*

As mentioned, the general approach of Rabbi Menachem Mendel was one of deconstruction, dissolving borders, revealing unities. His repeated assaults on the borders between the orthodox and the assimilated are the most obvious; but also between the revealed Torah and the esoteric tradition, and ultimately between the world as world and G-d as holiness. This took place simultaneously with the attempt to preserve the uniqueness of the Jew, the sacred nature of the Land of Israel, and the importance of the traditional halakhah in daily life.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel often quoted the passage in the Sacred Epistle of the Baal Shem Tov, which spoke of the Messiah coming “when your wellsprings burst forth to the outside”.<sup>81</sup> What are the ‘wellsprings’? The spiritual teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, particularly as expressed in Habad hasidic teachings, which in the view of Rabbi Menachem Mendel represented the most communicable essence of the entire Jewish mystical tradition.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s teachings would be published in weekly pamphlets. One such printed in January 1985 included the idea of removing the traditional restrictions on study of the *Guide* as a form

<sup>79</sup> Dienstag (n. 20 above), 318. R. Shneur Zalman’s halakhic work was his *Shulhan Arukh*. Concerning this see Y. Mondshine, *Sifrei HaHalakhah shel Admur Hazaken. Bibliografyah* (Kfar Chabad: Kehot, 1984).

<sup>80</sup> *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 26, 33.

<sup>81</sup> See I. Etkes, *The Besht: magician, mystic, and leader*, translated by Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press; Hanover; London: University Press of New England, 2005) 79–97.



of “bursting forth” of the wellsprings.<sup>82</sup> The *Guide* too, like *Tanya*, and like the kabbalistic writings of Rabbi Haim Vital, is part of the inner dimension of the Torah. It is true that Maimonides himself limits its readership in terms of his severe definition of the reader for whom the book is intended,<sup>83</sup> like the restrictions imposed by Rabbi Haim Vital on his own works. However, in both cases, claimed Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the restrictions have been broken through. In an intriguing note<sup>84</sup> he adds that this freedom from restrictions has been gained by the experience of the persecutions which the Jewish people have experienced “in recent generations”, clearly including the Holocaust. This suffering has made the Jewish people fit to receive the deeper teachings of the Torah.

*“Mitzvah Campaigns”*

One of the ways in which the deconstructive thrust of Rabbi Menachem Mendel was most clearly expressed was in the “Mitzvah Campaigns”. The first of these was the Tefilin Campaign, launched on the eve of the Six Day War in 1967. Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s directive to his followers was, in practical terms, to ask Jewish men and boys to put on Tefillin and say the Shema prayer, a procedure which takes two or three minutes. For the orthodox Jew who religiously donned Tefilin every day for the Morning service in the synagogue, who felt that Tefilin distinguished him as an orthodoxly observant and probably knowledgeable Jew, the idea that an ignorant man, far from “Torah values” and an orthodox Jewish life style should be invited to put on Tefilin was quite shocking. Surely Tefilin are part of the total directive of orthodox Judaism? How could a man who may have married a non-Jew or in some other way be beyond the pale of the community be invited to put on Tefilin?

We can see that it is precisely the borders between “observant” and “non-observant”, or “in the community”/“outside the community” which are being threatened. For Rabbi Menachem Mendel a Jew is a Jew, and the Mitzvah of Tefilin applied to him. In order to support his

<sup>82</sup> Later published in *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 26, 26–39.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. See Pines, vol. 1, 15–16.

<sup>84</sup> *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 26, 36, n. 107.

position, Rabbi Menachem Mendel cited a number of sources. One from Maimonides is the passage from Laws of Repentance in *Mishneh Torah*, which declares that one should always consider oneself and the whole world as equally balanced between good and bad, and if one carried out “one Mitzvah”—seemingly independent of everything else—one has tipped the scales for oneself and the whole world to the side of merit.<sup>85</sup> Later, Rabbi Menachem Mendel cited Maimonides’ statements about Jeroboam: although he sinned grievously by worshipping idols and causing others to do the same, he was still held accountable for every seemingly minor detail of the Law.<sup>86</sup> Hence a Jew who does not live an orthodox life-style is duty-bound to keep every detail of Jewish Law, and the Lubavitch hasidic followers were given the task to try to ensure that he or she would make a step forward through the various “Mitzvah Campaigns”. These began with the Tefilin Campaign launched in 1967 and continued through the 1970s with further campaigns. An important aspect of Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s rationale for all of them was the statement mentioned above in Maimonides’ Laws of Repentance 3:4, that a single action by any person can tip the spiritual balance of the world.

