

Books of the People
Revisiting Classic Works of Jewish Thought



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT



BOOKS OF THE PEOPLE

EDITOR

Dr. Stuart W. Halpern

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*Dedicated to members of the Grunberger and Pollack families
of Slovakia who perished, or survived but lost family, in the Holocaust*

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תנצב"ה

May their memories be a blessing to all future generations



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Editor's Preface

“**E**xactly what kind of eternity *does* a library provide? How likely is it for a manuscript to become a book on a library shelf? How hard is it to stay there?” In her 2014 book, *The Shelf: Adventures in Extreme Reading*, author Phyllis Rose explored these and other questions as refracted through her experience reading a randomly selected group of books in the New York Society Library.

In the Jewish tradition we believe that our books are what define us as a people – our library of texts, beginning with the Tanakh, followed by the Mishna and Talmud, is what make us who we are. These ancient but timeless works have inspired an ever-growing number of subsequent works of Jewish provenance, despite the warning of Ecclesiastes 12:12 that “of making books there is no end.” These writings are the keys to our eternity, both as religiously committed individuals and as a nation. To this day, a family’s library of Jewish books is a source of pride in countless homes and volumes are passed down from generation to generation.

In thinking about which works of Jewish thought can and should be an essential part of every Jewish library, I conceived of the volume you hold in your hand. Each chapter in this book features a scholar of Jewish studies revisiting a particularly foundational and salient work

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of *maḥshevet Yisrael* (Jewish thought), from medieval to modern, and discussing its themes, its historical context, the circumstances and background of its author (the “person of the book”), and, most importantly, its contemporary relevance. My hope is that this volume inspires you, the reader, to make each of the works featured in these chapters a permanent part of your personal library, if they aren't already, and if they are, to dust them off the shelf and revisit them with a new perspective. The chapters in this volume can also serve as useful guides for those looking into more extensive learning projects covering each of the books systematically.

While the list of books discussed in this work is not exhaustive, nor does it represent a formal canon in any way, it reflects the changing priorities and religious sensibilities of readers and students, whether in the academy or among the general population. Whereas a discussion of Jewish thought only a generation ago might have focused almost exclusively on the *Rishonim* (medieval rabbinic scholars) who wrote volumes focused on Jewish philosophy, today there is a much greater emphasis on mysticism and Hasidism and a developing awareness that Jewish theology might be embedded in biblical commentary or other texts. If this collection sparks debate as to what should have been included but was not, *harei zeh meshubah* (this would be praiseworthy).

The authors in this volume faced a fundamental methodological challenge; namely, explaining how contemporary readers might find meaning and relevance in texts written in intellectual and religious climates so different from our own and utilizing categories of thinking that seem, on the surface, foreign to contemporary readers. Yet, as religious Jews wedded to our ancient traditions, we cannot let this challenge paralyze us. The very project of an intellectually and spiritually vibrant Judaism has no choice but to face this task head-on – and indeed, so many religious people have found inspiration in these works, despite the contexts of their original composition. I fervently hope that this volume contextualizes while contemporizing, losing neither the vitality of the original works nor the concerns of today's readers.

Special thanks are due to the Director of the Straus Center, Rabbi Dr. Meir Y. Soloveichik, for his support of this project, as well as to our dedicated benefactors, Zahava and Moshael Straus, and to Yeshiva

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University President Richard M. Joel. I would like to also express my gratitude to the Maggid team, particularly Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, for his always appreciated guidance, as well as to Dr. Yoel Finkelman for his insightful review of the manuscript and Nechama Unterman, Shalom Dinerstein, Tomi Mager, and Rabbi Daniel Tabak for their diligence and warmth in preparing the book for publication. The care the Maggid team took in ensuring the beauty of this work is, as always, appreciated. Having the honor of Rabbi Lord Sacks writing a foreword for this book is a priceless privilege, given that he himself has composed his own library of timeless Jewish classics. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this book to my maternal grandfather, Martin Wagner, for, among many other things, instilling in me a love of Jewish books of all kinds.

Dr. Stuart W. Halpern
Winter 5777



Foreword

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The Koran calls Jews people of the book, but they were so long before. Already at Sinai, the Torah tells us, Moses wrote the laws in a book and read them to the people as they made a covenant with God. Deuteronomy tells us about a king that “he should write a copy of this Torah for himself as a book” and that “it should be with him and he should read it all the days of his life” (Deut. 17:18–19). Blessing Moses’ successor Joshua, God charged him: “This book of the Torah should not leave your mouth and you shall think about it day and night, so you may be careful to do all that is written in it. Then all will go well with you” (Josh. 1:8). Other religions had holy places, holy times, and holy people. Judaism was the first faith to focus on holy words, on a book and its power to transform the lives of those who learn and live its teachings.

