

Maimonides on Superstition

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## MAIMONIDES ON SUPERSTITION.

ONE of the most interesting features connected with the teaching of Maimonides is his attitude towards superstition. There has never been much doubt amongst Jews that they must not have recourse to witchcraft and other illegitimate methods of probing into the future, or of protecting their lives and property from injury. The question has, however, remained whether these practices are efficacious but wicked, or, on the other hand, merely futile. To Maimonides, who was a disciple not only of the Rabbis but also of the Greek philosophers, it seemed clear that this question admitted of only one answer. Superstition was just folly, and nothing more; it was therefore forbidden by the Torah, which aimed at making men perfectly wise.

The views of Maimonides on this subject are perhaps most clearly expressed in the letter which he wrote, towards the end of his life, to the wise men of Marseilles, who consulted him as to the genuineness of astrology. Almost the first sentence of the letter is characteristic of the man, for it shows him uniting rationalism with belief in revelation. "Know, my masters, that there are only three sound grounds for a man's belief. Firstly, belief may be based on a proof that appeals to the reason, as in the case of arithmetic, geometry, or astronomy. Secondly, it may depend upon the evidence of one of the five senses, as when we see that a thing is black or red, or taste that it is bitter or sweet, or feel that it is hot or cold, or hear that a sound is clear or confused, or perceive that a smell is disagreeable or pleasant. Thirdly, belief may be based upon the traditions we have received from the prophets

and the righteous. We should make a mental analysis of the subjects of our belief, and should trace them back to one of these three sources. Should any one believe something for a cause other than these three, he is a simpleton who believes everything." Reasoning upon the matter from this point of view, Maimonides makes short work of astrology, which is supported neither by reason nor by reliable authority. It is true that thousands of books have been written on the subject, which have gained wide credence, but this is because many persons believe all they read, especially if it is contained in an ancient book. The wise men of Greece, who were true philosophers, denounced astrology, which was only valued by "the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, and the Canaanites." The Persians also perceived that it is valueless.

Maimonides carefully distinguishes, as did Isidore of Seville six centuries earlier, between the true science of astronomy and the pseudo-science of astrology. According to the Greek philosophers, man and other creatures, as species, are governed by God through the intermediary action of the heavenly bodies, whilst the events that befall individuals depend only upon chance. This view gives no support to astrology. Still less can astrology be reconciled with the Jewish view, that all human events are governed by God's justice. Astrology is inconsistent with the belief in man's freewill, which is the basis of all true religion. In his *Guide to the Perplexed* (II, 10)<sup>1</sup>, Maimonides further develops his view of the influence of the stars upon terrestrial events. Every star affects a particular species. Thus the moon has a peculiar influence on water, producing the tides. Following Ptolemy, Maimonides believes that the waters in the seas and rivers are greater in volume at full moon than at new moon, and he thus accounts for spring and neap tides. Similarly, the

<sup>1</sup> In my references to the *Guide to the Perplexed*, I have made great use of Dr. Friedländer's English translation. In dealing with Maimonides as a Talmudist, I have mainly followed Weiss.

sphere of the sun affects fire ; that of the other planets, air ; whilst the fixed stars produce the revolution of the earth. Each variety of animals or plants is governed by an individual star.

In his letter to Marseilles, Maimonides admits that certain passages in the Talmud appear to imply that the aspect of the stars at the time of a man's birth produce certain effects upon his future life. Such utterances, he tells us, must be rejected or regarded as allegorical. This attitude is, of course, perfectly sound from the standpoint of traditional Judaism. The narrative and homiletical portions of the Talmud and Midrash have never been regarded as absolutely authoritative. Even the pious Rashi does not scruple to say upon occasion, "Our Rabbis have explained this as they have explained it"; that is, in a way which seems incorrect. Maimonides, however, adds a bold expression of opinion, which really amounts to a declaration that reason is supreme over the whole domain of thought. "A man should never cast aside his intellect; his eyes are intended to look forwards and not backwards." It may be noted that the denunciation of astrology, contained in this letter, is quoted with admiration by Jacob Emden, an eighteenth-century Rabbi, who had no sympathy with the philosophy of Maimonides, and believed that the *Guide to the Perplexed* was the work of a heretic, and that it had been falsely attributed to the pious codifier of Jewish law.

