

Judaism and Artistic Creativity: Despite Maimonides and Thanks to Him

IN SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND the place of artistic creativity in Judaism, Maimonides hardly appears to be a promising source with which to start. His emphasis on intellectual perfection as the defining characteristic of humanity would not appear to make him a promising candidate for our project. This is all the more the case when we consider that, for him, intellectual perfection involves the apprehension of already established truth, not the creation of new knowledge. Despite this, I suggest that Maimonides can be very helpful in seeking to elaborate a Jewish approach to the value of artistic creativity.

Maimonides may have been the first *posek* to count the imitation of God (*imitatio Dei*) as a specific commandment of the Torah. Yea or nay, he certainly emphasized its importance. The first text in which Maimonides discusses the imitation of God is his *Book of Commandments*, positive commandment 8:

Walking in God's ways. By this injunction we are commanded to be like God (praised be He) as far as it is in our power. This injunction is contained in His words, *And you shall walk in His ways* (Deut. 28:9), and also in an earlier verse in His words, [*What does the Lord require of you, but to fear the Lord your God,*] *to walk in all His ways?* (Deut. 10:2). On this latter verse the Sages comment as follows: "Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, is called merciful [*raham*], so should you be merciful; just as He is called gracious [*hanun*], so should you be gracious; just as he is called righteous [*tsadik*], so should you be righteous; just as He is called saintly

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[*hasid*], so should you be saintly.”¹ This injunction has already appeared in another form in His words, *After the Lord Your God shall you walk* (Deut. 13:5), which the Sages explain as meaning that we are to imitate the good deeds and lofty attributes by which the Lord (exalted be He) is described in a figurative way—He being immeasurably exalted above all such description.²

The point that *certain* of God’s actions are models for our imitation³ is reiterated in the second text in which Maimonides deals with the imitation of God, in *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Moral Qualities,” i.5-6:

The ancient saints trained their dispositions away from the exact mean towards the extremes; in regard to one disposition in one direction, in regard to another in the opposite direction. This was supererogation. We are bidden to walk in the middle paths which are the right and proper ways, as it is said, *and you shall walk in His ways* (Deut. 28:9). In explanation of the text just quoted, the sages taught, “Even as He is called gracious, so be you gracious; even as He is called merciful, so be you merciful; even as He is called holy, so be you holy.” Thus too the prophets described God by all the various attributes, “long-suffering and abounding in kindness, righteous and upright, perfect, mighty, and powerful,” and so forth, to teach us that these qualities are good and right and that a human being should cultivate them, and thus imitate God, as far as he can.⁴

The third text in which Maimonides discusses *imitatio Dei* is in his *Guide* I.54. There he quotes again from the *Sifrei*:

For the utmost virtue of man is to become like unto Him, may He be exalted, as far as he is able; which means that we should make our actions like unto His, as the Sages made clear when interpreting the verse, *Ye shall be holy* (Lev. 19: 2). They said: ‘He is gracious, so be you also gracious; He is merciful, so be you also merciful.’⁵

What must a person do in order to become like God, and fulfill the commandment of *imitatio Dei*? Maimonides addresses this questions in the very last chapter of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III.54), famously glossing Jeremiah 9:22-23:

Thus saith the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord who exercises loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth.

Maimonides explains that it is God's "purpose that there should come from you *loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth* in the way that we have explained. . ." (III.54, 637). I take Maimonides' point here to be that God expects human beings to emulate his actions of *loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth* after they have each reached the highest level of intellectual perfection available to her or to him.⁶

Although there is a great deal of scholarly controversy over what precisely Maimonides expects of the person who seeks to walk in God's ways, and thus imitate God, it is evident that he believes that one is indeed so commanded, and that fulfillment of that command involves some combination of ethical perfection (for Maimonides a prerequisite of intellectual perfection) and intellectual perfection.

Thus far Maimonides. Can we accept his *pesak* that there is a commandment to imitate God, without necessarily following him in his understanding of how one imitates God, i.e., through perfection of the intellect only? The Torah helps here. What does the Torah itself teach us about which of God's actions should be imitated?

