

COMMENTATOR'S PREFACE

☛ What is the justification for another Maimonides volume?

The plethora of Maimonides publications in every language testifies to the greatness, acknowledged by the entire world, of this twelfth century Jewish philosopher and jurist.

There are more titles on Maimonides than any other non-biblical Jewish figure. Yet few understand the single work that best embodies his thought, the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

For those who wish to study his revolutionary legal compendium, *Mishneh Torah*, there are many English-language commentaries, guidebooks, podcasts, and Internet videos. There are also fine modern translations. Since Maimonides wrote it in fine, clear Hebrew, students at almost any level can make progress, and most Rabbis or even advanced students can teach the material competently. There has never been any serious historical gap in the rabbinic transmission of *Mishneh Torah*.

If only the same could be said for Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.

Jewish schools have not taught the *Guide* systematically, if it all, either during Maimonides' lifetime, or following what historians call the "Maimonidean Controversy" that erupted after his death. The rabbis tell us that if a single generation had failed to maintain the transmission of the teaching of the Talmud, we would no longer be able to understand that fundamental work. Something like that happened with the transmission of the *Guide*.

The strange result is that while few devote any serious attention to the *Guide*, that does not stop them from giving opinions about it. It is common to hear people, even rabbis and professors, freely tell us what the book is about. They usually get it wrong. One reason is this lack of a consistent interpretive tradition. No solid consensus regarding the meaning of the *Guide* has emerged as a corrective.

Another reason is that the *Guide's* chapters require intense study. Such study must relate each chapter to the rest of Maimonides' works. There is no such study in English. The great Hebrew commentaries, for reasons that I will shortly explain, will not help.

Many do not read the *Guide* straight through but turn to a particular chapter or group of chapters. Sometimes they want to look up a reference made in Artscroll's *Stone Chumash*, or in other popular Torah commentaries and general works. Unfortunately, despite Maimonides' deceptively elegant prose, the student will lack the background to grasp the meaning of the chapter. The result is that these students continue to repeat mistaken conclusions heard from those who only claim to know.

The truth is that few come to the *Guide* adequately prepared to grasp what they read.

One problem is that few read the *Guide* in the original Judeo-Arabic. (Judeo-Arabic is twelfth century Arabic written in Hebrew letters, with many Hebrew terms). Even Arabic readers would have to learn the Hebrew alphabetic correspondence to their own script before they could proceed, and there are differences between ancient and modern Arabic. That is why its readers rely on

translations, and all translators are to some extent traitors to the original, including the English translations, which I will discuss below.

Another stumbling block, which Maimonides explicitly discusses, but which few consider, is that he had to cast a slight veil over his instruction. This has nothing to do with the claim some interpreters still make that Maimonides concealed a secret anti-religious doctrine in an esoteric layer of this work. There is no such layer. Rather, Maimonides sought to comply with the law, from the second century *Mishnah*, that prevents the public teaching of the account of divine creation, and of the account of divine providence (*Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava*), i.e., its teaching in any public forum. In this commentary I explain the workings and implications of this law.

Due to the lack of an interpretive tradition, we now have multiple conflicting accounts of the meaning of the Guide, including two main opposing schools, with their many branches. None share my interpretation. (None, that is, except for some views expressed by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his recently reconstructed 1951 lectures, *Maimonides – Between Philosophy and Halakhah*, Ktav 2016—see review at *Academia Letters*, and at <https://www.maimonides-guide.com/other-essays-by-scott-alexander>).

My interpretation is that the Guide is a textbook for the education of future prophets, and its materials that do not apparently further that education still relate to that purpose. The Guide examines the phenomenon of prophecy and its sibling, inspiration, from within and without.

But beyond the confusion about the Guide's purpose, modern readers require background knowledge that they do not have. One broad divide is that few rabbis understand philosophy well, and the philosophy department does not understand rabbinics. The two disciplines don't coincide and seem antagonistic towards each other. But this is a shortcoming. It was not a conflict for Maimonides, who taught that such conflicts are ultimately resolvable in what he called the "divine science."

While it is true that Maimonides demolished the fundamental principle of Aristotelian philosophy, Aristotle's rejection of divine creation, that did not mean that Maimonides opposed philosophy. He could distinguish his own philosophical/theological approach from those of his predecessors. This is one reason why the Guide remains a philosophic masterpiece, while at the same time being the *sine qua non* of Jewish religious thought. The student should be on familiar terms with both disciplines.

Further difficulties afflict the modern student. That student should be able to appreciate the differences between ancient and modern thought. In particular, the student needs to know how to negotiate the paradigm shift between the two, especially the chasm between the terracentric and heliocentric conceptions of the universe.

The student should also be familiar with all the contending religious views of the twelfth century, including the major varieties of Islam, Christianity, and the paganisms that preceded them, as well as the Jewish perspective on them. Philosophy students well-versed in the history of philosophy will be challenged by the nuances of Islamic, Christian and, yes, Jewish scholasticism that both preceded and immediately followed the writing of the Guide.

Maimonides seems to have presupposed that the reader would understand twelfth century scientific and general literature. The student should also recognize historical trends, both West and East, which were crucial to the emergence of the Guide under Saladin's rule.

Finally, we need to weave the multiple strands of this tapestry with the words of each chapter of the Guide. The reader faces a large task!

☛ How to read this book

Whether you read the Guide straight through, or just pick up a single chapter, first read the chapter in the most accessible translation available to you. None of Maimonides' chapters is very long, and you can read most of them in one sitting. Then read my relatively brief essay on that chapter. This should provide you with a solid understanding of its meaning, equip you for any further study you choose to do, and answer any reasonable question that may occur to you.

☛ Why, if this is supposed to be a "commentary," was it written in essay form?

If commentary has been the typical Jewish response to life and literature, the greatest commentator, Rabbi Shlomo Ben Yitzkhak, better known by his acronym name, Rashi (1040 – 1105) established the line-by-line form of that commentary.

Rashi was Maimonides' immediate predecessor. (Maimonides' lived from 1137/8 to 1204). But Maimonides' style of writing is very different from Rashi's style.

Rashi wrote two types of commentary. His Torah commentary is brief and sometimes elusive, illuminating the scriptural text with material drawn from the ocean of Midrashic commentary. He usually provides just enough information to point the reader to the Midrash appropriate to a given passage. He also briefly explains grammatical issues and resolves time conflicts in the text. His Talmud commentary, on the other hand, is more explanatory, not so much based on Midrashic lore. Rashi is a patient, helpful companion for the reader first coming to grips with the Talmud.

This summary should clarify the problem with the Guide's commentary tradition: the Guide is the work of Judaism's greatest essayist; a man whose *métier* was decidedly not the Rashi-style commentary format.

The reader will protest, wasn't *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides' first world-famous work, precisely a work of commentary? Yes and no. While the *Commentary* is frequently illuminating, and always based on sound scholarship, few rely on it to study the Mishnah. Part of the reason was that Maimonides wrote the *Commentary*, like the Guide, in Judeo-Arabic, which was therefore not immediately available to close European scholarship. But it is also true that the line-by-line commentary form does not reveal Maimonides' explanatory genius as an essayist.

The paradox of *Commentary on the Mishnah* is that Maimonides' several *introductions* to the sections of the *Commentary* are more popular than the commentary itself. Readers still enjoy those essays, like *Helek* and *Eight Chapters*. In other words, it was precisely the essays of *Commentary on*

the Mishnah that the Jewish world knows, and which are central to any Jewish library, not the commentary itself.

Similarly, *Mishneh Torah*, the eternal monument of Maimonides' middle period, was not a commentary, but rather an encyclopedic *corpus juris* of Jewish law. Maimonides provided that amorphous lore with a revolutionary classification scheme, and wrote it in a clear, beautiful Hebrew. It does not read like a statute book, but rather as succinct essays on each topic.

A glance at Maimonides' *Responsa* literature, his public correspondence, also reveal Maimonides as a master essayist. The Guide itself is a compilation of 181 brilliantly conceived and interrelated essays. In those essays he sometimes performs the function of a commentator, but never sustains these efforts, and though authoritative, those occasional glosses are a sidelight.

It would seem to follow that the best way to explain what Maimonides was trying to achieve in his Guide essays would not be by engaging in the "*ad loc.*" commentary style of Rashi or his successors. (*ad loc.* is the standard citation style for *ad locum*, Latin for "at the place," referring to a commentator's note to that place in any text). Would it not be more helpful to take the time and space to explain Maimonides' ideas and purpose in each of his chapters, as well as to clarify various apparent peculiarities in them?

There are many *ad loc.* commentaries to the Guide, most notably the gigantic and brilliant modern Hebrew commentary of Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Even-Shmuel (see below)

While I used many of those line-by-line commentaries for this work, rarely did I think that they explained to the unenlightened reader what any chapter of the Guide was about.

☛ Isn't the problem with the Guide of the Perplexed that it is just too perplexing?

