MAIMONIDES, MITZVOT, AND ME: A REFORM JEW'S INTERACTION WITH *MISHNEH TORAH*

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Text Immersion
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Maimonides, Mitzvot, and Me: A Reform Jew's Interaction with *Halakha*

My journey over the last five and a half years of rabbinical school has involved the deepening of relationships with many aspects of Judaism that I had previously only known by name or reputation. As is the case for many of my classmates, I arrived at the beginning of this period of focused study with Jewish roots that tapped through a layer of Jewish soil primarily rich with communal memories, creative music, and powerful experiences shared at summer camp or youth conclaves. The nutrients for my Jewish soil did not at that time arise from grappling with text or the study of Jewish history.

To my surprise, I did not have to travel far to develop a love for Jewish texts, in particular a new fondness for the *halakhic* codes. Coursework in rabbinical school involves far more breadth than it does depth in any one particular corner of the vast Jewish corpus. It has been a personal choice to study *halakha* further and I have fed this interest both through course selections and by studying *Mishneh Torah* in the capstone project. I gravitated toward this subject because of its conspicuous absence in the expressions of Reform Judaism I have observed. *Halakha* appears to me as a large hole missing from conversation in the majority of Reform Judaism. When it does come up for discussion, *halakha* is usually mischaracterized or wrongly defined, which serves to perpetuate the sense of its distance from us.

This result is troubling on many accounts. In Reform Judaism,

consequences of our present lack of esteem for *halakha* include a loss of knowledge, a lack of a framework for ethical and moral decision making, the absence of a common language for matters of Jewish practice, and a greater disconnect between us and other streams of Judaism. I am certain that others would add more to this list of losses, but these are enough for me to justify my need to study a subject that most Reform Jews could simply forget even without knowing what they are missing.

In my study of *halakha* I am seeking a *halakhic* or "Torah observant" lifestyle as it is generally understood by Orthodox Judaism. I am more interested in understanding, learning from, and eventually reframing in an authentic way (if this is even possible) the thinking that led someone like Maimonides to make a serious effort to codify mitzvot in the *Mishneh Torah*. Such learning could deeply impact the meaning we are able to draw from Judaism, leading to a more expansive and creative Jewish expression. Maimonides was searching for a solution to a problem of Jewish confusion and ultimately, and so are we. In his day, the average Jew struggled to find one accessible source for Jewish decision making that precluded them from having to dive into endless Talmudic arguments to know how to best follow mitzvot. Similarly, today, Reform Jews lack a cohesive method for making decisions about how to practice Judaism in a modern context. Certainly, along the way I am not opposed to adopting the practice of more mitzvot in my own life and I am thrilled when others around me find meaning from this practice as well, but

becoming *frum* is not at all the goal of my inquiry. Instead, I seek to learn from Maimonides' process way that can improve how we frame our Jewish expression today.

My Stance on Mitzvot

In this text-immersion project I am studying several sections of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, the first comprehensive medieval code of Jewish law. I have come to appreciate its clear, concise language and the logical way Maimonides breaks down the details of each mitzvah for the reader. Even today, nearly 900 years after its publication, it is relatively easy to understand what Maimonides envisioned as life guided by Torah law. The Mishnah Torah makes sense because it is logical. Following Maimonides' example and exploring mitzvot through this lens, life then appears as a set of choices nuanced with varying degrees of complexity. Yet, there remains a problem – life is not always logical and neither is Torah.

I have trouble finding meaning in a version of Jewish living that is as clear-cut as Maimonides presents because I end up feeling frustrated by what I perceive to be its inflexibility. Modernity provides us with so many innovations and revelations that at first glance challenge the very concept of a code of Jewish law. In my belief, our commandments and their collective structure, in a *halakha*, must respond and adapt to the new knowledge and perspectives we gain over time. The most outspoken of adherent Orthodox leaders have led to a misunderstanding that this is not the intent of *halakhic* Judaism. There is good

reason only ten commandments were set in stone.

