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RABBI ISAAC ABRAVANEL ON MAIMONIDES' PRINCIPLES OF FAITH

In his commentary to the tenth chapter of tractate *Sanhedrin*, Moses Maimonides sets forth 13 principles or dogmas that embody the basic beliefs of Judaism. These principles, Maimonides insists, must be held by every Jew;¹ holding these principles not only identifies one as a Jew—an innovation in and of itself because Maimonides was the first Jewish thinker to make being Jewish dependent on *belief*—but it is also a necessary condition for a person to attain immortality.² Maimonides observes:

When a man believes in all these fundamental principles, and his faith is thus clarified, he is then part of that "Israel" whom we are to love, pity, and treat, as God commanded, with love and fellowship. Even if a Jew should commit every possible sin, out of lust or mastery by his lower nature, he will be punished for his sins but will still have a share in the world to come. He is one of the "sinners in Israel." But if a man gives up any of these fundamental principles, he has removed himself from the Jewish community. He is an atheist, a heretic, an unbeliever who "cuts among the plantings."³ We are commanded to hate him and to destroy him. Of him it is said: "Shall I not hate those who hate You, O Lord?" (Psalms 139:21).⁴

The 13 principles that Maimonides thus establishes as the basic beliefs of Judaism may be summarized as follows:

- (1) that God exists; (2) that God is one; (3) that God is incorporeal;
- (4) that God is eternal; (5) that God alone may be worshipped; (6) that pro-

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phesy exists; (7) that the prophecy of Moses is superior to all other prophecy; (8) that the Torah was divinely revealed; (9) that the Torah is immutable; (10) that God knows the deeds of men; (11) that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked; (12) that the Messiah will come; and (13) that the dead will be resurrected.

The proper interpretation of these principles and their intent became a major issue in the intellectual life medieval Jewry.⁵ The most extensive medieval discussion of Maimonides' principles is found in the *Rosh Amanah (Principles of Faith)* by Rabbi Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508).⁶ The *Rosh Amanah* was written, Abravanel tells us, to defend Maimonides against those who rejected his formulation and enumeration of the principles, particularly Don Ḥasdai Crescas (1340-1410) and his pupil, Joseph Albo (fifteenth century).⁷

The first 22 chapters of the book are indeed devoted to an extended and often subtle defense of Maimonides. In chapter 23, however, Abravanel performs a notorious aboutface and attacks the very possibility of creed formulation in Judaism, insisting that Judaism has no dogmas or principles and that every one of its precepts and beliefs is as important as every other one.⁸ The *Rosh Amanah* is the *locus classicus* for the enunciation of this position. It is, however, noteworthy for more than that reason alone: in this book Abravanel presents an acute and sophisticated analysis of the Maimonidean principles, contributing toward their better understanding.

The book follows a strictly logical order of development. It begins with a citation of the 13 principles themselves, in an otherwise unknown Hebrew translation.⁹ Abravanel's then summarizes the opinions of Crescas and Albo before devoting four chapters (3 to 6) to a listing of 28 objections to Maimonides' principles, as of which he culled from the writings of Crescas and Albo and 8 of which he raised himself. This procedure is Abravanel's standard practice in almost all of his philosophical and exegetical works. First he raises a series of questions and then he proceeds to answer them. In the next six chapters Abravanel discusses nine propositions that he presents as being necessary for his argument. Having established the ground rules for his discussion, Abravanel proceeds to take up the objections *seriatim*, disposing of each in turn in Chapters 12 to 21. In the next chapter he ends his argument against Crescas and Albo by arguing for their dependence on Maimonides. Chapter 23 contains his arguments against Jewish credalism, while Chapter 24 is occupied with a defense of his claim that Judaism has no dogmas in the light of the fact that a mishnah (*Sanhedrin* X, 1) seems to posit dogmas in Judaism.

The fifth of Abravanel's nine preliminary propositions com-

prises Chapter 10 in the *Rosh Amannah*. As Abravanel puts it, the proposition states:

that the number of foundations and principles of faith as stated by Maimonides was neither accidental nor inadvertent; nor (did Maimonides choose the number thirteen) in order to match the thirteen attributes of God's mercy or the thirteen hermeneutical principles of Torah exegesis. Rather, with this number Maimonides intended to teach one or all of three lessons and great speculative teachings.

