

The Cultures of Maimonideanism

Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy

edited by

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VOLUME 9

The Cultures of Maimonideanism

New Approaches to the History of
Jewish Thought

edited by

James T. Robinson



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2009

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The cultures of Maimonideanism / [edited] by James T. Robinson.

p. cm. — (Supplements to the Journal of Jewish thought and philosophy ; v. 1)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-90-04-17450-4 (hardback : alk. paper) 1. Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204—Teachings. 2. Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204—Influence. 3. Philosophy, Jewish. I. Robinson, James T., 1965- II. Title. III. Series.

B759.M34C85 2009

296.1'81—dc22

2009007856

ISSN 1873-9008

ISBN 978 90 04 17450 4

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

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PREFACE

The papers included in this volume were, with one exception, presented at the Eighth EAJIS Summer Colloquium entitled “The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought,” which convened July 16–19, 2007 at Wolfson College, Oxford. The Colloquium, organized by Gad Freudenthal of CNRS and myself, was sponsored by the European Association of Jewish Studies. I wish to thank the EAJIS, along with its administrator Garth Gilmour, for assistance before and during the colloquium. I also wish to thank Michiel Klein Swormink, the Jewish Studies Editor at Brill, for accepting this volume for publication. I add a special note of gratitude to my co-organizer Gad Freudenthal—the organizer of conferences par excellence—and to the colloquium participants, who effectively transformed our inchoate ideas and aspirations into something far richer and more diverse than we could have expected. I think this is clear testimony to the richness and complexity of Maimonideanism.

* * *

In this brief preface, I would like to provide a few preliminary reflections on some of the main themes, concerns, problems, and also opportunities, that emerged during the colloquium and which are developed in the papers that follow. I will try to identify and highlight common features I find in many of the chapters, certain patterns emerging in the history of Maimonideanism. Although the chapters are organized more or less chronologically, these brief remarks will be presented synthetically, organized around four main areas: reception; accommodation; cultural mentalities—that is, the way Maimonides emerged in various contexts as cultural hero or emblematic figure; and application: the way the *Guide* was read, adapted, revived, and recreated throughout history in light of contemporary debates and ideologies, providing a “cure” for the illnesses of the time, a treatment for symptoms of intellectual malaise, a bulwark against superstition and the irrational, and—to focus on its most common use—a remedy for the perplexities of faith and reason.

Reception

It is one of many paradoxes or ironies in Jewish history that Maimonides, the elitist and pedagogical pessimist (if we accept Frank Griffel's characterization of him in Chapter 1), became the Teacher par excellence, ha-Rav ha-Moreh and Moreh Tsedeq, the inspiration of countless popular movements extending from the thirteenth century to the twentieth, from Western Europe to the Yemen, from Spain to the New World.

As described by Howard Kreisel (in Chapter 2), in some ways the emergence of a Maimonidean tradition was quite simple and straightforward, and followed naturally from the work of Maimonides himself. This, at least, was the case in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when Maimonidean enthusiasts in Spain, Provence, and Italy devoted themselves to the translating, explaining, imitating, defending, expanding, and extending of the work of the Master, creating the material foundation for an intellectual tradition. Often this meant completing a project begun by Maimonides, such as the philosophical explication of the "work of the beginning" and "work of the chariot." It moved in more general directions as well: writing a detailed Maimonidean commentary on the Bible, a full Maimonidean explication of Rabbinic midrash and aggadah, and completing the theological system only partially constructed by the Master. It is for the latter reason that even Gersonides might be considered a true Maimonidean—following some of the suggestions by Roberto Gatti (in Chapter 5)—even though Gersonides developed a new method, worked within a different philosophical framework, and arrived at very different conclusions than his predecessor.

There were other ways to follow Maimonides, less straightforward, but no less significant; for example the rewriting of his ideas within a more traditional context, the use of his methods to achieve seemingly non-Maimonidean goals, or the defending of his positions by appealing to authorities with disparate intellectual affinities—from Saadia Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra to Immanuel Kant. Nor was the simple straightforward translating and publishing of Maimonides' writings distinct from contemporary philosophical and ideological debates. This is certainly the case with the seventeenth-century Latin translations of Maimonides' writings mentioned by Yaacov Dweck (in Chapter 9), or the eighteenth-century editions of the *Guide* discussed by Abraham Socher (in Chapter 10). To what extent the republication of the *Guide*,

together with commentaries by Moses Narboni and Solomon Maimon, determined the course of *Guide* scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a fascinating subject; it highlights, among other things, the cultural power exerted by a publisher.

Accommodation

The examples discussed thus far I would consider first-order Maimonideanism, that is, the conscious and intentional creation of a tradition of philosophy and exegesis by countless and often anonymous translators, philosophers, theologians, exegetes, preachers, popular educators, propagators of wisdom and defenders of the faith. As discussed in many of the papers in this volume, there was also a second-order Maimonideanism. I refer to the way that Maimonides, through both his *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide*, forced or encouraged a completely new understanding of the canon. After Maimonides, Bible and rabbinic literature could no longer be read the same way. Earlier medieval authors, moreover, were brought into conversation with the Master, transformed into his allies and initiates.

This is certainly the case with Ibn Ezra who, as explained by Tamás Visi (in Chapter 4), was transformed into a Maimonidean commentator on the Bible. It was also the case with Judah Halevi—a more unlikely Maimonidean. As discussed by Maud Kozodoy (in Chapter 6), in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the *Kuzari* experienced something of a revival in Provence and Spain, but seems not to have offered a real living alternative to Maimonides. Unlike the nationalistic Halevi of religious Zionism (as discussed briefly by Dov Schwartz in Chapter 16) or the romantic Halevi of Rosenzweig (as mentioned by Hanoch Ben-Pazi in Chapter 14), Halevi's medieval commentators tended to transform his anti-philosophical work into a Maimonidean text: they explained it in light of the *Guide* and the works of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Jacob Anatoli, Levi b. Abraham and others. Even Halevi's polemic against Aristotle in Book 5 was transformed into an introductory textbook on Aristotelian philosophy!

Still more complex are examples of syncretism—the mixing of Maimonides with intellectual traditions seemingly opposed, often contrary, to the spirit of the Master. Well-known is the example of Maimonides' own descendents who, by focusing on the mystical terminology of *Guide* 3:51, created a Sufi Maimonideanism, which

would become the preferred tradition of Bet ha-Rambam into the fourteenth century. The example of Kabbalah is even more interesting. Mor Altshuler's identification (in Chapter 8) of Maimonidean patterns and ideals playing out in practice with Joseph Karo is quite remarkable, and should be followed up more generally in the history of later Kabbalah and Messianism. If Jonathan Dauber is correct (see Chapter 3), we have something more than syncretism: the organic development of Kabbalah out of Maimonides, at least concerning ideas about the unity of God and divine attributes. The same might be suggested of Meister Eckhart's negative theology and other mystical developments, Jewish and Christian alike.

Mentalities

Yet to be a Maimonidean does not require that one write a commentary on the *Guide*, a philosophical explication of Bible and Midrash, or even a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra. In fact, as shown by the papers in this volume, one can join the ranks of the Maimonideans without really understanding Maimonides—or even reading him. This was already true early in the thirteenth century when Aaron b. Meshullam defended the Master as if he were no different than Saadia Gaon. It continued into the later medieval, early modern and modern periods as well, as exemplified by the popular liturgical dogmatics of Yigdal and Ani ma'amin (as discussed by Abraham Melamed in Chapter 7), the purely symbolic Maimonides of the eighteenth century, and the thoroughly “yeshivish” Maimonides of the twentieth.

