

*A Treatise in Defence
of the Pietists by Abraham Maimonides*

ABRAHAM, the son and successor of Moses Maimonides, is one of the most tragic figures in Jewish history. His message, an ethically oriented mysticism, was exactly what Jewish religion needed in his time. For mysticism was in the air, it was the paramount spiritual force in the Islamic environment of the oriental Jews and almost equally strong in the Christian world. And the ethical aspect of monotheism was in danger of being smothered by concentration on the ritual and by a soulless liturgy. Abraham Maimonides' *chef d'œuvre*, the *Kifāyat al-‘Ābidīn*, "The Complete Guide for the Pious," as its still extant parts prove, provided the answer to the religious needs of his time. It united, in a unique combination, the three great elements of the Judaeo-Islamic culture of the High Middle Ages: religious law, which pervaded all aspects of life with its innumerable *minutiae*; ethical pietism, which gave meaning and significance to all the injunctions of the Law; and, finally, the spirit of Greek philosophy, which brought system, order and lucid reasoning into the enormous mass of religious traditions. Abraham also was a most ingenious exegete. He knew how to expound the Bible and other classical sources of Judaism in such a captivating way that even the modern reader is sometimes tempted to accept his pietist interpretations as the literal meaning of his texts. He succeeded indeed in securing for his ethical pietism its "place within religion", as he postulates in the treatise which forms the subject of this article.¹

Moreover, Abraham Maimonides did not content himself with his literary creations. He originated a circle of practising pietists, and not only in Old Cairo, where he had his seat, but also in Alexandria and even outside Egypt. It seems that in this he was

¹ Cf. S. EPPENSTEIN, "Abraham Maimuni, sein Leben und seine Schriften" in *Jahresbericht des Rabbinerseminars*, Berlin 1912-13. SAMUEL ROSENBLATT, *The High Ways to Perfection of Abraham Maimonides I*, New York 1927, Introduction pp. 1-128. A. H. FREIMANN, *Abraham Maimuni, Responsa*, Jerusalem 1937, pp. ix-xxii. N. WIEDER, *Islamic Influences on the Jewish Worship*. East and West Library, Oxford 1957 (In Hebrew. See Index, pp. 95-96). E. WIESENBERG in *Pērūsh Rabbēnū Avrāhām* etc., ed. S. D. Sassoon, London, 1959, pp. 11-63. Further literature in the latter, p. 12.

preceded by his older collaborator, Abraham he-Hāsīd ("the Pious") b. Abū Rabi' (the Arabic *kunya* normally attached to the name Solomon), who like himself was a physician, i.e. of Greek erudition. The Cairo *Genizah* has preserved a number of letters emanating from or referring to this circle. However, the treatise translated below shows that our knowledge of this circle is lamentably incomplete.²

The Opus (ha-ḥibbūr), as Abraham referred to his "Guide for the Pious," was a comprehensive book in ten volumes, one of which comprises, in the printed edition, 248 pages of Arabic text. Yet most of it, including the last volume, which contained the esoteric doctrines about the *wuṣūl*, the attainment of the goal of the mystic, is lost. This deficiency is indicative of Abraham's lifework in general. It was a failure. The rejuvenation of Judaism in the spirit of ethical mysticism to which he aspired with all his soul did not materialise. The maladies which he intended to cure persisted. The void which he attempted to fill became even wider. In the subsequent centuries, it was not only the crushing economic and social conditions, but also a groping after something which Abraham Maimonides had offered to his co-religionists but was not accepted by them, which induced many to join the dominant religion.

Why did Abraham Maimonides fail? Seemingly, he had all the prerequisites for success. His father had firmly established the foundations of Jewish law and of religious philosophy and obtained paramount authority in Israel as no other man before him for about a century. Abraham he-Hāsīd had prepared the ground for the pietist movement, which was encouraged also by similar trends in the Muslim population of Cairo. A book with almost the same title as Abraham Maimonides' "Complete Guide for the Pious," written by a Muslim contemporary and compatriot, has been preserved in manuscript. And Abraham himself was able to develop his brilliant gifts under the loving guidance of his illustrious father, with whom he studied all the religious and secular sciences of the age.

