

I quickly tried to start the ignition, but with no success. ... the terrorists were still shooting. ... Finally, on the fourth or fifth attempt, the car started, and it started smoothly, as if there had never been a problem. An obvious miracle.

Rubin raced toward Ofrah, a nearby Jewish community, well aware that he could collapse from loss of blood at any moment. Swinging into the security guard station, he managed to lower the window and shout, "Ambulance!" One of the gas station attendants nearby ran to the car shouting, "I'm a medic!" He ripped off David's shirt and proceeded to affix a tourniquet to his leg. Yet another miracle.

Rubin tells of his and Ruby's traumatic experience in his powerful new book entitled *God, Israel, & Shiloh: Returning to the Land*. (Rubin and his son have since both fully recovered.) But the attack is only one part of a larger story that Ruben tells in this important book: the story of Shiloh. Written from the perspective of a pioneer, the

book details Rubin's love affair with Shiloh, the ancient city that was home to the Tabernacle for 369 years.

When Rubin first moved to Shiloh in 1992, he lived in a caravan-trailer in "the heart of the Land of God." Later, with his new wife, Lisa, he gave himself over to community work, becoming the volunteer mayor of the city.

Rubin spends much time in his book tracing Biblical and contemporary Jewish history in order to convey the significance and the sacredness of Shiloh. Chronicling the return of the Jews to their ancestral land, Rubin recalls the victory of the Six Day War.

While the United Nations condemned Israel ... many Bible-literate people from around the world were ecstatic, as the victory was rightly viewed as at least a partial fulfillment of the prophetic vision of the return of Israel to its Biblical heartland.

Rubin describes how the modern Jewish city of Shiloh was established. In January 1978, eight courageous religious families founded the new city, enduring enormous hardships while living on the isolated, barren hills.

Relying upon a noisy generator for electricity, the early settlers lived in tents and caravans without running water. Despite their difficulties, they felt privileged to be returning to the Biblical heartland. "Shiloh," Rubin writes, "had been waiting for its children to return home for close to two thousand years." Today, nearly a thousand families live among the towns and numerous hilltop neighborhoods that comprise the Shiloh bloc.

Rubin's greatest pleasure is simply walking up and down the ancient boulders in Shiloh and exploring the hills and the city's past with his children and visitors.

"In the Talmud," writes Rubin, "there are three things that are acquired through great suffering: Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come."

To Rubin and the other courageous pioneers like him, some things are worth suffering for. **IA**

MiNofet Tsuf, Iyunim B'Moreh HaNevuchim (Hebrew)

By Jonathan Blass
Kollel Ritson Yehudah
Petach Tikva, 2006
2 vols., 913 pages

Reviewed by Yehuda Gellman



In this rich two-volume work, entitled *MiNofet Tsuf, Iyunim B'Moreh HaNevuchim*, Rabbi Jonathan Blass proposes an overarching systematic structure to Rambam's (Maimonides) thought and discusses various important philosophical topics found in Rambam's writings. Rabbi Blass is to be praised for giving us this *melechet hakodesh*, which took him more than ten years to write. The author states that this *sefer*, which focuses almost exclusively on *Moreh HaNevuchim*, is a contrast to the treatment of Rambam's work by typical Maimonidean scholars. Drawing upon quotations from the late Professor Marvin Fox, Rabbi Blass accuses academics of regarding Rambam as an Aristotelian philosopher first and foremost and only then as a God-fearing Jew. In contrast, our author portrays Rambam as a rabbi with much more traditional views. Rabbi Blass' work includes approbations from three outstanding rabbis (who do not claim to be experts in *Moreh HaNevuchim*): the late Rabbi Abraham Shapiro, former *rosh yeshivah*

Professor Gellman teaches philosophy at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

of Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav; Rabbi Yakov Ariel, a leading Religious Zionist rabbi and Rabbi Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg, a giant of a Talmudist. All of them attest to Rabbi Blass's piety and maturity in Jewish learning.

Academic scholars will probably take issue with many of Rabbi Blass's methodologies. To start with, they will claim that he indiscriminately draws from other Maimonidean works to elucidate passages in *Moreh HaNevuchim* or to nail down his interpretation of a particular passage. For example, on more than one occasion Rabbi Blass quotes from Rambam's *Iggeret Teiman* as a proof-text for his interpretation of *Moreh HaNevuchim*. While other Maimonidean works are, of course, relevant in interpreting *Moreh HaNevuchim*, they are far from decisive. Rambam wrote various works over a long period of time, and inconsistencies among them may indicate that, as time went on, he changed his mind concerning various philosophical matters (as he did with regard to some of his halachic rulings). Furthermore, this methodology ignores the range of genres in the Maimonidean corpus; Rambam wrote legal works, philosophical tracts, popular epistles, *teshuvot*, et cetera. Rabbi Blass does not allow for the possibility that Rambam's exoteric works, for example, were written with a different aim and for a different audience than his semi-popular works.

