

Moses Maimonides: The Rabbi Who Dared To Ask and Answer
The Ultimate Philosopher of Judaism
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G-d: Beyond Human Expression

1. Guide For the Perplexed I:57 (Pines, p. 133)

“All passages that you find in the Scriptures in which it is predicated of Him, may He be exalted, that He is the First and the Last are analogous to those in which it is predicated of Him that He has an eye or an ear.... All these words as applied to Him are according to the language of the sons of man. Similarly, when we say one, the meaning is that He has no equal and not that the notion of oneness attaches to His essence”.

2. Guide For the Perplexed I:59; Pines, p. 139).

“Know that when you make an affirmation ascribing another thing to Him, you become more remote from Him in two respects: one of them is that everything you affirm is a perfection only with reference to us, and the other is that He does not possess a thing other than His essence, which, as we have made clear, is identical with His perfections”

Allegorical Readings of the Torah

3. Guide, 2:29 (Friedlander translation)

Firstly, the account given in Scripture of the Creation is not, as is generally believed, intended to be in all its parts literal. For if this were the case, wise men would not have kept its explanation secret, and our Sages would not have employed figurative speech [in treating of the Creation] in order to hide its true meaning, nor would they have objected to discuss it in the presence of the common people. The literal meaning of the words might lead us to conceive corrupt ideas and to form false opinions about G-d, or even entirely to abandon and reject the principles of our Faith. It is therefore right to abstain and refrain from examining this subject superficially and unscientifically. We must blame the practice of some ignorant preachers and expounders of the Bible, who think that wisdom consists in knowing the explanation of words, and that greater perfection is attained by employing more words and longer speech. It is, however, right that we should examine the Scriptural texts by the intellect, after having acquired a knowledge of demonstrative science, and of the true hidden meaning of prophecies. But if one has obtained some knowledge in this matter he must not preach on it, as I stated in my Commentary on the Mishnah (Hagigah, 2:7), and our Sages said distinctly: From the beginning of the book to this place--after the account of the sixth day of the Creation--it is "the glory of G-d to conceal a thing" (Prov. 25:2).

Necessary Truths

4. Guide, III:28; Pines, p. 512

Among the things to which your attention ought to be directed is that you should know that in regard to the correct opinions through which the ultimate perfection may be obtained, the Law has communicated only their end and made a call to believe in them in a summary way—that is, to believe in the existence of the deity, may He be exalted, His unity, His knowledge, His power, His will, and His eternity ... In the same way, the Law also makes a call to adopt certain beliefs, belief in which is necessary for the sake of political welfare. Such, for instance, is our belief that He, may He be exalted, is violently angry with those who disobey Him and that it is therefore necessary to fear Him and to dread him and to take care not to disobey. (Guide, III:28; Pines, p. 512)

Rambam's Focus on Intellectual Development

5. Guide I:2, Pines, p. 24

“For the intellect that G-d made overflow unto man and that is the latter's ultimate perfection ... It was because of this that it was said of him that he was created in the image of G-d and in His likeness”.

6. Guide III:27, Pines, p. 511

“His ultimate perfection is to become rational in actu, I mean to have an intellect in actu; this would consist in his knowing everything concerning all the beings that it is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection”.

7. Rambam, Introduction to Mishna (Tr. Halbertal, Moshe. Maimonides (pp. 138-139). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

“For they [the sages] found that [man’s] purpose is but one activity, and all the other activities are to maintain his existence so he can perfect that one activity, which is to apprehend the intelligibles and know the truths as they are.”

8. Eight Chapters: 5:1 (tr. Joseph I Gorfinkle)

As we have explained in the preceding chapter, it is the duty of man to subordinate all the faculties of his soul to his reason. He must keep his mind's eye fixed constantly upon one goal, namely, the attainment of the knowledge of G-d (may He be blessed!), as far as it is possible for mortal man to know Him. Consequently, one must so adjust all his actions, his whole conduct, and even his very words, that they lead to this goal, in order that none of his deeds be aimless, and thus retard the attainment of that end.