I think the importance of the “cultural” or “rhetorical” Maimonides is clearly supported indirectly by the work of George Kohler and Görgo Hasselhoff (Chapters 12–13). That the *Guide* was studied seriously and philosophically beginning only in the nineteenth century I think is cogently argued. But one could add that Maimonides' work could be read philosophically in the nineteenth century only because of the cultural work done in the eighteenth and the debate and discussion surrounding the *Guide* in the nineteenth (as discussed by Michah Gottlieb in Chapter 11). The philosophical reading of the *Guide* in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth (with the work of Strauss and Levinas, as discussed by Benjamin Wurgaft in Chapter 15) emerges after more than one hundred years of debate and discus-

sion over the contested space that was Maimonides. In other words, one might hypothesize that cultural image—as much as philosophical content—played a key role in the development of reading practices and philosophical doctrines.

Medicine for the Soul

This brings us to the fourth category: the *Guide* as cure, as a remedy of sorts, a form of therapy, which Maimonides prescribed for the illnesses of his age, the deep anxieties—as Gad Freudenthal described it in his opening remarks at the colloquium—caused by the inconsistency between religion and philosophy.

In light of the papers in this volume, I think we can say that the *Guide* is not a single cure but many different cures, a pharmacy of sorts, a pharmacopeia; it is many medicines which, when mixed properly by the skilled physician, can cure a large assortment of diseases. Maimonides himself addresses the many different ailments in his own time, including unreflective conventional practice; biblical and rabbinic literalism; the “sickness” that is Kalām; idolatry and superstition (as represented by Sabianism); anthropocentrism and materialism. In later generation the list grew longer. The Christians considered the *Guide* a cure of Jewish literalism, Leone Modena thought it a remedy for Kabbalah, while Reformers in the nineteenth century focused their attention on a pilpulistic orthodoxy that seemed a mere shell of the Bible’s authentic ethical monotheism, as already pointed to—so they claimed—by Maimonides in the *Guide* and elsewhere.

In light of the chapters in this volume one might also identify a history of reading the *Guide* that corresponds closely with various and diverse movements of renewal and reform—with small case “r.” To say it differently: everyone had their favorite chapter in the *Guide* which supported their own ideas and aspirations. To give a few examples: The Sufi descendents of Maimonides preferred *Guide* 3:51, as did Ibn Tibbon, who termed it the “noblest chapter in the noble treatise.” Ibn Tibbon’s son-in-law Jacob Anatoli was attracted mainly to *Guide* 1:31–34 and its complex discussion of education and the limitations of knowledge. The Kabbalists, as well as the modern reformers, were drawn to the chapters on divine attributes, while in the seventeenth century, among Jews and Christians alike, it was Maimonides’ historicizing account of

biblical law that was considered most important. A history of reading the *Guide*, I think, would go a long way toward mapping—or rather, indexing—a historical topography of Jewish thought.

These are just a few general categories and concerns. There are many others that will emerge in the following chapters, such as the problems of elite vs. popular culture, the close relation between tradition and censorship (on many levels), the various processes of canonization, and the complex relation between master and disciple, charismatic figure and social-religious movement. But what I hope these remarks can do, simple and schematic as they are, is provide some orienting framework for the discussion that follows—in this book, and hopefully in many future studies of and conferences devoted to this very fruitful subject of Maimonideanism.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RABBI JOSEPH KARO AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MESSIANIC MAIMONIDEANISM¹

Mor Altshuler

*Introduction: The Reestablishment of the Sanhedrin and the
Rulings of Maimonides*

Maimonides' attitude towards Messianism is complicated and ambivalent.² It is clear, however, that he embraced two historical phenomena—the Sanhedrin and prophecy—and depicted them as messianic symbols, omens of the End of Days, whose reappearance in the Jewish world would herald the coming of the Messiah. It is the contention of this paper that, by expressing his views on the Sanhedrin and renewal of prophecy in a halakhic context, Maimonides laid the juristic foundations for the messianic practice of the sixteenth century.

The influence of Maimonides on sixteenth-century messianic circles is unquestionably significant. Particular attention should be paid to the failed attempt in 1538 to renew classic rabbinic ordination (*semikhah*) in Safed, thus reestablishing the Sanhedrin, the ancient High Court, which had lapsed in late antiquity or early medieval times.³ The motivation

¹ I would like to thank Joel Linsider and Esther Chipman-Frame for the translation into English, and Maya Levi for her fruitful remarks.

² See J. L. Kraemer, "On Maimonides' Messianic Posture," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 109–142; A. Ravitzky, "To the Utmost of Human Capacity?: Maimonides on the Days of the Messiah," in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, ed. J. Kraemer (Oxford, 1991), pp. 221–256; A. Eran, "Utopia and Realism—The Land of Israel in the Writings of Maimonides and R. Yehuda ha-Levi," *Tura* 2 (1992), pp. 178–198 [Hebrew]; M. Goodman, "History and Meta-History in the Posture of Maimonides," in *Be-Darkhey Shalom: Studies in Jewish Thought Presented to Shalom Rosenberg*, eds. B. Ish-Shalom and A. Berholz (Jerusalem, 2007), pp. 243–253 [Hebrew].

³ See M. Benayahu, "The Revival of Ordination in Safed," in *Yitzhak F. Baer Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, eds. S. W. Baron, B. Dinur, S. Ettinger and I. Halpern (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 248–269 [Hebrew]; J. Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 213–236 [Hebrew]; H. Z. Dimitrovsky, "New Documents regarding the Semicha Controversy in Safed," *Sefunot* 10 (1966), pp. 113–192 [Hebrew];

of Rabbi Jacob Beirav and his supporters was based on Maimonides' view, according to which the renewal of rabbinic ordination and the reestablishment of the Sanhedrin was a preliminary step to advancing the coming of the Messiah. Moreover, Maimonides determined in *Mishneh Torah* that the Sages of the Land of Israel have the authority to renew the ordination without waiting for divine intervention: "It seems to me that if all the Sages in the Land of Israel were to agree to appoint judges and to ordain them, the ordination would be valid, empowering the ordained to adjudicate cases involving fines and to ordain others."⁴ Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah provides instructions that are more detailed:

The court will say to the man who is worthy of being ordained: Rabbi So-and-so, you are ordained and you are authorized to adjudicate cases involving fines. And in this the man is ordained... and I think that when there is agreement of all the Sages and the students to appoint a man from the Yeshivah as the head [the appointment is valid] as long as it takes place in the Land of Israel.⁵

Maimonides provided viable instructions. Applying them, the Sages of Safed ordained Rabbi Jacob Beirav as a first step to reestablishing the Sanhedrin. A manuscript recently published by Abraham David contains a tractate in support of the move.⁶ The writer, possibly Rabbi Jacob Beirav, reasons that the renewal of rabbinic ordination was related to Maimonides' wish to hasten the redemption: "Here is Maimonides of Blessed Memory, who asked to renew the crown of ordination (*semikhah*) in order to [hasten the end] of our redemption and the salvation of our souls."⁷ The writer relates to Maimonides' comment in his original Arabic commentary on the Mishnah, where he explicitly notes that the reestablishment of the Sanhedrin would precede and herald the arrival of the Messiah: "And I think that the Sanhedrin will return before

E. Shochetman, "Renewal of the Semikha according to Maimonides," *Shenaton Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri, Annual of the Institute for Research in Jewish Law* 14–15 (1988–1989), pp. 217–243 [Hebrew].

⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, the Book of Judges, trans. A. M. Hershman (New Haven, 1949), Sanhedrin 4:11, p. 15.

⁵ *Commentary on the Mishnah*, ed. and trans. Joseph Kafih (Jerusalem, 1965), Sanhedrin 1:1, p. 147.

⁶ See A. David, "A New Document Regarding the Renewal of Semikha in Safed," *Kobez Al Yad* 17/27 (2003), pp. 277–287 [Hebrew].

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

the revelation of the Messiah, and it [the Sanhedrin] will be one of his [the Messiah's] omens."⁸ However, as Abraham David points out, Maimonides drew an exceptional, futuristic description of the End of Days. Attributing messianic motivation to him was probably a falsification of his original intention and a manipulative attempt to legitimize Beirav's controversial move.⁹

The attempt to resume rabbinic ordination and reestablish the Sanhedrin in 1538 was probably connected to the completion of the corporeal preparations for the arrival of the Messiah in 5300 (1540), as anticipated by Solomon Molkho and Abraham ha-Levi,¹⁰ highly regarded for their messianic calculations. The move failed due to the strong objection of the Sages of Jerusalem who resisted its messianic purpose. Before fleeing to Damascus, Rabbi Jacob Beirav succeeded in ordaining a few scholars, amongst whom was Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488–1575), the author of *Shulhan Arukh* and the most prominent representative of what I wish to call "sixteenth-century messianic Maimonideanism."

I. *Shulhan Arukh and Mishneh Torah*

Shulhan Arukh (1565), the most widespread code of law after Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, differs from the former in its method of ruling. Maimonides demanded exclusivity, stating: "Thus, I have called this work Deuteronomy (*Mishneh Torah*), for a person first reads the Written Law and then reads this work, and knows from it the entire Oral Law, without needing to read any other book."¹¹ Joseph Karo, unlike Maimonides, denotes a list of decisors (*poskim*), whose opinions he takes into account.

Alongside the texts of the Oral Law—Mishnah, Baraita, Tosefta—and "the three pillars of instruction"—Maimonides, Rabbi Isaac al-Fasi (Rif), an eleventh century scholar from Fez, Morocco, and the Ashkenazi

⁸ *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 1:3, p. 148.

⁹ See David, "A New Document Regarding the Renewal of Semikha in Safed," p. 283, n. 13.

¹⁰ See A. H. Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel: From the First through the Seventeenth Centuries* (New York, 1927), pp. 130–135.

¹¹ *Mishneh Torah*, Introduction, par. 42, trans. from the Hebrew text reconstructed according to the Yemenite manuscripts by the staff of Mechon Mamre 2007 (www.mechon-mamre.org).

Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel (Rosh),¹² Karo mentions Nahmanides, Rashba (Rabbi Solomon Ibn Adret, Barcelona 1235–1310), Rav Nissim, as well as *Mordekhai*,¹³ *Sefer Mitzvot ha-Gadol*¹⁴ and “the other renowned Sages,” along with local practice (*minhag*).¹⁵ This method is defined by Karo’s divine mentor as “bringing the hooks into the loops:”

Busy yourself constantly with rendering decisions in Jewish law and with the Talmud, the Kabbalah, the Mishnah, the *Tosafot* and Rashi, as you are doing. For you combine them and fit one to the other, bringing the hooks into the loops.¹⁶

The entirety of Karo’s rulings is thus a collection, which forms a virtual Sanhedrin that may be parallel both to the Sanhedrin that did not materialize in Safed and to its celestial equivalent, the “heavenly academy,”¹⁷ often mentioned by Karo’s divine mentor.

These methodological differences, however, did not prevent Joseph Karo from regulating the centrality of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* in both *Shulchan Arukh* and his previous composition, *Beit Yosef* (1550 or earlier). As Karo explains in the introduction to *Beit Yosef*, his first priority in the process of ruling is the majority view of “the three pillars of instruction.”¹⁸ As a result, most of Karo’s rulings are decided in

¹² Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel was born in 1250 in Ashkenaz, and was appointed head of the Jewish court of Toledo, Spain. His rulings are considered an early example of the integration of French, Ashkenazi and Sephardic traditions of Halakhah.

¹³ *Mordekhai* is a thirteenth-century halakhic composition by the Ashkenazi Mordekhai ben Hillel.

¹⁴ *Sefer Mitzvot ha-Gadol* was written by the thirteenth-century Ashkenazi scholar Moses ben Jacob to explain the 613 commandments.

¹⁵ Introduction to *Beit Yosef*, in Jacob ben Asher’s *Tur Orah Hayyim* with the *Beit Yosef Commentary* by Joseph Karo (Venice, 1550), p. 2b.

¹⁶ *Maggid Mesharim*, ed. A. Bar-Lev (Petah Tikva, 1990), p. 23; L. Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies* (New York, 1976), pp. 114–115. See also *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 258: “And so, be strong and vigorous in your Torah, as you engage in [the study of] Torah, Mishnah, Gemara, Rashi, Tosafot, decisors, and Kabbalah. For you tie them to one another, and all the angels on high seek your peace and well-being.” On the Kabbalah blended into Joseph Karo’s Halakhah, see Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*, pp. 52–70; M. Hallamish, “Joseph Karo—Kabbalah and Halakhic Decisions,” *Da’at* 21 (1988), pp. 85–102 [Hebrew]; I. M. Ta-Shma, “Rabbi Joseph Karo: Between Spain and Germany,” *Tarbiz* 59 (1990), pp. 153–170 [Hebrew]; I. Twersky, “The *Shulchan Arukh*: Enduring Code of Jewish Law,” *Judaism* 16 (1967), pp. 141–158; M. Hallamish, “The Logic behind the Relationship between Halakhah and Kabbalah,” in *Be-Darkhey Shalom: Studies in Jewish Thought presented to Shalom Rosenberg*, pp. 537–550 [Hebrew]. Moses Hallamish points out (p. 549) that when Kabbalistic literature is accepted as a halakhic source, it equals its status to that of the other disputable sources, thus demolishing its divine stature.

¹⁷ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 193.

¹⁸ Introduction to *Beit Yosef*, p. 2b.

accordance with Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, because the Sephardic Maimonides and al-Fasi usually form a majority against the minority views of the Ashkenazi Rosh.¹⁹ The lack of balance was the ground for the complaint of Rabbi Moses Isserles, Karo's contemporary Ashkenazi decisor (*posek*), concerning the discriminative rulings of *Shulhan Arukh*. Isserles disapproved of Karo's preference of the Sephardic Maimonides and al-Fasi even when the majority of the later decisors of early modernity (*aharonim*) disagree with them:

For our Sages, may their memory be for a blessing, said (TB, Eruvin 27a): do not learn from the generality. Let alone [do not learn] from the generality that this genius [Joseph Karo] determined for himself, to follow Maimonides and al-Fasi where most of the *aharonim* disagree with them. Thus, many comments in his books are not in accord with the rulings of our famous decisors, the sons of Ashkenaz, whose water we drink.²⁰

Although Isserles's criticism derived from the discrimination of Ashkenazi decisors, he chose to phrase his objection in generational terms—early decisors (*rishonim*) vis-à-vis later decisors (*aharonim*)—rather than in regional terms.