The chapter itself is given over to a discussion of the three "lessons" taught by the order and interrelationship of the 13 principles. It is this chapter that I present in annotated translation later.

Abravanel was neither the first nor the last scholar seeking to explain the inner structure of Maimonides' 13 principles. But, as will be seen, he was one of the most innovative. Among the first was Rabbi Simeon ben Zemah Duran, the renowned talmudist, who fled Spain for North Africa after the persecutions of 1391.¹⁰ In the introduction to his *Ohev Mishpat*,¹¹ a commentary on Job, Duran distinguishes between fundamental principles (which, explicitly following the terminology of the Sabbath laws, he calls *avot*, "fathers") and the sub-principles implied by them (*toladot*, "consequences"). He maintains that Maimonides chose his principles because they were all explicitly taught by biblical verses and not because they are the most important principles of Judaism. He writes:

. . . were it not for the dependence upon the verses, the number (of principles) would be smaller or greater (than thirteen); for, if we counted (only) the fundamental principles we would have only three principles, while if we counted the sub-principles there would be more than thirteen. However, the fundamental principles are three and no more. Belief in God and what follows (from that belief) is one principle. (Its sub-principles are): existence, unity, priority¹² incorporeality, and that it is proper to worship only God and no other. These five sub-principles all follow from one fundamental principle. Belief in the Torah and necessary corollary beliefs is one principle which is that God through the intermediation of the separate intellects¹³ causes a Divine overflow¹⁴ to extend to those who cleave unto Him so that they become prophets of different ranks, seeking to direct human beings to the service of God. Included in this principle are four¹⁵ (derivative principles): prophecy, the prophecy of Moses, that the Torah will never be changed or altered, for (the product of) divine activity is perfect, enduring, and eternal. Belief in retribution and its necessary corollary beliefs is one principle which is that God knows the deeds of men and rewards and punishes them according to their deeds, either in this world or in the next world, and either in the days of the Messiah or after the resurrection of the dead. Included in this principle are four (derivative) principles: God's knowledge and retribution, the coming of Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead . . .¹⁶

Duran thus reduces Maimonides' 13 principles to 3 fundamental principles which, he maintains, are necessary for human perfection.¹⁷ Duran initiated what has become a standard element in almost all interpretations of the 13 principles, namely, that they fall naturally into three main groups. Duran was also the first explicitly to link the three main groups of principles to the mishnah in *Sanhedrin*.¹⁸ In his *Magen Avot*¹⁹ he writes:

Divine revelation, reward and punishment, and the existence of God are foundations of the Torah. It is a foundation of faith to believe in God, in His existence, unity, priority, and that it is proper to worship (only) Him. This is included under (the heading) *apikoros*, as mentioned above. Next, (one should) believe in the prophecy of the prophets and in the prophecy of Moses, in the Torah and in its immutability.²⁰ This is included under (the heading of) "Divine revelation." Next, (one should) believe in reward and punishment and its offshoots. This is included under (the heading of) "resurrection."

It is well-known that Duran strongly influenced Joseph Albo.²¹ This is evident in Albo's enumeration of the principles of Judaism. He writes:

It seems to me that the general and essential principles of Divine law are three: existence of God, providence in reward and punishment, and Divine revelation.²²

Note how Albo derives the rest of the Maimonidean principles from these three. He writes:

It may be that Maimonides has the same idea concerning the number of fundamental principles as the one we have just indicated, and that his list consists of the three chief principles that we mentioned, plus the derivative dogmas issuing from them, all being called by him principles. Thus he lays down the existence of God, a fundamental doctrine, as the first principle. Then he enumerates along with it as principles four other dogmas which are derived from it, viz., unity, incorporeality, eternity, and exclusive worship. Then he lists as principles revelation, another fundamental doctrine, together with three other dogmas derived from it, viz., prophecy, superiority of Moses, and immutability of the law. Then comes Divine omniscience and providence in reward and punishment, the third fundamental doctrine, together with three other dogmas implied in it and derived therefrom, viz., spiritual retribution, Messiah, and resurrection.²³

Duran's influence on Albo in this regard is further seen in *Ikkarim I*, 10, where Albo connects his three principles to the mishnah in *Sanhedrin X*, 1 much as Duran did in his *Magen Avot*.

