

Maimonides on Forbidden Thoughts and Intellectual Engagement  
by David Silverberg

The closing section of Parashat Shelach introduces the obligation of *tzitzit* – affixing strings to the corners of one's four-cornered garment – which is to serve the expressed purpose of reminding the wearer of the divine commands: "... you shall look upon it and [thereby] remember all the commandments of the Lord and perform them, and you shall not stray after your heart and eyes, after which you [would otherwise] stray" (Bamidbar 15:39). The straightforward reading of this verse, it would appear, is that *tzitzit* are intended to prevent a person from following his natural, sinful tendencies. Left to his own vices, man instinctively "strays after his heart and mind," acting upon human impulses and passions. The Torah therefore required affixing to one's clothing a reminder of his lifelong position in the service of God. Without this reminder, one might "stray after his heart and eyes" and neglect God's commands.

The Talmud, however, appears to advance an additional level of interpretation of this verse. In Masekhet Berakhot (12b), the Talmud discusses the inclusion of the *tzitzit* section as part of the daily *shema* recitation, and points to several important themes introduced in this section warranting its daily recitation. Among those themes, the Gemara lists the issue of heretical, idolatrous and licentious thoughts, which the Torah addresses in the aforementioned verse – "*Ve-lo taturu acharei levavkhem ve-acharei eineikhem*" ("You shall not stray after your heart and eyes"). Apparently, the Talmud interpreted this phrase as introducing a prohibition against engaging the mind in these areas. The Torah here forbids not only acting upon one's natural tendencies and instincts, but also dwelling upon those tendencies in one's mind, specifically in regards to paganism, apostasy and sexual immorality.

Accordingly, Maimonides, citing this verse from Parashat Shelach, lists in his enumeration of the commandments (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot, lo ta'aseh* 47) the prohibition forbidding us "to stray after our hearts to the point where we believe views which are contrary to the views which the Torah has obligated us [to accept]. We should rather restrict our thought and place a limit upon it – namely, the Torah's commandments and warnings." This prohibition forbids unlimited intellectual engagement; a person's thoughts must remain within the bounds of the divine creed. Later, Maimonides adds that this prohibition also proscribes "being drawn after physical desires and occupying the mind in them." Just as the Torah prohibits engaging the mind in heretical beliefs, so does it forbid mental preoccupation with physical indulgence.

It should be noted that Maimonides here speaks only of beliefs "contrary to the views" established by the Torah, and licentious thought, omitting the third category of forbidden thought mentioned in the Talmud – idolatrous doctrines. Maimonides devotes a separate prohibition to the issue of idolatrous beliefs, which he lists as the tenth of the Torah's "negative commands." As opposed to the Gemara, which extracted that prohibition, as well, from our verse in Parashat Shelach, Maimonides cites a different Biblical source for the prohibition against intellectual engagement in idolatrous thought – "Do not turn to idols" (Vayikra 19:4). Based on a passage in *Torat Kohanim*, Maimonides interprets that verse as proscribing not idolatrous practice, which the Torah obviously forbids elsewhere, but rather involvement in idolatry even without performing pagan rituals. Thus, intellectual engagement in idolatry is afforded a special prohibition, separate and apart from the other two forbidden areas of thought – heresy and immorality. Maimonides appears to have arrived at this position based on the *Sifrei*, which he indeed cites in *lo ta'aseh* 47, which interprets the verse in Parashat Shelach as referring specifically to these two categories. He evidently understood that the *Sifrei* represents a view different from that expressed in the Talmud, and he embraced the position of the *Sifrei*. Later, as we attempt to clarify more precisely what level and sort of mental engagement Maimonides forbids, we will return to this distinction he draws between heresy and idolatry.



## **Maimonides and the *Sefer Ha-chinukh***

The anonymous *Sefer Ha-chinukh*, in explicating this prohibition (387), presents the underlying reason behind it:

“The root of this command is readily obvious: for a person will thereby be guarded against sinning to God all his days. And in truth, this command is a fundamental principle of the religion, because evil thoughts are the "parents" of impurity, and the actions are their offspring; and if a person dies before reproducing, there is no mention of children. It thus turns out that this prohibition constitutes the root from which all virtues stem.”

