

**How Best to Respond to Theological and Philosophical  
Misconceptions About Judaism in the 21st Century Based on  
Three Principle Historical Examples**

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Joseph Dweck

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Abstract: This dissertation examines how best to respond to theological and philosophical misconceptions about Judaism in the 21st century based on three historical examples. It examines the ideology of Social Reconstruction through education as a template for addressing societal misconceptions about Judaism. Drawing from the ideology of Social Reconstruction the template of five criteria was used to examine in detail the life and works of Maimonides in the 12th century and Moshe Haim Luzzatto and David Nieto in the 18th century - all of whom addressed societal misconceptions about Judaism. These same criteria were used to examine a lecture series given by me on misconceptions in Judaism. This lecture series was also compared to the historical examples of the three rabbis and was found to be in line with the pedagogical approach of Social Reconstruction and with the tradition that the rabbis used in response to the misconceptions of their time. It concludes that addressing misconceptions as a means to reconstruct society requires adhering to at least five important criteria.



## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

There is a tradition in Judaism of intellectual and religious leadership responding to societal misconceptions regarding Jewish philosophy and theology. Time and again due to either poor leadership or education or to extenuating societal circumstances a lack of scholarship produced societal misunderstandings of basic frameworks of Judaic thought.

This study will explore how best to respond to theological and philosophical misconceptions about Judaism in the 21st century based on three principle historical examples. It will look at three particular scholars: Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), David Nieto (1654-1728) and Moshe Hayim Luzzatto (1707-1746).

I have chosen these individuals because Maimonides was a groundbreaking thinker and his writings are still considered today to be deeply relevant and are used as sources for rational and comprehensive approaches to Judaic thought and law. During his lifetime he identified significant misunderstandings of key principles in Jewish philosophy and law that were espoused in Jewish society and he addressed them in a systematic and thorough manner through writing. We will explore the aspects of his primary works in which he dealt with these issues as well as external scholarly examinations of his works and life.

David Nieto addressed a specific issue during the time that he served as Chief Rabbi to the Sephardi community in London, England from 1701-1728 (the same post that I currently hold). The majority of his community were Conversos whose families had acted outwardly as Catholics during the Spanish Inquisition. They had great respect for the Mosaic Bible but the philosophies and principles of rabbinic Judaism were not familiar to them. Nieto wrote a thorough defence and support of rabbinic Judaism and due to his leadership traditional Judaism remained intact in the community for the next three centuries.

Moshe Hayim Luzzatto lived only 39 years. His responses to contemporary mindsets regarding Torah and Judaism are perhaps the most drastic. In his most well-known and widely studied works he addresses major contemporary practices and ideas of his time and refutes them. He uses a dialectical approach for much of his writings (as did Nieto) in order to bring out the arguments and differing ideas. In his approach to reaching societal thinking he even wrote three morality plays.

In this study we will seek answers to the following questions:

What circumstances in societies led to the misconceptions?

What prompted the leading scholars to address these misconceptions?

What didactic principles were used by them to design a plan or procedure to address the misconceptions?

There will also be subsidiary questions which I will use as criteria to discuss how effective the models used by the scholars were.

I will also look at a lecture series that I gave in 2016 regarding fourteen Jewish misconceptions. The students were questioned using an online survey regarding the experience they had of the lectures and how effective they think the lectures have been in treating the misconceptions. One of the leading students who helped coordinate the lecture series was also asked to conduct interviews of about ten individuals who attended the class to gain further insight into the experience of the lectures. Their comments were gathered by audio recording.

The data will be compared and contrasted in order to seek answers to the above questions.

In Chapter two the Pedagogical approach in curricular theory of Social Reconstruction is examined. Those who espouse this approach recognise breakdowns in society that are threatening to its healthy survival and believe that education is a way to reconstruct the social problems. Five key aspects of its tenants are delineated. These five tenants are used as a template in order to examine the philosophy and teachings of the three rabbis and identify whether their approach might have resembled the pedagogical ideology of Social Reconstruction.

Chapter three will examine the rabbis individually with a brief biographical background to give context to their approaches and challenges. The five criteria will be applied to their teachings and circumstances and examine each in light of the Social Reconstructionist ideology. The nature of the research for this was largely bibliographical and theoretical. Both primary and secondary sources were used to study the social circumstances of the times and how they contributed to the misconceptions that were dealt with. Additionally, the impetus that moved the rabbis to respond and why they consciously aimed at changing it will be explored. The modes through which they responded and the manner of information they chose in order to address it is explored as well.

Chapter four will examine three key misconceptions that all three rabbis dealt with albeit in slightly different ways. God, mitzvot (commandments) and Rabbinic hyperbolic interpretations called 'Midrash' seem to have been issues that were always misunderstood. We will look at the particular contemporary aspects of the misconceptions that each rabbi had to deal with and compare and contrast how their responses addressed them.

Chapter five will examine a lecture series that I gave in London from October to May of 2016 on Misconceptions of Judaism. Through the course I presented ideas from an approach of normative Judaism with sources from the Talmud, and key scholars who dealt with the ideas in a clear, rational, systematic and conceptual manner. The main subjects discussed



included issues regarding God and his involvement in the world, the commandments of the Torah including conceptual issues with key laws like the Sabbath, Dietary laws and Torah study itself. There were also subjects which dealt with Rabbinic literature and exegesis. Finally there were contemporary issues discussed in the lectures that were not considered issues among the three rabbis of the study, like the role of women in Judaism and questions of evolution and its relationship to the approach of the Torah to Creation.

Chapter six will outline conclusions drawn from the research.

## **Chapter 2 - Literary Review**

### **Social Reconstructionism**

The recognition of social breakdown and the desire to reconstruct it through educating people through teaching values and frameworks that help change thinking and mindset is known in the academic world as the ideology of Social Reconstruction. In this chapter this ideology will be examined for its key aspects and approaches and evaluated as a means for examining the historical approaches of three rabbis towards the rectification of societal breakdowns resulting from misconceptions in Judaism.

A common thread in all of the approaches that the rabbis took to addressing the societal misconceptions was that they saw a need to 'save' society. Their responses to breakdowns of understanding and, therefore, breakdowns in practice and appropriate behaviour were aimed at reconstructing society through education in a fundamental way. They all addressed core ideas and values in their writings and sought to redefine how Jews were thinking and acting regarding the study and understanding of Torah and its impact on religious and spiritual aspects of life.

This can be identified as belonging to a philosophy of education known today as Social Reconstructionism. Social Reconstructionists use educational institutions, curricula and frameworks to affect social reform through education. The modern educational ideology of Social Reconstruction was founded by Theodor Brameld as a reaction to World War II. 'He recognised the potential for either human annihilation through technology and human cruelty or the capacity to create a beneficent society using technology and human compassion' (Cohen, 1999). Yet, although not properly developed and specified until the twentieth century, one can view the approaches of Maimonides, Luzzatto and Nieto to be in line with Social Reconstructionism albeit in more rudimentary ways.

Schiro (p. 151) describes the basic premise of Social Reconstructionism as follows:

First, they assume that our society is unhealthy — indeed, that its very survival is threatened — because the traditional mechanisms developed by society to contend with social problems are incapable of doing their job. Second, Social Reconstructionists assume that something can be done to keep society from destroying itself...Finally, Social Reconstruction educators assume that education provides the means of reconstructing society.

All three of the rabbis recognised every one of those elements in their lives and subsequently their work as we shall examine below.

The Social Reconstructionist sees the world from a social perspective. Wisdom, education, human experience are socially defined. By exposing, restructuring, redefining and challenging how information is taught and learned in society people's thinking can change and therefore behaviours can change. The rabbis aimed at doing just this with their scholarship and teachings.

A fourth aspect to the approach is that the Social Reconstructionist does not aim to provide a specific program for change, rather he provides principles and vision that can facilitate change.

The situations in which people find themselves determine this. The vision is a general one that provides values and directions, not a blueprint that specifies exactly how to build the future good society. (Schiro, 2013, p.164)

All three recognised the teaching of principles and the provision of frameworks in order to reconstruct society's failures and breakdowns. It is remarkable that at least with regard to Maimonides and Luzzatto their teachings were so broad and pervasive in principle and framework that today there is hardly a sect in Judaism that does not study and teach their works (Garb, 2014 p. 13-14). Indeed, in the case of Maimonides he was so sure of his universal appeal that he predicted this in his lifetime (Maimonides, 1994, p. 126).

Finally, and perhaps the most important aspect of Social Reconstructionism through education is that being that it challenges and seeks to change the status quo, thus likely to suffer from backlash and opposition, it is also understood that it will require great work, bravery and conviction in reshaping the current conceptions about society and how it works as well as its truths and norms.

As William B. Stanley puts it:

The failure to give adequate attention to 'radical' ideas denies educators a major source of knowledge and unduly limits the process of social inquiry and change...it is often the case that radical ideas from the past have eventually been incorporated into the mainstream perspective. One could argue, therefore that... educators have a fundamental obligation to explore divergent ideas, including those that are radical. (p. 2)

This requires a confidence in being able to suggest ideas that run counter to normative practices or thinking of the day and a commitment to stand firm in seeing that they are properly taught and understood and that education is robust and accessible. Indeed, it requires a certain level of self-sacrifice for the good of society. Remarkably, these concepts seemed to have been innately understood by many early social reconstructionists; our three rabbis not withstanding.

One particularly significant individual who spoke clearly about it was Mahatma Gandhi. He claimed that 'there should be ceaseless positive education, which enables the individuals to accept and practice new radical and spiritual values in life.' 'Gandhi believed that the spirit of altruism and self-sacrifice is the basic element of human nature...Once it is awakened, one willingly would sacrifice even one's own life and ungrudgingly embrace even death for the good of others'. (Dayal, 2006, p.200).

All three of the rabbis in this study identified serious lacks in the mindset, philosophy and education of the societies in which they found themselves and understood that circumstances would not easily change. All three experienced considerable opposition in response to even the initial attempts at changing the current conditions. A common thread among them all is that they retained exceptional self-confidence and determination in their efforts despite pronounced and formidable threats to the contrary.

One important aspect of Social Reconstructionism is to view teaching as a mode to promote students to reconstruct *themselves*. In its highest impact it teaches and stimulates students to reconstruct society (Schiro, 2013, p.182). This will be an important aspect of the study in its intersection with my work in dealing with and teaching about the common misconceptions of Judaism in our times. I chose the three rabbis as subjects for the study because I have studied their works extensively and have, as a student, been educated and inspired by their scholarship and philosophy to not only reconstruct my own understanding and thinking about Judaism, but also to share it with others. The mode for empowering students to reconstruct society is outlined by Schiro as follows:

Stimulating students to learn how to reconstruct society involves helping them construct a set of meanings, meaning structures, perceptive functions, and interpretive functions so that when they encounter social problems they can analyse

and understand them, formulate a vision of better society where those problems do not exist, and act in such a way as to eliminate those social problems.

We find then, that there are five key aspects to the pedagogical approach to Social Reconstruction.

1. Recognition of social breakdown and a belief that it is alterable.
2. A conscious desire to change it.
3. The provision of working/thinking frameworks that provides concepts and values rather than specific solutions.
4. Seeks to empower learners to change their thinking
5. Includes a boldness and bravery to counter the status quo

We will see that each of the rabbis in this study accomplished the above in their modes of teaching. And we will examine these aspects of Social Reconstructionism as they apply to all three of our rabbis.

### **Chapter 3 - Analysing Examples From History**

In this chapter I examine the lives of each of the three rabbis mentioned in Chapter 1 in terms of misconceptions in Judaism that they each faced in their times. For each I examine their actions and responses in terms of the five criteria that are included in the pedagogical approach of Social Reconstruction. For each I identify their recognition of breakdown, their conscious desire to change it, the working framework that they presented, their approach at empowering the learners and their bravery to do so in the face of opposition.

#### **MOSES MAIMONIDES 1135-1204**

Maimonides was born to a prominent Jewish family in Córdoba in Andalusian Spain. He spent the first two decades of his life in Spain. Both the Jewish and secular culture of Andalusia had a major impact on his life and thinking. Even after leaving Spain at a relatively young age, for the rest of his life he regularly spoke of himself as the ‘Spaniard’ - *haSepharadi* (Kafeh, Igerot, p.107 note 2) and referred to ‘our practices’ as coming from Spain, Adalusia or the Maghrib (the Arab West) (Kraemer, 2008, p.43). Maimonides saw the Spanish schools and approaches in Torah as superior to that of the long established schools of Babylonia (Halbertal, 2014, p.15). His worldview took full shape in Spain. (More on the details of Maimonides’ life in Spain in Appendix I)

Maimonides lived his entire life in Muslim civilisation (Kraemer, 2008, p.2). However, there were differences in the Muslim approaches to society and culture. While there were tribes who believed in a more tolerant approach to the religion regarding non-Muslims, others were not as accepting. The Almohads who practiced and imposed a radical version of Islam, mainly based on enforcing the belief in the absolute unity of God, had no taste for compromise and they eventually gained control over North Africa and Andalusia. Their rule

tore apart the great cultural and scholarly advances that had been developed in Andalusia and which allowed Spanish Jewry to flourish in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

As a result Maimonides' family found themselves driven from their home in search of refuge. They wandered south to Fez, Morocco. The exact year that they left Spain is not clear, but Maimonides had already become a great and well-versed scholar by the time he left Spain (Halbertal, 2014, p18). The family spent five years in Fez, however, it was not free of the ruthless Almohad rule and it caused Maimonides family to carry on. They traveled eastward to Acre living there for one year and then finally settled in Egypt for the last thirty-eight years of his life.

