Could Maimonides Get into Rambam’s Heaven?

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Once a religion specifies the distinct beliefs that constitutes its theology, a new question must be answered: are all these beliefs equal in significance? Moses Maimonides was the first Jew to raise this question, and his answer is explicit: there are thirteen specific teachings of the Torah which stand on a plane all their own.¹

Rambam makes this claim in his commentary on the Mishneh, which opens with the words, “All Israelites have a share in the world to come. …”² Rambam thus makes clear that he views that text as a presentation of the dogmas of Judaism. Rambam lays down thirteen discrete beliefs as the dogmatic foundation of the Jewish faith. These may be summarized as follows:

1. That God exists
2. That God is one
3. That God is incorporeal
4. That God is ontologically prior to the cosmos
5. That God alone may be worshiped
6. That prophecy occurs
7. That Mosaic prophecy is superior to all others
8. That the Torah was given from heaven
9. That the Torah will never change nor be exchanged
10. That God knows individuals

² Sanhedrin X.1.
11. That the righteous will be rewarded and the evil punished
12. That the messiah will come
13. That the dead will be resurrected

Rambam does not himself present a list (as I do here) but a discussion of these ideas. He cites proof-texts from the Written Torah and in some cases sketches the outlines of a philosophic proof of the truth of the dogma. The entire discussion is a lengthy essay written originally in Arabic. Rambam's principles are better known in the Jewish world in the form of two poetic summaries: Yigdal and Ani Ma'amim, found in most prayer books. The first of these has become part of the liturgy in many Jewish communities.

After he finishes presenting his principles, Rambam makes the following statement:

When all these foundations are perfectly understood and believed in by a person he enters the community of Israel and one is obligated to love and pity him and to act towards him in all the ways in which the Creator has commanded that one should act towards his brother, with love and fraternity. Even were he to commit every possible transgression, because of lust and because of being overpowered by the evil inclination, he will be punished according to his rebelliousness, but he has a portion [of the world to come]; he is one of the sinners of Israel. But if a man doubts any of these foundations, he leaves the community [of Israel], denies the fundamental, and is called a sectarian, epikoros, and one who 'cuts among the plantings.' One is required to hate him and destroy him. About such a person it was said, 'Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate thee?' (Psalms 139:21).

Rambam's statement of his principles occurs at the end of a passage in which he defines the terms appearing in Mishnah Sanhedrin X.1 ("All Israelites have a share in the world to come . . ."). One term alone remains undefined: "Israelite." He appears to have posited his principles here at least in part in order to define the term "Israelite." An Israelite is a person who affirms the thirteen principles.

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The text quoted here, with which Rambam closes his statement of the principles of the Torah, turns out on close examination to be quite remarkable. In the first instance, we see that Rambam defines a Jew in terms of his or her acceptance of the principle, "When all these foundations are perfectly understood and believed in by a person he enters the community of Israel ... ." That Rambam took this theological answer to the question "who is a Jew?" seriously is evidenced by the fact that he immediately attaches to the acceptance of his principles the halakhic rights which Jews may demand of their fellows — to be treated with love, pity, and fraternity — and by the further fact that he here makes one's portion in the world to come (i.e., one's personal salvation) dependent upon the acceptance of the thirteen principles. Further, Rambam makes admittance to the world to come conditional solely on the acceptance of his principles, explicitly divorcing halakhic obedience from the equation ("even were he to commit every possible transgression ... ").

It should be emphasized that Rambam here makes unambiguous, conscious acceptance of the principles not only a necessary condition for being a Jew and enjoying a share in the world to come but also a sufficient condition. In other words, in order to be counted as part of Israel, it is necessary that one accept the principles; that is also enough. If we take Rambam at his word here, one need not do anything further.

Second, if one simply casts doubt upon any of the principles (i.e., does not overtly deny them), one excludes oneself from the people of Israel. Such an individual must be hated and destroyed and loses his or her share in the world to come.

