



LECTURE #12:
GOD'S KNOWLEDGE AND PROVIDENCE
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GOD'S KNOWLEDGE AND PROVIDENCE

1. The Development of Job
2. Split Personality – Perfecting the Body and Perfecting the Soul
3. Unity as an Ideal – Moses and the Patriarchs
4. From Moses until Moses

We demonstrated in the previous lecture how God's providence over man is executed primarily by way of his intellect. Scientific knowledge helps a person confront the evils of nature, political legislation helps him deal with the evils brought upon him by his fellow man, and character improvement helps him contend with the evils brought upon him by himself.

The *mitzvot* of the Torah relate to the evils caused by man, both those that a person causes his fellow, as well as those that he causes himself. According to Maimonides, however, the prevention of these two types of evil characterizes only one of the Torah's objectives. As we saw in Lecture no. 3, the Torah directs man to the perfection of his body and the perfection of his soul. Perfecting the social system and perfecting the character of its individual members both fall into the category of perfecting the body. Can Maimonides include the objective of perfecting the soul in his concept of providence?

In this lecture, we will try to show that a higher level of providence, which also depends upon a person's intellectual level, is in its essence connected to the perfection of the soul. As we have explained in the past, perfection of the soul involves perfection of the intellect. The ultimate objective of the Torah is the perfection of man's intellect that will allow him to achieve an intellectual apprehension of God. The primary claim, the truth of which we will attempt to establish in this lecture, is that knowledge of God leads to the highest level of individual providence.

JOB'S ANSWER

As we mentioned in the previous lecture, Maimonides understands that the book of Job deals with the issue of providence. He draws a correlation between the various positions regarding providence and the various characters in the book. According to Maimonides, Job himself first represents the view of Aristotle, but following God's revelation in the tempest, he changes his fundamental position and reaches a true understanding of providence.

Aristotle was of the opinion that Divine providence extends only to the species, but not to individuals, both in the case of animals and in the case of human beings. This was also Job's initial position:

Job's opinion on this is that this happening proves that the righteous man and the wicked are regarded as equal by Him, may He be exalted, because of His contempt for the human species and abandonment of it. This is what he says in all his speeches: "It is all one - therefore I say, He destroys the innocent and the wicked. If the flood slay suddenly, He will mock at the calamity of the guiltless" (Job 9:22-23). He says thus that if a torrent comes suddenly killing all those it meets and sweeping them away, He laughs at the calamity of the innocent."¹

It was for this reason that the Sages said: "May there be dust on the mouth of Job" (*Bava Batra* 16a), he having said things that one is forbidden to say. The Rabbis added, however, that "a man is not to be blamed for [what he does when] suffering" (*Bava Batra* 16b), and therefore, "he was excused because of his great sufferings" (*ibid.*)² Maimonides does not accept this explanation as the plain meaning of the biblical text. He agrees that Job erred at first in his understanding of Divine providence, but the reason that he was pardoned is that he retracted that understanding in the wake of God's revelation.

This view was such as arises at the first reflection³ and in the beginning thereof, especially in the case of one whom misfortunes have befallen, while he knows of himself that he had not sinned – which is not denied by anyone. For this reason this opinion is ascribed to Job. However, the latter said all that he did say as long as he had no true knowledge and knew the deity only because of his acceptance

¹ *Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 23.

² *Guide*, *ibid.*

³ I.e., Aristotle's view that Divine providence does not extend over individual human beings.

of authority, just as the multitude adhering to a Law know it. But when he knew God with a certain knowledge, he admitted that true happiness, which is the knowledge of the deity, is guaranteed to all who know Him and that a human being cannot be troubled in it by any of all the misfortunes in question.

The change that Job experienced relates to his knowledge of God. Maimonides is precise in his reading of the opening verses of the scriptural book, which describes Job as "perfect and upright, and one who feared God, and turned away from evil." No reference is made there to his wisdom. The significance of this argument is now clear; Job was not a wise man at this stage, for he knew God only by way of accepted authority. **Maimonides interprets God's revelation in the tempest as true knowledge of God, that is, personal knowledge, one that is not dependent upon what another person said.** When Job attained personal knowledge of God, and with it also certainty, his understanding of providence changed.

We must be precise about the change in Job's understanding that came in the wake of his true knowledge of God. Maimonides notes that after having acquired this knowledge, "he admitted that true happiness, which is the knowledge of the deity, is guaranteed to all who know Him." This means that the knowledge of God itself grants a person happiness. The knowledge of God does not exhaust itself with **the contents** of this knowledge; it is accompanied by a feeling of happiness, which Maimonides calls "true happiness." The significance of this idea is that the reward for knowing God is hidden in that knowledge itself; the very knowledge of God grants a person happiness.