#### *Maimonides’ Depiction of the Menorah*

During the 1980s there would be a new emphasis on Maimonides in the Habad-Lubavitch movement. However, near the beginning of the decade this was heralded by a striking challenge to traditional Jewish iconography, claiming Maimonides for support.

The popular Hanukkah festival is represented graphically by the Hanukkah Menorah, or Hanukiah, an eight (or nine) branched candelabrum. This often imitated the form of the Candelabrum described in Exodus 25:31–40 as an appurtenance of the Sanctuary, which is also described as featuring in Solomon’s Temple (I Kings 7:49). In this original Temple form of the Menorah, there was a central stem, with

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<sup>85</sup> Laws of Repentance 3:4. See *Likkutei Sivot* vol. 6, 272. This is included in a series of answers from Rabbi Schneerson to questions asked about the Tefilin Campaign, given in a talk in the autumn of 1967 (271–75).

<sup>86</sup> *Likkutei Sivot* vol. 20 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1982) 357 n. 49. See *Iggerot haRambam* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1981) “Letter on Apostasy”, 63; “Letter to the Yemen” end of ch. 1, 137. See Davidson, *Moses Maimonides* (n. 2 above), 501–509 for discussion of the authorship of the “Letter on Apostasy”.

three pairs of branches extending upwards to the right and left. At the top of each of the branches and also of the central stem there was a lamp for olive oil. The Hanukah Menorah (celebrating the miracle of the oil for the Temple Menorah lasting eight days instead of one, when the Macabbees regained the Temple from the Syrian Greeks) had to have eight lamps plus a ninth in a differing alignment. If it was constructed following the general pattern of the Temple Menorah it would therefore have four pairs of branches, each culminating in a lamp, and the stem might be the ninth lamp positioned higher than the others or in a different plane.<sup>87</sup>

The relief on the Arch of Titus in Rome depicts a Menorah among the spoils captured from the sacking of Jerusalem. In this relief the three pairs of branches rising upwards from the central stem are curved. A number of ancient Palestinian artefacts representing the Menorah also have curved branches. Many extant Hanukah candelabra likewise have curved branches.

However, a manuscript in the Bodleian Library of Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah in his own hand explaining Menahot 3:7 includes a diagram of the Menorah. In this the arms of the Menorah are straight diagonals, not curved. This diagram is included in Yosef Kapah's translation of the Commentary on the Mishnah which is based on this manuscript. He adds a second diagram from another manuscript of Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah in which, likewise, the arms of the Menorah are straight. Kapah comments that: "It is the same in all the manuscripts, the six branches extending from the central stem rise in straight lines to the height of the Menorah, and they are not curved at all."<sup>88</sup>

During a series of talks in the Summer of 1982, Rabbi Menachem Mendel raised the issue of the shape of the Temple Menorah and argued strongly that the arms were straight as in Maimonides' diagram. He claimed support also from other rabbinic texts, but the Maimonides diagram provided a clear icon expressing this view. A further detail in the diagram, namely the inverted triangles, representing the "goblets", which were therefore seen as inverted, were expounded in terms of a

<sup>87</sup> According to the halakhah the Hanukah Menorah does not have to follow the Temple Menorah pattern. See *Shulhan Arukh* Orah Haim 671:4.

<sup>88</sup> Y. Kapah, trans. and ed. *Mishnah with Maimonides' Commentary, translated from the Arabic from an original manuscript*, (Hebrew) vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1967, 1989) 78.

kabbalistic reading of the meaning of the Menorah, in which Divine effulgence flows downwards through the inverted goblets. These three talks were edited in the form of a commentary on the depiction of the Menorah in Exodus 24:31–40 which was published as a pamphlet on the weekly Pentateuchal reading in February 1983.<sup>89</sup> One practical effect is that many of the Habad-Lubavitch “Giant Menorah” lighting ceremonies involve a Menorah with straight arms, rather than curved.