This common question goes back to the lack of a consistent educational tradition for the Guide.

The student who plunges unprepared into the work of any great philosopher or theologian can be expected to be perplexed, but this usually just means that the student lacked diligent preparation.

Maimonides discusses this problem in the Guide, a topic which I call "educational humility." A natural drop in enthusiasm takes place once the novice begins studying anything new, recoiling, or unfairly criticizing, when it doesn't perfectly conform to his or her worldview. This usually results in a demand for "relevance" that shuts down intellectual growth.

But the Guide also presents problems that go beyond the usual educational resistance.

On a higher level, those perplexities are precisely the subject of philosophy and theology. There are eternal questions, like the dichotomy between free will and fate, or the nature of divine providence, that we never really solve, though their study yields partial answers that benefit us all. We call these conceptual knots "problematics," that is, problems that automatically generate new difficulties and new directions of thought. These perplexities show us what the most important questions are. "Those

who inquire without first being at an impasse are like people who do not know which way they need to walk” (Aristotle, *Physics*, Joe Sachs, trans.).

Perhaps God placed these problematics or perplexities in our world for us to try to unravel, for, as Aristotle also said, “All men by nature desire to know.” Maimonides worked to define the perplexities embedded in the divine science, and to show how we could best attempt to resolve them. In all of this, Maimonides believed that, ultimately, there are no contradictions in the divine science.

☛ But if we already know who we are religiously, and we know what we believe, why would we need a Guide for the Perplexed?

This question goes to the prophetic core of the Guide.

A religious Jew must have a justified basis for belief in God and in God’s Torah. Maimonides explained that a Jew who does not have such certainty (*emunah* and *bitakhon*), should apply to those who understand these things, studying with them until he or she achieves such well-grounded belief.

The Guide of the Perplexed was not meant to be such an introduction to Jewish beliefs, although it does contain important material of this kind.

In some ways, faith is simple, and a simple faith is good. But Judaism differs from other systems since ignorance of the law, of the Torah, is *no* defense to culpability for its violation, though we mitigate for such ignorance. A Jew should be able to explain his beliefs to himself, to others, and to defend them against opponents. For this they should need no further guide than the Torah, Talmud, and rabbinic law.

But it is also true that those who claim to know the entire Torah (*kol hatora kula*) are, for good reasons, unlikely to know it in its entirety. Maimonides wrote his legal encyclopedia, *Mishneh Torah*, to codify the law, even for areas of life that were not then of practical significance. An example of this was the law of agriculture in the land of Israel. By Maimonides’ time, the Jews had long lived in exile, and few studied those laws. The *Mishneh Torah* is still the only legal code since the *Mishnah* that covers all areas of the law, including those that the Jews could not apply in exile.

One item that was no longer taught was prophecy, and, specifically, how to train prophets. It was clear to Maimonides that the return of prophecy must accompany the establishment of a new Torah commonwealth in Israel, with its new Temple, new Temple service, and Messiah. But the close of prophecy took place over a millennium before Maimonides, its lore lost in the sands of time. If now was indeed the moment for the restoration of prophecy, which Maimonides certainly felt, how would we go about re-creating that institution?

Since the Bible speaks of the existence of schools of prophets, it follows that prophecy could be taught. There should, therefore, be an educational methodology for prophecy. Maimonides meant the Guide to be that textbook, curricula, and training ground for future prophets.

But prophecy is a special link to the divine, the realm beyond our reach. That is another reason why the question of how to prepare for prophecy will remain a perplexity even for those knowledgeable few who claim that they are not perplexed about their religious duty.

Perplexity precedes prophecy. (Rashi to Ex. 25:31, 40).

Since man is a combination of the corporeal and incorporeal, living in this corporeal universe, many aspects of creation and its continued providence will remain perplexing. “For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression *being*. We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed.” (Plato, *Sophist* 244a, trans. Joan Stambaugh.)

Still, the study is not pointless, because what we are sure of is that God did not create this universe in vain, even with its variety, its problematics and perplexities.

While we do not know God’s rationale, nor will we ever understand His intentions, we have no doubt that His creation is not irrational. We strive to comprehend Him by comprehending it.

☛ What perspectives did you hope to prove in writing this book?

I intend to show that the first purpose and main objective of Maimonides in the Guide was to create a textbook and curricula for the training of prophets.

Already at the beginning of Maimonides’ *Introduction*, he states that his “purpose was to explain the meaning of certain terms from the books of prophecy” and to explain “very obscure parables” in those books. These obscure parables were the means that the prophets used to convey their messages. Students in the ancient schools of prophets would presumably have studied how to interpret those terms and those parables.

Maimonides emphasized the importance of prophecy by requiring Jews to believe in it in the sixth of his famous Thirteen Principles of Faith:

“There exist human beings who have such lofty qualities. Prophets are in total control of their impulses and achieve such great perfection that their souls become prepared to receive pure spiritual wisdom. Their human intellect can then become bound up with the Creative Mind (*sekhel hapoel*) and receive an inspired emanation from it. This is prophecy, and those people who achieve it are the prophets.... The Torah testifies to prophecy” (*Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin*:10.)

In Guide 3:45, we learn that *prophecy precedes Torah*. “The fundamental belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law (*b’tora*), for without...prophecy there can be no...Law (*ki im lo yhei navi ayn tora*).”

Maimonides could be called a proto-Zionist, in that he sought to restore Jewish sovereignty and Temple worship in a Torah guided nation. Those concerns included the hope for a messianic restoration. This all presupposes the restoration of prophecy in Israel. But Maimonides had to reckon with the fact that “prophecy departed from Israel” after the destruction of the first Temple.

He sought to uncover the principles and structure behind prophecy. The first question was how prophecy could be taught, and then, how to construct such an educational program. He needed the entire Guide to answer those questions. It even required the creation of a new kind of student.

It will take us some work to attain Maimonides' ramified understanding of the phenomenon of prophecy. However, at a basic level, a level that he endorsed, we all seek inspiration in our lives, our jobs, our scientific and creative endeavors. That is why we should appreciate Maimonides' phenomenology of the way inspiration and prophecy work.

Another of my purposes is to dispel illusions and mistaken perceptions about the Guide. In his *Epistle on Resurrection*, a late post-Guide work, Maimonides complained that people were taking his writing out of context: they saddled him with beliefs that he did not hold. He condemned enemies who portrayed him as an opponent of the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead. It should have been obvious that he was not, especially, since he concluded his *Thirteen Principles of Faith* by requiring belief in resurrection. Unfortunately, misinterpretations of his work continue to proliferate.

One of those errors is the assumption of many scholars that Maimonides had a secret doctrine. There is none. He did, admittedly, employ some mild veiling in the Guide. He did this to protect the beginning student from the consequences of sophomoric hubris, as well as to comply with the Mishnaic law against the public teaching of divine science. None of these veils are difficult to lift with reasonable attention to the chapters of the Guide.

☛ What are your basic premises and commitments in these essays?

I begin with the premise that Maimonides was what we call an Orthodox Jew.

In other words, Maimonides believed in the principles and practices of Judaism that he codified in the *Mishneh Torah*. This may not strike you as a surprising claim; but trends in academic interpretation have made Maimonides fit a completely different picture.

While it is rare to find portrayals of Maimonides as a proto-Reform Jew, an agnostic, and even an atheist, I have heard such claims. More significantly, some made him a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a Pyrrhonian sceptic, and an anti-cabalist. Others, uncomfortable with his professed views, have him opposing the restoration of the sacrificial rite in a restored Temple. They would like to portray Maimonides as an opponent of creation *ex nihilo*, the power of prayer, and the particular providence promised to observant Jews. I reject such claims.

It will not be easy to dissuade those who think that Maimonides concealed anti-religious notions in the Guide. They prefer to think that he secretly held views that are digestible to secularists.

My suggestion is that it will be easier to proceed in this study if we try to understand Maimonides' outlook rather than attempting to substitute our own contemporary views.

One of my commitments is to favor mystical readings of the Guide. One of its first commentators, Avraham Abulafia (1240—c. 1291) wrote three mystical commentaries on the Guide. Moshe Idel ended the argument over the origin of cabala in his *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, demonstrating that

core themes classically considered to be cabalistic go back to pre-Talmudic times. I contend that Maimonides never abandoned that intense spirituality but, rather, strove to cleanse its language of alien and corporeal dross.

That spirituality explains Maimonides' commitment to the restoration of prophecy. It made him bend all available means to its restoration in a Torah commonwealth in Israel. All his writing was, in some sense, directed to that goal.

☛ You appear to think that this book is about prophecy. Isn't prophecy something like superstition or voodoo?

Maimonides fought important battles against vulgarization and corporealization in Jewish thought. He frequently wrote against magic, superstition, astrology, and particularly, against false messiahs and false prophets. But he championed real prophecy.

