

## ***Maimonides Misunderstood: Did Maimonides Champion the Golden Mean Over Torah Truths?***

**By: MOSHE MAIMON**

In 1921, an article was published by Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel of Antwerp—a prominent figure in the Mizrachi movement and later the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv—that sought to critically examine what he believed to be Maimonides’ wholesale adherence to the famous *Derech Ha-Memutza*, or *Shevil Ha-Zahav*, the Golden Mean. Taken as a whole, Rabbi Amiel’s essay attacks Maimonides for over-applying the Golden Mean to all aspects of Jewish thought, even when this conflicts with positions clearly staked by normative Jewish thought as reflected in the prophetic books. It is our contention, however, that Rabbi Amiel’s case suffers from simplistic analysis or shallow reasoning that fails to grasp Rambam’s meaning, as will be demonstrated.

Rabbi Amiel was an accomplished Talmudist with a talent for writing and a penchant for demagoguery—who sometimes used his scholarship for demagogic ends, as will be demonstrated below. Up until his passing in 1946, he enjoyed renown as a preacher and was a regular contributor to the (Mizrachi-oriented) religious press.

Rabbi Amiel’s essay essentially consists of two parts in which both public facets of his persona—the scholar and the pundit and writer—are vividly featured, as they relate to his claims about Rambam. The first part of the essay is devoted to his assertion that it is the Golden Mean ideal that underpins Maimonides’ philosophical outlook. The second part of the essay presents Rabbi Amiel’s concept of the “Prophetic Ideal” and the way he believes it challenges the Golden Mean.

---

Rabbi Moshe Maimon, a graduate of the RJJ, Mir, and Brisk yeshivos, serves as Rosh Bet Midrash of Lev Eliyahu in Deal, NJ, and is a General Editor at Machon Aleh Zayis in Lakewood, NJ. His sustained engagement with the Torah and the intellectual legacy of Rambam is reflected in his editorial work on the new edition of *Perush Rabbenu Avraham b. HaRambam al HaTorah*. He lives with his wife and children in Jackson, NJ, where he is the spiritual leader of K’hal Chassidim d’Jackson.

The article culminates with a call for contemporary Jewry to reject the Golden Mean due to what the writer interprets as compromising tendencies inherent in this philosophy that conflict with traditional Jewish sources. It is here, in his exhorting his audience to eschew Rambam's Golden Mean in favor of the more zealous Prophetic Ideal, that Rabbi Amiel's demagogic voice can be discerned.

In our analysis, we will focus on the examples cited by Rabbi Amiel to prove his assertion that the Golden Mean consistently informs Maimonides' positions. Particularly, we will scrutinize Rabbi Amiel's claim that what he regards as Rambam's universal adherence to the Golden Mean led him to adopt positions that diverge from the plain teachings of the Torah, as expressed by the prophets.

### **Following Rabbi Amiel's Line of Argumentation**

Rabbi Amiel begins his argument with the bold assertion that the center path, or Golden Mean, is the cornerstone of the entire philosophical framework represented in Maimonides' groundbreaking work in Jewish philosophy. He claims that not only does this principle form the ethical system promoted by Maimonides in *Hilchos Dei'os* and *Shemoneh Perakim*, but it also underpins all of Maimonides' philosophical and theosophical conclusions. In support of this claim, Rabbi Amiel marshals evidence from three areas of Jewish philosophy treated by Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* where Rambam's positions seem to Rabbi Amiel to have been formulated expressly to satisfy the demands of the Golden Mean— finding the middle ground between the two extremes.

Rabbi Amiel then proceeds to argue that this philosophical moderation causes Maimonides to develop a compromised view of *Kiddush Hashem*—the obligatory self-sacrifice in service of the ultimate ideal. This stance, Rabbi Amiel contends, is fundamentally contrary to the prophetic tradition, which emphasizes zealous devotion to God and His commandments.

Rabbi Amiel further maintains that if the Jewish nation were to follow Maimonides' path of moderation, they would be unable to fulfill their Divine mission in the world. The prophets, he asserts, exemplify a fiery passion for God's ideals, a zeal that demands total commitment, even at the cost of one's life. Maimonides' Golden Mean, with its emphasis on balance and moderation, dilutes this prophetic fervor, the writer contends.

Ultimately, Rabbi Amiel concludes, the Jewish nation must reject Maimonides' Golden Mean in favor of the prophetic ideal of passionate zealotry. Only by embracing this prophetic zeal, he argues, can the Jewish

people hope to achieve their ultimate goal of national redemption and realize the utopian vision that the prophets foretold.