This feeling of happiness is accompanied by another consequence. "A human being cannot be troubled in it by any of all the misfortunes in question." Because of the intensity of the happiness, all the misfortunes that befall a person over the course of his lifetime fail to undermine or sully that happiness. True knowledge of God and the happiness that accompanies it make a person immune to the **pain and suffering** caused by the misfortunes of the world. Let us be precise. **Maimonides is not saying that in the wake of this knowledge a person will not suffer such misfortunes.** Just the opposite is true. He implies that then as well a person is afflicted by such misfortunes. But there is a difference in his attitude to these misfortunes. All the afflictions that befall a person will not succeed in sullying the true happiness that he has acquired through the knowledge of God.

While he had known God only through the traditional stories and not by the way of speculation, Job had imagined that the things thought to be happiness, such as

health, wealth, and children, are the ultimate goal. For this reason he fell into such perplexity and said such things as he did.

Man's knowledge of God changes his perception of happiness. In general, man associates happiness with good health, wealth and children. Job suffered in all three areas; his property went up in flames, his children died, and he was afflicted with boils. A person perceives happiness in different ways, depending on his personality's center of gravity. When a person's basic outlook is intimately connected to mundane life, he imagines happiness in a pastoral manner as harmony between the various components of which this realm is comprised. Thus, good health, wealth and children are significant elements in his perception of happiness.

Already in his introduction to chapter *Chelek*, Maimonides categorizes "the men of Torah" according to their views regarding reward for the performance of *mitzvot*. The various perceptions regarding reward of the five groups described there reflect the different desires of their members. A person who delights in eating will find it difficult to imagine the Garden of Eden without sumptuous meals. Share with me your idea of happiness, and I will tell you who you are. Man's life in this world does not allow him to perceive of happiness detached from the mundane matters that bring him pleasure and delight.

When Job first encounters God, that is, when he first achieves direct and unmediated knowledge of God, his perception of happiness immediately changes. Now he knows that true happiness is hidden in the knowledge of God, and not in any of the elements of this world, not even his physical health or the lives of his children.

This is the meaning of what Job says: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see You. Wherefore I abhor, and repent over dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).

According to the context, Job appears to be saying: "Wherefore I abhor" – all that I had desired. "And repent over [being in] dust and ashes," as was stated earlier: "And he sat down among the ashes" (Job 2:8). And because of this last statement, which indicates correct understanding, God says in the next verse: "For you have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, like My servant Job" (Job 42:7).

Job appears as one who is sitting among ashes in order to alleviate the pain caused by his boils, and while scratching himself, he finds consolation and makes peace with his situation. Job's insufferable physical condition does not spoil the happiness that his

knowledge of God has granted him. Previously, he had known God with knowledge that parallels hearsay, knowledge based on tradition, and now when he knows God with knowledge that parallels unmediated vision, all his physical suffering becomes as naught in his eyes. Job's body is severed from his soul; while his body suffers, his soul delights in the knowledge of God.

SPLIT PERSONALITY – PERFECTING THE BODY AND PERFECTING THE SOUL

Is Maimonides directing us toward total contempt for physical life? Is he preaching severance from all mundane endeavors? We have seen previously that the Torah does not disregard perfection of the body with all its various elements. Moreover, the prophet himself was sent back down into this world after having climbed up and achieved comprehension of God. How can we resolve this tension in Maimonides's thought?

In his *Guide* (III, 51), Maimonides adds a long comment, the purpose of which is to guide the reader who has achieved **knowledge** of God how to perfect himself in his intellectual **service** of God. In this service, a person does not aspire to additional content and knowledge, but rather he tries to hold onto and remain firm in the knowledge that he has already acquired. This service may be viewed as intellectual meditation, in which a person empties himself of all his other thoughts and exerts himself to apprehend God in his mind and remain constant in that apprehension. This service is not at all easy; a person must first train himself in removing the thoughts and musings that flood his consciousness, and only after years of such training can he reach the next stage and try to maintain positive cognition of his apprehension of God.

Maimonides presents the *mitzvot* that accompany a person over the course of his life (prayer, reading of *Shema*, reading the Torah, blessings) as *mitzvot* the objective of which is daily training in concentrating his thoughts. Over the course of many years of such training, two separate realms of a person's life are created.

