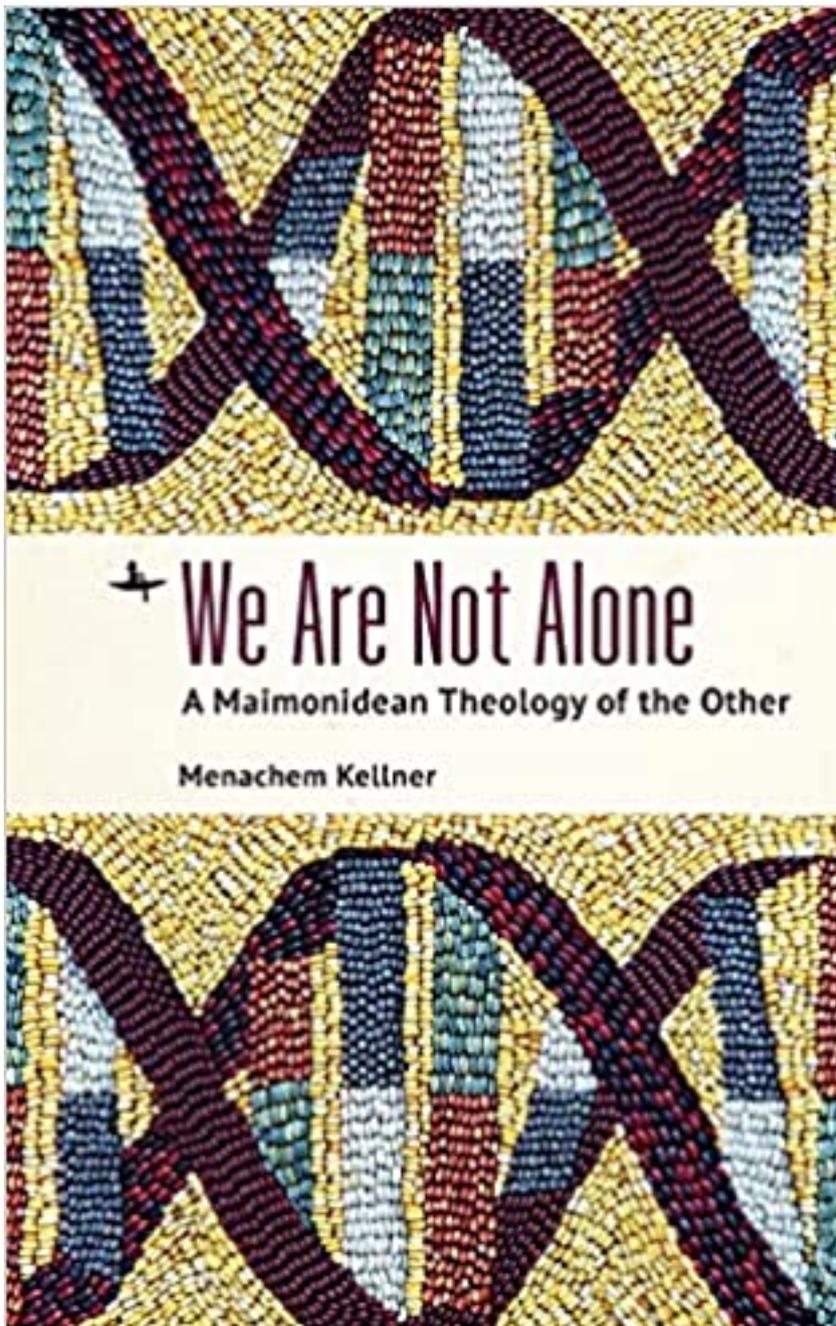


# We Are Not Alone: A Maimonidean Theology of the Other. Review essay

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Menachem Kellner is a leading scholar and interpreter of the thought of Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon; Maimonides, 1138-1204). A professor emeritus of Jewish philosophy and former dean at the University of Haifa, and currently Chair of the Department of Jewish Philosophy at the

Shalem College in Jerusalem, Kellner is the author of many important books, including (to mention just a few) such classics as *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel*,<sup>[1]</sup> *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Must A Jew Believe Anything*,<sup>[3]</sup> *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*,<sup>[4]</sup> *Science in the Bet Midrash: Studies in Maimonides*,<sup>[5]</sup> *They Too Are Called Human: Gentiles in the Eyes of Maimonides (in Hebrew)*,<sup>[6]</sup> *Maimonides the Universalist: The Ethical Horizons of the Mishneh Torah (with David Gillis)*,<sup>[7]</sup> and most recently (2021) the subject of this review essay, *We Are Not Alone: A Maimonidean Theology of the Other*.<sup>[8]</sup>

First, however, in the spirit of “full disclosure,” Menachem Kellner and I have been friends, not just colleagues, for some four decades. From time to time we exchange information and references, questions about sources, and discuss our different readings of shared sources in the respectful spirit of “a dispute for the sake of heaven [which] will persist.”<sup>[9]</sup> Besides such occasional academic differences, and despite the fact that he and I don’t differ very much in our personal lifestyles,<sup>[10]</sup> and share a fundamental existential commitment to the Jewish people and the State of Israel, one point of significant theoretical disagreement between us – as will become evident below – regards religious pluralism, a position I maintain and about which I have written, and which Kellner rejects (and has responded to some of what I’ve written)<sup>[11]</sup> and which he regards as theoretically self-defeating and giving up on the truth (although in practical terms, in his personal and scholarly life, he is certainly broadly accepting and respectful of the “other” – Jewish and non-Jewish alike).

A common theme underlying many of Kellner’s works is Rambam’s universalism – his commitment to truth from any source and vision of a messianic future in which all humans will come to knowledge of God – and his notion that what distinguishes Jews from non-Jews (at least until the messianic future) is the Torah’s truth, and no inherent biological characteristic. Rambam’s *Guide of the Perplexed* begins (1:1) with an analysis of the term *?elem*, usually translated as the “image” of God (Genesis 1:26-27), but which really (according to Rambam) means “the natural form” and “the true reality” of the human being, namely rational “apprehension,” which all humans share and which define *homo sapiens*.