### **Revisions by Rabbi Amiel in the Essay's Second Edition**

Later, in response to critical reviews of his original article—such as that of R. Tavyomi (reprinted in his *Imrei Tal*, Tel Aviv, 1954, pp. 93–99)—Rabbi Amiel modified the tone and tenor of his argument when he republished the article in his *Le-Nevuchei Ha-Tekufah*. In this revised version, he contended that the views presented in *Moreh Nevuchim* were not Maimonides' personal beliefs, but rather a strategic posture he adopted solely to counter philosophical claims that, in the minds of the misguided (namely, those for whom philosophical teachings represent the ultimate truth), undermined the Torah viewpoint.

The view that *The Guide for the Perplexed* represents a tactical concession to philosophy, rather than a true expression of Maimonides' actual views, is based on the observation that the positions in the *Guide* do not align with those expressed in *Mishneh Torah*. This perspective was first articulated by Nachmanides, paraphrasing the Sages of France, in his famous missive of defense of Maimonides against the criticisms of the French Talmudists:

What appears to you from that book in its chapters and sections, is that to draw the distant ones closer, he deviated from the path. Following in the footsteps of philosophy, he sought wisdom at its doors, and you look askance at his efforts, for he repelled his opponents with straw. (*Kitvei Ha-Ramban*, ed. Chavel, vol. 1, p. 340).

Yet, some academic scholars, it should be noted, drew a very different conclusion from the perceived inconsistencies between the *Guide* and *Mishneh Torah*. In their view, the *Guide* reflected Maimonides' true beliefs, while those in *Mishneh Torah* were intended to accommodate the rabbinic masses.

This position has gained considerable traction in academia of late, due to the influence of Leo Strauss who argued for this reading in a famous essay which introduces the Pines edition of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Elsewhere, I have argued against both perspectives, opting instead for what may be considered the holistic approach—in fact, one that Rabbi Amiel may well characterize as the middle ground—which sees both works as contributing to the complete harmony that is Maimonidean thought when properly understood. (See my article in *Ha-Mashev*, vol. 5, pp. 176–202, and reference as well the persuasive arguments that arrive at

the same conclusion in the essay by my dear colleague Betzalel Sochaczewsky featured in these pages, Vol. 31.)

To return to the subject at hand, let us analyze the merits of Rabbi Amiel's claim that the viewpoints expressed by Maimonides in *Moreh Nevuchim* reflect a slavish adherence to the Golden Mean, even at the expense of bending both Torah values and philosophical truth. The emphasis on this point—that Maimonides was so committed to the philosophy of reaching a compromise between extremes that he was willing to sacrifice Torah truth on the altar of the Golden Mean—is a very weighty charge, and crucial to our discussion.

### **Examining Rabbi Amiel's Critique of Maimonides**

At the outset, it bears noting that Rabbi Amiel seems to be conflating compromise with the Golden Mean. Accordingly, he views any instance of compromise between opposing viewpoints as adherence to the Golden Mean. The two, however, are not one and the same. Applying the Golden Mean to the intellectual quest would, by its very definition, necessitate finding the precise medium in every issue and blindly adhering to it. Indeed, it is hard to see any value such an approach can have when the intellectual quest must first set the compass to truth and then utilize logic and reason to arrive at that end, regardless of where it leads.

Compromise, on the other hand, means striving to understand opposing viewpoints and appreciating the merits of each while crafting a position that considers these merits. Such an exercise is indeed commendable, and it hardly needs to be stated there exist numerous sources across various philosophical, religious, and ethical traditions that praise the virtues of compromise and recognizing value in opposing viewpoints.

That Maimonides engaged in such an exercise—to the point where this forms an integral part of his intellectual profile—is a testament to both the excellence of his intellect and the nobility of his character. Far from being a new insight into his work uncovered by Rabbi Amiel, Rambam's quest to strike a balance between the Torah's teachings and the demands of philosophical speculation was the very premise for writing the *Guide for the Perplexed*, as clearly stated in the author's introduction. That the *Guide* was intended to present the Torah's precepts in a way that is compatible with philosophical truths, by its very definition meant navigating a course between what appears to be two conflicting truths.

However, whether motivated by a spirit of compromise or by adherence to the Golden Mean, Maimonides makes it clear that the objective could only be valid if it sacrifices neither the truth of the Torah nor the dictates of philosophy. Rabbi Amiel's assertion that Maimonides was so

committed to the Golden Mean that he would uphold it even at the expense of compromising fundamental religious or philosophical truths is, in effect, an accusation of intellectual dishonesty—an extraordinary claim and a damning indictment.

