



LECTURE #4:
ABRAHAM VERSUS MOSES
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We have previously raised the question: Why didn't Moses write a book of philosophy or a text on religious thought, the study of such topics being the ultimate objective of man? And furthermore, why did he go into such minute detail about the practical *mitzvot* related to the perfection of man's body, while the *mitzvot* related to the perfection of the human soul and the knowledge of God he wrote about in great generality? We must also deal with the parallel difficulty – why did Maimonides devote the greater part of his life to the practical *mitzvot*, and not the realms of the intellect and the knowledge of God?

In order to understand this matter, it should be noted that in the early days of the Jewish people a prophetic attempt was in fact made to guide man to his human objective, namely, the comprehension of God, **by way of study and contemplation alone**, rather than through the practical *mitzvot*. Maimonides attributes this attempt to **the patriarch Abraham**. In the *Guide of the Perplexed* (II, 39), Maimonides describes the prophetic activities of Abraham, in the context of his account of the activities of the prophets who preceded Moses.

He who received a great overflow, as for instance **Abraham**, assembled the people and called them by the way of teaching and instruction to adhere to the truth that he had grasped. Thus Abraham taught the people and explained to them by means of **speculative proofs** that the world has but one deity, that He has created all the things that are other than Himself, and that none of the forms and no created thing in general ought to be worshipped. This is what he instructed the people in, attracting them by means of eloquent speeches and by means of the benefits he conferred upon them. **But he never said: "God has sent me to you and has given me commandments and prohibitions."**

According to this description, Abraham acted as an **educator** and teacher, making use of intellectual proofs to demonstrate the existence of God and His being the Creator of all things. He also employed rhetorical devices to persuade others to accept what he had to say, but he

never acted as a **lawgiver**. Thus, Abraham's primary prophetic activity, in contrast to that of Moses and that of Maimonides, was to teach his fellow men and educate them. Later in the same passage, Maimonides notes that even the *mitzvah* of circumcision that had been given to Abraham, was not transmitted by him to the members of his household as a Divine commandment, but as a father's testament to his children and a family legacy.

ABRAHAM'S PLACE IN MAIMONIDES'S THOUGHT

There is no question that Maimonides greatly revered the patriarch Abraham, seeing him as the **second** most perfect human being in human history, after Moses. It may even be that, owing to the great admiration in which he held Abraham, Maimonides named his own son after the patriarch. In the genealogical list found at the end of his *Commentary to the Mishnah*, we do not find that any of his forbears were named Abraham, and so it may be surmised that he named his son after the patriarch.¹ (Obviously, he could not name him Moses, even though he admired Moses more than anyone else, for he himself bore that name.)

In his *Guide* (III, 51), Maimonides groups the three patriarchs together with Moses. The four achieved continuous comprehension of God, remaining in that state even while they engaged in their material pursuits and human necessities. Maimonides adds that "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." Historically speaking, Abraham was the first human being to reach this level.

Maimonides opens all his books² with the words, "In the name of the Lord, God of the world." This heading is taken from the words of the Abraham, about whom it was said: "And he called there in the name of the Lord, God of the world" (Genesis 21:33). In this way, Maimonides intimates that his entire literary oeuvre is but a continuation of Abraham's calling.³ In his *Guide* (III, 29), Maimonides explains the content of this calling. Abraham

¹ "I, Moses the son of R. Maimon the *dayyan*, son of R. Joseph the *chakham*, son of R. Isaac the *dayyan*, son of R. Joseph the *dayyan*, son of R. Ovadiah the *dayyan*, son of R. Solomon the *rav*, son of R. Ovadiah the *dayyan*, may the memory of the holy be blessed." We see from this list that there existed a certain tradition to name a child after his grandfather (Joseph, Ovadiah), though already Maimonides's father did not name his son after the latter's grandfather.

² See R. Saul Lieberman, *Hilkhot ha-Yerushalmi*, p. 5, note 7.

³ R. Kafih, at the beginning of his translation.

recognized that God "is neither a body nor a force in a body." Rather, He is separate from the material world, and in no way is He limited by it. This idea stands in sharp contrast to the idolatrous outlooks that were prevalent in his day. Abraham publicized his belief by calling out "in the name of the Lord," explaining that He is "the God of the world," i.e., a spiritual entity entirely set apart from the matter that He created.

