Ruminations on Rambam

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The Jewish Press newspaper has a feature in which questions are posed to a group of rabbis. I am one of the respondents.

A past question (February 12, 2021) struck me as particularly strange: "Should a frum Jew believe the sun goes around earth if the Rambam says it does?" My immediate reaction: how could anyone today, including a frum Jew, think that the sun goes around the earth? Science has advanced prodigiously since the 12th century, and Rambam himself taught that "a person should never cast reason behind, for the eyes are set in front, not in back." Rambam relied on the best science of his time. And there can be no doubt at all that he would call on us to rely on the best science available in our time. He would be highly embarrassed by those who, basing themselves on Rambam's own writings, posit that the sun revolves around the earth, rejecting the advanced science of today.

I concluded my response with these words: "One of the great dangers for religion—and for human progress in general—is for people to cling to discredited theories and outdated knowledge. Those who cast reason behind thereby cast truth behind. And truth is the seal of the Almighty."

What I took to be so obvious was apparently not so obvious to the other rabbinic respondents. One of them wrote that "it makes more sense to side with Rambam than it does with Copernicus." Another respondent asserted that Rambam was not giving a lesson in physics but "was explaining the world according to the Torah." And the final respondent thought it was "likely" that Rambam would agree with the findings of modern astronomy—likely, but apparently not certain.

How disappointing to realize that there are "frum" people today who feel comfortable denying modern astronomy based on words of a medieval sage. How sad for Rambam's reputation!

Rambam was one of the greatest luminaries in Jewish history. A pre-eminent halakhist, philosopher and medical doctor, he was also a brilliant and clear writer. Yet, in spite of his voluminous writings, he still remains misunderstood and misrepresented.

So while I was lamenting the column in the Jewish Press, I was simultaneously pleased to be reading a new book by Menachem Kellner and David Gillis, "Maimonides the Universalist: The Ethical Horizons of the Mishneh Torah," (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London, 2020). Both of these authors have written important works exploring the genuine teachings of Rambam based on a careful reading of Rambam's own words in his various writings.

This new book offers an important approach to understanding Rambam's Mishneh Torah—and the Rambam's general religious worldview as well. By studying the concluding sections of each of the 14 books of the Mishneh Torah, the authors have demonstrated an ethical framework for this halakhic work. Rambam was not only concerned with presenting the laws; he was concerned with inculcating the ethical/spiritual foundations of the laws.

In his *Guide of the Perplexed* (3:51), Rambam pointed out that all of the Torah's commandments exist "with a view to communicating a correct opinion, or to putting an end to an unhealthy opinion, or to

communicating a rule of justice, or to warding off an injustice, or to endowing men with a noble moral quality, or to warning them against an evil moral quality. Thus all are bound up with three things: opinions, moral qualities, and political civic actions." In the Mishneh Torah, Rambam applied this insight when presenting the halakhot.

In offering his ethical insights, Rambam does so in what Kellner and Gillis describe as a universalistic manner. Rambam often points to Abraham as a model human being…and Abraham discovered and served God long before the Torah was given. Abraham was not "Jewish;" he was a human being who longed to transmit proper beliefs and behaviors to society. At the precise midpoint of the Mishneh Torah, Rambam teaches "that each and every single human being can be as sanctified as the Holy of Holies" (p. 143). Jews and non-Jews can achieve true piety and spiritual perfection. Being "sanctified" does not depend on genetics but on one's personal strivings.

In closing his chapter on the "Laws of Slaves," Rambam notes that the halakha permits working a non-Jewish slave "with rigor." But he goes on to offer an impassioned call for sensitive and considerate treatment of such slaves. "Out of halakhah and aggadah, Maimonides constructs a halakhah that moves smoothly but pointedly from seeing the non-Jewish slave as an alien who can be treated as an inferior to seeing him as an equal fellow human being. The upshot is a statement of thoroughgoing universalism, as Maimonides builds towards the establishment of a truly Abrahamic society at the very end of the Mishneh Torah" (p.266).

The Torah offers Jews a distinctive way to understand and serve the Almighty. But Jews do not have a monopoly on God. All human beings, created in God's image, have access to the Almighty…just as Abraham himself had access long before the time of Moses. Kellner and Gillis note: "The point of the Mishneh Torah as a whole is the creation of a society which gives its members the greatest chance of achieving their perfection as *human beings*. In this way, the end of the Mishneh Torah comes round to its beginning: just as the beginning of the work deals with matters that relate to all human beings, so do the last chapters" (p. 308).

The authors have produced a remarkable book that allows us to see Rambam not merely as a codifier of laws, but as a promoter of an ethical, universalistic humanitarianism. They have shown the ethical component in Rambam's ending sections of each of the books of the Mishneh Torah. These ending sections "adjust the tendency of each individual book, generally in a universalist direction, and compose a balanced and integrated picture of halakhah, oriented towards universal conceptions of individual and social perfection. They guide the reader towards an understanding of all the ceremonial commandments as intellectually and morally purposive, and of the social commandments as infused with the divine, creating a sense of reciprocity between intellectual virtue and moral virtue" (p. 319).

Kellner and Gillis have written an impressive book that enables readers to enter more deeply into Rambam's religious worldview. At a time when Rambam is subject to so much misrepresentation and misunderstanding, it is heartening to read a book that seeks to present Rambam's teachings in a clear, genuine and convincing manner. Bravo and thank you to the authors.