On the one hand, this campaign concerning the shape of the Menorah can be seen in the context of Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s interest in Jewish iconography as an expression of Jewish identity. The above mentioned pamphlet makes clear that Rabbi Menachem Mendel saw the popular curved branches of the Menorah as deriving from the imagery on the Arch of Titus, and disputed the claim that this was a genuine depiction of the Menorah from the Sanctuary of the Temple. After all, apart from the inner sacred Menorah, there were other candelabra in the Temple, and various details of the image on the Arch of Titus—such as the depiction of a dragon—do not correspond with statements in the Talmud about the Menorah. It was also likely that the Menorah which Solomon made for the First Temple was not in the Second.<sup>90</sup> And anyway, why should a sacred Jewish symbol derive from a triumphal Arch representing the destruction of the Temple and the humiliation of the Jew?

For many years Rabbi Menachem Mendel had conducted a similar campaign about the depiction of the Tablets of the Law as having domed tops.<sup>91</sup> The Talmud<sup>92</sup> gives no suggestion about a domed shape. Rabbi Menachem Mendel considered the domed shape as deriving from medieval Christian art. Why should the image of the sacred Tablets of the Law be conceived on the basis of a Christian graphic theme?

Another aspect of Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s concern about Maimonides’ image of the Menorah has to do with Maimonides himself.

<sup>89</sup> It is published in *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 21 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1988), 164–172.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>91</sup> See *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 21, 484, quoting a letter by R. Menachem Mendel of 1961. The cover of the Lubavitch children’s magazine in Yiddish and English, *Shmuessen mit Kinder/Talks and Tales*, depicted the Tablets of the Law as rectangular blocks. This began publication in 1942 under R. Menachem Mendel’s direction. It is interesting that R. Menachem Mendel discussed this topic in 1981 in talks on the Sabbath of Ki Tisa (February) and several months later, on Simhat Torah day (October). This was shortly before he launched the campaign about the shape of the Menorah in the Summer of 1982.

<sup>92</sup> See T.B. Bava Batra 14a which describes the Tablets as rectangular blocks six handbreadths by six by three.

The image of Maimonides was being transformed into a central icon for Habad, and the “Rambam Menorah” was part of this process.

This was soon followed by another campaign, concerning widespread study of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* and Book of the Commandments.

*Annual Study Programme of Mishneh Torah*

In 1984 Rabbi Menachem Mendel instituted an annual study programme focusing on the *Mishneh Torah*, in some ways parallel to the Daf Yomi programme of Talmud study instituted in 1922 by Rabbi Meir Shapiro at the first Agudat Yisrael Congress in Vienna. *Mishneh Torah* covers the entire range of the halakhah, including those laws which apply only in Temple times. As defined by Rabbi Shneur Zalman in his halakhic work “Laws of Torah Study”, and summarized by Rabbi Menachem Mendel, there are four aspects to Torah study:

1. Knowing the practical laws needed for daily life;
2. Study of the entire range of Torah—the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, Midrash, Zohar and all the halakhot of the Torah;
3. A level which is intermediary between 1 and 2: study of all the halakhot of the oral Torah, including those which apply in Temple times;
4. Study of selected sections of Torah by heart.<sup>93</sup>

Daily study of the *Mishneh Torah* fits into the third category, fulfilling the individual requirement to study all the halakhot of the oral law. Rabbi Menachem Mendel also emphasised the sense of unity—love of one’s fellow—when large numbers of people are studying the same piece of Torah (similar sentiments are expressed by the devotees of the Daf Yomi).<sup>94</sup> However, one might feel that while Daf Yomi is accessible only to those who have reached the level of being able to follow a *shiur* in a page of Talmud, the study of the halakhot in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* is open to anyone who can understand the Hebrew

<sup>93</sup> Likkutei Sihot vol. 27, p. 230. See R. Shneur Zalman’s *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, 1:4, 2:1–2, 9–10.

<sup>94</sup> See the popular work by Rav Yehoshua Baumol, *A Blaze in the Darkening Gloom: The Life of Rav Meir Shapiro* (New York and Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1994) 161.

language or who can study the section in translation. A further element is the significance of the study of halakhah, the actual statement of the law, rather than the complex Talmudic discussion. The Talmud terms the halakhot “the crown of the Torah” and declares that anyone who studies them every day will enjoy the World to Come.<sup>95</sup> In *Tanya* IV ch. 29 there is a letter by Rabbi Shneur Zalman stressing the positive spiritual effect of study of halakhah.