ABRAHAM'S BATTLE WITH IDOLATRY

In the beginning of *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* in his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides surprises his reader; rather than contenting himself with an exposition of the laws of idolatry, he opens with a lengthy historical introduction, describing the history of the development of idolatry's understanding of the world. In the course of this description, significant space is given to the account of Abraham's struggles with idol worship. This description parallels Maimonides's description in his *Guide*, but also contains important additions to what is stated there.

Maimonides begins by describing the manner in which Abraham came to comprehend God. According to this description, Abraham reached this comprehension by way of philosophical speculation. Maimonides explains Abraham's proof in the *Guide* (II, 1). This is the first of four proofs, and follows Aristotle. This proof is based on the movement of the sphere and the stars, from which it follows that God must exist as the first Cause, the unmoved Mover. According to Maimonides, Abraham preceded Aristotle in positing this proof. Thus, at the age of forty – an age at which a person may recognize God intellectually (and not at the age of three, as is stated in some *midrashim*) – he recognized the truth of the unity of God. The expressions in boldface in the passage cited below clearly demonstrate that Maimonides understood that Abraham comprehended God in an intellectual manner.

After the mighty one was weaned, while still an infant, **his mind began to reflect**. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering. "How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself." **He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in anything**. He was submerged, in Ur Kasdim, among **silly** idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshipped idols, and he worshipped with them. **But his mind was busily working and reflecting** till he had attained the way of truth, apprehended **the correct line of thought and knew** that there is one God, that He guides the celestial sphere and created everything, and that among all that exist, there is no god beside Him. **He realized** that the whole

world was in error, and that what had occasioned their error was that they worshipped the stars and the images, so that the truth perished **from their minds. Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator.**

In the second stage, Abraham is described as one who would argue with his contemporaries, offering them proofs of God's existence and unity. Because of his educational activities, Abraham was persecuted by the king, who appears to have feared that the foundations of his rule would be undermined. For his kingship was based on the idolatrous notion that the king is the son of one of the gods, from whom he derives his authority. Abraham was miraculously saved, after which he set out for Charan, his new field of operations.⁴

Having attained this knowledge, he began to refute the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim, arguing with them and saying to them: "The course you are following is not the way of truth." He broke the images and began to instruct the people that it was not right to serve any one but the God of the Universe, to whom alone it was proper to bow down, offer up sacrifices and make libations, so that all human creatures might, in the future, know Him; and that it was proper to destroy and shatter all the images, so that the people might not err like these who thought that there was no god but these images. When he had prevailed over them **with arguments**, the king [of the country] sought to slay him. He was miraculously saved, and emigrated to Charan.

With respect to the verse, "And the souls that they had acquired in Charan," the *Midrash* states (*Sifrei*, Deuteronomy 32): "This teaches that the patriarch Abraham would convert them and bring them under the wings of the *Shekhinah*." Maimonides follows the *Midrash*, interpreting the conversion as Abraham's efforts to remove them from the idolatrous practices in which they had been immersed, and teach them the fundamental principle of God's unity, that "He is neither a body nor a force in a body." Maimonides adds that Abraham authored books on the topic. Thus, Abraham did indeed compose philosophical texts proving the existence of God, rather than halakhic codes or books of *mitzvot*.

⁴ This story is reminiscent of that which is related about Socrates who was sentenced to death by the authorities of Athens for having corrupted youthful souls through his contemplations and raising of doubt. Maimonides was certainly familiar with this story through the writings of Plato that had been translated into Arabic. The difference between Socrates and Abraham is that Socrates found his death by drinking the cup of hemlock, whereas Abraham was miraculously saved and thus established anew the belief in one God.

He then began to proclaim to the whole world with great power and to instruct the people that the entire universe had but one Creator and that Him it was right to worship. He went from city to city and from kingdom to kingdom, calling and gathering together the inhabitants till he arrived in the land of Canaan. There too, he proclaimed his message, as it says: "**And he called there in the name of the Lord, the God of the world**" (Genesis 21:33). When the people flocked to him and questioned him regarding his assertions, he would instruct each one according to his capacity till he had brought him to the way of truth, and thus thousands and tens of thousands joined him. These were the persons referred to in the phrase, "men of the house of Abraham." He implanted in their hearts this great doctrine, **composed books on it**, and taught it to Isaac, his son. Isaac settled down, instructing and exhorting. He imparted the doctrine to Jacob and ordained him to teach it. He, too, settled down, taught and morally strengthened all who joined him. The patriarch Jacob instructed all his sons, set apart Levi, appointed him head [teacher] and placed him in an academy to teach the way of God and keep the charge of Abraham. He charged his sons to appoint from the tribe of Levi, one instructor after another, an uninterrupted succession, so that the doctrine might not be forgotten. And so it went on with ever increasing vigor among Jacob's children and their adherents till they became a people that knew God.