Third, Rambam makes absolutely no provision for the possibility of inadvertence playing an exculpatory role when it comes to doubting or denying principles of faith. Even if one denies a principle of faith because one thinks mistakenly that one is following the teaching of the Torah, one has excluded oneself from the Jewish community and lost one's share in the world to come.

Fourth, Rambam presents his thirteen principles as dogmas in the strictest sense of the term. They are laid down as beliefs taught by the Torah (the highest ecclesiastical authority in Judaism), acceptance of which is a necessary (and sufficient) condition for being...
considered a part of the House of Israel and for attaining a share in the world to come.\(^5\)

Rambam thus makes a number of claims about the status of dogma in Judaism:

(A) Judaism has dogmas in the strict sense of the term
(B) Acceptance of these dogmas makes one a Jew and guarantees one a share in the world to come
(C) Doubts or mistakes (not even outright rejection) concerning one of these dogmas is sufficient to exclude one from the Jewish people and cost one his or her share in the world to come
(D) Rambam distinguishes between knowledge and belief and imposes an halakhic obligation to know and not just believe (i.e., accept on traditional authority) that God exists, is one, and is incorporeal.\(^6\)

When presented in this fashion, Rambam’s position is seen to be revolutionary. How are we to understand this? Rambam, it seems, understands the verse from Habakkuk, “the righteous shall live by his faith,” as teaching that the righteous person is defined as righteous by his or her faith. He furthermore seems to understand the term “live” in the verse as referring to life in the world to come. He also conflates the terms “Israel” and “righteous” (as the Mishnah itself did, justifying the claim that “all Israelites have a share in the world to come” by appealing to the verse, “thy people are all righteous . . .”). Finally, Rambam understands the faith which defines the righteous Israelite and through which he or she earns a share in the world to come in terms of thirteen discrete beliefs which constitute that faith.


One of the most striking elements in Rambam’s formulation is his apparent unwillingness to accept inadvertence as exculpatory.\(^7\) I mean by this that for Rambam a person who makes a mistake about matters of dogma is in no better shape than one who consciously and knowingly rejects one of the thirteen principles. Such a person is simply a heretic. This may not surprise all my readers: after all, if you are stopped for speeding, telling the police officer that you did not know that speeding was illegal is not going to get you very far. In Western legal systems, ignorance of the law is not generally considered a legitimate excuse for violating it.

Judaism, however, does recognize the category of *shegagah*, inadvertence, as mitigating guilt or even in some cases excusing it altogether. In matters of belief, however, Rambam leaves no room for *shegagah*.

Why does Rambam do this? He actually has no choice. Rambam was locked into this position by a number of his previous decisions. If we interpret *Habakkuk* as defining the righteous in terms of faith and further define faith in terms of its propositional content, as Rambam clearly does through his thirteen principles, then if one affirms an incorrect doctrine or denies a correct doctrine for any reason, one’s faith is in fact deficient, and therefore, so is one’s righteousness. If righteousness is a criterion for being a member of the House of Israel and for enjoying a share in the world to come, then the mistaken believer is, however sweet, and good, and pious in the conventional sense, not righteous and thus not a Jew and not a candidate for a share in the world to come.

Rambam not only understood religious belief in terms of its intellectual, propositional content, he was convinced that the beliefs of Judaism, at least, were basically equivalent to the teachings of true philosophy. This underlying approach to religious faith comes out clearly in the very first sentence of Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah*, his great and unprecedented law code. “The foundation of all [religious] foundations and the pillar of [all] the sciences,”

\(^7\) For proof that Rambam does not, in fact, distinguish the purposeful heretic from the inadvertent heretic, see my "What is Heresy?", *Studies in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. N. Samuelson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987) 191–214, and *Dogma*, 18–19.
Rambam writes, "is to know that there exists a Prime Existent." Remember, please, that this is the first sentence of a systematic exposition of halakhah, Jewish law. In this sentence, Rambam teaches that religion and science share a common axiom: God's existence. \(^8\)

This may sound odd to contemporary ears, but the science Rambam was dealing with was Aristotelian; the most foundational of all the sciences for any Aristotelian was metaphysics, and the fundamental teaching of metaphysics was God's existence. Thus, one who was confused on that issue was confused at the very basic level of scientific truth.

