

U-Madua Lo Yeresem

By: ASHER BENZION BUCHMAN

In the past year a Rabbinic ban was placed on works of Jewish scholarship that attempt to reconcile Torah with modern scientific discovery. The ban has been accompanied by attacks on a rationalistic approach to Jewish hashkafa while demanding allegiance to a mystical approach. This mystical approach is most clearly articulated in the works of Ramban, while the approach that is to be rejected is that of Rambam. The thesis of this article is that Ramban was no less a rationalist than Rambam and that, were he alive today, he would be at the forefront of opposition to this ban.

עבדי משה, בכל ביתי נאמן הוא ... ומדוע לא יראתם לדבר
בעבדי במשה (במדבר יב:ז-ח)

We are told of Moshe, 'he is firmly established in all my house,' that is his knowledge of all that makes up My universe is correct and firmly established. (*Moreh Nevuchim* 1:54)

ממשה עד משה לא קם כמשה (קבר הרמב"ם)

Do You Believe In Magic?

The Fifth fundamental [of faith] is that it is Him, The One On High alone whom it is proper to serve and elevate and publicize His greatness. And we do not do this to any that is below Him in existence from the angels and stars or spheres or elements or anything composed from them, for all of them act only by means of their nature and have no power and no choice but to do the will of Him On High, and they may not be made intermediaries to approach Him, but only directly to Him should all thoughts turn and all else should be abandoned. This is the prohibition of

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idol worship, and most of the laws of the Torah come to protect against it. (Rambam's Commentary to Mishnah, Introduction to 10th chapter of Sanhedrin)

Rambam's very definition of *avoda zara* differs from that of Ramban, who describes it as a prohibition against "attributing אלקות, G-dliness, to anything but G-d" (*Hagabos to Sefer Hamitzvos - Lo Saaseh 5*). According to Rambam, it is much more. Just as the purpose of *avodas Hashem* is to bring man to a certainty of G-d's existence and thus draw him close to His Creator, the prohibition of *avoda zara* is intended to stop man from creating obstacles to that connection. Rambam explains, as well, that no intermediary, no supernatural being or process, has any power to grant one's requests. Belief in witchcraft "is false, and it is that which idolaters used to fool the peoples of the world so that they would follow after them. It is not proper for Israel who are wise to be drawn after this nonsense and to imagine that there is any efficacy in it."

ודברים האלו כולן דברי שקר וכזב הן, והן שהטעו בהן עובדי עבודה זרה הקדמונים לגויי הארצות כדי שינהו אחריהן. ואין ראוי לישראל שהן חכמים מחכמים להמשך בהבלים אלו ולא להעלות על הלב שיש בהן תעלה שנ' כי לא נחש ביעקב ולא קסם בישראל. ונאמר כי הגוים האלה אשר אתה יורש אותם אל מעוננים ואל קוסמים ישמעו ואתה לא כן נתן לך ה' אלקיך. כל המאמין בדברים אלו וכיוצא בהן ומחשב בלבו שהן אמת ודברי חכמה אבל התורה אסרה אותן, אינו אלא מן הסכלים ומחסרי הדעת ובכלל הנשים והקטנים שאין דעתן שלימה. אבל בעלי החכמה ותמימי הדעת ידעו בראיות ברורות שכל אלו הדברים שאסרה התורה אינן דברי חכמה אלא תוהו והבל שנמשכו בהן חסירי הדעת ונטשו כל דרכי האמת בגללן. ומפני זה אמרה תורה כשהזירה על כל אלו ההבלים, תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך. (הלכות עבודה זרה יא:טז)

Belief in idolatry spread due the work of charlatans who were able to convince the gullible masses by the use of tricks that supernatural powers existed that could be harnessed for human advantage.

וכל הדברים הללו נעשו מחמת הצורך, והוא שבזמנים הקדמונים איחדו על ידן את אנשי המדינות ודמו בלב המוני העם ואמרו

להם שהצלחת ארצכם ומצבכם בצורות הללו, ושתתקבצו לבתיהם, ותכבדו אלו הזקנים היודעים סודותיהם, ונתקיים על כך השלטון, והאמינו שהוא דבר אמת .. ובאו קלי הדעות אחרי כן ומצאו אותן הספרים ואותן הדברים ודמו שהן אמת. (פיה"מ ע"ז ד:ו)

(See also *Hilchos Avoda Zara 1:2* - עמדו בבני האדם נביאי (השקר... והתחילו כוזבים אחרים).

However Rambam tells us that his evaluation of the efficacy of idol worship and witchcraft was not widely held.

הפילוסופים השלמים אינם מאמינים ב'טלאסם' אלא לועגים להם ולאותם החושבים שיש להם השפעה, וביאור זה יארך, אבל אמרתי זאת מפני שאני יודע שרוב בני אדם ואולי כולם נפתים אחריהם פתיות גדולות מאד ובדברים רבים ממיניהם, וחושבים שהם דברים אמתיים, ואין הדבר כן, ואפילו טובים וחסידיים מאנשי תורתנו חושבים שהם דברים נכונים אלא שהם אסורים מטעם התורה בלבד. (פיה"מ ע"ז ד:ו)

Ramban is among the majority of his age who disagree with Rambam's ridicule of the supernatural. He refers to Rambam's opinion and rejects it as follows.

ורבים יתחסדו בנחשים לומר שאין בהם אמת כלל כי מי יגיד לעורב ולעגור מה יהיה, ואנחנו לא נוכל להכחיש דברים יתפרסמו לעיני רואים. (רמב"ן על התורה, דברים יח:ט)

Ramban's major objection to Rambam's stance is the evidence of the science of his day. In an era when scientific understanding of physical phenomena was weak, observation seemed to confirm the power of the supernatural. Rambam's position is, in the opinion of Ramban, "pious" denial, an unwillingness to accept the powers of witchcraft and the benefit that could be gained by idolatrous worship linked with these practices, merely because the Torah prohibited it.

On this issue, Ramban is adamant. While, according to Rambam, the *chartumei mitzrayim* were charlatans, probably possessing some scientific knowledge that aided them in their tricks, Ramban considered them masters of the ancient wisdoms and he consulted

with the בעלי שדים when trying to analyze why their predecessors felt that they had seen אצבע אלקים when כינים was produced.

ושמעתי מהם שיקשה מאד להם מלאכה דקה ולאסוף דברים דקים, ומלאכה אינה נוחה לעשות, ומבורר זה להם, ולא אוכל להאריך.. שבעלי ההשבעות אומרים שהיא מלאכה כבדה אליהם ואינם מקבלים עליהם לעשותה אלא ברוב ההשבעות במצות מלאכה דשדאי. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קמו)

Many believe that the powers of witchcraft existed in Biblical times but disappeared with the decline of *avodah zara*. However, this is not Ramban's position. Ramban is convinced of this belief because he sees that in his own time these powers still exist. He concludes that the use of שדים is permitted, even though other types of occult practices are prohibited in the Torah because he knows it is common practice among Jews to use שדים.

ואני תמה מאד (לומר דשדים אסורים): כי שמעתי בבירור שמנהג (בתש' רשב"א א:תג הגירסא "מנהג חסידי אלמניו") אלמניו לעסוק בדברי השדים ומשביעים אותם, ומשלחים אותם ומשתמשים בהם בכמה ענינים. וסבור אני שיש לומר דמעשה שדים לחוד ומעשה כשפים לחוד. (תשובת רמב"ן, כתבי הרמב"ן חלק א דף שפא)

But Ramban is insistent in his stand, not only because the *Mikra* seems to support it and because he has scientific evidence to back it up, but also because belief in the supernatural is philosophic proof to בריאת העולם.

ונתברר עוד חדוש העולם על ידי משה בקריעת ים סוף והמן והבאר וענני הכבוד וזולתם ביציאת מצרים והנבואה במעמד הר סיני, שאלו הדברים מורים על החידוש. והיאך? כי לדברי המאמין בקדמות אם ירצה הקל לקצר כנף הזבוב או להאריך רגל הנמלה אינו יכול, וזה מאמרם והסכמתם ועל כרחם יאמרו כן (כן הוא במו"נ ב:יט - ולפי זה הדעת יהיה שינוי דבר מן הנמצאות מטבעו נמנע), ואם כן כל מי שיתחדש לו דבר כנגד התולדה, בין ע"י החרטומים ומכשפים בין ע"י נביא, מיד ידע ויאמין בחידוש. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קמו-קמז)

According to Ramban, the Egyptian sorcerers were an honest and educated group, much to be preferred over the philosophers of Greece, who were evil. The sorcerers were much closer to the truth for they had command over the science of the supernatural and thus understood that the world came into being through creation. Ramban, here, will not even allow himself to mention the name of Aristotle - שם רשעים ירקב -

ומכאן תראה אכזריות ראש הפלוסופים וקשיו ימחה שמו,
שהוא מכחיש כמה דברים שראו רבים וראינו אנחנו אמיתתם
ונתפרסמו בעולם. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קמז)

According to Rambam, it was the soothsayers who were the מכזבים, while Ramban held that it was Aristotle who was the liar, denying what everyone knew and what Ramban himself has witnessed personally. It seems that Ramban sees as Aristotle's motivation for his falsehood, the goal of divorcing the earth from any supernatural power and hence from the Creator. Aristotle can't admit to magic because that opens the door to belief in a Creator.