According to the *Chinukh*, the Torah imposes this prohibition as a safeguard against sin; since all wrongdoing originates from improper thoughts, by avoiding the thoughts one naturally avoids the deeds. The Torah forbids indulging one's mind in the two basic categories of religious offenses – heretical doctrine, and physical lustfulness – because of the obvious danger such thoughts pose to one's future conduct.

We might, at first glance, arrive at a different perspective, based on an intriguing passage in Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:8). Maimonides here discusses the importance of controlling and suppressing one's sensual drives, and digresses onto the issue of licentious thought. He cites in this context a famous though startling Rabbinic aphorism, "*Hirhurei aveira kashin mei-aveira*" – "The thoughts about the sin are more dangerous than the sin itself" – and offers the following philosophical explanation of the particular gravity of sinful thoughts:

“When a person is disobedient, this is due to certain accidents connected with the corporeal element in his constitution; for man sins only by his animal nature, whereas thinking is a faculty of man connected with his form – a person who thinks sinfully sins therefore by means of the nobler portion of his self; and he who wrongly causes a foolish slave to work does not sin as much as he who wrongly causes a noble and free man to do the work of a slave. For this specifically human element, with all its properties and powers, should only be employed in suitable work, in attempts to join high beings, and not in attempts to go down and reach the lower creatures.”

In this passage, Maimonides clearly speaks of the intrinsic, rather than practical, gravity of improper thought. His concern is not the tangible results of sinful mental engagement on one's conduct, but rather the misuse of the faculty of thought itself. In his view, a sin committed with the highest human power – the mind – constitutes a far greater offense than a wrongful act performed with one's physical body, which is a lower stature. Later, he applies this same principle to the faculty of speech, which is likewise a uniquely human feature which must therefore "not be employed in doing that which is for us most degrading and perfectly disgraceful." For Maimonides, this misuse of mind and speech constitutes a grave act of rebellion against the Almighty, who gave us these faculties as a means to achieve spiritual perfection.

One might have surmised that this outlook on the gravity of improper thought forms the basis of Maimonides' approach to the underpinnings of *ve-lo taturu*. Unlike the *Chinukh*, it would appear, Maimonides would explain this prohibition in terms of the intrinsic severity of misusing the sacred

capacity of thought for unholy purposes. Regardless of the practical effects of such thoughts, they are proscribed due to their inherently rebellious nature.

In truth, however, Maimonides, too, views this prohibition in light of the practical effects of improper thought. In his discussions of this prohibition in his *Code*, Maimonides indeed points to the practical effects of these forms of mental preoccupation that account for the prohibition. In *Hilkhot Teshuva* (4:4), Maimonides writes explicitly that looking upon indecent sights is forbidden because it will likely lead to immoral conduct, and he invokes in this context the verse of *ve-lo taturu*. Likewise, in a passage in *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* that we will discuss at length later (2:3), he speaks of the prohibition against heretical thoughts as intended to prevent one from embracing such ideas.

Thus, Maimonides indeed speaks of *ve-lo taturu* in terms of the preventative function it serves. His comments in the *Guide*, then, should be seen as merely explaining the particular severity afforded by the Sages to *hirhurei aveira* – sinful thoughts – to the point where they exceed in gravity the actual act of sin. Maimonides here simply seeks to justify this severity scale, which he does based on the uniquely human quality associated with thought and speech. But this does not form the basis of the prohibition against entertaining such thoughts; it merely explains the singular severity with which tradition views offenses involving the mind, rather than the body.