In my study of *halakha* I am most pursuaded by the expansive definition brought by Rabbi Gordon Tucker in his paper, "*Halakhic* and Metahalakhic Arguments Concerning Judaism and Homosexuality." This paper was submitted in 2006 as a dissent to the discussion by the Committee on Jewish Life and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether to ordain homosexuals. Tucker argues that *halakhic* reasoning needs to grow out of a more complex understanding of the interplay between *halakha* and *aggadah* in classical text, and that this interplay is ongoing and should include the aggadah of everyday life stories in the present day. He writes:

> The ongoing, developing religious life of a community includes not only the work of its legalists, but also its experiences, its intuitions, and the ways in which its stories move it. This ongoing religious life must therefore have a role in the development of its norms, else the legal obligations of the community will become dangerously detached from its theological commitments (19).

By echoing Tucker's claim that mitzvot ideally adapt to and reflect our present reality I also expose my belief of feeling guided, and at times even governed, by mitzvot. My personal sense of commandedness presents challenges over two issues: One, determining which mitzvot I should observe or strive to observe; and two, learning how to make this determination. I am always struck by how hard it is to seek out and learn from *halakhic* thinkers who present a compelling argument for modern progressive Judaism. I find it very attractive when Tucker makes the claim that we should begin by defining the broadened

concept of *halakha* as best expressed by:

> "*Halakha* with a capital "H," when we wish to denote not only collections of rules and precedents, but rather a more expansive repertoire of legally relevant materials, which include the accretions over time of theological and moral underpinnings of the community of faith. And a vision of a *Halakhic* methodology would then be one that would include the more conventional *halakhic* methods, but would also appeal to aggadic (narrative) texts that have withstood the tests of time to become normative Jewish theology and ethics" (20).

While Maimonides would not agree with this definition of legal material for *halakhic* reasoning, I think Tucker's argument addresses a similar concern that Maimonides faced when writing *Mishneh Torah*. Both of them attempt to answer the question: what reasoning best informs us in our constant struggle to serve God through our actions and closely follow the commandments of Torah in real daily life? And, both Tucker and Maimonides demonstrate a commitment to the accessibility of *halakha* to the average Jew.

I have been blessed in my path of study to overcome the hurdle of Hebrew proficiency and as a result, the *Mishneh Torah* is accessible for me as a source for learning. Were it not, I still believe I could uphold my commitments to this study through reading English translations, but the experience would not be as rich. As a Reform Jew I believe I am responsible to lead a life informed by mitzvot even though there exist prevailing interpretations of mitzvot in the broader Jewish community with which I disagree. For example, I am at odds with interpretations of *halakha* that do not express egalitarianism or in some

way alienate segments of our community. And, I believe that the laws of kashrut need to take into further account the ethical treatment of animals during their lifetime and ensure the livelihood of their caregivers as well. These disagreements do not push me away from observing mitzvot; rather they lead me to investigate our sources even further. These tensions push me to read the works of Rachel Adler, Gordon Tucker, Eugene Borowitz, Jack Cohen, Mark Washofsky, and others who continue to lead modern day scholarship and thought on the subject.

I do not need to verify the historicity of revelation at Sinai in order to feel comfortable with the role of mitzvot in my life. For many the dismissal of revelation goes hand in hand with the suspension of a binding *halakha*, but I find meaning in exploring and practicing *halakha* for a different reason. I take great value from the fact that generations of Jews observed *halakha*, even though their *halakha* looks much different than my own. I feel a meaningful connection to these generations of our past when I study or add a ritual in my life and this connection is sacred in a way that may be verified unlike the events of revelation will ever be. I also draw meaning from the knowledge that many generations struggled with aspects of defining *halakha* just as I do today, and in some sense this struggle is the central part of the ritual.

In our evening liturgy, the Ahavat Olam prayer beautifully testifies that mitzvot are the very means by which God expresses God's love for all people of Israel. We, in turn, must "meditate upon them day and night," because they

guide us, “they are our life” (Frishman, 8). What better way to express love than by giving someone the tools by which to live a just life? Through mitzvot, we as a Jewish community, learn how to care for one another, how to fight for and attain justice in our society, and how to identify our individual paths in prayer. Mitzvot guide me to meaningfully contribute to this important experience.