An interesting feature of this scheme is that it was designed to pertain to everyone: men, women and children. Those who could, were asked to study three chapters of the *Mishneh Torah* each day, thus completing the entire work in just under a year. At a lesser level, one could study one chapter a day. Rabbi Menachem Mendel wanted to include women—and also children—in the scheme and suggested that they should study Maimonides’ *Book of the Commandments* (*Sefer HaMitzvot*), in the order of study of *Mishneh Torah*, so that they would be studying the same material as those who are studying three chapters a day. Diaries are printed every year, so as to help people follow the study programme, and Eshkol printed a special edition of the *Mishneh Torah*, marking the beginning of each group of three chapters.

This programme of study was attacked by Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Shach (d. 2001) of the Ponovezh Yeshivah in Bnei Brak on the ground that a person might think that the final halakhah is according to the view of Maimonides, while that is often not the case.<sup>96</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel responded that this would also be an argument against studying the Mishnah.<sup>97</sup> Study of the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* and *Sefer HaMitzvot* remains a vigorous feature of the international Habad community, and is available through phone-in Torah schemes and on web-sites, as well as being promoted in girls’ schools and Yeshivot.<sup>98</sup> The annual *siyum* provides an occasion for large banquets and has become an “outreach” opportunity—whether within the wider Jewish community or, in a different style of event, attended by noted dignitaries from the Haredim.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>95</sup> T.B. Megila 28b.

<sup>96</sup> See his *Mikhtavim U-Ma’amarim*, Vol. 4 (Bnei Brak 1990) fol. 70.

<sup>97</sup> Oral communication from Rabbi Shmuel Lew. See *Hitva’aduyot* 5747, vol. 2, 732 (talk on Shabbat Vayakhel-Pekudei).

<sup>98</sup> Rabbi Schneerson asked that the boys in Lubavitch Yeshivot should study the Rambam *outside* the times of their regular study programme.

<sup>99</sup> As a result of this study programme a number of Hebrew works relating to Maimonides have been published, including two volumes on the sources of *Mishneh Torah*

*The Personal Example of Maimonides*

The first *siyum* (conclusion) in 1985 of the new programme for studying *Mishneh Torah*—according to the study schedule he himself designed—fell on Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s birthday, 11 Nisan, incidentally close to that of Maimonides, on the eve of Passover. Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s talks at the hasidic gathering on that day focused on the personal example presented by Maimonides, expressed in a famous passage in his letter to Shmuel ibn Tibbon concerning translating the *Guide*.<sup>100</sup> In addition to the picture of utter dedication to helping others which this passage presents, there is also a theme which Rabbi Menachem Mendel had comparatively recently added to the list of his demands on his followers: to have a positive halakhic concept of the spiritual duty of the Jew towards the Gentile.

Near the end of Laws of Kings in *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides states that the Jew has the responsibility “to compel all inhabitants of the world” to accept the Seven Noahide Laws. The Gentile who observes those laws, recognising them as coming from G-d at Sinai, inherits the World to Come.<sup>101</sup> Then follow two chapters defining the seven laws. A series of talks by Rabbi Menachem Mendel beginning in 1981 presented the striking idea, almost unique in orthodox Jewish thought, that the Jew is in some way responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of the Gentile.<sup>102</sup> Over the years the Seven Noahide Laws were communicated by the Habad followers through pamphlets, books, videos, websites and initiatives in Washington.<sup>103</sup>

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and several collections of Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s teachings on Maimonides. In addition Eliyahu Touger embarked on a project to translate *Mishneh Torah* into English, Malka Touger wrote a version of *Sefer HaMitzvot* for children, and the Lubavitch Ohelei Torah School system published *Sefer HaMitzvot* in Yiddish.

<sup>100</sup> See Yeshayahu Zaneh, “Iggeret haRambam liShmuel ibn Tibbon”, *Tarbiz* 10 (1938–9) 135–154, 309–332. The text is also published in *P’er HaDor* (Amsterdam, 1765; Jerusalem: Makhon Or HaMizrah, 1984, ed. David Yosef). The letter to Shmuel ibn Tibbon is no. 143 in both editions, p. 277 of the modern edition. An English translation is in Jacob A. Marcus *The Jew in the Medieval World, A Source Book 315–1791* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 307–309.