### Scholarly Engagement in Heretical Works

As discussed, Maimonides includes under the *ve-lo taturu* prohibition the two realms of the theological and the sensual. The latter category is fairly straightforward, forbidding one to actively engage his mind in thoughts of carnal indulgence. The issue of intellectual engagement in heresy, however, requires further clarification, for two reasons. First and foremost, it is evident from Maimonides' many works and published exchanges that he studied and even mastered scores of philosophical and theological works of heretics and idolaters. In fact, Maimonides even wrote a letter to his translator, Rav Shemuel Ibn Tibbon, urging him to study the works of Aristotle, and naming the commentaries to those works he deemed indispensable for proper comprehension. Clearly, Aristotle hardly accepted the basic tenets of Judaism. And yet, Maimonides studied and urged studying his works due to their scientific and philosophical value. Secondly, even if we can isolate the author from his works, the *halakha* requires clarification in its own right. Theoretically, we can identify three forms of "thought" which Maimonides here forbids:

1. At one extreme, this prohibition might refer only to the actual adoption of heretical beliefs. One is entitled to probe, study and inquire to whatever extent he pleases, provided that his conclusions remain within the realm of Jewish faith. According to this definition, *ve-lo taturu* establishes limits on belief, beyond practice and conduct. As opposed to the advice attributed to a certain non-Orthodox ideologue, encouraging Jews to "eat kosher and think *treif*," this command demands that both conduct and intellect conform to the tenets of the Jewish faith.
2. On the opposite end, this prohibition perhaps forbids all and any exposure to views that run counter to Jewish belief. According to this definition, *ve-lo taturu* sets a clear limit on intellectual involvement of any degree, including reading works containing heretical ideas, even out of curiosity or as part of an academic program.
3. Somewhere in the middle of these extremes would be a position defining this prohibition as referring to the study of heretical ideas from a theologically



neutral standpoint. That is, the Torah indeed forbids the mere studying – rather than only embracing – heretical notions, but this applies only if one approaches this pursuit with an empty mental slate, rather than with firm belief and conviction in the truth of Jewish theology.

Needless to say, this question, as to the halakhic limits of intellectual activity, represents among the central issues confronting contemporary Orthodox Jewish life. Most directly, how one perceives this prohibition will determine whether or not a Jew may enroll in a university course requiring that he read philosophical works that contradict the Jewish faith. We will, of course, limit ourselves here to discussing the relevant passages in Maimonides' writings and how the proponents of the various approaches have understood his position.

Let us return to Maimonides' description of this prohibition in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*:

“He has admonished us not to stray after our hearts to the point where we believe views which are contrary to the views which the Torah has obligated us [to accept]. We should rather restrict our thought and place a limit upon it – namely, the Torah's commandments and warnings.”

As noted by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein ("Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," in *Judaism's Encounter With Other Cultures*, Jason Aronson Inc., 1997), this description differs sharply from Maimonides' presentation of the parallel prohibition regarding idolatry (*lo ta'aseh* 10). Based on *Torat Kohanim* (to which he refers as the *Sifrei*), Maimonides proscribes even casual conversation about idolatrous images and even looking at them. He elaborates at great length to emphasize the extent of this prohibition, which includes inquiring about modes of idolatrous worship and pagan beliefs. Here, however, with regard to *ve-lo taturu*, Maimonides speaks of intellectual engagement to the point of belief; meaning, he appears to forbid only the acceptance of heretical doctrines, not theoretical inquiry into the content of those doctrines. This formulation would seem to accommodate the first possibility described earlier, defining the prohibition in terms of one's conclusions and convictions, rather than the simple exposure – even intensive exposure – to contrary theological concepts.

Nevertheless, some have attributed to Maimonides a far more restrictive stance, in light of his remarks in his *Code*. Amidst his discussion of the various prohibitions associated with idolatry, Maimonides bans contemplating any idolatrous material, and adds the following passage:

“We are likewise admonished with regard to any thought which might cause one to reject one of the Torah's fundamental precepts, that we may not bring it into our hearts or divert our attention onto it, thinking about and being drawn after the thoughts of the heart, because a person's mind is limited, and not all minds are capable of perceiving perfect truth. And if every person will be drawn after the thoughts of his heart, it will result in the destruction of the world, because of the limitations of his mind. How is this? At times a person will ponder idolatry; other times he will think about the Creator's oneness, that perhaps it isn't so; [or] what is above, what is below, what is before, what is after. At times [one will ponder] prophecy, whether it is true or not; at times [one will ponder] whether the Torah originates from the heavens or not, and he will not know the methods of inquiry with which to judge... and he will ultimately become a heretic.” (Hilkhos Avoda Zara 2:3)

