

# CENSORSHIP OF RAMBAM'S SEFER HA-MADAH AND MOREH NEVUKHIM

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## I. Introduction

This essay investigates the reasons why Rambam's *Sefer HaMadah* and *Moreh Nevukhim* were censored. Thus it will not focus on external censorship of Jewish books such as the Church's persistent and periodic burning of the Talmud in France, Spain, and Italy, particularly during the period 1240-1600, or government burnings of Hebraica as early as that recounted in the book of Maccabees (1 :50) by Antiochus IV, to climax during the Nazi period.

Yet further consideration on censorship recalls that the *Tanakh* itself does not tolerate all things, for example Idolatry, as when *Eliyahu HaNavi* in an act of censorship eliminates the *Baal* prophets, who cut themselves, in attempts to make it rain. Indeed the canonization of the *Tanakh*, represents acts of censorship, where disputes were held in Yavne by our sages, whether *Kohelet* was too skeptical, *Esther* too assimilationist, or *Shir HaShirim* too erotic. While the rabbis would include *Shir HaShirim* as an allegory of *HaShem's* love for the people Israel, and Rabbi Akiba could proclaim it the *Holy of Hollies*, the canonization of Hebrew scripture may have involved a process where many writings were considered, and only some incorporated. i.e. What happened to the *Book of the Wars of the Lord (BaMidbar 21 : 14)*, *Chronicles of the Kings of Israel and Judah*, *The Book of Jashar (Josh. 10: 13)*, and the *Midrash of Iddo (II Chron. 13:22)*?

## n. Philosophy Regarded by Some as a Dangerous Suspect Activity Leading to Heresy

In the Jewish tradition distrust of philosophy is illustrated by the *Hai Gaon of Pumbeditha (998-1038)* who asserted that the study of philosophy can lead to heresy. The dangerous threat viewed by Judaism as coming from philosophy is noted when the *Meshullam ben Solomon* writes, "Oh men cease from drawing waters from a well the father's neither bore nor dug. What have you to do with Plato or with the philosophers..." In Spinoza's *Traetatus Theologicus Politicus*, Spinoza *ad captum vulgi*, bluntly says, "the Jews despise philosophy", and as late as 1765 Moses Mendelssohn felt it necessary to apologize for recommending the study of logic, and to show why the prohibition against the reading of extraneous profane books (*Sforim Hitzonim*) does not apply to works on logic. Even Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlov (1770-1811), cautioned against Maimonides *Millot Ha-higgayon*, *Sefer HaMadah*, and *Moreh Nevukhim*, while Rabbi Moses Leib of Sassov (1745-1807) reprimanded the young men in Cracow who studied these philosophic works,

Heschel conceives of the opposition towards Rambam's philosophic texts as a case whereby Jewish religious authorities feared that Talmudic study would be compromised at the expense of increased interest in philosophy. 1

R. Alfakar saw that there is an unbridgeable gulf between Greek philosophy and Torah, as noted when Touati writes, "D'apres Juda Alfakhar aucune conciliation s'est possible entre la philosophie greque et la religion juive qui s'opposent irreductiblement." While Rambam did embrace in part Aristotle's moral theory in the Nicomachean Ethics of the "mean" or *Derek haEmzait*<sup>3</sup>, theories of the four causes<sup>4</sup>, and Aristotle's deprecation of touch as the lowest sense, Rambam recognized the unassimilatability into Judaism of Aristotle's view of the eternity of the Universe in favor of Biblical *creation ex nihilo*, as well as rejection of Aristotle's view of Providence (*Hashgihah*)<sup>5</sup>. Although philosophy is less of a suspect activity for Christianity<sup>6</sup>, the Church also saw Aristotle's teachings as a threat and thus censored Aristotle's work.!

