

On Reading Rambam in Brooklyn and in Haifa

By: MENACHEM KELLNER

In his article “Israel’s Inheritance: *Olam Haba*,” Rabbi Asher Ben-zion Buchman presents an interpretation of Rambam’s views on *olam ha-ba* at variance with the understanding of Rambam widely accepted in the world of Maimonidean scholarship. According to this latter view the *only* key for achieving a share in the World to Come is a minimal level intellectual perfection of a special (Aristotelian) type. Such perfection depends upon antecedently achieving a high level of moral perfection, without which (for reasons Plato and Aristotle made clear) one cannot hope to achieve the understanding of God and the universe which is our perfection and felicity as human beings and which, as noted, is the only key for opening the door to *olam ha-ba*. This state of affairs gives Jews a dramatic advantage over Gentiles since, for Rambam, the Torah is the best (but not only) guide to achieving both moral perfection and intellectual perfection. This advantage is relative, and has everything to do with what Jews do and learn, and nothing to do with any innate characteristic they may be thought to have by non-Maimonidean interpreters of Torah.¹

¹ For studies of what Rambam actually wrote about the question of human perfection, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), esp. pp. 1-5 and “Is Maimonides’ Ideal Person

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Rabbi Buchman is not the first person to (mis)read Rambam as he does. There is a long history of Jews looking at what Rambam wrote and responding: “This is Greek to me! It is not possible that Rambam actually believed these things.” Taking the Orthodoxy of their day as determining what Rambam must have meant, these interpreters have forced Rambam’s text to mean whatever they think Judaism (as they claim to understand it) teaches. There are two widely accepted ways of viewing Rambam. One may be called vertical, the other horizontal. In the first view, Rambam is situated in a chain of Jewish tradition stretching back to Moses, and is seen primarily as a halakhic decisor. It is primarily in this tradition that Rambam’s views are studied and understood. In the second view, Rambam is located in the context of contemporary or near-contemporary Muslim philosophy, and it is in relation to thinkers like al-Farabi that his views are studied and understood. The correct interpretation, in my opinion, is that Rambam must be understood as standing at the intersection of both arrows, the vertical one stretching back to Moses and the horizontal one encompassing his philosophical contemporaries and near contemporaries. Rambam was convinced that one could and must live simultaneously in both these worlds. It is that understanding of Rambam which Rabbi Buchman seeks to overturn in his article.

Rabbi Buchman chose to use one of my books² as a platform for rejecting this (correct) interpretation of Rambam: I guess it is easier to argue with Kellner than with Rambam. His criticisms of some of my scholarship reminded me of several experiences I have had. Some years ago, I had the privilege of participating in a Jewish-Christian-Shi’ite religious “conversation” outside of Lucerne, Switzerland. Many of the Muslim participants in the event were leading Ayatollahs from Iran. They proved themselves to be far more cultured, urbane, and sophisticated than one would expect from the image of Iranian ayatollahs to which we are usually exposed. I found it both striking and amusing that they saw themselves, not as

Austerly Rationalist” in Kellner, *Science in the Bet Midrash: Studies in Maimonides* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), pp. 63-80.

² *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006).

the intellectual *descendants* of medieval rationalist Muslim theologians known as Muatazilites (known to readers of *Hakirah* from *Guide of the Perplexed* III.17), but as still engaged in their debates, as if 800 years had not passed. They were still angry with the Asherites (doctrinaire orthodox opponents of the Muatazilites) for misrepresenting Islam. Unlike Islam, Judaism has developed a linear tradition of interpretation (such as *geonim*, *rishonim*, *aharonim*) and a sense of its own history. Muslims are still in the original period. Some Haredi thinkers treat Judaism in much the same fashion as the Muslim theologians whom I met (while also insisting on *yeridat ha-dorot*³). Opposed to this is the historical approach which characterizes the academic study of Judaism and about which Modern Orthodoxy seems to me to be somewhat schizophrenic. Instead of asking: what could Rambam have known in his own day, what did he actually read, by whom did he claim to be influenced,⁴ the approach I am criticizing here assumes that Rambam has to fit well into the interpreter's version of Judaism, and is forced to do so.