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Leo Strauss' How To Study Medieval Philosophy: Advice for Modern Students of the Un-Modern

It is always a special moment in academic pursuits when one has the opportunity to read a thoughtful and passionate assessment of an issue that is at the same time written with clear logic and flow such that all major insights are easily understood. Leo Strauss' lecture, "How to Study Medieval Philosophy," presents such an opportunity. Strauss presents a compelling argument for studying medieval philosophy as intellectual history, a deceivingly difficult task for the modern thinker. In order to afford medieval philosophy and medieval philosophers the proper examination they deserve as intellectual history, Strauss presents a framework for developing a *historical understanding* of the subject, which when followed properly allows the modern student to learn not only *about* medieval philosophy, but also *from* the medieval philosopher.

This difference, though deceptive at first glance, carries profound implications and calls upon us to reframe the basic understanding of what it means to be a student of philosophy. Strauss claims that we most often study *about* medieval philosophers through their writing, thought, life, and times instead of being in a position to learn *from* them. In doing so we examine their conclusions and compare them with our own ideas in a context of modern philosophy. This approach often leads to the dismissal of medieval philosophy or the characterization of it as insightful, but ultimately wrong. A more challenging and rewarding path involves learning *from* medieval philosophers by attempting

to understand their context and striving to know them as they knew themselves, rather than assuming we (as modern thinkers) can know them better then they knew themselves. In this pursuit Strauss claims we are hindered by the assumptions of progressivism and our roots in Kantian thought that suggest "the superiority of one's own approach, or the approach of one's own time, to the approach of the past" (Strauss, 324). In order to learn something *from* a medieval philosopher rather than just study *about* him, we must be sincerely willing to consider the possibility that his views are correct.

One step in this direction involves adopting a preference for historicism over progressivism, contending that the knowledge and understandings of all periods are equally "immediate to God" and thus equally valid (Strauss, 324). However, Strauss also finds error with the historicist's approach. While better than the progressivist, the historicist also ultimately dismisses the philosophy of the past by characterizing it as "an expression of the spirit of its time," an idea rooted in the assumption that modern culture allows for a deeper complexity of understanding than was possible in an earlier era (Strauss, 324). In this way the historicist makes the assumption that ultimately the thought of the past cannot accomplish as much as the thought of the present.

To avoid the pitfalls of progressivism and historicism and successfully learn *from* medieval philosophers, Strauss claims we need to make a, "conversion to philosophy," and attain, "as perfect a freedom of mind as possible" (325). This freedom involves the disposal of prejudice towards modern

philosophy and the willingness to give benefit of the doubt to the medieval thinker. In order to achieve the deepest learning, as students of philosophy we need to place ourselves squarely in the frame of mind of the philosopher in question and allow him to be our teacher. This endeavor involves a deliberate and thorough inquiry into history in order to place one's mind in the culture, society, and frame of reference in the same way that the medieval thinker would have done in his own life.

Strauss applies this framework for seeking a historical understanding to the study of Maimonides. In doing so he highlights a major issue at stake for Maimonides and Jewish medieval philosophy in general – namely the, "discussion between two important forces of the Western world: the religion of the Bible and the science of philosophy of the Greeks" (Strauss, 327). Maimonides' thought lies at the center of this intersection as revealed in his efforts to simplify and make accessible a Jewish way of life that incorporates both faith and obedience, and wisdom derived through scientific thought and insight. Identifying a historical understanding of Jewish medieval philosophers and Maimonides also requires studying their work through the lens of the Arabic-Jewish and Islamic philosophy upon which they stand – specifically Platonic philosophy.

Strauss specifies that this philosophy is better expressed as the, "political science of Plato and the teaching of Plato's *Republic* and his *Laws*" (335). Such a foundation should not be conflated with the political science of the Western

world and Christian scholasticism, which is contrastingly rooted in Aristotle's *Politics*. Strauss cites the related examples of prophecy and rules of conduct as key differences between these schools of thought. In the Platonic branch rules of conduct become "generally accepted opinions" rather than "natural laws" as they are classified in Christian doctrine, and prophets, according to the Islamic-Jewish perspective, serve to express God's law in the role of, "Platonic philosopher-king: the founder of a perfect political community" (Strauss, 335-336). These key differences in interpretation influence Maimonides' writing and the construction of his most important works, *The Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah*.