If while performing these acts of worship, you are free from distraction and not engaged in thinking upon any of the things pertaining to this world, cause your soul, - after this has been achieved – to occupy your thought with things necessary for you or superfluous in your life, and in general with worldly things, while you eat or drink or bathe or talk with your wife and your small children, or while you talk with the common run of the people. Thus I have provided you

with many and long stretches of time in which you can think all that needs thinking regarding property, the governance of the household, and the welfare of the body. On the other hand, while performing the actions imposed by the Law, you should occupy your thought only with what you are doing, just as we have explained. When, however, you are alone with yourself and no one else is there and while you lie awake upon your bed, you should take great care during these precious times not to set your thought to work on anything other than that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence in that true reality that I have made known to you and not by way of affections of the imagination. In my opinion this end can be achieved by those of **the men of knowledge** who have rendered their souls worthy of it by training of this kind.⁴

Thus, a person splits his life into two. In one part, he empties his mind of all worldly things, while in the other part, he engages in the affairs of this world. Maimonides notes that this is the objective of one who has reached the level of **men of knowledge**. Perfection of the body is totally separate from perfection of the soul. Maimonides immediately continues, however, and points to an even higher level, one that he attributes to Moses and to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And there may be a human individual who, through his apprehension of the true realities and his **joy** in what he has apprehended, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities **while** his intellect is wholly turned toward Him, may He be exalted, while outwardly he is with people, in the sort of way described by the poetical parables that have been invented for these notions: "I sleep, but my heart is awake; it is the voice of my beloved that knocks, and so on" (Song of Songs 5:2). I do not say that this rank is that of all the prophets; but I do say that this is the rank of Moses our Master... This was the rank of the Patriarchs...⁵

At this level, while a person is involved in the affairs of this world, he is connected in his thought to the apprehension of God. As opposed to the man of knowledge who must divide his time between the two realms, Moses and the Patriarchs, who reached the climax of **prophecy**, succeed at one and the same time to engage in both this-worldly affairs and also

⁴ *Guide*, III, 51.

⁵ *Guide*, *ibid.*

the apprehension of God. Here too the difference between the wise man and the prophet with respect to their respective relationships to their physical lives is evident.

It would, however, seem from the words of Maimonides that even at this level the personality of the prophet is split. While it is true that two things are occurring side by side, there is no true connection between the one and the other. This level is therefore described as "I sleep, but my heart is awake," that is to say, a person's body sleeps in relation to God, while his heart alone is awake and cleaving to Him. There is no true unity of body and soul. Later, Maimonides says that Moses and the Patriarchs "performed these actions **with their limbs only**, while **their intellects** were constantly in His presence, may He be exalted." Is this the ultimate possible connection between the body and the mind that apprehends God?

UNITY AS AN IDEAL – MOSES AND THE PATRIARCHS

In the continuation, a different idea creeps into Maimonides's words, testifying to the **connection** that existed between the physical actions of the Patriarchs in their daily lives and their souls that remained conjoined to God.

It also seems to me that the fact that these four were in a permanent state of extreme perfection in the eyes of God, and that His providence watched over them continually even while they were engaged in increasing their fortune – I mean while they tended their cattle, did agricultural work, and governed their household – was necessarily brought about by the circumstance that in all these actions **their end** was to come near to Him, may He be exalted; and how near! For **the end** of their efforts during their life was to bring into being a religious community that would know and worship God. "For I have known him, to the end that he may command, and so on" (Genesis 18:19). Thus it has become clear to you that **the end** of all their efforts was to spread the doctrine of the unity of the Name in the world and to guide people to love Him, may He be exalted. Therefore this rank befitted them, **for these actions were pure worship of great import. This rank is not a rank that, with a view to the attainment of which, someone like myself may aspire for guidance.**

According to Maimonides, even occupation in tending cattle, tilling the soil, governing one's household and other worldly pursuits can be included in "pure worship of great import." What turns these mundane activities into Divine service is the end for the sake of which they are performed. Since Moses and the Patriarchs intended in all their actions to

create a nation that knows God and serves Him, and because their entire objective was to spread the unity of the Name of God in the world, all of their actions could be classified as Divine worship. Furthermore, since this was their end, their minds were never cut off from cleaving to the knowledge of God. Action that has such a purpose creates the required continuity between material activities and God. The soul's transcendence from the body is not absolute. There is no absolute severance between worldly affairs and apprehension of God. **The purpose** is what bridges the gap that is so difficult to span between the sacred and the profane.

