Virtue Ethics in the Thought of Nahmanides

The scholar who wishes to clarify Nahmanides’ thought on virtue ethics is faced with a number of problems:

1. It is not clear how much exposure Nahmanides had to Greek philosophy. He did not know Greek and was therefore not able to read Greek philosophical texts in the original. The question of how much he would have learned of them via Arabic is controversial. The current view is that Nahmanides did know a certain amount of Arabic[[1]](#endnote-1) and could therefore have been exposed to the Greek philosophical work that had been translated into Arabic and reached Europe.[[2]](#endnote-2) But it is clear that his Arabic was quite limited. Apparently when he needed access to longer sources in Arabic he required a translation. Some works of philosophy were indeed translated into Hebrew during the 12th and 13th centuries.[[3]](#endnote-3) Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that Nahmanides drew his primary philosophical knowledge from secondary, Jewish sources. It would have been mediated in particular through Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*.[[4]](#endnote-4)
2. Nahmanides’ overt attitude to Greek philosophy was not merely critical but hostile.[[5]](#endnote-5) On the other hand, the influence of Greek philosophy is discoverable in his writings.[[6]](#endnote-6) In light of this, it is legitimate to ask to what extent he was willing to adopt foreign philosophical ideas and frameworks into his own ethical thought.
3. Nahmanides did not write any books of philosophy, so his statements of philosophical character do not always coalesce into a single clear statement.[[7]](#endnote-7) This fact makes it difficult for scholars of Nahmanides to point to any systematic treatment of ethical questions in his work.
4. The subject of virtues does not constitute a central topic in Nahmanides’ work, nor does any substantial discussion devoted to this topics appear in his writings. Nonetheless, his elevated moral consciousness is clearly recognizable in his Torah commentary, and it is reflected among other things in his approach to the question of “reasons for the commandments.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Taking all this into consideration, there is no way to know whether or how much Nahmanides may have been exposed to what we call “Virtue Ethics” (in the original sense of that term). In what follows, therefore, the suggestions I shall make with regard to his ideas about virtue ethics should be regarded as tentative.

It must be emphasized that between Aristotle and Nahmanides there exist great differences in fundamental assumptions, in aims, and in the basis of the virtues. Aristotle’s ideas were founded on philosophical study and on the social conventions of his time and place. For Aristotle, the purpose of the virtues was to help people achieve a state of optimal happiness. Nahmanides’ perspective, by contrast, was founded on the divine commands that appear in the Torah and on the words of the Sages. He understood the ultimate goal to be the attainment of mystical intimacy with the Creator and one’s being suffused with the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence (as will be explained in what follows). For Nahmanides, the purpose of adjusting and balancing the virtues properly was a religious one. Deficiency in the virtues is not merely a deviation from the correct way of life and a flaw in one’s spiritual integrity, but the creation of a barrier between the individual and God.

Let me begin by presenting the virtues that Nahmanides prescribed with regard to oneself, and then proceed to a virtue that Nahmanides prescribed in one’s relationships with others.

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For Nahmanides, the Torah — despite all its precise details — does not fully suffice to guide one’s behavior. And therefore, alongside all the many specific commandments, the Torah issues a command about general ethical guidelines that the individual must fill with practical content. Nahmanides points to two commandments that express wide-ranging demands for virtue: the commandment “You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2), and the commandment “Do what is right and good” (Deut 6:18).[[9]](#endnote-9)

Nahmanides viewed the commandment “You shall be holy” (Lev 19:2) as requiring a certain degree of abstinence, that is, a fundamental overcoming of one’s physical desires — for having sex, for eating meat, and for drinking wine. On these points this virtue demands abstinence above and beyond the explicit commands of the Torah:

The Torah proscribes immoral sexual relationships and forbidden foods, but it permits intercourse between man and wife, eating meat, and drinking wine. So there is license for a man of appetite to steep himself in lust with his wife (or his many wives), or to “be of those who guzzle wine, or glut themselves on meat” (Prov. 23:20), or to discuss all sorts of vile things, as long as they involve something that the Torah does not explicitly prohibit. One could therefore be a scoundrel with the full permission of the Torah.

