Messianic Hope

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When we say, “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even if he tarries, I will wait for him” —what are waiting for, what are we hoping for?

How does Rambam answer these questions? Let us see. He describes the ultimate end of the messianic process (it is a process for him, not an event) in two places. The first answer is found in the last paragraph in *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Kings,” xii.4:

> The Sages and Prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah so that they might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the nations, or be exalted by the peoples, and not in order to eat and drink and rejoice, but so that they be free to devote themselves to the Torah and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb them, and thus be worthy of life in the world to come, as we explained in “Laws Concerning Repentance.” Then there will be neither famine nor war, neither jealousy nor strife. Good things will be abundant, and delicacies as common as dust. The one preoccupation of the *whole* world will be only to know the Lord. Hence, **they** will be very wise, knowing things now unknown and will apprehend knowledge of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind, as it is written: *For the land shall be full of the knowledge (de'ah) of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea* (Isa. 11:9) [emphasis added, here and below].

Who are the “they” referenced here? Early copyists of *Mishneh Torah* were convinced that Rambam must have meant Jews and changed the text to read “Israel.” This makes no sense for at least two reasons. First, “the preoccupation of the whole world” will be to know God. Second, Rambam nowhere expresses the view or even implies that non-Jews are incapable of knowing God. It is this widespread and deep knowledge of God which explains why “there will be neither famine nor war, neither jealousy nor strife.” In a world governed by

intellect “Good things will be abundant, and delicacies as common as dust,” as it could even be today, were the world governed by intellect. Rambam’s messianic vision is universalist and, as we shall see, naturalist.

Prof. Zev Harvey has pointed out that Rambam recapitulates this messianic vision in *Guide* iii.11 (pp. 353-354 in the new Goodman/Leiberman translation). In that passage, Rambam teaches how to understand the end of *Mishneh Torah*:

> These grave evils that human beings inflict on one another, too, out of ambition, passion, opinions and beliefs all reflect privations. Just as a blind man, sightless and unguided, always stumbles, harming himself and others, human sects perpetuate dreadful evils against their fellow humans and themselves, reflecting their ignorance. Had they the insight befitting our human form, as vision befits the eye, all the harm they do to each other and themselves would end. For knowledge of the truth would dissolve hatred and spite and end the crimes of man against man. Thus, the promise The *wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard couch with the kid …the cow graze with the bear…the suckling play [by the viper’s nest]* (Isaiah 11:6-8). And the reason is given why such strife, hatred and struggles for power will end – man will truly know God as He truly is: *They shall not harm or destroy in all My holy mountain for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea* (Is. 11:9).

In this very short chapter, Rambam elaborates on the promises made in “Kings,” xii.4. The fulfillment of these promises depends not on miracles, not on changes in fundamental human nature, but on truly knowing “God as He truly is.” Both passages end with the same verse from Isaiah.

How ought we to read these two passages –as promises or as challenges? My point in this short essay is to argue that Rambam’s messianic vision is not a promise or a prediction of what will be, but a challenge to act in a fashion that will bring the world closer to the messianic era.

The messianic world is no different from our world, only (much) better: “Let it not enter your mind that in the days of the messiah any aspect of the regular order of nature will be abolished or some innovation will be introduced into the world of nature; **rather, the world follows its accustomed course…”** (“Laws of Kings,” xii.1).

However, the fulfillment of the three passages cited here depends upon humanity being vastly better than it is now. In *Guide* iii.32 (p. 438) Rambam emphasizes that God does not use miracles to change human nature. Rambam calls this “a major principle.” Rambam’s reservations about the possibility of truly knowing God (something even Moses failed to accomplish—*Guide* i.54) are well known. Since after the Messiah comes, “the world follows its accustomed course,” it would appear that Rambam’s description of the messianic world cannot be a promise or a prediction; it is, rather, a challenge to us make our world as close as possible to the messianic world.

For Rambam, the Torah holds out the promise that “knowledge of the truth would dissolve hatred and spite and end the crimes of man against man.” In such a world “ambition, passion, opinions and beliefs” will be dissolved by “knowledge of the truth.” Humans will no longer harm each other or themselves — “strife, hatred and struggles for power will end.” All this will come about through widespread knowledge of God. This is how Rambam himself interpreted the end of the *Mishneh Torah* in the *Guide*. Taking the last paragraph of the

Mishneh Torah both literally and seriously and interpreting it as he himself interprets it in the *Guide*, we learn that Rambam anticipated a messianic world in which all human beings will devote themselves to the knowledge of God. We appear to have here a messianic vision, not of utopia (literally, no place), but of reversion to the Garden of Eden before the sin of Adam and Eve. The restorative nature of the messianic world is made clear in the passage with which Rambam opens his discussion of the Messiah in *Mishneh Torah* ("Laws of Kings, xi.1):

> King messiah will arise and **restore** the kingdom of David to its **former** state and **original** sovereignty. He will **rebuild** the sanctuary and gather the dispersed of Israel. All the ancient laws will be **reinstituted** in his days; sacrifices will **again** be offered; the sabbatical and jubilee years will **again** be observed in accordance with the commandments set forth in the Law.

Rambam thus opens his account of the messianic era here by emphasizing its restorative character. The messiah will re-establish what once was and thus miracles will not be necessary. The non-miraculous restoration of what once was must be a process, not an event. As such, it is a challenge to those alive at that time to help the process forward.

