

Reading Rambam in Haifa and Studying Rambam in Brooklyn

By: ASHER BENZION BUCHMAN

I wish to thank Dr. Kellner for taking the time to share his interesting anecdotes with the *Hakirah* audience and for explaining to us how Rambam should be read. With regard to what is actually relevant to my essay, however, Dr. Kellner has little to say. In his claim that Rambam, in describing a heretic in *Perush HaMishnah*, says it refers to one who “doubts” rather than “casts doubt”¹ or “argues,” Dr. Kellner seems to miss the point that I make—that the choice between the possible translations must be decided by studying other statements of Rambam. The sometimes dramatic differences in meaning that exist in different translations of the *Perush HaMishnah* and especially the *Moreh Nevuchim* make it necessary for one studying these texts to use his judgment in deciding between them. In our case we must take into account: 1) That one of the thirteen principles is an act, actually worshipping *avodah zara*, rather than thought or speech, demonstrates that it is not beliefs that we are speaking of—but means of commitment to a position that are done outwardly,² and 2) Rambam’s lengthy explanation of the concept of לא תתורר demonstrates that doubt with regard to the thirteen *ikkarim* does not constitute heresy. And whereas Dr. Kellner claims that he learned his lesson from Rav Kappach, that attention must be

¹ “Casts doubt” that Dr. Kellner accepts as valid generally means “voices doubt,” which supports my position, and yet Dr. Kellner seems oblivious to this.

² Thus when I write that Rambam in *Perush HaMishnah* refers to stating denial, I am explaining his intent, and I proceed to prove that when he says מפקפק he means stating his denial.

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given to footnotes, it seems he missed note 21³ where I quote the Arabic that he implies is unknown to me. I explain there that “no other reading” than mine is possible, based on the arguments that I present later.

His lack of attention to the above point is minor, when compared to the fact that in his opening paragraph Dr. Kellner states, with regard to the advantage that a Jew has in gaining *olam haba*, “This advantage is relative, and has everything to do with what Jews do and learn, and nothing to do with any innate characteristic which they may be thought to have by non-Maimonidean interpreters of Torah.” He clearly thinks that I disagree with this statement, thus demonstrating that he actually did not read the essay but merely skimmed it and assumed he knew what my position was, fitting it into one of his preconceived categories. To restate my position: My essay explains that while it is not something innate in being Jewish that earns *olam haba*, nevertheless, the minimal requirement is reached by the simple commitment of faith to the principles of our religion. This constitutes sufficient knowledge. If this commitment is reflected in the person’s exterior speech and actions, his inner turmoil, whatever it might be, will not cause him to lose his share. As is often noted, there are no atheists in a foxhole. People are not certain about their own beliefs and may change their mind internally at any instant, even about issues of great moment. It is the commitment to an idea that a person states to the world that defines him and that is relevant to *olam haba*.

As for Dr. Kellner’s accusation that I expropriated the “*biddush*” of his interpretation of האומר in the Mishnah, he must forgive me, for in Brooklyn we do not believe that translating a Mishnah to mean what it is obviously saying is a “*biddush*.”⁴ But what should be

³ And checking the reference to the Rabinowitz translation in note 20 would find the same translation as Sheilat’s that I am faulted for overlooking.

⁴ The mere fact that he thinks I took this from him demonstrates how far Brooklyn is from Haifa. In Brooklyn one does not sit down to write an article until he has developed all the significant points that will be presented in his article. He writes to present what he has previously learned. Only when one writes for the sake of publishing and with an agenda does he look to accumulate data for his presentation in the midst of his writ-

of interest to the *Hakirah* readers is that, while realizing that the Mishnah refers to speech and that Rambam quotes the Mishnah, Dr. Kellner is certain that Rambam cannot take it to refer to speech. Why is this so? Because Dr. Kellner has only three choices about how to view Rambam and the mesorah. In his opinion Rambam transmitted two independent mesorahs to Israel, one Jewish and one Greek. He leaves out a fourth way of looking at Rambam and the mesorah, which is what Rambam himself says on the matter. Rambam is the bearer of the mesorah from Sinai, but since much had been lost by his time, he set out to reconstruct what was missing. He did this in both the areas of halacha and hashkafa.⁵ The reason Rambam uses the language of the Mishnah is because he is expressing the conceptualizations of the Mishnah.⁶