Prophecy, *navua*, is not only, nor even principally, about divining the future. It is an experience that goes beyond common sense without being irrational. Prophecy sometimes appears in the form of inspiration, which is one of Maimonides' twelve levels of prophecy (Guide 2:45). It is then the necessary partner in the pursuit of reason. It opens vistas otherwise unreachable.

Living in exile, the Jews could not produce prophets. In a chaotic, unfree society, prophets have no access to divine inspiration.

“Our sages say, inspiration does not come upon a prophet when he is sad or languid.... The same circumstances, prevalence of sadness and dullness, were undoubtedly the direct cause of the interruption of prophecy during the exile.... This is a real fact, and the cause is evident; the prerequisites (of prophecy) have been lost.” (Guide 2:36)

With the end of exile, there could be a rational, lawful, free society. Its citizens would no longer be sad or languid, nor would the chaotic circumstances of life fragment their thought. They could develop a close relationship with the sacred. We are too preoccupied and alienated to recognize the divine. Freed from the “prevalence of sadness and dullness,” perhaps we could again be on familiar terms with the sacred, the miraculous.

Freeing our minds is the first step toward knowledge of prophecy. That is because prophecy is directly linked to the actualization of our potential to know. Our realization of what we only potentially know joins with superior structures of thought. At that high level of conceptualization, no corporeal divisions remain, and all mind is one. Divine influence then converges with our preparation and practice. Everything we come to know turns out to be an illumination.

The prophet, due to his constitution and training, has privileged access to divine illumination. It is what he has bent his life toward. Just as there are specialists in every field, there would be specialists in prophecy.

One peculiarity of prophecy is that preparation does not lead directly to mastery, as with other professions. Something about it is involuntary. The revelation pulls the adept from his serene study.

“A person feels as if something came upon him, and as if he received a new power that encourages him to speak. He treats of science or composes hymns, exhorts his fellowmen, discusses political and theological problems; all this he does while awake and in full possession of his senses.” (2:45)

That is the lowest level, the level of the “call.” At higher levels (Maimonides describes a system of these levels), there is a more disturbing demand made upon the prophet’s consciousness. The prophet may feel it physically. In his dreams or visions, he sees beings or hears voices, sometimes accompanied by special symbols and archetypes.

At the uppermost levels, dialogues take place with higher beings, and the prophet may even be addressed by God, or be bathed in divine light. Physical tremors may grip the prophet. The illumination may be like a flash of lightning in the deepest night. Rationalizing the experience is of no use, yet the prophet grasps it and knows it.

Sometimes the prophet’s testimony comes through the form of words, but the words do not mean what they usually mean. The prophet may not grasp this consciously. “We are to be impressed with the idea that the things which the prophets communicate to us come from the Lord and are not altogether the products of their own conceptions and ideas.” (1:45)

The prophet makes himself this channel because he has tuned his intellect and imagination to the highest pitch. The powerful nature of these illuminations eliminates the usual rational steps toward understanding. This is due to the overwhelming strength of the divine signal. As it grows, so grows the prophet’s ability to grasp it. The prophet’s training prepares him to read its symbolic, analogic, and metaphoric messages. His ability to concretize this amorphous emanation makes the prophet the perfect channel to his humble audience. The prophet ascends and descends through these levels with the facility that we ascend or descend a ladder, the great ladder of Jacob that was, in patriarchal memory, the original of this metaphor.

However, the truth of the prophetic experience cannot be communicated. This is the unbridgeable chasm between the consciousness of the prophets and the experiences of ordinary religious people.

“At times the truth shines so brilliantly that we perceive it as clear as day. Our nature and habit then draw a veil over our perception, and we return to a darkness almost as dense as before... On some the lightning flashes in rapid succession and they seem to be in continuous light. Some perceive the prophetic flash at long intervals... By others only once during the whole night is a flash of lightning perceived... Others are in the condition of a man whose darkness is illuminated not by lightning but by some kind of crystal or similar stone or other substance that possesses the property of shining during the night; and to them even this amount of light is not continuous, but now it shines, and now it vanishes.” (*Introduction*)

Like the beautiful, scented bulrushes that Lewis Carroll’s Alice greedily plucks, but which soon wilt and lose their aroma, we were dreaming, and the memory vanishes.

Still, there seems to be process in prophecy, and the faculty for prophecy looks to be universally human. We want to comprehend and re-create that process, yet it remains an unaccountable miracle. This is one of the perplexities. God continues this emanation, but God may yet prevent it. Still, we should strive to become part of it.

☞ How does Maimonides examine the phenomenon of prophecy?

Speaking broadly, these are some of the steps that Maimonides took in his investigation of prophecy.

Maimonides begins with his “Lexicon” of the first half of Volume I in the Guide, where he defines certain prophetic terms used in Scripture. Those definitions were by no means an allegorization of scriptural ideas into philosophical ones, as some critics have claimed. A careful reading of those chapters shows that they advance mystical and deeply spiritual concepts, which convey the workings of providence, prophecy, and the sacred.

In the very center of Volume II, and, therefore, the center of the Guide, Maimonides announced his prophetic system. We will explore that system and its connection to all the other materials in the Guide. In that volume, we will also see why Maimonides needed to cleanse Aristotelian philosophy of its non-transcendent views on God and creation, and why he made it part of his prophecy curriculum. Maimonides also integrated Aristotle’s successors’ account of mind and matter in the structure of his theory of prophecy.

In later sections of the Guide, in Volume III, we will show how Maimonides’ search for reasons for otherwise inexplicable Jewish laws led him to demonstrate how they were a rejection of the pagan abuse of prophecy. At the end of the Guide, we learn how Maimonides conducts the prophetic adept to the cultivation of divine inspiration through a type of guided meditation.

Thus, in brief, we should recognize the centrality of prophecy in every section of the Guide. The marvelous and the sacred are present in each moment of prophecy and the prophetic pursuit. It is possible to catch the transcendent in each chapter of the Guide. The student should strive for that sublime spark.

☞ Shouldn’t we be more interested in Maimonides’ practical work, like *Mishneh Torah*, his legal encyclopedia?

This depends upon what you mean by “practical.”

The first book of *Mishneh Torah*, called *Yodei ha-Torah*, “The Foundations of Torah,” deals in introductory form with the same issues and concerns confronting the Guide. Maimonides would not have placed this material at the very front of his legal compendium, had he not considered it crucial to the practical understanding of Jewish law. But even apart from the mostly practical legal treatises in *Mishneh Torah*, some, like the treatise *Korbanot*, the Temple sacrificial ritual, have little “practicality” beyond preserving knowledge for a future messianic time.

The *Mishneh Torah* and the Guide represent the two major productions of Maimonides' mature scholarship. He felt compelled to bring both before the Jewish public and the world. He would have been chagrined to learn that history would treat them so differently. The rabbis once placed the Guide under a ban, yet most own at least one dog-eared *Mishneh Torah*. More than chagrined, Maimonides would have been shocked to hear the ridiculous legend that the author of *Mishneh Torah* did not write the Guide.

Maimonides was concerned that without education in this "divine science" there would be no new prophets in Israel, with the debilitating and dangerous consequence of a prophet-less nation entering the messianic era. Worse yet, a community unsophisticated in the conceptual foundations of its faith would be unable to meet the challenges posed by the alien worldviews always confronting it. For him, these were practical concerns.

☛ Isn't it true that this book was relevant for its time and place only?

Such a question could only occur to those who have not read the Guide.

Maimonides wrote a letter to his student Rabbi Joseph as a preface to the Guide. The letter suggests that the Guide was merely responding to problems troubling Jews living in the sophisticated Muslim world. A careful reading reveals larger issues.

One purpose of the letter was to provide part of the legal justification for Maimonides' *public* discussion of creation and providence (*Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava*) in apparent violation of the *Mishnah*. The excuse would be that the Guide was only Maimonides' answer to the questions of one student, Rabbi Joseph. You just happen to be reading his answer. While that does not seem like a strong justification, halachic law is frequently about subtle legal distinctions and defenses.

The letter was about prophecy. He tells Rabbi Joseph, having examined him, that "My hopes fastened upon you, and I saw that you are worthy to have the *secrets of the prophetic books* revealed to you so that you would consider in them that which perfect men ought to consider."

It is also true that when we have read the Guide and return to reflect on this initial letter, we glimpse how it foreshadows all the momentous discussions to come.

The Guide negotiates many treacherous divides: ancient versus modern, East versus West, North versus South, Platonism versus Aristotelianism, Ptolemaic versus Copernican cosmology, science versus religion, cabala versus philosophy, text versus context, Judaism versus Islam, and both against Christianity. None of these *perplexities* have lost their relevance.

☛ What about the fact that most scientific and medical notions of his day were proven to be wrong?

This is, indeed, a major problem, but no less so for Maimonides than for anyone writing before the 15th century. It continues to be a problem even as the 21st century reflects on the 19th century, as

physicists who propound “string” theory appraise their atomist predecessors. Paradigm shifts always come with scientific revolutions.