The breakdowns of society that Maimonides experienced at the beginning of his life, specifically the unravelling of Andalusia and its strength as a revered and powerful source of Jewish law and thought impacted his desire to rectify these breakdowns in various ways throughout his life (Halbertal, 2014, pp 1, 23). He described his feelings in the year 1172, approximately twenty years after leaving Spain, in his Epistle to Yemen/*Igeret Teiman* (Sheilat, 1995, p.116) as follows:

I am the most minor among the scholars of Spain whose stature is low in exile. I am always dedicated to my duties but have not attained the wisdom of my forbears, for evil days and hard times have overtaken us and we have not lived in tranquility; we have laboured without finding rest. How can *halakha* become clear to a refugee from city to city and from country to country? Yet, I have pursued everywhere the reapers and gathered ears of grain, both the solid and the full, as well as the shrivelled and thin. Only recently have I found a home...

Maimonides saw the greatest casualty of the breakdown as essentially educational.



As for yourselves, my esteemed friends, be confident and strong of heart! For, alas, I am constrained to inform you that in our day the people of your community and only a few of the neighbouring communities stand alone in raising the banner of Moses and engaging in the study of the Talmud and in pursuit of wisdom...in other communities in the East, the study of the Torah has ceased....(Quoted in Halbertal, 2014, p 10)

As a result of this several aspects of society faltered and were contributing to the devastation. One issue was the flaws in the scholarship of leaders. The once prominent yeshivas of Babylonia, the home of the great *Geonim* which had dominated the Jewish world from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, were deteriorating in quality and stature (Halbertal, 2014, p19). Religious leaders elsewhere in the East were directing people away from appropriate law and behaviour. Maimonides was not idle when such cases came to his attention. One such case prompted the writing of his Epistle on Martyrdom in which he writes 'And now I will begin to explain the magnitude of error upon which this pitiful person failed...' (Maimonides, 1994, p 109). (Further related issues are discussed in Appendix II).

Maimonides sought to change and rectify all of this through educating the masses. he believed that by making the Torah available to all in a clear, ordered and concise fashion he could affect the breakdowns that he was witnessing and ensure a strong future for the Jewish people. His greatest attempt at this was the Mishne Torah. However, all of Maimonides' works, The Commentary on the Mishna and the Moreh Nebukhim (Guide to the Perplexed) sought to affect real change in the way that people understood and studied Torah and thus engaged in their Judaism and relationship to God. Even the epistles and letters, that are recorded all aim at helping to rectify societal breakdowns.

We will examine these works directly and show that they indeed were aimed at this goal, but there are other elements in Maimonides' writings that show that he saw societal cohesion

and function as a divine goal. One such example is that he saw prophecy as rooted in this purpose. In the Moreh Nebukhim he presents various levels of prophecy. The lowest level is identified by one's incessant drive to help people and/or society:

The beginnings of the degrees of prophecy is that a person is graced with a divine aid that moves him and encourages him to do great and valuable good, like saving a group of pious people from evildoers, or influencing many people for the good.

(Maimonides, Guide, 1995, p.263)

Maimonides believed that the manner in which this reconstruction should be accomplished was through education and that it be done in a manner that teaches frameworks rather than simply data. Throughout his works this was his guiding principle.

Maimonides' first attempt at presenting a clear and lucid presentation of the corpus of Jewish law and thought was in his first major work, the Commentary on the Mishna. The fact that he used the Mishna as a basis for this work, thus setting the Mishna as a work to be studied on its own, was also based in his Spanish education (Halbertal, 2014 p.97). Maimonides sought to create a work based on the code of Rabbi Judah the Prince for it presented in concise form the core of all areas of the Oral Law. He would present in the Commentary the opinions of the Mishna that were considered law, and would also facilitate a summary of key points presented in the Talmud for the novice as well as a sufficient review for the learned Talmudic scholar. (Maimonides, 1995, p.26)

Perhaps most telling of his desire to present principles and frameworks of thought and to present the data within such frameworks are his more well known introductions throughout the Commentary. The main introduction, as well as introductions to various tractates and chapters systematically present principles on issues such as the origins, development and process of the Oral Law, the core tenants of Jewish faith, the manner in which we relate to

rabbinic biblical exegesis, the principles behind the entirety of spiritual purity and impurity and the core ideals regarding our moral growth and development as human beings in society. (Shelat, 1995, pp. 212-213; Halbertal, pp.134-163)

Yet, even after completing the Commentary Maimonides felt that there was no real access for the Jewish world to study the full Torah in an ordered framework. Deterioration of halakhic and philosophical knowledge as well as a loss of unified clarity among scholars began soon after the completion of the Talmud. As a result, confusion and misconception was setting in to the general population. He therefore, set out to put forth a complete presentation of the Oral Law and a full treatment of every commandment in the Torah together with the basic philosophical principles. He believed that this work would genuinely suffice to teach the full Torah to all who studied it (Maimonides, 2009, p.5): ‘For as God lives, I have been zealous on behalf of the Lord God of Israel, seeing a nation lacking a true and comprehensive book of its laws and lacking true and clear opinions; so I did what I did for the sake of God alone’. (Shelat, 401) Maimonides believed that his Mishne Torah would rectify the damage of the lack of scholarship and the poor resources available for studying the Torah in a complete and comprehensive fashion (Maimonides, 2009, *ibid*).

The Mishne Torah or ‘Review of Torah’ as he called it still has no equivalent alternative in the whole of Jewish literature and scholarship. No other work comprehensively treats every law of the Torah in its Biblical, Rabbinic and customary aspects along with its philosophical underpinnings.

*In my major work which I called Mishne Torah...I also listed all the religious and legal roots... I wished to have all this established on religious principles. (Maimonides, 1994)*

(For further treatment of metaphysical issues see Appendix II)

Maimonides organized the book in his own structure separating the laws into fourteen books. Entire lessons are gleaned from modern scholars simply on where Maimonides chose to categorise and include various laws in the corpus. It is a masterpiece of structure and organization.

The spread of his new structure and full treatment of the Oral Torah reached far and wide relatively rapidly. It was beyond bold in that he in no uncertain terms asserted that 'a person who first reads the Written Law and then this book will know from it the whole of the Oral Law, *without having need to consult any other book between them*'. (Maimonides, 2009, p. 5). While the work was lauded by many its powerful presentation also drew harsh and sharp criticism. One of the more glowing comments regarding the brilliance of the work is from Aaron ben Meshullam, an important contemporary French scholar, saying that the Mishne Torah was 'the ark of God' [which contains] the tables of the covenant, the breastplate of judgment and the Urim and Tummim' (as quoted in Davidson, p. 263, 265).

The critics, however, were strong and cutting. It is to be expected, though, that when ideas are put out into the public sphere with no uncertain aims at addressing breakdowns in the societal status quo, criticism and even attempts to thwart the teachings are inevitable. For this reason, an important aspect of social reconstruction through education is that the proponents and educators must have conviction and feel empowered to do so. The criticism of Maimonides' work came both during and after his lifetime.

One of the key opponents to Maimonides and his Mishne Torah were the scholars in Baghdad. The opposition was enhanced as a result of Maimonides' closest student, Yoseph ben Yehuda, teaching his master's Torah in Aleppo, Syria where, at the time, was under the influence and leadership of the Babylonian 'Ga'on', Shemuel ben Eli, who was a chief rabbinic authority and head of the yeshiva. The Ga'on's words were essentially accepted as law by the Jews in Syria. In response to this not only was Yoseph denigrated by the

Babylonian establishment but also Maimonides and his Mishne Torah. In a letter responding to his student's frustration he responds to the criticisms with clear statements about his expectations of such opposition while maintaining strength and fortitude. (Maimonides, 1994, p.126-7) (See extended quote in Appendix VIa)

Indeed, Maimonides' confidence in his work is expressed in its very name. He explains in his introduction that he called the book 'Mishne Torah' literally, 'reiteration of the Torah' so that 'one may first read the Written Law and then this book [and] know from it the whole of the Oral Law'. As Davidson writes (p. 198) 'It is designed to serve as a full and sufficient complement of the Written Law'.

The confidence that Maimonides had in his knowledge and indeed in his own character (Maimonides, 1994, p.131) likely was the basis for his tendency to assert his views and opinions in blunt and unequivocal terms. (Davidson, pp.44-5; Halbertal, p 75-6). Yet, it is also evident from his writings that Maimonides did not do so cavalierly. He felt, citing Ecclesiastes, 5:1<sup>1</sup>, that addressing any matter of Torah was presenting ideas before God.

He also gradually stepped away from the influence of the *Geonic* positions seeing that he was misled in his youth by their approaches and instead, asserted his own ideas and interpretations of law. 'God knows that in most of the places [that I altered my rulings in the Mishne Torah from the Commentary on the Mishna] is solely because I was misguided by following the *Geonim*, like R. Nissim's *Megillat Setarim* and R. Hafetz's *Sepher haMitsvot*'. (Igerot, Shelat, p 305) This tendency was yet another source of criticism exacted upon him by the rabbis in the yeshivahs of Baghdad. (Halbertal, p 93). This was bold for many reasons. The *Ge'onim* were recognised as monumental legal authorities and, from a logistical point of view, written words hold powerful sway. 'This is the great sickness and evil...that all words found written in books are fastened to the hearts as truth at first sight;

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<sup>1</sup> '...Let not your heart be quick to bring forth words before God'.

this is so especially when they come from those who preceded [us]' (Maimonides, 1994, p 112, note 8.

Maimonides' radical steps towards reconstruction were strengthened by his bravery and resolve to do what was right and to teach it to all who might hear and learn regardless of the danger and repercussions. He led with bravery and conviction. Nowhere is this made more clear than in his closing remarks in his Epistle to Yemen. Even to the point of putting himself in mortal danger he implores that his words of encouragement and strength be read to all albeit with caution. (Maimonides, 1994, p 56) (See extended quote in Appendix VIa)

### **Moshe Hayim Luzzatto (1707-1746)**

Moshe Hayim Luzzatto was born in Padua, Italy to wealthy parents in the early years of the eighteenth century. Just thirty years after the death of Baruch Spinoza and Shabbtai Zevi. The Jewish world into which he was born was still reeling from both the unsettling tides of the Enlightenment and the storms of a false messiah. Jewish Europe was in tatters and historian Heinrich Graetz (p. 199) bluntly describes the period: 'The Jews were at no time in so pitiful a plight as at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century... the former teachers of Europe...had become childish, or worse, dotards...There was not a single cheering event, hardly a person commanding respect who could worthily represent Judaism'. Even Luzzatto in Graetz's opinion was not notable for anything more than his talent for Hebrew poetry (p. 204). He is sold short by Graetz, however, even in terms of his mastery of Hebrew prose and poetry and is recognised today as the 'cornerstone of modern Hebrew literature...which served as a foundation for the integration of Jews into modern European life, and which opened the door to the development of Jewish nationalism and Zionism'. (Tishby, Introduction, xi)

The old structures were crumbling in the heights of the enlightenment and confusion regarding how to transition traditional beliefs and understandings into the new age was ever-present. Paradigms were shifting and Jewish thought was forced to shift with it. 'The 18th century was among the most volatile of the modern era; it was the century that saw the American and French revolutions, the Copernican revolution, Kantian philosophy, and technological upheavals like the steam engine'. (Garb p.93) Graetz's criticism of the Judaic scholarship of the time is mainly based on the lack of worldly knowledge that drew from the discoveries and thinking of the Enlightenment. He also shows great disdain for Kabbalistic study to which Luzzatto was quite partial. However, as Garb confidently asserts 'the further we travel through the line of time and modernity, the ability of the Jewish world to absorb the teachings of the 'Ramhal' increases' (p. 97).

The scholarship in Torah during the late 17th century had been quite affected by the major breaches like those of Spinoza and Zevi in their own respects and great confusion about fundamental principles filled the Jewish world. Luzzatto was more than just a gifted poet and writer, he was a prodigy and excelled in his studies. His parents spared no expense in providing him the highest education (Graetz, p. 233). He was partial to the study of Kabbala which was highly contentious at the time given the aftermath of the Sabbatean movement. Shabbtai Zevi had used kabbalistic teachings as a mode of propaganda to ensnare his supporters in his claims to be the Messiah. Thus, much of the response and rejection of the Sabbatean movement included the rejection of kabbalistic teachings. As a result the small group of students that met with Luzzatto in his early twenties in order to study Kabbala with him had become embroiled in controversy and dispute (Garb p.134).

Similar to Maimonides, Luzzatto saw those who aimed at stamping out his teachings as misguided and ill of spirit. Indeed, he saw the main driver, Rabbi Moshe Hagiz of Alton, as an instrument of the devil. (Shriki, 2001, p. 37). Moshe Hagiz was 'the recognised official zealot, whose utterances were decisive on matters of faith'. (Graetz, p.238) Luzzatto's teacher, R.

Yeshaya Bassan referred to him as an ignoramus and a judgmental man (Shriki, p. 36).