The very first thing we learn is that God is to be understood as a Creator. We human beings cannot create universes, but we can create things of beauty, and in that fashion imitate the Creator.⁷ For a variety of reasons, we do not ordinarily associate Judaism with the arts,⁸ but if we look again at the Torah, we see that Jews were once commanded to build beautiful structures, fashion beautiful articles of clothing, and craft implements of artistic merit. This is obvious from the detailed instructions for the building of the Tabernacle in the desert, the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, the fashioning of the priestly raiment and the various accoutrements of the Tabernacle and the Temple.⁹ Bezalel's special divine inspiration in fashioning these things is emphasized in the Torah (Ex. 31:3) and by the Talmudic rabbis (*b. Berakhot* 55a). In fact, in that latter text, we find:

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created. It is written here, *And He hath filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom and in understanding, and in knowledge [da'at]* (Ex. 35:31), and it is written elsewhere, *The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens* (Prov. 3:19), and it is also written, *By His knowledge [da'ato] the depths were broken up* (Prov 3:20).

Here we have a rabbinic text which explicitly associates God's creativity in creating the cosmos with Bezalel's skill in fashioning the Tabernacle.

But the Torah does not only teach us to value beautiful things, it also implicitly reverences literary beauty: after all, what is the Book of Psalms if not a series of exalted poems? The classical prophets of Israel wrote words that have inspired the world for thousands of years, not only because of their content, but also because of the beauty of their expression. Whatever else the Tanakh is, it is a work of surpassing literary beauty.

The Talmudic rabbis also seemed to have valued and even reveled in literary beauty—were this not the case, they would surely have invested less effort in the fashioning of aggadot and midrashim which stimulate literary analyses and imitation to this very day

If we are commanded to imitate God, as Maimonides repeatedly insists, ought we not also strive to imitate God's creativity, aesthetic and otherwise? There is little doubt that Maimonides would be amused by my attempt to use his doctrine of the imitation of God to argue for the religious importance of artistic creativity, if not downright annoyed.¹⁰ But there is evidence of his own appreciation for aesthetic experience, so it is at least possible that he could be convinced that if one could not imitate God in the most perfect possible way, then at least there is reason to think that he might be willing to grant the artist a lower level of the imitation of God.¹¹ But even if we could not convince Maimonides, it will be acknowledged that, to put it mildly, his intellectualist claims about the nature of Torah are unusual in the tradition. Indeed, many have read his words in this connection and been moved to exclaim: "It's Greek to me!"

Maimonides, as is well-known, expressed reservations about poetry and music. His views on these subjects are actually more nuanced than is usually thought, and, indeed, as befits a cultured Andalusian gentleman, he wrote poetry of his own. Maimonides certainly understood the value of music, even in connection with so exalted a religious experience as prophecy.¹² In his explanation of the differences between Mosaic and non-Mosaic prophecy in the seventh of his thirteen principles of faith, he writes:

The Fourth Difference: Every other prophet did not receive inspiration by his own choice, but by the will of God. The prophet could remain a number of years without inspiration, or an inspiration could be communicated to the prophet but he would be required to wait some days or months before prophesying, or not make it known at all. We have seen that there are those among them who prepared themselves by simplifying their soul and by purifying their minds as did Elisha when he declared, *Bring me now a minstrel* (2 Kings 3:15), and then inspiration came to him. . . .¹³

Now it is indeed the case that in the seventh of his *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides in effect explains the text from 2 Kings by informing us that Elisha needed the soothing effects of music to calm his anger, since one can certainly not prophesy in a state of anger. Music, thus, has definite religious value.

In the fifth of his *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides cites the value of aesthetic experience generally as a source of spiritual refreshment and as a cure for melancholy:

He who follows this line of conduct will not trouble himself with adorning his walls with golden ornaments, nor with decorating his garments with golden fringe, unless it be for the purpose of enlivening his soul, and thus restoring it to health, or of banishing sickness from it, so that it shall become clear and pure, and thus be in the proper condition to acquire wisdom. Therefore, our Rabbis of blessed memory say, "It is becoming that a sage should have a pleasant dwelling, a beautiful wife, and domestic comfort";¹⁴ for one becomes weary, and one's mind dulled by continued mental concentration upon difficult problems. Thus, just as the body becomes exhausted from hard labor, and then by rest and refreshment recovers, so is it necessary for the mind to have relaxation by gazing upon pictures and other beautiful objects, that its weariness may be dispelled. Accordingly, it is related that when the Rabbis became exhausted from study, they were accustomed to engage in entertaining conversation¹⁵ (in order to refresh themselves). From this point of view, therefore, the use of pictures and embroideries for beautifying the house, the furniture, and the clothes is not to be considered immoral nor unnecessary.¹⁶

Before we hasten to dismiss Maimonides on artistic creativity, note must be taken of an important new book by David Gillis, *Reading Maimonides' Mishneh Torah*.¹⁷ Gillis argues persuasively that the *Mishneh Torah*, in addition to its halakhic profundity and philosophic sophistication, is also a work of surpassing literary mastery; its structure is every bit as important as its content.