Nonetheless, we should not ignore the fact that Maimonides, like most thinkers in those pre-Copernican days, was mostly wrong in his scientific views. Worse was his insistence on terracentrism. He thought its opponents were hopelessly, and probably willfully, ignorant. Any attempt to try to reconstruct his thinking on this score is bound to fail. Important Maimonideans, living *after* Copernicus, continued to reject the Copernican sun-centered cosmos. Those who imagine that Maimonides would have changed had he seen the evidence deceive themselves.

On the other hand, it was important for him to weaken the hold of Aristotelian science with respect to its *eternalist* cosmology. In that regard, we should carefully consider his statement in Guide 2:22:

“I hold that the theory of Aristotle is undoubtedly correct as far as the things are concerned which exist between the sphere of the moon and the centre of the earth. Only an ignorant person rejects it, or a person with preconceived opinions of his own, which he desires to maintain and to defend, and which lead him to ignore clear facts. But what Aristotle says concerning things above the sphere of the moon is, with few exceptions, mere imagination and opinion; to a still greater extent this applies to his system of Intelligences, and to some of his metaphysical views; they include great improbabilities, [promote] ideas which all nations consider as evidently corrupt, and cause views to spread which cannot be proved.”

This statement, as well as several others, opened a crack in the Aristotelian orthodoxy which would eventually, with Rabbi Hasdai Crescas, lead to its collapse.

Maimonides did grasp nature’s dynamism. Maimonides’ rejection of static atomism, in favor of Aristotle’s fluid physics of matter and form, now seems prescient, as acknowledged by such moderns as Werner Heisenberg and Ernst Cassirer.

In Guide 1:72, Maimonides reviews the scientific and medical notions of the twelfth century. In my essay on that chapter, I examined the contemporary status of each of them, while asking methodological questions about how to judge those doctrines.

Maimonides’ readers should sensitively consider the cosmological/scientific situation as it confronted Maimonides. They should strive to read him as he would have read himself, as much as they can, and then determine whether they can integrate his positive contributions in a new synthesis.

The problem exists not only on his side of the scientific revolutions, but also on ours. We tend to take a patronizing attitude toward the ancients. Prof. Joe Sachs wrote:

“Articles on the *Physics* seem at most to pat Aristotle on the head for having come to some conclusion not utterly in conflict with present-day doctrines. This kind of smugness is a predictable result of the way the sciences have been taught to us. Conjectures and assumptions, because they have been part of authoritative opinion for a few centuries, are presented to us as stories, or as facts, without recourse to evidence or argument. Particular

doctrines, even when they stand on theoretical structures as complex and fragile as a house of cards, or even when they presuppose a picture of things that is flatly in contradiction with itself, tend to be prefaced with the words ‘we know....’ All the rhetoric that surrounds the physics of our time tells us that philosophic inquiry need not enter its territory, that here the philosophizing is over and done, that the best minds agree about everything, and that, in any case, non-experts cannot hope to understand enough to assess the evidence. Strangely, the physics of the 20th century is surrounded by the same air of dogmatic authority as was the school Aristotelianism of the sixteenth century.” (*Aristotle’s Physics: A Guided Study*, page 10, Rutgers, 1995).

Perhaps it is time to address these issues again, as science passes through another paradigm shift, already making 20th century physics look old.

☛ Who should read this book?

This question is important to me, as I recall my own struggles with the Guide.

I sympathize with anyone who opened the Guide in the hope of getting a quick read on a chapter but came away unenlightened.

The Guide has turned up in the hands of people from all different walks of life. Those who want to understand the way in which inspiration works or to grasp our relationship with the sacred, should read the Guide of the Perplexed together with my explanatory essays on each chapter.

My reader might be one who tried to read Maimonides’ elegant prose, but missed the message, since it might not have seemed necessary to read it a second time. Maimonides’ complex thought requires tenacity to master. As an example, with respect to his own *Thirteen Articles of Faith*, he wrote:

“Therefore, know them, and succeed in understanding them, and *review them many times*, and know them well (i.e., *not just memorization, but to understand fully, and be able to support them, and know their proofs*). Therefore, *if after one or ten times you think you have understood them, God knows that you are just involved in falsehood. Therefore, do not read them quickly*, because I have not written them as they suddenly entered into my mind. But, rather, after a deep and careful study of the whole area, and after I have seen many clear and true ideas, and I have seen what is proper to believe of them as fundamentals, and I have brought proofs and logical demonstrations for each and every one of them. May it be God’s will that I have been correct, that He helped me through this area on the good path...” (Trans. Marc Mermelstein, my italics).

A tall order? What writer ever asked so much from his readers? One might almost despair: who could ever hope to grasp the intricacies of Maimonidean thought?

The answer, suggested in various places, was that Maimonides possessed, among his many other attainments, the mind of a medical man, who always sought to help his patients and never do them harm, whatever their level of understanding. Maimonides had no secret doctrine, but his writing is

multilevel, almost multidimensional, and the depth of those levels often approaches the infinite. Nonetheless, the readers who strive for understanding, irrespective of education or ability, will derive immense benefit at their level, enough to ascend beyond it.

These essays should make that process easier. There are no footnotes, so as not to break the reader's flow more than necessary. Footnotes would have produced a commentary on my own commentary, a hall of mirrors that could go on forever. Rather, I kept internal commentary to a minimum of parenthetical references, so as not to delay the reader.

Still, I did not “dumb down” the material. Nor was this written as a popularization: there are good ones, but they were never meant to guide a student through a particular chapter. The Maimonidean complexities cannot be made simple, but only more accessible.

☞ Why are the translations of the Guide so important?

Maimonides wrote the Guide in Judeo-Arabic, which was the most natural language for him to write religious philosophy (Its Judeo-Arabic title is דלאלת אלחאירין, دلالة الحائرین, *Dalālat al-Hā'irīn*). He quickly realized the necessity for translation into other languages.

In his Maimonides' later writings, he saw that the center of Jewish community and culture was shifting from the Muslim world to Europe. He acknowledged the need to make the Guide more readily available. He authorized *Rabbi Shmuel Ibn Tibbon* of Provence (c. 1150 – c.1230); to translate the Guide into Hebrew, the universal Jewish language. R. Ibn Tibbon's translation is, despite its faults, the most well-known and frequently used translation of the Guide. (My italics indicate the way I usually cite these translators' names. **Shifting to Europe:** See his *Epistle to the Sages of Lunel*. In other writings, such as the *Epistle on Resurrection*, he lamented the “abasement” of Sephardic scholarly culture of his day).

While Rabbi Shmuel was working on his translation, he faced problems and wanted to consult with the author himself. He wrote to Maimonides, asking if he might make the trip from Provence to Cairo to address them in person. In his famous reply, Maimonides warned Rabbi Shmuel against making the trip, pleading that he was too busy and too frail to enlighten his translator.

The letter presents several serious interpretational problems, but my sense is to take Maimonides' protestations with a grain of salt. I have never heard of an author who would not have been eager to assist a willing translator. In my opinion, the problem *was* the translator, and it was a problem that Maimonides might not have known how to solve.

Rabbi Shmuel was a radical interpreter of the Guide, who alleged that it contained a secret hard-core Aristotelian doctrine at odds with Maimonides' commitments to individual divine providence, and, probably, creation *ex nihilo*. (Aviezer Ravitsky showed that R. Ibn Tibbon initiated the systematic esotericist interpretation later associated with Leo Strauss. “Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the Guide of the Perplexed,” *AJS Review* 6 (1981), 87–123. On pp. 118–120, he sums up: “Samuel Ibn Tibbon was the first to formulate a ... doctrine of Maimonides' deliberate contradictions and concealments, and he provided a comprehensive method for deciphering them. In this respect, Ibn Tibbon laid the foundations of the esoteric interpretation of the Guide...”)

Nonetheless, in a world where it was difficult to find competent translators, replacing a scholar of Rabbi Shmuel's ability was not an option. Maimonides probably realized that it was best to leave him on his own to finish the job, rather than stifle his flow by systematically criticizing him.

Another problem was R. Shmuel's hyper-literal translation methodology. Maimonides had counseled that translators should never sacrifice sense for literalism. Considerations of meaning always trump word for word accuracy. R. Shmuel, however, created an Arabicized Hebrew, literally translating typical Arabic formulations word for word rather than substituting common Hebrew alternatives. Rabbi Dr. Michael Friedländer, in a preface to his translation of the Guide, wrote that,

“Ibn Tibbon's version is very accurate; he sacrificed elegance of style to the desire of conscientiously reproducing the author's work, and did not even neglect the particle, however unimportant it may appear. Ibn Tibbon went, in his anxiety to retain peculiarities of the original, so far as to imitate its ambiguities...” (“*The Moreh Nebuchim Literature*”)

Nonetheless, for all its vaunted accuracy, Rabbi Yosef Kafih, in his modern Hebrew translation and commentary, notes errors in the Ibn Tibbon translation in nearly every chapter. (R. Ibn Tibbon's translation, together with his most famous ancient commentators, came out in 2025 in a splendid new edition, see below).