Love and Fear of G-d

9. Rambam, Foundations of the Torah 2:2 (tr. Simon Glazer)

But how may one discover the way to love and fear Him? **When man will reflect concerning His works, and His great and wonderful creatures and will behold through them His wonderful, matchless and infinite wisdom**, he will spontaneously be filled with love, praise and exaltation and become possessed of a great longing to know the Great Name, even as David said: "My soul thirsts for G-d, for the living G-d," (Ps. 42,2); and when he will think of all these matters. he will be taken aback in a moment and stricken with awe, and realize that he is an infinitesimal creature, humble and dark, standing with an insignificant and slight knowledge in the presence of the All Wise, as David said: "For when I see Thy heavens, the wonderful works of Thy fingers, of what use is man that Thou mayest remember him?" (Ibid. 8,4). And, in harmony with these matters, I elucidate great, general principles of the works of the Lord of the universe, so that they might serve as an opening for one who understands by which to love the Name, as some sages said on the subject of love: "Out of it thou wilt recognize the One who spoke, and the universe was called into existence."

10. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning Repentance (Halbertal, Moshe. Maimonides (p. 200). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition).

It is known and certain that the love of G-d does not become closely knit in a man’s heart till he is continuously and thoroughly possessed by it and gives up everything else in the world for it as G-d commanded us, “with all thy heart and with all thy soul” (Deut. 6:5). One only loves G-d with the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge, will be the love. If the former be little or much, so will the latter be little or much. A person ought therefore to devote himself to the understanding and comprehension of those sciences and studies which will inform him concerning his Master, as far as it lies in human faculties to understand and comprehend—as indeed we have explained in the Laws Concerning the Foundations of the Torah. (“Laws Concerning Repentance,” 10:6)

Importance of Philosophy

11. Mishneh Torah: Foundations of the Torah 1:1 (Simon Glazer Translation)

The foundation of foundations and firmest pillar of all wisdom is, To know that there is a First Being, that He caused all beings to be, and that all beings from heaven and earth, and from between them, could not be save for the truth of His Own Being.

12. Mishneh Torah *ibid.* 1:5

This Being is the G-d of the universe, Lord of the whole earth, who guides the sphere with an infinite force, a force of perpetual motion; for the sphere revolves continuously, which would be impossible without someone causing it to revolve; and it is He, blessed is He! Who causes it to revolve without hand and without body.

13. Mishneh Torah *ibid.* 4:12-13

When man contemplates concerning these things, and perceives all creatures, whether angel, sphere, or man the likeness of himself, and discovers the wisdom of the Holy One, blessed is He! in all beings of form and in all creatures, his love for the Omnipresent increases and his soul and body thirst and yearn to love Him, blessed is He! and, fear and terror, because of his own insignificance, shortcomings and levity seize him when comparing himself to one of the great and holy bodies, verily so to one of the pure forms, separated from bodies of clay, which never joined a body of clay. He then will find himself likened to a vessel full of shame and disgrace, empty and wanting.

The subjects in these four chapters of these five commandments, are the same which the early sages speak of as Vineyard, saying: "Four entered the vineyard" (Haggigah 14), who, though great men in Israel and great scholars, not all of them had the intellectual power to know and grasp all these matters clearly; and I say that no one is deserving to promenade in the Vineyard unless he be filled with intellectual bread and meat, that is to say: one must know what is forbidden and what is permitted and similar to these of the rest of the commandments. **And, although these matters were pronounced by the sages as of lesser importance**, for they said: "A great matter is the Works of the Chariot, and a small matter is the controversies of Abyia and Raba, *Sukkah*, 28a.. Nevertheless, they have precedence as a study **because they commence to compose man's mind**; moreover, they are the store of great good which the Holy One, blessed is He, hath provided for the social existence of this world, so that the life of the world to Come may also be inherited, and be accessible to all, little and great, men and **women, to one of broad understanding as well as to one of lesser understanding.**

Miracles

14. Guide, 2:29 (Friedlander translation)

When I, however, said that no prophet ever announced "a permanent change of any of its properties," I intended to except miracles. For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, the pure and noble hand into a leprous one, without the existence of any natural cause that could effect these or similar phenomena, these changes were not permanent, they have not become a physical property. On the contrary, the Universe since continues its regular course. This is my opinion; this should be our belief. Our Sages, however, said very strange things as regards miracles: they are found in Bereshit Rabba, and in Midrash Koheleth, namely, that the miracles are to some extent also natural: for they say, when G-d created the Universe with its present physical properties, He made it part of these properties, that they should produce certain miracles at certain times, and the sign of a prophet consisted in the fact that G-d told him to declare when a certain thing will take place, **but the thing itself was effected according to the fixed laws of Nature. If this is really the meaning of the passage referred to, it testifies to the greatness of the author, and shows that he held it to be impossible that there should be a change in the laws of Nature, or a change in the will of G-d [as regards the physical properties of things] after they have once been established.** He therefore assumes, e.g., that G-d gave the waters the property of joining together, and of flowing in a downward direction, and of separating only at the time when the Egyptians

