Chapter Nine

Am Examination of Maimonides, *Hilkhot Me’ilah* 8:8 – On the Underlying Rationale for Commandments According to Maimonides

*Sefer Avodah* of the *Mishneh Torah* closes with these heartfelt words:

It is fitting for man to meditate upon the laws of the holy Torah and to comprehend their full meaning to the extent of his ability. Nevertheless, a law for which he finds no reason and understands no cause should not be trivial in his eyes. “Let him not break through (*haros*) to come up against the Lord, lest the Lord break forth upon him” (Exod. 19:24); nor should his thoughts concerning these things be like his thoughts concerning profane matters. Come and consider how strict the Torah was in the law of trespass! Now if sticks and stones and earth and ashes became hallowed by words alone, as soon as the name of the Master of the universe was invoked upon them, and anyone who comported with them as with a profane thing committed trespass and required atonement even if he had acted unwittingly, how much more should man be on guard not to rebel (*ba’ot*) against a commandment decreed for us by the Holy One, blessed be He, only because he does not understand its reason; or to heap words (*le-ḥappot devarim*) that are not right against the Lord; or to regard the commandments in the manner in which he regards ordinary affairs. Behold, it is said in Scripture: “Ye shall therefore keep all My statutes, and all Mine ordinances, and do them” (Lev. 20:22); whereupon our Sages have commented that “keeping” (*shemira*) and “doing” refer to the “statutes” as well as to the “ordinances.” “Doing” is well known; namely, performing the statutes. And “keeping” means that one should be careful concerning them and not imagine that they are less important than the ordinances. Now the “ordinances” are commandments whose reason is obvious, and the benefit derived in this world from doing them is well known; for example, the prohibition against robbery and murder, or the commandment of honoring one’s father and mother. The “statutes,” on the other hand, are commandments whose reason is not known. Our Sages have said: “My statutes are the decrees that I have decreed for you, and you are not permitted to question them.” A man’s impulse pricks him concerning them, and the Gentiles reprove us about them, such as the statutes concerning the prohibition against the flesh of the pig and that against meat seethed with milk, the law of the heifer whose neck is broken, of the Red Heifer, or of the scapegoat.

How much was King David distressed by heretics and pagans who disputed the statutes! Yet the more they pursued him with false questions, which they plied according to the narrowness of men’s minds, the more he increased his cleaving to the Torah; as it is said: “The proud have forged a lie against me; but I with my whole heart will keep Thy precepts” (Ps. 119:69). It is also said there concerning this: “All Thy commandments are faithful; they persecute me for nought; help Thou me” (Ps. 119:86).

All the (laws concerning the) offerings are in the category of statutes. The Sages (’Ab 1:2) have said that the world stands because of the service of the offerings; for through the performance of the statutes and the ordinances the righteous merit life in the World-to-Come. Indeed, the Torah puts the commandment concerning the statutes first; as it is said,Ye shall therefore keep My statutes, and Mine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall live by them (Lev. 18:5)

This passage has garnered considerable attention but has yet to undergo a thorough analysis. It is evident that it encompasses numerous Torah principles and guiding ideas of Maimonides’ project. Moreover, it serves as a faithful reflection of Maimonides’ creative method, as content and style are seamlessly integrated, with the presentation of ideas and the form of interpretation closely intertwined. We can infer – and this principle should be remembered by all students of Maimonides – that the interpretive foundations should not be underestimated, as they often help to clarify or illustrate abstract and complex concepts. Philosophy and midrash are intimately connected in Maimonides’ work.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us begin with the closing phrase, “How much was King David distressed.” Maimonides’ interpretation of the verse about King David (“The proud have forged a lie against me; but I with my whole heart will keep Thy precepts” – Psalms 119:69) reveals a direct relationship between the extent of falsehoods spread by those attacking the fundamentals of Judaism and the level of commitment exhibited by the beleaguered believer. There is a causal connection between the two parts of the verse: the accusers fabricate lies, and in response, the believer’s dedication becomes even more resolute and unwavering.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, we can take this analysis a step further by noting that this original interpretation indirectly echoes a central concept in Maimonides’ philosophical approach to the reasons for the commandments. This dual idea posits that an intellectual and teleological explanation of the laws will showcase the wisdom of the Torah to the nations of the world and that such a demonstration is both valuable and commanded. The external pressure and the intentional outer-directedness are both evident and emphasized here.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is important to state unequivocally that this outward-directed approach characterizes not only Maimonides’ method but also underpins all conceptual development in the field of intellectual-philosophical reasons for the commandments. This stands in contrast to the assumptions and trends found in the Kabbalistic explanations for the commandments.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The starting point of this conceptual system is found in the following verses (Deut. 4:5-8):

See, I have taught you *ḥukim* [decrees] and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, for you to keep in the land that you are to enter and possess. Take care to keep them, for they will be your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations: when they hear all these *ḥukim,* they will say: “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!”…And what other great nation has *ḥukim* and laws as just as this entire Torah that I am setting before you today?

 These verses capture our attention and demand explanation. They capture our attention because they elevate non-Jewish attitudes toward us and our Torah to a high religious value; it is crucial to foster a positive perception based on an honest and comprehensive appreciation of the commandments of the Torah. This attitude is a fundamental component of the Jewish religious experience but an unusual one with no parallel elsewhere. These verses demand explanation due to their complex meaning: what is the subject of “they will be your wisdom,” which brings about an attitude of appreciation and sympathy from other nations, ensuring that we are seen as wise and intelligent? A cursory review of the main commentaries reveals the surprising novelty and far-reaching significance of the principle embodied in Maimonides’ interpretation.

