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Prophecy: The End of Reason?

Rabbi Baruch Weintraub

One of the oldest questions in religious philosophy in general, and in Jewish philosophy in particular, relates to the conflict between Reason and Revelation. Does the revelation of G-d's Will completely eclipse human reasoning?

Immanuel Kant, the famous 18th century Enlightenment philosopher, argued strongly in the negative. His distinction between heteronomy and autonomy of the will became one of the cornerstones of modern philosophy: Only he who acts according to his own understanding of the good is a true moral agent. Following this assessment, Kant rejected any type of 'Divine Law'. He argued that since such a law is dictated from outside of one's self, acting on its basis would diminish man's own moral standing.

The Torah, and the whole of Jewish tradition, obviously, seems to stand in opposition to such an assertion. As the Akeidah ultimately exemplifies, G-d's commandments are to be followed even in the most extreme situations, and even when they run completely against our moral reasoning. However, such a simplistic understanding may do injustice to certain of the Torah's teachings.

In Devarim 18:21, we read about a case in which a prophet's status is in doubt; the people are not sure if he is a real prophet, whose commands bear the Divine seal and must be followed, or a false prophet, in which case he deserves death: "Now if you say to yourself, 'How will we know the word (thing) that Hashem did not speak?'"

At face value, the Torah advises us to test the prophet: "If the prophet speaks in the name of Hashem, and the thing does not occur and does not come about, that is the thing that Hashem did not speak. The prophet has spoken it wantonly; you shall not be afraid of him." (18:22) Rashi explains that we demand that the prophet predict some future event. If the predicted event does not occur, the prophet is declared false and is to be executed. This approach seems to follow the traditional position noted earlier: the only measure for deciding if a certain commandment should be followed is to determine the authority of its speaker, and not to test the logical validity of its content.

However, a very different approach can be found in the seminal work of Rabbi Saadia Gaon, *Emunot V'deirot* (3:8). Given the importance of his words, we will quote them at length:

"Our reason to believe in Moshe was not the signs and miracles alone. Rather we believed him, as any other prophet, for he first called us to do something which was possible. When we hear his call and see it is possible, we then ask for a sign to prove its legitimacy. When he performs that miracle, we believe him... The same is the rule for anyone who claims prophecy. If he will say to us: 'G-d commands us to fast today' - we will ask for a miracle to prove the legitimacy of his message. When we see it, we will accept it and fast. On the other hand, if he will say, 'G-d commands you to commit adultery and steal'... we will not ask for a miracle, for he has called us to do that which is not possible, neither from the perspective of the intellect nor from that of tradition."

Rabbi Saadia's position stems from his own interpretation of the sentence we quoted earlier (18:22): "[If] the thing does not occur and does not come about' - meaning that it is impermissible and unworthy, then 'that is the thing that Hashem did not speak.'"

Clearly, Rabbi Saadia would never have agreed with the Kantian position that a man must be his own legislator. However, he would also oppose following the words of a prophet, even with miracles invoked as proof, if they insulted his faith in the righteousness and wisdom of G-d. It may be that Avraham, hearing the words of G-d directly during the Akeidah, could not deny the command, but the one who hears only from a miracle-working prophet cannot throw away personal responsibility for his actions.

The philosophical roots of Rabbi Saadia's position lie in a steadfast belief in G-d's rationalism, but the practical implication of his position is to enable us to carve a middle ground between heteronomy and autonomy as presented by Kant. From our parshah, says Rabbi Saadia, we learn that one can be a responsible and thinking moral agent, and yet accept upon himself completely the yoke of heaven. Such a position does not weaken faith, but on the contrary, it is the highest belief in the True G-d.

bweintraub@torontotorah.com

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Maimonides: Between Philosophy and Halakhah: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Lectures on the Guide of the Perplexed
Prof. Lawrence J. Kaplan (ed.)
Urim Publications (2016)

Background of the Book

In 1950 and 1951, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik presented a series of lectures at Yeshiva University on Maimonides' classic work, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. While no recordings of these lectures are available, a student in the class, Rabbi Gerald Homnick, produced a detailed set of notes. These, in turn, were edited by Professor Lawrence Kaplan of McGill University, a student of Rabbi Soloveitchik and an expert in his thought as well as in general philosophy. The result is a reconstruction of the lectures, which are philosophically precise and clear. The writing style also seeks to capture some of the tone of the original presentation, though Kaplan notes that Rabbi Soloveitchik's speeches in the lecture hall were much less interactive and dynamic than his shiurim in the yeshiva classroom.

Structure of the Book

Prefixed to the lecture notes is a lengthy essay by Kaplan, in which he conducts

a thorough analysis of the innovations developed by Rabbi Soloveitchik in the lectures and situates them in the context of Maimonidean scholarship overall.