Acquiring the foundational knowledge that underlies Maimonides' work and the work of medieval Jewish philosophers allows the modern student to begin to learn *from* these great teachers. Strauss maintains that it may be difficult, even impossible for some students of medieval thought to attain a historical understanding given the extent to which living in a context of modern philosophy predisposes one to dismiss the philosophy of the past. In addition, it may simply be impossible to attain the knowledge about history, culture, Platonic thought, and language necessary to evaluate Maimonidean thought. Instead, a start in the right direction involves understanding the differences between the underpinnings of modern and medieval Jewish philosophy. With this grounding, one develops sensitivity for modern bias.

Strauss rightly identifies a major difference between modern philosophy and medieval philosophy that contributes to the mischaracterization and lack of

a historical understanding when studying medieval philosophy. Unlike modern philosophy, medieval philosophy had to contend with the issue of its own legitimacy - the question of "why philosophy?" had to be addressed. Modern philosophy does not need to contend with the question of its own necessity and has replaced that pursuit with the endeavor to deem itself the "right" philosophy when compared to medieval philosophy. For a whimsical analogy – the description for a new release of any software application always describes its purpose and reason for existence, but the notes for any updates (version 2.0, 2.1, etc.) instead describe the advances over the original, justifying the reason to update. Medieval philosophy was "distinguished by a philosophic radicalism which is absent from modern philosophy," indicating that perhaps more was at stake in its conception (Strauss, 329). As Strauss hints, perhaps the original is in fact superior to the revision. There is something to learn from medieval philosophy because it faced the fundamental task of answering, *why philosophy? Why science?*

Strauss' assessment of the proper approach to medieval philosophy pushes the modern student of Jewish medieval philosophy to question the common habits of judgment that may prevent the greatest depth of learning in this subject area. Engaging in this exploration while in the course of studying sections of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* leads me rethink my initial reactions to Maimonides' philosophy, as a modern Reform Jew. This reading has also caused me to notice with greater detail the way we formulate Reform ideas about

Jewish law and how we represent the work of Maimonides and other Jewish medieval philosophers in our discussions, lectures, sermons, and other formats for education. It begs reflecting on our guiding Reform principles with Strauss' lessons at hand to see what we may have missed in the process of Reform if we have fallen short of attaining a historical understanding of Maimonides and others.

Implications for Reform Judaism

In the 1999 Statement of Principles on Reform Judaism, the leaders of our movement wrote:

> Throughout our history, we Jews have remained firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, even as we have learned much from our encounters with other cultures. The great contribution of Reform Judaism is that it has enabled the Jewish people to introduce innovation while preserving tradition, to embrace diversity while asserting commonality, to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt, and to bring faith to sacred texts without sacrificing critical scholarship.[1]

This statement presents a bold claim about the integrity required in creating Reform Judaism, a movement founded on diversity, tradition, innovation, and learning all while balancing faith and a devotion to critical scholarship. The resulting way Reform Jews express Judaism, based on decisions made at the intersection between modernity and tradition, lies at the heart of this statement.

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[1] "A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism" May, 1999. http://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/statement-principles-reform-judaism/

As leaders of the Reform movement we know well that this ideal does not always get upheld as carefully as it should even by us, let alone most Reform Jews. Nevertheless this statement demands further investigation in light of Strauss' argument.

Our movement's leaders reflect a perspective appropriately consistent with modern philosophy, that thought is progressive and knowledge cumulative. While the theme is not overly emphasized here, this statement paints Reform Judaism as an advancement of Judaism that contributes something positive to Judaism as a whole. Assume for a moment that we do maintain more wisdom now than we did in centuries before, as a result of generations collecting and producing knowledge. If this thought is true, do we simply know *more*, as a result of continued scientific and philosophic investigation, or do we actually know *better* - that we know how to interpret the collection of knowledge for a more accurate understanding of the world and its creation than we did before?