The crux of most academic reasoning on this subject is that *Chazal* were not the sophisticated thinkers the Greeks were and thus any philosophical idea that Rambam expresses is due to Greek influence. Dr. Kellner refuses to accept Rambam's own claim that he is explicating the words of *Chazal*. Rambam read not only everything available of the thought of the Greek philosophers but everything available in the writings of the idol-worshippers. He was no more influenced by the Greeks than he was by the idolaters—he accepted what he felt was proven and it helped him understand the deep thoughts of *Chazal* expressed in their *aggodos*. My essay in this volume is an example of how Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* explains the deeper meaning of an *Aggadic* Mishnah. As I quote there, Rambam says that those who take Midrashim literally are fools, while those who scoff at them are much worse. Those who refuse to ac-

ing. My article was formulated long before I heard of Dr. Kellner's book, and only a *Hakirah* author's claim that Rambam's position was as stated in the book, led me to consult his work. I read every word of his book carefully and found no Rambam that I was not aware of nor any evidence to back his contentions.

⁵ Rambam says this quite clearly in the *Moreh* and elsewhere and I discuss this at length in *Hakirah* 8 "Tradition! Tradition?"

⁶ See *Hakirah* 9 "Mishneh Torah Science and Art," and *Hakirah* 7 "A Hagiographer's Review."

cept that *Chazal* spoke at a deeper level are in this second category.⁷ The *Moreh Nevuchim* was written for the third group, who realize that Chazal spoke words of great depth and are willing to apply themselves to understanding them.⁸ Rambam explains that the central feature of the work is to explain the metaphors of Tanach. The key to understanding the Torah and the *Moreh Nevuchim* is to understand the philosophical truths couched in simple language.⁹

We all agree that Rambam writes many times that all of Israel will acquire *olam haba*, but some¹⁰ academics claim that Rambam cannot be trusted to write what he believes in Mishneh Torah. Thus, according to Dr. Kellner, the sufficient and necessary qualification for *olam haba* is (Aristotelian) knowledge of the first five of Rambam's principles. What about the other eight principles that Rambam claims are necessary? According to Dr. Kellner, it seems that these are just rhetoric. What about the other categories of sinners who lose their share, listed by Rambam in *Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:7? These are apparently just rhetoric too. What about Rambam's definition of the righteous gentile in *Hilchos Melachim* 8:11, who

⁷ The reason I referred to Dr. Berger's criticism was to point out that not all academics share Dr. Kellner's viewpoint on this matter and not all should be lumped together in one category. I then referred to Dr. Kellner's response as a matter of courtesy. With regard to what attitude we should have to Lubavitchers, only those Lubavitchers who are *magshimim* are relevant to this issue and they are a very small minority.

⁸ See introduction to *Moreh*.

⁹ See Introduction to *Chelek* cited above and brought completely in my essay *Completing Creation*.

¹⁰ Dr. Kellner claims he is left "scratching his head in amazement" by the "assertion" that necessary beliefs are not untrue beliefs. Yet this is also stated by the late Marvin Fox in a book that was reviewed (rather favorably) by Dr. Kellner. See Marvin M. Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990) p. 320 and M. Kellner, "Reading Rambam: Approaches to the Interpretation of Maimonides" *Jewish History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 73-93. (My thanks to Eliyahu Krakowski for this reference.) Shem Tov is cited by some as the originator of the opinion that necessary beliefs are untrue because he uses the word שקר, but he goes on to clarify "וההכחם יבין כי זה נאמר בלשון דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם".

gains *olam haba* by accepting and keeping the *mitzvos* he is commanded? Apparently, according to Dr. Kellner, that is rhetoric too.

