



LECTURE #6:
PROPHECY
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NATURAL PROPHECY

We saw in the previous lecture that the Law of Moses – the Divine political regimen – is rooted in prophecy and also aimed at prophecy. Owing to its Divine source, this political regimen does not exhaust itself with the ordering of social life, but rather it strives to perfect man's opinions regarding God, the climax of this knowledge of God being prophecy. The state, according to its loftiest objective as set down in the Law of Moses, is intended for nothing else but to produce prophets.

Maimonides delved deeply to grasp the essence of prophecy, and there is no doubt that his efforts to understand its profundity troubled his mind. Seventeen chapters of the *Guide* are dedicated to a discussion of the essence of prophecy (pt. III, chapters 32-48). Four of Maimonides's thirteen principles of faith (principles 6-9) relate to prophecy. So too, the last four chapters (out of ten) of the Laws of the Fundamental Principles of the Torah deal with prophecy.

Maimonides understands prophecy, not as a Jewish phenomenon, but as a **human** phenomenon. "It is one of the basic principles of religion that God inspires **men** with the prophetic spirit" (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:1). Understanding prophecy then is part of understanding man who is part of the world. Maimonides explicitly states in his *Epistle to Yemen*:

The reason we do not believe in the prophecies of Zeid and Amar is not because they are not Jewish. Many people have this erroneous idea... For Job, Elifaz, Bildad, Zofer, and Elihu received prophecy, even though they were not Jewish... A prophet is believed because of what he says, not for reasons of lineage. (*Epistle to Yemen*)

The historical fact that prophecy appeared among the people of Israel and not among the other nations is not connected to the unique innate qualities of the Jewish people (as was

argued, for example, by R. Judah Ha-Levi¹). Rather, it is explained by the fact that the Law of Moses was operative among this nation, shaping its human character in the best possible way. As we have seen, this is the primary purpose of the Torah. The influence of the Torah and its commandments advanced the people toward their human goal, namely, the recognition of God. Only from the level of this recognition is it possible to rise towards prophecy.

It clearly follows from the words of Maimonides that prophecy does not rest upon a person who has not undergone the appropriate preparations. Fundamentally, prophecy is a function of man's efforts to ascend to God. It does not suddenly descend upon a person irrespective of his level. Maimonides describes the progression towards prophecy in the continuation of *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:1:

The spirit of prophecy only rests upon the wise man who is distinguished by great wisdom and strong moral character, whose passions never overcome him in anything whatsoever, but who by his rational faculty always has his passions under control, and possesses a broad and sedate mind.

Maimonides sets wisdom and moral character as necessary conditions for prophecy; this is reminiscent of his definition of man's ultimate objective as the formation of a wise and good person.² As for moral traits, Maimonides adds the condition that the prophet's rational faculty must always keep his passions under control. A prophet's intellect cannot be weaker than the rest of his emotional faculties, i.e., his passions. In his *Guide* (II, 32), Maimonides unequivocally asserts that "with regard to one of the **ignorant** among the common people, it is impossible that [God] should turn one of them into a prophet – except as it is possible that He should turn an ass or a frog into a prophet." Wisdom is an indispensable condition for prophecy. One might ask: Surely Bileam's ass saw the angel and even spoke to Bileam! Maimonides, therefore, resolutely asserts that the story regarding Bileam's ass is a prophetic vision and not a realistic account of the actual events.³

Maimonides continues his description of a prophet's development, a process that requires profound understanding of the world and its causes, exclusive dedication to this end, and disregard for the vanities of the world:

¹ See *Kuzari*, I, 115.

² See Lecture no. 1.

³ See *Guide* II, 42: "And likewise the whole story of Bileam on the way and of the she-ass speaking; all this happened in a vision of prophecy...." See Maimonides's arguments there.

