

Of Knowledge and Virtue:
Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and Abraham the Patriarch in the Code of Maimonides

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Introduction: In Pursuit of Knowledge

What does it mean to live a Jewish life? In his *Mishneh Torah*, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (also known as Maimonides, or Rambam) addresses this question on every page. In nearly 1000 chapters he seeks to transmit the totality of the *halakha*; and in that sense, the *Mishneh Torah* provides both many answers, and one. “One should read the written Torah first and then read this [i.e., the MT],” Maimonides advises in his introduction. “Then he will know the Oral Torah in its entirety, without needing to read any other text beside.”¹

The root word he uses for knowledge, עֵדֻת, is probably one of the most significant in the entire *Mishneh Torah*. Rambam names his first volume סֵפֶר הַמַּדָּע — the Book of Knowledge. He begins his code of law not with instructions for the daily blessings, as does the Talmud,² but rather by prioritizing a series of theological, metaphysical, and scientific topics that, in his mind, precede all of Jewish observance. In the rabbinic worldview, Torah is the only direct evidence of God’s will. For Maimonides, the intellect that can correctly ascertain its meanings can more nearly apprehend the divine Intellect that revealed it.³ To be sure, a knowledge of laws, commandments and tradition is essential for every educated Jew. For Maimonides, however, this basic knowledge lays the groundwork for a more profound sort of knowing.⁴ To know the oral

¹ From the end of his הקדמה (introduction) the MT

² Although Maimonides created a novel organizational schema for the MT, he nevertheless followed the Babylonian Talmud in some respects. One such example is the structure of the first part of the second book of MT, סֵפֶר אֱהֻבָּה (The Book of Love of God) which begins with the rules for reciting the *Shema* and then progresses to laws of prayer, as does tractate *Berakhot* of the Talmud.

³ In *Guide* 3.18 Maimonides observes that, since human beings differ in intelligence, “The relation of Divine Providence is therefore not the same to all men; the greater the human perfection a person has attained, the greater the benefit he derives from Divine Providence.” (See Shlomo Pines, *trans. The Guide of the Perplexed*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963, p. 475)

⁴ In his introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides writes, “God, may His mention be exalted, wished us to be perfected and the state of our societies to be improved by His laws regarding actions. Now this can come about only after the adoption of intellectual beliefs, the first of which being His apprehension, may He be exalted, according to our

and written Torah in their totality — a lofty goal on its own merits — is to approach a world beyond ordinary cognition. By perfecting one's intellect, one might access the Active Intellect, a neoplatonic model of divine cognition that Maimonides articulates in Jewish terms.⁵

The MT was for general use: for teachers and their students; for practical answers to quotidian halakhic questions. Maimonides also wrote the MT for scholars. He believed it would allow them to spend less time studying Talmud, and more time in advanced metaphysical speculation. The MT would put these students on a fast track, guiding them to the 'correct knowledge' of Torah (דעה נכונה):

הקדוש ברוך הוא נתן לנו תורה זו, עץ חיים, וכל העושה כל הכתוב בה, ויודעו דעה גמורה נכונה--זוכה בה לחיי העולם הבא; ולפי גודל מעשיו וגודל חכמתו, הוא זוכה.⁶

The Holy Blessed One gave us this Torah, the Tree of Life. Anyone who does everything that is written in it, and who knows the totality of correct knowledge, merits through it the world to come; according to the greatness of one's deeds and the greatness of one's wisdom does one merit it.

According to Maimonides, one should divide his Torah study into thirds: one third for scripture, one third for Oral Torah (i.e., the MT), and one third for deep analytical thinking, including metaphysical speculation.⁷ What is the ultimate end of this disciplined speculation? For Maimonides, the purpose of every Jewish life is to know God.⁸ Thus, he proclaims in the very first *halakha* of the *Mishneh Torah*:

capacity.” (Isadore Twersky, *ed.*, *A Maimonides Reader*. New York: Behrman House, 1972, Kindle Location 3072.) Knowing *that* God exists is necessary for all Jews, and the desired outcome for all of humanity. Knowing *God's nature* is the more esoteric pursuit of the elect, the endeavor of an elite class of philosophers.

⁵ See Gillis, David. *Reading Maimonides' Mishneh Torah*. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015, p. 395

⁶ From הלכות תשובה (Laws of *Teshuvah*) 9.1

⁷ See הלכות תלמוד תורה (Laws of Torah Study), 1.11-12

⁸ David Gillis (p.1) demonstrates that Maimonides encodes this as both a particular and universal aspiration in his code: “The premise of Maimonides’ code of law, *Mishneh torah*, is that a human being’s purpose is to know God. It opens with the recognition of God’s existence; it closes with Isaiah’s messianic promise: ‘For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea’ [9.9]. That is the ultimate aim of all the ritual and civil laws that it prescribes.” Gillis further observes that Maimonides explicitly states this purpose in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*.

יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות, לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון. והוא ממציא כל הנמצא; וכל הנמצאים מן שמיים וארץ ומה ביניהם, לא נמצאו אלא מאמיתת הימצאו.⁹

The foundation of foundations and pillar of knowledge is to know that there is a First Existence. He is the Creator of all existent beings in the skies, on earth, and everywhere in-between; they were all created exclusively out of the truth of His existence.

Although knowledge of God was his desired outcome, Maimonides considered it exceptionally rare for a person to fully achieve it. He believed, furthermore, that God intended, to protect this knowledge from the undeserving through parable and allegory. So does Maimonides characterize God's purpose, "...which one cannot possibly oppose and which has concealed from the vulgar among the people those truths especially requisite for His apprehension."¹⁰ And who merited access to these truths? The pious sages of Israel: Abraham, Moses, Yehuda HaNasi, and presumably, Maimonides himself.

What was Maimonides' self-perceived role in this project? In the MT Maimonides portrays himself in the mold of Yehuda HaNasi: a compiler with the wherewithal to preserve and disseminate all of Oral Torah. By his own account, Maimonides draws from a wide body of rabbinic literature, including "...the two Talmuds, the *Tosefta*, the *Sifra*, and the *Sifre*..."¹¹ He draws also from decrees and rulings (גזירות ותקנות), customs (מנהגות), judicial decisions, and Geonic literature. He adapts all of these into his own homilies on biblical themes, along with *Aggadah* — lore he adapts from rabbinic literature.¹² Importantly, he also relies heavily upon the

⁹ From הלכות יסודי התורה (Foundational Laws of Torah) 1.1

¹⁰ *Guide*, Trans. Pines, p. 7

¹¹ From his *Introduction*

¹² In his *Commentary on the Mishnah* (another work in which he declined to cite his sources) he cautions that the work "...does not represent ideas which I invented of my own accord, nor original interpretations. Rather, they are ideas gleaned from what the Sages say — in the *Midrashim*, in the Talmud and elsewhere in their compositions — from what the philosophers, both ancient and modern, say; as well as from the compositions of many other people: and you should listen to the truth, whoever may have said it" (cited in Stroumsa, Sarah. *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 11.

non-Torah disciplines of physics and metaphysics, which in his view constitute the cosmic underpinnings of all reality. He does not mention these sources in the MT's introduction, but he does refer to Aristotle in other works.¹³ Although Maimonides sometimes relies on it and other times refutes it, classical Greek philosophy unquestionably enters the MT, just as it animates many of his other writings. We will examine some of the Greek theological and astronomical concepts that Maimonides considered 'correct knowledge.'

In his introduction, Maimonides recasts the great sages of Israel as his intellectual forebears, each in his own way promoting the correct knowledge of God. None was so great as Abraham the patriarch, who first came to know God through reason alone. He rediscovered that correct knowledge after many generations of idolatrous perversity, a heroic accomplishment for his descendants and a promise for a world redeemed. For Maimonides, Abraham's life is a cautionary tale: the correct knowledge can easily be lost.

Early in the MT, Maimonides warns that a sage who declines to teach disrupts Torah transmission (מונע תורה), placing a stumbling block before the blind (נותן מכשולות לפני העיוורים).¹⁴ He must have felt great responsibility to share the fruits of his prodigious intellectual labors. But it took a gifted student to understand the depth of his contributions. That is only natural given that sacred texts conceal layers of meaning below the surface — a premise of both Greek

, p. 11). This cosmopolitanism and breadth carried into the MT, as well, though his confidence apparently grew in the interim years. By the time he came to write the *Mishneh Torah*, he did not find it necessary to insert such a warning to his readers. Instead, he believed or hoped that his audience would trust he had done his homework, accurately presenting the ideas of earlier sages alongside his own innovations.

¹³ He first mentions Aristotle in his *Treatise on Logic*, one of his first compositions. He does so also in letters to colleagues, as well as in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Although Maimonides admired Aristotle greatly, he was not afraid to disagree with him. So Twersky: "we should not forget that he was also a critic of Aristotle and revised many aspects of traditional Aristotelianism; see, for example, Guide, II, on creation. Medieval religious philosophy would be unintelligible without this flexibility and intellectual agility, the fusion of dependence and independence." (Kindle Location 6615).

¹⁴ In הלכות תלמוד תורה (Laws of Torah Study) 5.4

philosophy¹⁵ and rabbinic hermeneutics. A staunch meritocrat, he unapologetically categorized students according to intellectual aptitude. After completing the *Mishneh Torah*, he wrote to a friend, indignant that the work might reach “...some raving, befuddled novice who would struggle with some of its passages owing to fundamental ignorance of them or intellectual ineptitude...”¹⁶ This attitude also emerges in his works themselves; he clearly earmarked them for different audiences. Maimonides wrote the *Mishneh Torah* in concise tannaitic Hebrew, for example. (He otherwise wrote almost exclusively in Judeo-Arabic, a common tongue to Jews of Muslim lands.) By means of meticulous organization and lucid language, Rambam intended the *halakha* to be not merely accessible, but also *known* to everyone in the Jewish world.¹⁷ Minimally educated people could grasp its basic contours through instruction and repetition. They could understand how to conduct their business and organize their households within the

¹⁵ Kraemer (Kindle Location 6842) discusses Al-Farabi’s influence on Maimonides’ method for communicating esoteric knowledge. Al-Farabi, one of Rambam’s direct philosophic inspirations, “demonstrated that the different literary styles of Plato and Aristotle perform the same rhetorical function of concealment. Plato refrained from inscribing the sciences in books, favoring pure hearts and congenial minds. When he was old and afraid of forgetting, he wrote things down, but used symbols (rumuz) and enigmas (alghaz), so that only the deserving would understand. Aristotle, however, communicated in writing by elucidation and exhaustive discussion, thereby making philosophy accessible. When Plato objected, it was explained that Aristotle’s style was nevertheless abstruse, obscure, and complicated regardless of the superficial clarity.”

¹⁶ As cited in Kraemer, Joel L. “The Life of Moses ben Maimon.” in Lawrence Fine, Ed., *Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 426

¹⁷ From his הקדמה (Introduction):

“I have seen fit to arrange this compendium in large divisions of the laws according to their various topics.” These divisions are distributed in chapters grouped according to subject matter. Each chapter is “subdivided into smaller paragraphs so that they may be systematically memorized” (Twersky, Kindle Location 577)

These comments on the organization of the work — in which Rambam emphasizes the consistency of chapter headings and thematic structure of the material discussed — stand in stark contrast to his introduction of *Guide to the Perplexed* (pp. 6-7, trans. Twersky, emphasis added), in which he remarks:

...You should not ask of me here anything beyond *the chapter headings*. And even those are not set down in order or arranged in coherent fashion in this Treatise, but rather are scattered and entangled with other subjects that are to be clarified. **For my purpose is that the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed...**

These comments reflect the disparate missions of these two works. In the MT, he wants to help all understand the *halakha* at its most manifest, performative level. In the *Guide*, by contrast, he primarily wants to help worthy students — and *only* worthy students — understand Torah’s deeper, esoteric wisdom.

categories of the forbidden and the permitted; the polluted and the free from pollution; the liable and the exempt.