These propitious conditions, however, were more than counterbalanced by unfavourable factors which made it impossible for the master to concentrate on his main concern, and consequently

² S. D. GOITEIN, "New Documents on Abraham Maimonides and his Pietist Circle," *Tarbiz* 33, 1964, pp. 181-197.

limited his radius of influence. Owing to the treasures of the *Genizah* documents, which are increasingly coming under control, we see now more clearly in all these matters, and become more and more familiar with the appalling conditions under which Jewish spiritual leaders had to work. About seventy five autographs of Abraham Maimonides himself have been identified of late by the present writer. Many references to him have been found in the correspondence of his contemporaries. Not less important is the general widening of our knowledge of that period in the course of the study of the relevant *Genizah* documents.³

First, the economic and occupational aspects of the master's life have to be taken into consideration. There were Jewish scholars who were communal employees in their capacity as judges and teachers of adults. However, for a *Nāgīd*, or Head of the Jews of the country, such as Abraham Maimonides, who fulfilled this function during his entire adult life (1205-1237; he was born in 1186), it was out of the question to derive his livelihood from the community. He was, like his father, a physician to the court, a service which included in his time also work in a government hospital. In a letter written in October 1235, when he was at the height of his career as *Nāgīd*, he writes that he was unable to attend the wedding of a beloved pupil of his because it was his turn in the hospital, and for reasons which he declined to specify he did not want any one to substitute for him on that particular night. We remember, of course, the moving complaints of Moses Maimonides of how the service of the court did not permit him to devote his time to study and to the guidance of the community. But this was in his later days, after he had already completed all his great books. Abraham Maimonides did professional work all his life and, moreover, died at the comparatively early age of fifty one, while his father lived until his seventieth year.⁴

There was another, most crucial difference between the father

³ A survey of the relevant *Genizah* sources is to be found in the present writer's paper "Abraham Maimonides and his Pietist Circle," *Jewish and Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. ALTMANN, Cambridge, Mass. 1967. Cf. also the article mentioned in note 2.

⁴ Abraham Maimonides must also have been seriously ill a long time before his death in December 1237. In a letter addressed to the judge Elijah b. Zachariah in March 1237 the hope is expressed that God would "break the laws of nature and keep our lord alive," which shows that already nine months before his death Abraham was hopelessly ill. MS. TS (Taylor-Schechter) 13 J 20 f. 24, line 15, in the University Library Collection, Cambridge.

and the son. Moses Maimonides functioned as *Ra'is al-Yahūd*, official head of the Jewish community of Egypt, although he did not bear the Hebrew title *Nāgīd*. But he did so for only a comparatively short time,⁵ while the son bore the burden of the community, as we have seen, during all his manhood. In addition—and this is most decisive—Abraham conducted (and most probably was forced to conduct) his office in a way entirely different from that of his father. He attended in person to all the innumerable questions of religious law, ritual and communal affairs, as well as to the social services, such as the care for the poor, the orphans and widows, the foreigners and the sick. From the spring of 1218 alone we possess forty two orders of payment written by the master in his own hand and dealing with a great variety of social cases. It is incomprehensible how he could have found time to deal with all these and other great or small matters, communal or private, in which he was approached and on which we find his autograph rulings in the *Genizah*.