When one, abundantly endowed with these qualities and physically sound, enters the *Pardes* and continuously dwells upon those great and abstruse themes – having the right mind capable of comprehending and grasping them; sanctifying himself, withdrawing from the ways of the ordinary run of men who walk in the obscurities of the times, zealously training himself not to have a single thought of the vanities of the age and its intrigues, but keeping his mind disengaged, concentrated on higher things as though bound beneath the Celestial Throne, so as to comprehend the pure and holy forms and contemplating the wisdom of God as displayed in His creatures from the first form to the very center of the Earth, learning thence to realize His greatness... -

The result of this activity is sharply formulated: "On such a man the Holy Spirit will **immediately** descend." This seems to imply that the aforementioned process, when indeed executed, **necessarily** leads a person to the level of prophecy. Prophecy is not only a universal human phenomenon; it is **a natural phenomenon**. Any person having the right qualities and skills, who directs his efforts at this end, will presumably attain prophecy.

On such a person the Holy Spirit will **immediately** descend. And when the spirit rests upon him, his soul will mingle with the angels called *Ishim*. He will be changed into another man and will realize that he is not the same as he had been, and has been exalted above other wise men, even as it is said of Saul: "And you shall prophesy with them, and shall be turned into another man" (I Samuel 10:6).

It follows also from the *Guide* (II, 32), according to "the opinion of our Law," that prophecy is "**a certain perfection in the nature of man**," that is, a natural state acquired in the wake of appropriate personality traits and following extensive efforts and protracted training. Maimonides, however, adds a condition: "It may happen that one who is fit for prophecy and prepared for it should not become a prophet, namely, on account of the Divine will." Maimonides also notes in his *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:5): "Those who sought the prophetic gift were called Sons of the Prophets. Although they concentrated their minds, the Divine Spirit might or might not rest upon them." In the *Guide*, Maimonides clarifies that this withholding of prophecy is **similar to a miracle**. That is to say, according to the natural order of the world, one whose moral traits and efforts render him fit for prophecy will indeed prophesy. Exceptionally unusual situations are, however, possible, in which God will withhold prophecy from him, "like one who has been prevented, like Jeroboam, from moving his hand." Moving the hand is an absolutely natural process, and so too is the attainment of prophecy. But just as God intervened and caused Jeroboam's hand to dry up, so

too is it possible for God to intervene and prevent a person from attaining prophecy. This means that the process of elevating oneself towards prophecy is natural, while the prevention of prophecy is considered a miracle.

Why does God withhold prophecy from one who is fit to receive the Holy Spirit? It is difficult to come up with a good reason. In light of the fact that Maimonides reduces the frequency of miracles, it follows then that he is saying that while the withholding of prophecy from one who is fit for it is possible, this not being in the category of the impossible, it is not very likely. Maimonides does, however, bring an example of such a phenomenon, noting that Baruch the son of Neriah, disciple of the prophet Jeremiah, aspired to prophecy and expected to achieve it, but failed to do so: "I am weary in my sighing, and I find no rest" (Jeremiah 45:3).

DID MAIMONIDES BELIEVE THAT HE ATTAINED PROPHECY?

In light of his understanding of prophecy as a necessary consequence of human effort, Maimonides undoubtedly yearned to attain it, for it is the ultimate objective of man's life. Maimonides's formulation at the end of the Book of Agriculture (*Hilkhot Shemitah ve-Yovel* 13:13), which comes to describe the man of virtue, more than anything else testifies about the author himself:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but also each and every individual **of those who come into the world**, whose spirit moves him and whose knowledge gives him understanding to set himself apart in order to stand before the Lord, to serve Him, to worship Him, and to know Him, who walks upright as God had made him to do, and releases his neck from the yoke of the many speculations that the children of man are wont to pursue – such an individual is consecrated to the Holy of Holies, and his portion and inheritance shall be in the Lord forever and evermore. The Lord will grant him in this world whatsoever is sufficient for him, the same as He had granted to the priests and to the Levites. Thus indeed did David, may he rest in peace, say: "O Lord, the portion of my inheritance and of my cup, You maintain my lot" (Psalms 16:5).