Even after generations of training and study, however, Abraham's efforts to educate the members of his household and those who drew close to them almost became entirely lost. Following the Israelites' descent into Egypt, there began a process of relapse into idolatry. Idolatrous rites spread throughout almost all the people, with the exception of the tribe of Levi. It was only Moses's mission that brought about a halt in this process and a renewal of the true service of God.

When the Israelites had stayed a long while in Egypt, they relapsed, learnt the practices of their neighbors, and, like them, worshipped idols, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, which steadfastly kept the charge of the patriarch. This tribe of Levi never practiced idolatry. **The doctrine implanted by Abraham would, in a very short time, have been uprooted, and Jacob's descendants would have relapsed into the error and perversities universally prevalent.** But because of God's love for us and because He kept the oath made to our ancestor Abraham, **He appointed Moses to be our teacher and the teacher of all the prophets, and charged him with his mission.** After Moses had begun to exercise his prophetic function and Israel had been chosen

by the Almighty as His heritage, **he crowned them with precepts**, and showed them the way to worship Him and how to deal with idolatry and with those who go astray after it.

Why didn't Abraham's prophecy withstand the test of time? Maimonides seems to allude to the answer to this question when he describes the activities of Moses in a manner so entirely different than his description of the activities of Abraham. In contrast to Abraham, Moses crowned Israel with the *mitzvot*. That is to say, **in contrast to the prophecy of Abraham which was based on providing information and teaching, the prophecy of Moses was based on the practical *mitzvot*, laws and statutes.**

FROM THE PROPHECY OF ABRAHAM TO THE PROPHECY OF MOSES

As is well known, Maimonides clearly differentiates between the prophecy of Moses and the prophecy of all the other prophets. The seventh principle of the thirteen articles of faith distinguishes the prophecy of Moses from that of all the other prophets: "[Moses] was the chief of all other prophets before and after him, all of whom were his inferiors. He was the chosen one of all mankind, superior in attaining knowledge of God to any other person who ever lived or ever will live." In his *Guide* (II, 39), Maimonides explains that the most important ramification of this distinction is that until the prophecy of Moses, there arose no prophet who commanded man **to perform specific acts in the name of God**. The prophets merely **taught, preached, and tried to educate**. It was only the unique level of Moses's comprehension that brought about the giving of the Torah as a system of laws and commandments.

After we have spoken of the essence of prophecy, have made known its true reality, and have made it clear that the prophecy of Moses our Master is different from that of the others, we shall say that **the call to the Law followed necessarily from that apprehension alone**. For nothing similar to the call addressed to us by Moses our Master had been made before him by any one of those we know who lived in the time between Adam and him; nor was a call similar to that one made by one of our prophets after him. Correspondingly it is a fundamental principle of our Law that there will never be another Law. Hence, according to our opinion, there never has been a Law and there never will be a Law except the one that is the Law of Moses our Master.

The explanation of this, according to what is literally stated in the prophetic books and is found in the tradition, is as follows. Not one of the prophets – such as the Patriarchs, Shem, Eber, Noah, Methuselah, and Enoch – who came before Moses our Master, has

ever said to a class of people: "God has sent me to you and has commanded me to say to you such and such things; He has forbidden you to do such and such things and has commanded you to do such and such things."

Maimonides concludes the chapter:

Only that Law is called by us Divine Law, whereas the other **political regimens** – such as the nomoi of the Greeks and the ravings of the Sabians and of others – are due, as I have explained several times, to the action of groups of rulers who were not prophets.

We learn here an essential principle regarding the Law of Moses, that the practical nature of that Law follows from the fact that it is a political regimen. However, unlike all other political regimens which are the products of people who are not prophets but rulers, the Law of Moses is a product of his prophecy. Thus, it is a Divine Law, that is, a **Divine political regimen**. This is the fundamental difference between the prophecy of Abraham and that of Moses: **Abraham acted as a prophet-educator, whereas Moses acted as a prophet-lawgiver**. Inasmuch as Abraham's prophetic endeavors faced almost total failure, it became necessary to change the Divine manner of operation. Instead of employing educational tools and nothing else, an entire political system had to be constructed. The objective remained the same, to call in the name of the Lord, the God of the world, to teach humanity the great principle of the unity of God. The means, however, had to change. It became clear that in order to realize this objective, it was necessary to construct a system far more comprehensive than the **houses of study** for the inculcation of philosophic speculation that plants God's existence and unity in the hearts of man. An entire **state** had to be established for this purpose.

