



Anti-Eschatology: Maimonides on the Messianic Era and the World to Come

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I. PREFACE

Besides various passages in the Tanakh (Hebrew/Jewish Scripture) which deal explicitly or implicitly, or which can be interpreted as dealing, with aspects of *a?arit ha-yim* (“the end of days”, i.e., some time in the future), there exists a broad spectrum of diverse Jewish eschatological literature, including naturalistic, apocalyptic, individual, national, and universal themes going back to 2nd Temple times, found in apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Rabbinic literature, and then in medieval texts.

In a sense, modern and contemporary Jewish arguments relating to Zionism and messianism also may reflect eschatological beliefs.

As for Zionism and the State of Israel, besides purely secular, nationalist, and security considerations – especially after the Shoah (Holocaust) – the renewal of Jewish sovereignty in Israel is widely seen in “religious Zionism” as *reshit tzemi?at ge’ulatenu*, “the beginning of the flourishing of our redemption.” Just as secular medical activity, building hospitals and medical technology are not seen as incompatible with praying to God for healing, but rather as the essential human component in implementing divine welfare, so, too, the secular activities of building a renewed Jewish state are seen not as pre-empting divine redemption, but as taking the first active steps to effect it.

Conversely, in certain circles, especially among some vocal *?areidi* (sectarian or ultra-Orthodox) groups, Zionism and the renewal of Jewish statehood are seen as an illegitimate human rebellion against the divine messianic initiative. Jews must not take an active role in the redemption, but must passively await God’s free establishment of the messianic era, however understood.

Zionism was also opposed on liberal, universalist grounds, for example by the German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), for whom the true Jewish homeland is the universal messianic future of all humanity; by negating their own separate nationhood, Jews pave the way for the ultimate union of all humanity.^[1] Other secular Jewish opposition to Zionism was found among socialists and Communists who opposed particular nationalism, and what they perceived to be colonialism, and believed that the solution to “the Jewish problem” lay in the world-wide revolutionary class struggle^[2].

A different contemporary dispute reflecting eschatological concerns relates to the controversy over the beliefs of elements in the Lubavitch-Chabad Hasidic movement who viewed or continue to view their late “Rebbe” Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) as the messiah.^[3]

Returning, then, to pre-modern and traditional Jewish literature, if by “eschatology” one means the belief in a supra-natural end of time, then the radical and rationalist interpretation of the messianic era (*yemot ha-mashia?*) and the “world to come” (*olam ha-ba*) in naturalistic terms of Rambam (Moses Maimonides, 1135/8 -1204) constitutes a revolutionary “anti-eschatology” against the majority traditional opinion both before and after him,^[4] and in certain respects, by its rationalist,

this-worldly naturalism, provides a precedent for modern Zionism.

II. MEDIEVAL RATIONALIST-TRADITIONALIST ESCHATOLOGY PRE-MAIMONIDES: SA`ADIAH GA`ON

Sa`adiah Ga`on (882-942) was one of the first medieval Jewish philosophers, but in a sense he established a “tradition” of Jewish philosophy in terms of his impact on subsequent generations.^[5] His *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (Arabic: *Kitab al-Amanat w'al-I`tiqadat*; Hebrew: *Sefer Ha-Emunot v'ha-De`ot*) Sa`adiah – reflecting the views of Islamic Mu`tazilah Kalam – suggests that in light of injustice in this world, God’s absolute justice necessitates there being the world to come for appropriate reward/punishment. Just as body and soul are united in this world and act together (9:1), so in the world to come, reward and punishment will affect body and soul together in resurrection, a supra-natural miracle, which is more rationally possible (since it is not *ex nihilo*) than creation *ex nihilo* (#7 in the Ibn Tibbon Hebrew translation). Therefore, biblical passages alluding to resurrection should be taken at face value and not metaphorically (7:2).^[6] In short, Sa`adiah employs rationalist arguments to support traditional eschatological beliefs, in which resurrection is taken literally as the miraculous restoration of body and soul, and is associated with the concept of the world to come. Such traditionalism was – and is – widely followed in subsequent literature. Rambam, however, represents a rebellion against such a traditional approach and a radical reinterpretation of eschatological texts.

III. ANTI-ESCHATOLOGY: MOSES MAIMONIDES (RAMBAM : Rabbi Moses ben Maimon)

In his early “Letter to [the Jewish Community of] Yemen (c. 1172, Rambam explained at length that, over the years, false messiahs have deceived thousands of Jews. Attempting to calculate the time of the messianic redemption only confuses people and leads to disappointment and loss of belief. “Calculating the end” (*?ishuv ha-ketz*) is therefore prohibited in the Talmud.^[7] Moreover, if the date of the deliverance from Egypt is not clear (did the predicted 400 years predicted in Genesis 15:13 begin with Jacob’s migration to Egypt or with subsequent enslavement?),^[8] all the more confusion pertains to the future redemption. Eschatological speculation, in short, is dangerous.