Luzzatto wrote a polemic against Shabbtai Zevi in the form of a proof for classical Lurian kabbala in a treatise he called *Kin'at HaShem Tseva'ot/ Vigilance (Zealousness) for the Lord of Hosts*<sup>2</sup> (Luzzatto, 1984, p.73).

His main desire was to address what he called the darkness of his time. And to bring light to the confused and misguided members of the Jewish people.

*'It is true that the darkness of the Exile dimmed the eyes of Israel. The counsel of the ones with understanding is lost and their wisdom has gone rotten'. (Luzzatto, 1984, Kin'at HaShem, p. 72)*

*'Must we always be walking in darkness and not light?!' (Shriki,, p. 37)*

Luzzatto sought to reconstruct and rejuvenate the fundamentals and principles of Jewish knowledge so that they would be more accessible to the Jewish world and bring clarity and enlightenment to the public. (Garb p. 97)

A unique condition in Luzzatto's attempts to do this was that he was the subject of vicious attack by the prominent rabbis of Europe who saw him as another potential false Messiah (Garb, p.77). This, in no small part because he included kabbalistic principles into his teachings. Therefore, his youth, remarkable knowledge, zealous personality coupled with the period in which he lived, made him a virtual lightning rod for controversy and claims of heresy.

In all of this his rabbi and teacher Yishaya Bassan, respected scholar of Padua in his own right, stood to defend his young student in his endeavours but regularly cautioned him

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tishby, Ch. 4, pp. 223-253



against saying or doing anything too provocative. He even recognised his scholarship in Kabbala to have surpassed that of its founding scholar, Isaac Luria. (Shriki, pp. 38-40)

The controversy eventually forced Luzzatto to leave Padua. He agreed under great pressure from Hagiz and other European rabbis not to write anything in Kabbala (Garb, *ibid.*).

Luzzatto arrived in Amsterdam in 1735 and there he was well received by the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community. He was celebrated and given the position as the Head of the Sephardi yeshiva there. His main source of income, however, was as a cutter of precious stones. Luzzatto's years in Amsterdam were quiet and peaceful and it was there that he wrote his two most famous and widely studied books: *Derekh HaShem* (The Way of God) and *Mesilat Yesharim* (The Path of the Upright) (Garb p.85).

These books drew from his kabbalistic framework but he wrote these for a popular readership not mentioning any kabbalistic concepts overtly as part of his agreement with the European rabbinate. The agreement, although a source of much pain and difficulty for Luzzatto was, in this sense, a positive impetus for it allowed him to produce two books for a popular audience that would become cornerstones in modern Jewish philosophy (Garb p. 85).

As their titles suggest both works are meant to present ways of living rather than particular behaviours. By defining a conceptual path and guidelines the reader is empowered to become familiar with the system within which life choices should be made and behaviours evaluated. The Way of God was written to set out the principles that explain the nature of God, His creation, humanity, providence and theodicy. The Path of the Upright aims at presenting the principles and ideas that allow a person to refine oneself in order to connect to, and build a relationship with, God.

In both books he indicates the problem of misconceptions and confusion as being a source of impediment for being able to follow the path to awareness and enlightenment.

When one knows details of information and understands how they are categorised and systematically interrelated, then he has a great advantage over one who has similar knowledge without such distinction. It is like the difference between seeing a well-arranged garden, planted in rows and groupings as opposed to seeing a wild thicket or forest growing in confusion. (Luzzatto, 1981, p. 9)

He aimed to provide direction and clear understanding empowering the reader to become aware of the framework of Judaism as a whole and through it find clarity for leading one's life especially in the New Age.

The number of details of information is greater than the human mind's ability to hold and one cannot know them all. Rather, what is fitting for a person to strive for is knowledge of the concepts and principles...As our sages said 'The words of Torah should always be in your hands as principles rather than details'...Therefore, dear reader I have written this book and my intent is to set forth the general principles of Jewish faith and service with its proper clarity in such a way that it can be clearly understood to provide an adequate picture, free of ambiguity and confusion.

(Luzzatto, 1981, p.11)

(The treatment of the misconceptions and advocacy for teaching of principles in the Mesilat Yesharim is addressed in Appendix III)

The epidemic deficiency in religious scholarship was the loss of clarity regarding principles and foundational beliefs. This is what Luzzatto sought to rectify with the books he published

in Amsterdam. 'His way was to see principles and structures where others saw a jumble of details'. (Garb p.98)

The controversy which defined Luzzatto's career occurred only over three years of his short life. First in 1730 and then between 1735-6. The controversy was entirely fuelled by accusations of Sabatean heresy. (Tishby, p.223) It is important to note that Luzzatto was only 23 years old when it began. While he was an intellectual prodigy and developed thought far beyond his years one must consider that he could not have progressed quite as far developmentally. He stood strong against not only the irregular and relentless onslaught of Hagiz and his contemporaries who saw him as a 'wise, but young and unmarried man' (Shriki,, p. 108), but also against that of his own teacher, Bassan who at a deep point in the controversy beseeched his pupil to cease and desist his learning and teaching due to the fact that 'those who hate you are far greater than you imagine in your soul; even though your words are good and proper in the eyes of all who see them, your actions are not desirable' (Shriki,, 198). He had seen his beloved pupil who was reported to ask for a woman's hand in marriage directly, as acting in arrogance and without 'humility and saintliness which [truly] bring a person to [experiencing] the Holy Spirit, and lacking *derekh erets* (lit., the way of the land — proper etiquette and manners). An ironic accusation given that the entire Mesilat Yesharim is based on the passage attributed to R. Pinehas ben Yair (Avoda Zara, 20b) that Bassan alludes to in this letter. Bassan was so pressed under the accusations against his pupil that he faltered in his support telling him that 'against my will...I will be forced...to be one of those who stab at you with voices and flames'. (Shriki,, p. 199)

At 23 years old, Luzzatto's attempts at pioneering a new vision and system for Jewish thought that he believed answered the problems that began manifesting as a result of the Age of Enlightenment, was met with heavy backlash. His own teacher threatened desertion. Any person in his position would be weighed down with such pressure and difficulty that it would not be surprising if the endeavour was given up altogether. One might say it was

specifically his youth coupled with his deep devotion to God which afforded him the courage to take such risks.

It is noteworthy that Luzzatto wrote a great deal regarding hope and its place in our service of God from which he no doubt drew his own in the face of his sorrows. He wrote a book, *Taktu Tefilot*, of 515 prayers themed on hope with each prayer ending in the words 'I have hoped for your salvation, God!'. He also wrote an essay called 'On Hope' in which he asserted that (Luzzatto, Otserot, 1986, p.247):

Hope enlivens those who have it...One who hopes in God even if he has few good deeds, he will never be abashed, as it is written: 'Know I am God, those who hope in me will not be abashed (Is., 49:23)'...One who hopes even if he is in hell he will come out [of it]

Although such bravery is indeed a trait that we find in those committed to reconstructing society, Like Maimonides before him, Luzzatto put his hope and faith in God. He wrote in response to his teacher that even if he were to desert him God would be his security (Shriki,, p. 202):

I know today that I am a servant of the God of Israel and my service is desired before his glorious throne...I have not put my faith in a man, nor have I turned to a human, nor will I ever, for I have trusted in God and I do not fear!

### **David Nieto 1654-1728**

David Nieto was born in Venice on the 29th Tebet 5414 (January 18,1654). He died on the same Hebrew date in the year 5488 (1728), 74 years old. He studied theology and medicine at the University of Padua (Petuchowski, p.14) and in Leghorn, was appointed by the

congregation in the double capacity of preacher and doctor (Gaster, p.102). At the time, there was an active relationship between the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community in London and the congregation in Leghorn. The London congregation invited Nieto to take the position of *Haham*, or Chief Rabbi to the community in a letter addressed to him on 4th Sivan, 5461(1701). Nieto accepted the position and moved to London in the end of the month of Elul of 5461 (3 months after receiving the letter). The Mahamad, or Board, did everything in their power to make sure that the new rabbi of the congregation was comfortable. However, they stipulated that in his new capacity he was not permitted to practice medicine (Gaster, p.102).

Nieto, however, found himself at the helm of a Jewish community in London that lacked tradition and clear knowledge of classical, normative Jewish law and practice. These were Spanish and Portuguese Jews who were forced to practice their Judaism in clandestine conditions under the mortal threat of the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions (Petuchowski, p.33). Nieto was faced with a formidable challenge. His congregation was essentially one generation away from outward practicing Catholics!

In order for his role to be successful and to ensure the viable future of his community, he would need to address the misconceptions in Judaism held by his congregation and guide the people towards the normative Jewish practices and beliefs which held not only the Bible, but also the Rabbinic works of the Mishna and Talmud, along with the legal and philosophical works of the likes of Maimonides and R. Joseph Karo as canon.

Jakob J. Petuchowski (p. 33) presents the issue in the following terms:

Those Marranos...who were willing to forsake all their possessions and risk life itself, because they felt compelled to obey the Law of Moses which was given by God Himself, expected Jewish life in Holland or Italy to conform to the pattern of that Law

of Moses which, in its strictly literal sense, had meant so much to them. Imagine, then, their surprise when, in place of the 'Mosaism' they had expected to find, they were confronted by a *Rabbinism...But sooner or later this surprise had to give way to a definite course of action. Would they, or would they not, adjust themselves to the pattern of Rabbinic Judaism?*

Not only had the Marranos been bereft of Jewish tradition for over one hundred years, in that time they had espoused a Christian one. Relinquishing it would be no easy task and would present its own problems. Once one tradition is unraveled all tradition is vulnerable to the same. (Petuchowski, p.34).

Nieto may have been the perfect man for the job. By at least one historian's standards, Nieto was the only scholar in the Jewish world at the time that held a robust and deep enough knowledge to do it.

The Jews were at no time in so pitiful a plight as at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century...The former teachers of Europe...had become childish, or worse, dotards...There was...hardly a person commanding respect who could worthily represent Judaism...Few rabbis occupied themselves with any branch of beyond the Talmud, or entered on a new path in this study. The exceptions can be counted. *Rabbi David Nieto, of London was a man of culture. He was a physician, understood mathematics, was sufficiently able to defend Judaism against calumnies...and wrote much that was reasonable.* (Graetz, pp. 199-200)

Hyamson writes that he 'stood out above the heads of all his predecessors' (p.82). 'In Nieto they had a man who earned respect in Jewish and non-Jewish circles, one who shone as a scholar in religious and secular spheres, who had behind him a brilliant record, and in front of him the promise of an even more brilliant one' (p.90).

Nieto did not just suffice with trying to convince people with an occasional lecture or sermon. He had committed himself to presenting a comprehensive and convincing framework on the subject. He intended to reconstruct the breakdown in knowledge and understanding in his community and the actual and future potential casualties that it could cause by educating the public.

The issue was doubly challenging because he was not only addressing a passive and ignorant public, but an opinionated and scholarly elite as well. This, as with Maimonides and Luzzatto, required that Nieto have, in addition to impeccable scholarship, a personal resolve and conviction to stand up to the opposition. Being that these were often people who were ready to risk their lives for their beliefs, the feud was particularly passionate.

Such opposing viewpoints were fuelled by writings from the likes of Uriel da Costa who, born in Portugal, as a New Christian, moved to Amsterdam in 1617 in order to reconnect to his Jewish heritage. When he arrived, however, he found the rabbinic Judaism that he encountered to be contemptuous and veering from what he believed to be the pure Mosaic law of the Bible. He is quoted as saying that the 'manners and ordinances of the Jews do not correspond at all to those which Moses had prescribed', and that 'The present-day sages of the Jews have still retained their manners as well as their malignant character; stiff-neckedly they fight for the sect and institutions of the detestable Pharises'. (Pet. p.34-35)

Da Costa preceded Nieto. He overlapped with Barukh Spinoza who was a son of the same Jewish community in Amsterdam. Amsterdam was the mother community of the one in London<sup>3</sup> and the ties were tight. Nieto had come into more than just the passive effects of persecution, he was fighting against a considerable corpus of, what was to Rabbinic

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<sup>3</sup> The Portuguese Jews of London were admitted by Oliver Cromwell in 1656 after being petitioned by the community in Amsterdam. The petition was spearheaded by Rabbi Menashe ben Israel. See Hyamson, pp.12-13.

Judaism, heretical thought that was uniquely stemming from the Sephardi community (Pet., p.40). Da Costa had published 'Examination of Pharisaic Traditions' in which he detailed several disagreements with the traditions and law of Rabbinic Judaism<sup>4</sup>. The Marranos, as explained, were particularly susceptible to these arguments.

Thus, Nieto had to defend the Oral Law against individuals of considerable intellectual accomplishments as well as the popular audience. His tactic for doing so was to write a book rich in substance for the scholars but cast in four parts in the format of a dialogue between a non-believer and a scholar of the Oral Law for the average reader (Pet., p.19). He modelled it after Rabbi Yehuda haLevi's *Kuzari* — Actually calling its subtitle 'The Second Kuzari' in which the Scholar or *Haver* revisited the King of the Kuzars. He called it *Mateh Dan* - The Staff of Judgment', 'DaN' in Hebrew (דן) being the acronym of his Initials David Nieto.

