

Jeremiah, Hurban, Rambam and the Intellectual Love of God

Rabbi Dr. David Horwitz

Rosh Yeshiva RIETS

When we approach the times of the Three Weeks, the Nine Days, and finally, *Tish'a be-Av*, our thoughts naturally turn to the prophet who foretold the calamity of *hurban ha-bayit*, who pleaded with the Jewish people to change their ways, and who ultimately went into exile with his people. This prophet, of course, is *Yirmiyahu Ha-Navi*, Jeremiah. Traditionally, we read a *haftarah* from *Sefer Yirmiyahu* for the first two *Shabbatot* of the Three Weeks. Moreover, according to *Hazal*, *Yirmiyahu* was also the author of *Eichah*, the Scroll of Lamentations that we read on *Tish'a be-Av*. Furthermore, we precede our recital of the *kinot* on the fast day with a haunting *haftarah* from *Yirmiyahu*.

A recent book on the prophet Jeremiah begins with the following description of the man:

“Who was Jeremiah? No one in the Bible loved his people more than he did. Yet no one chastised them more harshly. He prophesied doom, and he cried. He cursed the day of his birth. He survived several attempts on his life while influencing the destiny of his people and of the entire human race during his long years of misery and suffering...

In his day, the Jewish people ceased to exist as a sovereign nation. The religion of Israel was about to disappear. The pagan world was reigning supreme. The teachings of the Torah were about to be forgotten. As the remnants of Judah were driven into Babylonian exile, this man, now old and worn with age, was forced by some exiles to go with them down to Egypt, where he disappeared from the pages of history. His influence, however, continues to this day. At the most critical moment in world history, this great sufferer ensured the survival of his own people by showing them how to overcome exile...”¹³

Hazal, of course, portray in vivid terms Jeremiah's cry as to why the land was “lost.” The Talmud provides an enigmatic answer through a citation of a verse from Jeremiah.

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: What is meant by Who is the wise man that he may understand this [... for what is the land destroyed] (Jeremiah 9:11)? Now, this question was put to the Sages, Prophets, and Ministering

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב, מאי דכתיב: (ירמיהו ט:יא) מי האיש החכם ויבן את זאת? דבר זה נשאל לחכמים ולנביאים ולא פירשוהו, עד שפירשו

¹³ Mordecai Schreiber, *The Man Who Knew God: Decoding Jeremiah* (Plymouth, UK, 2010), p.2.

Angels, but they could not answer it, until the Almighty Himself did so, as it is written, *And the LORD said, Because they have forsaken my law which I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, neither walked therein (Ibid., 9:10). But is not have not obeyed my voice identical with neither walked therein? Rab Judah said in Rab's name: [It means] that they did not first recite a benediction over the Torah.*

Nedarim 81a

הקב"ה בעצמו, דכתיב: (שם ט:י) ויאמר ה' על עזבם את תורת יגו', היינו לא שמעו בקולי היינו לא הלכו בה! אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: שאין מברכין בתורה תחלה. מסכת נדרים דף פא:

What is signified by the fact that they did not make a blessing over the Torah? Surely it must refer to something more significant! Rabbenu Nissim Gerondi, in his comments on that passage, quotes the explanation found in the *Megillat Setarim* of R. Jonah. The children of Israel at the time certainly studied the Torah. However, *they did not consider the Torah important enough* for they were not involved in learning *Torah li-shemah*. That devaluation of Torah expressed itself in the fact that they did not make a benediction prior to study, and that is the point of the Gemara.

One aspect of Jeremiah's teaching that I wish to address here is his view of the role that the thinking Jew should take in relating to God and in connecting with God. What is the proper place of human action? What is the role of the human intellect?

The Rambam answered these questions by looking at the concluding verses of the *haftarah* that we recite on *Tish'a Be-Av* morning (Jeremiah 8:13-9:23), beginning with the words "I shall utterly destroy them." The *haftarah* ends as follows:

Thus said the LORD: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; Let not the strong man glory in his strength; Let not the rich man glory in his riches. But only in this should one glory: That he understands and knows Me For I the LORD act with loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the world; For in these I delight -declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 9:22-23¹⁴

כה אמר ה' אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו ואל יתהלל הגבור בגבורתו אל יתהלל עשיר בעשרו: כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידע אותי כי אני ה' עשה חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ כי באלה הפצתי נאם ה':

ירמיהו ט:כב-כג

At the end of his philosophic work *Moreh Nebukhim* (3:54), the Rambam quotes and expounds upon these verses from Jeremiah. He does this in the context of his presentation at the end of the *Guide* of the "four perfections," that is, four different avenues of human endeavor in which various types of people strive to achieve greatness. What are the "four perfections"? The Rambam explains:

The ancient and the modern philosophers have made it clear that the perfections to be found in man consist of four species. The first and the most defective, but with a view to which the people of the earth spend their lives, is the perfection of possessions- that is, of what belongs to the individual in the manner of money, garments, tools, slaves, land,

כבר ביארו הפילוסופים הקדומים והאחרונים, שהשלמות הנמצאות לאדם ד' מינים. הראשון, והוא הפחות שבהם, והוא אשר עליו יכלו ימיהם אנשי העולם, הוא שלמות הקנין, ר"ל מה שימצא לאדם

¹⁴ The JPS translation of Jeremiah, in the volume titled *The Prophets* (Philadelphia, 1977), translates the Hebrew phrase (9:23) *haskel ve-yado'a oti* as *in his earnest devotion to Me*. My translation (*that he understands and knows Me*) reflects the Rambam's understanding of the phrase. I have also translated the triad that in Hebrew is *hesed, mishpat u-tzedakah* as *loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness*, as opposed to the JPS translation of *kindness, justice and equity*, in order to conform to the Pines translation of the Rambam, in the passage where he uses these terms. See below.

and other things of this kind... The philosophers have explained that the endeavor and the efforts directed by man toward this kind of perfection are nothing but an effort with a view to something purely imaginary, to a thing that has no permanence. And even if these possessions should remain with him permanently during the whole of his life, he would by no means thereby achieve perfection in his self.

The Guide of the Perplexed, III:54¹⁵

ממון ובגדים וכלים ועבדים וקרקות וכיוצא באלו ... ובארו הפילוסופים כי מי שישים השתדלותו וטרחו לזה המין מן השלמות, לא טרח רק לדמיון גמור, והוא דבר שאין לו קיימא, ואפילו יתקיים בידו הקנין ההוא כל ימי חייו לא יהיה לו בעצמו שום שלמות.

ספר מורה הנבוכים ג:נד

In other words, some people think that the purpose of life is simply to make as much money as possible. These people are sadly mistaken.

Rambam continues:

The second species has a greater connection than the first with the individual's self, being the perfection of the bodily constitution and shape- I refer to that individual's temperament being most harmonious, his limbs well proportioned and strong as they ought to be. Neither should this species of perfection be taken as an end, for it is a corporeal perfection and does not belong to man qua man, but qua animal; for man has this in common with the lowest animals... Utility of the soul is absent from this species of perfection.

והמין הב' יש לו התלות בגוף האדם יותר מן הראשון, והוא שלמות תבנית הגוף ותכונתו וצורתו, ר"ל שיהיה מזג האיש ההוא בתכלית השווי ואבריו נערכים חזקים כראוי, וזה המין ג"כ מן השלמות אין לעשותו תכלית כוונה, מפני שהוא שלמות גופני, ואין לו לאדם מאשר הוא אדם אבל מאשר הוא בע"ח, וישתתף בזה עם הפחות שבבע"ח ג"כ ... אך תועלת נפשית נעדרת מזה המין.

In other words, people whose notion of perfection consists in "working out," whose exclusive preoccupation entail attaining bodily strength and obtaining cosmetic surgery, are also sadly mistaken.

The third category, moral greatness, is certainly praiseworthy according to the Rambam, and is far superior to the first two categories, but Rambam apparently understands that intellectual perfection, which entails knowledge and understanding of God, is even higher than that. Adopting Talmudic language, we would say that Rambam expresses the notion that talmud is greater than *ma'aseh*.

The third species is a perfection that to a greater extent than the species subsists in the individual's self. This is the perfection of the moral virtues. It consists in the individual's moral habits having attained their ultimate excellence. Most of the commandments serve no other end than the attainment of this species of perfection. But this species of perfection is likewise a preparation for something else and not an end in itself. For all moral habits are concerned with what occurs between a human individual and something else. This perfection regarding moral habits is, as it were, only the disposition to be useful to people, consequently, it is an instrument for someone else. For if you suppose a human individual is alone, acting on no one, you will find that all his moral virtues are in vain and without employment and unneeded, and

והמין השלישי הוא שלמות בגוף האדם יותר מן השני, והוא שלמות מעלות המדות, והוא שיהיו מדות האיש ההוא על תכלית מעלתם. ורוב המצוות אינם רק להגיע אל זה המין מן השלמות, וזה המין מן השלמות ג"כ איננו רק הצעה לזולתו ואינו תכלית כוונה בעצמו, כי המדות כולם אינם רק בין האדם ובין זולתו, וכאלו זה השלמות במדותיו הוכן בה לתועלת בני אדם ושכ כלי לזולתו, שאם תעלה בלבך שאחד מבני אדם עומד לבדו ואין לו עסק עם אדם, נמצאו כל מדותיו הטובות עומדות בטלות אין

¹⁵ Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London, 1963), Ip. 634.

that they do not perfect that individual in anything; for he only needs them and they again become useful to him in regard to someone else.

