Religion and Superstition: A Maimonidean Approach

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Judaism seeks to bring us closer to God through proper thought and deed. Superstition seeks to circumvent God's power through the use of magical formulae or rituals. While Judaism demands intellectual and moral excellence and a direct relationship with God, superstition provides purported means of bypassing or manipulating God in order to ward off evil or to achieve some other desired goal.

Since religion and superstition ultimately transcend the domain of human reason, it is possible to blur the lines between the two. The Torah is emphatic in commanding that we not turn to shamans or wonderworkers, but that we stay focused on our personal relationship with God. "There shall not be found among you anyone... who uses divination, a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or one who consults a ghost or a familiar spirit, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination unto the Lord" (Devarim 18:10-12).

Rambam clarifies the boundaries between religion and superstition in his discussion about using incantations to heal a wound:

Anyone who whispers a charm over a wound and reads a verse from the Torah, or one who recites a biblical verse over a child lest he be terrified, or one who places a Torah scroll or tefillin over an infant to enable him to sleep, are not only included in the category of sorcerers and charmers, but are included among those who repudiate the Torah. They use the words of the Torah as a physical cure,

whereas they are exclusively a cure for the soul, as it is written, ‘they will be life to your soul.' On the other hand, one who is enjoying good health is permitted to recite biblical verses, or a psalm, that he may be shielded and saved from affliction and damage by virtue of the reading. (Hilkhot Avoda Zara, 11:12)

What are the characteristics of those individuals who "repudiate the Torah"? 1) They treat biblical verses as though they are magic formulae that can effect a cure. 2) They use religious objects e.g. Torah scroll, tefillin, as though they are endowed with independent magical powers. 3) They resort to incantations and magical rituals, rather than turning directly to God. In short, they behave superstitiously, rather than religiously.

If we were to confront these individuals, though, they would be surprised to be placed in the category of those who "repudiate the Torah". They might well think of themselves as being pious, Torah-true Jews. After all, they have not gone to soothsayers or diviners for help; they have recited the holy words of the Bible and have used religious items of our own Jewish tradition. Wherein have they sinned? The Rambam would answer: even if a person employs Torah words and symbols, he/she may yet be guilty of sinful behavior. To use the Torah's words and symbols in a superstitious way is also superstition! Indeed, such behavior repudiates the Torah's express teaching that we turn directly to God and that we not engage in magical practices.

The Rambam notes that if a healthy person chants biblical verses in the hope that the merit of this mitzvah will invite God's protection, this is still on the correct side of the line separating religion from superstition. The person is not attributing intrinsic supernatural power to the biblical verses; rather, he is directing his thoughts to God Himself, and hopes that the merit of his biblical readings will engender God's protection. Although this may not be an example of religion at its best, it is permissible-and not in the category of repudiating the Torah.

In the laws of Mezuzah (5:4), Rambam cites another case in which he distinguishes between religious and superstitious behavior.

There is a widespread custom to write the word Shaddai on the outer side of the Mezuzah, opposite the blank space between the two sections. Since it is written on the outside, there is no harm done. On the other hand, those who write inside the Mezuzah names of angels or names of saintly men, some biblical verse or some charms, are included among those who have no share in the world to come. Those fools not only fail to fulfill the commandment but they treat an important precept, which conveys God's Oneness as well as the love and worship of Him, as

if it were an amulet to benefit themselves, since they foolishly believe that the Mezuzah is something advantageous for the vain pleasures of this world.

Here, too, the Rambam chastises those who treat a religious object as though it were a magical charm. People are included among "those who have no share in the world to come" even if they themselves may think they are acting piously. Rambam makes it clear that superstitious behavior-even if cloaked in traditional religious symbols-is a serious transgression of the Torah's teachings.

What leads people to superstitious behavior? Why doesn't everyone realize the foolishness of employing magical incantations and rites? Why would people rely on superstitious behavior rather than turning directly to God with their prayers?

