HAVING ESTABLISHED the validity of the general belief in prophecy, Maimonides proceeded to reassert the Orthodox dogma that only the Torah of Moses could be regarded as true revelation. Many Jewish sectarians, including the Qaraite, had accepted the belief that both Jesus and Mohammed were “true prophets.” Unwilling to risk the dangers of complete tolerance, Maimonides insisted that Christianity was only one step above idolatry, and Mohammed was just “insane.” How could one pretend to be a prophet who has not even learned to despise the pleasures of the senses? “Holiness is the repudiation of sexual relations.”

Nevertheless, both Christianity and Islam were, according to Maimonides, divinely ordained “preparations” for the ultimate establishment of the kingdom of God. In other words, they tended to lead mankind toward the truths of monotheism, though they were not absolutely true in themselves.

Just as it is impossible to assign a valid purpose to every phenomenon in life, though the existence of inner purposiveness within living things is obvious, so too we can find the radiance of purpose in many portions of the Torah, though not in every verse and every detail. However, we cannot but affirm that there is a general purpose for the precepts of the Torah and that this fundamental purpose is “the improvement of the body and the soul” of men. Rationality is the noblest quality of human beings. Could God be conceived then as less rational than men? With-
out attempting to account for every detail of the law, we must discover God’s purpose at least in the most important precepts and mizvoth.

Maimonides divided the mizvoth of the Torah into fourteen categories, assigning some rational motivation for each of them. In general, he declared, rituals and ceremonies are related to ideals and sentiments in several diverse ways—as practical guidance is to good intentions, as a concrete illustration is to an abstract doctrine, as a shell is to a kernel, as the body is to the soul. “For ideas without deeds which affirm and fortify them cannot continue to be effective among the people.”

The attainment of perfection in piety is dependent upon the establishment of ideal physical conditions for the individual and a just order in society. Spiritual perfection is intellectual greatness superimposed upon ideal moral qualities, which are in their turn dependent on a just and equitable order in society. Consequently we arrive at a threefold goal as the ultimate purpose of the Torah:

Our final conclusion emerging out of all these postulates is that every commandment, be it positive or negative, has as its purpose to correct injustice or to instill such ethical qualities as are needed for the good of society; or to teach opinions that are true or ideas that are needed for the prevention of evil, or the training in good virtues . . .

It is interesting to note that Maimonides referred to two classes of beliefs, those that were true in themselves and those that needed to be affirmed as true for the sake of an ideal, stable society. Like Plato in The Republic, he was keenly conscious of the need for cementing a society by means of affirmations that were not strictly true, but were suited to the needs of that particular society. Like Aristotle, he frequently affirmed that “man is by nature a political being.” It is impossible for great men to attain their full spiritual stature in isolation. A just and perfectly ordered society is needed as the matrix, for the emergence of a small number of chosen souls who will attain the perfection of “cleaving unto the Active Reason.” This select group of saintly philosophers will understand and continually contemplate the abstract conception of the Deity. But the large masses of the people cannot be expected either to comprehend so subtle a concept or to rest content with a God idea that is completely stripped of all the elements that they associate with personality. A façade of opinions or dogmas is needed, Maimonides believed, in order to provide a foundation of ideological unity for
the Jewish community. For this reason the Torah enjoined the belief in certain humanlike qualities of the Deity, such as His hearing and seeing, His pitying, loving, and avenging. These qualities are not true, in the strict sense of the word, but they must be affirmed as if they were true, since they are “necessary” for the maintenance of the community of Israel. These “necessary” ideas, considered strictly as social instruments and armored with the unyielding rigidity of dogma, do not conflict with the logical truths of philosophy; on the contrary, the dogmas of the Torah-community provide a moral atmosphere and a congenial social environment for the emergence and growth of philosophical and saintly souls. At the same time, these “necessary” ideas do not violate the philosopher’s passion for truth, since for his own meditations he will know how to interpret them in accord with the axioms of reason.

Understand what we said in regard to beliefs: at times the commandment contains a true belief, which is true in itself, not in its relation to some other purpose, like the belief in the unity of God, His eternity and incorporeality. But at times a belief is enjoined which is necessary for the removal of iniquity or for the acquisition of good qualities, like the belief that the Lord, may He be exalted, becomes angry at the one who robs, as it is written, “And my wrath shall be kindled and I shall kill,” or the belief that He, may He be exalted, will hear the cry of those that are wronged and oppressed and will save them, as it is written, “And it shall be, when he will cry unto me, I shall hear, for I am merciful. . . .”

