

The anonymous letter against philosophy, MS Opp. 585, 78v – 81r

[78v] What can I say to this man who is overflowed with wisdom, endowed with knowledge, full of intelligence, the one who by education forever reached the active intellect, the beloved rabbi Juda. I have already paid my respects to your knowledge of Torah about our question and now I will add to this question. Firstly, I would like to introduce the topic of righteous person and evil person and their equality in God's providence in this world and the difference between them in the world-to-come. Is it really true what I asked you and wrote you that if the evil one can reach the truth as much as the righteous one, there is no difference between them according to their nature?

I was really surprised when I read what you wrote in your second letter, that even through the practical *mitzvot* man can attach himself to his Creator etc., more precisely that he will stay attached to Him in the world-to-come, even according to the way of nature. And you know that this is not the reason for the survival of the soul because the theoretical intellect survives, not the practical one, let alone some other parts of soul as the vegetative soul, the sensible soul, the imaginative soul and the awakened soul. The practical intellect is nothing more than the ladder, which leads to the theoretical intellect in this world, as it is written in the *Ruah ha-hen*¹ in the chapter 3, and in all the books, I have read, and I think that you agree with it. And if there is the difference between them, i.e. between the righteous one and the evil one in this world, than it is surely only in the terms of the way of the miracle, as you wrote in the name of *Milkhamot Ha-Shem*², in these words: "there exists another argument where according to the way of the miracle God destroys sometimes some souls miraculously³, in order to warn mankind, as in the case of three kings and four ordinary men who do not have the part in the world-to-come. They were destroyed, even though their intellect was active because God can do everything, even something that is bad for them but good for humanity. Because it was a public thing, their deeds were publically outrageous⁴, the end of the quotation. We are not talking from the perspective of the way of the miracle but from the perspective of the way of nature, because the one who truly believes in the aspect of punishment of creation according to the way of the miracle, should also in general believe in the reward for the good according to the way of the miracle, also because of the Torah itself and because of the *mitzvot*. That means he should believe in the reward for the Torah study and for the following *mitzvot*, even though his intellect does not achieve the activeness, or even though he does not know how to achieve the active intellect at all. However, God, may His name be blessed, is able to do nothing out of something, i.e. to destroy somebody whose intellect is active but he is a sinner. In other words, He can make nothing out of something, even though it is against nature. And this is what I believe in and it seems to me this is what most of the believers in our religion. i.e. those who study it and those who do not occupy themselves so much with the wisdom of philosophy, believe in too. I have in my hand the letter, which wrote rabbi Menakhem Agler, of blessed memory, to Yom Tov

¹*The spirit of grace*, the philosophical first textbook which should prepare the reader to the Maimonides' *More Nevukhim*. The spirit of the grace is an anonymous text from 13th century.

..השכל המעשי הוא כסולם לעלות למדריגת השכל העיוני...

„*The practical intellect is like a ladder whose steps lead upward to the theoretical intellect.*“

ELIOR, O. *Ke-aspaklarja meira: limud ha-mada be-tarbutot jehudijot šonot kfi še-hu mištakef be-mavo'a bejnajmi le-mada ha-aristoteli u-be-korotav le-orech ha-dorot*. Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2010. p. 242.

² God's wars, quite famous Gershonides' book about theologically philosophical questions.

³ The Hebrew word *mofet* means not only miracle but also "good example" which is exactly the meaning in this particular quotation – God showed the fate of the mentioned person in order to make an example.

⁴ This is a halakhical term. The implication of the publically outrageous deeds is the aspiration to consciously infuriate God, which is one kind of the sin. There are three kinds of sins: (i) the sin made by ignorant mistake; (ii) the sin made by the weakness – because of the temptation; (iii) the sin made consciously for the sin itself and for provocation. Cf. MAIMONIDES, M. *Mishne Tora*. Sefer Hakorbanot. Hilchot Šegagot. chap. 1 – 2.

Lipmann⁵ Mühlhauzen, of blessed memory. He mentioned the same idea that you wrote to me, [based] on the book *Milkhamot Ha-Shem*, and furthermore, he wrote, that from the standpoint of the way of the miracle, as the wise rabbis already told, the whole Israel has the share in the world-to-come, even the ones who do deeds without reason. Similarly is told: “rabbi Chanania ben Akashia told us that Holy One, blessed be He, wants to make Israel more valuable”⁶ and also “rabbi wept, saying: ‘there is one who acquires his share in the world-to-come in one moment’”⁷ and all the similar cases. Accordingly, it is with the case of resurrection; in this believe most of the initial problems do not exist.

