

Asceticism among the Judeo-Sufis of Egypt: The Cases of R. Abraham Maimonides and R. David II Maimonides

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Abstract

In order to situate the theory and practice of asceticism among the Judeo-Sufis of Egypt within the larger context of medieval Jewish thought, and to highlight the special importance they lent to asceticism, the present article gives a brief survey of the general approaches to the discipline of *zuhd* among medieval Judeo-Arabic thinkers from Sa'adya to Maimonides. Most medieval writers on asceticism from within this tradition advocated a moderate form of renunciation. This article argues for a subtler distinction within the Jewish tradition by looking more closely at one cultural and chronological sphere: the Judeo-Sufis of Medieval Egypt. There thus follows an in-depth synopsis of asceticism presented in the works of two of Maimonides' descendants, his son R. Abraham Maimuni (1186-1237) and R. David ben Joshua Maimuni (14th century), who were leaders of the Egyptian Jewish pietist movement. It introduces the reader to the main elements of asceticism in these two thinkers' thought, notably making use of heretofore unpublished manuscripts of David's works. The author argues that Abraham and David propound a more acute expression of asceticism, not merely as a "therapeutic" means towards attaining a temperate ethical disposition, but as an ideal, and, in the case of R. David, an indispensable stage in the Path towards gnosis. The article claims that this new emphasis may be explained, on the one hand, by the impact of the Sufi environment predominant in 13th-15th century Egypt on Abraham and David's approach, and, on the other, by their ideal of spiritual preparation in anticipation of the renewal of prophecy and the ensuing redemption. On the second point, the author also suggests that some of the pietists' ascetic practices may have been adopted by early Qabbalists in the East from a similar perspective.

Introduction

In a brief but extremely dense article on the role and significance of asceticism in the Jewish tradition, the Hebraist and Arabist

Georges Vajda maintained that Judaism, unlike Christianity—and, might I add, Islam — does not consider that asceticism, though deemed meritorious or even obligatory in certain circumstances, can lead to any supplementary perfection which is not already conferred on the individual by the regular and integral observance of the religious precepts of the “perfect Law.”¹

Vajda’s claim is borne out among most medieval moralists who wrote on asceticism from within the Judeo-Arabic tradition, and who, by and large, propounded a moderate strain of abstinence. Nonetheless, from ancient times, Judaism has always known a category of practitioners whose conduct was characterized by a “going beyond” the strict requirements of the Law.² Such individuals, called *ḥasidim* or “pietists,” observed the commandments in a manner that exceeded the call of duty, though of course with varying sets of rituals and goals. While these individuals sometimes enjoyed great respect in the eyes of their fellow Jews, their lifestyle was not always perceived as an ideal to be adopted by the community at large, nor did these pietists intend it as such.

In the particular case of the *ḥasidim* who flourished in thirteenth to fifteenth-century Egypt, we find the defense of a more exacting form of asceticism. I discuss this alternative emphasis, first presenting the evolution of the ethical principle of asceticism known within the Muslim and Judeo-Arabic tradition as *zuhd*. The latter, which in the first instance designates abstinence from material pleasures, is considered as an essential virtue of religious life not only for pietists but also for the common devotee.³ Its practice can assume various nuances deriving from two basic attitudes: on the one hand, an external act of renunciation of things physical, resulting in the mortification of the body, and, on the other, an inner, mental state evincing total indifference to worldly phenomena.⁴

1 G. Vajda, “Le rôle et la signification de l’ascétisme dans la religion juive,” *Archives de sociologie des religions* 18 (1964): 35-43.

2 See S. Safrai, “The Teachings of the Pietists in Mishnaic Literature,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 16 (1965): 15-33.

3 In the following pages, *zuhd* is translated indiscriminately as “asceticism” or “abstinence.”

4 For further definitions, see I. Kinberg, “What is Meant by ‘Zuhd?’,” *Studia Islamica* 62 (1985): 27-44.

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Following traditional rabbinic teachings, medieval Jewish ethics does not generally uphold a negative attitude towards the body or life's material benefits. Asceticism, abstinence, mortification, fasting, wearing of penitential garments, or sexual continence are not considered part of the norm of religious practice. However, exceptions, both individual and collective, have arisen.

In general, medieval authors writing in Judeo-Arabic on asceticism advocated a moderate form of self-restraint, with the possible exception of Qaraite authors. Indeed, there emerged in Mesopotamia and the Near East a group with markedly ascetic practices known as the "Mourners of Zion," imbued with an ideal of voluntary poverty and renunciation. These tendencies, prevalent amongst the Jerusalem Qaraites, but also present to a lesser degree in Rabbanite circles, may have been influenced by similar trends of *zuhd* which characterized the initial stages of Islamic mysticism.⁵

An ambivalent attitude towards asceticism, rejecting it, on the one hand, as a recommended path for the masses, while retaining it, on the other, as an ideal of perfection, continued to permeate medieval Jewish ethics. In its first meaning quoted above, *zuhd* did not necessarily signify among the early Jewish thinkers and moralists a severe regimen of mortification, but rather temperance in the enjoyment of the physical life. Thus Sa'adya Gaon (d. 942), one of the first Jewish theologians writing in Arabic, discusses asceticism in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* among the various modes of the ideal life only to reject it on account of its destructive

5 I touched on this issue, which I hope to take up again on a more extensive basis, in my article "Karaism and Sufism," in *Karaite Judaism*, ed. M. Polliack (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 199-211. See also the following article in the same volume: Y. Erder, "The Mourners of Zion: The Karaites in Jerusalem in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," 213-235; and J.T. Robinson, *Asceticism, Eschatology, Opposition to Philosophy: The Arabic Translation of Salmon ben Yeroham on Qohelet* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), especially 114 and 125, as well as the Arabic texts referred to on pages 190 n. 58 and 364/6 respectively, where Salmon (Jerusalem school, ca. 930-960) uses the typically Sufi notions of *qunû'* (contentedness, also p. 335) and *ittikâl* (reliance on God). Moreover, as far as I know, he is the first Judeo-Arabic author to explain the Patriarchs' pursuit of a pastoral life as a means to *ittikâl* and to depict the biblical patriarchs and prophets as paradigmatic ascetics, both of which motifs continue in Judeo-Sufi exegesis.

potential: were it to be universally applied, it would lead to the ruin of man's earthly existence, which would run counter to God's will. Sa'adya rather expounds a constrained type of renunciation of vital necessities, while attending to the needs of both body and soul.⁶ A similar attitude inspired by a reflection on the fragility of human life is adopted by Isaac Ibn Ghiyath, an eleventh-century Andalusí exegete, in his Judeo-Arabic commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes, called precisely *Kitâb al-Zuhd*.⁷

Just prior to his final chapter on the love of God, Bahya Ibn Paquda (Muslim Spain, 11th c.) devotes the ninth chapter of his *Farâ'id al-Qulûb*, the *Duties of the Hearts*, to asceticism, *zuhd* in Arabic, or *perishût* in Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation.⁸ Despite his dependence on Muslim mysticism, Bahya's teachings, though clearly marked by a negative attitude to the physical world, remain in line with his Judeo-Arabic predecessors. He equates *zuhd* with temperance and considers total renunciation, consisting of seclusion from society, an ideal rarely attained in biblical times and hardly worthy of recommendation in his own day.⁹ In fact, he advocates pursuit of the middle path as that prescribed by Jewish law, and defines the genuine ascetic more in terms of a mental attitude: as one who directs all his actions to the service of God, while at the same time fulfilling his duties within society. It is such a regimen that leads to the highest goal of spiritual life, namely, the love of God. He does, however, envisage a small, religious elite

6 Sa'adya Gaon, *Amânât*, ed. S. Landauer (Leiden: Brill, 1880, 315), and Sa'adya Gaon, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. from Arabic by S. Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), treatise 10. See also I. Efron, "Saadia's General Ethical Theory and Its Relation to Sufism," in *Seventy-fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review* (Philadelphia: Jewish Quarterly Review, 1967), 166-177.

7 See G. Vajda, "Quelques observations en marge du commentaire d'Isaac Ibn Ghiyâth sur l'Ecclésiaste," in *The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume*, 518-527. See also H. Mittelman, "A Description of *Perushut* (*Al-Zuhd*, "Abstinence") in a Commentary Ascribed to Isaac Ibn Ghiyath and its Comparison to Islamic Mysticism," *Daat* 48 (2002): 57-81 (Hebrew).

8 Bahya Ibn Paquda, *Torat Ḥobot ha-Lebabot*, ed. Y. Qâfih, (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1984), 383-408. See also 146. The sequence of Bahya's chapters is: 1. Divine unity; 2. Contemplation; 3. Submission to God; 4. Reliance on God; 5. Sincerity; 6. Humility; 7. Penitence; 8. Examination of the Conscience; 9. Asceticism; 10. Love of God.

