***Maimonides: A Radical Religious Philosopher*.**
By Shalom Sadik.
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Shalom Sadik is one of the leading figures in the new generation of medieval Jewish philosophy scholars, serving as Associate Professor in the Goldstein Goren Department of Jewish Thought at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. The author of two impressive books in Hebrew published by Magnes Press, his new volume, *Maimonides: A Radical Religious Philosopher*, is Sadik's first book in English, and is based on a series of his essays that were published in Hebrew on Maimonides. The subtitle and central thesis of the book is that Maimonides is a 'radical religious philosopher'. By using that phrase, Sadik is asserting that Maimonides combines a highly naturalistic view of the world that prioritises the contemplation of nature as a religious imperative without abandoning the structure of Jewish law [*halakha*]. He thus rejects the attempt to situate the 'true' Maimonides as either the philosopher Maimonides of the *Guide for the Perplexed* or Maimonides the *halakhist* of the *Mishneh Torah*. His book contends that both works deal with philosophy and law, without ignoring the existence of differences and contradictions between the different genres of writing.

The Introduction lays out four central principles which Sadik identifies as the key components of Maimonides's radical religious philosophy. First, God is static and unchanging, not personal and relational. Second, revelation is the product of a perfected human capacity, and is not an instance of a personal god addressing a human being. Third, the uniqueness of prophecy lies in the elevated political role of the prophet as legislator and leader, a role that the prophet can fulfill because of the perfection of both his intellectual and imaginative faculties. Fourth, the religious commandments have an important moral and social benefit for their adherents (9-10). These four principles are based on the premises that philosophy and religion are complementary, where philosophy encourages one to 'discover the foundations of everything via critical thinking' (7) and where religion is 'an imitation of philosophy', in poetic form (using the language of Al-Farabi).

The book is divided into four chapters based on four central topics in Maimonides's philosophy: esotericism, free choice, conventional opinion, and natural morality. Each of these topics has a long and extensive scholarly literature and is the subject of much academic debate over the last hundred years, though in fact these arguments extend back to the interpreters of

Maimonides's writings in the Middle Ages. Sadik welcomes the reader into the world of Maimonidean scholarship both in the main text and the footnotes, in a way that is accessible to both the novice and veteran scholar of the debates.

The first chapter is devoted to the theme of esotericism, the idea that Maimonides intentionally concealed certain of his views and did not reveal the complete truth to all his readers. Sadik presents a nuanced approach to explaining Maimonides's method, by building on the extensive range of Maimonidean scholarship on this subject. He points out where Maimonides writes esoterically for pedagogical reasons, in order to slowly guide the student by not revealing the truth too quickly, and where he writes esoterically for political reasons, to hide ideas that may be dangerous to certain audiences. Sadik warns the reader against jumping to the conclusion that all esotericism in Maimonides is political, which can lead one to the simplistic and faulty conclusion that religion is exoteric, philosophy esoteric, and that Maimonides is thus a secret atheist. He also shows that esotericism is not limited to the *Guide* and plays an important role in Maimonides's legal writings as well, such as in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and the *Mishneh Torah*, though the esoteric strategies differ in each. Sadik's categorisation is particularly helpful in delineating how Maimonides operates differently depending on the style of the work. In the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and *Mishneh Torah*, he uses (a) terse descriptions and 'chapter headings' on key terms such as 'providence' and 'prophecy' and (b) metaphors, following the example of Moses who uses allegory in describing God as a physical deity in the Bible. In the *Guide*, Maimonides takes these two strategies and adds three additional methods: (c) to connect themes across dispersed chapters; (d) to interpret with a favourable eye even if the interpretation is farfetched; and (e) to search for pedagogical and political contradictions (35-36, 44). Lastly, Sadik very interestingly responds to the scholarship of Yair Lorberbaum, who rejects the meaning of the seventh category of contradiction in the *Guide* as a political one. In response, Sadik looks at the Judeo-Arabic for the word 'necessary [*cherora*]' in the statement: 'it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others' and shows how in many other chapters of the *Guide* (such as III 28), though not necessarily all of them, it refers to a social necessity, following the precedent of many medieval commentators who read the text this way (51-54).

The second chapter deals with the question of whether Maimonides believes human beings have free choice or if all human action is predetermined by God. An initial reading of Maimonides's corpus would likely lead one to the fifth chapter of the *Laws of Repentance* in the *Mishneh Torah* where Maimonides very clearly explicates the principal that freedom of choice is a foundation of the Torah. However, more recently, a number of scholars, including Shlomo Pines, Alexander Altmann, and Moshe Sokol, have questioned this premise. In their estimation, Maimonides's affirmation

of freedom of choice was a popular concession in his legal writings and his true esoteric view in the *Guide* was divine determinism, which sees all human choices originating from a chain of causes, at the head of which stands God (78). Human beings are no different than animals, the spheres, and the separate intellects, whose choices are all determined. Sadik writes a sharp response to these arguments, defending Maimonides as an advocate for human free choice in both genres of writings, countering their interpretation of these chapters in the *Guide*. A key source for Sadik's argument is the structure of the soul in the *Eight Chapters*, where the rational part has a practical and reflective division (85-86). This reflective part deliberates about the proper means to accomplish an action. This leads Sadik to come to the definition that 'choice is the internal decision towards any direction while the chooser *has the ability* to do other actions' (105). Thus, the external influences that produce changes in temperament and influence desire, imagination, and knowledge, which Maimonides lists in the introduction to the second part of the *Guide* and in the first chapter of that section, seem to support the deterministic position, but merely incline an individual in a certain direction. The individual still has the freedom to deliberate and choose an action, notwithstanding how they are influenced by external factors (111). This leads human beings to be the only creature that operates freely outside of the deterministic framework of the universe. But this freedom is solely the ability to navigate choices presented to individuals, even if influenced by external forces.

