Reviewed by Zev Leff

Although *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles Reappraised* by Marc B. Shapiro and *Even Shisiya on the Thirteen Principles of the Rambam* (Hebrew) by Rabbi Yochanan Meir Bechhofer are both dedicated to discussing Rambam’s Thirteen Principles of Faith, as formulated in his commentary to the Mishnah, they do so from very different perspectives.

Rabbi Bechhofer presents scholarly/halachic and hashkafic explanations for each principle, which are largely based on the insights of his mentor, Rabbi Shmuel Yaakov Weinberg, the late rosh yeshivah of Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore.

The author is mainly concerned with demonstrating the role the Thirteen Principles play in Jewish theology. Since the entire Torah was dictated by God, one would think that everything in the Torah is of equal significance. Nevertheless, Rambam held that there is room for defining principles of faith. (The Chatam Sofer in his responsa [*Yoreh Deah* 356] cites a source even earlier than Rambam who refers to Thirteen Principles of Faith—albeit the source does not identify exactly what the principles are.)

Rabbi Bechhofer cites Rabbi Weinberg’s opinion that the Thirteen Principles do not define the Jewish religion. That purpose would be served by three basic principles, as Rabbi Yosef Albo writes in *Sefer Ha’ikarim*: belief in God, belief in the Divine source of the Torah and the concept of reward and punishment.

The Thirteen Principles that Rambam set forth point to why the Torah is the absolute truth. Additionally, they define the Jewish people and what creates the faith community. In other words, the Principles define who is within the faith community of Klal Yisrael, and who, by virtue of not accepting some of these truths, is outside of this community.

Rabbi Bechhofer proceeds to examine each of the Thirteen Principles. His stated purpose in writing this exposition is “to explain in a comprehensive manner how these Principles are one system and each Principle is a necessary component to accepting the Torah as truth” (p. 19; my translation).

He also explains that each of these principles is based on tradition and Revelation rather than on philosophical investigation. Rabbi Bechhofer therefore limits his discussion of these Principles to sources that are within Torah tradition.

Dr. Shapiro also examines each of the Thirteen Principles in a comprehensive and scholarly manner. He informs us that his work was written in response to an article by Rabbi Yehudah Parnes that appeared in Yeshiva University’s *Torah U-Madda Journal*. In the article, Rabbi Parnes argues that “heresy is defined by the Thirteen Principles of Maimonides.”

Dr. Shapiro acknowledges that the underlying assumption that the Thirteen Principles are the bedrock of Orthodoxy has never been openly challenged in modern times by those who identify with Orthodoxy (pp. 1-2).

Nevertheless, Dr. Shapiro wrote an article (which was published in that same journal and which subsequently served as the basis for this expanded work) in response to Rabbi Parnes with the purpose of showing that traditional Jewish theology has allowed for much more latitude than
found in the Thirteen Principles. As a result, many outstanding sages did not regard the Thirteen Principles as the last word in Jewish theology. Indeed, there is a history of opposition to Maimonides’ Principles among the ranks of traditional, or as it is called in modern times, Orthodox Judaism (p. 2).

Similarly, in concluding his book, Dr. Shapiro writes:

I wrote this book to examine the claim that Maimonides’ Principles are the last word in Jewish theology. Simply by looking at traditional Jewish sources, I believe it has been clearly demonstrated that many of his Principles were not regarded as authoritative, either before his time or afterwards. The fact that Maimonides placed the stamp of apostasy on anyone who disagreed with his Principles did not frighten away numerous great sages from their search for truth. The lesson for moderns is clear (p. 158).

After reading Dr. Shapiro’s work, I am not convinced that he “clearly demonstrated” anything more than the fact that in regard to the Thirteen Principles, as in all areas of Torah, differences of opinion have always existed. This is the manner in which the Torah sages who are entrusted with the transmission of the Oral Law develop and decide that law. Nevertheless, this does not preclude a consensus emerging subsequent to the conflicts of opinion. That is to say, even though there were differences of opinion concerning the Thirteen Principles in the Middle Ages, today the Principles are universally accepted.

