

Maimonides, Was He a Kabbalist?

*According to many sources,
not only was the RaMBaM a secret Kabbalist,
he was also a receiver of the Holy Zohar prior to it being publicly known.*

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
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Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, the great Maimonides, of whom it is said, “*from Moses to Moses there never arose one like Moses.*” RaMBaM’s code of Jewish Law, the Mishneh Torah was the first of its kind to codify the tremendous corpus of the Talmud into a subject by subject format. It is the Mishneh Torah that set the standard for all later Jewish legal codes. In fact, while many areas of Jewish law have evolved since the days of Maimonides, the Mishneh Torah is still in many cases the final definitive word on what Jewish law is. Therefore, RaMBaM’s place in Jewish history is special. He is considered by many to be the greatest Torah luminary since Talmudic times.

It is true that RaMBaM’s legal works are highly revered. Yet, this was not always the case with his philosophical works. After Rambam completed his Mishneh Torah, he set out to write a comprehensive overview of correct Jewish philosophy as he previously did for Jewish law. His work, entitled *Moreh Nebukhim-The Guide to the Perplexed*, caused such controversy and resentment that in some circles the work was openly excommunicated. Though the majority of the days Rabbinat supported RaMBaM, there was that very vocal and not so small minority that vehemently opposed RaMBaM’s method of uniting certain aspects of Greek thought along with Torah elucidation.

The question that must be asked is why would RaMBaM avail himself of the gentile Greek philosophies? Why would he not stay safely within the confines of Torah Judaism? Most answer this question by stating that RaMBaM was a rationalist and that he appreciated nothing greater than those achievements that could come using the human mind. *The Guide to the Perplexed* is considered a masterpiece of Aristotelian philosophical thought. My question is: I wonder if Rambam really meant his book to be understood in that way? The master Kabbalist, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia says no.

According to Abulafia, RaMBaM’s usage of Greek philosophy served a different purpose. It enabled RaMBaM to reveal certain secrets of the Torah, using Greek philosophy as a veil of concealment. I will discuss more about Abulafia later in this article.

When I first considered writing this essay, I contemplated what it is that I truly wished to say. I asked myself, do I really want to disprove Rambam as being a rationalist. Being that it is so clear that he was, I do not think any rewriting of history can be done. I also did not want to relate the well-known belief that Rambam, in his later years, renounced rationalism, and became a Kabbalist. I agree with Yitzhak Shilat’s assessment that this

opinion is offensive to both the Rambam and to the Kabbalah. (Igrot HaRaMBaM, Vol. 2, page 696, Yeshivat Birkat Moshe, Ma'aleh Adumim).

I want to make the point, that not only was RaMBaM a rationalist, he was also a mystic, one who achieved a high level of metaphysical understanding. I want to show in this essay that RaMBaM, the alleged rationalist master, was also a master of the secret tradition of the Kabbalah.

I started my research for this essay not expecting to find much if any corroborative evidence that could prove or even suggest that RaMBaM was a Kabbalist. To my surprise, I was wrong. There is a wealth of literature available referencing RaMBaM's Kabbalistic side. There are even a number of Kabbalistic texts, suspiciously unknown to even most Kabbalists that were purportedly written by RaMBaM himself! (Many of which are today available in English translation).

I believe that most of these texts can be conclusively proven not to have been written by RaMBaM. Yet, this is not the case with all of them. The great Kabbalist and Halakhist, Rabbi Haim David Azulai (the Hida) writes in his work, Shem HaGedolim (Hey, 77) that RaMBaM authored Sefer HaNimtza, a book which references the Sefer Yetzirah!

I started to write this essay with the idea that I was doing pioneer work to prove that RaMBaM was really a secret Kabbalist. I quickly came to realize that this was in no way a new topic, much has been said on it already. To try and prove that RaMBaM was a secret Kabbalist therefore became superfluous. Instead, I have decided to share here the information others have written alongside some of my own observations on how the head of the so-called rationalist school of Judaism was indeed a "closet" Kabbalist.

Recently, Dr. Fred Rosner of New York has been very prolific in translating a number of works attributed to Maimonides. Amongst these collections are some of the Kabbalistic works that Maimonides allegedly had authored. Two of Dr. Rosner's works on Maimonides, which I highly recommend as excellent reading, are "The Existence and Unity of G-d" and "Six Treatises Attributed to Maimonides" (both are published by Jason Aronson Inc. N.J.)