Abraham ben Shem Tov Bibago²⁴ was another of Abravanel's predecessors who wrote on the subject of the internal structure of the Maimonidean principles. There is little point in discussing Bibago's contribution at this point, except to note that Abravanel borrowed from him, in some places almost word for word, as in the chapter presented here. It is the third of the three "lessons" that Abravanel says Maimonides sought to teach by his ordering of the principles.²⁵

In recent times the subject of the internal structure of the 13 principles has been taken up by a number of scholars. Surprisingly, Schechter does not discuss it in his "Dogmas of Judaism," but David Neumark does, offering a novel interpretation. He divides the principles into two groups, those that can be verified by proof and those that can be neither proved nor disproved.²⁶ Meyer Waxman subjects Neumark's discussion to withering criticism and proposes that the principles be divided into the same three groups into which Duran divided them; he labels them God (principles 1 to 5), Torah (principles 6 to 9), and Man (principles 10 to 13).²⁷ In this, as we will see, he follows a suggestion of Abravanel. More recently, Yaakov Stieglitz²⁸ and Arthur Hyman²⁹ have reverted to the classic division of Duran and Albo. Hyman follows them as well in relating the three groupings to the different terms in mishnah *Samhedrin* X, 1.

We thus see that of the scholars, both medieval and modern, who have analyzed the internal structure of the Maimonidean principles, all but Neumark (and Bibago) follow the threefold division first proposed by Duran. It is to Abravanel's credit that, his dependence on Bibago notwithstanding, he breaks new ground and, in so doing, adds significantly to our understanding of the principles.

Abravanel sees the structure of the 13 principles as teaching at least three separate "lessons." The first approach divides the principles as did Duran and Albo, but with a different emphasis, showing their interrelatedness. On this understanding the first five principles describe God, the Commander; the next four relate to the content of His commands, the Torah; the last four relate to those whom God commands, the Israelites. The emphasis here, however, is on how the principles lead to obedience to the Torah. We observe the Torah either because of the exalted nature and "perfect rank" of its Commander, because of its own perfection, or because of the "hope for reward and the fear of punishment"; the latter is the subject of the last four principles.

The second of the three lessons relates to the cognitive status of the principles. Here Abravanel seems to be breaking new ground entirely. He divides the principles into four groups. The first (principles 1 to 3) consists of those that are philosophically acceptable without

reservation. These are principles that Maimonides, according to Abravanel, thought were rationally demonstrable. The next three principles, while not being entirely acceptable philosophically, are rationally demonstrable to one degree or another. The third group (principles 7 to 9) consists of principles about which Aristotelian philosophy must remain agnostic, since they relate to claims (about the Torah) that may be true or false but that are not necessarily so, one way or the other. The last four principles, according to this analysis, must be rejected by Aristotelian philosophy, since they all deal with ramifications of God's knowledge of particulars, which Aristotle denies.

The last "lesson," the one derived from Bibago, divides the principles into two groups: those relating to God and those relating to His works. The first group comprises principles 1 to 4. The principles of unity, incorporeality, and eternity (priority) are shown to be related to Maimonides' doctrine of negative attributes. The second group, principles 4 to 13 (principle 4 falling into both groups) is itself divided into four parts. The first consists of principles relating to actions of God that are general and occasional (creation, miracles, prophecy). The principles in the second subdivision relate to God's actions that are particular and transitory and that relate specifically to the Jewish people. In this group Abravanel (Bibago) includes the superiority of Mosaic prophecy, Divine revelation, and the immutability of the Torah. The third subdivision consists of the principles that relate to the actions of God that are both general and permanent. This category includes God's knowledge, providence, and retribution. The particular actions of God that will occur in the future (Messiah and resurrection) define the last of the four subdivisions. On this account, the 13 principles are shown to follow Maimonides' discussion of Divine attributes (*Guide*, I. 51-60). They all express either attributes of negation or attributes of action. These are the only kind of attributes that, according to Maimonides, may be predicated of God.