Further if we agree with Leo Strauss that the conflict between philosophy and religion, Athens and Jerusalem, is the secret vitality of the west, then the interpretation of the Maimonidean controversy as just a geographical or regional conflict becomes problematic. Weinberger writes, "The strife around *Sefer HaMadah* and the Guide entailed a clash between two worlds, that of the Sephardim with their Islamic Arabic culture of which Maimonides was a product, and that of the Ashkenazim of northern and southern France, who lived in a Christian civilization. "8 Although it may be the case that the Rabbis of northern France, who devoted themselves mostly to Talmudic studies and frowned upon secular scholarly pursuits, sought to stop the spread of Maimonides' philosophical teachings into the north from Spain (where scholars like the ibn Tibbons and the Kimhis, in escaping to Provence from the Almohades brought with them works of Saadia Gaon, Bahya ibn Pakuda, and Yehudah Ha-Levi), we must recall the suspect status of philosophy.

#### ill. Why Censorship of the Mishneh Torah?

In regards to fear that the MT would supplant study of the Talmud, Zeitlin writes, "There seemed at first to be grounds for this charge in the fact that he did not mention the name of any of the *Tannaim* or *Amoraim*. Further he had stated in his introduction that anyone familiar with the Pentateuch would after reading the MT, have a knowledge of all the Oral laws without having recourse to any other book."9 Rambam in his epistle to Pinhas, the Dayyan of Alexandria refuted these charges. Admiring rabbis such as Samuel HaKohen, Saadya ben Berakhya, R. Nissim, and R. Shemarya recognized the importance of the MT as a code.

However some in the rabbinic community objected to *Sefer HaMadah*, for Maimonides placed among the five categories of heretics, those who believed that the Creator was corporeal. 10 The *Midrashim* give accounts of great banquets in *O/am HaBah*, where the righteous will partake of the most delicious foods and wines, while the wicked gaze on with their hands tied, forbidden to partake. Rambam in *Hilkot Teshuvah* and elsewhere proclaims that there is no eating, drinking, or anything corporeal in *O/am HaBah* but the righteous sit with crowns on the heads enjoying the light of the *Shechinah*.11 The crowns represent the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge gained in this world, including for the Rambam scientific learning such as philosophy and medicine. Rambam rejects a corporeal Creator espoused in works such as *Shi'ur Qomahl2*, as encapsulated by *Yigdal's* proclamation, "*Ain Lo Demut HaGuf VeAino Guf*"

Touati lists Rambam's negation of the corporeality of the Deity as the first criticism in the following list of attacks Rambam faced from anti-Maimonidists: (1) l'enseignement de Maimonide sur l'absolue incorporelité de Dieu; (2) ses theories sur la prophetie ramenee a une vision; (3) sa tendance a restreindre le champ du miracle; (4) sa negation des demons; (5) sa reduction des anges au role de Moteurs des Spheres celestes; (6) les interpretations spiritulistes qu'il avait donnees du Paradis et L'enfer; (7) les motifs qu'il avait assignes aux preceptes religieux (mitzvot); (8) l'alegorization des recites bibliques a laquelle se livraient ses disciples; (9) le dedain qu'ils auraient affiche a l'egard des Sages du Talmud; (9) le relachement de la pratique religieuses qu'on croyait constater chez eux et dont on imputait la responsabilite a l'etude de la philosophie.13

#### IV. Why Censorship of the Moreh Nevukim?

One reason that the Guide was censored was because Maimonides offers an allegory in Part III, chapter 51, on the approximate remoteness and nearness of classified groups of people to the inner chamber of the seventh heavenly palace where Moshe Rabenu is located in dialogue with HaShem. 14 Those most far removed outside the city of God, are all human beings who have no doctrinal belief neither one based on speculation nor one that accepts the authority of tradition. The second farthest group away from the palace are those "who have turned their backs upon the ruler's habitation", and "who have incorrect opinions." The third group farthest away from the palace are described when Rambam writes, "Those who seek to reach the