The term *image* (*?elem*), on the other hand, is applied to the natural form (*al-?urah al-?abi`iyah*), I mean to the notion in virtue of which a thing is constituted as a substance (*jauhar*) and becomes what it is. It is the true reality of the thing in so far as the latter is that particular being. In man that notion is that from which human apprehension (*al-idrak al-insani*) derives. It is on account of this intellectual apprehension that it is said of man: “In the image of God created He him.”<sup>[12]</sup>

The *Guide of the Perplexed*, written in Judeo-Arabic, then ends with a Hebrew poem:<sup>[13]</sup>

God is very near to everyone who calls, /  
If he calls truly and has no distractions;  
He is found by every seeker who searches for Him, /  
If he marches toward Him and goes not astray.

Similarly, Rambam’s earlier *Mishneh Torah* (his Hebrew encyclopedic code of Jewish law) begins with the “Book of Knowledge” (*Sefer Ha-Mada*) and the opening words: “The foundation of foundations and the pillar of the sciences is to know that there is a first being, who causes all existing things to exist.” The Code then ends with a quote from Isaiah 11:9: “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea.”

Previously, in his Commentary on the Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, Rambam had equated the

“stamping die” (*?otam*) by which God “stamped” the human species with “the form of the human species (*?urat al-insan al-nau`iyah*), by which a human being is human, in which all humans participate.”[\[14\]](#)

There is no distinction in these passages between Jews and non-Jews, all are humans, endowed with intellect which is their true essence and the “image” of God, defining *homo sapiens*. In Rambam’s three greatest works, the history of the human species thus begins with the creation of *homon sapiens* with reason, and culminates with universal knowledge of God.

In other words, in Rambam’s consistently rationalist and universalist view, in his philosophical *Guide of the Perplexed*, in his compendium of the *halakhah* (Jewish law), and in his early Commentary on the Mishnah, humanity begins with reason, and leads ultimately to the knowledge of God. There is no essential distinction, at the beginning or at the end of human history, between Jews and non-Jews.

Jews differ from non-Jews only “functionally” (what has been called “software”), because of the truth of the Torah and not “essentially” (what has been called “hardware”), namely some built-in physical or biological difference between Jews and non-Jews, a particularism maintained, at least in some respects, by the poet and philosopher Judah Ha-Levi (1085-1141) and by some Jews in the later and contemporary mystical tradition (including certain trends in today’s Orthodox Judaism).

Rambam’s universalism, then – certainly as understood by Kellner – leads to an appreciation of and respect for “the other” (i.e., the non-Jew) as fully human, whereas the particularism of the mystical tradition can, all too often, lead to a denigration of others as less than fully human. The practical dangers of such theoretical particularism are all too real and present in our times, and Kellner sees Rambam’s universalism as necessary in our world of increasing intolerance (including on the part of some Jews) and strife. Assuming that Kellner’s understanding of Rambam is correct – and I believe it largely is, with the exception of a few unresolved technical questions – such universalism has urgent moral as well as purely academic implications.

That lesson, which is at least implicit in his earlier studies of Rambam, has now become the explicit agenda of *We Are Not Alone: A Maimonidean Theology of the Other*.

This book is not addressed to people who are content in their Judaism. It is definitely addressed to those Jews made uncomfortable, or even occasionally embarrassed, by so much of what passes for “Torah-true” Judaism today . . . The issue is of crucial importance. Hermann Cohen often pointed out that the doctrine that all human beings are created in the image of God, have a common source in God, makes the notion of *humanity* necessary. No longer are humans defined essentially in terms of tribal affiliation. Translating this ideal into reality is an unfinished project, but an ideal that we must surely pursue.[\[15\]](#)

And again:[\[16\]](#)

It is also a polemic, arguing for a version of tolerance that rejects both the “Scylla of relativism and the Charybdis of absolutism.”

As such, the book can and should be read and studied carefully not only by those with an academic interest in Jewish philosophy in general, and Rambam in particular, but by Jews and non-Jews alike who share the concern that religious exclusive truth claims (and not just “tribalism”) have so often led, and in our day still frequently lead to intolerance, to discrimination against others

perceived to be heretics, unbelievers, and not fully human, and to disastrous wars and destruction. Rambam, in Kellner's clear and consistent presentation, provides an important example of how one can affirm truth claims without such theological and moral perversions, and is thus a necessary antidote to these all too prevalent religious maladies.

Again, the book can be read by non-specialists. Kellner writes in a remarkably clear, non-technical, and occasionally informal style, accessible to all, a huge advantage in a book, while in many respects certainly academic, which is intended for a broader readership.[\[17\]](#)

The book's first chapter, "Jewish Voices Rejected; A Jewish Voice Affirmed" contrasts masterfully the particularism of Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, an influential voice in today's "Religious (i.e., Orthodox) Zionism" in Israel with Rambam's universalism. Aviner follows Judah Halevi's affirmation of an essential, indeed ontological, difference between Jews and non-Jews, and Kellner cites Aviner's clear and consistent view on this, which Kellner sees as adopting nineteenth-century German romanticism which Aviner "foists" on Judaism:[\[18\]](#)

We are the chosen people, not because we received the Torah, but, rather, we received the Torah because we are the chosen people. This is so because the Torah is so apt to our inner nature . . . There are . . . those who claim against us that we are "racist." Our answer to them is . . . if racism means that we are different from a superior to other nations, and by this bring blessings to other nations, then indeed we admit that we differ from every nation, not by virtue of skin-color, but from the aspect of the nature of our souls (*ha-teva` ha-nishmati shelanu*).

Since Aviner would not reject the possibility of non-Jews converting to Judaism, Kellner says that Aviner "cannot be a racist in any contemporary sense of the term," but "seems to be using 'racism' here as a shorthand for essentialism."[\[19\]](#) As Kellner shows, Aviner's is by no means the most extreme position of the "essentialist" view that Jews by their very nature differ from (and are superior to) non-Jews.