Dr. Shapiro argues that since the sources of Jewish theology are not part of the curriculum in yeshivot, the students know nothing about them. Nor is the typical posek, who has mastered the Talmud, codes and responsa, acquainted with the theological literature, and he often does not even recognize the issues (p. 157).

It should be noted that Rabbi Weinberg, who delivered extensive talks on the Thirteen Principles at Ner Israel and elsewhere, and Rabbi Bechhofer are both the products of yeshivot. Serious Talmudic students study musar, emunah, Chumash, Tanach, tefillah as well as other so-called “theological literature,” despite the fact that these subjects are not part of the official yeshivah curriculum. These students approach such subjects from the classical Jewish sources, and they are capable of doing so because they have an extensive and deep understanding of both the Oral and the Written Law. Is Dr. Shapiro unaware of the musar and hashkafah va’adam that take place in every yeshivah? Is he unacquainted with the abundance of sefarim published every year on a variety of topics related to theology, written by famous roshanim yeshivah as well as by serious young Talmudic scholars, both in Israel and in the Diaspora? Our scholars are very aware of Jewish theology; nevertheless, they arrived at a consensus that Rambam’s Principles should be accepted.

Every serious yeshivah student knows that there were disagreements as to whether the Thirteen Principles were, in fact, beneficial to posit, and if so, which ones were to be considered Principles. Is there a serious yeshivah student who is ignorant of Rabbi Yosef Albo’s Sefer Ha’ikarim or Rabbi Moshe de Trani’s Beit Elokim? Yes, there were disagreements as to what kind of disbelief rendered one a heretic (e.g., open rebellion, erroneous intellectual conclusions or ignorance). Yet while there were disagreements with regard to the various details and the parameters of the Principles, the Thirteen Principles have been accepted in their general form as the expression of Torah Judaism, and, as stated above, one who denies any of them is outside the pale of the faith community of Torah Judaism. For example, the conviction that God is a corporeal being like any other corporal being is a belief that is outside the realm of Judaism, despite the fact that the Sages do not agree whether to deem one a heretic for harboring this belief. Hence, the principle is true, although its exact parameters are subject to the debate of Torah scholars.

This situation is comparable to that which occurred with the publication of the Shulchan Aruch. Despite the fact that there was debate among bona fide Torah scholars as to the benefit and propriety of creating a code of Jewish law, and despite the fact that there are instances where the rulings of the Shulchan Aruch have not been accepted, the Shulchan Aruch overall has been accepted by Klal Yisrael—its sages and the rank and file of observant Jews—and has therefore become the definitive code of Jewish observance. Similarly, over the generations, the Thirteen Principles have been accepted as the definitive code of Jewish belief, albeit not every detail of Rambam’s presentation of them has been accepted. Hence, Yigdal and the Thirteen Principles are recited by most Jews every day in Shacharit.

Dr. Shapiro admits that he is not a theologian, but rather an intellectual historian (p. 158). Indeed, perhaps this explains why he misunderstands so many Torah sources. While one of the Thirteen Principles is that the entire Torah that was handed to Moshe Rabbeinu is God-given, Dr. Shapiro tries to show how certain parts of the Torah are “post-Mosaic.” He states:

In his commentary on Numbers 22:1, Rashbam focuses on the phrase “beyond the Jordan,” … the difficulty is that in Moses’ day the Israelites had not yet entered the Promised Land and the term “beyond the Jordan” would not have been used for the side of the Jordan on which they were encamped.…

Dr. Shapiro concludes

In other words, this phrase was only added after Moses’ death, which occurred before the Israelites crossed the Jordan.

This explanation is a far cry from that of Rashbam, who does not even
intimate when this section was written. Rather, Rashbam simply explains that “beyond the Jordan” was written to reflect what would be in the future, just as other parts of the Torah are written prophetically (see Ketubot 10b).

In a similar vein, Dr. Shapiro informs us that

according to Midrash tanhuma and Yalkut hamakhiri, it was the Men of the Great Assembly who changed certain words in the Torah (p. 98).

What Dr. Shapiro fails to mention is that those portions of the Tanchuma and Yalkut are not found in most early editions, as the Tzeidah Ladesec notes (quoted by Etz Yosef in Beshalach, no. 16). The Meor Ainayim (also quoted by Etz Yosef) also points this out when he states that the words “the Men of the Great Assembly” in the midrash were not originally there, and are an amendment by a later source.