We find in the Talmud:

Anyone who knows how to calculate astronomical seasons and the movement of constellations and does not do so, the verse says about him: “They do not take notice of the work of God” (Isa. 5:12) … From where is it derived that there is a *mitzva* incumbent upon a person to calculate astronomical seasons and the movement of constellations? As it was stated: “Take care to keep them for they will be your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations” … What wisdom and understanding is there in the Torah that is in the eyes of the nations?…This is the calculation of astronomical seasons and the movement of constellations.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This interpretation assumes that the subject, namely the science of astronomy, is not explicitly mentioned and is recognized only through the context and logic of the text. The biblical verses suggest that there must be a universal field of study in which there is no distinction between Israel and the nations; everyone engages in it together, and the Gentiles are impressed by the solid achievements of the Jews.

A second approach offered by the Talmud emphasizes the unique relationship established between a Jew and God by means of faith and keeping the commandments:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: All of the *mitzvot* that the Jewish people perform in this world will come and strike the faces of the nations of the world in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: “Take care to keep them for they will be your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations” (Deut. 4:6). It is not stated: Before the nations; rather, the verse states: “in the eyes of the nations,” which teaches that they will come and strike the faces of the nations of the world in the World-to-Come (Avoda Zara 4b).

The phrase “in the eyes of the nations” implies a direct confrontation, whereas “before the nations” reflects simply opposing positions. This interpretation suggests that Israel’s wisdom and understanding, as perceived by the nations, stem from the unique nature of the Torah’s system and Israel’s steadfast loyalty to it, despite the mockery, jeering, and contempt from the nations who seem dominant in this world. History may be hostile to Israel, but ultimately, they will be honored and the validity of their Torah recognized.

In any case, the wisdom that will be revealed for all to see arises from the decrees and laws that are observed with sincerity and unwavering commitment. The adjacent teaching of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi supports this:

What is the meaning of that which is written: “Which I command you this day, to do them” (Deut. 7:11)? Today is the time to do them, but tomorrow is not the time to do them. Today is the time to do them, but today is not the time to receive one’s reward. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: All of the *mitzvot* that the Jews perform in this word will come and bear witness for them in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: “Let them bring their witnesses that they may be justified, and let them hear, and say: It is truth” (Isaiah 43:9). He explains: “Let them bring their witnesses that they may be justified”; these are referring to the Jews. “And let them hear, and say: It is truth”; these are referring to the nations of the world.[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Baḥya ibn Paquda and R. Abraham ibn Daud offer another interpretation, rooted in the belief that the unique respect of the nations toward Israel arises from the systematic and profound study of philosophy and the fundamentals of faith. Accordingly, incomprehensible laws cannot be a source of appreciation or a reason for appreciation or admiration. The only candidate for such a response is the intellectual-logical treatment of the principles of religion. R. Baḥya writes in his *Sha’ar Hayiḥud*, Chapter 3:

Regarding whether or not it is our duty to rationally investigate on the unity of God, I will say as follows: For anyone who is capable of investigating this and other similar matters through rational inquiry – it is his duty to do so according to his intelligence and perception. I have already written in the introduction to this book sufficient arguments which demonstrate the obligation of this matter. Anyone who neglects to investigate into it is blameworthy and is considered as belonging to the class of men who fall short in wisdom and conduct. He is like a sick man who is an expert on the nature of his disease and the correct healing method, but instead relies on another doctor to heal him who applies various healing methods, while he is lazy to inquire using his own wisdom and reasoning into the methods employed by the doctor, to see whether or not the doctor is dealing with him correctly or not, when he was easily able to do this without anything preventing him. The Torah has already obligated us on this, as written: “know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, [that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other]” (Deut. 4:39). The proof that “lay it to your heart” refers to intellectual investigation, is from what the following verse says: “And none lays it to his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding” (Isa. 44:19). So too David urged his son: “And you, Solomon my son, *know you* the God of your father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing soul; for the Lord searches all hearts” (Chr. 28:9). And David said: “*Know you* that the Lord He is God” (Ps. 100:3). And “Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he has *known* My Name” (Ps. 91:14), and “But let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and *knows* Me” (Jer. 9:23), and our Sages said: “be diligent in the study of Torah and know what to answer a heretic” (Avot 2:14), and the Torah says: “Take care to keep them for they will be your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations” (Deut. 4:6). And it is impossible for the nations to admit to our claims of superior wisdom and understanding unless there are proofs and evidences which can testify for us along with the testimony of the intellect on the truth of our Torah and our faith. And our Maker has already promised us that He will remove the veil of ignorance from their minds, and show His magnificent glory as a sign to us on the truth of our Torah when He said: “And the nations shall walk by your light” (Isa. 60:3), and “And many nations shall go and say, Come you, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob” (Isa. 2:3). It is now clear from logic, Scripture, and tradition that it is our duty to investigate into this of what we are capable of clearly grasping with our minds.[[7]](#footnote-7)

R. Baḥya also emphasizes the idea of universalism. However, while the Talmud attributes the universal aspect to the subject matter (astronomy), R. Baḥya’s approach locates universalism in the philosophical-logical realm.[[8]](#footnote-8)