Kellner suggests that "eight hundred years after his death, Maimonides can still help us with that confrontation"[\[20\]](#) with such theologically and morally objectionable essentialist particularism. Without going into detail here, in Rambam's view of history, Abraham philosophically discovered God,[\[21\]](#) and "the upshot of all of this is that Abraham discovered God on his own, so to speak. God did not choose Abraham [who was] the first human being to discover the truth about God."[\[22\]](#)

Judah Halevi had famously differentiated the personal and biblical "God of Abraham" from the impersonal and philosophical "God of Aristotle."[\[23\]](#) The paradoxical twist, then, is that for Rambam, the God of Abraham was, in many respects, the God of Aristotle. Since, however, the Israelites coming out of Egyptian slavery were primitive and unable to maintain the unassisted purity of knowledge of God as taught by Abraham, a "divine accommodation" became necessary: "God accommodates the Torah to the primitive needs of the Jewish people at an early stage of their development."[\[24\]](#) Moses thus supports, but does not supplant Abraham, for example, by instituting the sacrificial cult. Since human nature, according to Rambam, cannot be changed rapidly from one extreme to the other, but only gradually, the Torah retained the accepted and prevalent mode of worship at the time, but changes its focus from the gods of paganism to the true God.[\[25\]](#)

Rambam's view, then (in sharp contrast with that of Judah Halevi and his contemporary followers like Shlomo Aviner), "is neither pluralist nor liberal, but it does save Maimonides from the charge of a lack of religious self-confidence, and from the charge of racist particularism."[\[26\]](#) And so, in Kellner's understanding, Rambam, like Isaiah and Amos, was a universalist: all people are

essentially the same, the Torah is true, and all people will ultimately accept the truth of the Torah,<sup>[27]</sup> although without becoming Jews in an ethnic sense,<sup>[28]</sup> and will be some kind of “Jewish non-Jews” or “non-Jewish Jews.”<sup>[29]</sup>

Maimonides denies that Jews as such are in any way different from non-Jews as such. In that case, why remain Jewish? His answer is simple: there is something uniquely special about *Judaism* as such. This unique teaching will ultimately be accepted by all humanity.<sup>[30]</sup>

On the other hand, despite saying that Rambam “is neither pluralist nor liberal,” Kellner does acknowledge that in some limited respects Rambam was a pluralist:<sup>[31]</sup>

Maimonides, after all, was a universalist, not a pluralist, and he was convinced that truth is one, objective, and unchanging – no relativist he. If virtue is knowledge, then ignorance of the truth is immoral and also a form of mental illness. However, on the other hand, because of his universalism, Maimonides adopted a kind of pluralism: there can be salvation outside the synagogue, so long as one accepts the philosophic truth ultimately taught by the synagogue.

At this point, the distinctions seem to fade or at least blur. Moses Mendelssohn, in the second part of his *Jerusalem: Or On Religious Power and Judaism*, differentiated sharply between necessary universal truths of reason and conditional, contingent historical truths “not only in their essential nature but also with regard to the method by which they can be taught, that is, in the way in which men can convince themselves and others of their truth.”<sup>[32]</sup> Rambam, and presumably Kellner, seem to be referring to what Mendelssohn regarded as the necessary truths of reason; but what of contingent historical truths which are the basis of so many conflicting religious claims, whether the revelation at Sinai or the resurrection at Golgotha? Will Christian “non-Jewish Jews” or Jews in a non-ethnic sense, as envisaged by Rambam (as understood by Kellner), or as envisaged by Kellner himself, have to give up Golgotha and in some non-Jewish sense accept Sinai? Let us keep in mind that the universalism of Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*, the end of which we cited above, refers in the penultimate chapter in the uncensored version, to Christians and Muslims recanting the errors and “lies” they inherited:<sup>[33]</sup>

It is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator; for our ways are not His ways, neither are our thoughts His thoughts. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite (Mohammed) who came after him, only served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord . . . But when the true King Messiah will appear and succeed, be exalted and lifted up, they will forthwith recant and realize that they have inherited naught but lies from their fathers, that their prophets and forebears led them astray.

Kellner honestly acknowledges this aspect of Rambam’s thought, and has no problem with it.

In order for Judaic messianism to reach fruition, the world needs Christianity and Islam to pave the way for the messiah’s advent. Maimonides is perhaps the most universalist of premodern Jewish thinkers, but, as a messianic exclusivist, he had no room for non-Jewish religions in the messianic world.<sup>[34]</sup>

Such an emphasis on universalism, Kellner suggests, provides a needed alternative to increasing Jewish particularism (as we saw, for example, above in Aviner). Kellner sees this regrettable trend

as reflecting non-Jewish behavior and discrimination against the Jews as a minority:

I admitted . . . that presenting these two terms in this fashion reflects a prejudice of mine: that the Jewish tradition, from the Bible onward, is fundamentally universalist, becoming ever more particularist as Jewish history became ever more difficult. Over the generations, it became more and more difficult to see the non-Jew as a fellow creature made equally in the image of God. Thus, we find a kind of ethnic particularism developing and growing especially from the Middle Ages onward.[35]

So far, so good, and Kellner's position throughout the book is stated clearly, openly, and with honesty and integrity. I personally share what Kellner calls his universalistic "prejudice." However, the growing particularism he describes so clearly cannot, in all honesty, simply be blamed (or blamed only) on historical circumstances, in other words, on non-Jewish behavior towards Jews. If it is true that the biblical message is essentially universalistic, and that many (quite possibly most) rabbis – especially but not only among *?aredi* ("sectarian Orthodox" or "ultra-Orthodox") circles – today share an increasingly extremist and particularistic approach, the question we face is whether these rabbis do not understand the Torah, or whether they (and not people like Kellner and me) do understand the Torah!

The situation isn't so simple and binary: good Jews persecuted by bad Gentiles. In a recently published article, the eminent historian David Berger, whose many publications include important studies of medieval Jewish apologetics and Jewish-Christian polemics, discusses this problem in light of an important and provocative thesis of another scholar of medieval Judaism, Israel Yuval at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.[36]

The hostile attitude toward Christian society found in medieval Ashkenazic literature is quite well known . . . Expressions of bitter hostility toward Christianity and its adherents are found throughout this literature, most especially in liturgical poetry, even before the catastrophe of the First Crusade in 1096. Israel Yuval has recently argued that these expressions of animosity are not merely reactions to medieval persecutions but rather are rooted in an ancient, more comprehensive worldview, associated with apocalyptic ideas about the ultimate redemption.

