



"By Pharaoh's Life"
By David Silverberg

Parashat Miketz tells the dramatic story of Yosef's sudden rise to royal power in Egypt and his harsh treatment of his unsuspecting brothers, who came from their home in Canaan to purchase grain in Egypt. Maimonides does not discuss the actual narrative of Yosef and his brothers anywhere in his writings. But one very tangential detail in this story occupied Maimonides on several occasions in his works, and he seems to have afforded it extreme theological importance. This detail involves an expression Yosef uses in accusing his brothers of coming to Egypt with the intention of spying: "By Pharaoh's life – you will not leave here except with the arrival of your youngest brother here... Otherwise, by Pharaoh's life – you are spies" (42:15-16). The term *chei Pharaoh* ("by Pharaoh's life") represents a common form of an "oath" in Biblical Hebrew used to express determination and resolve. Numerous times in Tanakh we read of people who swear by a person's life to express their adamant resolve with respect to the issue at hand. (See, for example, Shemuel I 1:26; Shemuel I 17:5.) Generally, the reference is to the life of someone whom the person uttering this "oath" holds in high esteem. Naturally, then, Yosef, the Egyptian viceroy, would swear by the life of his superior, Pharaoh.

Chei Pharaoh, Chai Hashem

Maimonides detected a subtle modification of this expression when it is used in reference to God. In the Book of Rut (3:13), for example, Boaz promises Rut that he would marry her and reclaim her father-in-law's estate, and adds, "*Chai Hashem*" – which we would seemingly translate as, "By God's life." When invoking "God's life," rather than the life of another human being, the Hebrew word employed is *chai*, rather than *chei*. This difference is manifest very clearly in the Book of Melakhim II (4:30), where the Shunamite woman says to the prophet Elisha after the death of her son, "*Chai Hashem ve-chei nafshekha im e'ezvekha*" – "By God's life and the life of you soul, I am not leaving you." Even in the same verse, the word *chai* is used in reference to the Almighty, whereas *chei* appears in connection with a human being's life.

Before we discuss Maimonides' theory in explaining this distinction, let us first digress onto the grammatical difference between these two words. *Chai* is a verb that means "live," whereas *chei* means "the life of." The word *chei* evolves from the noun *chayim*, life; *chei* is produced by transforming the noun *chayim* into the possessive form, a grammatical technique known as *semikhut*, which yields *chei*. Similarly, for example, the Hebrew word *dagim* is the plural noun of "fish"; when the Torah speaks of the "fish of sea," it employs the term "*degei ha-yam*" (e.g. Bereishit 9:2). The word *dagim* becomes *degei* in the *semikhut* form, just as the word *chayim* becomes *chei*. Thus, the expression *chei Pharaoh* that Yosef uses in this verse means "by Pharaoh's life," whereas the phrase *chai Hashem* should seemingly be rendered, "God lives."

According to Maimonides, this syntactical distinction reflects a fundamental difference between the philosophical concept of "life" as it pertains to God and as it pertains to the human being. He writes in *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah 2:10):

And He does not know with a knowledge that is external to Him, as we know. For we and our knowledge are not one and the same, whereas the Creator, may He be blessed – He, His knowledge and His life are one and the same from every angle,

from every perspective, and in every sense of oneness. For were He to live a life and know with a knowledge that is external from Him, there would be many deities – He, His life and His knowledge... It therefore says, "*chei Pharaoh*" and "*chei nafshekha*," whereas it does not say, "*chei Hashem*," but rather "*chai Hashem*" – for the Creator and His life are not disparate, as are the lives of the living bodies, or the lives of the angels.

When we describe a human being as "alive," we implicitly acknowledge the theoretical possibility that he does not live. In a theoretical sense, we could speak of the given individual as not living, because life is something external to the human being that is given to him. And even if a human being could live forever, his quality of "living" would be regarded as a quality granted to him from an external source. With respect to the Almighty, by contrast, there can be no such thing – even in the realm of the theoretical and abstract – as the entity of God without life. The quality of "living" is part of the Almighty's very essence and integral to Him. Otherwise, Maimonides argues, the notion of divine oneness would be undermined. God's life cannot come to Him from an external source, for if it did, we must afford to that external source power equal to or surpassing that of God, which, in effect, would amount to polytheism. Hence, philosophically speaking, God does not have life; rather, life is integral to His very being as the sole divine force in the universe.

For this reason, Maimonides asserts, although we find instances of people – such as Yosef – swearing "by the life" of another human being, there can be no such thing as swearing "by God's life." This expression implicitly refers to God and His life as two fundamentally separate entities; it speaks of a possessive relationship between God and His life, which must mean that His life is external to Himself, just as something a person possesses is, by definition, external to his being. Therefore, when one invokes God while swearing in this fashion, he must say, "*Chai Hashem*," which would probably mean, "As God lives." One can speak only of God living, but not of God possessing life.