But, despite that, Maimonides only brings us halfway to our goal. We learn from him the central importance of the imitation of God in the Jewish religion, but in order to remain true to that religion, we cannot follow him all the way. His extreme intellectual elitism leaves all but the philosophically sophisticated out in the cold.¹⁸ But that very same elitism makes Maimonides into one of the great universalists in the history of Jewish tradition: what determines a person's value has nothing to do with race, gender, or religion, and everything to do with what does with one's life.¹⁹ Creativity, artistic and

otherwise, is hardly the special preserve of Jews. In seeing creativity as a way to imitate God, we follow in Maimonides' footsteps and expand the tents of Torah in a way which can only bring us closer to the messianic era.²⁰

NOTES

1. *Sifrei* on Deut. 10:12.
2. Quoted, with emendations, from *The Commandments* (Charles B. Chavel, trans.; London: 1967), vol. 1, 12-13.
3. See *b. Sotah* 14a for the impossibility of imitating *all* of God's actions.
4. Quoted, with emendations, from *Mishneh Torah, Book One: The Book of Knowledge* (Moses Hyamson, trans.; Jerusalem: 1974), 47b-48a.
5. *Guide of the Perplexed* (Shlomo Pines, trans.; Chicago: 1963), i.54, 128.
6. For a detailed analysis of this passage, see M. Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: 1990), ch. 4. It is particularly appropriate here to write "her or him," since of all the people to have reached this level of perfection, as Maimonides states in this chapter (Moses, Aaron, and Miriam), one was a woman. Further on this subject, see M. Kellner, "Misogyny: Gersonides vs. Maimonides," in *Torah in the Observatory: Gersonides, Maimonides, Song of Songs* (Boston: 2010), 283-304.
7. Indeed, since we cannot become *God-like*, the most we can do is imitate God's actions. This is the message of *Guide* I.54. God created a new and beautiful cosmos; we at least can fashion beautiful things, in the plastic arts, in music, in literature. We can also seek to *understand* the cosmos which God created ("Laws of the Foundations of the Torah," ii.1-2) and in that fashion come closer to God. The practice and study of science can also be thus assimilated to the imitation of God. Jolene S. Kellner points out that Maimonides could easily have (but actually did not) connect his doctrine of *imitatio Dei* to the idea that human beings are fashioned in the image of God. It is God's image in us that it makes it possible for us to imitate God.
8. See Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmation and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, NJ: 2000).
9. This is emphasized in Kenneth Seeskin, *No Other Gods: The Modern Struggle Against Idolatry* (New York: 1995), ch. 3.
10. There is little direct evidence that Maimonides had a sense of humor, even though there is one apparent joke in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In I.36, Maimonides implies that God will be angry at those who believe that God gets angry.
11. See M. Kellner, "The Virtue of Faith," in Kellner, *Science in the Bet Midrash: Studies in Maimonides* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), ch. 11. Strict intellectualist that he was, Maimonides had room in his heart (and mind) to admire what to him were lesser forms of perfection. See also the studies cited by Zachary Braiterman, "Maimonides and the Visual Image after Kant and Cohen," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 20:2 (2012): 217-30.
12. For discussion, see M. Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: 2006), 9n, and 29-30, and Braiterman, *ibid.*
13. I cite David Blumenthal's translation as found in M. Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 170.

- Maimonides does not list this distinction in his second account of the differences between normal and Mosaic prophecy (“Laws of the Foundations of the Torah,” VII.6).
14. *b. Shabbat* 25b.
 15. *Ibid.*, 30b.
 16. Trans. J. Gorfinkle, from: http://archive.org/stream/eightchaptersofm00maim/eightchaptersofm00maim_djvu.txt
 17. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, forthcoming.
 18. My wife, Jolene S. Kellner, takes particular umbrage at the fact that a consequence of Maimonides’ intellectualist approach to the nature of humanity is that the mentally defective can have no share in the world to come.
 19. On the connection between Maimonides’ elitism and his universalism, see Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism*, supra n. 12, at 15-17, and 216-264.
 20. My thanks to Jolene S. Kellner for her helpful criticism and to Eugene Korn and James Diamond for their suggestions.