Judaism is the supreme example of a faith, a civilization, predicated on books and bookishness, education and the life of the mind. Aristotle’s pupil Theophrastus searched for a way to describe this to his fellow Greeks: he called the Jews a nation of philosophers. So fundamental is this bookishness to Jewish identity that something of it persists even among lapsed or secular Jews. Heinrich Heine famously called the Torah the “portable homeland of the Jew.” George Steiner wrote a fine article entitled “Our homeland, the text,” describing dedication to literacy as “the open secret of the Jewish genius and its survival.”

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The text, he said, is “home” and each commentary “a return.” The novelist Amos Oz called the book he wrote with his daughter about their own secular Jewish identity *Jews and Words*.

What created this remarkable affinity between Jews and books, Jews and study, Jews and words? We hear it in the several commands of Moses urging parents to educate their children, speaking of the Torah and its laws “when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deut. 6:7). We hear it again in the penultimate command of the Torah instructing the people, men, women, and children, to gather together as a nation every seven years to hear the Torah read in public. We encounter it in the great assembly convened by Ezra and Nehemiah, rededicating the people after the Babylonian exile by means of a collective Torah reading. We hear it yet again when Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, just before the destruction of Jerusalem, wins a concession from Vespasian: “Give me Yavneh and its sages” (Gittin 56b). The result was the salvaging of the academy, the *beit midrash*, as the carrier of Jewish education and identity. Paul Johnson memorably called rabbinic Judaism “an ancient and highly efficient social machine for the production of intellectuals.”

This is a history that turns time and again on learning and literacy, and there is nothing quite like it in the annals of any other nation. I have argued that one of the shaping factors in the religious history of Israel was that it coincided with the birth of the alphabet – the word “alphabet” itself comes from *aleph-bet*, later adopted by the Greeks as *alpha-beta*. This created the possibility, for the first time in history, of a society of universal literacy. The move from orality to literacy was itself a monumental shift in the direction of the abstract thought essential to the monotheistic mind.

At the heart of this history is the Book of Books itself, the Torah. For a thousand years, from the days of Moses to Malachi, Jews wrote commentaries to the Torah in the form of *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*, the prophetic books and the holy writings. For another thousand years, from late Second Temple times to the era of the *Geonim*, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries in the form of the vast literature of the Oral Law, *Midrash*, *Mishna*, and *Gemara*. For the next thousand years, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries to the commentaries in the form of

biblical interpretation, and the clarification and codification of Jewish law. Jewish thought has been a series of ever-wider circles at whose center is the Book, the Torah, that forms the text and texture of Jewish life.

What lies behind this extraordinary set of phenomena is the basic premise of Judaism that our relationship with God is defined by a covenant, a document, a written text, detailing the pledge our ancestors took at Mount Sinai and the history that surrounded it. Everything we know as a people about the divine acts of Creation, Liberation, and Redemption, everything sacred about the structure of the society and the shape of the moral life, is contained in the words of the Torah. The Book became our constitution of liberty as a nation under the sovereignty of God, and its words were “our life and the length of our days.”

In the modern world, for complex reasons, while Jews made signal contributions to scholarship in almost every field, in economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, physics, chemistry, and medicine, the connection between Jews and Judaism, and between books and the Book, was broken. Early in the twentieth century, Thorstein Veblen, in an article entitled “On the Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe,” argued that it was specifically the alienated quality of the Jewish intellectual that was the source of his creativity: “He becomes a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no-man’s-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon.”

After the Holocaust, Jewish intellectuals struggled with the question of whether it was possible to write books any more, whether words could ever be adequate to describe that black hole in human history, and whether language had been broken beyond repair. Theodor Adorno said it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. Jacques Derrida, one of the architects of deconstructionism, wrote that “a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game.” The image of a ghostly, surreal book haunts the work of the Egyptian-French-Jewish intellectual Edmond Jabès. “The fragment,” he wrote, “the exploded book, is our only access to the infinite.” We exist, he said, in the infinite space “where all we write is erased, even as you write it.” Each of these figures testifies in

some way to a loss of faith in literature, and in the power of civilization to civilize. One of the first acts of the Nazis against the Jews – following in the footsteps of Christians in the Middle Ages – was to burn Jewish books, and, as Heine had warned, when people begin by burning books, they end by burning people.

Even so, most Jews kept their faith in books and writing as a form of redemption of a world gone mad. In December 1941, the 81-year-old historian Simon Dubnow was shot and killed. It is said that his last words were, “*Yidn, shreibt un farschreib*,” “Jews, write and record.” It is what many of them did, writing their last memories on scraps of paper they then buried in the grounds of the ghettos and concentration camps. The poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan said that “only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darkneses of murderous speech.”

