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The Position of Nahmanides during the Maimonidean Controversy

The Maimonidean Controversy of the 1230s marks a critical point in the development of the Jewish people in Medieval Europe. It was the first battle fought in the clash of cultures spurred by the Almohad expulsion of Jews from Al-Andalus and the subsequent migration of Andalusian Jews to Provence. At the same time, the controversy's conclusion (and perhaps the very controversy itself) represented the spirit of Inquisition's first reaching Jewish life – a spirit that would end Jewish life in France, later Spain, and ultimately in the entirety of Western Europe.

The controversy also was a major moment in the life of Nahmanides. Known in retrospect as one of the thinkers in Jewish history, Nahmanides is more famous for events later in his long life: the disputation with Pablo Christiani in 1263, his emigration to the Land of Israel, and his commentary to the Pentateuch completed near the end of his life. Though he was not one of the original parties to the dispute, Nahmanides took a very significant role in the intellectual sphere of the controversy, and while only in his thirties staked out a bold path to navigate the collision of Andalusian and Ashkenazi Judaism.

The *locus classicus* of Nahmanides' place in the controversy is the letter he wrote to the Rabbis of Northern France after both a ban and counter-ban had been placed on Maimonides'

philosophical works. In the letter, Nahmanides issues a three-pronged argument against the French *herem* on Maimonides, and he then proposes a compromise resolution: to revoke the universal ban on the works, while still opposing group study of them. There is, however, debate amongst scholars as to what exactly Nahmanides proposed to do about group study. This debate stems from both textual and philosophical arguments. I will primarily examine the views of Chaim Dov Chavel, who argued that group study was merely to be publicly discouraged, and of David Berger, who argued that group study should be formally banned.

Background of the Controversy

The Genesis of the controversy lies in the Almohad conquest of Al-Andalus in the 1140s. Under duress to convert to Islam, most Jews chose to flee northward: some stayed in Christian Aragon and Castille, others continued north into Provence. They carried with them a rich intellectual tradition, reverence for R. Isaac Alfasi, and a high courtier culture, notable engaging with Arabic and Aristotelian philosophy in the most intimate way.¹ Though most philosophical works were not understandable to the Hebrew- and French-speaking Provençal community, translation soon became a vocation for many Andalusian expats. Samuel ibn Tibbon translated Maimonides' *Moreh Nevukhim* (Guide for the Perplexed) in 1204, bringing the thought Jewish Andalusia's greatest product to France for the first time.² Opposition to Maimonides' philosophy brewed amongst some of the native Provençal scholars, concerned both about heresy contained his works as well as leading the Provençal community to heretical positions outside of

¹ Berger, *Cultures in Collision and Conversation* 52-53

² Though Maimonides' halakhic corpus *Mishneh Torah* had been available in Provence for some time, and Rabad of Posquieres and Zerachiah ha-Levi already responded to it during Maimonides' lifetime.

his works.³ In 1232 R. Solomon ben Abraham of Montpellier proclaimed a prohibition on studying the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah*'s philosophic section *Sefer ha-Madda*. Solomon also sent his primary disciple, R. Jonah Gerondi, to northern France to garner support against the Maimunists. This trip resulted in a formal *herem* (ban) being issued upon the study of these books. This ban was opposed vigorously by Maimunists in Lunel and Narbonne, who responded with a counterban against the anti-Maimunists. Maimonides' supporters also sent their own delegate, R. David Kimchi, to Spain to rouse support. Kimchi received a mixed response, though some communities also proclaimed their own ban against the anti-Maimunists later that year. At this stage, near the climax of the crisis, Nahmanides entered the scene. After first writing a letter to the Spanish leaders advocating restraint and to bring the subject before a *bet din*, he sent a long letter to the Rabbis of Northern France, arguing that they should revoke their ban.⁴

Nahmanides' Arguments

The letter is often referred to as the "Before I shall answer, I did err" letter.⁵ The tone that Nahmanides sets in his first line carries throughout his long preferential remarks. Calling to his own humility and his readers' greatness, Nahmanides lauds them in Biblical terms, calling them "the princes of the tribes," and "the faces seen in the Chariot." He humbles himself, saying "I am as the ant, and there is not a word on my tongue;" "even the designation of collegueship does not rest upon us."⁶ Nahmanides writes in this fashion to change the tone of discourse. Until this

³ Nina Caputo gives a long treatment to the connection between the attacks against claimed heresy in the Jewish spheres of Provence and the Christian culture of inquisition in Chapter 1 of her dissertation *"And God Rested on the Seventh Day...": Time, History, and Creation in Medieval Jewish Culture*.