Nieto used many of the arguments that had been used by previous rabbis against the Karaite Jews because they shared in common with the Marranos the questioning of the validity of the Oral Law. Yehuda HaLevi was an obvious source to draw from as was Maimonides. (Pet., p.70)

But throughout he aims to establish the principle of Rabbinic authority and the validity of the Oral Law. He does not simply try to prove this law or that, but through using the various laws as examples, builds the case for the rabbinic framework. (See Appendix II for a treatment of this)

With this presentation Nieto was not simply refuting particular arguments, he was offering a coherent presentation and explanation of the Oral Torah and Rabbinic Judaism to the people. In doing so he not only proved its validity but also empowered the people with a conceptual system with which they could understand all aspects of the Oral Torah.

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<sup>4</sup> See Petuchowski, pp.35-40 for a detailed listing.



The bravery that seems to run through the bold individuals who seek to reconstruct society through education was quite present in Nieto and in his determination to teach authentic principles he stood his ground when challenged. He was no stranger to sharp and relentless attack.

Although Haham Nieto enjoyed the support and respect of the majority of his community and those outside of it, there were those whose criticism was a source of great challenge and difficulty for him. This came out strongly after a now famous discourse that Nieto gave on 20 November 1703. It was the Sabbath and he was delivering the discourse in the *Yeshiba* (House of Study). He sought to address the elements of Deism that were budding in society that believed that God did not intervene in the world and nature. Nieto insisted that nature was in fact God working through His providence. In other words, 'God' and 'Nature' were one and the same. He asserted that all elements of nature were ascribed to God by the Biblical and rabbinic authors. (Pet., p.15)<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the idea that God and Nature were one and the same was highly sensitive because it sounded terribly similar to the philosophy of Spinoza's Pantheism. This was particularly incendiary because Barukh Spinoza was bitterly excommunicated by the 'mother' community of Amsterdam in 1656. The ban had never been lifted. Thus, Nieto's comments were seen by some as congruous with Spinoza's and, therefore, heretical.

Dissension arose in the congregation. Joshua Zarfatti a member of the congregation refused to enter a wedding at which Nieto was present (Solomons, p.10) so as not be in the same room as the heretic. This was reported to the Mahamad (the lay leadership of the community) who had required a £5 penalty for insulting or speaking badly about the Haham (Hyamson, p.90-91). In this case, because it was a sensitive issue and the affront was quite

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<sup>5</sup> See also (Ashkenazi, 1995, 18).

public and serious the fine was £100 (Solomons, p.10) which was quite a sum in 1703.

Zarafatti challenged this penalty which was declined by the Mahamad and it was announced from the Teba (central prayer podium) in synagogue that Zarfatti was not permitted to enter the synagogue (Solomons, p.10). Nieto had written a defence of his position which he called *De la Divina Providencia* and submitted it to the Mahamad. The treatise was published, but failed to appease the congregants who were on side with Zarfatti.

Nieto found himself embroiled in an attack on his very orthodoxy of thought and was challenged as being himself a heretic. This particular attack goes beyond even the attacks that Maimonides and Luzzatto suffered. Both were derided regarding their scholarship but there were no real questions as to their faithfulness to the core principles of Judaism. Nieto, on the other hand, was considered by the opposing individuals to be a heretic. Notably, however, because Nieto was Chief Rabbi and had the backing of his lay leadership they came to his defense and acted to quell the opposition; a privilege neither Maimonides nor Luzzatto enjoyed.

Because of this, and the subtleties but considerable and important differences between Spinoza and Nieto's views, including the differences between pantheism and panentheism and *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* (Pet., p.15), Nieto needed external affirmation and accreditation of his views as being in line with traditional Rabbinic Judaism from someone who was a trusted scholar of such standing. Therefore, the question was sent by the Mahamad to Rabbi Zevi Ashkenazi of Altona (later to become the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Amsterdam). The community in London received a response from R Zevi on Friday, 7 August 1705. The Haham Zevi, as he was known, asserts in his response that not only is Haham Nieto not heretical in his views, but he is to be commended.

'His statement that nature and God and God and nature are all one, is what I say as well! And I endorse it and support it based on what King David wrote in Psalms 147

'Who covers the heavens with clouds, Who prepares dew for the earth...This idea is straight and holy and those who do not believe in it are the ones who are considered heretics... ' (Ashkenazi, 1995 p.53-54).

Nieto stood strong through the waves of controversy and maintained his ground on the basis of his robust knowledge and the conviction of his heart. He was not one to shy away from bold statements or teachings and spoke his truth courageously. One such instance was a response that he wrote against a sermon delivered by the Archbishop of Cranganor on the occasion of Auto-da-Fe at Lisbon in 1705. Nieto was concerned still about the fate of the victims of the Inquisition which was still manifest in the Iberian Peninsula at the time. (Pet., p. 21)

Nieto also wrote *Esh Dat* (Fiery Religion) which was a diatribe against Nehemia Hayyun, an old adherent of Shabbtai Zevi, the false Messiah. It was written in Hebrew and issued at publication in 1715 with a Spanish translation. This was done for the Marranos in his congregation who did not understand Hebrew. (Solomons, p. 30-31) He believed that by teaching the public and presenting well-sourced and founded principles in a readable and easy-to-digest manner he could change the dangerous misconceptions of his community.

This was not done without great care and devotion to the people. A beautiful passage at the end of his *Mateh Dan* he expresses the commitment and dedication that he had to his community in London when the King asks him to remain in the country of the Kuzars (Nieto, 2008, 361-362, p.315).

Kuzar: Should you consent to stay with us here, I will give you a million golden dinars, for your departure hence would weigh heavily upon me.

Haver: Were you to offer me all the gold and silver in the world, I could not delay here longer; I must get my way back to the great city of London, to minister to the holy congregation of Sepharadim, may God maintain soundly their establishment, as I have done since the beginning of 5462/1701.

Each of these rabbis, responding to the issues of their time, took it upon themselves to respond to breakdowns in Jewish, religious society and sought to reconstruct it. Each used similar tactics as a template for affecting the change, albeit at different periods, in different regions and with differing philosophies.



## **Chapter 4 - Addressing Common Principles**

As mentioned, the pedagogical approach of Social Reconstruction aims at teaching principles in order to empower students with a *framework* for thought with which they can make decisions and evaluate ideas. In Judaism there are certain principles that are the firm foundations of its edifice upon which all else is built. God is at the centre. The mitzvot (commandments) are its functionality and the thoughts and teachings of the sages throughout history, its fruitful development.

God, the commandments, and rabbinic, scholarly exposition are the wellsprings of traditional Judaism. Misconceptions in any of these areas cause breakdowns in Jewish thought and observance.

Our rabbis dealt with all three of these issues in their teachings and hoped to mitigate the damage caused by the misunderstandings and misconceptions to which these issues were vulnerable.

### **God**

Failing to properly understand the basic ideas of God in Judaism at best leads to irrational, superstitious ideas, and at worst, to heresy and idol worship<sup>6</sup>. God is the foundation upon which all else is based. If the concept of God is unclear everything else is unclear. For this reason Judaism's ultimate credo is 'Hear Israel! God is our Lord, God is one'. (Deut., 6:4)

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Dayan Dr I. Grunfeld, *Horeb - A philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances* by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, Introduction by Translator, xlii.

## Maimonides' Treatment

During Maimonides' time anthropomorphising God was commonplace. There were rabbis who, according to Maimonides, crossed the line in attributing physical attributes to God in more than figurative terms.

Maimonides is well known for outlining 13 principles that form the core belief system of Judaism. Of these the first four deal with the existence and nature of God. (Maimonides, 1995, p. 143)

1. God Exists
2. God is One
3. God has no body of any kind.
4. God is absolutely primal.

These four aspects of God are all interrelated, but they are, according to Maimonides essential for every member of Israel and adherent to the Jewish religion to know.

Maimonides reiterates these principles in his Mishne Torah in its first chapter.

In the Mishne Torah he does not actually refer to God at all at the beginning but rather *Matsui Rishon* - 'Primal Existence'. He was aware that using the term 'god' would not help to address misconceptions as people would simply insert their own notion of go as a definition for the word. He, therefore, first defines the entity of which he speaks and then names it God.

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdoms is to know that there is Primal Existence and He gives existence to all that exists...This existence is God. (Maimonides, 2009, 1:5)

One specific misconception in Maimonides' time was that of the third principle, God's corporeality. He considers one who anthropomorphises God to be a heretic.

One who says there is one god but he is of body and shape [is a heretic].

(Maimonides, 2009)

This misconception was not only held by laypeople but also rabbinic authorities as is expressed by the most prominent and well-known of his critics, Rabbi Abraham ben David of Provence (1120-1198) whose glosses to the Mishne Torah are printed in most common editions. He sharply rejects Maimonides' assigning heresy to those who anthropomorphise God.

'Why has he called this individual a heretic? How many great and better than he followed this thinking based on what they read in the scriptures and the rabbinic parables which confuse....' (Maimonides, 2001)<sup>7</sup>

Confusions in this area also caused lines to be blurred between Judaism and Christianity. As Maimonides highlights in his Epistle on Resurrection (Maimonides, 1994).

When the chief of the prophets wished by order of God to teach us that He is One, without associates, and to remove from our hearts those wrong doctrines that the Dualists propound, he proclaimed this fundamental: *The Lord is our God, the Lord alone* [Deut. 6:4]. But the Christians utilized this verse to prove that God is one of three, teaching that *Lord, our God, the Lord* makes three names, all followed

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<sup>7</sup> Mishne Torah, Teshuba, 3:7, Gloss of R'AbD.



by one, which indicates that they are three and that the three are one. Far be God from what they say in their ignorance.

Therefore, Maimonides saw this as a core and essential misconception that had to be clarified.

### Luzzatto's Treatment

In the 18th century after the likes of Barukh Spinoza had left the fold of Judaism as a result of exploring philosophical thought, knowledge of God alone based on rational principles became a danger that was likely to bring people into heresy. If God could not be explained rationally and philosophically He could not be wholeheartedly accepted. This caused the armour of religion to weaken and become highly vulnerable.

The study of philosophy opened doors to novel thought that people had not previously entertained at all. This became a dangerous door to open at the dawning of the Enlightenment. There was thus merit in believing and accepting truths because of their traditional merit; they had been passed down from one generation to the next. A faithfulness to time-honoured principles upon which we based our lives was excentuated. In his *Derekh HaShem* he opens almost identically to Maimonides' first words of the Mishne Torah. However, there is one conspicuous difference that Luzzatto adds which was important in addressing the misconceptions of his period. Luzzatto includes the word *Emuna* - faith to the word *Da'at* - knowledge when introducing God. He emphasises faith.

Every member of Israel must have *faith* and know that there is Primal Existence...  
and He gives existence to all that exists, and He is God. (Luzzatto, 1981)

He continues to stress the aspect of faithfully accepting God stressing that it is enough that it is an accepted truth by our forefathers for generations rather than the knowledge-based approach favoured by Maimonides even as he is sure to validate its value.

These concepts can also be verified by demonstrable proofs...through such scientific disciplines as physics and astronomy...we will not occupy ourselves with this, however, but will rather set forth the well-known basic principles handed down by tradition. (Luzzatto, 1981)

In the Jewish world at the time there were also heavy strains of kabbalistic thought in the aftermath of Shabbtai Zvi's messianic movement. Luzzatto, being a scholar of the kabbala sought to ground the ideas into a mode of thought that definitively established the core beliefs so as to set them apart from the flaws of kabbalistic thinking. One such problem was the understanding of the kabbalistic Sefirot of which there are ten. People were inclined to think of the Sefirot themselves as various expressions of God and misunderstood them to be gods that one could serve and pray to. He writes in his treatise against the Sabbatean movement (Luzzatto, 1984, p. 71)

They have attributed a body and bodily occurrences to the creator of man!...From the words of these 'Mekubalim' who follow him (Zvi) and drink from his well they have been called 'The believers in the Ten' along with all manner of lies and abomination and people have found reason to lean on their words!

So although he based the foundation of God's existence primarily in faith, he nonetheless, felt it important to define what our understanding of God is. In the first chapter of his Derekh HaShem he outlines this in six core principles:

1. The fact of His existence
2. His perfection
3. The necessity of His existence
4. His absolute independence
5. His simplicity
6. His unity

In doing so, Luzzatto aimed to clarify the confusion and reestablish the truth of Judaism to its appropriate status.

### Nieto's Treatment

As mentioned, Nieto dealt with concepts of Deism in his time. Isaac Newton's mathematical interpretations of the universe along with the likes of Spinoza's Biblical criticism which questioned its divinity introduced the notion that while God exists, He does not interfere with the world. Nieto made a point of refuting this idea. One of the more famous treatments of his on the issue was the lecture he gave in London on 20 November 1703. He felt that God had to be 'brought back' into the phenomena of life and the universe. If people did not believe that God was responsive and engaged with the affairs of human beings there would be no place for real religious and spiritual life. Although we do not have the transcript of his lecture, we know he said it because it became the subject of a great controversy.

## Mitsvot - Commandments

Understanding the purpose of the mitsvot and how we are meant to relate to them is central to a robust involvement in traditional Judaism. If covenant with God is at the centre of Judaism, mitsvot are modes of acting within the covenant and build the relationship that we have with God. Therefore, Seeing the mitsvot as if they are mechanical tokens for personal reward creates a mindset that is based primarily on personal gratification and self-protection rather than focusing on building an active relationship with God. Similarly, if we only see mitsvot as behaviours meant to keep us obedient to God rather than behaviours that are meant to better our own spiritual and physical lives so that we might be more fit to engage in the covenant with God, they become intrusive rather than beneficent.

