YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PRINCIPLES OF FAITH**

**By Rav Joshua Amaru**

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated by Mr Paul Pollack   
in honor of Rabbi Reuven and Sherry Greenberg

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Shiur #04: Rabbinic Faith and Maimonidean Principle

# Preface

Last week I offered a third way to think about beliefs in general and belief in God in particular. I suggested that we do not need to choose between the extremes of super-rationalist philosophical religion and the anti-rationalist “leap of faith.” Furthermore, I claimed that the mainstream position of *Chazal*, our Sages of blessed memory, lies between these two extremes: it takes the existence of God to be an undisputed fact that is part of the structure of our consciousness, which is expressed not just by what we say but especially by how we act. This week I would like to demonstrate why I think this is the case. Subsequently, I will fulfill my promise to explain why I think that Rav Chasdai Crescas’s critique of the Rambam is not really a problem, and why I think it is very likely that the Rambam agrees with Crescas that conviction cannot be imposed.

# Who are the Rabbinic Heretics?

As far as I can tell, there is no explicit exposition of a philosophical position about the nature of belief in God to be found anywhere in the literature of *Chazal* (i.e., the Mishna, Gemara, Midrash, etc.). For that matter, it is hard to find in *Chazal* what looks to us like the exposition of a philosophical position about anything. They just did not make their points in that sort of language. With regard to belief in God, the Rabbis never really ask the question, and are far more interested in the implications of God's existence for how we act than in any abstruse philosophical debate. Nonetheless, there is an implicit philosophical position about the nature of faith to be found here, though it was obscured by later systematic religious philosophy and theology. One way to discover it is to look at who the Rabbis regarded as a heretic. A heretic is clearly someone who has crossed a theological line, but where and how such a line drawn reveals the basic conception.

The Rambam, in the third chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, lists 24 categories of people who do not merit a share in the World to Come.[[1]](#footnote-1) The two central theological categories in the list are the *min* and the *apikoros*. The Rambam defines a *min* as one who meets any of the following five criteria:

1) he professes not to believe in God at all;

2) he claims that God is not One;

3) he believes that God has a body;

4) he denies that God is the origin and source of all;

5) he worships a star or the like as an intermediary with God.

An *apikoros* is defined as someone who denies any of the following:

1) prophecy;

2) Moses's standing as a prophet;

3) God's knowledge of people's actions.

It is difficult to overstate the degree to which this is the Rambam’s original interpretation. The rabbinic sources which make use of the concept *min* mention only one of the Rambam's five categories, that a *min* is someone who practices idol worship.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is very likely that in many of the cases where the term is used, *min* refers to early Christians or other sectarians, particularly Gnostic dualists.[[3]](#footnote-3) With regard to *apikoros*, I could not find a single source in all of Rabbinic literature that matches the Rambam's definitions.[[4]](#footnote-4) *'Apikoros*' may have started off as referring to a follower of the Hellenistic philosopher Epicurus, or more generally to Hellenized Jews, but it seems to have morphed into a more general term for a heretic. In the only place in which an attempt is given to define in explicitly, it is taken to mean someone who exhibits gross disrespect for Torah scholars.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is important to note that I am not in any way claiming that the Rambam’s interpretation of these categories in illegitimate: he is simply taking the rabbinic categories and defining them in more abstract terms. Nonetheless, this move certainly reflects the Rambam's philosophical bent and obscures something about the way the Rabbis use these terms that I think is very important.

What is missing from the Rambam's account is *Chazal's* focus on actions as the indicators of heretical belief. Perhaps the most explicitly theological case is the *mishna* in *Berakhot*: "Anyone who says… *modim, modim* ('We give thanks' in the *Amida* prayer) – we silence him."[[6]](#footnote-6) The sanction against repeating the word "*modim*" arises, the Gemara[[7]](#footnote-7) explains, from fear that such a repetition reflects the acceptance of some sort of dualism on the part of person praying.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is clear that the objection is to the doctrine of dualism but the focus of the discussion is on the action – on not saying something that might be understood in that direction.[[9]](#footnote-9) That dualism is an unacceptable theological belief is implicit.

Even more suggestive is the discussion of a *meshummad* or a *mumar*[[10]](#footnote-10) that appears in several places in the Talmud.[[11]](#footnote-11) A *mumar* is someone who eats non-kosher food or does not keep other *halakhot*. The Gemara distinguishes between two categories of *mumar*. On the one hand, there is a *mumar le-te’avon* – i.e., someone whose transgression comes as the result of religious weakness, such that if given the opportunity to eat kosher without additional effort, he would do so. On the other hand, there is the much more severe *mumar le-hakh'is* – i.e., someone who will transgress regardless of the opportunity to avoid it. The *mumar le-hakh'is* is condemned not merely for his actions but for the religious commitment they reflect. So much is clear from the term *le-hakh'is*, which means to anger. A person who willfully transgresses in this manner is described as someone seeking to anger God. Yet the test for this sort of heresy[[12]](#footnote-12) is a test of behavior: whether he chooses to transgress when there is no benefit to be gained. The particular doctrine that he espouses is ignored: what counts in establishing basic religious commitment is action.