So after giving the details of those things that are specifically prohibited (in ch. 18), the Torah now gives us a general commandment to restrain ourselves from excess even in those things that are permitted: to limit intercourse to that which is necessary to fulfill the commandments … and to limit our intake of wine (notice that the nazirite of Numbers 6, who may not drink wine, is referred to as “holy,” and the Torah presents the evils of wine in its stories about Noah and Lot). [[10]](#endnote-10)

Following this comment, Nahmanides broadens the demand for additional kinds of holiness that are not linked to physical desires and are not mentioned explicitly in the Torah, such as distancing oneself from uncleanness and refraining from excessive speech:

We must keep ourselves separate from uncleanness even if it is something not specifically forbidden elsewhere. (Again, the fact that the nazirite—who avoids contact with the dead—is described as “holy” provides an example.) Similarly, one must keep from defiling one’s mouth and tongue by overeating of gross foods and from foul speech … One should sanctify oneself in this way until one reaches the level of restraint of R. Hiyya, who never spoke an idle word in all his days.

Nahmanides concludes the list with a demand for personal conduct that includes physical cleanliness:

This general commandment actually goes so far as to include cleanliness as an aspect of holiness … it is in fact the essence of the text to insist that we keep ourselves clean, pure, and separate from the mass of humanity, who soil themselves with all sorts of perfectly permissible ugliness.

It must be emphasized that Nahmanides does not require anyone to completely refrain from physical pleasure. Abstinence (in his view) is not expressed by mortification of the body. Man needs to have control over his desires so that his physical actions are employed only in the service of God and not for personal pleasure. Holiness requires that one be cleansed of all immoderate desire. Elsewhere he wrote: “‘And serve Him alone,’ according to the Sages, means to act before Him at all times like a slave serving his master, treating his owner’s demands as central and his own needs as incidental, to the extent demanded by m. Avot 2:12: ‘Let all your deeds be for the sake of heaven’—even his own physical needs should be satisfied only for the sake of serving God. He should eat and sleep and do whatever it takes to maintain his body for God’s service. And this is indeed a correct explanation” (commentary to Deut 6:13). In a *derashah* on Ecclesiastes, he similarly writes: “One must not pursue worldly pleasures, which are ephemeral and fade swiftly … All worldly pleasures and desires are worthless. One must uproot them from one’s mind and forget them completely … One must occupy oneself in this world entirely for the sake of heaven and in fear of God and not indulge oneself with luxuries, using only what is necessary. That is the only true pleasure.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

In sum, one who adopts the virtue of abstinence in accordance with the general commandment to “be holy” will know that one must be punctilious in areas of personal ethics: eating, drinking, sex, impurity, hygiene, speech. This level of refinement is demanded of everyone. It does not demand that one detach oneself from ordinary life, which is an attribute only of the most virtuous.[[12]](#endnote-12)

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Alongside the general demand for abstinence, there is an additional character trait that is most important for Nahmanides. The work in which he presents in most detailed form his views on the necessary ethical traits is the *Iggeret ha-Musar* (“Epistle on Ethics”) which he sent in his old age from the land of Israel to his son, Nahman, who was living at that time in Catalonia.[[13]](#endnote-13) In this short epistle, Nahmanides guides his son in the ways of proper behavior. The epistle begins with a warning against anger:

Make sure always to speak pleasantly to everyone at all times, and in this way you will be saved from anger, the vice that causes sin. Our Sages of blessed memory said the same: “All kinds of hell hold sway over one who is angry” [b. Ned. 22a].

Immediately afterward Nahmanides clarifies that avoiding anger is not a goal in itself, but is just one step on the path to acquiring the virtue of humility:

And when you are saved from anger you ascend to the virtue of humility, *which is the best of all virtues*.

According to this statement of Nahmanides, humility is the most important ethical character trait.

The prohibition of pride is for Nahmanides a commandment of the Torah. It is derived from the text’s warning the king of Israel “not to act haughtily toward his fellows” (Deut 17:20):

This implies that haughtiness in general is forbidden by the Torah. If the text curbs the king’s haughtiness, how much more is this true for others, who can have no pretensions to act haughtily. For the text cautions even one who is deservedly exalted to lower himself beneath his less deserving fellows. In fact, haughtiness is a quality despised by God even in a king, for greatness and exaltation belong to the Lord alone. Praise too belongs only to Him, and humanity should boast of none but Him.

Though this verse is about the king, the prohibition of pride affects not only the king but everyone: The king has good reason to be proud, and yet it is forbidden him. Simple people have no such reasons for pride and so must certainly not fall into this vice.