To a remarkable degree, then, Jewish sense and sensibility, whether in ages of faith or crisis of faith, is bound to a book. That is what makes this work so valuable and illuminating. It is about a series of very special books, from Saadia Gaon’s *Emunot VeDeot* to Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man*, in which outstanding Jewish thinkers from the tenth to the twentieth centuries wrestled with the relationship between Judaism and the wider culture of their day. To what extent were they compatible? Where and why did they conflict? Could Judaism be translated into the concepts and categories of the world outside, and if not, why not?

Jews tend not to philosophize. Philosophy is a Greek mode of thought more than a Jewish one. Greeks thought of truth in terms of system; Jews thought of it in terms of story. The Greeks sought the truth that is timeless; Jews pursued the truths that unfold through the course of time. The Greeks perfected the logical imagination, Jews the dialogical and chronological imagination – truths that emerge from conversation and from the ticking clock of history. The great Greek thinkers put their faith in reason; Jews had access to revelation also, and thus to truths that cannot be arrived at by reason alone.

Foreword

Western civilization was to a large degree formed by the tension between these two ancient ways of thinking, mediated at times by Christianity, and at others by the great philosophers of Islam. But the Jewish contribution was an important one, and it should remain so to us as we seek to meditate on our faith and understand its role in the conversation of humankind.

The works that emerged from this encounter are the “great books” of Jewish thought, and a familiarity with them is essential to Jewish literacy. For while the codes of Jewish law and the commentaries on the Torah are about the details – and God is in the details – the works of Jewish philosophy and mysticism are ways of standing back and, in Matthew Arnold’s phrase, seeing life steadily and seeing it whole. Saadia, Judah Halevi, Maimonides, Albo, Maharal, the Alter Rebbe of Chabad and Rav Nachman of Bratslav, Hirsch, the Netziv, Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik, and Rav Hutner, these are the great-souled Jewish thinkers who scaled the mountain of thought and described the view from the heights. To be sure, you cannot live on a mountaintop, but no one, at least some time in his or her life, should miss the climb.

So congratulations to Stuart Halpern for editing yet another outstanding collection of essays on Jewish thought by today’s modern masters, and to all the contributors themselves. This is a wonderfully enlightening work, testifying to the ongoing vitality of Yeshiva University as a center of contemporary Jewish thought at the highest level. This is where the work begun by Saadia ten centuries ago continues today: the dialogue between Judaism and the world, captured in books about the Book that enlarge our intellectual horizons and lift our engagement with God, our people, and the world.



Emunot VeDeot: The Contemporary Relevance of Rav Saadia Gaon's Thought

Rabbi Yitzchak Blau

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Jews, including even the philosophically inclined, rarely study Rav Saadia Gaon's *Emunot VeDeot* (*The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*). Much has changed since the medieval era, and we may find categories of his thought outdated. Moderns do not think of the world's matter as made up of the four elements of earth, wind, water, and fire, nor do we accept the geocentric view of the universe. In truth, the gap between modern and medieval thinkers is deeper than a shift in scientific conceptions about the cosmos. In our current intellectual horizon, we no longer affirm our ability to definitively demonstrate absolute truth through a set of logical arguments. Even given the above, some medieval analysis remains quite relevant. Medieval thought in areas such as ethical philosophy, theories of punishment, reasons for the commandments, biblical interpretation, and the balance between reason and revelation still have as much resonance today as they did then. Surprisingly, I will even argue that Rav Saadia Gaon provides significant insight into combating contemporary radical skepticism and has much to say about epistemological theory. While someone might think that theories of knowledge have changed so much that a sage from the tenth

century could not possibly enhance the contemporary discussion, this essay attempts to show that this is not the case.

Sometimes, medieval categories utilized by a philosopher are not truly crucial to the position he takes. Rav Saadia argues that humanity is the pinnacle and purpose of Creation. One of his arguments supporting this position begins with the idea that the main item always lies at the center. The edible part of a nut is in its middle and the heart is located at the center of the human body. Since the earth is situated at the center of the universe, the purpose of Creation must live on earth. Humanity represents the greatest creature on earth; ergo, we are the pinnacle of Creation.¹ Given the Copernican revolution and the move to a heliocentric model, we moderns could say that Rav Saadia's entire argument collapses. On the other hand, Rav Saadia also cites verses such as Genesis 1:26 ("And God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'"), Isaiah 45:12 ("I, even I, have made the earth, and created man upon it; I, even My hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded"), and Psalm 8 (particularly, vv. 5–6: "What is man, that You are mindful of him? And the son of man, that You think of him? Yet You have made him but little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor") to buttress his claim, and it seems that his position does not truly depend on this one specific argument. Thus, the Copernican shift does not mean abandoning the position.