Without a doubt, Maimonides's spirit moved him, and his knowledge gave him the understanding to set himself apart in order to stand before the Lord, to serve Him, to worship Him, and to know Him. He too released his neck from the yoke of the many speculations that the children of man are wont to pursue. These are the very things noted in his description of the prophet, who withdraws "from the ways of the ordinary run of men who walk in the

obscurities of the times," from "the vanities of the age and its intrigues." And he too dedicated his entire self to this objective, "concentrating his mind always on higher things." Did Maimonides, as a result of his efforts, attain prophecy? Or perhaps God withheld prophecy from him as He withheld it from Baruch the son of Neriah, by way of miraculous intervention? Or perhaps he did not attain the prophetic spirit because "languor or sadness" rested upon him? For in the exile he was "a thrall slave in bondage to the ignorant who commit great sins and in whom the privation of true reason is united to the perfection of the lusts of the beasts,"⁴ and "the spirit of prophecy does not descend upon one who is sad or indolent, but comes as a result of joyousness!"⁵

Various passages in Maimonides's writings intimate that he believed that he did indeed attain prophecy.⁶ In certain places he provides a precise description of the manner in which prophecy descends upon a person, speaking in first person: "But 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."⁷ In the introduction to his interpretation of *ma'aseh merkavah*,⁸ he notes that he did not receive his explanation from a teacher; rather, it comes from his own study as a result of "guided reflection and **Divine** aid." In his commentary to the book of Job, Maimonides writes that his notions came to him "through something similar to prophetic revelation."⁹

In the correspondence between Maimonides and his disciple Ibn Vaknin, we find the disciple beseeching his master to reveal secrets to him that will allow him to attain prophecy. Maimonides in his *Epistle to Yemen* records a family tradition that in the year 4970 to the creation (1210 C.E.) prophecy will be restored to Israel. As we mentioned in our second lecture, Maimonides was born in 1138.¹⁰

⁴ *Guide* II, 36.

⁵ *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:4.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "*Ha-He'emin ha-Rambam she-Zakhah li-Nevu'ah*," *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1946), heb. Section, pp. 159-188. The examples cited below are taken from his article.

⁷ Introduction to the first part of the *Guide*. See also commentary of Abarbanel, who asks: "Is the master speaking of himself, when he is not a prophet?"

⁸ Introduction to the third part of the *Guide*.

⁹ *Guide* III, 22.

¹⁰ See Heschel, *ibid.*, p. 182.

These citations do not unequivocally answer our question whether or not Maimonides believed that he had attained prophecy. It seems clear, however, that He aspired to its attainment, and that he viewed his entire life's enterprise as a continuation of the missions of the two great prophets who arose in Israel, Abraham and Moses. We have already mentioned that Maimonides opened every book with the statement incorporating Abraham's call, "In the name of the Lord, God of the world," in recognition of the fact that his own work was a direct continuation of that call.

The title that Maimonides gave to his halakhic code, *Mishneh Torah*, certainly brings to mind the book of Deuteronomy (which also goes by that name), which could more precisely be called the "Law of Moses," for in it Moses speaks in first person and reviews the entire Torah. Moreover, the *Mishneh Torah's* relationship to the book of Deuteronomy is clearly evident in the fact that it opens with the *mitzvot* with which Deuteronomy opens, and which are taken from there. The knowledge, love and fear of God, and walking in His ways, are the *mitzvot* with which both the book of Deuteronomy and the *Mishneh Torah* open. In our discussion below regarding the imaginative faculty's role in prophecy we shall consider additional evidence concerning Maimonides's prophetic awareness.

PERFECTION OF THE IMAGINATIVE FACULTY AS A CONDITION FOR PROPHECY

In his discussion regarding the traits that make a person fit for prophecy, Maimonides inserts a condition that at first glance seems surprising: A prophet must be "physically sound." What does this mean, and why should wholeness of body be a condition for the attainment of the prophetic spirit? This formulation conceals one of the most important characteristics of prophecy, according to Maimonides. A fundamental condition for attaining prophecy is **the perfection of the imaginative faculty**. The imagination is a **physical** faculty, and the expression "physically sound" seems to allude to the perfection of the imaginative faculty, without which prophecy is impossible, according to Maimonides. As opposed to a person's intellect and moral traits that allow for development over the course of his life, the imagination is a faculty that is fixed in a person from the moment he is born, and does not allow for later correction.