9 Ibn Paquda, *Torat Ḥobot ha-Lebabot*, 9:3, 390-391.

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practicing a special ascetic discipline (*al-zuhd al-khâss*), whose presence would serve as an example for the community of believers.¹⁰ Moreover, there is no evidence that Bahya's teachings gave rise in his time to a widespread ascetic movement, as was the case with the Egyptian pietists.

For Judah Halevi, the righteous man must provide every part of his person with its due. Hence, he does not consider the mortification of the body a virtuous act. He writes:

The Divine law imposes no asceticism (*tazahhud*) on us. It rather desires that we should keep the equipoise, and grant every mental and physical faculty its due, as much as it can bear, without overburdening one faculty at the expense of another [...]. Our law, as a whole, is divided between *fear, love, and joy*, by each of which one can approach God. Your contrition on a fast day is not more acceptable to Him than your joy on the Sabbath and holy days, if it is the outcome of a devout heart.¹¹

Nonetheless, Halevi describes the ideal pious man (*ḥasid*) as one who, like the biblical prophets, forsakes social and family life and yearns for absolute solitude and an ascetic life. However, since the cessation of prophecy, this ideal of extreme asceticism is no longer relevant.¹²

As for Maimonides, he too reflects the dualistic approach to asceticism already encountered in Bahya. His emphasis on a virtuous and contemplative life, expressed in the *Guide*, necessarily carries as its corollary withdrawal from mundane pursuits and

10 Ibn Paquda, *Torat Ḥobot ha-Lebabot*, 9:2, 386-389. See G. Vajda, *La théologie ascétique de Bahya Ibn Paqouda* (Paris: Larose, 1948), esp. 118-123; A. Lazaroff, "Bahya's Asceticism against Its Rabbinic and Islamic Background," *JJS* (1970): 11-38, H. Kreisel, "Asceticism in the Thought of R. Bahya Ibn Paquda and Maimonides," *Daat* 21 (1988): 5-22. It can be added that in Sufi ethics, too, the ascetics were to serve as an example within society. Cf. al-Sulami, *Ādâb al-Suhba*, ed. M. Kister (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1954), 80. See also *infra*, n. 54.

11 Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, trans. H. Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken, 1964), Part 2, § 50, 113. See also D. Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari* (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 2000). 45-48.

12 *Ibid.*, Part 3, §1-5, 135-141.

pleasures. Indeed, he adopts a more positive stance towards asceticism and hints that its extreme form is the goal of such perfect individuals as the prophets. Accepting Aristotle's view that touch is the most repugnant of all the external senses, he regards sexual relations negatively. He is opposed to overindulgence in the carnal pleasures, the prevention of which, he states in the *Guide*, is ensured by the numerous prohibitions instituted by the Torah.¹³ Yet in his ethical and halachic writings, such as the fourth of his *Eight Chapters* and in his *Mishneh Torah* (*De'ot*, 3), Maimonides pleads for a "middle path," in moral virtues as in asceticism, equidistant from the two extremes of overindulgence and total abstinence. God is not the enemy of man's physical body, and the Torah does not require him to deprive himself of pleasures.¹⁴

While some individuals may at times follow a temporary regimen of extreme self-deprivation, this is for therapeutic purposes and should not become normal conduct. Such behaviour is akin to taking medicine that may be beneficial for certain ailments, but will harm a normal, healthy person.¹⁵ His dualistic attitude to the Nazirite is worthy of note, since we will revert to it in connection with his son who elaborated upon it. While castigating the Nazirite for depriving himself of worldly enjoyments, he praises those who adopt this austere rule for reasons of sanctity, quoting Amos 2:11, which juxtaposes Nazirites and prophets.¹⁶ Maimonides reprimands his coreligionists who "bind themselves with oaths and vows" and imitate the extreme practices of non-Jewish ascetics — most probably the Sufis. Indeed, I had suggested that Maimonides, by unequivocally discountenancing permanent forms of extremism in his *Eight Chapters*, was polemicizing against his Jewish contemporaries who had been

13 *Guide*, 3:33.

14 Aviram Ravitsky, "The Doctrine of the Mean and Asceticism: On the Uniformity of Maimonides' Ethics," *Tarbiz* 79 (2011): 439-469 (Hebrew); J. Parens, "Maimonidean Ethics Revisited: Development and Asceticism in Maimonides?," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 12 (3): 33-62. See also I. Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 459-468: "Attitude Toward Asceticism."

15 *Eight Chapters*, ch. 4, *Hilkhot De'ot* 1:4, and *Guide* 3:8, ed. Qâfih, 466-474.

16 *Eight Chapters*, ch. 4, ed. Qâfih, 383 and 385; *Hilkhot Nedârim* 13:23; *Hilkhot Nezîrût* 10:14, and *Guide* 3:33; 3:48. Cf. Kreisel, "Asceticism," xvi.

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attracted to the Sufi-inspired asceticism¹⁷ — the very ideal his son Abraham was to advocate in his ethical regimen!

Notably, Maimonides attributes more radical forms of ascetic conduct to those who follow the path of *ḥasîdut*, which, in keeping with the celebrated ethical syllabus taught by Pinhas b. Yair, is one degree below prophecy.¹⁸ He implies here that the intellectual perfection of the *ḥasîd* approaches that of the prophet. Thus, for the elite a more severe form of asceticism is reserved which could be called ‘intellectual asceticism.’

Asceticism in the Writings of Abraham Maimonides

Maimonides’ descendants played a prominent part in the Jewish pietist current that arose in thirteenth-century Egypt under the influence of Muslim Sufism.¹⁹ Like the latter, which served them as a model, the Egyptian pietists took seriously the ethical virtue of asceticism both in theory and in practice, and we find in their writings a defense of a more rigorous expression of asceticism which marks a departure from previous trends. Several texts and poems devoted to *zuhd*, probably emerging from their ranks, have survived among the Cairo genizah manuscripts,²⁰ and certain of their pietistic practices, such as a sober diet, celibacy, wandering, fasting, nightly vigils, solitary retreats, and the wearing of hair-shirts and ragged garments, were inspired by the quest to rein in worldly pleasures.

The leading figure of this movement was none other than Abraham the son of Moses Maimonides (1186-1237),²¹ who succeeded his father as Nagid of Egyptian Jewry. Although essentially a halachic work, but with a special emphasis on the

17 I. Twersky, *Introduction to the Code*, 463; P. Fenton, *The Treatise of the Pool by Obadiah Maimonides* (London: Octagon Press, 1981), 55, n. 8; P. Fenton, *Obadiah et David Maïmonide, Deux traités de mystique juive* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1987), 36, n. 67.

18 *Eight Chapters*, introduction, Qafih, 372.

19 For an outline of this tendency, see Fenton, *Deux traités*.

20 For example, see *Deux traités*, 31 on *takhalli* (“renunciation”), 32, n. 55.

21 The present writer has devoted a number of studies to R. Abraham and his circle. See the introduction to his *Deux traités*. See also E. Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Circle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

spiritual significance of the precepts, his magnum opus the *Kifâyat al-‘âbidîn*, the “Compendium for the Servants of God,”²² besides including various references to ascetic behaviour, comprises an important chapter on the theme of asceticism.²³ In this work, concerning many of the positions he adopts on ethical issues, Abraham Maimonides continues the teachings of his father but invariably takes them a step further towards his particular pietistic ideal. This is true also in the domain of asceticism. For example, in his discussion of the three levels of the special observance of the Sabbath, Abraham praises the value of fasting on the Sabbath due to a deep immersion in contemplating God’s majesty and His creation.²⁴ In this, he runs counter to his father’s unequivocal condemnation of mortification on the holy day.²⁵

The chapter specifically dealing with asceticism appears in the second part of *Kifâya* Book IV. This section, intended for those who follow the “Special Way,” forms a kind of Sufi ethical manual comprising 13 chapters, some of whose themes—sincerity, humility, faith, and asceticism—are also present in Bahya’s *Farâ'id*.²⁶ The chapter devoted to asceticism (*zuhd*) is the tenth in this section (ch.

22 Abraham Maimonides, *The High Ways to Perfection*, ed. S. Rosenblatt, vols. 1-2 (New Haven and Baltimore: Columbia University Press, 1928-1938), contains the Arabic original and an English translation (henceforth *Kifâya*). There exists a modern Hebrew translation: Abraham Maimonides, *ha-Maspiq le-‘Obedey ha-Shem*, trans. Yosef Duri (Jerusalem: S. D. Sassoon, 1968), as well as a new English translation based on the Hebrew: Abraham Maimonides, *The Guide to Serving God*, trans. Y. Wincelberg (Jerusalem and New York: Feldheim, 2008).