In ancient times, continues Ramban, none doubted the power of the supernatural. Moshe Rabbenu learned the 49 wisdoms and Shlomo Hamelech was expert in the magic of Egypt and the *nichush* of the East (Ramban's Introduction to Commentary on the Torah). Ramban considers magic the superior science, the "spiritual" wisdom.

ובאותם הזמנים הקדמונים, כגון ימים של מש"ר ע"ה, היו
נודעים לכל כי החכמות באותו הדור היו כולן רוחניות, כגון
עניני השדים והמכשפים ומיני הקטרות למלאכת השמים, לפי
שמחמת קרבתם לבריאת העולם ולמבול לא היה שום אדם
מכחיש בחדוש העולם ולא ממרה באלוק, אלא שהיו מבקשים
תועלת מצד עבודת השמש וירח והמזלות ועושין להם צורות
לקבל כח עליוני, כי אפילו בין הפלוסופים כתוב בס' אלטלסמ"ש
שמביאים בצורות רוח ודבור. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קמז)

Even the philosophers, claims Ramban, believe to some extent in the power of the supernatural. Indeed, Ibn Ezra rejects sorcery but believes in astrology as science - just as Isaac Newton did - and hence sees the *Urim Ve'Tumim* as a quasi-scientific device capable of divining truth. (See *Ibn Ezra, Pirush Ha.Aruch, Shemos*

28:6, Ramban *Al Hatorah Shemos 28:30*.) But not all philosophers of the time were so inclined. Rambam knew even then that astrology is a false science and *tzuros* do not capture רוח ודבור.

Aristotle, according to Ramban, was ignorant of the ancient “spiritual” sciences. He came from a nation lacking a *mesora* of the wisdom of Adam and Noach and only dealt with what was concrete.

וכאשר קמו היונים, והם עם חדש שלא נחלו חכמה, כאשר ביאר בעל ס' הכוזרי, קם האיש הידוע ולא האמין רק במורגש וחפש חכמות מורגשות והכחיש הרוחניות ואמר שענין השדים ומעשה הכשפים אפס, ואין בעולם פעולה רק לטבעים, ודבר ידוע ומפורסם שאינו כן, ומכל מקום באותו זמן של מש"ר ע"ה לא היה שום רשע ואפיקורס כופר באלו, רק הנבואה היתה בספק אצל האומות. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קמז)

As bad as the *apikoresim* of past generations had been, none was so evil as to deny the power of magic. Because Aristotle did so, he is considered to be particularly evil. Aristotle is truly not wise, for true wisdom is that of the spiritual sciences. The sciences of אוב operated on such a high plane that they had been largely lost by Ramban's days (*Drosbas Toras Hashem Temimah, pg 149*) but the sciences that had a more concrete element still held sway.

וגם שואלין האומות למנחשים, והם ההולכין אחר העופות, ונשאר זה גם בדורות האלו מפני שהוא ענין מורגש, ובעלי העיון הנקראים בעלי הפילספים יכחישו גם זה ואומרים כי הם תעתועים, וגם ר' אברהם בן עזרא כתב, ריקי מזה אומרים כי המנחשים אמת כו'. ואם נתחסד בזה לשקר נודה לדבריו, אכן זאת המדה מגרעת היא לנו, מפני שדבר ברור הוא שיש בהם אומרים קצת עתידות ... והנני מברר זה ואיני יודע אם אני עושה בטוב. כבר פירשו רבינו האי ז"ל ... ומהם השוכנים בארץ והם הנקראים רוחות, ואלו מתלבשים בגוף, נתפש כהתפש האויר שהוא נתפש בנודות, ושרי מזל טלה הם מורים העתידות על ידי העופות בקול ובכנף, ולא יגידו עתידה רחוקה. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קמט)

ורבינו שרירא כתב בתשובת שאלה ובלשון הזה, מסרו חכמים אחד לחבירו הכרת פנים וסדרי שרטוטין ... ואף חכמי הגוים הכירו בהם מעט מזער מן הטבעים הגסים כמנהגם (עי' בהערות

דרב שעוועל). וסדרי שרטוטין שאמר הגאון ז"ל ... הוא חכמת הכף ושרטוטין, שעד עכשיו משתמשין בהן ומתעסקין בהן בני אדם. וכל אלו הדברים וכיוצא בהם חכמות ישנות אמתיות הן ומקובלות ביד מקבלי התורה, וכשאבדנו אבדו חכמות עמנו, ונשאר זכרם בשבוש ביד מועטים, ובאו הפילוסופים והכחישום. וכבר היה איש יוני קיבל מחסידי אלמאני חכמה זו, והיה אומר בצורת הפנים דברים נפלאים לעיני הגוים, ושמו רבי שבתאי היוני. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קסא-קסב)

There certainly is validity in studying the conduct of birds to predict weather and ascertain other physical phenomena, and the study of a person's facial expressions as well as his body language will yield psychological insight to those who are properly trained. But these things are indeed מורגש and not matters of the occult and do not involve שדים or רוחות. The study of שרטוטין, if defined as palm reading, crosses the line into the occult and hence the real and the imagined wisdoms are all contained within the same category in the mind of Ramban. (Perhaps שרטוטין could be handwriting analysis and if so Rav Sherira Gaon refers only to real wisdoms that were perhaps highly developed in ancient times.) Rambam himself (see *Moreh Nevuchim* II:37) allows that a person with perfection of the imaginative faculty but not the intellectual faculty can rise to the level of a קוסם, which apparently involves the intuitive or perhaps ESP powers that some scientists now believe in. It is indeed difficult to draw a line between the end of science and the beginning of the occult.

The primary value of other wisdoms - the concrete sciences, says Ramban, in agreement with Rambam (see introduction to *Moreh Nevuchim*) - is to be a vehicle, a ladder to the understanding of חכמה אלקית. But we see that in this they are a dismal failure.

ודבר ברור הוא שרוב תועלת שאר החכמות אינה אלא להיות סולם לזו (מעשה בראשית) ולחכמה שקורין הם ידיעת הבורא, כי כשהם מבלין ימיהם בחכמת ההגיון כדי שלא יטעו בדרכי המופת, ויבואו אחרי כן לחכמת הלמודים (מתמטיקה), ומהם חכמת המנין וחכמת המדות, התועלת המגיעת מאלו שיאמר גובה החומה או עומק הבור, וכשיעתיקו מאלו לחכמת הגלגלים, ובה התועלת גדולה לדעת תנועת הגלגלים והחבור והפרוד, והארץ והישוב, ולקות המאורות, ומכל מקום אין התועלת גדולה כנגד

היגיעה, וכשיעתיקו לחכמת הניגון יהיה העמל יותר מרובה והתועלת פחותה, והם עצמם מודים כי התועלת הגדולה בכל אלו שיבואו במחקרן לחכמה שקורין מה שאחר הטבע, והיא חכמת אלקות. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קנה)

Were Ramban alive today, his assessment of what the study of the natural sciences has to yield would certainly be different. From the days of Aristotle until his own, Ramban had seen little progress in the growth of human knowledge. But, as man unlocks the secrets of the atom and the human genome and grasps the vastness of outer space, we begin to understand what Rambam meant when he said:

והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו. בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים ויראה מהם חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ, מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח ומפאר ומתאוה תאוה גדולה לידע השם הגדול כמו שאמר דוד צמאה נפשי לאלקים לקל חי. וכשמחשב בדברים האלו עצמן מיד הוא נרתע לאחוריו וירא ויפחד ויודע שהוא בריה קטנה שפלה אפלה עומד בדעת קלה מעוטה לפני תמים דעות כמו שאמר דוד כי אראה שמיך וגו' מה אנוש כי תזכרנו וגו'. (הלכות יסודי התורה ב:ב)