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ruler's habitation and to enter it, but never see the ruler's habitation, are the multitude of the adherents of the Law, I refer to *the ignoramuses who observe the commandments*". They serve the Creator out of blind mechanistic duty on the contingency of receiving a reward motivated out of fear and punishment, rather than serving out of love. Antigonus of Socho receiving the tradition from Simon the Just, says, "*Al Tihyu kaAvdem hamishmsheem et haRav al Minat lZKabal Piras, eleh heyo KaAvadem hamishmsheem et HaRav shelo al minat li Kabail Piras.*"

Although religious authorities feared that "la philosophie est responsable du retachement de la pratique religieuse"<sup>15</sup>, the main fear of Jewish religious authorities appears to be direct revelation of secrets. Teaching in writing, to be differentiated from oral teaching, the secrets of the *Tanakh* (i.e. *ma'aseh merkavah*<sup>16</sup>, *ma'aseh bereshit*<sup>17</sup>, *prophetology*<sup>18</sup>, *angelology*<sup>19</sup>, *Sitre Torah* as contradictions of the Torah<sup>20</sup>, etc)<sup>21</sup> is forbidden by oral law. For example, Mishneh Hagigah 2: 1 reads, "*En doresin ba'arayot biselosah welo bema'aseh beresit bisenayim welo bammerkabah beyahid ella im ken hayah hakham wehebin midda'ato. Kol hammistakkel be'arba'ah debarim ratuy 10 ke'illu lo ba la'olam mah lema' lan umah lemattan mah lefanim umah le'ahor. Kol sello has al kebed qono ratuy 10 ke'illu lo ba la'olam.*" The subject of the merkavah found in M.Hag 2:1 is found further in the corresponding section of the Tosefta (T.Hag.2:1-7), and in the *gemara* to this Mishneh in *Yerushalmz* (Hag.77a-d) and *Bavli* (Hag. 1 1 b-16a),<sup>22</sup> These texts presume the dangers of this esoteric subject, for according to M. Hagigah 2: 1 *merkavah* may not be expounded (*en doresin bammerkabah*) except under special circumstances, and according to Megillah 4: 10, it may not be used as a prophetic lection in the synagogue (*en maftirin hammerkabah*). Special knowledge of the esoteric subjects, is reserved for a small group of initiates. Rabbinic anecdotes stress its secret and wondrous nature, and hazard for the pre-mature.

Strauss argues that Rambam had to break these rabbinic laws, in order to save the law<sup>23</sup>, namely if the Rambam did not write down the secrets of the above esoteric subjects, they risked being lost depriving those who were perplexed of the Rambam's guidance. While Rambam promises to transmit the secrets of *ma'aseh bereshit* (Creation in Genesis 1) which the Rambam links with physical science (*hokmat Hatebah*), and *ma'aseh merkavah* (chariot vision in Ezekiel 1, 10; 43: 1-3) which the Rambam links to metaphysics (*Hokmat Elokut*)<sup>24</sup> Strauss cautions against these reductions, for Maimonides may intentionally contradict himself in order to keep the esoteric teachings of *the Guide* separate from exoteric teachings.<sup>25</sup> Strauss' differentiation between esoteric and exoteric becomes all the more interesting in light of Halperin's thesis that there are two types of rabbinic *merkavah* exegesis, the exoteric exegesis recorded in Talmud, Midrashim, and Targumim; and an esoteric exegesis reserved orally or in secret books for an elite.<sup>26</sup>

Rambam recalls a tradition in the Talmud attributed to Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish that the merkavah are the *Avoit*<sup>7</sup> and which is recapitulated in *Zohar 262b Vaethhanan* where we read, "*Only HaShem had a delight in thy fathers (Devarim 15). Commenting on this, R. Simeon said that the patriarchs are the holy chariot above. As there is a holy chariot below, so there is a holy chariot above. And what is this? As we have said, the holy chariot is the name given to the Whole, all being /inked together and made one. But the fathers are only three, and the chariot has four wheels. Who is the fourth? It says, 'And chose their seed after them', this includes David HaMelech, who is the fourth to complete the holy chariot, as we learnt, 'The patriarchs are the consummation of the whole, and the Body was completed through them and made one. Then David HaMelech came and perfected the whole and made firm the body and perfected it. Rabbi Yitzak said, 'As the patriarchs merited to be crowned with the holy chariot, so did David merit to be adorned with the fourth support of the chariot.'*" Philosophy is comprehension of the whole.