At first glance, Maimonides' ruling in this passage categorically forbids intellectual engagement of any kind in heretical material, corresponding to the second approach described earlier. Indeed, Rabbi Yehuda Parnes, in the inaugural volume of Yeshiva University's *The Torah U-Madda Journal* (1989, p. 70), concludes based on this passage that Maimonides "prohibits freedom of inquiry in the areas of idolatry and heresy. Though freedom of inquiry is generally a desirable and appropriate approach, with respect to areas of thought that are essentially heretical, the halakhah imposes a prohibition ruling out free intellectual activity." Areas of scholarship that cross the boundary of acceptable Jewish theology are thus off-limits to the Jew.

To justify Maimonides' own, intensive engagement in heretical works, Rabbi Parnes invokes the halakhic principle of *le-havin u-le-horot*, established by the Talmud (Sanhedrin 68a) as grounds for permitting the study of witchcraft for purposes of halakhic decision-making. Meiri, a Medieval Talmudic commentator and philosopher, extends this provision beyond the strict parameters of witchcraft to all heretical material. Accordingly, Maimonides, a leading halakhist and spiritual leader of his time, was obliged to master philosophical works for purposes of arriving at the proper assessment of this material from a Torah viewpoint. His conduct in this regard would thus not set an example for the masses to follow.

Others, however, advanced different approaches in understanding Maimonides' formulation of this *halakha*. Rabbi Lichtenstein, in the aforementioned essay, detects a contrast between this formulation and Maimonides' comments in the previous passage, where he describes the prohibition against various forms of involvement in idolatry. There, Maimonides explicitly outlaws all contact with idolatry, even mere perusal or aesthetic interest. In forbidding studying heretical material, however, he speaks only of serious intellectual engagement, which, in Rabbi Lichtenstein's view, means limiting this prohibition to "entertaining it as a serious option," such that violation of this command is "conditioned upon its subsequent impact." Accordingly, Maimonides here refers to the final of the three possibilities raised above: the study of heretical ideas from a neutral frame of reference for purposes of serious consideration.

In the second volume of *The Torah U-madda Journal* (1990). Drs. Lawrence Kaplan and David Berger published a lengthy article in response to Rabbi Parnes' essay, in which they seek to clarify Maimonides' ruling based on its Talmudic source and other passages in Maimonides' writings. Recall that Maimonides describes several examples of philosophical speculation regarding which he forbids exposing oneself to heretical theories. One such example is inquiry into the questions of "what is above, what is below, what is before, what is after." Maimonides borrowed this phrase from a Mishna in Masekhet Chagiga (2:1), which reads, "Whoever considers four things it were better for him not to have come into the world: what is above, what is below, what is before, and what is after." Maimonides explains the intent of this admonition in his *Commentary to the Mishna*:

"Now it is known that every person by nature... desires to know all the sciences, and it is impossible that a person will not think about these two sciences [natural science, and philosophy] in some rudimentary manner. And he will direct his thought toward them without the proper preliminaries and without having proceeded along the various stages of science. Therefore [the Sages] prohibited this and warned against it. And in order to frighten one from directing his thought to the Account of the Beginning without the proper preliminaries they said, 'Whoever considers four things,' etc."

Thus, Maimonides interprets this warning as directed towards those who seek to probe the mysteries of nature without proper training, urging them to exercise patience before rashly arriving at



definitive conclusions as to the origins and nature of the universe. He addresses this Mishnaic passage again in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1:32), where he similarly explains the Mishna's warning to mean

“that man should not rashly engage in speculation with false conceptions, and when he is in doubt about anything, or unable to find a proof for the object of his inquiry, he must not at once abandon, reject and deny it; he must modestly keep back... hesitate [from uttering an opinion] and pause.”

Towards the end of this chapter, Maimonides states explicitly that the Scriptural and Talmudic passages imposing limitations on scientific and philosophical inquiry were not intended "to close the gate of investigation entirely, and to prevent the mind from comprehending what is within reach." Rather, he emphasizes, "The whole object of the Prophets and the Sages was to declare that a limit is set to human reason where it must halt." In other words, when the Mishna proscribes probing mysteries such as "what is above, what is below, what is before, what is after," it forbids approaching these issues with the arrogant presumption that all answers are within the mind's reach. A student embarking on this philosophical quest must first acknowledge the need for what Maimonides terms "preliminaries" – an extended and intensive process of academic training. In addition, as he emphasizes in the *Guide*, even the veteran scholar must admit the limits of his own capacities and of human knowledge generally.

