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# MAIMONIDES



# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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- ✘ Know the importance of Maimonides in Medieval Philosophy
- ✘ Know his Major Works
- ✘ Understand the basic philosophical theory proposed in the *Guide of the Perplexed*
  - + Patriarch had a “metaphysical knowledge
  - + *Torah* texts can be read on multiple levels
  - + God and the Via Negative
  - + Commandments

# MAIMONIDES' IMPORTANCE

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- ✘ Famous physician who wrote medical treatises
- ✘ The leading rabbinic authority of his time
- ✘ First Jewish scholar to attempt to introduce articles of faith to Judaism
- ✘ Greatest Jewish philosopher of medieval period
  - + Influenced by Neo-Platonized Aristotelian philosophy
  - + *The Guide for the Perplexed*

# MAIMONIDES LIFE

1138 - 1204

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- ✘ Born to a distinguished family in Cordova, Spain
- ✘ Almohad invasion in 1148 – family forced to move to Fez, Morocco
- ✘ Settled in a section of Cairo (Fustat) in 1166
  - + Physician to Saladin
  - + Leader of the Jewish community in Egypt
- ✘ Died in 1204 after working himself to exhaustion

- ✘ ***Torah (Pentateuch)*** – The five books that were revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai - contains 613 commandments
- ✘ ***Talmud*** – The collection of ancient Rabbinic writings consisting of the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*, constituting the basis of religious authority in Orthodox Judaism

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***Mishnah*** - The first section of the Talmud, consisting of a collection of early oral interpretations of the scriptures as compiled about A.D. 200

# MAIMONIDES MAJOR WORKS

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- ✘ *Commentary on the Mishnah*
- ✘ *Mishnah Torah*
- ✘ *The Guide of the Perplexed*

# COMMENTARY ON THE MISHNAH

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- ✘ Commentary – Chapter 10 of *Sanhedrin*
- ✘ First attempt to introduce articles of faith to Judaism
  - + 13 principles that he considers binding on every Jew
- ✘ The first two are:
  - + The existence of God
  - + The absolute unity of God

# ***MISHNAH TORAH***

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- ✘ Systematizes all of the commandments of the Torah
- ✘ Attempts to show that Jewish law serves a rational purpose - not only obedience
- ✘ Established him as the leading rabbinic of his time

# MISHNAH TORAH

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- ✘ Book One (*The Book of Knowledge*) sets forth the philosophic foundations of Jewish belief
  - + A theory of moral traits or dispositions
  - + The need to study the Torah
  - + The laws concerning idolatry
  - + The importance of repentance
- ✘ Book Fourteen (*Judges*) - a Messiah will come
  - + Restore sovereignty to Israel
  - + Establish peace with other nations
  - + Lead the world in the study of science and philosophy

# ***THE GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED***

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- ✘ Maimonides' most extensive philosophic discussions
- ✘ Written in Judo-Arabic
- ✘ Influenced by Neo-Platonized Aristotelianism
- ✘ Style
  - + Written Speech
  - + Letter to an advanced student - Joseph ben Judah

# ***THE GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED***

## ***INTRODUCTION***

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*My knowledge goes forth to point out the way,  
to pave straight its road.*

*Lo, everyone who goes astray in the field of Torah,  
Come and follow its path.*

*The unclean and the fool shall not pass over it;  
It shall be called the Sacred Way.*

# “METAPHYSICAL KNOWLEDGE” PERIODICALLY KNOWN AND THEN FORGOTTEN

- ✘ Adam – most perfect metaphysical knowledge
  - + Belief in a timeless, changeless, immaterial deity
  - + Lost in the time of Enoch
  
- ✘ Abraham rediscovered the knowledge
  - + Passed to Isaac and Jacob
  - + Lost during the Egyptian captivity
  
- ✘ Moses found it again
  - + If presented as philosophic proofs the people would forget again
  - + Offered a blue print for a social order – the commandments

# JUDAISM IS BASED ON PHILOSOPHY

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- ✘ The patriarchs introduced philosophy to Israel
- ✘ A record of such teaching was destroyed when Israel went into exile and suffered persecution
- ✘ Only one tradition worth preserving: that which affirms the truth.

# PHILOSOPHY AS PARABLES

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- ✘ Torah can be interpreted on two levels: one for the educated and one for the average worshipper
- ✘ What was taught under the guise of *ma'aseh bereishit* (the account of the beginning) is what Greek thinkers taught as physics (or natural science)
- ✘ What Jewish tradition taught under the guise of the *ma'aseh merkava* the account of Ezekiel's chariot is what the Greek thinker taught under the guise of metaphysics (divine science).