I asked you about the one who does not believe in the way of the miracle but believes that everything is running according to the way of nature, and believes that the whole Torah is nothing more than the ladder. And it seems to me that all or most of the men who deal with science and philosophy do not study and do not follow *mitzvot*. If they would believe in the way of the miracle, they would not throw away⁸ the Torah study and *mitzvot* because thanks to them one will be rewarded in the way of the miracle. But they deal with science and philosophy because thanks to them one will be rewarded in the way of nature. Really, the way of nature does not achieve the thousands means of the way of the miracle⁹, because according to the way of the miracle even the smallest one from the sons of Israel can succeed. Because even though he is not able to achieve everything that could achieve our Moses, of blessed memory, he is still able to be righteous like our Moses, of blessed memory. Just as wrote Rabbi, of blessed memory, in the chapter Tshuva, part fifth: however, everybody is able to be righteous like our Moses, of blessed memory, or evil like Jeroboam, son of Nebat¹⁰, end of the quotation.

And I don't think that philosophers that I have seen are the same as the pious people who don't care about the reward of well-being and do not study in order to achieve the reward. The one who believes in the way of the miracle also believes that this is what his heart wants. Somebody will do a lot and somebody will do a little, as long as he directs his heart towards Heaven.¹¹ If he sets all his intentions in order to study and to teach the following and fulfilling all the words of God's Torah in love, then, if he will have the possibility in his hands, i.e. if he can succeed in achieving the wisdom of philosophy to make his intellect active and to connect with the active intellect, he can occupy himself with it. That means everybody should first of all try and achieve what he can achieve, in accordance with the order. That means from the beginning,

⁵ There is a mistake in the original text – Limpan not Lipmann

⁶ *Babylonian Talmud*. Makkot 23b: “*Rabbi Hannya ben Akashya says: The Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to confer merit upon the Jewish people; therefore, He increased for them Torah and mitzvot.*”

ר' חנניא בן עקשיא אומר רצה הקב"ה לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות

⁷ *Babylonian Talmud*. Avoda zara 10b. „*rabbi wept, saying: 'there is one who acquires his share in the World-to-come in one moment, and there is one who acquires his share in the World-to-come only after many years of toil.'*”

בכה רבי ואמר יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת ויש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים

⁸ Allusion to *More Nevuchim*, ie. Guide for the perplexed – the book is for the ones who are educated in Torah AND in philosophy and now they are confused because their rational capacity clashes with the literary interpretations of Torah. They can even abandon the dogma as a whole and literarily throw it away.

אם שימשך אחרי שכלו וישליך מא שידעהו מהשמות ההם ויחשוב שהוא השליך פינות התורה.

„ If he be guided solely by reason, and renounce his previous views which are based on those expressions, he would consider that he had rejected the fundamental principles of the Law“ MAIMONIDES, M. *More Nevuchim*. Introduction (*pticha*), p. 4.

⁹ That means that way of nature is not as good as the way of the miracle, even as one of the thousand; the way of the miracle could be also apprehended as diversifiable because treats every human individually.

¹⁰ The whole passage in the Mishneh Torah is: A person should not entertain the thesis held by the fools among the gentiles and the majority of the undeveloped among Israel that, at the time of a man's creation, The Holy One, blessed be He, decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked. This is untrue. Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses, our teacher, or wicked, like Jeroboam. [Similarly,] he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or generous, or [acquire] any other character traits

¹¹Borrowed from Masekhet Brakhot 17a, see below.

firstly the chumash¹², then other twenty-four books,¹³ than he should study the explanation of the *mitzvot*, the regulations and *minhagim*¹⁴ leading to their following, then the wisdom of philosophy and the science of logic, the mathematics, natural science and metaphysics. Moses, of blessed memory, wrote it similarly in Hilchot Jesudej ha-Torah at the end of the chapter four.¹⁵ According to the way of the miracle there can be one who begins a thousand houses, do everything he can but dies before he finishes them and one who begins a thousand houses, learn all the mentioned degrees until he finishes metaphysics and then dies. These two are equal in their achievements and can take pleasure from the world-to-come, as the sages, of blessed memory, said: one who does a lot and one who does a little etc.¹⁶ God, may his name be blessed, does not make a difference between small and big miracle. Truly, he does not draw our attention to the parable written by the rabbi, of blessed memory, in part three, chapter fifty-one¹⁷ from the way of nature, but because he wants us to learn that it is not sufficient for a man to stay in the beginning of the mentioned degree or in the middle. If it is possible, he should reach it and finish it because Merciful demands the heart. The reward is according to the endeavour: Ruben tried with all his power, did not finish a thousand houses and died; Shimon¹⁸ finished all the degrees, stayed just an inch from the metaphysics, did not finish because of his sins and died. According to the way of the miracle, Ruben will succeed in the world-to-come more than Shimon.