Moreover, there was the political aspect of the office of the Head of the Jews. The interruption of twenty years in the tenure of the office by Moses Maimonides⁶ was due to the rivalry of the Nethanel Halevi family, which was local and had provided some *ra'is'* during the twelfth century. This rivalry did not cease with Maimonides' death. It linked itself, dangerously, with opposition to Abraham Maimonides, attempted religious reforms and impeded their spread by invoking government interference. The catchword with which the opposition fought the reforms was *bid'a*, innovation, which was anathema to the strictly orthodox Ayyubid rulers of Egypt. In a personal letter to the Sultan, the *Nāgīd* had to explain that the pietist practices were confined to his private synagogue and were not imposed on the public places of prayer. Subsequent history proves indeed that none of Abraham Maimonides' proposed reforms had found acceptance.⁷

The treatise translated in the following reveals still another side

⁵ From 1171 to 1176 (at most), and again from 1196 to his death in 1204, cf. the present writer's "The Title and Office of the Nagid," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 53 (1962), pp. 93-119, especially pp. 105-6, and "The Life of Maimonides in the Light of New Finds in the Cairo Geniza," *Peraqim*, Hebrew Academy of America 1966, pp. 29-42.

⁶ Cf. the preceding note.

⁷ Cf. "New Documents from the Cairo Geniza," *Homenaje a Millás-Vallicrosa* Barcelona 1954, I. pp. 707-720, and RICHARD GOTTHEIL, *Mélanges Hartwig Derenbourg*, Paris 1909, p. 98.

of the pietist movement among the Egyptian Jews, about which, as far as I know, no documentation has yet been found otherwise. The document proves that the opposition against the pietists was general: on the part alike of the religious scholars and dignitaries, the congregational leaders and the broad masses of the community. The pietists were accused of being lax in the observances of the ritual, of using improper language in religious matters and, above all, of propagating false theological doctrines. These accusations are of course familiar from Muslim orthodox reaction against the Sufi mystics (and indeed from the adversaries of mysticism in general). However, while Abraham Maimonides seems to have taken the first two accusations rather lightly, he evidently was very much disturbed with regard to the third. He reckons, indeed, with the possibility that there might be persons who deviated from the beliefs held by the Jewish community and spread dissident views. For such teachers of falsehood the master had no mercy. Unfortunately we are left in the dark as to where the persons alluded to might have lived and what kind of tenets they held. In any case it is evident from the whole tenor of the treatise that the circle of pietists was by no means confined to the immediate pupils and companions of Abraham Maimonides, but that it represented a ramified movement, partly independent of the master.

It is not difficult to explain how heretical views could be ascribed to the pietists or were actually held by them. Again and again, in reply to simple questions with regard to the meaning of biblical texts, the master emphasised that they contained secrets which could not be divulged at all or only under certain conditions; cf. *Abraham Maimuni, Responsa*, ed. A. H. Freimann, Jerusalem 1937, nos. 24, 30 and 43. The esoteric character of religious teachings easily lends itself to imaginary or real deviations.

The treatise in defence of the pietists, which seems to be complete, is short, obviously being intended to be sent as a circular of the *Nāgīd* to the communities under his control and to be read out there in the synagogues. It consists of forty eight lines, preceded by a title page containing another four lines. It is a draft, in the *Nāgīd*'s own hand; he left to the copyist the task of filling in the quotations from the Bible and the Talmud alluded to in the text. The manuscript is preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, where it bears the shelf mark MS Heb. c 28, fol. 45 and 46, and is listed in the *Catalogue* of the Hebrew Manuscripts by Neubauer

and Cowley, vol. II, no. 2876, f. 45 and 46. In the Index of the *Catalogue*, the author is not identified with Abraham Maimonides. This fact, together with the rather difficult handwriting of the master, may have been the reason that this interesting document has not yet been published thus far.

The text, as is usual in Abraham Maimonides' writings, is in Arabic language (but Hebrew script), smoothly interwoven with many Hebrew words and quotations. The Hebrew elements are marked in our translation by italics.

fol. 45: A Treatise by Abraham, son of Moses—[*may the memory of the righteous be blessed*]⁸—being an enquiry into the obligatory character of asceticism and its recommendable status in religion.⁸

fol. 46: A man proficient in one part⁹ of the religious law but incompetent in another will not give decisions with regard to the part in which he is not competent. Thus, a religious scholar proficient in *civil law*, for instance, but incompetent with regard to *Temple sacrifices*¹⁰ [*Impure and pure things*] will not give decisions, because of his proficiency in *civil law*, with regard to *sacrifices* [*Impure and pure things*] which he does not know well [*or with which he does not occupy himself*]. In view of this, when *our Holy Master*¹¹ was approached with regard to the son of his sister and when it was said to him [end of the line left free for additional words] . . .¹²

B. It is not permissible to let *judges*¹³ and experts in religious law and their like judge over ascetics and mystics without their having experience in the latter's Way and knowledge of its relationship to, and place within religion. [Marginal note: Several texts in

⁸ Crossed out: "and its religious status."