Here are a few reasons:

True religion demands a lot from us. Superstition demands very little. True religion requires that we confront God directly. Superstition offers short cuts, ways to bypass that awe-inspiring confrontation with God.
Superstitious practices have been sanctioned by generations of people who seem to have religious credibility. If these great ones believed in demons and made amulets, then these things must be permissible (in spite of the Rambam's rulings).
When people are afraid and desperate, they may suspend their reason in order to adopt superstitious practices-"just in case" these might be efficacious. Why take chances by not trying everything?
A great challenge for religious leadership is to wean people from superstitious tendencies and bring them closer to God. People need to be reminded to use their reason, rather than to surrender to a mindless supernaturalism. The Torah itself was well aware of the human weakness of turning to diviners and magicians-and the Torah strictly forbade such practices that obstruct a direct relationship with God. Religion teaches responsibility, careful thinking, and reliance on God. Superstition promotes avoidance of personal responsibility, suspension of rational thinking, and reliance on supernatural forces other than God.

There are pressures within contemporary Orthodox Jewish life that foster a superstitious, rather than a true religious, view of Judaism. On the surface, these negative factors appear in the garb of religious words and symbols; yet, just as in the misuse of Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot cited in the passages from Rambam earlier, these tendencies reflect the unfortunate and misguided features of superstition. That these behaviors pass themselves off as being authentic Orthodox Judaism should be a source of concern and anguish to all thinking

Orthodox Jews.

Examples:

1. I (along with many others) periodically receive a brochure from an organization that provides charity to needy individuals and families. The brochure includes abundant pictures of saintly-looking men with long white beards, engaged in Torah study and prayer, and signing their names on behalf of this charity. The brochure promises us that "the Gedolei Hador are the official members of the organization." One of the Gedolei Hador is quoted to say: "All who contribute to [this charity] merit to see open miracles." We are asked to contribute to this cause so that the Gedolei Hador will pray on our behalf. We even are given choices of what merit we would like to receive from these prayers: to have nahat from our children; to have children; to find a worthy mate; to earn an easy livelihood. "Urgent requests are immediately forwarded to the home of the Gedolei Hador." If we are willing to contribute so much per name, we are guaranteed that a minyan of outstanding talmidei hakhamim will pray for us at the Kotel. If we contribute a lesser amount, we only will have the prayer recited by one outstanding talmid hakham. We are also told that we can write our request as a kvitel and it will be placed in the Kotel for forty days; we can even transmit our prayer requests by telephone hotline, after we have made a contribution via credit card.

This charity purports not only to be Torah-true, but to have the involvement and backing of the Gedolei Hador. Anyone looking at the brochure would see this as an Orthodox Jewish charity operated by highly religious individuals.

Let us grant that this is indeed a worthy charity that provides assistance to needy Jews. Let us grant that the people who operate this charity see themselves as pious Jews of the highest caliber, literally linked to the Gedolei Hador. Yet, the brochure is not an example of true religion at all, but of something far more akin to superstition.

Is it appropriate for a Gadol Hador to assure contributors that they will be worthy of open miracles? Can anyone rightfully speak on behalf of the Almighty's decisions relating to doing open miracles? Doesn't this statement reflect a belief that prayers uttered by so-called sages (similar to incantations uttered by shamans?!) can control God's actions, even to the extent of making Him do miracles?

Moreover, why should people be made to feel that they are not qualified to pray to God directly? Why should "religious leaders" promote the notion that if people will pay money, some pious individual will recite a prayer at the Kotel-and that the prayer uttered by such an individual at the Kotel is more efficacious than one's own prayers? How tasteless and contrary to religious values is the notion that a minyan of outstanding talmidei hakhamim will pray if you pay enough; but only one will pray for you if you choose to contribute less than the recommended sum?

In this brochure, dressed as it is in the garb of Torah-true religion, we have a blatant example of superstition-tainted Judaism. The leaders of this organization assume: 1) Gedolei Hador (we are not told who decides who is a Gadol Hador, nor why any Gadol Hador would want to run to the Kotel to pray every time a donor called in an "urgent request") have greater powers to pray than anyone else. 2) A Gadol Hador can promise us open miracles if we send in a donation. 3) A prayer uttered at the holy site of the Kotel has more value than a prayer uttered elsewhere i.e. the Kotel is treated as a sacred, magical entity. 4) A kvitel placed in a crevice in the Kotel has religious value and efficacy. This brochure relies on the public's gullible belief in the supernatural powers of Gedolei Hador and the Kotel.

Lest one think this charity is the only Orthodox Jewish group that promotes a superstitious (rather than truly religious) viewpoint, one may do a google search and find others who do pretty much the same thing. The Wailing Wall Kvitel Service advertises that it will deliver your personal prayers or requests to the Lord "even if you cannot travel to the holy land to visit Jerusalem in person." We are assured that once this Service receives our kvitel and donation, the kvitel will be placed between the stones of the Kotel and "you will receive a postcard from the wailing wall."

