
Maimonides at the Margins

James A. Diamond

**Converts, Heretics, and Lepers:
Maimonides and The Outsider**

*University of Notre Dame Press, 2007,
368 pages.*

Reviewed by Orly Roth

In his great philosophical work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, the twelfth-century rabbi Moses Maimonides attempted to systematically resolve the inherent tension between the conclusions of philosophy and biblical revelation. The source of this tension is the discrepancy between the Bible's anthropomorphic descriptions of God and philosophy's long tradition of rejecting any similarity between man and the divine. In order to reconcile these opposites, Maimonides used a familiar literary technique: the metaphor. In his *Guide* he states that "the Tora speaketh in the language of the sons of man," meaning the language of the common people. At certain points, he asserts, the biblical narrative should

not be read literally. It is instead a series of allegories which represent abstract philosophical concepts. By acknowledging that the Bible has a metaphorical aspect, one can understand it rationally and reconcile it with the demands of philosophy.

A close examination of Maimonides' writings reveals that the *Guide* can itself be read in precisely the same manner. Maimonides testified that, like the Bible, his work contained an "esoteric" layer in addition to its apparent literal meaning. This layer was intended only for those with the intellectual capacity to comprehend it. Just as the biblical descriptions of God as a corporeal being are not to be understood literally, the text of the *Guide* has a theological or philosophical meaning that is not immediately evident.

This assumption forms the basis of *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers: Maimonides and The Outsider* by James A. Diamond, who holds the Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Chair of Jewish Studies at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. Diamond's

examination of Maimonides' writings is quite broad, encompassing several texts in which Maimonides discusses archetypal figures situated at the fringes of normative society, including the upper reaches of the social order. Diamond contends that Maimonides relates to these figures in a manner which is not solely moral or legal in nature. He also perceived them as metaphors for theological and philosophical ideas with deep and far-reaching implications. The figure of the convert, for example, serves as a metaphor for an ideal form of Judaism represented by the biblical Abraham. In the same manner, Maimonides treats Elisha ben Abuya, the mishnaic sage who eventually turned his back on the Tora and is thus referred to as *Acher* ("Other") in rabbinic writings, not simply as a well-known heretic but also as an archetype of intellectual degeneration.

In order to back up this fascinating claim, Diamond examines all of Maimonides' works through the lens of allegory and metaphor—not only the *Guide of the Perplexed* but also the *Mishneh Tora*, *Sefer Hamitzvot*, his commentary on the Mishna, and numerous letters. This interpretative approach gives serious intellectual weight to Diamond's book but also requires certain clarifications and justifications, which he doesn't always provide.

In the opening five chapters of his book, Diamond focuses on archetypal human figures characterized as "outsiders": the convert, the leper, the heretic, the king, and the sage. Each of these figures is uniquely located outside of normative society. The convert joins the community from without; the leper is forcibly distanced from society as a result of his condition; the heretic removes himself from the community by his own volition; the king's status and power make him different from others; and even the sage is an outsider, because he isolates himself by dedicating his life to lofty religious works and contemplation of God. Diamond states that these figures "become, in Maimonides' hands, metaphors for something much larger than their own existential predicaments."

In his chapter dealing with the convert, for instance, Diamond claims that Maimonides considers a man who renounces his religion and voluntarily accepts the yoke of Judaism to be an example of the "true" Jew—an exemplar for those born into Judaism. Diamond cites a letter written by Maimonides to a convert named Ovadya, in which he explains why a proselyte, who is not born into the Jewish people, is nonetheless permitted to recite the liturgical statement "our God, and God of our fathers." Maimonides' explanation is based on his view of the biblical Abraham. In

the *Mishneh Tora* he explains that Abraham was a teacher-philosopher who relied on his intellect to contemplate the world around him, and thus arrived at the truth. The nation Abraham founded was composed of those who followed his way, in addition to his biological descendants. The convert, therefore, is a valued member of the community of Abraham's progeny: He is a student of the biblical patriarch and, as such, essentially his "offspring."

But Maimonides saw the convert as far more than just an integral part of the Jewish people. He raised him to the level of a religious ideal. Because Abraham founded Judaism after undergoing a deep spiritual transformation, Maimonides understood the convert's personal journey to Judaism as a symbolic reenactment of the religion's establishment. The truths Abraham bequeathed to his descendants—biological and intellectual—cross vast expanses of time, space, and culture to capture the heart of the convert. As a result, there is no one worthier than he of being considered one of Abraham's progeny.

The convert enjoys another point in his favor: He adopts the ways of his "father" by his own choice. His motivations are interior and personal. In this, he has an advantage over someone who is born a Jew and follows the

traditions of his fathers simply because he was raised in a certain environment. Such unthinking adherence to the familiar obstructs intellectual independence and original thought and can lead to the perpetuation of grave errors (the worst, in Maimonides' opinion, are errors concerning the nature of God). The convert does not face this danger, because he is first and foremost guided by his intellect, in contrast to those who acquire their worldview from the unquestioned authority of parents and teachers.