R. Abraham ibn Daud trenchantly argues that it is inconceivable that the unique Jewish wisdom refers to our laws. Political regimes and moral norms (i.e., a legal system) do not inspire respect or admiration, as any intelligent person can follow them without a revelatory religious foundation. The only plausible conclusion is that the verse refers to the “roots of religion.” The most remarkable, even marvelous fact is that the Torah provides all truths and philosophical principles precisely, effortlessly, and without complication:

The Most Blessed God declares in His sagaciousTorah: “Take care to keep them, for they will be your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations. When they hear all these *ḥukim*, they will say: ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!’” This statement does not refer to the non-rational *mitzvot*, as these would not appear impressive to those outside our nation. It also does not pertain to political practices or ethical virtues since any rational person can adopt such practices for themselves and their followers, even without being a person of religion. Rather, [this verse] refers to the wonder of the nations when they investigate the roots of Israel’s faith. They generally find that these agree with the results of their extensive research and diligent pursuit of truth, achieved through thousands of years of debate and consideration, while it is given to us without toil or investigation, received from the true prophet. We [then] discovered it articulated logically in true philosophy.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Against this background, we can better appreciate Maimonides’ simple and decisive statement that the expression “wisdom and understanding” refers specifically to *ḥukim*. These laws, which may seem pointless and useless, testify to a deeper wisdom. This is the straightforward meaning of the verse: “when they hear all these *ḥukim*, they will say: ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’” It is clear that the subject of “for they will be your wisdom” refers to the *ḥukim*. Thus, it is evident – without a shadow of a doubt, and this is Maimonides’ main intent – that there are reasons and benefits for the *ḥukim* as well.

And it says: when they hear all these *ḥukim* they will say: “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!” Thus it states explicitly that even all the *ḥukim* will show to all the nations that they have been given with wisdom and understanding. Now if there is a thing for which no reason is known and that does not either procure something useful or ward off something harmful, why should one say of one who believes in it or practices it that he is wise and understanding and of great worth? And why should the religious communities think it a wonder?[[10]](#footnote-10)

All the commandments, both *ḥukim* and *mishpatim* [rational commandments], are structured around a rational-philosophical interpretation: The *mishpatim* have “an apparent reason, and their benefit in this world is known,” while the *ḥukim* are such that "their reason is not known." However, one who strives and equips themselves with the necessary knowledge will certainly find reason, understanding, and justification even for the *ḥukim*.

This proof[[11]](#footnote-11) that even *ḥukim* have reasons and benefits, is not merely an addition to the system of proofs that Maimonides presented for his theoretical position on the need to offer reasons for the commandments. It necessitates a unique interpretation, one that will be accepted by the nations of the world. This need drives the effort to find universal concepts and methods of explanation, stimulating from the outside and directing our focus outward.

This point becomes clearer and more precise when we compare Maimonides’ interpretation in the *Guide* with his similar argument regarding the allegorical interpretation of the *aggadot* of the Sages in his commentary on the Mishnah. In his sharp critique of those who take the *aggadot* literally, who

do not explain them at all, making all impossible things correspond to reality. They do this because they lack understanding of wisdom and are distant from the sciences...

Maimonides expresses great indignation:

As God lives, this sect loses the beauty of the Torah and darkens its brilliance. They turn God’s Torah into the opposite of His intent, since God said of the wisdom of His Torah, “When they hear all these *ḥukim* they will say: ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!’”... Yet, this sect recounts the simple words of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, in such a way that when other nations hear it, they say, “This is certainly a foolish and silly people, this small nation...”[[12]](#footnote-12)

At first glance, applying the verse about *ḥukim* to the aggadic stories of the Sages seems puzzling. What does aggada have to do with *ḥukim*? However, the connection becomes clear from the matter itself upon closer examination. *Aggadot* and *ḥukim* are both apparently inaccessible and require an allegorical interpretation to clarify their meanings. The common thread to the rational interpretation in both fields intellectually is to highlight their wisdom and intelligence in the eyes of the nations until they acknowledge: “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!” Without intelligent interpretation, they will misjudge us, saying: “This is certainly a foolish and silly people, this small nation.”

Thus, we see that this outward-directed motif is also present in the *Mishneh Torah*, albeit indirectly and without polemical emphasis. It does not overtly influence the teleological conceptual system that seeks to uncover the hidden reasons for the commandments, particularly the *ḥukim*. Nevertheless, the idea subtly emerges, and its impact is evident. For example, in *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 12:1, Maimonides states emphatically: “One does not shave the ends of the head as the star worshippers used to do.”[[13]](#footnote-13) An even more intriguing ruling appears in *Hilkhot Ma'aseh Hakorbanot*: “The continuous offering of the afternoon is offered in the same manner as the continuous offering of the morning. Everything follows the regimen for the offering of the burnt offering. The lamb was not bound before its slaughter so as not to copy the practice of the heretics.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The comment of R. Ya’akov bar Sheshet, author of *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim* regarding this matter is very instructive:

I know that among the righteous and sages of Israel, there are those who criticize me for providing reasons for two or three of the Torah’s commandments, opening the door to rational explanations for many more commandments. I bring here proof that a wise man can provide a reason for any commandment whose rationale is not explicitly stated in the Torah, and this will be of great benefit… for it will enhance the Torah’s beauty in the eyes of the nations, leading them to declare: “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!” For they often question the purpose of certain commandments, dismissing them as mere parables. However, when we offer them reasons based on wisdom, which they cannot refute, they will say: “Come, let us go up to the house of the Lord.”