In yet another attempt to disprove Rambam’s Principles, Dr. Shapiro contends that

the curses in Deuteronomy originated with Moses, not God, as R. Nissim Gerondi writes: “God agreed that they be written with Moses, not God, [as] R. Nissim

Dr. Shapiro then surmises:

It is hard to see how this approach, in which God is no longer directing but concuring, can be brought in line with Maimonides’ insistence that the entire Torah was prophetically revealed (p. 113).

Dr. Shapiro completely misunderstands this statement by Rabbeinu Nissim. Much of the narratives in the Torah contain passages that were stated by individuals—such as Avraham, Pharaoh, Hagar, Lavan and countless others. When God gave the Torah, He chose which of these individuals’ words would be included and exactly how they would be phrased; He then dictated them to Moshe. These words subsequently became Torah. Rabbeinu Nissim is saying that Moshe, in fact, said the curses on his own and God then agreed to dictate them as Torah.

Dr. Shapiro maintains that Moshe had a role “in the authorship of the Torah” and that God accepted this (p. 114). To support this claim, Dr. Shapiro quotes a midrash hagadol from Shemot:

Rabbi Samuel Bar Nahmani said: “Why does it say concerning each thing [Moses did] As the Lord commanded Moses? This may be compared to [the case of] a king who commanded his servant, saying to him, ‘Build me a palace.’ The servant expertly built him a great and spectacular palace. He wrote on everything [he built] the name of the king. When he finished, the king entered and saw it and was very pleased. He said: ‘All this honour has my servant done me, including inscribing my name on every place, yet while I am inside, he is outside! Call him that he may come right in.’ So, too, when Moses finished the work of the Tabernacle, and he wrote in every section, As the Lord commanded Moses, God appeared and His Shekhinah dwelt in it [the Tabernacle] and He saw it and it pleased Him…. He said: ‘The son of Amram

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[Moses] has done me all this honour and he is outside! He is worthy to enter My presence and come under the shade of My Shekhinah” (pp. 114-115).

According to Dr. Shapiro, God did not make specific requests, but Moshe wrote “as the Lord commanded” after each section, implying that God had done so. Dr. Shapiro writes:

In other words, Moses independently added the phrase, “Even as the Lord commanded Moses,” and because of this he was rewarded. Using the words of R. Nissim, we can say that God agreed that these words should appear in the Torah, but they certainly were not dictated to Moses in the scribal fashion described by Maimonides (p. 115).

We can explain this midrash the same way we explained Rabbeinu Nissim in the previous citation. Even though various Biblical personalities may have initiated certain statements, God ultimately made the choice to include them in the Torah. Those statements then became God’s words. This in no way contradicts Rambam’s assertion that every word of Torah is written by God. Incidentally, this midrash also appears in Vayikra Rabba 1-7. There, the Maharavz (Rabbi Zev Wolf Einhorn) offers a completely different explanation. He rejects the notion that it was Moshe who wrote the words “as the Lord commanded Moses” and explains that there is not an exact correlation between the mashal (parable) in the midrash and the nimshal (moral). In the mashal, the servant constructed a magnificent palace on his own, although he gave credit to the king, from whom he received the original order. Moshe, on the other hand, built the mishkan exactly as he was commanded, down to the last detail. Everything that Moshe did was to fulfill the will of God; God wanted the world to know of Moshe’s meticulous fulfillment of His commandments so He instructed Moshe to write “as the Lord commanded Moses” each time.

Yet another example of Dr. Shapiro’s misunderstanding of Torah sources concerns aggadah, which is defined by Chazal as the part of Torah that has no halachic implications, “[things] not permitted or prohibited, defiled or pure, guilty or innocent” (Yerushalmi, Horiot 3-8). In other words, one cannot derive pesak from aggadah. In the same manner, Dr. Shapiro seeks to apply this approach to matters of emunah and bitachon.

