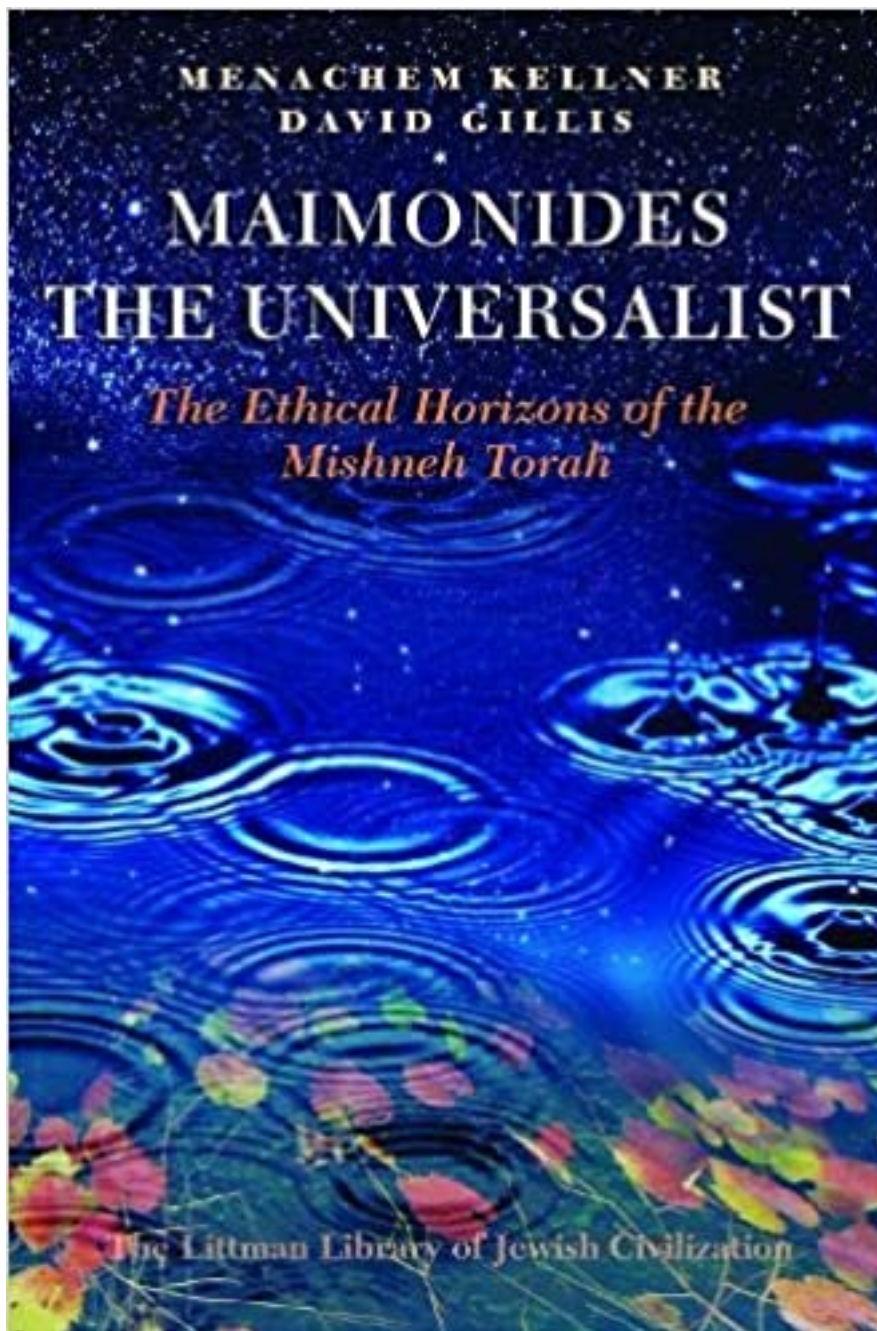




Maimonides the Universalist: The Ethical Horizons of the Mishneh Torah

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Menachem Marc Kellner, David Gillis: *Maimonides the Universalist: The Ethical Horizons of the Mishneh Torah*. London: Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization and Liverpool University Press, 2020. 368 pp.



Scholars have long noted that Maimonides perorates each book of his magisterial code, *Mishneh Torah*, with a passage that does not explicate the prosaic details of individual halakhot but that

frequently takes flight as an inspirational message about spirituality and the place of ethical values in the corpus of halakhah.^[1] Whether those passages constitute Jewish law per se or are consigned to mere rhetorical flourish is a subject of dispute.

These closing texts assume importance because they are what Maimonides wants his reader to remember when he or she finishes studying each book of *Mishneh Torah*. And since Rambam wrote them in a halakhic treatise meant for Jews, it is hard to minimize them as apologetics meant for gentile eyes.

Each of those fourteen passages comes under systematic explication and scrutiny in Menachem Kellner and David Gillis's new book, *Maimonides the Universalist: The Ethical Horizons of the Mishneh Torah*. A well-published and internationally renowned Maimonides scholar, Kellner held the Sir Isaac Wolfson Chair in Jewish Religious Thought at University of Haifa and now chairs the Department of Jewish Thought and Philosophy at Jerusalem's Shalem College. Gillis earned a doctorate in Maimonides' thought at the University of Haifa under Kellner's supervision. Together they attempt to demonstrate just how dominant universalism is in Maimonides' view of God, Torah, and history, and how universalism is central to his conception of halakhah when lived correctly.