In his subsequent “Commentary to the Mishnah,” Rambam discusses various concepts, including “the world to come” (*`olam ha-ba*), the messianic era (*yemot ha-mashia?*), and resurrection (*te?iyat ha-metim*). The problem is that people tend to conflate these terms, all of which are distinct and refer to different concepts. Precise terminology is the key to precise thinking.

The Mishnah (“Pereq ?eleq” – Sanhedrin, ch. 10) states:

All Israel have a portion in the world to come (*`olam ha-ba*) . . . But these are the ones who do not have a portion in the world to come: One who says there is no resurrection (*te?iyat ha-metim*) [according to the Torah]; that the Torah is not divinely revealed (*min ha-shamayim*), and an Apikoros.^[9]

In his lengthy commentary to this passage (leading to his formulation of his “Thirteen Principles”),^[10] Rambam sharply differentiates these terms, which must not be confused or conflated with each other.

(a) The World to Come (*`Olam Ha-Ba*)

The sages,^[11] peace be on them, said that in the world to come there is no eating, drinking, washing, anointing, or sexual intercourse. Rather, the righteous are sitting with their crowns on

their heads and enjoy the light of the divine presence (*shekhinah*). The meaning of their saying ‘with crowns on their heads’ is the existence of the soul in the existence of what it knows, and that [the soul] and [its knowledge] are one thing, as the great philosophers have mentioned. . . Their saying ‘enjoy the light of the divine presence’ means that those souls enjoy what they comprehend of God . . . The ultimate end and felicity are the attainment of this exalted rank . . . The utter unhappiness is for that soul to be cut off and to perish and not to have any existence, and this is what the Torah refers to as being cut off (*karet*) . . . The garden of Eden is a fertile place on earth . . . which God will reveal to humans in the future . . . But Gehinom is a term for the sorrow which the wicked will suffer, but the Talmud but does not describe that sorrow.

In other words, “the world to come” is a term referring to the immortality of the intellect (not the lower faculties of the soul), in proportion to its attainment of knowledge of God, in light of the Aristotelian identity of mind, thinking, and object of thought^[12]. This immortality, however, is a function of knowledge, not ethical behavior, and is impersonal, since the body – which individuates us from each other – no longer exists. The individual intellect simply becomes an indistinguishable part of universal knowledge, just as water thrown from a pail into the sea, in the absence of the pail, is no longer distinguishable from the water of the sea. Moreover, it is only “to come” from the perspective of the living individual, but “the world to come” already exists, alongside this world.

In his later Hebrew work, the Mishneh Torah (Code of Law), “Laws of Repentance” Ch. 8, Rambam repeats and expands of his concept of “the world to come,” and states:

The world to come now exists . . . It is called the ‘world to come’ only because human beings will enter into it at a time subsequent to the life of the present world in which we now exist with body and soul, and this existence comes first.

Rambam’s critic Ravad comments in his *hasagah* (critical note) here:^[13]

The words of this man seem to me to be close to one who denies resurrection of the bodies [and affirms immortality] only of the soul. By my life, this is not what the sages thought . . . All these [rabbinic statements] prove that they will stand alive in their bodies. Perhaps the creator will give them strong and healthy bodies, like the bodies of the angels, and the body of Elijah . . . and the crowns are meant literally, not figuratively.

However, we must recall that Rambam is not discussing resurrection here, but the world to come, and, as mentioned above, in his commentary to the Mishnah, Rambam is attempting to clarify the several terms by showing that they refer to distinct concepts.

(b) Resurrection (*Tehiyat Ha-Metim*)

Resurrection of the dead is one of the foundations (*qa`ida; yesod*) of the Torah of Moses and there is neither religion (Arabic: *din*; Hebrew: *dat*) nor membership in the Jewish community (*millah*) for one who does not believe this. It is for the righteous . . . for how can the wicked live, since they are dead even during their lives. Thus the sages said:^[14] “The wicked even in their lives are called dead, and the righteous even in their death are called alive.” Know that a person will surely die and will disintegrate into that from which he was compounded.

In this passage Rambam seems to suggest – or actually suggests – that resurrection is a metaphor. Later in this passage, when discussing the thirteenth of his “Thirteen Principles,” and in contrast with the first twelve principles which are explicated, he merely states:

The thirteenth foundation is the resurrection of the dead, which we have already explained.

As we shall see, Rambam was subject to sharp criticism for his alleged – or real – denial of actual,

physical resurrection, and was forced to respond to this criticism. However, in this text, having explained his understanding of “the world to come” and of “resurrection,” Rambam turns to “the messianic era.”