23 There are also a few random references to asceticism in Abraham Maimonides’ *Commentary on Genesis and Exodus*, ed. E. Wiesenberg (London: S.D. Sassoon, 1958). However, these are generally brief and most often refer to the *Kifâya* for further explanation, for example, his remarks on Gen. 27:4, *Commentary*, 74, which are expanded in the chapter on asceticism, *Kifâya*, II, 288-292.

24 *Kifâya*, chapter 11, ed. I. Rosenblatt, 142. See Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists*, 107-108 for a discussion of this passage, which was written in the spirit of the “special way” and not intended as a legal rule for common observance.

25 Cf. Maimonides, *Responsa* II, 208; *MT Shabbat* 30:12; *MT Hilkhot Shebîtat ‘Asôr* 9:4. Ibn Paquda, *Torat Ĥobot ha-Lebabot*, 9:5, 402 is also opposed to fasting on the Sabbath and festivals.

26 For the sequence of chapters in Bahya’s work, see note 8.

20, according to the original numbering),²⁷ preceded by a chapter on contentedness (*qanâ'a*)²⁸ and followed by chapters on the combat against the self (*mujâhada*), self-control, and solitude (*khalwa*).²⁹ Overall, the author of the *Kifâya* expresses a positive attitude towards asceticism in this chapter, which is, significantly, one of the longest in this section (30 pages).³⁰

Deftly construed, the chapter echoes, in parts, Bahya's treatment of the subject. Abraham begins with a definition of asceticism, before discussing its value for spiritual life, its essential character, practical instructions towards its attainment and their obstacles, the signs of true asceticism, the latter's benefits, and objections to asceticism and their refutation.

In his opening paragraph, Abraham presents a dualistic conception of man that perceives in the body the adversary of the spirit, which must ultimately be subdued. "As form [viz. the soul]

27 *Kifâya*, II, 224-307; Duri, 113-135; Wincelberg, 330-411.

28 In *Kifâya*, Ar. 216, Eng. 217: "Contentedness is the principle and source of abstinence." Rabbi Abraham considers contentedness a preliminary to abstinence, and he therefore places the latter's chapter after that of contentedness, whereas David Maimonides (see below) reverses the order. By way of comparison, according to al-Muhâsibi (ob. 857) *apud* al-Hujwîrî (ob. 1077), *Kashf al-Mahjûb*, trans. R. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1911), p. 179, contentedness is superior to renunciation.

29 Unfortunately, the *Kifâya* has come down to us in an incomplete form, and the following and final section on *wusûl*, "arrival" or "communion with God," describing the ultimate stage of the spiritual path, has not been preserved. I have endeavoured to define Abraham's conception of *wusûl* on the basis of various references gleaned in his writings in my article "New Light on R. Abraham Maimonides' Doctrine of the Mystical Experience," *Daat* 50 (2002): 107-119 (Hebrew). The contents of the original work as a whole were reconstructed from Genizah fragments and cross-references in my article "Dana's Edition of Abraham Maimuni's *Kifâyat al-'âbidîn*," *JQR* 82 (1991): 194-206. The chapters of the ethical section are: 1. (= ch. 11) Way of the Law; 2. (12) Way of the Elect; 3. (13) Sincerity; 4. (14) Compassion; 5. (15) Generosity; 6. (16) Gentleness; 7. (17) Humility; 8. (18) Reliance; 9. (19) Contentedness; 10. (20) Abstinence; 11. (21) War against the self; 12. (22) Self-mastery; 13. (23) Solitude.

30 In addition to this chapter, according to a cross-reference on page 145, Abraham also devoted a section to abstinence in the lost Third Preamble, which prefaced these ethical chapters. Furthermore, he penned a small tract entitled "On the obligatory nature of asceticism (*zuhd*) and its commendability for religion." See S. Goitein, "A Treatise in Defence of the Pietists," *JJS* 16 (1965): 105-114, and Fenton, *Deux traités*, 82-84.

ascends to its principle, which is God, its attachment to Him is strengthened, and as it descends to [the level of] its substratum, which is matter, its attachment to its principle is weakened.”³¹ “This world,” he states, “is a great veil (*hâjib*) separating the servant from his Master.”³² Pursuit of the spiritual brings us closer to the divinity, whereas pursuit of physical pleasures keeps Heaven at bay. If pleasures become obsessive, they can reduce man to a sort of slavery, which terminates only with his death. Preoccupation with worldly pursuits deflects him from the Divine truths and detracts from the time necessary to acquire spiritual perfection and knowledge of the Most High. Consequently, attachment to worldly pleasures is, as it were, a form of idolatry, while asceticism is among the most sublime virtues and is to be counted among the stations of the exalted way (*al-masâlik al-rafi‘a*).³³

Abraham then proceeds to highlight the value of asceticism. Through aloofness, the ascetic is liberated from mundane preoccupations and his mind is free to meditate spiritual matters.³⁴ Whoever contents himself with the basic vital necessities, which are obtainable with ease, will spare himself the effort and fatigue wasted in search of the superfluous.³⁵

31 *Kifâya*, Ar., 224-226, Engl., 225-227. This dualistic anthropology is consistent with that taught by Maimonides; see for example his *Introduction to the Commentary on the Mišnah*, ed. Qâfih, 22: “In the welfare of the body lies the destruction of the soul, whereas in the destruction of the body lies the welfare of the soul.” Cf. the saying to the same effect by the Sufi Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896), *Tafsir*, Beirut: Dâr al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 69 (on Qur. 7, 176): “The more the servant buries his ‘self’ in the earth, the more he elevates his heart to heaven.”

32 *Kifâya*, Ar., 224, Engl., 225. See also *Guide* 3:9, ed. Qâfih, 474: “Matter is a great veil (*hijâb*) preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is. It does this even if it is the noblest and purest matter.” Cf. *Guide* 1:30; 2:23; 2:36, and Introduction (ed. Qâfih, 13): “All impediments which prevent man from attaining his highest perfection... derive solely from his matter.”

33 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 232, Engl., 233.

34 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 232, Engl., 233, discusses the Special Way in the context of the renewal of the prophecy models of David and Elijah.

35 Cf. my translation of Abraham’s son’s work *The Treatise of the Pool by Obadiah Maimonides*, 100-101: “Essential commodities are easier to procure than that which is superfluous.”

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In keeping with a methodology applied by our author throughout this section of the *Kifâya*, he endeavours to confer on his ascetic ideal a biblical and rabbinical legitimization by demonstrating that it was that followed by the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) and the ancient prophets (Samuel, Elijah, Elisha), as well as the rabbinical sages of Israel (Abba Hilqiya). In support of this claim, like Bahya, he adduces multiple examples from the Bible and Talmud,³⁶ while, unlike Bahya, he avoids direct Sufi quotes or anecdotes.³⁷ Nonetheless, as previously stated, Abraham's positive attitude to asceticism was influenced by both his father's teachings and prevalent Sufi trends. In contrast to Maimonides, however, he manifestly employs Sufi terminology and models. Consider the following description he gives of the ascetic discipline pursued by the (Hebrew) prophets, where the donning of woollen garments and the retreat to the mountains and deserts are obvious references to Sufi practice:

And thus for all things worldly or most of them, wherefore the saints and the prophets assumed zealousness (*mujâhada*) in forsaking worldly habits in addition to bestirring themselves with the reflections of the heart, and donned wool³⁸ and contented themselves, insofar as food was concerned, with what was necessary [and] not agreeable and accustomed themselves to fasting and reduction [of rations], and some of them gave up women and forsook [human] settlement and repaired to mountain caves and secluded deserts. All this constituted zealousness for the beginner in the discipline, such as the followers of the prophets and saints at the beginning of their pursuit [of their course]. And zealousness was also displayed therein by him who became confirmed in

36 *Kifâya*, Ar., 234, Engl., 235. Cf. Ibn Paquda, 9:6, 402-405. Moreover, on 252-253 he refers by name to Bahya and this part of the *Hidâya* in connection with the hairy mantle worn by the biblical saints.

37 Some of the Sufi quotes brought by Bahya in his chapter on asceticism were already identified by A. Yahuda in the introduction to his Arabic edition of Bahya's *Hidâya* (Leiden: Brill, 1912), 103-110: "Aussprüche über das Wesen und die Grenze der Akese (Zuhd)."