Universalism is a contested notion in many scholarly circles today, and it is distinctly unpopular in contemporary Orthodox and Israeli rabbinic societies. The struggle between universalism and Jewish particularism is age-old, going back at least as far as the Tanakh, which insists that Jews have a universal mission "to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth" (Gen. 12:3) and yet are still "a people that dwells apart" (Numb. 23:9).

Jewish philosophers and rabbinic authorities have been similarly conflicted. Some believe that being a chosen and holy people means that Jews are intrinsically different, that is, superior. Yehuda Halevi, kabbalists, and perhaps the majority of Zionist rabbis today believe that Jews have a unique spiritual soul that non-Jews lack. Yet rationalists like Sa'adyah Gaon and Maimonides insisted that Jews and gentiles are biologically and spiritually identical. Jews are not alone, and if they display different behavior and spiritual worldviews, it is not due to any unique ethnic DNA, but only to the influence of the Torah education and its values. Daniel Lasker of Ben Gurion University put it best: the differences are in our software, not our hardware.

Kellner and Gillis occasionally digress into erudite excursions about related passages in *The Guide of the Perplexed* and Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishneh*, but their book most often reads easily, making it accessible to readers not intimately acquainted with *Mishneh Torah*. And the book's extensive cross-references to Rambam's other works are a source of delight to scholars of Maimonidean studies.

A few examples of Kellner and Gillis's analysis convey the sense of the book: *Mishneh Torah's* Book of Love (book 2) deals with commandments directed only to the Jewish people—for example, *tzitzit*, *mezuzah*, circumcision—in other words, particularist, ethnocentric topics. Yet the authors point out that Maimonides concludes the book by taking the reader back to Abraham, whom Rambam views as rediscovering monotheism and who was tasked with a mission directed toward all humanity. Circumcision here is a means of promoting the universal ideal of intellectual and theological perfection toward which all humans should strive. Furthermore, Rambam's theology stresses that knowing God entails a commitment to justice and morality.

The Book of Festivals (book 3) deals with uniquely Jewish holidays—primarily Purim and Hanukkah. While both festivals are associated with Jewish-gentile warfare, Kellner and Gillis analyze how Maimonides' deft hand makes the underlying message of these holidays initially about peace between a husband and his wife, then peace between human beings, and ultimately the messianic age that is characterized by peace among all nations.

In the Book of Agriculture (book 7), Rambam announces that the holy life is not confined to Levites, nor even to Jews. He insists that every human being (“all who come into the world”) is capable of attaining a high degree of holiness and become, in effect, his own “Holy of Holies.”

The Book of Acquisition (book 12) ends with the laws of slavery. In the final passage, Maimonides stresses that ideal behavior is ethical action that transcends formal law. While not legally required, Jews must treat gentile servants with dignity because *all* people are created by God in the very same way (“Are we not all made in the same womb?”). Jews who obey God and the Torah stand under the moral imperative of *imitatio dei* (imitating God’s ways), and so failing to treat others—whether Jew, gentile, or servant—with mercy and empathy is theologically equivalent to acting as an idolator. Hence showering all persons with compassion (*hesed*) is the true defining characteristic of God-centered Jews.

Mishneh Torah’s final book (book 14) is the Book of Judges, which ends with Maimonides’ stunning vision of the messianic era—that is, the ultimate goal of all Torah and Jewish law, and the realization of the Jewish people’s global religious mission. In this messianic world all peoples realize the faith of Abraham by living the moral life, by not subjugating others, and by coming to know God. Manuscript scholars have recognized that some particularistic Jews were scandalized by Rambam’s universal vision in this passage. One even tried to “improve” this text by doctoring it and inserting the word “Israel” into Maimonides’ claim that at that time “[different kinds of] people will achieve a great knowledge of God.”^[2] Paradoxically, in trying to particularize the text, that traditionalist has succeeded in emphasizing the universal thrust in Maimonides’ conception of sacred history.

One element beyond the book’s purview is the undeniably particularistic elements scattered throughout *Mishneh Torah*, such as the difference between the value of Jewish life and non-Jewish life,^[3] as well as his intolerance toward Christians and nonmonotheists.^[4] Ultimately, any compelling understanding of Maimonides *qua* universalist must confront these problematic cases.

There is a widespread assumption that the more “authentic” a Jew is, the more that person must believe that Jews are essentially different and should separate from non-Jews. For many Orthodox, this is near-dogma and stands at the center of their Jewish identity. Moreover, in our day when religious practice has become increasingly parochial and ritualistic, and when in the COVID era it is often willfully oblivious to scientific truth, Kellner and Gillis’s study fulfills a critical function. It reminds us that the greatest thinker and master of halakhah in all of Jewish history insisted that Jews are not meant to be a ghetto people, that correct belief in God demands Jews to see the Torah in universal categories, and that the halakhic life is an educational process designed to help Jews become rational, ethically sensitive, and positive forces upon all human history.

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