

## HOW DID NAHMANIDES PROPOSE TO RESOLVE THE MAIMONIDEAN CONTROVERSY?

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The permissibility of pursuing “external wisdom” became a major motif in the intellectual history of the Jews during the Middle Ages, and in the 1230’s it exploded into the greatest controversy that had ever shaken European Jewry, cutting across the three major cultural centers of Northern Europe, Southern France, and Iberia. Concerned by allegorization of Scripture and other manifestations of philosophical radicalism, R. Solomon b. Abraham of Montpellier dispatched his distinguished student R. Jonah Gerondi to Northern France with copies of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* and *Sefer ha-Madda* so that he might alert the Northern Rabbis to the sort of works that had been used and misused by the radical allegorizers.

Whatever Rabbi Solomon’s intentions, the result was a ban prohibiting the study of both books. Enraged, Provencal advocates of philosophical study proclaimed a counterban against R. Solomon and his disciples and sent their own distinguished representative, the aged R. David Kimhi, to solicit support for the counterban among their presumed natural allies in Northern Spain. Radak’s mixed reception speaks volumes for the intellectual and religious changes in certain segments of the Sephardic elite during the early thirteenth century. In some circles he received the unalloyed support that he expected; elsewhere, however, for reasons ranging from the ideological to the personal, he encountered reluctance, ambivalence, even hostility.<sup>1</sup> With the benefit of hindsight,

<sup>1</sup> The best reconstruction of the course of events remains that of Azriel Schochet, “Berurim be-Parashat ha-Pulmus ha-Rishon ‘al Sifrei ha-Rambam,” *Zion* 36 (1971): 27-60. For a recent analysis, see my discussion in Gerald J. Blidstein, David Berger, Sid Z. Leiman and Aharon Lichtenstein, *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or*

we can unhesitatingly identify Nahmanides as the most distinguished Spanish Rabbi in the 1230's, indeed, in the entire history of Christian Spain. At the time, his preeminence was not quite so unambiguous, but all sides surely recognized that his stand in the controversy would loom large. It was hardly a simple matter, however, to predict the position of a figure who exemplified in striking fashion the kaleidoscopic variety of intellectual and spiritual currents which swirled through Provencal and Spanish Jewish communities during those decades. Talmudic exegete and codifier, mystic, physician, theologian, poet, biblical commentator, communal leader, and future polemicist, Nahmanides absorbed and reshaped the influence of Tosafist dialectic, of Southern French Rabbis and kabbalah, and of indigenous Spanish traditions. Nahmanides' attitude toward philosophical study reflected the complexity of his intellectual and spiritual legacy. He studied the philosophical corpus of his Jewish predecessors, greatly admired Maimonides, and insisted on the value of theological investigation in his work on theodicy. At the same time, he despised Aristotle, vigorously rejected many of Maimonides' rationalistic assertions, and believed the secrets of the Torah to be embodied in mysticism rather than metaphysics. As I have noted elsewhere, Nahmanides regarded the revelation as an empirical datum *par excellence*, so that philosophical inquiry could build upon it without struggling by unaided reason to reach conclusions already provided by God. Consequently, Nahmanides expressed his central views in the form of a commentary to the revelation, and his attraction to kabbalah was itself an expression of his search for a revealed source of theological truths.<sup>2</sup> This presentation of Nahmanides' position hardly reflects the unvarying consensus of modern scholarship. Because of the great variety of strands which formed his religious persona, students of medieval history and philosophy, of the Maimonidean controversy, and of Nahmanides himself have perceived him in strikingly different ways. Until quite recently, most scholars placed

*Integration?*, ed. by Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale, N.J., and Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 85-100.