Almost as soon as Rabbi Shmuel completed his work, *Rabbi Judah al-Harizi* (1165-1225), a poet, presented his alternative translation in lovely flowing Hebrew style. The Jewish world, however, did not accept the al-Harizi Guide translation (perhaps because R. Ibn Tibbon had Maimonides' general authorization). Maimonides' son, R. Avraham ben HaRambam, described R. Harizi's version as being inaccurate. Yet it has great value as a contemporary corrective to R. Ibn Tibbon's work. It also may indicate variations between ancient Judeo-Arabic manuscripts of the Guide. It is available in a handsome vocalized edition.

Rabbi Yosef *Kafih*, (1917 – 2000, pronounced “*Qāfigh*,” not “*Kapakh*”) produced the best Hebrew translation, and included a commentary. I discuss the translation further, below, together with my discussion of the commentaries I use.

The industry of Guide translation continues apace. Dr. Michael *Schwarz* wrote recently produced a two volume (2002) Hebrew translation. His Hebrew is more modern than that of R. Kafih, whose Hebrew is more biblical and historic in character. Still, I prefer R. Kafih, as I will explain. Prof. Schwarz included a commentary which I discuss below.

Prof. Schwarz prepared a critical evaluation of all the Guide translations, amounting to 32, in 11 languages, as part of his apparatus. It is an excellent barometer of interest in the Guide. The attention of so many scholars in all eras and nations to this work is probably the strongest testimony to its continuing relevance and importance.

In English, there are now three choices. Rabbi Dr. Michael *Friedländer* (1833 – 1910) wrote a fine translation, from before 1904, including extensive footnotes. These important notes were, sadly, sacrificed in all subsequently printed versions. Although English was not Rabbi Friedländer's first

language, he mastered it. His translation is literate and readable. Some have criticized his work, nonetheless, attention paid to his footnotes reveals a good understanding of the Arabic sources.

On the other hand, Dr. Shlomo Pines' 1963 University of Chicago translation, the choice of academics, is linguistically inelegant, even clumsy. Serious and annoying mistranslations regularly crop up, such as his repeated use of the formulation "creation in time" when Maimonides means "creation *ex nihilo*." Like R. Ibn Tibbon, he was a hyper-literal translator. Pines' close relationship with the philosopher Leo Strauss is one of the reasons for the academic popularity of his translation.

In 2024, Dr. Lenn Evan Goodman produced, with his collaborator Phillip I. Lieberman *The Guide to the Perplexed, a new translation*, through Stanford University Press. Dr. Goodman also concurrently published a separate volume of essays, *A Guide to The Guide to the Perplexed: A Reader's Companion to Maimonides' Masterwork*. The translation, by our foremost scholarly translator and commentator of Arabic language medieval classic works resolves, with its consciously conversational style, many of the problems noted above. (Among his other translations I recommend the splendid *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale* and the equally endearing *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*. **The Title of the Guide:** Interestingly while Pines calls it "The Guide of the Perplexed," differently from Friedländer, who calls it "The Guide for the Perplexed," the better translation would probably be Goodman's "The Guide to the Perplexed," though all are ambiguous.)

Although I use different translations, the convention in my essays is to use Rabbi Michael Friedländer for English translations, and Rabbi Yosef Kafih for Hebrew translations. Both are available in print and online (the online versions are available from the "Links" section of my website, but you can also find them on Google). Unfortunately, it is very difficult to find the Friedländer version *with* notes, since it has not been republished in that format since 1904. It sometimes becomes available in used bookstores, and I encourage readers to buy it. There should be a new printing of it. Scans of his original footnoted version are available from *Google Books*, although with difficulty: the reader will find that it is easier to access the scan from the "Links" section of my website: <https://www.maimonides-guide.com>.

☛ Who are the commentators that you rely on, and why did you choose them?

Rabbi Friedlander lists 45 commentaries in his survey "*Moreh Nebuchim Literature*" in his 1904 translation of the Guide. At least four major ones have appeared since. (I refer to commentaries simply by the last name or principal name of the author, initially in italics).

The standard old edition of the Guide, with the Ibn Tibbon translation, grouped the four best known ancient Hebrew commentaries together: those of Rabbis *Shem Tov*, *Efodi*, *Abravanel*, and *Crescas*. Fortunately for us, that sad printing is now replaced in 2025 with a new, reset, re-edited and elegantly printed two volume edition, something we had only dreamt of. It is from a group of three Rabbis in Bnei Brak called the *Makhon L'idud Limud Hagot v'Daat L'Israel*. Unfortunately, I have only found one source to purchase it from as of this writing, and I urge you to do so while it is available and affordable: <https://www.greenfieldjudaica.com/item.asp?item=70577>. In addition to the four above commentators, this edition for the first time includes two commentaries by Rabbi *Caspi* (*Amudei*

Kesef and *Maskiyot Kesef*) and the important work of Rabbi *Narboni*. Greenfield Judaica provides a publisher's note in Hebrew, which, translated, states that this edition was prepared:

“According to ancient and authoritative manuscripts. Hundreds of errors in the various manuscripts (*shibushi nuskhao*t) have been corrected and dozens of omissions have been remedied, with precise proofreading, etc., including commentaries from the greatest of the earliest and later [classic] commentators - published by the *Institute of Thought and Knowledge of Israel*.”

R. *Shem Tov* Ben Yosef Ben Shem Tov wrote the longest of these ancient commentaries.

R. Friedlander aptly characterized R. Shem Tov's commentary:

“The commentary of Shem Tov is profuse and includes almost a paraphrase of the text. He apologizes, in conclusion, for having written many superfluous notes and adding explanation where no explanation is required; his excuse is that he did not only intend to write a commentary, but also a work complete in itself.”

Nonetheless, having spent untold hours in R. Shem Tov's company, I have come to appreciate him, since he knows what he is talking about, and from time to time criticizes the commentators who preceded him. (He lived in the 15th century. He should not be confused with the several other Shem Tov's in his family who also wrote on the Guide).

Efodi is the acronym of Profiat Duran, the pen name of R. Isaac ben Moshe (1350 - 1415). He wrote a famous satire of Christianity under his *nom de plume*. He composed the shortest of those four Guide commentaries, consisting of pithy notes, sometimes saying in a sentence what it takes a page for R. Shem Tov to write.

R. Don Isaac *Abravanel* (1437 - 1508, frequently spelled “Abarbanel,” but his biographer, Benzion Netanyahu, spells it “Abravanel” and I have seen evidence that he is right), wrote a long commentary on parts of the Guide, adopting something resembling the essay style that I favor. However, he begins each essay by listing a battery of difficult questions, and then, at length, works out what he takes to be the answer to each question. As you might expect, this makes for difficult reading. Despite this, his essays are insightful and responsibly written. My commentary essay on Maimonides' *Introduction* to the Guide includes my translation of R. Abravanel's Hebrew commentary on that *Introduction*, which I use to contrast my own interpretive approach to the Guide.

R. Asher b. Abraham *Crescas* wrote the brief but useful commentary which runs in tiny letters at the bottom of many pages of the standard R. Ibn Tibbon translation. He is not to be confused with the much more important R. Hasdai Crescas. (R. Asher lived in first half of 15th century; R. Hasdai lived from c. 1340 to 1410. R. Hasdai authored the first comprehensive philosophical attack on the Guide, *Or Adonai*, which is itself a commentary on Maimonides' famous twenty-six propositions summarizing Aristotelian philosophy in the *Introduction* to Vol. II of the Guide. The *Or Adonai* was the basis for Harry Austryn Wolfson's 1929 work, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*. According to Prof. Wolfson, R. Hasdai's demolition of Aristotelian physics precipitated trends leading to the scientific enlightenment in the Renaissance. The correct pronunciation of Crescas is “Kreskas,” not “Khroshkhrosh”).

I use four modern commentaries, R. *Even-Shmuel*, R. *Kafih*, Dr. Michael *Schwarz*, and Dr. Lenn *Goodman*.

The greatest commentary on the Guide was the Hebrew commentary of Rabbi Dr. Yehuda *Even-Shmuel* (Kaufman), 1886-1976. The work is in four volumes, published by the Israeli publishing house *Mossad haRav Kook*, beginning in 1934/35, with the fourth and final book coming out posthumously in 1987. He only completed through Chapter 13 of Book III of the Guide.

R. Even-Shmuel was born in Ukraine, and, having attended major European yeshivas, went on to study at universities around the world, earning his doctorate in literature at Dropsie College in Philadelphia. He was for some years a leader of the Jewish community in Canada, but went to Israel, where he later entered the pre-independence government as Minister of Culture.