Yet, reading the *Mishneh Torah* for its rulings alone reveals just one side of an intricately-constructed work. Gifted, highly committed scholars could venture much further. In his *Essay on Resurrection* Maimonides reflects on the MT's integration of theology and *halakha*:

I acted the same way in my major work, which I called *Mishneh Torah*... I also listed all the religious and legal roots, my objective being that those that are called disciples of the wise, or *Geonim*, or whatever you choose to name them, build their legal details on legal foundations, so that their learning will be organized and their knowledge systematically arranged. I wished to have all this established on religious dogmas. They will no longer cast the knowledge of God behind their backs, but will exert themselves to the limit of their power to attain what will perfect them and bring them nearer to their Creator not to what the masses imagine to perfection...¹⁸

Meritorious scholars would quickly find that the MT provided them both guidance in philosophical speculation (especially in ספר מדע, the Book of Knowledge, as described above), and more time with which to pursue it. For such scholars, Rambam also wrote the *Moreh Nevukhim* (*Guide of the Perplexed*), his philosophical masterwork.¹⁹ As in the *Guide*, in the MT he remained silent or non-committal on several controversial points, especially concerning apparently insoluble differences between Judaism and Greek philosophy. Critics attacked his ambiguity, exerting pressure that, in one case, eventually led him to respond with the *Essay on Resurrection*.

¹⁸ *Essay on Resurrection*, 213. Cited in Halbertal, p. 166

¹⁹ Rambam's intellectual discrimination is not simply a matter of writing different works for different audiences. For example, even though the *Mishneh Torah* is his most accessible, lay-directed work, Maimonides nevertheless orders and fills it with speculative knowledge. David Gillis has shown that the MT is a microcosm; a miniature representation of Rambam's Graeco-Muslim-influenced cosmology. In interrogating the complex relationship of *halakha* and philosophy in the Rambam's thought, he demonstrates that there is a transcendent coherence to the work. Only Maimonides' most advanced and devoted students would appreciate this transcendent detailing of the *Mishneh Torah*, which Gillis (p. 1) describes as "...an object of contemplation, a work of art itself designed to convey the knowledge of God."

Maimonides had many admirers, but also some fierce critics. His detractors accused him of harboring heretical views in theology and hermeneutics, and for omitting his sources. Among his fiercest critics was Abraham ben David, the Ravad (c. 1125-1198) a great Provençal Talmudist. He criticized Maimonides for a great many things, most notably for omitting his sources: it impeded the ability of the Ravad and other scholars to challenge Rambam's rulings. Scholars continue to debate Maimonides' theological stances (particularly the primacy of creation and the resurrection of the dead), the extent of his cosmopolitan identity, and his halakhic *modus operandi* to this day.

We have already seen that, in just the first several pages of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides emphasizes the need to *know* the entirety of Torah and the singularity of God. These categories also correspond to his prominent intellectual contributions to Judaism: as a philosopher and halakhist.²⁰ It would be tempting to separate his various works according to each of these categories,²¹ but the truth is more complex. Ever since he was a teenager, Maimonides was drawn to philosophy; it is evident throughout his entire corpus. By “philosophy” I mean two things primarily: on one hand, the speculative Jewish disciplines of מעשה בראשית (“physics”) and מעשה מרכבה (“metaphysics”). Maimonides explores these areas in the first section of the MT (הלכות ידוסי תורה), and defines the terms as such in his introduction to the *Guide*.²² On the other hand, I mean the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy that he internalized in large measure

²⁰ For Maimonides, philosophy and *halakha* are not separate categories. Their inseparability is evident in his choice to begin the *Mishneh Torah* with chapters about physics and metaphysics. According to Stroumsa (p. 70), “His decision to incorporate these foundations, as an opening chapter, in his *Code of Law* obviously reflects the Almohad conception of faith as definable by jurisdiction and subject to juristic ruling.”

²¹ I.e., those primarily concerned with *halakha* (*Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer HaMitzvot*, *Commentary on the Mishnah*) in contrast with his philosophical *Guide of the Perplexed*.

²² Pines, p. 6

through the writings of Muslim scholars.²³ Maimonides did not accept everything he read in these works;²⁴ that which he did accept, however, he understood as foundational truth about the universe — the truth which scriptural allegory conceals and speculative inquiry reveals. For that reason, he begins the MT, a code of law, by treating the philosophical topics of God and Creation. For that reason also, his writings exude a strong overarching coherence, even despite significant variations in language, register, and content. Modern scholars such as Moshe Halbertal and David Gillis tend to view the MT and the *Guide* as intimately interdependent works, if not as a single composite work. As David Gillis has shown,²⁵ Maimonides did not seek to “harmonize” Greek philosophy with Judaism so much as to prove their unquestionable unity. This proposition resounds strongly throughout the Maimonidean corpus.

For most of Maimonides’ readers, however, the extent of his philosophical influences were not at all apparent. Maimonides identified himself firmly in the chain of rabbinic tradition, taking care to clarify that in his introduction to the MT. There, he recounts, in a manner reminiscent of *Mishnah Avot* 1.1,²⁶ the history of revelation and transmission. To that effect, he named the notable scholars — all of them — who preceded him. These scholars, he would argue, capably discerned the deepest meanings of Torah and transmitted their knowledge to subsequent generations.²⁷ In the coming pages we will explore Rambam’s presentation of two paradigmatic

²³ Sometimes, glaring conflicts arise between the two, such as in the question of *creatio ex nihilo* or the resurrection of the dead. When rabbinic and Aristotelian traditions teach such radically different things, it is especially difficult to discern Maimonides’ true thinking. Indeed, in such situations, he may have disguised his true thinking to placate his critics, intending that his students would glean the truth.

²⁴ Cf. fn. 13

²⁵ Gillis, pp. 4-8

²⁶ Moses received the Torah at Sinai, and passed it to Joshua; and Joshua [passed it] to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets passed it to the men of the great assembly. They said three things: be deliberate in judgment, raise up many students, and make a fence around the Torah.

²⁷ Listing all of the sages at once rather than naming them alongside their positions may have served as a response to Karaite challengers, who accused Rabbanites of following opinions of individuals, and not the unified voice of God.

sages in the *Mishneh Torah*: Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (the “codifier”); and Abraham the patriarch (the “philosopher”). In the *Mishneh Torah*, these figures serve as models for his own scholarship in legal and speculative matters. Rambam’s portrayals open a window into his self-perception, revealing the motives, aspirations, and singular personality of one of Judaism’s greatest thinkers.

Yehuda HaNasi: The First Great “Codifier”

In this section I will show that Maimonides presents himself as a ‘Yehuda HaNasi *redivivus*’ in the *Mishneh Torah*. Through sophisticated literary applications and selective preservations of Aggadic hagiography, Maimonides codifies both his adulation for the legendary sage and his perceived similarity in both historical circumstances and purpose.²⁸

As discussed above, Maimonides begins the MT with an expansive transmission history reminiscent of the opening statement of *Mishnah Avot*. Thus he establishes his legitimacy, also declaring his admiration for the Mishnah and affinity with its compiler. After all, Maimonides had already written his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, sparing no accolade for its supposed compiler. Reflecting on his role as codifier of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides expresses his feelings of kinship with the legendary sage:

There were before me Gaonim and great men who composed tracts, in Hebrew or Arabic, to determine the rulings in specific matters. But as for establishing the rulings regarding *all* the Talmud and *all* the laws of the Torah — no one has done this before me, since the days of our Holy Rabbi [i.e. Rabbi Judah “the Prince”] and his holy companions.²⁹

²⁸ Legend has it that Maimonides was a direct descendent of Yehuda HaNasi! (Kraemer p. 413)

²⁹From the Epistle to Rabbi Phinehas the Judge, as cited in Stroumsa (p. 62). This is a summary of the moving homiletical comparison that Maimonides draws in his introduction to the MT. A deeper investigation reveals significant differences between the Mishnah as Rambam describes it here and the Mishnah as it actually exists. See Halbertal, pp. 91-94.

The Mishnah, a product of 3rd century Palestine, is traditionally considered the first systematic compilation of the Oral Torah.³⁰ Its Hebrew root ו.נ.ש. connotes teaching, learning, and repetition. Maimonides chose a nearly identical title for his own work, the *Mishneh Torah*.³¹ As he indicates above, he viewed his role as one of both preservation and radical innovation. In Yehuda HaNasi's day, he represents that geopolitical upheavals and temporal distance from the source of revelation had led to a state of attenuated halakhic knowledge, posing a threat to continuity. Dramatic circumstances require dramatic action, and Yehuda HaNasi recorded³² what had been an exclusively oral tradition. Hence, though the *idea* of recording oral laws was not new in Maimonides' day, he did consider his law code a revolutionary effort to preserve the oral law. Indeed, it was revolutionary in many ways. By seeking to transmit all of *halakha* in one place, devoid of sources or attribution, Maimonides thought he would simplify and redefine Torah study in much the same way [he imagined] that Yehuda HaNasi had done. Moshe Halbertal offers a powerful conceptual explanation:

[Maimonides] portrayed *halakhah* in a profound state of crisis resulting from harsh political conditions that had become progressively worse since the completion of the Talmud. In these circumstances, the prospect of centralized, institutional halakhic authority — which depends on political stability — was lost. The loss of any possibility of centralized authority, in turn, gave the *halakhah* a localized, interim quality, unraveling what had been a uniform, universally accepted system. Maimonides sought to reverse this situation through a dramatic literary exploit that would change the state of *halakhah* without changing the geopolitical conditions that had brought about its fragmentation. He wanted to overcome these harsh conditions by means of a mighty composition that, in effect, would create a virtual center able to serve as a stand-in for political stability... this effort was particularly audacious

³⁰ The *Tosefta*, which Maimonides describes in this chapter as a later commentary to the Mishnah, may in fact be older in whole or in part. The dating of these materials is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. In any case, Maimonides clearly saw the Mishnah as the paradigmatic halakhic compilation:

רבנו הקדוש חיבר המשנה. ומימות משה ועד רבנו הקדוש, לא חיברו חיבור שמלמדין אותו ברבים בתורה שבעל פה.

³¹ *Mishneh Torah*, which means the “second” or “repeated” Torah, is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek “Deuteronomy” (“second law”). In choosing this title alone, Rambam casts himself in the mold of both Yehuda HaNasi and Moses. Little wonder that some scholars thought his title presumptuous!

³² Maimonides apparently thought Yehuda HaNasi composed the Mishnah as a book. This follows a Spanish tradition that it was originally redacted in writing. (In contradistinction, a Franco-German tradition held that it was oral only.) Scholars today predominantly believe it was not originally redacted in writing. See Halbertal, Moshe, “What is the *Mishneh Torah*? On Codification and Ambivalence,” in Jay M. Harris, ed., *Maimonides After 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence* Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 83-84.

because the sought-after change would come about solely by dint of the composition's inherent power and its author's greatness of fame; the face of *halakhah* would be totally transformed without any political or institutional change.³³

Halbertal reveals the depth of Maimonides' vision and ambition for his project in the history of *halakha*. In some respects, however, the power of Maimonides' story comes at the expense of oversimplifying reality. For instance, for all his stated affinity between Yehuda HaNasi's mission and his own, he elides the many significant differences between the Mishnah and his work. For instance, the Mishnah attributes opinions and seldom provides clear rulings. It is certainly not a 'code' in the same sense as the MT.

The tendency to simplify is also evident elsewhere in his vision for the *Mishneh Torah*. In expounding the history of *halakha* he nostalgically recalls the overwhelming consensus in the Great Sanhedrin³⁴ and the Talmud.³⁵ To some degree, his positions comport with rabbinic tradition, which indicates that halakhic disagreements are a byproduct of temporal distance from revelation and dispersal from national sovereignty. Still, to argue that the *very purpose* of halakhic disputation is to arrive at the "correct" ruling is to engage in polemics. Kraemer writes that he simplifies and unifies the story of transmission to rebut Karaite attacks on rabbinic authority:

... it was claimed, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi had assigned statements in the Mishnah to their authors to preserve the continuity of legal transmission, since omission of scholars' names would have broken the chain of transmission from one scholar to another. Maimonides accomplished this—or so he believed—by listing the names of all the scholars collectively in the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, seeking to riposte the Karaite claim that the

³³ Halbertal p. 99

³⁴ See, for instance, הלכות ממרים (Laws of Rebellious Ones) 1.3, in which Maimonides states there are no disagreements in Oral Torah: בידוע שאינו קבלה ממה רבנו [ג. דברי הקבלה, אין בהן מחלוקת לעולם; וכל דבר שתמצא בו מחלוקת, בידוע שאינו קבלה ממה רבנו]. Similarly, in 1.4, he contends that the Great Sanhedrin presided over a time without any halakhic disagreements: כשהיה בית דין הגדול קיים, לא הייתה שם מחלוקת בישראל.

