

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM - MAIMONIDES' VIEW AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PRESENT

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One of the most fascinating features of the Talmudic structure is that it enables dialogue and debate between sages separated by years and miles. Talmudic dialectics meant the audacity to bridge the span between distant scholars, to bring them into collision, and so to try to elucidate the problems and dilemmas before us. My main teacher in this exposition is, of course, Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides, the great Sephardic master, the second Moses. However, I would like to invite to our deliberation a second giant, a man who, according to his own confession, developed his hunched back by studying Maimonides' Guide, the Ashkenazic philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, the third Moses. Of both of them it was said, "From Moses to Moses there was no one like Moses": from Moses, our Biblical teacher to Moses Maimonides, and from Maimonides to Mendelssohn. It is clear to me that the second clause is an arrant exaggeration. The first is undoubtedly true. I say this in order to emphasize my differential veneration for them, and of course my preference for Maimonides my teacher. However, at the same time, I want to remark that the great figures of Jewish law and thought don't stand alone, but, rather, are an integral part of a continuous chain of tradition and deliberation. The problem that I want to present here will certainly have its focal point in Maimonides. However, in the search for possible answers, we will not restrain ourselves from resorting to the teachings of other masters.

In order to present the problematics of our issue, I will try to return first of all to Mendelssohn's times, and use the parallel of the three rings included in Lessing's last play "Nathan the Wise". Nathan is endowed with the character of Lessing's close friend Mendelssohn, the third Moses.

As Professor A. Altmann has shown, Lessing's answer is based on another version of the story found in "Shevet Yehuda" ("The Rod of Judah"), the famous work of Rabbi Shlomo ibn Verga. In that version, Ephraim Sancho the Jew, answers, through a similar parable, the question of Pedro the Elder as to which of the two religions is the best. In this parable we confront the story of the father who had given each of his two sons (Judaism and Christianity) a precious stone.

Ibn Verga's version, however, is not the first. We find the story in other places. We shall now spend some time, however, investigating the version we find in the Decameron.

In the Decameron, Saladin asked the Jew Malchizedek which of the three religions he considered to be the true one. Malchizedek answered telling the story of the three rings:

I remember often to have heard of a great and rich man, who amongst his rare and precious jewels, had a ring of exceeding great beauty and value, and being proud of possessing a thing of such worth, and desirous that it should continue for ever in his family, he declared by will that to whichever of his sons he should give this ring, him he designed for his heir, and that he should be respected as the head of the family... The ring passed from one to another in a long succession till it came to a person who had three sons, all virtuous and dutiful to their father, and equally beloved by him. And the young men, knowing what depended upon the ring, and ambitious of superiority, began to entreat their father, who was now growing old, every one for himself, that he would give the ring to him.

The good man, equally fond of all, was at a loss which to prefer; and as he had promised all, and being willing to satisfy all, privately got an artist to make two others, which were so like the first that he himself scarcely knew the true one, and at his death gave one privately to each of his sons. They subsequently all claimed the honour and estate, each disputing them with his brothers and producing his ring; and the rings were found to be so much alike that the true one could not be distinguished. They then went to the law to determine the succession, but neither was it decided there.

And thus it has happened, my lord, with regard to the three laws given by God the Father to the three peoples concerning which you proposed your question... (The Decameron, First Day, Story Three).

There are some points that have to be stressed. The additional rings were fashioned by a skillful master, and the father could 'hardly' tell which was the original one. On his deathbed the

father gave his children the rings. Malchizedek's answer was that the question had to remain undecided.

This story was already considered by its contemporaries as dangerous but it is not totally relativistic. We could easily change it into a more relativistic one. We could assume, for example, that the true ring was lost, and all three rings were counterfeit.

We are presented with two different religious paradigms. One is relativistic, while the other - with which I identify - is unique or special in that it recognizes two levels. It conveys that it is certainly possible that we have an objective indeterminability, and despite this we have to be committed to our specific religion in a subjectively absolute way. Deism, as many other philosophical positions, drew from this parable the conclusion that all rings are false. As a believer I insist that there is, indeed, a true ring even if, from a philosophical perspective, it is impossible to determine which one it is or even that it is. This is for me the meaning of "faith" - my objective relationship to the truth of my religion, even though there may exist an objective indeterminability. If Hell would have been located in the middle of our city there would, perhaps, be no sinners, but, then again, our religious choice would be devoid of significance. Our relationship to holiness would be no different than our relationship to electricity. Our search for the true ring is the inner meaning of faith.