Emphasis on the centrality and significance of humanity raises an intriguing parallel with a twentieth-century author. Some argue that our current knowledge of the immensity of the cosmos disproves any notion of humanity as the purpose of Creation. Rav Saadia writes that we should not deny mankind's importance merely because the human body is small and weak: "Even though his body is small, his soul is wider than the heavens and earth since his knowledge encompasses

1. *Emunot VeDeot* (henceforth, *EV*) 4: Introduction.

all of them.”² In analogous fashion, G. K. Chesterton cautioned against trying to “rebuke spirit by size.”³

Maimonides’ towering and overshadowing presence may also play a role in students of Jewish thought not encountering Rav Saadia. Those inclined toward exploring the classics of medieval Jewish philosophy are more likely to begin with *The Guide of the Perplexed*. The great influence of Maimonides’ *Guide* is evident even for those utterly uninterested in philosophy. Anyone who reads Nahmanides’ commentary on the Torah or Rav Tzadok HaKohen’s hasidic works encounters ideas from the *Guide*. The same cannot be said of *Emunot VeDeot* or other parallel works. Without denying the *Guide*’s greatness, there is no reason to assume that Maimonides had a monopoly on medieval philosophic insight. Rather, there is plenty of worthwhile material in Rav Saadia, and contrasting his positions with those of Maimonides proves instructive. Of course, much “rationalist” commonality exists between these two titans of Jewish thought as well. Rav Saadia agrees with Maimonides that magic does not exist and affirms that the Egyptian magicians trading “miracles” with Moses utilized sleight of hand.⁴ He also preceded Maimonides in affirming God’s incorporeality and dedicates part of the second treatise to explaining anthropomorphic terms in Tanakh. Furthermore, he preceded Maimonides in outlining a list of fundamental Jewish beliefs.⁵ Yet the differences between them offer greater illumination than the similarities.

Rav Saadia’s aforementioned position on humanity’s centrality in the created order serves as a good example of a contrast with that of Maimonides. In the *Guide* (as opposed to a contrasting passage in the introduction to Maimonides’ *Commentary on the Mishna*), Maimonides rejects the view that humanity is the purpose of the created order and that all the mineral, vegetable, and animal worlds as well as the planets

2. *EV* 4:2.

3. G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco, 1993), 23.

4. *EV* 3:5.

5. Haggai Ben-Shammai, *A Leader’s Project: Studies in the Philosophical and Exegetical Works of Saadia Gaon* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2015). Ben-Shammai’s work discusses many aspects of Rav Saadia’s thought. The discussion on principles of belief appears in chapter 5.

and the stars were created to serve humanity.⁶ Rav Abraham Isaac Kook pointed out how balancing the two serves an important religious purpose as each position can inspire greater religious sensitivity. Rav Saadia's position, says Rav Kook, challenges humankind to realize the goal of the universe whereas Maimonides' reminds humanity not to adopt an arrogant position toward the rest of the created order.⁷

Another instructive contrast relates to optimism or pessimism about our current world of human experience. Maimonides outlines three causes of human suffering: forces of nature, other humans, and the evils that each individual's folly brings upon himself. Those who realize that the third category is the most common cause of our troubles and begin to function with greater wisdom can conclude that the goods of this world outweigh the evils.⁸ In contrast, Rav Saadia argues that this world cannot be where God rewards the righteous since all joys and pleasures of this world come suffused with sadness and suffering. As we shall see, this fits with Rav Saadia's great emphasis on the next world.⁹

BIOGRAPHY

Rav Saadia was born in Egypt in 882 but we know little else about his early family life and education. He lived in Syria and *Eretz Yisrael* before ultimately settling in Babylon, serving as the head of the academy in Sura. Rav Saadia was involved in various debates and polemics with external and internal opponents. In terms of the former, he wrote criticisms of both the Karaites and of the radical Hiwi al-Balkhi. In terms of the latter, Rav Saadia backed the Babylonian exilarch in his debate with Aharon ben Meir of *Eretz Yisrael* regarding control of the Jewish calendar. He also had a falling out with the exilarch, David ben Zakkai, which led to Rav Saadia losing his position as head of the academy before the two

6. *Guide* III:13.

7. *Maamarei HaRe'iyah* 110–111.

8. *Guide* III:12.

9. For more on this contrast, see Shalom Carmy, "Tell Them I've Had a Good Enough Life," *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, ed. Shalom Carmy (Northvale, 1999), 107–111. Carmy suggests that it is not the mere rewards of future existence that alter the evaluation but the perspective of eternity that does so.

men ultimately reconciled and Rav Saadia was restored to his place. He passed away in 942.