38 The very term *sufi* is traditionally derived from the woollen (*suf*, in Arabic) apparel worn by the Muslim mystics.

holiness (*walâya*),³⁹ and all the more so by the prophets, because it became for them an acquired trait (*malaka, habitus*), so that they had no longing for what is not necessary, wherefore the two opposite extremes were [all] one to them.⁴⁰

I perceive in Abraham's presentation of *exempla* drawn exclusively from biblical and rabbinical sources and his "biblicizing" of Sufi custom an attempt to facilitate the adoption of his special form of asceticism inspired by Sufism by affirming the genuineness of its Jewish foundation. Indeed, when he does refer explicitly to Sufis, it is invariably in order to show their dependence on ancient Jewish rites.⁴¹ Furthermore, as indicated by a quotation from the *Kifâya* preserved in a Genizah manuscript which I uncovered many years ago, he perceived the adoption of Sufi practices, including asceticism, as an indispensable stage in the process of the redemption of the Jewish people.⁴²

Abraham Maimonides then proceeds to propose a definition of asceticism which can be traced back to Sufi sources:

The essence of abstinence consists in its being of the heart. I mean that the heart be abstinent in regard to the love of [the things of] this world, turning away therefrom, and being

39 Here too, and elsewhere, Abraham uses a typically Sufi term, that of the quality of a *walî* ("an intimate of God"). On the latter, see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. XI, art. "walî" [H. Radtke - P. Lory]. This concept is frequently to be found, most often with *anbiyâ'* ("prophets"), in the *Kuzari* 1:4 (ed. D. Baneth, 7) 1:109 (38), 1:115 (40), 2:14 (50), 2:44 (68), 3:11 (99), 3:19 (109), 3:49 (129), 4:3 (151, 159), 5:10 (200), 5:20 (220), and Ibn Paquda, *Hidâya* 2:5, ed. cit. 115; 3:3, 142; 3:4, 155; 3:6, 165; 4:4, 209, whereas, significantly, Maimonides employs *walî* only once in the *Guide*, and even then in a general sense and in the plural (*Guide* 1, 54 ed. Qafih, 130).

40 *Kifâya*, Ar., 248, Engl., 249. Compare this passage to Bahya's description of the first category, composed of extreme ascetics (Ibn Paquda, *Torat Ĥobot ha-Lebabot*, 9:3, 390) who "flee inhabited places, wander in the desert and wilderness, sustain themselves with herbs of the field, don woolen garments and rags, and take refuge in caves," and to Maimonides' historical description of the ascetics in *Eight Chapters*, ed. Qafih, ch. 4, 382-383.

41 *Kifâya*, Ar., 236-238, Engl., 237-239. For such specific references to Sufis, see 223, 321, 323, 349, 419, and 423.

42 See Fenton, *Deux traités*, 75-76.

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preoccupied with the love of God and what unites one with Him.⁴³

Ultimately, renunciation does not belong to the first category of asceticism, to wit, the curtailment of physical pleasures, but to the second, namely an inner, mental ethos in which the individual is totally liberated from the desire of this world. Since at this stage asceticism is a spiritual state of mind, it is therefore conceivable that even a rich man, garbed in silk and residing in a palace, could be an ascetic, providing he is immersed in the love of God and had emptied his heart of worldly ambitions. This state is superlatively exemplified by the biography of the Patriarch Abraham, who, despite his great wealth, led a pastoral existence, chose to be monogamous, and even remained unaware of Sarah's great beauty, upon which he had never gazed.⁴⁴ This is undisputable proof that asceticism had become for him a permanent disposition.

Conversely, a poor man arrayed in rags, whose diet consists of stale bread, is not necessarily an ascetic, for perhaps he had been reduced to this condition by external circumstances, and not by his own volition. Here again the vocabulary employed in the relevant passage clearly reflects a Sufi background:

It should not be said then of Abraham [the Patriarch] that he was not abstinent,⁴⁵ nor again should it be said of every poor man (*faqîr*)⁴⁶ whom we see wearing ragged garments and eating dry morsels that he is abstinent, because he does that by compulsion and not out of choice.⁴⁷ Nor again should it be

43 *Kifâya*, Ar., 236, Engl., 237. Cf. Bahya's statement at the beginning of his tenth chapter on love (Ibn Paquda, *Torat Ḥobot ha-Lebabot*, 10, introd., 409): "Our aim in asceticism is to unite the heart and the emptying it [of all save] the love of God." Cf. the definition by Junayd in Abû Tâlib al-Makkî, *Qût al-qulûb*, 1, Cairo: Halabi, 1961, 547: "The essence of abstinence attains one's heart, which is filled with the sole remembrance of God."

44 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 240, Engl., 241.

45 Cf. the similarity with the opinion of Salmon b. Yeruham in J. T. Robinson, *Asceticism, Eschatology*, 366.

46 Also synonymous with an adept of Sufism.

47 For a similar judgement from a Sufi source, see al-Tûsî, *Kitâb al-Luma' fi l-Tasawwuf*, ed. R. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1914), Ar. 418, Engl., 112: "Others retire from the world and dwell in caves, fancying that solitude will deliver them from their passions and cause them to share in the mystical

said of one who has assumed the traits of the abstinent by donning coarse garments and eating what is not agreeable, such as dry bread by itself without relish and the like, and [by] isolating himself (*inqitâ'*) in deserts and mountains and the like, that he is truly abstinent, except on condition that his heart turn away from [the things of this] world from which he has separated, not sorrowing over it nor longing for any worldly state other than that in which he is situated, but be, at all events, very firm in the discipline for abstinence [...]. He, then, who turns away from the love of [this] world with his heart, he is the truly abstinent. He, on the other hand, who longs for its goods, whose heart is smitten with the love of them, sorrowing over what he is missing thereof, he is the one who is in reality not abstinent.⁴⁸

How then can true spiritual abstinence be acquired? It necessitates a long preliminary discipline consisting of learning to curb one's natural impulses through the combat with one's self, a subject that Abraham Maimonides was to discuss in the following chapter on zealotry (*mujâhada*) (ch. 21). It is desire and not the body that has to be constrained. Worldly pleasures are not the purpose of man; sensual delights such as food, drink, and cohabitation are shared by dumb beasts, like dogs, asses and swine.⁴⁹ Moreover, many physical pleasures are illusory, like the elegance of one's attire, which becomes insignificant when one is not exposed to the public eye.

Pleasure is also a result of habit. A person accustomed to riding an animal would be ashamed to be seen walking on foot; the

experiences of the saints, but the fact is that hunger and solitude, if self-imposed and not the result of an overpowering spiritual influence are positively harmful." See also in the same vein Obadyah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, fol. 14a, Engl. 93: "Do not believe, like the poor in spirit, that seclusion (*inqitâ'*) is meant for the mountains and caves and that by merely withdrawing thereunto they will accomplish aught, for it is not so."

48 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 240, Engl., 241.

49 *Kifâya*, Ar. 242, Engl., 243. Cf. Maimonides' *Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishnah*, I, ed. Qâfih, 41: "Man's purpose is not to eat, drink, or cohabit [...] for these are all ephemeral accidents which do not enhance his essence. Moreover, man shares all of these acts with different beasts. It is but knowledge that enhances his essence and transports him from a lower to a higher level." Cf. also *Guide* 2:36.

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interruption of the habit leads after a time to the diminution of desire and renunciation then becomes second nature.⁵⁰

Having evoked the principle of habit, our author distinguishes between two levels of abstinence: on the one hand, an extreme form of renunciation of physical pleasures, undertaken by novices, and, on the other, spiritual abstinence practiced by accomplished ascetics in whom abstinence has become an inured trait (*malaka*) so that they no longer require external training:

He who turns away from the love of [this] world with his heart, he is the truly abstinent [...] the abstinence of the heart consists of zealotry in resisting natural impulse [...] it consists in the human being's observation with his intellect, in a manner free from passion and delusion, of the fact that the pleasures of this world are not the object of his humanity.⁵¹

It can be observed that Abraham has opted for his father's second and higher form of asceticism, an 'intellectual asceticism,' which he amplifies into a 'devotional' or 'spiritual' asceticism. It is not that of a temporary stage adopted for therapeutic purposes, as Maimonides advocates in chapter 4 of his *Eight Chapters*, but that of a more strenuous discipline meant to obtain the devotee's intellectual acquiescence.⁵² However, he may also have had in mind the select group of individuals evoked by Bahya, who were to practice a "special [mode of] asceticism" as a model for others.⁵³ Indeed, as I have shown elsewhere, Abraham does precisely envisage such a select group of ascetics (*akhyâr...zuhhâd fî d-dunyâ*), who were to continuously practice solitary meditation (*munqati'în dâ'iman*) and devote themselves (*tafarrugh*) to Divine worship in the synagogue, so as to be a model of imitation (*yatashabbahu*) for their fellow worshippers.⁵⁴

50 *Kifâya*, Ar., 252, Engl., 253.

