



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

Walking with History

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Harold Held and Louise Held,
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UNIT 5: MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

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“In the beginning” - It may be counter-intuitive, but “In the beginning” is an appropriate opening for an essay on Jewish thought in the Middle Ages. This opening phrase of the Book of Genesis first entered the vocabulary of English speakers in the 1380s, with John Wycliffe’s translation of the Latin Bible into English. The words were “canonized” in the English language in 1611 with the publication of the Authorized King James version of the Bible. What is so interesting about these three words as the translation of the very first word of the Torah, *b’reishit*, is that for Jews, the translation is a medieval innovation! As we will see, during the entire rabbinic period, which dates from the 1st century destruction of the Second Temple to the Muslim conquest of the early 7th century, there was not one single Jewish voice that claimed that the first word of the Torah meant what some medieval Jewish thinkers understood “*b’reishit*” to mean. We will survey the three emerging genres of medieval Jewish thought - Bible commentary, philosophy and mysticism, in order to appreciate the gloriously inconsistent ways in which our ancestors understood the Torah’s opening utterance. We’ll also peek into the world of halakhic or Jewish legal codification to see how a few thinkers contended with the less savory side of creation. The animating question behind our investigation is: What is the relationship between Torah and truth?

BIBLE COMMENTARY (*PARSHANUT*)

Among the novel intellectual and literary endeavors of the Middle Ages was the creation of a running commentary on the Bible. During the rabbinic period, Midrash collections were compiled that connected biblical verses to contemporary ideas of the time, but there was little systematic attention paid to explicating the flow of biblical verses within the context of the Bible itself. Put differently, rabbinic Midrash tended to exploit individual verses or phrases for the purpose of the darshan, the creator of a midrash. By the Middle Ages, for a variety of reasons, there was an increased interest in understanding what the Torah meant in its own terms.¹

The first word of the Torah, as it turns it, is not so easy to understand or to translate. Moreover, as we will discover, different translations come with dramatic philosophical and religious implications. Saadiah Gaon (882-942) was one of the very first Jews to bring a philosophical lens to the Torah. Saadiah, who was born in Egypt and spent most of his life in the academies of Babylonia, penned one of the first translations of the Torah into Arabic and one of the first running commentaries on the Torah. Saadiah offers a one word interpretation of *b’reishit* in his commentary: *ba-rishonah*.

Saadiah has sidestepped two grammatical problems of the Hebrew. *Ba-rishonah* tells us, much like the Wycliffe and the King James Bibles, that “In the beginning” God created the heavens and the earth. Even looking only at the English transliteration, one can see that the Torah begins with *b’* while Saadiah changes it to *ba*. Saadiah’s change is equivalent to adding the definite article, thus changing the meaning from “In a beginning” to “In the beginning”. The Torah might better be translated here as “In a beginning”. The end of the word *b’reishit* is problematic too, since it almost always indicates that *b’reishit* itself introduces another noun, as in: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of (*reishit*) knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7). Combining the problematic prefix and suffix of *b’reishit*, one might arrive at the following translation: “In a beginning of...” But, since the word after *b’reishit* is not a noun but a verb, the translation of *b’reishit* is very tricky. Saadiah preserves the Hebrew root of *b’reishit* (*resh*, *aleph*, *shin* – as in *rosh*, or head) and smoothes out the bumps of the Hebrew grammar.

In Saadia Gaon’s philosophical work, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (933), he defends, for the first time in Jewish history(!), the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation from nothing. Saadiah was heavily influenced by

¹ Shai Cherry, *Torah through Time: Understanding Bible Commentary from the Rabbinic Period to Modern Times*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007, pp. 18ff.



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the Muslim philosophical theology called Kalam. Ancient Greek philosophy tended to reject providence and divine intervention as traditionally maintained by Judaism and Islam. Kalam argued that Greek philosophy erred in its metaphysical assumption that the world was eternal and operated solely according to immutable laws of nature. Kalam, and Saadiah here is a prime example, predicated its religious philosophy on God having created the universe and thus on God's ability to intervene in creation to reward the righteous and to punish the wicked. If the universe were eternal as Aristotle had suggested, then the laws of nature could not be altered to wield the carrot and stick that traditional religion relied upon for obedience.