Dr. Rosner, however, is of the opinion that RaMBaM did not study Kabbalah at all. Accordingly, he believes all those pieces dealing with Kabbalah most certainly could not have been written by Maimonides himself. In his comments on those texts, Rosner endeavors to prove that Rambam was not their author. In my opinion, Dr. Rosner's arguments are weak.

It appears that I am not the only one to think so. Rabbi Moshe Greenes who wrote the foreword to Dr. Rosner's "Six Treatises" is also of the opinion that RaMBaM was a Kabbalist. In a few pages, Rabbi Greenes has presented some very convincing arguments to show RaMBaM's Kabbalistic background. Here are some of Rabbi Greenes comments:

“There is, however, one significant premise on which I must disagree with the authorities Dr. Rosner cites. They seem to accept as a self-evident truth that Maimonides did not study Kabbalah, nor was he even familiar with that branch of Torah learning. This view is based mainly on the fact that nowhere in his works do we find any reference to that Torah discipline.

A closer study of the subject, however, reveals quite the opposite to be true . . . Maimonides was indeed steeped in Kabbalah... the seeming absence of references to Kabbalah in his writings is very much in keeping with accepted practice of that period and is also consonant with his personal literary style.

...many Rishonim (early Torah scholars)... state unequivocally that Maimonides was a master of the Kabbalah. To list a few briefly: Sefer HaChinuch 545, Sefer HaZikaron, and RaMBaN in his Perush of Torah (see Koran P’nei Moshe, Devarim 22:6,7).

In addition, the nineteenth-century Rabbi Gershon Henoch of Radzin (known as the Ba’al HaTcheilet), published a thoroughly convincing study which demonstrates that the Ta’amei HaMitzvot (Rationales of the Torah Commandments) of the Guide to the Perplexed are actually Kabbalistic teachings couched in rationalistic terms.

Maimonides was apparently an adherent of the position that Kabbalah was, in fact, a “hidden” and “secret” branch of Torah, and its study must not be conveyed by any other means than “from the mouth of the master to the ear of an understanding recipient.” It is no wonder, then, that Maimonides avoided any reference to Kabbalah in his writings.” (Rabbi Moshe Greenes, Foreword to Six Treatises Attributed to Maimonides, Fred Rosner M.D. Jason Aronson Inc. N.J., Publisher)

Rabbi Greenes raises a very correct point when he says, “the seeming absence of references to Kabbalah in his (RaMBaM’s) writings is very much in keeping with accepted practice.” This “accepted practice” was the edict of secrecy that was to surround Kabbalistic knowledge for a 1,000-year period ending in the year 1490. Reference to this is made in Sefer Even HaShoham, Halakhot of Kabbalah, Pituhei Hotam, 103: *“The edict from above not to publicly study the wisdom of truth (Kabbalah) was only for a certain time, until the year 5250 (1490). From then onward ... the best way to observe this mitzvah is in public, before great, and small. For by merit of the (study of Kabbalah) will King Mashiah come.”* In light of this, it would only be fitting that the great codifier of Halakha would himself observe the Halakha, and keep the secret Torah a secret.

For those who study Maimonides’s Mishneh Torah, the most frustrating aspect of study is to discover how Maimonides came to the conclusions that he did, for unlike other legal codifiers, RaMBaM never documented his sources. He does not say from where this or that legal decision was derived. This is the “personal literary style” (of RaMBaM) that Rabbi Greenes referred to above. Therefore, even when RaMBaM is referring to the Kabbalah, he does not say that what he is teaching is Kabbalah. I personally know this for a fact.

Many of the teachings that RaMBaM has included in the opening four chapters of Hilkhot Yesodei Torah (The Laws of the Foundations of Judaism), which deal with the secrets of Ma'aseh Bereshit (the working of creation) and Ma'aseh Merkava (the contemplation of the Divine chariot) are Kabbalistic in nature. Moreover, in my opinion, RaMBaM's explanation of these topics is some of the best and most profound Kabbalistic teachings available. I have taught Hilkhot Yesodei Torah many times over the years. I never cease to be amazed at just how much Kabbalah this so-called rationalist Maimonides actually knew.

Judging by what RaMBaM wrote and how he wrote it, I am convinced that he must have had access to the secret Zoharic traditions. Yet, Rambam died in 1204, and the Zohar was not revealed until 1290. How could it be that RaMBaM had access to it? To this question too, there is an answer.