This is how Berger's article ends:

The presence of a vision of vengeance and destruction alongside a vision of subjugation and recognition of the faith of Israel expresses a tension between two types of prophecies, two traditions, and two psychological needs. On the one hand, there is the desire for radical, absolute, ultimate vengeance against the oppressor; on the other hand, there is the desire to see one's opponent admit his error not for a passing moment but for untold generations . . . The ironclad faith that the Jew would ultimately be victorious at the end of days made it possible for an oppressed minority to maintain itself even in its contemporary condition. An examination of the various paths that this faith took can help us understand the remarkable phenomenon that manifests itself before our eyes – not the survival of the gentiles at the end of days, but the survival of the Jews in medieval Europe.

It's not that Kellner is wrong in suggesting that external pressures had a deleterious effect, nor that he denies a built-in particularism in various Jewish texts. The question raised by historians like Yuval and Berger is to what extent the particularistic tendencies reflect or antedate persecution, and to what extent they may be an expression of inherent, and perhaps authentic, Jewish teachings. In his "Conclusion" Kellner writes forthrightly:[37]

In each of the chapters of this book, I have taken issue with positions which were once universally held by Jews and which today are still held in certain sectors of the community. My object was not to deny that Jewish texts and traditions teach views which I have here called particularist and which I find objectionable. Denying that would involve ripping out of our history huge swathes of Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, medieval and contemporary rabbinic authorities, and many, many Jews whom I love and with whom I interact on a regular basis . . . Both approaches are inherently false. The Jewish tradition has always had both universalist and particularist elements. My point in this book has been to show that individuals who choose to emphasize the universalist elements of Jewish tradition can often find support in positions held by Maimonides or implied by his explicit positions (the implications of which he may or may not have been aware) . . . I have written an apology, not a polemic; one can defend a point of view while striving to present alternative positions in the best possible light.

Kellner's balanced approach is in sharp contrast with those who pick and choose only those sources which suit their beliefs, and make those sources, and only those sources, representative of Judaism as a whole.[\[38\]](#) However, the problem really is much deeper and broader. If Jews today expect – and are witness to – profound Christian self-examination, especially in light of the Shoah, are we Jews not also required to undergo such self-examination (what in Hebrew is called *?eshbon ha-nefesh*) and come to terms with problematical texts in Jewish literature (as Kellner does, especially in his first chapter)?

The focus on the Islamic and especially the Christian realms in which virtually all Jews lived for so many centuries begs the question we (unlike Rambam) face today, of the status accorded to non-Abrahamic religious traditions, but at least it avoids the trap of Franz Rosenzweig, whose negative view of Islam stands in sharp contrast with his view of Christianity as “the eternal way” (the rays of light, emanating from the Jewish star, and enlightening the pagan world).[\[39\]](#)

In light of these complexities, it seems to me that Kellner has not yet resolved some important difficulties, either in Rambam or in his own thought: given that Rambam was “neither pluralist nor liberal” (certainly not in any contemporary senses of the terms), and that in the end of time both Rambam and Kellner affirm that all humans will ultimately accept the truth of Judaism, even if they will not become Jewish in an ethnic sense, how does such universalism differ in kind and not just degree from triumphalism (however enlightened), and how can we resolve what may be a fundamental internal contradiction in Kellner (if not in Rambam)? Kellner's Rambam is “saved” from “the charge of a lack of religious self-confidence.” But our “self-confidence” today is indeed challenged, as Kellner frankly admits with remarkable honesty and humility:[\[40\]](#)

It is because of that self-confidence that Maimonides has no trouble acknowledging the partial truth of Christianity and Islam. That made sense in his world in his day, but does it make sense in ours? Maimonides lived and thought in a world in which truth was one, objective, unchanging, and in principle accessible. This made excellent sense in his finite, static universe. While I have no desire to admit to any version of epistemological relativism, it cannot be denied that our confidence in what we know has been shaken. The appropriate response to this situation is not, it seems to me, relativism, which makes a mockery of truth and of the possibility of actual communication; nor pluralism, which makes a mockery of truth and of revelation; but, rather, the appropriate response to our predicament ought to be modesty. A person who is modest about her claims to truth, as opposed to absolute about them, is open to the possibility of being inspired . . . by other people whose claims to truth are equally restrained and modest.[\[41\]](#)

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This is not the place to reiterate my own arguments that our knowledge is inevitably conditioned by

various cultural, linguistic, religious, social, and personal factors, but it seems to me that Kellner's acknowledgment of our lack of "self-confidence" and that "what we know has been shaken" approaches and perhaps reaches some degree of epistemological (certainly not moral) relativism. The concern we share that in our post-modern times when people assert the equality of competing "narratives" without regard for facts or empirical and historical truth, and the moral equivalency of all points of view (even on what one might have expected to be a neutral, scientific issue like Covid vaccinations), is a practical moral challenge far more than it is a technical and theoretical epistemological issue. So are Kellner's "modesty," "restraint," and "a lack of self-confidence" in truth claims as opposed to my view of some degree of necessary epistemological relativism a case of a distinction without a difference? Are plural understandings of the truth from different perspectives, or even in that sense plural truths, really the same as no truth? The legitimate epistemological questions cannot be equated with a denial of moral standards, and that all opinions ("narratives" in today's "politically correct" terminology) are equal.