Nor is this behavior restricted to the "hareidi" sector of Orthodoxy. One website informs us that Jews and non-Jews have long had the practice of writing their private thoughts and prayers and having them inserted into the cracks of the Kotel "in the firm belief that at this holiest of locales God is always present and listening." (Doesn't Judaism believe that God is always present and listening everywhere?) The sponsors of this website which promises to insert the kvitels "on a same day basis", have also arranged with a kollel in Jerusalem to have Tehillim recited for the ill or to have Torah studied in someone's memory. This program is staffed by volunteers of the Orthodox Union, a mainstream Orthodox organization!

The Jewish Press of March 19, 2008 reported on the trip to Israel by Senator John McCain who traveled with Senator Joe Lieberman. The article included a photograph of Senator McCain placing a kvitel in the Kotel! He obviously was told that this was the "religiously correct" thing to do, bringing this practice to another level of public acceptance. Senator Barack Obama, on his recent trip to Israel, also placed a kvitel in the Kotel, also having been advised that this was the proper thing to do.

The Jerusalem Post (April 15, 2008) ran a news item reporting that the Rabbi of the Kotel and his assistants clean out the kvitels from the Kotel twice a year, before Pessah and Rosh HaShanah. They do so in order to make room for the millions of kvitels that come in from all over the world, from Jews and non-Jews. The kvitels are put into plastic-lined bins and then brought to the Mount of Olives cemetery for burial. The custom of the kvitels is raised to a level of holiness.

Certainly, those who write kvitels do so with a sense of piety, with a sincere desire to get their prayers to God. Yet, shouldn't religious leaders be telling people that they ought to bring their prayers to God-by praying directly to Him. There is no need whatever to write out prayers for deposit in the Kotel. On the contrary, this practice smacks of superstition, relying on magical powers that are attributed to the Kotel rather than on direct prayer to God.

Defenders of the kvitel practice will argue: this is an age-old custom, approved or tolerated by great sages; this is a harmless custom that doesn't hurt anyone; this is a way for people to feel that their words will have a better chance of reaching God. In response, we can say that there are various beliefs and practices that were approved or tolerated by great sages in the past-but that are more akin to superstition than religion e.g. belief in demons (sheidim and mazikim), writing and wearing magical amulets, conducting ceremonies to ward off evil spirits etc. The fact that great people believed or did these things does not make these things correct. The Rambam condemned those who used Torah scrolls, tefillin or mezuzot as magic charms-and I would assume that there were rabbis before (and after) his time who approved or tolerated these practices. The Rambam attempted to make people see the difference between religion and superstition; unfortunately, not everyone wanted to accept this distinction, but preferred to remain attached to superstitious beliefs and practices.

Superstitious practices do cause harm. According to Rambam, severe punishments (including loss of one's portion in the world to come!) are meted out to those who engage in superstitious rites. Moreover, a superstitious approach to Judaism undermines its intellectual and rational foundations, treating it more as a

cult than a religion. This is a vast disservice to Judaism, and turns intelligent and reasonable people away from Torah.

People may feel that superstitious behavior is a way to gain supernatural results-but this feeling is repudiated by the Torah. Rabbis and teachers need to remind the community that one need not-and should not-seek superstitious means of controlling or appeasing God. Rather, people should be reminded of their right and responsibility to pray directly to God on their own, without needing to resort to the supposed powers of holy men, holy objects, holy places.

2. Another example of the fostering of superstition over religion relates to the recitation of the mourner's kaddish. The kaddish is a beautiful prayer, glorifying God's greatness and redemptive power. The text of the kaddish is ancient, and originally was recited as a prayer following a Torah study session (Sotah 49a). It seems to have been adopted as a mourner's prayer only in the 13th century, and became a widespread practice throughout the Jewish world with the passage of time.

Certainly, the kaddish has become imbued with deep emotion and religious feeling among mourners. It is meritorious for a mourner to chant this prayer, as a means of showing respect for the memory of a loved one and even as a way to add merit to the soul of the deceased.

