

Some Ironic Consequences of Maimonides' Rationalist Approach to the Messianic Age

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Rationalism and messianic activism are conceptual strangers. The rationalist views the world as ever following its natural course. The typical messianic activist views it as teetering on the edge of fundamental change that will topple the order of the Creation, or perhaps more accurately, restore that order to its ideal form. The rationalist perspective is hostile even to the activist who anticipates a naturalistic messianic age that is "no different from the current world except with regard to our subjugation to [foreign] kingdoms" (*Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 34b; Sanhedrin 99a*) since even such an activist seeks to hasten the end, while the sober and skeptical view of the rationalist reminds him that Jewish history is replete with messianic disappointment. He believes in the coming of the anticipated day, but even if the deeds of the Jewish people can help speed its arrival, he understands those deeds as the ordinary performance of *mizvot*, and not classic messianic activity. Both the psychology of the rationalist and his logic dictate his fundamental opposition to messianic activism.¹

And yet, it is not only the case that rationalism and messianic activism sometimes coexist; inevitably, and against the will of those who uphold the banner of messianic rationalism, the rationalist orientation produces views that serve as the impetus for active messianism and provide a means of defense for messianic phenomena of even the most hysterical sort. As if impelled by a demon, the skeptical thinker extends

* This is an English translation of an article that originally appeared in *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991).

decisive support to movements that are thoroughly inimical to his mode of thought.

I

One example of this phenomenon is set forth without reference to its implicit irony in Gerson Cohen's essay on the messianic postures of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. Cohen suggests that it was precisely the rationalistic worldview of the Sephardim that generated optimism regarding the possibility of penetrating the secrets of history, and thus, some Sephardic intellectuals succumbed to the temptation of eschatological calculation. Even though these thinkers themselves were not caught up in messianic movements, they created an atmosphere charged with messianic tension, which made the masses more receptive to a variety of messiahs.² Cohen's thesis is intriguing, but it cannot be accepted with certainty both because the messianic movements in question were not particularly significant and because it is possible to offer other tenable explanations for Sephardic messianism.³

Another example of this phenomenon whose sharp irony has not been previously noted derives from the most famous messianic passage in the writings of Maimonides—the description of the messianic process that appears at the end of “The Laws of Kings”:

Do not suppose that the Messianic King must produce signs and wonders, bring about new phenomena in the world, resurrect the dead, and the like. This is not so... If a king will arise from the House of David who studies the Torah and pursues the commandments like his ancestor David in accordance with the written and oral law, and compels all Israel to follow and strengthen it and fights the wars of the Lord—this man enjoys the presumption of being the Messiah.. If he proceeds successfully, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, then he is surely the Messiah (*Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Kings” 11:3).

In the following chapter, Maimonides adds the following:

As to all these matters and others like them, no one knows how they will happen until they happen, because they are impenetrable matters among the prophets. The Sages too had no tradition about these issues; rather, they weighed the Scriptural evidence, and that is why they differed about these matters. In any event, neither the sequence of these events nor their details are fundamental to the faith, so that no one should occupy himself and spend an inordinate

amount of time studying the *aggadot* and *midrashim* that deal with these and similar matters, nor should he make them central, for they lead to neither love nor fear of God. Nor should one calculate the end.... Rather, one should wait and believe in the general doctrine as we have explained (*Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Kings" 12:2).

It is evident that Maimonides' purpose, which he formulates here almost explicitly, is to moderate and dissipate messianic tension.⁴ One who understands that the statements of the rabbinic sages regarding these matters can be mistaken will not direct most of his energy toward the study of the *midrashim* that describe the redemptive process and will thus not succumb to the dangerous messianic temptation. But this practical purpose is not the only consideration that motivated Maimonides' assertion. There can be no doubt that his repudiation of signs and wonders and his rejection of confident reliance upon rabbinic *aggadot* derive from a fundamental rationalist perspective. He believed, however, that the philosophical approach and the practical objective go hand-in-hand. To provide further security, he went on to propose standards necessary for establishing not only messianic certainty, but even presumptive messianic status. Not everyone who wants to lay claim to the mantle can come and do so.⁵

And yet, not only was this rationalist approach inadequate to stem the tide of burgeoning messianism, under certain circumstances it actually helped fan the flames of a messianic movement by depriving its opponents of their primary weapon. In the absence of an existing movement, it may be that Maimonides' approach could convince certain types of readers to refrain from plunging into messianic activity,⁶ but when messianic movements already have a solid footing, this rationalist approach brings about results diametrically opposed to those that Maimonides expected.