### Maimonides' Treatment

Maimonides insists that mitsvot should not be seen as mechanical modes of self-protection or units which are primarily meant to yield reward. He stresses this both in his Commentary on the Mishna and in the Mishne Torah. In the Commentary he addresses the statement of R. Hananya b. Akashya which says that 'God wanted to bring merit to Israel. Therefore, he made Torah and mitsvot abundant'. He writes that the point of the high number of mitsvot is to enhance the statistical benefit of doing one correctly with full love and commitment. This negates the idea that the multitude of mitsvot is so that one can get add more merit with the performance of more mitsvot. It is not a quantitative goal, but a qualitative goal.

Among the foundations of the faith is that when a person fulfils one mitstva of the 613 appropriately and as it is meant to be, and did not include with it an ulterior motive of any kind at all, but rather does it for its own sake from love...he thereby merits the world to come. (Maimonides, 1995, II, p.165)

He reiterates this in various ways in the Mishne Torah but most explicitly in the Laws of Teshuba.

One should not say 'I am hereby doing mitsvot...in order to receive the blessings written in the Torah...it is not fitting to serve God in this way...One who serves from love engages in Torah and mitsvot for no ulterior motive...rather they do what is true because it is true and goodness follows from it naturally. (Maimonides, 2009)

Maimonides made the point that performing the commandments is an act of love and that, therefore, they must be performed as such. Ulterior motives of any kind negatively affect their meaning and worth. They are not acts that God needs us to get done, but modes in which we can build love.

#### Luzzatto's Treatment

Luzzatto addresses the same issue and presents a similar point albeit in a different way. He adds that the actual performance of mitsvot affects one's existential spirituality and purity and thus facilitates connection with God in that the heightened holiness of a person makes one fit to connect with the Holiest of holies.

Every act of observing God's commandments brings a person closer to God step by step. The individual then attains a degree of God's light corresponding to the degree of closeness and this in turn causes a degree of perfection.... (Luzzatto, 1981)

He emphasises the aspect of intent and mindset in the performance of mitsvot in his introduction to the dialogue version of the Mesilat Yesharim<sup>8</sup>. He asserts that intent is at the

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Maimonides Hilkhot Teshuba, 7:7, where he states that the mindset of teshuba is what renders the performance of a mitsvah as genuine and acceptable or not.

core of the action of mitsva. This was important because there was much focus on the practical and legal elements of the mitzvot but not on the purpose and goals. The lack of focus on the covenantal element of mitzvot in that they are a mode of relating and connecting to God causes the adherence to mitzvot to be mechanical in nature as actions that must be accomplished rather than behaviours that, essentially, are acts of love. Luzzatto spends the entire introduction of the dialogue version of his *Mesilat Yesharim* to address this by pointing exposing the 'scholar' to pay no mind to the love and fear aspects of service of God while a great deal of attention is paid to the legal and practical aspects.

When we scrutinise the issue we find that the mitzvot of action are one category and the mitzvot of the heart and mind are another...The verse places the commandments of the heart before the commandments of the body for it is befitting...the core aspect of service is in the refinement of thought and then expressed in actions. (Luzzatto, 2003, p. 62)

Mitsvot to Luzzatto are not simply moral acts, but means to an end. They are aimed at building a relationship of love and reverence with God through action coupled with mindset. In addition the mitzvot themselves refine, purify and sanctify us so that we can form a relationship with God<sup>9</sup>.

### Nieto's Treatment

Nieto used his knowledge of medicine to express the concept of mitzvot. He also quotes the statement of Hanania b. Akashia from the end of Tractate Makkot as Maimonides did, but he asks if indeed the multitude of commandments is meant to bring merit, it is odd that the negative commandments outnumber the positive (active) ones by 117! Indicating that it is difficult to achieve merit through passivity.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Maimonides, *Moreh Nebukhim*, Kafeh ed., pp.348-9.

Dan: The negative commandments outnumber the positive by 117!

Naftali: Indeed, it seems so.

Dan: What are their punishments?

Naftali: Death, lashes, or being spiritually expelled.

Dan: If that is the case then R. Hanania b. Akashia should have said that God wished to *punish* Israel! For there are only 248 ways to achieve merit and there are 365 ways to sin! (Nieto, 1705, II, 8-12, p. 24a)

Nieto explains further that the punishment that follows a transgression is a healing for the soul and it allows it to gain forgiveness and atonement. He explains that the transgressions affect the sanctity of the soul. Thus, the caution against engaging in them protects the soul from becoming damaged and defiled. One such example he brings is with the Torah's sexual prohibitions.

Concerning the sexual prohibitions it is written 'Do not defile yourselves with all of these for with all of these did the [other] nations defile themselves who I am sending away from before you and the Land was made impure' (Lev., 18:27). Here you see that these things are inherently impure...Just as you don't ask the physician, who warns you not to eat certain foods, why they are poisonous, so to we do not ask the Holy One what is poisonous about the prohibitions...they are fatal poisons to the soul! Here you see that God brought us merit even with the negative commandments. (Nieto, 1705, II, 22-24, p.24b)

Nieto thus sees the mitsvot as existentially affecting one's spiritual state and ability to be close to God. This was important in Nieto's community because as Marranos, having come from the Catholic world, the minutiae of the mitsvot were an issue and difficult to understand. The need to establish the obligatory aspect of the details of the mitsvot was imperative for

‘whoever does not believe that the commandments and their minutiae, and the minutiae of their minutiae, contain wonderful and divine secrets, cannot properly be called a Jew’. (Pet., p.66)

All of the rabbis, however, see in the mitsvot modes of connecting with God rather than simply ways to refine the human being or society.

### **Midrash - Rabbinic Parable and Homiletic Interpretations**

The aspect of the rabbinic writings called ‘Midrash’ (lit. ‘interpretation’ or ‘expounding’) has often been a source of great confusion. The fanciful hyperbolic style of Midrash was not always understood to be hyperbole but, instead, taken literally by many readers. Indeed, even certain groups of scholars insisted on seeing them in their literal sense. Seeing them in this way caused Rabbinic Judaism to be seen as irrational and irrelevant by rationalists and caused those who accepted them at face value to lose their own rational and grounded approach to Torah and its commandments. The very term Midrash, however, implies that these stories are expositions that are based in abstract and multi-layered meanings and thus parable is used in order to present the subtleties and robustness of the ideas.

Due to the fanciful nature of Midrash it is vulnerable to critics of rabbinic thought as well as to literal and simplistic thinkers. Therefore, it is the subject of great inquiry among those who wish to understand rabbinic thought and all of the rabbis in our study have dealt with it.

### **Maimonides Treatment**

Maimonides recognised the misconceptions regarding the Midrash as a major issue. He initially intended to write a book explaining the Midrash.



I will author a book [in which] I will compile all the Midrash that is in the Talmud and other works and I will explain them and elucidate them in a manner that is fitting with the truth. I will bring proofs to all of it from their own words. I will reveal what what can be taken at face value, and what is parable...in this book I will explain many aspects of faith....(Maimonides, 1995, II, p.140.)

However, in the end he chose not to do so and instead wrote the *Moreh Nebukhim* as a means to deal with the underlying misconceptions. Maimonides understood the Midrashic literature to be the 'secrets of Torah' and the parables are 'Riddles of the Wise'. (Maimonides, 1995, II, p. 137). These are the elements of metaphysics and abstract philosophy which are presented in parable.

Maimonides outlined three different ways that people approach Midrash. The first, are those who read it literally and believe that doing so is an honour to the Rabbis who authored them. The second are those who scoff at the fanciful nature of the Midrash and dismiss it. The third are those, about whom Maimonides writes 'By God! They are so few that they can hardly be called a group!' (Maimonides, 1995, II, p. 137) who understand that the Rabbis of the Talmud were presenting the Midrash in parable in order to present abstract and sophisticated ideas. 'They understand that their words consist of simple and secret meaning' (ibid.). Maimonides thus set out an appropriate approach to understanding Midrash, thus mitigating the misunderstandings. He did not, however, believe that those who misunderstand would relinquish their beliefs. Indeed, he cautions them from reading his expositions.

'If you are reading my words and are of either of the two first groups, don't delve into any of my words on this issue, for it will not help you at all. Indeed, it will harm you... how can one who is used to eating junk food digest health food without first rejecting it?' (ibid.)

### Luzzatto's Treatment

Luzzatto's approach to the Midrash is almost identical to Maimonides. It is quite likely that he wrote his explanation (in 1740) as a response to the heretics he encountered in Sephardi circles in Amsterdam (Pet., p. 101).

He presents the Midrash as containing the secrets of the Torah; the aspects that address the metaphysics of Torah as well as the various aspects of the studies of divinity. He also sees them as riddles and parables but he goes on to much more detail regarding the various types of modes used by the Rabbis of the Talmud. (This was a natural approach by Luzzatto who was a noted literary expert.)

Like Maimonides he writes that there is danger in exposing the metaphysical ideas (Luzzatto, 1961, Intro, p. 18) (Extended quote in Appendix VIb)

He explains further that there were principles the sages used in expounding these ideas and in constructing these parables (ibid.) and the reader must, therefore, read them with an awareness of these principles. Luzzatto's presentation of Midrash recognises them as sophisticated ideas presented in parable in order to protect their value and become accessible only to the refined and sophisticated thinker. They are not, however, to be seen as expressive of poor or elementary thinking among the sages who developed them.

### Nieto's Treatment

Nieto is in line with both the approaches of both Maimonides and Luzzatto in that he sees the Midrash as bearing wisdom that must be uncovered and is concealed by parable and hyperbole. In his unique way he claims that anyone who would denigrate the Sages as a result of their Midrash should be held in contempt. (Nieto, 2008, IV, 304, p. 214)

(Extended quote in Appendix VIc)

Nieto clearly recognises that, as Maimonides wrote, there is underlying meaning and interpretation to the parables of the sages and that indeed they did not expect that the fanciful nature of the stories should be understood in its literal sense.

## Chapter 5 - Methodology

In order to further test this pattern outlined with Maimonides, Luzzatto and Nieto, I applied it to a course that I had given in London in 2016 on Jewish Misconceptions to see if it fit into the template of Social Reconstruction that I presented in Chapter 1. I also looked to see if it followed the similar tradition of addressing misconceptions in Jewish history and examined it to see if it fit the patterns that I identified with the three rabbis in Chapters 3 and 4.

I used the Action Research method. 'Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously' (Gilmore, Krantz and Ramirez, 1986). The idea here is to not only address the issues that are being faced — in the case of my study, the misconceptions of Judaism and their effects — but also to analyse the situation in tandem with addressing it. The way in which I addressed the immediate situation was to prepare and deliver the lectures rather than write a book. The lectures were an immediate response to an issue and it also allowed me to build relationships with people so that they could address questions to me about their framework of Judaism. I did not formally examine the situation prior to the lectures. There was a recognition from the students that the circumstance of their general Jewish knowledge was either flawed or lacking and I had recognised the same. I did not, however, actively engage in hearing feedback and response to the lectures until the end of the series when I began this dissertation.

There will be three parts to this analysis:

- A. The Story - How the creation and implementation of the series occurred. I will reflect on my intentions for doing it, and the impetus for creating it.

B. Feedback - I will analyse the feedback from the participants and examine whether they recognised the effects of the lectures in a way that would validate the aim of Social Reconstruction. I ascertained this feedback both through a questionnaire and interview (Yin, 2003 p.89). This was done because of the human nature of the study of which the respondents could provide significant insight. The type of interview for this study was one with structured questions in the style of a survey (Yin, 2003 p. 91) but being in interview format allows for greater elaboration in the response. The questionnaire was submitted to the people who regularly attended the class via Survey Monkey. It included 7 questions<sup>10</sup> with 16 respondents between the ages of 22 and 50 male and female. Interviews<sup>11</sup> were also conducted by one of the students in the class to ten volunteers who attended the class as well. These individuals were between the ages of 22 and 50 both male and female, who elaborated on similar questions that aimed to focus on the aspects of social reconstruction that was part of the course.

C. The Curriculum - I will examine the curriculum and some of the source sheets and analyse whether they are similar to the three subjects (namely, God, mitzvot, and midrash) that the rabbis had addressed in their approaches to addressing the same misconceptions.

#### A. The Story

In 2014 I became the Senior Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Sephardi Community of England. In that capacity I am recognised as a leader in the greater Jewish community and I am asked and expected to present and speak on Jewish ideas and values publicly.

Key programmes and classes that will be identified as the Senior Rabbi's projects will begin in September 2014 and held at regular intervals. These will be planned,

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 3

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 3 for questions

supported and promoted by the Mahamad (Board of Directors). Some of these will include weekly...and monthly classes. (Dweck, 2014)

One of such engagements was a series of weekly lectures that I gave to a group of Jewish people between the ages of 20-40. These individuals were predominantly orthodox Jews with varying levels of observance. Most of the people attending live in Hendon which is a Jewish neighbourhood, but there were people who came to the lectures who lives in Stanmore, St John's Wood, Hampstead and elsewhere.