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Both abstinence and humility are personal ethical traits that one must develop with regard to oneself. Nonetheless, for Nahmanides the development and improvement of the personality was not a goal in itself. Its great importance was that these traits are a necessary stage on the way to mystical intimacy with the Creator, which is one of the basic pillars of Jewish philosophy and mystical tradition in the Middle Ages. Mystical intimacy with God as the goal of human existence and as a spiritual ideal for the medieval sages in general and Nahmanides in particular demands inquiry into the esoteric teachings of the exegetes and Jewish thinkers, but that is outside the scope of this article.[[14]](#endnote-14) In the present context I will address only the overt level and not the theurgic dimension in Nahmanides’s understanding of the reason for the commandments. *Devequt* is described by Nahmanides as follows: “Remembering God and loving Him always, never letting your thoughts leave Him ‘when you lie down and when you get up’ [Deut 11:19], to the extent that even when speaking with other people one’s thoughts are not with them but remain before God. It could be that the lives of people who are on that level are ‘bound up in the bundle of life’ [1 Sam. 25:29] even while they are still alive, being themselves a habitation for the *Shekhinah*” (comment to Deut 11:22). It would seem that this comment does not address the kind of mystical intimacy demanded of the masses, but only that of the spiritual elite, who must commune directly with the Shekhinah by means of extreme concentration and purification of the body. Yet even the ordinary person must attain a certain level of intimacy with God. According to Afterman, Nahmanides thought that intimacy with God was structured on a pyramidal basis: “At its base are the masses who commune with the sages; at its apex are those unique individuals who achieve direct intimacy with the Shekhinah, at various levels, while they are still living. In between are found the people of integrity: once, the prophets; now, the sages.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Both in *Iggeret ha-Musar* and in his comment to the commandment to “be holy,” Nahmanides wrote that positive character traits serve as rungs by which to ascend higher and higher in one’s service of the Holy One, with the ultimate goal of mystical intimacy with God.

In *Iggeret ha-Musar*, after identifying humility as “the best of all the virtues,” he writes:

Through humility, the trait of fear will enter his heart … and when he behaves humbly, being ashamed before others and fearing sin and rejoicing in the worship of the Omnipresent and *cleaving to His will, His Shekhinah will rest upon him* … and now, my son, know and see that everyone whose pride exalts him over others rebels against the kingdom of heaven, for he glorifies himself with the garment of God’s kingdom … so make yourself small and let the Omnipresent exalt you.

The proud man distances himself from his Creator and rebels against Him. In contrast, the man who acquires the virtue of humility can achieve the fear that will assist him in concentrating upon God and lead to mystical intimacy with Him — which is the aim of human existence and its ultimate goal.

In his commentary on the commandment to “be holy” Nahmanides similarly emphasizes that the final aim of the added holiness that comes to expression through abstinence is mystical intimacy with the Holy One. At the end of those comments, he writes this:

“For I the Lord your God am holy” means that by being holy ourselves, we achieve intimacy with Him.

It is clear, then, that Nahmanides understood the virtues necessary in one’s personal life — humility and abstinence — as merely a stage on the journey to the goal of mystical intimacy with the Creator.[[16]](#endnote-16)

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So far, we have discussed the virtues that have to do with personal morality. The second general commandment (according to Nahmanides) has to do with the pursuit of what is good and right in the realm of interpersonal relations. Nahmanides deals with this topic in a number of places. At the end of his comment to the verse “be holy,” discussed above, he offers two examples of general commandments, of which one stems from the verse “Do what is right and good” (Deut 6:18):[[17]](#endnote-17)

It is in fact the way of the Torah to conclude a series of specific prohibitions with a general commandment of the same kind. After giving the specific details of how business is to be conducted fairly — “you must not steal” [Exod 20:15], “you must not defraud” [Lev 19:13], “you must not wrong anyone” [Lev 19:33] and the like — the Torah concludes, “Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord” [Deut. 6:18], inserting a positive commandment to behave with uprightness and equity and actually go beyond the letter of the law, acting in a way that will win the approval of others, as I shall explain (God willing) when I reach that text.

The examples cited by Nahmanides here deal with business matters. Beyond the explicit prohibitions — not to steal, not to overcharge the customer — the Torah demands uprightness “beyond the letter of the law,” that is, business dealings based on self-restraint and thoughtfulness. This is also the meaning of his statement, “They said in the Mekhilta: Doing ‘what is upright in His sight’ — this refers to business dealings. It teaches that anyone whose word is reliable, with whom people are happy to do business, is considered as if he had fulfilled the entire Torah. I will expand on this when I reach ‘Do what is right and good’ [Deut 6:18] if the good God is good to me” (from his comment to Exod 15:26).