³⁵ In a letter Maimonides asserts "...the proper purpose [of the Talmud] was to know what was to be done or avoided." He chastises scholars who are "wasting time with talmudic give and take, as if meaning and purpose resided in an exercise in debate...the give and take and the debate entered into it by happenstance." (Halbertal p. 106)

Rabbanites rely on the opinions of individual scholars. He therefore wrote down the chain of transmission in his introduction “in order to teach that the tradition consists of many on the authority of many, not a single individual from a single individual.”³⁶

Both Rambam’s unbroken transmission of history and his elimination of argumentative discourse emphasizes the collective agreement of rabbinic authority. Said another way, his grand history of transmission reflects the ethos of rabbinic Judaism for precisely the reason his omission of sources does not. The Mishnah, Tosefta, and both Talmuds tend to *preserve* minority positions and the names of the scholars who held them. Decisive rulings can be found, to be sure, but they do not stand out as the primary goal of the discourse itself. Yet, his introduction screams *simplicity* and *agreement*. The phrase “הסכימו עליהם” (“they all agreed...”), appearing twice in the introduction, memorably describes both the Great Sanhedrin and the entire Jewish people. By attributing to the prestigious Yehuda HaNasi a finalizing codification philosophy, Maimonides implicitly repudiates his critics from both within and without normative rabbinic Judaism.

In his introduction to the MT, Maimonides explicates *many* parallels between Yehuda HaNasi and himself. He first describes the historical need for the Mishnah, and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s rise to that occasion. Later, he draws explicit parallels to his own day. These two accounts appear at mirror ends of the lengthy introduction, constituting a literary inclusio that contextualizes Maimonides’ work within the history of rabbinic transmission. Below are the two sections, side by side:

³⁶ Kraemer, Joel L. *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds*. New York: Doubleday, 2008, Kindle Location 5942

Yehuda HaNasi/Mishnah	Maimonides/MT
<p>Our Holy Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] composed the Mishnah. And from the days of Moses until our Holy Rabbi, no one composed a text for public dissemination concerning the Oral Torah. Rather, in every generation, the head of the court or a prophet of the same generation would write for himself a reminder of the traditions that he heard from his teachers; and he would teach them verbally in public. Thus would each and every person write for himself according to his ability, from the clarification of Torah and its <i>halakhot</i>, just as he heard. This applies as well to matters that were renewed in each generation, not with regard to the Oral Law, but rather from one of the thirteen principles [of biblical exegesis]; affirmed by the high court [i.e., the Sanhedrin]. So it was always, until our holy rabbi.</p> <p>He compiled all of the oral teachings, judgments, clarifications, and interpretations learned from Moses our Teacher — those spanning the entire Torah that the high court taught throughout the generations. And [Yehuda HaNasi] drew from all of these to compose the Mishnah. It was taught in public, and made known to all Israel, who all wrote it down. They made it known everywhere, in order that the Oral Law would never be forgotten by the Jewish people.</p> <p>And why did our Holy Rabbi do this, rather than allowing the status quo to continue? Because he saw that students were diminishing in in number, and troubles were multiplying, and the evil empire³⁷ was spreading throughout the world and growing in might. Meanwhile, the Jewish people were wandering in their dispersal to the ends [of the world]. So he composed a single text that everyone could take with them, in order that they could learn it quickly and it would not be forgotten. Yehuda HaNasi and his court spent their days teaching the Mishnah publicly.</p>	<p>Now in this time, we are beset by additional troubles, and everyone feels the pressure. The wisdom of our sages has been lost, and the understanding of our discerning ones has disappeared. Therefore, those interpretations, answers, and <i>halakhot</i> that the <i>geonim</i> composed and considered fully explained have posed a difficulty in our day. Only a very small number of people understand their contents properly. And needless to say, [this applies also] to the Talmud itself: the <i>Bavli</i> and <i>Yerushalmi</i>; <i>Sifra</i> and <i>Sifrei</i>, and the <i>Toseftas</i>. For these require broad knowledge, a wise spirit, and a good deal of time, after which one can know from them the right path concerning matters of the forbidden and permitted and the remainder of Torah laws.</p> <p>Because of this, I girded my loins — I, Moses son of Rabbi Maimon the Spaniard. Leaning upon the Rock, blessed be He, I contemplated all of these compositions. I saw fit to compose a text clarifying the matters [discussed] in all those works concerning the forbidden and the permitted; the polluted and the free from pollution, and the remainder of Torah laws. All in clear language and a concise manner, such that the entire Oral Torah will be organized for everyone — without difficulty or objection. No ‘so-and-so says this’ or ‘so-and-so says that’ — rather, lucid, accurate statements clarified from all the aforementioned works that endure from the days of our Holy Rabbi until now.</p> <p>[Thus] will all the laws be revealed to small and great alike, regarding each and every <i>mitzvah</i>, as well as the enactments of the sages and prophets. The principle of the work is that a person will require no other text at all concerning the laws of the Jewish people. Rather, this composition will serve as the compilation of the Oral Torah in its entirety, including enactments, customs, and decrees implemented from the days of Moses our Teacher until the composition of the Talmud, and as the <i>geonim</i> interpreted in their post-Talmudic works.</p>

If Maimonides’ transcendent purpose in composing the MT was to help the Jewish people know God, then he also recognized a more quotidian purpose: providing needed access to the complete Oral Torah for a dispersed, oppressed, possibly undereducated populace. This account resembles his earlier portrayal of Yehuda HaNasi in word choice, tone, and structure. The similarities are

³⁷ I.e., the Romans

far too compelling to be coincidental. To underscore these perceived similarities, Maimonides juxtaposes Yehuda HaNasi and himself. He does so in chiasm, a traditional feature of Hebrew poetry. Chiasm presents equivalent components symmetrically in order to emphasize their similarity (e.g. ABCBA). The color-coding in the chart above helps to illustrate how he did this. Here is a summary:

Yehuda HaNasi (Mishnah)	Maimonides (<i>Mishneh Torah</i>)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mishnah as first compilation of the Oral Torah since Moses 2. Mishnah is a “meta-compilation” based on many oral traditions, subsequent judgments, and clarifications 3. Importance of not forgetting the Oral Torah 4. Fewer students, great troubles, oppressive and expanding empire; dispersal of Jews/Importance of not forgetting the Oral Torah 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Great troubles; everyone feels the pressure/Wisdom of Sages has been lost; very few people understand the Oral Torah sufficiently 2. MT is a “meta-compilation” of many oral compositions, covering the entire Oral Torah 3. MT as first compilation of the Oral Torah to span the days of Moses through the <i>Geonim</i>

This comparison elegantly situates Maimonides in the sequence of rabbinic tradition. Beyond serving only as a link in a chain, though, Maimonides portrays himself as the next great lawgiver. Responding to the oppressions of the Roman Empire and the dispersal of the Jewish people, Yehuda HaNasi stepped in to preserve knowledge (or, more specifically, to halt the attenuation of knowledge) of the Oral Torah. Maimonides casts himself in a similar light. Much like the later Jacob ben Asher and Joseph Karo — other influential codifiers of the 14th and 16th centuries, respectively — Maimonides was dissatisfied by the state of halakhic knowledge in his time. He felt in the shifting fortunes and geographies of the Jewish people a need to maintain Torah. In Yehuda HaNasi’s circumstances, Rambam describes a chaotic dispersion of the Jewish people (ישראל מתגלגלים והולכים לקצוות). He later describes his own work as a “gathering” (מקבץ). In this

way, he views his codification as a response to the paradigmatic Jewish condition of exile and decentralization.³⁸ The Messiah will one day preside over a repatriated Jewish people. In the meantime, Maimonides' ideal of universal awareness of the Law could effect an intellectual in-gathering, if not a messianic one.

In his introductory transmission history Maimonides describes most of the sages tersely; seldom does he expend much ink. For Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, however, he allots three entire paragraphs. He calls the legendary patriarch “רבינו הקדוש” - “Our Holy Rabbi,” his only honorific besides “משה רבינו” (“Moses our Teacher”). Moses, of course, is the original lawgiver, and he serves as the model for both Yehuda HaNasi and for the Rambam. In his introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides explains that Yehuda HaNasi merits his holy designation because was “the outstanding one in his generation, and unique in his time; a man in whom were found all precious attributes and virtuous traits...”³⁹

Rambam invokes Yehuda HaNasi (also known in rabbinic literature simply as “Rabbi”) in several other locations in the *Mishneh Torah*. These instances seem primarily to illustrate those “desired and good qualities” that he so admires in the sage. I say “he admires” because Maimonides might have included any number of additional *aggadot* featuring Yehuda HaNasi. (Not all of these paint him in an especially saintly light.) Yet, Maimonides provides only sources that underscore his esteemed reputation and considerable piety.

³⁸ In fact Maimonides mentions yet another dispersion and geopolitical crisis during the geonic period. Following Talmudic precedent, “Maimonides characterizes Ravina and Rav Ashi as follows: ‘the last great sages of Israel who transcribed the Oral Law, issued decrees, enacted ordinances, and instituted customs...’” (Halbertal p. 95). Maimonides was none too impressed with the leadership or the halakhic reach of the Geonate, which in his day was but a shadow of its former glory.

³⁹Fred Rosner, *trans. Moses Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah*. New York: Feldheim, 1975, p. 64

A series of Talmudic *aggadot* depict the end of Yehuda HaNasi's life.⁴⁰ Maimonides does not relate these stories directly in the MT, though he does refer to the death of the sage somewhat more obliquely in הלכות אבל (Laws of Mourning):

וכן אין מספידין יתר על שנים עשר חודש--אין לנו בחכמים גדול מרבנו הקדוש, ושנים עשר חודש בלבד נספד. וכן חכם שבאה שמועתו לאחר שנים עשר חודש, אין סופדין אותו.

We do not eulogize for longer than twelve months. We have no greater sage than our holy rabbi [i.e., Yehuda HaNasi], and twelve months was he eulogized. Similarly, if a report [of the death] of a sage reaches us after twelve months, we do not eulogize.

A typical person who dies is eulogized for no longer than seven days. Outstanding rabbis, however, may be eulogized for up to one year. Maimonides' exemplar is Yehuda HaNasi, whom he includes among the greatest of the sages.

On two other occasions in the *Mishneh Torah* does Maimonides mention the "holy rabbi" in a way that illustrates his high esteem and authority, without mentioning any particular attributes. The first instance is from הלכות איסורי ביאה (Laws of Forbidden Sexual Unions).⁴¹ In this case, a person claims to be a priest without corroborative evidence (or a witness) outside of his own testimony. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi nevertheless accepts him as a priest based only upon stories he relates of his childhood. The invocation of Rabbi Yehuda here seems to have the effect of legitimizing an otherwise somewhat surprising leniency.⁴² A similar case appears in הלכות תרומות (Laws of Heave-Offerings). There, he exempts some from the responsibilities of תרומה (tithes) whom previous sages had not exempted.⁴³ Again, the Rambam seems to

⁴⁰ See, for instance, BT *Ketubot* 103-104

⁴¹ See הלכות איסורי ביאה (Laws of Forbidden Sexual Unions) 20.13-15

⁴² This section, after all, begins with the statement: "מי שבא בזמן הזה, ואמר כוהן אני--אינו נאמן, ואין מעלין אותו לכהונה על פי" (Today, one who comes and says, "I am a priest" -- we do not believe him or elevate him to that status by his own words)." (*ibid.*)

⁴³ In הלכות תרומות (Laws of Tithes) 1.5

invoke his authority to illustrate the reliability of an otherwise [seemingly] surprisingly lenient ruling.