Rambam's vision is restorative, not utopian. From this it follows that the messianic era will in principle be not unlike the present world. Hollywood will not be called upon for special effects. Since the messianic era is constituted by the reconstitution of a past golden age, it is possible to find our way forward to what once was in the past (not "Back to the Future" but "Forward to the Past') without miracles, and nature will therefore continue in its accustomed patterns, and hence the messianic era must be brought about through human effort. Note well: in this text Rambam says, 'The days of the Messiah refers to the time when sovereignty will return to Israel, and the people of Israel will return to the Land of Israel.' Nowhere does he say that God will send the Messiah; rather, he implies that it is up to humans to bring the Messiah. From this it follows that the coming of the Messiah is a process, not an event. This passage repeatedly focuses on political freedom and sovereignty. This point is important to emphasize, since many of our contemporaries (mis)read Rambam as teaching that the point of the messianic era is Jewish sovereignty over the (whole) Land of Israel (not to mention dominion over it). For Rambam, the point of the messianic era is knowing God.

Wisdom, apprehension, and knowledge cannot be achieved by war, only by study. The whole world can become preoccupied with the knowledge of the Lord only if war is replaced by education. To the extent that it is rational for ends to determine means, then the only way to bring about the fulfilment of the messianic redemption, at least as it is understood by Rambam, is to make the study of true Torah (which includes *ma'aseh bereshit*, physics, and *ma'aseh merkavah*, metaphysics) our aim, and not domination of one group by another.

Was Rambam actually enough of an optimist to anticipate a messianic return to an Edenic humanity without miracles? This seems to be a large mouthful—in such a reality, the world would **not** continue in its accustomed way, human nature as we know it would be replaced by an improved version, and the Torah of Moses would be replaced by the Torah of Abraham.

In order properly to comprehend Rambam's view of future history, as it were, it will be useful to examine his understanding of past history. James Diamond leads the way by citing Aviezer Ravitzky to the effect that the key to Rambam's messianic vision "is to be found precisely in Rambam's allegorical interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden in the opening chapters of the *Guide* ... the opening of human history is united with its final

perfection ... the universal redemption of the human race ... refers in fact to man's return to his original stature represented by the human archetype." For Rambam, the Eden story teaches values, not history. He presents the story of Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the Garden of Eden in *Guide* i.1-2 and ii.30, not as an account of what actually happened, but as an explanation of the human condition as it is and as it will be. Torah does not describe past history and apparently does not describe future history. Rambam's account of the messianic future is not an account of what will happen; rather it is an account of a future which we should aim for, even if it is not clear that we will ever actually arrive at it. In terms I learned from my teacher Steven Schwarzchild it is regulative, not predictive. In other words, Rambam's vision of the messianic era is not a prediction but an ideal to regulate our behavior in the here and now—not a promise, but a challenge.

Continuing in a Schwarzschildian mode, Kenneth Seeskin (like me, a student, friend, and admirer of Schwarschild) commented (personal communication): "In general, it might be pointed out that according to Rambam, human nature will not change during the Days of the Messiah so that the laws of the Torah will still be binding.Yes, Schwarzschild was optimistic to the extent that he thought a messianic era was not only possible but one day would actually arrive. But, no, he was not so optimistic as to think that human beings would be able to dispense with holidays and rituals."

What then can we learn from "Laws of Kings," xii.4 and *Guide* iii.11 if we cannot learn future history? We can learn, as Kenneth Seeskin teaches, that there is much reason for hope. In Rambam's view the point of the messianic era is to bring the Torah *lekhol ba'ei olam* , to all human beings. This messianic vision offers us a goal at which to aim, an ideal by which to regulate our behavior. That goal is the realization of the opening chapters of the Bible: **all** human beings are created in the image of God and should therefore be treated, not only as means, but as ends, also

Rambam's naturalism means that this goal can in principle be achieved by human beings, without divine intervention, miraculous or otherwise. Kant insisted that *ought* implies *can*: if I ought to do something, I must be able to do it. Steven Schwarzschild insisted on a Jewish corollary to that Kantian teaching: If I can achieve some worthwhile goal, then I am obligated to try to achieve it. Getting ever closer to a messianic world is surely a worthwhile goal. Actually, reaching that goal may not be possible, but getting ever closer is. Since we can do it, we should make every effort to make the world a place in which all human beings are treated as creatures made in the image of God. Rambam, in effect anticipating Hermann Cohen, and Schwarzschild, following Cohen, teaches that we ought to devote ourselves to the project of creating a messiah-worthy world.

Hermann Cohen and, following him, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, would say that Rambam did not really expect this to happen, that we may come ever closer to the messianic era, but will never actually reach it. That may or may not have been Rambam's actual position; I do not really have a settled opinion on the subject. What is crucial to understand is that—whether actually achievable, or an ever-receding while paradoxically ever-closer dream—Rambam's messianic vision is one of ultimate universal peace and enlightenment. This is a vision which will be realized only if human beings do not wait for God to do it but bring it about themselves.

In sum, there is something important that Maimonidean messianic universalism and naturalism teaches us: hope. We can hope for (and work towards) a world in which different nations and cultures can value their own contributions to the human mosaic without diminishing the value of others—without wholly otherizing the other. If we can hope, we need not despair: the human condition is not necessarily tragic.

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