Yet, it must be remembered that the kaddish is a prayer, not a magical incantation. A member of my Congregation, originally from Israel, recently returned to Israel for the burial of his father and for the Shiva period. A rabbi of the Hevra Kaddisha there informed him that he was obligated to say kaddish each day in order to get his father into heaven. If the mourner was not sure he could say kaddish each day, he should pay the Hevra Kaddisha a certain sum, and they would guarantee a daily recital of kaddish-thereby insuring the father's acceptance into heaven.

My congregant called me to ascertain whether the rabbi of the Hevra Kaddisha was giving him correct information. The answer: it is virtuous to recite the kaddish, and it is virtuous to give charity. When a mourner does virtuous deeds in memory of a deceased loved one, this is a tribute to the deceased. In some spiritual sense, the righteous deeds of the mourners may bring repose to the soul of the loved one. Moreover, the recitation of kaddish helps the mourner cope more meaningfully with the loss of a loved one.

However, it is not correct to treat the kaddish as a magic formula. Until the 13th century, kaddish was not recited for deceased loved ones-and yet surely God did not deprive them of their eternal reward. Also, God is the One who alone deals with the souls of the departed, and He surely judges people fairly. It would be ludicrous to think that God withholds justice depending on whether a mourner recites kaddish or not.

For many Jews, including pious Orthodox Jews, kaddish is treated as though it is a magic incantation rather than a prayer glorifying God's greatness. People go to extraordinary lengths to recite the kaddish in a minyan. In itself, this is a virtue. Yet, if they do so because they believe the kaddish is a magic formula to gain entry to heaven for the deceased, then the practice obviously passes into the domain of superstition.

3. Another indication of superstitious trends in Jewish life is the tendency to rely on "good luck" charms e.g. red string tied around the wrist; food or drink blessed by certain kabbalistic sages. I have known cases of otherwise rational people who have turned to "wonder workers" for help in saving a mortally ill loved one. Medical doctors have been unable to save the patient; out of desperation, relatives have asked for "spiritual" cures. In one case, a "saintly" rabbi was flown in from Israel to pray at the bedside of a dying child. (The child unfortunately died.) In another case, a "saintly" rabbi received a contribution after which he sent to a sick patient a bottle of Arak that he had blessed. (That patient also died.) It happens sometimes that people recover from their illnesses. When they do, they are ready to swear that the cure was the result of intervention by the saintly person who prayed for them or sent them holy things to eat or drink. This gives further fuel for desperately ill people to turn to magic workers for help; after all, it might do some good!

Although we can understand-and even sympathize-with this attitude, we must also state clearly that it represents a turn away from true religion and a turn toward superstition. As such, we should be teaching people to avoid falling into this way of thought and behavior. We should be urging people not to rely on red strings, or amulets, or foods/drinks blessed by "saintly" people: rather, they should turn their hearts and minds and souls entirely to God.

Rambam: Judaism and Reason

Rambam stressed the need for human beings to use their power of reason. Superstition is the antithesis of reason, and therefore a false path to truth. While philosophers surely understand this, what are we supposed to do with the masses

who are more prone to fall into the ways of superstition? The answer is: we must teach the masses a philosophically sound and rational approach to religion. We must encourage people to use their powers of reason.

Rambam disdained those who were content to espouse truth on the basis of blind faith, without attempting to establish the intellectual foundations of truth. People who do not use their reason are deficient even in their faith; they are prone to superstition and are gullible to the pronouncements of charismatic (even if misguided) authority figures.

Rambam pointed out that there are things accepted as truth-which are not in fact true. Human reason is necessary as a constant and reliable agent to challenge, verify or reject long-held "truths". Just because a great authority taught something does not ensure that it is true. Indeed, truth stands on its own merit, not on the basis of the opinions of human beings.

For when something has been demonstrated, the correctness of the matter is not increased and certainty regarding it is not strengthened by the consensus of all men of knowledge with regard to it. Nor could its correctness be diminished and certainty regarding it be weakened even if all the people on earth disagreed with it.(Guide, II:13)

In his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Sanctification of the New Moon, 17:24), Rambam states that many books on astronomy and mathematics were composed by Greek sages. Similar works by ancient Jewish sages of the tribe of Issachar have not come down to us.

Since all these rules have been established by sound and clear proofs, free from any flaw and irrefutable, we need not be concerned about the identity of their authors, whether they be Hebrew Prophets or Gentile sages. For when we have to do with rules and propositions which have been demonstrated by good reasons and have been verified to be true by sound and flawless proofs, we rely upon the author who has discovered them or transmitted them only because of his demonstrated proofs and verified reasoning.