The claim that what Rambam writes in *Mishneh Torah* can be ignored at times, is based on two passages in *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:28.¹¹

“Scripture further demands **belief in certain truths**, the belief in which is indispensable in regulating our social relations: **such is the belief that God is angry with those who disobey Him**, for it leads us to the fear and dread of disobedience [to the will of G-d].in some cases the law contains a truth which is itself the only object of that law, as e.g., the truth of the Unity, Eternity, and Incorporeality of G-d; in other cases, that truth is only the means of securing the removal of injustice, or the acquisition of good morals; such is **the belief that G-d is angry with those who oppress their fellow-men, as it is said, "Mine anger will be kindled, and I will slay," etc. (Exod. xxii. 23); or the belief that G-d hears the crying of the oppressed and vexed, to deliver them out of the hands of the oppressor and tyrant, as it is written, "And it shall come to pass, when he will cry unto me, that I will hear, for I am gracious" (Exod. xxii. 25).**”

In order to interpret this as Dr. Kellner wishes, we must say that Rambam believes that the Torah (*chas v'shalom*) is also lying when it says G-d listens to the crying of the oppressed or gets angry with sinners. Of course the whole point of the *Moreh* is that G-d does not get angry and we cannot translate these words literally; however, when the Torah says such a thing it refers to some phenomenon within Creation that demonstrates anger and G-d's *hashgacha*.¹² Were we to interpret this passage as Dr. Kellner says, we would then conclude that Rambam did not believe in *Schar V'Onesh* and that G-d does not listen to prayers and deliver the oppressed

¹¹ I think I can guess why Dr. Kellner quotes *Moreh* 3:32, but it is certainly irrelevant.

¹² People have a tendency to deal lightly with how Rambam explains the meanings of Biblical anthropomorphisms in the first part of the *Moreh*—they suffice with the understanding that the terms are not literal but do not dwell on why the terminology was used and the profound meanings that must be drawn from it.

from their oppressors. One would have to assume that Rambam does not believe in *hashgacha*.¹³ This interpretation would render much of what Rambam explains in the *Moreh* as meaningless and unnecessary. If one studies this passage, considers all the translations, and understands how Rambam views *hashgacha*,¹⁴ he will understand that of course these things are “truths,”¹⁵ and man must know it is true so that he will have the proper fear instilled within himself, for only if man understands G-d’s ways will man purge himself of evil, otherwise evil will destroy him.¹⁶

Once we do not interpret this passage as some academics would have us do, their ability to dismiss anything they wish in Mishneh Torah evaporates. (In fact, one might argue that, for the academy’s masses, their understanding of ‘necessary beliefs’ as false beliefs that are necessary for the masses is their own necessary belief—a false belief that is necessary for their agenda.)¹⁷ Their methodology of

¹³ *Hashgacha pratis* on the individual.

¹⁴ The introduction to my book *Encountering the Creator: Divine Providence and Prayer in the Works of Rambam* gives a brief description of Rambam’s views on *hashgacha* and *Tefillah*, and the entire book is dedicated to understanding Rambam’s views on *hashgacha* and *tefillah* and explicating *Sefer Breishis* and *Medrashei Chazal* based on this understanding.

¹⁵ Rambam differentiates between beliefs about G-d in which the knowledge itself improves the person, and beliefs in things such as *schar v’onesh* where the improvement comes based on the subsequent actions that these beliefs lead one to take. Since knowledge of *schar v’onesh* is knowledge of a creation of G-d and not about G-d Himself, the belief itself does not bring the ultimate improvement.

¹⁶ This is not the place for explaining this idea fully. Rambam’s words must be studied and large parts understood, before one understands how this comes about. Reading “Is Reward And Punishment A True or A Necessary Belief? Musings on MN 3:28” <<http://yediah.blogspot.com/2010/09/is-reward-and-punishment-true-or.html>> will give the interested reader a start on this issue.

¹⁷ Rambam tells us that he does conceal within *Moreh Nevuchim*, as Chazal insisted that we not teach *Maaseh Merkava* except to those who are capable of understanding it. This is irrelevant to what is explained in Mishneh Torah. Dr. Kellner seems actually to claim that the *ikkar* of *schar v’onesh* is not true, thus overturning any understanding on why the *ikkarim* should be relevant to *olam haba*.

reading *Moreh Nevuchim* requires that *Mishneh Torah* be ignored whenever it contradicts what they perceive the Moreh to be saying.