51 *Kifâya*, Ar. 240-242, Engl., 241-243.

52 Cf. Kreisel, "Asceticism," xix-xx.

53 Bahya, *Kifâya*, Gate 9, ch. 1, 385 and ch. 2, 386-389.

54 P. Fenton, "Maimonides — Father and Son: Continuity and Change," in *Traditions of Maimonideanism*, ed. Carlos Fraenkel (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 103-137, in particular 120.

Practical Recommendations

Abraham Maimonides provides some practical recommendations as to how to enter upon the ascetic way. Since the eradication of habits is impossible in one stroke, especially where they are supported by natural impulse, recourse must be taken to a psychological technique. One must sound one's heart in order to determine what attracts it to worldly pleasures. Thereupon one must modify one's negative habits in order to elevate oneself. This must be done gradually, for haste can prove fatal and lead to failure.⁵⁵ For example, if one is accustomed to consuming a variety of dishes at one meal, the number of dishes should progressively be reduced. Only then can one progress to the next stage, which consists in partaking of plain food and avoiding exquisite dishes, before subsequently reducing the quantity consumed. Abraham recommends fasting as a preliminary to abstinence. However, external abstinence is futile if unaccompanied by internal abstinence. The latter consists of attaching one's thoughts to God's love in prayer and fear accompanied by internal purity. For instance, while fasting, one should shun all thoughts of the delicious dishes with which one will break the fast.⁵⁶ The association of external and internal should ease the task, "whereupon the gates of mercy will open for you, the lights of wisdom will shine upon you, and the treasures of Divine grace will be revealed."⁵⁷

However, caution must be exercised during his ascetic discipline, both physically by not falling ill, and morally by not falling prey to conceit or illusion. These general guidelines hold true for particular cases.

Most interestingly, among the latter, Abraham Maimonides discusses the exceptional case of reconciling the cultivation of abstinence with the practice of public office, which, in his capacity of leader of Egyptian Jewry, had an idiosyncratic ring to it:

55 Similarly, Maimonides, *Guide* 3:32, in another context, recommends progressive evolution and the avoidance of confronting negative dispositions head-on.

56 *Kifâya*, Ar., 256, Eng., 257.

57 *Kifâya*, Ar., 258, Eng., 259.

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Now a statement about the generalities is unavoidable, and from them guidance will be obtained for the particulars. I say then that as far as the government of a congregation is concerned, [involving] such [functions] as the administration of justice, and headship and prefecture, the discipline towards abstinence becomes possible in conjunction with it only by dint of intense effort, because there is too little time for external discipline, since the most important part of it is employed in preoccupation with that thing wherewith one is preoccupied, and the heart is diverted from internal discipline because of its concern with that matter which engages it, and concerning [situations] like that it is said: “Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burnt? Or can one walk upon hot coals, and his not be scorched?” (Prov. 6:27-28).⁵⁸

King David: A Counterexample?

It may be objected that kingship had an adverse effect on the biblical King David. Abraham claims this was not so, since David had already exercised asceticism, to the point where it had become his second nature, definitively acquired, even prior to his accession to the throne. Had not David first been a mere shepherd before becoming king? Furthermore, his was a Divine rule, entirely conducted in accordance with God’s will; consequently, he and those like him—presumably other kings and leaders of Israel—enjoyed Divine protection, which ensured the preservation of the purity of their heart, so that neither their appointment to public office nor the temptations attendant upon it had in any way altered their moral stature.⁵⁹

Yet, despite that, the author of the *Kifâya* admits that leadership necessarily has an adverse effect on asceticism. Consequently, one who aspires to austerity should refrain from

58 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 260-262, Engl., 261-263. Some pages previously, Abraham had given a critique of political leadership: “Thus also for the love of leadership and government even though it is an affair of the soul, not a sensual pleasure, yet it is a thing not intrinsically appertaining to the human body, nor having any connection with the person himself, but [rather] diverting him from the perfection of himself” (*Kifâya*, Ar., text, 244, Engl., 245).

59 Cf. Tûsî’s argument, cited in note 68.

public office. He explains that the same dilemma also applies at a family level:

As for the government of the members of his household, relatives, kinsmen, domestics and the like, he who is resolved upon this elevated path must gradually reduce his domestic staff, and sever relations with whomsoever is not indispensable, such as servants and domestics. Thereafter, he should reduce his connections with his relatives until he remains only with those whose care is required of him by law, namely his wife and minor children, or senile parents unable to provide for themselves, or his father, his mother, whom old age now prevents from self-sufficiency. In such cases, one faces a difficult dilemma. Preoccupation with them diverts one from his ultimate goal, while by abandoning them, he neglects his duty and transgresses the precepts.⁶⁰

Accordingly, Abraham, quite exceptionally among Jewish moralists, takes a rather reserved attitude towards marriage.⁶¹ It is true that Maimonides approved of the sort of celibate asceticism endorsed by Ben Azzai, but that was if it served the purpose of intellectual perfection subsequent to the subduing of the sexual impulse.⁶² Abraham, however, goes further than his father and, providing prooftexts from the lives of the patriarchs and prophets, declares that whosoever embarks upon this path should do so prior to marriage, postponing the latter until such time as perfection is attained.⁶³ Abstinence moreover requires keeping aloof from family and society, such as Elisha's separation from his parents at

60 *Kifāya*, Ar., text, 262-264, Engl., 263-265.

61 On the question of celibacy amongst the Judeo-Sufis, see Fenton, *Deux traités*, 68-69, and Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists*, 67-70.

62 MT *'ishût* 15:2-3.

63 *Kifāya*, Ar., text, 264-266, Engl., 265-267. His son had a similar attitude. Cf. Obdayah Maimonides, *Treatise of the Pool*, Ar., fol. 14a-b, Engl. 94: "The accomplished adepts who pursued this Path strived to perfect their souls before marriage knowing full well that after having begotten spouse and offspring there would be little opportunity for spiritual achievement, and if they were to achieve anything it would be rare and after much hardship." See Robinson, *Asceticism, Eschatology*, 336-337, for Qaraite utter opposition to celibacy.

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the behest of Elijah, a theme which is discussed more fully in the subsequent chapter on solitude.

The Signs of Asceticism

Abraham Maimonides goes on to examine the signs which inform the devotee of the authenticity of his achievement along the path of abstinence. The element of duration is not a consideration, for some reach their goal only after many years and much effort, whereas others obtain the same result in a short space of time.⁶⁴ Again, Abraham Maimonides invites the devotee to examine his attitude at a psychological level and to set as a criterion the question of whether any change has occurred in his internal attitude to his material existence and whether he misses the objects he has renounced. He states with great subtlety:

The extent of the deflection of the soul [= one's psychological reaction] is also subject to variation, for if it deflected [i.e. was disturbed] slightly, it is closer to abstinence, and if it is deflected greatly, it is closer to the absence of abstinence.⁶⁵

The Benefits of Abstinence

Our moralist proceeds to deal with the fruits of abstinence which afford the individual immunity from various sins, such as dishonesty in commercial dealings or sexual offences through lust and provide him with strength to comply with the positive commandments of the Torah. However, the achievement of inner asceticism paves the way to higher mystical states which are conducive to communion with the Divine (*wusûl*):

When however, [abstinence] is firmly established, the fruits it produces are the confirmation of "fear [of God]", and

64 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 266-268, Engl., 267-269.

65 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 268, Engl., 269. Similar, but not identical considerations are to be found *apud* al-Makkî, *Qût al-qulûb*, I, 506-508.

genuine “love [of God]” and sincerity in the “service [of God]” and the attainment of the mystical goal (*wusûl*).⁶⁶

Besides these moral benefits, asceticism also bears worldly fruits, such as peace of mind and relief from aggravation, which are infinitely superior to the pleasures that must be abandoned in order to attain them.⁶⁷

Three Challenges to the Necessity of Asceticism, and their Refutation

Abraham reserves the final part of this chapter to rebutting three hypothetical objections to the advocacy of asceticism. All three concern biblical accounts of material welfare and luxury which seem to be at odds with the principles of asceticism: 1) the promise of material reward in return for the observance of the religious precepts; 2) the materialistic nature of the patriarchal blessings; 3) and the magnificence of the priestly garments worn during Divine service.⁶⁸ In connection with the first, he asks:

How can it properly be said that abstinence is among the recommendations of the Law [...] when we find that the Bible has already rendered the comforts of this world the reward of obedience and their removal the punishment of disobedience?⁶⁹

To this quandary, Abraham Maimonides offers two replies. Firstly, asceticism is reserved for a narrow minority and never imposed upon the nation as a whole, for that would lead to the abandonment of necessary pursuits such as agriculture and commerce and would bring about the general collapse of society.⁷⁰ The common people are in need of these promises, since the true

66 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 270, Engl., 271. On *wusûl*, see *infra*, n. 29, and art. ‘wisâl’ *El²* vol. XI, 228-230 [D. Gril]. As we will see shortly, these four stages are developed by David II Maimonides in his treatment of asceticism.