- 2 See my "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. by Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 110-111, and my discussion in *Judaism's Encounter*, pp. 99-100. See too my unpublished Master's essay (which analyzes more briefly the letter which stands at the center of this article), *Nahmanides' Attitude toward Secular Learning and Its Bearing upon his Stance in the Maimonidean Controversy* (Columbia University, 1965), chapter 1 (pp. 2-23).

him squarely in the anti-philosophical camp, and some of these regarded his expressions of admiration for Maimonides and his works as tactical stratagems that did not reflect his deepest convictions.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars understood that this one-sided picture of Nahmanides was a caricature, but presenting a balanced, integrated portrait of his multi-faceted genius remained a daunting task.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, all students of Nahmanides face a difficult challenge in describing and accounting for his position during the Maimonidean controversy. Though a full characterization of his stand requires the analysis of more than one document, by far the most important source is a much-discussed letter that he wrote to the rabbis of Northern France. Here, textual uncertainties and ideological perplexities have produced contradictions and confusion in the scholarly literature. My limited purpose in this essay is to examine some of these uncertainties with the hope that confusion will give way to clarity. The bulk of this

<sup>3</sup> Note, inter alia, Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, first edition (New York, 1937), vol. 2, p. 140 ("With the growth of antirationalist forces, most kabbalists rejected Maimonides and all scholasticism. With Nahmanides, the antiphilosophical reaction received the stamp of approval from a revered authority."); J. Newman, *The Commentary of Nahmanides on Genesis Chapters 1-6:8* (Leiden, 1960), pp. 13-14; the references to Y. Baer, H.H. Ben Sasson, Y. Kaplan, S. Krauss and others in Bernard Septimus, "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love': Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," in Twersky, *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides*, p. 14, n. 12. Krauss (*Ha-Goren* 5 [1905]: 84, 88) affirms that Nahmanides was insincere even in his limited defense of philosophy and goes so far as to ascribe to him a belief in the corporeality of God; for a more recent affirmation of the erroneous view that Nahmanides was an anthropomorphist, see Martin A. Cohen, "Reflections on the Text and Context of the Disputation of Barcelona," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 35 (1964): 169, 176.

<sup>4</sup> Though leaving much to be desired, the most successful effort in the nineteenth century was Joseph Perles, "Über den Geist des Commentars des R. Moses ben Nachman zum Pentateuch und über sein Verhältniss zum Pentateuch-Commentar Raschis," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (MGWJ) 7 (1858): 81-97, 117-136. The best characterization to date is Septimus, "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love'" (n. 3). See too Ch. Henoah, *Ha-Ramban ke-Hoqer ve-ki-Mequbbal* (Jerusalem, 1978); Moshe Idel, "R. Mosheh ben Nahman—Kabbalah, Halakhah, u-Manhigut Ruhanit," *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 535-580; Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Acceptance and Devaluation: Nahmanides' Attitude toward Science," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1(1992): 223-245; David Novak, *The Theology of Nahmanides Systematically Presented* (Atlanta, 1992); Josef Stern, "Nachmanides's Conception of *Ta'amei Mitzvot* and its Maimonidean Background," in *Community and Covenant: New Essays in Jewish Political and Legal Philosophy* ed. by Daniel Frank (Albany, 1995), pp. 141-171; Stern, "The Fall and Rise of Myth in Ritual: Maimonides versus Nahmanides on the *Huqqim*, Astrology, and the War against Idolatry," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997): 185-263.

highly respectful, even deferential letter explains that the rabbis of the North do not fully understand the cultural circumstances that produced Maimonides' *Guide* and indicates why his purportedly objectionable views are either correct or at least well within the framework of normative Judaism. The *Mishneh Torah*, including *Sefer ha-Madda*, receives unstinting praise; while one may challenge specific points, the work itself is Torah pure and simple. Finally, as he concludes his lengthy, eloquent defense of "the great rabbi," Nahmanides sets forth a concrete proposal. The first element of this proposal is crystal clear: the ban against both books must be revoked. At this point, however, textual problems begin to muddy the waters. Nahmanides' letter is extant in three versions. Chaim Dov Chavel reproduced the poorest of these in the first two printings of his standard *Kitvei Ramban*; beginning with the third printing, he published a better one based on the first printed edition. The best text was published in 1860 from a Saraval manuscript by Joseph Perles, who supplied variant readings from the other versions.<sup>5</sup> Because Chavel's text is by far the most widely used and hence the most influential, our story must begin there. After the vigorous recommendation that the ban against the *Guide* and the *Sefer ha-Madda* be revoked, the letter in the current printings of *Kitvei Ramban* continues as follows:

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

Let a royal command issue forth from you as you become a single group and a lasting bond to destroy an upraised arm, to excommunicate, ban, and place under a curse every tongue speaking arrogantly which God will destroy, one who mocks the *aggadot* or opens his mouth against *asmakhtot*. As for those who study the *Guide of the Perplexed* in groups, place your fearsome hand to their mouth, for the command of the great rabbi who wrote it was, "Do not

<sup>5</sup> See C.D. Chavel, *Kitvei Ramban* (Jerusalem, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 333-351; Joseph Perles, "Nachträge über R. Moses ben Nachman," *MGWJ* 9 (1860): 175-195. For the publication history of the various versions, see Mauro Perani, "Mistica e Filosofia: La Mediazione di Nahmanide nella Polemica sugli Scritti di Maimonide," in *Correnti Culturali e Movimenti Religiosi del Giudaismo*, ed. by Bruno Chiesa (Rome, 1987) (*Atti del V Congresso internazionale dell'Associazione Italiana per lo Studio del Giudaismo* [AISG *Testi e Studi* 5]), p. 239, n. 35.

interpret or publicize it.”<sup>6</sup>

This appears to be perfectly clear, and indeed it is. The ban on private study of the *Guide* should be revoked, but a ban on group study should remain (or be instituted). Nonetheless, Chavel, following Ze’ev Jawitz, was persuaded by a later passage (which we shall examine presently) that Nahmanides did not want any ban at all against the *Guide*. A reader who regards such a conclusion as firmly established can force this text to conform to it. Thus, the ban might apply to those who speak arrogantly and who mock Rabbinic texts, but for those who study the *Guide* in groups, a fearsome hand (without a ban) is sufficient. Chavel himself goes even further than this. His English translation of the letter reads as follows:

...to excommunicate, ban, and desolate every “tongue that maketh great boasts,” while God 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.<sup>7</sup>

This translation appears to limit the ban to those who make unspecified “great boasts” without applying it even to those who mock the Rabbis. As for group study of the *Guide*, Chavel explains in his note to the last line that “lay the hand of your fear upon their mouth” means, “Your fear will leave them awestricken, unable to contravene your word.” Any formal ban against organized study of the *Guide* has been made to disappear.<sup>8</sup> The language of the Saraval manuscript, however, links the

<sup>6</sup> *Kitvei Ramban* I, p. 349. *Aggadot* are the non-legal pronouncements of the Rabbis; *asmakhtot* are Scriptural citations used to buttress Rabbinic laws. On the parenthetical phrase והיא מן המידה, which I have left untranslated, see n. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Nahmanides, *Writings and Discourses*, translated by Charles B. Chavel (New York, 1978), vol. 2, p. 409.

<sup>8</sup> Two additional points make the story of Chavel’s understanding of this passage even more interesting. 1. His translation continues, “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.’” Presumably, he takes the first clause to mean that striking fear without a ban is the proper measure of action. The clause itself, however (והיא מן המידה), does not appear in the text utilized in the later printings of *Kitvei Ramban*, a text which forms the basis for Chavel’s translation of the letter as a whole; it is, rather, borrowed from the text he used in the first two printings (see the end of this note), where it substitutes for a line in the current text and, as Perles remarked in his apparatus (*MGWJ* 9 (1860): 193, n. 15), defies comprehension. Chavel has not only

treatment of those who study the *Guide* in groups even more tightly to those who mock the Rabbis and speaks unambiguously of a ban.

ויצא דבר מלכות לפניכם ותהיו לאגודה ולקשר של קיימא לנדות ולשמת על לשון מדבר גדולות אשר אלהים יצמת, המלעיג על ההגדות או מרחיב פה על האסמכתות ועל עוסקי בספר מורה הנבוכים כתות כתות. כי מצות הרב הגדול המחבר היא לא תפרסמוהו ולא תפרשוהו.