⁴ It is assumed by most that Ramban's letter were written shortly before a ban against R. Solomon was proclaimed in Saragossa

⁵ Chavel, *Kitve Ramban* 331

⁶ Chavel, *Writings and Discourses* 364-365

point all arguments have been tipped with fire, slinging arrows against the opposition in defense of the established position, with no regard to the damages they cause. Nahmanides realized that in invoking his own authority he could not coerce the French rabbis to obey his will; he would need to instead convince them that he was correct, and they would need to act accordingly by their own choice. He epitomizes his stance:

Today, however, I am as a child who inquires of [his] teacher and as a disciple who is eager to ascertain the opinion of his instructors – “and a timid man cannot learn.” I have thus removed the veil of shame from my face, and I have set before my eyes the words of the rabbis of France both on the Written Law and on the Oral Law, in which every student [of Torah] is wrapped, to respond to objections and to increase discussions of questions they ask. When I will object to their decree and when I will refute their words, I will ask the What, the How, and the Wherefore [of their decision].

My spirit, though is a willing spirit, blowing from a place of love. It is not an abhorrent spirit or a murmuring thought. [I will act] only as one who lends his ear to his attentive instructor and whose [whole] hearted desire is a flaming flame, a scorched face. For I am full of words, and like new wine-skins, I have burst. My tongue shall speak in my mouth, but it is not I who will speak, [for] I am without knowledge. Teach my, my Rabbis, and I will hold my peace.

Knowing he was starting from a dissenting position with the French Rabbis, Nahmanides cleverly opened the door to resolution between the two sides of the conflict, rather than the submission of one to the other.

After completing his appeal to the egos of the French Rabbis, Nahmanides argues that their ban is unjustified on three fronts: the French Rabbis are in the wrong cultural context to rule appropriately; a *herem* would be devastating to the unity of the Jewish community; and the so-called “heretical” dicta in the *Sefer ha-Madda* are in fact the rightful heirs of similar positions held by venerated Jewish scholars throughout history.

Nahmanides’ first argument is in his defense of Maimonides the pillar of Sepharad, a figure who looms large over the non-Ashkenazi world. More than just being a tremendous

Talmud scholar – this was something even the Provençal anti-philosophers agreed to – Maimonides was a savior of sorts for much of Spanish and North African Jewry:

He “built a tower in the midst of the Talmud...and a sanctuary for the masses, the unlearned masses who go up into the breaches. ... How many dispersed of faith has he gathered! ... To how many hungry for wisdom is his bread given, his water sure! How many atheists and perverts who have put our Talmud to shame has he answered correctly!”⁷

Maimonides wrote in a culture steeped in a philosophical tradition that was not always friendly to Jewish thought. Nahmanides himself recognized this – evidenced by his writings that reveal both extensive knowledge of classic Greek philosophy and his antipathy towards it⁸ – and respected Maimonides for the successful response he issued (though he did disagree with Maimonides on many philosophical issues as well as methodology). Nahmanides castigates the French for their insensitivity to the *Moreh Nevukhim*'s *sitz im leben*, throwing it aside despite its necessity and success where it originated. Maimonides wrote the *Guide for the Perplexed* because where he lived there *were* those perplexed. But the rabbis who banned that very work had nothing to be concerned of: the French tradition did not include any intellectual pursuits but Talmud study, and so there was no concern to respond to. “If you are in the bosom of faith, soundly implanted in the courtyards of tradition, full of sap and richness,” Nahmanides questions, “will you not pay heed to those that dwell in the uttermost parts!”⁹ In banning Maimonides' works, the French Rabbis dealt with a “gaon,” one of the most respected and

⁷ Chavel, *Writings and Discourses* 372-3

⁸ See later in this essay for a discussion of how Nahmanides' own views of philosophy influenced his proposed resolution. See David Berger's master's thesis (Columbia University 1965) for a fuller treatment of Nahmanides's relationship to philosophy.

⁹ Chavel, *Writings and Discourses* 373

respectable figures in the Jewish world with light esteem, and Nahmanides thinks this disrespect is entirely inappropriate.