Understanding the true sciences gives man some understanding of the genius of Creation and forms a link to the Creator. To Rambam the Torah's prohibition of *avoda zara* and magic, was meant to prevent what was bad for the soul and also bad for the body. When he was queried by the scholars of Montpelier about the value of astrology, he responded as follows:

This is what lost us our kingdom and destroyed the *Bais Hamikdash*, and brought us to our present condition. Our forefathers sinned and thus vanished, because they found many books pertaining to the matters of astrology - which is at the heart of *avoda zara* as we explained in the laws of *avoda zara*. They erred and followed after it, believing that they were magnificent sciences, with great utility, and thus they did not involve themselves with learning the military sciences and principles of conquest but chose to believe that the astrology would suffice [for their protection]. This is why the prophets called them ignorant and foolish. Indeed they were fools, following after that which has no

value. (Letter to scholars of Montpelier. See Igros HaRambam, Shilot vol. 2 p. 480)

Belief in the supernatural and the superstitions is belief in falsehood and thus harmful to the soul. Acting according to these beliefs is foolish and self destructive. Rationality is an essential element of the Torah's teaching and the rejection of superstition is in itself a means of bringing Israel and the world closer to G-d, while also advancing their material prosperity. In fact, the advancement of material prosperity was an important factor in Rambam's religious vision.

עתידה ארץ ישראל להוציא גלוסקאות וכלי מילת. (שבת ל:)

In the days of Moshiach ... nothing will change in nature from how it is now, except that kingship will return to Israel, and in the words of the *Chachamim* 'there is nothing between this world and the days of Moshiach but the servitude to other kingships,' and in those days there will still be the weak and the strong, but man's *parnasah* will come much more easily, until the point that when a man does a minor task it will produce major results and this is what they meant by saying 'The land of Israel is destined to bring forth cakes and silk garments.' (*Pirush Hamishnayos*, 10th chapter *Sanhedrin*)

Chazal and Rambam foresaw the technological revolution that would accompany the unlocking of the secrets of nature. The utopian world of *ימות המשיח* will be facilitated by the scientific progress that will allow man to spend most of his time in study. (See also *Hilchos Teshuva* 8:6.) But so long as man looked to the "spiritual" sciences, so valued by Ramban, to fulfill his needs, he was doomed to stagnation in both the spiritual and material realm.

***Hashgacha* and the Laws of Nature**

Ramban elaborates on this science of the supernatural of which he is so convinced:

ועתה דע והבן בעניני הכשפים, כי הבורא ית' כאשר ברא הכל מאין עשה העליונים מנהיגי התחתונים אשר למטה מהן, ונתן כח הארץ וכל אשר עליה בכוכבים ומזלות לפי הנהגתם ומבטם בהם, כאשר הוא מנוסה בחכמת האיציטגנונית, ועשה עוד על הכוכבים והמזלות מנהיגים מלאכים ושרים שהם נפש להם, והנה הנהגתם מעת היותם עד לעולם ועד גזירת עליון אשר שם להם, אבל היה מנפלאותיו העצומות ששם בכח המנהיגים העליונים דרכי תמונה וכחות להמיר הנהגת אשר למטה מהן .. ועל כן אמר בעל ספר הלבנה, החכם בנגרמנסי"א, כשהלבנה, והיא נקראת גלגל העולם, בראש טלה על דרך משל, ויהיה פני מזל פלוני, תעשה תמונה לדבר פלוני ויוחק בה שם השעה ושם המלאך הממונה עליה מן השמות ההם הנזכרים באותו הספר ותעשה הקטרה פלונית בענין כך וכך, יהיה המבט עליה לרעה, לנתוש ולנתוץ ולהאביד ולהרוס, וכאשר תהיה הלבנה במזל פלוני תעשה תמונה והקטרה בענין פלוני לכל טובה, לבנות ונטוע. (רמב"ן על התורה, דברים יח:ט)

According to Ramban, G-d only forbade us to use the wisdom of astrology because of the Torah's command **תמים תהיה עם** "You should be whole with the L-rd your G-d," which he held was a principle that constituted one of the 613 *mitzvos*. (See *Hagabos* to *Sefer Hamitzvos*, added *Aseh* 8.) Even though G-d made what we consider the supernatural part of nature, governed by its own set of magical rules, nevertheless, Israel was not to avail itself of it. The stars and constellations govern the rest of the world אשר חלק ה' אלקיך אתם לכל העמים אשר תחת כל השמים (דברים ד:יט) "which the L-rd your G-d appointed to all the nations underneath the heavens," but G-d took Avraham and offered him the alternative of being governed directly by G-d. (See *Perush HaRamban Al Hatora*, Breshis 17:1.) For Israel, all the natural laws and supernatural laws would be suspended and G-d's salvation or destruction would come according to their merits. In fact:

No man has a portion in the Torah of Moshe Rabbenu unless he believes that all that happens to us is miraculous with no presence of the rules of nature at all, both in the case of the community and the individual. אין בהם טבע. (Perush HaRamban Al Hatora, Shemos 13:16)

Man, on the personal level, can choose to reject nature altogether:

אני ה' רפאך - I am The L-rd your healer - therefore the saints in the days of prophecy, when they would fall sick because of their sins, would not seek out doctors but prophets. (Perush HaRamban Al Hatora, Vayikra 26:11)

This is Ramban's concept of *hashgacha*, Divine Providence. The ideal is for man to live outside the laws of nature, under G-d's constant *hashgacha*.

The cornerstone of Ramban's philosophy is his attitude toward *כשוף* and *נחוש*. *כשוף* is evidence that the concrete laws of nature are pliable (see above), and that man has the power to uproot these laws, but, nevertheless, is prohibited from using these mechanisms. There is a pure order, that is G-d's will, and an unnatural order. The Torah commands us to maintain the pure order of things

כשהלבנה ... בראש טלה על דרך משל, ויהיה פני מזל פלוני, תעשה תמונה לדבר פלוני וכו' ותעשה הקטרה פלונית בענין כך וכך, יהיה המבט עליה לרעה, לנתוש ולנתוץ ולהאביד ולהרוס, וכאשר תהיה הלבנה במזל פלוני תעשה תמונה והקטרה בענין פלוני לכל טובה לבנות ולנטוע. והנה זה גם הנהגת הלבנה בכח מנהיגה, אבל ההנגה הפשוטה אשר במהלכה הוא חפץ הבורא יתברך אשר שם מהם מאז, וזה הפך, וזה סוד מכשפים וכח שאמרו בהם שהם מכחישים פמלייא של מעלה. לומר שהם הפך הכוחות הפשוטים והם הכחשה לפמלייא בצד מהצדדין ועל כן ראוי שתאסור אותם התורה שיונח העולם למנהגו ולטבעו הפשוט שהוא חפץ בוראו, וגם זה מטעמי איסור הכלאים כי יבואו מן ההרכבות צמחים יעשו פעולות נכריות יולידו שנוים ממנהגו של עולם לרע או לטוב שהן עצמן שנוי ביצירה. (רמב"ן על התורה דברים יח:ט)

However, just as the pure order can be changed by interacting with the מזלות, for the descendants of Avraham it will be changed by interacting with G-d.

וכשאנו מעיינין יפה אנו רואין שאין לאדם חלק בתורת מש"ר ע"ה עד שיאמין שכל דברינו ומעשינו כלם נסים, אין בהם טבע ומנהגו של עולם, שהרי יעודי התורה כלה נסים ומפתים גמורים הם ... לפי שמעולם לא התפלל אדם להקב"ה שיתן לו טובה או שיצילנו מרעה ולא קלל את אויבו בשם עד שהאמין בנסים כולם כאשר אמרתי, כי בשנוי טבע העולם נעשה הכל, לא בענין אחר זולתו ... (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קנג)

We are to work with תפלה and מצוות to control our fate, and our destiny is not governed by the rules of nature. Therefore, Ramban comments on the ideas of Rambam.

