Review Essay: Menachem Kellner's New Book on Rambam's Views on Non-Jews

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Among his books are "Maimonides, Spinoza and Us" and "Maimonides: Essential Teachings in Jewish Faith and Ethics."

Racism is an ugly feature of human life, the source of profound misery to untold millions of people. Racism posits that a particular group is inherently superior to other groups. This kind of thinking leads to discrimination—and often to violence--against the victimized groups.

Hate groups throughout the world thrive on racist ideologies. Whether they are white supremacists or black supremacists; whether they foster racial, religious, ethnic or national hatred—such people are a danger to society. Racist ideology inevitably leads to dehumanizing those who are not part of the “in-group.” Even when no actual violence transpires, the ideology itself fosters mistrust, hatred, fear and societal malaise.

Jews have suffered as victims of bigotry, racism, and dehumanization throughout history and in many lands. We know firsthand about the evils of one group claiming innate superiority over others. We know that the arrogance of the haters poisons minds and hearts; and we know that this poison is destructive.

We have all learned from our earliest youth that the Torah teaches that humanity was created in God’s image. The Mishna reminds us that each human life is of inestimable value and is irreplaceable. It would seem to be a foundational principle of Torah Judaism that all human beings are equally created by and beloved by God. Racist attitudes or discriminatory behavior would seem to be antithetical to the core teachings and values of Judaism.

Yet, even though Jewish experience and Jewish teachings are so clearly opposed to racist ideology, the fact is that there is a stream of Jewish tradition that fosters the notion of innate Jewish superiority to non-Jews. This notion is found in the writings of Rabbi Yehuda Halevy and in Kabbalistic literature; and it has found expression in the writings and teachings of contemporary Orthodox rabbis.

Professor Menachem Kellner, who taught Jewish philosophy at Haifa University for many years and who now teaches at Shalem College in Jerusalem, has recently published a book (in Hebrew, Bar Ilan University Press), Gam Hem Keruyim Adam: haNokhri beEinei haRambam (They too are called human: Maimonides' views on non-Jews). He makes it amply clear that Maimonides rejected the notion that Jews are ontologically different from and superior to non-Jews. The Rambam maintains the classic Jewish teachings that stress the common humanity of all people. Differences among human beings arise not due to innate metaphysical otherness, but due to cultural and sociological factors. In essence, Jews are the same as all other human beings. Jews differ from others (as others differ from Jews) based on beliefs, religious traditions, communal values etc.

Dr. Kellner's book is a fine and important academic study. But it is also an alarming wake up call to contemporary religious Jews. It points out how deeply the Jewish supremacist views have taken hold among many otherwise pious Jews. It underscores the critical need to reclaim Rambam's insights not only because they are true to our Torah tradition, but because they can purge contemporary Torah Judaism from highly negative and dangerous attitudes.

Dr. Kellner begins his discussion by citing examples of rabbinic teachers who have articulated supremacist views. Most egregiously, a book was published several years ago entitled Torat haMelekh. Authored by Orthodox rabbis and published by an Orthodox yeshiva, it asserts that non-Jews are not quite human in the same sense that Jews are human. Non-Jews, therefore, are not entitled to the same rights as Jews. This attitude provides justification for discriminatory policies against non-Jews, not excluding acts of violence. Torat haMelekh evoked tremendous negative reaction within Israeli society, and various modern Orthodox and religious Zionist rabbis criticized it soundly. However, other Orthodox rabbis either agreed with the authors of Torat haMelekh, or argued that the authors had the right to express their views even if those views could be construed as incitement to violence.

Dr. Kellner cites the more "moderate" position of a well-known and highly popular religious Zionist rabbi. This rabbi has written: "We are a chosen people not because we have received the Torah; but we received the Torah because we are

a chosen people. The Torah is so very appropriate to our inner nature. Our nation has a distinctive nature, character, communal psychology, a unique Godly character….Some argue against us that we are 'racist.' Our answer is…if racism is defined in that we are different and more elevated than other nations and therefore we bring blessing to other nations—then, we admit that we are different from all nations, not by color of skin, but by the nature of our souls; and the Torah is the description of our inner content." According to this view, the Jewish people has a unique spiritual nature, superior to that of other nations. We received the Torah because of our innate spiritual receptivity. Non-Jewish souls are different—and less holy—than Jewish souls.

Dr. Kellner refers to a leading Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University who admits that all humans are created in the image of God, but that Jews are more in the image of God than non-Jews. Although this statement is not at all identical with the views of Torat haMelekh, it shares the underlying notion of Jewish supremacy. Stated simply, Jews are intrinsically holier and closer to God than non-Jews.

Dr. Kellner demonstrates with admirable clarity that the supremacist views of the above-mentioned rabbis are soundly rejected by Rambam. Anyone who recognizes the Oneness of God is considered to be a follower of Abraham our Father. Rambam's universalism recognized that all people—regardless of ethnic background—could rise to the highest spiritual levels. (p. 57).