At times, when Rambam uses a turn of a phrase that appears in Chazal or quotes a verse from Tanach in a context reminiscent of a Chazal, Rabbi Blass concludes that Rambam uses such language or a specific verse because he is alluding to a particular saying of the Sages. Furthermore, according to Rabbi Blass, Rambam is interested in pointing the reader to a "secret teaching." On such grounds, Rabbi Blass has Rambam advance the view (similar to that of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook and the *Kuzari*) that the Jewish nation has a unique metaphysical status, and is in a category of its own. Most Maimonidean scholars would disagree

with Rabbi Blass, concurring instead with Professor Menachem Kellner, professor of Jewish thought at the University of Haifa, who maintains that according to Rambam, the Jewish people do not have a special metaphysical status.¹ Maimonidean scholars would probably argue that the rabbinic language found in Rambam does not necessarily refer to "secret teachings," but may be part of his habitual vocabulary. Moreover, they would protest that Rabbi Blass fails to provide a persuasive reason as to why certain teachings were concealed in the first place.

Maimonidean scholars would cringe at Rabbi Blass's tendency to elucidate Rambam by referring to Ramban, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, Rav Kook and others whose cultural and religious contexts are in stark contrast to those of Rambam. Ramban, they would say, favored kabbalistic interpretations and excelled at understanding events in the Torah as alluding to later historical periods and events. Both of these methods are alien to Rambam's thinking. The *Kuzari* is often at odds with Maimonidean ideology. And while Rav Kook praised Rambam, Maimonidean scholars will note that Rav Kook's kabbalistic and philosophical approach is wholly distinct from that of Rambam. For Maimonidean scholars, Rabbi Blass's work is lacking in that in an effort to make everybody say more or less the same things, it disregards the obviously deep divisions in Jewish belief that exist.

Finally, scholars will gripe at two related chapters in the second volume. One chapter lists several of Chazal's aggadic teachings that Rambam contradicts in his writings. The second attempts to show how Rambam did not really disagree with Chazal. Medieval thinkers, from the Geonim on, including Radak, Abraham Ibn Ezra and others, did not feel bound to accept the aggadic teachings of Chazal.² Furthermore, Rambam was quite willing (as Rabbi Blass himself notes) to relegate a troublesome Chazal to the category of a "minority view," as he did to numerous rabbinical endorsements of astrology.

As a philosopher who has written on Rambam's philosophy, including *Moreh HaNevuchim*, I find myself sympathetic to most of the objections I have listed above. It is precisely for this reason that I believe Rabbi Blass's work is so important and so welcome.

Academic scholarship on *Moreh HaNevuchim* is heavily dominated by Orthodox Jews. This is especially true in Israel, where I can think of at least a dozen Orthodox scholars who have published in this area and who comprise the vast majority of Maimonidean scholars in Israel today. This situation has prevailed in Israel for many decades, and it seems to be similar, if not quite so pronounced, in the United States. At the other end of the spectrum, however, we find that *yeshivot* and other non-university Orthodox institutions of learning seem to have forsaken the study of *Moreh HaNevuchim*. There are several reasons for this, including a suspicion of philosophy in an age of secularization. (Two philosophical works nevertheless studied in *yeshivot* are *Chovot Halevovot*, which has a *mussar* flavor and the *Kuzari*, which makes a clear distinction between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle.)

The result is that in the Orthodox world, *Moreh HaNevuchim* has been abandoned to Orthodox academics, scholars who, with a few exceptions, seem to have an agenda in addition to mere historical interest in Rambam. This agenda helps explain why Orthodox academics are so attracted to his work: the agenda is Modern Orthodoxy. More specifically, it is certain aspects of Modern Orthodoxy, namely the endorsement of "secular studies," especially the humanities, and the recognition of the influence of non-Jewish culture on traditional Judaism.

To many Orthodox Maimonidean scholars, Rambam—the greatest of the great—confirms more than any other Torah-true Jewish philosopher how an Orthodox Jew can position him or herself squarely within the general culture. By emphasizing how Rambam studied Aristotle, Plato, Neo-Platonism, Al



Levaya

A COMMUNITY SERVICE FOR
ORTHODOX UNION MEMBERS
IN THE GREATER NEW YORK AREA

As part of our mission to enhance Jewish life in every area, the OU Levaya Program substantially lowers the cost of a traditional, halachic funeral, while maintaining the highest level of adherence to halacha.

THE OU LEVAYA PROGRAM

- ✧ ensures k'vod ha-met, that the deceased is cared for in accordance with all the requirements—and is tendered all the honor and dignity—that the halacha requires.
- ✧ ensures that the aveilim, mourners, are treated with all the sensitivity and concern to which they are entitled.

Fixed price of \$3,945 for a chapel service, or \$3,570 for a graveside service, includes: *hotza'ah* (transportation from the place of death by the Chevra Kadisha), *tahara* (preparation of the deceased), *tachrichim* (burial garments), a wood *aron* (burial container), the use of a Parkside chapel for the funeral service, and conveyance to a New York metropolitan area cemetery. All the halachic aspects of the

OU Levaya Program are provided by the Chevra Kadisha of the Va'ad Harabonim of Queens (in Brooklyn, *tahara* is performed by the Chevra Kadisha of the Va'ad Harabbanim of Flatbush), or by your own chevra. When necessary, arrangements can be made at additional cost for *shmira*, the use of other chapels, or for transfer to a cemetery in Israel. Monuments are also available for purchase.