One might have expected such a shocking charge to be supported by a full-length exposition, but Rabbi Amiel's popular essay points to just three instances where he believes Maimonides chooses a compromise between philosophical and Torah-based positions. He apparently believes these cases prove his thesis.

### **Flawed Reasoning and Analytical Inconsistencies**

Before delving into each of these examples to determine whether they in fact support his claim, an overarching issue demands our attention. That is the writer's flawed reasoning marked by simplistic and shallow analysis that underlies the entire essay.

In each of the examples cited by Rabbi Amiel, Maimonides presents a specific issue where differing opinions exist, following with a presentation of his own position. This stance often falls somewhere between the two extremes, sometimes incorporating elements from both sides. Rabbi Amiel cites the mere fact that Maimonides' conclusions lie between these extremes as sufficient proof that the primary motive in Rambam's deliberations was to find the middle ground and adhere to the Golden Mean. However, such a narrow and superficial approach overlooks the richness, depth and nuance inherent in Maimonides' system of thought, and thus fails to make a compelling case.

Prominent lapses of logic that taint Rabbi Amiel's analysis include the following observations:

- **Questioning the “Middle Ground”:** Simply identifying a position taken by Rambam as standing between two extremes is an arbitrary exercise on Rabbi Amiel's part; in no way does it guarantee that Rambam's contention represents a true middle ground. The viewpoint branded as “middle ground” might in fact be subtly biased toward one extreme or another.
- **Considering Alternative Motivations:** It is worth questioning whether Maimonides' choices were motivated at all by a desire to occupy the middle ground. Why not take this unparalleled scholar, deep thinker and pious leader of his generation at his word that other significant factors besides the desire for balance influenced his decisions on specific issues?

- **Selective Adoption of Philosophical Views:** If Maimonides was indeed driven by the philosophical ideal of the Golden Mean, why did he not fully embrace certain philosophical doctrines that could be reconciled with Torah teachings? If the allure of philosophical moderation was so compelling, why did he not adopt these views in their entirety? Why would the Greek Golden Mean hold such sway over Rambam when he rejected or diminished other fundamental Aristotelian convictions, such as the eternality of the world and Divine Providence? One is forced to conclude that Rambam's selectivity reflects a complex interplay of factors guiding his thought process, as opposed to a single one-size-fits-all rule of thumb.

The failure to take the above angles into consideration seriously compromises Rabbi Amiel's treatment of the subject matter. Let us now proceed to examine each of his examples individually.

### **Example One: Eternality of the World**

The first example concerns the question of the world's eternality. In *Guide for the Perplexed* (2:29), Maimonides explores the Aristotelian view which asserts that the world has always existed and will continue to exist for all eternity. Aristotle's perspective is contrasted with the simpler belief held by the masses which posits that just as the world was created at a specific point in time, it will eventually come to an end. Rambam then expresses his own view on the matter; he concurs with Aristotle that the world is eternal but disputes Aristotle's assertion that the world has an infinite past as it has an infinite future. According to Rambam, the world was created at a specific point in time, attained an eternal status and will thus continue to exist eternally.

In the interests of good old pedantry, we might quibble with Rabbi Amiel's oversimplified recounting and point out that Maimonides lists not just these two extreme opinions, but also obfuscates the picture by detailing the Platonic view. According to this view, the world was indeed created—albeit from some primordial eternal matter—and like all creations, will cease at some point to exist. Put this way, Plato has already staked out the middle ground, and Maimonides can no longer be credited for brokering a compromise between two intractable opinions.

Be that as it may, Maimonides' view, standing as it does between the two earlier detailed extremes is marshalled as proof by Rabbi Amiel of Rambam's Golden Meanism. If Rabbi Amiel intended only to highlight Maimonides' intellectual tendency to seek out strands of truth in varying and opposing viewpoints, then I have no real issue with this interpretation. I would mention, however, that Maimonides gives no indication here

that he was motivated by a desire to compromise between conflicting views. In fact, when presenting these differing perspectives, Maimonides does not make any effort to argue why the common belief—that the world will eventually cease to exist just as it once did not exist before it was created—should be considered compelling. This suggests that he may have cited this view simply to illustrate the complexity of the debate, rather than to advocate for a middle ground.

