

## THE USES OF MAIMONIDES BY TWENTIETH-CENTURY JEWRY

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The influence of iconic figures and texts can be complex to the point of inscrutability. We all know, for example, that the Devil can quote Scripture; what, then, does this tell us about the influence of Scripture? On the one hand, believers feel bound by Scriptural teachings; on the other, this very loyalty can lead them to force Scripture to say what they badly want to do or believe on other grounds. To cite a sharp pre-modern observation of this point in an area of great relevance to Maimonidean studies, R. Isaac Arama, a distinguished fifteenth-century Spanish thinker, asked why certain philosophers need the Bible at all. After all, their *modus operandi* appears to be as follows: If the Bible agrees with their philosophical views, they interpret it literally; if it does not, they interpret it allegorically or symbolically so that it is made to agree with those views. In what sense, then, are they bound or even influenced by the Bible?<sup>1</sup>

Maimonides is not the Bible, but he has achieved such stature in the minds of Jews that citing his authority is always useful and sometimes compelling, while dismissing him out of hand is difficult or at least undesirable. In assessing his impact or how he is used, we consequently need to ask ourselves a series of questions: Was the position in question actually formed under the impact of Maimonides? If it was formed out of other considerations, was it genuinely honed or reinforced by his authority? Is his view simply a useful aid in arguing for that position? Is the position really in tension with his but forced into compatibility

<sup>1</sup> *Hazut Qashah*, appended to *Sefer Aqedat Yitzhak*, vol. 5 (Pressburg, 1849), chapter 8, p. 16b. Cf. Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1992), p. 257.

by questionable reasoning? Has a position acknowledged to be different from his nonetheless been modified and moderated under the impact of his opposing view? What makes this complex enterprise even more daunting is the fact that Maimonidean positions themselves can be divided into those that more or less reflect straightforward recording of earlier rabbinic texts, those that endorse one strand of rabbinic opinion over another, and those that are more or less the independent views of Maimonides. The more quintessentially Maimonidean the position, the more its impact reflects that of Maimonides himself.

Maimonides' iconic status in the twentieth century was greater than that of any other Jew in post-biblical history. Now this may be true of earlier periods as well, but there was a time when Rashi might have given him a run for his money. Unlike Maimonides, whose positions as codifier and philosopher produced assertions clearly seen as his own, Rashi's originality was somewhat obscured by the fact that he was primarily an elucidator of other texts. Still, serious students of those texts understood the nature of Rashi's contribution and realized that his understanding contrasted with that of other authorities in innumerable cases. But in modern times, and especially in the twentieth century, the bulk of Jewry saw itself as very different from Rashi, while Maimonides remained a model for serious Jews in all religious denominations and even for some who saw themselves as secular. He was, after all, a physician and philosopher, perhaps a radical philosopher, as well as a Talmudist, and even his great rabbinic code was suffused with a broad, philosophical spirit.

On the other hand, the percentage of Jews who studied Maimonides seriously - or even not so seriously - was much lower in the twentieth century than in any previous period. Thus, a discussion of his impact and how he was used is primarily a discussion of elites - and largely, though far from exclusively, of Orthodox elites, who regarded his work as in some sense authoritative.

Maimonides' extraordinary standing was illustrated in an academic environment when the late Isadore Twersky of Harvard—admittedly a not-altogether typical academician—was invited to deliver the keynote address in the amphitheater of the Hebrew University's Mt. Scopus campus at the quadrennial conference of the World Congress of Jewish Studies. What he chose to do for nearly an hour was to read excerpts of Jewish testimonials through the ages to the greatness of Maimonides.