צריך להם ולא ישלימוהו בדבר, אמנם יצטרך אליהם ויקבל תועלתם עם זולתו.

Finally, the Rambam arrives at the fourth and highest perfection.

The fourth species is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues- I refer to the conception of intelligible, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection. A perfection belonging to him alone; and it give him permanent perdurance; through it man is man...

והמין הרביעי הוא השלמות האנושי האמתית, והוא כשיגיעו לאדם המעלות השכליות, ר"ל ציור המושכלות ללמוד מהם דעות אמתיות באלהיות, וזאת היא התכלית האחרונה, והיא משלמת האדם שלמות אמתית, והיא לו לבדו, ובעבורה יזכה לקיימות הנצחית, ובמה האדם אדם.

Now, as he does in many other places in the *Moreh Nebukhim* (and in various places in Mishneh Torah as well), the Rambam proceeds to claim that the same philosophic idea that he has just enunciated has already been previously expounded in *Tanach*, and in this case, by the prophet Jeremiah with the aforementioned verses. He writes:

The prophets too have explained to us and interpreted to us the self-same notions- Just as the philosophers have interpreted them- clearly stating to us that neither the perfection of possession nor the perfection of health nor the perfection of moral habits is a perfection of which one should be proud or that one should desire; the perfection of which one should be proud and one should desire is knowledge of Him, may He be exalted (that is, God), which is the true science. Jeremiah says concerning these four perfections: Thus said the LORD: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; Let not the strong man glory in his strength; Let not the rich man glory in his riches. But only in this should one glory: That he understands and knows Me For I the LORD act with loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the world; For in these I delight -declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:22-23)

הנה בארו לנו הנביאים גם הם אלו העניינים בעצמם, ופרשו אותם לנו כמו שיפרשום הפילוסופים, ואמרו לנו בפירוש שאין שלמות הקנין, ולא שלמות בריאות הגוף, ולא שלמות המדות, שלמות שראוי להתפאר ולהתהלל בו ולא לבקש אותו, ושהשלמות שראוי להתהלל בו ולבקשו הוא ידיעת הש"י שהיא החכמה האמתית, אמר ירמיהו באלו השלמיות הארבעה, כה אמר ה' אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו, ואל יתהלל הגבור בגבורתו, ואל יתהלל עשיר בעשרו, כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידוע אותי ... כי אני ה' עושה חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ ... כי באלה חפצתי נאם ה', ... בחסד משפט וצדקה חפצתי נאם ה'.

The Rambam understands that the *wisdom* that Jeremiah begins with is moral excellence, but not intellectual knowledge of God, a notion that is referred to at the end of the verse. Thus according to the Rambam's understanding of Jeremiah, the intellectual/philosophic/religious understanding of God is the *summum bonum*, the "consummation devoutly to be wished" by every Jew. Jeremiah was trying to persuade his people not to follow the pursuit of the defective perfections, but to aim for an intellectual apprehension of God, the highest and most noble one.

But that is not the end of the story according to the Rambam. In the final paragraph of the *Moreh Nebukhim*, he seems to swerve away from the position that ascribes absolute primacy to the intellectual endeavor. He writes:

As we have mentioned this verse (i.e., Jeremiah 9:22-23) and the

ואחר שזכרנו זה הפסוק מה שכולל מן העניינים הנפלאים, וזכרנו דברי

wondrous notions contained in it... we will complete the exposition of what it includes. For when explaining in this verse the noblest ends, that is, the intellectual apprehension of God, he (Jeremiah) does not limit them only to the apprehension of Him, may He be exalted. For if this were his purpose, he would have said But only in this should one glory: That he understands and knows Me, and would have stopped there; or he would have said: That he understands and knows Me that I am One; or he would have said: that I have no figure, or that there is none like Me, or something similar. But (instead) he says that one should glory in the apprehension of Myself and in the knowledge of My attributes, by which he means His actions (in this world)... In this verse he makes it clear to us that those actions that ought to be known and imitated are loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness... Then he completes the notion by saying: For in these I delight- declares the LORD. He means that it is My purpose that there should come from you (that is, from human beings) loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth in the way we have explained (Guide I:54) with regard to the thirteen attributes (of God): namely, the purpose should be assimilation (by man) to them and that this should be our way of life. Thus, the end that he sets forth in this verse may be stated as follows: It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a manner corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted...