While this last analysis, which Abravanel borrowed from Bibago, may seem somewhat strained, the first two "lessons" that he derives from the number and internal structure of Maimonides' principles of faith certainly add to our understanding of them and demonstrate the truth of Abravanel's claim that Maimonides' choice and ordering of his principles "was neither accidental nor inadvertent."

The translation presented here is based on the *editio princeps* of the *Rosh Amanah* (Constantinople, 1505). It is not entirely literal in that I have introduced words and phrases not found in the original but that were clearly demanded by the plain sense of the Hebrew. I

have placed in parentheses all additions that were not needed in this way but that I supplied to aid intelligibility.

Rosh Amanah: Chapter Ten

An Explanation of the Fifth Proposition Necessary for this Study

The fifth proposition is that the number of the foundations and principles of faith³⁰ as stated by Maimonides³¹ was neither accidental nor inadvertent;³² nor did (Maimonides choose the number thirteen) in order to match the thirteen attributes of God's³³ mercy³⁴ or the thirteen hermeneutical principles of Torah exegesis.³⁵ Rather, with this number Maimonides intended to teach one or all of three lessons³⁶ and great speculative teachings.

The first lesson which Maimonides meant to teach with these roots³⁷ is that the true servant of God cannot escape placing as the goal of his service (one of three things. The first is) the exalted and perfect character of God. From this perspective Maimonides presented the first five principles. They are (first), that God is the most perfect possible Existent and that He exists necessarily, in and of Himself and that because of the perfect character of His existence it is proper to serve Him. Second, that God is One; because of this it is also proper that we love Him and cleave to Him, since aside from Him there is no God. Thus Moses³⁸ after communicating (the fact of) God's unity in the verse, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One* (Deuteronomy 6:4) immediately said, *And thou shalt love the Lord thy God* (Deuteronomy 6:5). That is to say, since God is One and has no second, it is fitting that every heart and soul perfectly love and cleave unto Him. The third principle, that of incorporeality, also teaches God's perfection, for spiritual things are more exalted and perfect than physical things. The fourth principle, that God is eternal,³⁹ and that everything else is created also teaches the (exalted) degree of His existence since "before any being was created,"⁴⁰ *the Lord was one and His name was one* (after Zechariah 14:9). (This fourth principle also teaches) that God created the world and endowed every created being with existence and goodness. The fifth principle, that God is the only proper object of worship, teaches three beliefs. These are that He is omnipotent, that He acts by will and volition, and that He guides our people without an intermediary. These five principles are presented from the perspective of God's perfect rank.

The second perspective (from which the principles are presented) is that of the commandment, that is to say, the Torah itself. With respect to this Maimonides presented (the next) four principles. They are, (first), the existence of prophecy among prophets in general; (second), its existence in an exalted degree in Moses—which indicated the exalted degree of the Torah given through him; (third), that the Torah which is in our hands today, together with its division into verses and the interpretation received by tradition,⁴¹ was all given from Heaven. To prevent us from thinking that the Torah was given for a limited time (only) which has passed and ended, Maimonides presented the principle of the immutability⁴² of the Torah which teaches that it will neither be altered nor exchanged for another. These four principles all relate to the Torah itself.

The third aspect—that involving those who receive the command—relates to retribution: the hope for reward or the fear of punishment, for many people observe the Torah in order to receive the reward,⁴³ and not for its own sake. It was with respect to this aspect that Maimonides presented the principles of Divine knowledge and providence and of reward and punishment because these all teach that God is just and does good *unto the good and to them that are upright in their hearts* (Psalms 125:4) both in this world and in the next while *the wicked shall be cut off from the land* (Proverbs 2:22). But since there is room to doubt this because of the evils that overtake the righteous and the goodness and happiness enjoyed by the wicked, Maimonides, by way of solving the problem, presented the twelfth principle, about the coming of our Messiah, and the thirteenth principle, about the resurrection of the dead, for then there will be true reward for God's servants, *the children of Jacob, His chosen ones* (Psalms 105:106), and terrible punishment for idolators; *some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence* (Daniel 12:2). From this it is clear that the last two principles, those relating to the coming of the Messiah and to resurrection, are types and branches of the eleventh principle since they are particular types of reward and punishment in general. They were only included among the principles in order to anticipate and solve a problem as I said above⁴⁴ and will clarify further below.⁴⁵ I have thus explained the numbering of these thirteen principles to you as well as the first lesson which Maimonides sought to teach through their number.