My father was a folklorist who wrote articles about legends concerning both Rashi and Maimonides. Folk legends about Rashi, he wrote, are largely depictions of the personality of a beloved father, underscoring his devotion to Torah and his outstanding character. The legends about Maimonides, on the other hand, reflect the awestruck admiration of “a village-dweller for an international personality, the attitude of an ordinary person to his relative occupying a position in the highest circles,” so that the popular imagination did not even shrink from attributing to him an effort to create an immortal human being.<sup>2</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that few controversies in twentieth-century Jewish life bearing a religious dimension were carried on without reference to Maimonides, and often his presence loomed very large indeed, sometimes bestriding the discussion like a colossus. The reasons for this extend beyond his exceptional stature and reflect several special characteristics of his great legal code. First, despite the importance of R. Isaac Alfasi’s earlier compendium, Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* was the first comprehensive code, so that the trajectory of later decision-making was in many cases set by his judgment as to the Talmudic opinion that should prevail. Second, he included assertions that we would normally describe as theological rather than legal in that code. For some readers, this transformed an expression of opinion into a position that bore legal force. Related to this point is his formulation of a creed, some of whose elements are also incorporated in his code, in which he asserted principles that could not, he said, be rejected without crossing the line into heresy. Thus, the deviant believer would forfeit his or her portion in the world-to-come. How many people could screw up the courage to defy a figure of Maimonides’ stature once the stakes had been ratcheted up to so high a level?<sup>3</sup> Finally, his code, unlike the later *Shulhan Arukh*, incorporated laws that applied only to a sovereign Jewish state, whether in the past or in the future. Thus, for several issues that arose in the twentieth century, Maimonides was the prime, sometimes virtually the only, classical source with something relevant and authoritative to say.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah Berger, “Ha-Rambam be-Aggadat ha-Am,” in *Massad*, vol. 2, ed. by Hillel Bavli (Tel Aviv, 1936), p. 216; “Rashi be-Aggadat ha-Am” in *Rashi: Torato ve-Ishiyuto* (New York, 1958), ed. by Simon Federbush, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that his dogmas went entirely unchallenged. See Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (London & Portland, OR, 2004).

Let us, then, take a fleeting glimpse at the role Maimonides played and continues to play in a series of issues dividing twentieth and early-twenty-first-century Jewry.

For Orthodox Jews, the issue of the permissibility and desirability of advanced secular education remains, perhaps remarkably, a major point of contention. For obvious reasons, Maimonides appears to lend support to the position affirming the desirability of such education, not only because of what he said but because of what he so patently did. Indeed, Norman Lamm once remarked that if Maimonides returned to this world, he would surely choose to teach at Yeshiva University. But, as we shall see, nothing about the uses of Maimonides is straightforward. In this instance, a genuine characteristic of Maimonides that we shall encounter again, to wit, his elitism, affords the opportunity to challenge this assessment. Thus, representatives of Traditionalist Orthodoxy have argued that Maimonides' own pursuit of philosophy was to be restricted to a small coterie of the elite. Did he not say that his great philosophical work was intended for a tiny number of readers? Did he not also say that one may not turn to philosophical pursuits without first mastering the corpus of rabbinic law? Now, these arguments do not accomplish all that their advocates wish, since they leave in place Maimonides' value judgment as to the superiority of philosophically accomplished individuals to philosophically naïve rabbinic scholars, but at least the traditionalists' educational and curricular priorities can be salvaged without an overt rejection of Maimonides.

Moreover, Maimonides did not always formulate his legal rulings in a manner conducive to the interests of Orthodox modernists. Thus, he forbade the reading of idolatrous books and apparently extended this prohibition to anything that could engender religious doubts. This passage became the basis for an article by Rabbi Yehudah Parnes, then at Yeshiva University, in the first issue of *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, a publication dedicated to the principle of integrating Torah and worldly knowledge, arguing that Jewish law requires severe restrictions on the reading habits and hence the curriculum of all Jews. I responded to this argument in an article co-authored with Lawrence Kaplan, invoking other Maimonidean texts as well as the evident behavior of Maimonides himself, but there is no better illustration of the ability to appeal to Maimonidean authority on both sides of almost any issue than an exchange in which advocates of a broad curriculum need to defend themselves against the assertion

that they are defying the precedent set by a man who took all of human learning as his province.<sup>4</sup>

A delicate issue with a long history that became particularly acute in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the Jewish attitude toward non-Jews. Beginning in the thirteenth century, Christians pointed to Talmudic passages discriminating against Gentiles. Without diminishing the acute threat that these arguments posed to medieval Jews, one can still point out that the matter became all the more sensitive (though slightly less dangerous) in an age that began to advocate an egalitarian ethic granting Jews citizenship, genuine religious freedom, and legal equality. Here again Maimonides plays a major role on both sides of the discussion. Antisemites cited Maimonides' codification of discriminatory laws such as the exemption from returning lost objects to non-Jews, even a prohibition against doing so, while defenders of the Jews, both Jewish and Gentile, pointed to his citation in similar contexts of the biblical verse that God's mercy is upon all his creatures, as well as specific rulings such as those prohibiting theft from non-Jews as well as Jews.<sup>5</sup> More than one Orthodox rabbi in the late twentieth century maintained that Maimonides' formulation of the reason why one may not return lost objects to non-Jews, namely, that one would be "strengthening the hand of the world's wicked," limits the prohibition only to wicked Gentiles. For reasons rooted in the values of the commentator, an apparently general statement that non-Jews are wicked becomes an explicit distinction between those who are wicked and those who are righteous.<sup>6</sup>