We can understand the inner meaning of the paradigms if we compare religion with ethics. I belong to those that can't believe in the relativity of ethics, that can't believe that good and evil are arbitrary, and all values are equivalent. There are many ethical rings, all presenting opposite values. Some of us believe that there is also a true ring. Our efforts are aimed at discovering this ring. Indeed the relativistic storyteller has slyly moved us into this position which may at first glance seem more objective. However, what he is actually doing is nothing less than wearing an additional, relativistic ring.

Let us, at present, leave the relativistic trap. Let us assume that there is indeed a true ring - my ring. The problems are still not over. A new question now arises. What is our relationship to the other rings? Does the exclusiveness of my belief imply that the other rings are worthless?

When asked why he saw no need to make proselytes for Judaism, Mendelssohn wrote:

True we believe that our religion is the best in an absolute sense. It is the best for us and our descendants... Which external worship is the best for other nations, God has perhaps made known to them through prophets or has left to their reason to decide. I know nothing about this and I cannot make out anything concerning it. But this much I do know: no external worship can be universal... This too I know: I sincerely love all friends of virtue and wisdom. (Altman: 576).

We find our problem as the background of Mendelssohn's answer. One solution is found in the classical Jewish sources. This solution is centered around the thesis of Noachide laws. The Torah is binding upon the Jewish people, but all of humanity has a more basic and primary law, the law that was given to Adam and specifically to Noah. This is the law - centered in seven precepts - that in some way is the positive lesson of the Deluge. Only through this basic law is humanity - human. The Torah is the law of a people endowed with a special mission. All of humanity, however, may be saved. Not through the 613 precepts, but through a basic universal core.

This idea can be illustrated with the figure of Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh (1822-1900) of Livorno and his disciple Aime Palliere (1875-1949). After a tortuous spiritual odyssey Palliere decided to become a Jew, but Rabbi Benamozegh persuaded him to remain a Noachide, i.e. to develop an alternative religiosity, to be a Jew without practicing Jewish rituals. The Noachide conception forms the universalistic basis of the Jewish religion. As Mendelssohn said in his "Jerusalem", in order to belong to the omnipresent Shepherd it was not necessary for the entire flock to graze on one pasture (Altman: 578).

We can now come back to Maimonides. Maimonides accepts, of course, the concept of Noachide teachings, and he formulates this expressly in his Code. However, his formulation opens up a new alternative, and a difficult decision. Is salvation bound to one of the many religions that nourish from Biblical roots, or do we open the doors also to other traditions, even to those totally alien to Mosaic inspiration?

To answer this question we have to refer to Maimonides' formulation in Hilchot Melachim (Law of Kings 8:11), on those who have a share in the world to come, the Jewish equivalent of Salvation. But here, as we shall see, we are confronted with an interesting riddle:

Anyone who accepts the seven commandments and is diligent in performing them, is one of the "righteous of the nations of the world", and he has a share in the world to come. And this if he accepts them and performs them because the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded them in the Torah, and taught us through Moses our teacher that the commandment thereof had been enjoined upon the descendants of Noah even before the Torah was given.

However, if he observed them on the basis of his own conclusions based on reason, he is not deemed a "resident alien", nor is he one of the "righteous of the nations of the world", (Hassidim) the pious among the people,

(and not)/(but, rather)

one of their Hachamim, the wise among the people.

There are two possible readings of the Maimonidean text:

and not
but rather

The difference in Hebrew is very slight, only one letter: "welo" or "ela". The common reading was "welo": 'and not', but we know now according to the manuscript of the Mishne Torah in the Bodleian Library, that the first reading is a scribal error and that the correct reading is the second: 'but rather'. That is, Maimonides speaks of two different religiosities, the first of the Hassidim, the pious, the other of the Hachamim, the wise.

This scholarly dilemma of the interpretation of an obscure passage is one of the most fascinating existential and religious problems put before us. Do we speak only of three rings? Do the Noachides have to belong to a religion that is based on Mosaic revelation? Are the wise also saved, or only the pious?

What was Maimonides' position? This is a fascinating problem. In my opinion it is very probable that he held in great esteem those that came to the truth by their own means. Aristotle was one of these, but the greatest example of this way was, undoubtedly, the patriarch Abraham himself. If this is true, then not only the righteous but also the 'hachamim', the wise among the people are invited to the eternal life of the world to come. It should be noted that this interpretation was accepted by Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook, the late great Rabbi of Eretz Israel, one of the most prominent Jewish thinkers of modern times.