The archetype of the leper is another philosophically significant metaphor. Unlike the convert, who joins the community, the leper is expelled from it. The convert undertakes a protracted intellectual struggle to discover the truth, whereas the leper, at the core of his being, threatens to undermine the foundations of these truths. As a result, the community is commanded to eject him. It is important to note that the book of Leviticus does not use the term "leprosy" to refer solely to the disease we know today. Rather, the word refers to a spectrum of afflictions which attack not only the human body but also inanimate possessions such as clothes and buildings. This presented the sages of the medieval period with an intellectual challenge, because the symptoms enumerated in the biblical texts did not correspond to any

known disease. As a result, a number of interpreters—such as Nahmanides—saw the afflictions described in the Bible as signs of divine intervention. Maimonides also held that science was incapable of offering a satisfactory explanation for these phenomena. He saw them, however, not as miracles pure and simple, but rather as external manifestations of moral degeneration affecting both humans and the objects around them.

In this vein, Maimonides states in the *Guide* that leprosy is punishment for the sin of *lashon hara* (evil speech). In the *Mishneh Tora*, he claims that idle talk and “pointless” slander are the seeds of moral corruption, which reaches its climax—or nadir—in “evil speech against God.” In the *Guide*, Maimonides holds that internal corruption is accompanied by the gradual spread of “leprosy” from the walls of a sinner’s house to his furniture, his clothes, and finally his body itself:

Now this... was no normal happening, but was a portent and a wonder among the Israelites to warn them against slanderous speaking. For if a man uttered slander the walls of his house would suffer a change; if he repented the house would again become clean. But if he continued in his wickedness until the house was torn down, leather objects in his house on which he sat or lay would suffer a change: If he repented they would again become clean. But if he continued in his

wickedness until they were burnt, his skin would suffer a change and he would become leprous.

The appearance of blemishes signals danger and bids the sinner to change his ways. In the absence of genuine repentance, the sinner is punished by infection and increasing isolation, until he is expelled from healthy society because of his impurity. As Maimonides writes, “[he is] set apart and exposed all alone until he should no more engage in the conversation of the wicked, which is raillery and slander.”

Social isolation is an important philosophical issue for Maimonides, and Diamond examines it by comparing the mental state of the leper to that of the hero of the book of Job. Indeed, the afflictions suffered by Job are very reminiscent of the biblical description of leprosy’s physical symptoms. Diamond explains that, according to Maimonides, acute physical pain leads the sufferer to the mistaken conclusion that there is no moral order to creation and that he has fallen victim to an arbitrary fate. Job was protected from such doubts because he was not denied human companionship. This allowed him to engage his fellows in a series of profound philosophical and psychological dialogues. In the course of these discussions, Job began a process through which he arrived at a better understanding of the

order of the universe. This interaction was essential to his spiritual development. Unlike Job, the leper is isolated and deprived of all contact with others. The lack of social ties prevents him from properly understanding the true causes of his situation. He continues to maintain his mistaken beliefs and suffers the consequences.

The convert and the leper are “outsiders” because of their actions or beliefs. In contrast, the king is an outsider because of what he *is*. The role he must fulfill separates him from society at large. Like the leper and the heretic, his presence is fraught with moral and theological problems: most especially, the danger that because of his power and exalted status the king may come to be perceived by his subjects as a god. Maimonides deals with this difficulty in a highly original way. He does not separate the ruler from the community or make him transcendent of it—much like a god—but adopts the opposite method. He obligates the king to act with unblemished morality and extreme humility.

The requirement of profound humbleness is unusual in the context of Maimonides’ general concept of ethics. Influenced by Aristotle, Maimonides usually asserted that the moral individual follows the middle path, or “the mean,” in order to maintain balance and abstain from exaggerated or

abnormal behavior. As he wrote in the *Mishneh Torah*:

Every human being is characterized by numerous moral dispositions which differ from each other and are exceedingly divergent.... To cultivate either extreme in any class of dispositions is not the right course nor is it proper for any person to follow or learn it. If a man finds that his nature tends or is disposed to one of these extremes, or if one has acquired and become habituated to it, he should turn back and improve, so as to walk in the way of good people, which is the right way.

The right way is the mean in each group of dispositions common to humanity; namely, that disposition which is equally distant from the two extremes in its class, not being nearer to the one than to the other.