In the presence of a real messianic pretender whose followers affirm with certainty that the process of redemption is already upon us, what evidence is available to non-believers who wish to demonstrate beyond doubt that this is not the Messiah, nor is this the beginning of the redemption? If the figure in question is neither an ignoramus nor a heretic, the only option is to demonstrate that specific conditions that should already have been met at this stage have in fact not been fulfilled. There is simply no other argument that can refute the messianic claim with certainty.

And now, along comes Maimonides to inform us that the Messiah

need not perform a single sign or wonder, and that even the rabbinic descriptions of the messianic process are not authoritative. If so, the non-believer's sole method of providing an absolute refutation of the messiah has been taken away from him. In the throes of the enthusiasm and psychological upheaval marking a powerful messianic movement, the certainty of the believer will surely wield greater force than the tentative rejection expressed by the denier. Under these conditions, even the criteria required to establish the status of presumptive Messiah offer little assistance to the skeptic. First, someone who has not yet attained the status of presumptive Messiah could still conceivably turn out to be the Messiah; thus, even one who argues that these criteria have not been met cannot rule out the possibility that the figure in question is destined to be the redeemer. Moreover, it was precisely Maimonides' rationalistic approach that compelled him to choose standards that are not so difficult to achieve—at least in the eyes of a believer. Thus, before Shabbetai Zevi's apostasy, his followers were convinced that he was a king of Davidic ancestry who studied the Torah and pursued the commandments, that he compelled all Israel to follow and strengthen it, and that he fought the wars of the Lord if only in a spiritual sense. Similarly (after due allowance for the deep differences between the movements), just such an explicit argument can be found in publications of some circles in the Habad movement, who see all the virtues enumerated by Maimonides in the personality and deeds of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.⁷ It is very difficult for a rationalist to establish pre-messianic requirements that someone who is not the Messiah would find absolutely impossible to fulfill, especially since the criteria are, by their very nature, designed to characterize an individual who could ultimately turn out not to be the Messiah.

If we now turn our attention to the largest messianic movement in the history of Judaism, we will see that we are not dealing with a merely abstract possibility. One who carefully reads *Sefer Zifat Novel Zevi* by R. Jacob Sasportas, the primary opponent of Sabbateanism before the apostasy, will realize that the Maimonidean ruling from the "Laws of Kings" was the major stumbling block that he faced, preventing him from presenting his rejection of Shabbetai Zevi's messianic claim in unequivocal terms. It is true that Sasportas continually relies on the words of Maimonides as his basis for rejecting a confident affirmation of the Sabbatean faith, and this reliance is legitimate and even convincing for those who are prepared to be convinced. However, his frequent assertion that the Sabbateans deny

the validity of Maimonides' position obscures the true historic impact of this Maimonidean passage on the raging controversy regarding the Messiahship of Shabbetai Zevi.

Scholem, for example, writes that while Nehemiah Cohen relied on sources such as *Sefer Zerubavel* and *Sefer Otot ha-Mashiah*⁸ to refute the claim of the messianic pretender, Sasportas relied upon Maimonides and the plain meaning of Biblical texts.⁹ This is correct. Nonetheless, it is absolutely clear that if Maimonides had ended his "Laws of Kings" after Chapter 10 without ever writing the last two chapters on the Messiah, Sasportas would have presented his objections to Sabbateanism on the basis of the plain meaning of Scripture and other sources such as the *Zohar* without any need for the Maimonidean position. Even more so – and this is the main point – had Maimonides not written these final two chapters, Sasportas would have presented his rejection of Shabbetai Zevi's Messiahship not tentatively but with absolute conviction. Anyone who relies upon the passage in the *Mishneh Torah* for anti-Sabbatean purposes must also accept its authority with respect to the view that we have no definitive knowledge of the messianic process. Maimonides' position proved to be a minor and almost negligible impediment to the Sabbatean movement; its primary impact was to lend the movement major and almost definitive support.