Now I would like to return to the problem which is hardly acceptable to me, regarding a person who does not believe in the way of the miracle but does believe in the way of nature and at the same time believes in Torah of our rabbi Moshe, may he rest in peace. However, he also believes that the Torah is nothing more than a ladder for the way of nature. It is hard for me to accept this in our time when the wisdom of our sages and knowledge of our educated is fading away and hiding away because of the long-lasting diaspora and our mind is decreasing. How we can give full evidence of three desiderata, namely that He, blessed be He, exists without the body, does not have the resources (force) in the body and is only one?¹⁹ It is not possible to bring the proof, only to recognize the essence, necessity, possibility, and impossibility considering first intelligence and to construct the proof from them. This is the acquired

¹² The five books of Moses.

¹³ The Hebrew Bible.

¹⁴ Custom, an accepted tradition.

¹⁵ „I maintain that it is not proper for a person to stroll in the *Pardes* unless he has filled his belly with bread and meat. "Bread and meat" refer to the knowledge of what is permitted and what is forbidden, and similar matters concerning other mitzvot.“

¹⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Masekhet Brakhot, 17a:

„One who brings a substantial sacrifice and one who brings a meager sacrifice have equal merit, as long as he directs his heart towards Heaven.“

¹⁷ Author alludes to the palace metaphor. The king is in the palace. One part of his people is in his country and the other is outside of it. Part of the people in the country are facing back to the palace, a part is facing another direction. Some of them desire to go to the palace but cannot even see its wall. Some of them who desire can reach the palace and go through its gate, some of them can reach the hall, some of them the inner part, and some of them even the room where the king is. The people outside of the country are people without any religion. Maimonides calls them irrational and sees them almost as non-humans. People in the country but facing backward to the palace are those who believe in false doctrines and in some cases are even worse than the first group. People who desire to go to the palace but cannot even see it believe in the true religion and follow it but are the mass without education. People who can see the palace but cannot go through the gate studied only practical law but are not trained in philosophy. Those who are in the hall studied philosophy and logic, who are in the inner part studied physics and those who are with the king in his room studied natural science and metaphysics. Cf MAIMONIDES, M. *More Nevuchim*. Part III, p. 65

¹⁸ Although both of the names are the names of sons of Jacob, the author does not refer here any particular story from Torah, he just uses the names as examples.

¹⁹ Maimonides appoints these three desiderata in *More Nevuchim*: God exists, is without a body and is only one. Cf MAIMONIDES, M. *More Nevuchim*. Part II, pp. 1-2.

intellect²⁰ and in that case, who in our time knows what is necessity, what is possibility and impossibility. Was not there creatio ex nihilo? It seems to us that this is the first principle but ancient philosophers as Plato and Aristotle thought, based on their reason, that something out of nothing is impossible. Further, the rabbi, of blessed memory, wrote that they did not pride themselves with the proof,²¹ but the commentators of Aristotle's books claimed that they had the proof²² and mutakalimún claimed that the first principle is contrariwise. And us, who believe in Torah of our rabbi Moshe, may he rest in peace, do believe that something out of nothing is possible. Rabbi, of blessed memory, also wrote at the end of his 25th proposition what the commentators of Aristotle's books claimed, namely that the eternity of the world is a necessity, that mutakalimún claimed that is impossible and he, of blessed memory, claims that is possible. Also similarly in part three, chapter 15 rabbi, of blessed memory, divides the people to those who speculate about possible and impossible.²³