While each of these references demonstrates Yehuda HaNasi's lofty standing, the next two examples describe the scrupulousness of his character. Here Maimonides invokes Yehuda HaNasi's piety in speech ethics and ritual observance. In הלכות דעות (laws of virtuous attributes), Maimonides presents him (technically his student Rav) as the paragon of disciplined speech:

לעולם ירבה אדם בשתיקה, ולא ידבר אלא בדבר חכמה או בדברים שהוא צריך להן לחיי גופו. אמרו על רב תלמיד רבנו הקדוש, שלא שח שיחה בטילה כל ימיו - וזו היא שיחת רוב כל אדם. ואפילו בצורכי הגוף, לא ירבה אדם דברים. ועל זה ציוו חכמים ואמרו, כל המרבה דברים, מביא חטא; ואמרו לא מצאתי לגוף טוב, אלא שתיקה.⁴⁴

One should seek to increase in silence, and refrain from speaking anything other than wisdom or what is necessary for his physical well-being. It is said of Rav, disciple of our holy rabbi, never spoke an idle word all of his days -- even though that is the manner of most conversation. One should not speak at length, even concerning one's bodily needs. About this the sages commanded, saying, "One who speaks at length brings on sin;" and "I found nothing more beneficial to my body than silence."

A similar case appears in הלכות תפילין:

קדושת תפילין, קדושה גדולה היא: שכל זמן שתפילין על ראשו של אדם, ועל זרועו--הוא עניו וירא, ואינו נמשך בשחוק ובשיחה בטילה, ואינו מהרהר במחשבות רעות, אלא מפנה ליבו לדברי האמת והצדק. לפיכך צריך אדם להשתדל להיותן עליו, כל היום -- שמצותן, כך היא. אמרו עליו על רב תלמיד רבנו הקדוש, שכל ימיו לא ראוהו שהלך ארבע אמות בלא תורה, או בלא ציצית, או בלא תפילין.⁴⁵

The sanctity in *tefillin* is a great sanctity indeed. For any time *tefillin* are upon a man's head, or his arm -- he is humble and God-fearing; and he is not drawn to levity or idle chatter. Nor does he ponder evil thoughts. Rather, his heart turns to matters of truth and justice. Therefore a man must strive to wear them on his person all day, as the *mitzvah* requires. It is said of Rav, disciple of our holy rabbi, that all his days he would never be seen to walk more than four cubits without Torah, *tzitzit*, or *tefillin*.

In both of these cases the pious scholar is Rav, *the student* of Yehuda HaNasi.⁴⁶ A *Geonic* responsum depicts Rav as a pious scholar,⁴⁷ so it is not without precedent. Curiously,

⁴⁴ In הלכות דעות (Laws of Virtuous Attributes) 2.4

⁴⁵ From הלכות תפילין (Laws of *Tefillin*) 4.25

⁴⁶ Jacobs, Louis. *Holy Living: Saints and Saintliness in Judaism*. Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1990, pp. 79-80. The disciplined *tefillin*-wearing is attributed to R. Sheshet in the Babylonian Talmud (based on a passage in *Shabbat* 118b).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Maimonides takes care to point out that relationship, as if credit for Rav's piety is due to his teacher as much as to his student.

To summarize, in the MT, Maimonides depicts Yehuda HaNasi as the most significant disseminator of knowledge since Moses, in both deed and character. According to the Rambam, the "holy rabbi" possessed the political savvy, audacity, and foresight to produce precisely the legal innovation the Jewish world required.⁴⁸ Maimonides lionized the sage, modeling his own codificatory efforts after those of his predecessor.⁴⁹ By drawing clear historical parallels, he also sought to bolster his own legitimacy as a transmitter of the prized knowledge of Israel.

Abraham the Patriarch: The "Originator"

It takes a shrewd halakhic innovator to preserve an expansive oral tradition in destabilizing circumstances. For Maimonides, Rabbi Yehuda was an intellectual savior of sorts, guarding the knowledge of God for future generations. If Yehuda HaNasi was a preserver, the biblical Abraham was an originator — not of *halakha*, per se, but of the pre-revelation, unmediated knowledge of God. According to the Rambam, he came to know God independently, through reason alone. That he did so in an exclusively pagan world is a testament to his brilliant intellect and spiritual acumen. In the Rambam's eyes, Abraham was not only a genius, but a prodigy; not only the first Hebrew, but the paradigmatic philosopher.

⁴⁸ Gillis (p. 361, fn. 96) speculates that Maimonides also compared himself to Yohanan b. Zakkai, whom rabbinic tradition depicts in a similar role to Yehuda HaNasi about 100 years earlier.

⁴⁹ Or, to be more precise, recasting R. Yehuda's innovations in a distinctly Maimonidean mold (as discussed above).

It seems that Abraham also captured Rambam's heart. Maimonides so adored him that he named his only son after him. Reflecting on his son, a tender side of the Rambam emerges:

When I consider the condition of this world, I find consolation only in two things: in contemplating and studying and in my son Abraham, for God, may he be blessed, has given him grace and blessing from the blessing of his namesake who believed in God and in his promise. May He give him long life...⁵⁰

Rabbinic tradition depicts Abraham as a steadfast servant of God. He uproots himself from his home and his family, only to endure many trials. Maimonides himself fled Cordoba, which he always considered his home, twice relocating to escape Almohad persecution. He, too, endured many trials, including the loss of his beloved Andalusian Jewish community, as well as the untimely death of his brother. One wonders how prominently these events figured into his empathy for Abraham, who maintained his faith in God even in the most trying circumstances.⁵¹

To be more precise, for Maimonides, Abraham's belief in God is no great "leap of faith," but rather the natural result of this *correct knowledge* of God (דעה נכונה); and God rewards him richly in turn. In that sense, in chapter one of הלכות עבודה זרה (laws concerning idolatry)⁵² Rambam does not introduce new halakhic obligations so much as expand upon *the primary* halakhic obligation: *The foundation of foundations and the pillar of knowledge is to know that there is a First Existence.*⁵³ As I indicated in the introduction, that is the first statement of the MT's first book, ספר המדע (the Book of Knowledge). Idolatry, or the worship of stars and

⁵⁰ As cited in Kraemer p. 427

⁵¹ Maimonides writes about the *Akedah* in the *Guide*, ch. 24. In this chapter Maimonides contends with the suffering of the righteous, which he describes as "one of the greatest difficulties of the Law....especially in the story of the binding of Isaac" (*Trans.* Twersky, Kindle Location 4003)

⁵² This chapter portrays the story of Abraham combatting idolatry to become the hero-philosopher of the Jewish people.

⁵³ Thus, the first three commandments in Rambam's ספר המצוות (Book of Commandments) are: (1) To know that there is a God; (2) to ascribe absolute unity to God; and (3) to love God.

constellations, as he also calls it, is therefore the most significant threat to the cardinal principle of Judaism.

Elsewhere, Maimonides presents Torah as the antidote to idolatry,⁵⁴ a position strongly rooted in rabbinic tradition. Also based rabbinic lore is his depiction of Abraham, who intuitively knows of God and the universe through reason. What, then, does Maimonides add to the discourse? For starters, he frames Abraham's journey in the human history of correct worship and idolatry. He also places his own astronomical vocabulary in Abraham's mouth: in audacious repudiation of astrology, Abraham asserts God's control above the heavenly bodies (מנהיג הגלגל).

⁵⁵ Note the remarkable similarity to Maimonides' account of physics from הלכות יסודי תורה (the foundational principles of Torah⁵⁶) in which he ascribes to God the very same action: מנהיג הגלגל. Plainly, the Abraham who counters idolatry is a Maimonidean philosopher.

The Maimonidean Abraham also exemplifies many ethical virtues. In the *Mishneh Torah* alone, Maimonides lifts him up as the exemplar of forgiveness,⁵⁷ holiness,⁵⁸ hospitality,⁵⁹ parenting,⁶⁰ and righteousness.⁶¹ The Maimonidean Abraham is also an autodidact and smasher of idols, characteristics ascribed to him elsewhere in rabbinic literature. These characteristics coalesce into a picture of an Abraham who is unflinchingly loyal, and abidingly good. He is the paragon of moral perfection. Maimonides conveys the sense that this moral perfection is rooted

⁵⁴ See Stroumsa, p. 102

⁵⁵ In הלכות עבודה זרה (Laws concerning Idolatry) 1.3

⁵⁶ 1.5

⁵⁷ See הלכות דעות (Laws of Virtuous Attribute) 6.6

⁵⁸ See הלכות יסודי התורה (Foundational Laws of Torah) 7.9

⁵⁹ See הלכות אבל (Laws of Mourning) 14.2

⁶⁰ God singled Abraham out for this responsibility in Genesis 18.19. Thus, Maimonides portrays Abraham as the dutiful father, transmitting Torah knowledge as commanded in Deuteronomy 6.7. See הלכות דעות (Laws of Virtuous Attributes) 1.7.

⁶¹ See הלכות מתנות לעניים (Laws of Alms to the Poor) 10.1

in his superior intellect. For Maimonides, the unwavering *knowledge* of God must accompany the unconditional *love* of God.⁶² Of his many virtues, the most consequential are his knowledge and love of God. These attributes transcend the realm of mere ‘character development,’ few people, if any, reach Abraham’s level of perfection. This Maimonides asserts in the transition to the second book of the MT, ספר אהבה (the Book of Love of God):⁶³

העובד מאהבה, עוסק בתורה ובמצוות והולך בנתיבות החכמה--לא מפני דבר בעולם, לא מפני יראת הרעה, ולא כדי לירש הטובה: אלא עושה האמת, מפני שהוא אמת; וסוף הטובה לבוא בכלל. ומעלה זו היא מעלה גדולה עד מאוד, ואין כל חכם זוכה לה. והיא מעלת אברהם אבינו, שקראו הקדוש ברוך הוא אוהבו לפי שלא עבד אלא מאהבה. והיא המעלה שציוונו בה הקדוש ברוך הוא על ידי משה רבנו, שנאמר "ואהבת, את ה' אלוהיך, בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך, ובכל מאודך" (דברים ו). ובזמן שיאהב את ה' אהבה הראויה, מיד יעשה כל המצוות מאהבה.

Whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with the study of the Law and the fulfillment of commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits--such a man does what is truly right because it is truly right, and ultimately, happiness comes to him as a result of his conduct. **This standard is indeed a very high one; not every sage attained it. It was the standard of the patriarch Abraham whom God called His lover, because he served only out of love.** It is the standard which God, through Moses, bids us achieve, as it is said, "And you shall love the Lord your God" (Deut. 6:5). When one loves God with the right love, he will straightway observe all the commandments out of love.⁶⁴

Abraham’s love of God differs from romantic love, or even from the love of a child for a parent.

It relies upon religious devotion, filtered through one’s intellective faculties. Halbertal describes it this way:

Cognition is not a neutral activity, void of desire and feeling; rather, it contains the kernel of religious experience, built on the pairing of attraction and recoiling. In the philosophical reading, love — attraction — is the infinite

⁶² This is a highly intellectual love. Kraemer (Kindle Location 5966, emphasis added) elaborates: “Maimonides wrote that when one contemplates God’s wondrous works and perceives His infinite wisdom, one comes to love God and senses one’s own lowliness. Knowing the nature of the universe is a way to attain love of God, which is realized only through apprehension of the whole of being and the contemplation of God’s wisdom manifested in it. This contemplation consists of correct opinions concerning the whole of being, which correspond to the various theoretical sciences by which these opinions are validated. **This philosophic interpretation of the love of God is closer to Spinoza’s intellectual love of God (amor dei intellectualis) than to any description of love of the divine in the Talmud and Midrash.** Maimonides clarified at the start that his main concern was science and the study of nature, the foundation of his restoring Judaism as a religion of reason and enlightenment.”

⁶³ This second book of the *Mishneh Torah* details the *halakhot* for prayer, ritual garments, scrolls, and circumcision. These are the foremost ways a(n adult, male) Jew shows love to God.

⁶⁴ From הלכות תשובה (Laws of *Teshuvah*) 10.4, trans. Twersky (Kindle Location 1183)

desire to know God; awe is the recoiling expressed in the awareness of one's marginality. But that awareness is brought about by the knowledge itself, and so the cycle goes round.⁶⁵

By maintaining both knowledge and love of God, Abraham became the exemplary Jew.⁶⁶

Maimonides makes this point repeatedly in the *Guide*, and especially in the MT. In short, Maimonides draws upon a vast knowledge of Bible, Midrash, Islamic sources, and Greek philosophy to subtly reinvent the greatest hero of rational monotheism.