were drowned, and only in a particular place. I have already pointed out to you the source of this passage, and it only tends to oppose the hypothesis of a new creation. It is said there: R. Jonathan said, G-d made an agreement with the sea that it should divide before the Israelites: thus it is said, "And the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared" (Exod. 14:27). R. Jeremiah, son of Elazar, said: Not only with the sea, but with all that has been created in the six days of the beginning [was the agreement made]: this is referred to in the words, "I, even my hands have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded" (Isa. 45:12); i.e., I have commanded the sea to divide, the fire not to hurt Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, the lions not to harm Daniel, and the fish to spit out Jonah. The same is the case with the rest of the miracles.

The Afterlife

15. Introduction to Pereq Heleq (Halbertal, Moshe. Maimonides (p. 140). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.)

And they said, peace be upon them, "In the world to come there is no eating, no drinking, no bathing, no anointing, no sexual intercourse; rather, the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads, taking pleasure in the radiance of G-d's presence." By "their crowns on their heads," they mean the existence of the soul through the existence of what it has learned, the soul and its learning becoming one thing, as the erudite philosophers have said.... And when they say "taking pleasure in the radiance of G-d's presence," they mean that the soul enjoys what it has learned of the Creator. (Introduction to Pereq Heleq)

16. Mishneh Torah: Laws Concerning Repentance 8:3 (tr. Simon Glazer)

The term soul employed on this subject refers not to the breath of life necessary for the body, **but the form of the soul which is the intelligence by which it attained knowledge of the Creator's Being according to its intellectual power, and by which it attained knowledge of the non-concrete intelligences and other works of G-d**, even it is the form which we have explained in the fourth chapter of the treatise concerning Fundamentals of the Torah, and it is called soul for the purpose of this subject. **The life herein spoken of, because there is no death connected with it, seeing that death is only incidental to the happenings which befall a body**, and as there exists no body, is called a collection of life, even as it is said: "Yet the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life" (I. Sam. 25:29). And, this reward is such that there is no reward higher than it, and the kind of good after which no other good exists, and it is for it that all of the prophets craved.

Human Perfection

17. Guide for the Perplexed 3:54 (Friedlander Translation)

Hear now what I have to say after having given the above explanation. The ancient and the modern philosophers have shown that man can acquire four kinds of perfection. The first kind, the lowest, in the acquisition of which people spend their days, is perfection as regards property...

The second kind is more closely related to man's body than the first. It includes the perfection of the shape, constitution, and form of man's body; the utmost evenness of temperaments, and the proper order and strength of his limbs. This kind of perfection must likewise be excluded from forming our chief aim; because it is a perfection of the body, and man does not possess it as man, but as a living being...

The third kind of perfection is more closely connected with man himself than the second perfection. It includes moral perfection, the highest degree of excellency in man's character. Most of the precepts aim at producing this perfection; **but even this kind is only a preparation for another perfection, and is not sought for its own sake**. For all moral principles concern the relation of man to his neighbour; the perfection of man's moral principles is, as it were, given to man for the benefit of mankind. Imagine a person being alone, and having no connexion whatever with any other person, all his good moral principles are at rest, they are not required, and

give man no perfection whatever. These principles are only necessary and useful when man comes in contact with others.

The fourth kind of perfection is the true perfection of man: **the possession of the highest, intellectual faculties; the possession of such notions which lead to true metaphysical opinions as regards G-d.** With this perfection man has obtained his final object; it gives him true human perfection; it remains to him alone; it gives him immortality, and on its account he is called man. Examine the first three kinds of perfection, you will find that, if you possess them, they are not your property, but the property of others; according to the ordinary view, however, they belong to you and to others. But the last kind of perfection is exclusively yours; no one else owns any part of it, "They shall be only thine own, and not strangers' with thee" (Prov. 5:17). Your aim must therefore be to attain this [fourth] perfection that is exclusively yours, and you ought not to continue to work and weary yourself for that which belongs to others, whilst neglecting your soul till it has lost entirely its original purity through the dominion of the bodily powers over it. The same idea is expressed in the beginning of those poems, which allegorically represent the state of our soul. "My mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept" (Song 1:6). Also the following passage refers to the same subject, "Lest thou give thine honour unto others, and thy years unto the cruel" (Prov. 5:9).

The prophets have likewise explained unto us these things, and have expressed the same opinion on them as the philosophers. They say distinctly that perfection in property, in health, or in character, is not a perfection worthy to be sought as a cause of pride and glory for us: that the knowledge of G-d, i.e., true wisdom, is the only perfection which we should seek, and in which we should glorify ourselves. Jeremiah, referring to these four kinds of perfection, says:

"Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me" (Jer. 9:22, 23).