Thus, the Rabbis should ban “the tongue speaking arrogantly which God will destroy, one who mocks the *aggadot* or opens his mouth against the *asmakhtot*, and those who study the *Guide of the Perplexed* in groups.” Here there is no room for maneuver. Group study of the *Guide* is to be placed under a ban.<sup>9</sup> Let us now continue with Chavel’s text:

ואם אתם רבותינו תסכימו עם חכמי פרויניצה וגם אנחנו נצא בעקבותיכם, תחזקו הדבר הזה בחרם ואלה, ברעם וברעש ובקול המולה גדולה ולהב אש אוכלה ובמלחמת תנופה עבדותו הרדפה הן למות הן לשרושי הן לענוש נכסין ולאסורין הלא די בזה תקנה וגרר.

And if you our Rabbis will agree with the Provençal sages and we too will follow in your footsteps, you will strengthen this matter with an excommunication and curse, with thunderous noise, a great roaring sound, the blaze of consuming fire, and sweeping warfare, engaging in pursuit unto death, uprooting, confiscation of possessions, or imprisonment [cf. Ezra 7:26]; with this step there will be a sufficient enactment and restraint.<sup>10</sup>

borrowed it from the other version; he has changed its location in order to provide the necessary transition. (In the current Hebrew printings, it appears in parentheses in its new location.) 2. In the version published in the first two printings, we find the erroneous reading תשימו יד מוראכם אל פיהם (“place your fearsome hand to your [not “their”] mouth”). In his note to that line, Chavel commented, “The intention is that you should place your hand to your mouth by refraining from issuing a curse and an excommunication, but only an enactment and restraint, as he explains later.” In the later printings, this note has, of course, disappeared, but the overall interpretation which it presumably supported remains intact. (The truth is that even in the first version this reading was virtually impossible to sustain because of the immediate continuation.) To clarify these two points, let me present the relevant lines in Chavel’s first printings, which correspond to the text in *Qovez Teshuvot ha-Rambam* (Leipzig, 1859), sec. 3, p. 10a:

ויצא דבר מלפניכם ותהיו לאגודה ולקשר של קימא והיא מן המדה. ואל עוסקי ספר מורה הנבוכים כתות כתות תשימו יד מוראכם אל פיהם כי מצות הרב הגדול המחברו הוא לאמר: לא תפרשוהו ולא תפרסמוהו.

<sup>9</sup> Perles’ ed., p. 193. The point is that this text leaves us no syntactic option at all. ועל לנדות ולשמת על עוסקי בספר מורה הנבוכים כתות כתות can only be governed by תחת.

<sup>10</sup> *Kitvei Ramban*, p. 349. The word that I have translated “pursuit” (*hardafah*) is actually

The last part of this sentence is the crux of our problem. As I have translated it, it means that a stringent ban against those who mock the Sages and study the *Guide* in groups is sufficient to address the legitimate concerns of the Northern French Rabbis; there is no need for a general ban against the *Guide*, let alone the *Sefer ha-Madda*. The exaggerated rhetoric is there to persuade the Rabbis of the North that the narrow ban Nahmanides proposes is more than a symbolic gesture; at the same time, no one took literally the references to death and imprisonment taken from Ezra 7:26. This rhetoric does not obscure the main thrust of the proposal, which is the abolition of the key ban. Thus, Nahmanides can continue, as we shall see, with a description emphasizing the irenic character of his recommendation.

Jawitz, however, and Chavel after him, did not see the possibility of this reading or did not find it plausible in light of the continuation emphasizing peaceful persuasion. Thus, Chavel translates, “An ordinance and safeguard will suffice for this [problem].”<sup>11</sup> In other words, this clause explicitly rules out any ban. How, then, can this be reconciled with the categorical statement, “You will strengthen this matter with an excommunication...”? There is only one solution to the problem, and it was proposed as self-evident by Jawitz. The little word “not” (*lo*) is missing from the text. Hence, read, “*Do not* strengthen this matter with an excommunication.”

Jawitz was so certain of this that in his critique of Graetz’s understanding of the letter, he wrote the following remarkable footnote:

It may well be that a little word, the word *lo* which is missing between ‘footsteps’ and ‘strengthen’ in the *Qovez Teshuvot ha-Rambam* before me, is also missing in the other versions of the letter to which I do not currently have access; perhaps (*sic!*) this is what caused Graetz to err. But who can fail to see that every word in the remainder of this passage demonstrates its [erroneous] omission, indeed proclaims that omission in the loudest tones?”<sup>12</sup>

the Talmud’s explanation of the word I have translated “uprooting” (*sheroshi*); *hardafah* is in turn defined as excommunication. See *Bav. Mo’ed Qatan* 16a.