So foundational did Maimonides find Abraham's enlightened refutation of astral worship that he decided to dedicate an entire chapter of the MT to it.⁶⁷ He also refers to this chapter in the *Guide*,⁶⁸ elaborating upon some of its finer philosophical points. Rambam's account in the MT begins with an unstated assumption: At first, humans revered the One God alone.⁶⁹ Then, during the days of Enosh, the sages of his generation began to worship the constellations. Noting the lofty position of stars and spheres,⁷⁰ humans concluded that God had appointed them divine viziers, intending humans to worship them alongside God "...just as a king desires that the servants who stand before him be honored." Eventually humanity forgot God altogether, listening to false prophets and erecting temples to the stars. So the corruption continued until the

⁶⁵Halbertal, Moshe, *trans.* Joel A. Linsider. *Maimonides: Life and Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, P. 199. Cf. Kramer, fn. 63

⁶⁶ The fact that Abraham preceded both Aristotle and the designation of "Jew" by over 1000 years would hardly have bothered Maimonides. For him, the knowledge of God, covenant, and revelation were cosmic events, existing on a higher order than ordinary historical time. See *Guide* 13.

⁶⁷ As noted above, Chapter one of הלכות עבודה זרה (Laws concerning Idolatry)

⁶⁸ Ch. 39

⁶⁹ As Twersky points out, Maimonides believed, contrary to modern scholarship, that "monotheism was the original state of belief and idolatry a corruption of it" (Kindle Location 605).

⁷⁰ This cosmological vocabulary betrays Maimonides' Greek "scientific" influences, which he received from both Aristotle and Plotinus — though he likely thought them the same person — by way of Islamic scholars. As David Gillis points out (p. 4), "Maimonides' universe has an Aristotelian superstructure and a Neo-platonic infrastructure." The word גלגלים (spheres) has special significance in Maimonides' cosmology, as it describes the hierarchical spheres of reality separating humanity from God. Gifted students can scend these rungs given adequate training and intellective ability.

entire world was filled with idolatry. Such is the state of the world until Abraham is born. Before too long, he upends the idolatrous world order and spreads the true knowledge of God. He therefore becomes the hero of the Jewish people and the perfect exemplar for ספר המדע (The book of Knowledge).

Rambam's Abraham is a unique synthesis of extant Jewish legends and Maimonidean philosophical innovations. Both the Midrash and the Qur'an — which Maimonides may have encountered⁷¹ — record similar accounts. I have placed the MT text alongside both one of its closest midrashic cousins, as well as a similar Qur'anic pericope.

Midrash - Beit HaMidrash 2:118	<i>Qur'an - Sura 6.74-80</i>	<i>Mishneh Torah - הלכות עבודה זרה Ch. 1</i>
<p>When Abraham was three years old, he went out of the cave and [observing the world] wondered in his heart: who created heaven and earth and me? All that day he prayed to the sun. In the evening, the sun set in the west and the moon rose in the east. Upon seeing the moon and the stars around it, he said: This one must have created heaven and earth and me — these stars must be the moon's princes and</p>	<p>And when Ibrahim said to his sire, Azar:⁷³ Do you take idols for gods? Surely I see you and your people in manifest error. And thus did We show Ibrahim the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and that he might be of those who are sure. So when the night over-shadowed him, he saw a star; said he: Is this my Lord? So when it set, he said: I do not love the setting ones. Then when he saw the moon rising, he said: Is this my Lord? So when it set, he said: If my Lord had not guided me I should certainly be of the erring people. Then when he saw the sun rising, he said: Is this my Lord? Is this the greatest? So when it set, he said: O my people! surely I am clear of what you set up (with Allah). Surely I have turned myself, being upright, wholly to Him Who originated the heavens and the</p>	<p>After Abraham was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering: "How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself." He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in aught. He was submerged in Ur of the Chaldees, among silly idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshiped idols, and he worshiped with them. But his mind was busily working and reflecting until he had attained the way of truth, apprehended the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, that He guides the celestial sphere and created everything, and that among all that exist, there is no god besides Him. He realized that men everywhere were in error, and that</p>

⁷¹ It was possible, if not common, for elite Jewish scholars to study the Qur'an in certain times and places. Maimonides demonstrates familiarity with its cadences in some of his writings. An account of physician and co-worker Ibn Abi Usaybi'a suggests that Maimonides memorized it! See Kraemer, *Kindle Locations* 167,1339, 2267.

⁷³ Azar, otherwise known as Terah, is one of the names for Abraham's father in Muslim tradition.

<p>courtiers. So all night long he stood in prayer to the moon. In the morning, the moon sank in the west and the sun rose in the east. Then he said: There is no might in either of these. There must be a higher Lord over them — to Him will I pray, and before Him will I prostrate myself.⁷²</p>	<p>earth, and I am not of the polytheists. And his people disputed with him. He said: Do you dispute with me respecting Allah? And He has guided me indeed; and I do not fear in any way those that you set up with Him, unless my Lord pleases; my Lord comprehends all things in His knowledge; will you not then mind?⁷⁴</p>	<p>what had occasioned their error was that they worshiped the stars and the images, so that the truth perished from their minds. Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator. Having attained this knowledge, he began to refute the inhabitants of Ur of the Chaldees...⁷⁵</p>
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In all of these accounts, Abraham reasons his way to God, rejecting the religion of his family. All of these accounts depict Abraham as a child or imply his precocity, conveying the sense that he is a savant. There is no evidence that Maimonides drew his influence directly from the Qur'an, but the striking similarity of these three accounts underscores the depth of cultural exchange possible in Muslim Al-Andalus (and earlier in the Middle East). Both the Midrash and the Qur'an seem informed by Greek notions of cosmic causality (i.e., the 'unmoved mover' of Aristotle) although Maimonides more plainly places the "scientific" language of the 'unmoved mover' in Abraham's mouth: "How is it possible for the sphere to continue to revolve without having anyone controlling it?" Maimonides' other innovations are subtle, yet significant: The first thing that stands out in his account is his emphasis on Abraham's intellectual abilities. In Hebrew, the root ע.ו.י appears seven times:

כיון שנגמל איתן זה, התחיל לשוטט בדעתו והוא קטן, ולחשוב ביום ובלילה, והיה תמיה: **היאך אפשר שיהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד, ולא יהיה לו מנהיג**; ומי יסבב אותו, לפי שאי אפשר שיסבב את עצמו. ולא היה לו לא מלמד ולא **מודיע** דבר, אלא מושקע באור כשדים בין עובדי עבודה זרה הטיפשים. **י** ואביו ואימו וכל העם עובדים עבודה זרה, והוא היה עובד עימהן. וליבו משוטט ומבין, עד שהשיג דרך האמת, והבין קו הצדק, **מדעתו הנכונה**; **וידע שיש שם אלוה אחד**, והוא מנהיג הגלגל, והוא ברא הכול, ואין בכל הנמצא אלוה חוץ ממנו. **וידע** שכל העם

⁷² Trans. William Braude, trans., *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, p. 31

⁷⁴ Trans. accessed via University of Michigan Library - <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/k/koran/koran-idx?type=DIV0&byte=190943>

⁷⁵ Twersky, trans., Kindle Location 1025

טועים, ודבר שגרם להם לטעות, זה שעובדים את הכוכבים ואת הצורות, עד שאבד האמת **מדעתם**; ובן ארבעים שנה, הכיר אברהם את בוראו. כיון שהכיר וידע, התחיל להשיב תשובות על בני אור כשדים...

Abraham teaches himself the first truth of the *Mishneh Torah*:⁷⁶ to know that there is one God ((ידע שיש שם אלוה אחד). This is exactly the phrasing Rambam chooses to begin ספר המצוות (The Book of Commandments). Abraham arrives at this correct knowledge (דעתו הנכונה), and makes it publicly known (מודיע) as a prophet would do. He even composes treatises (חיבר ספרים) on the subject. He also instructs his son Isaac in the way of this “great fundamental principle” (עיקר גדול),⁷⁷ and thus do his descendants continue the chain of transmission. This all comes as a corrective to the beginning of the *halakha*, in which Maimonides describes the rise of *false knowledge* (מודיע לכל אחד). Abraham teaches his students according to their intellectual capacity (דעתם הרעה), another characteristically Maimonidean attitude toward conveying and learning knowledge. All told, the Hebrew root ד.ע.י appears 23 times in this chapter. All the while Abraham rights the wrongs in the chain of theological transmission, overcoming his hostile, seemingly insurmountable circumstances to revive and transmit the *correct knowledge*.

As for Abraham’s superior דעה (intellect), there is some precedence in rabbinic literature. Although the Midrash and the Qur’an both imply Abraham’s independent reasoning, Maimonides states it outright. Other *midrashim* depict Abraham as a prescient autodidact, as well. For instance, in a well-known Midrash,⁷⁸ Abraham is likened to a traveler who sees a palace in flames. “Shall I assume,” he muses, “that this palace has no master?” So too, the Midrash posits, Abraham encounters a world in flames and maintains faith in God even so.

⁷⁶ See הלכות יסודי התורה (Foundational Laws of Torah) 1.1

⁷⁷ Note that the principle of knowing the one God - “ידע שיש שם אלוה אחד” - is formulated identically to its first appearance as the first commandment in ספר המצוות (the book of commandments).

⁷⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 39.1

Abraham reasons through analogy: Surely a palace has a steward; of course the world has a God!

In a second Midrash, the 2nd century sage Shimon Bar Yohai reveals the source of Abraham's knowledge.⁷⁹

R. Shimon bar Yohai said: Our father Abraham — his own father did not teach him, nor did he have a master to teach him. From whom, then, did Abraham learn Torah? It was the Holy One who had provided him with kidneys that were like two pitchers overflowing and filling him with Torah and wisdom all through the night [as it is written (Psalms 16.7: “I bless the ETERNAL, who has guided me; my kidneys/conscience admonished me all the night”)]

אמר ר' שמעון: אב לא למדו ורב לא היה לו, ומהיכן למד את התורה? אלא זימן לו הקדוש ברוך הוא שתי כליותיו כמין שני רבנים, והיו נובעות ומלמדות אותו תורה וחכמה, הה"ד (תהלים טז): אברך את ה', אשר יעצני, אף לילות יסרוני כליותי. (שם א)

Given Maimonides' mastery of the sources, it is impossible to deny the influence various *midrashim* must have held in shaping his understanding of this history. As Twersky points out, “Maimonides, who maintained a lifelong interest in Midrash, its hermeneutic problematics as well as its ideational potential, freely and effectively utilized non-halakic materials throughout the *Mishneh Torah*.⁸⁰ Yet, Maimonides' account differs in another subtle yet significant way: he removes God's actions from the story. In his account, the biblical scene of God's commissioning of Abraham is gone. Gone as well is the call of *lekh-lekha*. Absent is the covenant that God makes with him; the only biblical prooftext in the chapter is a scene in which Abraham proclaims the name of the ETERNAL.⁸¹ Abraham takes it upon himself to repudiate the paganism around him and educates the residents of Haran — all of his own volition. It is an unusual account, for God occupies a central yet distinctly *passive* role in the proceedings. Instead of God, *Abraham* moves history along. Through his actions alone does God return to the world. Only in the last

⁷⁹ *Genesis Rabbah* 61.16; 91.3. Translation William Braude, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, p. 31

⁸⁰ From *Introduction to the code*, p. 143; as cited in Gillis, p. 9

⁸¹ *Genesis* 21.33

few lines of the chapter, when the enlightened patriarchs die off, and Israel returns to its idolatrous ways in Egyptian slavery, does God re-enter history. God does so by “appointing Moses our Teacher as chief of the prophets and sending him forth.” (עשה משה רבינו רבן של כל”ה). The contrast between Abraham’s autonomous rise to leadership and Moses’ divine commissioning emphasizes the singularity of Abraham, at least in this particular chapter of the MT.