⁹ Above the line: "in one science."

¹⁰ Written above the line instead of the words crossed out. The reason for this change is to be sought in the example quoted in the following. See note 12.

¹¹ The Patriarch Yehudah ha-Nasi, the compiler of the *Mishnah*.

¹² The reference is not to the nephew of the Patriarch, but to that of Rabbi *Hiyyah*. He received ordination from the Patriarch to adjudge cases involving civil and ritual law, but not for the release of first-born animals, which is a sub-section of the teachings about the temple sacrifices, cf. T. B. *Sanhedrin* 5a (I owe this identification to the kindness of Professor S. LIEBERMAN). On the margin, three letters are added which seem to be *ymr*, possibly an abbreviation of *yimṣā raḥamim* "may he find mercy (with God)." This, however, is a eulogy for a person who died recently rather than one for a saint of the remote past.

¹³ The rabbis were called in that period "judges", because their main occupation consisted in dealing with cases of civil law.

the Talmud testify that not every *judge* is *pious* and that the *pietists* are higher in rank than the *judges*. It is sufficient to quote their saying about an eminent *sage of the sages of Israel*.¹⁴

C. However, he who strives constantly for public office and leadership and is full of pride and conceit is an enemy of the followers of those Ways [above the line: as we have said before],¹⁵ and is therefore not permitted to make decisions either for or against them, even if he possesses all the knowledge required in this matter. For they (our sages) of blessed memory have said: *No man should judge one whom he loves or one whom he hates*.¹⁶

D. On the other hand, persons of the following description are qualified to judge in these matters. Men of wide erudition who, among other knowledge, are familiar with the science of these Ways and their place within religion;¹⁷ people of strong religiosity whose *fear of God is even greater than their learnedness*;¹⁸ persons untainted by partiality, seeking the truth alone, as is laid down as a condition for judges in general that they should be *Godfearing and men of Truth*;¹⁹ those who proceed with caution in legal processes, as the *members of the Great Assembly* have ordained: *be deliberate in judgment*;²⁰ finally, those who are wary of what spoils those who judge and the judgment, namely *envy, greed and hankering for glory*, of which the Bearers of the tradition metaphorically said that they *put a man out of the world*.²¹

E. Such persons should examine the state of the ascetics and mystics and of the *pietists* in general and scrutinise their affairs. If they hear about any one of them something which points to corruption or faultiness of belief, they will not accept all that they hear about him, for most people abhor the followers of these positive²² Ways, Ways which are so different from, and opposed

¹⁴ The reference to the talmudic saying is contained in the remnants of a few letters at the bottom of the margin.

¹⁵ These words, it seems, were added by the master, when he decided to insert our treatise into his *magnum opus*, the Guide of the Pious, where he had often opportunity to speak against the vanity of the communal leaders of his time.

¹⁶ T. B. *Kethubboth* 105b.

¹⁷ Literally: "the religious way".

¹⁸ Cf. *Mishnah*, 'Avoth 3 : 9.

¹⁹ *Ex.* xviii : 21.

²⁰ *Mishnah*, 'Avoth 1 : 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4 : 21.