על כן נתמה מן הרמב"ם ז"ל שהוא מגרע הנסים ומגביר הטבע.
(דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קנד)

The Torah commands us not to consult with those who foresee with נחוש even though there is accuracy in these forecasts and they could protect us from danger. The gentiles are permitted to use it because it is not *avoda zara* but we are expected to live on a higher plane:

כי בני נח לא נצטוו על הנחוש ... והנה פירש טעם איסורן בישראל מפני זה שיהיו כלם לה', על כן תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך, ופירש תמים שלם כלומר שיהיו כלם שלמים להקב"ה ולא יהיה מהם חלק לככבים ומזלות או לשדים (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קנ)... וכאשר כלל הכתוב המועננים והקוסמים עם התועבות הנזכרות, חזר ופירש, הגוים האלו אשר אתה יורש אותם אל מועננים וקוסמים ישמעו, כי חכמתם לדעת הבאות, ואתה לא כן נתן לך ה' אלקך, ואסר לך הנחשים והקסמים בעבור שעשה לך מעלה גדולה לתתך עליון על כל גויי הארץ, שיקים בך נביא ויתן דבריו בפיו ואתה תשמע ממנו מה יפעל קל.
(רמב"ן על התורה דברים יח:ט)

Even those predictive sciences which are not specifically prohibited in the Torah, such as astrology, are still under a general

ban because of the *mitzvah* אלקיך עם ה'. One should not seek out what they have to say, but if a person should inadvertently become aware of impending doom by their means, the solution is prayer for it has the power to reverse what nature would normally bring. It has the power to change the rules of nature.

שאינן האצטגנינות בכלל נחוש ... דמותר לשמוע להם ולהאמין בדבריהם ... אלא שפעמים הקב"ה עושה נס ליראיו לבטל מהם גזרת הכוכבים, והם מן הנסים הנסתרים שהם בדרך תשמישו של עולם שכל התורה תלויה בהם... לפיכך אין שואלין בהם, אלא מהלך בתמימות, שנ' תמים תהיה עם ה' אלקיך, ואם ראה בהן דבר שלא כרצונו עושה מצוות ומרבה בתפלה. (תשובה, כתבי הרמב"ן א:שעט)

But if astrology indicates that a day is dangerous, an individual should follow the advice it gives.

אבל אם ראה באצטגנינות יום שאין טוב למלאכתו, נשמר ממנו, ואינו סומך על הנס. וכסבור אני שאסור לבא כנגד המזלות על הנס. (תשובת הרמב"ן, שם)

Though Rambam is very strict regarding all forms of dependence on the occult, Ramban believes that we should interpret more leniently in these types of issues.

ואלו דברים צריכים עיון ופירוש רב, מכל מקום אל תדקדק עם בני אדם יותר מדאי. (תשובת הרמב"ן, שם)

Ramban considers prohibiting the use of the supernatural altogether as too strict a position and a very serious imposition on the masses. The fact that the Torah prohibits us from using all these “spiritual” sciences, which Ramban considers the higher sciences, demonstrates that the Creator’s expectation of us was that we reject the dominion of the laws of nature.

But as we noted above, Rambam sees in these laws of nature that Ramban asks us to reject, the key to drawing close to the Creator.

What is the path to coming to love and fear Him. When a man gives deep thought to His magnificent and

tremendous creations and discerns from them His genius that cannot be measured. (*Mishnah Torah Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah 2:2*)

Of G-d's *hashgacha* Rambam explains:

Divine *hashgacha* in this lowly world only applies to the species of mankind ... and all the good and evil that befalls him is in accordance to what is fitting for him as it says 'All his paths are judgment.' (*Devarim 32:4*) But with regard to other living creatures and certainly growing things and the like, my view is like that of Aristotle. I do not believe that a specific leaf fell via an act of *hashgacha*, nor that a specific spider attacked a certain fly due to a Divine decree and due to His specific will ... but all this transpired by chance as Aristotle said. Divine Providence is connected, in my opinion, to Divine intellectual influence and to the species which is the recipient of that intellectual influence thereby becoming an intellectual being. Only such a being can be accompanied by Divine Providence, with all events of his life being a function of reward and punishment. Whereas the sinking of a ship with all aboard and the collapse of a roof on all inside a house is an act of nature, nevertheless it is the choice of the individual that will govern whether he will enter that house. This determination will be made according to the desires of the Divine, and consistent with the judgment due the individual. (*Moreh Nevuchim III:17*)

Man, made in the image of G-d, is capable of prophecy, of knowing the Divine Will, and even man who has not attained to that level still gains Divine guidance.

The degree of *hashgacha* that each individual attains is commensurate with the degree of Divine intellectual influence that he has attained. (*Moreh Nevuchim III:18*)

While Ramban believes that G-d changes nature day by day and moment by moment to accommodate the merits of His saints (see Ramban's introduction to his commentary on *Iyov*), Rambam explains that all men maintain a connection to G-d constantly and will attain his guidance, hear His message, according to their

individual merit. But in this *hashgacha*, the laws of nature are not violated (*Moreh Nevuchim* III, 51).

Tefilla

Just as the understanding of Rambam and Ramban towards the supernatural is pivotal in determining their attitude towards *hashgacha*, so too does their understanding of *hashgacha*, in turn, determine their attitude towards *tefilla*.

Rambam states:

מצות עשה להתפלל בכל יום שנאמר ועבדתם את ה' אלקיכם
(שמות כג:כה) מפי השמועה למדו שעבודה זו היא תפלה שנאמר
לעבדו בכל לבבכם (דברים יא:יג). אמרו חכמים (תענית ב.) אי
זו היא עבודה שבלב? זו תפלה. (הלכות תפלה א:א)

The concept of *tefillah* (תפלה) is described in the Torah as *avodah*, worship. The *avodah* of the sacrifices constitutes that *avodah* which primarily engages the components of the body, including the emotions. *Tefillah* is a higher form of worship because it is done via speech which is the expression of one's "heart" which means a person's essence, soul, intellect, that which makes him a *צלם אלקים* - "the image of G-d" (see *Moreh Nevuchim* III:32). Rambam, in his *Sefer Hamitzvos* lists *tefillah* as the fifth of the positive commands preceded only by the *mitzvos* of *ידעת ה'* (Knowledge of G-d), *ייחוד ה'* (Unity of G-d), *אהבת ה'* (Love of G-d), and *יראת ה'* (Fear of G-d). The fulfillment of these first four *mitzvos* is humanity's goal and man was created and the Torah was given so that man might fulfill them. Rambam's placement of *tefillah* immediately after these four *mitzvos* is an expression of the centrality of this *mitzvah* to Judaism. This is the indispensable *mitzvah* for transforming man into an *עבד ה'*, servant of G-d. The *mitzvos* of *Yedias Hashem*, *Yichud Hashem*, *Ahava* and *Yirah* are states of being for which we strive. *Tefillah* is the central vehicle for getting there.

While to Rambam this *mitzvah* is the most important action that the Torah commanded us to do, to Ramban there is no such *mitzvah* in the Torah.

The whole issue of *tefillah* is not an obligation at all, but it is the quality of the mercy of the Creator May He Be

Blessed that He listens and answers whenever we call to Him. (*Hagabos* on *Sefer Hamitvos, mitzvas aseh 5*)

Ramban does agree, however, that the Torah's command of "When you go out to war in your land against the enemy who torments you, blow with your trumpets and be remembered before the L-rd your G-d" (*Bamidbar* 6:10) constitutes "a *mitzva* to respond to every calamity that befalls the community by crying out before G-d in prayer and to blow trumpets" (*ibid*). Rambam also lists this *mitzvah*, i.e., responding to specific hardships with צעקה by crying out. But he considers this a completely different *mitzva* which serves as the basis for the concept of fasting, and the description of this *mitzva* constitutes the introduction to *Hilchos Taanis*, The Laws of Fasting. We must recognize when calamity befalls us that it is a result of our actions. The calamity must spur us to evaluate how we came to this point and we must turn to G-d, begin a process of repentance, and ask for G-d's forgiveness (*Mishna Torah Hilchos Taanis 1:1-4*).

According to Rambam, the *mitzva* of *taanis* applies in time of calamity; while the *mitzva* of *tefillah* is to be performed "every day." Just as the most fundamental of the sacrifices is the תמיד - the sacrifice that is brought every day, so too is constancy the essential element of *tefillah*, the *avoda* of the heart. The *tefillah* morning, afternoon, and evening is meant to connect man to G-d, so that he will arrive at a state of שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד - I consider G-d always in my presence (see *Moreh Nevuchim* III, 51).