The present Reform platforms are at some level based on the claim that Judaism was at one time X and is now (through reform) some advanced version shaped through addition, subtraction, and transformation. The new version stands on the collected wisdom of each passing generation and by its nature interprets the tradition into a meaningful way of life, tailored to modern Jews who would not otherwise be satisfied by a purely doctrinal faith. This way of thinking can and does lead to the belief that we somehow understand or interpret Judaism better than previous generations of Jews did. I would be lying

if I denied falling into this trap in my own thinking on some occasions. Yet, I would much rather see us confidently claim that Reform Judaism is the correct advancement that matches Reform Jews and those of a similar mind, while stopping short of claiming superiority. There must be a way to frame the relationship between Reform Judaism and other expressions of Judaism that takes this balance into account. Such a conclusion begins by studying the past through a historical understanding.

As Strauss points out, applying the habits of modern thinking to the work of medieval philosophers prevents us from truly learning something *from* them and instead, only allows us to learn *about* them. As our movement's evolution indicates, we do tend to judge the conclusions of medieval Jewish philosophers and give preference to the work modern thinkers like Heschel, Buber, Kaplan, Borowitz, and beyond. Strauss might say that by our habits we are even intent on "an unhistorical interpretation" of medieval philosophy. The propensity for this error in studying philosophy leaves me concerned with how a similar approach exists in our study of the Jewish practices and conventions of the past, such as *halakha*. The easy dismissal of such concepts, which I suspect to be common amongst Reform Jews and even some Reform rabbis, ultimately impedes significant learning *from* historical versions of Jewish expression and ensures that modern Reform Jews end up learning only *about* the past. Though we live and practice Judaism in a post-*halakhic* era where the vast majority of Jews do not practice classical *halakha*, we should not stop short of learning from

halakha and the process of its evolution. While *halakha* is only one example of such a system that Reform Jews is frequently overlook, there are others as well. We must incur some greater consequence from what amounts to a dismissal of medieval philosophy and its related expression of Torah observant Judaism.

It is worth considering what might be lost through the assumption that modern is *better than* what preceded it and the assumption that we know the thinkers of the past better than they knew themselves. By knowing what might be missed through this type of thinking we can begin to address areas of our movement's beliefs and tenents that may lack proper justification or exist as a result of unhistorical interpretations. Naturally, we want to feel positive about the beliefs and practices we hold true. In a world driven by and counting on daily advancements in technology, science, health, and industry, we habitually judge newer as automatically being better and more profound– why shouldn't this carry over to thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and practices of religion as well?

The Principles for Reform Judaism in 1999 reflect a very different perspective from those written one century earlier in the way they reference earlier versions of Jewish expression. The 1885 Pittsburgh platform, which stemmed from a conference lead by Rabbi Kaufman Kohler states, "We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages."[2] This

[2] "The Pittsburgh Platform" November 1885. http://www.ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/declaration-principles/

statement's qualification does not overtly render a judgment, either good or bad, as to the "moral and philosophical progress," in question. However, writing this phrase does seem to imply that past perspectives were bound by limits of knowledge or reason that no longer exist in the present – historicism exemplified. Further, with respect to *kashrut* and the priesthood they write,

> We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.[3]

In this expression the leaders go several steps further by characterizing the biblical origination of these laws and their rabbinic expansion as having occurred in some foreign context.

Arguing that a concept is foreign or distant is a good way to justify its dismissal. In the process of dismissal, one loses control or authority over the idea as well – for good and for bad. The loss of control over *halakha* and what is or should be is one consequence of our unhistorical study of medieval philosophy and its legacies, As Rachel Adler rightly points out in *Engendering Judaism,* we live in a world where the progressive Jewish presumption about *halakha* is that, "the term, its practice, and its definition belong to Orthodoxy" (25). To the contrary Adler argues that, "*halakha* belongs to liberal Jews no less than to

[3] The Pittsburgh Platform

Orthodox Jews because the stories of Judaism belong to us all. A *halakha* is a communal praxis grounded in Jewish stories" (ibid). We have chosen to dismiss it because perhaps somewhere along the way leaders disagreed with what they learned *about halakha* instead of seeking to understand what they could learn *from* its creation and development.