A prolific and versatile author, Rav Saadia contributed to an impressive range of Jewish subjects. He wrote halakhic monographs, a poem enumerating the mitzvot (later immortalized by Rabbi Yerucham Fischel Perla's epic commentary), a commentary on sections of the Bible, a translation of Tanakh (known as the *Tafsīr*), poetry and liturgical works, volumes on language and grammar, a siddur, a commentary on *Sefer Yetzira*, and of course the philosophical classic that is the subject of this essay. Just as Maimonides worked within the framework of Aristotelian thought in crafting the *Guide*, so too Rav Saadia utilized the categories of the predominant philosophy of his time, that of the Mutazilite Kalām.¹⁰

This essay addresses central themes in Rav Saadia's philosophy with a particular focus on ideas impactful on contemporary religious life. (Thus, I shall not discuss Rav Saadia's critique of twelve theories of Creation¹¹ or his reasons for rejecting ten erroneous conceptions of the soul.¹² Suffice it to say, regarding these matters, that he affirms Creation *ex nihilo* and that he conceives of the soul as a corporeal substance, albeit of a lighter nature than regular physical matter, independent of the body. When the body dies, the soul lives on ultimately to be reunited with the body at the End of Days.) Rather than purely theoretical interest, this essay aims for existential relevance for today. Though topical headings break up the essay, some of the issues discussed straddle two categories so the reader should not expect a fully neat division between topics.

REASON AND REVELATION

In response to the critique that our sages discouraged philosophical study, Rav Saadia responded that our sages' concern was only that Jewish thinkers might begin their philosophical inquiries without the

10. For a discussion of Rav Saadia's relationship with Kalām philosophy, see Sarah Strousma, *Saadia Gaon: A Jewish Thinker in a Mediterranean Society* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2002).

11. *EV* 1:3.

12. *Ibid.*, 6:1.

data of revelation. Their caution against speculation regarding “what is below and what is above, what was before and what is to come” (Mishna Ḥagiga 2:1) does not apply to those starting with true information gleaned from the prophets.¹³ But why engage in philosophical speculation altogether? Rav Saadia argues that there is value to fortifying our prior belief through reasoned argument. It is like the ability to work out a math problem instead of looking up the answer in the back of the book.¹⁴ Furthermore, such study enables us to respond to various critics. While his initial discussion mentions only these two justifications, a later passage adds another possible reason that we shall now explicate.

Analysis of resurrection leads Rav Saadia to address the nature of biblical interpretation. He states that we should interpret the biblical text literally unless it contradicts one of the following: empirical knowledge, logic, another verse, or our tradition.¹⁵ In those four instances, we must interpret metaphorically. For example, we know that Eve was not literally the “mother of all living things” (Gen. 3:20) and that God cannot actually be a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24). Malachi was not instructing his listeners to test God (Mal. 3:10) since the Bible cautions against doing so (Deut. 6:16). Finally, despite the verse’s mention of forty lashes as being the punishment that a court should administer to sinners (Deut. 25:3), tradition tells us that this means thirty-nine. Absent these four conditions, however, we must interpret the Torah literally lest religious life turn into an arbitrary free-for-all, in which every legal and narrative section could be creatively reread so that not kindling a fire on Shabbat could refer to not going to war, not eating *hametz* on Passover could mean avoiding sexual immorality, and the Jewish people entering the ocean when leaving Egypt could mean that they moved among an army.¹⁶ Along these lines, Rav Saadia determines that we should interpret verses about resurrection literally since none of the four conditions apply. Logic dictates that the same God who brought the world into being *ex nihilo* could also resurrect the dead.

13. Ibid., Introduction: 6.

14. Dr. David Shatz suggested this analogy.

15. *EV* 7:1.

16. Ibid., 7:2.

Note that here reason plays a constructive role in interpreting revelation. It is one factor instructing us whether to interpret verses literally or metaphorically. This provides a model for the contemporary man of faith. Even if we ultimately ground belief in faith, experience, intuition, and tradition, this does not mean that we completely neutralize reason; on the contrary, reason and logic greatly influence how we interpret and apply the tradition.

Having addressed why, according to Rav Saadia, we utilize reason to supplement revelation, we turn to why we need revelation in addition to reason. Admittedly, this question carried much more weight in the medieval world when there was greater confidence in reason's ability to work out the cosmic truths about ethics and religion. Rav Saadia indeed assumes that reason would suffice, and his initial discussion provides two reasons for revelation.¹⁷ First, philosophical reasoning takes time, while revelation allows a person to arrive at the truth without the years of doubt while waiting for conclusions. Moreover, not everyone has the intellectual and personal wherewithal to successfully conclude intellectual investigation. Revelation therefore proves crucial for this less capable group. In a later section, Rav Saadia provides additional reasons for requiring revelation, and we shall discuss them within the next topic heading.

RATIONAL AND REVELATORY COMMANDMENTS

Rav Saadia divides the mitzvot between commandments the intellect obligates even without the word of God and those we know about and are obligated to fulfill only because of the divine word.¹⁸ The former comprises three different categories. Reason demands that we pay homage and give thanks to someone who has done great things for us. It further demands that a sage not allow others to curse him. Finally, logic dictates that the created beings should not be allowed to harm each other. The first category creates the obligation to know God and worship Him, the second prohibits blasphemy, and the third outlaws stealing from or cheating fellow humans. In addition, God prescribed

17. *Ibid.*, Introduction: 6.