# Chazal's Attitude to Theology

It is very clear that the Rabbis had doctrines that they thought were essential, as can be seen in the *mishna* in *Sanhedrin*[[13]](#footnote-13) that lists people who do not merit a share in the World to Come. What is absent from that list are specifically theological doctrines. *Chazal* take for granted that keeping *mitzvot* is incoherent without a belief in God, and that such belief is best revealed through behavior rather than the profession of theological doctrine. The *min*, the heretic, is someone who either participates in idolatry or who transgresses in a manner that reveals denial of the authority of *mitzvot*. *Chazal* also addressed sociological groups, like early Jewish Christians and Hellenizers, who were to be condemned. Thus, belief and commitment are to be measured largely in terms of behavior rather than explicit theology.

As the case of the *mumar le-hakh'is* demonstrates, the focus on behavior does not reflect a lack of concern on the part of the Rabbis with what someone believes, as if all that matters is what you do regardless of why you do it. Rather, faith and practice are not distinct areas but interlocked aspects of how people live. They can come apart, as they do in the case of the *mumar le-te’avon*, whose cravings overcome him. *Chazal* do not relate to the case seen at least occasionally today – of a practicing Jew who denies the existence of God. Perhaps such a person was inconceivable to the Rabbis. Alternatively, perhaps such a person should not be taken at face value. Maybe he is best understood as someone who is profoundly ambivalent about what he or she believes. Her actions indicate a commitment while her explicit statements deny it.

# Why There Is No Problem with the Rambam’s Mitzva to Believe

The first few *shiurim* in this series were structured around Rav Chasdai Crescas's critique of the Rambam counting belief in God as a mitzva. Though investigation of that claim can be very fruitful, I believe that the actual critique is based on a hidden assumption that the Rambam does not accept. As promised, I want to explain here why I do not think that counting belief (or knowledge) of God presents a problem for the Rambam, and why it is reasonable to suppose that he agrees with Crescas that conviction cannot be compelled.

The hidden assumption of Crescas’s critique has to do with the meaning of the concept or term ‘mitzva’ itself. Crescas assumes that a mitzva should be understood as an action that one is commanded to do (or not do, in the case of *mizvot lo ta’aseh*). This understanding is perfectly reasonable – the whole of rabbinic literature speaks of *mitzvot* as actions that one is *chayav* (obligated) to do or as prohibitions that one is punished for transgressing. The great majority of the Rambam’s list of *mitzvot* can be said to fit this model as well. Yet to anyone who looks at the whole of *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* and the *Mishneh Torah*, it will be clear that the Rambam is using the term ‘mitzva’ in a different way. There is no doubt that the number of obligatory or prohibited actions far exceeds 613. So any list of 613 will require some sort of categorization in which multiple actions fall under a single mitzva. That is what Crescas thought the Rambam was doing, and was the source of his criticism. But for the Rambam, a mitzva, i.e., one of the 613 listed in either *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* or the *Mishneh Torah*, is not a category of obligations and prohibitions. Rather, the 613 *mitzvot* are the organizing principles of the Torah as a whole.[[14]](#footnote-14)

There is a great deal of evidence for this point and I will mention just some of it.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. The problem of *mitzvot* to believe is not limited to the first mitzva. It can easily be extended to the first four *mitzvot*: 1. belief in God as the source; 2. belief in the unity of God; 3. love of God; 4. awe of God. The sixth mitzva, to cleave to God, and the eighth, to make oneself like God (*imitatio Dei*), can arguably be understood as *mitzvot* of faith as well. Obviously, this point is not decisive, since it is about these very *mitzvot* that the question was raised.
2. The Rambam dedicates significant sections of the *Mishneh Torah* to what appears to be the exposition of beliefs or the recommendation of personality traits (much of *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah, Hilkhot Deot, Hilkhot Teshuva*, and the end of *Hilkhot Melakhim*). Nevertheless, these *‘halakhot’* are classified under particular *mitzvot*.
3. Significant numbers of *mitzvot* and their attendant expositions in the *Mishneh Torah* are not commands to act but the description of institutions: most of *Sefer Shoftim* is like this.
4. Some *mitzvot* don’t fit the model of commanded or obligated action at all: most of *Sefer Tahara* is an elaboration of the rules of *tum’a* (impurity) and *tahara* (purity), in which the relevant *mitzvot* are defined not as obligation but as *dinim*, i.e., a set of rules.

So if we accept that in assembling his list of the 613 *mitzvot* the Rambam never intended that we think of them as 613 actions (or types of actions) that we are commanded to perform, Crescas’s objection disappears. It is very likely that Rambam agrees with Crescas that conviction cannot be commanded; that was not what he was trying to achieve by counting belief in God a mitzva.