Maimonides believed, undoubtedly, that salvation is possible even without a direct dependence on Biblical revelation. In his letter to Hasdai Ha-Levi we read:

... As to your question about the nations, know that the Lord desired the heart, and that the intention of the heart is the measure of all things. That is why our sages say, "The pious men among the Gentiles have a share in the world to come" (Sanhedrin 105a), namely, if they have acquired what can be acquired of the knowledge of God, and if they ennoble their souls with worthy qualities. There is no doubt that every man who ennobles his soul with excellent morals and wisdom based on the faith in God, certainly belongs to the men of the world to come. That is why our sages said, "Even a non-Jew who studies the Torah of our teacher Moses resembles a High Priest" (Bava Kama 38a). What is essential is nothing else than that one tries to elevate his soul toward God through the Torah. thus said David, "I put the Lord always before me; because He is my right hand I do not waver." (Psalms 16:18). And Moses is praised for this reason: "This man was very humble" (Num. 12:13), because this is the height of perfection... Besides there is no doubt that the patriarchs as well as Noah and Adam, who obviously did not observe the Torah, by no means be-

came denizens of Gehenna. On the contrary as they achieved what pertains to the ennoblement of man they are raised aloft..." (Twersky, (1972) 477-8).

This is not a new idea. the struggle against paganism is, of course, one of the most important aims of the Bible. Nothing is more alien to its ideals than paganism. However, we can still find in Malachi a strange proclamation.

From furthest east to furthest west my name is great among the nations. Everywhere fragrant sacrifice and pure gifts are offered in my name; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts. (Malachi 1:11-12).

Of course, this verse was a problem for exegesis, and various interpretations were offered. It is interesting to note that the Talmudic sages in one of their interpretations accepted it at its face value, and said that indeed even in paganism the true God was recognized as the 'God of the gods'.

This idea was developed later by David Kimchi, the great medieval commentator. He offers several optional interpretations, but in the central one he presents us with an idea that can be interpreted as affirming that below the exteriority of even the pagan cult, we find that the intentionality of the heart is directed to God; even when its external forms are mistaken.

Franz Rosenzweig, the great Jewish thinker of the beginning of the 20th century, believed that there is some kind of theological covenant between Judaism and Christianity. Rosenzweig didn't include Islam, however, in this alliance, and this is undoubtedly a problematic aspect of his system. Such covenant is, however, far more than the usual Noachide conception implies. But in some way it is a modification of an idea developed by Maimonides, and, apparently, taken by him from Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's famous book "HaKuzari".

Maimonides didn't speak of any alliance. He spoke, rather, of Christianity and Islam paving the way for the Messianic mission of Judaism. This position was undoubtedly the reversal of Christian doctrine. The church regarded Judaism as a 'preparation evangelica' (preparation for the Gospel), Maimonides - following Yehuda HaLevi - regarded Christianity as 'preparation messianica'.

In order to understand our issue better, I will permit myself to paraphrase and systematize - in modern language - Maimonides' basic intuitions on this problem, scattered all over his writings. Maimonides saw his relationship to Christianity and Islam as theologically problematic. There were, of course, points of contact and nearness, but also severe points of difference. In a strange way, these are dialectically arranged. Theologically - Maimonides found Islam nearer. His strict monotheism - and of course the religious metaphysical systems of the great Islamic philosophers - provided much common ground. At the same time he was totally alienated from Christian theology, and especially its core - the Trinity and

Incarnation. On the other hand, he saw that he had in common with the Christians the faith in Revelation as canonized in the Bible. This is the reason that in one of his responses he allows the teaching of the Hebrew scriptures to Christians, while he did not allow them to be taught to Muslims, who argued that the Hebrew text had been corrupted - even intentionally - and used the knowledge of the text as a tool in their textual and theological criticism. In a historical perspective, this Halachic decision points out the ambivalence to both religions with whom we have much in common, but despite all this, Maimonides couldn't consider them as perfect religious alternatives. They have a historical mission in preparing for the messianic age, however they are not redemption itself. As Yehuda HaLevi put it in a text that influenced Maimonides (The Kuzari 4:23, 226-7):

(The) design... should be compared to the wisdom hidden in the seed ... where it is apparently transformed into earth, water, and dung without leaving a trace - so it seems to the contemplator. But really this seed transforms earth and water into its own substance, carrying them from one degree to another, until it refines the elements and makes them like unto itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc., in order that the 'heart' (of the plant) may appear in purity and become fit to receive the Divine Influence and the form of the first seed: then the tree bears fruit resembling that from which it had been produced. So it is concerning the religion of Moses: all later religions are transformed into it, though externally they may reject it. They merely serve to pave the way for the expected Messiah: he is the fruit; all will be his fruit, if they acknowledge him, and will become one tree.