(c) The Messianic Era (*Yemot Ha-Mashi’a*)

The days of the messiah are the time when sovereignty will return to Israel, and they will return to the Land of Israel. The king will rule from Zion . . . All the nations will establish peace treaties with him . . . But nothing in existence will change from what it is now, except that Israel will have sovereignty. This is what the Sages said:[\[15\]](#) “There is no difference between this world and the days of the messiah, except for our subjugation to the nations.” . . . The great benefit that will be in that era is that we will rest from our subjugation to the kingdom of evil which prevents us from performing all the commandments. [Then] knowledge will increase . . . wars will cease . . . and everyone in those days will attain the great perfection by which he will merit the life of the world to come. The messiah will die and his son will rule after him and his son’s son . . . In such a condition the world to come will be attained. But the ultimate purpose is only the world to come, and it is for this that one strives...

In Rambam’s explicit view, the messianic era is thus understood entirely naturalistically. It involves no miracles, no change in the natural order, and (unlike “the world to come” which already exists) it refers to a future state in this world, involving the national restoration of Israel, inaugurating a period of universal peace and well-being. In such a future state, freed from the toils and tribulations of the present world in which we live and which prevent us from attaining the knowledge, conditions will then be more conducive to people devoting themselves to the attainment of knowledge which, in turn, is the key to “the world to come.”

Similarly, in the very last section of his *Mishneh Torah* (Code of Law), Laws of Kings and Their Wars, Ch. 12, Rambam returns to a discussion of the messianic era.[\[16\]](#)

1. Let no one think that in the days of the messiah any of the laws of nature will be set aside . . . The world will follow its normal course . . .

4. The sages and prophets did not long for the days of the messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world or rule over the heathens or be exalted by the nations . . . Their aspiration was that Israel be free to devote itself to the Torah and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb it, and thus be worthy of life in the world to come.

In addition, in the uncensored version of “The Laws of Kings and Their Wars,” Ch. 11, Rambam, while regarding Christianity and Islam as faulty religions,[\[17\]](#) sees them as serving a messianic purpose, “to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord.”

But if he does not meet with full success, or is slain, it is obvious that he is not the messiah promised in the Torah . . . But even of Jesus of Nazareth, who imagined that he was the messiah, but was put to death by the court . . . has there ever been a greater stumbling than this? All the prophets affirmed that the messiah would redeem Israel, save them, gather their dispersed, and confirm the commandments . . . But it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator . . . All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite (Muhammad) who came after him, only served to clear the way for the messiah-king, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord.[\[18\]](#)

To reiterate: both “the world to come” and “the messianic era” are understood naturalistically by Rambam, and “resurrection” is treated metaphorically. The difference, then, is that “the world to come” already exists, and refers to the impersonal immortality of the intellect (the rational soul) in proportion to the knowledge it attained, whereas “the messianic era” is a future and better natural state in this world, in which nothing in the natural order is changed.

IV. RAMBAM’S “TREATISE ON RESURRECTION”

In response to widespread criticism and charges that he denied resurrection, in 1191 Rambam wrote his *Treatise on Resurrection*.^[19] In his defense, Rambam noted that he had, after all, included resurrection as the 13th of his “Thirteen Principles” in his commentary to the Mishnah “Pereq ?eleq.” Our focus and emphasis, however, should not be on resurrection, but on the world to come as the final purpose of life. The masses only understand corporeal existence, but what is incorporeal is more real than the material. The Torah only deals with reward and punishment in this world, within nature, and does not mention immortality or resurrection. The generation of the Exodus, who had just been freed from slavery, and had limited understanding, needed (like children) the promise and threat of immediate reward / punishment. Whenever possible, Rambam explained, I reconcile Torah and reason and interpret events as part of the natural order. The world to come is part of the natural order, whereas resurrection is a supra-natural miracle. To deny the theoretical possibility (not the actual fact)^[20] of resurrection is to deny the very possibility of miracles, including the theophany at Sinai. Natural events persist and are permanent, whereas supra-natural miracles are transient and temporary; if they persisted permanently, they would be seen to be natural, not miracles, and would no longer be effective as “signs.” There is no necessary connection between resurrection and the messianic era. In short, for Rambam, the implication of miracles necessarily being temporary and transient, is that after the resurrection there is also a temporary and transient stage, followed by a second death.

V. CRITICISM OF RAMBAM^[21] AND REAFFIRMATION OF ESCHATOLOGY: RAMBAN

Some of Rambam’s critics accepted his “Treatise on Resurrection” at face value. From their perspective, Rambam’s reaffirmation of resurrection sufficed as a response to the criticism. This was not, however, the position of Ramban (Nahmanides – Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, 1194-1270), a major figure in the history of *halakhah*, exegesis, and Kabbalah, who participated in the Barcelona Disputation of 1263.^[22] Ramban played a moderate role in the second stage of the Maimonidean controversy (1230-1235), and both criticized and praised Rambam. Ramban opposed both the rabbinic bans on Rambam’s works and philosophy, and the counter-bans. He argued that Rambam was justified in what he did, because he had not written his philosophic works for the Jews of (Christian) France, who had no background in philosophy and science, but for Jews in the (Islamic) south and east who were confronting the challenges of rationalist philosophy available in Arabic.