## V. Anti-Maimonideans

Three anti-Maimonist Rabbis included R. Solomon ben Abraham of Montpellier and his two disciples, R. Jonah Gerondi and R. David ben Saul. Dubnov comments on these three rabbis placing a ban on Maimonides philosophical work when he writes, "Das dreigliedrige Rabbinerkollegium entschloß sich nun zu einem folgenschweren Schritt: es verhängte den Cherem ueber alle diejenigen, die sich mit Philosophie und mit profanen Wissenschaften ueberhaupt, insbesondere aber mit den philosophischen Werken des Maimonides (More Nevuchim und Sefer HaMada) befaßten, wie auch ueber solche, die Ueberlieferungen der Bibel und des Talmud in rationalistischem Geiste auszulegen wagten (zu Beginn des Jahres 1232).<sup>28</sup> These anti-Maimonideans sought the support of the Dominicans to enforce the censorship of Maimonides work. Graetz, employing a technique of Thucydides, reconstructs a possible dialog between R. Solomon ben Abraham and R. Gerondi and the Dominicans by writing, "Ihr verbrennt eure Ketzer, verflucht auch unsere."<sup>29</sup> As to the rabbis appealing to the Dominicans, Dubnov gives the following lengthier reconstruction of the dialog that may have taken place, "Wir wissen daß es in unserer Stadt viele Ketzer und Gottlose gibt, die sich durch die Lehre des Moses aus Aegypten, des Verfassers ruchlosen philosophischen Buecher, veruehren ließen. Vertilget ihr eure Ketzer, so vertilget mit ihnen auch die unseren und verbrennet die schaedlichen Buecher."<sup>30</sup>

## VI. Motivations of the Friars to Carry out the Book Burnings?

The following three reasons are advanced by scholars as to the motivations for the friars to burn Rambam's philosophic works: (1) The friars, then recently forming, and wishing validation in the eyes of the established Catholic Church, welcomed the position of authority to serve as arbiters in a Jewish matter; (2) The friars confused Maimonides philosophical works with the Rambam's *halachic* writings, which the Church still regarded as containing matters dangerous to ecclesiastical power<sup>31</sup>; (3) The friars who had been given the authority by the Church to root out the Albigensian heretics in France, were caught up in their zeal. Whatever the motivation of the friars, the rabbis who may have urged them to burn Rambam's writings, soon found that their strategy backfired, for a few years later the friars initiated a long history of censorship of the Talmud that involved over 300 years of Talmud burnings.<sup>32</sup> According to Rabbi Hillel of Verona, the burning of Rambam's books took place near the cathedral of Notre Dame, and the bonfire was lit with tapers from that altar. Rabbi Abraham Maimuni, according to some accounts, pictured the fire that burnt his father's books, with *the letters ascending to heaven*, as making them immortal, even as *Eliyahu HaNavi* was translated alive to heaven in a fiery chariot.

## VB. Conclusion

While the question of censorship of *Hebraica* is an important question for Jewish librarians and archivists, this essay has focused on the internal censorship of Rambam's philosophical writings.

