

Maimonides' Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates as a Key to Understanding his Views on Interpretation

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Maimonides' approach to interpretation of the Bible and rabbinic literature has already been well-studied. This paper, however, emerges from a perspective that has not yet received the attention it deserves: in one of his medical works, Maimonides presented a systematic discussion of hermeneutical method. Implicit in it is a treatment of two well-known principles: the 'principle of grace' and the 'principle of loyalty.' To some extent, these two principles oppose one another. The 'principle of grace' seeks to offer the most beneficent interpretation to the text, while the 'principle of loyalty' requires the avoidance of any external assumptions about its meaning. When Maimonides' writings are re-considered in light of the discussion in his Commentary on the Aphorisms of Hippocrates, it becomes clear that he has applied both principles to varying degrees in his interpretations of medical books, of rabbinic literature and of the Bible language. The discussion begins with a survey of the sources in which the term appears, presented in accepted chronological order: first and foremost in the Mishnah, where the term refers only to Jewish society, and later in the Tosefta and halakhic exegesis, where use of the term is significantly expanded, at times to include the entire human race and even animals. The socio-historical use of the word is then analyzed. It is posited that the Rabbis used the word *beri'ot* to address individuals in society and to channel their thinking and daily conduct, in the effort to strengthen social solidarity and influence its morals and value system in accordance with the way the Rabbis wished to shape them. In terms of historical context, the changing use of the term *beri'ot* reflects a period in which political changes in the Land of Israel caused Jewish society to undergo a metamorphosis from extended multi-generation family units to nuclear family units. As a result, individuals in society were empowered, but this came at the expense of social solidarity. The term *beri'ot* thus served as a 'propaganda technique' which the Rabbis used to reinforce community values: it symbolized the importance of social identity and the kinship among the individuals that comprise it.