Intelligent people need to distinguish between what is true and what is spurious. Surely, we may rely on the wisdom of the prophets and rabbinic sages, just as we rely on the advice of skilled physicians or experts in other fields. Yet, even when receiving advice from these authorities, we should not suspend personal judgment altogether. In his Epistle to Yemen, Rambam warns:

Do not consider a statement true because you find it in a book, for the prevaricator is as little restrained with his pen as with his tongue. For the untutored and uninstructed are convinced of the veracity of a statement by the mere fact that it is written; nevertheless its accuracy must be demonstrated in another manner.[1]

Just because "authorities" and "scholars" have claimed something to be true does not make it true. Rambam, in his Letter on Astrology, remarks that "fools have composed thousands of books of nothingness and emptiness".[2] Men "great in years but not in wisdom" wasted much time studying these worthless books and came to think of themselves as experts. They taught nonsense to the public, imagining that they were conveying truth. Unsuspecting people believed these "experts" because they seemed to be erudite and convincing.

Rambam explains that we should only accept something as reliably true if it belongs to one of three categories. 1) It is proven clearly by human reasoning such as arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. 2) It is perceived with certainty through one of the five senses. 3) It is received from the prophets or the righteous. In considering whether or not something is true, we must determine through which category we have derived its truthfulness. If we cannot verify something through one of these three categories, we cannot accept it as being true.

A dilemma arises. Rambam categorically rejects the validity of astrology, considering it a foolish superstition rather than a bona fide science. Yet, the Talmud and Midrashim record the opinions of righteous sages who themselves seemed to ascribe veracity to astrology! Thus, by Rambam's own standards of determining truth, shouldn't we believe in astrology since we have received this belief from the righteous? Rambam resolves this seeming problem:

It is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly the matter was hidden. Or there may be an allusion in those words; or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him. You surely know how many of the verses of the holy Torah are not to be taken literally. Since it is known through proofs of reason that it is impossible for the thing to be literally so, the Targum [Aramaic translator of the Torah] rendered it in a form that reason will abide. A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back.[3]

Once we have verified the truth of something on the basis of reason, we should not accept the literal meaning of texts that contradict this verified truth. If a sage has made a statement that violates a proven truth, then either 1) he was mistaken; 2) he was speaking in allegorical or poetic language, not to be taken literally; 3) he was speaking within the context of his time and place. If the Torah itself-which is Truth-records something that contradicts verified truth, then the Torah must be interpreted to conform to this established truth. For Rambam, it is axiomatic that the Torah of Truth cannot teach something that violates rational truth.

Rambam argued that reason was the best antidote to falling into a superstitious mindset. With all the risks of allowing people to use their reason, he thought it was essential to put religion on a philosophically sound basis. It was religiously and intellectually wrong to foster a fundamentalist, obscurantist, literalist view of religion that ascribed irrational teachings to the Bible and our Sages. If it is dangerous to rely on reason, it is even more dangerous to violate reason.

Conclusion:

There are strong tendencies in our day (evident in other religions, as well as Judaism) that foster authoritarianism, obscurantism, and fundamentalism. These tendencies promote uncritical thinking, surrender of autonomy, and reliance on holy "authorities". These are ingredients that make for a superstitious worldview rather than a truly religious worldview.

Rambam's insistence on our use of reason is of vital importance to all who would like to reclaim a philosophically-sound Judaism. Rambam teaches us to separate between true religion and superstition; between direct confrontation with God and spurious use of magical charms and incantations; between proper teachers of Torah and counterfeit "sages" who play on human weakness and ignorance.

It is a central challenge of modern Orthodoxy to foster an intellectually meaningful Judaism; to combat tendencies toward superstitious belief and action; to encourage individual responsibility and direct relationship with God. It is time to reclaim the lofty vision of Rambam of a Torah Judaism rooted in reason, that leads to a life of "lovingkindness, righteousness and judgment" (Guide 3:54).

[1] A Maimonides Reader, ed. Isidore Twersky (Springfield: Behrman House, 1972), p.454. For a fine discussion of Rambam's views on superstition, see Marc B. Shapiro, "Maimonidean Halakhah and Superstition", in his book Studies in Maimonides and his Interpreters, University of Scranton Press, Scranton and

London, 2008, pp.95-150.

[2] Ibid., pp. 464-5.

[3] Ibid., p. 472.