He had a considerable career in publishing with the publishing house known as *Dvir*, established by the poet Chaim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), and with the *Mossad haRav Kook* publishing company. He wrote on many subjects, but principally on medieval Jewish thought. He produced an annotated book of Midrash, as well as critical editions of the work of Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Mülhausen (14th-15th centuries), and of the *Kuzari* of R. Yehuda haLevi, which he translated from Judeo-Arabic. He won the coveted *Israel Prize* for Jewish studies in 1973 for his *Kuzari*. He also wrote an English-to-Hebrew dictionary and was the organizer of the *Encyclopedia Hebraica* humanities section.

I translated a memorial essay dedicated to R. Even-Shmuel by his publisher, who celebrated him as the greatest *khozrim b' teshuva* (returnee to orthodox Judaism) of our generation (see the essay section of my website, <https://www.maimonides-guide.com/other-essays-by-scott-alexander>).

R. Even-Shmuel wrote his commentary in beautiful Hebrew, radiating a wealth of historical, philosophical, halakhic and cabalistic light on the Guide. He usually precedes each chapter with a short summary. His comments are long enough to introduce and orient readers in the Maimonidean text. R. Even-Shmuel relied on the Ibn Tibbon Hebrew translation as the basis for his comments. Toward the end he was preparing a new Hebrew translation, but it never saw the light of day.

Rabbi Yosef *Kafih*, 1917-2000, was born in Yemen, the scion of a rabbinic dynasty which preserved and disseminated the Maimonidean legacy of historic Yemenite Jewry. Maimonides had a special relationship with the Jews of Yemen that they never forgot, and religious Yemenites to this day follow the *halakha* of the *Mishneh Torah*. R. Kafih used ancient Yemenite manuscripts as the basis for his Hebrew translations of all of Maimonides' major writings.

R. Kafih's translation and commentary on the Guide was published by *Mossad haRav Kook* in three volumes (1972), with each page divided into three parts, the left panel being Maimonides' original Judeo-Arabic text, the right panel R. Kafih's Hebrew translation, and the bottom panel his commentary. That was an excellent edition, since, if you identify a Hebrew term on the right, you can usually, by glancing at the same line over to the left panel, locate the original Judeo-Arabic term. That edition is now hard to acquire (but it is available to users of *Otzar haHochma*). A two-panel, one volume edition (without the Judeo-Arabic) is currently available in print and online. It has a helpful apparatus. I rely on this translation as my default choice for passages from the Guide in

Hebrew, since R. Kafih was the most learned expositor of Judeo-Arabic in our times. His commentary is also reliable for rabbinic context in the interpretation of the Guide. However, it cannot explain what is going on in each chapter, simply because it is an *ad loc.* commentary and not an essay type commentary.

I would make that same criticism of the most recent Hebrew translation and commentary by Prof. Michael Schwarz (born Salzburg, Austria, 1929-2011). This translation comes in two volumes, for which he won the *Israel Prize* in 2011 (Tel Aviv Univ. Press, 2002, not online). His Hebrew is modern, his comments are mostly of a bibliographical nature, referring both to historic sources as well as 20th Century academic publishing and periodical literature. Just because of that, the work is invaluable, and it has an extensive apparatus. I do not rely on his translation because I have more confidence in R. Kafih's Yemenite-rabbinical tradition. Nonetheless, Dr. Schwarz' work is important, and I refer to it throughout my essays.

Dr. Lenn Goodman's footnotes to his 2024 English translation mentioned above are a welcome addition to the commentary tradition. He drew from his wealth of knowledge of the Arabic language neo-Platonic tradition and other classical sources for his glosses. I use his translation and commentary in my weekly discussions of the Guide. They open vistas that have not previously been available to readers. Goodman departs from the dominant Straussian crowd of academic interpreters. Dr. Goodman's companion volume of essays should be appreciated by his readers.

☛ Who are the other sources that you mention?

Many years ago, my interest was in the Zohar, the fundamental text of Jewish mysticism. When I began studying the Guide, I noticed Jewish mystical ideas, though they did not appear in their usual style. This surprised me because in those days most people thought that the Guide opposed cabala. Indeed, one academic authored a book about what he took to be Maimonides' war against mysticism. (Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, 2006; but see Faur, *Homo Mysticus*, 1999 for the opposing view).

One writer recognized the Guide's spiritual energy and correctly identified it for what it was: Maimonides' interest in prophecy. Dr. David Bakan (1921 – 2004), a second-generation Freudian psychologist, *emeritus* professor at York University in Canada, wrote *Maimonides on Prophecy* (1991, Jason Aronson, Inc.), then the sole work advocating the significance of prophecy in the Guide. His volume is a commentary on selected chapters from the Guide. Dr. Bakan called it an "*ad loc.*" commentary on those chapters, but it is more like a guided reading. This small book, breaking from the usual commentary tradition, achieved far more than many of its predecessors, even though its focus was only on fourteen chapters.

Dr. Bakan uncovered the importance of prophecy by reading the Guide as a psychologist would, paying special attention to the way Maimonides locates subconscious symbols and archetypes in the prophetic scriptures. Dr. Bakan had broken with academic orthodoxy before, having courted controversy with his *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (1958), which has grown in acceptance it did not enjoy when published. David and I had many discussions about Maimonides,

as I was surprised and pleased to have found someone who was mostly on my wavelength. He was a great supporter when we established what was later to become the Maimonides Group at Yahoo.com.

Rabbi Dr. Marvin Fox (1923 – 1996) broke from the Leo Strauss school of interpretation with his *Interpreting Maimonides* (University of Chicago, 1990). Each of the chapters of that remarkable book open new vistas in the study of the Guide. In one chapter, he explained the need for an essay style commentary and briefly tried his hand at it. Rabbi Fox also reopened the issue of Maimonides' alleged esotericism when he showed that Arabic did not support the translation "contradiction" for the term Maimonides used ("contrary" would be closer), in his "*seven causes of inconsistencies and contradictions to be met with in a literary work.*" That they are *logical contraries* rather than *contradictories* points to the ultimate resolvability of all such oppositions. (My chapter *Introduction II: Contradictions* draws strongly on Rabbi Fox's new interpretation of Maimonides' method of "contradictions," as against Leo Strauss' claim that those contradictions concealed a secret.)

Similarly, Dr. Kenneth Seeskin, professor of Jewish Civilization at Northwestern University, rejected the notion of a secret teaching in the Guide. His *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (Cambridge, 2005), refuted academics who portrayed Maimonides as a covert Aristotelian eternalist who did not believe in creation *ex nihilo*.

My most important source was Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887-1974). Dr. Wolfson was responsible for the greatest commentary on the Guide that was *never* written. He conducted his close painstaking reading in his multitude of books and essays but never wrote a commentary as such.

Professor Wolfson was born in Ostrin (whence his middle name), in what is now Belarus, and studied at the Slobodka Yeshiva as a student of Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Epstein. He emigrated with his family to the United States in 1903 and studied at the Isaac Elchanan Yeshiva (later Yeshiva University). He received his doctorate from Harvard, where he became America's first professor of Judaica. Those who knew him described him as a relentless scholar, who seemed to have never left the library, day or night.

Wolfson's first book was his doctoral thesis, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle: Problems of Aristotle's Physics in Jewish and Arabic Philosophy*. It remains, in my opinion, the great American philosophic work of the 20th century. (See the *Links* section of my website *maimonides-guide.com*). I still think this despite my criticism of Wolfson's underlying theory: see my essay "Is the Universe One or Many?" in the essay section of my website.

Wolfson's focus in the *Crescas* book was on Maimonides' twenty-six propositions summarizing Aristotelian physics and metaphysics (Guide: Book II *Introduction*), and Rabbi Hasdai Crescas' comprehensive attack, *Or Adonai*, previously noted. Prof. Wolfson's book is a critical edition of *Or Adonai* as well as a translation of R. Crescas' vague and allusive text. He preceded the translation with a 127-page general introduction and followed it with a massive 381 pages of notes. These notes unlock the hidden world of Jewish philosophical scholasticism up until R. Crescas' time and after.

Wolfson followed *Crescas* with important and equally weighty volumes on the philosophy of Spinoza and Philo Judaeus. In 1976, Harvard published his monumental *Philosophy of the Kalām*.

“Kalām” is the Arabic term for Muslim theology. Wolfson’s book works as a kind of commentary on the five Kalām chapters at the end of Book I of the Guide (ch.1:71, 1:73-76), which, until then, had been scholarly *terra incognita*. He followed that with the briefer, but no less important, *Repercussions of the Kalām in Jewish Philosophy* (1979).

Much of Wolfson’s Maimonides work came in the form of carefully written essays. Wolfson himself collected 11 essays in his *Religious Philosophy* (1961). Prof. Isidore Twersky collected 57 of Wolfson’s essays in the two volume *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, (1977), but I have read several important essays, bearing in some way on the Guide, that do not appear in any anthology of his work. A collected works edition should be prepared.