Assuming, then, that Maimonides indeed had this Mishna in mind when codifying and formulating the prohibition of *ve-lo taturu* in the *Code*, he did not intend to forbid any intellectual exposure to theories that oppose Jewish belief. Rather, he seeks to limit serious scientific and philosophical inquiry to those with the proper training, and to demand intellectual humility during this pursuit. Rash, simpleminded theorization on the part of the ignorant, and the arrogant presupposition of intellectual perfection by the scholar, are what threatens to lead one towards heretical beliefs. In the absence of these dangerous attitudes, the Torah prohibition against the study of heretical ideas does not apply.

Drs. Kaplan and Berger raise another argument, as well, based on Maimonides' description in the *Code* of an inquiring student who might "not know the methods of inquiry with which to judge" the material, which might then lead him to heresy. If, indeed, this is the concern underlying the prohibition of *ve-lo taturu*, then presumably one who has, indeed, acquired the proper tools may engage in heretical material. Indeed, the authors (in a letter to the editor in the third volume of *The Torah U-madda Journal*, 1991-2) cite a passage from Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch's commentary to the *Code*, entitled *Yad Peshuta*, where he reaches this very conclusion:

“It would appear from the Rambam's statement that if a person studies Torah and *Hokhma* [secular wisdom] in the proper order, he will thereby acquire the knowledge of the *middot* [methods of inquiry] that he ought [to use to] judge [matters], and he will then be able to ascend on the highway leading unto the house of the Lord and achieve the knowledge of God.”

According to this reading, *ve-lo taturu* hinges on the particular background and mindset of the given individual. It forbids irresponsible and unrestrained access to heretical knowledge, while permitting serious study of heretical texts if it is conducted maturely and after the establishment of a firm foundation of faith and understanding of Torah.

Rabbi Parnes responded to and dismissed this contention, arguing that the underlying reasons given to explain a *mitzva* do not affect its practical implementation and scope. He insists that



Maimonides applies this prohibition against intellectual engagement in heretical content to even the most accomplished and pious scholars. Even if an individual has fortified himself scholastically and spiritually to the point where he is assured freedom from the theological threats of apostasy, he nevertheless remains subject to the objective prohibition against consulting works of heretical content.

## Conclusion

This week's discussion will end with far more questions than answers. Earlier we raised three theoretical approaches to understanding Maimonides' position on this very sensitive issue. As we have seen, his comments in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* appear to express the first possibility, whereas the relevant passage in the *Code* reflects either the second or the third, depending on which reading one embraces. Thus, Maimonides' stance remains somewhat obscure.

It should be emphasized that we have dealt here strictly with the very specific issue of the prohibition of *ve-lo taturu*, the question of whether or not it yields an absolute ban against the study of works with deviant content. It hopefully goes without saying that as a practical matter, many other issues are involved, as well, including the obvious question of prioritization, given the limited time in a person's life available for academic pursuits, and the clear supremacy of Torah study over other scholarly endeavors. Motive, of course, must also be considered when determining the priority of a given course of study, as must the precise nature of the material, its manner and context of presentation, and of course the broader cultural context in which one lives. It is worth citing the following passage from Rabbi Lichtenstein's essay, eloquently calling for spiritual sensitivity and caution if and when one decides to engage in theologically deviant material:

“Even if problematic studies be deemed permissible, given the right motive and the right person, it does not follow that they are necessarily advisable. As with respect to the moral realm, potential gain and loss must be weighed carefully. Qualifying variables aside, the bottom line of course is that the risks remain. Taking them can only be justified by the faith that they can be counterbalanced by genuine spiritual beliefs, not by the pretense that they are either fictitious or flimsy.”

© Maimonides Heritage Center, 2005

[www.maimonidesheritage.org](http://www.maimonidesheritage.org)