This series followed one that I gave on Maimonides' 13 principles of faith to the same group in 2015. These lectures were given in Hendon at Porat Yosef synagogue on Bell Lane. They took place on Wednesday nights for approximately one hour at 9pm between October and May.

The lectures on the 13 principles dealt with the philosophical underpinnings of Judaism. After the series a group of the students approached me and asked that I give another series of lectures. In this series they wanted me to address common misconceptions in Judaism. They had realised from the first lectures that there was much about the fundamental principles that they did not know and thus realised that there was likely much about what they did know or notions that they had that were misunderstood or misconceived. They recognised that what they did already know was not necessarily clear or correct.

The students presented me with fourteen subjects that they wanted me to address (See Appendix IV for syllabus). From October to May of 2016 I delivered a weekly lecture on the topics they had presented to me. I presented them with sources and support and aimed at presenting the ideas in terms of principles and frameworks rather than various points of data on the subject.

I agreed to do these lectures because I recognised that the Jewish education of these individuals was quite poor and as a result the commitment to Jewish life among many of them and their peers was deteriorating. More than once an individual had come to me as a result of listening to the first series, and confessed their struggles with Jewish faith and that they had never been taught what they were learning in my lectures. They sought greater clarity and found joy in the approach and information that I was teaching. At the onset I had not intended consciously on engaging in Social Reconstruction through the educational process. However, upon reflection and study I believe that the endeavour can be seen as following the pedagogical approach of Social Reconstruction.

## B. The Feedback

As explained the view of Social Reconstruction is that society, or segments of it, can be reconstructed through education. Five elements of the approach were identified.

1. Recognition of Social Breakdown
2. Actions taken to change it
3. Working/thinking frameworks are presented rather than specific data points
4. Seeking the empowerment of learners with knowledge and principles
5. Approach is brave and/or radical

Points 2 and 3 will be addressed in the next section in which I examine the curriculum.

Points 1, 4 and 5 will be examined below.

### Social Breakdown

For me the recognition of the breakdown in this cohort of the London orthodox Jewish community regarding Jewish ideas was apparent based on the questions that I was being

asked. As we will see it was symptomatic of the London Jewish Community in general. I received enquiries about subjects like God, mitzvot, rabbinic authority and providence and could easily recognise that from the questions there was a great lack of knowledge. Many of the questions assumed myths or superstitions. There was considerable confusion regarding the nature of Jewish law and practice with people confusing or not knowing the difference between laws that were biblical in origin as opposed to those that were rabbinic or those that were merely custom.

This became evident in the responses to one of the questions of the questionnaire: 'The lectures addressed questions/misconceptions you had about Judaism'. In response to this question 31.25% answered 'very much' and 62.5% responded 'to a large extent'. In response to the question: 'The lectures met what you were seeking', 50% responded 'very much' and 37.5% responded 'to a large extent'. Thus it showed that there were indeed misconceptions and that they had heard fitting clarifications.

I also realised that many of the misconceptions came from poor education and scholarship. People would say that they learned this or that idea in school or from their rabbi. Or it would be something that they had always seen done but did not know the origins.

An interesting example of this is regarding the law of washing hands before eating bread. I had mentioned in a class that it was permitted to speak in between washing the hands and saying the blessing over the bread. In most Jewish circles this is contrary to usual practice. Most people are careful not to speak between washing and saying the blessing over the bread. Yet, few people learn this from actually studying the sources but rather follow what they see. I had posted on Facebook (2016) the source for the allowance to speak and also mentioned that I had seen the Chief Rabbi of Israel and recognised Halakhic authority, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef speak in between on many occasions. The shock of this one legal point that went against common knowledge was so great that it became the most read and responded



to post I had ever offered on Facebook. Close to 50% more people saw and engaged with that post (39,144 views and shared by 131 people as of writing this) than ones in which I praised the Pope for showing compassion to homosexuals and in which I condemned the Belsz Hassidic community for not allowing women to drive (Facebook, 2015)<sup>12</sup> (17,176 views and shared by 55 people), which, based on their political implications, in the orthodox Jewish world one would have thought that they would have elicited far greater response than a commonplace practice before eating.

### Seeking the Empowerment of the Student

The goal in presenting ideas in general frameworks as opposed to specific data points or details is in order to empower the students with a knowledge of principles so that they can form working concepts of Judaism through which they will be able to relate to and evaluate various bits of information. This approach concentrates on defining concepts so that they are properly understood. In essence it offers a 'Jewish lens' through which one can view the world.

In order to ascertain whether the students felt that they were empowered with changed perceptions the following questions were asked in the interviews: 'After the series did you feel better informed about Judaism and its framework in general?' Some of the responses to this were 'Yes, completely' (3) 'I definitely feel better informed'. (10) 'It made a difference to how I think philosophically'. (1) 'Yes, especially on the notion of prayer which I knew nothing about; very eye opening'. (4) A better understanding of God; more about what's the truth'. (5) 'The topics involved were the foundations of Judaism and, therefore, very relevant especially the first lectures on prayer, mitsvot, and God's involvement in the world. (10)

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/RJDweck/posts/856502957738135>

It is clear from the responses that the students felt that they had gained useful knowledge and were enlightened as to their misconceptions. They recognised a difference in how they think about Judaism as well as that they were informed about the fundamental principles.

Approach is Brave/Radical

Because Social Reconstruction seeks to change the status quo it is likely to suffer from backlash. There is little formally taught in the orthodox Jewish world about Jewish principles. As the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes in his forward to his book Radical Then, Radical Now (Sacks, 2008) as to why one should remain a Jew?

Time and again I asked, not What? but Why?...I saw the originality, the distinctiveness, the sheer sanity of [Judaism's] vision of the world and of mankind, and how little is understood by ourselves and others even now. We need to go back to our texts. Crisis is creative.

The crisis he speaks of is the high rate of assimilation in the Jewish community and he identifies the core issue as a lack of education and knowledge of the Jewish vision and principles.

A JPR Report of Jews in the United Kingdom in 2013 (Graham, Staetsky and Boyd, 2013) showed that only 14% of British Jews felt that studying Jewish religious texts was important. 25% said it was 'fairly important'.

Since the principles address frameworks for thinking they are often contentious because when one is teaching data they are being taught what to think or what to do, but when principles are taught they are learning *how* to think. When there are systems in place that

teach one way of thinking about Judaism that includes misconceptions, correcting those misconceptions addresses people's perceptions about Judaism. These misconceptions often come from the common and popular teachings of the accepted teachers in a community. Challenges to these concepts, therefore, challenge the accepted authority in some way.

For this reason, all of the rabbis in this study experienced significant opposition to their teachings from those who saw their messages as being counter to the frameworks that they held. In our interviews some mention was made of the fact that other rabbis are not teaching these ideas. One person said 'No one else deals with this'. (5) Another said 'He addressed a wide range of topics, especially sexuality, women, a lot of rabbis don't address these in an honest manner'. (7) 'Good to see that a rabbi had such an approach for misconceptions'. (8) 'It turned some things we know about Judaism on its head'.(1)

Czesław Miłosz said: "In a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot." There is a certain boldness necessary in order to speak about what others will not in a society. Such situations are also often met with opposition by those who may feel threatened by people saying things that others are not saying and might prefer are left unsaid.

I faced opposition from prominent Sephardi rabbis in the London community because some of their students were attending my lectures and were commenting to and asking these rabbis about the ideas that I was teaching which challenged the ideas that these Sephardi rabbis had been teaching. The rabbis both chastised the students for learning with me and encouraged them to 'broaden their horizons' and learn with other people. These rabbis also spoke poorly about me and my beliefs to other eminent Israeli rabbis saying that what I was teaching was problematic. These backlashes threatened my standing in the community, especially since I was new to the community having only arrived one year prior to giving this lecture series. It did help, however, that I held a senior rabbinic position which gave weight to

my authority. I record all of this maintaining anonymity for those involved because of its highly sensitive political and social nature. (McKosker Barnard & Gerber, 2001)

### C. The Curriculum

As mentioned in Chapter 2 the approach of Social Reconstruction believes that actions can be taken to keep society from breakdown by educating. In addressing these misconceptions I aimed to present the 14 subjects as principles with sources for each. I used Talmudic sources to show how the ideas were dealt with in a traditional rabbinic framework. I also used later scholars who approached the issues from a conceptual view, like Maimonides and Luzzatto which would help solidify the points. I presented these sources to the students at each lecture so that they could see the roots of my messages to them in traditional sources.

After the main lecture I opened the floor for questions so that people could clarify any points that they felt were needed. I attempted to, therefore, present the ideas that they were seeking in a well-supported, conceptual framework. I believe that this action can indeed be seen as an act to affect change and reconstruct the lacks in the society's knowledge.

When asked in the survey whether the lectures had addressed the modern misconceptions that they were struggling with over 99% responded in the affirmative. 62.5% responded 'very much' and 37.5 % responded 'to a large extent'. One of the people interviewed recognised the conceptual nature of the classes although he hadn't expected it 'It was more conceptual sometimes, I thought it would be more practical'. (1)

When asked in the survey whether the information was well supported over 87% responded in the affirmative. (50% 'very much' 37.5% 'to a large extent' 12.5% 'neutral') Some responses to this question during the interviews were: 'Yes a lot of sources were brought in

and the source sheets on the website were especially useful when listening to the shiur online, it was easier to follow'.

The format of the lectures was also aimed at creating opportunity for clarification with opening the floor to questions at the end. When asked whether the format was optimal in the survey over 93% of respondents answered in the affirmative (56.25% 'very much' 37.5% 'to a large extent').

From the responses it would seem that both the approach of the curriculum and the sources used helped to address the misconceptions that many of the students held about Judaism.

Working/thinking frameworks are presented

In comparing the lecture series with the three rabbis of this study I looked to the three subjects that they all addressed, God, mitzvot and Rabbinic Thought and Literature. The 14 subjects that could essentially be grouped into those three categories although there were other subjects that were uniquely contemporary.

On the subject of God was Lecture 1: 'Is God Involved in the World?', Lecture 4: 'Prayer' - dealing with our communication and interaction with God and Lecture 5: 'Superstition' - which dealt with working around God's systems and maintaining a faithful relationship with Him.

On the subject of the mitzvot were Lecture 3: 'Commandments', Lecture 6: 'Studying Torah vs Working' Which dealt with the commandment to Study Torah and its implications on earning a living, Lecture 7: 'Custom vs Law' which examined the relationship between the legal aspect of the commandments and the customs that developed through history and their legal significance. Lectures 11-13: 'Kosher Food' which dealt with the concepts of kosher

meat and the general framework of law of what makes something kosher. Lectures 13 and 14 'Shabbat' which dealt with the concept of prohibited 'work' on Shabbat 'and the idea of rest.

On the subject of Midrash and Rabbinic Literature were lectures 8-10: 'Understanding Midrash', 'Relating to the Supernatural Events in Torah', 'Addressing Modern Biblical Criticism Against Traditional Understandings'.

The remaining subjects of the lectures addressed more contemporary issues such as the Role of Women in Judaism (Lecture 17) which is an issue that for all intents and purposes did not exist for either of the three rabbis we examined in this study. The issue of Sex and Relationships in Judaism with the heightened acceptance of pre-marital sex and divorce in modern society. The issue of Science and Evolution given the revolutionary discoveries in the modern world and its reconciliation with the Torah and its approach to creation and nature. Appendix V contains direct weblinks to all of the audio recordings of the lectures.

The subjects covered in these lectures mirror the three areas that our rabbis addressed and also dealt with contemporary issues. It is interesting to know that in the modern era these issues still constitute central misconceptions in Judaism and require clarifying.

When asked if the lectures addressed contemporary misconceptions respondents in the survey 100% responded in the affirmative (62.5% 'very much' 37.5% 'to a large extent'). Some of the responses to the interviews on this question were: 'The topics discussed were the foundations of Judaism and therefore very relevant, especially the first few lectures on prayers, mitzvot and is God involved in the world'. (10) 'Definitely. All very relevant. Role of Women, Shabbat and purpose. Very relevant and well received'. (3) 'Yes 100% Felt he really had his finger on the pulse of current issues. Many issues that I feel'. (7)

One of the issues that I learned from the feedback is that people wanted more time for asking questions. People are interested in asking questions after they have heard material that challenges misconceptions. This was a unique aspect of the project that was markedly different from the rabbis that we studied. I was addressing misconceptions in a live lecture rather than through a book that I authored. Which allowed, among other things, for people to directly ask questions for the purposes of clarification and elaboration. We know that Maimonides answered questions sent to him regarding his Mishne Torah and Nieto, as a rabbi of a particular community must have had dialogue with the people regarding his writings. We do not know much about Luzzatto's responses to questions regarding his writings.

All of the lectures, however, presented conceptual perspectives and definitions aimed at helping to create a clearer working framework for Jewish thought and perspectives as did the works of the rabbis.





## Chapter 6 - Conclusion

The aim of this study was to discover how best to respond to philosophical and theological misconceptions about Judaism in modern times that threaten the current state and future of healthy Judaism. This was done by studying three historical figures who dealt with addressing considerable misconceptions that were held by the Jewish people in their times. Was there a basic system for doing so effectively? Were there certain criteria that were important to meet in order to successfully rectify these misconceptions?