We learn from the exile in Egypt that living in a state whose rule is not based on the pursuit of the objective of God's unity will slowly lead the people who live in that state to adopt the fundamental points of view that underlie its rule. Just as Abraham was persecuted by the authorities in Ur Kasdim, so too houses of study cannot inculcate the idea of God's unity under an idolatrous regime. In order to instill this idea a state must be established that is entirely based on this idea. This is the primary novelty of the Law of God that was given to Moses. It is clear that a Law of this type cannot but relate to all the necessities of life in all their details and particulars. It must build a comprehensive system of laws, that encompass all of man's life in the framework of his political life. For this reason, the great majority of the Torah does indeed deal with the perfection of the body, that is, the perfection of the polity and

the perfection of those qualities that allow for life therein, as was explained in the previous lecture.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EXILE

In many places in his writings, Maimonides gives expression to his understanding of the destructive significance of the exile. Maimonides does not understand the essence of exile as the Jewish people's presence outside the borders of **Eretz Israel**, as it was understood by his slightly older contemporary, R. Judah Ha-Levi in his book, *The Kuzari*. As understood by Maimonides, the essence of exile lies in **the destruction of the state** and the dissolution of the regime that is capable of leading the state's inhabitants towards their ultimate objective, namely, the comprehension of God. According to Maimonides, the essence of exile is not a geographical, but rather a political matter – living in the shadow of an unfit regime.

In our first lecture, we saw how Maimonides apologizes at the end of his *Commentary to the Mishnah* for the fact that it took him seven years to complete the commentary. One of the main reasons that it took him so long was "what God decreed upon us with respect to the exile." It was also for the very same reason that Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi found it necessary to redact the Mishnah. The exile impairs study and halakhic decision-making, and makes it necessary to summarize the Halakhah in books. Another consequence of the exile was the loss of knowledge and science that the Jewish people had acquired, as Maimonides explains in the *Guide* (II, 11):

We have already explained that all⁵ these views do not contradict anything said by our prophets and the sustainers of our Law. For our community is a community that is full of knowledge and is perfect, as He, may He be exalted, has made clear through the intermediary of the Master who made us perfect, saying: "Surely, this great community is a wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 4:6). However, **when the wicked from among the ignorant communities ruined our good qualities, destroyed our words of wisdom and our compilations, and caused our men of knowledge to perish, so that we again became ignorant**, as we had been threatened because of our sins – for it says: "And the wisdom of the wise men shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent men shall be hid" (Isaiah 29:14); when, furthermore, we mingled with these communities and their opinions were taken over by us, as were their morals and actions – for just as it says regarding the similarity of actions: "They mingled

⁵ The science of astronomy.

themselves with the communities and learned their works" (Psalms 106:35), it says with regard to the adoption by us of the opinions of the ignorant: "And they please themselves in the children of strangers" (Isaiah 2:6), which is translated [into Aramaic] by Yonatan ben Uziel, peace be on him: "And they walk according to the laws of the gentiles"; when, in consequence of all this, we grew up accustomed to the opinions of the ignorant, these philosophic views appeared to be, as it were, foreign to our Law, just as they are foreign to the opinions of the ignorant. However, matters are not like this.

In his *Guide* (I, 71), Maimonides explains that the other nations' domination over the people of Israel led to the loss of the esoteric knowledge regarding *ma'aseh bereishit* and *ma'aseh merkavah*:

Know that the many sciences devoted to establishing the truth regarding these matters that have existed in our religious community have perished because of the length of the time that has passed, **because of our being dominated by the pagan nations**, and because, as we have made clear, it is not permitted to divulge these matters to all people.

The lesson learned from the Egyptian exile was reinforced in the later history of the Jewish people. In order to teach the great principle of the unity of God, we must construct a political system, all of whose laws will lead those living in that polity towards the realization of man's ultimate objective. It is for this reason that the Law of Moses is so filled with laws and details that relate to all aspects of human life.

In our next lecture, we shall deal with Maimonides's understanding of the importance of the political idea for the realization of the Torah's goals.