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Medieval Jewish Thought & the Italian Renaissance / Warburg Institute / 12 April 2021 / 17:00

## Averroes & Maimonides in Rabbi Obadiah Sforno's *Light of the Nations*<sup>1</sup>

### 1. *Light of the Nations*, front cover (Latin).

Opusculum nuper editum contra nonnullas Peripateticorum opiniones, demonstratiue docens presertim circa creationem et vniuersi nouitatem et diuinam de mortalibus curam et humanarum animarum immortalitatem, quas ipsi turpiter respuunt religionis penitus irridentes. Quare illud merito *Lumen Gentium* appello.

A short work recently composed against some opinions of the Peripatetics, which in particular shows demonstratively the creation of the universe *de novo*, divine providence over mortals, and the immortality of the human soul, which they [i.e., the Peripatetics] shamefully reject, while thoroughly deriding religion. For this I have aptly called it *The Light of the Nations*.

### 2. *Ibid.*, Introductory Epistle (Hebrew, pp. 2a-b).

הן רבים עתה אמרו שמצוה עלינו להאמין כל שרשי תורתנו. ומהם הרמב"ם ז"ל בספר המורה מאמר ג, פרק כה, גם שנראה שברח מזה בתחילת ספרו ספר המדע -- עם היות בכמו אלה לב דופק עם ספק על ימין שהיא שמאל, ותהי האמת והפכה בספק ספקא אצל המון בני עמנו ואצל קצת תופשי התורה מן השפה ולחוץ, מבלי אין אצלם ראיה מספקת להעביר כל ספק משרשי תורתנו, עד היות אמונה כזאת בלתי בחיריית ובלתי נופלת תחת מצוה כלל כי אמנם לא יוכל האדם להאמין כרצונו בהחלט, כל שכן כאשר יצווה, גם כי אולי יפצה פיהו ברצון ההמון ויבטא בשפתיו.

There are many now who say there is a commandment upon us to believe in all the basic principles of our Law.<sup>2</sup> Among them is Maimonides in his book *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Part III, Chapter 28,<sup>3</sup> although it seems that he fled from this view in the beginning of his *Book of Knowledge*.<sup>4</sup> Now, in such individuals a heart pounds with doubt if their right hand is their left. The truth and its contrary are in grave doubt among the multitude of our nation and among some who pretend to be scholars of the Law but have no sufficient argument to remove all doubt from its basic principles. Their belief is thus involuntary [*bilti behiriit*] and does not at all fall [*nofelet*] within the purview of a commandment, for a person decidedly cannot believe at will [*raṣon*], especially if commanded.<sup>5</sup> This is surely the case when one speaks to appease the will of the multitude and makes pronouncements [only] with one's lips.

<sup>1</sup> Or *'Ammim*, Bologna 1537; *Lumen Gentium*, Bologna 1548.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Rabbi Isaac Abrabanel, *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 23: "We are obligated to believe [*le-ha'amin*] everything that is written in the Law."

<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, III, 28, Pines trans. (modified), p. 512: "[I]n regard to true opinions, the Law...has called to believe in them [Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew: *le-ha'amin bahem*; Arabic: *li-i'tiqādhā* = to the belief / opinion / conviction / knowledge of it]... that is, to believe [or to hold a conviction] in the existence of God, His unity, His knowledge, His power, His will, and His eternity."

<sup>4</sup> *Hilkhot Yesode ha-Torah* 1:1, 6, 7: "The foundation of foundations and the pillar of the sciences is to know [*leyda*] that there is a First Existent... Knowledge [*yedi'ah*] of [God's existence] is a positive commandment... Knowledge of [God's unity] is a positive commandment."

<sup>5</sup> See Rabbi Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, preface, Weiss trans. (modified), p. 27: "It may be seen from the meaning of the term 'commandment' [*miṣvah*] and its definition that it does not apply [*she-lo' tippol*] to things that are not in the province of will [*raṣon*] and choice [*behirah*]. Thus, if beliefs...are things that are not in the province of will and choice, it follows that the meaning of the term 'commandment' is not applied [*she-lo' tippol*] to them."

### 3. *Ibid.*, Introduction (Latin, pp. 6-7; Hebrew, p. 4b).

Cumque hac nostra tempestate, tanta sit eiusdem Phylosophi et sequacium fama ut si quis eorum opinionibus contradicerit, manifestis et per se notis contradicere procul dubio reputetur.

In our times, the fame of the Philosopher and his followers is so great that if someone contradicts their opinions, he is doubtless considered as if he contradicts things that are manifest and self-evident.