²² Positive as opposed to natural, i.e. which were laid down (by God or His prophets).

to their own, and attribute to them deficiency. For such is the attitude of any one who has not attained a certain perfection towards those who have attained it. Says the Talmud: *ignoramus hate the scholars etc.*²³

F. Instead, those judges will proceed with caution and make many careful inquiries and will confer with them repeatedly about those rumours, until their state has been fully made clear. The Torah says about one who, himself a disbeliever, spreads disbelief among the people and induces it to worship idols: *When you hear etc. make careful inquiries etc.*²⁴ If God, the exalted, commands such great caution and exhaustive inquiries with regard to *one who seduces Israel to idol worship*, how much more should these be applied to one who treads upon the path of the *pious* and is dedicated to a life of *sanctity*.

G. Should careful examination, based on cautious procedure, . . .²⁵ and personal contact, prove that there was nothing wrong in their ways except a certain lack of guidance and carelessness of expression, bordering on blasphemy, they should be held to restrain their tongues and to be careful in the formulation of their saying. Should there be discovered negligence with regard to some religious duties out of inadvertence or mistake, they should be admonished to mend their ways. Should, however, careful examination, undertaken with the utmost caution, prove that (they were) indeed guilty of corruption of belief, even were it only in one of the articles of faith accepted in Israel, or guilty of something which could lead to such corruption, and should they have been ordered to stop this and did not obey, or had been admonished to repent and did not repent, then they should be punished like one who seduces the people and leads it astray.

H. Contrariwise, should careful examination bring out the opposite, namely that they were innocent of that of which they were accused and that their enemies made slanderous statements about them, then their slanderers should be punished, since they are in a position similar to that of *a false witness*, of whom (God) the exalted commanded: *You shall do to him as he schemed to do*

²³ T. B. *Pesahim* 49b: "ignoramus hate the scholars more than the pagans hate the Jews."

²⁴ *Deut.* xiii: 13-15.

²⁵ Reading doubtful.

to his brother.²⁶ May the God of Israel remove from his people groundless hatred and take away from them the heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh, as it is written etc.²⁷ and lead them on the way which is good and fitting according to him, as it is written etc.²⁸

רסאלה לאברהם ברבי משה וצל פי תחקיק אלחק

פי וגוב אלזהד (וחאלה) וחאלה אלמרציה ענד

אלשריעה (אלשרעי כל מן)

עלם

- 1 אן מן כאן מאהר פי גו מא מן אלשריעה מקצר פי עלם
- 2 אכר לא יחכם פי אלמו אלדי הו מקצר פיה לאנה אדא כאן עאלם
- 3 מן עלמא אלשריעה מאהר פי (עלם) דיני ממונות מתלא
 אל קדשים
- 4 מקצר פי עלם (אלטמאות ואלטהרות) מא יחכם (פי) לאגל מהארתה
 אלקדשים
- 5 פי דיני ממונות פי (אלטמאות ואלטהרות) אלדי הו גיר מחכם להא
- 6 (או גיר משתגל בהא) ובחסב דלך למא אסתודן רבינו הקדוש
- 7 פי בן אכתה וקאל לה
- 8 פתחכים אלדיינים ואלמפתיין (ונחווהם) פי עלם אלפקה ונחווהם פי
- 9 אלוהאד ואלעבאד מן גיר אן (!) יכון להם כברה בטריקהם ומערפה
- 10 בנסבתהא ומחלהא פי אלשריעה לא יגו ואמא מן לה מנאפסה
- 11 ומתאברה עלי אלתקדם ואלריאסה () ודו כבר ותעטים פהו
 כמא קדמנא
- 12 עדו ארבאב הדה אלטרק ולדלך יחרם עליה אן יחכם להם או עליהם
- 13 ולו כאן (מן) ממן האו עלם כל מא יגב עלמה פי ד'לך וגירה לקולהם
- 14 ז'ל לא לידון אנשי למאן דרחים ליה ולא למאן דסני ליה בל אלדי יגב
- 15 אן יחכם פי מחל הדה אלאמור הם ארבאב אלעלם אלגזיר אלדי מן
- 16 גמלה עלומהם עלם הדה אלטרק ומחלהא פי אלטריק אלשריעה
- 17 ואלדין אלמתין אלדי יראתם קודמת לחכמתם אלסאלמון מן אלהוי
 אלקאצדין אלחק כמא שרט פי אלחכאם עמומא יראי אל(הים) אנ(שי)
 אמ(ת)
- 18 דוי אלתתבת פי אלאחכאם כמא אמר אנשי כנסת הגדולה היו מת(ונים)
- 19 בדין אלמחלרזין ממא יפסד אלדנים ואלדין הקנאה ותהאווה והכבוד
- 20 אלדי בין אלנאקלון אנהם מוציאין את האדם מן העולם פמללו

²⁶ Deut. xix: 19.