The second lesson which Maimonides intended to teach through the (specific) number of principles (relates to their philosophic status). Aristotle⁴⁶ would admit to the truth of the first three principles in all their parts and roots. These are: the first principle, that of God's perfect and necessary existence; the second principle, that of God's unity—that there is no partner or second in divinity (with God) nor any composition or multiplicity in Him; and the third principle, that God is neither a body nor the force of a body. Aristotle would admit the truth of these three principles in all their parts, for they are matters (the truth of which) has been apprehended by rational demonstration.

Aristotle would admit (to the truth of) the next three principles, however, (only) from one point of view and would deny them from another point of view. Aristotle would accept our assertion in the fourth principle that God is eternal and has no beginning. But he would deny our assertion that everything other than God is not eternal but, rather, created. Similarly, Aristotle would admit to our assertion, in the fifth principle, that it is proper to worship only God since He is omnipotent. But Aristotle would deny our claim that God guides and extends providence to our people without any intermediary. So also, Aristotle would accept our assertion, in the sixth principle, that prophecy depends upon perfection of character and knowledge and the purity of the soul (of the prophet). But he would deny our claim that prophecy can be withheld by the Divine will. These are the foundations which Aristotle would accept in part and would deny in part.

Next, Maimonides presents three principles which Aristotle would neither accept nor deny, since they cannot be treated within (the scope of) his (methods of) inquiry and since he would not consider them impossible. These are: the seventh foundation, that Moses was elevated above all other prophets by the purity of his character and the degree of his prophetic attainment; the eighth foundation, that the Torah as we have it today is divinely ordered and (was) apprehended through prophecy; and the ninth foundation, that the Torah will never change nor be replaced. The truth of these three beliefs can be neither proved nor refuted by rational inquiry or human speculation.

After this Maimonides presented the last four principles which Aristotle, according to the methods of his inquiry, would deny in all their parts. These are: (the tenth principle), that God knows particulars and extends His providence to them; (the eleventh principle), that God repays the righteous with a goodly reward in accord with the commandments they have fulfilled and repays the wicked with great punishment for not keeping and observing the commandments of the Torah; (the twelfth principle), that the Messiah will come in order to establish that reward and punishment; and (the thirteenth principle), that in the end of days “(many of) them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake . . .” (Daniel 12:2). Aristotle would deny and refuse to accept these four beliefs because they involve particular Divine reward, given according to the commandments and related to them.

Maimonides has thus taught us belief in these thirteen principles, of which the first three are perfectly established in all their parts by rational inquiry. Three others are partially established by speculative inquiry. (Another) three of them are possibly (true) according to (rational) inquiry, being neither necessarily (true) nor necessarily false. The last four principles are necessarily false according to philosophical speculation in the way I described. In that they are all correct beliefs, however, according to the Torah and in truth, belief in them is proper and necessary. It was because of their great importance that they were put forward as principles of faith.⁴⁷

The third lesson which Maimonides sought to teach with this number of principles relates to the fact that a believer’s faith in the Divine Torah cannot but involve faith in God or in His works, for nothing else exists.⁴⁸ Now, that which we ought to believe about God is that He exists necessarily and is absolutely perfect. We have no way of imagining⁴⁹ or comprehending his perfection except by way of negation; (we can) not do it positively. For, as Maimonides established in the *Guide*,⁵⁰ no positive attribute can be predicated of God. Solomon admonished (us) with respect to this in *Ecclesiastes* where he said, “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thy heart be hasty to utter a word before God; for God is in Heaven, and thou upon the earth; therefore, let thy words be few” (Ecclesiastes 5:1). By this he means to say that one should not be eager, whether in one’s words or inquiry, to predicate positive attributes of God for He *is in Heaven*, that is, absolutely beyond our ken.⁵¹ His existence is absolutely different from ours, as different as the heavens are from the earth. Thus, His attributes are not like ours but are, (rather), absolutely different. Therefore, the only way in which it is possible for us to describe Him is with negative attributes. This is the meaning of the verse, *therefore let thy words be few*, that is, exclusionary⁵² and negative⁵³