In another place, he transitions from the general to the specific, highlighting Maimonides’ achievements and revealing his motives: “The rabbi’s intention is evident in all his words, clear to every educated believer. He makes the commandments of the Torah understandable according to the intellect... and he did so in response to the heretics and skeptics who say, ‘What is the point of this particular commandment? It makes no rational sense!’”[[15]](#footnote-15) Although the nature of the reasons given in *Mishneh Torah* differs from those in the *Guide –* with the historical dimension being almost non-existent and the reasons being mainly moral and intellectual, as I detailed in my book on Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* – this motive still drives the scholar. The impetus for a teleological explanation of the commandments is the same force that directs outward, regardless of whether the reasons are historical or moral. This is what R. Ya’akov bar Sheshet meant.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Let us revisit the beginning of the law found at the end of *Hilkhot Me’ilah* and examine another matter of decisive importance. I propose two possible interpretations of this passage: one that views it as a warning with a threefold intention and another that perceives it as having a dual focus. Despite their differences, both interpretations share a conceptual innovation related to the issue of antinomianism.

If we understand Maimonides’ words according to the first possibility, we find that he is cautioning against three distinct dangers or errors:

(a) An individual who observes the commandments and seeks to understand their underlying reasons may ultimately come to neglect them if he cannot discern a rationale: “a law for which he finds no reason and understands no cause should not be trivial in his eyes…how much more should man be on guard not to rebel against a commandment decreed for us by the Holy One, blessed be He, only because he does not understand its reason.” The failure to find a satisfactory explanation for a commandment, after thorough investigation, can ultimately lead to the nullification of the Torah.

(b) Another risk is that a person may develop flawed or unreasonable explanations that are theologically distorted: “Let him not break through (*haros*) to come up against the Lord…or to heap words that are not right against the Lord.” The language here is precise, and the meaning becomes unmistakably clear when viewed in light of the concluding statements in *Hilkhot Tzara’at*:

Now the way of the company of the scornful and wicked is this: In the beginning, they are profuse with vain words, as in the matter whereof it is said, “A fool’s voice cometh through a multitude of words” (Eccles. 5:2). Then they go on to speak to the discredit of the righteous… Then they become accustomed to speak against the prophets and discredit their words, as in the matter whereof it is said, “But they mocked the messengers of God…” (2 Chron. 36:16). Then they go on to speak against God and to deny the very root of religion, as in the matter whereof it is said, “And the children of Israel did impute things that were not right unto the Lord their God…” (2 Kings 17:9).[[17]](#footnote-17)

In an entirely different context, Maimonides uses strong language to criticize the liturgical poets who are careless with their words, drawing on the same verse from 2 Kings 17 (“And the children of Israel did impute things...”) This suggests that the poetry conceals “things that were not right unto the Lord their God…” implying statements that verge on blasphemy or are outright blasphemous.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Maimonides defines the term *haros*: “When doing this, he should not make categoric affirmations in favor of the first opinion that occurs to him and should not, from the outset, strain and impel his thoughts toward the apprehension of God.”[[19]](#footnote-19) His son, R. Abraham, further elucidates this concept: “*harisa* is the soul’s impulsive engagement with ideas that lie beyond its intellectual capacity.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Thus, the concern is not merely the presence of multiple interpretations as opposed to a singular, cohesive explanation; rather, it is the risk of embracing erroneous reasoning that fundamentally distorts the subject matter. This distortion arises from an uncontrolled and undisciplined intellectual surge devoid of the necessary preparatory rigor.[[21]](#footnote-21)

(c) The reflective individual who fails in their attempts to discern the reasons behind the commandments will continue to observe them without being convinced of their underlying rationale: “nor should his thoughts concerning these things be like his thoughts concerning profane matters,” and “nor should he think about them with his mind as he would ordinary matters.” Maimonides immediately follows this by stating: “‘And you shall guard (*ushemartem*) all My decrees (*ḥukim*) and all My judgments (*mishpatim*) and perform (*va‘asitem*) them.’ Our Sages commented that this verse adjures us to guard and perform both the *ḥukim* and the *mishpatim*. The meaning of ‘performing’ is well known, signifying that one should observe the *ḥukim*.[[22]](#footnote-22) ‘Guarding’ – that is treating them with caution and not regarding them as inferior to the *mishpatim*.” According to Maimonides, “guarding” entails a correct and unreserved axiological stance, affirming that the decrees are indeed beneficial. R. Eliezer of Metz equates “guarding” with performance, with guarding referring to the mental aspect. R. Ḥasdai Crescas interprets “guarding” as an act of remembrance. Maimonides, however, emphasizes that “guarding” is intended to counteract rote performance, to caution against the mechanical observance of commandments, and to insist that one must not approach and element of the Torah as it was a meaningless, mundane matter, performed solely out of fear. Rather, it requires the conviction that every commandment has a reason and an explanation, which is precisely why they were given.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This emphasis is fundamental to Maimonidean thought, and it is instructive to consider his emphatic words in *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*. After meticulously cataloging the various forms of divination and sorcery forbidden by the Torah, Maimonides concludes with the following statement:

These practices are all false and deceptive and were means employed by the ancient idolaters to deceive the peoples of various countries and induce them to become their followers. It is not proper for Israelites who are highly intelligent to suffer themselves to be deluded by such inanities or imagine that there is anything in them, as it is said, “For there is no enchantment with Jacob, neither is there any divination with Israel” (Num. 23:23); and further, “For these nations, that thou art to dispossess, hearken unto soothsayers and unto diviners; but as for thee, the Lord thy God hath not suffered thee so to do” (Deut. 18:14). Whoever believes in these and similar things and in his heart holds them to be true and scientific and only forbidden by the Torah, is nothing but a fool, deficient in understanding, who belongs to the same class with women and children whose intellects are immature. Sensible people, however, who possess sound mental faculties, know by clear proofs that all these practices that the Torah has prohibited have no scientific basis but are chimerical and inane and that only those deficient in knowledge are attracted by these follies and for their sake leave the ways of truth. The Torah, therefore, in forbidding all these follies, exhorts us, “Thou shalt be wholehearted (*tamim*) with the Lord thy God” (Deut. 18:13).[[24]](#footnote-24)

This is not about someone who engages in witchcraft but rather about an individual who refrains from such practices without being genuinely convinced that they are futile and nonsensical. Maimonides sought a complete alignment between action and intention: to fulfill commandments and avoid transgressions based on a profound understanding that “I did not say to the seed of Jacob, seek Me among emptiness” (Isa. 45:19).[[25]](#footnote-25)

As previously noted, Maimonides’ words can be interpreted as a cautionary statement with a dual focus. In this reading, the phrases “should not be trivial in his eyes” and “not to rebel (*ba’ot*) against a commandment solely because he does not understand its reason” function as overarching principles. Maimonides then highlights two specific dangers: (1) The risk of distorting or obscuring the truth by offering explanations that are fundamentally flawed; and (2) The assumption that the commandments are devoid of reason, thereby rendering them arbitrary and purposeless. Under both interpretations, the passage is meticulously crafted – exemplifying a well-considered structure – wherein the warning is reiterated with remarkable eloquence.

The common thread in this passage lies in its significant conceptual innovation concerning the issue of antinomianism. In the history of religion, it is widely accepted that antinomianism arises from philosophical understanding. The commandment is perceived as serving a particular purpose, and once the underlying meaning and intent of the commandment are fully grasped, the performance of the act itself may be deemed unnecessary. In this view, knowledge renders the act superfluous. Medieval sages frequently addressed this concern,[[26]](#footnote-26) emphasizing the potential danger that understanding the rationale and purpose of a commandment might lead to the abandonment of its practice. This passage introduces a new form of antinomianism, one rooted in ignorance. An individual who fails to grasp the profound meaning of a commandment may ultimately nullify its observance, reasoning that if no rationale exists, there is no reason to continue the practice. In contrast, knowledge that penetrates to the core of the commandment enhances the value of the act and serves as a safeguard for its continued performance. Thus, in addition to philosophical antinomianism, which posits that understanding the commandment’s purpose might lead to the abandonment of its practice, there exists a more perilous form: agnostic-skeptical antinomianism. While philosophical antinomianism is speculative – that knowledge might lead to evasion of observance – agnostic antinomianism is conclusive; a lack of understanding inevitably leads to contempt and non-performance.

This idea resonates with various sources, and it is worth mentioning some of them. R. Meir Aldabi writes in the eighth path of his *Shevilei Emunah*:

I have encountered individuals of misguided spirit who mistakenly believe that the commandments discussed by Abaye and Rava are “a small matter,” thinking their obligation lies merely in their performance. They hold that these commandments serve only to fulfill the will of the Creator, who gave them to test Israel, to see whether they would follow His commandments without regard to any inherent benefit. They liken this to a king who tests his subjects to see if they obey his will, regardless of whether the command itself carries any intrinsic value, other than demonstrating the subject’s obedience to the sovereign.

These individuals interpret the scriptural verse, “The word of the Lord is refined [*tzerufa*]” (Ps. 18:31), in accordance with the teaching of our Sages (Gen. Rabba 44:1): “The commandments were given only to refine [*letzaref*] people through them. After all, why should the Holy One blessed be He care whether one slaughters an animal from the throat or he slaughters it from the nape?” However, these mistaken individuals erroneously understand “to refine [*letzaref*] people through them” to mean simply testing whether people will follow God’s Torah and commandments, irrespective of any benefit or deeper purpose in the commandments themselves. Consequently, they regard the discussions of Abaye and Rava as insignificant – “a small thing” – leading them to neglect the performance...[[27]](#footnote-27)

Apart from the polemical tone regarding the proper interpretation of the rabbinic statement that “the disputes of Abaye and Rava are a small thing,” a significant emphasis emerges: the absence of a teleological understanding may destabilize the entire framework, giving rise to agnostic antinomianism.

We must juxtapose the remarks of R. Aldabi with those of R. Joshua ibn Shuaib in his book of sermons. He begins with a forceful assertion that echoes the sentiments of R. Baḥya ibn Paquda:

It is insufficient to perform the commandment superficially without meticulous attention to its details, or to fulfill it out of rote habit and mere adherence to tradition. As it is stated, “Cursed is the man who trusts in man” (Jer. 17:5), meaning that one who relies solely on others’ interpretations without striving to understand the commandment and approach it with proper intent is to be condemned.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Ibn Shuaib’s continuation mirrors the language and emphasis of R. Aldabi almost verbatim.