Now, Maimonides did famously affirm that pious non-Jews have a portion in the world to come; at the same time, he conditioned this on their belief in revelation. This condition has troubled some Jews since the days of Mendelssohn, when its source was unknown. We now know the source, and one recent scholar - the late Marvin Fox - noted Maimonides' requirement, apparently approved of it, and enthusiastically endorsed a

<sup>4</sup> Yehuda Parnes, "Torah U-Madda and Freedom of Inquiry," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 1 (1989): 68-71; Lawrence Kaplan and David Berger, "On Freedom of Inquiry in the Rambam - and Today," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990): 37-50.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Joseph S. Bloch, *Israel and the Nations* (Berlin and Vienna, 1927).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this and related matters, see my "Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts" in the forthcoming proceedings of the 2001 Orthodox Forum; on returning lost property, see the discussion at note 15 there and the references provided in that note. [The article was published in *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age*, ed. by Marc Stern (Lanham, 2005), pp. 83-108.]

version of the Mishneh Torah text denying that those who observe moral laws on the basis of reason alone are even to be considered wise.<sup>7</sup> What motivated Fox was his own philosophical argument against the existence of a morality independent of the divine will. Most moderns, who have different instincts about morality and fairness, remain troubled, and so they eagerly point to a letter attributed to Maimonides that appears to contradict the condition he set forth in his code.<sup>8</sup> It is perfectly evident that larger moral instincts are at work in the choice of which Maimonides you embrace.

This issue applies to non-Jews in general, but Maimonides has also been invoked in very different ways with specific reference to Christianity. In a famous censored passage near the end of his code (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4), he explains why he thinks the divine plan arranged for the spread of Christianity and Islam. It has not been uncommon for twentieth-century Jews motivated by ecumenical sentiments to cite this explanation as evidence of Maimonides' positive stance toward those religions, to the point of asserting that he saw them as a way of preparing the world for the messianic age by disseminating monotheism. In fact, as rabbinic authorities know very well, this is not what he says at all. Christianity and Islam, he maintains, prepare the world for the messianic age by familiarizing many people with the Torah, so that the Messiah will be able to speak to them within a familiar universe of discourse. But Christianity, unlike Islam, is in Maimonides' view full-fledged *avodah zarah*, usually translated loosely but not quite accurately as idolatry.

The central philosophical and religious beliefs of Maimonides have been the subject of fierce debate in academic circles with little impact on more than a few Jews. Still, the subject deserves some attention even in this forum. Under the influence of Leo Strauss, Shlomo Pines, and others, the perception of Maimonides as a theological radical who disguised many of his real views has attained pride of place among many historians of philosophy. In this perception, Maimonides considered matter eternal, denied that God actively intervenes in human affairs, rejected physical resurrection, considered philosophical contemplation superior to prayer, and did not believe that anyone other than the most sophisticated philosopher has a portion in the world to come. For these

<sup>7</sup> Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides* (Chicago and London, 1990), pp. 130-132.

<sup>8</sup> See my "Jews, Gentiles and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos," n. 49.

scholars, his legal works and more popular philosophical teachings were intended for the political purpose of establishing a stable social order. One deep irony of this position is that the author of the standard list of Jewish dogmas would be revealed as one whose adherence to some of those dogmas is very much in question. The irony is deepened in light of the contention in Menachem Kellner's *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* that Maimonides virtually invented the notion of Jewish dogmas, a contention that I consider overstated but nonetheless reflective of an important reality.<sup>9</sup>