In the Hasidic text entitled, "Nativ Mitzvotekha" by Rabbi Yitzhak, the Komarno Rebbe, (Nativ HaTorah, Shvil 1), the author brings down a condensed summary of the history of the original Zohar, as taught by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. According to the Komarno Rebbe, the Zohar was passed down generation after generation from the Tanaim of Israel to the Amoraim of Bavel. Eventually, with the decline of the office of the Gaon in Baghdad, the holy Zohar made its way out of Babylon, and ended up in the west where it became known and its popularity grew.

The Komarno Rebbe writes, *"It appears from the works of the RaMBaM, in a number of laws [that he has written] as well as on other topics, that he certainly knew it [the Zohar]."* One of my Hasidic peers in Kabbalah has informed me that the RaMBaM, in certain places uses terminology whose source of origins are to be found in the Zohar.

Another interesting text regarding Maimonides and Kabbalah is David Bakan's "Maimonides on Prophecy" (Jason Aronson Inc. N.J.). This book is Professor Bakan's commentary on selected sections of RaMBaM's "Guide to the Perplexed," specifically those sections dealing with the topic of Ma'aseh Merkava and the prophetic experience. Nowhere more than in the "Guide to the Perplexed" does RaMBaM reveal his Kabbalistic knowledge. Regarding Bakan's work, Prof. Norbert Samuelson of Temple University has written, *"Bakan has successfully demonstrated that ... no sharp line can be drawn (either historically or conceptually) between Jewish philosophy and Jewish mysticism...both reach similar conclusions."*

No one was more aware of RaMBaM's philosophical-mystical connection than the famous master of the prophetic Kabbalah, Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, Unknown to most, Abraham Abulafia's system of Kabbalistic meditation was incorporated into all the later Kabbalistic systems, though very rarely giving Abulafia credit by name.

There are full sections of Abulafia's works quoted in the "Pardes Rimonim" of Rabbi Moshe Cordevero. Rabbi Haim Vital's censored fourth section of "Sha'arei Kedusha," which deals exclusively with holy names and meditative techniques, was taken directly

out of Abulafia's book, "Hayei Olam HaBa." Rabbi Vital even quotes Abulafia by name and book. Even the later systems of the Hasidei Beit El, the Kabbalistic yeshiva of Rabbi Shalom Sharabi based many of their meditative techniques on Abulafia's works. In short, Abulafia might not have been greatly famous, but his works bears the mark of absolute authenticity in the world of Kabbalah.

Abraham Abulafia taught that there are only two great books of Kabbalistic study (he said this prior to the revelation of the Zohar). The two great books are the "Sefer Yetzirah" of Avraham Avinu, and the "Guide to the Perplexed of Maimonides."

Professor Moshe Idel in his work on Abulafia entitled, "Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah" writes, *"According to Abulafia, Maimonides' Guide (1,71) has reconstructed the lost secrets of the Torah, the "Sitrei Torah". Since biblical stories are viewed as allegories of spiritual progression of the human soul, the Torah, according to Abulafia, is aimed at directing man to attain the prophetic experience. By decoding Maimonides, then, Abulafia has revealed the true Jewish path of the ultimate felicity [happiness] – a path relevant to everyone, everywhere."* (Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah, Moshe Idel, Page 17, State University of NY)

A Kabbalist of the stature of Abraham Abulafia, a man who successfully achieved the mantle of prophecy, whose teachings to this day are the greatest guarded treasures in a Kabbalist's treasure chest would not be so totally off mark regarding Maimonides. Even from a critical point of view, we must acknowledge that if Abulafia says there is more than meets the eye in the "Guide to the Perplexed," some how and in some way, he must be right.

David Bakan, quoting Gershom Sholem's "Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism" (page 126) writes, *"the affinity of... mystic[s] with the great rationalist [is] astounding."*

The two places in the Mishneh Torah where, in my opinion, RaMBaM's Kabbalistic knowledge is most revealed are the Hilkhot Yesodei Torah (Foundations of the Torah) and the Hilkhot De'ot (Laws of Personality Development). Yesodei Torah, as I mentioned earlier, opens with a discussion of Ma'aseh Bereshit and Ma'aseh Merkava. Herein Rambam reveals things that only a Kabbalist would know.