Let us examine several illustrations from *Sefer Zizat Novel Zevi*:

And if those who rebel against the rabbis' words [i.e., the Sabbatean believers] will say that our sages have not hit upon the truth, and, as Maimonides said, all these matters cannot be known by man until they occur, then I too agree. But I will not discard the tradition of our sages, all of whose words are justice and truth, before the messianic fulfillment. And if after that fulfillment, it turns out that their statements still do not accord [with the actual course of events], then the Messiah himself will argue on their behalf... And if you have acted out of piety by believing [in Shabbetai Zevi], you have in fact placed yourselves in the straits of serious doubt... Either way, I am innocent and bear no iniquity... Have you heard me declare in public that this is all lies and falsehood? Rather, I have told all those believers who have asked me that it is possible [that he is the Messiah], although it is a distant possibility until he has performed a messianic act.¹⁰

And in another passage:

None of his initial deeds accord with the words of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai in [*Zohar*] *Parashat Shemot*, and God forbid that we

should say, like the ignorant among the masses, that none of our sages hit upon the truth. And though Maimonides stated in the above mentioned passage that no one will know these matters until they occur, he nonetheless agrees that until that time, we are to remain rooted in the tradition of our sages.¹¹

It is clear from these passages that were it not for the Maimonidean ruling, the followers of Shabbetai Zevi would have been at a loss to account for the lack of congruence between what they saw as reality and the depiction of the redemptive process in rabbinic texts and the *Zohar*. It is also clear that Sasportas would have taken advantage of this lack of congruence to refute the Sabbatean messianic claim categorically. Indeed, after the apostasy, we find a letter by R. Joseph Halevi denying Shabbetai Zevi's Messiahship on the basis of passages from the Talmud and the *Zohar* that are no less relevant to the period before the apostasy, and he does so without any need for additional arguments relying upon Maimonides.¹² The importance of Maimonides for the Sabbateans themselves is manifest in the words of Nathan of Gaza, who falls back upon the Maimonidean passage even after the apostasy of his master:

And though we have found no hint of this matter in the explicit words of the Torah, we have already seen how strange the sages' words are regarding these matters, so that we cannot fully understand anything they say in their context, as the great luminary Maimonides has also testified; their words will be understood only when the events actually unfold.¹³

I would not venture so far as to say that the success of the Sabbatean movement would have been impossible if not for the Maimonidean ruling, but there can be no doubt that we are witness here to a sharp and highly significant irony.

It is particularly interesting that Maimonides himself encountered the problem that we have been examining when he composed his *Epistle to Yemen*. The *Epistle's* assertion that the Messiah *will* be recognized by signs and wonders results from the need to reject the messianic mission of a specific individual by establishing clearcut criteria. Thus, the discrepancy between the "Laws of Kings" and the *Epistle* on this point also demonstrates the tension between rationalism and the requirements of anti-messianic polemic during a confrontation with a real messianic movement.¹⁴

II

Until now we have concerned ourselves with messianic activism of an extreme sort that did not arise out of rationalism but used it effectively as a protective shield. Now we will turn to more moderate messianic manifestations that derive in no small part from the naturalistic conception of the redemption, which continues to provide them with inspiration to this day. Thus, the ironic connection between the restrained messianism of the rationalist and messianic activism is by no means restricted to the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern period; it extends into the modern age, leaving its mark on Religious Zionism both in the nineteenth century and in our own day. This irony arises from deep within messianic rationalism and is rooted in its very essence. On the one hand, the naturalistic conception of the redemption tends to prevent messianic delusions as well as behavior that deviates from the realm of the normal. But on the other hand, the very nature of the naturalistic conception encourages activism. If the Messiah is not destined to appear with the clouds of heaven, if it is necessary to fight the wars of the Lord in the plain sense of the word, if the Temple is not destined to descend fully assembled from the heavens, if it is necessary to re-institute *semikhah* (the direct chain of rabbinic ordination between master and pupil deriving from Sinai) and the *Sanhedrin* before the arrival of the redeemer, then human activity is needed to help realize the messianic hope. This conclusion appears so clear and unavoidable that some scholars and thinkers view Maimonides as a guiding spirit for religious Zionism.¹⁵

It seems to me that despite the logic inherent in this claim, Maimonides had no such intentions. He advises his readers simply to "wait." The Maimonidean positions that are capable of generating messianic activism derive solely from rational and halakhic considerations. For example, the determination that *semikhah* must be re-instituted by an act of the rabbis in the land of Israel before the redemption can occur is based on a verse from Isaiah in conjunction with the quintessential Maimonidean position that the *halakhah* will not change at the End of Days and that miracles are to be left out of the messianic process.¹⁶ This approach precludes Maimonides from describing a *Sanhedrin* composed of rabbis without *semikhah*, or of proposing, as did certain rabbis after him, that *semikhah* would be re-instituted with the return to earth of the prophet Elijah (who certainly had *semikhah*) from his place in the heavens.