18. *Ibid.*, 3:1.

other mitzvot not obligated by the intellect so that we may perform them and receive greater reward. At first, it seems that these mitzvot have no intrinsic purpose, but Rav Saadia proceeds to state that they must have some slight justification even if not as great as the justifications of the rational commandments. Revelatory mitzvot include Shabbat and the festivals, Jewish dietary laws, and some sexual restrictions such as incest. Regarding Shabbat and the festivals, Rav Saadia notes how these institutions promote rest and community building while providing the opportunity to study and pray with greater depth and devotion.¹⁹ At the same time, he clearly categorizes Shabbat in the category of commandments based on revelation.

The contrast with Maimonides is quite striking. Maimonides denies the existence of revelatory mitzvot entirely, insisting that all commandments have a significant telos (ultimate aim). For Maimonides, divine wisdom demands that God's commands not be vain or frivolous but rather rooted in logic, wisdom, and purpose.²⁰ Maimonides accepts a division between commandments whose purpose is self-evident and those whose purpose is more mysterious, but this division reflects the limitations of human reasoning and not the nature of the commandments themselves. The red heifer has as much logic and purpose as honoring parents even though humanity understands one easily and struggles to comprehend the goal of the other. Indeed, the *Guide* attempts to offer a rationale for every Torah commandment.

Now, Rav Saadia could claim that it is rational for God to give commandments to humans in order to provide them with heavenly reward even if the specific acts have no inherent purpose. Ironically, this argument resembles Maimonides' approach to the details of a commandment, which he concedes need not have a specific rationale. In the context of details, Maimonides agrees that in some instances rationality requires an arbitrary choice. Apparently, though, Maimonides distinguishes between the two scenarios. Once reason demands a certain general command, it also requires specific details, even if arbitrary, so that the act of the commandment has a concrete identity or so as

19. *Ibid.*, 3:2.

20. *Guide* III:26.

to enable a strong sense of communal performance. However, this is not akin to God issuing a commandment with no rational basis on the general level either.

We should avoid identifying Rav Saadia's categories of rational and revelatory commandments with one common usage of *hukkim* and *mishpatim*. The category of *hukkim* can refer to commandments with some kind of paradoxical or irrational quality. Those who associate *hukkim* with the paradoxical emphasize the question of why would the red heifer purify the ritually impure and yet make some priests active in the purification impure. How can we send a goat to Azazel on Yom Kippur when such a practice seems to violate halakhic prohibitions against offerings outside the Temple and may even resemble idolatrous ritual? Nothing paradoxical or irrational can be attributed to the institution of Shabbat, one of the most understandable commandments in our tradition. We would not classify it among the *hukkim*. However, the intellect does not compel Sabbath observance so it is categorized as revelatory.

Rav Saadia returns to the purpose of revelation and explains its benefit regarding each of these categories of commandments.²¹ By definition, we would not know the revelatory commandments without God's word so they depend upon revelation. Even the rational commandments require divine help in their application and definition. Reason demands that we thank God in prayer, but we depend on prophets to clarify the timing of prayer, the text of prayer, and the location of prayer. As Rabbi Kafih notes in his commentary, this example requires further thought since we usually assume that these prayer details are rabbinic in nature and were thus not taught via revelation. Reason prohibits adultery but does not detail how a marital union is formed. Logic forbids theft but does not say how property is acquired. Furthermore, logic recognizes the wrongness of various actions without being able to determine the appropriate punishment for each transgression. Revelation fills in this missing information.

With regard to the means of forming a marriage and acquiring property, we can question whether any given method is truly superior to another. Perhaps we need some definitive rule, but many options

21. *EV* 3:3.

could work equally well. Determining appropriate punishments, on the other hand, seems to clearly depend on a discerning wisdom. A version of this argument appearing in Rav Joseph Albo's writings offers further examples where divine direction clearly does more than just provide an arbitrary standard. Aristotle famously favored the golden mean for each character trait. For example, we should be brave, not cowardly or foolhardy. Regarding physical pleasures, we strive for temperance while avoiding hedonism or asceticism. However, this concept is more easily affirmed than practiced. How do we determine where the middle point is and how do we cultivate the appropriate character traits? Rav Albo writes that the halakhic system provides the recipe when it restricts certain foods permanently while prohibiting others in particular situations.²² Again, revelation aids in working out the details of goals we recognize through reason.