Some beliefs tend to authenticate themselves by the actions that they inspire:

It is clear that the belief in the possibility of a sinner’s return belongs in the category of the beliefs which are indispensable for the existence of the Torah-community, for it is impossible for man not to err or sin . . . and if he believes that he will never be able to atone for his sin, he will continue in his error, possibly even intensifying his rebelliousness to the point of becoming irretrievable. But thanks to this belief in repentance, he will mend his ways and return to the practice of good virtues, becoming possibly even more perfect than before his sin. . . .

In another connection, Maimonides defines repentance as the attainment of that psychical level which in the judgment of God would make the erstwhile sinner reject the temptation to sin, if the identical
opportunity were again presented to him. In other words, repentance is not success in winning an act of pardon from the Almighty, but the mending of one's character, by dint of persistent effort. But to people generally who are beset with the feelings of guilt and helplessness the practices of prayer and repentance must be represented not as so many exercises in self-purification, but as petitions for the grace and favor of the Almighty King and compassionate Father. The belief in divine forgiveness is the example of a "necessary" idea that becomes true if accepted in all sincerity.

This twofold meaning of the same act, one for the philosopher and one for the masses, is not self-contradictory, since every society is inevitably an organic whole. The ultimate purpose of the Torah is fulfilled in the lives of the few philosophical saints, but these giants of the spirit can thrive only in a concrete, many-sided community and for its sake. As one commentator put it:  

And it is necessary that the mass-man should believe that God is moved by human petitions and rituals of propitiation. Though this belief is false, strictly speaking, it is necessary for the existence of society. Therefore these beliefs are called necessary, not true. The wise man will understand that these beliefs are said in accord with the maxim, "The Torah spoke in the language of men...."  

Along with ideas true and "necessary" the Torah enjoined the observance of many commandments, which were designed for the purpose of maintaining an ideal, justly ordered society. This overarching purpose was the central motivation of all the laws regulating relations "between man and man."

As to ritual observances, Maimonides noted that the Torah was given in the midst of certain historical circumstances and that the significance of each rite can be seen only when it is viewed against the background of the prevailing pagan practices in the time of Moses.

The complex laws, regulating the sacrifices in the sanctuary and temple, were designed for the purpose of weaning the people away from the worship of pagan deities. In the days of Moses the people were not yet ready for more elevated forms of worship. They could not conceive of serving the Almighty in any other way than by bringing offerings into the temple. Hence, it was necessary for Moses to adapt his teaching to the primitive habits of his contemporaries.
Moses’ predicament may be compared to the appearance of a prophet in our day who would call to the service of God in the following manner: “The Lord commanded you not to pray to Him and not to fast and not to seek His help in time of trouble, but to let your service consist in thought only, without deeds.”

Such a message would be in keeping with the inner truth of faith, but it would hardly be accepted by the people of our day. In the same way, Moses was compelled to take account of the habits, rites and ideas which prevailed in his generation. He could not antagonize the people by rejecting ways of thinking and acting that were dear to them. He could only regulate and spiritualize their customs, so as to lead them by degrees in the right direction, and he had to begin at the people’s actual point of spiritual development.

Maimonides was familiar with some pagan practices from quotations and descriptions which he found in contemporary Moslem literature. Though he was clearly aware of the paucity and inaccuracy of the information available to him concerning the rituals of the heathen, he felt justified in propounding the general rule that Judaism evolved in the course of an arduous struggle against the follies and rites of the pagan world. All the quasi-magical rites in Judaism were ultimately due to the strategy employed by Moses and his successors in their relentless efforts to combat the inroads of the pagan mentality. Many a time the architects of the Jewish faith had to stoop in order to conquer.

The essence of paganism is the worship of the creature, rather than of the Creator; i.e., the attribution of independent dominion to stars, mountains, rivers, names of angels, etc. For this reason Maimonides considered astrology and the juggling of mysterious “names” by the proto-Qabbalists of his day to be at once sheer stupidity and unalloyed paganism. Judaism is, in essence, a continual protest against the pagan worship of the creature and against magical reliance on the manipulation of occult forces. It is at the point where magic and naïve superstition end that Judaism begins.