And the misguided of our nation think that there is nothing in performing the commandment but an expression of adherence to divine will, with no further significance or underlying purpose. They cite the rabbinic maxim, “Why should the Holy One, blessed be He, care whether one slaughters an animal from the throat or from the nape?”… Regarding the statement: “the design of the Divine Chariot is ‘a great matter’; the disputes of Abaye and Rava are ‘a small matter’”… they explain the disputes of Abaye and Rava as representing the Talmudic exegesis of commandments, that is, the Oral Torah, while the design of the Divine Chariot represents philosophical and natural inquiries. Consequently, they argue that meticulous adherence to commandments is unnecessary, leading them to neglect or entirely forego their observance. This is truly the path to destruction and death... And they do not recognize: “I did not say to the seed of Jacob, seek Me among emptiness” (Isa. 45:19). Those endowed by God with intellectual insight will examine the intellectual insights alluded to in the commandments.[[29]](#footnote-29)

We can thus conclude that in his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides introduced a novel rationale for adhering to the Torah’s laws and further solidified the pursuit of understanding the reasons behind the commandments. From this perspective, it is in *Mishneh Torah* where “intellectualism” is emphasized.

1. A careful study of Maimonides’ writings unveils a significant chapter in the history of exegesis of both the Bible and *aggada*. A compelling example is Maimonides’ *Guide* III:54, where his exegetical and sermonic brilliance is evident. Maimonides often highlights innovative interpretations or adds sermonic “spice,” as seen in *Guide* III:51 with the phrase “Ben Zoma is still outside.” It is likely that Maimonides extended this tradition of creative interpretation to Jewish law, attaching certain laws from biblical verses that the Sages did not utilize. For instance, see *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 3:8 and *Kesef Mishneh* on the same passage (which also cites the Mahari Colon). Compare: Schlomo Weissblueth, “Pesukei tanakh umaamarei ḥazal keasmakhtot led’ot filosofiyot,” *Beit Mikra* 14:2 (5729), 59-79.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The verse that serves as a heading for the *Mishneh Torah* is: “Then I would not be ashamed when I behold all Your commandments” (Ps. 119:6). See the Ibn Ezra’s commentary *ad loc*; *Tur Oraḥ Ḥayyim, Siman* 1; Ramḥal, *Mesilat Yesharim,* Chapter 5; R. Don Isaac Abravanel, *Naḥalat Avot* on Avot 5:18. Compare: *Hilkhot Lulav* 8:15, [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Guide* III:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kabbalistic reasons for the commandmentsare directed inward, employing specialized concepts and aiming to enhance the “effect” of the commandment. This generalization is also applicable to the interpretation of *aggada*. For example, R. Shem Tov ibn Shaprut, in *Sefer Pardes Rimonim*, Sabbioneta 5314, Introduction, explains why he did not use the Rashba's interpretations of *aggada* and instead relied mainly on the commentaries of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra. The Rashba attempted to merge philosophical ideas with Kabbalistic concepts, yet “They are, in truth, two opposites with no middle ground between them, and it is a source of confusion for the students in their study... I will try to clarify and interpret the words of the *aggadot* which appear to me to need interpretation according to the Torah opinions made known to us from the words of our great teacher, Maimonides of blessed memory, and R. Abraham ibn Ezra of blessed memory, as their opinions are close to philosophy and can be discussed openly in the markets and streets before all nations.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Shabbat 75a. See: *Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 3:5; *Hilkhot Kiddush Haḥodesh* 17:24; *Responsa of Maimonides*, Blau edition, *Siman* 150, 285-286; “Iggeret el Rav Ḥasai Halevi MiAlexandria,” *Iggerot Harambam*, Shilat edition, 677ff. (see below, chapter 11, n. 49); see also “Iggeret Leḥakhmei Montpellier al Gezerat Hakokhavim” *ibid*, 478ff. Compare with the interesting usage in *Maḥzor Vitri*, Shimon Horowitz edition, Nuremberg, 5683, 520, and the kabbalistic use made by R. Todos in the section of “Otzar Hakavod Hashalem,” published by Aryeh Feldman, *Sefer Hayovel Likhvod Shalom Baron*, Saul Lieberman, ed., Jerusalem: [American Academy for Jewish Research](https://www.google.co.il/search?tbo=p&tbm=bks&q=inauthor:%22American+Academy+for+Jewish+Research%22&source=gbs_metadata_r&cad=1), 5735, Hebrew section, 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Avoda Zara 4b. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rabbi Baḥya Ibn Pakuda, *Ḥovot Halevavot*, Sha’ar Hayiḥud, Chapter 3. Translation by Rabbi Yosef Sebag, https://www.sefaria.org.il/Duties\_of\_the\_Heart%2C\_First\_Treatise\_on\_Unity.3.2?lang=en. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Torat Ḥovot Halevavot*, Yosef Qafiḥ trans., Jerusalem 5733, 41, n. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Sefer Haemuna Harama*, Jerusalem, 5727, Introduction, 4. Compare: R. Abraham ibn Migash, *Kevod Elokim*, Constantinople, 5345 (Reprinted: Jerusalem: Jewish National and University Library, 5737), Chapter 27, 58b: “For they will be your wisdom... This phrase cannot refer to the Torah itself, for those who do not understand its truths cannot appreciate its value. How then would Israel achieve greatness, honor, and admiration with the statement: Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people?... It must mean that their knowledge is on par with that of the nations, indicating that both groups possess a similar level of understanding.” See also R. Joseph Gikatli, *Ginat Egoz*, Jerusalem 5749, 343; R. Abraham Shalom, *Neve Shalom*, Venice 5335, Introduction. R. Meir ibn Gabbai, *Avodat Hakodesh*, Jerusalem 5733, 151, mentions only Maimonides’ teaching in the *Guide* II:11 where the verse under discussion is brought in the context of studying the natural sciences. He does not mention the *Guide* III:31 at all. Compare also: R. Moshe Mat, *Mateh Moshe*, Warsaw 5636, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Guide* III:31. Compare: R. Isaac Abravanel in his commentary on Deut. 4:6, who wholeheartedly supports Maimonides’ approach. R. Abraham ibn Ezra preceded Maimonides in his *Yesod Mora Vesod Hatorah*, Joseph Cohen, Uriel Simon edition, Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 5767, the Eighth Gate, 156; but see also his commentary on Gen. 2:11. See R. Samuel ibn Tibbon, *Yikavu Hamayim*, Pressburg 1837, 173.This approach appears soon afterwards in R. David Kimchi’s introduction to his commentary on the Book of Joshua. Compare also: R. Nissim Gerondi, *Derashot HaRan*, Aryeh Feldman edition, Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 5769, *Derasha* 1, 1; *Derasha* 9, 332. R. David Ganz, *Neḥmad Vena’im*, Jessnitz 5503, at the end of his introduction, relies on the approach on Maimonides but limits it to astronomy. R. Joseph Jabez*, Ohr Haḥayyim*, *Kol Kitvei R. Joseph Jabez*, Lublin 1914, 114, suggests a connection between this verse and the study of philosophy, but not reasons for the commandments. Compare this with the discussion in Chapter 3, 117-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In this context, it is important to note that Maimonides seeks to prove and confirm the correctness of his position based on biblical, Talmudic, and philosophical evidence. *Guide* III:20, along with the famous conclusion of his *Sefer Hamitzvot*, should be understood as a series of proofs. Maimonides does not merely establish a comprehensive philosophical position; he also demonstrates that his approach is firmly grounded. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Maimonides’ *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin, *Perek Ḥelek*, Kafiḥ edition, 136 (=Maimonides’ *Introductions to the Mishnah*, Shilat edition, 133). It is well-known that Maimonides often offered strong critique of the *darshanim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See also: Hilkhot Avoda Zara 12:7; 6:6. See also Hilkhot De’ot 3:1; Hilkhot Shabbat 2:4; Hilkhot Evel 4:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Hilkhot Temidim Umusafim* 1:10. At the end of his gloss Raavad comments: “I do not know what is meant by the practice of the heretics.” In another context, I highlight philosophical echoes – sometimes unconscious – in the wording of the laws in the *Mishneh Torah*. This assumption or fact of a philosophical influence helps clarify questions or difficulties in Maimonides’ text. For example, in *Hilkhot Bet Habeḥira* 1:17, Maimonides states: “We must not make steps for the Altar, as (Exod. 20:23) states: ‘Do not ascend on My Altar with steps.’ Rather, we must build an incline on the southern side of the Altar, diminishing [in height] as it declines from the top of the Altar until the earth. It was called the ramp. Anyone who ascends the Altar with steps receives lashes. Similarly, anyone who demolishes a single stone from the Altar, any part of the Temple building, or [the floor of the Temple Courtyard] between the Entrance Hall and the Altar with a destructive intent is deserving of lashes, as (Deut. 12:3-4) states: ‘And you shall destroy their altars.... Do not do so to God, your Lord.’” The juxtaposition of these two laws is puzzling, and the author of *Kesef Mishneh* has already noted: “The use of the term ‘similarly’ that our teacher wrote is imprecise.” However, if we consider that Maimonides was already contemplating the explanation he would later provide in the *Guide* (III:45), a reasonable and logical connection emerges, making the use of “similarly” precise. There, he writes: “In all this there is one and the same purpose, namely, that we should not worship God in the form of the particular cults practiced by them with regard to the objects of their worship; and this is the meaning of the prohibition in general. It says: ‘How did these nations serve their gods? Even so, will I do likewise…’ You know likewise how widespread was the worship of Pe’or in those times, and that it consisted in the uncovering of the nakedness. Therefore it commands the Priests to make themselves breeches to cover the flesh of their nakedness during the divine service and notwithstanding this, not to go up to the altar by steps: ‘That thy nakedness be not uncovered thereon.’” The main source of the law “Do not do so to God, your Lord” appears in Chapter 6 of *Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah*. Here, in *Hilkhot Bet Habeḥira*, it is a summary and review, and the connecting point between the two parts of the law is the element of idolatry, as explained in the historical-conceptual context provided in the *Guide*.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Sefer *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim,* Georges Vajda and Ephraim Gottlieb edition: Jerusalem, The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1969, Chapter 3, 83; Chapter 15, 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In his letter to R. Jonathan ben David ha-Kohen of Lunel, Maimonides emphasizes that the purpose of his involvement in philosophy is “to show the peoples and the princes her charms.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Hilkhot Tumat Tzara’at* 16:10. See also *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 6:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Guide* I:59. As a general rule, Maimonides promoted the need for caution and moderation in speech. See, for example, *Hilkhot De’ot* 2:4; *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 3:3; *Hilkhot Tefillin* 4:25. Compare: Maimonides’ *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Avot 1:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Guide* I:5. See: *Ma’amar Teḥiyat Hametim*, Y. Finkel edition, New York; American Academy for Jewish Research, 1940, 14, 19 (Explanation of foreign words). See also: David Baneth, “Harambam kemetargem divrei atzmo,” *Tarbiz* 23 (1952) 170-191. Compare: *Guide* I:32 (Have regard for the honor of his Creator); and Maimonides’ *Commentary to the Mishnah* (Ḥagiga 2:1) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Peirush Rabbenu Avraham ben Harambam al Bereshit u’Shemot,* Ephraim Yehuda Weisenberg edition, London: S. D. Sassoon, 1958, 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For a general overview, see: *Guide* I:31ff. Specifically see: *Guide* I:34. Maimonides consistently asserts that it is preferable to remain silent than to risk intellectual harm by proposing unfounded ideas or attempting to answer questions that are inherently unanswerable. See: *Guide* II:16 (regarding creation and novelty); *Hilkhot Teshuva* 5:5 (regarding knowledge and free will). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Note that Maimonides is here referring specifically to *ḥukim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Regarding secular matters, compare with: *Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 6:8; *Bi’ur Shemot Kodesh Ve’ḥol*, Moses Gaster edition, Berlin: Dvir 1923, 3ff. Maimonides employs the term *ba’ot* to describe the performance of a commandment with an attitude of scorn and contempt, devoid of any belief in its efficacy – a mechanical and arbitrary fulfillment of religious obligations. See *Hilkhot Shegagot* 3:10: “Yom Kippur, sin-offerings and guilt-offerings do not generate atonement unless one repents and believes in the atonement they grant. If, however, one rebels (*ba’ot*) against them, they do not generate atonement for him. What is implied? A person was in a state of rebellion, but brought a sin-offering or a guilt-offering, saying or thinking in his heart that these will not generate atonement. Accordingly, even though they were offered as commanded, they do not generate atonement for him. When he repents from his rebellion, he must bring another sin-offering and/or guilt-offering…” He is clearly discussing a situation where one performs an act without belief or faith. See Rabbi Jonah ibn Janaḥ, *Sefer Harikma*, Michael Wilensky edition, Berlin 1931, s.v. *Ba’at*. Regarding the term *shemira*, see: *Sefer Yere’im, Amud Hayirah*, *Siman* 26; R. Ḥasdai Crescas, *Ohr Hashem*, R. Shlomo Fisher edition, Jerusalem 1990, Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Hilkhot Avodah Zara* 11:16. Much has been written about “Thou shalt be wholehearted (*tamim*),” but that is another discussion. Maimonides underscores that to be *tamim* signifies the alignment of action with belief or intellectual conviction. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See: *Guide* III:26; and compare: II:47; III:49. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. These things are well-know and need no proof, yet it is worthwhile to see Maimonides at the end of his *Sefer Hamitzvot*; R. Hillel Miverona, *Sefer Tagmulei Hanefesh*, Joseph B. Sermoneta edition, Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences, 1981, 182-183: “Therefore, one should refrain from interpreting the commandments metaphorically as a means of evading their literal observance... and to say that the intent of a given commandment is such, and it is enough for me to understand the power of the reason itself, and I do not need to fulfill it as written...” Also, the apt words of R. Baḥya ben Asher to Deut. 29:28 (*Rabbenu Baḥya al Hatorah*, 3, Charles Ber Chavel edition, Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1968, 435): “I have heard attributed to the late Maimonides an interpretation of the verse, ‘The hidden things belong to the Lord, our God.’ He explained that the profound secrets of the Torah and the reasons for the commandments are known only to the exalted God. If a person is fortunate enough to grasp even a trace of the commandments’ underlying principles and mysteries, this should not lead him to neglect their outward observance. One must still fulfill the commandments in their physical form and should not dismiss them, for ‘as for the revealed things, they are for us and our children… to keep.’ While this interpretation itself… is valuable, it does not align with the plain meaning of the biblical text.” A striking definition has already been given by R. Yehuda Halevi, *Sefer HaKuzari* 3, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Shevilei Emunah*, Warsaw 1887, *Netiv Shemini*, 161. This appears in the context of the author’s discussion of the meaning and ramification of the rabbinic statement (Sukka 28a; and also Bava Batra 134b) calling the disputes of Abaye and Rava “a small matter,” and the design of the Divine Chariot “a great matter.” See above, Chapter 7, 209-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Ḥovot Halevavot*, Introduction, Abraham Zifroni edition, Tel Aviv: Maḥbarot Lesafrut, 1949, 79: “And he responded that tradition should take the place of study... I replied that this is appropriate only for those who are unable to engage in study due to minimal understanding or inadequate intellectual resources, such as women, children, and the mindless amongst the men…” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Derashot Rabbi Joshua ibn Shuaib al Hatorah Umoadei Hashana*, Zev Metzger edition, Jerusalem 1992, *Parashat Tzav Uleshabbat Hagadol*, 207. There is a difference between the two formulations. Aldabi emphasizes a causal connection between the assumption that there are no reasons for commandments and neglecting their performance. This emphasis is missing in Ibn Shuaib. See the excerpt from the Rashba (a note regarding the activity of performing commandments) brought from the Oxford 2250 ms. in *Siddur R. Amram Ga’on*, Aryeh Leib Frumkin edition, Jerusalem 1912, 40a: “And the mistaken ones think that the meaning of *letzaref* is to know whether or not they will follow His Torah and His commandments, irrespective of whether or not they are beneficial in any way, leading them to understand the points made by Abaye and Rava regarding the act of the commandment ‘a small thing.’ This truly leads them to negate the performance of all the commandments.” This may be the source of the teachings of R. Aldabi and Ibn Shuaib. With regard to the matter itself, see R. Joseph Jabez*, Ohr Haḥayyim* (above, n. 9), 109: “One who acts without offering a reason is cursed and blasphemed by the onlookers.” The Rashba’s statement is cited in *Sefer Mateh Moshe* (above, n. 8). Second Gate, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)