The question that we must ask is, being that the Mishneh Torah is a book codifying Jewish Law, and thus deals exclusively with physical reality, why then does Maimonides begin this book of Law with discussions of abstract metaphysical realities? The answer to this question is very important.

RaMBaM begins the Yesodei Torah with these words, *"The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being..."* (Yesodei Torah 1:1). RaMBaM is writing a book of Law, and we are required by law to KNOW certain things about G-d and spiritual reality. Apparently, RaMBaM expects all of us to experience metaphysical reality. After all, the Biblical use of the word "to know" means

that one has an intimate knowledge, i.e. an experience (as Adam “knew” his wife Eve). Simply believing in these things is not enough; we are required to KNOW them.

The knowledge of metaphysical reality can only be achieved by certain methods of abstract contemplative thought. For only physical reality is perceivable through the physical senses. In order for us to fulfill our obligations of knowing metaphysical reality, we must experience it through our metaphysical senses. However, what are our metaphysical senses and how are they to be cultivated? RaMBaM answers this in Chapter Two of Yesodei Torah.

After explaining in Chapter One of the Yesodei Torah what is known about G-d, or better to say, what we do not know about G-d, RaMBaM opens Chapter Two with the commandment that we are to love G-d. Again, we must ask, how does the Torah come and command us to feel a certain way. By nature, human beings are not always masters of their emotions. Emotions cannot be just turned on and off. How can we be commanded to love G-d, which is an expression of emotion?

RaMBaM says, *“When a person meditates (Hitbonenut) [on] His wondrous and great deeds ... he will immediately love, praise and glorify [Him].”* RaMBaM continues and says, *“I will explain important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds to provide a foothold for the person of understanding ... In this manner, you will recognize He who spoke and [thus] brought the world into being.”* (Yesodei Torah 2:2)

Rabbi Eliyahu Touger explains this section of Yesodei Torah in these words: *“we can understand why the RaMBaM explains “important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds” ... The Mishneh Torah is a book of law and does not include philosophical and metaphysical principles unless they are Halakhot, directives for practical behavior. Hence, the statement that it is necessary to contemplate G-d's greatness to achieve love would appear sufficient. Nevertheless, the Rambam continues, elaborating on Ma'aseh Merkava and Ma'aseh Bereshit (the subject matter of the next three chapters) because the knowledge of G-d attained through the study of these Halakhot constitutes the fulfillment of the mitzvah of loving G-d.”* (Likutei Sichot, Va'etchanan, 5748).

How then is one to know G-d as required by law as outlined in Chapter One? How is one to love G-d as required by law as outlined by Chapter Two? The answer to both questions is the same: Hitbonenut: Meditation! One is to contemplate G-d. Who but a Kabbalist knows how to do this? Who but a Kabbalist could teach this to others?

Hidden within all of RaMBaM's teachings are Kabbalistic truths. Avraham Abulafia knew this, he saw through the façade of Maimonides. Like the Torah given to us by Moshe from Sinai, which came complete with both a revealed aspect and a concealed aspect, so too the Torah of Moshe ben Maimon Maimonides has with it both pshat (surface) and sod (secret depths).

With all this apparent proof of RaMBaM's knowledge of Kabbalah, we would expect that all Kabbalists would agree that RaMBaM was indeed one of the secret initiates. However, we find that this might not be the case. Regarding the RaMBaM, the greatest of the Kabbalists, the Ari'zal writes in Sefer HaGilgulim (Chapter 64) the following:

“[With regards to the] RaMBaM and the RaMBaN (Nachmanides), the [spiritual] source of both of them [i.e., their souls] is from the [metaphorical] two peyot (sidelocks) of ZA (Zeir Anpin, the Small Face, Tiferet). As is known, each peah (sidelock) has within it the Name El Shadai, which numerically is equal to the name Moshe (both equal 345). Therefore, both of them (RaMBaM and RaMBaN) are named Moshe. Now, the RaMBaN was from the right side lock, the side of grace, therefore did he merit in his later years to [learn] the wisdom of truth [the Kabbalah]. However, the RaMBaM was from the left side lock which is complete severity, therefore he was not able to achieve this wisdom.”