Yet in his actual comment to “Do what is right and good” Nahmanides did not restrict himself to restraint in business dealings and financial matters; he expanded the ethical demand to all interpersonal relationships:

The Sages have a lovely approach to this, saying that it means one should keep well within the strict letter of the law. Deut 6:17, after all, has already told us to obey the commandments; now the text is telling us, “Even outside the realm of the commandments, make sure to do what is right and good, for God loves the right and the good.” This is in fact something of major importance. It is impossible for the Torah to include every potential human interaction, social, commercial, and political. But once it has mentioned a number of them (such as these from Leviticus 19: “You shall not go about as a talebearer” [v. 16], “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge” [v. 18], “Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow” [v. 16], “You shall not insult the deaf” [v. 14], “You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old” [v. 32], and the like), it repeats the instruction to do what is good, honest, and upright, encouraging people to voluntarily yield some of their prerogatives, so that one is known as someone of honesty and integrity in every aspect of behavior.

One who accustoms himself to doing “what is right and good” will know how to treat others justly and with integrity. The requirement is that one behave with moderation and consideration in all one’s relations with others. At every stage of interaction with other people one must live in empathy with those around him.[[18]](#endnote-18)

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Which biblical characters (in Nahmanides’s opinion) serve as models of ethical behavior?

Abstinence and refraining from the idle pleasures of this world was in Nahmanides’s view the province of Abraham, Isaac, and David. In his comment to “Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented” (Gen 25:8), Nahmanides wrote, “‘Old and contented’ — He had gotten everything he asked for, and all his wants were completely satisfied. So too was Isaac ‘contented with days’ [Gen 35:29]. He was not waiting for the coming days to bring him anything he did not already have. We read the same of David: ‘He died at a ripe old age, contented with days, riches and honor’ [1 Chron. 29:28]. That is the story both of God’s kindness to the righteous and of their own virtue in not desiring anything they do not need: ‘You have granted him the desire of his heart’ [Ps. 21:3]. It is not so with others: ‘A lover of money never has his fill of money’ [Eccles. 5:9]. These righteous men serve as examples of people for whom a small amount is enough, who had no need for luxuries.[[19]](#endnote-19) Nahmanides also attributed this quality to Job, who said, “Did I rejoice in my great wealth, in having attained plenty?” (Job 31:25). In his commentary to Job, Nahmanides wrote, “And it may be possible to explain ‘Did I rejoice in my great wealth?’ as Job praising his own frugality. He announced that he did not put his trust in silver or gold, that he took no great pleasure in his vast wealth, but that he rejoiced in his lot to the full extent of what he had, with no desire for anything more” (comment to Job 35:28).

The biblical character who serves as example for attaining the virtue of humility is of course that of Moses, the most complete human being ever from a religious perspective, of whom it is said, “Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth” (Num 12:3). Nahmanides characterized Moses as a man who shunned pride and remained humble even when his humility is not explicitly recorded in the text, as for example in the following cases.

In the first encounter between Moses and God, at the burning bush (Exodus 3–4), Moses rejected God’s request that he inform the elders of Israel about the exodus from Egypt, finishing by saying, “Please, O Lord, send by the hand You will send” (Exod 4:13). Nahmanides begins his explanation of Moses’s words with three explanations, from the Targum and Rashi, that interpret Moses’s words in various ways. He then writes, “But I think it means ‘by the hand of whomever You wish to send — for there is no one in the world who would not be better suited for this mission than I.’ Now Moses’s reason for such obstinacy was that he was ‘a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth’ [Num. 12:3]. For he did not dare aggrandize himself enough to tell the king, ‘The Lord sent me,’ nor go to the Israelites to take them out of Egypt and become their king.” Moses’s humility was so great that he thought everyone more worthy than him to bring the word of the Lord to the people of Israel.