Following this are the notes themselves. Rabbi Soloveitchik did not lecture on *The Guide* in the order of its composition. Rather, he developed topical units which addressed different areas of Maimonides' thought. These include prophecy, ethics, and love and fear of G-d, among others. The volume presents the units in a straightforward fashion, accompanied by Kaplan's footnotes throughout. In these, Kaplan points to some of Rabbi Soloveitchik's sources as well as other places within his writings which may flesh out the content of the lectures. Occasionally, these references are also used to fill in logical gaps in the original notes.

The Goal of the Lectures

Much of the scholarship which addresses *The Guide* is aimed at reconstructing Maimonides' sources and uncovering his "true" philosophical beliefs from beneath layers of apparent contradictions. These do not seem to be Rabbi Soloveitchik's goals in these lectures. Rather, he seeks to uncover

Maimonides as a religious personality and describe the religious experiences which undergird the philosophical presentations made in *The Guide*.

The approach taken in the lectures is significant in terms of reconstructing the course of Rabbi Soloveitchik's own thought. As Professor Dov Schwartz notes in his foreword, these lectures present a snapshot of a shift in overarching themes and emphases in Rabbi Soloveitchik's writing that occurred between the 1940s and 1950s. More critically, perhaps, these lectures allow the modern reader to gain new access to Maimonides. The discussions in *The Guide* are presented from within a perspective of Aristotelian philosophy which modern readers generally do not share. This makes it difficult to relate to the work at a religious level, since many of Maimonides' basic assumptions seem foreign. By detaching the religious phenomena which fuel *The Guide* from their technical philosophical framework, Rabbi Soloveitchik grants readers an opportunity to develop a relationship with the Rambam in a meaningful way at the level of human experience which is common to all.

afriedmann@torontotorah.com

Rabbi Yitzchak HaLevi Herzog

Born: Poland, 28 Kislev 5649 (3/12/1888)

Died: Jerusalem, 19 Tammuz 5719 (7/25/1959)

Chief Rabbi: Mandate/Israel (Ashkenaz), 1936-1959

Biography

Rabbi Herzog was ordained at the age of 19. By age 25, he had completed an M.A. and a doctorate in literature, at the Sorbonne and the University of London. Rabbi Herzog wrote his thesis on renewing use of *techelet*, from the perspective of both halachah and chemistry.

Rabbi Herzog served as Rabbi of Belfast, then Dublin, and then as Chief Rabbi of Ireland. Rabbi Herzog married Sarah, daughter of Rabbi Shemuel Heilman. Sarah served as president of Mizrachi Women. In 1934, Rabbi Herzog made his first trip to Eretz Yisrael. Impressed, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook encouraged him to move to Eretz Yisrael. Later that year, Rabbi Kook passed away, and Rabbi Herzog was appointed as Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi. He served in this role until 1959.

In 1941, Rabbi Herzog embarked on a worldwide trip to rescue Jews from the concentration camps. He met with U.S. President Roosevelt to ask him to bomb the camps, but Roosevelt refused. In 1946, Rabbi Herzog travelled Europe to convince Holocaust survivors to ascend to Eretz Yisrael. He met with Pope Pius XII, who refused to return Jewish children who had been hidden in monasteries during the war. Rabbi Herzog went from monastery to monastery himself, to remove the children and bring them to Israel.

Legacy

Rabbi Herzog saw Torah and Science working hand in hand. In the introduction to his book, *Torat ha'Ohel* [The Torah of the Tent], he wrote of a vision of a messianic time when "Science itself would recognize and acknowledge that it has reached the limit of its ken."

Rabbi Herzog, who was involved in establishing the State, fought against the secular character of the State. At the same time, he acknowledged the importance of democracy, and he contended that one could establish a Jewish and democratic society, governed by Torah. He dedicated most of his book, *Techukah l'Yisrael Al Pi haTorah* [Torah-Based Legislation for Israel], to an explanation of his approach. Naturally, he opposed separation of Religion and State.

Rabbi Herzog's approach prioritized leniency, and especially in decisions tied to Religion and the State, and public affairs. At the same time, he was conservative, and did not break from religious tradition.

Regarding appointment of women to the Knesset, Rabbi Herzog defended it on halachic grounds. He argued that the historic practice of excluding women from public office did not apply to modern conditions, in which women have access to the same education as men. At the same time, he prohibited appointment of women as halachic authorities.

