Maimonidean Rationalism vs. Folklore’s supernaturalism

Maimonidean Medieval Rationalist Prejudices against belief in Folkloric superstition that destined little attention to the field by serious Enlightenment and Wissenschaft Des Judentums scholars

One of the strongest attributes of Maimonides as Norman Strickman has shown in his book, Without Red Strings or Holy Water, is his condemnation of magical folk beliefs and superstitions, customs, rituals, and traditions such as witchcraft, amulets, segullas, theurgic delusions of grandeur, and other folk beliefs which he viewed as a form of avodah zarah (idolatry). Rambam viewed these beliefs as a potential threat to true Torah understanding. Rambam was not willing to tolerate these “buba ma’ases” as the folk beliefs of naïve and foolish notions of ignorant simple minded people. Rambam studied works such as Ancient Nabatean Agriculture to gain insights into what Biblical idolatry was. However Rambam considered many magical practices of his own days as vestiges or relics of ancient day folk practices. He believed the resort to folk practices and beliefs occurs during intellectual and moral weakness in the area of the cognitive realm of reason to know natural scientific causes for the workings of the universe. Rambam holds that he believed the Torah was given to the Jews to abolish such bogus charlatan beliefs and superstitious customs, rituals, which are not less dangerous than false theological beliefs to which Judaism is opposed since there are a part of the same falsehoods. Maimonides held that the version of Judaism believed in and practiced by many pious Jews of his generation had been infected with pagan notions. In the Mishneh Torah, he aimed at cleansing Judaism from these non-Jewish practices and beliefs and impressing upon readers that Jewish law and ritual are free from irrational and superstitious practices. Strickman’s book, Without Red Strings or Holy Water explores Maimonides’ views regarding God, the commandments, astrology, medicine, the evil eye, amulets, magic, theurgic practices, omens, communicating with the dead, the messianic era, midrashic literature, and the oral law. Maimonides insisted that all magical practices are, “false and deceptive.” He held that it is not proper for Israelites who are highly intelligent to allow themselves to be deluded by such inanities or to imagine that there is anything in them, as it says in Bamidbar, “For there is no enchantment with Jacob, neither is there any divination with Israel” (23:23). Ironically Yakov’s favorite son, Yosef in the environment of Egypt where magic practices were rampant, proclaims, “don’t you know that a person like me practices divination.” Perhaps the apple does fall far from the tree, as the injunction “notain emet li-Yakov” might suggest that Yakov as the model for the torah scholar who dwells in the tents of the Yeshivot of Shem ve-Ever, and who wished to exit his mother’s womb so as to go and learn there, possesses the type of character that focuses on strict halakhah and the lomdish no nonsense or hocus pocus Brisker rigueur with regards to analysis of Talmudic texts. Such a portrait of such a Yakov is very distant from the Yosef model of character who takes on the persona of a wizard who knows magic, divination, and methods of dream interpretation.

Maimonides taught that, “Whoever believes in these (magical practices) and similar things in his heart, holds them to be true and scientific and only forbidden by the Torah, is nothing but a fool, deficient in understanding.” According to Maimonides, our concept of reality should be based on the teachings of the Torah properly understood by reason, logic, mathematics, physics, metaphysics, and sense perception. All of these help us to understand the teachings of the Scripture. Any interpretation of the Torah that contradicts the latter is unacceptable. An apparent exception is a kamea menusah (an amulet
that works) the Rambam says one may wear on Shabbos for its psychosomatic or psychological benefit. Likewise the Rambam acknowledges the psychosomatic aspect of healing in his medical writings. Thus Hezekiah davened to Hashem and gained an extra 7 years of life. As my grandmother said, “davening and reciting Tehillim” were her “best medicine” implying the psychological benefit of such meditation which scientifically is shown to stabilize and reduce blood pressure. However in general the Rambam condemns superstitious practices when he writes, “What is divination? He who makes signs for himself: `If this happens I will do such a thing; if it does not happen, I will not do such a think, lik Eliezer, the servant of Abraham did. All these actions are forbidden.” (see Hullin 95b and Ta’anit 4a; divination is forbidden based on Vayikra 19:26 and Devarim 18:9).

The prohibition against sorcery is given in many verses of the Torah that prohibit such acts as idolatrous magic. Rambam in Introduction to Hilchot Avodat Kochavim, lists 11 negative commandments that relate to sorcery and witchcraft. The details of these prohibitions is listed in the gemarah, Sanhedrin 64a-b and in Rambam’s Hilchot Avodat Kochavim chapter 11. The Rambam was aware that one requirement to sit on the great Sanhedrin which Rambam predicts will be reconstitute in the messianic age, is to be able to “identify” practices of witchcraft, sorcery, and wizardry and thus the Rambam according to Shlomo Pines read as many works as he could in what might be called today “history of comparative religions and anthropology” on the idolatrous practices in antiquity to shed light on present day objectionable superstitious beliefs. The Rambam was not only interested in performing mitzvot for the right reasons, but gave reasons to hukim and mishpatim that appear to lack obvious reasons. For example the Rambam comments that the issur on mixing milk and meat (lo tivshal gidei bihelev imo) was because idolatrous Canaanites mixed milk and meat at fertility idolatrous orgies where milk and meat was eaten together in conjunction with licentious practices, in order it was alleged to effect the fertility of crops. Rambam says that Baal worshipers also mixed milk and meat. This confirmed by Pritchard’s study of ancient Near Eastern texts and cognate semitic languages whereby the Rash Shamra texts include a ritual where the sacrifice of a calf cooked in its mother’s milk was offered to Ball as an offering. Rambam similarly gives the reason why Jews are forbidden to mix wool and linen (laws of shatnes) because the idolatrous Canaanite “priests” did just this. Anything adhered to for irrational or non-coherent beliefs and opinions based on superstition was not sufficient for the Rambam as constituting true knowledge (daas). For the Rambam opinions of superstitions are usually false, and if true only accidentally so, and their adherers are unable to reasonably justify these irrational behaviors before the tribunal of reason. Rambam in Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 11:16 states emphatically that the powers of sorcerers claim to have do not exist. He further states that anyone who believes that these powers exist, but the torah nevertheless prohibited partaking of them, “lacks intellect”.

On the other hand, (a) Ramban, Devarim 18:13, (b) Rabbeinu Nissim, (c) Derashot haRan no. 4 and (d) R. Yosef ibn Chabib (e) Nimmukei Yosef, Sanhedrin 16b, sv. Tanu Rabanan, all disagree with the Rambam and assume that such “powers” do exist in the world and the torah nevertheless prohibited partaking of them. Rambam did not deny that Moshe Rabbenu’s nevuhah derived from the Koachah tahor while that of Bilam and the necromancers of Egypt from the Koach ha-tumah. The point is that the Rambam’s intellectual honesty and integrity could not admit that Hashem created a world based on accident, circumstance, haphazard events. For Rambam Hashem is not a system. That would be idolatry to believe
so, for nature could be altered by theurgic practices that cause chain reactions in different sub-systems of the G-dhead, and thus one would in effect have reduced G-d to a machine or object. That is the essence of idolatry found in other ancient cultures where one believes they can control the idol by feeding it, polishing it, or entreating it. For Rambam one must only pray to Hashem, who is transcendent and beyond mere human control etc.