²⁷ Ezek. xxxvi: 26.

²⁸ Cf. I Sam. xii: 23.

21 תאולא תם אלדי יגב אן ינטרון פי חאל אלוהאד ואלעבאד ונחורם
מן אלחסידיים

22 יחררו אמרהם ואלא סמעוא ען אחדהם מא ידל עלי פסאד

Margin

1 (בדא וגן) ונצוץ אלתלמוד תשהד באן לים כל דיין חסיד

ואן אלחסידיים (. . .) אעלי

2 דרגה מן אלדיינים וכפי בקולהם פי גדול מן חכמי ישראל ועלוהם

Verso

1 ואכתלאל עקידה לא (יסל .) יצדקון כל מא יסמעונה מן (.) מן עתרה

2 לאן אכתר אלנאס ינפרון מן ארבאב הדה אלטרק אלוצעיה למבאינתהא

3 ומכאלפתהא למא הם עליהם (!) וינסבונהם (ללעון ואלנקץ) ללנקץ כחאל

4 כל נאקץ ען כמאל מע ארבאב דלך אלכמאל קאל נץ אלתלמוד גדולה

5 שנאה ששנאיים עמי הארץ וכול בל יתבתון ויכתרון אלבחת ואלתקצי

6 () ויפאוצנהם פי מא סמע ענהם דפועא אלי אן יתחרר חאלהם

7 נץ אלתורה פי אלחכם פי מן יכפר ויכפר אלנאס ויגדב

(אלכפאר עובדי) לעז כי תשמע וכול /כלומר לעבודה זרה/

8 ודרשת וחקרת וכול ואלא כאן תע יאמר (פי) בהדא אלתתבת אלעטים

9 ואלבחת אלמסתקצי פי מן ידיח ישראל לעז כיף לא יכון מתלה

10 פי מן יסלך פי דרך חסידיים ויגדב לקדושה פאדא אכרג אלבחת

11 ואלתקצי (. . .) בעד אלתתבת ואלמפאוצה אן לים תם

12 פי טריקהם סוי עדם תסדיד סדדוא או תסיב פי אללאקאוויל

13 ותגדיף פיהא קדר מעהם אלצבט לאלסנתהם ואלתחדיד לאקאווילהם

14 או תפריט פי בעץ אלאעמאל אלשרעיה סהוא וגלטה אסתתאבוא

15 ואן אכרג אלבחת ואלתקצי בעד גאיה אלתתבת אן תם פסאד

16 אעתקאד ולו פי עקידה ואחדה מן עקאיד ישראל או מא יודי

17 לפסאד עקאיד (.) ישראל ונהיו ען דלך ולם ינתהו ואסתתאבוא

18 ולם יתובוא חנינד יקאצצון (כמא) שבה מא יקאצץ אלמסית ואלמדח

19 ואן אכרג אלבחת צד דלך ואן (הם) הם סאלמון ממא יקדפון בה

20 ואן אעדאהם ישנעון עליהם באלמתאל יקאצץ אלמשנעון עליהם

21 לאנהם (. . .) שבה מא אמר בה תע פי עד זומם ועשיתם

22 לו כאשר זמם לעשות (ל) אחיו ואלהי ישראל (יתקן) יסלק מבין

עמו ישראל שנאת

23 חנם (וירם) ויסיר מקרבם לב האבן ויתן להם לב בשר ככתוב וכול

וינחם בדרך הטובה והישרה לפניו ככתוב וכול יק יקצצון