The second argument comes from a more practical point of view. Nahmanides has already established the stature of Maimonides in many individuals to be great; he furthers this with evidence of communal reverence for Maimonides. Particularly in the land of Yemen, where the community inserted “and during the life of our Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon” into the *kaddish*, was Maimonides’ stature above all others’. Given these circumstances, a ban from the far-off land of France would not be respected. “They will say to your face, ‘On the contrary!’” Nahmanides asserts. A ban would serve only to strengthen the resolve of the Maimonists – something Nahmanides was already witnessing in Spain – and his worst fear would be realized: “The Torah will thus become like two Torahs, and all Israel into two groups.”¹⁰

After a tangent to discuss the French Rabbi’s improper imposition of authority over Spain, Nahmanides continues with his third attack against the ban: The *Sefer ha-Madda* (which was the secondary target of the ban, alongside the *Guide*) is not heretical but “the writing of God which [Maimonides] transcribed.”¹¹ Nahmanides here responds to two major claims of heresy the anti-Maimonists made about the book. The first, his claimed denial of punishment in Gehenom, is shown to be a misconstrual of his position; furthermore, Maimonides’ actual position (punishment consistent with the accrued severity of sins, followed by destruction of the soul forever) is expressed “in equivalent in the Sifra.”¹² To defend Maimonides’ anti-anthropomorphic statements, Nahmanides only needs to call upon “all the Gaonim...and all our

¹⁰ *ibid.* 384

¹¹ *ibid.* 389

¹² *ibid.* 390

ancient Sages of Spain and Babylon” before proceeding to cite the three units of Tanakh and a longer logical proof of God’s lack of bodily form.

Given these arguments – that the ban is disrespectful and culturally unaware, dangerously impractical, and based on false claims – Nahmanides argued the ban was unjustified and should be uprooted. However, this was not all that he proposed. What exactly his proposal was is a matter of scholarly debate.

The Proposed Resolution and Its Attitude Toward Group Study

Nahmanides then proposed a resolution – one that I will argue later was not only a compromise between the warring factions but also one that matched his own ideology well. The first step he proposed was to entirely invalidate the first ban on Maimonides’ two philosophical works. (Even here, Nahmanides was careful to leave the authority in the hands of the French Rabbis and deliver a convincing, rather than imposing, message: “Therefore, our Rabbis, consider *your decision* and be deliberate in *your judgment*,”¹³ and “A [Shofar] blast forbids, and a blast permits.”¹⁴)

The second step of the resolution was to take action against certain types that were more universally recognized as threatening. However, the exact course of action that Nahmanides proposed is debated. Chaim Dov Chavel reads Nahmanides following words as asking for a harsh reprimand towards group study of the *Moreh Nevukhim* – perhaps similar in strength to the

¹³ *ibid.* 408

¹⁴ Translation mine. Invoking language of BT Mo’ed Katan 16a, Nahmanides implies that the authority who permits should be the same as the one who forbade in the first place.

prohibition that R. Solomon initially imposed; David Berger reads that Nahmanides calls for a full-hearted ban on group study, and that only private study of the *Guide* was to be allowed at all.

The primary cause of this debate is a few textual questions. The two scholars use different manuscripts of Nahmanides' letter in their publications and commentary. The text that Chavel uses reads:

ויצא דבר מלכות מלפניכם ותהיו לאגודה / ולקשר של קימא לאבד זרוע רמה
להחרים לנדות ולשמת כל לשון מדברת גדולות,
אשר האלהים יצמת המלעיג על ההגדות או מרחיב פה על האסמכתות
ואל עוסקי ספר מורה הנבוכים כתות תשימו יד מוראכם אל פיהם,
(והיא מן המדה)¹⁵ כי מצות הרב הגדול המחברו הוא לאמר: / "לא תפרשוהו ולא תפרסמוהו."¹⁶

And he translates it:

And let there go forth a royal commandment from you – and you shall become one band, “a knot intended to be permanent” – to destroy the outstretched arm, to excommunicate, ban, and desolate every tongue that maketh great boasts, while G-d will crush whoever mocks the Agadoth (homilies) or speaks boldly [and disparagingly] about the Scriptural supports [for Rabbinic interpretations].

Concerning those who engage [themselves] in group study of the book *Moreh Nebuchim*, lay the hand of your fear upon their mouth.

This is the proper measure [of action], for the charge of the great Rabbi [Maimonides], its author, was as follows: “Do not explain it or publicize it.”¹⁷

Chavel interprets these lines to mean there should not be a ban on group study.