<sup>11</sup> *Writings and Discourses*, p. 411.

<sup>12</sup> Ze’ev Jawitz, *Toledot Yisrael*, vol. 12 (Tel Aviv, 1954), p. 183. Jawitz’s conviction was certainly reinforced by the fact that he was working with the text that reads, “Place your fearsome hand to *your* mouth.” (See above, n. 8.)



Although Chavel did not incorporate this emendation into his text, he cited it in a note, inserted it in brackets into his English translation, and predicated his entire understanding of the letter upon its validity. In the most recent study of the letter, Mauro Perani does not address this textual issue directly; nonetheless, his unqualified assertion that Nahmanides simply proposed the annulling of the ban indicates quite clearly that he reads the passage along the same lines.<sup>13</sup> I hesitate to say that this reading is the current state of the question—despite the crucial role of this letter in the controversy, there probably is no state of the question. What is certain is that this is a central position in current scholarship and the reigning impression among lay readers of the standard edition.<sup>14</sup>

I have already alluded to the irenic continuation of the letter and its impact on the deletion of the ban from the text by some scholars. Here, then, is that continuation, again following Chavel's text:

במרעה השלום תנהלו הצאן ובנאות האהבה תרביצו העדר, ועוד ראוי לכם להזהיר בנחת את

<sup>13</sup> "Mistica e Filosofia" (n. 5), p. 251.

<sup>14</sup> Neither Schochet nor Septimus clearly articulates his understanding of Nahmanides' position, though both properly refer the reader to Perles' edition. Schochet discusses only Nahmanides' proposal to annul the ban and tells his reader nothing about the concomitant recommendation to ban group study of the *Guide*; see "Berurim" (n. 1), p. 44. In his *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy 1180-1240* (Leiden, 1965), Daniel Jeremy Silver, who used the edition in *Qovez Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, reported that Nahmanides "suggests peace and a withdrawal of the ban as the sole remedy; if not the withdrawal of the whole ban, at least of that part which subjects the *Mishneh Torah*" (p. 171). This summary, which misses the distinction between private and public study of the *Guide* while accurately reflecting Nahmanides' far greater enthusiasm for the *Mishneh Torah*, is an indication of Silver's own struggle to determine the bottom line of this text.

The other book-length treatment of the controversy (Joseph Sarachek, *Faith and Reason: The Conflict over the Rationalism of Maimonides* [Williamsport, Penn., 1935]) maintains that Nahmanides urged that the ban be revoked. "In the first place, it should never have been enacted.... Under no circumstances...should the Book of Knowledge, a part of the Code, have been prohibited because it could not be put in the same category as the *Guide*.... On the other hand, extreme caution must be exercised in using the *Guide*. Maimonides himself urged that it not be studied save under certain stipulations, particularly, that people occupying themselves with it be mature in age and steeped in rabbinic literature" (pp. 116-118). In other words, no ban at all should remain, even against the *Guide*, although the latter should be studied only by properly qualified readers. Here again, the author's struggle to make sense of a challenging text is painfully evident.



הכל להניח העסק מכל וכל, ירא שמים ישוב וישקוד על ספר תורה שבכתב ותורה שבעל פה, כי הוא בית חיינו ובזה מעלתנו תגדל, השומע ישמע והחדל יחדל, שאי אפשר לכם להוכיח לכוף כל ישראל להיות חסידים. ובזה נהגו אבות העולם ליסר מזה חכמים גדולים, אף כי למנוע מן ההגיון התלמידים המתחילים ללמוד, כמו שמצאתי בתשובת רבינו האי גאון ז"ל לנגיד מ"כ שכתב לו בלשון הזה: 'תקון הגוף ומישור הנהגת האדם הוא עסק המשנה והתלמוד, ואשר טוב לישראל... ואשר יסיר לבו מזה ויתעסק בדברים ההם בלבד, יסיר מעליו תורה ויראת שמים, ויפסיד עצמו באותן הענינים הכתובים בספרים החצונים, ויסיר מעליו כל דברי תורה לגמרי. ומזאת ההסרה יארע לאדם שישבש דעתו עד שלא יחוש לעזיבת התפלה... ואם תראה שאותן בני אדם המתעסקים באותן הדברים ודרכי הפילוסופיא יאמרו לך שהיא דרך סלולה ושבה ישיגו לידיעת הבורא, לא תאבה להם, ודע כי יכזבו לך באמת. ולא תמצא יראת חטא וענוה וקדושה אלא באותם המתעסקים במשנה ובתלמוד ובחכמה יחד, לא בדברי חכמה בלבד.'