Prof. Twersky called Wolfson a daring scholar who was not afraid to put forward an audacious hypothesis, often choosing bold conjecture over safe, but boring analyses. Dr. Jonathan Cohen recently collected and assessed Wolfson’s statements outlining his philosophical perspective and contrasted them with two other major Jewish philosophical voices of the 20th century in his *Philosophers and Scholars: Wolfson, Guttman and Strauss on the History of Jewish philosophy* (2007 Lexington books), pointedly making Harry Wolfson the first of those three giants.

Prof. Wolfson conceived that Philo’s first century middle-Platonic grand synthesis inaugurated a golden era of religious philosophy. This era extended down to Spinoza, who overthrew this systematic, if varied approach, resulting in philosophy’s decline. This scheme oddly parallels Leo Strauss’s classic age of philosophic rationalism thoughtlessly overthrown by the Enlightenment, leading, eventually, to the crisis of modern philosophy, a thought which partly motivated Dr. Jonathan Cohen’s work.

Of those two major thinkers, I found Harry Wolfson’s sure, constant counsel to be far more useful than that of Strauss in the reading of any particular chapter of the Guide.

☛ Are you a Straussian or an anti-Straussian?

It would be hard for me to be an anti-Straussian, since my initial interest in the Guide was due to Strauss. And I remain impressed that Leo Strauss always encouraged his students to study the Guide.

Core Straussian concerns remain my concerns. Strauss recognized that the crisis and collapse of the Western philosophical project occurred when Martin Heidegger, the leading philosopher of his day, joined the Nazi party, in conscious assertion that Nazism was the culmination of the Western tradition. He never convincingly recanted after the war. (See my review essay, “Heidegger, the Jews, and Religion: Thoughts on *Martin Heidegger, Between Good and Evil*, by Rüdiger Safranski” in the essay section of my website, maimonides-guide.com).

Strauss drew the full implications from this implosion of modern philosophy. Seeing no remedy, he turned to the abandoned intellectual wealth of the past. He contended that modern thought must reassess the overthrow of late ancient rationalism by the Enlightenment.

Strauss argued that the Enlightenment thinkers had merely laughed off their predecessors, failing to preserve and extend their great achievements. Those moderns read their predecessors' ancient tomes against the intentions of their authors, even changing the meaning of the words. Strauss insisted that we could only begin to overcome the crisis in Western philosophy by recovering the texts of the ancients, reading them as they would have read themselves.

One implication of this return was an acceptance of the ancients' idea that there was such a thing as absolute truth, and that they honestly sought to grasp that truth, even though successive waves of thought would cancel or change their conceptions. Strauss' view clashed with the prevalent modern relativism and perspectivism that reject the possibility of truth.

By contrast, Strauss was open to a Platonist reading of the world, i.e., that there are enduring true ideas. But he did not identify himself with either the Plotinian Neoplatonism of Plato's successors, or with the middle Platonism of Philo Judaeus (as did Harry A. Wolfson).

Strauss' return to the past, no matter how it would work out, came as a breath of fresh air to 20th and 21st century thought. This was especially true in America where Strauss effectively used his platform at the University of Chicago to spread his iconoclastic views.

Strauss had early on written an exceptional book on Maimonides, his 1935 German language *Philosophie und Gesetz* (translated as *Philosophy and Law: Essays Toward the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*). That persuasive work focused on the claim made by medieval thinkers, including Maimonides, that there is a religious duty to pursue philosophy.

Problems with Strauss. But Strauss later concluded that to safely pursue philosophic speculation under Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or any other regime, the philosopher had to conceal its radical character. Philosophy's individual search for truth conflicts with religion's communal search for revealed truth. The philosopher had to practice a special literary discipline to protect himself and his work. Strauss called attention to this discipline in the famous title of his 1952 essay collection, *Persecution and The Art of Writing*.

The result was that the great original Straussian project of the close reading of the ancients degenerated to a search for their secret doctrines, which they allegedly concealed to avoid persecution. He claimed that such concealment pervades the works of many philosophers. Strauss' primary source would turn out to be none other than Maimonides in the Guide.

As a result of Strauss's search for secrets, he thought that there were Platonic doctrines concealed in the Guide. Strauss argued that Maimonides concealed these for two reasons: to protect the philosopher from persecution, and to protect the "noble lie," that is, the opinions that rulers use to rule society. Strauss insisted that the philosopher had a duty to protect society's purely conventional opinions from the inevitably dangerous results of free philosophic inquiry. The philosopher even had to continue to repeat the noble lies to safeguard those worthwhile civic traditions, while concealing the dangerous truth in coded prose.

There is something compelling in all of this. We can learn important lessons from Strauss in how to read ancient works, especially his emphasis on decoding their structure, including such things as whether a subject or word occurs at the beginning, middle, or end, or the numerological significance of a chapter number, and so on.

Strauss' evidence for his claim that philosophers practice concealment was Maimonides' statement that there were "*Seven causes of inconsistencies and contradictions to be met with in a literary work*" (*Introduction* to the Guide). He argued that those contradictions concealed a secret doctrine.

As I show in my chapter "*Introduction II: Contradictions*," the term mistranslated "contradictions" refers to *contraries* that can be resolved. Maimonides suggested that such "inconsistencies" found in the Guide "will be found to arise" because of two of those causes, "the fifth cause or the seventh.":

"... [The fifth] is a certain method adopted in teaching and expounding profound problems....The teacher must...content himself with giving a general though somewhat inaccurate notion on the subject....Later on the same subject is thoroughly treated and fully developed in its right place."

"... The seventh cause: it is sometimes necessary to introduce such very obscure matters (*b'inyanim amukim meod*) as may be partly disclosed and partly concealed....On one occasion....the problem is treated as solved in one way... On another occasion...the opposite way. The author must endeavor by concealing the fact as much as possible, to prevent the uneducated reader from perceiving the contradiction." (Guide *Introduction*)

He goes on to say that "contradictions" in works of philosophers are of the fifth cause, but that in the Guide they "will be found to result from the fifth cause or the seventh."

However, against Strauss, in both cases, Maimonides' reason was that students beginning their studies were unqualified for straightforward exposition.

The main reason for concealment, however, the reason that justified contraries of the seventh kind, was that Jewish law prohibited the *public* teaching of what Maimonides called "the divine science." The divine science included the entire subject of Jewish mystical experience, including certain problems that also concern philosophy and theology.

When I tried to follow Strauss' demand for close reading, I did not recognize any political esotericism in the Guide. And when it came to sorting out obvious issues in the readings, Strauss was not particularly helpful.

Worse, Strauss, and especially the later Straussians who chafed at Maimonides' explicit doctrines, claimed that he used the system of contradictions to conceal his alleged rejection of such typical religious commitments as creation *ex nihilo*, divine providence, the effectiveness of prayer, etc. These things tend to make professors uncomfortable.

My own examination, and not only mine, but those of others, including Kenneth Seeskin and Herbert Davidson, convinced me that Maimonides meant the things that he said and wrote.

For all these reasons, while I would not characterize myself as violently anti-Straussian in the highly politicized mode of, say, Shadia Drury (or the non-political anti-Straussianism of Prof. Davidson), I think the best assessment is that Strauss is not as helpful to the deep study of Maimonides as recent generations had thought.

☛ Do you think that the Guide has a secret doctrine?

I do not believe that Maimonides concealed a secret doctrine in the Guide.

While Maimonides did not believe that everyone could understand his work in the same way, I do not think that he meant it only for an elite. Nor do I believe that Maimonides feared persecution, either from the Jewish community or from Muslims, such that he would need to hide his teachings.

Given the importance of Maimonides' service to the caliphate, and to the vizier especially, he had little to fear from what he wrote in the Judeo-Arabic text of the Guide, especially since the authorities had not shown much interest in censoring documents written in Hebrew script.

Nor do I think he had any reason to fear the Egyptian Jewish community. Maimonides had an international reputation by the time he arrived in Cairo and quickly rose to the leadership of his community. While he had rivals, none posed any serious threat to him or to his work.

There was a threat early in his career, when Maimonides became the subject of a lawsuit in Egypt by a Muslim who claimed to have known him in Morocco. This plaintiff alleged that while in Morocco Maimonides had carried himself as a Muslim, and, therefore, by professing Judaism in Cairo, he had committed capital heresy against Islam. This lawsuit was dismissed, probably because the charges were uncorroborated, but also because of Maimonides' close connections to the regime. The court called upon the Qur'an's statement that there is no compulsion in religion (*Sūrat al-Baqarah* 2:256).

For these reasons, I do not consider persecution to have been a serious factor in Maimonides' art of writing. Naturally, Maimonides would not have gone out of his way to offend his Muslim hosts, however, a quick perusal of Chapters 71 through 76 of the first book of the Guide, which contains his attack on Muslim theology, do not read like the work of someone seriously concerned with persecution.

I work under the assumption that Maimonides was a believing Jew, and that there is no reason to suspect that he held heretical views on such central questions as creation, providence, and the efficacy of prayer. He would not regard Torah as a "noble lie." He would have had no reason to conceal anything to preserve the civic stability of the community.