החכמים ז"ל עליו, נשלים כל מה שהוא כולל, וזה שלא הספיק לו בזה הפסוק לבאר שהשגתו ית' לבד היא הנכבדת שבשלמיות, כי אלו היתה זאת כונתו, היה אומר כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידוע אותי, והיה פוסק דבריו, או היה אומר השכל וידוע אותי כי אני אחד, או היה אומר כי אין לי תמונה, או כי אין כמוני, ומה שדומה לזה, אבל אמר שאין להתהלל רק בהשגתו ובידיעת דרכיו ותארו ר"ל פעולותיו ... ובאר לנו בזה הפסוק שהפעולות ההם שראוי שיודעו ויעשה בהם, הם חסד משפט וצדקה ... ואח"כ השלים הענין ואמר כי באלה חפצתי נאם ה', ואמר בחסד במשפט וצדקה חפצתי נאם ה', ר"ל שכוונתי שיצא מכם חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ, כמו שבארנו ב"ג מדות, כי הכוונה להדמות בהם ושנלך על דרכם. א"כ הכוונה אשר זכרה בזה הפסוק, הוא באורו, ששלמות האדם אשר בו יתהלל באמת, הוא להגיע אל השגת השם כפי היכולת, ולדעת השגחתו בברואיו בהמציאו אותם והנהיגו אותם, איך היא, וללכת אחרי ההשגה ההיא בדרכים שיתכוין בהם תמיד לעשות חסד ומשפט וצדקה, להדמות בפעולות השם

Rambam's interpretation at the end of the *Moreh*, which stresses *human action* and *Imitatio Dei*, through imitating the thirteen Attributes of God, seems to favor actions of kindness towards others as opposed to intellection as the *summum bonum*. But at the beginning of his discussion of the verse in Jeremiah, the Rambam clearly favored intellection, the fourth perfection, over moral action, the third perfection! How can one resolve the contradiction?

Samuel ibn Tibbon, the translator of Rambam's *Moreh Nebukhim*, and who also translated Rambam's commentary on *Pirkei Abot*, as part of his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, dealt with this issue in the introduction to his translation of *Abot*. Ibn Tibbon cites Jeremiah 9:23, and favors the interpretation that prefers the intellectual apprehension of God as manifestly superior to moral qualities. Consequently, perforce, he cannot interpret the words of Jeremiah as preferring moral action over intellectual contemplation. Moreover, if he could, he would even reinterpret the last paragraph of the *Guide*.

Menachem Kellner summarizes ibn Tibbon's re-conceptualization of the words of Jeremiah (and if possible, even the words of the Rambam) as follows:

“These three virtues [viz., loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness], ibn Tibbon claims, *lead to the end but do not constitute it*. More than that, in referring to these three qualities, ibn Tibbon maintains, the prophet Jeremiah was not calling upon us to emulate God through them, but rather to apprehend *God Who* works with ‘loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness.’”¹⁶

Thus, according to Samuel ibn Tibbon, Jeremiah was not advocating the human *Imitatio Dei* at all!

Of course the simple reading of the Rambam’s interpretation of Jeremiah is one that would lead us to dispute ibn Tibbon. It would maintain that Rambam claims that Jeremiah calls upon us to emulate God through *our human works* of “loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness.” *That is the summum bonum*. But if this is so, how can one reconcile this with Rambam’s account of the four perfections, in which the highest one is not expressed through a life of action, even moral action, but through a life of contemplation?

In resolving this Maimonidean conundrum, Alexander Altmann writes:

“Maimonides obviously distinguishes between the moral virtues (the acquisition of which is aided by fulfilling the Divinely revealed Law, as he had pointed out before) on the one hand and the imitation of the Divine attributes, which, unlike the moral virtues, is not the result of practical reasoning but follows from theoretical, metaphysical considerations. *Imitatio Dei* is, therefore, but the practical consequence of the intellectual love of God and is part and parcel of the ultimate perfection. It should be noted that Maimonides treats it on a par not only with the knowledge of God and his attributes but also with the recognition of Divine Providence as extending to the sublunar sphere in a manner befitting it, viz., corresponding to the degrees of intellectual perfection found among men.”¹⁷

Thus, one who has obtained an intellectual love of God will understand how God acts with such beneficence and magnanimity in this world, and he will desire to imitate His virtues, and as an expression of this love of God, *he will live a practical life of hesed*.