Certainly I am simplifying the issue. There were many forces involved in the move to a post-*halakhic* framework, most notably learned scholars and philosophers who questioned the classic conceptions of Israel's election, revelation at Sinai, and the codification of Jewish practice that followed. But, were enough students and thought leaders able to engage in a "conversion of philosophy" for the sake of developing a historical understanding of this key Jewish convention in the process? The lack of this type of inquiry leads us to a place where Rachel Adler must remind us of our collective inheritance of Jewish narrative. Instead, a historical understanding of the philosophy of *halakha* might actually support her thesis.

I appreciate the whimsical expression that reflects the essence of *halakha*, "build a fence around the cow and you set him free." There exists both security and great flexibility in understanding the Torah law in this way; so too with Maimonides and his thought, if you choose to learn and accept the possible truth in his conclusions. If we abandon the fear of being delegitimized by the classical adherence to Torah law and no longer consider it a threat to Reform Judaism, we gain the freedom to explore and climb all over the jungle gym of Judaism's

foundation. Strauss' argument for the pursuit of a historical understanding of medieval philosophy has implications in the way modern Reform Jews could more beneficially examine classical Jewish practice and the convention of *halakha*.

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Mishneh Torah: A Book of *Halakha* or the Reshaping of Jewish Curriculum?

What's in a name? The title *Mishneh Torah*, when translated literally, means *repetition of the Torah*. Debate continues as to whether Maimonides aimed to produce a comprehensive and accessible summary of all *halakha* or whether he wished to go a step further and replace earlier literature with a canonical work of *halakha*. Professor of Law and Jewish Thought, Moshe Halbertal argues, the answer lies in how you interpret Maimonides' statement in the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, which reads, "a person who first reads the Written Law and then this compilation, will know from the whole of the Oral Law, without having occasion to consult any other book between them" (Halbertal, 40).

Halbertal illuminates two possible ways of interpreting the characteristics Maimonides' bold statement. One, that Maimonides intended on providing a complete replacement for earlier *halakhic* literature. In this effort he would have been even more effective by replicating the use of the enlightening philosophical framing he provides for several sections of the first book, *Sefer HaMada*, across the entire composition. Two, the relatively few introductions to the different sections of *Mishneh Torah* suggest Maimonides' intention of writing only a summarized and accessible law code, rather than a replacement for earlier attempts at *halakha*. The ways in which Maimonides inserts philosophy into this

groundbreaking *halakhic* work suggest that his goals were even more far reaching.

Exploring the sections of *Sefer HaMada* that represent Maimonides' philosophical quest give the reader insight into Maimonides' goals as a thinker. It is possible that while Maimonides may have wished to accomplish a full and accessible replacement for the resources of Jewish legal reasoning of his era, history has shown that in fact his work far surpassed even the loftiest ideal that Maimonides could have imagined. *Mishneh Torah* was a game-changing accomplishment. *Mishneh Torah* is still a central source in the study of *halakha*. While authorities may not always determine law according to the letter of the *Mishneh Torah* today, it serves as the baseline to begin researching many arguments.

The debate over Maimonides' intention for writing the *Mishneh Torah*, whether he designed it as an accessible summary or as a completely renewed substitute for what had become a sluggish and unreachable collection, reflects a central tension of the content of the work itself. As Rabbi David Hartman, appropriately titles his book, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest,* Maimonides' work spans both subjects – Torah and Philosophy – and does so quite intentionally. As Hartman highlights, "Maimonides begins his *Mishneh Torah* with a treatment of various philosophical themes. Is this not a strange way to begin a strictly legal codification?" (49). An agenda of change lies behind this choice. Perhaps it also indicates that the *Mishneh Torah* is Maimonides way

of furthering a slightly more complex mission than either of the two mentioned above, the creation of a new Jewish curriculum.

To draw a boundary between the philosophical concerns and the legal aspects of his work runs contrary to what some features of the *Mishneh Torah* teach us and ultimately does a disservice to Maimonides' underlying goal. In the arc of his work, Maimonides desires, to effect a change in the way the whole community understands the *halakhic* path to God. He accomplishes this task by offering a, "bridge between the *halakha* of the *am haaretz* and the *halakha* of the *hassid"* (Hartman, 48). This perspective demonstrates a range of continuity between Maimonides' earliest work, *The Commentary to the Mishnah* and his last work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*. The former was written for the general population, just as the *Mishneh Torah*, and the latter written at a much higher level and intended for the elite. Should one follow this arc and the "suggestions of *aggadic* knowledge, he will meet his teacher in the *Guide*, where the way of the *hassid* is explained" (Hartman, 48).