The centrality of Maimonides in Karo's halakhic world is demonstrated clearly in a responsum published in his collection of responsa *Avqat Rokhel*. Relying on the fact that Maimonides was the official leader of the Jews in Egypt and the East, Karo concludes that in the Land of Israel and throughout the eastern lands (Arabistan) and North Africa (the Maghreb), one should rule in accordance with Maimonides:

Maimonides of blessed memory, the greatest of the decisors, and of all the communities of the Land of Israel, Arabistan, and the Maghreb, followed his views and accepted him as their rabbi. And why should [the communities] who follow his rulings...be compelled to vary from them? And particularly since their fathers and fathers' fathers followed that practice, the sons should not vary to the left or the right from [the rulings of] Maimonides, of blessed memory.²¹

Karo conveys a similar view in *Kesef Mishneh*, his commentary on *Mishneh Torah*: "The simple custom (*minhag*) in all the Land of Israel is [following] the words of our master [Maimonides] and we have never

¹⁹ See J. I. Dienstag, "The Attitude of Maran Joseph Karo to Maimonides," *Sinai* 59 (1966), pp. 58–59, 72 [Hebrew].

²⁰ Introduction to *Shulhan Arukh* by Moses Isserles, *Orah Hayyim* (Krakow, 1578–1580), p. 2b.

²¹ *Responso Avqat Rokhel* (Salonika, 1791), sec. 32, p. 139.

heard [anyone] speaking up in disagreement.”²² And the same attitude is found in a promise made by Karo’s heavenly mentor:

Busy yourself constantly in the study of the Torah. For when you casuistically examined the opinions of Maimonides yesterday, the two views you expressed are correct and Maimonides is pleased that you have succeeded in uncovering his full meaning and he is pleased that you always quote his opinions and discuss his views casuistically... When you die, Maimonides will come out to meet you because you have defended his decisions and, even now, he pleads on your behalf.²³

It is obvious that Joseph Karo regarded Maimonides as the paradigmatic halakhist and he supported Maimonides’ centrality in the world of Halakhah. Yet, Karo did not support Maimonides’ exclusivity and refrained from creating a juristic situation in which his own rulings would be unnecessary. On the contrary, by granting Maimonides the status of the sole decisor in the Land of Israel and throughout the East, Karo aspired to strengthen his own status as Maimonides’ authorized interpreter.²⁴

The hope of inheriting the rein of Maimonides is reflected in one of Karo’s mystical revelations that took place in 1543, five years after the failure of the attempt to renew rabbinic ordination in Safed. As a divine compensation, Karo’s heavenly mentor promised him that all the Sages of the world would unanimously ordain him: “For you sacrificed your soul for the return of the Sanhedrin, you will merit being ordained by all the Sages of the Land of Israel and all the Sages in the Diaspora.”²⁵ The heavenly messenger created an implied analogy

²² *Mishneh Torah* with *Kesef Mishneh* (Venice, 1574), part 3, *Seder Zera’im*, Tractate *Terumot*, 1:11, p. 87b.

²³ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 194; Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 115.

²⁴ See Karo’s introduction to his commentary *Kesef Mishneh*, in *Mishneh Torah* (Venice, 1574), part 1, p. 2. Whether the exclusivity of Maimonides in the Land of Israel is general or valid only vis-à-vis specific cases is the subject of a present controversy between the Sephardic school of decisors and the Yemenite school of decisors. See for example Joseph Kafih, Introduction to *Mishneh Torah*, trans. M. J. Bohnen (Jerusalem, 1984); A. Kafih, “Are the Rulings of Maran in *Kesef Mishneh* and *Avqat Rokhel* general or relate to details?” in *Minhat Aharon* (Jerusalem, 2007), pp. 298–315 [Hebrew].

²⁵ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 211. See also *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 9; Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 113. This previous revelation took place on Sabbath, 27th of Iyyar, portion *Be-Midbar*, possibly in 1538, in the midst of the fierce public controversy over the renewal of the *Semikhah*. The heavenly messenger promises Karo: “And your sons will be [members of the] Sanhedrin in the Chamber of the Hewn Stone. You will yet see them teaching the laws of Kemizah.” See also Jacobs’s explanation on p. 121, n. 5: “Kemizah is the manner in which the priest smoothes out the meal of

between Karo and Maimonides by using a majestic title, “a prince and ruler” (*sar ve-nagid*), while outlining the same geographical area that had been under the authority of Maimonides: “And I will raise you up to be a prince and ruler over all the Diaspora of Israel throughout the realm of Arabistan.”²⁶ This revelation clearly shows that Joseph Karo aspired to become Maimonides’ successor and the mediator between the medieval *Mishneh Torah* and his own times. He hoped to take his place beside Maimonides as “prince and ruler” over the Land of Israel and “over all the Diaspora” while his compositions would assume their place alongside Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah* as binding in all communities.

II. *Joseph Karo’s Prophecy and Maimonides’ Halakhah*²⁷

Maimonides’ obvious mark on Karo’s works of Halakhah should not blur his unexpected influence on Karo’s mystical world. As known from Karo’s intimate diary, he often experienced the appearances of a mysterious voice that spoke through his throat and mouth. The voice identified itself as an archangel, an emissary from the heavenly academy: “The Holy One blessed be He and all the members of the heavenly academy have sent me to instruct you in the secret truth of the matter.”²⁸

The celestial messenger was an androgynous entity. At times, it would appear as a feminine being, identified as the Shekhinah or the Mishnah, the manifestation of the Oral Law. At other times it assumed a masculine identity, called “the Preacher” (*Maggid*),²⁹ “the speech” (*ha-dibbur*) or “the voice” (*ha-kol*),³⁰ emulating the prophecy of Moses

the meal offering in the Temple: from komez, a handful. With the Temple rebuilt, the Sanhedrin will teach the priests how to carry out the sacrificial system.” The source is TB Ketubot 106a.

²⁶ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 211.

²⁷ Sections II and III were previously published in: “Prophecy and Maggidism in the Life and Writings of R. Joseph Karo,” *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 33 (2006), pp. 81–110; “The Concept and the Experience of Prophecy of R. Joseph Karo,” in *Be-Darkhey Shalom: Studies in Jewish Thought presented to Shalom Rosenberg*, pp. 452–472 [Hebrew].

²⁸ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

that was called “speech” (*dibbur*) and “voice” (*kol*).³¹ Indeed, the voice defined his/her appearances as prophecy³² and suggested the analogy to Moses, regarding which scripture says, “mouth to mouth I speak with him.”³³ This analogy was Karo’s way to confirm the value of his halakhic work, as well as a reflection of his messianic aspiration to become a second Moses. In fact, Rabbi Moses Isserles echoed Joseph Karo’s messianic stand by using a similar hyperbole to express his great regard for Karo’s rulings: “And I have seen the words of Joseph Karo in *Shulhan Arukh* as given from the mouth of Moses, from the mouth of the Mighty One.”³⁴

Yet, being a man of Halakhah, Karo anchored his prophetic-like experiences in applicable halakhic standards. Thus, the pattern of his prophesying met the criteria for Mosaic prophecy as set forth in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*.