Elsewhere Nahmanides argued that Moses’s humility won him the opportunity to play a role comparable to that of the Holy One. After the Holy One assigned Moses as His agent to bring the word of the Lord to Pharaoh (Exod 6:29), Moses replied, “See, I am of impeded speech” (Exod 6:30), and the Holy One responded, “See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet” (Exod 7:1). The commentators suggest various interpretations of the difficult phrase “I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh.” In his comment to Exod 6:13, Nahmanides suggests a daring interpretation that takes the verse at face value: “‘You will go before Pharaoh and command Aaron, but Pharaoh will not hear your words. Aaron, on assignment from you, will utter your words to him, just as God commands a prophet and the prophet utters His words and reproves the people with them.’ This was a promotion for Moses, which he earned by his great humility in being embarrassed on account of his impeded speech.” According to Nahmanides, Moses was originally intended to speak directly to Pharaoh. But by virtue of his humility he rose to a level like that of the Lord: Just as God speaks to the prophet and the prophet transmits His words to the people, Moses too would speak to Aaron, who would transmit his words to Pharaoh.

The humility of Moses was expressed not only in his encounters with the Holy One but also in his encounters with human beings. For example, after Moses came down from Mount Sinai and saw the Golden Calf, he asked Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” (Exod 32:21). Nahmanides asks why Moses accused Aaron only of the people’s sin and did not task him with his own sin: “Moses ought to have first castigated him for his own sin, and only then for that of the people: ‘How could you commit this great sin against God, and make so many others stumble in the same way?’” Nahmanides’s explanation is that Moses, out of his great humility, did not want to remind Aaron of his own sin, because Aaron was his older brother. “But Moses, in his great humility, was careful to respect his older brother, and mentioned only the people’s sin.” In all three of these cases and in others as well,[[20]](#endnote-20) Nahmanides characterizes Moses as a humble man even when the text itself does not explicitly say so or even call for such an explanation.

At one point Nahmanides compares the humility of Moses to that of Aaron — both of them avoid strife because of their humility. Of Moses Nahmanides writes in connection to the accusations of Aaron and Miriam: “‘Now Moses was a very humble man’ [Num 12:3]. God had to be jealous on Moses’s behalf. He himself would never respond to a quarrel of this kind even if he had known about it”; about Aaron Nahmanides writes, “‘Korah fell on his face’ [Num 16:4]. But Aaron did not. He did not say a word during this entire dispute, being both too sacred and too disciplined to do so. He kept silent, as if admitting that Korah’s status was greater than his own, but that he was simply doing what Moses said and obeying the king’s decree.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

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To conclude: Nahmanides made ethical demands that touch both on thought and on action, both in one’s relationship with God and in one’s relationship to other people. The goal of the commandment “Do what is right and good” is to employ justice in order to make society whole again; the goal of the commandment “be holy’ is abstinence that would ultimately lead to mystical intimacy with the Creator. This commandment is linked with the demand for humility, whose goal is likewise intimacy with the Creator. The processes of perfection, transcendence, and purification will eventually lead to intimacy between man and God.

The four cardinal positive virtues designated by Aristotle were courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom. The two virtues designated by Nahmanides are that of abstinence (somewhat akin to Aristotle’s “moderation”) and uprightness (somewhat akin to Aristotle’s “justice”). Does this similarity bear witness to Nahmanides’s acquaintance with the details of Aristotle’s ethical teaching, or is the resemblance simply a coincidence? This question will remain open for future inquiry and research.