Excommunication should only fall on those who “make great boasts,” while God will handle those who mock the Rabbis and their interpretations. (It is unclear to me if Chavel thinks these two clauses are connected; my own personal reading of this text is that Nahmanides thinks a human ban should include those who ‘mock the *aggadot*’ and speak disparagingly of the

¹⁵ See Berger, “How Did Nahmanides Propose to Resolve the Maimonidean Controversy”, *Cultures in Collision and Conversation*, p. 121 note 8 for a discussion of this parenthetical comment.

¹⁶ Chavel, *Kitve Ramban* 349

¹⁷ Chavel, *Writings and Discourses* 409

Asmachtot.’) Group study of Maimonides falls into an entirely separate category, and the only appropriate action is to “lay the hand of your fear upon their mouth.” That is to say, the Rabbinic leadership should oppose public study of the *Guide*, and intimidate the laity to follow this. But those who do perform group study should by no means be excommunicated.

David Berger obtains his source of the letter from a different manuscript, originally published and edited by Joseph Perles. Berger claims that it is “by all indications superior to the one [used by Chavel],” though he does not detail in his essay why this is so.¹⁸ His text reads:

ויצא דבר מלכות לפניכם ותהיו לאגודה / ולקשר של קיימא לנדות ולשמת
 על לשון מדברת גדולות אשר אלקים יצמת,
 המלעיג על ההגדות או מרחיב פה על האסמכתות, ועל עוסקי ספר מורה הנבוכים כתות כתות.
 כי מצות הרב הגדול היא "לא תפרשוהו ולא תפרסמהו."¹⁹

Berger translates his text:

And let a royal decree go forth from before you, and unite to form a lasting bond in order to ban... whoever mocks the aggadot and scoffs at the Rabbinical method of citing proof-texts and those who study the *Guide* in groups, for the great Rabbi, its author commanded, “Do not explain it or publicize it.”²⁰

Berger’s text unequivocally lumps group study of the *Moreh Nevukhim* together with the other anti-Rabbinic offenses under the proposed new ban. Chavel’s text also can allow for the inclusion of group studies of the *Guide* in the ban, even with his text reading "אל עוסקי ספר מורה" instead of "על". This list would also fit neatly with the poetic structure of the letter, though Chavel chooses to read differently. Berger’s text leaves him no choice: He has no second

¹⁸ Berger, *Nahmanides' attitude toward secular learning* 86

¹⁹ *ibid.* 88 He writes it as a block paragraph; I broke up the lines to highlight the poetic structure and to visually match with Chavel’s publication.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

clause of action about “placing fear upon them,” whether on top of or separate from the earlier mention of a ban.

A second textual disagreement emerges after Nahmanides elucidates on the “do not explain it or publicize it” command of Maimonides. He continues his letter:

ואם אתם אבותינו תסכימו כם חכמי פרובנציה וגם אנחנו נצא בעקבותיכם,
תחזקו הדבר הזה בחרם ואלה, ברעם וברעש ובקול המולה גדולה ולהב אש אוכלה
ובמלחמת תנופה עבודתו הרדפה / הן למות הן לשרושי הן לענוש נכסין ולאסורין
הלא די בזה תקנה וגדר / במרעה השלום ובנאות האהבה תרביצו העדר.

Chavel translates this:

If you, our Rabbis, will agree, with the sages of Provence we too will go forth in your footsteps.

You should [not] strengthen this matter with excommunication and imprecation, with thunder and quaking, and with the noise of the great tumult and the flame of a devouring fire, and a war being brandished [with the object of] subjecting the pursued whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment. An ordinance and safeguard will suffice for this [problem]. You will lead the sheep in a peaceful pasture, and you will rest the flock in meadows of love.²¹

The critical matter of debate here is the word “not,” that Chavel relegates to a footnote in his Hebrew printing and inserts in brackets in his English printing. Chavel’s emendation follows the conviction of Ze’ev Jawitz before him²² that it is impossible for Nahmanides to have intended such a harsh consequence to befall even group study of the *Guide*. For one thing, it is inconsistent with Chavel’s own interpretation of the prior passage. But furthermore, Nahmanides devoted a major portion of his earlier arguments to the impractical nature of *haramim*. If a universal ban on Maimonides’ philosophical works were both disrespectful and bound to cause a schism between communities that revere him as their leader, would such a harsh ban on group

²¹ Chavel *Writings and Discourses* 410-11

²² *Toledot Yisrael*, vol. 12 p.183 (cited from Berger, “How Did Nahmanides Propose to Resolve the Maimonidean Controversy”, *Cultures in Collision and Conversation*, p.123 note 12)

study cause a drastically diminished response? Would Yemenite Jewry willingly continue to refer to Maimonides as “our great Rabbi” in its liturgy while accepting that his philosophy is too dangerous to be discussed publicly? Chavel, like Jawitz before him, was not willing to accept this possibility, and thought Nahmanides could not possibly mean such a thing. The only escape from this problem is to assume that the text is in error, and must include the modifier “not.”