There are some misreadings of Rambam in *Must A Jew Believe* but little of what qualifies as “*hiddush*.” Yet one thing is worth discussing here since it is a major issue in Dr. Kellner’s work and aptly demonstrates how he builds castles on sand. As I quoted in my essay, Rambam calls for the execution of those who are מגשימים even if this is caused by error, and yet of the *Karaim* he expresses tolerance.

אבל בני אותן הטועים ובני בניהם, שהדיחו אותם אבותם ונולדו במינות, וגידלו אותן עליו--הרי הן כתינוק שנשבה לבין הגויים וגידלוהו הגויים על דתם, שהוא אנוס; ואף על פי ששמע אחר כך שהיה יהודי, וראה היהודיים ודתם--הרי הוא כאנוס, שהרי גידלוהו על טעותם. כך אלו האוחזים בדרכי אבותיהם שתעו. לפיכך ראוי להחזירן בתשובה, ולמשוך אותם בדרכי שלום, עד שיחזרו לאיתן התורה; ולא ימהר אדם להורגן. (ממרים ג:ג)

Thus, Dr. Kellner is *mechadesb* that there is a difference between denial of the first five principles and of the last eight, and he claims this strengthens his position. In fact there is no contradiction at all. The only reason Dr. Kellner could make this argument is that he left out the last four words in *Hilchos Mamrim* **ולא ימהר אדם להורגן**. With these words in place, there is no evidence that Rambam distinguishes among various heretics. What Rambam says in the *Moreh* about those who have been misled is clarified in *Hilchos Mamrim*. When the Jewish Kingdom and Sanhedrin will be reestablished, the Torah leaders will accost those who are members of sects that reject the 13 *ikkarim*, and will try to convince them of the error of their ways—as Rambam says, **ולא ימהר אדם להורגן**. But should they insist on sticking to their beliefs and wish to die for what they consider קדוש השם, they will be accommodated.¹⁸ Why did Dr. Kellner leave out these last four important words?¹⁹ This is merely the way of some academics not to be bothered by phrases that do not “fit in.” They don’t accept that every word Rambam writes is chosen with

¹⁸ Will those who argue for rejecting the *ikkarim* be מוסר נפש? I doubt it. I don’t believe the “orthodoxy” they hope to form will have that type of devotion to the Torah.

¹⁹ It exists in Kappach’s version and Frankel’s and most manuscripts and was the text before the early *acharonim*.

the greatest of care, and it is because of this that they don't understand him.

I originally had no intention of mentioning Dr. Kellner's work.²⁰ He writes for other academics, people who work with the same premises—who share a common theology, who “read” Rambam and who, when they have a question, are faced with a contradiction, produce a superficial answer that does not require Rambam to be consistent and certainly not “frum.” But *Must A Jew Believe* has made its way into our community,²¹ and the pain of seeing Rambam misrepresented led me to attempt to point out that adopting Rambam's rationalism does not mean accepting unquestioningly the musings of a self-proclaimed intellectual elite—often academic scholars who are not orthodox.²² Rambam puts up a red light in the second chapter of the *Moreh* to bar those he wishes to advance no further. He describes a “learned man”²³ who had posed a question to him. “You appear to have studied the matter superficially, and nevertheless you imagine that you can understand a book²⁴ that has been the guide of past and present generations, when you for a moment withdraw from your lusts and appetites, and glance over its contents as if you were reading a historical work or some poetical composition. Collect your thoughts and examine the matter carefully, for it is not to be understood as you at first sight think, but as you will find after due deliberation.” Rambam cannot be read; he has to be studied, he has to be learned—every word weighed carefully.

²⁰ His book is mentioned in one paragraph and one footnote.

²¹ See note 4.

²² Rambam writes in the introduction to the *Moreh* that it is written for the observant Jew who accepts the principles of our faith—others cannot be expected to understand it. He writes in *Hil. Yesodei HaTorah* (4) that the preparatory study for *maaseh breshis* and *maaseh merkava* dealt with in the *Moreh* is the Talmudic discussions of Rava and Abaye. Only those expert in those discussions will appreciate the *Moreh*.