How does this philosophical argument relate to the first word of the Torah? Here's the Jewish Publication Society's translation of the Torah's first two verses: "When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, 'Let there be light'".² None of the elements between the dashes (verse two) is described as having been created by God. That's how the world was when God began creating in Genesis 1:1. An entirely reasonable interpretation of the Hebrew is that those elements were eternal and that God fashioned those eternal elements into the heaven and the earth. (That is precisely what is described in one of Plato's dialogues, *Timeaus*.)

For Wycliffe and King James, when the curtain of creation rose for the very first time, there was nothing on stage. God created everything out of nothing. But the Hebrew suggests that when the curtain went up, there were a few elements chaotically swirling around on stage. Those elements circumscribed God's freedom. God had to work with the materials at hand, not ones God created for the express purpose of our world. The Jewish Publication Society's translation qualifies divine omnipotence—maybe God can't create the world out of nothing? Saadiah is unwilling to flirt with an eternal world or even with the existence of eternal elements because of the implications these ideas would have for divine power and providence. He preemptively translates the Torah's first word in such a way as to sidestep that theological pitfall. As we will see, a far more famous biblical commentator, Rashi, did not share Saadiah's concerns.

Although Rashi was born in 1040, more than 150 years after Saadiah, he lived in a Christian Europe where Greek philosophy had not yet penetrated Jewish intellectual circles. In some of Rashi's late Bible commentary, one sees the influence of the Christian Crusades which began in 1096, but the vast majority of his commentary consists of excerpts from earlier rabbinic material from the Talmud and Midrash. Although Rashi does not seem to be familiar with Saadiah's Bible commentary, he explicitly rejects Saadiah's interpretation of the verses at the beginning of Genesis. Rashi explains that since the Torah did not begin with the word *ba-rishonah*, the Torah's account of creation is not to be understood chronologically. Rashi tacitly admits that the Torah does not reveal when, or if, God created those elements listed between the dashes, that is, in Genesis 1:2.

PHILOSOPHY

Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a 20th century disciple of the great medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), unpacked the implications of the Torah's opening verse as follows: "The world is not God—the negation of atheism and pantheism".³ For those in the philosophical tradition who trace their intellectual lineage to Aristotle, God and the physical world are radically separate. God is beyond the metaphysical *mehitzah* (partition), which renders God, in classical theological terms, transcendent. In Maimonides' words, "There is no association between God, may he be exalted, and what is other than he" (*The Guide of the Perplexed*

² JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000.

³ Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Religion and Science in the Middle Ages and in the Modern Era," in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 140.



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[1190], Book I, Chapter 61). In Maimonides' presentation of Judaism in an Aristotelian key, God loses the familiar intimacy (immanence) of the biblical and rabbinic God. For Maimonides, philosophy/science is the source of truth and the key to reading the Torah. When Maimonides claims the elements inside the dashes are earth, air, water and fire, he takes his cue not from the Torah, which does not mention fire, but from Aristotle's four elements.⁴

Maimonides recognizes, as had Saadia, the stakes of the dispute between *creatio ex nihilo* and the philosophical preference for the eternity of the world. According to Maimonides, were Aristotle correct, it would “destroy the Torah in its principle, necessarily give the lie to every miracle, and reduce to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Torah holds out” (*Guide*, Book II, Chapter 25). If God is radically and exclusively transcendent, as Aristotle maintains, then God could not reward the righteous with rain or punish the wicked with drought, as we read in the second paragraph of the Shema (Deuteronomy 11:13-21). Although Maimonides suggests that we should accept *creatio ex nihilo* because the eternity of the world has not been proven and its proof would destroy the Torah, he offers three hints that he, himself, might not believe in *creatio ex nihilo*:

- 1) In the introduction to his *Guide of the Perplexed*, he tells his readers that he will not always be truthful in order to protect the sensibilities of the masses;
- 2) “Whoever prefers one of the two opinions because of his upbringing or for some advantage is blind to the truth” (*Guide*, Book II, Chapter 23);
- 3) Maimonides did not believe that Jews were rewarded with rain or punished with drought. He held that these threats of reward and punishment were included in the Torah as a concession to the Israelites who couldn't imagine a different religious system than what they'd experienced in Egypt (*Guide*, Book III, Chapters 30 and 32)!

Regardless of Maimonides' true beliefs, his agenda of creating a Judaism that was as compatible with philosophical thought as possible was not universally appreciated. Portions of the Jewish intellectual elite continued to be attracted to philosophy, but another worldview soon surfaced that challenged philosophy on almost all issues.