ובהיות כי יקרו מאד דברי אריסטו ותלמידיו בעיני רבים ונכבדים, עד היות אצלם מי שיחלוק על אריסטו ותלמידיו הנזכרים כחולק על החוש או על מופת חותך -- באופן כי הרמב"ם ז"ל כתב בספר המורה, מאמר ב, פרק כב, וזה לשונו: "והכלל הוא שכל מה שאמר אריסטו בכל הנמצא מגלגל הירח ולמטה הוא אמת ולא יטה ממנו אלא מי שלא יבינהו או שקדמו לו דעות ירצה להרחיק מהן כל סותר ולשמרם או שימשכוהו הדעות ההן להכחיש ענין נראה". עד כאן לשונו.

The words of Aristotle and his followers are so precious in the eyes of many notable individuals that according to them one who disputes Aristotle or his aforesaid followers is like one who disputes sense perception or a valid syllogism. **Maimonides accordingly wrote in his *Guide*, Part II, Chapter 22: "The general rule is: everything that Aristotle said about all that exists beneath the sphere of the moon is true, and no one will deviate from it unless he does not understand it or unless he has preconceived opinions that he wishes to defend or that lead him to a denial of a thing that is manifest" [see also *ibid.*, II, 24].**

### 4. *Ibid.*, Order (Latin, p. 8; Hebrew, p. 5b).

Quibus scilicet patebit error putantium ut sacrarum Scripturarum volumina credulitates tantum frivolasque et penitus dubias doceant sententias a Phylosophis quodammodo deridendas, cuius oppositum docet Sacrum Deuteronomij documentum cap. 4 ubi dicit *Scito ergo hodie et cogitato in corde quod Dominus ipse est Deus in celo sursum et in terra deorsum et non est alius*.

Quibus aperte docet quod talia scire non credere tantum convenit.

From these [inquiries] will become clear the error of those who think that in sacred Scripture there are taught many frivolities and doubtful opinions which are an object of derision for the philosopher. The opposite of this is taught in Deuteronomy, Chapter 4 [verse 39]: "*Know* therefore this day and consider it in thine heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath: there is none else." This means that it is appropriate *to know* those things and not only to believe them.

ובאלה יתבאר אצל כל מעיין טעות החושבים שאין בכתבי הקדש דבר מקנה ידיעה אבל דברים יאמינם המאמין לא שידעם, אשר על זה כל פילוסוף ישחק וכל חולק ילעג למו -- עד שהחכם ר' שמואל אבן תבון ב'באור המלות' שעשה אחר שהעתיק ספר מורה הנבוכים, כתב באות החי"ת וזה לשונו: "חכמת הטבע אמר הרב ז"ל שהוא מה שקראוהו רבותינו ז"ל מעשה בראשית". והוסיף ואמר, וזה לשונו: "ואמהות ספרי החכמה הזאת הם הספרים הנמצאים לאריסטו בה". והוסיף ואמר: "ואני איני רואה בפרשת בראשית כי אם ראשי פרקים מעט מזער ממה שבאלו הספרים, אינו חלק ממאה ולא חלק ממאתים. עד כאן לשונו. ולפי זה לשוא ציונו "המורה לצדקה" [יואל ב: כג] באמרו: "וידעת כי ה' אלוהיך הוא האלוהים" [דברים ז: ט], "וידעת היום והשבות אל לבבך" (שם, ד: לט). וכאלה רבות בתורה ובנביאים לצוות ולזרז על הידיעה וההשכל ואין גם אחת מצוה להאמין.

From these [inquiries] will become clear to every reader the error of those who think there is naught in sacred Scripture that grants knowledge but only things that the believer believes without knowledge, and regarding which the philosopher derides and every critic mocks. **Thus, Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon, in the Glossary that he composed after translating the *Guide of the Perplexed*, wrote under the letter *het* as follows: "Natural science [= *hokhmat ha-teba*'], according to Maimonides, is what our Rabbis called 'Ma'aseh Bereshit' [= the Account of the Beginning]."<sup>6</sup> He added the following:**

<sup>6</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, I, introduction, Pines trans. (modified), pp. 6, 9: "We have mentioned [in our legal works] that the Account of the Beginning is identical with natural science"; "God opened His book with the Account of the Beginning, which is natural science." See Ibn Tibbon's translation: זכרנו [בחיבורינו התלמודיים] שמעשה בראשית הוא חכמת הטבע... לזה שם פתיחת ספרו ית' במעשה בראשית אשר הוא חכמת הטבע Cf. *ibid.*, I, 17, et al.