The basic axiom of all the sciences is God's existence; the basic axiom of religious faith is God's existence. At their very heart, then, religion and science do not teach the same thing, they are the same thing. \(^9\)

Science must be based on knowledge, not "blind" faith (the very opposite of Maimonidean faith!) or wishful thinking. Thus, one must be able to know scientifically that God exists. Since such knowledge is possible, Rambam can make it the first of his thirteen principles; he can also make it the first commandment: "knowledge of this [God's unconditional existence, uniqueness, and mastery of the cosmos] is a positive commandment."

Thus, "the foundation of all foundations and the pillar of [all] the sciences is to know" that God exists. In Maimonidean terms, to know something means to be able to show why it is so, in other words, to offer rational proof for it. \(^10\) For Rambam, therefore, to fulfill the very commandment, to accept the first principle of faith, one must be sufficiently sophisticated to prove God's existence.

The importance of scientific knowledge to religious faith is further underscored by Rambam in the four chapters following his

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\(^8\) In interpreting this passage, I follow Isaac Abravanel. See Rosh Amanah, ch. 5 (Hebrew, 63; English, 76).


\(^10\) To know something, for any Aristotelian, is to know it with its causes. See, for example, Physics ii.3, 194b.
emphatic opening assertion concerning the identity of the basic axioms of religion and of science. In these chapters, Rambam gives a quick course in two sciences, physics (including astronomy) and metaphysics, maintaining that it is through the study of these sciences that one can be brought to the love and fear of God.

Rambam does not specify in his statement of the "Thirteen Principles" whether they are to be known or simply believed (i.e., accepted on the basis of traditional authority without necessarily understanding why they are and must be true). But in his parallel statement in "Laws of the Foundations of the Torah," he clearly states that it is knowledge of God's existence which is the "foundation of all foundations." He further states there that knowing that God exists is the first of all the commandments of the Torah. It makes considerable sense, therefore, to interpret the "Thirteen Principles" (at least the first five of them, which deal with God) as involving knowledge rather than belief.

Rambam, as it happens, cannot be interpreted in any other fashion. For Rambam as for all other philosophers, the distinction between knowing and believing is crucial. Knowledge, as Rambam understands it, corresponds to reality and must, therefore, be true (the expression "true knowledge" is thus redundant). Belief is what we represent to ourselves as corresponding to reality, whether or not in fact it actually does so correspond. Human beings are distinguished from all other creatures on earth by their ability to achieve knowledge. In fact, being born with human potential means being born with that ability; becoming truly human means realizing that ability to one extent or another.

Note carefully what I have just written: the child of human parents is born as a potential human; only that potential human being who achieves knowledge actually becomes a full-fledged human being. Immortality, a share in the world to come, is something to which only humans can aspire. It is Rambam's settled doctrine that only human beings, i.e., only those individuals born to human parents who have also achieved knowledge ("perfection of the intellect" in the sort of language Rambam used) have shares in the world to come. This is a position which grates painfully on the ears of many people today, but there is no point in pretending that it isn't there. It is a position which Rambam adopts and
which, in fact, he must adopt given his understanding of human psychology.\textsuperscript{11}

What sort of knowledge must we acquire in order to establish our humanity and thereby earn a share in the world to come? On this, the medievals were divided with some saying all knowledge counted others said only knowledge of God and the angels counted.\textsuperscript{12} In the language of the Middle Ages, the question was "does knowing mathematics and the physical sciences get one into the world to come, or must one also know metaphysics?" Rambam comes down heavily for the second alternative. To become an actual human being, to earn a share in the world to come, one must acquire knowledge of metaphysical matters — namely, God and the angels.

One must acquire knowledge: it is not enough to be able to recite things by heart like a parrot. One must be able to understand what one is saying. For Rambam, then, one cannot even fulfill the first of the 613 commandments until one can properly prove to oneself that God exists. Furthermore, since acceptance of the "Thirteen Principles" is a key to enjoying a share in the world to come and only those who have achieved knowledge gain entry into that world, it follows that believing the "Thirteen Principles" is not enough: one must know that God exists, is one, is incorporeal, etc.