Other scholars, such as Arthur Hyman, Isadore Twersky, and Marvin Fox, resisted the extreme radicalization of Maimonides. It is, I think, very difficult to reconcile the portrait of a radical Maimonides who denied immortality to any non-philosopher with the Maimonides who fought to teach even women and children that God has no body so that they would be eligible for a portion in the world to come. Maimonides battled to establish a conception of God that in its pristine form was indeed inaccessible to the philosophically uninitiated, but I believe that he meant his dogmas sincerely as a realistic vehicle for enabling all Jews to achieve immortality. In recent years, several efforts have been made to render Maimonides the philosopher accessible and relevant to a larger audience. Kenneth Seeskin has made this an explicit objective,<sup>10</sup> Yeshayahu Leibowitz's depiction of an austere, distant Maimonidean God for whom halakhah is the be-all and end-all of Judaism was broadcast on Israeli radio,<sup>11</sup> and David Hartman's *Maimonides: Torah and the Philosophic Quest* was clearly aimed at an audience beyond the academy. But the Maimonides presented in these works and others is not always the same Maimonides.

A few moments ago, I allowed myself the expression "even women and children." The role of women is an issue that came to occupy center stage in much twentieth-century discourse, and Maimonides played no small part in Jewish debates about this matter. His dismissal of the intellectual capacity of women is well known, but his heroic image and immense influence have led committed Jewish thinkers and scholars with twentieth-century sensibilities to see if some more positive assessment can be elicited from his works. Thus, Warren Harvey argued in an article

<sup>9</sup> See my review essay in *Tradition* 33:4 (1999): 81-89.

<sup>10</sup> *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> *The Faith of Maimonides*, trans. by John Glucker (New York, 1987).

published more than twenty years ago that although Maimonides excluded women from the study of the Oral Law, and preferably even from that of the written Torah, he regarded the commandments to know God and love him, which certainly obligate women, as inextricably bound up with the study of Torah, indeed of Talmud or *gemara*. Thus, we have a powerful deduction to set against Maimonides' explicit assertion, and we ought at least to take it into account.<sup>12</sup>

An even stronger example of this approach is Menachem Kellner's recent article<sup>13</sup> contrasting Gersonides, who allegedly regards women as intellectually inferior by their very nature, with Maimonides, who allegedly sees their deficiencies as environmentally induced. Among other things, Kellner points to a passage in which Maimonides lists Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as the three individuals who died in a state reflecting the highest level of human achievement. Thus, says Kellner, one-third of those who reached the highest level ever achieved were women. (One could quarrel with his use of the plural here.) I am inclined to think that Kellner is too hard on Gersonides and too easy on Maimonides. No rationalist philosopher in the Middle Ages—including Gersonides—could really exclude all women from the capacity of attaining a high level of intellectual achievement, since these philosophers regarded such achievement as necessary for prophecy, and there were indisputably women prophets. As to Maimonides, Kellner's arguments for his higher estimation of women strike me as very weak, to the point where I understand them primarily as a result of the admirable desire to interpret the stance of the greatest of Jewish thinkers in as favorable a light as possible.

And so we come to two issues where a Maimonidean ruling placed significant restrictions on women. As Harvey pointed out in that article, it is very far from clear that the usual guidelines for deciding among conflicting talmudic opinions required the ruling that women should not be taught Torah. But that is how Maimonides ruled in his pioneering code, with lasting impact on Jewish law and practice. The twentieth century has seen major changes, but Beis Yaakov schools had to be justified as an emergency measure, and Orthodox institutions teaching Talmud to

<sup>12</sup> "The Obligation of Talmud on Women according to Maimonides," *Tradition* 19:2 (Summer, 1981): 122-130.

<sup>13</sup> "Sin'at Nashim Pilosofit bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim: ha-Ralbag le-'ummat ha-Rambam," in *Me-Romi li-Yerushalayim: Sefer Zikkaron le-Y. B. Sermonetta (Mehqerei Yerushalayim be-Mahashevet Yisrael* 14 [5758]), pp. 113-128.



women, though they rely on the position of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and other distinguished authorities, are subject to ongoing criticism that requires incessant justification.

