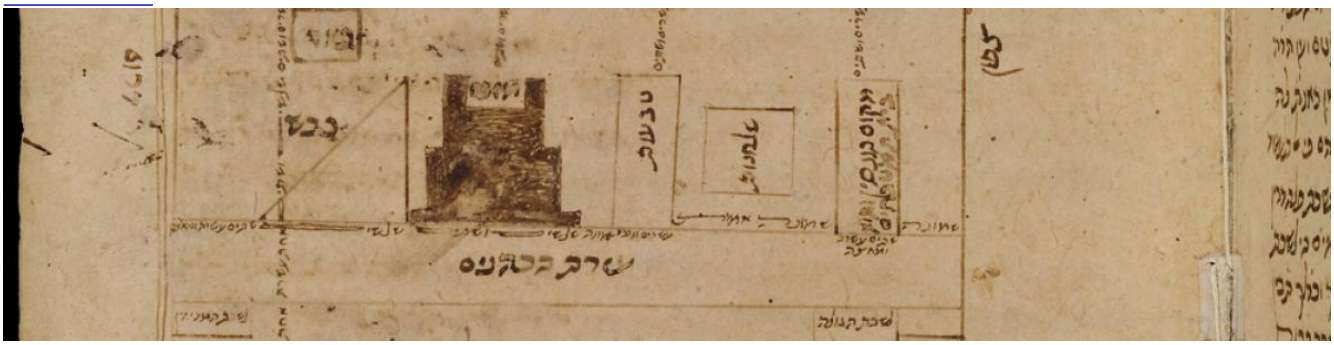
Was Rambam a Hareidi Rabbi?

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The greatness of Rambam—Moses Maimonides—is so overwhelming that no serious student of Jewish law or philosophy can ignore him. From the medieval period to modern times, scholars have confronted the writings of Rambam, often seeking his support for their own positions. It is really an intellectual boon to have Rambam on one's side!

The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization has recently published a volume, *Reinventing Maimonides in Contemporary Jewish Thought.* It includes a collection of articles by Drs. James Diamond and Menachem Kellner, dealing with how some modern rabbinic sages interpreted Rambam. While much can be learned from each of the articles, I'd like to focus on the articles by Menachem Kellner on Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman and Rabbi Aharon Kotler. These two 20th century luminaries cast Rambam into the mold of a Hareidi sage. When they read Rambam, they understood him in a way that Rambam himself would have found problematic.

Dr. Kellner reminds us that Rambam was an Arabic-speaker who engaged in theology, mathematics, logic, physics, and philosophy. Rambam believed that *maaseh bereishith* was the study of physics, and *maaseh merkava* was the study of metaphysics. Kellner asks: "Would such a person perceive the Torah essentially differently from someone studying it in Yiddish and for whom *maaseh bereshith* and *maaseh merkavah* are tied to the mysteries of kabbalah rather than to physics and metaphysics?" Kellner argues that Rambam and Rabbi Wasserman read "very different Torahs."

Rabbi Wasserman (1874-1941), an eminent representative of hareidi Orthodoxy, used Rambam to support his own hareidi views. "Rabbi Wasserman was so sure that he was right and that his view was that of traditional Judaism that he found it inconceivable that Maimonides might not concur with his approach." He thought Rambam would easily fit into his yeshiva in Baranowicze.

Dr. Kellner demonstrates with admirable precision how Rambam's clear statements were reinterpreted by Rabbi Wasserman in a manner opposite to their intention. He could not accept that Rambam really thought that *maaseh bereishith* was natural science; rather, he argued that Rambam was really referring to a deeper, esoteric wisdom not available through human reason.

Kellner notes that Rabbi Wasserman's image of Maimonides was far removed from the original. "How could Rabbi Wasserman, whose Torah (studied in Yiddish) reflects eight hundred years of misgivings and suspicions about the culture surrounding him, grasp in depth the Torah that Maimonides (apparently) studied in Arabic, reflecting a positive attitude towards a fifteen-centuries-old tradition of Greek wisdom?"

In his chapter on Rabbi Kotler, Kellner argues that "not only does Rabbi Kotler read Maimonides as if the Great Eagle had grown up in east European yeshivas…but he also loads upon Maimonides notions

that, ostensibly, he should have known are entirely alien to him."

For example, Rambam states: "Not only the tribe of Levi, but each and every individual of those who come into the world [*kol ba'ei ha'olam*] whose spirit moves him and whose knowledge gives him understanding to set himself apart in order to stand before the Lord…such an individual is as consecrated as the Holy of Holies, and his portion and inheritance shall be in the Lord forever and ever more. (Laws of Sabbatical Year and Jubilee, 13:12-13).

This is a striking example of Rambam's universalistic worldview: all people of all backgrounds have access to God if they suitably devote themselves to the Almighty. Rabbi Kotler, though, reads this passage to refer to Torah sages who devote themselves to the study and observance of halakha. Dr. Kellner notes: "Rabbi Kotler was educated in a Jewish tradition…which accepted as obvious that an essentialist difference prevails between the Jewish people and the nations of the world (obviously in favor of the former.)" Even though Rabbi Kotler surely knew that *kol ba'ei ha'olam* means everyone—Jewish or not—he could not imagine that Rambam actually thought all people had equal access to the Almighty. Only Jews, and specifically only Torah sages, were able to reach the highest spiritual levels.

Rambam taught (Laws of Torah Study, 3:1): "One who makes up his mind to study Torah and not work but live on charity, profanes the name of God, brings the Torah into contempt, extinguishes the light of religion, brings evil upon himself and deprives himself of life hereafter….The end of such a person will be that he will rob his fellow creatures." It is difficult to find a clearer statement that opposes a "kollel system" where men are encouraged to study Torah all day and live off the charity of the community. Yet, Rabbi Kotler ignores this explicit statement and relies instead on a Talmudic passage that says: "from the day that the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One blessed be He has nothing in His world but the four cubits of halakhah." Although Rambam himself interprets that Talmudic passage differently, Rabbi Kotler does not choose to veer from his own understanding of the text. It seems that Rabbi Kotler would have Rambam praise the "kollel system" since students (presumably) are devoting themselves day and night to learning halakha…and thereby entering the four cubits which the Almighty has in this world.

Other chapters in this volume deal with Rabbi Naftali Tsevi Yehudah Berlin; Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook; Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira; Rabbi Aviner and Rabbi Kafih. Interestingly, each of these thinkers reads Rambam differently. Rambam continues to evoke serious thought. He remains a powerful guide…and a formidable challenge.