Part of the problem is terminological, and where different thinkers may draw the lines between categories such as "toleration," "pluralism," "relativism," etc., and how they define degrees within each category. Kellner places "tolerance" between "relativism" and "absolutism," and states: "My intention here is to develop a strong version of religious tolerance, without shading over into some form of pluralism and without sacrificing the idea that truth and falsity are important distinctions."[\[42\]](#)

Such a "strong version of religious tolerance" involves acknowledging that other religions have "inherent worth" and are "endowed with intrinsic dignity and metaphysical worth."[\[43\]](#) Kellner then continues: "Once I acknowledge that with respect to other faiths, I am on strong grounds to insist that followers of other religions acknowledge the singular role and inherent worth of Judaism." We need to note that while acknowledging that other traditions have "inherent worth," "intrinsic dignity," and "metaphysical worth" (whatever that last term may mean), Kellner avoids what he would regard as a pluralistic acknowledgment that the other religions are true in some sense (except, perhaps, in the sense that they adopt and acknowledge the truth of Judaism as part of their own tradition), and he defines "theological pluralism [as] the assertion that other religions are no less true than one's own . . . I want to arrive at a position of tolerance without being forced to abandon the claim that truth matters."[\[44\]](#)

In Kellner's view, epistemological relativism means plural truths, and if there are plural truths, there is no truth *per se*.

An epistemological relativist should have no problem agreeing with Judah Halevi's philosopher who deduced from the conflicting truth claims of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that they were all equally false.[\[45\]](#)

Correct, that's what Judah Halevi's philosopher deduces. Keeping in mind, however, that conflicting claims cannot all be simultaneously true, but can all be false,[\[46\]](#) our problem is a double-edged sword: to what extent can and should we recognize truth in other religions, and to what extent can and should we recognize that our own traditions there are claims and myths that are not true, at least not in a literal sense, although possibly in a metaphorical sense or as parables conveying moral lessons. Rambam, of course, was the greatest pioneer in insisting that much confusion ("perplexity") derives from the failure to recognize that much of biblical language is equivocal, metaphorical, or amphibolous, or from failure to understand biblical parables, beginning with the fact that a given story is, indeed, a parable.[\[47\]](#) Kellner's insistence on the "truth" of Judaism to be acknowledged by others fails, in my opinion, to deal with this important lesson taught by our mutual master, Rambam. Should Jews, let alone non-Jews, accept as literally true all kinds of parables – or in less complimentary terms, myths – in Jewish literature? And if Kellner, like Rambam, can acknowledge that much of religious language is not to be taken literally, then

where should we draw the lines, and will Kellner and I, let alone all Jews or even non-Jews, agree on what should be taken as literal “truth” and what is not “true,” certainly when taken literally? Who is authorized to make such determinations? Let us keep in mind that when Rambam categorized an otherwise pious, righteous, and moral Jew who believes in a corporeal God as a *min* (heretic), his critic Ravad (Rabbi Abraham ben David) commented:

Why did he call such a person a heretic, when some who were greater and better than he followed this opinion, according to what they saw in the Bible and even more, according to what they saw in *aggadot* (legends) which corrupt opinions?[48]

What, then, is left of Kellner’s desire to remain faithful to the concept of “truth” and consistent rejection of some kind of epistemological relativism (on these or other grounds), and thereby, affirmation of some level of pluralism?

Toleration, even in a strong sense, may imply only recognition of the equality, dignity, and worth of another person, without acknowledging the truth of that person’s beliefs. In 1994, at an interreligious conference in Jerusalem, then Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI who is generally known for his conservative approach, asked whether we can move from mere toleration to mutual acceptance. However, as is often the case with thinkers, posing the question is often far more important than the answers later offered. As became clear in his subsequent official declaration *Dominus Iesus*, Ratzinger’s call for mutual acceptance meant only respect for the personal equality of the other, not acceptance or recognition of the validity of the other’s doctrinal position. Such acceptance is at best *de facto*, not *de jure*, and according to Ratzinger, “the Church’s constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de jure*.”[49]

Finally, the teachings of Rambam, whose universalism Kellner so admires (although he also openly criticizes various other aspects of Rambam’s “mistakes,”[50] especially his intellectual elitism), are not free from various other problems relevant to Kellner’s agenda. These problems in Rambam’s writings do not undermine the general universalism to which Kellner’s book is devoted, nor do they significantly affect Kellner’s own explicit agenda of a “Maimonidean Theology of the Other.” Nevertheless, they should be addressed, at least for those who have an academic interest in Rambam’s thought and Kellner’s prolific scholarship.

Let us examine three points in Rambam’s writings, which pose at least a tension, if not an inconsistency, or perhaps actual contradiction in his general universalism and functionalist (as opposed to Halevi’s essentialist) approach. It may well be possible to explain them (and I offer some possibilities), but if Kellner is correct in his universalist reading of Rambam (and I think he is), they should be taken into account. Kellner and I have discussed these points on occasion, and I include them here for consideration.

#### (1) “Holy Seed”

An ostensibly “essentialist” phrase may be found in Rambam’s codification of the “Laws of Forbidden Intercourse,”[51] discussing a Jew having relations with a non-Jewish servant woman (*shif?ah*), for which the punishment of lashes was not instituted in the Torah but only by the later “scribes” (*soferim*) with a lower level of authority:

Let not this sin be light in your sight since it does not involve [being punished by] lashes according to the Torah. For this leads the son to deviate from the Lord, because the son of the [non-Jewish] servant woman is a slave and not an Israelite, and is found to cause the holy seed (*zera` ha-qodesh*) to be defiled.

The term “holy seed” comes from Ezra 9:2, in the context of the widespread intermarriage of Jewish men with non-Jewish women whom they had to divorce:[52] “They have taken for themselves and for their sons the daughters [of non-Jews], so that the holy seed became mixed with the peoples of the lands.” Rambam was surely aware of the source of the term. Does not this term, and its context both in Ezra and the *Mishneh Torah* have essentialist connotations, far more in line with Judah Halevi’s belief in an essential difference (as Kellner has discussed) between Jews and non-Jews than with Rambam’s own functionalist approach?

One can, of course, find ways to explain Rambam’s use of the term in a functionalist manner. For example: Rambam’s passage maintains that intermarriage leads to abandonment of the Torah (“to deviate from the Lord”); the Jewish family being so central to observance of the Torah, without the framework of the family following the Torah, their “holiness” is defiled and lost. “Holiness” (as Kellner has pointed out in various places) is not a built-in, and inherent, or “essential” category, but a functional quality of the Torah’s way of life. If this is a correct understanding of the passage, it simply means that Rambam adopted Ezra’s phrase in the context of his discussion of the halakhic prohibition of such relations going back to Ezra’s dealing with the problem.