67 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 270-272, Engl., 271-273.

68 Interestingly, this question is also broached in Sufi literature. Cf. al-Tûsî, *Kitâb al-Lumâ’*, 101, who discusses the wealth accrued to Muhammad, notably from the spoils taken from the Jews. He argues that prophets possess a God-given strength which raises them above self-interest.

69 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 272, Engl., 273.

70 A similar argument was already advanced by Bahya, *Torat Hobot ha-Lebabot*, ch. 9:1, 385.

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nature of reward — the bliss in the world to come — reserved for the elite, was not explicitly revealed, for, because of its abstruse nature, it would be unattractive to the common people.

Secondly, mundane pursuits and occupations were to be encouraged, for without them the world, including the ascetics, could not subsist. The Torah promises worldly benefits to the obedient in order to assist them in their religious duties, but such benefits are not the ultimate reward.

A second objection against asceticism could be raised from the materialistic content of the blessings bestowed upon his sons by the Patriarch Isaac. To this challenge Rabbi Abraham develops a lengthy reply.⁷¹ A preliminary question raises the difficulty of Isaac's blessings being contingent upon the delicacies he requested (Gen. 27:25). Abraham provides two answers to this dilemma, his own and that of his companion Rabbi Abraham he-Hasid.⁷² In the former, he maintains that the request for delicacies was due to Isaac's need to bring on a certain spiritual symmetry (*munâsaba*)⁷³ between himself and Esau as a prerequisite to the blessing. Likewise, according to Rabbi Abraham he-Hasid, the delicacies stimulated an intimacy (*taqarrub*) between Isaac and Esau which facilitated the transmission of the blessing.⁷⁴

To the second aspect, namely, that the blessings themselves consisted of the bestowal of material prosperity, Abraham replies yet again that these promises, in keeping with those vouchsafed by the Torah, were merely a means for obtaining the ultimate reward, which is of a spiritual nature.⁷⁵

A third objection concerns the splendour of the priestly vestments, inlaid with gold, jewels, and precious stones. Is not this show of magnificence at odds with an attitude of asceticism?

71 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 280-296, Engl. 281-297.

72 On this central figure of the pietist circle in Fostat, see P. Fenton, "Some Judaeo-Arabic Fragments by Rabbi Abraham ha-Hasid, the Jewish Sufi," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 26 (1981): 47-72. In his *Commentary on Genesis 27:4*, ed. S. Wiesenberg (London: S. D. Sassoon, 1958), 75, Abraham, refers to this idea developed in the chapter on asceticism in the *Kifâya* and reports it in the name of his grandfather, Rabbi Maymûn. This supplementary nearness referred to here is perhaps akin to *munâsaba*. See following note.

73 On this term see Fenton, *Deux traités*, 140, n. 13.

74 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 282-290, Engl. 283-291.

75 Interestingly, this problematic is also posed in Sufi literature. Cf. al-Tûsî, *Kitâb al-Luma'*.

Abraham replies that the purpose of their elegance was to instil a sense of grandeur into the souls of the masses who beheld him. Their ornateness contrasted with the simplicity of the linen garments the High Priest was wont to don upon entering the Holy of Holies. Here he had no need to beautify himself, for the goal of the ascetic was to appear before God in an intangible presence (*hudûr ma'nawî*).⁷⁶

It can be observed that at times the ultimate state of spirituality is reached through utter poverty,⁷⁷ while at others, ascetics were rewarded with earthly prosperity, from which they were inwardly detached. These belong to the mysteries of Divine Providence.

In conclusion, Abraham states:

God will assist whoever tends (*qâsid*) towards Him and travels (*sâlik*) [the path] leading to Him, in achieving his aim; for he that loves his master and is abstinent in regard to everything except Him, him does his master love, and he, who is in earnest in the quest of Him, reaches the object of his quest.

Finally, we would like to add another brief mention of asceticism, which comes up in the section of the *Kifâya* dealing with vows.⁷⁸ As already pointed out by I. Twersky, Moses Maimonides displayed a somewhat dialectical attitude to vows, on the one hand practically forbidding them in his ethical theory since they favour abstinence and self-mortification, while on the other hand considering them commendable in a legal context if they were to enhance one's moral conduct.⁷⁹

In his chapter on vows, while clearly taking his cue from his father, Rabbi Abraham departs quite substantially from the latter's first position and expands on the commendable aspects of vows.

76 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 296-298, Engl. 297-299.

77 *Kifâya*, Ar., text, 298-306, Engl. 299-307. For the first category, R. Abraham gives the examples of Elijah and Elisha, Nahum Ish Gamzu, Honi ha-Ma'agal, Abba Hilqiya (cf. B. Ta 'anit 21a, 23a), and, for the second, King David, Eli 'ezer b. Harsom (cf. B. Yoma 35b) or the wife of R. Aqiba (B. Nedarim 50a).

78 This chapter is included among those published by N. Dana, *Sefer ha-Maspik le'Ovdey Hashem* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1989), 307-311.

79 Twersky, *Introduction to the Code*, 467-468.

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Though not an obligation, the latter contain a “mystery” (*sirr*)⁸⁰ which trains the devotee in the spiritual discipline of asceticism (*zuhd*) and in shunning worldly enjoyments which deflect him from Divine worship (*ta'abbud*). The same is also true of the “mystery” of the discipline of the Nazirite, which keeps him aloof from physical passions and those that perturb his intellect, providing that the aim of his vow is to serve God, as it is stated: “Vows are a barrier for abstinence” (*Abôt* 3:13).⁸¹

Asceticism in the Writings of David II Maimonides

Asceticism is also discussed in the works of some of Abraham Maimonides' descendants who perpetuated the Judeo-Sufi tradition. Among the latter are to be counted Abraham Maimonides' son 'Obadyah (1228-1265)⁸² and especially David II b. Joshua Maimonides, the last known member of the Maimonidean dynasty (c. 1335-1415).⁸³ David succeeded his father Joshua as *nagîd* of the Egyptian community in 1355, a function which had been occupied over the past century and a half by several of his ancestors, some of whom had been associated with the Judeo-Sufi circle. We find him later in Syria, in Aleppo and Damascus, where remnants of his writings were discovered. David II Maimonides deals with this theme in at least two of his preserved Judaeo-Arabic works, on the one hand his as-yet-unpublished *Tajrîd al-Ḥaqâ'iq* (“Abstract of speculative truths and extract of ethical aims”), and, on the other, his *al-Murshid ila t-Tafarrud* (“The Guide to Detachment”), of which I have published the Arabic text, as well as a Hebrew and French translation.⁸⁴

80 In Abraham Maimonides' writings, this term denotes the deeper spiritual significance of a precept. This is an example of Abraham's “spiritualization” of Maimonides' Code.

81 R. Abraham “fills in” the missing data in Maimonides' statement on Naziritehood in MT *Hilkhôt Nezîrût* 10:14 by providing an anecdote connected with Simon the Just as an illustration of nazirite sanctity. Incidentally, in his *Beth Yosef*, R. Joseph Caro (d. 1575) gives *ad loc* the same example, which is probably what Maimonides had in mind.

82 See, for example, Fenton, *The Treatise of the Pool*, ch. 14-15, 101-105.

83 On 'Obadyah, see Fenton, *The Treatise of the Pool*, and idem, *Deux traités*, 115-118. On David II Maimonides, see *Deux traités*, 195-204.

84 *Deux traités*.

The *Tajrîd al-Ḥaqqâ'iḳ* is divided into two parts, the first of which, containing 46 chapters, deals with philosophical issues. The second part, originally composed of twelve chapters, treats of ethical principles. Substantial but incomplete sections of the two parts, containing in all over 460 pages, have been preserved in the libraries of Cambridge, Oxford, and Saint Petersburg.⁸⁵ The Bodleian manuscript (Huntington 489), written, by the way, in David Maimonides' own hand, contains almost all of the second part. Its ninth chapter (fols. 130a-138b), entitled "True bliss is attained through asceticism, contentedness, and gnosis (*zuhd, qanâ'a, ma'rifa*)," is relevant to our subject.⁸⁶ His exposition in this chapter is theoretical and markedly more mystical in nature in comparison to Abraham Maimonides' account. Unlike his ancestor, he provides no practical indications but explains in Sufi terminology the mystical role asceticism indispensably plays in the ascending scale of virtues leading to the "perfect man" (*al-insân al-kâmil*).⁸⁷ The underlying structure of this progressive regimen is based on the celebrated saying by R. Pinhas b. Ya'ir referred to previously:

1) Heedfulness leads to cleanliness, 2) cleanliness leads to purity, 3) purity leads to abstinence, 4) abstinence leads to holiness, 5) holiness leads to modesty, 6) modesty leads to fear of sin, 7) fear of sin leads to piety, 8) piety leads to the Holy

85 P. Fenton, "The Literary Legacy of David ben Joshua, Last of the Maimonidean Negidim," *JQR* 75 (1984): 1-56, especially 2-8. On the impact of this work, see idem, "New Light on Maimonidean Writings on Metempsychosis and the Influence of Avicenna," in *Avicenna and His Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Y. Tzvi Langermann (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 341-368, esp. 359-368.