Well, if the disagreements and doubts descended on the first principle (if something can come out of nothing) and also can touch on other first principles, [79v] you cannot answer me from the foundation of the first principle, namely that totality is more than the part. I know that all first principles that need to prove three mentioned desiderata are not so simple that we can find among them one similar to the first principle of something out of nothing. And because disagreements and doubts stroke upon first wise men and sons of their sons, even if in our generation are educated people, none of us can reach the wisdom of Aristotle's books and the wisdom of mutakalimún. We should not elevate ourselves. Similarly, it is hard for me that rabbi, of blessed memory, wrote in his book, I don't remember where that among twenty-five propositions exists one which philosophers explored so long until they founded the proof. And who in today's world is able to examine if they were right or not? If you say, that's because they already brought the proof so everybody can examine its truth, I already said that even if they contemplated it all the time and investigated it every minute, they could still make a mistake, much like Aristotle's commentators made mistake when claimed that Aristotle had the proof about the eternity of world. I do not suspect them to intentionally lie about Aristotle, and I also do not think that they were precise in everything, they just tried to be as precise as they could, even if they were wrong. And you know that if someone was wrong about one proposition or about one thing from his acquired intellect, even just about one part from ten thousand, intentionally or not, his proof is invalid. Which is the same as if he did nothing, and in that case according to the way of nature he does not reach anything in the world-to-come. That is in accordance with what I wrote above, namely that only theoretical intellect survives, which means the one what a person reached in this world through correct proof and without error. And if you will say that even though hearts are in our time shrinking it is possible for us to distinguish between concepts of possibility and impossibility thanks to books of our ancestors, that is not true because of two reasons. Firstly, even if those books were correct in their subjects, if we knew other books of mutakalimún or other philosophers in disagreement with the books we already have, maybe those books would be more truthful for us or maybe we would be confused and full of doubts. And second argument is quite known, nobody can decide

²⁰ The acquired intellect is term often used by Ibn Rushd alias Averroes. That means it is a concept adopted from Arabic philosophy and describes the state when the intellect is starting to be perfect in the degree he can be connected to the active intellect. Cf. HYMAN, A. (ed.) *Philosophy in the Middle Ages. The Christian, Islamic and Jewish Tradition*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 2010. p. 316

²¹ „It seems to me that he did not consider it as a proof but as a proper and right claim.” MAIMONIDES, M. *More Nevuchim*. Part 22, p. 12.

²² „His followers and commentators of his books claim that it contains not only possible but also necessary proof and that it is obviously fully established proof.” Ibid.

²³ Maimonides lists philosophers with different opinions to the question of which things are not possible, if existence is possible and if creation by God is possible. MAIMONIDES, M. *More Nevuchim*. Part III, p. 21-22.

between the two unless he is the wisest of them all. And I already wrote that we cannot reach the wisdom, all the more when we are not wiser than they were.

And you cannot answer me with the argument of the majority of people who study our religion because I already wrote that they believe in the way of the miracle and the Merciful owns their hearts. They do not suffer any damage even if they make mistakes, even if they say about forbidden that is allowed, about impure that is pure, about optional that is obligatory and other similar cases. There is no damage because that is how Torah was delivered on Mount Sinai, that every scholar of every generation can explain the law according to his understanding and according to the majority, as is said “to follow the court between them”²⁴ etc. When rabbi Eliezer, of blessed memory, did not agree with the majority, of blessed memory, the *bat kol* came and said that the law should be interpreted according to rabbi Eliezer. A lot of miracles testified to his truth and despite that, majority was not turned but said “it is not in the Heaven [Torah], that means she was removed from the Heaven and it is written in her that majority should be followed,²⁵ I don’t need to continue. We found in similar cases, for example in the case of the sanctification of a new moon, that we don’t have to worry about the establishment of the hour of the sanctification because wise, of blessed memory said, as is already said in Torah, you will read otam instead written atem.²⁶ That means it is you who is important and if you make a mistake it depends if the mistake was deliberate or unintended. Indeed, Torah does not depend on the truth of the matter, it is obligatory for every wise man of every generation to aspire with all his capability to reach the truth and if they tried as much as they could, even if they reached the opposition of the truth, it does not matter because the Merciful asks for hearts.

Also, it is hard for me to understand how somebody who follows the way of nature can be rewarded by good [80r] in the world-to-come. If you are telling me that person cannot reach there more than he already reached here than the statements of prophets, of blessed memory, surprise me because they must hyperbolize about substantial reward of good, as is said: “Oh how abundant is Thy goodness, which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee”²⁷ and: “neither hath the eye seen a God beside Thee, who worketh for him”²⁸. The statements of the wise, of blessed memory, are very surprising because they said that in this world does not exist anything similar to that pleasure, that means there is reason to be surprised because if one can reach absolute human success, then he can reach here everything he will reach in future in the world-to-come. If it is indeed like this, he does not have any more pleasure than the pleasure here. If you said that one can reach there more than he reached here, you also have to say how much it is greater that even the accomplishments of rabbi Moshe, may he rest in peace, are not like that at all. Because if it was similar, then in this world we could find something similar to the pleasure from the world-to-come. And rabbi, of blessed memory, wrote himself in the chapter chelek, literal quotation: “just as the blind man cannot conceive of colors etc., so in this material