Being that this is essentially an issue of knowledge and education modern educational theories were also explored. The pedagogical approach of Social Reconstruction was developed to do precisely this. 'They have faith in the ability of education, through the medium of curriculum, to educate the 'masses of humanity' to...analyse themselves in relation to their society'. (Schiro, 2013 p.151) I examined the main tenants of the theory and approach and found five key points to it as I outlined in Chapter two.

The aim was to use these points as a template and apply them to the lives and works of Maimonides, Luzzatto and Nieto. Did they follow these criteria? As indicated in Chapter three It turned out that they did. Each one of them recognised that there was a breakdown, believed that it could be rectified (at least partially) and aimed through education to teach principles that would empower the learner to gain a useful and functional framework for thought. They all were met with opposition from established leaders and all stood firm in their conviction to present their ideas despite the backlash.

Some of the key misconceptions in Judaism were addressed by all three rabbis. God, mitzvot and midrash are key questions that stand at the foundations of the Jewish religion. How those questions are answered define the nature of Judaism. Each of our rabbis addressed these issues in fundamental ways presenting principles for each of them with

which the learner could develop a framework for thought through which he or she could understand many of the detailed questions that apply to these subjects. The principles that each presented for these subjects were outlined in Chapter four.

It was also found that there were significant misconceptions about Judaism in the Jewish community of London. In response to a course given on Maimonides' 13 principles of Judaism in order to address these misconceptions, the students asked me to address specific aspects of Judaism in which they felt they lacked understanding. After the completion of the course it was examined against the criteria of Social Reconstruction that had been recognised as well as against the three rabbis studied. Was this modern approach addressing misconceptions using the basic tenants of the pedagogical approach of Social Reconstruction? And was it in line with the tradition of the rabbis I had studied who had aimed to do the same?

It was discovered that all of five criteria of Social Reconstruction were met in the lecture series much of it was in line with the tradition of the three rabbis studied. It had also been requested that God, mitzvot and midrash be addressed. Indeed, the majority of subjects addressed fell into one of those three categories as outlined in Chapter five. There were, however, other issues that were quite contemporary but are prevalent questions in most areas of orthodox Judaism today. These mainly have to do with sexuality and gender roles and scientific discovery and its connection with religious thought and practice. In the modern era due to the development of women's rights and civil rights people have fought for equality and recognition including people who are homosexual and transgender. These require careful and sensitive thought from a religious perspective in ways that had not been addressed prior to these societal developments. Scientific progress has also developed raising questions about the origins of life on earth and the age of the earth among other issues which may seem to contradict classical understandings of the Bible and Jewish principles. These are outlined in Chapter five as well.

One of the most important revelations that came from this study is that teaching principles is a key to addressing misconceptions. As Margaret Mead wrote 'Children should be taught how to think not what to think' ([Archives.org](https://www.archives.org)). In order to truly address these misconceptions that can lead to a breakdown in religious society it is imperative that teachers and rabbis are educated in these principles. This is an avenue that warrants further exploration. How might we devise a curriculum that aims at instilling a system of principles for our teachers and religious leaders that will empower them to educate our children accordingly? We are good at educating about details and data. We can easily teach what to do and what to think, but we are greatly challenged with teaching *how* to think. It seems to me from this research that developing a curriculum that would address core Jewish principles in a fundamental and systematic way would be a great step in reconstructing Jewish Society.

In examining my approach to misconceptions against the approaches of the earlier rabbis in this study, certain key and evident differences emerged. I was addressing these misconceptions in real time in front of a live audience. The rabbis addressed them in writing books for people to read. They may or may not have known who would be reading their words and those reading may or may not have known the rabbis whose words they were reading. By doing the lectures in person I am introduced to the learners. Because they live in the same city as I do they also know me and see me in other settings. They have an opportunity to follow how I might act or engage in the world as a Jew in a contemporary and mutual setting. The live lectures also lends itself to questioning and elucidation. This is an important component to learning which is highly restricted when learning from written information. By engaging personally it allows for more direct and immediate clarification which is important when one is forming ideas for oneself. This, I believe, adds another important component to learning as it puts the principles into a live and dynamic contemporary context.

I also audio record each class and post them online. This allows for people around the world who might also be interested in studying these subjects to participate in the learning. The class that is posted online can be accessed immediately around the world. And likewise, questions can be sent immediately from around the world regarding the issues addressed. In the 12th and 18th centuries this, of course, was unheard of. People can also hear my voice which naturally includes intonations and non-verbal expressions that the written word often lacks. The recordings also allow for future generations to access the information as the writing does. One difficulty with immediate dissemination and response is that it is potentially more controversial and vulnerable to backlash as it is immediately heard and responded to in contemporary society.

Through this study it was found that certain misconceptions in Judaism persist. And while there are unique aspects to these misconceptions due to the specific events and mindsets of the time, there are, nonetheless ideas that are regularly misunderstood. This is mainly because the principles are broad and complex and not as easy to teach and understand as data points. Maimonides calls these issues *davar gadol* - 'great things' as opposed to the data points which he calls *davar katan* 'small things'. He writes that everyone can learn the small things, adults, children, men and women, while the great things are not easily accessible to all and require preparation and training. (Maimonides, 2009 p.36,39) These should be points that are focused on heavily by educators and curricula. They should be developed so that they can be taught on various levels and in ways that are age appropriate for a broad range of pupils.

As a result of this study it is evident that principles are an essential part of a Jewish educational curriculum. It is clear that much effort and focus should be placed into developing such a curriculum and in educating not only students, but educators in this way. In doing so, we might come closer to Isaiah's prophetic vision in which 'The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the seas'. (Isaiah, 11:9)



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## Appendix I - Further details of Maimonides life in Andalusian Spain

Spain was home to great and prolific scholars. The rabbis in Spain were of the world. Among them were Samuel haNagid (993-1056), Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1021-1058), Judah haLevi (1075-1141), and Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164). Spanish scholars like Hisday ibn Shaprut and Shemuel haNagid, were superb linguists and served the Caliphs in diplomatic, advisory and scholarly roles (Kraemer, 2018, pp.45-48).

Pertinent to Maimonides' upbringing was the presence of the great Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103) who arrived in Spain from Morocco late in life and became the head of the yeshivah in Lucena. His *Halakhot* which was an early codification of the law gleaned from the Babylonian Talmud later became a staple of the curriculum in Spanish yeshivas in contrast to those of Babylonia where they studied the Talmud almost exclusively (Kraemer, 2008, p.57). Alfasi was succeeded by his student Yoseph Ibn Migas (1077-1141) as head of the yeshiva and was the teacher of Maimonides' father. Maimonides considered him his own teacher and wrote glowingly about him: 'For the mind of that man in Talmud astounds, God knows, whoever ponders his words and the depth of his learning, so that it can virtually be said of him, *There was no king like him (Kings II 23:25) in his way*' (Maimonides, 1995, Introduction). Wherever in his writings he refers to 'my teachers' he is referring to Alfasi and Ibn Migas. He further writes in his introduction to his Commentary on the Mishna that he disagreed with Alfasi no more than ten times.



## Appendix II - Further Issues of Social Reconstruction in the Works of Maimonides, Luzzatto and Nieto

### Maimonides

Another issue was in dealing with the establishment in Baghdad. He did not regard the leadership of the yeshivot as having any real scholarly substance as he explicitly states to his beloved student Yoseph ben Yehuda in a letter: 'What do you expect? he [the head of the Yeshiva] is a man who has been told from his youth that there is no one like him in the generation, and now it is reinforced by age and prestige. The lack of self-examination in such environments along with his need of approval from others...how do you expect, my son, that they should come near a level of truth to the point that he would admit to a personal flaw thus uprooting his position and that of his fathers?!' (Maimonides, 1994, p127).

Additionally, there was an inherent problem with the core texts that were available, namely the Mishna, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds and a myriad of codes that distilled laws from these former texts on various subjects. The Talmuds did not state clearly what the law was in most of its treatments and the codes that came later only dealt with specific areas of law (Davidson, 2010, p. 193).

The difficulty in gleaning any meaningful and systematic framework of Jewish law and thought from these along with the relentless persecution and influences of foreign cultures created a profound breakdown of knowledge and many misconceptions.

Maimonides always saw the law as bound to an underlying philosophy of Torah. And while he did not write his philosophical work, Moreh Nebukhim, until later in his life, he always included his philosophical understandings of Torah in his legal writings.

My manner in all areas is that whenever there is any hint to elements of faith I will explain aspects of it. For it is important to me to explain a fundamental idea more than anything else that I teach. (Maimonides, 1995, p. 53)

Among the key areas of misconception were anthropomorphism — seeing God as an entity that had a body and emotions, rejecting the natural causal order as expression of God and His providence as opposed to supernatural miracles, and the lack of clarity as to what was genuinely part of Jewish tradition and what was not. (Halbertal, 2014, pp 2-3)

There were few things that Maimonides took greater issue with than the anthropomorphising of God. Along with explicitly stating this in his Mishne Torah (Maimonides, 2009, p.81), he wrote against it extensively in his Moreh Nebukhim (Maimonides, 1996 p.87).

The natural order was also an area in which people had terrible difficulty accepting as expressive of God's providence. Superstitions were common and Maimonides sought to reject them at all opportunities<sup>13</sup>. (Davidson, 2005, p. 223) Maimonides desired to settle Judaism into a religion of reason and to remove from it all superstitious and unfounded mystical thought. (Kraemer, p.18)

#### Issues relating to Metaphysics

Early in his life Maimonides aimed to do the same with the metaphysical, philosophical underpinnings of Torah. He sought to write works that would explain the messages of the prophets and the legends or *midrash/aggada* (Maimonides, 1995, v.II, p.140) of the sages that, according to him contained the deeper, hidden philosophies of the Torah (ibid.). He believed that there were serious misconceptions in the understandings that people had regarding what the legends of the sages were. Identifying two distinct groups one misconceived by understanding the legends literally and thus not only missing their message, but also degrading the sages themselves by attributing to them the failure to recognise the fantastical and implausible nature of many of the legends they presented. The second group misconceived by considering the sages irrelevant by assuming that they

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<sup>13</sup> For a substantive listing of many such examples see Davidson pp.222-230.

indeed meant the legends to be taken literally. Instead, Maimonides explains that the legends are to be understood as a form of riddles housing the kernels of thought in challenging presentations only to be accessed through careful thought and by substantial scholars (ibid.).

At first Maimonides believed he could present these ideas in a book that would treat the legends and offer explanations, thus expounding on the deep philosophical tradition of Torah. Later, however, as he attempted to do this, realised that metaphysics was not like law. Law could be studied by all (Maimonides, 2009, p.39) whereas the metaphysical aspects of Torah were not straightforward and are only understood in organic, rather than systematic, ways (Maimonides, 1996, p.8).

Thus, the identification of the misconceptions regarding the nature of the Torah's metaphysics were presented within his systematic, popular works, namely the Commentary on the Mishna and the Mishne Torah. 'As Maimonides was addressing both intellectuals and the uneducated, he propounded religious principles in the Mishne Torah and his other legal compositions by way of tradition, not by adducing proof, which required proficiency in many sciences about which the jurists knew little or nothing'. (Kraemer, p. 322-3) The proofs and underpinnings of the ideas themselves were not misconceived *per se*, but, more accurately, *hairan* - perplexities in the minds of scholars who had studied and understood the foundational principles, but, who were confused when it came to dealing with the more sophisticated and complex philosophies of the Torah's framework for reality (Halbertal, p. 277).

Maimonides, therefore, believed that society did not require reconstruction with regards to the deeper metaphysical elements. These were of the realm of the elite who perhaps might be the teachers and agents of the social reconstruction and thus would need to know the

deeper intricacies and core ideas of the society that they were reconstructing through education.

‘Even if I could not find an opportunity to teach a proven truth to but one exemplary person which would not be fitting for 10,000 ignoramuses I would prefer to say it for that one and I would not be silent because of the insults of the masses and I would work on saving the one from the confusion and show him out of his confusion until he reaches wholeness and respite’ (Maimonides, 1996, p.13)

Maimonides, however, did not have great faith in the establishment of schools and discouraged even his closest and most beloved student from opening a house of learning, encouraging him rather to keep to himself and be diligent in his own study (Maimonides, 1994, p.134).

Maimonides instead relied on the wide reaching power of literature to teach and empower the students of the world directly and on his own.

The Mesilat Yesharim was also written in a similar vein. Although it is essentially a guide for personal refinement its raison d’etre was to guide a person towards a substantive and meaningful relationship with God; something Luzzatto believed was all but forgotten in the traditional sphere of Jewish thought and scholarship of the time.

#### Luzzatto and the Mesilat Yesharim

It is not well known that Luzzatto wrote the Mesilat Yesharim in two different formats. One was written in the form of dialogue between a Hakham (scholar) and a Hasid (saint)<sup>14</sup>. The other is a monologue of the author. Both versions are practically identical in terms of structure and information, however, one marked difference in the dialogue version is the

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<sup>14</sup> This is the only version of the Mesilat Yesharim that we have in Luzzatto’s own handwriting. (Mesilat Yesharim, Preface, p. 9)

introductory discussion between the scholar and the saint. The saint is at first presented to be a simpleton, who does little more than pray and read Psalms, while the scholar is portrayed as man of great wisdom and understanding. Not far into the discussion, however, the saint exposes that the scholar has failed to understand the most basic fundamentals of Torah and Judaism such as the love and fear of God and the command to walk in His ways. With all of the scholar's comprehensive knowledge he is missing the very foundations upon which the entirety of Judaism is built. With this exposé of sorts Luzzatto reveals that the fundamental misconceptions are not just an issue with the ignorant masses and accuses the intelligentsia of the time as being guilty.