There is no intention on the part of Maimonides to encourage actions expressly designed to bring the redeemer. Nevertheless, Jacob Katz's important essay showed how his position led to the famous attempt to re-institute *semikhah* in sixteenth-century Safed out of explicit messianic motivations.¹⁷

Similarly, Maimonides' determination that the Third Temple will be built by human hands, a determination that was so important to R. Zevi Hirsch Kalischer in his proto-Zionist polemic, certainly did not stem from a desire to encourage messianic activism. The view that the Third Temple will fall intact from the heavens appeared in marginal sources, and Rashi introduced it into the center of Jewish messianic consciousness only as a consequence of a serious difficulty in a Talmudic passage in tractates *Sukkah* and *Rosh ha-Shanah*. There, the Talmud states that the origin of a particular rabbinic prohibition lies in a concern arising out of the possibility that the Third Temple might be built at night^{*} or on a holiday. Rashi raises an objection based on another Talmudic passage that unequivocally prohibits building the Temple during these times, and he resolves the contradiction by concluding that the Third Temple will not be built by human hands.¹⁸ Although from a purely exegetical standpoint there is no better answer than the one offered by Rashi, a commentator who has been influenced by rationalism will be unwilling even to consider such a possibility. For this reason, R. Menahem ha-Meiri does not even mention Rashi's explanation, and instead he forces himself to manufacture a suggestion that we are concerned about the prospect of an error by the rabbinic court, which out of love for the Temple may allow it to be constructed during times when it is forbidden to do so.¹⁹ That is to say, ha-Meiri is prepared to express concern about an error by a rabbinic court presumably functioning under the supervision of the Messiah himself so that he will not have to entertain the notion of buildings dropping out of the sky. Despite the rationalist motivation, which has nothing to do with messianic activism, the position that the Third Temple would be built by human hands—as well as related naturalistic approaches—had a greater potential to generate such activism than the approach that looks forward to miracles in which human beings play no active role.

As I have noted, there are scholars who do not see the irony in this situation because they attribute to Maimonides a conscious, though moderate, activist intention. I see no evidence for this motivation in his writings, and I am not willing to create such a Maimonidean position

based on logical considerations alone, when his explicit directive is simply to wait.²⁰ On the other hand, scholars who have dealt with Maimonides' influence on messianic developments before the rise of Zionism tend to view his stand as a successful attempt to thwart messianic activism. As we have seen, this position too is highly questionable. It seems to me that we stand before an ironic paradox with significant consequences. The rationalist, while striving to moderate the messianic drive, will sometimes unwillingly enhance it.

¹ I have used the term "rationalist" to refer, following Nahmanides' formulation, to someone who tends to maximize nature and limit miracles, and who reacts skeptically toward beliefs that lack plausible evidence. It should be understood that the term carries no fixed definition, and when referring to medieval thinkers, one must utilize standards appropriate to that period.

² Gerson D. Cohen, "Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sephardim" in *Studies of the Leo Baeck Institute*, ed. Max Kreutzberger (New York, 1967), 56-115.

³ For another explanation, see my article, "Three Typological Themes in Early Jewish Messianism: Messiah Son of Joseph, Rabbinic Calculations, and the Figure of Armilus," *AJS Review* 10 (1985): 162, n. 82.

⁴ Cf. Amos Funkenstein, *Teva, Historia, u-Meshihyyut ezel ha-Rambam* (Tel-Aviv, 1983), 57: "The purpose of the substantial attention that Maimonides dedicated to the messianic era was to prevent the proliferation of messianic movements seeking to hasten the End, and thus, following his forerunners who advocated a realistic messianism, he refrained from painting the Messiah in overly concrete colors. To do so would give an opening to anyone who wanted to come and proclaim himself the Messiah." We shall see as we proceed that the last part of this passage requires fundamental rethinking.

⁵ The importance of the category of presumptive Messiah in preventing the spread of messianic movements is highlighted in Aviezer Ravitsky's analysis, "Ke-fi Koah ha-Adam: Yemot ha-Mashiah be-Mishnat ha-Rambam," in *Meshihyyut ve-Eskatologiyah*, Zvi Baras, ed. (Jerusalem, 1983), 205-206, and in David Hartman's introduction to A.S. Halkin and D. Hartman, *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides* (Philadelphia, 1985), 191. On Maimonides' moderate approach to events in the messianic era, see Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), 24-32.