We are now in a position better to understand why Rambam cannot allow for shegagah with respect to his principles. Well-intentioned but poor philosophers do not achieve knowledge; their mistakes exclude them from the ranks of actual (as opposed to potential) humans and thus keep them out of the world to come. Similarly, for well-intentioned but confused or mistaken Jews, their mistakes in metaphysics (i.e., mistakes concerning at least the first five of Rambam's principles) exclude them from membership in Israel and from the world to come.

\textsuperscript{11} On Rambam's psychology, see my \textit{Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People} (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 9–15.

I earlier noted that *shegagah* with respect to matters of religious belief renders that belief incorrect and thus not really belief at all as far as Rambam is concerned. I said that this reflected Rambam’s claim that *emunah* is defined in terms of intellectual affirmations. Now we can understand why. Rambam defines belief in this fashion because of his theory of knowledge. If one hold incorrect beliefs (i.e., makes mistakes in metaphysics), then one has not achieved one’s humanity and is thus not even a candidate for admission to the world to come.

There is at least one way in which Rambam appears to be inconsistent with respect to the application of his principles. This has to do with his attitudes towards Karaites. Karaites reject part of the seventh principle in that they deny the divine origin of the Oral Torah. With respect to all the other principles, they are fully “orthodox.”13 In his first public statement concerning the Karaites, in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Rambam considers them heretics and calls for their execution where possible. In the course of time, Rambam moderated his stance, distinguishing between the founders of Karaism and rabbinitic Jews who join them, on the one hand, from their descendants on the other hand. Descendants of Karaites, Rambam avers in the *Mishneh Torah*,

Misguided by their parents [and] raised among the Karaites and trained in their views, are like a child taken captive by them and raised in their religion, whose status is that of an *anus* [one who injures the Jewish religion under duress], who, although he later learns that he is a Jew, meets Jews, observes them practice their religion, is nevertheless to be regarded as an *anus*, since he was raised in the erroneous ways of his fathers. Thus it is with those who adhere to the practices of their Karaite parents. Therefore efforts should be made to bring them back in repentance, to draw them near by friendly relations, so that they may return to the strength-giving source, i.e., the Torah.14

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14 The passage from the *Mishneh Torah* is from “Laws of Rebellious Elders,” III.3. I cite the translation of A.M. Hershman in *The Book of Judges* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1949) 143–44. Hershman’s translation is based upon the standard printed editions. Mss. and some early editions omit the word “Karaites” from the
Let us recall that acceptance of principles of faith is supposed to lead to a share in the world to come. This acceptance, I pointed out above, involves more than parroting the principles; it involves some level of understanding them. This is so because Rambam, on his own philosophical grounds, can only get people into heaven, so to speak, if they have made themselves full human beings, individuals with a certain amount of intellectual perfection. One achieves that level of perfection only through an understanding of basic metaphysical teachings. Correct knowledge concerning God, therefore, is the only key to immortality. Essential elements in this knowledge are taught and explained in the first five principles.

Rambam's first five principles, therefore, teach metaphysical truths. Understanding those truths constitutes enough intellectual perfection to guarantee a share in the world to come. The other principles teach truths, of course, but of a type different from the first group. These latter truths relate to certain historical events (concerning the giving of the Torah), to the way God relates to us, and to certain future events (Messiah and resurrection). Rejection of these truths excludes one from that community constituted by their acceptance (the community of Israel) but does not and cannot in and of itself lead to exclusion from the world to come.