(2) “Love your fellow as yourself”

Rambam’s interpretation of Leviticus 19:18, the commandment to “love your fellow as yourself,”[53] consistently and explicitly maintains that the commandment applies to the *re`a* (“fellow”), namely one’s fellow Jew, and not to the non-Jew who is not included in the category of *re`a*.

In his Judeo-Arabic “Book of the Commandments,”[54] positive commandment 206, we see that Rambam explicitly limits the commandment to “my brother in religion:”

The two hundred and sixth commandment is the commandment we were commanded to love each other, as we love ourselves, and that my compassion and love for my brother in religion be like my love and compassion for myself, for his money and for his body, and that whatever I wish for myself I should wish for him as himself, and whatever I hate for myself or for one who keeps close to me I should hate for him as himself. This is what was meant by saying, “Love your fellow as yourself.”

Twice in the *Mishneh Torah*,[55] Rambam similarly restricts the reference to *re`a* (fellow) in the commandment to one’s fellow Jew.

It is a commandment for every person (*adam*) to love every other Israelite as himself (*ke-gufo*), as it says, “Love your fellow as yourself.” Therefore, one must praise him and take pity on his property,[56] just as one takes pity on one’s own property and desires honor for oneself.[57]

And again:

According to their (i.e., the rabbis’) words, it is a positive commandment to visit the sick, to comfort mourners, to participate in a funeral, and to dower a bride . . . These are acts of kindness performed by a person, which have no fixed measure. Although all these commandments are of rabbinic authority, they fall under the general rule (*kelal*) of “Love your fellow as yourself.” Whatever you want others to do to you, you do for your brother in the Torah and in the commandments (*le-a?ikha ba-Torah uva-mi?vot*).[58]

How, then, can we explain Rambam's departure from his characteristic universalism in his particularistic understanding of Leviticus 19:18? One possibility, of course, is inconsistency, but we would expect more of a thinker of Rambam's stature. A second possibility is that Rambam is less of a universalist than many would like to think, but that flies in the face of the clear universalism of his reading of the "image" of God as universal human intellectual apprehension (discussed above).<sup>[59]</sup> A third possibility is that some readers of his works differentiate between "Rambam" the rabbi and "Maimonides" the philosopher, but that leads us to conclude that he suffered from an intellectual and spiritual split personality, a conclusion I find impossible.

A fourth possibility is that we always need to read Rambam contextually. Rambam's approach in general was to categorize concepts and explicate terms (as he did for much of Part I of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, beginning with *ʔelem*, the "image" of God). Thus, for example, in his *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 3:9 he categorizes and explains different types of dissident belief, which must not be confused with each other, distinguishing from each other the categories of *min* ("sectarian"), *apiqoros* ("heretic"), *kofer ba-torah* ("denier of the Torah"), and *meshumad* (apostate). Similarly, in his Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Sanhedrin, Ch. 10 (where he lists his "13 Foundations [or: Principles]" of Judaism), he carefully differentiates, and explains at length, concepts frequently conflated with each other, including *ʔolam ha-ba* ("the world to come"), *teʔiyat ha-metim* ("resurrection of the dead"), *gan ʔeden* ("the Garden of Eden," i.e., paradise), and *yemot ha-mashiʔa* ("the messianic era").

Keeping in mind, then, this general approach in which terms and concepts must be clearly understood and differentiated, Rambam's interpretation of Leviticus 19:18 may simply mean that he understood – like many before and after him – the term *reʔa* in our verse contextually as referring only to another Jew, just as the first part of the verse immediately before our phrase refers explicitly to *benei ʔamekha* ("the children of your people"), and the previous verses also refer explicitly to *ʔamekha* ("your people") and to *aʔikha* ("your brother"). In other words, Rambam may simply, in his typical manner, be attempting to be terminologically and conceptually precise: as he read it contextually (and not unreasonably) the term *reʔa* in this specific verse refers to one's fellow Jew. That limitation, however, does not undermine Rambam's general universalistic outlook, and the fact that this verse refers to another Jew does not mean that there are not grounds elsewhere for a broader ethic.

### (3) The sacrificial cult

Rambam's theory of the origins of the sacrificial cult (in *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:32) is mentioned by Kellner, as discussed above.<sup>[60]</sup> To reiterate: the sacrificial cult was, in effect, a concession to the primitive intellectual and spiritual state of the Israelites coming out of Egyptian slavery. Since human nature cannot be changed rapidly from one extreme to the other, but only gradually, the Torah retained the accepted and prevalent sacrificial mode of worship of the time, but changes its focus from the gods of paganism to the true God of Israel.

On the other hand, towards the end of the *Mishneh Torah*, in his discussion of the messianic era, which will be a natural state of affairs in the ideal future, without any changes in the natural order, Rambam explicitly stated that the Temple will be rebuilt and the sacrificial cult will be restored:<sup>[61]</sup>

King Messiah will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its former state and original sovereignty. He will rebuild the sanctuary and gather the dispersed of Israel. All the ancient laws will be reinstated in his days; sacrifices will again be offered (*maqrivin qorbanot*); the Sabbatical and Jubilee years will again be observed in accordance with the commandments set forth in the Torah.

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How shall we reconcile this explicit statement with Rambam's view of the sacrificial cult as a

concession to the primitive Israelites following their redemption from Egyptian enslavement? Why should a primitive practice we presumably have or will have outgrown in messianic times be restored? Once again, we can suggest (as we did above) that Rambam was unaware of any inconsistency here, or that we should create a dichotomy between Rambam in *halakhah* and Maimonides in philosophy, both of which are unreasonable options. Turning to the contextual perspective, we are still left with a rather obvious difference between Rambam's theory of the origins and reasons for the sacrificial cult (in the *Guide of the Perplexed*) and his messianic vision of the restoration of that cult (in the *Mishneh Torah*).