²⁴ Dt 17,8:

„If cases come before your courts that are too difficult for you to judge—whether bloodshed, lawsuits or assaults—take them to the place the LORD your God will choose.“

²⁵ „What is the relevance of the phrase “It is not in heaven” in this context? Rabbi Yirmeya says: Since the Torah was already given at Mount Sinai, we do not regard a Divine Voice, as You already wrote at Mount Sinai, in the Torah: “After a majority to incline”“ Story is from Bava metzia 59a-b, quotation from 59b.

²⁶ The genre of midrash founded on orthography – אָתֶם, atem, you, should be read as אוֹתָם otam, to them; this is an allusion that we are not dealing with astronomy, but with human interference – scholars designate the new moon, the calendar is produced by people.

²⁷ Psalm 31,20:

Oh how abundant is Thy goodness, which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee; which Thou hast wrought for them that take their refuge in Thee, in the sight of the sons of men!

²⁸ Is 64.3:

„And whereof from of old men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen a God beside Thee, who worketh for him that waiteth for Him.“

world one does not know the pleasures of the spiritual world.”²⁹ end of the quotation. And if the profit is truly so great it is necessary to marvel how is way of nature preferable to way of the miracle. It can be because of the disjunction of spirit from the body when spirit still in the body cannot reach the benefits because of the force of the body, but as soon as he is separated from the body, he can reach everything that is in his powers. Spirit can reach it because he does not have any corporeal drive. If this is the case, why then the soul of the evil person or stupid person who cannot reach anything in this world, cannot reach everything spirit can reach in the world-to-come according to the way of nature, because he does not have now corporeal drive? And in what way can nature appropriate the achievement of the reward in this world and the achievement of much bigger reward in the world-to-come as we mentioned?

It is still hard for me to understand that if the whole Torah is nothing more than the ladder for the achievement, how one who studies and follows the whole Torah can find himself separated from this world and without achievement. His deeds will be deeds of vanity and emptiness³⁰ according to the way of nature. If it is indeed the case, why our scholars, of blessed memory, instructed us that oral Torah is the same as *halakha* that Moses got on Sinai and this is why it is important to even let yourself be killed, according to the custom of Jews publicly, for the desecration of the name? And why rabbi Akiva wanted to die of hunger because he didn't have the water to wash his hands before a meal and there is a lot of similar cases in Talmud. Isn't it perplexing? Rabbi Akiva did not achieve in his time what he could achieve, that means all the time he grew old he could continue further and further till the accomplishment. And similarly, the sages, of blessed memory, instructed us to let ourselves be killed, even those who achieved nothing. If this is true, what benefit has this death without achievement? Would it not be better for man to survive, even if he sinned against the whole Torah, but to achieve eternal accomplishment than to die without achievement and thus to loose and be separated from the world-to-come, according to the way of nature? And you can tell me that it is impossible for anybody to achieve true understanding without studying and following all 613 mitzvot and all *mitzvot* and *takkanoth* of rabbis and customs of Torah and Judaism. And one who does not accomplish everything like rabbi Akiva, may he rest in peace, reaches false understanding and will be even worse than one who reached nothing and would be better for him to die without achievement than live in false understanding. But if you tell me this, then there are many reasons to wonder what about Aristotle and Plato and other similar people who did not study and followed all 613 *mitzvot* and commandments of rabbis and their *takkanot* and customs of Judaism. Similarly, all the philosophers I ever saw were benevolent towards following *mitzvot*. Did they all reach false understanding according to everything what is mentioned above?

²⁹ „just as the blind man cannot conceive of colors and the deaf cannot perceive of sounds, so bodies cannot perceive of the spiritual joys like fishes cannot know the fire because they live in the secret of water, similarly in this material world one does not know the pleasures of spiritual world.” MAIMONIDES, M. *Seder Neziqqin*. Introduction to the *Perek Chelek*.

³⁰ Inspiration from prayer Aleinu: „God who has not made us like the nations of the world and has not placed us like the families of the earth; who has not designed our destiny to be like theirs, nor our lot like that of all their multitude, for they bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god who cannot save“