Maimonides argued that God has no body⁸² — not a universal assumption in 12th century Judaism.⁸³ In fact, argued Maimonides, it is improper and inaccurate to describe God as one describes a man. God does not ‘act’ in the human sense. God does not “speak,” strictly speaking. So when Torah depicts God as a character alongside other human characters, it does so allegorically. Anthropomorphism and anthropopathism help Torah speak “in the language of humanity.”⁸⁴ By omitting the call of *lech-lecha*, Maimonides interprets by implication: Abraham hears the ‘call’ via contemplation and discernment, not through conversation. This subtle revision of the biblical narrative recalls the story of Yehuda HaNasi and Rambam’s history of halakhic transmission: both solidly continuous with rabbinic tradition, yet subtly expansive. By deftly integrating a variety of Jewish sources with his principles of Greek philosophy,

⁸² Kraemer (Kindle Location 6945) describes Maimonides’s views as follows: “People believe that God is the same as they, only greater and more splendid and not of flesh and blood. The term in Hebrew for shape and configuration, well known to the common people, is to’ar, as beautiful of form (to’ar) in Gen 39:6. But image (selem) denotes the natural form, what comprises the essence and true reality of the thing. In man, his natural form is what gives him intellectual apprehension. **Maimonides concluded that it was owing to the divine intellect in human beings that they are said to be created in the image of God and in his likeness, not that God is corporeal and has a shape.** Human beings are the only creatures in the cosmos who share a quality with God, namely, reason. Humanity is like God in this most important sense.”

⁸³ Some Jewish mystics of the 12th century who believed in *Shi’ur Qomah*, the measurement of God’s body. For more on Maimonides’ clash with this school of thought see Kraemer, Kindle Location 5722.

⁸⁴ Cf. הלכות יסודי התורה (Foundational Laws of Torah) 1.9

Maimonides gives us an Abraham who embodies his most prized attributes as a philosopher and lover of God.

Prophetic Knowledge

Like Maimonides himself, his depictions of Judaism's greatest sages defy neat categorization. When it comes to Abraham and Yehuda HaNasi, he relies on various ancient texts, filling out their personalities as suits his agenda. For one familiar with accounts of these two towering figures in scripture and Midrash, his own portrayals read like meticulously-composed historical fiction, or even contemporary "fan fiction." That is, he subtly but meaningfully combines and expands them. At first glance his stories square nicely with established biblical and post-biblical sources: The Maimonidean Abraham smashes his father's idols and extends hospitality to visitors; the Maimonidean Yehuda HaNasi codifies the Mishnah. Yet, these familiar details obscure Rambam's subtle yet radical revisions: In the MT, each hero becomes a steward of sacred knowledge, without whose help the knowledge of God might be lost, and the world might fall again into corruption. Therefore, according to Maimonides, *preservation* and *transmission* of correct knowledge is as important as the knowledge itself. Hence, he depicts Yehuda HaNasi as a public lecturer and Abraham as an itinerant proselytizer:

Abraham	Yehuda HaNasi
<p>והתחיל לעמוד ולקרות בקול גדול לכל העם, ולהודיעם שיש אלוה אחד לכל העולם, ולו ראוי לעבוד. והיה מהלך וקורא ומקבץ העם מעיר לעיר ומממלכה לממלכה, עד שהגיע לארץ כנען, והוא קורא, שנאמר "ויקרא שם--בשם ה', אל עולם" ⁸⁵ (בראשית כא.לג).</p> <p>[Abraham] began to call loudly to all people and make it known to them that there is one God in the entire world, and it is fitting to serve Him. He would go about and call to the people, gathering them in city after city and country after country, until he came to the land of Canaan - proclaiming [God's existence] - as [Genesis 21:33] states: "And he called there in the name of the ETERNAL, the everlasting God."</p>	<p>וישב כל ימיו הוא ובית דינו, ולימד המשנה ברבים.⁸⁶</p> <p>[After composing the Mishnah] Yehuda HaNasi and his court sat for all of their days, teaching it in public.</p>

Abraham and Yehuda HaNasi are the perfect messengers for their times. Abraham, of course, is already known as a prophet in the Bible.⁸⁷ Maimonides highlights the prophetic dimension of Abraham's role elsewhere in the MT,⁸⁸ as well as in the *Guide*. Commenting on Abraham's correct knowledge of God's unity, he asserts, "It was Abraham our father who began to proclaim in public [the] opinion to which speculation had led him."⁸⁹ In both the MT and the *Guide*, Maimonides repeatedly invokes Genesis 18.19, from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this story "God treats Abraham as a prophet, disclosing His plans to him, and Abraham, like one of the prophets of Israel, eloquently demands justice from God and pleads for mercy."⁹⁰ Interestingly, the Abraham of הלכות עבודה זרה (Laws concerning Idolatry) is not called "prophet." He proselytizes of his own volition, with no mention of revelation. That even further underscores his radical self-motivation, as we saw above. On the other hand, Maimonides' Abraham also perfectly matches his own account of prophecy in הלכות יסודי התורה (Foundational Laws of

⁸⁵ From הלכות עבודה זרה (Laws concerning Idolatry) ch. 1

⁸⁶ In the הקדמה (Introduction), 15

⁸⁷ Genesis 20.7

⁸⁸ In הלכות יסודי התורה (Foundational Laws of Torah) 7.2, Maimonides details the prophetic visions and bodily indications of prophecy. Abraham is his first scriptural example.

⁸⁹ *Guide* 13 - trans Twersky, Kindle location 3614

⁹⁰ Berlin, Adele, Marc Zvi. Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane. *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 37

Torah). Unsurprisingly, the prophet's superior knowledge and wisdom feature prominently in Maimonides' description. Note in particular the phrase דעה נכונה (correct knowledge) elsewhere attributed to Abraham:

מיסודי הדת, לידע שהאל מנבא את בני האדם; ואין הנבואה חלה אלא על חכם גדול בחכמה, גיבור במידותיו, ולא יהיה יצרו מתגבר עליו בדבר בעולם אלא הוא מתגבר בדעתו על יצרו תמיד, **בעל דעה רחבה נכונה** עד מאוד⁹¹

One of the foundations of the religion is to know that the Deity prophesies to humankind; and the prophecy only comes to one who is great in wisdom, mighty in character; one whose passions do not overcome in any manner whatever. Rather, through his intellect he overcomes his passions constantly, a **master of correct and exceedingly broad knowledge**.

The rarefied combination of intellectual and moral perfection applies perfectly to the hagiographical depictions of Abraham and Yehuda HaNasi we have seen thus far. He mentions neither figure in this *halakha*, but the similarities resound. This is so even linguistically: Maimonides invokes the phrase עד מאד — “exceedingly” — to illustrate the height of virtue, as he did for Abraham.

Yehuda HaNasi, who lived hundreds of years after the classical prophets, was certainly not a prophet. Yet, commenting on Rambam's extended discussion of the sage in the *Introduction to the Mishnah*, scholar Howard Kreisel observes that Maimonides treats him:

...as a person whose intellectual and moral perfection was exceeded only by that of Moses. In ascribing him all the qualifications for prophecy, Maimonides essentially indicates that while there were no postbiblical *public* prophets, those possessing prophetic perfection continued to arise on the stage of history. They functioned as great sages. R. Judah the Prince is the model of such a sage. The product of his activity had a singular impact in both preserving and adapting the Law to his period. More than any other postbiblical figure, he served as the model for Maimonides' own activity.⁹²

Transmitting God's teaching in the public domain is one of the central acts of prophecy. In each age, the prophet finds himself opposing the corruptive influence of history. Trapped between an

⁹¹ In הלכות יסודי התורה (Foundational Laws of Torah) 7.1. Emphasis added.

⁹² Kreisel, Howard T. *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal*. Albany: State University of New York, 1999, p. 27

obdurate people and a livid God, the prophet is frequently unpopular, if not reviled. And yet, history vindicates him, recalling him as a visionary and innovator; a moral voice in preservation of the correct knowledge of God. Maimonides was aware of the controversy that awaited him upon publishing the MT. He knew that some would view his work unfavorably, and so he likely sympathized with the biblical prophets. He did not think of Yehuda haNasi as not a prophet in the literal sense. Yet, his imagination moved him to emulate the holy rabbi's bold leadership: a willingness to disrupt the status quo in order to protect knowledge of God. Imbuing his imagined Yehuda HaNasi with the central attributes of prophecy is a particular extension of his casting himself in the mold of the third-century sage: it bolsters his portrait of a continuous Jewish textual history, unbroken on account of the prescient, paradigm-shifting innovators who saved it from oblivion.

Conclusion

In order to best preserve that knowledge of God, Maimonides made some fairly audacious decisions. When he set out to write the *Mishneh Torah* — the most time-consuming project of his life — he knew that he was wading into controversial waters. He must have steeled himself by looking to his intellectual forebears, in whose stead he casts himself. The paradigm shifts of Abraham and YeHuda HaNasi were chaotic and terrifying, yet pregnant with redemptive potential. Maimonides labored to further that mission. Through courage and visionary leadership, he believed, the Jews could become “great sages, knowing the hidden matters, apprehending the knowledge of their Creator...”⁹³ Thus would peace reign; thus would the whole world world

⁹³ From הלכות מלכים ומלחמות (Laws of Kings and Wars) 12.5

come to know God. Maimonides endowed the MT with a scope as tiny as the fulfilment of a particular *mitzvah*, and as cosmic as the messianic redemption.

As the *Mishneh Torah* begins, Maimonides laments alongside the prophet:

“The wisdom of our sages has been lost,
and the understanding of our discerning ones has disappeared.”⁹⁴

Yet, in concluding, he invokes the prophet’s corrective vision:

“The world will be filled with knowledge of the ETERNAL,
as the waters cover the sea.”

⁹⁴ Cf. Isaiah 29.14

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Primary Sources: Abraham (Appendix A)

- Avodah Zarah Ch. 1: text selections

- Halacha One

- Errant of the people descending to idolatry

... כיון שעלה דבר זה על ליבם, התחילו לבנות לכוכבים היכלות, ולהקריב להם קרבנות, ולשבחם ולפארם בדברים, ולהשתחוות למולן--כדי להשיג רצון הבורא, בדעתם הרעה. וזה, היה עיקר עבודה זרה.

וכך הם אומרים עובדיהם עיקרה, לא שהם אומרים שאין שם אלוה אלא כוכב זה. הוא שירמיהו אומר "מי לא ייראך מלך הגויים, כי לך יאתה . . ." (ירמיהו י"ז--ח) כלומר, הכול יודעין שאתה הוא האל לבדך; אבל טעותם וכסילותם, שמדמין שזה ההבל רצונך הוא.

- Halacha Two

- Abraham is born, unique among all peoples

והחכמים שהיו בהן כגון הכומריין וכיוצא בהן, מדמין שאין שם אלוה אלא הכוכבים והגלגלים שנעשו הצורות האלו בגללן ולדמותן. אבל צור העולמים, לא היה שם מכירו ולא יודעו, אלא יחידים בעולם, כגון חנוך ומתושלח ונוח ושם ועבר. ועל דרך זו, היה העולם מתגלגל והולך, עד שנולד עמודו של עולם, שהוא אברהם אבינו עליו השלום.

- Halacha Three

- Mighty Abraham reasons his way to God, using Aristotle's unmoved mover!

כיון שנגמל איתן זה, התחיל לשוטט בדעתו והוא קטן, ולחשוב ביום ובלילה, והיה תמיה: **היאך אפשר שיהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד, ולא יהיה לו מנהיג**; ומי יסבב אותו, לפי שאי אפשר שיסבב את עצמו. ולא היה לו לא מלמד ולא מודיע דבר, אלא מושקע באור כשדים בין עובדי עבודה זרה הטיפשים. י ואביו ואימו וכל העם עובדים עבודה זרה, והוא היה עובד עימהן. וליבו משוטט ומבין, עד שהשיג דרך האמת, והבין קו הצדק, **מדעתו הנכונה**; וידע שיש שם אלוה אחד, והוא מנהיג הגלגל, והוא ברא הכול, ואין בכל הנמצא אלוה חוץ ממנו. וידע שכל העם טועים, ודבר שגרם להם לטעות, זה שעובדים את הכוכבים ואת הצורות, עד שאבד האמת **מדעתם**; ובן ארבעים שנה, הכיר אברהם את בוראו. כיון שהכיר וידע, התחיל להשיב תשובות על בני אור כשדים...