## Notes

1. see Heschel, J. Abraham, "Renunciation and Fulfilment", Maimonides, Image Books, 209.
2. Touati, "Les Conflits Autour de Maimonide", in Juifs et Judaïsme de Languedoc, Cahiers de Fanjeux, 176; also see Zinberg, Israel, Die geshikhte fun der literatur bay Yidn, Vilna, volume 3.
3. Rambam does advocate departure from the Aristotelian mean (*yesh deot sheasor liAdam linhog bahen beyonit*) with regards to humility and not getting angry. We are bidden to go to the extreme in humility because in *Bamidbar* we read, "VeHaEish Moshe ana miod miko/ haAdam asher a/ penai HaAdamah". Rambam also recognizes that the Hasid will depart from the mean when he writes, "Mi shehu medakdek al azmo biyoter veyitrachak mideah beyonit meat letzad zeh olitzad zeh nekrah Hasid (*Mishev Torah*. 47b. lines 17-18).
4. Aristotle teaches that there are four causes: (1) the *causa materialis*; (2) the *causa formalis*; (3) the *causa finalis*; and (4) *causa efficiens*. *HaShem* can be thought to be the *causa efficiens* in the creation of everything

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that exists. The teleological or *causa finalis* of the world is the messianic age when according to the Book of Judges of the *Yad Hazakah* the following contingencies will obtain: (1) no war, (2) no famine, (3) no jealousy, (4) no strife, (5) blessings will be abundant (scholars will be able to study full time without financial burdens), (6) the Levitical priesthood will be reinstated in a rebuilt Temple complex, (7) Jews will not be persecuted (i.e. the lamb (Jews), will dwell with the wolf (other nations that persecute us), (8) the one preoccupation of the world will be to know HaShem, for according to Isaiah, "For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of HaShem, as the waters cover the sea (11 :9)."

5. see *Moreh Nevukim* III, 8-24.

6. Strauss, Leo, Persecution and the Art of Writing, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980, 19

7. The council of the Ecclesiastical Province of Sens held in Paris in 1210 prohibited the reading of the works of Aristotle on pain of excommunication. In 1215 Robert de Courcon the Papal legate renewed the prohibition in the following words, "*Non Legantur Libri Aristotelis De Metaphisica Et de Naturali Philosophia, Nee Summae de Eisdem.*" The church also tried to censor the Aristotelian teachings of Averroes.

The inquisition in France in 1277 indicted Siger of Brabant, the author of *De Anima Intellectiva*, because of Averroism.

8. Weinberger, Moshe c., *Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Jewish History*, Yeshivah University Press, 32.

9. Zeitlin, Solomon, "Mishne Torah-Jewish Constitution", Maimonides, Bloch Publishing Co., 80.

10. see *Sefer HaMadah, Hilcot Teshuvah*, 84b, III, 7

11. see *Sefer HaMadah, Hilcot Teshuvah*, 90a, VIII, 2

12. see Idel, Moshe, "*Maimonides and Kabbalah*", in Studies in Maimonides, Harvard Univ. Press, 34; Idel demonstrates that Rambam is an Aristotelian rationalist, and not a Kabbalist, while to be sure the Rambam's work influenced Kabbalah. For example Abulafia's commentary on the thirty-six secrets of the Guide, Sitre Torah, is just one of many Kabbalistic works that sought to appropriate Rambam's teachings to the Kabbalistic camp. Abulafia's pupil, Gikatilla in his mystical commentary to the Guide also sought to relocate Maimonides teaching within the constellation of Jewish mysticism. The legend of Maimonides conversion to Kabbalah by Rabbi Yacov the Nazarite seems connected to Rabbi Yitzak of Acre's presentation in *Meirat Einaim*.

13. Touati, "*Les Deux Conflits autour de Maimonide et des Etudes Phi/osophiques*", in Juifs et Judaisme de Languedoc, Edouard Privat editeur, Cahiers de Fanjeaux, 174.

14. see *Moreh Nevukim* III, 51; Rambam writes, "Among them there (present in the ruler's council) is he who because of the greatness of his apprehension and his renouncing everything that is other than HaShem, may He be exalted, has attained such a degree that it is said of him, 'And he was there with HaShem (Ex.34:28), putting questions and receiving answers, speaking and being spoken to, in that holy place". This is Platonic in that, "Questioning is the piety of thought".