The second of these issues reflects the fact that only Maimonides' code ruled on matters relating to Jewish kingship and authority. A rabbinic text had affirmed that a Jewish king must be male, and Maimonides extended this, without a clear source, to all positions of authority (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:5). In pre-State Palestine, this ruling was mobilized to argue even against women's suffrage, but it was particularly relevant to the holding of political office. A discussion of this issue by Rabbi Ben Zion Uzziel illustrates strikingly some of the motifs that we have already encountered.<sup>14</sup> First, he berates his correspondent for suggesting that Maimonides may have misunderstood the rabbinic text under the influence of the custom of his own time. We are permitted to disagree with Maimonides, but we may not say such things about him. Second, Rabbi Uzziel stresses that Maimonides' position is not articulated in any other classical source. (Note that Maimonides' addressing of issues not dealt with by other authorities usually endows him with special authority; in this instance, it was used against him.) Finally, Rabbi Uzziel deduces from a discussion of the Tosafists that they disagree with Maimonides even though they do not say so explicitly. In the presence of a strong desire to rule against Maimonides, both inference and the silence of other sources can count against an explicit ruling. It is worth noting that the Maimonidean prohibition of positions of authority for women played a role in Saul Lieberman's opposition to the ordination of women, a stand that had a significant impact on the decision of some Conservative traditionalists to leave the Jewish Theological Seminary or break with organized Conservative Judaism when women were admitted into the rabbinical program.

The role of women in the Israeli polity leads us to the question of the State itself. Maimonides has been a central figure for both religious Zionists and religious anti-Zionists. His position that the messianic process will develop naturalistically was seized upon by religious Zionists to demonstrate that Jewish sovereignty must be reestablished by human effort, this despite his explicit admonition that we are simply to wait. His assertion that the final Temple would be built by human hands and

<sup>14</sup> *Pisqei Uzziel bi-She'elot ha-Zeman* (Jerusalem, c. 1977), #24.

not, as Rashi thought, by the hand of God, reinforced this perception.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the vehemently anti-Zionist Satmar Rov pointed to Maimonides' omission in his *Book of the Commandments* of the commandment to live in Israel. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, sympathetic to the State and hawkish on territorial concessions but opposed to Zionist ideology, "proved" that the State has no messianic significance whatever by citing the fact that Maimonides did not list the return of the dispersed of Israel until a late stage of the Messianic process - this despite the fact that Maimonides wrote that the order of events in the unfolding messianic scenario is not a fundamental religious principle. The Rebbe was well aware of the rabbinic texts about gradual redemption cited by religious Zionists, but he maintained that Maimonides knew them too and had effectively ruled against them in a binding, authoritative code.

Beyond the State there is the Messiah. Here Maimonides looms enormously large. In the last two chapters of his code, he set forth criteria for identifying first a presumptive Messiah and then one who had attained his status with certainty. While many Jews had written about the Messiah, only Maimonides expressed his views in a code, which once again led some readers to grant them the force of law. A king from the House of David becomes presumptive Messiah by studying the Torah, strengthening it, compelling all Israel to obey it, and fighting the wars of the Lord. He attains the status of certain Messiah by gathering the dispersed of Israel and building the Temple in its place.

The waning years of the twentieth century produced a major messianic movement that apparently violated these Maimonidean guidelines, and it was precisely the movement whose leader had described the last two chapters of the *Mishneh Torah* as legally binding. Here we are witness to the most creative efforts to establish that a position that Maimonides explicitly rejected is in fact compatible with his guidelines. Thus, Lubavitch hasidim during the Rebbe's lifetime argued that he had achieved the criteria of presumptive Messiah. He was a king because rabbis are called kings in the Talmud; he "compelled" by persuasion; several thousand Jews qualify as "all Israel"; and mitzvah tanks qualify as instruments of the wars of the Lord. Some even argued that he had

<sup>15</sup> See my discussion in "Some Ironic Consequences of Maimonides' Rationalistic Messianism" (in Hebrew), *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 1-8 (Hebrew section) [English translation in this volume].

at least begun the activities associated with the certain Messiah; he was, after all, instrumental in preserving the Jewish identity of Soviet Jews so that they could be gathered into the land of Israel, and 770 Eastern Parkway is at least the interim Temple and the spot where the final, heavenly Temple will descend before both buildings are transported to Jerusalem. As to Maimonides' assertion that if the figure in question "does not succeed to this extent or is killed, then it is known that he is not the [Messiah]," this refers only to one who was killed, not one who died of natural causes, or it refers only to a scenario in which the Messiah would arrive naturalistically, or it is irrelevant because the Rebbe did not die at all.<sup>16</sup> Remarkably, almost incredibly, a learned Lubavitch rabbi arguing that a supremely righteous man can annul himself to the point where he is nothing but divinity found a Maimonidean passage that allegedly reflected this conception.<sup>17</sup>

These are instances where people who know Maimonides' statements very well and even consider them binding nonetheless disregard or refashion them through creative exegesis. But many people who revere him reject his positions or even consider them heretical without knowing that he held them at all. Orthodox Jewish education, even in Modern circles and all the more so in Traditionalist ones, pays little attention to what we call theology. Thus, it is easy to compile a list of *explicit* positions of Maimonides - not those of the putative esoteric radical - that would be labeled heresy or near-heresy in many contemporary yeshivas. Examples include his assertion that rabbinic statements about the details of the messianic process may be unreliable, that the Rabbis could have made scientific errors, that God does not intervene in the lives of individual animals, and more. Maimonides' iconic status was achieved at the price of consigning many of his views to a black hole of forgetfulness.