²³ This term is one of Rambam's jokes. They are more plentiful than Dr. Kellner intimates.

²⁴ Rambam is talking about the Torah but it applies to studying the Torah's teachings based on the *Moreh*.

Dr. Kellner is right when he says that misinterpreting Rambam endangers one's *olam haba*. In the introduction Rambam implores us, "I adjure any reader of my book, in the name of the Most High, not to add any explanation even to a single word, nor to explain to another any portion of it except in conformity to what has been explained by previous theological authorities, nor may he teach others anything of his deductions that are not in conformity."²⁵ The reader must, moreover, beware of raising objections to any of my statements, because it is very probable that he may understand my words to mean the exact opposite to what I intended to say. He will injure me, while I endeavored to benefit him. 'He will requite me evil for good.'" Rambam's rule is to interpret him conservatively when there is any doubt about his meaning. I have interpreted Maimonides in the *Moreh* to be consistent with another known famous *mechaber*, Rambam of *Mishneh Torah*.

As Dr. Kellner notes, there is a stream within traditionalist Judaism that from the very beginning opposed Rambam's rationalist understanding of the Torah, and it is today perhaps as strong as it ever has been. Many articles have been written in *Hakirah* in opposition to this stream,²⁶ but it is important to understand that rationalism does not lead to what one stream of Modern Orthodoxy is calling for—a Judaism defined as humanism plus meaningless acts of halachic compliance that can be manipulated whenever apparent need arises, coupled with lip-service allegiance to a few of the *ikkarim*. The schizophrenia that Dr. Kellner feels he encounters in Modern Orthodoxy is a split within the movement between those who turn to Rambam as their guide and those who wish to use him as a stepping stone to something better of their own making. Those within the movement must decide where they stand.

²⁵ While most of the translation is from Friedlander's edition, I modified the last sentence according to Kappach's translation—the reader should research the various editions to ascertain what he thinks is the exact meaning. The serious reader should not believe anything I say or that Dr. Kellner says, but use our essays as a starting point to investigate these issues for themselves.

²⁶ In *Hakirah* 2 "U'Madua Lo Yeresem" we explained how magic and astrology were viewed as sciences, and thus Rambam's views were reasonably rejected. Ramban called the view *chassidus*.

Rambam was indeed *farfrumt*.²⁷ Rav Meir Simchah of Dvinsk was a student of both Maimonides of *Moreh Nevuchim* and Rambam of *Mishneh Torah*. He would answer questions in *Mishneh Torah* based on insights from the *Moreh* and it was his reading during the month of Ellul.²⁸ He stated *כי דברי רבינו בכל ספריו...רוח אחת להם*, “one spirit informed all the works of our teacher.” No person as “*frum*” as Rambam has lived since the *siyyum hashas*.²⁹ In the midst of the condemnation of Rambam’s works, his opponent in thought, Ramban,³⁰ said it best:

הלא שאלתם עוברי דרך..בתהלת הרב הגדול במעלת חסידותו בתוקף
אמונתו בעוצם ענותנותו בגדלות יחוסי בנדבת כיסו במעשיו הנפלאים במליו
הנוראים בהיותו ביראת אלקיו דבק וחושק ובתלמודו נושק.



²⁷ While *Shem Tov* may quote those who had problems with *Moreh* 3:51, it is quoted often in my essay as support to my “farfrumt” position, and in my Flatbush Shabbos morning pre-shacharis shiur on *Sefer HaMada* we read from it (as well as from many other sections) often and discuss it in depth to the delight and inspiration of the entire group. Those whom Dr. Kellner has exposed to this material to their dismay must read in a different way.

²⁸ See *Imrei Rebbe Shefatiah* p. 18.

²⁹ I will always remember my discussion twenty-five years ago with one of the last of the surviving *Alter Mirrer*. He spoke of how he would read *Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah* and understood that Rambam was the genius philosopher, and he also read a *teshuva* by Rambam of how he had accepted upon himself the *chumra* of *tevilas Ezra*, which he never missed except in case of illness. Rav Finkelstein *sblita* was in awe of how these different qualities coexisted.

³⁰ See *Hakirah* 2, “*U’ madua Lo Yeresem*.”