Ramban contends that *tefilla* is for one's personal benefit, because G-d in His mercy responds to one's prayers. The נסים נסתרים that guide human destiny in general, and Israel's destiny specifically, is a direct function of *tefilla* and *mitzvos* (see quote above). But, Rambam never once in *Hilchos Tefilla* speaks of G-d answering prayers. In *Hilchos Taanis* Rambam says that man's cries will lead to *teshuvah* and bring about the removal of suffering because when man changes and draws closer to G-d the added *hashgacha* he receives will guide him to salvation. In *Hilchos Tefillah* even this statement is absent. *Tefillah* is *avoda* not merely בקשה, request. Like the *avoda* of sacrifices, *tefillah* is selfless dedication and devotion to G-d. The first *bracha* of *bakasha* indicates how *tefilla* transforms us. In it we ask for דעת, wisdom. With this growth in understanding we draw closer to the Creator and hence His *hashgacha* upon us grows, and a byproduct of our *avoda* is our salvation. (This section is taken from the

introduction to *Encountering the Creator*, a study of divine providence and prayer in the works of Rambam. For a fuller understanding of these concepts, the reader is directed to that work.)

Who is Right?

Rashba was asked by a wise man of Montpellier whether he could make a lion of metal for the purpose of רפואה, and he permitted it - שגם מורנו הרב הגדול משה בר נחמן ז"ל היה מתיר ועושה ואין לנו גדול ממנו (תשובת הרשב"א א:תיג). But when challenged on this *pesak* by a חכם from that place, he responds that he is out of his depth on this issue. He knows that Rambam forbids it and Ramban permits it.

אין לבבי מכיל חקירתם כי רבה מבוכתם ונפלאה ממנו אמתתם ... ומי יתן וידעתי חכם בארץ ואעשה לי רב עלי ואשמיעיניה וישמיעני ובסתום חכמה בכל אלה יודיעני. ואדון בזה עמו גם עם הרב הגדול מורה צדק הרב רבינו משה ברב מימון ז"ל לא כמשיב על דבריו ועל דבריך רק כחוקר ושואל אולי תמצא ארוכה למבוכה. (תשובות הרשב"א א:תיג)

The statement of Rambam that requires his analysis comes from the *Moreh Nevuchim*.

And to distance ourselves from all types of witchcraft we were warned against adopting any of the practices of the idolaters, even things connected with agriculture and cattle raising and the like. The prohibition includes all that they say helps which in fact does not make sense rationally, and that only works with סגולה, and this is included in ולא תלכו and *Chazal* call it דרכי האמורי because it is a branch of magic since logic does not dictate it, and these practices lead to the performance of witchcraft which in turn is dependent on the stars, and hence demands the elevation of the stars and their worship. *Chazal* distinctly say 'whatever is used as medicine' is not included in דרכי האמורי - meaning, whatever rationality is accepted is permitted and all else is prohibited.... and do not question me because *Chazal* permitted the nail from a gallows and the tooth of a fox, for in those times they thought they had

been proven to be effective via their experimentation, and they used them as cures just as the hanging peony is used in the treatment of an epileptic, and dog dung for a swelled throat, and the vapors of vinegar and *marcasa* for hard swellings. For all things that have been proven to work via experimentation as these, even thought logic would not have suggested them, qualify as cures. (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:37)

What Rambam is telling us is that since we have not plumbed the depths of medical understanding, we need not know why a cure works as long as study and experimentation prove that it does. He also tells us that the fox's tooth was a valid cure in ancient times when "they thought" it worked. Clearly he implies that in his time, when knowledge of medicine was more sophisticated, it could no longer be used. In earlier times, faulty experimentation seemed to confirm the efficacy of something that was, in fact, useless. Likewise, what was acceptable in Rambam's day, such as the "hanging peony," would be rejected in modern days as superstition and categorized as דרכי האמורי. The supernatural is rejected and anything that claims to work via סגולה is unacceptable, including the metal lion.

Rashba suggests an alternate explanation to כל שיש בו משום דרך סגולה אין בו משום דרכי האמורי. We are told to avoid all use of דרך סגולה of the gentiles for gaining any advantage because of תמים תהיה. Rather we should feel that through doing *mitzvos* we will be protected from harm. But should we be struck with disease, then all manner of cure, including those that work סגולה are to be used with the caveat that in all means of cure שיהא לבו לשמים וידע שאמתת הרפואה ממנו ידרשנו ולא שיכיון שהכל תלוי בסם פלוני וברפואת אשי הרופא .. ולא עוד אלא שאסור להכנס בעיני הסכנות ולבטוח על הנס .. ומצוה זו כולל כל עסקי בני האדם במלאכתם זולתי האנשים השלמים שזכותיהם מרובות (שם). This conceptualization is similar to that of Ramban. A Jew must attempt to work on a higher level and expect his good health be secured by the performance of *mitzvos*, as a literal translation of the second *parsha* of *Shema* promises. But when illness strikes he must not eschew the cures that G-d put into nature even if these cures work סגולה, דרך, unless he is a *tzaddik* who feels confident that G-d will save him. Ramban, was in fact a doctor, and in his medical practice used the wisdom of astrology. (See *Azharas Shemiras Habrius, Kisvei HaRamban vol 1, pg 385.*)

Rashba suggests, further, that it is not only for curing illness that we may use the forbidden arts but that if information is gained by the use of מעונן ומנחש it can be utilized when this information forecasts a state of danger from causes other than illness (ibid). Rashba, again following the teachings of Ramban, leans towards the understanding that the supernatural workings of these “spiritual” sciences are philosophically akin to G-d’s supernatural salvation that is related to the performance of *mitzvos*.

יושב בסתר עליון וכו' לה' הישועה, ריב"ל מסדר להני קראי
וגנני. והיכי עביד הכי והאמר ריב"ל אסור להתרפאות בדברי
תורה? להגן שאני. (שם, על פי שבועות טו:)

Although one cannot use verses of Torah as a סגלה and not even for רפואה, it is permitted to do so for protection from danger. Rambam, however, quotes this Gemara somewhat differently.

הלוחש על המכה וקורא פסוק מן התורה, וכן הקורא על התינוק
שלא יבעת ... לא די להן שהן בכלל חברים ומנחשים אלא שהן
בכלל הכופרים בתורה. שהן עושין דברי תורה רפואות גוף,
ואינן אלא רפואות נפשות שנ' ויהו חיים לנפשך. אבל הבריא
שקרא פסוקים או מזמור מתלים כדי שתגן עליו זכות קריאתו
וינצל מצרות ונזקים הרי זה מותר. (הלכות ע"ז יא:יב)

It is not to be believed that saying specific words of Torah has a supernatural effect. It is only the merit we have from Torah and *mitzvos* that can ever have any benefit. What will make a difference is the effect that saying these verses will have on the person’s growth. And the words are not expected to heal but merely to protect one from danger. But to Rashba, if G-d put into nature the power for a mystical incantation and a קמיע to protect one from danger, then certainly verses of Torah and Tehilim have the power to do so. Tosfos (*Shevuos* 15b s.v. *assur*), a party to the same *shitta*, says that if it is an issue of סכנת נפשות one may use verses from the Torah to save one’s life. Ramban is very clear in the belief that the words of Torah themselves (not the effect that these words have on the person) have supernatural powers.

שכל התורה כלה שמותיו של הקב"ה, ובכל פרשה ופרשה יש
בה שם שבו נוצר הדבר או שנעשה בו או שנתקיים אותו ענין

בו. ויש במקצת זה ספר והוא נקרא שמוש תורה, שמפרש בפרשיות שמוש כל אחת מהן והשם היוצא ממנה והאיך יוצא ממנה והאיך משתמשין בה, אבל יש לנו קבלה שיותר ממה שכתוב בספר ההוא שם שמות, כל התורה כלה מבראשית ועד לעיני כל ישראל כלה שמות, כגון שנ' ברא"ש יתבר"א אלקי"ם או כיוצא בזה, לכן נפסל ספר תורה בחסרון אות אחת או ביתרון, ואלו כתב אדם, ה' ימלך לעולם ועד מלאו וי"ו, פסל ספר תורה כלו, וזה סבור שלא הזיק כלום. [עי' בהערות של ר' שעוועל] ומזה ידע מש"ר ע"ה כל מה שיכול שום נברא לידע ולהבין. וכן בנביאים, מפרשת המרכבה של יחזקאל יוצאים שמות כל פתחי היכלות, ומפרשת הבקעה יוצא השם שבו אדם מחיה מתים, ודבר נודע לרבים, כי מפסוקי ויסע ויבא ויט יוצא שם של ע"ב אותיות שבו משתמשין חסידי הדורות היודעים אותו להמית ולהחיות, ולנתוש ולנתוץ להאביד להרוס, לבנות ולנטוע. (דרשת תורת ה' תמימה דף קסז-קסח)

The שמות have supernatural powers greater than magic, but they work in irrational ways, just as magic does. However, Rambam rejects the concept of magical powers in the שמות as well. The concept of שמות with 42 and 72 letters represents various understandings of השם. There are no magical powers in names but there is great spiritual growth in understanding what these various names tell us about the Creator (*Moreh Nevuchim* 1:62).