Berger does not agree with this emendation. He considers such an emendation to be a “deletion of the ban from the text.”²³ His reading of this passage is consistent with his holistic understanding of Nahmanides’ proposal:

First, the ban on the *Sefer ha-Madda*, which is a wonderful book must be lifted. Second, the ban on the *Guide*, a ban which currently applies to private as well as public study, must be lifted as well. Third, a ban on group stud of the *Guide* should be instituted. Fourth and finally, the study of philosophy should be entirely discouraged, but gently and without a ban.

However, Berger’s confidence in the accuracy of the text is not necessarily deserved. I did not have the ability to see either Chavel’s or Berger’s manuscripts myself, however the possibility of a word – even a critical word – being lost in transmission is not out of the question. In my own study of Berger’s master’s thesis for this essay, I noticed that he himself fell prey to a critical typo that inverted the meaning of sentence (see the figure below)²⁴:

The really righteous individual, however, should put himself in the hands of God alone, and the Biblical mandate granting permission to the doctor to cure his patients should ^{not} be understood as encouragement to the patient to go to a physician.³⁸

²³ Berger *Cultures in Collision and Conversation* 124

²⁴ Scanned image of Berger’s master’s thesis available in the Yeshiva University Library, p.32

In discussing Nahmanides' perspective on the conflict between active medicine and divine intervention, Berger accidentally misrepresents his own position, before emending his text with "the little word 'not.'"²⁵

The third textual disagreement between Chavel and Berger revolves around a letter from R. Hai Gaon that Nahmanides cites. The letter concerns R. Hai's soft condemnation of the study of philosophy. In Chavel's reading, R. Hai seeks to discourage those who study *only* philosophy to the exclusion of Talmud. His version concludes the letter as such:

You will find fear of sin, humility, and sanctity only among those who engage themselves in the combined [study of] the Mishnah, Talmud, and wisdom, [but] not in the words of wisdom *alone* (emphasis mine).²⁶

Nahmanides, as Chavel would have him, is here only discouraging excessive study of philosophy to the point where it removes traditional material from the curriculum. But study of the *Guide*, so long as its readers also study Talmud, is not inappropriate.

In Berger's text, the concluding word "alone," which necessitates Chavel's interpretation, is not present. This allows him to maintain his position that Nahmanides wanted to discourage study of philosophy entirely, but with different degrees of strength for different contexts of study.

The Ideological Underpinnings of Nahmanides' Proposal

Nahmanides in many places in his commentary to the Pentateuch writes of his disdain towards Aristotle and the failures of Greek philosophy. Many scholars understand from here that Nahmanides was firmly against the pursuit of philosophy, and would therefore be staunchly in

²⁵ Berger, *Cultures in Collision and Conversation* 123

²⁶ Chavel, *Writings and Discourses* 413

the anti-Maimunist camp. Based on this, Nahmanides' proposed resolution would be much of a compromise even for his own position, and more based on desires to maintain unity and preserve communal honor, authority, and respect.

However, this representation of Nahmanides is primarily mistaken. Bernard Spetimus has outlined in his essay "Open Rebuke and Concealed Love" that Nahmanides was very much an heir to the Andalusian tradition, in his attitudes toward authority of *aggada* (or lack thereof), cultured in poetry, and being well-read in philosophy. In many of these sources where Nahmanides chides Aristotle, he shows his familiarity with Aristotle's thought. In the letter to the French rabbis itself Nahmanides lays out that pursuit of Greek philosophy was permitted by the Talmudic Rabbis, though cautioned, and that the slippery slope from Greek philosophy to heresy was only the sad outcome of a necessary activity.

A more complete explanation of Nahmanides' own attitude toward philosophy is found in the explanation of David Berger. In a full chapter of his master's thesis, Berger argues that what defined Nahmanides' position is that he was "seeking not a religious philosophy by a philosophical religion."²⁷ Nahmanides believed in the power of philosophy to guide the mind toward answers to great truths about the universe. However, it could not stand on its own, free from any axioms. For Nahmanides, the divine revelation found in the Torah was an empirical datum *par excellence*. It was possible to expand from this datum to reveal more mysteries that were not explicit in the Torah via philosophical methods, but to begin such an excursion without any footing (or even ignoring the Torah) and then claiming to reach truth of the same quality smacked Ramban of arrogance and foolishness.