And so writes Maimonides in this code (Judges 11:4):

But it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the creator; for our ways are not His ways, neither are our thoughts His thoughts. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite (Muhammad) who came after him, only serve to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written, "For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve him with one consent" (Zeph. 3:9).

Maimonides criticized the two religions, not the people, but the theologians and prophets. He was sure that some day all humanity would be united "when the true King Messiah will appear and succeed".

If we attempt to understand Maimonides' various positions as parts of a whole system, we are forced to conclude that tolerance doesn't imply relativism. Nor does it entail renouncing the vision of a world in which my religion - and a Noachide universal faith

- will be the final stage of the development of humanity. The danger doesn't lie in my belief in a hierarchy. The real problem is the ominous danger present in 'gnostic' theology, i.e. the ideology of dividing the world into those 'sons of light' allied with God, and the 'sons of darkness' allied with the Devil. Faith can sometimes be put to use as an instrument for racism and antisemitism. Maimonides experienced this on his own flesh. He was forced to flee Spain, and embark upon a hard life of suffering and wandering. It is not, however the historical background in which I'm interested. Maimonides reflected on the theological meaning of antisemitism. It is impossible to present Maimonides' views on our issue without including a reference to his analysis.

Judaism was forced to fight against the attack of ever renewed paganism. Nazism was its ultimate exponent, but not its only one. "Ever since the time of Revelation, every despot or slave that has attained to power, be he violent or ignoble, has made it his first aim and final purpose to destroy our law, and to vitiate our religion, by means of the sword, by violence, or by brute force, such as Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian, ... and others like them. This is one of the two classes which attempt to foil the divine will." (Twersky: 440) We still have to defend ourselves against right and left, spiritual and physical oppression. However, there is another opposition, perhaps less lethal, but still painful and certainly dangerous. "These also endeavour to demolish our law and vitiate it by means of arguments which they invent, and by means of controversies which they institute. They seek to render the law ineffectual and to wipe out every trace thereof by means of their polemical writings, just as the despots do it with the sword." (Twersky: 440). Gnostic dualism has sometimes penetrated into the daughter religions. We are faced here with a tragic Oedipus-like situation. "After that there arose a new sect which combined the two methods, namely conquest and controversy, into one, because it believed that this procedure would be more effective in wiping out every trace of the Jewish race and religion." (Twersky: 440-1).

We can now get a final look at the riddle of the three rings. In the version of the Decameron the ring has only extrinsic value. In Lessing's version, in "Nathan the Wise" we find a different theme; a reference to the intrinsic value of the ring, to a special characteristic with which the ring endowed its wearer. In Lessing's words the power of its iridescent stone, made the man who wore it "of God and man beloved". Lessing's conclusion, through Nathan's words, representative of deistic thought that opposed every positive religion, was that if this is the truth all three sons are at the same time deceived and deceivers. Perhaps the father put an end to "the tyranny of the one ring in his house", and there is no real ring.

I, and almost all of my fellow Jews, are not deists. This is a necessary remark to be made here, as I think it is not at all accidental that the Decameron's Malchizedek, Lessing's Nathan, and of course Ephraim Sancho were Jews. They were not teaching the futility of the religious choice, but, rather, the absurdity and

impossibility of religious debate and disputation. A religious encounter is not a scientific congress. This doesn't mean, however, that the dialogue is unnecessary. On the contrary, in the religious dialogue we find the realization and materialization of the inner characteristic of the ring. This was indeed Mendelssohn's interpretation of Lessing's play. We have to invert our conception. The secret does not lie in 'being loved', but in 'loving'.

So, free from prejudice, let each one aim
To emulate his brethren in the strife
To prove the virtues of his ring by kindness
By cordial understanding, charitable acts.

The proof that the ring is the true ring, is that its wearer lives according to the precepts of tolerance, and our readiness to accept God's love for all men, and to pray and work, not for salvation, but for the cordial understanding of all people.

When confronted with any great thinker of the past, we have to face the fact that theology was always mixed with polemics. This is true also of my great master, Maimonides. He was confronted with the terrible dilemma of preaching tolerance in a time when his co-religionists were persecuted for remaining loyal to their faith, and of understanding while still having to struggle to assure the Jewishness of the next generation. Polemics were sometimes apologetics in disguise. Maimonides always taught that there must be a political basis for spiritual development. Polemics was the price theology had to pay for living in the Diaspora. For us, modern disciples of Maimonides, the rebirth of the State of Israel, is also the opportunity to develop our beliefs, while keeping our antenna in tune to our fellow men all over the world, but without the need for a constant theological struggle against other beliefs.