Rambam equated the "image of God" with human intellectual capacity. This "image of God" is a latent quality within each person from birth; yet only by actualizing one's intellect does one achieve the crown of being an "image of God." Dr. Kellner notes: "According to Rambam, a good non-Jewish philosopher—i.e. a good person who has developed beyond moral perfection to intellectual perfection—is on a higher level than a righteous Talmid Hakham who is ignorant of the sciences. Moreover, the non-Jewish philosopher will merit greater Divine providence than the righteous Torah scholar, and his [the non-Jew's] portion in the world to come will be greater [than that of a Talmid Hakham unversed in the sciences, and it is questionable] whether such a Talmid Hakham will merit it at all." (pp. 78-79).

In Rambam's introduction to his commentary on Pirkei Avot, he writes that he has drawn on the teachings of our rabbinic sages, and also from the words of the non-Jewish philosophers: one must "hear the truth from whoever states it." The wisdom of our sages and the wisdom of the philosophers aim at ultimate truth, albeit from different vantage points. In the introduction to his commentary on the Mishna, Rambam states that wisdom is present not only in the words of our

prophets, but also in the teachings of the non-Jewish philosophers. Our goal is to be wise and good: this goal can be attained by Jews and non-Jews alike. (p. 137) For Rambam, Aristotle was a prime example of a non-Jewish philosopher who attained great wisdom and moral virtue. (141).

In his Hilkhot Shemitah veYovel (13:10) Rambam explicitly states that ultimate knowledge of God is possible for every human being: Each person among all humanity (mikol ba'ei olam), if properly dedicated to wisdom and righteousness, can become the "holy of holies." While some rabbinic interpreters claim that "kol ba'ei olam" refers only to Torah-observant Jews, this is far from what Rambam in fact has taught. This is an example of how supremacists attempt to re-interpret statements of Rambam that posit a universalist view. (156).

Dr. Kellner reviews various statements of Rambam, drawn from Talmudic and Midrashic sources, in which Jews are described in laudable terms. Jews are said to be modest and compassionate, kind and forgiving. Non-Jews are characterized as having violent and argumentative qualities. We know, though, from personal experience that there are Jews who have negative personal qualities and there are non-Jews who have fine personal qualities. The ancient rabbinic statements in praise of Jews might best be understood as being prescriptive rather than descriptive. In any case, the moral qualities and deficiencies attributed to Jews and non-Jews need not be understood as innate, unchangeable qualities, but rather as the result of environmental and cultural factors. (p. 202).

Rambam's universalist vision recognizes that although all humanity can achieve great spiritual heights, Jews have a unique blessing in that God gave us the Torah and mitzvoth. The commandments aim at making us finer, wiser, and more virtuous people. But non-Jews of all ethnic backgrounds may convert to Judaism and become part of the Jewish people. There is no intrinsic barrier that would bar a non-Jew from becoming Jewish.

For the supremacists, though, Jewish souls are essentially different from non-Jewish souls. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook: "The difference between the Jewish soul, its self, its inner desires, aspirations, character and status, and that of all nations, at all their levels, is greater and deeper than the difference between the human soul and the animal soul; between the latter there is merely a quantitative distinction, but between the former an essential qualitative distinction pertains." (Orot, Jerusalem, 5745, p. 156). This attitude makes it highly difficult for a non-Jew to convert to Judaism. Conversion would involve a sort of "soul transplant" through which the non-Jew attains the intrinsically superior Jewish soul.

Why did the supremacist view emerge in the first place, and why has it gained adherents in our own time? Why haven't the views of Rambam consistently prevailed throughout Jewish history and into the contemporary era? Dr. Kellner reminds us that the supremacist view was popularized by Rabbi Yehuda Halevy's Kuzari, which was written as a defense of a despised people. (p. 215). The Muslim and Christian communities were vastly larger and more powerful than the Jews. Indeed, Jews suffered humiliation, violence and expulsion at the hands of the Muslims and Christians. The Kuzari was—and is—a phenomenal Jewish morale booster. In head to head competition with a philosopher, Muslim and Christian, the Jewish sage emerges victorious and convinces the King of the Khazars of the superior truth of Judaism. Although the world despises the Jews, God loves us! We are His chosen people. We are the only ones who have the unique spiritual and Godly nature that connects us with God.

This attitude has an obvious appeal to persecuted Jews. Even though we are being oppressed, we are superior to our oppressors! This was true in the days of Rabbi Yehuda Halevy, and it continues to be true today. Jews who feel threatened by the non-Jewish world feel bolstered by their belief in their own superiority to non-Jews. The supremacist view thrives when Jews lack self-confidence, when they are afraid of the outside world, when they allow their emotions to prevail over their reason.

Dr. Kellner recommends "theological humility," the ability to accept that other people also have truths and spiritual insights from which we can learn. He calls for Jewish self-confidence in the style of Rambam. He asks that we reclaim the universalist impulse that recognizes the essential humanity of all people, that deplores racist and supremacist views that diminish the humanity of others.

It is truly remarkable that Rambam, who lived in the Middle Ages, should provide a religious worldview that is so modern…and even post-modern. How wonderful it would be if our community could overcome supremacist tendencies, and become spiritually self-confident, intellectually vibrant, compassionate and wise.