86 There is also a certain amount of relevant material in Chapter 4 (fols. 14a-96a). The latter is an enlargement on ch. 4 of Maimonides' *Eight Chapters* and deals with the "mean" in regard to twenty different virtues, including a discussion (fols. 54-58) of contentedness and abstinence (*qanâ'a, zuhd*).

87 He devotes chapter 11 to a description of the Perfect Man, as opposed to *al-shakhs al-kâmil*, dealt with in his *Guide to Detachment*. See *Deux traités*, 230 and 295. On these terms, which manifestly carry Sufi overtones, see also P. Fenton, "The Second Ibn Tibbon: Salomon Munk and His Translation of the Guide," in *Maimonides' "Guide of the Perplexed" in Translation: A History From the Thirteenth Century to the Twentieth*, ed. J. Stern, J.T. Robinson, and Yonatan Shemesh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 199, n. 67, and *infra* n. 93.

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Spirit, 9) the Holy Spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead, and 10) the resurrection of the dead proceeds from Elijah.⁸⁸

David Maimonides commences his chapter with the statement that *asceticism, contentedness, and gnosis* are the key to true bliss, for the latter can only be attained by eschewing physical delights, the extravagance of the irascible soul, and the whims of the imaginative soul.⁸⁹ In the following passage he perceives asceticism as the first of three “journeys” or stages culminating in Divine gnosis:

Know that the individual can attain true beatitude through three disciplines: eschewing delights of the appetitive soul, avoiding the profligacy of the irascible soul, and the whims of the imaginative soul. It is this discipline which involves asceticism (*zuhd*) with regard to worldly pleasures. This is called abstinence and entails “recoiling from all but God.” The second discipline entails assiduity in the performance of worship, that is prayer and Divine service, turning towards God and the observance of the religious precepts. This is called worship (*‘ibâda*) and entails “the going out towards God.” These two disciplines of abstinence and worship are referred to in our texts as “worship through fear.” The third discipline which is conduct [carried out] with pure thought towards grasping God, the contemplation of His greatness through the marvels of His creatures and His radiant wisdom, with certain and true apprehension and abundant love, through sincere affection of the true essence insofar as He is the Real. This discipline is called “arrival at (*wusûl*) God” and this is gnosis (*ma‘rifâ*) [...] ⁹⁰ and this is known in our texts as “worship through love.”

88 Mishnah Sota 9:15. David Maimonides refers to the different versions of this saying and varies his interpretations accordingly (fol. 137a). On the variations, see S. Liebermann, *ha-Yerushalmi ki-fshuto* (Jerusalem: Darom, 1934), 35 *et seq.*

89 I have as yet not found a Sufi text which refers specifically to these three principles as stages along the Path. However, in the following passage *qanâ‘a* (“contentedness”) is replaced by *‘ibâda* (“worship”), which brings us closer to the classical Sufi formula *sharī‘a, tariqa, haqīqa*. See following note.

90 These are the well-known three stages of the journey to God in Sufism, also referred to in his *Murshid*, 94. Cf. *Deux traités*, 298-299.

He then goes on to say:

Now with non-agnostics, abstinence in relation to worldly enjoyments is practiced either in order to obtain in return Divine reward, or through fear of punishment [...] Such attitudes are those of an insincere servant (*obed shelo li-shmah*) [...]. Ibn Sina calls the latter “a transaction by which the next world is purchased with the present.”⁹¹ However, those that practice abstinence through love of God or in order to exalt Him are praiseworthy.⁹²

Having said this, he recognizes that “worship through fear” is nonetheless an indispensable stage and constitutes a [category] of abstinence. Nonetheless, “worship through love” solely for the sake of the Divine essence is, of course, superior to the former and “is the goal (*ghâya*) of all goals and the finality of all ends” whereby the individual becomes a “true servant of God” and worthy of the name of Israel (fol. 135b).

In the progressive stages of R. Pinhas b. Ya'ir's regimen, “abstinence” is an essential degree upon which hinge the higher levels:

1) Heedfulness is the first of the degrees of 4) abstinence (*zuhd*), the last degree of which is 7) “fear of sin.” As for 8) piety (*hasidût*), it refers to assiduity in the performance of the

91 Ibn Sina, *Ishârât*, III, ed. S. Dunya (Cairo: Dâr al-ma'ârif, 1947), 226.

92 The author is following Maimonides' *Commentary on Sanhedrin* 10 (ed. Y. Qâfih [Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1965], 199) and his *MT Hilkhot Teshubah* 10. See also Maimonides' *Commentary on Abot* I (ed. Y. Qâfih [Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1965], 408-410), whom David II quotes explicitly. Cf. also Joseph Ibn 'Aqnin, *Sefer ha-Musar*, ed. W. Bacher (Berlin: Mekizey Nirdamim, 1911, 5-6. It is noteworthy that in the first passage of his *Comm. on Sanh.* 10 (ed. Qâfih, 199b) is to be found one of the instances in which Maimonides mentions the expression *al-insân al-kâmil* (see also *Intro. to Comm.* Vol. I, ed. Qâfih, p. 45b: *rajul kâmil*). Although this term can designate an individual who has perfected his practical and intellectual virtues, Maimonides was certainly aware of its mystical overtones in Sufism. David II Maimonides devotes his following chapter (ch. 10) precisely to the Perfect Man. The term also occurs in the *Midrash* (Numbers) attributed to David I Maimonides, Cambridge University Library, Ms Ff2.17, fol. 130a: 'If the Perfect Man ennobled his soul and transported (*wassalahâ*) it to its principle.'

duties of the Law, whereas the 9) “holy spirit” alludes to gnosis. At this level, the gnostic’s thought has veered towards the abode of supernal sanctity, in which emanation of the Divine illumination (*shurûq nûr al-Haqq*) becomes continuous within the individual’s inner self (*sirr*). Through this, the gnostic obtains true life or 10) “the resurrection of the dead” [...]. As for the expression “and the resurrection of the dead proceeds from Elijah,” therein is contained a most marvellous and subtle allusion, for “Elijah” is a metaphor designating the souls’ conjunction (*ittisâl*) with their principles (*mabâdî*) (fol. 136a-137a).⁹³

David Maimonides declares that he has explained this more fully in his exegesis of Joel 3:4 in *Maqâlat Derekh ha-Hasidût*, which, now lost, was apparently also built around R. Pinhas b. Ya’ir’s maxim (cf. 137a).⁹⁴

In short, spiritual asceticism refers to the point at which the soul attains perfection in its regimen of perseverance. Henceforth, it turns in its entirety (*bi-kulliyatihâ*) towards the Divine Reality to a point where it unceasingly proclaims “This is the day of our Lord” prior to the hour of separation (*firâq*), i.e., “the terrible day of the Lord” (Joel 3:4). However, this degree is reserved for the “select few,” while it behooves ordinary individuals to persevere in their asceticism.⁹⁵

As we have explained, beatitude will come about through asceticism, worship and gnosis [...] as set out in the verse “Thou shalt *fear* the Lord thy God; Him shalt thou *serve*, and to Him shalt thou *cleave*, and *swear* by his name” (Deut. 10:20). Now “fear” refers to asceticism, “service” refers to assiduous

93 Employment of this saying to designate the gradual stages of the mystical way is not peculiar to R. David, for it is already found in Bahya, who does not, however, use it as a basis for an ethical syllabus. Cf. Ibn Paquda, 8:3, 364. But in his *Taqwîm al-Adyân*, written in 1223, Daniel Ibn al-Mâshita does just that, dividing the maxim into two spiritual levels: the “stations of perseverance” (*manâzil al-ijtihâd*) and the “stations of piety” (*manâzil al-hasidût*). See P. Fenton, “A Critique of Maimonides’ *Guide* by Daniel Ibn al-Mâshita,” in *Genizah Research after Ninety Years: The Case of Judaeo-Arabic*, ed. J. Blau and S. C. Reif (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 78.