ETHICAL THEORY

Several passages in *Emunot VeDeot* strike a pragmatic and consequentialist note. In other words, the wrongness of actions depends on the negative results they produce rather than on any inherent wrongness. Theft is wrong because if people are allowed to steal, no one will have motivation to work and produce goods and society will not have enough resources to survive. Adultery is negative because offspring will not successfully identify their parents and this will destroy all the precious aspects of stable family life.²³ A Kantian or deontological approach would see theft and adultery as wrong irrespective of which results they produce. We shall see shortly that Rav Saadia incorporates Kantian elements as well but the utilitarian emphasis is quite strong. Furthermore, Rav Saadia sees human motivation as very much influenced by rewards and punishments. One of his arguments in favor of life after death is the biblical example of martyrs. People would not be willing to die for a cause unless they knew that compensation awaited them in another world.²⁴ This claim ignores the possibility of a martyr being so committed to his ideals that

22. *Sefer HaIkkarim* 1:8.

23. *EV* 3:2.

24. *Ibid.*, 9:2.

he would prefer doing the right thing to prolonging life irrespective of hopes for compensation in a future existence.

On the other hand, Rav Saadia does incorporate deontological or intuitive elements of ethics as well. Recall his first category within the rational commandments. The need to repay or at least acknowledge debts of gratitude is not explained by consequentialist considerations but rather is regarded as an inherent truth. He also declares that there is no point in arguing with someone who denies the goodness of truth and the evils of falsehood.²⁵ Here too, he relates to this principle as a self-evident truth rather than as a point of utilitarian consideration.

Eliezer Goldman makes an insightful point in his analysis of Rav Saadia's ethics. While modern ethical philosophers attempt to find one principle that undergirds all our ethical obligations, common sense theories adopt a variety of ethical sources.²⁶ For example, most of us have both deontological and consequentialist ethical intuitions. We feel that there is an inherent wrongness to particular actions and yet also we feel that results sometimes must be a factor in ethical decision making. Perhaps we should view the different strands of ethical theory in *Emunot VeDeot* as a strong point rather than as an inconsistency or a weakness.

A third element of Rav Saadia's ethics emerges from his concluding treatise. Reminiscent of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, this section calls for balancing between thirteen different pursuits of humanity. Each one has its place but exclusive focus on any one of them is dangerous. According to Rav Saadia, this reflects the essential theme of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes does not reject joy, wisdom, or money but only converting one such item into the solitary goal. Even the pursuit of wisdom and the desire to serve God in seclusion require balancing factors. Someone who only studies may not procure the physical necessities for survival. Relying on others to provide will generate enmity and resentment.²⁷ A person who secludes himself in order to exclusively worship God

25. *Ibid.*, 3:8.

26. Eliezer Goldman, "Rav Saadia Gaon's Ethical Theory" [Hebrew], *Daat* 2/3 (1978–1979): 7–28. The point is on page 23. The rest of the paragraph reflects my viewpoint and not necessarily that of Goldman.

27. *EV* 10:14.

may also suffer from physical deprivation and such a life precludes religious fulfillment in the realms of business, agriculture, and the fullness of a varied life.²⁸

Goldman points out that Rav Saadia's analysis implicitly rejects the idea of a sharp division of labor in Jewish society.²⁹ One might suggest that only the elite should study while the masses take care of society's physical needs. Some passages in Maimonides seem comfortable with such an arrangement. In his introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishna*, Maimonides states that the purpose of the multitudes not proficient in wisdom is to provide material needs and companionship for the select wise individuals. Another view could posit that different sectors of society perform divergent tasks but all contribute to the whole. The roles of priests and Levites provide an example of such a model. In opposition to those possibilities, Rav Saadia assumes that both sages seeking wisdom and those drawn to the single-minded pursuit of cleaving to God must personally involve themselves in the world of economic and domestic responsibilities.

For each one of the thirteen pursuits, Rav Saadia explains its limitations and its value. His focus on the next world emerges clearly. Rather than viewing rest as a way of recharging batteries for the challenges of this world, he explains its value as a reminder and taste of the ultimate tranquility in the next world.³⁰ So too, God implanted the desire for honor within us so that we would yearn for honor in the World to Come.³¹ The very topical divisions of *Emunot VeDeot* reflect the same focus. Note how little discussion of eschatology and the future existence appear in *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Rav Saadia dedicates three of the ten treatises in the entire work to the Messiah, resurrection, and the World to Come. This choice reflects his view of reward and punishment as crucial motivating factors. In fact, he justifies the eternity of reward and punishment as a way of providing the most powerful incentive to

28. Ibid., 10:15.

29. Goldman, "Rav Saadia Gaon's Ethical Theory," 20.

30. *EV* 10:16.

31. Ibid., 10:12.

live a godly life.³² Beyond his interest in motivating religious observance, Rav Saadia's concern for divine justice also encourages this focus.