It appears that the Ari'zal is saying that RaMBaM did not know of the Kabbalah. Yet, after all we have just learned how can this be? Is it possible that the Ari'zal (G-d forbid) was wrong, or perhaps everyone else, including Abulafia is wrong in understanding RaMBaM? The answer to this is that both are correct, the Ari'zal, and Abulafia and the rest. However, to understand the explanation of this takes us into deep levels of Kabbalistic teachings.

RaMBaM, the Ari'zal reveals to us, emanated from a high spiritual source. However, RaMBaM's source was from the “left side,” the metaphor that represents severity and limitation. However, the RaMBaM is certainly not the only soul to emanate from this “side.” Indeed, countless millions of souls emanate from the “left side,” each in accordance to its grade in the spiritual worlds. These souls are equally able to ascend in holiness and receive Divine revelation, as are their “brother and sister” souls that emanate from the metaphorical “right side.” The only difference is in the manner or technique used in meditative practice.

The form of meditation used by RaMBaM is called Hitbonenut. It is a form of meditation using the intellectual faculty of the left lobe of the brain, the one that controls rational thinking. Being that RaMBaM emanates from the “left side,” it is appropriate for him to use the “left brain” for his meditative practices.

When the Ari'zal said the RaMBaM “was not able to achieve this wisdom,” he did not say that RaMBaM had never seen or knew of anything Kabbalistic. Rather the Ari'zal was saying that RaMBaM's level of understanding was of the “left side” and that there was another dimension of learning that RaMBaM did not touch. Maybe Rabbi Abulafia would have agreed with this, especially since Abulafia viewed himself as picking up the teachings where RaMBaM left off. This implies that RaMBaM's Kabbalistic work was not complete, and that he (Abulafia) would be the one to complete it. In light of the edict forbidding public Kabbalah study in force during the RaMBaM's lifetime, and its nullification during Abulafia's lifetime, this very well might be the case.

An interesting point that confirms the fact that RaMBaM knew the Kabbalah but not to its depths is found in the works of the Komarno Rebbe. The Rebbe writes in his “Megilat Setarim” that in a vision it was revealed to him that the soul of his late father emanated from the same source as did RaMBaM’s soul. Just as with RaMBaM, the father of the Komarno Rebbe did not have the greatest depth of understanding of the Kabbalah, although he was a very well learned Kabbalist. In conclusion, we can firmly state the case that RaMBaM knew the teachings of the Kabbalah. Even the language of the Ari’zal can be understood in this light.

The Ari’zal hinted to us something very deep, not only about RaMBaM, but also about our present epoch where the Jewish people are living in exile. Today, in exile, all Jews are under the dominion of the forces of severity. It is our collective job to perform the Kabbalistic ritual of “Mituk HaDinim” (sweetening of judgement).

The definition of exile is that we are all under the dominion of the forces of judgement and severity. Being that this is the case, like RaMBaM before us, we too should take advantage of “left brain” spirituality. This means that we should cultivate our intellectual faculties and integrate them with our artistic intuitive “right brains.” By uniting intellect with intuition, we merge left with right and right with left. This is a technique of meditation that I refer to as “Sekhel Tenudah” (oscillating consciousness). The details of this can be found in my commentary to Chapter one of Sefer Yetzirah (specifically the fourth Mishna).

The RaMBaM lived during a time when the Kabbalah was meant to be kept secret. Therefore, he could not openly reveal the sources for his material. He nevertheless taught people the “left brain” path that unites intellect with that which is higher than it, i.e., spirit. Rational intellectualism is what was predominant in RaMBaM’s day. Philosophy was in. Mysticism was out. Therefore, with great wisdom and care, RaMBaM concealed the teachings of mysticism in the garments of philosophy. This explains why he made such great use of the works of the Greeks. He used them to cloak the hidden teachings of Torah. A master like Abulafia was able to penetrate this veil and reveal the truth, but he could have only done this when the time was right.

"Hilkhot Yesodei Torah" (the Laws of the Foundations of Torah) and the "Guide to the Perplexed" conceal within them some of the greatest torah secrets. They are accessible to anyone wishing to make use of his intellect to contemplate their deep and secret implications. This path of Hitbonenut contemplative meditation is an excellent technique to be used by the vast majority of people today. It enables us to “sweeten the judgements” of intellectual limitation and to broaden our horizons to perceive the greater, encompassing spiritual world surrounding us.

It was RaMBaM that revealed to us how to perform true contemplative meditation (Hitbonenut). Only a Kabbalist could have done this: RaMBaM the Kabbalist!