

HOMO MYSTICUS



A GUIDE TO MAIMONIDES'S
Guide for the Perplexed

JOSÉ FAUR



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הגדה לפרשנות חזונו של מיימוני

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*DEUS ABSCONDITUS,
HOMO ABSCONDITUS*

REVELATION, IN THE SENSE that God can make Himself known to human, is the cornerstone of Scripture and the Maimonidean intellectual apparatus. Although God as He is to Himself *ad intra* is *deus absconditus* and totally inaccessible, the whole point of the Hebrew Scripture is that God does reveal Himself to humankind.¹ God's es-

sence cannot be known to human, especially in his somatic condition, yet human is privy to discern God through revelation.² Following the rabbis, who taught that this world is like "a pitch dark night,"³ Maimonides compared human's earthly station to someone standing in a pitch dark night. Alluding to the 'palace' symbolizing the divine abode,⁴ the rabbis taught that "in the inner chambers" of God's dwelling "luminescence abides with Him," whereas "in the outer chambers" He is surrounded by darkness.⁵ The tension "inner/outer chambers" is resolved in a successive series of "flashes/darkness."⁶ Referring to the individual grasping the lightning flashing through the night, Maimonides commented:

He would be illuminated by flashes of lightning rapidly succeeding each other, and, therefore, he would appear to be in continuous light with no interruption. . . . To another the lightning flashes only once during his [entire] night. There are also some, who, from one lightning flash to another [experience] long or short intervals. There are also some that cannot come up to the level of having their night illuminated by lightning but by a radiant body or some type of rock that is iridescent by night.⁷

The "flashes of lightning" represent divine inspiration reaching from above. The "radiant body" or "rock" (like the *lapis philosophorum* of the alche-

mists) stands for human ability to pierce the night with their own intellectual faculties.⁸ The conceptual basis of this model comes from rabbinic literature.

R. Eleazar (d. 279) taught that the primeval light created in the first day (Gn 1:3) was to be a brilliance by which humans could “contemplate the universe from one end to the other.” It is inaccessible to the wicked, and it is “reserved for the righteous in the future to come.”⁹ This light is the culmination of human development. It is not the mystical light known in phenomenology and general religious experience.¹⁰ The primeval light is akin to the Philonic logos and the rabbinic *memra*.¹¹ Maimonides identified it with “the Glory of God,”¹² which is “the active intellect flowing from God.”¹³ The motif of a pristine light beamed by God to make Himself manifest is developed at the end of the daily prayer (*Amida*). Its purpose is to guide humankind: “Because with the light of Your countenance You gave to us Tora and life, love and favor, charity and mercy, blessing and peace.” This light, like the Philonic logos and the rabbinic *memra* is essentially intellectual. Indeed, R. Amme (third century), a colleague of R. Eleazar, taught, “Great is intelligence (*da’at*) that was given between two Signs (*otiyot*) [Names of God].”¹⁴ The expression “given between two Signs” means that intelligence—like the divine light mentioned at the end of the *Amida*—proceeds from God and directs [the individual] to Him, thus establishing a link between them. It parallels the Temple, where the Divine Glory (*Shekhina*) coming from God dwells, establishing a link between the people and their Maker. Elaborating on this basic theme, the same R. Eleazar taught, “Great is the Temple that was given between two Signs.” Since both the Temple and intelligence fulfill parallel functions—the former in the realm of the collective and the latter in the realm of the individual—R. Eleazar concluded, “Whoever has intelligence is as if the Temple had been built in his days.”¹⁵ Following up this doctrine, R. Amme eloquently laid out the thesis that “Great is intelligence that was inserted in the first blessing of the daily (prayer).”¹⁶ The blessing reads: “You [God] freely distribute [*honen*] intelligence [*da’at*] to man and teach discernment to humans. We supplicate from You to distribute freely to us [*ve-honnenu*]: wisdom, discernment, and intelligence. Blessed are You, O Lord! who distributes intelligence freely [*honen*].”¹⁷