I can offer only one possible attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction, or in the very least, inconsistency, between the two passages. In the nineteenth century, the Reform movement frequently offered historical explanations (as did Rambam) for various biblical practices and institutions, but with conclusions radically different from Rambam's. The Reform movement believed that we have progressed from the primitive state of affairs in biblical times, and therefore no longer have any need for those practices and institutions.<sup>[62]</sup> Rambam never drew such a conclusion that "they" were primitive, but "we" are not and have progressed.

Of course the human species has progressed technologically and scientifically, i.e., in our accumulated knowledge. That, however, does not mean that we are in any way more intelligent than Aristotle, or wiser and with a greater spiritual insight than Isaiah, Micah, Amos, etc., or more moral than the ancients. Let us keep in mind that the Shoah was perpetrated by the country and culture that was in many respects the most "advanced" in the world in the first decades of the twentieth century, not only in technology and science, but in philosophy, music, etc. If my understanding of Rambam is correct, he would have responded to the 19th-century Reformers: "Of course they were primitive – but what makes you think that we are not?" Indeed, his description of educational progress of people to higher intellectual and spiritual levels (in his Commentary to the Mishnah, Introduction to "Pereq ?eleq" [Sanhedrin, Ch. 10]) suggests that primitiveness is indeed a stage in the history of humanity, but is not merely a historical stage (in the life of the Jewish people or other groups). Primitiveness is, in my understanding of Rambam, an existential situation all humans must grow out of and overcome individually and collectively as they develop intellectually, spiritually, and morally.

If, then, my attempt to reconcile Rambam's theory of the origins of the sacrificial cult with its future restoration is correct, we come back to Kellner's book, which attempts, through Rambam, to promote a different and better way in which people, despite their differing truth claims, can relate more positively and beneficially to "the other."

In many respects like Hermann Cohen over a century ago (although Cohen was no Zionist, and Kellner strongly is), Kellner thus affirms a "Jewish messianism" as taught by Rambam:

Maimonidean naturalist and universalist messianism is both a challenge to create a world in which the messiah could come, and a promise that the human condition is not ultimately tragic. Until that message is universally adopted and acted upon, Judaism still has a task.<sup>[63]</sup>

In effect, Maimonides, Cohen, and [Steven] Schwarzschild teach us we ought to devote ourselves to the project of creating a messiah-worthy world.<sup>[64]</sup>

- [1] Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- [2] (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
- [3] Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999; second edition, 2006).
- [4] Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- [5] (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009).
- [6] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2016).
- [7] Littman Library of Jewish Civilization (Liverpool, 2020).
- [8] (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021). In this context it should be noted that besides his many important works of academic scholarship, Kellner has devoted in recent years a remarkable and admirable commitment, talent, and expenditure of time, publishing critiques and rebuttals of the disturbing and growing phenomenon of discrediting Israel and Zionism, calls for B.D.S., and opposition to the very existence of Israel as the State of the Jewish People, even, and especially by a number of Jewish intellectuals and professors of Jewish Studies.
- [9] Mishnah Avot 5:17. In my understanding, this passage in the Mishnah means that “a dispute which is not for the sake of heaven [which] will not persist” means that a decision must be reached, for example in torts, to resolve and put an end to the dispute, whereas “a dispute [which] is for the sake of heaven” can never come to any final resolution, because *elu ve-elui divrei Elohim 'ayyim*, usually translated as “these and those are the words of the living God” but perhaps should be better translated as “these and those are the living words of God” (cf. Babylonian Talmud, *'Eruvin* 13b and elsewhere). Since the word *'ayyim* (“living”) is in the plural, it seems to me that it cannot apply to “God” but to “the words.” When the schools of Hillel and Shammai both claimed to be correct in their conflicting halakhic ruling, a “heavenly voice” (*bat qol*) pronounced that “these and those are the living words of God, but the *halakhah* is according to the school of Hillel.”
- [10] Kellner (p. 2) refers to “contemporary Orthodox Judaism in Israel (*dati le'umi*), the community in which I live.” One of the ways in which he and I differ is that, although my Jewish practice (like Kellner’s) is moderately traditional, I find it paradoxical that the community which believes its approach to be “true” to the Torah has taken on the Christian label “Orthodox” (as has, *au contraire*, the Reform movement), and in any event I find points of theoretical value and practical importance across the Jewish religious spectrum. I, therefore, remain “non-partisan,” and refuse to “hyphenate my Judaism” with any of today’s denominations. Kellner (p. 87) states: “I do not believe in the existence of nonhyphenated human beings. To be human is to be born into a culture that supports and is supported by a community.” I fully agree – we are all “hyphenated” human beings – but that does not require me to “hyphenate” my internal Jewish identity.
- [11] For example, see Menachem Kellner and Jolene Kellner, “Respectful Disagreement: A Response to Raphael Jospe,” in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, ed. Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), pp. 123-133, responding to my essay “Pluralism Out of the Sources of Judaism: The Quest for Religious Pluralism Without Relativism” in that volume, pp. 87-122.
- [12] *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:1, English translation by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 22.
- [13] *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:54. English translation by Shlomo Pines, p. 638.
- [14] Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5.
- [15] *We Are Not Alone*, Preface, pp. xiii-xiv. Cohen, of course, was opposed to Zionism and believed in a symbiosis of Judaism and Germanism. Menachem Kellner is certainly a committed Zionist.
- [16] *Ibid*, p. 105.
- [17] A charming example of Kellner’s informality and humor may be found in his discussion of “Maimonidean mistakes” in chapter 5 (p. 130, note 80): “Maimonides was an extreme intellectual elitist. Hearing me talk about his elitist views once so annoyed my wife that I posted a list of Maimonides’ mistakes on our refrigerator so she would be angry with him, not me. His intellectual elitism led the list.”
- [18] Cf. Ch. 1, pp. 2-3, where Kellner has translated a passage by Avineri into English. On what determines Jewish particularity, cf. my “Jewish Particularity from Judah Ha-Levi to Mordecai Kaplan: Implications for Defining Jewish Philosophy,” in my *Jewish Philosophy: Foundations and Extensions*, Vol. Two (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008), pp. 19-34.
- [19] *Ibid*, p. 6. Cf. pp. 82-83.
- [20] *Ibid*, p. 27.
- [21] *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:63. Abraham essentially came to a knowledge of God through philosophical examining and instruction (*nazar wa-ta'lim*). Rambam’s view ultimately goes back to the rabbinic exegesis of Genesis 12:5, “and the persons (*nefesh*) they had acquired in ?aran” as meaning, in the words of Targum Onkelos: “the people they had made subservient to the Torah in ?aran,” in other words, that Abraham taught others the truth about the one God.
- [22] Kellner, *op. cit.* p. 14.
- [23] Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* 4:16.
- [24] Kellner, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- [25] Rambam, *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:32; Kellner, pp. 25-26.
- [26] *Ibid*, p. 31.
- [27] *Ibid*, p. 39.
- [28] Kellner strongly rejects my characterization of his position (based on Rambam) as a type of “enlightened triumphalism.” See his “Response” (mentioned *supra*, note 11).
- [29] *Ibid*, p. 91, note 23.
- [30] *Ibid*, p. 52. Cf. pp. 83-84.
- [31] *Ibid*, p., 91, note 23.
- [32] Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings*, edited and translated by Alfred Jospe (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 62; cf. the translation by Allan Arkush, with commentary by Alexander Altmann (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1983), pp. 90-91.
- [33] *Mishneh Torah*, Book XIV: Judges, Chapter 11. Translation by Abraham Hershman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), cited in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), pp. 226-227.
- [34] Kellner, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
- [35] *Ibid*, p. 97 and again on p. 121.
- [36] David Berger, “The Fate of the Gentiles” in *TABLET* (22 October 2021), discussing these questions and the challenge posed by Israel Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- [37] Kellner, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-163.
- [38] For example, Isaak Markus Jost (1793-1860), a liberal German-Jewish historian and preacher, wrote: “The love of our neighbor leads us and guides us in all our actions. We hereby unanimously nullify any words uttered at any time which may have left any impression that we have contravened the Torah precept . . . Any slight hint that our Torah makes a distinction between Jews and non-Jews is null and void. We have no part in it, now or ever.” Translation by Asaf Yedidya in “Between Reform and Apologetics: The Public Letter by Isaak Marcus Jost on ‘Love Your Neighbor’ and Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer’s Response” (*Zutot* 10 [2012]), pp. 34-35.
- [39] As I have written elsewhere, I reject the notion that it is for Jews to determine that Christianity alone is “the way” for non-Jews. Either we have pluralism or we don’t, but pluralism – or even Kellner’s “strong tolerance” – cannot be a merely a duality of legitimate religions. As for what Rosenzweig meant by Christianity as “the eternal way,” my teacher Nahum Glatzer – who had been a young associate of Rosenzweig – agreed that Rosenzweig’s view of Christianity reflected his biography, namely his early attraction to Christianity and intention to convert, and that his assigning to Christianity alone the positive mission of serving as “the eternal way” cannot otherwise be justified. Conversely, some of my colleagues today understand “the eternal way” as negative: what is eternally on the way never ultimately arrives at the truth.
- [40] *Ibid*, p. 40.
- [41] Kellner refers here to the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.
- [42] *Ibid*, p. 105.
- [43] *Ibid*, p. 107, adopting terminology from the Statement of the (Orthodox) Rabbinical Council of America, 3-5 February, 1964.
- [44] *Ibid*, p. 114.
- [45] Kellner, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- [46] An absurd example: the conflicting claims that Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad were the first president of the U.S.A. are all false.