... והחכמים שהיו בהן כגון הכומריין וכיוצא בהן, מדמין שאין שם אלוה אלא הכוכבים והגלגלים שנעשו הצורות האלו בגללן ולדמותן. אבל צור העולמים, לא היה שם מכירו ולא יודעו, אלא יחידים בעולם, כגון חנוך ומתושלח ונוח ושם ועבר. ועל דרך זו, היה העולם מתגלגל והולך, עד שנולד עמודו של עולם, שהוא אברהם אבינו עליו השלום. כיון שנגמל איתן זה, התחיל לשוטט בדעתו והוא קטן, ולחשוב ביום ובלילה, והיה תמיה: **היאך אפשר שיהיה הגלגל הזה נוהג תמיד, ולא יהיה לו מנהיג**; ומי יסבב אותו, לפי שאי אפשר שיסבב את עצמו. ולא היה לו לא מלמד ולא מודיע דבר, אלא מושקע באור כשדים בין עובדי עבודה זרה הטיפשים. ואביו ואימו וכל העם עובדים עבודה זרה, והוא היה עובד עימהן. וליבו משוטט ומבין, עד שהשיג דרך האמת, והבין קו הצדק, **מדעתו הנכונה**; וידע שיש שם אלוה אחד, והוא מנהיג הגלגל, והוא ברא הכול, ואין בכל הנמצא אלוה חוץ ממנו. וידע שכל העם טועים, ודבר שגרם להם לטעות, זה שעובדים את הכוכבים ואת הצורות, עד שאבד האמת **מדעתם**; ובן ארבעים שנה, הכיר אברהם את בוראו... כיון שהכיר וידע, התחיל להשיב תשובות על בני אור כשדים ולערך דין עימהם, ולומר שאין זו דרך האמת, שאתם הולכים בה. ושיבר הצלמים, והתחיל להודיע לעם, שאין ראוי לעבוד אלא לאלוה העולם, ולו ראוי להשתחוות ולהקריב ולנסך--כדי שיכירוהו כל הברואים הבאים; וראוי לאבד ולשבר כל הצורות, כדי שלא יטעו בהן כל העם, כמו אלו שהן מדמין, שאין שם אלוה אלא אלו.

- Further MT Sources on Abraham's VIRTUES

- Hilchot de'ot 6.6, Abraham's forgiveness

ז [1] כשיחטא איש לאיש--לא ישטמנו וישתוק, כמו שנאמר ברשעים "ולא דיבר אבשלום עם אמנון, למרע ועד טוב: כי שנא אבשלום, את אמנון" (שמואל ב יג, כב); אלא מצוה עליו להודיעו ולומר לו, למה עשית לי כך וכך ולמה חטאת לי בדבר פלוני: שנאמר "הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך, ולא תישא עליו חטא" (ויקרא יט, יז). ואם חזר וביקש ממנו למחול לו, צריך שימחול; ולא יהא המוחל אכזרי, שנאמר "ויתפלל אברהם, אל האלוהים" (בראשית כ, יז).

When a man sins against another, the injured party should not hate the offender and keep silent, as it is said concerning the wicked, "And Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor evil, for Absalom hated Amnon" (11 Sam. 13:22). But it is his duty to inform the offender and say to him "Why did you do this to me? Why did you sin against me in this matter?" And thus it is said, "You shall surely rebuke your neighbor" (Lev. 19:17). If the offender repents

and pleads for forgiveness, he should be forgiven. The forgiver should not be obdurate, as it is said, "And Abraham prayed unto God (for Abimelech) " (Gen. 20:17).

A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies) (Kindle Locations 858-861). Kindle Edition.

- **Hilchot Teshuvah 10**, Abraham the exemplar of piety and purpose, serving God only out of love without any external compulsion

ד ומעלה זו היא מעלה גדולה עד מאוד, ואין כל חכם זוכה לה. והיא מעלת אברהם אבינו, שקראו הקדוש ברוך הוא אוהבו לפי שלא עבד אלא מאהבה. והיא המעלה שציוונו בה הקדוש ברוך הוא על ידי משה רבנו, שנאמר "ואהבת, את ה' אלוהיך, בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך, ובכל מאודך" (דברים ו.ה). ובזמן שיאהב את ה' אהבה הראויה, מיד יעשה כל המצוות מאהבה.

Whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with the study of the Law and the fulfillment of commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits-such fits-such a man does what is truly right because it is truly right, and ultimately, happiness comes to him as a result of his conduct. This standard is indeed a very high one; not every sage attained it. It was the standard of the patriarch Abraham whom God called His lover, because he served only out of love. It is the standard which God, through Moses, bids us achieve, as it is said, "And you shall love the Lord your God" (Deut. 6:5). When one loves God with the right love, he will straightway observe all the commandments out of love.

A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies) (Kindle Locations 1183-1188). Kindle Edition.

- **Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 7.9** - All divine names used around Abraham are holy; those used around Lot are profane

ט כל השמות האמורות באברהם, קודש; אף זה שנאמר "אדוניי, אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך" (בראשית יח.ג), הרי הוא קודש. כל השמות האמורות בלוט--חול, חוץ מזה: "אל נא, אדוניי. הנה נא מצא עבדך חן" (בראשית יח.יט). כל השמות האמורות בגבעת בנימין, קודש. כל השמות האמורות במיכה, חול. כל השמות האמורות בנבות, קודש.

- **Hilchot De'ot 1.7** - Abraham keeping God's ways and teaching them to his children

יג ולפי שהשמות האלו שנקרא בהן היוצר, הן הדרך הבינונית שאנו חייבין ללכת בה, נקראת דרך זו, דרך ה'. והיא שלימדה אברהם אבינו (לבניו, שנאמר "כי ידעתיו, למען אשר יצווה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו, ושמרו דרך ה', לעשות צדקה ומשפט" (בראשית יח.יט). וההולך בדרך זו, מביא טובה וברכה לעצמו, שנאמר "למען, הביא ה' על אברהם, את אשר דיבר, עליו" (בראשית יח.יט).

How shall a man train himself in these dispositions, so that they become ingrained? Let him practice again and again the actions prompted by those dispositions which are the mean between the extremes, and repeat them continually till they become easy and are no longer irksome to him, and so the corresponding dispositions will become a fixed part of his character. **And as the Creator is called by these attributes, which constitute the middle path in which we are to walk, this path is called the Way of God and this is what the patriarch Abraham taught his children,** as it is said "For I love him, because he will charge his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord" (Gen. 18:19). Whoever walks in this way secures for himself happiness and blessing, as the text continues, "In order that the Lord might bring upon Abraham that which He spoke concerning him" (ibid. 18:19).

A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies) (Kindle Locations 745-750).

- **Hilchot Matanot L'Aniyyim 10.1**, Abraham as the source of righteousness

א חייבין אנו להיזהר במצוות צדקה, יתר מכל מצוות עשה--שהצדקה סימן לצדיקי זרע אברהם אבינו, שנאמר "כי ידעתיו, למען אשר יצווה . . ." (בראשית יח.יט). ואין כיסא ישראל מתכונן ודת האמת עומדת אלא בצדקה, שנאמר "בצדקה, תיכונני" (ישעיהו נד.יד); ואין ישראל נגאלין אלא בזכות הצדקה, שנאמר "ציון, במשפט תיפדה; ושביה, בצדקה" (ישעיהו א.כז).

We are obligated to be more scrupulous in fulfilling the commandment of charity* than any other positive commandment because charity is the sign of the righteous man, the seed of Abraham our Father, as it is said,

"For I know him, that he will command his children ... to do righteousness" (Gen. 18:19). The throne of Israel is established and the religion of truth is upheld only through charity, as it is said, "In righteousness shall you be established" (Is. 54:14). Israel is redeemed only through charity, as it is written, "Zion shall be redeemed with judgment and they that return of her with righteousness" (ibid. 1:27).

A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies) (Kindle Locations 1798-1801).

- **Hilchot Avel 14.2**, Abraham's *hesed* in hospitality

ג [ב] שכר הליווי מרובה מן הכול; והוא החוק שחקקו אברהם אבינו ודרך החסד שנהג בה--מאכיל עוברי דרכים, ומשקה אותן, ומלווה אותן. וגדולה הכנסת אורחים מהקבלת פני שכניה, שנאמר "וירא, והנה שלושה אנשים . . ." (בראשית יח.ב). וליוויים, יותר מהכנסתן; אמרו חכמים כל שאינו מלווה, כאילו שופך דמים.

The reward for escorting strangers is greater than the reward for all the other commandments. It is a practice which Abraham our Father instituted, and the act of kindness which he exercised. He gave wayfarers food to eat and water to drink and escorted them. Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than receiving the Divine Presence, as it is said: "And he looked, and, lo, three men stood over against him, and when he saw them, he ran to meet them" (Gen. 18:2). But escorting guests is even greater than according them hospitality. Said the rabbis: "Whoever does not accompany guests is as though he would shed blood" (Sotah 46b).

A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies) (Kindle Locations 2793-2796).

- **Further MT Sources on Abraham**

- **Abraham as prophet**, sharing commonalities of bodily effects with other prophets. הלכות יסודי התורה ז.ב.

ה וכולן, כשמתנבאין, אבריהן מזדעזעין וכוח הגוף כושל, ועשתונותיהם מיטרפות ותישאיר הדעה פנויה להבין מה שתראה: כמו שנאמר באברהם, "והנה אימה חשיכה גדולה, נופלת עליו" (בראשית טו.יב); וכמו שנאמר בדניאל, "והודי, נהפך עליי למשחית, ולא עצרתי, כוח" (דניאל י.ח).

- Explicitly framing **Abraham's Aristotelian Philosophy & Prophecy** - , *Guide* 13:

One's saying: God "was" before He created the world-where the word "was" is indicative of time-and similarly all the thoughts that are carried along in the mind regarding the infinite duration of His existence before the creation of the world, are all of them due to a supposition regarding time or to an imagining of time and not due to the true reality of time. For time is undoubtedly an accident. According to its it is one of the created accidents, as are blackness and whiteness. And though it does not belong to the species cies of quality, it is nevertheless, generally stated, an accident necessarily sarily following upon motion, as is **made clear to whoever has understood stood the discourse of Aristotle** on the elucidation of time and on the true reality of its existence... This is one of the opinions. And it is undoubtedly a basis of the Law of Moses our Teacher. And it is second to the basis that is the belief in the unity [of God]. Nothing other than this should come to your mind. **It was Abraham our Father who began to proclaim in public this opinion to which speculation had led him. For this reason he made his proclamation "in the name of the Lord, God of the world" (Gen. 21:33); he had also explicitly stated this opinion in saying: "Maker of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:22).**

A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies) (Kindle Locations 3627-3628). Kindle Edition.

- A lengthy account of **Abraham's theological clashes with the pagans** - *Guide* 29:

It is well known that Abraham our Father was brought up in the religious community of the **Sabians**⁹⁵ whose doctrine it is that there is no Deity but the stars. When I shall have made known to you in this chapter **their books, translated into Arabic, which are in our hands today**, and their ancient chronicles and I shall have revealed to you through them their doctrine and histories, it will become clear to you from this that they explicitly asserted that the stars are the deity and that the sun is the greatest deity. They also said that the rest of the seven stars are deities, but that the two luminaries are the greatest est of them. You will find that they explicitly say that the sun governs the upper and the lower world. They say it in these very terms. And you will find that they mention in those books and those chronicles cles the story of Abraham our Father, and they say literally what follows: lows: When, who was brought up in Kutha, disagreed with the community and asserted that there was an agent other than the sun, various arguments were brought forward against him...

. A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies) (Kindle Locations 4206-4212).

- Everyone who adopts Judaism is **considered a descendent of Abraham** (from *Letter to Ovadia the Ger*)

Whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham our Father, peace be with him. These men are Abraham's household, and he it is who converted them to righteousness. In the same way as he converted his contemporaries through his words and teaching, he converts future generations through the testament ment he left to his children and household after him. **Thus Abraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Judaism. Therefore you shall pray, "Our God" and "God of our fathers," because Abraham, peace be with him, is your father.** And you shall pray, "You who have taken for his own our fathers," for the land has been given to Abraham, as it is said, "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give to you" (Gen. 13:17).

A Maimonides Reader (Library of Jewish Studies) (Kindle Locations 6363-6366).