See how the prophet arranged them according to their estimation in the eyes of the multitude. The rich man occupies the first rank; next is the mighty man; and then the wise man; that is, the man of good moral principles: for in the eyes of the multitude, who are addressed in these words, he is likewise a great man. This is the reason why the three classes are enumerated in this order....

Having stated the sublime ideas contained in that Scriptural passage, and quoted the explanation of our Sages, we will now complete what the remainder of that passage teaches us. The prophet does not content himself with explaining that the knowledge of G-d is the highest kind of perfection; for if this only had been his intention, he would have said, "But in this let him who glorieth glory, that he understandeth and knoweth me," and would have stopped there; or he would have said, "that he understandeth and knoweth me that I am One," or, "that I have not any likeness," or, "that there is none like me," or a similar phrase. He says, however, that man can only glory in the knowledge of G-d and in the knowledge of His ways and attributes, **which are His actions**, as we have shown (Part 1. liv.) in expounding the passage, "Show me now thy ways" (Exod. 38:13). We are thus told in this passage that the Divine acts which ought to be known, and ought to serve as a guide for our actions, are, *hesed*, "loving-kindness," *mishpat*, "judgment," and *zedakah*, "righteousness." Another very important lesson is taught by the additional phrase, "in the earth." It implies a fundamental principle of the Law; it rejects the theory of those who boldly assert that G-d's providence does not extend below the sphere of the moon, and that the earth with its contents is abandoned, that "the Lord hath forsaken the earth" (Ez. 8:12). It teaches, as has been taught by the greatest of all wise men in the words, "The earth is the Lord's" (Exod. 9:29), that His providence extends to the earth in accordance with its nature, in the same manner as it controls the heavens in accordance with their nature. This is expressed in the words, "That I am the Lord which exercise loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness

in the earth." The prophet thus, in conclusion, says, "For in these things I delight, saith the Lord," i.e., My object [in saying this] is that you shall practise loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. In a similar manner we have shown (Part I. liv.) that the object of the enumeration of G-d's thirteen attributes is the lesson that we should acquire similar attributes and act accordingly. **The object of the above passage is therefore to declare, that the perfection, in which man can truly glory, is attained by him when he has acquired--as far as this is possible for man--the knowledge of G-d, the knowledge of His Providence, and of the manner in which it influences His creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge he will then be determined always to seek loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, and thus to imitate the ways of G-d.** We have explained this many times in this treatise.

Solutions for the Perplexed?

18. Halbertal, Moshe. Maimonides (pp. 356-357). Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.

Efforts such as these to interpret the Guide in a uniform manner have been made throughout the work's history. But a deep and thorough reading shows it to defy these efforts, however sophisticated and creative they may be. How, for example, can the spirit of Part III, Chapter 51, which describes the redemption of the philosopher's soul from the fetters of the world and from death, be reconciled with that of Chapter 54, which tells of the philosopher's return to worldly life after coming to recognize that all he can know about G-d are His actions in the world as it exists? How can the claim of the uniqueness and miraculousness of Moses' prophecy as it is stated in the Guide II, 35 be harmonized with the description in the Guide I, 51, in which Moses's insight into nature provides the source and content of his revelation? Or, in what way can we reconcile Maimonides' stated claim that he adopts creation ex nihilo in the Guide II, 25, while other chapters in the Guide establish a naturalistic explanation to the basic steps in the biblical creation story? And is there a possibility to bring together the miraculous nature of providence described in the Guide III, 51 protecting the virtuous person from all evils, and the naturalistic version proposed in the Guide III 23, where the wise man, like Job, internalizes that true happiness consists in the knowledge of G-d no matter what happens to him? It seems to me undeniable that the Guide of the Perplexed leaves multiple possibilities open to the reader, and that may well have been Maimonides' intention. The distress originally felt by the student thus opened the door to a range of possibilities. In allowing for four different lines of interpretation, Maimonides tacitly addresses the perplexed person as follows: You can maintain your loyalty to Judaism whether you affirm eternal existence or creation in time, and your philosophical inquiry may lead you to mystical experience or back to the world. Your perplexity is not a paralyzing fracture that can be resolved only in an intellectual and spiritual suicide through amputation of an important part of your spirit. Your perplexity, arising from the encounter between Torah and wisdom, opens before you various possibilities for religious existence and meaning.