MYSTICISM

Although elements of mysticism can be found in the Torah and in rabbinic literature, the specific language of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah emerges in full force with the *Zohar* in 13th century Christian Spain. (A Sufi-inspired mysticism is already found in the 11th century with Bahya ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*.) The Kabbalists accepted Maimonides' contention that God was radically transcendent, but they also believed that God was radically immanent within creation. Just as French and Spanish Catholics had an intensely personal relationship with God through Jesus and Mary, so, too, did the French and Spanish mystics through Kabbalah. In Kabbalistic parlance, the *Ain Sof*, or infinitude, is that aspect of divine essence that is beyond all human comprehension. Yet, God chose to reveal divine characteristics through the emanation of the ten *sefirot*, or hubs, which channel the flow of divine energy. The sefirotic system is activated by Jewish mystics performing the commandments with the proper intention. While in the philosophical worldview, nothing humans do can affect God, for the Kabbalists, the free flow of divine energy in the sefirotic world, which eventually trickles down into the physical world, is completely dependent on human, i.e. male Jewish mystics', actions. In this system, God and Jews are in constant interaction.

⁴ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Book II, Chapter 30.



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Maimonides had understood the Torah to be written on two levels, one for the philosophical elite and another for the masses. Both levels served important purposes. For the Kabbalists, the outer garb of the Torah was often degraded; only the inner meaning was prized. The Zohar's reading of the first verse of the Torah alerts its readers that the Torah is a mystical and cryptic code of divine self-disclosure: *B'reishit*, with the *sefirah* of *reishit*, [*Ain Sof*] created God. Allow me to translate. Through or with the second of the 10 *sefirot*, which is sometimes called *reishit*, the "highest" *sefirah*, which itself is connected to and embedded within *Ain Sof* and is therefore unknowable, totally hidden, and unmentionable, that force created/emanated God, a name sometimes given to the third *sefirah*. *B'reishit bara Elohim* is kabbalistic code for the first and ineffable *sefirah* creating or emanating the third *sefirah*, God. Thus, the Torah describes how God was created, not those things created by God! For the mystics, the God we "see" in the Torah is only one aspect of God that has been emanated in a process of divine unfolding from that which is beyond our ken. So, don't mistake "God" for God.⁵

Yesh m'ayin, something from nothing, was how the Jewish philosophical tradition described God's creation: there was absolutely nothing, God created, and then there was something. God used no eternal elements that were combined into material reality. Before creation (although time was one of the created things), God was alone. The Kabbalists understood that *yesh*, creation, was from Nothing with a capital N. *Ayin*, Nothing, is one name for the first *sefirah* which is embedded within the *Ain Sof*. The Kabbalists are suggesting that all material creation, *yesh*, garbs divine energy that pulses from divine Nothingness, *m'ayin*.⁶ The universe is an emanation of God's overflowing divinity that cascades in some mysterious manner from pure energy to seeming physicality.⁷ Thus, in a real, albeit attenuated, way, how we relate to one another and to the planet is how we relate to God. That's why how we behave matters to God.

HALAKHAH / JEWISH LAW

In the Talmud, there is far less concern for legal codification than there is for legal reasoning. After the close of the Talmud and the talmudic academies in Babylonia, a new genre of Jewish literature emerged that attempted to systematically codify the breadth of Jewish law. The late medieval mystic and halakhist Joseph Caro compiled the *Shulkhan Arukh* in 1563 from the 11th century code of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi, the 12th century *Mishneh Torah* of Maimonides, and the 14th century work of Rabbenu Asher. On most issues, Caro adopted the halakhah according to two of his three sources. Although Maimonides begins his code with a philosophical discussion of God and God's role in creation, neither Alfasi nor Rabbenu Asher treat such theoretical issues. Nevertheless, the halakhah is concerned with the works of creation, even those not specifically mentioned in Genesis.

The Talmud, for example, directs a woman to wash her hands before feeding a baby to prevent an evil spirit from endangering the baby's health (Yoma 77b). Maimonides, a physician, preserves the emphasis on good hygiene but without attributing the need for washing to demonic activity.⁸ Another passage in the Talmud warns against cooking meat and fish together, in order to avoid leprosy, according to Rashi (Pesakhim 76b). The *Shulchan Arukh* codified that (Yoreh Deah 116:2), and also obligated one to wash his hands between eating meat and fish for the same reason (Orah Hayyim 173:2). Maimonides avoids discussion of such silliness altogether.⁹ Here's how one 17th century commentator disposed of that halakhah: "It is possible that nowadays there is not a great danger, since we have seen several things mentioned in the Gemara (Talmud) as dangerous due to an

⁵ See Daniel Chanan Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*. New York: Paulist Press, 1983, pp. 49f. and notes.