Now you know that the perfection of the bodily faculties, to which the imaginative faculty belongs, is consequent upon the best possible **temperament**, the best possible **size**, and the purest possible **matter**, of the part of the body that is the substratum for the faculty in question. It is not a thing whose lack could be made good or whose deficiency could be remedied in any way by means of a regimen. For with regard to a

part of the body whose temperament was bad in the original natural disposition, the utmost that the corrective regimen can achieve is to keep it in some sort of health; it cannot restore it to its best possible condition. If, however, its defect derives from its size, position, or substance, I mean the substance of the matter from which it is generated, there is no device that can help.¹¹

The imaginative faculty depends upon a person's material composition. The temperament, size, and quality of the matter of which a person is composed, determine whether his physical faculties will be able to find expression. The prophet's physical soundness is a necessary condition for his ability to prophesy, because his imaginative faculty depends upon that soundness. Prophecy, therefore, depends not only on effort and dedication, but also on natural givens without which a person cannot attain prophecy. This is how Maimonides understands the verse in Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you; and before you came out of the womb I sanctified you." This verse does not mean to say that a child who has not yet reached intellectual perfection can nevertheless prophesy, and it is not speaking of Jeremiah alone: "For this is the state of **every** prophet; he must have a natural preparedness in his original natural disposition."¹² This preparedness refers to the physical soundness with which the prophet is born. There are certain necessary genetic characteristics that are conditions for prophecy, conditions that are meant first and foremost to allow the most developed imaginative faculty.

What is the imaginative faculty?

You know, too, the **actions** of the imaginative faculty that are in its nature, such as **retaining things perceived by the senses, combining these things, and imitating them**. And you know that its greatest and noblest action takes place only when the senses rest and do not perform their actions.¹³

The imaginative faculty operates in various ways. First, it preserves the quality of the things perceived by the senses. Colors, sounds, smells and the like can be impressed in a person's memory even after they cease to act upon the senses. In accordance with the intensity of a person's imagination, he can see colors and hear sounds as if they were actually before him. Since, however, the memories of sense perceptions generally recede and slowly turn into

¹¹ *Guide II*, 36.

¹² *Guide II*, 32.

¹³ *Guide II*, 36.

weak reflections of the world, new combinations of these reflections also come into being. This is the way the imagination creates monsters that have no parallel in the real world. A person who once saw a horse and an eagle, can draw in his imagination a monster that looks like a horse with huge wings.

When a person is awake, his senses which take in the external world greatly influence him, and therefore his imaginative faculty is weak. While he is sleeping, however, and his senses do not operate, the imaginative faculty is free to act, and it creates all kinds of imaginary creatures and twisted plots, known to us as dreams. The great danger posed by the imaginative faculty is that a person is sometimes tempted to think that these imaginary creatures are real. The imagination's influence upon a person can cause him to veer from the truth, and the stronger a person's imagination the more likely he is to come to the conclusion that his fantasies have substance.

In the case of a prophet, however, the process is just the reverse. The prophet's imagination does not preserve the data reaching it from the senses, but rather data coming from the intellect. In the *Guide* (II, 36), Maimonides defines the essence of prophecy as follows:

Know that the true reality and essence of prophecy consist in its being an overflow overflowing from God, may He be cherished and honored, through the intermediation of the active intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward **the imaginative faculty**.

This overflow is a parable for the spiritual-intellectual force that flows from God.¹⁴ According to the medieval understanding of existence, which Maimonides fully ascribed to, between God and the material world there are matter-less intellectual beings ("separate intellects") at different levels, each one influencing in some way the natural order of the material world. The active intellect refers to the lowest intellectual being that influences our sublunar world. This entity may be viewed as the supreme law of nature in our world. It is by way of this intellectual entity that the Divine overflow rests upon the prophet, that is to say, there is an intellectual path that starts with God, passes through the separate intellects, and ends in the prophet's intellect.

¹⁴ See *Guide* II, 12.

Maimonides, however, emphasizes that this overflow rests **first** on the intellect and only **afterwards** on the imagination. He means to say that the intellectual understanding in the mind of the prophet in the form of **concepts** is then translated in the prophet's imagination into sensible **images**. This may be viewed as a transition from the mind to the imagination, between which there are laws of transformation that create a correspondence between the concepts and the images.

Why does the prophet need the imagination, which is in essence a physical faculty? Why can't prophecy suffice with intellectual comprehension? Here lies one of the most important keys to the understanding of the role of prophecy. We shall analyze this role in our next lecture.