Divine Knowledge

Maimonides addresses here also the concept of divine knowledge, which likewise must be perceived as part of God's essence, rather than a separate entity. Human knowledge comes through the medium of the senses and the functioning of the intellect; it is acquired from an external source. God's knowledge, by contrast, originates from Himself. Were God to have to acquire knowledge from elsewhere, then the source of that knowledge must be afforded divine status equal or superior to that of God's, which would of course amount to polytheism. By necessity, then, God's knowledge is integral to His essence, rather than the product of His interaction with an external source.

Maimonides discusses this theory in much greater length elsewhere in his writings, including in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, particularly in chapters 68-69 of the first section. (See also 1:53 and 3:20-21.) Additionally, towards the end of his famous introduction to *Masekhet Avot*, known as *Shemoneh Perakim*, Maimonides addresses this issue as part of his explication of the doctrine of *bechira chofshit* – free will. After establishing the precept of human beings' free will, man's capability to choose between right and wrong (as opposed to the doctrine of determinism prevalent in ancient ideologies), Maimonides addresses the famous theological paradox often referred to as the question of *bechira-yedi'a*, or the contradiction between free choice and divine knowledge. This argument contends that once God has prior knowledge of all events, including man's future decisions, these decisions are, by definition, predetermined to occur, and one therefore has no control over his seemingly chosen courses of action. Maimonides' answer, as he develops in the final passage of *Shemoneh Perakim*, is that the question presumes a degree of parity between human knowledge and divine knowledge. We can speak of a human being "knowing" with absolute certainty the occurrence of a given event only if the event had actually occurred, and there would thus be no possibility that this event did not occur. If we would attempt to project this same line of

reasoning to God's prior knowledge of future events, we would indeed wonder how man could choose how to act once his decisions are known to God the way past events are known to a human being. However, Maimonides explains, divine knowledge is part of the divine essence. Thus, since the human mind cannot – by definition – comprehend God's essence, it cannot, by extension, comprehend His knowledge. It is therefore futile to even attempt to reconcile this alleged contradiction between *bechira chofshit* and divine knowledge.

Maimonides returns to this issue in *Mishneh Torah*, amidst his discussion of *teshuva* (repentance). In the fifth chapter of Hilkhot Teshuva, Maimonides reiterates the precept of *bechira chofshit*, given its direct impact upon the obligation of *teshuva*: only if a person bears personal accountability for his actions can we speak of an obligation to feel remorse for one's misdeeds. Towards the end of this chapter (*halakha* 5), he raises the aforementioned question of *bechira-yedi'a* and provides the same answer as he had in *Shemoneh Perakim*, referring us in this context to his earlier comments, in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, regarding the nature of divine knowledge.

The Ra'avad, in his critique of *Mishneh Torah*, disapproves of Maimonides' handling of the *bechira-yedi'a* issue:

This author did not act in the manner of the wise men, for nobody begins [discussing] a matter if he does not know how to complete it, and [yet] he began raising difficulties and left the matter as a difficulty, subjecting it once again to faith. It would have been preferable for him to leave the matter to the simplicity of the simple ones rather than arousing their hearts and then leaving their minds with doubt, such that at some later time some questions might arise in their hearts concerning this matter. And although there is no compelling answer to this, it is advisable to provide some kind of answer for it. I would say that if a person's piety or sinfulness hinged upon a decree of the Creator, may He be blessed, then we would say that His knowledge constitutes His decree, and this question would [indeed] be very difficult. But since the Creator relinquished this authority and transferred it to the person himself, His knowledge does not constitute a decree; it is rather similar to the knowledge of the astrologers who know on the basis of some other force what direction this [person] will take... But [even] all this is not sufficient.

The Ra'avad accuses Maimonides of raising a philosophical difficulty concerning one of the principal axioms of Judaism and leaving it unresolved, instructing his readership to accept the axiom as a matter of faith. If, the Ra'avad argues, Maimonides has no explanation for this paradox and must leave it as a philosophically unresolved article of faith, then he should have never begun this discussion in the first place. In this sense, Maimonides, in the Ra'avad's view, "did not act in the manner of the wise men," who do not raise an important question only to leave it unanswered and insist on blind faith.

It would appear, however, that the Ra'avad's objection to Maimonides' discussion reflects an imprecise reading of Maimonides' response to this question. Maimonides did not dismiss this question by simply writing, "We don't know; we just have to accept it." Quite to the contrary, Maimonides responded to this philosophical question with a sound philosophical argument. He refers us to his earlier discussion, in Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah, where he cogently argued for the oneness of divine knowledge with the divine essence, and he cites a verse from the Book of Shemot (33:20) – "for man cannot see Me and live" – as proof to man's inability to comprehend the divine essence. The combination of these two factors yields Maimonides' conclusion that probing the nature or mechanics of divine knowledge is, for all intents and purposes, an exercise in futility. Maimonides does not dodge the question, as the Ra'avad charges; he demonstrates philosophically that the human mind cannot understand the workings of divine knowledge, thus rendering the question of *bechira-yedi'a* meaningless.