The knowledge of these [pagan] ideas and rites is a very important gateway leading to the comprehension of the reasons for the commandments, for the root of our entire Torah and the axis upon which it turns is the determination to erase these ideas from the hearts of men and to eliminate them from the world . . . it is the primary, general intention of the whole Torah . . .
With the limited information of the history of religions at his disposal, Maimonides endeavored stoutly to explain the rites of Judaism as being primarily so many acts of symbolic repudiation of the ways of heathendom. Occasionally, too, a magical practice had to be included within the Torah, as an unavoidable concession to the ingrained primitive habits of the people of Israel at the time of Moses. For, as Maimonides put it, "It is impossible for human nature to go suddenly from one extreme to the other." 10

The Torah, for example, prohibited the eating of the fruit of a tree in its first three years of growth (Arla). This prohibition was a silent protest against the policy of the pagans to dedicate such fruit to the use of their temples. The Torah ordained the bringing of the fruit of the fourth year to the Holy Temple; the purpose of this commandment was to make certain that the people will not bring the fruit to the pagan altars. It will be noted that Maimonides was not dismayed by the fact that two opposing strategies were employed by the Torah to counteract the same pagan custom. Maimonides also pointed out that the bringing of fruits to pagan temples was occasionally accompanied by immoral and orgiastic fertility rites which were intended to hasten the growth of the trees. After four years, there was no longer any danger of such practices.

The Torah prohibited the practice of grafting the branch of one tree upon the stem of another because the pagans would indulge in unnatural sexual acts in connection with this work (Kilaim). Similarly, the planting of grains in a vineyard was prohibited so that the Israelites would be removed as far as possible from the temptation to indulge in the immoral, magical rites that were frequently performed in connection with these practices. The prohibition of interweaving threads of flax and wool (Shatnez) is based on similar reasoning; namely, the fact that pagan priests made it a point to wear garments made from cloth that was woven in this manner. 11

In the Holy Temple, the tablets of the law were placed in the Ark, within the Holy of Holies, not because there was any holiness or divinity in the tablets themselves, but simply to indicate that the words of the prophets constituted the basis of the covenant between God and Israel. Since prophets derived their inspiration from angels (the Active Reason), the belief in angels had to be reinforced by the representation of the cherubim. The rite of burning incense in the Holy Temple was designed for the purpose of eliminating the noxious odors resulting
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from the burning of the sacrifices on the altars, not to offer a pleasing fragrance to the Almighty. The sacrifices offered in the temple consisted of cattle, goats and sheep, for these were sacred “totem” animals to many of the pagan nations, and in slaughtering them the Jews demonstrated their disbelief in the sanctities of the pagan world. The pagans would bring leavened and sweetened offerings to their gods, but not salt. This is why the opposite practice was enjoined in the Torah; i.e., leavened and sweetened foods were prohibited, but salt was to be sprinkled on all offerings upon the altar.\(^\text{12}\)

The drinking of blood was prohibited “for blood was very unclean in the eyes of the Sabean [Near Eastern pagans], who nevertheless would drink it on special occasions, believing blood to be the peculiar drink of the demons, so that when they partook of it, they thought they entered into partnership with the demons and learned the future from them.”\(^\text{13}\) It is for a similar reason that the eating of meat was prohibited altogether, so long as the Israelites dwelled in the desert of Sinai, for the worship of demons is very widespread in the desert. Later, when they entered into the land of Israel, where such practices were almost unknown, the prohibition on meat was rescinded.

In the Torah we find a detailed description of sacrifices that were to be brought daily, on the Sabbath or in honor of the new moon. The new moon sacrifices are of special interest to us, since they appear to be the residue of moon worship. Manifestly, the sacrifices described in the Torah were in effect long before the Torah was accepted by the Israelites. The Torah simply allowed the established practice to continue since the Israelites were powerfully addicted to it, specifying, however, that the offerings were to be brought to God, not to the moon. In this manner the danger of moon worship was averted. But as to “the offering of wine,” Maimonides wrote, “I am disturbed about it up to this day. Why should it be commanded, seeing the pagans also offered wine to their gods?”\(^\text{14}\) For that matter, Maimonides also confessed his inability to find a good reason for the table in the sanctuary and the showbreads that were placed upon it.\(^\text{15}\)

As to the laws of ritual uncleanness, which seem so cumbersome and unnecessary, Moses’ general aim was to soften the harsh and complicated regulations of the pagan nations, but he could not shock the sensibilities of the people and defy their ingrained prejudice. “For this Torah of God . . . came to lighten the burden of existing rites, and if
some of them appear to you to involve a great deal of trouble and annoyance, it is so only because you do not know the customs and ideas which prevailed at that time . . .”

Thus the laws of ritual defilement were designed in part for the purpose of discouraging people from coming into the Holy Temple too frequently. Insofar as the masses are concerned, familiarity breeds contempt. The more the common people were kept away from the Holy Temple, the more they were likely to revere it. Accordingly, the laws of defilement were so designed that, at any one time, “you will find very few people that are clean.” Another motive for these precepts is to induce people to stay away from that which is ugly or disgusting. Third, “The Torah had to accommodate itself to the accepted customs of the time, for the Sabean lavished a great deal of energy upon such matters as ritual uncleanliness.”