<sup>101</sup> Laws of Kings 8:10–11.

<sup>102</sup> See *Likkutei Sihot* vol. 26, 132–144. A twentieth-century orthodox precursor in this endeavour was the prominent London Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld (1912–1984). See his *The Universal Bible, being the Pentateuchal Texts at First Addressed to All Nations (Torat B’nei Noach) Teaching for the Sons of Noah*, translation and notes by Solomon Schonfeld (Sidgwick and Jackson: London, 1955).

<sup>103</sup> As a result of efforts by Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s followers, in 1982 the American Congress declared March 10, 1982—Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s Hebrew birthday that

Rabbi Menachem Mendel seemed to be presenting the view that a Jew should be a universal person. This was how he saw himself, and also how he wanted his followers—particularly, his *shluhim*, rabbinic emissaries—to see themselves. This contrasts with his simultaneous concern to preserve the halakhic identity of the Jew, vigorously promoting the controversial “Who is a Jew?” campaign, and his espousal of what would generally be termed a *haredi* life-style for his followers. The figure of Maimonides—himself a man of paradox—can be seen as unifying some of these contrasts. Further, there is a strong sense that Rabbi Menachem Mendel felt personally drawn by the image presented in the letter to Shmuel ibn Tibbon, and saw it as a source for a kind of hasidic universalism expressed through constant positive activity.

At the 1985 *siyum* he said:

The well-known letter of Maimonides concerning his daily routine... [tells us that] when he would come home (after visiting the royal court) tired and hungry “I find the balustrades filled with people, *Gentiles and Jews*... I go out to cure them and to write for them prescriptions for their maladies... till night... even though I am very weak...”

This means [comments Rabbi Menachem Mendel] that in his daily life Maimonides showed a “living example” how one has to help *every human being* who needs help, not considering at all how difficult this might be, even to real self-sacrifice. For indeed, it was for this purpose that Maimonides dedicated many hours every day, without considering his own welfare.

This means, that apart from the halakhic teaching and instruction in his book the *Yad*, that a Jew has to try to do all he can for Tikkun HaOlam, [putting right the world], there is also the teaching and instruction from the personal conduct of Maimonides in his daily life—that he dedicatedly, with self-sacrifice, tried to bring help and aid to every person, Jews and non-Jews, for that is what is meant by “Tikkun Olam”—beginning with the literal health of the body.<sup>104</sup>

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year—as national “Education Day”, a day devoted to spiritual values (see Congressional Record for March 30, 1982: H.J.R. 447). This set a precedent which continues to the present. In recent years it has been called “Education and Sharing Day”.

<sup>104</sup> *Hitva'aduyot*, 5745, vol. 3, pp. 1710–11, 11 Nisan, sec. 28.



One could argue that this model of dedicated effort on behalf of others, both Jew and non-Jew, set the paradigm for the way Rabbi Menachem Mendel saw himself, and what he wanted his followers and especially his *shluchim* to become.<sup>105</sup>

### *Messianism*

The final message conveyed by the campaign to study the *Mishneh Torah* concerns the messianic thrust of the Habad movement. Maimonides' depiction of the advent of the Messiah, in the final chapters of *Mishneh Torah*, were cited by Rabbi Menachem Mendel in 1970 in a context of the special focus on the Lurianic messianic process which he had brought to post-holocaust Habad thinking, linked with Habad Jewish outreach and the "bursting forth of the wellsprings".<sup>106</sup> For the Hasidic followers, this passage in the *Mishneh Torah* became a central element in the messianic movement in the last years of Rabbi Menachem Mendel's life.

