

OMER MICHAELIS, *Crisis Discourse and the Dynamics of Tradition in Maimonides' Oeuvre*. [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2023. Paper. Pp. 312. \$39. ISBN: 978-9-6578-3918-8. doi:10.1086/741863

This carefully structured and tightly argued book in Hebrew is a study of the “crisis of tradition” as the concept at the core of Maimonides’s two greatest works: *Mishneh Torah* (MT) and *Guide to the Perplexed*. It begins with an examination of rabbinic statements that suggest that to transgress accepted halakhic norms can be “to act for the Lord” or “for the sake of heaven.” It then contrasts the limited sense of these potentially antinomian statements in their Talmudic and post-Talmudic contexts—before Maimonides—with their centrality and foundational importance for Maimonides himself.

Omer Michaelis analyzes the “crisis of tradition” in MT via an examination of halakhic dynamism versus halakhic unity and coherence in Maimonides’s thought on all of its levels: 1) the level of “Oral Torah,” which is a perfect transmission with no differences of opinion, according to certain statements by Maimonides, 2) the level of *halakhot* derived from the Torah by the rabbis via its rules of interpretation, and 3) the level of rabbinic decrees. Michaelis argues that Maimonides posited halakhic dynamism on *all* of these levels (including the first one) but simultaneously thought that halakhah could not function without the unity and coherence provided by the decisions of the Great Court in Jerusalem. When the court ceased to exist (during the Talmudic era), a degree of cohesion was still provided by the Babylonian Talmud. Acceptance of the Talmud’s authority by communities of Israel throughout the lands of their dispersion provided a temporary lifeline in the absence of the court. But even that level of authority no longer existed in the post-Talmudic era according to Maimonides (as opposed to claims made by the geonim of Babylonia). Israel cannot continue to keep the commandments and remain a single nation in exile without agreement on a new, central source of authority. This is the “crisis of tradition” at the heart of MT.

According to Michaelis, Maimonides knew that MT *might* be accepted as nothing more than one very important halakhic code among others. When he famously declared that MT

ought to take the Talmud's place, he was suggesting a possibility that only history could decide. If the communities of Israel accepted MT in the spirit in which he offered it, that could provide universal halakhic cohesion despite the lack of a central court. Yet it would come at the steep cost of freezing halakhic dynamism in favor of a static written code. That is the "transgression" inherent in "acting for the Lord" by composing MT. Michaelis argues that the very need for such a violation depends upon Maimonides's evaluation of the nature of the Oral Torah and its crisis in his day. The content, style, language, organization, and proposed purpose of *Mishneh Torah* are all best understood as an attempt to address that crisis as Maimonides described it.

Maimonides's approach has echoes in Judah Halevi, who similarly suggested that the absence of the Great Court results in halakhic incohesion. But for Halevi, tradition is superior to interpretation or argumentation, and it is precisely the latter that leads to disunity. The superior reliability of tradition is at the heart of Halevi's rebuttal to Karaite rejection of the Oral Torah and neo-Aristotelian insistence on the eternity of nature. In contrast, for Maimonides, argumentation is essential to halakhah, yet it threatens halakhic coherence unless it is controlled via the unifying rulings of the Great Court. As for metaphysical issues, Maimonides not only claims that tradition cannot guarantee truth, but declares that Israel has become utterly bereft of its metaphysical tradition due to the travails of exile. Since there is no metaphysical tradition to speak of, metaphysical claims in the name of tradition are inherently misleading.

All of this analysis is conducted by Michaelis with great sensitivity to the language of Maimonides (and Halevi) in Arabic and Hebrew. Special attention is paid to the various terms for tradition, argumentation, interpretation, and rational inquiry, all in context. In the last part of the book, on the *Guide*, this is true as well for terms related to esotericism versus the need to reveal secrets.

According to Shlomo Pines, Maimonides's *Guide* was a unique creation. Michaelis takes pains to show that although it was the first *Jewish* book of its type, it fits neatly into an Arabic genre that was already extant. In the *Guide*, Maimonides takes to task not only the *mutakallimun* for pseudophilosophy in the interests of tradition, but also the neo-Aristotelians. Michaelis demonstrates that Maimonides echoes al-Ghazali, who argued that the philosophers base their rejection of revealed truths upon a more definite picture of metaphysical reality than reason can demonstrate. Replacing one source of authority with another, they fail to meet their own rigorous standards because they are unduly influenced by a different tradition, namely that of the Greeks.

Therefore, a dialectical method is called for. An individual, by virtue of both reason and his realization of its limits, can free himself of all traditions and thereby reach a closer approximation of the truth. In the *Guide*, Maimonides's limited revelation of metaphysical secrets (in the form of an epistle addressed to a talented individual) allows the learned reader extraordinary intellectual flexibility, including the integration of seemingly conflicting cultural traditions. Michaelis shows that the form and approach of the *Guide* have clear precedents in the writings of Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali. In particular, Ibn Sina wrote that a limited revelation of secrets in writing becomes necessary when a danger is present that knowledge may be lost. Maimonides claims that it has *already* been lost to Israel and must now be recovered and preserved. The *Guide* as a masterpiece by Maimonides is best understood in terms of the crisis of tradition that he posits at its core.

Science and tradition dwell in harmony in MT, as opposed to the *Guide*, which addresses a deep tension between them. MT conveys a sense of universal coherence and finality, while the *Guide* seems to encourage mutual skepticism and a sense that there are no final answers. Michaelis's analysis of the "crisis of tradition" as the fundamental starting point in both works provides us with a valuable key that can help us unlock the deepest questions about these two great literary masterpieces. It sheds light on Maimonides's shared underlying outlook, which

led him to shape both of these works as he did. It may also prove to be a productive lens through which to view the medieval critics of Maimonidean law and philosophy.

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