In these circles, however, Maimonides' great rabbinic works are alive and well. In the course of the twentieth century, the *Mishneh Torah* moved to center stage in traditionalist bastions of Torah study. Here too there is a certain degree of irony, but it predates the twentieth century. Maimonides envisioned his code as a work that would serve as a standard handbook for scholars, summarizing the results of Talmudic

<sup>16</sup> For these arguments and much more on Lubavitch messianism, see my *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London and Portland, Oregon, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Avraham Baruch Pevzner, *'Al ha-Zaddikim* (Kfar Chabad, 1991), pp. 8-10.

discussions and freeing people already familiar with those discussions from the need to revisit them in painstaking detail. He did not realize that it would become an adjunct to Talmudic study, complicating and enriching it even further.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, R. Meir Simchah of Dvinsk wrote his classic *Or Sameah* centered on Maimonides' code. The immensely influential, pathbreaking methodology of R. Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk took Maimonides as its point of departure even as it revolutionized the study of the Talmud itself. Two generations later, R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik made Maimonides' "Laws of Repentance" the centerpiece of annual discourses during the High Holiday season that drew thousands and influenced thousands more, discourses captured in part in *On Repentance*, one of the great Jewish religious works of the century. In an effort at popularization that engendered criticism but also enjoyed modest success, the Lubavitcher Rebbe urged daily study of sections of the *Mishneh Torah* modeled after similar initiatives in the study of Mishnah and Talmud. And in the far narrower world of the academic study of Talmud in a university setting, scholars specializing in the field sought to find in Maimonides evidence of sensitivity to their own central contention, to wit, that the anonymous sections of the Babylonian Talmud are later than the rest and should be treated accordingly.

When Prof. Kraut sent the participants in this conference an e-mail message indicating that many hundreds of people had registered, I replied, "Did you tell them that Maimonides himself was speaking?" The attendance here is ample testimony to the magic of Maimonides' name. This wide appeal leads me to a final observation about the abiding power of Maimonides the communal leader and gifted writer to inspire audiences to this day.

In early 1989, I spent seven extraordinary weeks teaching at the inaugural mini-semester of the Steinsaltz yeshiva in Moscow, the first such institution to be granted government recognition since the Communist revolution. The students consisted largely of refuseniks who had risked careers and livelihoods to commit themselves to Jewish learning and observance. In addition to the study of Talmud, Bible and more, there was a slot twice a week for Jewish Thought. I decided that the text I would teach would be Maimonides' *Epistle to Yemen*, a work directed to a beleaguered Jewish community pressured to abandon its faith. It was as if Maimonides had composed the work for the students

in that yeshiva. The greatest challenge in teaching the *Epistle to Yemen* in that environment was to read the words without shedding tears.

I conclude then with one small selection from the many relevant passages in which Maimonides speaks to Soviet Jews during the transitional moments between implacable persecution and the beginnings of hope.

Persecutions are of short duration. Indeed, God assured our father Jacob that although his children would be humbled and overcome by the nations, they and not the nations would survive and endure. He declares, "Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth," that is to say, although they will be abased like the dust that is trodden under foot, they will ultimately emerge triumphant and victorious. And as the simile implies, just as the dust settles finally upon him who tramples upon it and remains after him, so will Israel outlive its oppressors. The prophet Isaiah predicted that during its exile various peoples will succeed in their endeavor to vanquish Israel and lord over them, but that ultimately God would come to Israel's assistance and put an end to their woes and afflictions... The Lord has given us assurance through His prophets that we are indestructible and imperishable, and we will always continue to be a preeminent community. As it is impossible for God to cease to exist, so is our destruction and disappearance from the world unthinkable.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Abraham Halkin and David Hattman, *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1993), p. 102.