15. Touati, "*Les Deux Conflits autour de Maimonide et des Etudes Phi/osophiques*", Juifs et Judaisme de Languedoc, 179.

16. see *Moreh Nevukim* III, 1-7

17. For example, "What is the nature of light on the first day of creation, if the sun, moon, and the stars (light giving bodies), are not hung up in the firmament until the fourth day? Rashi remarks that "the light created on the first day is the light stored up for the righteous in *Olam HaBah*"? What is the nature of such stored up hidden light? see Rambam's commentary on Bereshit.

18. see *Moreh Nevukim* II, 32-48

19. see *Moreh Nevukim* II 3-12

20. Why for example is it prohibited to see HaShem's face, yet exceptional individuals do see HaShem's face and live?; see: Ex.3; 24: 10; Deut.34: 10; Isa.6: 1; Ezek.1, 10

21. It is a matter of debate whether the Rabbinic tradition (see TB Hagigah 13a) may link *ma'aseh merkavah* and *ma'aseh bereshit* together based on the following passage from *Seder O'am Rabbah* (ch. 30, ed. Milikovsky, p.445) where we read, "He reveals the deep and secret things (Dan2:22). Deep-that is the depths of the *Merkavah*, and secret- that is *ma'aseh bereshit*."
22. *Merkavah* is also found in Mishneh: MegiHah 4: 10, Tosefta: Meg. 3(4):28, 34. BT: Ber.21 b, Shabb. 80b, Sukk.28a (=B.B 134a), Meg.24b.31a.
23. Gitten 60b reads, Devarim shebal'peh e atah rashay lektavtan-mekan atah lemad shehatalmud 10 netan lektov eleh mepenai shehatorah meshtakchat.
24. see *Moreh Nevukim*, I, Introduction, 3b
25. Strauss, Leo, Persecution and the Art of Writing, 45, and "Jerusalem and Athens", in Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy. Univ. Chicago Press, 1983, 154; see Gitten 60b, Berachot 54a
26. see Halperin, David, The Merkavah in Rabbinic Literature. The American Oriental Society, New Haven, 1980
27. Thus the man (ch. 10=malach) corresponds to Abraham, the lion to Yitzak, the ox to Yakov. The Qumran Essene sect also associated the ox as a symbol of Yakov. see Baumgarten, Joseph M. "*The Qumran Sabbath Shirot and Rabbinic Merkavah Traditions*", RQ 13, 1988, 199-214
28. Dubnov, Simon, "*Die Maimonisten und Ihre Gegner*", Weltgeschichte des Jüdischen Volkes, 109; Touati puts it this way, "Vers 1230, un eminent rabbin de Montpellier, Solomon ben Abraam, et ses deux élèves, R. Yonah Gerundi et R. David ben Saul, se décident à passer à l'action et à barrer la route à la spéculation philosophique en interdisant, sous peine d'excommunication, l'étude du Sefer Ha-Mada, l'introduction philosophique au Code de Maimonide, celle du Guide et des sciences générales (175).
29. Graetz, Heinrich, "*Maimuni's Schriften und die Inquisition*", Geschichte Des Juden, vol.7, 66.
30. Dubnov, Simon, "*Die Maimonisten und Ihre Gegner*", Weltgeschichte Des Jüdischen Volkes, 113.
31. see Cohen, Jeremy, "The Actual Controversy", in The Friars and the Jews. Cornell University Press, 153; Cohen notes that the biases against the Talmud that fueled its being burned by the Church included: (1) parts of it were considered blasphemous; (2) the argument that without the Talmud the Jews would be more likely to convert to Christianity; and (3) it could injure Christian faith. Cohen's thesis is that it is not until after the 1232 burning of Maimonides' writings that the friars systematically undertook the study of Hebrew and the Aramaic of Talmudic texts to conduct disputations in order to beat the Jews at their own game of interpretations of rabbinic literature, now used by the friars to attempt to prove the truth of Christianity. 32. see Dubnov, Simon, "*Die Maimonisten und Ihre Gegner*" Weltgeschichte Des Jüdischen Volkes, 67

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