According to Ramban,^[23] what is regarded as natural order is, in fact, a “hidden miracle” or “secret miracle” (*nes nistar*), involving no violation of natural order, in contrast with a public and exceptional “obvious miracle” or “public miracle” (*nes galuy*), violating the natural order.^[24] Because of his explicit and important affirmation of “obvious/public miracles,” Ramban reaffirmed the traditional and holistic view (as in Sa`adiah Ga`on) of the unity of body and soul in this life and in physical resurrection. Contra Rambam, therefore, Ramban emphasized that, following the resurrection, the messiah and his generation will live forever in refined bodies. In his “Chapter on Recompense” (“Sha`ar Ha-Gemul”),^[25] he rejected Rambam’s approach point by point.

In contrast with Rambam’s view that the ultimate reward is “the world to come” and that the punishment is *karet* (i.e., not attaining the world to come), Ramban (p. 283) reaffirms the notion of

reward **in** the world to come, and the final punishment is in Gehinom (Gehenna). However, that punishment – the punishment of Gehinom – is a river of fire, and comes immediately after death, not in the messianic era or world to come (p. 288), and *karet* is not being cut off from the world to come (as in Rambam), but is a term for punishment and misery (p. 289).

According to Ramban, Rambam's views on "the world to come" in the Laws of Repentance, ch. 8 (cited above) are contrary to the Torah and the rabbis. Rambam's "words corrupt opinions (*meshabeshot ha-de`ot*) . . . and do not accord with our view" (p. 291). The world to come follows the resurrection (p. 293), and Rambam's view that in the messianic era everyone will die again is contrary to the view of "the people of our tradition" (*anshei kabbalatenu*), that after the resurrection there will be no death (p. 310), and that after the resurrection will come eternal life (p. 311).

VI. CONCLUSION: SUMMARY OF RAMBAM'S ANTI-ESCHATOLOGICAL VIEWS:

(a) **The world to come** is the impersonal survival of the intellect (not the lower functions of the soul related to the body), in proportion to intellectual attainment; it already exists and is "to come" for each qualified individual after death; since individuation is a function of the body, the survival of the intellect in proportion to knowledge is general and impersonal. **Karet** (the biblical term meaning to be cut off) means simply not attaining a portion in the world to come.

(b) **The messianic era** is a future state, understood in naturalistic terms, and has nothing to do with resurrection; because of better conditions, it will then be easier for people to attain the intellectual perfection which constitutes "a portion in the world to come." In other words: there is no reward/punishment **in** the world to come; the reward **is** the world to come; the punishment is **not** attaining the world to come, i.e., *karet*.

(c) **Resurrection** is described metaphorically in the Commentary on the Mishnah, but, on the other hand, it is listed as the 13th principle of Judaism. So did Rambam really believe literally in resurrection? Opinions differ on this question.

- Because of the explicit statement in the Mishnah affirming resurrection, Rambam could not ignore it or openly deny it. In this context, we need to consider Leo Strauss' theory of esoteric writing, in his essay "Persecution and the Art of Writing."[\[26\]](#) Under certain circumstances – such as a modern totalitarian regime, or a pre-modern traditional society – an author is not free to express openly his true opinion, and therefore is compelled to hide it in esoteric writing, which will be understood one way by the masses and the authorities, and in a different (and true) way by the intelligentsia. What cannot be stated explicitly is hinted at implicitly.[\[27\]](#)
- In other words, Rambam, being committed to Jewish life and the *halakhah*, could not possibly openly oppose an explicit rabbinic statement in the Mishnah. The "oral Torah" of rabbinic Judaism is no less binding than is the "written Torah" of Scripture. However, he could affirm it by saying "of course I affirm it – but it's not what you think it means." Moreover, just as various Biblical passages (eg., anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms) are to be understood as metaphorical, equivocal or ambiguous language,[\[28\]](#) the words of the rabbis are also to be understood non-literally when apparently, on a surface level, they contradict scientific or factual knowledge.[\[29\]](#)
- We are left, then, with the question: Is Rambam's "Treatise on Resurrection" merely apologetic lip service? What, for example, is the point of a temporary resurrection followed by a second death (in contrast with the traditional view, including that of Sa`adiah Ga'on)?
- In the words of a scholar of the controversy, on the question of resurrection, "Maimonides affirmed even as he squirmed."[\[30\]](#)

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