Maimonides regarded prophecy as the final perfection of a person, and he characterized Moses as the only prophet who had achieved that perfection,³⁵ stating: “The term prophet used with reference to Moses and to the others is amphibolous.”³⁶ In his code of law, *Mishneh*

³¹ For example, in Num 7:89: “When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak (*ledabber*) with Him, he would hear the voice (*gol*) addressing him (*middaber*) from above the cover that was on top of the Ark of the Covenant between the two cherubim; thus He spoke (*vayedabber*) to him.”

³² See *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 370: “Although prophecy has departed from Israel, it has not departed from within you.”

³³ Numbers 12:7–8. See *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 116: “for you are privileged to speak mouth to mouth when I speak with you.”

³⁴ Introduction to *Shulhan Arukh* by Moses Isserles, *Orah Hayyim* (Krakow, 1578–1580), p. 2b.

³⁵ On Mosaic prophecy in the writings of Maimonides, see A. J. Reines, “Maimonides’ Concept of Mosaic Prophecy,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40–41 (1969–1970), pp. 325–361; M. Kellner, “Maimonides and Gersonides on Mosaic Prophecy,” *Speculum* 52 (1977), pp. 62–79; J. Levinger, *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier* (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 21–48 [Hebrew]; H. Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht, 2001), pp. 148–315; D. Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan, 2002), pp. 68–80 [Hebrew]; M. Rigler, “Maimonides—Bibliography of Bibliographies,” *Sinai* 68 (2005), pp. 455–471 [Hebrew]. Most scholars take the view that Maimonides distinguished Mosaic prophecy as perfected intellectual cognition. See, e.g., Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea*, p. 190: “All the differences between Mosaic and non-Mosaic prophecy revolve around the notion that Mosaic prophecy alone was purely intellectual.” According to Dov Schwartz, however, Maimonides’ true opinion was that Moses prophesied using the imaginative faculty.

³⁶ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, 1963), p. 367. See also Kellner, “Maimonides and Gersonides on Mosaic Prophecy,” p. 65: “amphibolous; that is to say, it is the same word but it is used with reference to two totally distinct and fundamentally dissimilar phenomena.”

Torah, The Book of Knowledge (Fundamentals of Torah) Maimonides identifies five characteristics that distinguish Moses' prophecy from that of the other prophets. All five can be found in Joseph Karo's pattern of mystical revelations:

1. Prophesying while awake

In what respect was the prophecy of Moses distinguished from that of the other prophets? All the prophets received their inspired messages in a dream or in a vision; Moses while awake and standing, as it is said, "And when Moses went into the tent of meeting that He might speak with him, then he heard the Voice speaking unto him from above the ark of the testimony" [Num 7:89].³⁷

Joseph Karo likewise was called on by the heavenly messenger only while he was awake. Moreover, he regarded sleep as laziness, punished by withholding of speech: "I then slept until daybreak so that when I awoke the sun was shining. I was very upset, saying to myself: 'Why did I not arise during the night so that the speech should come to me as befores?'"³⁸

2. Direct prophecy without intermediary

All the prophets received their messages through the medium of an angel. Hence, what they saw, they saw as an allegory or riddle. Moses received his messages not through an angel, as it is said, "With him do I speak mouth to mouth" [Num 12:8], "And the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face" [Exod 33:11]. Furthermore "And the similitude of the Lord doth he behold" [Num 12:8]; that is to say, that it was no allegory that was revealed to Moses but he realized the prophetic message clearly, without riddle and without parable. To this, the Torah testifies in the text, "Even manifestly, and not in dark speeches" [Num 12:8], which means that he received his prophecy not as a riddle, but had a clear and lucid vision.³⁹

At first glance, the appearance of an angel, as mediator and messenger, would appear to differentiate Karo's prophecy from that of Moses, which was "not through an angel." But that gap between the phenomena is

³⁷ *Mishneh Torah*, The Book of Knowledge, ed. and trans. M. Hyamson (New York, 1937), Fundamentals of the Torah 7:6, p. 43a.

³⁸ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 8, as trans. in Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 111; R. J. Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford, 1962), p. 257.

³⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, The Book of Knowledge, Fundamentals of the Torah 7:6, p. 43a.

closed by the angel's promise to be revealed in the manner of the revelation to Moses: "Behold, I come to delight you and to speak through your mouth, not in a dream but as one who speaks with his friend."⁴⁰

3. Prophecy without fear

All the prophets (when receiving their messages) were filled with fear and consternation and became physically weak. Not so our teacher Moses, of whom scripture says, "as a man speaketh unto his friend" [Exod 33:11]. Just as a man is not startled when he hears the words of his fellow man, so the mind of Moses was vigorous enough to comprehend the words of prophecy while retaining his normal state.⁴¹

Similarly, the *Maggid* speaks with Karo: "as you see this time, I speak with you as a man speaks with his friend."⁴² Indeed, Karo did not become disoriented or unconscious in the manner that characterizes mystical ecstasy;⁴³ rather, he remained lucidly conscious, able to recall the content of the revelations and note them in his mystical diary post factum. His tranquility contrasts with the reaction of his coterie during the public revelation at the *Tiqqun Leil Shavu'ot*, as Elkabetz describes it: "It was an exceedingly pleasant voice, becoming increasingly stronger. We all fell upon our faces and none of us had any spirit left in him because of our great dread and awe."⁴⁴

The allusions to the giving of the Torah—"The sound of the horn grew louder and louder; Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice" (Exod 19:19)—cast Joseph Karo, like Moses, as an island of tranquility and calm surrounded by followers—the Israelites at the giving of the Torah; the members of the group at the *Tiqqun Leil Shavu'ot*—who are terrified by the awesomeness of the revelation.

⁴⁰ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 193, alluding to Exod 33:11.

⁴¹ *Mishneh Torah*, The Book of Knowledge, Fundamentals of the Torah 7:6, p. 43a.

⁴² *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 8.

⁴³ On agitation as a means for attaining the mystical vision or as a reaction to it, see G. Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and of Abraham Abulafia*, ed. J. Ben-Shlomo (Jerusalem, 1968), p. 248 [Hebrew]; H. Pedaya, *Vision and Speech: Models of Revelatory Experience in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles, 2002), pp. 47–90 [Hebrew].

⁴⁴ *The Epistle of Solomon ha-Levi Elkabetz*, in Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 100.

4. Prophesying at will

None of the prophets could prophesy at their pleasure. It was otherwise with Moses. He was invested with the prophetic spirit and was clothed with the power of prophecy whenever he pleased. There was no need for him especially to concentrate his mind and prepare for the prophetic manifestations since he was ever intent and in readiness like the ministering angels. He therefore prophesied at all times; as it is said, “Stay ye that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you” [Num 9:8].⁴⁵

Similarly, Karo called on the divine voice whenever he chose: “I began to grind *mishnayot*, and I had not completed two chapters before—hark! My beloved came and said. . . .”⁴⁶ The mechanism for summoning the celestial messenger was to grind *mishnayot*, which Karo, as a halakhist, regularly studied.⁴⁷ On the mystical plane, however, *mishnayot* played the role of a textual embodiment of the middle realm, the entryway to the supernal realm, just as the Oral Torah was the entryway to the written Torah. The harmonious blending of a halakhic point of view with kabbalistic symbolism was characteristic of Karo’s spiritual world and was expressed in the technique of reviewing, or “grinding,” *mishnayot* in order to summon the divine voice. In Hebrew, to “grind” is to chew, and in Aramaic, *g-r-s* is the root of the verb meaning “review” or “recite out loud.” The term depicts the act of studying as a loud, oral recitation, fitting well with the manner in which the Oral Torah is studied. Mystical study, however, differs from halakhic study, which is centered on reading and recitation, and “grinding” *mishnayot*, as the term is used by Karo, may mean not just reading them aloud but may have overtones of grinding, physically rupturing the literal meaning.