Rashba closes pretty much as he started, in a state of uncertainty. But, then in a postscript, he tells us what he considers the flaw in Rambam's position and this, rather than the many Gemaras he quotes, is what moves him towards the position of Ramban. Rashba knows that Rambam will be able to answer any proofs that he has from the Gemara. Rambam explains that the statements of individual *Chachomim* which imply that there is truth to astrology have deeper interpretations (see *Igros HaRambam, Shelot* p. 488).

עוד יש לי מקום עיון בדברי הרב ז"ל שכתב אמרו בפירוש כל שיש בו משום רפואה אין בו משום דרכי האמורי רוצה בזה כל מה שיגזרה העיון הטבעי הוא מותר וזולתו אסור ע"כ ואני שואל מסתפק בדברי הרב ז"ל מהו הדבר שיקראהו הרב ז"ל שיגזרהו העיון הטבעי? אם מה שיגזרהו עיון חכמים שחברו ספרים בטבע כאריסטו וגאלינוס וחבריהם שחברו ספרים בטבע

הסמים והמסעדים המועילים לפי עיונם וכל מה שלא השיג עיונם הוא בכלל אסור דרכי האמורי לפי שעיון חכמים אלו שהשתדלו בחכמה הטבע כולל כל מה שאפשר להיות פעל כל בעל טבע בטבעו ואצל עיון חכמים אלו יפסק מאפשרות העיון הטבעי? זה באמת מה שלא יקבלוהו השכל כי באמת הדברים הפועלים בסגלה אין פעולתם בפלא מהם אלא בטבע מסגל, רצוני לומר בטבע לא ישיגנו עיון החכמים ואפילו החכם שבחכמים לרוב העלם הטבע ההוא מכלל המין האנושי מצד שהוא אדם, כסגלת אבן השואבת שהברזל קופץ עליה ויותר מזה מורגל בירדי הים באניות תוחבין מחט בחתיכת עץ צף על פני המים ומראין לו אבן וישוט על פני המים עד שיפנה אל פני הסדן ושם ינוח - ולא ישיג עיון טבע זה כל חכם שבחכמים אלו של חכמת הטבע. ואם כן אף כל המינין בעלי הסגולות בטבע הם פועלים כסמים והמסעדים ואין בהם משום דרכי האמורי כמו שאין בדברים המפורסמים המועילים לפי העיון הטבעי של אלו החכמים. (תשובת הרשב"א א:ת"ג, סוף התשובה)

Rashba claims that there is really no difference between the rationality attached to the physical sciences and what Rambam would consider the occult. He proves this by looking at the אבן השואבת, the magnet, and the compass. Their workings are beyond human comprehension, based on a principle that the most brilliant of men cannot unravel. Its workings are those of סגלה and no different from the "spiritual" sciences in their rationality. This assessment would never be made by Rashba today now that electromagnetism is understood. Rambam recognized that magnetism belonged firmly in the grouping of the natural sciences and discussed (*Moreh Nevuchim* II:12) the science behind it. He understood that there is a clearly defined area called the natural sciences that are true and comprehensible, and a clearly defined area called the occult that the Torah banned, and is, in fact, nonsense. Nevertheless there is, between these two groups, a gray area that cannot be so easily identified, and only as science progresses can we progress in identifying where the line between the occult and science lies.

But to Rashba the distinction between real science and the occult was totally blurred, and even the most fundamental of scientific principles, magnetism, was viewed as the occult. To him, there was only one clearly defined grouping, not two. His evaluation was based upon the misapprehensions of his time and only because of this was he led to side with Ramban. Rashba was a rationalist, but

in 13th-century Europe rationalism led one to believe in the occult. The Ralbag, as well, highly respected not only for his Torah, but for his scientific knowledge, felt compelled to explain that the workings of magnetism are dependent on סגלה. (See *The Jews and the Sciences in the Middle Ages*, Y. Tzvi Langermann, VI, *Gersonides on the Magnet and the Heat of the Sun*.) Four centuries later, Sir Isaac Newton was still trying to convince his fellow scientists that it is not “occult qualities” (כח הסגלה) within individual objects that make them produce unique processes, but that general laws, with rules common to all matter, govern the workings of nature.

And the Aristotelians gave the Name of occult Qualities not to manifest Qualities, but to such Qualities only as they supposed to lie hid in bodies, and to be unknown causes of manifest effects: Such as would be the causes of gravity, and of magnetick and electrick attractions, and of fermentation, if we should suppose that the forces or actions arose from qualities unknown to us and incapable of being discovered and made manifest. Such occult qualities put a stop to the improvement of natural philosophy, and therefore of late years have been rejected. To tell us that every species of thing is endowed with an occult specific Quality, by which it acts and produces manifest effects, is to tell us nothing: But to derive two or three general principles of motion from phenomena, and afterwards to tell us how the properties and actions of all corporeal thins follow from these principles would be a very great step in philosophy. (*Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light*. 1704. Sir Isaac Newton. pp. 375-8)

Ramban, too, was a rationalist committed to the scientific method. When faced with the problem of determining what were the indications of an עוף טמא, he writes:

אחר שכתבתי בהלכות העופות פירוש מקצת הראשונים וראיתי דרכי כולם חזרתי לבדוק בעפות ותפשתי תחלה בעורב השחור וכו' ונדחו דברי ר"ת ז"ל וכו' אבל קרקבנה נקלף וגם זה סותר דברי ר"ת ז"ל ואף בדברי רש"י ז"ל וכו' ולפי שאין אנו יכולים להכחיש דברים הנראים לעינים אנו חוזרים על כרחנו לאחוז דרך הר"ם בר' יוסף ז"ל. (חדושי הרמב"ן לחולין סב:)

Ramban rejects the opinions of the senior scholars of Ashkenaz because his experimentation in zoology had proven them to be incorrect. We must accept what our eyes tell us, he concludes.

With regard to the rainbow he feels compelled to explain its nature based on the teaching of the Greeks, for he finds their evidence indisputable.

זאת אות הברית אשר אני נותן - על כרחנו נאמין לדברי היונים
שמלהט השמש באויר הלח יהיה הקשת בתולדה, כי בכלי מים
לפני השמש יראה כמראה הקשת, וכאשר נסתכל עוד בלשון
הכתוב נבין כן, כי אמר את קשתי נתתי בענן, ולא אמר אני נותן
בענן. (רמב"ן על התורה, בראשית ט:יב)

With regard to how a child is formed, Ramban feels it worthwhile to quote the opinions of the Greeks, even though they contradict those of *Chazal*.

אמרו (נדה לא.) אשה כי תזריע, אשה מזרעת תחלה יולדת זכר
... אמרם מזרעת, על דם הרחם שיתאסף בשעת גמר ביאה באם,
ומתאחו בזרע הזכר, כי לדעתם הולד נוצר מדם הנקבה ומלובן
האיש, ולשניהם יקראו זרע ... וגם דעת הרופאים ביצירה כך
היא. ועל דעת פילוספי היונים כל גוף העובר מדם האשה, אין בו
לאיש אלא הכח הידוע בלשונם היולי שהוא נותן צורה בחומר
... ואם כן יהיה מלת תזריע, כמו זרועיה תצמיח (ישעיה סא:יא).
(רמב"ן על התורה, ויקרא יב:ב)

Were Ramban alive today his eyes would tell him that Rambam's views of the wisdoms were correct. (The Vilna Gaon's [1720-1797] opinion on this matter (see *Yoreh Deah* 179:13) and the relevance of the *Zohar* will be the subject of a future essay.) As Rambam pointed out in his letter to the scholars of Montpellier, following the belief in the "spiritual" science of witchcraft is what held ancient societies back. Over time, as the Torah has succeeded in freeing the Western world from belief and reliance on the occult, a new age of progress has been ushered in and man is being drawn closer towards the coming of *Moshiach*. Rambam's vision of *והארץ* *והארץ* is being fulfilled.