[47] *Guide of the Perplexed*, Introduction.

[48] Ravad, gloss (*hasagah*) to *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 3:7. Note that Ravad himself did not affirm any corporeal notions of God, which he regarded as based on “corrupt opinions” in *aggadot*, but he rejected the right and authority of Rambam to categorize such belief as heresy. Kellner cites this passage, with a different translation, on p. 130.

[49] Declaration “Dominus Iesus” on the Unity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (6 August 2000). Available on the Vatican website.

The Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or *in principle*). . . 22. *Equality*, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ — who is God himself made man — in relation to the founders of the other religions.

Benedict's successor, Pope Francis, has gone beyond this position in the direction of *de jure* pluralism. In his visit to the United Arab Emirates, he co-signed with Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, a document, “Human Fraternity: For World Peace and Living Together” (4 February 2019), which states *inter alia*:

Freedom is the right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism and diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in his wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept.

The document is available on the Vatican link:

<http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2019/2/4/fratellanza-umana.html>.

[50] Kellner, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-132,

[51] *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Holiness, “Laws of Forbidden Intercourse” 12:13.

[52] The term is also found in Isaiah 6:13, but in a different context.

[53] See my forthcoming “Love Your Fellow as Yourself: Universalism and Particularism in Jewish Exegesis of Leviticus 19:18” in *JC Relations*.

[54] My translation is based on the Arabic and Hebrew edition of Yosef Kafi?, *Sefer Ha-Mi?vot* (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1971), p. 163. An English translation, *The Commandments* by Charles Chavel (London: Soncino Press, 1967) was based on the Hebrew translation of the book.

[55] For an exhaustive study of this work, cf. Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

[56] Literally: money.

[57] *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Moral Dispositions and Ethical Conduct 6:3.

[58] *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Judges, Laws of Mourning 14:1.

[59] In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:1.

[60] Rambam, *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:32; Kellner, pp. 25-26.

[61] *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Judges, Laws of Kings and Their Wars 11:1. My slight changes in the English translation by Abraham Hershman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), cited in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), p. 222.

[62] Moses Mendelssohn opposed on several grounds the notion that the human species progresses, as proposed by his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. See the discussions in Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama Press, 1973), pp. 539-542, and my “Moses Mendelssohn: A Medieval Modernist” in my *Jewish Philosophy: Foundations and Extensions*, Vol. 2 (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008), ch. 10, pp. 205-242

[63] Kellner, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

[64] *Ibid*, p. 104. On Cohen and Kellner's teacher Steven Schwarzschild, see p. 91, note 23.