Guide the sheep in a peaceful pasture and rest the flock in meadows of love. It is also proper for you to admonish everyone gently to set aside the pursuit (*ha-eseq*) altogether, so that a Godfearing individual will return to diligent study of the written and oral Torah, for this is the abode of our life and through this will our standing increase. He who listens will listen, and he who refrains will refrain, for you can not admonish and compel all Israel to be saints. In such fashion were the fathers of the world accustomed to reprove even great scholars to refrain from this, and all the more to prevent beginning students from pursuing philosophy (*higgayon*), as I have found in a responsum of R. Hai Gaon of blessed memory to the Nagid, may his rest be honored, in which he wrote him as follows: "The perfection of the body and proper human behavior is [the result of] the pursuit of Mishnah and Talmud; this is what is good for Israel.... Anyone who removes his heart from this and pursues those matters *alone* will remove from himself Torah and the fear of heaven; he will ruin himself with those matters written in external books and will entirely remove from himself all the words of the Torah. And this removal will result in the confusion of a person's mind to the point where he will not be concerned about abandoning prayer.... If you will see that those people who pursue those matters and the ways of philosophy tell you that this is a paved road which enables them to attain knowledge of God, do not heed them, and know that they are in fact lying to you. You will not find fear of sin, humility and sanctity except in those who study Mishnah, Talmud, *and wisdom together, not matters of wisdom alone*."<sup>15</sup>

The authenticity of R. Hai's letter is in question, but this difficult

<sup>15</sup> *Kitvei Ramban*, pp. 349-350. Whatever the meaning of *higgayon* may be in its original Talmudic context (*Bav. Berakhot* 28b), in this letter it appears to refer to philosophy.

problem need not detain us here.<sup>16</sup> There is no persuasive reason to believe that it was interpolated into Nahmanides' letter, and our concern here is with Nahmanides, not with R. Hai.<sup>17</sup> In the text printed by Chavel, which is distinguished by the words I have italicized, the Gaon opposes the exclusive study of philosophy but explicitly approves the study of "wisdom" along with Torah. Jawitz, Chavel, and Perano endorse this version as consistent with what they believe to be the overall tenor of the letter. This reading, however, must overcome nearly insuperable obstacles.

First of all, it is difficult to sustain even in its original setting. Did R. Hai really have to polemicize against the position that one should study no Torah at all? Moreover, Nahmanides introduces the Gaon's letter by saying that one should gently admonish people "to set aside the pursuit (*ha-eseq*) altogether." This has to mean that philosophy should not be studied at all. Jawitz apparently took the "pursuit" here to mean study of the *Guide* in groups, while Chavel and Perano take it as "excessive study of the *Guide*";<sup>18</sup> given their version of the quotation from R. Hai, such desperate efforts are understandable, but they are implausible in the extreme.

The Saraval manuscript as well as other citations of R. Hai's letter omit the crucial words בלבד (alone) [in the phrase "those matters alone"] and ובחכמה יחד, לא בדברי חכמה בלבד (and wisdom together, not matters of wisdom alone).<sup>19</sup> Thus, R. Hai criticizes one who removes his heart

<sup>16</sup> I have discussed this question in my essay in *Judaism's Encounter* (see n. 2), pp. 68-69. The most careful recent analysis is in Amos Goldreich's dissertation, *Sefer Me'irat 'Einayim le-Rav Yitzhak de-min 'Akko* (Jerusalem, 1981; Pirsumei ha-Makhon le-Limmudim Mitqaddemim, 1984), pp. 405-407. Goldreich is inclined to accept the authenticity of the letter; I am more inclined to be skeptical.