Following Hartman's assessment that Maimonides envisioned a continuum of sorts for how one effectively approaches God through *halakha* then it means Maimonides believed there are different levels of achievement towards this goal. The *Mishneh Torah*, on this view, becomes more than a code of Jewish law and might be better understood as a tool for better Jewish living. If so, the *Mishneh Torah* is less of an innovation and more of an authentic continuation of a genre, not dissimilar in intention from the earliest forms of *halakhic* writing.

For example, when studying the composition of the Mishnah and exploring the many possible reasons for its development, it becomes clear that its authors meant to create a tool for teaching new rabbinic authorities how to go about Jewish legal reasoning. By comparison Maimonides developed the *Mishneh Torah* as a tool in the larger curriculum for all levels of Jewish students.

The blending of philosophy and *halakha* serves this educational goal quite well. Philosophy is the way towards providing a rationale for the way of thinking and choices he hopes students will correctly execute through *halakha*. The introduction to *Hilchot Avodah Zarah* offers a solid example of Maimonides' use of philosophy in this manner. In the introduction he presents a short history of the origins of idolatry in the world. He describes three major stages of biblical history: 1) the origins of paganism; 2) Abraham's revolt against pagan society, by destroying Terah's idols; and 3) brainwashing in Egypt, Moses' eventual election and the giving of the law. In each of these cases the role of human decision-making grows larger as time evolves.

At the beginning, people made an understandable mistake in their form of worship, wrongly assuming the celestial bodies were themselves gods (Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:1). In the second case false prophets (leaders) were to blame by claiming God's authority and leading others to worship false gods, making the conscious decision to do so (Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:2-3). Finally in the last case Moses is elected to return the masses to monotheism. After they had become acculturated to worshipping the Egyptian gods while in slavery, Moses must

deliver God's law to them, and pronounce the "judgment" should they return to idol worship (Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:3). Idol worship serves an example of the trajectory of human understanding, an asset that must be developed through allegedly philosophical prophets and leaders such as Abraham and Moses. In this way Maimonides casts Abraham as the first philosopher, a dual role that also carries the weight of *halakhic* teacher. As their knowledge grows people become increasingly held responsible for their actions. Only after such an introduction does Maimonides open with the laws prohibiting the worship of anything but the one, true God.

The evolution presented through the introduction to *Avodat Kochavim* is also a small example of the way Maimonides might wish students to evolve in their ability to draw a path toward worshipping God through *halakha*. The first misunderstandings in finding the right path occur as natural mistakes, the next arise at the hands of misdirected or false leadership, and the final, correct state results from true prophecy and the fullest expression of the laws and their consequences.

One of the most prolific and learned scholars of Maimonides' life and work, Isadore Twersky, concurs with Hartman's argument about the calculated blending of philosophy and *halakha*. Labeling it the "Philosophic-ideological Motive: Rationalist-Spiritual Need," Twersky explains that:

> It is clear Maimonides intended from the outset not only to compile 'rules in respect of that which is forbidden and permitted, clean and unclean,' but also to elucidate 'Torah principles' and 'theological fundamentals,' to

> set forth 'true and exact opinion,' and to indicate how each person can understand the 'ultimate goal of the precepts, according to his capacity' (78).

The rationalist-spiritual motivation is the third that Twersky elaborates in addition to the historical-external and immanent-jurisprudential motives that, together, made the case for codification. Twersky also warns against an oversimplification or distillation of Maimonides interests just to arrive at one neat answer to the reason for the *Mishneh Torah* (78-79). The complex proposal of *Mishneh* Torah having its largest impact as a version of Jewish curriculum and given a philosophical sensibility remains a safe assumption.