However, Maimonides qualifies this requirement by noting two attributes which a moral person must avoid, even if it requires going to the opposite extreme. The first is anger, and the second is arrogance or pride. Regarding pride, he explains:

There are some dispositions in regard to which it is forbidden merely to keep to the middle path. They must be shunned to the extreme. Such a disposition is pride. The right way in this regard is not to be merely meek, but to be humble-minded and lowly of spirit to the utmost.

According to Diamond, Maimonides’ discussion of the king defines

his concept of extreme humility. His choice of the term “lowly of spirit” (*shfal ruab*) in this context is not a coincidence. The expression traditionally refers to the lowest classes of society—the poor and oppressed, widows and orphans, etc. These groups are typically vulnerable to and dependent on others who are stronger than they are. A social structure of this type can lead to arrogance and conceit on the part of the strong and give them the mistaken idea that power and authority are in the hands of men rather than God. Maimonides’ demand that the king must be “lowly of spirit” is a warning against such delusions. By drawing a parallel between the king and the weakest classes of society, Maimonides conveys a clear message about the universal order: Even the king is not truly sovereign. Just like the lowliest of humans, he is entirely dependent on a higher authority.

This sentiment is intended to subdue the dangerous euphoria of power. Simultaneously, it serves as a metaphor for the moral attributes that prevent man from misunderstanding his place in the order of things. Only by putting his ego aside and realizing that he does not stand at the center of the universe can man achieve a clear awareness of his dependence—and the dependence of the world as a whole—on God.

In the last chapters of his book, Diamond moves from the subject of

flesh-and-blood figures to a discussion of the nonhuman—God and the Sabbath. God is the ultimate “outsider,” a perfection that is beyond everything that exists in the physical world. The Sabbath is a temporal anomaly that breaks the normal, profane flow of time.

The discussion of God, or more precisely, the “indwelling” of God as the *shechina*, or the divine presence—to which Diamond devotes two chapters of his book—touches on one of Maimonides’ most challenging theological ideas. His assertion in this context is bound up in the intellectual tradition of “negative theology.” It holds that God is fundamentally different from anything which we are capable of perceiving with our senses. No attributes or physical descriptions can convey his absolute otherness. God can be presented only by way of the negative. In other words, through emphasizing the radical dissimilarity between God and the world we inhabit.

This basic postulation demands an explanation of the anthropomorphic representations of God in the Bible—a task Maimonides undertook in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. One of these representations is the revelation of the *shechina* (meaning “indwelling” in Hebrew), which by its very name implies movement in space. Maimonides rejects the possibility that one

can relate spatial movement to God, and instead he offers an abstract, spiritual meaning for the verb “*shachan*” (to dwell)—as he does for other words which the Bible uses to describe divine actions, such as “*halach*” (going), “*yatza*” (going out, exiting), etc. He explains the reference to God’s “place” (*makom*) which appears in the books of the Prophets in a similar manner. Since God has no body which occupies space, *makom* does not refer to physical location; it is rather an indication of God’s “rank and the greatness of his portion in existence.” By the same reasoning, when God says to Moses, “there is a place by me,” Maimonides defines the word “place” as referring to “a rank in theoretical speculation and the contemplation of the intellect, not that of the eye.”

Maimonides’ negative theology informs his understanding of divine providence as well. He asserts that it is impossible for man to achieve direct knowledge of the essence of God. However, one can study the manner in which God acts through contemplation of nature. The creation, after all, bears witness to its creator, and knowledge of the world allows man to better understand his maker (this is why Maimonides was of the opinion that the study of the sciences was obligatory). Contemplation of the world reveals that nature operates according to laws and is not subject

to arbitrariness or divine caprice. The rising of the sun each morning, for example, is part of the natural order, and one need not fear that it may be interrupted or disturbed by the whimsical intervention of God or man. Ignorance of the workings of nature leads to a mistaken understanding of God’s actions and eventually to the erroneous idea that divine providence is concerned with maintaining a precise account of every human action and deed. Error gives birth to error and, even worse, to heresy: Those who hold to such a simplistic concept of providence may interpret incidents of suffering and injustice in the world as proof that God is indifferent or simply limited.

Against this false perception, Maimonides presents a theory of divine providence that emphasizes God’s otherness in relation to the world. Despite the fact that God does not intercede in nature at every moment, the configuration of the cosmos according to immutable, predetermined laws *is* divine providence. One who correctly grasps his place in creation and his standing in relation to God sees pain or suffering not as divine retribution, but rather as an integral part of the natural order and the laws that govern it. On the other hand, one who is caught up in the arrogant delusion that the entire universe revolves around him, and

that God is intimately involved in his life, is prone to feeling that divine providence has abandoned him when things go wrong.

The examples cited above illustrate the essence of Diamond's thesis quite well. His analysis of each of these archetypes charts a path through Maimonides' theological and philosophical principles. Ultimately, Diamond asserts that Maimonides uses these extreme archetypes to challenge accepted beliefs and social conventions. This is undoubtedly an ambitious and thought-provoking argument. But is it founded on a solid methodological basis? The answer, as we shall see, is not a simple one.