⁶ Daniel C. Matt, "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in Lawrence Fine, *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*. New York: New York University Press, 1995.

⁷ The Kabbalists employ a Neoplatonic framework for their theological assertions.

⁸ *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Shevitat Asor 3:2.

⁹ See his general attitude towards superstition in *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 11:16.



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evil spirit, but now there's no harm because nature has changed and, also, everything depends on the nature of the lands".¹⁰ It's not that our Talmudic ancestors were wrong, heaven forefend, but nature changes, and besides, demons are local phenomena.

CONCLUSION

The challenge and glory of Judaism is its honesty and its commitment to multiple ideologies. Rashi, Saadiah, Maimonides, and the Kabbalists had gloriously inconsistent approaches (vis-à-vis one another) to Torah and truth—yet, they all dedicated their lives to living out their understanding of God's will as mediated through the Torah and rabbinic tradition. Concerning the Torah's first verse, Rashi allowed the Torah to speak in its own voice, while Saadiah, Maimonides, and the author of the Zohar played the ventriloquist to further their own religious agendas.

Upon encountering theologically problematic verses like the ones which open Genesis, the rabbis of the Talmud were wont to say, "If the Torah hadn't been explicit, our mouths could never utter such a thing".¹¹ The rabbis, along with Rashi, tolerated theological tension better than many medievals. If we now believe that the world was created in a Big Bang, do we need to read that 20th century theory into our ancient Near Eastern Torah?¹² Or, can we admit that the Torah's opening creation myth is not to be read as a science text?

Can we employ glorious inconsistency and agree with Maimonides on some issues and the Kabbalists on others, or leave the question of God's participation in creation open for the individual to decide for herself? Let me go out on a Conservative limb and posit that leprosy is now and has always been unrelated to the consecutive and uninterrupted consumption of meat and fish. It's not that nature has changed; it's that the Talmud got the medical science wrong.

The Talmud says that God's seal is truth.¹³ Whether it is about the composition of the Torah or the evolution of humanity, our challenge as Jews is to apply the truth, as best we can determine it, to the glory of God.

¹⁰ Magen Avraham (Rabbi Avraham Abele ben Hayyim ha-Levi Gombiner c.1637-1683), on Orah Hayyim 173:2.

¹¹ See, for example, Megillah 21a in the Babylonian Talmud, and on the matter of creation, Midrash Genesis Rabbah, 1:5.

¹² See, e.g., Gerald Schroeder, *Genesis and the Big Bang*, New York: Bantam Books, 1990, and my critique of such folly in "Crisis Management via Biblical Interpretation: Fundamentalism, Modern Orthodoxy, and Genesis," in *Jewish Tradition and the Challenge of Darwinism*, ed. Geoffrey Cantor and Marc Swetlitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 166-187.

¹³ Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69b.



UNIT 5: MEDIEVAL THOUGHT – TEXT 1

בראשית ב:ג
וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, וַיְקַדֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי בּו שַׁבַּת מְכֹל-מְלַאכְתּוֹ, אֲשֶׁר-בָּרָא
אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת.

GENESIS 2:3

And God blessed the 7th day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all his work, which God created to make.

רש"י : בראשית ב: ג
אשר ברא אלהים לעשות : המלאכה שהיתה ראויה לעשות בשבת ככל ועשאה
בששי...

RASHI ON GENESIS 2:3

Which God created to make: The work that was fit to be done on Shabbat, he doubled and did it on the 6th day.

כלי יקר : בראשית ב: ג
אשר ברא אלהים לעשות : לפי שהשבת מורה על בריאת יש מאין ודוקא מאותה
בריאה שבת, אבל מבריאת יש מיש לא שבת כי כמה נטיעות קולטות וצומחות
בשבת. וכל הנבראים שבששת ימי המעשה נבראו כדי לעשות מהם יש מיש... על כן
נאמר "אשר ברא אלהים לעשות" שבראם כדי לעשות מהם יש מיש דבר יום ביומו.
ומכלל זה אנו למידין שהשבת מופת על בריאת יש מאין...