A good illustration of the primitive obsession with rites of purification is the law governing the periodic “uncleanliness” of women and the complex ritual of lustration in specially designed baths (mikveh). Among some primitive people, “the menstruating woman had to be locked in a house all by herself, the places upon which she walked were burned and whoever spoke to her became unclean. . . .” If you compare these stringencies with the comparative mildness of the regulations in the Torah, Maimonides concluded, you will note the spirit of moderation that governed the laws of Moses.

As to the dietary laws, most of the requirements of Judaism are simply sanitary regulations. “The best part of the meat is permitted for us.” The flesh of the pig was prohibited because of the unclean habits of this particular animal. “And if the eating of pork were permitted, the streets and the houses would be as dirty as latrines, even as are the countries of the Franks [Europeans] in our day.” This is what the famed physician of Egypt thought of the Christian lands of Europe. Mutatis mutandis!

Blood and trepha (non-kosher) meat are bad for digestion. As to the mixing of meat with milk, “it appears probable to me that there was about it an odor of pagan worship. It is possible that they boiled meat with milk in the course of one or another of their celebrations.”

The laws of marriage and divorce constitute the basis of a justly ordered society. The law concerning the “bitter waters” to be given to the woman suspected of adultery, establishing an ordeal for the discovery of sexual sins, was designed to discourage marital infidelity by
scaring the superstitious women and embarrassing the understanding ones.\textsuperscript{19}

The law of levirate marriage existed long before the covenant at Sinai. Since the people could not be weaned away from this primitive custom all at once, the Torah modified the law by the introduction of the ceremony of \textit{Halitza}.\textsuperscript{20}

The law of circumcision established a sign which is common to all Jewish people. At the same time,

One of the reasons for circumcision, to my mind, is to lessen the enjoyment of sexual intercourse and to weaken this organ as much as possible. . . . That circumcision lessens this organ's capacity for conjugal relations and sometimes removes the pleasure associated with it, I have no doubt.\textsuperscript{21}

The major portion of the Torah was devoted to the ordering of an ideal society, so designed as to encourage at least some people to devote themselves to the cultivation of the noble qualities of the soul. As to the \textit{lex talionis}, the principle of "an eye for an eye," it was, to Maimonides, simply an application of the principle of absolute justice.

And he who lost a limb through the actions of an assailant, then the same limb should be removed from the assailant, "as he put a blemish in a man, so a blemish shall be put in him." Though we today substitute money for this punishment, do not be disturbed, for our intention is here to explain the reasons of the verses in Scripture, not the words of the Talmud.\textsuperscript{22}

Sufficient illustrations have been cited to indicate the rigorous and even ruthless logic which Maimonides brought to the analysis of the Jewish faith. The essence of Judaism is the belief in the one incorporeal Deity and the determination to cleave unto Him. But the Jewish faith developed in distinct historical circumstances; therefore, it adopted and preserved in its passage through history some irrational rites, vestiges of the ancient struggle against paganism. For the most part, these rituals possess no intrinsic significance, save insofar as they are needed for the maintenance of the Torah-community.

Maimonides himself did not draw any conclusion as to the superfluous
or obsolescence of the rituals, but his system of thought was bound to lead to this consideration. And, in spite of his silence, he did not doubt for a moment the rightness of following the inner logic of his ideas to its ultimate conclusions. For, as he saw it, reason is virtually identical with the will of God. Indeed, it is the one quality which derives directly from God, being the inherent law of His being. Scriptural language at times attributed all natural phenomena to the Deity, since He was the source of all power and the laws of nature were designed and fixed by Him. But while the forces of nature were established by God, they did not represent. His will in the same sense as the light of reason, deriving automatically from God, through the agency of the Active Intellect. Sin and failure are due to matter; the direct action of the Deity is reason. And reason is at all times good.

“For through the knowledge of truth, all hatred and quarrels are eliminated, and people cease to injure one another.” We must not compromise with the strict dictates of the intellect in interpreting the Torah, “for only the truth is acceptable to Him, and only falsehood does He hate.”

NOTES

2. Ibid., 2:31.
5. Ibid., 3:36.
6. Ibid., 3:34.
8. Ibid., 3:32.
10. Ibid., 3:32.
11. Ibid., 3:37.
15. Ibid., 3:45.
16. Ibid., 3:47.
17. Ibid., 3:47.
22. Ibid., 3:41.
23. Ibid., 2:48.
24. Ibid., 3:11.
25. Ibid., 2:47.