Rabbi Herzog opposed creation of a monument to the victims of the Holocaust, as a non-Jewish practice. However, he did not view it as prohibited.

yperez@torontotorah.com

Biography

Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Approximately 800 years ago, circa 1220, Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg (also known as “Maharam Rothenburg, Light of the Exile”) was born into a rabbinic family in Worms, Germany. Trained first by his father, and then by the great authors of the “Tosafot” commentaries to the Talmud, Rabbi Meir became the leading Ashkenazi scholar of his generation. He served as Rabbi of several communities; he also authored more than 1500 responsa, as well as parts of the Tosafot commentaries, liturgical piyutim (poems), and works of law.

Many of Rabbi Meir’s decisions involved conflicts regarding Jewish communal structure, and so his writings provide a rich resource of historical information, as well as an insight into the political theory of halachah. Among the works on Rabbi Meir’s political philosophy is “Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg: His Life and His Works as Sources for the Religious, Legal and Social History of the Jews of Germany in the Thirteenth Century” by Dr. Irving Agus, and the more modern “Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg and the Foundation of Jewish Political Thought” by Dr. Joseph Isaac Lifshitz.

An eyewitness to the public burning of the Talmud in Paris in 1244, Rabbi Meir was intimately familiar with persecution of Jews. In 1286, King Rudolf I declared Jews “serfs of the treasury”, removing their political freedom. Rabbi Meir tried to flee, but he was captured and imprisoned. Rabbi Meir refused to be ransomed, lest this encourage the capture of more rabbis; during seven years of imprisonment, he continued to lead the community, and to write responsa, from his cell. Fourteen years after his death, Rabbi Meir’s body was ransomed and buried.

Among Rabbi Meir’s greatest students were Rabbeinu Asher and Mordechai, who led Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities, and who heavily influenced the codification of Jewish law in the ensuing centuries.

torczyner@torontotorah.com

Torah and Translation

Jewish Democracy

Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg

Cited in Hagahot Maymoniyot to Hilchot Tefillah 11:1

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

על אשר שאלת אם יש קטטה בין הקהל ואינם יכולים להשוות דעתם לברור ראשים בהסכמת כולם זה אומר בכה וזה אומר בכה ומחמת חלוק לבם בטל התמיד ומדת הדין לוקח [לכאורה צ"ל "לוקח" – מ.ט.] ואין אמת ושלוש בעיר ולא בכל המלכות הנגרים אחריהם איך יעשו?

נראה בעיני שיש להושיב כל בעלי בתים שנותנים מסים ויקבלו עליהם ברכה שכל אחד יאמר דעתו לשם שמים ולתקנת העיר וילכו אחר הרוב הן לברור ראשים הן להעמיד חונים הן לתקן כיס של צדקה הן למנות גבאים הן לבנות הן לסתור בבית הכנסת להוסיף ולגרוע ולקנות בית חתנים לבנות ולסתור בו ולקנות בית האופים ולבנות ולסתור בו. סוף דבר כל דבר צורך הקהל יעשה על פיהם ככל אשר יאמרו.

ואם ימאנו המיעוט ויעמדו מנגד לשמור לעשות ככל הכתוב יש כח ביד הרוב או ביד שימנו הרוב עליהם לראשים להכריחם ולכופם בין בדיני ישראל בין בדיני האומות עד שיאמרו רוצים אנחנו, ואם יצטרכו להוציא ממון על ככה הם המיעוט יתנו חלקם באותו ממון. והמסרב מלומר דעתו על פי הברכה בטלה דעתו וילכו אחר רוב מקבלי הברכה.

סוף דבר כופין בני העיר זה את זה לכל צרכי העיר שהם צריכים הרבה כי ההיא דתניא בתוספתא דבבא בתרא כופין בני העיר זה את זה לבנות להן בית הכנסת ולקנות להן ספר תורה נביאים וכתובים וכופין בני מבוי זה את זה לעשות להם לחי וקורה למבוי וכו' אף על פי שאין זה צורך גדול כל כך אפילו הכי כופין כ"ש שאר ענינים הצריכים להן יותר והיה זה שלום העני מאיר ב"ר ברוך זכרונו לה"ה ע"כ:

Regarding your question: If there is strife in the community and they cannot unite to select leaders unanimously, and this one says thus and this one says thus, and as a result of their different views “the daily offering is not brought (Mishnah Taanit 4:6)” and justice suffers and there is neither truth nor peace in the city, or in the entire land which is drawn after them, what should they do?

I believe they should hold a meeting of all of the taxpayers, and accept upon themselves a “blessing” [euphemism for a penalty] that each will express his view altruistically, and for the sake of the city, and they will follow the majority. This applies whether selecting leaders, or appointing *chazanim*, or establishing the *tzedakah* fund, or appointing collectors, or building or demolishing the synagogue or adding or reducing, or purchasing a wedding hall or building or demolishing it, or purchasing a bakery or building or demolishing it. The bottom line is that whatever the community needs should be done upon their word, according to all they say.