KLI YAKAR (1550-1619) ON GENESIS 2:3

Which God created to make: Since Shabbat points to *creatio ex nihilo*, it is this manner of creation from which God ceased, but he did not cease from formation from what had already been created out of nothing, because there are plants that continue to absorb and grow on Shabbat. All of creation on the first six days was created in order to continue making something from them after the first six days. That's why the verse says, "which God created to make". For God created them [out of nothing] in order to make from them something from something in their own time. And from this we derive that Shabbat is a sign of *creatio ex nihilo*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- According to Rashi, what does the Torah teach us in this verse?
- According to Kli Yakar, what does the Torah teach us in this verse?
- For each commentator, what does the last word, *la'asot* (to make), refer to?
- This biblical passage is included in our *Kiddush* on Shabbat. Which interpretation do you find more meaningful for your Shabbat? Why?



MEDIEVAL THOUGHT – TEXT 2

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה י: ו

דבר ידוע וברור שאין אהבת הקב"ה נקשרת בלבו של אדם עד שיסגה בה תמיד כראוי ויעזוב כל מה שבעולם חוץ ממנה, כמו שצוה ואמר "בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך" (דברים ו: ה). אינו אוהב הקב"ה אלא בדעת שידעהו, ועל פי הדעה תהיה האהבה אם מעט מעט ואם הרבה הרבה. לפיכך צריך האדם ליחד עצמו להבין ולהשכיל בחכמות ותבונות המודיעים לו את קונו כפי כח שיש באדם להבין ולהשיג כמו שבארנו בהלכות יסודי התורה.

MAIMONIDES (RAMBAM, RABBI MOSHEH BEN MAIMON, 1135-1204), MISHNEH TORAH: HILKHOT TESHUVAH 10:6

It is known and clear that the love of God does not become attached to a person's heart until he is engrossed in it always, and abandons everything in the world except for it, as was commanded "with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 6:5).

One only loves God through the knowledge with which he knows him, and the love will be according to the knowledge – if a little [knowledge] a little [love], and if a lot, a lot.

Therefore, a person must devote himself to comprehending the wisdom which makes his creator known to him, according to the person's ability to understand, as we explained in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*.

רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה ד: יב

בזמן שאדם מתבונן בדברים האלו ומכיר כל הברואים ממלאך וגלגל ואדם כיוצא בו ויראה חכמתו של הקב"ה בכל היצורים וכל הברואים, מוסיף אהבה למקום ותצמא נפשו ויכמה בשרו לאהוב המקום ברוך הוא...

MISHNEH TORAH: HILKHOT YESODEI HA-TORAH 4:12

When a person considers these things and recognizes all the creations, the angels, the spheres, man, and the like, and he sees the wisdom of the Blessed Holy One in all the creations, he adds to his love of God, and his soul will thirst and his flesh will yearn to love God, blessed be he.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- According to the first text, how does one fulfill the mitzvah of loving God?
- The 2nd text is usually interpreted to mean that one must study physics and metaphysics in order to know, and thus love, God. Do you believe that science and philosophy are the (exclusive) vehicles through which to love God?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of calling the study of science and philosophy a commandment?



MEDIEVAL THOUGHT – TEXT 3

תיקוני זוהר תקונא שתין ותשע, דף קיד א:
ווי לון לבני נשא טפשייא אטימין לבא סתימי עינא, דעלייהו אתמר "עינים להם
ולא יראו" (תהילים קטו:ה) בנהורא דאורייתא! אלן אינון בעירן דלא מסתכלין
ולא ידעין אלא בתבנא דאורייתא דאיהי קליפה מלבר ומוץ דילה דאתמר בהון:
מוץ ותבן פטורין מן המעשר. דחכימין דאורייתא מארי דרזין זרקין תבנא ומוץ
דלבר ואכלין חטה דאורייתא דאיהי מלגאו.

TIKKUNEI ZOHAR (c. 1300), TIKKUN 69, PAGE 114A

Alas for those fools whose minds are closed and whose eyes are shut, of whom it is said, "They have eyes but they do not see" (Ps. 115:5) the light of the Torah! They are animals, who do not see or know anything except the straw of the Torah, which is the outer husk or the chaff, of which it is said: chaff and straw are exempt from *ma'aser*/tax [because they are worthless]. The sages of the Torah, the mystics, throw away the straw and chaff, which are external, and eat the wheat of the Torah, which is internal.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- As Rabbi Cherry explained in his essay, Jewish mystics believed that divine unity was contingent upon Jewish men performing commandments with the proper intention. What do you think of that, and how do you feel about it? Is there a way this can be true for us today?
- Many hold that the externals of Torah are, in large part, legal. Do you agree? If so, what could our text mean when it says that Jews who focus exclusively on that external level are fools?
- How can we best train or educate ourselves to see "the light of Torah" today?