For the most part, Diamond's reading of Maimonides is "unfettered" by academic conventions. To his credit, he is independent of any particular school of thought. Regrettably, Diamond does not trouble himself to inform the reader as to his methodology, leaving us with no alternative but to try and infer it from the texts he chooses to analyze and the interpretative method he employs.

As previously noted, the two primary sources Diamond uses are the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Mishneh Tora*. Diamond works with both texts in parallel, moving from one to the other with ease. This method is based on the idea that in order to understand

Maimonides' position on a certain issue, one must examine all his writings on the subject, because they are in essence complementary parts of a coherent whole. Diamond's entire book rests on this assumption, and without it his thesis collapses like a house of cards.

This methodological outlook goes against the conventional approach to the study of Maimonides, which holds that his writings can be classified as either halachic (those dealing with Jewish law), or philosophical. The *Mishneh Tora*, for example, is defined primarily as a halachic code, whereas the *Guide* is considered a philosophical work. In my opinion, and in this I concur with Diamond, this simplistic dichotomy does an injustice to the texts themselves. The danger of such an approach is especially apparent regarding the *Mishneh Tora*. Most scholars view the work as a collection of laws based on the Talmud. However, it is clear that Maimonides' careful editing of this monumental composition, as well as the motivations he lists for various laws—sometimes quite different from those enumerated in the Talmud—is not insignificant: They represent a clear reflection of his philosophical worldview. Therefore, the artificial distinction between his "halachic" and "philosophical" writings only hinders our ability to fully understand the *Mishneh Tora*.

Diamond adopts a different approach, relating to the *Mishneh Tora* as a composition that expresses Maimonides' philosophy no less than his halachic positions. This is a logical assumption, and I must admit that I read the work in a similar fashion. However, Diamond's method has its problems: The *Mishneh Tora* deals with various categories of halachic law, and the unique nature of each must be taken into account when analyzing their contents. The degree to which it is possible to discern Maimonides' philosophical views in his halachic rulings is unclear. One can argue that on certain weighty issues (questions of personal status, for example), Maimonides' legal opinion probably reflects his philosophical ideas. On "lighter" issues, however, such as the laws of acquisition, he chooses not to engage in a deep analysis and is satisfied with the reasoning presented in the Talmud, though it may not be compatible with his philosophy. As Yohanan Twersky wrote in his introduction to the *Mishneh Tora*:

One must act with caution in evaluating the influence of personal or philosophical opinion over halachic rulings or interpretation.... It is unnecessary to presuppose a purely philosophical motivation behind each ruling, particularly if it already has an explanation based on logic or rabbinic precedent.

Furthermore, any sweeping philosophical reading of the *Mishneh Tora* must consider Maimonides' distinction—elucidated in the *Guide*—between "essential belief" and "true belief":

Sum up what we have said concerning beliefs as follows: In some cases a commandment communicates a correct belief, which is the one and only thing aimed at—as, for instance, the belief in the unity and eternity of the deity and in his not being a body. In other cases the belief is necessary for the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing or for the acquisition of a noble moral quality—as, for instance, the belief that he, may he be exalted, has a violent anger against those who do injustice... and as the belief that he... responds instantaneously to the prayer of someone wronged or deceived.

An "essential belief," according to Maimonides, may not be "true," but it is necessary to ensure social stability. From this, it is possible to conclude that at least some of the halachic rulings included in the *Mishneh Tora* were set down with this rationale in mind and are not intended to convey any deep philosophical convictions.

Equally problematic is the treatment of the *Mishneh Tora* and the *Guide of the Perplexed* as if they were a single text. In fact, they were composed with two very different audiences in mind. The *Mishneh Tora* was intended to replace the Talmud as the practical

legal code of the Jewish people, and thus to be accessible to all. The *Guide* was composed for a reader of another type: “the perplexed” of the book’s title. These were students and scholars who had studied philosophy and the sciences in addition to religious learning and were wrestling with the contradiction—or in Maimonides’ view, the supposed contradiction—between the Bible and the edicts of rationalism. Although both works appear to possess an esoteric meaning, the distinction between their intended readerships certainly influenced their style of writing and the content their author wished to convey.

At the very least, these difficulties demand some methodological

discussion, which Diamond could easily have provided in the preface to his book. In the end, however, this does not detract from the merits of *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers*. Its author analyzes the notoriously difficult Maimonidean texts with surgical precision. His iconoclastic and original interpretations make for fascinating reading and help to deepen our understanding of Maimonides’ thought, the enormous intellectual riches of which have yet to be exhausted.

Orly Roth is a lecturer in Jewish philosophy.