However, faith and belief are mitzvot like all other mitzvot. Hence, the halachic decision-making process applies to matters of faith in the way it does to other mitzvot. While Dr. Shapiro acknowledges that both the Chatam Sofer (Yoreh Deah 356) and Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook clearly state that matters of faith...
are subject to pesak (p. 142, note 15), he goes on to declare that he is unaware of any Rishon who maintains this view, and proceeds to negate this opinion.

Evidently, the Chatam Sofer— with his vast Talmudic knowledge— believed that the fact that matters of faith are amenable to pesak was an obvious truth that needed no corroboration. Dr. Shapiro concludes that

a separate study is needed in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of views of Rishonim and Acharonim concerning whether matters of belief … can be decided in a halachic fashion.

The existence of such a study will not be the deciding factor as to the halachic application of this rule to matters of belief. Rather, the majority of qualified posekim who are intuitively accepted as such by the majority of Torah observant Jewry will in fact have to decide what the rule is, and when it applies, for this is also halachah.

Dr. Shapiro subsequently goes on to make a brazen attack on Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. Alleging that Rav Moshe was unaware of Maimonides' philosophical views, Dr. Shapiro states:

Although R. Moses Feinstein was the greatest posek of his time, he seems to have had no knowledge of Maimonidean philosophy. He was therefore able to state that Maimonides believed in the protective power of holy names and the names of angels, as used in amulets. For Maimonides' rejection of this, see his commentary on Mishnah Sanhedrin 7: 4 and Guide i. 61-2. (p. 156, note 1).

Dr. Shapiro evidently misunderstood Rav Moshe's responsum (YD part 2, p. 239), as well as the Rambam, both in his commentary to the Mishnah and in his Guide for the Perplexed. Before I explain what Rambam and Rav Moshe actually said, let's assume that Rambam did, in fact, dispute the protective power of God's names, as Dr. Shapiro claims. And let's assume that Rav Moshe never learned Guide for the Perplexed. But is it likely that Rav Moshe was also unaware of Rambam's commentary to the Mishnah?

Obviously, Rambam's commentary to the Mishnah is the domain of a halachist and Talmidist, even according to Dr. Shapiro. Perhaps Rav Moshe held that Rambam's words in the Mishneh Torah superseded halachically his words in the commentary to the Mishnah (Hilkhot Mezuzah 5:4)? In the former, Rambam rules that God's name "Shakkai" should be placed on the outside of the mezuzah, indicating his belief that the Shem does have protective power. Many times there are conflicts between the Mishneh Torah and the commentary to the Mishnah, and usually the Mishneh Torah is considered the more authoritative.

But we do not need to resort to this line of reasoning. Rambam does not dispute the protective power of God's holy names. A simple reading of both sources reveals that Rambam is actually defining what in fact constitutes a name of God. He says that people think that combinations of letters from verses constitute the names of God that have magical powers. This, says Rambam, is a view held by fools and amulet writers who use the letter combinations as God's name. In fact, God's names are the descriptive names mentioned in the Torah and codified in the Talmud as the seven names that one is prohibited to erase.

Rambam never disputes their ability to protect; hence he says that it is customary to write God's name "Shakkai" on the outside of the mezuzah and not on the inside. Similarly, Rambam says that amulets that contain God's name and Torah verses are sacred. In his responsum, Rav Moshe simply quotes the Rambam in Mishneh Torah where he prohibits the insertion of God's names into a mezuzah not because he didn't believe in their power but because doing so would reduce the mezuzah to an amulet and diminish its true importance as a Divine command. Rambam likewise states there that although using Torah verses or Divine names to heal is permissible. Hence, Rav Moshe was not ignorant of Rambam's philosophical opinions.

Even Shisiya will encourage people to study matters of faith and theology and to delve into them in the same manner that they probe other Torah subjects. As with all Torah study, the study of such subjects will be for the purpose of lilmud al menat la'iszot (encouraging observance and commitment to Torah), thus glorifying and magnifying the Torah. I recommend Even Shisiya to Torah students who can appreciate it; a translation in English is soon to be released, which will make it accessible to the wider public.

As for The Limits of Orthodox Theology, I cannot recommend it to the general public, who can be easily misled by some of the questionable theses in this book. For the discerning reader who will carefully check the sources, this book will provide an interesting historical perspective as to the various opinions surrounding the Thirteen Principles.