²⁷ Berger, *Nahmanides' attitude toward secular learning* 4

This is an understanding that Chavel agrees with at least in part²⁸, and this understanding seems consistent with Chavel's own understanding of Nahmanides' proposal. Study of philosophy alone was to be discouraged, but the *Moreh Nevukhim* was not a problematic book, since it did combine the wisdom of the Torah and the Greeks. Berger is in more of a bind; his interpretation of Nahmanides' outlook seems to conflict with his interpretation of Nahmanides' practical advice. Berger navigates out of this conflict with the understanding that Nahmanides placed himself atop a tightrope, attempting on his own to synthesize the study of philosophy with the study of revelation. "In his own capable hands," Berger writes, "[philosophical study] could be a useful handmaiden of the Torah; for most others, it was fraught with peril. The gentle discouragement of this pursuit – even if applied to scholars – was by no means bad public policy, particularly if it could persuade the Northern Rabbis to withdraw their damaging ban."²⁹ It is then entirely reasonable to understand Nahmanides' proposed ban on group study of the *Guide*: if even scholars must be very careful when walking the tightrope of studying philosophy as a devout Jew, how much less trustful can he be of the lay populace!

History played Nahmanides-via-Berger's fears out in due time. Only 70 years after the initial crisis, a new controversy played out in Provence. In 1305, Abba Mari ben Moses, also of Montpellier, publicly criticized the widespread study of not only the *Moreh Nevukhim*, but of pure Greek philosophy, in public Jewish lectures and books. The "pop philosophy" was even more dangerous and liable to lead to heresy than study of the *Guide*.

A Fresh Look at a Textual Controversy

²⁸ See Chavel, *Ramban: His Life and Teachings*, chapters five and ten

²⁹ Berger, *Cultures in Collision and Conversation* 127

I would now like to propose my own reading of the “you shall [not?] strengthen this matter with excommunication and imprecation” passage. I am particularly sympathetic to Berger’s explanation of Nahmanides’ ideological grounding of his proposal. However, the harsh tone that Nahmanides uses in this passage also strikes me as dissonant with the rest of his letter. Nahmanides spends so much time arguing against a ban on practical grounds. He writes in his prefatory appeal that he is intimidated to enter into debate with the scholars, threatened by the “great fire” that consumes all its path that the French Rabbis maintain in their ferocious devotion to it. How could Nahmanides echo this tone when he was opposing it for so long?

I would like to suggest that this passage is not problematic and not in need of emendation. Instead, it should be read as satirical. First, Nahmanides argues, I suggest you annul the ban and institute an intimidating policy discouraging public study of the *Moreh Nevukhim*. After all, this is what Maimonides himself wanted. However, Nahmanides continues, should you continue on the path you have chosen, strengthen the decree! Add in “thunder and quaking;” launch a war and scorched-earth policy against the heretics, casting reputations, wealth, and bodies by the wayside! This exaggeration is so over the top that it is meant to discourage the Rabbis from continuing with the ban. Nahmanides is warning them that if they continue, extreme destruction will result. He then concludes with a sincere message: “An ordinance and safeguard will suffice for this. You will lead the sheep in a peaceful pasture, and you will rest the flock in meadows of love.”

In my understanding, this passage has nothing to do with group study, and therefore is not relevant to the debate between Berger and Chavel at all. Berger can maintain his understanding of Nahmanides’ living on a tightrope, distrusting others to follow him safely,

without being forced into either a textual emendation he does not like or a passage that is extremely difficult to explain away.

Conclusion

In the heart of the largest intellectual crisis of the Medieval period, Nahmanides penned a tremendous letter that illustrated his complex philosophy of religious intellectualism, as well as political savvy. He strongly rejected attempts to stiff-arm either side into submitting to the other. He displayed a strong sense of cultural awareness in two worlds – Christian Europe and Islamic Africa and Arabia. He wrote in some of the most tradition-rich poetry possible, with references on nearly every line to either a Biblical verse or a Talmudic dictum. He argued for theory and practice, and proposed a resolution that could satisfy both sides and his own conscience. Though the degree of harshness with which Nahmanides opposed group study of the *Moreh Nevukhim* is debated, such a minute point should not obstruct the unanimously-understood brilliance of the work.

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