



## Parashat Vaetchanan

In Parashat Vaetchanan, Moshe admonishes *Benei Yisrael*, "You shall observe and perform [the Torah], for it is your source of wisdom and understanding before the [other] nations, who will hear of these statutes and say, 'What a wise, understanding people is this great nation!'" (4:6).

On two occasions in his writings, Maimonides infers from this verse that the Torah must have the potential of earning the admiration of other nations, and therefore we may not accept any approach that make the Torah appear foolish or bereft of profound meaning.

The first context is Maimonides' discussion in *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:31) concerning *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, the search for rational explanations underlying the Torah's commands. Maimonides mentions and strongly rejects the theory advanced by some thinkers that there is no rationale underlying the *mitzvot*, and he enlists this verse as evidence for his position. He writes:

He [Moshe] thus says that even every one of these "statutes" convinces all nations of the wisdom and understanding it includes. But if no reason could be found for these statutes, if they produced no advantage and removed no evil, why then should he who believes in them and follows them be wise, reasonable, and so excellent as to raise the admiration of all nations?

If Moshe foresees the gentile world admiring the laws observed by the Jewish people, then these laws must have some logical basis and rationale. Maimonides thus concludes:

But the truth is undoubtedly as we have said, that every one of the six hundred and thirteen precepts serves to inculcate some truth, to remove some erroneous opinion, to establish proper relations in society, to diminish evil, to train in good manners, or to warn against bad habits.

The second context is Maimonides' famous introduction to his commentary to the tenth chapter of Masekhet Sanhedrin, where he formulates his approach to the non-legal "Aggadic" sections of the Talmud, which often relate stories that appear to be mythical. Maimonides observes that the vast majority of people accept all these passages at face value, in their plain, literal meaning, and either believe these accounts as factual, or ridicule them. He strongly denounces both approaches, arguing that the Aggadic accounts in the Talmud undoubtedly have a deeper, non-literal meaning through which the Sages convey profound concepts and truths. In his rejection of the literalist approach, he makes reference to this verse in Parashat Vaetchanan:

This group destroys the beauty of the Torah, darken its radiance, and make God's Torah the opposite of what it is meant to be, for God said in the perfect Torah, "...who will hear of these statutes and say, 'What a wise, understanding people is this great nation!'" and this group tells over the words of the Sages *z"l* in such a

way that the other nations say, "What a foolish and brutish people is this small nation!"

According to Maimonides, the Aggadic sections of the Talmud cannot possibly be taken literally, for if they are, the Torah becomes a source of ridicule for the other nations, rather than a source of admiration and respect. He therefore demands that we look behind these passages to unearth the profound messages they seek to convey, messages that indeed reflect the depth and wisdom of the Torah, which ultimately all nations of the world will come to acknowledge, respect and admire.