Maimonides, therefore, presented three principles, the second, third, and fourth, the meanings and implications of which are negative. These are that God is one, incorporeal, and eternal. The sense of the three of them is that God can be neither included in anything nor can He be limited. Limitation may occur in one of three ways. First, as in the case of a numerical attribute, encompassed by and included within number insofar as it is an attribute. Second, limitation by place, as in the case of bodies enclosed by their place. Third, limitation by time, as in the case of things which are subject to generation and corruption; time being greater than they at both their (temporal) extremities. It is (well-) known that a thing limited in any of these three ways is deficient. Thus, after Maimonides presented the first principle that of God’s divinity, which is the foundation of all foundations,⁵⁴ he removed from God these three types of limitation. In asserting the second principle, that God is one, Maimonides established that God does not fall under (the category of) number since he made clear that God is not like the one of counting, nor of genus, nor of species. In asserting that God is not a body he established that God is not

defined by place for what is not a body is not in any place. In asserting that God is eternal Maimonides established that God does not fall under (the category of) time and is not limited by it. It is for this reason that He is called *eternal God* (Deuteronomy 33:27). From this it may be seen that God is not deficient, for deficiency only results from the aspect of limitation. These first four principles thus establish proper beliefs concerning God and His infinite perfection.⁵⁵

With respect to God's actions, however, in that same fourth principle (Maimonides) made clear that God's first, all-embracing act was the creation of the world. In the fifth principle (Maimonides) established that God's power is infinite and that He acts by desire and will, not by nature, as is the case with other, created beings. These two propositions should be held by anyone who affirms creation *ex nihilo*.⁵⁶

God's actions may be divided four ways. They are either general and occasional: (as) the creation of the world, implied⁵⁷ in the fourth principle; miraculous activity, which is hinted at in the fifth principle; and the existence of prophecy which is presented in the sixth principle. (The second category of God's actions is) actions which are particular and occasional, and which relate only to the generality of our nation. In this category (Maimonides) counted the seventh foundation, (the superiority of) the prophecy of Moses over (the prophecies) of all the other prophets; the eighth foundation, revelation;⁵⁸ and the ninth foundation, the immutability⁵⁹ of the Torah—that by its nature and essence it was given for eternity, never to change. (The third category) is of general and permanent actions. In this category (Maimonides) presented God's knowledge and providence, in the tenth foundation, and reward and punishment, in the eleventh foundation. The matters include all men and operate at all times. (The fourth category) is of particular actions which will occur in the future, like the coming of the Messiah, presented in the twelfth principle, and resurrection, presented in the thirteenth principle. This is called the principle of particular resurrection according to the opinion of Maimonides who wrote at the beginning of his commentary to the Mishnah⁶⁰ that the resurrection of the dead will be restricted to the righteous. This follows the statement of the Sages who said that the (great) power of rain is for the righteous and wicked (alike) while the resurrection of the dead is restricted to the righteous.⁶¹

All this being so (we find) that the number of the principles has been arrived at in a correct fashion. Some relate to God Himself and some relate to His actions; among (these actions) are (first) the general and occasional, (second) the particular and occasional—which are more closely related to the Torah, (third) the general and permanent, and (fourth) the particular actions which will occur in the future. Thus (we have) clarified this lesson which Maimonides (sought to teach) by the number of these roots.

We find in Tractate *Ta'anit* that when R. Eliezer ben Pedat asked what was set aside for him in the world to come, he was told from Heaven: "thirteen rivers of balsam oil (as clear as the Euphrates and the Tigris) which you will be able to enjoy."⁶² They hinted by this that he will live eternally in great pleasure because of the thirteen principles of faith in which he believed.⁶³

Similarly, when R. Joshua ben Levi entered paradise:

Elijah heralded him, proclaiming, "Make room for the son of Levi, make room for the son of Levi!" As he proceeded on his way, he found R. Simeon b. Yohai⁶⁴ reclining on thirteen heaping sacks of gold.⁶⁵ "Are you," the latter asked him, "the son of Levi?"