If this case is intended to prove that the primary consideration of Rambam was to find a suitable compromise, and that he was prepared to do so even though it would necessitate running counter to the traditional rabbinic viewpoint, then it is difficult to see how Rabbi Amiel finds support for his contention here.

Instead of demonstrating a fealty to the Golden Mean at the *expense* of the prophetic ideal, this example shows Maimonides developing a position that successfully harmonizes the Torah with philosophy. In fact, this example serves as a perfect case study of how Maimonides achieved his stated goal in writing the *Guide*. Here, he accepts Aristotle's view that the world will indeed continue for all eternity, but he fundamentally diverges from Aristotle by asserting that the world was created at a specific point in time. This crucial distinction allows Maimonides to reconcile the concept of creation *ex nihilo*—a core tenet of Jewish belief—with the philosophical notion of the world's eternal existence. In doing so, Maimonides navigates between the extremes of eternal creation and finite existence, crafting a position that acknowledges the philosophical weight of Aristotle's argument while remaining faithful to the theological principles of the Torah.

### **Example Two: Prophecy**

In this example, Rabbi Amiel shines a spotlight on Maimonides' view of prophecy. As Maimonides himself suggests in the *Guide* (2:32), the contours of this debate mirror those of the previous one, with two diametrically opposed opinions. On one side, the view of the common believer insists that prophecy is a completely supernatural occurrence, capable of happening just as easily to a trained prophet as to an unlettered boor. On the other side, those with a philosophical perspective are convinced that prophecy is the natural culmination of intellectual refinement, guaranteed to occur to anyone who takes the necessary steps to prepare for it. Maimonides' view, however, is that while prophecy is a natural phenomenon, it is also dependent on Divine will and, therefore, cannot be fully subjected to scientific empiricism. The corollary is that a person may be fully

suited for prophecy but still not attain it absent the Divine will to enable the prophetic experience.

If Rabbi Amiel's intent in highlighting this matter was to showcase instances where Maimonides' commitment to the principle of the Golden Mean led him to cede some theological ground, then it serves as a weak example. In this case, Maimonides did not merely find a middle ground between two opposing views. Instead, he ingeniously managed to embrace both perspectives, effectively "having his cake and eating it too." Rather than compromising, Maimonides skillfully integrated both approaches into a harmonious whole.

### **Example Three: Divine Providence**

The third example concerns the thorny theological problem of Divine Providence, as detailed in Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:17–18). On one side lies the Aristotelian conviction that Divine Providence extends only to the celestial spheres, while on the other, there is the claim that Divine Providence covers every minute occurrence in the world and reaches down to every blade of grass and every windblown leaf. Maimonides then presents his own belief system, according to which God extends general Providence over species, while leaving individual members of those species subject to the vagaries of nature and chance, save for the select few who are granted extra measures of Divine grace commensurate with the degree of their intellectual-spiritual perfection.

At the outset, it is crucial to note that Rabbi Amiel has, once again, oversimplified the issue to advance his argument, portraying Maimonides' view as a compromise driven by the Golden Mean. In reality, Maimonides lists five different views on the concept of Divine Providence, four of which, though incorrect, held sway among theologians of old until the fifth, the correct prophetic view, was revealed.

Moreover, neither of the two extremes outlined by Rabbi Amiel represents the Torah's perspective. The first is the viewpoint of Aristotle, and the second belongs to the Islamic Ash'arite sect of philosophers. Therefore, if Maimonides sought to find common ground between these two views, he was not making concessions from the Torah. Rather, he was navigating between two opposing perspectives from ancient philosophy, neither of which aligned with prophetic truth.

For his part, Rabbi Amiel is convinced that Maimonides' position—namely that individual members of a species, including humans, are governed by the laws of nature and subject to the vicissitudes of unforgiving chance and the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"—stands in direct opposition to the plain words of the prophets. According to the



prophets, people receive their just deserts, and no one is punished without judgment. For Rabbi Amiel, the prophetic words recounted in the *Book of Jonah* (4:11), “Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 innocent persons, who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, and also many blameless animals,” represent a clear repudiation of Maimonides’ viewpoint. He interprets this passage as evidence of the prophets’ zealous approach, which, in his view, would surely not countenance Maimonides’ Golden Meanism.