Putting what Prof. Altmann wrote into Talmudic categories, one may say that we find here the expression of what the Rambam concludes in Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (1:3), that Talmud is greater than *ma’aseh* because *Talmud is mevi li-yidei ma’aseh*.¹⁸ That is, the fourth perfection (intellectual apprehension of God) is greater than the third perfection, precisely because the fourth perfection *leads* to an expression of *Imitatio Dei* that is animated by and fortifies a profound *metaphysical* knowledge of God. Acts of loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness by a man towards his fellow man are behaviors that naturally stem from apprehension of the God Who commanded them and Who uses these instruments in His governance of the World. Such acts constitute the telos of the human being who *through these actions of Imitatio Dei* obtains a greater measure of understanding of God.

¹⁶ Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides and Samuel ibn Tibbon on Jeremiah 9:22-23 and Human Perfection,” in Moshe Beer (ed.), *Studies in Halakha and Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Prof. Menachem Emanuel Rackman on this 80th Anniversary* (Ramat-Gan, 1994), pp. 49-57, on p. 52. (I have added the italics and brackets.)

¹⁷ Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides’ ‘Four Perfections,’” *Israel Oriental Studies*, Vol. II (1972), pp. 15-24, p. 24.

¹⁸ Moses Hyamson, *Mishneh Torah: The Book of Knowledge by Maimonides* (Jerusalem, 1965), p. 57b, translates as follows: *And so too you will find that study in all cases takes precedence of practice, since study leads to practice, but practice does not lead to study. Vide Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 40b.*

It is this intellectual conception of the Messianic age that the Rambam stresses.

Hence, all Israelites, their prophets and sages, longed for the advent of Messianic times, that they might have relief from the wicked tyranny that does not permit them to properly occupy themselves with the study of the Torah and the observance of the commandments; that they might have ease, devote themselves to getting wisdom, and thus attain life in the World to come. For in those days, knowledge, wisdom and truth will increase it is said (Isaiah 11:9), For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD... Because the King who will arise from the seed of David will possess more wisdom than Solomon and will be a great prophet and instruct them in the way of God; and all nations will come to hear him....

Rambam Hilkhoh Teshuva 9:2

Rambam repeats these notions at the end of the *Mishneh Torah*.

The Sages and Prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the heathens, or be exalted by the nations, or that it might eat drink and rejoice. Their aspiration was that Israel be free to devote itself to the Law and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb it, and thus be worthy of life in the world to come.

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

Hilkhoh Melakhim (12:4-5)

ומפני זה נתאוו כל ישראל נביאיהם
וחכמיהם לימות המשיח כדי שינוחו
ממלכיות שאינן מניחות להן לעסוק
בתורה ובמצוות כהוגן, וימצאו להם
מרגוע וירבו בחכמה כדי שיזכו לחיי
העולם הבא, לפי שבאותן הימים תרבה
הדעה והחכמה והאמת שנאמר כי מלאה
הארץ דעה את ה' ... מפני שאותו המלך
שיעמוד מזרע דוד בעל חכמה יהיה יתר
משלמה, ונביא גדול הוא קרוב למשה
רבינו, ולפיכך ילמד כל העם ויורה אותם
דרך ה', ויבואו כל הגוים לשומעו
רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ט:ב

לא נתאוו החכמים והנביאים ימות המשיח,
לא כדי שישלטו על כל העולם, ולא כדי
שירדו בעכו"ם, ולא כדי שינשאו אותם
העמים, ולא כדי לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח,
אלא כדי שיהיו פנויין בתורה וחכמתה, ולא
יהיה להם נוגש ומבטל, כדי שיזכו לחיי
העולם הבא, כמו שביארנו בהלכות תשובה.
ובאותו הזמן לא יהיה שם לא רעב ולא
מלחמה, ולא קנאה ותחרות, שהטובה תהיה
מושפעת הרבה, וכל המעדנים מצויין כעפר,
ולא יהיה עסק כל העולם אלא לדעת את ה'
בלבד, ולפיכך יהיו ישראל חכמים גדולים
ויודעים דברים הסתומים וישיגו דעת בוראם
כפי כח האדם, שנאמר כי מלאה הארץ דעה
את ה' כמים לים מכסים.
רמב"ם הלכות מלכים יב:ד-ה

Putting together all the aforementioned Maimonidean notions into a final statement, one may say that according to the Rambam, Jeremiah pointed the way for *kelal Israel* to perform its part in undoing the *Hurban*. It does so by engaging in a religious/philosophical pursuit of knowledge, culminating in the awareness of God, which expresses itself in acts of interpersonal kindness as illustrations of *Imitatio Dei*. This synthesis of thought and action expresses the ethically and intellectually bountiful period of the Days of the Messiah, which we all pray shall arrive soon.