In this same letter Maimonides tells us that he had himself studied deeply astrology and the various religions of the world. "Probably there remains no book on these subjects, translated into Arabic from other languages, which I have not read and carefully considered." His main authority on such matters is the book of *Nabatean Agriculture*, which was translated into Arabic by the descendant of a Chaldean family who had been converted to Mahometanism. Maimonides considers that it contains an account of the Sabeans or star-worshippers, and he quotes from it all sorts of extra-

ordinary tales regarding Adam, Noah, and Abraham. Adam, it appears, brought from India to Babylon some wonderful things, such as a golden tree in full growth, and two leaves, each large enough to cover two men. The branches from another tree move like serpents when they are thrown upon the ground, whilst a certain plant renders its possessor invisible. The stars are the only true gods, and they impart inspiration to men, either directly or through trees dedicated to them. When the prophet Tammuz died, all the images gathered together in the temple at Babylon, which is dedicated to the sun, and there lamented his death. Maimonides mentions a number of superstitious practices enjoined in this work, and he declares that the motive of certain Biblical precepts is the desire of God that his people should avoid any acts resembling those of the idolaters (*Guide to the Perplexed*, III, 37). Some of his illustrations are undoubtedly telling. Thus one ceremony recommended in the book of *Nabatean Agriculture* is that of grafting an olive branch upon a citron-tree. This can be well contrasted with the Mosaic precept, forbidding the cross-breeding of animals and plants.

Amongst other books of the same class, mentioned by Maimonides, is the book of Tomtom, an Indian author, several of whose books on magic were translated into Arabic. Maimonides cites from this work the custom followed by men of wearing a woman's dress when worshipping Venus, and by women of wearing a buckler and other armour when worshipping Mars. He thinks that the Mosaic prohibition against wearing clothes distinctive of the opposite sex may have reference to these idolatrous ceremonies. A similar remark applies to the eating of blood, which is mentioned as a religious ceremony by Tomtom, and which is entirely forbidden in the Pentateuch. Again, the passing of children through the fire to Moloch is regarded by Maimonides as a species of witchcraft. He supposes that this ceremony was intended for the benefit of the child, and did not involve it in any injury. He

identified a relic of this practice as still existing in his own day, for midwives took a young child, wrapped in its swaddling clothes, and swung it over a fire, upon which incense of a disagreeable smell had been placed. This superstition was the more dangerous, because young children are entrusted to women "who are generally weak-minded and ready to believe anything, as is well known."

In studying books on idolatry and superstition, Maimonides was inconsistent with himself. In his Code of Jewish Law, he condemns the study of other religions; indeed, he could not fail to do so, if he was to remain faithful to the authority of the Talmud. Thus he writes: "The idolaters have composed many books about the principles and rites of their religions. God has commanded us not to read these books nor to reflect upon anything contained in them" (*On Idolatry*, ii, § 2). Further: "Not only are we forbidden to turn our minds to idolatry, but any thought that tends to disturb our belief in the principles of the Law is prohibited. We are warned not to consider such things nor to reflect on them, lest we be attracted towards them. The mind of man is feeble, and not every one can clearly grasp the truth." I suppose it to be the fact that Maimonides held that these studies, which are dangerous for the ordinary man, are perfectly safe for the philosopher. This was precisely his view with regard to all forms of speculative theology.

Astrology may be a pseudo-science, but it has at least a certain dignity, which is lacking in other forms of superstition. The astrologer with his astrolabe is a picturesque figure, but we cannot refrain from a pitying smile when we hear a man mumbling an incantation, or see him wearing a nail from the gallows in order to cure himself from a swelling, or a fox's tooth in order to induce slumber<sup>1</sup>. We may be sure that Maimonides had a healthy contempt for such practices, and he characterizes them in fitting terms. Thus in his *Guide to the*

<sup>1</sup> See Sabbath, 67 a.

*Perplexed*, I, 61) he writes: "You must beware of sharing the error of those who write amulets. Whatever you hear of them or read in their works, especially in reference to the names of God, which they form by combination, is utterly senseless: they call these combinations *shemoth* (names), and believe that their pronunciation demands sanctification and purification, and that by using them they are enabled to work miracles. Rational people ought not to listen to such men, nor in any way believe their assertions." So also, in his Code, after an enumeration of superstitions, he sums up his view of the matter in the following terms:—

"All these things are false and vain—the foolish customs of ancient idolaters. It befits not Israel, who are of approved wisdom, to be attracted by such folly or to imagine that it is of profit, as it is said 'There is no enchantment in Jacob or soothsaying in Israel.' And it is said, 'For these nations whom thou drivest out listen to enchanters and soothsayers, but the Lord thy God hath not made thee thus.' Those who believe in such things and who think that they are true and rest on wisdom, but have been forbidden by the Law, are fools and lacking in knowledge, and are to be classed with women and children, whose intellect is imperfect. The wise and perfect in knowledge know by clear proofs that all these things which the Law has forbidden do not rest on wisdom, but are vain and foolish—attractive only to the ignorant, who have abandoned the ways of truth. Therefore the Law, in warning us against these vanities, saith, 'Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God'" (*On Idolatry*, xi, 16).