Additional costs apply outside New York City limits.

One phone call to 1.877.LEVAYA.OU assures you of pressure-free and solicitous treatment at a reasonable cost.

PARKSIDE
MEMORIAL CHAPELS, INC.

Parkside Memorial Chapels is one of the most reputable, independent Jewish funeral homes. Still Jewish family owned and operated, it is committed to upholding our traditions, and to treating everyone with dignity and respect.

ORTHODOX UNION
תורה
ואמונות
Enhancing Jewish Life

For any further information or if you have any questions concerning the OU Levaya Program, please call 1.877.LEVAYA.OU (1.877.538.2926) or visit our website at www.ou.org/programs/levaya.

Farabi, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Bajja and the whole gang, these scholars create a model to be emulated by contemporary Orthodox Jews.

In addition, showing how Rambam borrowed freely and heavily from non-Jewish philosophers can establish that Jewish thought is indebted—and is *permitted* to be indebted—to non-Jewish thought. This in turn helps provide a rationale for the creation of new *hashkafot* (outlooks) drawing from modern rather than ancient and medieval non-Jewish thought.

I remember how excited I was many years ago when I read an article by Herbert Davidson, a prominent Orthodox scholar, which showed that Rambam's *Shemoneh Perakim* borrows heavily, sometimes almost word by word, from Al Farabi's *Aphorisms of a Statesman*. As a religious academician, I felt vindicated to discover that Rambam was so deeply immersed in the non-Jewish culture of his day!

The more Rambam can be shown to diverge from standard traditional Jewish points of view, the more Orthodox scholars are emboldened to do so as well, but this now occurs in the name of "Modern Orthodoxy" rather than medieval rationalism. Most Orthodox Maimonidean scholars are happy to conform to the norms of academic research and to arrive at conclusions that are not necessarily informed by their religious sensitivities. And here is why Rabbi Blass's work, irrespective of any particular content, is so important: Rabbi Blass presents a Rambam who is quite different from Maimonides. His Rambam is one whose intimate *chavrutot* are solely the Torah greats of his age and those who preceded him; one whose secret teachings are not embedded in far-out views by today's conventional Orthodox standards, based on Islamic or Greek philosophy, but are rooted in allusions to sayings of Chazal! To Rabbi Blass, to study Rambam is to engage in a religious task, and so in order to publish a book about Rambam one must receive rabbinic approbations attesting to one's piety and Torah learn-


ing. Rabbi Blass's Rambam is one who presents an overarching elegant structure in which all of his ideas fall nicely and neatly into place, much like the Gemara *shiur* I used to hear from my *rebbe*.

Orthodox academics should read this work not with the expectation of agreeing with Rabbi Blass but to become exposed to an entirely different, serious perspective that should cause us to rethink the prevalent secular mood and methodologies of the discipline. If a secular bias can exist in the discipline, then why can't a traditional religious bias exist just as well?

Rabbi Blass and those who endorsed his work, despite the fact that they are not experts in *Moreh HaNevuchim*, surely have an agenda of their own. And that agenda is to argue for the autonomy of Torah studies from secular studies, and to contend that Jewish thought is internal to Torah, and not beholden to "outside" influences. In their view, it is primarily the Rishonim who must be consulted if we are to understand Rambam. And while others find that certain Maimonidean ideas reflect non-Jewish philosophical influences, to Rabbi Blass they may simply be concealing secret teachings that are based on Chazal.

By conveying this view of Rambam to the public, Rabbi Blass has provided Orthodox Maimonidean scholarship with the opportunity to engage in self-reflection. As a result of such a critique, perhaps more non-academic rabbis and *roshei yeshivah* might learn to appreciate the contribution of academic scholarship to understanding the Great Eagle in a way that non-academic study alone cannot. I strongly recommend that the non-academic rabbi and *rosh yeshivah* study the recent translation of *Moreh HaNevuchim* into Hebrew by Professor Michael Schwarz, professor emeritus of the Departments of Jewish Philosophy and Arabic Language and Literature at Tel Aviv University. Professor Schwarz, an Orthodox Jew, provides a superb translation with a commentary that summarizes scholarship on *Moreh HaNevuchim*

and includes extensive references to Torah literature.

Rabbi Blass has provided Orthodox scholars, in the disparate worlds of the university and the yeshivah, with an opportunity to rethink their positions, to benefit from the insights of each other, and, most of all, for each to ask of themselves the question, "Are you absolutely sure?" 

Notes

1. See Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany, 1991).

2. See, for example, Ibn Ezra on Bereishit 22:4, on the age of Yitzchak at the *Akeidah*. Chazal state that Yitzchak was thirty-seven years old at the time; rejecting this, Ibn Ezra states that Yitzchak was probably around thirteen.

Do we have your e-mail address?

If not, you're not getting the most out of the Orthodox Union.

Sign up at www.ou.org, or just send an e-mail saying "Subscribe" to updates@ou.org, and we'll keep you in touch with updates, Israel alerts, *kashrut* info and Shabbat Shalom greetings.