MEDIEVAL THOUGHT – TEXT 4

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים נה:יא
עבריין שעבר על גזירת הצבור או שעבר עבירה, אם לא נידוהו נמנה למנין עשרה.

SHULKHAN ARUKH (RABBI JOSEPH KARO, 1488-1575), ORAH HAYIM 55:11

A transgressor who transgressed a communal decree or who transgressed any transgression, if he has not been excommunicated, he may be counted in the minyan of ten.

משנה ברורה על שולחן ערוך אורח חיים נה:יא
אפילו עבירה שחייב עליה מיתה. והטעם דכתיב בעכו"ן "חטא ישראל" - אע"פ
שחטא, ישראל הוא ובקדושתיה קאי.

MISHNAH BERURAH (HAFETZ HAYIM, RABBI ISRAEL MEIR HA-KOHEN, 1839-1933), COMMENTARY ON SHULKHAN ARUKH ORAH HAYIM 55:11

Even if the transgression was a capital offense [he may be counted in a minyan]. And the reason is that it's written with regard to Akhan: "Israel sinned" (Joshua 7:11). Even though he sinned, he is still a Jew, and his holiness endures.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Look at the story of Akhan in Joshua chapter 7. How does the Hafetz Hayim use the biblical text to make his point?
- Is holiness an inalienable quality of Jews? Of non-Jews? What do these texts say? How do you feel about that?
- Think about your synagogue. Are there transgressions that would cause someone to be excluded from the minyan? What are they? What standard of proof is required to say that someone has transgressed?



MEDIEVAL THOUGHT – TEXT 5

שמונה פרקים לרמב"ם : הקדמה
ודע, שהדברים אשר אומר בפרקים אלו...אינם דברים שבדיתים מעצמי ולא
פרושים שחדשתים. אמנם הם ענינים לקטתים מדברי חכמים...ומדברי
הפילוסופים...ושמע אמת ממי שאמרה.

EIGHT CHAPTERS OF THE RAMBAM: INTRODUCTION

And take note: the things I say in these chapters...are not new concepts that I have invented. They are an anthology from our sages... and the works of philosophers...Hear the truth from whoever said it.

ספר החינוך מצוה ת
האומר למי שראוי ליורשו נכסי לך ואחריך להקדש...היורש זוכה בנכסים ויש לו
למוכרן ולעשות בהן כל חפצת נפשו.

SEFER HA-HINUKH, THE BOOK OF EDUCATION (ANONYMOUS, LATE 1200s), PRECEPT 400

If someone said to an eligible heir, "My property goes to you and afterwards to the Temple", the heir owns the property and he may sell it or do anything he wants with it.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Rambam tells us to "Hear the truth from whoever said it". Think of some ideas and practices which originated outside the Jewish tradition and are now accepted by Jews. What might we bring in now to enrich contemporary Judaism?
- *The Book of Education* elucidates the 613 commandments of Rambam's list, in the order of their appearance in the Torah. As heirs of medieval Judaism/s, which of these strategies would you like to bequeath to the next generation? Why?
 - Saadiah Gaon - using religious philosophy to interpret Torah
 - Rashi - separating Torah from science
 - Rambam - using science to interpret Torah and transforming the study of philosophy and science into a mitzvah
 - Zohar - reading the Torah as a cryptic code describing God's inner world, dismissing much of the Torah's plain sense, seeing the physical world as a garb for the continuously flowing energy of and within God
 - *Halakhah*/Jewish law changing and adapting to new circumstances and understandings of reality
- In the previous question, Rabbi Cherry applied *The Book of Education's* ruling about inherited property to Judaism itself when he asked us to consider what we would keep from our medieval ancestors and what we might discard. Discuss this in light of Deuteronomy 33:4:

תּוֹרַה צְנוּחַת לָנוּ מִיְשֵׁה מוֹרְשָׁה קְהֵלֶת יִעֲקֹב.

Moses commanded us Torah, the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.





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