These are very enlightened principles, but hardly suitable to the codifier of Talmudic Law. Writing in this capacity, Maimonides is obliged to admit that various absurdities are admissible. Sometimes he merely mentions them without comment, as when he tells us that we may wear such amulets as are well approved by experience, when we walk abroad in the public street upon the Sabbath.



Sometimes, again, he is forced into various compromises and inconsistencies, in order to reconcile his views with those of the Talmud. Here is an example:—

“A person bitten by a scorpion or serpent may whisper a charm over the wound even on the Sabbath, in order to settle his mind and to strengthen his heart. The thing is of no avail whatever, but, seeing he is in danger, he is permitted to do it, in order that he may not feel troubled. Those who whisper upon a wound a charm, consisting of verses from the Law, or who read such verses over a child to save it from fear, or who place beside an infant the scroll of the Law or phylacteries in order to send it to sleep, are not only guilty of superstition, but are amongst those who deny the Law. They treat the words of the Law as a mere bodily medicine, whereas they are a spiritual medicine, as it is said, ‘And they shall be life unto thy soul.’ The man, however, who is in health may read verses and psalms so that the merit of their perusal may shield him, in order to save himself from trouble and injury” (*On Idolatry*, ii, §§ 11, 12).

Elsewhere Maimonides suggests another defence for the permission given by the Talmud to employ methods of healing, apparently superstitious. The beneficial effects produced by the nail from the gallows or the tooth of a fox cannot be accounted for by reason, but they were considered by the Rabbis to be facts established by experience. Such methods of healing were comparable to “the hanging of the peony over a person subject to epileptic fits, or the application of a dog’s refuse to the swellings of the throat, or of the vapours of vinegar and marcosite to the swellings of tumours. The Law permits as medicine everything that has been verified by experiment, although it cannot be explained by analogy” (*Guide to the Perplexed*, III, 37).

The whole position of Maimonides in these matters was vigorously assailed by Solomon ben Adrath of Barcelona (commonly known as the Rashba), a celebrated thirteenth-



century Rabbi. He points out<sup>1</sup> that Maimonides states, in the very chapter of his *Guide* just cited, that only such cures as are recommended by reason are permitted, and other cures are prohibited. Thus he seems to be inconsistent with himself. Besides, who is to say what things are established by reason? Shall we rely on the authority of Aristotle and Galen, and call every practice superstitious that did not commend itself to their understanding? Are we in fact to consider them infallible authorities? Surely, continues the Rashba, we find that some substances are shown by experience to possess mysterious qualities, for which we are unable to account. Thus iron is drawn upwards towards the magnet, although this movement is contrary to the nature of all heavy bodies. Solomon, whose knowledge embraced the whole vegetable world, "from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop by the wall," is clearly indicated by the Scriptures, as having discovered the hidden properties of all herbs. We must not think that the opinions of natural philosophers can set bounds to the whole field of human knowledge.

I have just referred to King Solomon's medical knowledge. It was generally believed by the Rabbis that he composed a certain "book of medicines," mentioned in the Talmud, although the name of the author is not there stated. We are told that Hezekiah put away this book and was commended for doing so (Pesachim, 56 a). Most of the commentators, and notably Rashi, consider that this action of Hezekiah was praiseworthy, because the possession of the book caused people to rely upon human means of cure from sickness rather than upon divine aid. Maimonides, in his commentary on the Mishna, denounces this view. If the book had been a genuine medical work, Hezekiah would not have suppressed it. Just as a starving man must seek for food to save his life, so a sufferer from any ailment must obtain suitable medical treatment and

<sup>1</sup> *Responsum* of Rashba, 413; see also brief *Responsum*, 167.

thank God for thus providing him with means of relief. The "book of medicines" must have been in some way injurious, although it was undoubtedly written by Solomon with a good purpose. Probably it contained an account of talismans and other superstitious methods of treating sickness. Solomon enumerated them for information only but Hezekiah suppressed the book, because he found that his people made actual use of the talismans about which they read. Maimonides thinks that it is also possible that the book treated of poisons and their antidotes, and was therefore a dangerous weapon in the hands of the unscrupulous.