⁹⁵ The term Rambam uses to refer to pagans (Twersky)

Primary Sources: Yehuda HaNasi (Appendix B)

- From the Introduction: side-by-side of Yehuda HaNasi and Maimonides' self-described role

Yehuda HaNasi/Mishnah (Hebrew)	Maimonides/MT (Hebrew)
<p>רבנו הקדוש חיבר המשנה. מימות משה ועד רבנו הקדוש, לא חיברו חיבור שמלמדין אותו ברבים בתורה שבעל פה; אלא בכל דור ודור, ראש בית דין או נביא שיהיה באותו הדור, כותב לעצמו זיכרון בשמועות ששמע מרבתי, והוא מלמד על פה ברבים. וכן כל אחד ואחד כותב לעצמו כפי כוחו, מביאור התורה ומהלכותיה כמו ששמע, ומדברים שנתחדשו בכל דור ודור, בדינים שלא למדום מפי השמועה אלא במידה משלוש עשרה מידות והסכימו עליהן בית דין הגדול. וכן היה הדבר תמיד, עד רבנו הקדוש.</p> <p>והוא קיבץ כל השמועות וכל הדינים וכל הביאורים והפירושים ששמעו ממשנה רבנו, ושלמדו בית דין של כל דור ודור, בכל התורה כולה; וחיבר מהכול ספר המשנה. ושינו ברבים, ונגלה לכל ישראל; וכתבוהו כולם, וריבצו בכל מקום, כדי שלא תשתכח תורה שבעל פה מישראל.</p> <p>ולמה עשה רבנו הקדוש כך, ולא הניח הדבר כמות שהיה--לפי שראה שהתלמידים מתמעטים והולכים, והצרות מתחדשות ובאות, וממלכת הרשעה פושטת בעולם ומתגברת, וישראל מתגלגלים והולכים לקצוות; חיבר חיבור אחד להיות ביד כולם, כדי שילמדוהו במהרה ולא יישכח; וישב כל ימיו הוא ובית דינו, ולימד המשנה ברבים.</p>	<p>ובזמן הזה תכפו צרות יתרות, ודחקה שעה את הכול, ואבדה חכמת חכמינו, ובינת נבוינו נסתתרה; לפיכך אותן הפירושים והתשובות וההלכות שחיברו הגאונים, וראו שהם דברים מבוארים, נתקשו בימינו, ואין מבין ענייניהם כראוי אלא מעט במספר. ואין צריך לומר, התלמוד עצמו: הבבלי, והירושלמי, וספרא, וספרי, והתוספתות -- שהן צריכין דעת רחבה ונפש חכמה וזמן ארוך, ואחר כך ייוודע מהן הדרך הנכונה בדברים האסורים והמותרין ושאר דיני תורה היאך היא.</p> <p>ומפני זה נערת חוצני, אני משה בירבי מיימון הספרדי, ונשענתי על הצור ברוך הוא, ובינתי בכל אלו הספרים; וראיתי לחבר דברים המתבררים מכל אלו החיבורין, בעניין האסור והמותר והטמא והטהור עם שאר דיני תורה: כולן בלשון ברורה ודרך קצרה, עד שתהא תורה שבעל פה כולה סדורה בפי הכול--בלא קושיה ולא פירוק, ולא זה אומר בכה וזה אומר בכה, אלא דברים ברורים קרובים נכונים, על פי המשפט אשר יתבאר מכל אלו החיבורין והפירושים הנמצאים מימות רבנו הקדוש ועד עכשיו.</p> <p>עד שיהיו כל הדינים גלויין לקטן ולגדול בדין כל מצוה ומצוה, ובדין כל הדברים שתיקנו חכמים ונביאים: כללו של דבר, כדי שלא יהא אדם צריך לחיבור אחר בעולם בדין מדיני ישראל; אלא יהיה חיבור זה מקבץ לתורה שבעל פה כולה, עם התקנות והמנהגות והגזירות שנעשו מימות משה רבנו ועד חיבור התלמוד, וכמו שפירשו לנו הגאונים בכל חיבוריהן, שחיברו אחר התלמוד.</p>

- Transmission of Torah and T. Yehuda HaNasi's reasons for legal innovation -

יב Halacha - הקדמה לספר המדע - Introduction

יב רבנו הקדוש חיבר המשנה. ומימות משה ועד רבנו הקדוש, לא חיברו חיבור שמלמדין אותו ברבים בתורה שבעל פה; אלא בכל דור ודור, ראש בית דין או נביא שיהיה באותו הדור, כותב לעצמו זיכרון בשמועות ששמע מרבתי, והוא מלמד על פה ברבים.

יג וכן כל אחד ואחד כותב לעצמו כפי כוחו, מביאור התורה ומהלכותיה כמו ששמע, ומדברים שנתחדשו בכל דור ודור, בדינים שלא למדום מפי השמועה אלא במידה משלוש עשרה מידות והסכימו עליהן בית דין הגדול. וכן היה הדבר תמיד, עד רבנו הקדוש.

יד והוא קיבץ כל השמועות וכל הדינים וכל הביאורים והפירושים ששמעו ממשנה רבנו, ושלמדו בית דין של כל דור ודור, בכל התורה כולה; וחיבר מהכול ספר המשנה. ושינו ברבים, ונגלה לכל ישראל; וכתבוהו כולם, וריבצו בכל מקום, **כדי שלא תשתכח תורה שבעל פה מישראל**.

טו ולמה עשה רבנו הקדוש כך, ולא הניח הדבר כמות שהיה--לפי שראה **שהתלמידים מתמעטים והולכים, והצרות מתחדשות ובאות, וממלכת הרשעה פושטת בעולם ומתגברת, וישראל מתגלגלים והולכים לקצוות**; חיבר חיבור אחד להיות ביד כולם, **כדי שילמדוהו במהרה ולא יישכח**; וישב כל ימיו הוא ובית דינו, ולימד המשנה ברבים.

● Cf. Maimonides' reasons for legal innovation - Introduction - הקדמה לספר המדע

מ - מב Halachot

מ ובזמן הזה תכפו צרות יתרות, ודחקה שעה את הכול, ואבדה חכמת חכמינו, ובינת נבוינו נסתתרה; לפיכך אותן הפירושים והתשובות וההלכות שחיברו הגאונים, וראו שהם דברים מבוארים, נתקשו בימינו, ואין מבין ענייניהם כראוי אלא מעט במספר. ואין צריך לומר, התלמוד עצמו: הבבלי, והירושלמי, וספרא, וספרי, והתוספות--שהן צריכין דעת רחבה ונפש חכמה וזמן ארוך, ואחר כך ייוודע מהן הדרך הנכונה בדברים האסורין והמותרין ושאר דיני תורה היאך היא.

מא ומפני זה נעתי חוצני, אני משה בירבי מיימון הספרדי, ונשענתי על הצור ברוך הוא, ובינתי בכל אלו הספרים; וראיתי לחבר דברים המתבררים מכל אלו החיבורים, בעניין האסור והמותר והטמא והטהור עם שאר דיני תורה: כולן בלשון ברורה ודרך קצרה, עד שתהא תורה שבעל פה כולה סדורה בפי הכול--בלא קושיה ולא פירוק, ולא זה אומר בכה וזה אומר בכה, אלא דברים ברורים קרובים נכונים, על פי המשפט אשר יתבאר מכל אלו החיבורים והפירושים הנמצאים מימות רבנו הקדוש ועד עכשיו.

מב עד שיהיו כל הדינים גלויין לקטן ולגדול בדין כל מצוה ומצוה, ובדין כל הדברים שתיקנו חכמים ונביאים: כללו של דבר, כדי שלא יהא אדם צריך לחיבור אחר בעולם בדין מדיני ישראל; אלא יהיה חיבור זה מקבץ לתורה שבעל פה כולה, עם התקנות והמנהגות והגזירות שנעשו מימות משה רבנו ועד חיבור התלמוד, וכמו שפירשו לנו הגאונים בכל חיבוריהן, שחיברו אחר התלמוד. לפיכך קראתי שם חיבור זה משנה תורה--לפי שאדם קורא תורה שבכתב תחילה, ואחר כך קורא בזה, ויודע ממנו תורה שבעל פה כולה, ואינו צריך לקרות ספר אחר ביניהם.

● Sparseness of speech- הלכות דעות ב.ח

ח - ד] לעולם ירבה אדם בשיחה, ולא ידבר אלא בדבר חכמה או בדברים שהוא צריך להן לחיי גופו. אמרו על רב תלמיד רבנו הקדוש, שלא שח שיחה בטילה כל ימיו--וזהו היא שיחת רוב כל אדם. ואפילו בצורכי הגוף, לא ירבה אדם דברים. ועל זה ציוו חכמים ואמרו, כל המרבה דברים, מביא חטא; ואמרו לא מצאתי לגוף טוב, אלא שתיקה.

● Piety and Discipline with Tefillin - הלכות תפילין ד.כה

כה קדושת תפילין, קדושה גדולה היא: שכל זמן שתפילין על ראשו של אדם, ועל זרועו--הוא עניו וירא, ואינו נמשך בשחוק ובשיחה בטילה, ואינו מהרהר במחשבות רעות, אלא מפנה ליבו לדברי האמת והצדק. לפיכך צריך אדם להשתדל להיותן עליו, כל היום -- שמצותן, כך היא. אמרו עליו על רב תלמיד רבנו הקדוש, שכל ימיו לא ראוהו שהלך ארבע אמות בלא תורה, או בלא ציצית, או בלא תפילין.

● No excessive mourning, even for the pious - הלכות אבל יג.יא-יב

יא וכן אין מספידין יתר על שנים עשר חודש--אין לנו בחכמים גדול מרבנו הקדוש, ושנים עשר חודש בלבד נספד. וכן חכם שבאה שמעונו לאחר שנים עשר חודש, אין סופדין אותו.

יב [יא] אל יתקשה אדם על מתו יתר מדי--שנאמר "אל תבכו למת, ואל תנודו לו" (ירמיהו כב.י), כלומר יתר מדי: שזה הוא מנהגו של עולם; והמצער עצמו על מנהג העולם, הרי זה טיפש. אלא כיצד יעשה--שלושה לבכי, שבעה להספד, שלושים יום לתספורת ולשאר החמישה.

● Story One about Terumah - הלכות איסורי ביאה כ.יד-טו

יד [יג] מי שבא בזמן הזה, ואמר כוהן אני--אינו נאמן, ואין מעלין אותו לכהונה על פי עצמו: ולא יקרא בתורה ראשון, ולא יישא את כפיו, ולא יאכל בקודשי הגבול--עד שיהיה לו עד אחד. אבל אוסר עצמו בגרושה וזונה וחללה, ואינו מיטמא למתים. ואם נשא, או נטמא--לוקה; והנבעלת לו ספק חללה. [יד] ואם היה מסיח לפי תומו, נאמן

טו כיצד: מעשה באחד שהיה מסיח לפי תומו ואמר, זכור אני כשאני תינוק, והייתי מורכב על כתפו של אבי שהוציאני מבית הספר, והפשיטני. כותנתי והטבילני לאכול תרומה לערב, וחבריי בודלין ממני, והיו קוראין אותי יוחנן אוכל חלות; והעלהו רבנו הקדוש לכהונה, על פי עצמו.

● Story Two about Terumah - הלכות תרומה א.ו-ז

ו [ה] כל שהחזיקו עולי מצרים, ונתקדש קדושה ראשונה--כיון שגלו, בטלה קדושתן: שקדושה ראשונה--לפי שהייתה מפני הכיבוש בלבד, קידשה לשעתה ולא קידשה לעתיד לבוא

ז כיון שעלו בני הגולה, והחזיקו במקצת הארץ--קידשוה קדושה שנייה העומדת לעולם, לשעתה ולעתיד לבוא; והניחו אותן המקומות שהחזיקו בהם עולי מצרים, ולא החזיקו בהם עולי בבל כשהיו, ולא פטרום מן התרומה והמעשרות, כדי שיסמכו עליהם עניים בשביעית. ורבנו הקדוש התיר בית שאן, מאותן המקומות שלא החזיקו בהם עולי בבל; והוא נמנה על אשקלון, ופטרה מן המעשרות