<sup>17</sup> Graetz, who first challenged the authenticity of R. Hai's letter, also expressed suspicion that it was interpolated into our text. Once the first position is affirmed, the second has the advantage of avoiding the conclusion that Nahmanides was misled by a forgery. See H. Graetz, "Ein pseudoepigraphischen Sendschreiben, angeblich von Hai Gaon an Samuel Nagid," *MGWJ* 11 (1862): 37-40.

<sup>18</sup> Chavel may equate excessive study with study in groups. See *Kitvei Ramban*, p. 349, n. 62: 'להזהיר בנחת', מבואר שכל עצמה של הצעת רבינו היתה 'להזהיר בנחת', אבל לא לגזור שום גזרת איסור, רק תקנה וגדר לבלתי עסוק בתלמוד זה בחבורה. Perano ("Mistica e Filosofia," p. 251), clearly influenced by Chavel's formulation, speaks of "un tempo eccessivo dedicato allo studio del *Moreh*," while Chavel's English translation of "lehaniah ha-'eseq mi-kol ve-khol" reads (p. 411), "To completely desist from engaging abundantly [in the study of the *Moreh Nebuchim*]" (bracketed phrase in the original).

<sup>19</sup> Perles' ed., p. 194. The quotation from R. Hai in the Saraval manuscript differs in

from Torah and studies those matters—not those matters alone—and he asserts that you will find fear of sin, humility, and sanctity only in those who study Mishnah and Talmud—not in those who study Mishnah and Talmud along with philosophy. The point is that someone who turns his attention from the exclusive study of Torah will eventually reach the point of removing himself from Torah entirely. In this version, both R. Hai and Nahmanides present a coherent argument. The study of philosophy should be discouraged, period.

What, then, did Nahmanides propose to resolve the Maimonidean controversy? 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 study of the *Guide* should be instituted. Fourth and finally, the study of philosophy should be entirely discouraged, but gently and without a ban.

Read in this fashion, the letter is smooth and clear—but the fourth point remains troubling. Nahmanides had studied Maimonidean philosophy, and he continued to do so. The letter of R. Hai is explicitly directed to a great scholar, and so we cannot easily appeal to special dispensation for exceptional people. I am inclined to think that this provision results in part from the exigencies of the moment and in part from a genuine element in the complex psyche of the author. Nahmanides was of two minds as he struggled with the question of philosophical study. In his own very capable hands, it 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.<sup>20</sup>

Faced with a major communal crisis, Nahmanides crafted a delicately balanced resolution. Even though the proposal was never implemented in all its details, it may well have been instrumental in helping to defuse a

other, minor ways from the passage I have reproduced from Chavel's edition, but these changes are not sufficiently significant to detain us here. On other citations of R. Hai's letter, see *Ozar ha-Geonim to Hagigah*, pp. 65-66, and the literature noted by Goldreich, *Sefer Me'irat 'Einayim* (above, n. 16).

<sup>20</sup> Note that despite his observation that even great scholars were admonished against philosophical study, Nahmanides makes a point of indicating the special importance of discouraging beginning students.

situation which jeopardized cordial intellectual and communal interaction among the three great centers of European Jewry in the formative period of their relationship. I suspect that the rabbis of Northern France regarded Nahmanides' suggestion as so nuanced that pursuing it would only lead them deeper into the morass. After reading it they decided that they should leave this matter in the hands of the local authorities, and they simply withdrew from the fray, perhaps after a formal revocation of their ban.<sup>21</sup> In the final analysis, it is more than likely that this was precisely what Nahmanides preferred and precisely what the Jews of Europe needed as they shaped their distinctive cultural and religious profiles aware of one another but driven by diverse instincts and aspirations to produce the rich and varied tapestry of a united and divided people.

<sup>21</sup> For evidence that Nahmanides' letter had a significant impact on the Northern French Rabbis, see Shohet, "Berurim," p. 44.