It may be added that the nature of Jewish tradition respecting Solomon quite prepares us to expect the belief that a "book of medicines" composed by him would deal with magic. Josephus tells us in his *Antiquities* that God taught King Solomon the "art of opposing the demons for the succour and healing of men. So that he (Solomon) composed incantations by which sickness of all sorts is assuaged, and left to posterity methods of exorcising by which they that are bound can chase away the demons so that they shall never come back again."

Witchcraft is another gross form of superstition which has always been condemned by Judaism. Here again the question arises whether the wizard is aided by the powers of darkness, or whether he is a mere deceiver. The Mishna in dealing with the subject distinguishes between the wizard who really practises sorcery, and the pretender to magical powers who deceives the eye by sleight of hand (Sanhedrin, vii). The former is guilty of a capital offence; the latter is exempt from punishment by man, although he has acted wrongly. Maimonides does not explain this passage in his commentary on the Mishna, but he incorporates it in his Code (*On Idolatry*, xi, § 15). This is perplexing, as immediately afterwards he declares that all such superstitious practices are in reality inefficacious. Perhaps the distinction intended is that whilst

the wizard pretends to do something miraculous, the person who "deceives the eye" is a mere conjurer, who does a thing which although wonderful is consistent with the ordinary workings of nature. As an example of this conjuring, Maimonides might have cited the performance of the father of Karno, who produced bundles of silk from his nostrils. The donkey that turned into a log of wood, on being given water to drink, was the product of witchcraft, properly so called (*Sanhedrin*, 67 b). Stories of this kind appear to be related by the Talmud quite seriously, and we are doubtless intended to understand them as the narrations of actual events. On the other hand, in the parallel passage in the Jerusalem Talmud, we find one story which seems to indicate a healthy scepticism. A wizard was seen by one of the Rabbis to throw a stone into the air, whereupon it descended as a calf. He told the tale to his father. "If you ate the calf," said the latter, "this was indeed witchcraft; otherwise it was a mere trick." The general trend of opinion in the Talmud is, however, in the opposite direction, and in like manner many of the contemporaries and the immediate successors of Maimonides were quite convinced that real results could be achieved by means of magic and sorcery. Nachmanides was a man of genius and piety; he had a genuine admiration for Maimonides, but still he reprobates the view that witchcraft is unavailing. "We cannot deny," said he, "things which are of notorious efficacy, and which are admitted by our Rabbis<sup>1</sup>." Again, he explains the scriptural references to Azazel by means of the "science of necromancy," and continues thus: "We must silence those who pretend to scientific wisdom, being led by the Grecian (Aristotle), who denied everything except what was manifest to his own perception, and who proudly imagined that nothing was true except what he and his wicked disciples could verify."

Maimonides does not entirely reject the belief in dreams,

<sup>1</sup> Nachmanides on *Deut.* xviii. 10-12.

to which there are several references in his Code. Thus he tells us that "those who have a bad dream must fast on the next day, in order to arouse themselves to an examination of their actions and to repentance. They must so fast even on Sabbath" (*On Fasts*, i, § 12). Again: "A person who is excommunicated in a dream, must afterwards seek for ten learned men to release him from the ban" (*On study of the Law*, vii, § 12). On the other hand, he believes that most dreams are vain; they are like straw which contains a few grains of wheat (Preface to Commentary on the Mishna). He therefore omits several laws relating to dreams. Thus the Talmud gives a kind of incantation, suitable for those who have seen an evil dream (*Berachoth*, 55 b). Maimonides omits this formula, and also a prayer, far less objectionable in nature, given in the same passage. This prayer still finds a place in the Jewish ritual.

It has been conclusively shown by Weiss that Maimonides, in codifying Talmudic legislation, sought to free it from many unworthy elements. He leaves out entirely certain superstitious laws, such as those based on the idea that even numbers are unlucky. The following regulations of the Talmud are also omitted by Maimonides:—

(1) "If a man's voice is heard from a pit, declaring that he divorces his wife, we must take precautions lest the sound proceed from a demon. If we see a human form with a shadow, and the shadow of a shadow, we may rest assured that it is not a demon" (*Gittin*, 66 a).

(2) "If we hear a voice from heaven proclaiming that a man is dead, we permit his wife to marry again" (*Yebamoth*, 122 a).

(3) "A man must not greet another at night-time, for we fear lest the being whom he sees is a demon" (*Megillah*, 3 a).

(4) "We should not pray for what we require in Aramaic, because the angels do not understand that language" (*Sabbath*, 12 b).