PROVIDENCE

We affirm the justice of God yet we do not experience this world as rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. Rav Saadia's theodicy emphasizes the compensatory power of the rewards of the next world. Why do the righteous suffer? Sometimes, they receive punishments in this world for their small number of transgressions; they are then free to exclusively collect reward in the World to Come. Other times, God afflicts the righteous as a test in order to increase their reward in the World to Come.³³ Rav Saadia draws an interesting distinction between the two categories. Regarding the first, God can inform the sufferer via prophecy so that he will take the punishment to heart and in turn repent. In contrast, God cannot inform the second type of sufferer since the heroism consists of loyally bearing the difficulty without concrete knowledge of a resulting reward. In alliance with a major strand of thought in our tradition, Rav Saadia does not think that all suffering can be attributed to sin. Indeed, *Hazal* already introduced the concept of "afflictions of love." In elucidating this concept, other thinkers mention the character growth that suffering can engender; for example, Rabbenu Nissim, a fourteenth-century Spanish rabbi, writes of becoming less attached to physicality.³⁴ Rav Saadia does not mention any personal development but simply writes of faithfully enduring the pain. Rav Saadia raises the obvious question of why God needs to afflict in order to reward and answers by referring back to his doctrine that earned rewards are superior to freely dispensed gifts.

The death of children particularly concerned Rav Saadia and he affirms that they will receive compensation in the next world. He even mentions the children of the flood generation and of the Midianites as examples of this phenomenon.³⁵ Apparently, a war waged against an

32. *Ibid.*, 9:7.

33. *Ibid.*, 5:3.

34. *Derashot HaRan, Derasha* 10.

35. *EV* 9:2.

enemy nation does not obliterate the moral question regarding children and even though God commands their death, He must compensate those children. Note also that Rav Saadia implicitly rejects Maimonides' notion that only someone who knows basic metaphysical truths can find a place in the World to Come³⁶ and that only gentiles who affirm monotheism merit salvation in the hereafter.³⁷ We imagine that the Midianite children would not perform well on the theological exam. The children question resurfaces in the context of Rav Saadia's rejection of reincarnation. He does not so much provide an argument against this doctrine; instead, he neutralizes all the claims in favor of it. None of the verses cited in favor of reincarnation truly refer to it. The claim that this idea explains the suffering of children is neutralized by Rav Saadia's argument that compensation of the World to Come already addresses the conundrum.³⁸ Perhaps Rav Saadia does not need a specific critique of reincarnation since mention of this doctrine does not appear in Tanakh or *Hazal*. Once he has negated all the arguments in favor, the default position remains that this is not a part of our tradition.

The importance of divine justice and the idea that the World to Come realizes this value help explain Rav Saadia's great interest in the future existence. As noted, the righteous and wicked do not always receive their just deserts in this world. Rav Saadia does say that God sometimes administers just deserts in this world so that people will see an example of the divine justice they can anticipate in the World to Come.³⁹

PROPHECY

According to Rav Saadia, we authenticate a prophet when God performs a miracle on his behalf.⁴⁰ To prevent any attribution of divinity to the prophet, prophets have all the limitations of humanity including mortality, dependence on food and drink, and the occasional struggle with illness and poverty. They cannot perform miracles on demand nor do

36. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance* 3:7.

37. *Ibid., Laws of Kings* 8:11, according to one textual variant.

38. *EV* 6:8.

39. *Ibid.*, 5:1.

40. *Ibid.*, 3:4.

they always have access to hidden information. These limitations clarify that miracles and prophetic message stem ultimately from God and not from the independent powers of the prophet. Beyond the miraculous, the content of the prophecy also helps an audience evaluate a prophetic claimant. If he directs us to do something against reason or tradition, such as calling for theft or adultery, then we know that he is a false prophet.⁴¹ Though we no longer encounter prophets, concerns about focusing attention on holy individuals more than on God remain very relevant.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Rav Saadia outlines four sources of knowledge: sense experience, direct apprehension of the intellect, logical derivations, and reliable traditions.⁴² The first refers to information gained through our five senses and the second to our intuitive appreciation of the importance of truth and the evils of falsehood. The third makes derivations based on the earlier sources of information. We might not empirically sense our soul and its intellectual capacity but we experience its functioning and can therefore derive its existence. We see animals eating and giving out waste and can infer that they have some kind of digestive system. The real innovation of Rav Saadia is his fourth category. Maimonides, our frequent foil, champions arriving at truths through metaphysical reasoning but does not emphasize information acquired via tradition. Indeed, a person could think that relying on others reflects some kind of epistemological failure and that the truly independent thinker would accept only truths he personally verified. Rav Saadia notes that no one actually functions that way. We accept what we are told about our family lineage and our property as true. We rely on the advice of others to determine which courses of action are worthy and rewarding and which are foolhardy and dangerous.⁴³ Obviously, we exercise some judgment regarding whom to rely upon and we try to determine if they have a decent track record of reporting. That being said, we justifiably rely on others in our pursuit of knowledge.

41. *Ibid.*, 3:8.

42. *Ibid.*, Introduction: 5.

43. *Ibid.*, 3:6.