Chei Ha-olam

Let us now return to Maimonides' explanation of the difference between the words *chei* and *chai* in the context of swearing by a man's life or "the life of God." Rabbi Yitzchak Arama (scholar from the Spanish Inquisition era), in his classic Biblical commentary *Akeidat Yitzchak* (Parashat Miketz), challenges Maimonides' theory in light of an explicit verse towards the end of the Book of Daniel (12:7). Daniel records a vision of an angel who made an oath "*be-chei ha-olam*," literally, "by the life of the world," presumably a reference to the Almighty. This would, at first glance, appear to prove that the word *chei* is appropriate even in reference to God – in direct contradiction to Maimonides' theory concerning the distinction between *chei* and *chai*.

In truth, however, Maimonides explicitly addresses this verse in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. In the first section of the *Guide*, Maimonides devotes a chapter (72) to identifying the parallels between the human being and the universe at large, pointing to numerous systems within the human being that correspond to the systems of the universe. In this discussion Maimonides likens God's power over the universe to the control of man's intellect over the rest of his being:

There also exists in the Universe a certain force which controls the whole, which sets in motion the chief and principal parts, and gives them the motive power for governing the rest. Without that force, the existence of this sphere, with its principal and secondary parts, would be impossible. It is the source of the existence of the Universe in all its parts. That force is God; blessed be His Name! It is on account of this force that man is called microcosm; for he likewise possesses a certain principle which governs all the forces of the body, and on account of this comparison God is called "the life of the Universe"; comp. "and he swore by the life of the universe" (Daniel 12:7).

Maimonides states very clearly how he understood this verse from Daniel. The angel in Daniel's prophecy refers to God as *Chei Ha-olam*, the "Life of the Universe" because the Almighty sustains the world and gives it life. He makes no reference at all to "the life of God," a terminology to which Maimonides objects, and describes instead the "life of the world," or, more accurately, the source of the world's "life." The use of this expression, then, is not at all inconsistent with Maimonides' theory. (Maimonides' interpretation of this verse in Daniel can be found as well in two earlier sources, with which Maimonides was likely very familiar: Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon's translation of Daniel, and Ibn Ezra's commentary to Daniel.)

This discussion has practical ramifications concerning proper pronunciation in our daily liturgy. The *Pesukei De-zimra* section of the morning prayer service concludes with the description of God as "*Chei Ha-olamim*," a term presumably borrowed from Daniel's prophecy. There has been some discussion as to whether this expression should be pronounced as we have transliterated it – "*Chei Ha-olamim*" – or "*Chai Ha-olamim*." In light of Maimonides' interpretation of the verse in Daniel, we would likely conclude upon the prevalent pronunciation – "*Chei Ha-olamim*" – which would be translated as, "He who gives life to [all] the worlds." Indeed, the *Tosefot Yom Tov* (classic commentary to the Mishna), in his closing comments to Masekhet Tamid, supports this position based on Maimonides' theory. This is also the position of the Gaon of Vilna, as documented in *Ma'aseh Rav* (32). The dissenting view is that of Rabbi Yaakov Emden (18th century, Germany), who, in his text of the *siddur*, champions the pronunciation of "*Chai ha-olamim*." He explains his position in a very complex grammatical discussion that appears in his collection of responsa, *She'eilat Ya'abetz* (141). It should be noted that this controversy also affects the pronunciation of the *borei nefashot* blessing recited after eating certain foods, which likewise concludes, "*Barukh Chei Ha-olamim*."

Repeated Emphasis

Rabbi Yosef Kapach, in his commentary to *Mishneh Torah* (Yosodei Ha-Torah 2:10), notes the uncharacteristic repetition of this theory in Maimonides' writings. As discussed, Maimonides mentions the distinction between *chei* and *chai* in all his major works – *Shemoneh Perakim*, *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide for the Perplexed*. Rabbi Kapach claims that this repeated emphasis demonstrates the gravity of the issue in Maimonides' eyes. Maimonides considers the expression *chei Hashem* in an oath an outright rejection of the fundamental doctrine of divine oneness, in that it implicitly acknowledges God's "life" as an entity separate from God Himself, which itself implies an independent force that sustains God. Such a declaration would fall under the category Maimonides describes in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (3:7) as "one who says that there is a deity, but they are two or more," who forfeits his share in the world to come. Conversely, one who invokes a person or object in an oath with the word *chai*, which is used in reference to the Almighty, in effect equates that person or object with God, which likewise amounts to a sort of polytheistic belief. Maimonides therefore repeatedly emphasized the distinction between *chei* and *chai*, so as to preserve the fundamental belief in the oneness of God and avoid any possible implication to the contrary.