(5) "He who extinguishes the Sabbath light because he is in fear of heathens, of robbers, or of an evil spirit, or to enable a sick person to sleep is absolved" (Mishna, Sabbath, ii, 5). Maimonides omits this altogether from his Code, and in his commentary on the Mishna he explains the "evil spirit" as a species of melancholia, which alters the ordinary nature of man, so that light and company become distressing to him. In the *Guide to the Perplexed* (I, 7) Maimonides explains the term "demons" metaphorically, and declares that it may be rightly applied to the wicked, who are not human in the true sense of the word, but use for mischievous ends the gifts of intelligence and judgment with which they have been endowed. Finally, he passes over without comment the remark of the Mishna that "the destroying spirits were, in the opinion of some, created on Friday evening at twilight" (Aboth, v, 9).

(6) "We must not inquire from demons on the Sabbath (i. e. regarding our lost property). R. Jose adds that we must not do so even on week-days, because such a course is dangerous" (Sanhedrin, 101 a). Maimonides omits this altogether. It may be interesting to quote the form in which this provision appears, four centuries after the time of Maimonides, in the *Shulchan Aruch*, the most authoritative compendium of traditional Judaism. To the text by R. Joseph Karo I have added, in brackets, a note by his contemporary, R. Moses Isserles: "To traffic with demons is forbidden, but some permit us to ask them about a theft (or in any like case. Some permit us, in any event, to adjure them in God's name. Most of those, however, who meddle with such transactions do not emerge from them in peace; therefore, he who guardeth his soul will keep far from them)." (Yoreh Deah, 179, § 16.)

In other cases Maimonides avoids giving a superstitious reason for a law in his Code, although such a reason may be assigned to it by ancient authorities. Thus the Talmud relates that when R. Jose entered a ruin in order to pray, he was warned by the prophet Elijah not to do so. A ruin

should be avoided for three reasons: lest one be suspected of entering it for an immoral purpose, lest it should fall on one, lest it be haunted by demons (Berachoth, 3 a). Maimonides contents himself with stating that one should not pray in a ruin, without giving any reasons whatever (*On Prayer*, v, § 6).

The Talmud tells us that if a woman's first two husbands die, she must not marry a third husband, because it would bring him bad luck (Yebamoth, 64 b). Maimonides includes this law in his Code, but adds that if the woman has actually married again, her third husband need not divorce her (*On Prohibited Marriage*, xxi, § 30). In one of his *Responsa* (§ 143) Maimonides treats this provision with something approaching contempt, as depending on mere chance. He states that in Andalusia marriages of this kind were permitted by Isaac Alfasi and Joseph ibn Migash. Maimonides was himself accustomed to sanction them in Egypt. Later authorities laid great stress on this law, stating that if the woman married again, she must be divorced, for "a dangerous practice must be prevented even more than one which is otherwise forbidden" (Tur Eben Haezer, 19).

As a final illustration, I may cite the words of Maimonides with regard to the way in which we are to regard the precept to attach a Mezuzah to the door-post. Nothing may be written upon the inner side of this parchment-roll except the two statutory passages from Deuteronomy. On the outer side we may write, in accordance with the prevalent custom, the word "Shaddai" (Almighty). "Those who write upon the parchment the names of angels have no share in the world to come. Not only do these fools fail to carry out a divine precept, but they treat the religious duty of proclaiming the Unity of God and acknowledging the love and service due to him, as though it provided them with an amulet for their own profit, because they fancy in their folly that they will thus obtain vain temporal prosperity" (*On Phylacteries, &c.*,

v, § 4). It is instructive to contrast this statement with older authority for the view that a Mezuzah guards the house to which it is affixed. The Mechilta points out that even the drops of blood, sprinkled upon the doorposts of our fathers in Egypt, sufficed to hinder the destroyer from entering their houses. How much more then should the Mezuzah be efficacious, seeing that God's name is so often written upon it, and it is suspended by day and night. If it fails to shield us, this can only be because our sins divide us from our God. Again, in the Jerusalem Talmud (Peah, i, 1), we read that when a certain noble presented R. Judah the Prince with a precious pearl, the Rabbi dispatched in return a Mezuzah, and declared it to be a far more excellent gift. Whilst the pearl would require to be jealously guarded from thieves, the Mezuzah would itself watch over the safety of its possessor. R. Joseph Karo, in his commentary upon the words of Maimonides which have been quoted, can only excuse him by explaining that the Mezuzah, although guarding the house, must not be placed there in order to do so, but in obedience to God's will.

When it is remembered that the activity of Maimonides covers in the main the last forty years of the twelfth century, it will be seen that his attitude towards superstition deserves to be accounted as a special claim to the gratitude of all lovers of light.

H. S. LEWIS.