This would also suggest that he agreed with the law of his community that certain kinds of discussion should not take place in public. The authors of that law did not suggest that fear of philosophy was their justification for the prohibition of the public teaching of what Maimonides called "divine science," *i.e.*, the lore of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava*, creation and providence

To the contrary, the Talmud explicitly prohibits rabbis from neglecting or rejecting Hellenic lore, when necessary for the resolution of problems. The example that the Talmud gave was Greek

astronomical science used for the calculation of the Jewish religious calendar. Maimonides, in a *Responsa*, interpreted that Talmudic mandate broadly. Jews are supposed to seek truth wherever it is available. They should not reject it merely because it did not come from authentic Jewish sources.

The rabbis who wrote the Mishnah against public teaching did not seem troubled about possible philosophic content, even if it came from Greeks, nor did they suggest that this would be the reason to conceal that content. Aristotle's ideas were, in any event, no secret to the Jews. More to the point, Maimonides showed that *divine science*, which could not be made *public*, was not the same as philosophy when he openly summarized Aristotelian philosophy in his famous *26 Propositions*. (Guide vol. II, *Introduction*).

The obvious conclusion is that Maimonides did not conceal a secret doctrine in the Guide.

While Jewish law does prohibit the *public* teaching of the divine science, nowhere does it prohibit its *private* instruction, and the historical record never lacked marvelous examples of its famous teachers and their students, like R. Shimon Bar Yohai and his student son Eleazar. The law against public teaching was not concerned with the *teaching*, but with the *student*. The tradition strongly suggests that the teaching can be dangerous (possibly life threatening) to the insufficiently prepared or immature student. Maimonides sounds this concern for the student repeatedly in the first part of Book I of the Guide (esp. 1:5, 1:31-36).

Maimonides' limited veiling is readily explained by his halachic and educational concerns. He sought to foster the proper education of the public, through graduated exposure, since they were unlikely to be sufficiently prepared or mature for these advanced but important topics.

☛ Why are your commentary essays on Maimonides' *Introduction* to the Guide so different from the rest of your commentary essays?

I wrote two essays on Maimonides' *Introduction* to the Guide. They are "*Introduction* I: The Well, the Pearl and the Golden Apple," and "*Introduction* II: Contradictions."

The first of these does not follow the generally straightforward explanatory style of the rest of my essays. This was because Maimonides' *Introduction* is like no other chapter of the Guide. It is the most important chapter of the book.

Maimonides uses his *Introduction* to explain his aims and methods, but also to provide some object lessons in how his method works. Unfortunately, his commentators failed to follow his lead. They failed to see, hidden in plain sight, the key to his allegorical method. Concealed by his "Golden Apple" are revelations that are too shocking to be revealed publicly. These are not doctrines of philosophy. The allegory conceals the deeply intrusive way that prophetic influence invades the mind and even the body of the prophet.

The explanation of all of this requires some groundwork. For this purpose, I called upon the commentary of Rabbi Abravanel on Maimonides' *Introduction*. He is an excellent source for sorting through the surface layer of meaning, but his reticence or avoidance of the core doctrine provides its

own lesson in psychic sublimation. R. Abravanel becomes my perfect foil to explain what is really going on in this complicated text.

My “*Introduction II: Contradictions*,” relies on the findings of Rabbi Dr. Marvin Fox, in his *Interpreting Maimonides*, to expose the basic error of Straussian esotericism in the Guide – the interpretation of “contradictions.” If the alleged contradictions are not really contradictions at all, where are the supposedly hidden secrets of the Guide?

Especially in “*Introduction I: The Well, the Pearl, and the Golden Apple*” I beg the reader’s indulgence and patience, since it contains the key to the Guide, and illustrates my approach to it.

☛ What was the history of this project and its genesis?

I began working on Maimonides in 1997 when, with Lance Fletcher and his FreeLance Academy, we created the *Maimonides Listserve* on ONEList.com, which became the *Maimonides Group* at Yahoo.com. That was where I conceived the design for my commentary essays on the Guide of the Perplexed. The Yahoo platform finally gave up the ghost in 2020. We have since relocated to the Facebook platform, as *Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed Discussion Group*.

I began to both teach and write about the Guide in 2000, producing the original version of my first explanatory essay in 2004, *The Well, the Pearl and the Golden Apple*. That is when I started to produce this essay style commentary on each chapter of the Guide of the Perplexed. I have taught the Guide for many years at the Skokie Community Kollel, and now weekly on the *Google Meet* platform (by invitation).

In 2017, I created a website to place this work before the public, *maimonides-guide.com*. I am continuing to make improvements and additions to it, while producing chapter commentaries on the rest of the Guide. You will find other materials there, including podcasts, links, and associated essays.

☛ Can Maimonides speak to us today?

Eight hundred years is a long time. Why should we heed a voice from a bygone era with its own problems, so different from our own?

Maimonides wrote familiarly about a dimension that we no longer pay much attention to. We have all sensed that there are powers greater than us, and horizons beyond our own. There is more in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our secular sciences.

In our own era, deprived by secularism of the divine source of wisdom, Maimonides’ rethinking of the prophetic dimension has immediate relevance. However we take it, and whether Maimonides achieved his goals, the Guide remains an ever-fruitful source of inspiration to our own rethinking.

It might seem as though the search for a science of prophecy would be our least relevant concern today. But the restoration of prophetic inspiration might be what we should seek. It would certainly be relevant to any reader who regards religion as important.

But beyond them, anyone who ever felt that there is a world beyond our own, a realm of the sacred, or merely the uncanny, should find a serious-minded approach to those unknown but no less real domains to be relevant to his or her own life.

Moreover, anyone who has tried to mine their sources of inspiration should seek out the Guide. The sources of prophecy and the sources of inspiration are so similar that the Guide calls such inspiration the second of the twelve levels of prophecy. We all seek deeper and more powerful sources of inspiration, not just writers, artists, and theoretical physicists.

Maimonides invited us to join him in this adventure, without letting us know where it would end. This commentary should help the reader on these hidden paths, for which the original maps are gone.

☞ “Open ye the gates”

The purpose of this book is to make the complexities of Guide comprehensible to any serious reader.

When we meditate on even the simplest smallest phenomena, we realize their staggering complexity. This reality of existence is a source producing perplexity. We unconsciously negotiate this perplexity every moment of our lives.

Maimonides worked to reduce this complexity, through his remarkable powers of organization, simplification, and summarization. This is precisely the reason why the *Mishneh Torah*’s epitome of Torah law remains such a significant part of the Jewish library.

Maimonides accomplishes similar feats of compression and classification in the Guide. In the first forty chapters, he provides a *Lexicon* for the proper symbolic reading of special terms occurring in scriptural prophecy. His summarization of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics in twenty-six propositions (in the beginning of Book II) is an enormous feat of comprehension and instruction. It set the table for all future Jewish philosophers. His classification of the twelve levels of prophecy was the first serious intellectual effort directed toward understanding this difficult phenomenon.

Another way in which he sought to reduce complexity was through his writing style, in both Hebrew and Arabic. But here we have a double-edged sword.

As Judaism’s greatest prose stylist, he possessed a clear voice that spoke directly to the reader. As we briskly read the short chapters of the Guide, we feel as though we understand what he is saying. That is precisely where the problem begins, since we have only skimmed the surface of his deeply multilayered prose. Forced to reread those passages, we find ourselves puzzled and perplexed. We unconsciously skipped over things that did not seem immediately clear. Going back to try to understand, we see how little we grasped.

The purpose of these essays is to help the reader to recover that initial sense of understanding, by restoring the context of each chapter.

This final masterwork of the great man’s career has been too long misunderstood and neglected. Much good can come of recovering it for our present generation. When we turn from the morass of

secularism and postmodernism to seek abiding truths, my hope is that this commentary will help to realize the legacy of Maimonides in the Guide of the Perplexed.

☛ Acknowledgments

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I have also learned much in classes with Rabbi Yosef Posner, who taught through the entire Guide in a classroom setting, an act of both bravery and intellectual commitment.

My wonderful students include Mr. Howard Weiss, as well as my long-time *khaver*, Mr. Avi Zwanziger. Other great students have been Mrs. Sheila Siegel, Mr. Ira Wiznitzer, Mr. Israel Spak, as well as the group in my current talks on *Google Meet*.

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I write this after having finished the commentary essays of Volume I of the Guide, as well as on the first 11 chapters of Volume II, knowing well that there are many more to go. This is a project with long time horizons, and I acknowledge that I might change my mind on key commitments after having gone through the commentaries on each of those volumes. I am pleasantly surprised, however, that thus far most of my initial conclusions have held up.

To the extent that I am blessed to be inspired to channel Maimonides at all, I hope to continue this work for many more years to come. Recall the motto preceding the Guide: “Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in” (*Isaiah* 26:2). If this commentary does anything to help the Rambam open those gates I will have accomplished my purpose.

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