Honen not only means ‘a freely bestowed gift’ but also something coming from without. The message is clear. Human intelligence comes from God and is freely bestowed to human—in the sense that it is not gener-

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ated by inner faculties, hence, the Maimonidean doctrine, that the light beamed by God is the active intellect continuously gushing toward His creations. "One who does not perceive intellectually [*yu'qal*] God at all is like one who is in darkness and has never seen the light."¹⁸ Genuine worship of God must involve the active participation of the human intellect. It can only take place after the individual "has formed an intellectual concept (of God). If you perceived God and His actions according to what the intellect determines, you could thereafter consign yourself to Him, march toward His nearness, and strengthen the link between you and Him, which is the intellect."¹⁹

By applying their minds, humans can be illuminated and gain access to the divine intellect: "But he who had perceived and directs all of himself according to his understanding is like one who stands by the pure light of the sun."²⁰ While in the state of intellectual propinquity, the individual "is with God and God is with him."²¹ God is ceaselessly projecting His light and does not 'hide' from humans. As mentioned earlier, at the ontological level—outside the perimeters of revelation—*deus absconditus* is human inability to comprehend God. Within revelation, however, this doctrine concerns human attitude toward God. God 'hides' from humans as a result of humans 'hiding' from God. "Only when one departs from Him," by turning off his intellect, then "is hidden from God," and "God becomes hidden from him."²²

This doctrine I found corroborated also in the text of the Tora. God, blessed be He, said: "And I shall hide my face from them and it [the people] shall be devoured, and many evils and afflictions will find it [the people]. And in that day it [the people] shall say: because my God is not in my midst these evils have found me" (Dt 31:17). He [God] clarified that (His) "hiding of the face" was caused by us and that we have effected the hiding. As He says, "And I shall surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that he did" (Dt 31:18).²³

Deus absconditus is human hiding from God, not God from human (see Is 29:15). Because human refuses to let himself be touched by the light of reason, *homo absconditus* is more dangerous than all the other species in the animal kingdom.²⁴

The rise and development of human consciousness is an oddity. There is nothing in nature that can explain the quantum jump from collective unconsciousness to individual consciousness. Indeed, the very notion of 'consciousness' is the struggle against the 'natural', like Jacob challenging the 'natural' right of Essau, the firstborn, daring to wrestle an angel. "The ascent toward consciousness is the unnatural thing in nature; it is the specific of the species Man, who on that account has justly styled himself *Homo sapiens*. The struggle between the specifically human and the universally natural constitutes the history of man's conscious development."⁷⁶

The genesis of the consciousness of Israel—the matrix of what may be properly designated the Jewish archetype—originated at the Theophany at Sinai. It was at this pivotal moment in human history that the children of Israel overcame the traces and archetypes of pagan humanity by jumping a quantum leap from the realm of myth to the realm of reason. A further stage, to be examined in the following chapter of this book, involved the realm of prophecy, the final unfolding of the human spirit. Both stages began at Sinai.

Raising from mythical to rational thinking came at the moment that the people discerned an absolutely external reality, categorically irreducible to man—God. Mythical man is wrapped in his own imagination. Not only is he incapable of perceiving anything outside his own projections, but, consequently, he cannot come to grips with himself. At that stage, "Man is not yet thrown back upon himself, against nature, nor the ego against the unconscious; being oneself is still a wearisome and painful experience, still the exception that has to be overcome."⁷⁷ Consequently, he is incapable of discerning a nonanthropomorphic deity. It is by virtue of divine revelation that the people of Israel grasped God as an absolute nonanthropomorphic Reality, thus, breaking the grip of imagination. The people did not, could not, ascend to God. At that stage of human consciousness God, as an absolute nonanthropomorphic Supreme Reality, is nonexistent, as color to the blind and sound to the deaf. Rather, He "came down" to Mount Sinai before "the eyes of all the people" (Ex 19:11, 20).⁷⁸ The true miracle was not the awesome "voices and lightning" at Sinai but the fact that the people perceived them as indices of a nonanthropomorphic Supreme Reality, thus, effecting a quantum jump from mythical to rational thinking.