Rambam, somewhat astonishingly, says that the primary purpose of most the prohibitions of the Torah is to uproot *Avoda Zara*. (See opening quote from *Pirush Hamishnayos*, and *Moreh Nevuchim*

III:29.) On the other hand he writes (*Sefer Hatmitzvos, Aseh 187*) that עקר עבודה זרה was uprooted with the defeat of the Canaanites. Nevertheless, so many other *mitzvos* are necessary to remove the subsidiaries of *avoda zara*. These include belief in the occult and superstitions that Rambam lists in *Hilchos Avoda Zara*. Their hold has considerably lessened over the years but they still have strength, not only in the gentile world but in the Orthodox Jewish world as well. In recent years a story of a talking fish swept the religious world. Ramban, the doctor, the scientist would not have been amongst those believers. The story of a woman possessed by a *dybbuk* then held sway and many, many believed. Ramban the genius, in the 21st century, would not have been amongst those believers. Ramban, the rationalist, like Rambam, would have told us that these beliefs were rooted in *avoda zara* and damaging to the soul.

***Chazal* and the Natural Sciences**

In telling us that in the days of Moshiach הארץ תוציא גלוסקא, Chazal speak of a future in which knowledge of the sciences will have blossomed, and ushered in great technological progress. The implication is obvious. They recognized that their knowledge of the natural sciences was limited and man's knowledge in this area would grow with time and this growth in knowledge was integral to the coming of *Mosbiach*. Rambam is quite explicit about this.

Do not ask of me to reconcile everything that they (*Chazal*) stated from science with the actual reality, for the science of those days was deficient, and they did not speak out of traditions from the prophets regarding these matters. (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:14)

It is one of the ancient beliefs, both among the philosophers and other people, that the motions of the spheres produced mighty and fearful sounds... This belief is also widespread in our nation. Thus our Sages describe the greatness of the sound produced by the sun in the daily circuit in its orbit. The same description could be given of all heavenly bodies. Aristotle, however, rejects this, and holds that they produce no sounds. You will find his opinion in the book *The Heavens and the World*. You must not find it strange that Aristotle differs here from the

opinion of our Sages. The theory of the music of the spheres is connected with the theory of the motion of the stars in a fixed sphere, and our Sages have, in this astronomical question, abandoned their own theory in favor of the theory of others. Thus, it is distinctly stated, "The wise men of other nations have defeated the wise men of Israel." It is quite right that our Sages have abandoned their own theory: for speculative matters every one treats according to the results of his own study, and every one accepts that which appears to him established by proof. (*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:8)

In fact, when Rambam says "they did not speak out of traditions from the prophets," he implies that in the days of the prophets, there was a greater knowledge of science than in the days of *Chazal*. Therefore he explains:

וטעם כל אלו החשבונות ומפני מה מוסיפים מנין זה ומפני מה גועין. והאיך נודע כל דבר ודבר מאלו הדברים והראיה על כל דבר ודבר היא חכמת התקופות והגמטריאות שחברו בה חכמי יון ספרים הרבה. והם הנמצאים עכשיו ביד החכמים. אבל הספרים שחברו בה חכמי ישראל שהיו בימי הנביאים מבני יששכר לא הגיעו אלינו. ומאחר שכל אלו הדברים בראיות ברורות הם שאין בהן דופי ואי אפשר לאדם להרהר אחריהם, אין חוששין למחבר בין שחברו אותם נביאים בין שחברו אותם גוים. שכל דבר שתנגלה טעמו ונדעה אמתתו בראיות שאין בהן דופי אין סומכין על זה האיש שאמרו או שלמדו אלא על הראייה שנתגלתה והטעם שנודע. (הלכות קה"ח יז:כד)

Thus, there is agreement between Rambam and Ramban that there was an earlier period of advanced knowledge in the true sciences but they argue as to what these sciences were. Throughout history there were rises and declines in the state of learning and knowledge, and the state of learning varied in different areas of the world. For example, the building of the pyramids required advanced scientific knowledge that did not exist anywhere in the world in later centuries. But the analyses of the early Greeks were the beginning of a path of rediscovery that was destined to lead to the grasp of science that exists today, which is unprecedented and has the potential to bring with it the utopian vision that *Chazal* and Rambam saw. Our

prayers (*shemona esrei*) begin with a request for knowledge and end with the coming of the *Moshiach* and the building of the *Bais Hamikdash*. This is the order that must be followed for Jewish destiny to be fulfilled. This contrasts with Ramban who, consistent with his thought, sees in the utopian days of *Moshiach* literal fulfillment of lions and lambs lying together in peace as a miraculous power of harmony takes hold (see *Droshas Toras Hashem Temimah*, p. 154).

Rambam foresaw (although he warns that no one can truly know what will happen in those days) the reestablishment of the Sanhedrin and *semicha* preceding the coming of *Moshiach*, and this, in turn, implies the reversal of the process that *Chazal* saw when they proclaimed עתידה תורה שתשתכח מִישראל.

ואני סבור שהסנדרין תשוב לפני התגלות המשיח וזה יהיה
מסימניו, אמר ואשיבה שופטין כבראשונה ויעצין כבתחלה
ואחרי כן יקרא לך עיר הצדק. (פירוש המשניות סנהדרין א:ג)

Rambam interpreted the *Navi's* statement that Eliyahu Hanavai will come before the final days as referring to the return of prophecy:

יראה מפשוטן של דברי הנביאים ... שקודם מלחמת גוג ומגוג
יעמוד נביא לישראל לישר ישראל ולהכין לבם שני' הנה אנכי
שולח לכם את אליהו הנביא. (הלכות מלכים יב:ב)

To Rambam, the return of prophecy is a return to the highest state of knowledge that man can attain. (See *Sefer Hamitzvos*, end of *shoresb 14*; *Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah 7:1*; *Moreh Nevuchim III:45*.) This is the environment that must exist before the *Moshiach* will come. Man's growth in understanding via his scientific knowledge will be a stepping stone to this state, for a thorough understanding of the workings of the world are a prerequisite for prophecy.

אלא דעתו תמיד פנויה למעלה קשורה תחת הכסא להבין באותן
הצורות הקדושות הטהורות, ומסתכל בחכמתו של הקב"ה כולה
מצורה ראשונה עד טבור הארץ ויודע מהם גדלו, מיד רוח הקדש
שורה עליו. (הלכות יסודי התורה ז:א)

Rambam not only foresaw the progress that would take place in the Western world but he was a major catalyst in making it happen.

In the Jewish world his impact was immediate, and while he writes that his views of rationality had almost no adherents in his day, Ramban, a generation later, refers to the “many” (רבים מתחסדים לומר) who promote this view. In the world, at large, Rambam’s influence was immense. “His position as one of the medical giants of history is indelibly recorded [and] the heritage of his great medical writings is being more and more appreciated.” (Rosner, F. (1965) Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). *Annal. Int. Med.* 62:373-375) Thomas Aquinas acknowledges the influence that “Rabbi Moshe” had upon him, and the Western world learned to balance faith and reason. (See for example, Jellinek, *Thomas von Aquino in der Jüdischen Literatur*, Leipzig, 1853; Haberman, *Jacob Maimonides and Aquinas: A Contemporary Appraisal*, KTAV Publishing House 1979.) Maimonides was a major influence on thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke whose work, in turn, served as the major influence in the philosophy of America’s founding fathers. (See *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis*, Leo Strauss; University of Chicago Press, 1996; *Living as Jews in Christian America*, Daniel Lapin, Jewish Action, Winter 2004.) The freedom and moral values of America is what made possible the great advances of the modern world, and these values are the values of the Torah, taught to the world most prominently by Rambam.

Ramban and the *Cherem*

In the years following Rambam’s death, a dispute between the Maimunists (mostly of Provence) and anti-Maimunists (centered in France) ignited throughout Europe with each side placing a ban on the other. Incredibly, perhaps the most central issue over which Rambam was attacked was his insistence on G-d’s incorporeality and his proclamation that those who do not accept this are heretics. This should serve to remind us that while many people believe to this day that Rambam’s philosophy is tainted by Greek influence, it is his philosophy that is accepted by all practicing Jews when it comes to defining the fundamentals of our faith. His intellectual input in defining the nature of Judaism is profound. Those who argued with him in the 13th century, and apparently made up the majority of Jewish scholars, would have harnessed us with the mainstream view that G-d, *chas vesholom*, has a body. (But see Rav Kasher, *Torah Shlema*

16 p. 288-321, for an explanation of his view of what is considered offensive to *chachmei* France in stating the incorporeality of G-d.)

It is Ramban who rose up to defend Rambam's works, and Rambam himself, from these attacks.