94 He mentions notably that the station of humility (*anawa*) refers to gnosis (*irfân*), “the aim of the perfect ones and the design of the gnostics.”

95 Here we have an echo of the two levels of ascetics already encountered in the doctrines of Bahya and Abraham Maimonides.

worship i.e., “worship through fear,” whereas “cleaving” refers to gnosis, i.e. “worship through love.”⁹⁶ The latter implies the preoccupation of one’s thoughts with grasping the [Divine] Reality and being attached (*wusla*)⁹⁷ to His gate. As for “cleaving and swearing by His name,” it signifies that once the individual has arrived at this exalted degree (*manzila*) and reached the nobleness of His essence, that is His name, he will become cognizant of what he has apprehended just as one who gives oath must be fully conscious of the object of his oath [...]. Every virtuous and perfect man prays that he may attain this degree (fol. 138a-b).

The *Al-Murshid ilâ t-Tafarrud*, whose very title, “The Guide to Detachment,” smacks of a regime of abstinence, embodies the most far-reaching synthesis of traditional rabbinical ethics and the spiritual stations of the Sufi path. The above-quoted adage by R. Pinhas b. Ya’ir also forms the framework of the progressive stages of the pietist path (*ḥasidût*) expounded in this work. The latter is divided into 28 chapters, three of which, chapters 7, 8, and 9, touch on the virtue of abstinence, designated with the Mishnic term *perishût*. The treatment is much less elaborate than in the *Tajrîd*, probably because the *Murshid* is in fact an abridgement of the larger work called *Maqâla fî Derekh ha-Ḥasidût*, only remnants of which have been preserved. It is noteworthy that amongst the latter, fragments dealing with abstention and solitude (*perishût*, *‘uzla*, *khalwa*) have also come to light.⁹⁸

Chapter 7 of the *Murshid* deals with the third station, namely, that of asceticism, (*perishût*),⁹⁹ which David Maimonides considers the quintessence of the pietistic way. He understands *perishût* primarily as an act of withdrawal from society into a state of solitude and seclusion:

An ascetic (*pârûsh*) is an individual who withdraws from the benefits and pleasures of this world. In a word, he isolates

96 In his *Murshid*, 30 (*Deux traités*, 248), David considers the ascetic practice of fasting and vigils expedients towards the revelation (*mukâshafa*) of gnosis.

97 On this term, see *Deux traités*, 140, n. 11.

98 Cf. “Literary legacy,” 15.

99 *Murshid*, Ar., text, 18, Hebrew, 19, French trans., 236-239.

Asceticism among the Judeo-Sufis of Egypt

himself and avoids all else besides God. Hence, abstinence is seclusion and withdrawal.

Withdrawal presents numerous advantages, enabling one to devote oneself to worship and an intimate dialogue with God rather than with men.¹⁰⁰ Seclusion preserves one from the sins to which one is most often exposed in society as well as from discord and quarrels and harm caused by slander, jealousy, falsehood and prejudice. In addition, solitude in this world is a preparation for death insofar as it eases the grief of solitude after death. The Sages have alluded to this phenomenon in the expression: “the righteous, even after death, are called ‘living’” (B. Berâkhôt 18a).¹⁰¹

David Maimonides harps back to the theme of asceticism in his eighteenth chapter, which deals with the temperance to be exercised in relation to the five senses. He follows herein Maimonides’ theory of the golden mean but concludes the chapter by making a distinction, already encountered above, between outward or preliminary asceticism and true or spiritual asceticism which entails the total submission of the senses to the soul:

One must exercise moderation in respect of the sensual phenomena, restricting oneself to what is indispensable and necessary since it is impossible to completely abstain from them. As excess in sensual matters impedes the achievement of the desired goal, a person must limit himself to what is necessary to sustain the body weakened by the ascetic discipline. This rule will assist him in advancing along the Path of true asceticism (*al-zuhd al-ḥaqîqî*). Asceticism is indispensable as a means to inculcate spiritual principles and

100 The exposition of these advantages is borrowed from al-Ghazali, *Ihyâ’ Ulûm al-Dîn*, vol. 2, Beirut, n. d., 201ff.

101 In the following Chapter 8 (*Murshid*, Ar., text, p. 18-20, Hebrew, p. 19-21, French transl., p. 281-283) the author examines the seven categories of *perûshîm* or ascetics discussed in the Talmud (TB *Sotâh* 22b). Though perhaps inspired by Bahya’s categorization of ascetics (*Torat Ḥobot ha-Lebabot*, 9:3, 389-393), these are not identical with those presented in the *Duties of the Hearts*, which speaks of the three sincere categories and the three hypocritical ones. According to our author these categories are established according to the devotee’s level of knowledge and training and whether his practice of withdrawal is out of love, like Abraham, or out of fear, like Job.

eradicate physical ones, for whenever bodily forms and preoccupations take hold of the soul, they tarnish its luminosity. It is indispensable too that his [asceticism] be genuine, for whoever abandons external pleasures in a specious manner, while his heart in fact still inclines towards them, his asceticism will be of no avail since God neither considers [external] forms nor deeds, but fathoms the innermost heart, the recesses of the soul and the depths of the conscience. [...] Although in the initial stages of the devotee's itinerary, he may affect outward asceticism, he must evolve towards true asceticism, as our Sages specified: “[by all means let a man engage in good deeds, even if not for their own sake], for through the work for a selfish purpose he will arrive at the stage of doing good for its own sake” (B. Sanhedrin 105b). The mystery (*sirr*)¹⁰² of this discipline is to obtain the submission of the vital soul and its subordination to “the lamp of the Lord” (Prov. 20:27), i.e., the human soul. In short, he must subject the sensitive, appetitive, and irascible faculties to the luminous substance and Divine light.¹⁰³

Though echoes of Moses Maimonides' treatment of the subject of asceticism still reverberate in this text, we can observe that the ascetic discipline has moved to the fore to become an essential component of spiritual life.¹⁰⁴

Finally, do we know if the Egyptian Judeo-Sufis practiced what they preached? Admittedly, we have no precise statistics from this period, but Abraham Maimonides does give random references to ascetic practices among the members of his circle, such as solitary retreats and the wearing of special garments. Perhaps the most eloquent testimony to the actual adoption of these practices is the fact that numerous names mentioned in surviving Geniza documents are followed by the epithet *he-Ḥasīd* ‘the pious’, or indeed *al-zāhid* ‘the ascetic’, suggesting that the phenomenon was actually widespread.¹⁰⁵

102 See *supra*, n. 80.

103 *Murshid*, Ar., text, p. 14-18, Hebrew, p. 15-19, French transl., p. 236-239

104 Space does not allow me to deal with additional chapters which touch on this subject, such as Chapter 18, dealing with temperance and [the golden mean]. Cf. *Murshid*, Ar., text, 56/58, Hebrew, 57/59, French trans., 270-271.

105 Cf. *Deux traités*, p. 37.

Conclusion

In contrast to Georges Vajda's view that the classical writers on Jewish ethics, such as Bahya, Halevi, and Maimonides, propounded a moderate form of asceticism, I demonstrate that for Abraham Maimonides and his descendants, 'Obadyah and David, the value of asceticism as a spiritual expedient was greatly enhanced. It was no longer an intermediary stage of temporary duration, a therapeutic step in the climb towards the attainment of a temperate ethical disposition or the achievement of equanimity. Instead, it was promoted to a supreme ethical principle and would almost have been an end in itself, were it not for the fact that it had become a gate through which the highest spiritual stations of communion and gnosis could be attained.

The reasons for this shift in emphasis, I believe, are to be sought in the increasing influence of the Sufi environment in which Egyptian Judaism evolved, coupled with the conviction that theirs was the generation proximate to the renewal of prophecy and the redemption.¹⁰⁶ Preparation for the latter demanded a strict regimen of moral and intellectual purification and renunciation. This discipline of a "special asceticism," though intended to have a wide resonance, was, however, reserved for the select few, capable of plying the "elevated paths" that were to prepare the way.

A final thought. It is commonly held that, faced with fierce opposition, Abraham Maimonides' Judeo-Sufi enterprise failed as a popular movement. I suggest that many of its principles in fact survived, especially its ascetic components, and were eventually absorbed into the nascent mystical trends of Eastern Qabbalah, in which an increase in acute ascetic practices can again be observed in preparation for the impending redemption.¹⁰⁷

106 I have described at length the pietist way as a "prophetic discipline" in my *Deux traités*, 70-80, which has been further elaborated upon by Russ-Fishbane, Part 3, "Prophecy and Messianism," 187-243.

107 I have dealt with the transfer to the Holy Land of some of the pietists' practices, such as the "solitary retreat" (*hitbôdedût*), and their adoption by the Qabbalists in *Deux traités*, 96-105.