And if the minority should protest and stand in opposition, refusing to comply with what has been written, then the majority, or their designated leaders, have the power to compel and force them – whether with Jewish law or with secular law – until they say they wish to comply. And if they need to spend money for this, then the minority shall pay their share of that sum of money. And one who refuses to state his view, in accordance with the “blessing”, his view is void, and they shall follow the majority of those who accept the “blessing”.

Bottom line: The population of a city may compel each other for any municipal need which is a great need. It is like the Tosefta in Bava Batra (actually Bava Metziah 11:23), “The population may compel each other to build a synagogue for themselves, and to acquire for themselves Torah, Prophets and Writings. And the residents of a street may compel each other to prepare a *lechi* and *korah* for the street [to permit transport within on Shabbat], etc.” Even though this is not such a great need, they may compel; how much more so for other matters, which are greater needs. This shall be a source of peace.

Despite the many halachic obstacles to carrying out capital punishment, it is possible for a rabbinical court to execute a defendant. In such a case, Devarim 21:22 states that the criminal's body is to be left exposed for the day; Sefer haChinuch records this as the Torah's 535th mitzvah. Exposure may be viewed as additional punishment (Ramban to Devarim 21:22), or as a means of warning the community against emulating the victim's crimes. (Sefer haChinuch 535) The Talmud (Sanhedrin 45b) records a debate regarding which crimes warrant this exposure.

Devarim 21:23 limits the period of exposure, requiring burial before sunset; Sefer haChinuch records the prohibition against delayed burial as the Torah's 536th mitzvah, and the commandment of burial as the Torah's 537th mitzvah. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 6:5) applies these two mitzvot to all deaths; we are required to bury everyone without delay. One exception is where delaying would add honour for the

deceased, such as where time is needed for the deceased's children to arrive. (Sanhedrin 47a; Yoreh Deah 357:1)

The prohibition against delaying burial leads to halachic controversy regarding autopsies, use of cadavers for medical research, bone grafts and certain types of organ donation. Consult your rabbi for practical guidance.

There is a separate mitzvah of treating a deceased person with respect; this mandate guides the practices of the *chevra kadisha* in preparing a body for burial. However, this mitzvah is broader than burial; it also applies to proper eulogy. In addition, we are obligated to escort bodies for burial, as part of the mitzvah of "Love your neighbour as yourself". (Rambam, Hilchot Avel 12:1, 14:1)

torczyner@torontotorah.com

Weekly Highlights: Sept 10 – Sept 16 / 7 Elul – 13 Elul

Time	Speaker	Topic	Location	Special Notes
שבת Sept. 10				
5:55 PM	R' Jonathan Ziring	Daf Yomi	BAYT	Rabbi's Classroom
After minchah	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Gemara Avodah Zarah: Sacrifices and Gifts	BAYT	Simcha Suite
Sun. Sept. 11				
8:45 AM	R' Jonathan Ziring	Responsa	BAYT	Hebrew
8:45 AM	R' Josh Gutenberg	Contemporary Halachah	BAYT	On summer hiatus
9:15 AM	R' Shalom Krell	Book of Shemuel	Associated North	Hebrew
9:30 AM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Treating Terrorists	Limmud FSU	<i>limmudfsucanada.org</i>
Our Supporting Member Program: Biblical Criticism in Jewish Schools? Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner, Rabbi Dr. B. Barry Levy 7:00 PM at Yeshivat Or Chaim, 159 Almore Ave (begins with minchah) Free for the families of those who have given \$36 this year; \$36 for others				
Mon. Sept. 12				
8:00 PM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Medical Halachah: Diabetes on Shabbat	Shaarei Shomayim	Open to laypeople
8:30 PM	R' Jonathan Ziring	Tefillah, Emunah, Rosh HaShanah Week 1: Tefillah: What's the Point?	Shomrai Shabbos	For men only
Tue. Sept. 13				
1:30 PM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	The Poetry of Rosh HaShanah, Week 1	Shaarei Shomayim	
Wed. Sept. 14				
10:00 AM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Prophets of Sin & Redemption Week 2: Yoel	Beth Emeth	There is a fee info@torontotorah.com
2:30 PM	R' Jonathan Ziring	Narratives of Exodus	Location: Contact carolleser@rogers.com	For women
Thu. Sept. 15				
1:30 PM	R' Mordechai Torczyner	Shoftim: Devorah's War	49 Michael Ct.	For women
Fri. Sept. 16				
10:30 AM	R' Jonathan Ziring	Bava Metzia, Perek 4 Issues in Onaah	Yeshivat Or Chaim	Advanced