# Why Was It Important for the Rambam to Count Belief as a Mitzva?

What was the Rambam trying to achieve? In order to understand this, it behooves us to appreciate both the prodigious aspiration that the Rambam had for his awesomely systematic work, and his understanding of how Torah and *Chokhma* (wisdom or knowledge) are integrated. The Rambam’s goal, as he states clearly in his introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, was nothing less than to create a compendium of the whole of the Oral Torah (*Torah she-be’al peh*) that would *replace* all that had come before.[[16]](#footnote-16) For the Rambam, the Oral Torah is structured in terms of *mitzvot*,[[17]](#footnote-17)and so it is no wonder that the first part of his attempt to create a systematic exposition of the Torah would involve generating a list of those *mitzvot* and their sources in the Written Torah, as he does in *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*.[[18]](#footnote-18) This structure carries over to the *Mishneh Torah*, in which he lists the relevant *mitzvot* to be elaborated as the headings for each of the fourteen books.

Such a comprehensive structure could not leave out basic principles of faith, or even basic truths about the nature of the world (as in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*), because for the Rambam the Torah encompasses not only Law but also what we would call nowadays physics and metaphysics. The nature of the world and the nature of our relationship with God are part of the Torah no less that the laws of *Keriat Shema*, and the Rambam was convinced that *Chazal* had deep knowledge of these areas. To be sure, the compendium of the Oral Torah does not include much more than a cursory survey of these topics – perhaps because it is better that the masses not delve into them too deeply – but they are nonetheless essential parts of the Oral Torah.

# What's Next

With this *shiur* I bring to a close the introductory part of this series. In subsequent *shiurim*, I will delve into particular articles of faith rather than discussing faith in general. This investigation will be informed throughout by two things. First of all, I want to address the practical issue of the relationship between belief and practice, between *emuna* and *mitzvot*. Second, for every article or principle of faith, I want to understand: What is at stake? Why is this idea so essential? Through asking such questions, we can break out of the framework of a list of doctrines and try to sketch a more integrated notion of *emuna*.

1. We will return to this chapter in subsequent *shiurim*, as it significantly overlaps with the Rambam’s principles of faith that he expounds in his commentary on the *Mishna* (in the introduction to *perek Chelek* of *Sanhedrin*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Eruvin* 26b. The Gemara there does offer an alternative definition of *min* which the Rambam does not mention! We will get to that point in a moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, the discussion of *Birkat Ha-minim* in *Berakhot* 28b-29a. For the objection to dualism, see *Berakhot* 33b. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Strikingly, the term is used in at least one place to refer to someone who denies the Oral Torah, which the Rambam lists under a different category of heresy (*kofer ba-Torah*)! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Sanhedrin* 99b. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Mishna Berakhot* 5:3. See the parallel and slightly different *mishna* in *Megilla* 4:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Berakhot* 33b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dualism, or the doctrine that there are two competing divine forces, usually one good and the other evil, was very prevalent in the ancient world. In the Roman sphere it could be found in the cult of Mithras and in other Gnostic groups. In the Babylonian area of influence, the dominant religion was Zoroastrianism, which is explicitly dualistic. It is easy to see why *Chazal* would object to actions that seem to indicate sympathy for such a doctrine. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I unabashedly call this 'action' even though it is an example of a 'speech act' because the objection is not to the use of the words in conversation but specifically in the context of prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In almost all of the Talmudic manuscripts the term is *meshummad*, which literally means 'destroyed one.' In almost all printed editions of the Talmud, the term has been changed to *mumar*, which literally means 'changed one.' Presumably, this change was made in response to Christian censorship of the Talmud. I will use the term *mumar* in what follows, as that is the more familiar term. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See especially *Horayot* 11b, *Eruvin*, 69a-b, *Chullin*, 3a-6a, *Sanhedrin* 27a, *Avoda Zara* 26b. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. According to one opinion, a *mumar le-hakh'is* should be regarded as a *min*. This is the other definition of *min* found in *Chazal*, in addition to someone who practices idolatry (which I mentioned above). Note how far removed it is from the Rambam's abstract categories. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Mishna* *Sanhedrin* 10:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This notion that the 613 *mitzvot* are the organizing principles of the Torah according to the Rambam is argued for by Moshe Halbertal in his Hebrew article: *“Sefer ha-Mitzvot la-Rambam: Ha-Architectura shel ha-Halakha ve-ha-Teoria ha-Parshanit Shelah*,*”* *Tarbiz* 59:c-d, 5750, pp. 457-480. Halbertal argues convincingly that we should understand *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* as a preliminary architectonic to the *Mishneh Torah* and discusses some of the implications of this assertion. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A careful reading of the Rambam’s methodological introduction to *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, which is called the *Shorashim,* supports this point as well. But that is too complicated to go into here. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Scholars dispute the degree to which the Rambam thought of the *Mishneh Torah* as a valid replacement to the whole corpus of the *Talmud*, *Midrashim*, etc. I am inclined to share the more conservative opinion that he never intended that the scholarly elite cease to make use of these sources, and that *Mishneh Torah* would replace all previous works for the masses. Nonetheless, he saw his work as encompassing, at least, all that the average person needs to know in the Oral Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See the beginning of the *Hakdama le-Peirush Ha-Mishna* where he elaborates on this notion. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Note that, according to the Rambam, for something to count as a mitzva, besides being a principle of the Torah, it must also be mentioned in the Written Torah. This creates a wonderfully integrated system in which the full content of the revelation (the Oral Torah) is connected throughout to the text of the revelation (the Written Torah). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)