However, Rabbi Amiel’s recasting of this issue glaringly omits Maimonides’ extensive discussion of this very point as a prelude to his own analysis. Maimonides explicitly states that his position on Divine Providence is informed by a careful study of the prophetic attitude found in the sacred texts. He includes a detailed discussion of the principal that justice is inherent in God’s being and that the core belief in His system of reward and punishment is the bedrock of our religion. How that jives with the apparent randomness of worldly occurrences is a weighty theological concern, and one that ultimately hearkens back to the age-old question of the suffering of the righteous, but that is beyond the scope of our discussion. Indeed, Rabbi Amiel might have wanted to challenge Maimonides’ carefully considered view that God’s principles of fairness and justice are not compromised by the lack of special Divine Providence for those who have not achieved perfection of character and soul, and any serious discussion of this important topic would have been most welcome. However, there is no excuse for his ignoring Maimonides’ reasoning or pretending it did not exist.

Furthermore, Rabbi Amiel overlooks Maimonides’ diligent effort to ground his opinions in Biblical and prophetic prooftexts. While a detailed analysis of Maimonides’ views on Divine Providence is beyond the scope of this essay, it is essential to note that they are thoroughly laid out in the very chapters Rabbi Amiel references. If Rabbi Amiel had genuine objections, he should have taken the time to inform us of them. But there is no justification for presenting Maimonides’ views as standing in direct contrast to prophetic teachings without also acknowledging that Maimonides himself saw no such contradiction. By doing so, Rabbi Amiel does a disservice to his readers and to the intellectual rigor of the debate.

### **A Cautionary Note on Using Rambam for Social Commentary**

In conclusion, it should be clear that the spurious claim that Maimonides' adherence to the Golden Mean forced him to compromise on fundamental Torah truths and prophetic axioms is not only unsupported by the evidence presented, but, in fact, runs counter to that very evidence. Rabbi Amiel's portrayal of Maimonides as someone who compromises on Torah principles to adhere to the Golden Mean is thus not only misleading but also misrepresents the nuanced and deeply philosophical nature of Maimonides' approach. Rather than compromising, Maimonides engages in a sophisticated analysis that transcends the binary oppositions Rabbi Amiel suggests, remaining firmly grounded in the prophetic tradition while also addressing the philosophical challenges of his time.

Rabbi Amiel's entire argument, and especially the shoddy analysis of the particular issues he raises, are so detached from the actual content of Maimonides' teachings that it is hard to avoid the conclusion that his motivation wasn't a genuine desire to understand Maimonides on his own terms, but rather an attempt to undermine the relevance of the Golden Mean in contemporary religious and social contexts. If this is correct, it is most disheartening to see that a promising investigation into a crucial feature of Maimonidean thought has been reduced to an exercise in demagoguery.

If there is one thing we have learned in our effort to understand Maimonides within his intellectual and philosophical context, it is that the pursuit of knowledge should be driven by a quest for truth, not by an attempt to extract lessons for contemporary issues. When we approach a study with the aim of validating its relevance to modern debates, we run the risk of creating an echo chamber out of our scholarly pursuit so that it always yields the desired results, and we end up finding only what we seek, rather than uncovering the actual truth.

My own motivation for embarking on this journey was the goal of understanding Rambam and to give expression to the master's positions as faithfully as I could, not to derive convenient lessons for today's world or to serve any contemporary agenda. If nothing else, Maimonides' legacy and the integrity of our scholarship demand that we approach these texts with a commitment to uncovering the truth for its own sake, rather than bending our interpretations to fit modern narratives.

Yet, if Rabbi Amiel believed that the social and religious needs of his time were best served by his critique of Maimonides and his advocacy for a more zealous and uncompromising stance on Jewish ideals, then perhaps today—where we often feel as if society around us has become increasingly polarized and social discourse has all but broken down in the

face of shrill extremism—he would forgive us for pointing out the fallacies in his arguments and setting the record straight. In an era like ours, where the problem is often not a lukewarm, compromising stance but rather hard-nosed intransigence—where we sometimes argue so vehemently for our cause that we drown out opposing voices—even Rabbi Amiel might be inclined to reconsider his critique and acknowledge that his case against Maimonides does not hold up under scrutiny.

Instead of using Maimonides as a foil for a call to arms, Rabbi Amiel might, in contemporary context, encourage us to follow Maimonides' example and walk the path of the Golden Mean. Just as Maimonides did with such distinction, serving as a brilliant role model for all successive generations, Rabbi Amiel might now champion the wisdom in promoting moderation, understanding, and unity in the pursuit of truth. Perhaps now he would advocate for a balanced approach, one that respects diverse perspectives and values differing opinions—all while remaining firmly committed to the eternal truths of the Torah. 