It seems that here too Maimonides opens a window to help us understand God's relationship to the world. Whatever Moses and the Patriarchs could do, certainly God is capable of doing. God's absolute separateness from the world finds a pathway of connection through the objective of the world. Even in the material world one can point to God as the ultimate objective, this being the justification for the existence of base matter. Even in the material world one can know God. For most people, this knowledge requires a severance between mind and body, but select individuals succeed in lighting the darkness of matter and even turning the occupation in it into pure Divine worship.

FROM MOSES TO MOSES

Not even Maimonides had the pretension that he had achieved this level; he humbly states that "this rank is not a rank that, with a view to the attainment of which, someone like myself may aspire for guidance." The connection between body and mind remains an ideal that only Moses and the Patriarchs succeeded in actualizing in their lifetimes. The rest of mankind can only reach the level at which true Divine worship takes place in the confines of a particular realm in their lives and at particular times. This, indeed, is the way Maimonides describes the various levels of people in his introduction to the *Guide*.⁶

Sometimes truth flashes out to us so that we think that it is day, and then **matter and habit** in their various forms conceal it so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first. We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes **time and time again**.

Among us there is one for whom the lightning **flashes time and time again**, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day.

⁶ We already cited a section of this passage in Lecture no. 6 in our discussion regarding the prophetic powers of Maimonides.

That is the degree of the great one among the prophets, to whom it was said: "But as for you, stand you here by Me" (Deuteronomy 5:28), and of whom it was said: "That the skin of his face sent forth beams, and so on" (Exodus 34:29).

Among them there is one to whom the lightning flashes **only once** in the whole of his night; that is the rank of those of whom it is said: "They prophesied, but they did so no more" (Numbers 11:25).

There are others between whose lightning flashes there are greater or shorter intervals.

Thereafter comes he who does not attain a degree in which his darkness is illumined by any lightning flash. It is illumined, however, by a polished body or something of that kind, stones or something else that give light in the darkness of the night. And even this small light that shines over us is not always there, but flashes and is hidden again, as if it were the flaming sword which turned every way" (Genesis 3:24). It is in accord with these states that the degrees of the perfect vary.

Man's materiality and his habits prevent him from remaining constant in his knowledge of God. Even with respect to Moses, it was separate flashes of lightening, one following the other in close succession that created the unceasing light that he saw. Job did not exist in history; he is merely a parable, a parable for those moments that a person merits to apprehend God, so that even when he sits among the ashes, he does not experience affliction. It is man's fate, however, by the very fact that he is a physical creature, to suffer afflictions, and only occasionally can he raise himself to the happiness of pure apprehension of God.

In an unusual formulation that testifies to **a flash of apprehension**, Maimonides notes the insight gained from these flashes regarding providence.⁷

A most extraordinary speculation **has occurred to me just now** through which doubts may be dispelled and divine secrets revealed. We have already explained in the chapters concerning providence that providence watches over everyone endowed with intellect proportionally to the measure of his intellect. Thus providence always watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God. On the other hand, an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose thought sometimes for a certain time is emptied of God, **is watched over by providence**

⁷ *Guide*, III, 51, in the continuation of his comment.

only during the time when he thinks of God; providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied with something else. However, its withdrawal then is not like its withdrawal from those who have never had intellectual cognition. But in his case that providence merely decreases because that man of perfect apprehension has, while being occupied, no intellect in actu; but that perfect man is at such times only apprehending potentially, though close to actuality. At such times he is like a skilled scribe at the time when he is not writing... Hence it seems to me that all prophets or excellent and perfect men whom one of the evils of this world befell, had this evil happen to them during such a time of distraction, the greatness of the calamity being proportionate to the duration of the period of distraction or to the vileness of the matter with which he was occupied.

When he is actually engaged in apprehension of God, a person enjoys total providence; no evil can befall him, because at that time he is totally identified with his intellectual apprehension, so that an evil that befalls his body does not befall him at all. When, however, he returns to his body, and his person now includes his body as well, he can experience the evils that befall him. Nevertheless, he cannot be likened to one who has never apprehended God. The moments of Divine apprehension create a new world order. From now on his apprehension will cast a shadow over all the pleasures and goods of the world. Even if the person is still connected to and values the elements of this world, his attitude toward them is changed.

Maimonides, it should be remembered, mentions his great grief following the death of his brother, R. David, and his own illness that followed in the wake of the evil tiding. The evils of this world befell him, shaking him with great intensity. Nevertheless, he concludes his letter with the mention of those moments of joy during which he was able to cleave to the rational ideas: "Were it not for the **Torah** which is my **delight**, and the words of **wisdom** through which I could forget my grief, I would have perished in my affliction."