This lengthy treatment in the introduction of the dialogue version of the Mesilat Yesharim is barely addressed in its counterpart. This deletion may well be the reason why the Mesilat Yesharim ended up becoming the 'seminal book for work in the field of 'Musal' (refinement of character) for the entire house of Israel' (Luzzatto, 2003, p.9)

The ignorance of fundamental principles amongst the leading scholars of Judaism was not new to the eighteenth century. As we saw above, Maimonides dealt with similar issues and bemoaned the poor and incomplete scholarship of the rabbis in positions of leadership which affected the education of the masses.

The main point that is highlighted in the argument of the saint to the scholar is that actions alone are insufficient in the service of God and that one's intentions must be appropriately aimed. (Luzzatto, 2003, p. 58). The scholar takes the core principles of Judaism such as the love and fear of God and that all of one's actions should be for the sake of heaven as having no depth or detail but rather general ideas that are self evident (Mesilat, p.60). To which the saint counters (Luzzatto, 2003, p. 59,63):

*It is a commandment to sit in the Succa — this is a principle which has many details which in turn have many laws. It is a commandment to wear tefilin which has many details and established laws...the commandment to aim all of one's actions towards Heaven is a principle without details? One without need of exposition? Is it a principle that everyone understands fully without further study at all? And the fear and love of God — are they so simple and clear that they require no study and contemplation?*

*Besides knowing all about the of practice mitzvot there are four other principles that accompany the actions which are necessary to complete them (namely: love of God, fear of God, walking in His ways and serving Him with all one's heart) yet, you have toiled in only one and dismissed four!*

### Nieto

He focuses on the classical basis of Deuteronomy 17 (8-11) to establish the authority of the rabbis to formulate law and legally binding interpretations of Scripture.

*'When a legal matter is too extraordinary for you...you are to come to the Levitical priests and to the judge that there is in those days... You are to take care to observe what they instruct you, by regulation that they tell you, you are to do; you are not to turn away from the word that they tell you, right or left'.*

He sets out to show that there was clear existence of Oral law in Biblical times.

I will now undertake to convince those who have clear understandings, by authority of the Scriptures, that in the days of Moses and other prophets, the oral law was in existence. (Nieto, 2008, I:4, p.19)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Petoehowski, p.79

Nieto divided the book into five dialogues. He provided a synopsis of each himself at the headings to the prefixed paragraphs (Loewe, pp. xiii-xiv):

Dialogue I - The indispensability of the Oral Torah and its equality with the Written Torah. (Nieto, p.12)

Dialogue II - The reliability of the oral tradition. (ibid., p.32)

Dialogue III - Internal rabbinic controversy concerns only analysis of law not the underlying axioms of halakhic Judaism. (ibid., p.87)

Dialogue IV - Jewish tradition is not closed to science or philosophy from whichever source it may be presented. (ibid., p. 140)

Dialogue V - Talmudic astronomy as the base for the Jewish calendar.

In this structure Nieto sets proofs to the authenticity of the Mishna. This was important because beyond establishing the validity of the Oral Law, the accepted works in Rabbinic Judaism that were supposed to contain it also needed to be verified. He used four proofs to do this.

- A proof from chronology and geography (Nieto, 2008, II:112-118, pp. 64-65) establishing that the Babylonian Jews were neither under the authority of the Roman Emperor or the Leader of the Jews in Israel, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, and still they accepted the Mishna as containing the authentic Oral Law (Pet., p.82).

- A proof from understood terminology (M.D., II:120, pp.65-67) The Mishna uses terminology that assumes that all of its readers are familiar with them and if the case were contrary we should expect that there would be strong opposition and contention to the assertions of the Mishna. The lack of these shows that it is authentic. (Pet., pp.82-83),

- A proof an impossibility of forgery (M.D., II:122, p.67-68) Being that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi had lived after the destruction of Bethar how would they have accepted upon themselves all the stringencies of law established in the Mishna if they were not already common parts of Jewish life? (Pet., p.83).

- A proof from the submission of later to earlier authorities (M.D., III:42-58, pp.101-103) The voluntary relinquishing of the right to oppose the Tannaim (rabbis of the Mishna) by later authorities shows that they submitted to the authority of the Mishna recognising it as the authentic tradition (Pet., p.83).

He also defended the Midrash and Aggada which are largely comprised of parables and hyperbole presented by the Rabbis as metaphors set to encourage deeper readings and meanings of the text. This was important because the cynical reader might take these stories as literal and thus dismiss the authority of the Rabbis who presented such unreasonable tales. Nieto relies on what was written on the subject by earlier Rabbinic scholars but adds some of his contemporary knowledge to broaden the points. He mentions, for example, that Pythagoras and Aesop had used similar hyperbole, but of poorer calibre, in order to teach certain principles. (Nieto, 2008, 304 - p. 213-14)

Nieto also focused on refuting the new, specific objections that had been brought out in the 18th century (Petuchowski, p.89).





## Appendix III - Interview and Survey Questions

### **Interview Questions:**

1. **Did the misconception series lectures meet what you were seeking?**
2. Did the lectures address the questions/misconceptions you had about Judaism?
3. Was the content relevant to modern issues, questions and challenges, addressing the key misconceptions about Judaism today?
4. Was the content of the lectures well supported?
5. Was the format for the lectures optimal?
6. After the series did you feel better informed about Judaism and its framework in general?
7. Did you feel better educated to begin to make a difference about this in your community?

### **Questions asked on Survey:**

The lectures met what you were seeking.

The lectures addressed the questions/misconceptions you had about Judaism.

The content of the lectures was well supported.

The content was relevant to modern issues, questions and challenges, addressing the key misconceptions about Judaism today.

The format for the lectures was optimal.

Options for response:

Not at all

–

To a limited extent

–

Neutral

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To a large extent

–

Very much

## THE MISCONCEPTION SERIES

### • LECTURE ONE – INTRODUCTION TO MISCONCEPTION SERIES ○ Why and how do misconceptions arise?

- What are the effects of misconceptions?
- Brief examples of current misconceptions
- Brief overview of lecture series

### • LECTURE TWO – IS GOD INVOLVED IN THE WORLD? ○

*Overview of a few misconceptions about God's involvement in the world*

- What is the extent to which God is involved in the world?
- Knowledge vs Judgement
- Free will
- What about rabbis who say natural disasters and diseases are judgements from God?

### • LECTURE THREE – COMMANDMENTS ○ *Overview of a few misconceptions about keeping commandments/mitzvot*

- Definition of a commandment/mitzvah
- Why are we *commanded* to do mitzvot if they are merely for our own benefit?
- Why are there stories in the Torah of God punishing those who do not follow commandments?

### • LECTURE FOUR – PRAYER ○ *Overview of a few misconceptions about Prayer*

- Philosophy of prayer
- Laws of prayer
- Power of prayer (holy men's blessings/gravesite prayers/paying for prayers)

### • LECTURE FIVE – SUPERSTITION ○ *Overview of a few superstitions in our communities*

- Can we alter our reality by performing rituals?

- Segulot, dybbuks, kapparot, parnassah – what are they?
- The Zohar and Kabbalah

• **LECTURE SIX – STUDYING TORAH vs WORKING** ○ *Point out a few misconceptions about Torah study and the working world*

- Are we obligated to live a life of Torah study?
- Yeshiva/Kollel system
- Army service

• **LECTURE SEVEN – CUSTOM vs LAW** ○ Difference between custom and law

- Importance of customs
- Why has custom trumped, or become equal to, law?
- Are customs binding?

• **LECTURE EIGHT – BIBLICAL STORIES** ○ Did the seemingly supernatural events in the Torah really happen? Are they reality or metaphorical?

- Midrashim being taught as Peshat today, and the associated problems with this
- Biblical criticism – what is our response?

• **LECTURE NINE – KASHRUT/KOSHER FOOD** ○ *Overview of a few misconceptions about Kashrut/Kosher Food*

- Why keep Kashrut?
- Food cooked by non-Jews
- Wine, oil and bread made by non-Jews
- Kosher symbols on food packaging (hechshers)
- ‘Suitable for Vegetarian’ food and restaurants

• **LECTURE TEN – ELECTRICITY ON SHABBAT** ○ What does the Torah say about lighting or extinguishing a fire on Shabbat and Yom Tov?

- Why and how is electricity considered ‘fire’ or ‘building’?

- Dissenting rabbinic voices on the banning of electricity on Shabbat and Yom Tov
- Is there no halakhic allowance of using mobile phone or electric cars on Shabbat and Yom Tov?

• **LECTURE ELEVEN – ROLE OF WOMEN IN JUDAISM** ○

*Overview of a few misconceptions people have about women in Judaism*

- What is the role of women in Judaism?
- Tzniut/Modesty – why is this important? What about jeans/sheitels?
- Why are there fewer commandments for women than men?
- Women rabbis

• **LECTURE TWELVE – SEX & RELATIONSHIPS** ○ Problems with pre-marital relations

- Status of sex in Judaism
- Lust vs Love, importance of Niddah

• **LECTURE THIRTEEN – SCIENCE & EVOLUTION** ○ Does Judaism accept Evolution?

- Can Judaism and Jewish law adapt to scientific advances?
- ‘Consciousness’ and the challenges that Science faces to explain this phenomenon

• **LECTURE FOURTEEN – END OF SERIES: THE FUTURE OF JUDAISM** ○ What is the current state of Judaism?

- What are the problems with the current state of Judaism?
- How can we improve Judaism? What needs to be done?
- When are we able to change laws that seem outdated? (two-day Yom Tov, electricity, etc.)
- The Messiah – who and what is this?

## Appendix V

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-2-is-g-d-involved-in-the-world-28th-october-2015/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-4-prayer/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-5-superstition-25th-november-2015/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-3-commandments-4th-november-2015/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-6-learning-torah-and-working/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-7-minhag-vs-halakha/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-9a-what-is-considered-kosher/>; [https://](https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-9b-what-is-considered-kosher/)

[www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-9c-what-is-considered-kosher/](https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-9c-what-is-considered-kosher/)

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-10a-shabbat-melakha-work/>; [https://](https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-10b-shabbat-sleep-oneg-shabbat/)

[www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-10b-shabbat-sleep-oneg-shabbat/](https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-10b-shabbat-sleep-oneg-shabbat/)

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-8a-midrash/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-8b-midrash/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-8c-midrash/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-class-14-sex-relationships-torah/>

<https://www.sephardi.org.uk/misconceptions-role-women-torah/>

## Appendix VIa - Extended Quotes - Maimonides

(from page 20)

I knew that when I composed the [Mishne Torah] that it would fall into the hands of some evil and envious person who would denigrate its virtues and act as if it were dispensable or faulty. Some foolish ignoramuses would consider it of little use. It would reach some raving, befuddled novice who would struggle [with it] in several places and fail to grasp the precision of thought that I used in its composition. It would also reach some rigid, delusional and confused religionist who would attack the foundations of belief it contains. These would be the majority. The Mishne Torah is not comparable to the Torah, which is true guidance for mankind, or the words of the prophets. Yet only some people have followed those. The ignorance of those who do not see the value in my book is not greater than those who do not see the value in the words of God...if one were to spend time in distress and worry over all ignorant criticisms towards a particular truth...all of his days would, without a doubt, be [filled] with pain and anger. (Maimonides, 1994, p.126-7)

(From page 21)

What I wish of you is to send copies of this epistle to every congregation in cities and villages, in order to strengthen their faithfulness and straighten their steps. And read it before the community and individuals...after you take care with the utmost precaution [to keep it from] wicked people who will publicise it before the nations of the world for then [events] will occur to us from which God must save us. I have [nevertheless] written this and fear from the [outcomes] greatly, but I have determined that teaching what is right to the masses is worth suffering the danger...as those who have taken the place of the prophets (the sages of Israel) have said: 'Messengers en route to fulfilling a commandment are not harmed', and there is no greater commandment than this. Peace be upon all of Israel. (Maimonides, 1994, p 56)

Appendix VIb - Luzzatto

(From p. 49)

The element of Torah's secrets...it is not fitting to be presented openly for anyone who wishes to acquire them because they are both precious and deep. Being that they are precious the words of the Creator must not be handed over to those who are not refined of character, even if they are wise. Being that they are deep...only individuals with sharp and clear minds who have learned the ways of critical thinking. (Luzzatto, 1961, Intro, p. 18)



## **Appendix VIc - Nieto**

(From p. 50)

While no one questions the 'idolatrous Roman and Greek authors who never knew or served God, [yet] the major part of their poetry consists of incest, adulteries and rapes of their gods. Although they contain some learning and elegance, the benefit is trifling in comparison to the injury that results from them. Yet, not only do they not explain the words of our sages, but even contemptuously censure them!...besides, are they not ignorant that it was customary among sages both Israelite and gentile to write enigmatically and parabolically...these enigmas cover excellent morality as they say of Aesop'. (Nieto, 2008, IV, 304, p. 214)