The “great Tanna,” Rabbi Joseph Ashkenazi of Safed, is said to have had the practice of singing *mishnayot*. Zvi Werblowsky and David Tamar assume, in view of that account, that Joseph Karo likewise reviewed *mishnayot* melodiously.⁴⁸ In his famous epistle, Solomon Elkabetz also

⁴⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, The Book of Knowledge, Fundamentals of the Torah 7:6, p. 43a.

⁴⁶ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 73, alluding to “Hark! My beloved knocks” (Song 5:2), on which Rashi comments “He causes his *Shekhinah* to rest on the prophets, conveying admonitions through them.” And Maimonides wrote that the verse “Hark! My beloved knocks” denoted a voluntary prophetic inspiration gained by Moses alone. See *Guide* 3:51, p. 623; M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1988), pp. 116–119.

⁴⁷ Karo’s routine for studying *mishnayot* is detailed at *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 275.

⁴⁸ See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic*, p. 272; D. Tamar, *Studies in the History of the Jewish People in Eretz Israel and in Italy* (Jerusalem, 1986), p. 197 [Hebrew].

recounts that, at the *Tiqqun Leil Shavu'ot*, Joseph Karo and the members of his mystical group studied "...with quite unbelievable melody and tunefulness."⁴⁹ But Elkabetz testifies as well that the voice that was heard from Karo's mouth was not a melody but rather:

We heard a voice speaking out of the mouth of the Pious, may his light shine. It was a loud voice with *letters clearly parsed*. All the companions heard the voice but were unable to understand what was said.⁵⁰

The similarity between the beginning of the process, involving Karo's review of *mishnayot*, and the outcome of the process—the voice being heard from Karo's mouth—becomes clearer in light of Maimonides' comments on the encounter at Sinai:

...It was he who was spoken to and they heard the great voice, but not the articulation of speech...Moses being the one who heard the speech and reported to them...that all Israel only heard at that Gathering one voice one single time...Moses made them hear it again as spoken in his own speech with an articulation of the letters that were heard. The Sages said this, quoting in support of this assertion the dictum: "God hath spoken once, twice have I heard this" [Ps 62:12].⁵¹

Maimonides believes that the Israelites at the Giving of the Torah heard a single sound, that is, a single tone in which all the words were encompassed; accordingly, they did not understand the meanings of the words. Moses, who understood divine speech in its entirety, separated the phonemes and repeated each word separately so the Israelites could understand them as well. Joseph Karo "ground," i.e., reviewed, *mishnayot*—perhaps reciting them constantly and rapidly⁵²—such that the words and phonemes merged into one another. At the second stage, the "speaking voice" or the "speech," in which all the words were encompassed, burst forth from his mouth. At the third stage, Karo separated

⁴⁹ *The Epistle of Elkabetz*, p. 100.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Guide* 2:33, pp. 364–365. The dictum of the Sages can be found in *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, ed. J. Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia, 1933), vol. 2, Tractate *Shirata*, chapter 8, p. 62: "...but He can say two words in one utterance, a manner of speech of which human beings are incapable, as it is said: 'God hath spoken once, twice have I heard this (Ps 62:12).'" However, according to another tradition that can be found in TB *Makkot* 23b–24a, the people of Israel heard the first two commandments directly from the mouth of the Almighty.

⁵² There may be some similarity to Abraham Abulafia's technique of rapidly reciting combinations of letters of God's names. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 39: "The immediate goal of these combinations is to achieve a state of 'warming of the heart'...in order to be ready to receive the emanated influx."

the elements of speech and repeated each word for his companions and wrote them in his mystical diary.

A dynamic continuum was thus formed, comprising three steps: active, passive, and active.⁵³ At the first stage, Karo actively ground *mishnayot*; at the second stage, he allowed the voice to flow from his mouth, while he himself served as a receiving vessel, a sort of horn, for the celestial voice; at the third stage, he was again active in “parsing letters”—separating the speech into understandable words.

It should be noted that the term “parsing letters” first appears in Isaac Abrabanel’s commentary on Numbers 7:89, in which he takes issue with Maimonides’ idea that the divine voice was not a sensible and audible voice. In Maimonides’ view, the voice was an emanation of eternal truths, which Moses apprehended by his intellect and ‘translated’ into letters and words. Isaac Abrabanel, however, maintained that God spoke with Moses through a miraculously created audible voice: “But [Maimonides] would say that the voice heard by the Israelites at Sinai was a voice created without *parsing the letters*, for they were not all prepared for prophecy.”⁵⁴ It may be assumed that Solomon Elkabetz borrowed the term from Abrabanel and passed it on to the younger generation of scholars in Safed,⁵⁵ who used the term as part of the broad discussion regarding the revelation at Sinai, especially the clause “and all the people saw the thunderings.”⁵⁶ It should also be observed that Isaac Abrabanel served here as a mediator between the philosophical world of Maimonides and the sixteenth-century Kabbalists who lacked systematic education in philosophy.

5. Sanctification and glowing facial skin

...All the prophets, when the prophetic power left them, returned to their tent, that is, attended to the satisfaction of their physical needs.

⁵³ See J. Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem, 2004), pp. 68–71, 216–219, 261 [Hebrew].

⁵⁴ Isaac Abrabanel, *Commentary on the Torah* (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 30.

⁵⁵ After Elkabetz, the term “parsing the letters” appears in Hayyim Vital’s *Etz ha-Da’at Tov* (Jerusalem, 2001), Part 1 (section *Yitro*), p. 77a. See also Isaiah Horowitz, *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit ha-Shalem* (Amsterdam, 1649), Tractate *Shevu’ot*, chapter *Torah Or*, p. 112; Immanuel Hai Ricci, *Mishnat Hasidim* (Lemberg, 1858), *Masekhet Shaharit de-Shabbat*, ch. 8, par. 1, p. 116b.

⁵⁶ Exodus 20:15. For further discussion, see M. Weinfeld, “The Uniqueness of the Decalogue and its Place in Jewish Tradition,” in *The Ten Commandments*, ed. B. Z. Segal (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 31–34 [Hebrew].

Therefore, they did not separate themselves from their wives. Moses, our teacher, never went back to his former tent. He accordingly permanently separated himself from his wife and abstained from similar gratifications. His mind was closely attached to the rock of the universe. The divine glory never departed from him; the skin of his face sent forth rays of light, and he was sanctified like the angels.⁵⁷

Joseph Karo did not permanently withdraw from this-worldly life, but he aspired to a life of withdrawal, especially to sexual relations divested of physical pleasure.⁵⁸ He believed asceticism to be the path to liberation from physical desire and to a purified consciousness, on account of which Moses' face glowed. In compensation for that ascetic way of life, the divine mentor promised him that an inscription would appear on his forehead, in the manner of Moses' facial glow: I will give you the privilege of having it written on your forehead that you are the head of the Yeshivah.⁵⁹ The remainder of the inscription may be supplied by another revelation:

This is the venerable Tanna of the Land of Israel, this is the head of the Yeshivah of the Land of Israel; this is the great author [*mehabber*; the term by which Karo is widely referred to in halakhic scholarship] of the Land of Israel.⁶⁰

Joseph Karo's belief that he was experiencing a renewal of direct revelation, that is, of prophecy, which had ended with the destruction of the Temple and the Exile, thus encompassed both his aspiration that his prophecy would be established in the Land of Israel and complement the life work of Moses, who had not entered the Land. But that aspiration did not lead him to challenge or negate the historical continuum

⁵⁷ *Mishneh Torah*, The Book of Knowledge, Fundamentals of the Torah 7:6, p. 43a.