The concept of God in Jewish tradition elucidates the function of the Theophany at Sinai. The Scripture and rabbis distinguish between the concept of God as Elohim and the concept of God as represented by the

Tetragrammaton YHWH. The Scripture uses Elohim when referring to God as relating to a specific physical or social order. It may be inferred through reasoning upon realizing the harmony and arrangement prevalent in the universe. YHWH designates God in reference to something unique and individual, transcending the general order of things.⁷⁹ It cannot be inferred by means of analytical reasoning, but only through revelation. Because Elohim is only inferred, knowledge of His existence is not free from uncertainty. The only possibility of 'certainty' (*yaqin*) is when God is perceived directly by means of revelation. In such a case He would be perceived as YHWH, as with Job. At the beginning he knew God only through tradition (*taqlid*). Later, upon experiencing the majesty of YHWH directly, he gained certainty (*yaqin*), recanted his previous criticism, and confessed.⁸⁰ The Rabbanites (in opposition to the Karaites) maintained that knowledge of YHWH is "intuitive" to the Jewish people. This intuition is not an anthropological development but the effect of a specific historical event—the Theophany at Sinai. Thus, it is the exclusive patrimony of the people of Israel. From this perspective the difference between Elohim/YHWH is methodological: one is inferred indirectly by analytical means; the other is apprehended directly by revelation. The methodology will determine whether God appears as engaged in the general and universal or in the personal and individual. There is a radical difference between the perception of Elohim and YHYH: perception of Elohim cannot be free of doubts, he who is privy to YHWH is absolutely certain (*yaqin*).⁸¹

The purpose of the Sinaitic revelation was to have the Jewish people 'reach certainty' (*al-yaqin*) of YHWH's existence and His oneness through 'direct experience' (*bi-al- mushahada*).⁸² Some rabbis maintained that the people heard all the ten commandments directly from God, others that they only heard the first two. Maimonides regarded the second view as more authoritative.⁸³ On this basis he distinguished between the first two commandments, which are described as "rational" since they could be fully grasped by reason, and the other commandments, which are "conventional." The sequence rational commandments → conventional commandments is essential for the prophetic process. Otherwise, the relation imagination → reason, peculiar to pagan thinking, would prevail.⁸⁴ Because of their essential rationality, only the first two commandments were directly heard by every Israelite. In this manner the existence and oneness of YHWH were directly grasped by all.⁸⁵ Although they are two different commandments, they were issued in a single voice.

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[W]hat ensues from the Scripture and the words of the sages is the following: the congregation of Israel did not hear at that standing [at Sinai] except one single voice, only once. From that voice Moses and all Israel perceived, "I am [the Lord who took you from Egypt]" and "There should not be [for you any other deities before me]" (Ex 20:2-3). . . . And they [the rabbis] explained that they [the people at Sinai] did not hear another voice from God.⁸⁶

These commandments are intimately related to one another. The second commandment constitutes a repudiation of polytheism and the very foundations of mythical thinking. For the Scriptures and the rabbis mythical thinking is not peripheral to polytheism: it is the method by which polytheism is established.⁸⁷ As was brilliantly expressed by Cassirer:

In the multiplicity of his gods man does not merely behold the outward diversity of natural objects and forces but also perceives himself in the concrete diversity and distinction of his functions. The countless gods he makes for himself guide him not only through the sphere of objective reality and change but above all through the sphere of his own will and accomplishment, which they illuminate from within. He becomes aware of the trend peculiar to each concrete activity only by viewing it objectively in the image of the special god belonging to it. Action is differentiated into distinct independent functions not through abstracts, discursive concept formation but by the contrary process, wherein each of these functions is apprehended as an intuitive whole and embodied in an independent mythical figure.⁸⁸

Polytheism and monotheism do not represent different modalities striving to express the same Supreme Being. Rather they constitute two different patterns of mental perception: the second commandment is a repudiation of both polytheism and mythical thinking.

To apprehend the existence of YHWH is necessary to cast off mythical thinking: to cast off mystical thinking it is necessary to apprehend the existence of YHWH. Hence, the first and second commandments were