1. See Raphael Jospe, “Ramban (Nahmanides) and Arabic,” *Tarbiz* 57 (1987): 67–93 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. From the 9th century on, most of the works of the Greek philosophers were translated directly into Arabic. See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ʻAbbāsid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998); Christina d’Ancona, “Greek Sources in Arabic and Islamic Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arabic-islamic-greek/#Bib. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Most of this translation was done in Provence, and the translators worked from the Arabic versions of the philosophical texts, not the original Greek. For example, Judah Alharizi translated the *Magna Moralia* attributed to Aristotle c. 1200; Samuel ibn Tibbon translated Aristotle’s *Meteorology* in 1210; his son Moses ibn Tibbon translated the summary by Ibn Rushd (the greatest of the Muslim philosophers in Spain) of Aristotle’s *Physics* in around 1250. Translations were made in Catalonia too. For example, R. Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, one of the heads of the community in Barcelona at the beginning of the 13th century and a contemporary of Nahmanides, played a central role in the translation enterprise in Christian Europe, translating Jewish, Muslim, and even Buddhist works from Arabic, among them Pseudo-Aristotle’s *Book of the Apple*. These facts and many others can be found in Zonta Mauro, “Medieval Hebrew Translations of Philosophical and Scientific Texts: A Chronological Table,” in *Science in Medieval Jewish Culture*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 17–73. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Moshe Idel, “Nahmanides: Kabbala, Halakha and Spiritual Leadership,” *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 557 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “Nahmanides’ attitude toward philosophy was negative in the extreme, and he was not prepared to grant it any role whatsoever in his Torah commentary … the fate of Aristotle was even worse, since every time Nahmanides mentions him, he does so negatively.” See Idel, *Nahmanides*, 557; Oded Yisraeli, “From ‘Torat Ha-Shem Temimah’ to the Torah Commentary: Milestones in Nahmanides’ Creative Life,” *Tarbiz* 83 (2014–2015): 189–190 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See for example Amos Funkenstein, *Styles in Medieval Biblical Exegesis – An Introduction* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1990), 47–49 [in Hebrew]; Ephraim Kanarfogel, “On the Assessment of R. Moses ben Nachman (Nahmanides) and his Literary Oeuvre,” *Jewish Book Annual* 51 (1993–4): 165–166 and bibliography on notes 28–29. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. E.g. Idel, *Nahmanides*, 559–560; Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanides and the Creation of Tradition* (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2006), 14 [in Hebrew]. [The English version of *By Way of Truth* has just appeared (September 2020), and you might want to cite from it. I unfortunately don’t have access to it.] [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Halbertal, *By Way of Truth*, 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See also Chaim Henoch, *Nachmanides: Philosopher and Mystic* (Jerusalem: Torah Laam Publication, 1978), 123–131 [in Hebrew]; Moshe Halbertal, *Interpretative Revolutions in the Making: Values as Interpretive Considerations in Midrashei Halakhah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 30–32 [in Hebrew]; Halbertal, *By Way of Truth*, 286–290; Oded Yisraeli, “‘Taking Precedence over the Torah’: Vows and Oaths, Abstinence and Celibacy in Naḥmanides’s Oeuvre,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 28 (2020): 133–134 and n. 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See also his explanation of the sin of the “wayward and defiant” son: “He commits two violations: one, cursing his father and mother and rebelling against them; and two, being a glutton and a drunkard, which violates Lev. 19:2, ‘You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy’” (comment to Deut 21:18). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Moses ben Nahman, *Writings of R. Moses ben Nahman*, ed. C.B. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963), 190–191. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On abstinence in Nahmanides’ thought and its reflection in his Torah commentary and in his personal life, see further in Yisraeli, “Vows and Oaths,” 133–139. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The question of the *Iggeret*’s authorship is much discussed in the scholarly literature. The accepted view today is that it is completely authentic. See Oded Yisraeli, *R. Moses b. Nachman (Nachmanides) - Intellectual Biography* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2020), 326–327 [in Hebrew]. Quotations from the *Iggeret* are based on the Hebrew of MS Parma-Palatina 2784/28 (De Rossi 1390; F 13633), which was copied in 1286, just 15 years after Nahmanides’ death. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. On the idea of mystical intimacy with God and its development among the thinkers of the Middle Ages, see the study of Adam Afterman, *Devequt – Mystical Intimacy in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2011) [in Hebrew]. On mystical intimacy in Nahmanides’s thought see further there, 286–333, with bibliography of earlier research on this topic at 286 n. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 296; see the full discussion on 296–302. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. On abstinence as a stage on the way to mystical intimacy see Yisraeli, Vow and Oath, 140–145. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The other general commandment mentioned there is the commandment to keep the Sabbath, which is not directly connected to ethical traits. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See also his comment to “Be careful to heed all these words” (Deut 12:28): “There is no specific mention here of laws, rules, injunctions, or commandments. It just says ‘all these words’ to include something more general in the statement, that is, ‘what is good and right.’ See my comment to Deut 6:18.” It is interesting to note that in his comment to Deut 6:18 all the examples of specific prohibitions are taken from Leviticus 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This apparently does not contradict Nahmanides’s claim that the Patriarchs were extremely wealthy; see his comment to Gen 25:34. See also Miriam Sklarz, “The Terms ‘Error’ and ‘Enticement’ in Nahmanides’ Rebuke of Ibn Ezra,” *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* 8 (2008): 567–568 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The humility of Moses is mentioned also in Nahmanides’s comments to Exod 16:6, Num 11:28, and Deut 1:12. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Nahmanides added these words to his commentary only after reaching Israel. See Yosef Ofer and Jonathan Jacobs, *Nahmanides’ Torah Commentary Addenda Written in the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013), 448–449 [in Hebrew]. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)