A second experience concerns one of the most embarrassing things that ever happened to me: I found what I thought was a mistake in the late Rav Kafih's wonderful Arabic-Hebrew edition of Rambam's Commentary on the Mishnah. I rushed to write to him about it and after a few days received a very polite letter suggesting that I look at the footnotes of the page in question. I will note below how this is relevant to Rabbi Buchman's criticisms of my work.

The third experience occurred in connection with my book, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (SUNY Press, 1991). But first, a word of explanation on how I came to write the book.

³ I wrote a book on the subject which Rabbi Buchman would most likely hate: *Maimonides on 'The Decline of the Generations' and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

⁴ In this connection see: Steven Harvey, "Did Maimonides' Letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon Determine Which Philosophers Would Be Studied by Later Jewish Thinkers?" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 83 (1992): 51-70 and Shlomo Pines' introduction to his translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. lvii-cxxxiv.

In one of my first Hebrew articles⁵ I argued that for Rambam the difference between Jew and Gentile would disappear by the time the messianic era reached fruition and that, in effect, his Thirteen Principles are a messianic definition of who is a Jew.⁶ I gave a copy of the article to a gentleman in my shul in Haifa who told me that he could not possibly accept the thesis for which I argued in my article. I told him I would write an article in his honor, explaining why Rambam could not avoid the conclusion I attributed to him. Well, I sat down to write the article, and it became the book I just mentioned, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*. When the book appeared, I gave a copy to my friend from shul who duly read it, and then, with great intellectual honesty told me that he found my arguments convincing and that in consequence his admiration for Rambam had been seriously diminished. Anyway, to get to the point, my older sister (who then lived in Kew Gardens) arranged for the book to be read by a reading group in her shul, one of whose members wanted to talk to me about it. He said he could not accept the views I attributed to Rambam. I asked how he could not, seeing that in the first half of the book I had laid the philosophical groundwork (Rambam's adoption of the theory of the acquired intellect, and his adoption of Aristotle's definition of human beings as rational animals) from which flowed all of the universalist Jewish positions in the second half of the book. My sister's friend replied: "Oh, I skipped all that philosophical stuff and went straight to the Jewish issues." As I will note below, Rabbi Buchman's rejection of my readings of Rambam is a consequence of "skipping all the philosophical stuff."

Rabbi Buchman seems to be fighting battles originally fought 800 years ago, battles that led to the burning of Rambam's books in 1232. If Rambam were really as uncomplicatedly '*farfrumt*' as Rabbi

⁵ "A Suggestion Concerning Maimonides' Thirteen Principles and the Status of Gentiles in the Messianic Era," *Tura: Oranim Studies in Jewish Thought* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuḥad, 1988): 249-260 (Hebrew).

⁶ For a recent restatement of that thesis, in English, and in much greater depth, see my discussion with Rav Chaim Rappoport: "Maimonides' *True Religion* – for Jews, or All Humanity?" *Me'orot* [= *Edah Journal*] 7.1 [2008] [<http://www.yctorah.org/content/view/436/10/>].

Buchman would like him to be, why were his books burned? Why did the ba'alei ha-Tosafot seek to place the *Guide of the Perplexed* and *Sefer Madda* on the index of forbidden books? Why did his 15th century commentator Shem Tov open his commentary to *Guide of the Perplexed* III:51 as follows:

Shem Tov said: Many rabbinic scholars said that Maimonides did not write this chapter and if he did write it, it ought to be hidden away or, most appropriately, burned. For how could he say that those who know physics are on a higher level than those who engage in religion, and even more that they are with the ruler in the inner chamber, for on this basis the scholars who are engaged with physics and metaphysics have achieved a higher level than those engaged with Torah!?

Why did the Rivash write that Rambam wrote things “that it is forbidden to hear” (responsum 45)? Why did R. Hasdai Crescas (d. 1412) devote a whole book (*Or ha-Shem*) to showing how Rambam had been (in his words) seduced by the beauty of Greece at the expense of remaining faithful to true Judaism? The examples are endless, but apparently of little interest to Rabbi Buchman.

