Maimonides: Essential Teachings on Jewish Faith and Ethics

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Review
By Israel Drazin

Maimonides
Essential Teachings on Jewish Faith & Ethics
The Book of Knowledge & the Thirteen Principles of Faith
Annotated & Explained
By Rabbi Marc D. Angel, PhD
Skylight Illuminations, 2012, 177 pages

There are divergent interpretations of the brilliant sage Moses Maimonides (1138-1204). Some scholars, such as Leo Strauss of the University of Chicago, are convinced that Maimonides wrote for two audiences, intellectuals and the general population, and that he frequently hid his true views from the non-intellectuals, convinced that the more philosophically-minded could mine what he wrote and understand what he really thought. Others, such as Menachem Kellner of the University of Haifa, believe that this is not true. Maimonides meant what he wrote and did not hide ideas so as not to disturb the common people or say things just to make people feel better. Rabbi Marc Angel, the founder and director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org) takes the latter approach and presents it well.

He includes his English translations of texts from Maimonides' Book of Knowledge and from his famous Thirteen Principles of Judaism. He chose these two sources because they give a clear presentation of Maimonides' teachings on morality, ethics, Torah study, idolatry, and the principles of Judaism. He places Maimonides' words on the right side of the book, puts numbers where there are ideas he wants to explain, and he explains them on the left side.

For example, he quotes Maimonides' teaching about when Jews should give up their lives for Judaism on the right and gives historical examples on the left. Similarly, he mentions Maimonides view that prophets must be philosophers on the right and explains on the left that people do not have to accept his view and gives his opinion why. Also, he quotes Maimonides that righteous people do more than what the law requires and deviate from the middle path on the right and describes the higher standard on the left. His explanations are clear and he frequently refers to other books that help clarify and supplement Maimonides' thoughts, including other books that Maimonides composed.

Rabbi Angel starts his book with a thirty page introduction that introduces Maimonides, his history, and writings to the reader. He tells readers that Maimonides was both a rabbi and a philosopher, and how he attempted to harmonize these two worldviews. He describes the Book of Knowledge and the Thirteen Principles. He points out that Maimonides insisted that religion must have a sound intellectual foundation. "His approach (to religion) allows a person (of every religion) to be religious without turning off his or her brain." He tells readers that Maimonides emphasized knowledge of God, rather than simple belief in God.

Rabbi Angel informs us that Maimonides felt strongly that there is no ontological distinction between Jews and other human beings; humans are humans. The Torah emphasizes this message when it states 36 times that we should love the stranger. Non-Jews know things Jews don't know and everyone should learn from everyone else; the truth is the truth no matter what its source. One cannot be a true Torah scholar without deriving wisdom from all sources. Righteous non-Jews have a place in the world to come.

The book is filled with Rabbi Angel's insightful interpretation of Maimonides and this great sage's important teachings, such as the following: Maimonides believed in miracles, "but God does so very rarely." People should not be ascetic, such as fasting when not required to do so. Contrary to the thinking of some ultra-Orthodox, Maimonides stressed that Torah scholars should work for a living and not depend on the charity of others.

In summary, readers will gain much by reading this book because Maimonides was the greatest sage since the biblical Moses and Rabbi Angel gives us a good explanation of his views.