# KNOWLEDGE LOST

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- ✘ Concludes that the tradition of learning that began in Israel has been lost again
- ✘ People pray to a material God – justified by a literal translation of the Torah
- ✘ Someone was needed to reintroduce Jews to the teaching of their own tradition

# PURPOSE OF THE *GUIDE*

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- ✘ To make the Torah respectable to philosophy and philosophy compatible with the law.
- ✘ To explain obscure parables in the Scripture and point out that they are parables, thereby delivering the educated reader from perplexity

# THE *GUIDE*

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- ✗ In reality much more:
  - + A commentary on biblical terms that appear to ascribe corporeal qualities to God
  - + An uncompromising defense of negative theology
  - + An extended critique of the kalām (The kalām in Islamic practice relates to the discipline of seeking theological knowledge through debate and argument)
  - + A systematic treatment of creation, prophecy, and providence
  - + A theory of Jurisprudence.

# TORAH AND PHILOSOPHY

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- ✘ The message of the *Guide* is dispersed so the reader must follow clues
- ✘ In the *Guide* Maimonides explains the biblical texts as imitating philosophical texts
  - + Subject are too difficult for average worshipper
  - + Must be expressed as parables or metaphors
    - ✘ Educated few will interpret at one level
    - ✘ Average worshipers at another

Maimonides' Philosophy on God and the Commandments

***THE GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED***

# DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

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- ✘ Individuals first exposed to the Torah need anthropomorphic descriptions
- ✘ Torah speaks in the language of ordinary people – must be interpreted
  - + Prophet saw God
    - ✘ An intellectual seeing rather than visual
  - + God spoke to the prophet
    - ✘ The prophet came to understand what God wanted
- ✘ Bible can be falsely interpreted (such as the claim that God is corporeal)

# CORPOREAL GOD

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- ✘ To satisfy the first two commandments one must believe in a timeless, changeless, immaterial deity who is one in every respect and unlike anything in created order
- ✘ A person who fails to recognize such a deity is an idolater
- ✘ To worship God under a false description is not to worship God at all

# GOD AND THE VIA NEGATIVE

- ✘ God is not comparable to anything else: He is one person, one number, one idea
  - + No plurality of faculties, moral dispositions or essential attributes
- ✘ Plurality is objectionable because it compromises logical priority
  - + Cannot be a composite of  $F$  and  $G$ 
    - ✘ What brings them together and keeps them together
    - ✘ Would have to be something prior and more inclusive than God

# GOD AND THE VIA NEGATIVE

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✘ Maimonides' appealed to negation

“God is powerful” → “God is not lacking power”

✘ What he means is

“God does not lack power or possess it in a way that makes it comparable to other things”

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“Know that when you make an affirmation ascribing another thing to Him, you become more remote from His in two respects: one of them is that everything You affirm is a perfection only with reference to us, and the other that He does not possess a thing other than is essence...”(*GP* 1.59)

# ATTRIBUTES MENTIONED IN PRAYER

- ✘ Insists daily prayer is mandatory, however the qualities mentioned in prayer:
  - + Are either negations or they are descriptions of effects of divine activity
  - + They do not provide knowledge of God's essence
    - ✘ God is merciful to the extent that the order of nature exhibits merciful characteristics
    - ✘ Angry to the extent that the order of nature is harsh toward things that do not take proper care of them selves

# COMMANDMENTS

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- ✘ The 613 original commandments found in the Torah are all a means to the fulfillment of the first two, which he interprets as belief in the existence of God and rejection of idolatry (which make up what we call *monotheism*)

# COMMANDMENTS

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- ✘ All Jewish law aims at two things: the improvement of the body and the improvement of the soul
  - + Improvement in the body improves the soul
  - + Soul is also improved by acquiring correct opinions and eventually knowledge on everything humans are capable of knowing

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- ✘ The more knowledge the soul acquires, the more it is able to fulfill the commandment (Deut. 6:5) to love God
    - + Biggest stumbling block - the belief that to remain true to the Bible is to interpret literally
    - + Result of literal interpretation is a material conception of God – amounts to idolatry

# ***THE GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED***

## **FINAL POEM**

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God is very near to everyone who calls,

If he calls truly and has no distractions;

He is found by every seeker who searches for

Him,

If he marches toward Him and goes not astray.

# SUMMARY

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- ✘ Famous physician who wrote medical treatises
- ✘ The leading rabbinic authority of his time
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# SUMMARY

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## ✘ *Guide to the Perplexed*

- + Patriarchs had a “metaphysical knowledge”
- + *Torah* texts can be read on multiple levels
  - ✘ Contains philosophical teachings within the parables
- + The attributes given to God
  - ✘ Do not define his true essence
  - ✘ Must be careful not to corporealize God
- + The Commandments are given to
  - ✘ Improve the body
  - ✘ Improve the mind