Now to some details. Rabbi Buchman maintains that, according to Rambam, in the words of M. Sanhedrin X.1, all Jews have a share in the World to Come and that upon conversion a proselyte “immediately gains *olam haba*.” He is clearly upset by the fact that according to Kellner Rambam could not possibly hold these positions since Rambam “required absolute certainty, perhaps rising to the level of clear knowledge, rather than mere faith, to acquire *olam haba*.” In order to “refute” my interpretations he writes, among other things, that Kellner

“quotes’ Rambam as writing (after listing the 13 *ikkarim*), ‘anyone who doubts any one of these basics has no part in the

⁷ I actually think that Rambam makes a much less radical claim in the parable of the palace; see *Maimonides on Human Perfection*, pp. 13-40. The point for our purposes here is that Shem Tov and the rabbinic scholars (*rabani'im* in the original) to whom he refers may not have liked the views they found in Rambam, but did not deny that they found them there.

World to Come.’ This ‘quote’ is based on an understanding of *Perush haMishnah* that is obviously inaccurate.”

Rabbi Buchman then goes on to cite a variety of Hebrew translations of Rambam’s text, as if that proves the meaning of the original Arabic. Attention to footnotes, which Rav Kafih, z”l, gently suggested to me was important, would have led Rabbi Buchman to Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford, 1986) and from there to the original Arabic text of the ‘Thirteen Principles.’ He could then have consulted with an Arabist who would have told him that the Arabic *واحدٌ اذ اختلف* means precisely ‘one who doubts.’ A competent Hebraist would also have told him that the terms *מפיקפק* and *מערער* do not mean “actively arguing against...” in contemporary Hebrew, but rather “casting doubt upon.”⁸

In a footnote to this passage Rabbi Buchman claims that

Dr. Kellner also misrepresents Rambam’s position on the issue of error and on what qualities are necessary to earn *olam haba*. On p. 138 of his book, he does note that ‘in not a few places Maimonides speaks as if he accepted a traditionalist account of reward and punishment.’ But he chooses not to try to resolve the sources he uses with the many sources that show that his interpretations are impossible. He instead explains that Rambam was merely conning us. He justifies this approach with yet another misreading of the *Moreh Nevukhim*, perhaps his most offensive. (When Rambam speaks of ‘necessary’ beliefs he certainly does not mean that they are not true as Dr. Kellner claims.)

That parenthetical sentence really made me scratch my head in amazement. But before that: what to do? Rambam himself tells us in the introduction of the *Guide of the Perplexed* that he “cons” his

⁸ The Arabic is found in Rav Sheilat’s edition of *Hakdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah* (Ma’aleh Adumim: Ma’aliyot, 1992), p. 375. Rabbi Buchman ignores Rav Sheilat’s Hebrew translation (p. 146): *ואם יתקלקל לאדם*.

audience, to adopt Rabbi Buchman's inappropriate expression.⁹ As to necessary beliefs, I invite the readers of *Hakirah* to study *Guide of the Perplexed* III.28 (in which the issue is introduced), and then *Guide of the Perplexed* III.32 and then decide who offensively misrepresents Rambam: Kellner or Rabbi Buchman. Rambam is not much given to humor, but there is a sort of joke in *Guide of the Perplexed* I:36, where Rambam implies that God gets angry at anyone who thinks that He actually gets angry. Rabbi Buchman's claim that for Rambam "necessary" beliefs are true would probably earn God's ire—I have no doubt that it would earn Rambam's.

Rabbi Buchman continues the footnote under discussion by sending the reader to my friend David Berger's highly critical but respectful review of *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*¹⁰ He mentions my reply to David in the second edition of the book¹¹ without further comment. I urge readers of this note to read the review and my reply; here I would like to make one comment about the debate. If David's interpretation of Rambam and of the history of Jewish thought is correct, and my interpretation of them is incorrect, then his campaign against Habad is absolutely on the mark,¹² since there can be no doubt that attributing divinity to the Rebbe is out-and-out heresy according to Rambam. If Rabbi Buchman is so convinced by David Berger, he had better stop all contact with Habadniks, stop eating Lubavitch *shehitah*, and take no advantage of Habad *shlichim* when he travels, otherwise he endangers his own share in the World to Come (although, from my perspective, misrepresenting Rambam is a bigger sin).