⁶ Though, as we will see, even this assumption needs to be substantially qualified.

⁷ See M. Zelikson, "Kol Mevasser Mevasser ve-Omer," *Kovez Hiddushei Torah: ha-Melekh ha-Mashiah ve-ha-Ge'ullah ha-Shelemah* (1983), 14-17. See also: "Mihu Yehudi: Shabbat ha-Gadol—ve-ha-Hishammemet ha-Gedolah," *Kfar Chabad* (1984), 53, at the end of the essay.

⁸ These were popular works depicting an apocalyptic drama preceding the messianic age.

⁹ Gershom Scholem, *Shabbetai Zevi ve-ha-Tenuah ha-Shabbeta'it bi-Yemei Hayyav* (Tel Aviv, 1957), 557-559.

- ¹⁰ Isaiah Tishbi, *Sefer Zizat Novel Zevi le-Rabbi Ya'akov Sasportas* (Jerusalem, 1954), 104.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 119. The reference to *Zohar Parashat Shemot* points to an extensive and detailed description of events during the course of the messianic process that should have already occurred, at least in part, by that point in the Sabbatean movement. See *Zohar*, Part II, 7b and following.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 190-191, and cf. 195.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 260. See Scholem, *Shabbetai Zevi*, 628.
- ¹⁴ See: Maimonides, *Iggerot*, ed. Yosef Kafah (Jerusalem, 1972). There is some plausibility in Kafah's attempt to harmonize the assertion in the *Epistle with Maimonides'* position in the *Mishneh Torah*. See Kafah's notes *ad loc.* Nonetheless, the emphasis in the *Epistle* is certainly different from the impression given by the "Laws of Kings."
- ¹⁵ For this general conception from different perspectives and with different degrees of emphasis, see Joel L. Kramer, "On Maimonides' Messianic Postures" in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature II*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1984), 109-142; Aryeh Botwinick, "Maimonides' Messianic Age," *Judaism* 33 (1984): 425; Menachem Kellner, "Messianic Postures in Israel Today," *Modern Judaism* 6 (1986): 197-209; Shubert Spero, "Maimonides and the Sense of History," *Tradition* 24:2 (1989): 128-137.
- ¹⁶ Maimonides, *Perush ha-Mishnayot, Sanhedrin* 1:3; cf. *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 4:11. This example is cited by several of the authors in the previous footnote. See also Funkenstein, *Teva, Historia, u-Meshihyyut*, 64-68.
- ¹⁷ Jacob Katz, "Mahloket ha-Semikhah bein Rabbi Ya'akov Beirav ve-ha-Ralbah," *Ziyyon* 15 (1951): 28-45.
- ¹⁸ Rashi, *Sukkah* 41a s.v. *i nami*; *Rosh ha-Shanah* 30a s.v. *la tserikha*. Cf. Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer, *Derishat Ziyyon*, Israel Klausner ed. (Jerusalem, 1964), 144-147.
- ¹⁹ Ha-Meiri, *Beit ha-Behirah, Sukkah*, *ad loc.*
- ²⁰ For reasons that may be scholarly and may be personal, I do not assert that Maimonides' own posture would have necessarily compelled him to oppose the messianic motif in religious Zionism, especially after the development of the larger movement out of other considerations; my remark at the beginning of this essay about movements that are "thoroughly inimical to [the rationalist's] mode of thought" refers to Sabbateanism and other classic messianic movements. Still, the encouragement of messianic activism, even of the moderate type, played no role in Maimonides' consciousness, but emerged willy-nilly out of his rationalist position.
- On the other hand, the attempt to use Maimonides to prove that there is no messianic significance in the establishment of the State of Israel runs afoul of the problem we pointed out in the first half of the essay. Proponents of this position customarily point out that Maimonides mentions the ingathering of the exiles only after the appearance of the Messiah and the rebuilding of the Temple ("Laws of Kings" 11:4). But Maimonides himself pointed out in his "agnostic" ruling ("Laws of Kings" 12:2) that the order of these events is not central to the faith. When I mentioned this to Zalman Alpert of the Yeshiva University Library, he graciously directed me to the exchange between Amnon Shapira and Dov Wolpe, *Ammudim* 413, 415, 416 (1980): 211-214, 291-295, 345-347.

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