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<sup>105</sup> A major aspect of Rabbi Menachem Mendel's work was as a spiritual healer for members of the Lubavitch community and for others whom they brought to his attention. See R. Littlewood and S. Dein, "The Effectiveness of Words, Religion and Healing among the Lubavitch of Stamford Hill", *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* No. 19 (1995) 339–383. Many of the letters in the 28 printed Hebrew and Yiddish volumes of his correspondence concern issues of health. Sometimes he warns his correspondent that he or she must follow the instructions of their doctor; sometimes he suggests a new medicine or treatment which should be mentioned by the patient to their doctor, gently, trying not to cause offence; sometimes he suggests that one should look for further medical advice. Very often he stresses a purely spiritual aspect of the person's life: to check the Mezuzot or Tefilin, to eat kosher. Unlike a folk healer, he never recommended herbs or amulets. His medical resource was conventional western medicine, taken at what he understood as its most advanced level, together with traditional observance of Jewish law, and—most important—asking blessings for the patient at the grave of the Previous Rebbe. He was concerned at the effect of his advice and blessings, and would ask for feedback. For his secretaries Rabbis Leibl Groner and Binyamin Klein, who took the phone calls, reported the problem to Rabbi Menachem Mendel and relayed his answers, the stories of healing were paramount. If a blessing for a Jew was required, he would ask for the name of the mother of the patient, and if a non-Jew, he would ask for the name of the father. On the one hand this follows the paradigm of a hasidic Rebbe, in a tradition going back to the Baal Shem Tov. On the other it relates to the image of Maimonides. His emissaries continue to offer spiritual healing by asking blessings for people in need at his grave.

<sup>106</sup> See Rabbi M.M. Schneerson, *Sefer HaMa'amarim Bati LeGani* vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1977), 322.

The most significant feature is its depiction of a “possible Messiah”:

If there will arise a king from the house of David, studying Torah and fulfilling Mitzvot like David his father...and he compels all Israel to strengthen [the observance of Torah].. then he is *behezkat Mashiah*, a possible Messiah. If he succeeds and builds the Temple in its place and gathers the scattered Jewish people then he is *Mashiah bevaday*—certainly the Messiah. And he will put the world right to serve G-d together...<sup>107</sup>

For many of the Habad following, this described their own Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel. Maimonides’ rationalisation of the advent of the Messiah helped to bring the most extreme and other-worldly aspect of Jewish thought within the bounds of *this world*. However, when Rabbi Menachem Mendel passed away in 1994, most of the Habad community did not see him in terms of the uncensored text of *Mishneh Torah*, which states:

But if he does not succeed to this extent, or he is killed, then it is known that this is not the one who was promised by the Torah, and he is like all the wholesome and fit kings of the House of David who died. G-d only set him up in order to test the many...<sup>108</sup>

Instead other varieties of mystical theology came to the fore, some radical and others more moderate.<sup>109</sup> Yet even for the more moderate of these theologies the image presented by Maimonides of a leader who is a “possible Messiah” remains relevant. They present a perspective in which the paradigm shift communicated by the teachings of Rabbi Menachem Mendel, seeking to bring the Jewish people to observance of the 613 Commandments and the Gentiles to the observance of the Seven Noahide Laws, together with the implicit transformations of consciousness that task entails, will lead to the advent of the Messiah.

### *This-Worldly Spirituality*

The phrase “transformation of consciousness” is, we feel, the significance of the image of Maimonides for Habad: a deconstruction of

<sup>107</sup> Laws of Kings, 11:4.

<sup>108</sup> Laws of Kings, following 11:4 in the Mosad HaRav Kook edition.

<sup>109</sup> See David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London: The Littman Library, 2001), and Chaim Rapoport, *The Messiah Problem: Berger, the Angel and the Scandal of Reckless Indiscrimination* (London, 2002).

the polarity between “spiritual” and “worldly”. The Habad focus on “this-worldly” spirituality, as opposed to “other-worldly” spirituality, the “Lower Unity” rather than only the “Upper Unity”, from its earliest generations, was complemented by a consistent interest in Maimonides. He was seen as a paradigm of the combination of other-worldly faith and this-worldly *sekhel*, rationalism.

In addition there is the sense of a “special affinity”, particularly on the part of the last Habad Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Maimonides in his personal life represented dedication and physical help to all who needed his aid, and his teachings (as viewed by Habad) provided both for the halakhic reality of Judaism and its sense of spiritual quest. He was seen as a paradigm of the leadership of Habad, to a certain extent in the case of Rabbi Shneur Zalman and most emphatically for the last Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel. For Habad, as for the Maskilim and others, Maimonides also represented the ideal Jew. As understood by the Habad-Lubavitch movement in the post-Holocaust age, their goal, and that of Maimonides, was the same: to draw down and manifest the spiritual in *this world*.

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