I want to end my presentation with a final look into the problem from the perspective of Jewish history and my Jewish identity. In Biblical exegesis, there is one motif that repeatedly crops up. This is the identification of Job as the archetype of Israel. Job suffers, and his suffering is interpreted by his friends as proof that he has sinned. Job rebels and protests against this judgment, for he feels himself innocent, while his friends adamantly stick to their position. 'You suffer, ergo you have sinned'. One of the most recurring themes in Jewish history is precisely this theological argument. Slavery, dispersion, and persecutions are the proof that Israel is not right in its loyalty to its faith and religion, and it has sinned by not accepting the revelations or the messianic message.

The ancient Eliphaz proclaimed that Job was indeed Cain:

What have you done? "The voice of your brother's blood cries unto me from the ground!" So the voice of God in the Holy scriptures accuses the Jews ... Only when a Jew comes over to Christ he is no longer Cain... (Talmage, 29-31).

The modern Bildad says:

This is how Israel punishes itself for its secular self-assertion... the existence of the Jews is adequate proof of the existence of God. It is an adequate demonstration of the depths of human guilt and need... The Jews of the ghetto give this demonstration involuntarily, joylessly and ingloriously but they do give it. They have nothing to attest to the world but the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ that falls upon them... (Talmage, 247).

And a later Tzophar adds:

For the enthusiastic, dominating, just now apparently all-conquering devotees of political Zionism we would feel the sorrow that Jesus felt when he wept over Jerusalem... The Christian final attitude must be that of Paul: "Brethren, my heart's desire for Israel is that they must be saved." (Talmage, 249).

Israel has refused to admit that suffering is a proof of its being in the wrong. Job's friends represent - in this interpretation - those religions and conceptions that from time immemorial have analyzed Jewish history and have discovered the sins of the people. And indeed, after the answer to Job, God says to the friends: "For you have not spoken properly to my servant Job". God, however, expects something paradoxical from Job, that he should pray for his 'friends' - his detractors. And with this prayer we witness the return of Job. The return of Job symbolizes Israel's return to its land. His first sons were lost, but Job found some sad consolation in the newborn sons and daughters. The Holocaust is an event we cannot forget. There are no rational explanations for it. However, we do have another perspective on it since the establishment of the State of Israel - the new relationship between Job and God. The book of Job has taught us to wait for redemption, but also, that when we see the first rays of sun at the dawning of a new day, we shall pray for our 'friends'. Pray for their well-being.

Modernity is characterized by great ideals: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Martin Buber expressed, in his essays, the tragic situation of our contemporary world which is divided by a stone wall or an iron curtain, not only politically, but ideologically as well. On one side are people ready to sacrifice equality because they believe in liberty as the supreme ideal. On the other side are those who think that equality must prevail even if liberty is curtailed. Of course, we can permit ourselves to hope that there exists a supra-synthesis, we cannot, however, close our eyes to the fact that the world is in a bitter - hot or cold - struggle. It is here we find the necessity of fraternity and confraternity.

We soon realize that we live in societies that are human, and hence imperfect. We discover that we are, perhaps, ideally free - but are chained by innumerable constraints. We realize that we

are equal; though some are more equal, and some less equal - and in need of our help. We are neither totally free, nor totally equal. But we are 'totally' brothers. Fraternity means that we have to help where equality and liberty are limited.

Human beings have taught fraternity for centuries, and millenia. It is now time that we teach confraternity. Fraternity means the creation of a family, of a society, of a religion, within which we are brothers. Confraternity means the discovery that families, societies, and religions themselves are brothers. We have brothers outside the boundaries of our fraternity.

It may be that one is exclusive in his religion, or that he considers it the one and only truth. He can see others as mistaken, primitive, obstinate, blind, and so on. Confraternity teaches him that there is one limit to the way he may picture them - they are not the representatives of the Devil.

Confraternity means struggle against those religious and political tendencies - I will call them here 'neo-Gnostic' - that divide the world into two: the sons of God, and the envoys of the Devil. Confraternity means believing that the only human-satanic creatures are those that see in others satanic creatures.

Confraternity doesn't mean wiping away our differences, but it does mean that all of us have one heavenly Father. "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?" (Malachi 2:10). My teacher taught me once the hidden meaning of the Biblical verse: "... on that day the Lord shall be one, and his name one!" (Zach. 14:10). It will only be in the end of days that God will be one and His name will be one. Indeed, the Biblical promise has been partially fulfilled. Many religions now believe in the unity of God. However, even if we worship the same God, we are still divided. The names of God are different, and sometimes people don't even recognize that the same Being is clothed with different names. The realization of the second part of the prophecy is still to come.

Confraternity means that even when we don't agree on His name, we must make place for each other.