The great Ravad upon examining this book (*Sefer Mada*) has made no such comment that it be hidden. On the contrary, scholars who study it do not want to part with it. Ravad has written certain comments upon certain words of Rambam, but never has he charged him with disbelief in, or misstatement of any of the principles of the Torah. And if complaints are directed against Rambam's teachings of incorporeality of G-d, this has a long line of tradition in the teachings of the prophets and Sages, Gaonim and Rabbis. You will find this view clearly set forth also in a work written by Rabbi Eleazar ben Yehuda of Worms. (Kisvei HaRamban vol. 1, pp. 331-351)

At first, Ramban called only for moderation and discussion. He suggested that a third party (the rabbis of Spain), although perhaps inferior in learning to the warring parties, be called upon to hear both sides and render a judgment. Ramban's comments in his first letter, asking that a fair hearing of the views of both sides be presented before any *cherem* is proclaimed, were echoed in the calls made this past year when the works of Rabbi Nosson Slifkin were slapped with the accusation of heresy. While Ramban's letter quieted matters for a while, the trial never came to pass and so Ramban wrote a second letter to the rabbis of France in an attempt to have them rescind their ban on the study of the *Moreh Nevuchim* and *Sefer Mada*.

Although Ramban is, in fact, the embodiment of the teachings of the *Baalei Tosfos* of France ("מפיהם אנו היים") and although it is on the basis of his mystical *hashkafa*, that the followers of Rambam's rationalist teachings are attacked now, it is he who rises up to defend Rambam and his works.

Do write me for what reason you have rendered your decision ... I have seen the clear decision of your holy gathering - the Rabbis and leaders of all of France - declaring the ban upon every person who dares contemplate upon the words in the books of *Moreh*

Nevuchim and *Sefer Mada*, your intention being that these books be hidden forever. But why have you declared the ban upon all communities, considering them all of one category, thus failing to give honor to the great Rabbi (Moshe ben Maimun) who built a fortress around the Talmud - a mighty fortress for the glory of G-d. It is he who has closed up the breach of the Sanctuary, and has restored it to its former glory. He has helped and defended the entire exile, beginning with Spain and other lands of the west, even to the east and the Land of Israel. How much knowledge which lay scattered he has gathered! How much learning he has increased! How much food he has given to the hungry, and counsel to the needy! ...

You (of France) have been taught reliance upon tradition from infancy; you have always been planted firmly in the house of the L-rd. But because of this, will you not recognize that it is he (Rambam) who has brought back the dwellers in the far ends of the earth to the fortress (Torah)? Were it not for his words and the teachings of his books by which they live, they would have long ago faltered on the path. Is it for you, O masters of the Talmud that he has toiled? What he did was to prepare a haven of refuge where one might flee for protection from the storms of the Greek philosophers, to save them from Aristotle and Galenus. Have you heard of their teachings? His books were not intended for you, O our masters. (ibid)

The words here issued by Ramban are almost identical to the statements made in defense of Rabbi Slifkin's works, which seek to reconcile science and Torah, and which are aimed at the secularly educated, *baalei teshuva* and potential *baalei teshuva*. Rabbi Slifkin's views, as he himself explains, are in fact based on the principles, and sometimes on the actual words of Rambam. Consequently thus those who have risen in his defense are in large measure followers of the thinking of Ramban. (Since the authors of the ban did not explain explicitly the heresies in Rabbi Slifkin's work, we cannot be certain that there is no heresy in his work. Rabbi Slifkin, in fact, states his openness to the possibility that he may have made mistakes and stated things that should be removed. However, those defending the ban have made statements that contradict the philosophy of Rambam, and clearly imply that these are the issues which

precipitated the ban. It is these statements that are addressed in this article.)

Ramban's description of the claims of the attackers of Rambam matches, practically verbatim, the words of modern day *machrimim*.

It appears to you that in this *sefer* (*Moreh Nevuchim*), in its chapters and sections, for the purpose of קרוב רהוקים he diverged from the straight path, and in the footsteps of philosophy he followed and knocked on the door of science, and you find it difficult to accept how he attempts to refute his enemies with mere straw (ibid.)

One signatory of the Slifkin ban, HaRav HaGaon Rav Elya Ber Wachtfogel explains, "And he also writes that *Chazal Hakedoshim* can err *chas vescholom* in worldly matters *chas vescholom*." As we have seen above, it is certainly the position of Rambam that *Chazal* can err in matters of science and clearly Ramban would not disagree on this point. Harav Hagaon Rav Moshe Sternbuch takes issue, most explicitly, with the claim that the world may be greater than 6000 years old as scientific evidence suggests. Many people have claimed that this is not incompatible with the words of our Rabbis, since the first days of Creation - certainly the days before the sun and moon were put into rotation - were unlikely to have been actual 24-hour days. Rambam would certainly go along with evidence produced by modern scientists, for he states (*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:25) that he would have accepted Plato's interpretation of קדמות העולם had it been proven since it does not contradict any of the 13 *ikarei haemunah*. He would have interpreted *parshas Breishis* to be compatible with Plato if there was real proof for his position. Although Ramban claims the original days were 24 hours long, what we know about Ramban's allegiance to scientific truth would lead us to believe that he too would have done as he always did, that is, accept the evidence of his own eyes. Rav Sternbuch says that the views among the Rabbis that support Rav Slifkin are "minority views that have been rejected or ignored." In fact, these views are certainly those of Rambam, and those of any true student of Ramban.

Rav Sternbuch's essay begins with the famous quote of Ramban, "A person does not have a portion in the Torah of Moshe unless he believes that everything that happens in this world is

miraculous.” In Rav Sternbuch’s view, because of this principle, all who try to explain the Torah so as to be compatible with scientific belief fall into Ramban’s category of non-believers. He sees evidence of this heresy in the desire to minimize the miraculous nature of events. In this statement, however, Rav Sternbuch is in direct contradiction to Ramban. Ramban states that although G-d constantly does things miraculously, it is G-d’s way to minimize miracles. For this reason Noach had to build as large an ark as he could, even though at the end, it would not be large enough to contain all the animals without the aid of a miracle. (כי כן הוא הדרך בכל הנסים שבתורה או בנביאים לעשותם מה שביד אדם לעשות, והשאר יהיה בידי שמים (רמב"ן על התורה, בראשית ו:יט)) Since Ramban (see below) did not consider Rambam, the rationalist, to be without a “portion in the Torah of Moshe” we should understand (see *Toras Hashbem Temimah* p. 154) that he considered Rambam’s view of *hashgacha*, which only operates on the actions of man, compatible with his view that all is miraculous. (See Ramban’s introduction to *Sefer Iyon, Kisvei Ramban*, vol. 1, p. 19, where he implies this.) And more than that, had Ramban lived in our time and seen, as Rambam did, the full evidence that magic is false and science is true, he would have, in all probability, accepted the thinking of Rambam, and he, too, would have been "מגרע הנסים ומגביר הטבע".

Ramban and Rambam

As we have seen, modern day attacks on religious scientists and rationalists are, in fact, attacks on the work of Rambam, and the general defense presented today is that of the Ramban.

But Ramban differs from his modern day defenders in his character and in his confidence born of immense knowledge. We see this clearly as his defense of Rambam proceeds. Although Ramban begins his letter with great humility before the elders of France "ואדע" כי כרובים הם ... ואני כנמלה ואין בלשוני מלה" 37 years of age, this does not stop him from proclaiming later on:

ולמה פלילי צדק לא תתנו מחסום לפי ספריכם ולא תשלחו רסן
ענותכם על פני אמריכם ללמד אתכם דבר כן ...
כי אמרתם באזננו בגאווה ובוז מילין דלא נשמע,
להם עין קהלתנו דמוע תדמע,

הוצאתם עתק מפיכם דברים הנראים לקנאה ושנאה נאמרין,
אסור לשומעם אף כי לאמרם ומכל שכן לכותבם,
שכתבתם אמרתם על האיש הקדוש ההוא, בכל גלות צרפת
וספרד לא קם כמוהו,
המורה גם יורה, מי כמוהו מורה,
ובכל מיני חכמות בקי, וכל ספריו קב ונקי ...
לא דברתם נכונה בעבד ה' ואוכיחם,
ואערכה לעיניכם כי לא אשא פני איש, להשיב על זה אמהר
ואחיש,
ואל אדם לא אכנה אל הגאון ומוראו אקנא,
מדוע את הרב ממעשהו תפריעו וצדיק כביר תרשיעו,
הלא שאלתם עוברי דרך,
המאריכים לשון, המפליגים מליצה, הנושאים משל בערך,
בתהלת הרב הגדול, במעלת חסידותו,
בתוקף אמונתו, בעוצם ענותנותו, בגדלת יחוסו, בנדבת כיסו,
במעשיו הנפלאים, במליו הנוראים,
בהיותו ביראת אלקיו דבק וחושק, ובתלמודנו נושק.