⁵⁸ See *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 138: "Regard yourself as standing before the King, King of kings, the Holy One blessed be He, whose *Shekhinah* hovers over you and continuously accompanies you. Accordingly, be wary of taking pleasure in eating, drinking, or sexual relations, as I have taught you; such pleasures should be repugnant to you and you should not crave them."

⁵⁹ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 175; M. Pachter, "Kabbalistic Ethical Literature in Sixteenth-Century Safed," *Binah* 3 (1994), pp. 159–178. On the glowing of Moses and Simeon bar Yokhai's faces according to the *Zohar*, see Y. Liebes, "Physiognomy in Kabbalah," *Pe'amim* 104 (2005), pp. 27–28 [Hebrew]; M. Hellner-Eshed, *A River issues forth from Eden* (Tel Aviv, 2005), pp. 57–58 [Hebrew]; B. Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky: Chapters in the Reception History of the Zohar and the Construction of its Symbolic Value* (Jerusalem, 2008), pp. 11–42 [Hebrew].

⁶⁰ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 5.

of halakhic decisors; rather, he regarded himself as continuing their work and gathering their rulings. The halakhic tradition referred to in the revelations includes the prominent code of law writers on whom Karo relied in his own rulings:

From the time of Moses, master of all the prophets, until the time of Rabbi [Judah the Prince], the Oral Torah was not written down. The entire Mishnah was not explicated until Rav Ashi came to gather, compile, interpret and rule. From his time, there were no [compilations of] *halakhot* . . . until Rif, Maimonides, and Rosh came to rule on the [issues of] Halakhah throughout the *Gemara*. And Maimonides did wonders in speaking of the entire Torah, but from then until now, no one was moved to gather everything [i.e., all halakhic rulings] as you have been moved.⁶¹

These individuals appear in the list of decisors in the introduction to Karo's *Beit Yosef*, attesting to the effort to harmonize Halakhah with both prophecy and Kabbalah that characterized Karo's mystical world as well as his approach as a halakhic decisor. In fact, the mystical transformation of Karo's juristic synthesis of various views, which he called "bringing the hooks into the loops," is the symbol of the divine abundance that Karo felt whenever he learned Torah, Mishnah or Kabbalah. The divine influx flew with no barrier from past generations to present generations and from the heavenly Yeshivah to its parallel earthly Yeshivah in the Land of Israel, turning synthesis and harmony into a Kabbalistic principle as well as a halakhic one.

Particular attention should be paid to the messianic undertone of the term "the head of the Yeshivah of the Land of Israel," which reveals the messianic motivation behind Karo's prophetic-like mysticism, by echoing the instructions of Maimonides regarding the renewal of rabbinic ordination: "to appoint a man from the Yeshivah as the head as long as it takes place in the Land of Israel."⁶²

Karo's messianic motivation is even clearer when the view of Maimonides concerning the return of prophecy is taken into account. In his famous *Epistle to Yemen*, Maimonides describes the reappearance of prophecy as a sign that betokens the arrival of the Messiah:

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶² *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin, 1:1. On the messianic context of sixteenth-century prophetic-like phenomena, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1941), pp. 119–155; M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, 1988), pp. 1–31; J. Dan, *On Sanctity* (Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 31–58 [Hebrew]; M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, 1998), pp. 61–65, 295–298; M. Goldish, *The Sabbatean Prophets* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), pp. 41–55.

It is doubtless true that the reappearance of prophecy in Israel is one of the signs betokening the approach of the Messiah, as is stated: "After that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" [Joel 3:1]. This is the most reliable tradition concerning the advent of the Messiah.⁶³

Maimonides expressed this view in the *Guide of the Perplexed* as well: "This also will be the cause for prophecy being restored to us in its habitual form, as has been promised in the days of the Messiah, may He be revealed soon."⁶⁴ It is reasonable to assume that Joseph Karo regarded his prophesying as a sign of the messianic age. Taking into account Karo's involvement in the reestablishment of the Sanhedrin, one may conclude that Joseph Karo was consistently internalizing and carrying out Maimonides' abstract instructions regarding the necessary preparations for the arrival of the Messiah.

III. *Elijah the Prophet and Maimonides' Messianic Vision*

An important aspect of Joseph Karo's messianic inspirations was his desire to meet Elijah the Prophet: "see him while awake and exchange greetings with him."⁶⁵ In Karo's mystical diary, Elijah is portrayed as a magical figure with mythic and eschatological strains, identified with Metatron, the servant-angel "taking on bodily form and appearing in this world."⁶⁶ The appearance of Elijah can thus be achieved through the magical use of letters to adjure angels,⁶⁷ supported by asceticism and abstention: "And you should afflict yourself as I told you so that you will be privileged to see Elijah while you are awake, and he will speak with you mouth-to-mouth."⁶⁸

⁶³ *Epistle to Yemen*, in *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*, eds. A. Halkin and D. Hartman (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 122.

⁶⁴ *Guide* 2:36, p. 373.

⁶⁵ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31; see also pp. 104, 298. In Karo's mystical diary, the divine messenger is sometimes identified with Metatron. Thus, Joseph Karo in fact was granted a revelation of Elijah.

⁶⁷ See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic*, p. 270; M. Idel, "Inquiries in the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," *Sefunot* 17 (1983), pp. 240–243 [Hebrew]; M. Altshuler, "Revealing the Secret of His Wives"—R. Joseph Karo's Concept of Reincarnation and Mystical Conception," *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 31 (2004), p. 100; Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 203–212.

⁶⁸ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 9. In *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, Elijah serves as intermediary between the soul and the mysteries of the Torah, and the messianic era is characterized by

Karo's aspiration to experience the appearance of Elijah appears *prima facie* to contradict his wish to attain Moses' status, for an appearance of Elijah is at a lower rung on the ladder than the prophecy of Moses. On that account, Zvi Werblowsky assumed that "this desire may be no more than a carry-over from the popular tradition which regarded the apparition of the prophet as one of the greatest spiritual boons."⁶⁹ But the tradition also assigns Elijah the eschatological role of heralding the redemption. Here, too, Maimonides' influence is evident, for the step down—from Mosaic prophecy to appearance of Elijah—is characteristic of Maimonides' position, according to which the historical prophet, Moses, is more exalted than the eschatological prophet of the Messianic age. In the portion of his legal treatise that deals with kings and wars, Maimonides writes:

Taking the words of the prophets in their literal sense, it appears that the inauguration of the messianic era will be marked by the war of Gog and Magog; that prior to that war a prophet will arise to guide Israel and set their hearts aright, as it is written: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" [Mal 3:23]. He will come neither to declare the clean unclean, nor the unclean clean; neither to disqualify those who are presumed to be of legitimate descent, nor to pronounce qualified those who are presumed to be of illegitimate descent, but to bring peace in the world, as it is said: "And he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" [Mal 3:24]. Some of our Sages say that the coming of Elijah will precede the advent of the Messiah.⁷⁰

Maimonides repeats in the *Guide* the idea that the renewal of prophecy will precede the coming of the Messiah and herald it.⁷¹ Following that lead, Joseph Karo took up both sides of the prophetic coin: he strove to achieve an appearance of Elijah as a sign that the redemption was near, but he did so without waiving the superiority of Mosaic prophecy. Thus, what reveals the implicit messianic aspect of Karo's view of prophecy turns out, paradoxically enough, to be its very grounding in Maimonides' halakhic position.

the directness of revelation—appearance. See Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 181.