Rambam's claim, therefore, that all his principles are dogmas in the strict sense that perfect acceptance of them is a necessary and sufficient condition for being part of the House of Israel and having a share in the world to come is thus seen to be exaggerated: the first five principles are dogmas in that sense. No mistakes can be tolerated concerning them, and none are. Innocent mistakes concerning the other principles can be tolerated to the extent that those who make these mistakes need not be treated with the full text, replacing it with to'im, "those who are mistaken." This textual issue is of no significance for us here, since the mistake in question is the rejection of the Oral Torah. On Maimonides' attitudes towards Karaites in general, see Yizhak Twersky, Mavo le-Mishneh Torah le-Rambam (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991) 65–67; on the changes in his attitudes towards them, see Ya'akov Blickstein, "Maimonides' Attitude Towards Karaites," Tehumin 8 (1988): 501–10 (Hebrew), and Daniel J. Lasker, "The Influence of Karaism on Maimonides," Sefunot 5 (1991): 145–61 (Hebrew).
rigor of the laws concerning heretics. The treatment of Karaite descendents in Rambam’s writings proves this claim.

But is it indeed the case that Rambam distinguishes between the first five principles and all the others as I here claim? It turns out (luckily for my case!) that he makes the point more or less explicitly in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, part I, chapters 35 and 36. In these chapters, Rambam distinguishes infidelity from ignorance, allowing a certain latitude for the latter but absolutely none for the former. Infidelity relates to proper beliefs concerning God, ignorance to the other teachings of the Torah.15

Karaite did not reject God’s existence, unity, or incorporeality; they did not reject God’s creation of the Universe; and they did not pray to intermediaries. Persons raised as Karaites, in other words, are not “infidels” in the sense described here by Rambam. They reject a true teaching concerning the Torah, but they do not misconstrue or misrepresent the nature of God. As such, they do not commit fatal metaphysical mistakes and are not, therefore, excluded willy-nilly from the world to come.

The founders of Karaism (and rabbinite Jews who join it later) consciously rebelled against the authority of the Sanhedrin, a capital offence. Thus, they deserve death. Their descendents have not so rebelled and can, therefore, be treated with greater leniency. By maintaining correct beliefs about God, Karaite descendents remain within the essential fold of Judaism (if not within the Jewish community); their disagreement is largely about matters of “detail,” so to speak.

Rambam, thus, attached cardinal importance to the first five of the “Thirteen Principles” and somewhat less importance to the others. Rejection of or mistakes concerning the first group truly exclude one from the community of Israel and from the world to come. Mistakes concerning the latter group do not actually exclude one from the community of Israel (we are, after all, bound to make efforts “to bring them back in repentance, to draw them near by friendly relations, so that they may return to the strength-giving

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15 Further on Rambam’s distinction between the first five principles and the last eight, see *Dogma*, 34–49.
source, i.e., the Torah”) and certainly do not, in and of themselves, exclude one from the world to come.

We have before us an interesting example of the interplay between popular and philosophical religion. This interplay can be understood in two different ways. Maimonides’ philosophic conception of the nature of faith forced Rambam the theologian to posit an unyielding approach to questions of dogma: faith is defined in terms of its cognitive content, which in turn can be given dogmatic expression. But Rambam the communal leader was interested in making it possible to draw Karaites back into the fold and had to diverge from the strictly “Maimonidean” character of his own dogmas. It might be thought that philosophical religion demands that Karaites or other misguided folk who reject the Oral Torah be excluded from the Jewish community in this world and altogether from the next while the needs of popular religion forced Rambam to be more flexible. That has been shown not to be the case: Karaites (and others like them) can be encouraged to return to the fold specifically because they do not violate the canons of philosophical religion – the first five of Maimonides thirteen principles.

There is another way of approaching the same set of facts: philosophical religion “needs” the first five principles; the others are the requirements of popular religion. Furthermore, shegagah, with respect to only the first five, is disallowed by philosophical religion; the needs of a besieged community, which could not allow for a relaxed approach to matters of theology, forced Rambam the communal leader to posit a more unyielding attitude towards shegagah with respect to the other principles than his philosophical commitments actually demanded. On this approach it may be said with a measure of poetic license that Maimonides, who could allow for shegagah with respect to principles six–13, could not get into Rambam’s heaven, since the latter did not allow for such laxity.16

16 This article was accepted for publication more than five years ago. In the interim I have expanded upon many of the ideas expressed here in Must a Jew Believe Anything? (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999).