I was amused by another issue raised by Rabbi Buchman since he (silently) adopts a *hiddush* of mine and misapplies it to the Rambam. In arguing (against Rambam) that Hāzal did not intend M. Sanhedrin as a statement of dogma I note that the mishnah speaks

⁹ A friend suggested that there is room to judge Rabbi Buchman לכף זכות: perhaps all he is trying to do is to fulfill Rambam's wishes by keeping his true views hidden from the masses.

¹⁰ *Tradition* 33 (1999), pp. 81-89.

¹¹ This second edition appeared in 2006; the "afterword" is on pp. 127-147.

¹² David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001).

of actions, not beliefs. The Mishnah is interested in socially disruptive behavior, and not in what people think. That is why it writes of האומר¹³ and why the Mishnah speaks primarily of forbidden behavior and nowhere speaks of forbidden thought.¹⁴ This admittedly new interpretation of M. Sanhedrein X.1 is a key element of my argument about the nature of אמונה in classical Judaism and is developed and defended in chapter two of *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* and is central to my disagreement with David Berger. Rabbi Buchman “borrows” this reading of mine and misapplies it to Rambam.

Rambam does not, as Rabbi Buchman thinks, use the expression “he who says” in his statement of the principles in his commentary on the Mishnah. Rabbi Buchman may have not wanted to bother to hunt up my *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, but he could have found an accurate English translation of the principles in an appendix to *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* and saved himself this mistake. It is true that Rambam says האומר in his restatement of the principles in the *Mishneh Torah*, but given “all that philosophical stuff” which forms the basis for his positions (and which Rabbi Buchman resolutely ignores, even though it is explicated at length in *Dogma* and cited in *Must a Jew*), I do not attach much importance to this—Rambam was simply using the language of the Mishnah. Moreover, as Rambam himself tells us in an important responsum (# 264 in Blau’s edition), his interest in the *Mishneh Torah* discussion is on the social consequences of heresy; in that context, his use of the term האומר makes perfect sense.¹⁵

I have largely restricted myself here in this note to a discussion of the places where Rabbi Buchman explicitly targets my interpretations of Rambam. A full-fledged discussion of his article would involve much more time and effort than I am willing to invest.¹⁶ I

¹³ As opposed to locutions such as “*hoshev*,” “*meharber*,” “*omer el libbo*,” etc.

¹⁴ See the discussion in *Must a Jew...*, pp. 33-38.

¹⁵ For details, see Menachem Kellner, “Must We Have Heretics?” *Conversations* 1 (2008): 6-10.

¹⁶ But one of Rabbi Buchman’s strangest claims cries out for even a brief reply. He is the author of a work called *Rambam and Redemption*. As such, I find it amazing that he could believe, as he apparently does, that according to Rambam there is a judgment day which precedes *olam ha-ba*. It is beyond doubt (and this is affirmed by the many medieval authorities

invite the interested reader to compare what I have written about Rambam to Rabbi Buchman's interpretations and judge between us. In addition to my books and articles cited above, I would also like to direct the reader's attention to *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), esp. ch. 7.

Jews have responded in many ways to the challenge implicit in Rambam's writings. At first, an attempt was made to throw him out of the dormitory. When that failed, the next step was basically to ignore what he said.¹⁷ Given the plethora of editions and translations of his works in the modern world, not to mention the literally thousands of articles and books written about him, that has grown ever more difficult. One option is to decide that since he is obviously still in the dormitory, he must agree with what all the other denizens of that dormitory think—that is Asher Benzion Buchman's approach, an approach that involves forcing Rambam's square peg into round holes. Another approach, truer to Rambam, is to acknowledge that the dormitory has more rooms than is often thought. ❧

who were upset by Rambam) that according to Rambam *olam ha-ba* is the name given to the status achieved by those (apparently few) individuals whose souls survive the death of their bodies. There is no *yom ha-din* on which all human beings are judged at one and the same time.

¹⁷ It is striking that the “yeshiva world” has yet to produce a single translation of or commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*. There is not even a “yeshivish” edition of Samuel ibn Tibbon's medieval translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed*.