The third chapter focusses on the theme of conventional opinion or generally accepted notions, identified through the Greek *endoxa*, Arabic *mash'hurath*, or Hebrew *mefursamot*. These are views about the world that are based on human agreement or social convention, not ones rooted in the laws of nature. The term *mash'hurath* is key for understanding Maimonides's thought, since he identifies it in *Guide* I 2 with the knowledge of good and evil and also with the majority of the ten commandments, other than the first two, in *Guide* II 33. How does the Greek *endoxa* become Maimonides's *mash'hurath*? Sadik rejects looking back to Aristotle's *Topics*, where *endoxa* is discussed, since the Arabic translation of the work interprets the term differently and ascribes to it a different connotation (124). Another likely source is the usage of Al-Farabi, whose generally accepted premises are not simply related to popular matters, but include the natural and divine sciences, though only according to the 'eyes of the ignorant masses, but not for the people with wisdom' (126-127). In other words, they are a simplification of knowledge for people who are incapable of making theoretical philosophical inferences (128). However, Maimonides presents a much starker position than Al-Farabi. He offers a clear definition of generally accepted notions in his *Millot ha-Higgayon*, where he defines them as social norms established by popular agreement dealing with evaluations of good or bad, such as regarding appropriate dress or the way one should return favours (133-134). Sadik

traces an even wider variety of usages of the term *mash'hurath* in the *Guide* which covers people, stories, sayings or well-known book scenes, speculative positions, opinions that are common and accepted by the public, and even well-known historical events (135). Maimonides's position is that the fact that a view is generally held reflects no certainty that it is rooted in truth, but merely describes the popularity of these ideas (139). One of the conclusions that emerges from Sadik's insightful comparison between Al-Farabi and Maimonides is that Al-Farabi sees conventional opinion as a popular dissemination of theoretical truths, while Maimonides views commonly held opinion as an untrustworthy source for truth.

The fourth chapter on natural morality (or 'natural law', as it is commonly known) addresses the question about whether Maimonides held moral laws to be rooted in nature and thus universal or based on social convention and thus mutable according to each individual society. The question of whether Maimonides has a natural law teaching is an issue that came to the fore in the twentieth century through the writings of Marvin Fox and David Novak, who took opposing sides in this debate. Sadik outlines the complexities of Maimonides's position by presenting the arguments of both interpretations, before judiciously making a case for a natural law teaching that is rooted in both nature and convention. In trying to understand the case against natural law in Maimonides's writings, he cites *Guide* II 2 and 33 which presents the knowledge of good and evil and the commandments such as 'thou shalt not kill' as generally accepted opinions (159). Sadik similarly rejects the identification of the Noachide Laws, which are codified in the *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and their Wars*, with natural law. Instead, he categorises them as the laws required in order to live in a Jewish state. In making the case for natural law in Maimonides's thought, he refers to *Guide* II 39, where Maimonides defines the uniqueness of the Torah by discussing existing laws and ranking one set of laws that constitutes the best one.

> The Law of Moses is the best since it is the perfect mean between excessive abstinence and excessive permissiveness, and unlike all the other legal systems, which tend to excessiveness or permissiveness. (168)

As Sadik points out, ranking the Torah as the ideal moral law only works if there is a natural hierarchy with a perfect moral standard in which the Torah can be compared to other laws. If the morality of all laws were dependent on social convention, then it would be impossible to rank the Torah as best. In adjudicating these contrasting statements in the *Guide*, Sadik comes to the conclusion that most laws are based on the social agreement of different groups, dependent on history and culture. Yet Sadik also admits that there is a very basic natural law based on the repudiation of the pursuit of lust as well as acts that physically harm a person's body or mind (183). This is why he argues that Maimonides writes in *Guide* III 8 that avoiding drunkenness is an intelligible truth and not a mere social norm, since it mitigates against the

person's ability to engage in the acquisition of knowledge. However, he still insists that the method of conveying this moral truth through establishing particular rules is dependent on each society and culture to determine for themselves.

Throughout these four chapters, Sadik is responding to two different alternative readings of Maimonides. The book explicitly rejects the theologically conservative reading of Maimonides that views him simply as a *halakhist* with a traditional view of creation *ex nihilo*, submission to divine will through the commandments, and a minimal role for philosophy and independent thought. The book also rejects the atheist or agnostic reading of Maimonides that views him as a philosopher, whose identification with religion and the commandments is merely a superficial feature of living in the Middle Ages. Sadik is equally critical of the postmodern reading of Maimonides which suggests that Maimonides can be read with any of these multiple approaches, since it forsakes the tools to decide which is correct. He rejects this approach, stating that authors 'always have a specific agenda and belief system—which is, after all, integral to the definition of philosophy' (19).

Maimonides: A Radical Religious Philosopher presents a model of Maimonides as a religious philosopher who is deeply engaged in both the depths of philosophy and religion, living a life that respects the best of both worlds. In today's polarised world, where people tend towards religious and secular extremes rather than pursuing a middle path, Sadik looks to the figure of Maimonides as a philosophic, moral and religious guide. Though, one potential problem with being a radical religious philosopher is that, in being identified as a radical, one might scare away the different audiences that one is hoping to win over. In this regard, one wonders if Maimonides would identify with the description, perhaps choosing subtlety and caution over promoting his agenda so explicitly, with the danger of losing many of his intended readers. (This is a reason that traditionalist readers of the *Mishneh Torah* can read it without studying the *Guide* and, while not appreciating his full philosophic project, can still be implicitly influenced by parts of it.) Notwithstanding, Sadik's book carries deep and important insights which make the volume an eminently worthy addition to the ongoing tradition of Maimonidean scholarship.