"The fundamental books of this science are those written by Aristotle on it." He further wrote: "I do not consider the pericope of Genesis to provide anything more than chapter headings, very little in comparison to what is in [Aristotle's] books – not one hundredth or even one two-hundredth of it." According to this, our Righteous Teacher [= Moses; cf. Joel 2:23] commanded us in vain: "Know therefore that the Lord thy God is God" [Deuteronomy 7:9] and "Know therefore this day and consider it in thine heart" [ibid., 4:39]. There are many such verses in the Pentateuch and Prophets which command and encourage us to knowledge and science, and there is not one commandment to believe.<sup>7</sup>

### 5. Ibid., Chapter 2, On the Elements (Latin, p. 20; Hebrew, p. 13b).

[A]rguitur sic cum elementa in se invicem convertantur, danda est ergo materia quedam omnibus comunis ratione cuius in se invicem convertantur, sicut habetur ratione et auctoritate Phylosophi et Aven R. in lib. *De Generatione* I [primi] t.c. 54 et 87 et *Metaphysicorum* VIII t.c. 14: [1] vel ergo ipsa materia est his omnibus immediate et eque primo appropriata, [2] vel non. [1] Non primum: quia diversis formis nedum contrarijs diverse requiruntur materie, prout habetur ratione et auctoritate Aven. R. in comento *Physicorum* VIII t.c. 46. Preterea surgeret questio quare quedam eius materie pars habuisset altera illarum formarum magis quam reliqua informari, cum sit omnibus ab eterno equaliter disposita. [2] Restat ergo secundum: scilicet ut materia elementis communis non habuisset esse his omnibus immediate uniformiter disposita, et per consequens habuerunt diverse elementorum forme eidem materie, ratione diversorum alterationis modorum successive inesse et per consequens elementa non habuerunt esse ab eterno, alteratio, enim, nonnisi in tempore ad forme ingressum precedente fieri contingit.

I argue that since the [four] elements change from one into another, there must be a matter common to all of them by virtue of which they change from one into another, according to the argument and authority of the Philosopher and Averroes in *On Generation and Corruption*, Book I, Chapters 54 and 87 [= I, 7, 324a; I, 10, 328b], and *Metaphysics*, Book VIII, Chapter 14 [= VIII, 2 1042a-1042b]. If so, either [1] that [common] matter would be immediately and equally disposed to receive all of the [elements], or [2] it would not. [1] The first [disjunct] is impossible because different matters are required for different and contrary forms, according to the argument and authority of Averroes in his commentary on *Physics* VIII, Chapter 46 [= VIII, 6, 258b]. Moreover, a question arises how it came about that a part of this [common] matter takes the shape of one of the forms rather than another, despite *the matter's* being equally disposed *from eternity* to receive all of them. [2] There remains, therefore, the second [disjunct], namely, that the matter common to the elements was not disposed to receive them all immediately and uniformly, and consequently the forms of the elements have the same matter but differ according to different kinds of changes, and consequently the elements are not pre-eternal, because change precedes [the coming to be of] the form in time.

יתבאר שהיסודות הם בלתי קדמוניים באופן זה, כי בהיות שיסודות משתנים קצתם לקצתם, יתחייב שיהיה איזה חומר משותף לכל צורותיהם, כמבואר במופת אריסטו ואבן רשד בספר ההויה וההפסד, מאמר א, פרק[ים] נד ופז, ובספר מה שאחר, מאמר ח, פרק יד. ובהיות הדבר כן, הנה לא ימלט מאחת משתנים: [א] האחת היא שיהיה אותו החומר מוכן לקבל צורת כל אחת מהיסודות בשוה, או [ב] שנית שהוא בלתי מוכן להן בשוה. [א] אמנם לא יתכן שיהיה מוכן לכל אחת מהן בשוה כי התחלפות הצורות יתחייב מהתחלפות החומרים, כמבואר במופת אבן רשד בביאור ספר השמע, מאמר ח, פרק מו. ועוד, כי אם היה זה אמת, לא נתן סיבה איך קרה זה שאיזה חלק מהחומר, עם היותו מוכן לכל אחת מצורות היסודות בשוה, נמצאת בו מקדם צורה אחת מהן יותר מהפכה או זולתה. ומה מאד נפלאו דברי הרמב"ם ז"ל, שכתב בספר מורה הנבוכים מאמר ב, פרק יט, בהיתר זה הספק, והשיב כמליץ בעד אריסטו, ואמר כי התחלפות היסודות נמשך להתחלפות המקום בקרבתו ומרחקו מן הגלגל, כאילו המקום היה סיבת מציאות הצורה. והנה על הפך זה יעיד החוש כי בהשתנות חלק יסוד לצורת הפכו, הגובר הוא אמנם במקומו וישנה מקומו בבוא אליו צורת הפכו. וזה כי הצורה סיבת היות המורכב במקום, לא הפך זה. והנה האויר אשר אצלנו על שטח הארץ הוא במקום המים ולא ישנהו המקום [אל] עצם המים. ובלעדי זאת מבואר הוא שהחומר הראשון בהיות מציאותו כוחי בלבד לא יהיה מצד עצמו בשום מקום בפעל, ואיך יהיה מקומו סיבה לצורתו? [ב] אם כן ישאר שאותו החומר המשותף לצורות היסודות לא היה מוכן לכולם בשוה. ומזה יתחייב שכל אחת מצורותיהם המתחלפות