This idea carries no weight against what we might otherwise derive today from *Mishneh Torah*. In fact, I believe that our progressive communities stand better prepared to interpret *Mishneh Torah* as a serious educational tool that was designed in a larger system in order to raise students' knowledge and develop in them the capacity for a more intimate devotion to God through following *halakha*. Framing this impressive work in terms that members of our communities more easily understand does no harm to the significance of the work either. Perhaps this type of presentation is actually in keeping with its motive as well, "the collection and compilation [of *halakha*]…[and] facilitation and simplification [of the law]" (Twersky, 79). For it is upon us to represent *Mishneh Torah* in our teaching of it to Reform Jews by its original purpose: to facilitate the learning and practice of Jewish living for all.

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Prospectus for Future Study

The most rewarding aspect of this text-immersion project has been developing the framework of habits for personal study of Jewish texts over an extended period of time. As a student of classroom-based learning for the majority of undergraduate and graduate school, my habits as a learner reflect the demands of this guided environment. I have long admired the rabbinic mentors and figures in my life that have successfully woven a habit of self-directed study into their rabbinate. For some, this pursuit led to writing books or becoming expert in a particular subject and for others, a habit of study has served to ground their professional work and bring balance to their rabbinate. Selecting personal study as a priority of one's rabbinic career requires a focused effort and the regular planning of learning goals.

Even at this early stage in my career, I can imagine how one's rabbinate can easily become centered on serving others and creating Jewish "output" for congregants at all levels and with a high level of productivity. Rabbis who engage in this work without also devoting time to self-directed "input" might find themselves more easily devoid of creativity and more accustomed to teaching the similar themes over and over and become stagnant. It is an interesting and even somewhat ironic commentary on the modern Reform rabbinate that I should need to lay out a course for this aspect of my work. With almost no exceptions, the works I choose to study will have been written by rabbis whose entire rabbinates were built on the prerequisite mastery of the

entirety of classical Jewish texts. That I feel as though I am still wading in the shallow end in comparison is not such a reflection of my level of knowledge as it is on the nature of the rabbinate in 21st century progressive Judaism. The reality is that our work focuses on other aspects of rabbinic thought besides guiding *halakhic* decisions. Nevertheless studying classical Jewish texts can only serve to strengthen my skills as a leader, Jewish educator, and guide of Jewish living.

In many years I would like to look back on my rabbinate and assess that I have continued to learn and even master sections of classical texts throughout my career. While I will of course also judge my development in the ever-important skills of working with people, giving pastoral guidance, and leading healthy organizations, I will also hope to conclude that I have amassed a collection of Jewish knowledge for my own personal growth and enjoyment as well as for my professional capacity.

In order to lay the foundation for this journey of learning, I propose to develop and reevaluate a plan of personal study each spring. Annually I will assess the habits I employed throughout the year, take the time to review the entries in a study journal and reflect on my learning process in order to identify what has been most memorable, challenging, surprising, and rewarding. At that time I will choose a new subject, text, or Jewish scholar to explore in the coming year, devise goals and develop a scope and sequence of study. Given that one goal of this text-immersion project was to model a framework for self-study that

would continue beyond ordination, it follows that I include in future study some of the habits formed in this process that have proven most beneficial.

Proposal

During the first year of my rabbinate, I propose setting aside 2 hours per week of focused solo or *chevruta* study on a topic of my own choosing for the purpose of *torah lish'ma*. While the subjects I select and the texts I study may inspire teaching courses or sermon ideas, this type of productivity is expressly not the goal for this personal development project. Topics will be chosen from the list below or selected in cooperation with a study partner.

The project will begin by selecting a subject or text source to explore and setting 3-5 learning goals. To track the project I will compose a study journal where I record translations or notes from each hour of study. Throughout the project I propose writing 2-3 blog posts on my personal website that share insights from the learning sessions or texts. Each spring I will evaluate the project, reflect on my learning goals and choose a new topic to begin for the coming period.

Suggested Texts or Topics

- *Halakha* of prayer spaces and synagogue prayer spaces
- Talmud Bavli Berachot
- Pesitka d'Rav Kahana
- Psalms
- Wisdom Literature
- Mussar
- Talmud Bavli Pesachim – specifically the sedar
- *Halakha* of Yom Kippur
- Personal Obligations to the Land of Israel as expressed in Codes