⁶⁹ Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic*, p. 269. See also R. Shatz, "Gnostic Literature as a Source of Shlomo Molcho's *Sefer ha-Mefo'ar*," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6 (1987), pp. 252–258 [Hebrew].

⁷⁰ *Mishneh Torah*, The Book of Judges, trans. A. M. Hershman, Laws concerning Kings and Wars, 12:2, p. 241.

⁷¹ See *Guide* 2:36, p. 373.

Moreover, Karo, influenced by Maimonides, linked the various prophets destined to appear at the End of Days, drawing no clear distinctions among them.⁷² He anticipated performing miracles, like Moses and Elijah: “And I will work miracles and wonders through you, and they will know thereby that God is within Israel.”⁷³ He aspired to cause people to repent, like the prophet of the future, whether or not identified as Elijah: “And here, too, you disseminated Torah, and they were ashamed on your account to sin . . . And many will return on your account from sinning, and you will then go up to the Land of Israel.”⁷⁴

Karo’s approach to the stature of Halakhah in the days of the Messiah was also influenced by Maimonides’ image of the future prophet. Wanting to preserve the permanent standing of the Torah of Moses, Maimonides ruled that the Torah was not destined to change even in the time of redemption, and that the future prophet will neither add to nor subtract from it; rather, he will encourage the Jews to fulfill its commands:

Accordingly, when a man worthy to be a prophet, comes professedly as a messenger of God, and proposes neither to add to the Law nor to take aught from it, but only exhorts his bearers to serve God by obedience to the precepts of the Torah.⁷⁵

In a similar way, Joseph Karo did not aspire to change the Halakhah but to summarize it and to rule in accordance with its principles:

Behold, all the Sages of Israel plead for you to the Holy One, blessed be He, namely, Rabbi Isaac al-Fasi, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon and Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel, because you are engaged in explaining their words and deciding in accordance with their opinions and you explain these and frequently decide in accordance with their opinions.⁷⁶

⁷² In *Laws Concerning Kings and Wars*, Maimonides did not definitively declare the prophet of the End of Days, destined “to guide Israel and set their hearts aright,” to be Elijah; and in *Laws Concerning the Fundamentals of the Torah*, he even noted that the future prophet would not work miraculous signs, as did Moses, Elijah, and Elisha. It may be inferred from this that Elijah is not the sole prophet destined to appear at the End of Days.

⁷³ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 92.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁷⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, *The Book of Knowledge, Fundamentals of Torah* 10:1, p. 45b.

⁷⁶ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 7, as trans. in Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 110.

Conclusion

Moses ben Maimon and Joseph Karo were scholars of Halakhah, codifiers, whose formal occupation was law making and legislation. Maimonides's centrality in Joseph Karo's Halakhah is well known both from Karo's introduction to *Beit Yosef* and from his method of ruling in general. It should be noted, however, that celebrating Maimonides was Karo's way to enjoy his predecessor's prestige thus strengthening the status of his own halakhic compositions.

The similarity between Maimonides and Joseph Karo goes beyond the field of Halakhah in the sense that both had meta-halakhic interests: Maimonides was a philosopher and Joseph Karo's passion lay in Kabbalah. However, some tend to separate their Halakhah from their meta-halakhic worlds—of philosophy or Kabbalah—although this is an artificial distinction that is refuted in this article. In fact, both Maimonides' and Karo's juristic decisions were not isolated from their spiritual convictions, and the concealed axis of their halakhic considerations was often constructed around their speculative attitudes.

The clearest indication of Joseph Karo's tendency to combine halakhic and meta-halakhic considerations is the fact that he materialized two of Maimonides' *halakhot*—reestablishing the Sanhedrin and resuming the prophecy, which according to Maimonides heralded and readied for the coming of the Messiah. This is probably the motivation behind Karo's involvement in the attempt to renew rabbinic ordination in Safed in 1538. Similarly, it was the motivation behind the forming of his mystical revelations as prophecies in accordance with the pattern of Moses' prophecy in Maimonides' doctrine. The desire to reestablish the Sanhedrin and renew prophecy reveals Karo's messianic aspirations and the manner in which he was influenced by Maimonides' halakhic rulings concerning the messianic era.

The world of Joseph Karo was thus composed of Maimonides' rulings along with the spiritual world of the Kabbalah. This synthesis ascended to a unique pattern of messianic prophesying anchored in halakhic standards.

Moreover, Joseph Karo's dialogue with the juristic messianism of *Mishneh Torah* suggests that it was a broader phenomenon—the reliance of messianic activists in the sixteenth century on the Halakhah of Maimonides. The corporeal nature of his rulings, his non-miraculous 'recipes' for resuming prophecy and reestablishing the Sanhedrin made

Maimonides very useful throughout “the messianic century,” as the sixteenth century is sometimes defined.

It should be noted, however, that the intellectual atmosphere in that century was not a pro-philosophy one. In fact, it was an anti-philosophy climate to the extent that Joseph Karo’s divine messenger denies the rumor, or perhaps the joke, that Maimonides, the Great Eagle, had been reincarnated as a worm. The divine messenger is quite ambivalent when he calls Maimonides “a Righteous Man” (*Zaddik*) in order to spare him the humiliation of being transmigrated as a worm:

And Maimonides is among the righteous men (*zaddikim*), not reincarnated in a worm, as say those Sages. For let it be that so it was decreed because of certain heretical views he expressed. But the Torah he had studied protected him as well as his good deeds, for he was a master of good deeds, so he was not reincarnated... but died and went straight up as a righteous man—a *Zaddik*.⁷⁷

One may assume that “certain heretical views he expressed” refer to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, which Karo had obviously read. Nevertheless, two of the most persistent opponents of this composition were Rabbi Solomon Ibn Adret and Rabbenu Asher ben Yehiel, both of whom were highly regarded by Karo. However, Karo’s view in favor of Maimonides’ philosophical occupation might imply that there were more supporters of Maimonides the philosopher than we tend to believe.

Still, the blindness of conservative circles caused them to elevate Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* but reject his philosophy when served ‘naked,’ and embraced it only when an authoritative scholar, such as Joseph Karo, clothed it in Halakhah and religious pietism. This conclusion, however, may also be phrased as a positive statement: The sixteenth-century messianic circles preserved the centrality of Maimonides as a legislator, and indirectly adopted the philosophy that was included in his juristic work. There is no doubt, then, that the chapter of sixteenth-century Maimonideanism is a very significant episode in the development of this phenomenon. The ways in which Maimonides left his mark on Jewish Messianism is to be further explored, in particular his influence on the Golden Age of Kabbalah in Safed. This chapter of Maimonideanism, in which the lore of the Great Eagle was sanctified, should be further illuminated.

⁷⁷ *Maggid Mesharim*, p. 194; Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, p. 115.