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sforno, Commentary on Mishnah *Abot* 5:22: "Turn it [= the Law] over and over, for everything is in it... And you will not need the books of the Gentile philosophers and scientists."

נמצאות בחומר הראשון לא בסבת היותו משותף לכולן אבל בסבת התחלפות השתנותו אל הכנות מתחלפות. ובהיות שכל תנועת השתנות תהיה בלי ספק במשך זמן קודם לאותה הצורה אשר תביא בסוף ההכנה הקנויה באותה התנועה, יתחייב בהכרח ששלש מהיסודות לפחות הם בלתי קדמונים.

It may be proved as follows that the [four] elements are not pre-eternal. Inasmuch as the elements change from one into another, there must be a matter common to all of their forms, as was demonstrated by Aristotle and Averroes in *On Generation and Corruption*, Book I, Chapters 54 and 87 [= I, 7, 324; I, 10, 328b], and *Metaphysics*, Book VIII, Chapter 14 [= VIII, 2 1042a-1042b]. If so, a disjunction is inescapable. Either [1] the same [common] matter is disposed to receive the forms of all the elements equally, or [2] it is not disposed to receive them equally. [1] Now, it is not possible that it is disposed to receive all of them equally, because the difference in forms follows from the differences in matter, according to the demonstration of Averroes in his commentary on *Physics* VIII, Chapter 46 [= VIII, 6, 258b]. Moreover, if this were true, he did not explain how it came about that *a part* of this [common] matter has had *from eternity* the shape of one of the forms rather than another, despite its being equally disposed to receive all of them. **How astonishing are the words of Maimonides, which he wrote in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part II, Chapter 19, in resolution of this objection. He responded as a defender of Aristotle, and said that the differences in the [four] elements derive from differences in place, whether close to the encompassing celestial sphere or far away from it, as if its place was the cause of the existence of the form.<sup>8</sup> However, sense perception testifies to the contrary. For when the part of an element changes into its contrary form, the part undergoing change is in its place, and does not change its place until after it has changed its form. This is because the form is the cause of a compound thing's being in its place, and not the reverse. Thus, the air [over dry land] is right above the surface of the earth and in the place of water, yet its place does not turn it into water. Furthermore, it is clear that prime matter, whose existence is wholly potential, is in itself nowhere in actuality, so how could its place be a cause of its form?** [2] It remains, therefore, that the matter common to the forms of the elements was not disposed to receive them all equally. Consequently, each of the different forms [of the elements] is found in the first matter, not by virtue of the matter's being common to all, but by virtue of the different kinds of changes which lead to different dispositions. Inasmuch as any motion of change occurs without doubt during a time prior to [the coming to be of] that form, and brings about the acquired disposition, it follows necessarily that at least three of the elements are not pre-eternal.

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<sup>8</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, II, 19, Pines trans. (modified), pp. 304-305: "We again put a question to Aristotle, saying to him... What is it that prepared this prime matter so that a part of it receives the form of fire and a part that of earth, and what is between them is prepared to receive the forms of water and air, while the matter of the universe is one and common?... Aristotle gave an answer to this, saying: This was made necessary by the differences between the various places, for these differences made it necessary for this one matter to have various dispositions. Whatever is near the encompassing sphere was endowed with subtlety and swiftness of motion...and received the form of fire; and the more distant matter is from the encompassing sphere... the thicker it is... until it becomes earth."

See Ibn Tibbon's translation:  
שאלנו עוד אריסטו ואמרנו לו... איזה דבר זימן החומר ההוא הראשון עד שקיבל קצתו צורת האש וקצתו צורת הארץ, ומה שביניהם לקבל צורת המים והאוויר, וחומר הכל אחד משותף?... ענה אריסטו על זה בשאמר: חייב זה התחלף המקומות, כי הם חייבו לזה החומר האחד הכנות מתחלפות. וזה כי אשר סמוך לו המקיף נעשה בו דקות ומהירות תנועה... וקיבל צורת האש, וכל מה שרחק החומר מן המקיף... היה יותר עב... והיה [ליסוד] הארץ.