



Parashat Pekudei

The "Glory of the Lord" and the Shekhina
by David Silverberg

Parashat Pekudei tells of the successful completion of the work performed for the construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), the purpose of which was expressed by God Himself back in Parashat Teruma: "They shall make for Me a Sanctuary, and I shall reside in their midst" (Shemot 25:8). Indeed, as the Torah describes, the Mishkan's construction is followed by God's "taking residence" within it: "Moshe finished the work. The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle" (40:34). As several commentators note, this illustration of the "glory of the Lord" clearly parallels the drama of the Revelation at Sinai, during which "the glory of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days" (24:15). This week we will focus our attention on this concept of the "glory of the Lord" which descended upon Mount Sinai, and, in our parasha, resided in the Tabernacle. As we will see, the precise definition of this term became subject to a fundamental dispute among Medieval Jewish philosophers, with Maimonides, of course, playing a critical role in the controversy.

Divine Incorporeality

To introduce the debate, let us first briefly digress onto the more general issue of the belief in God's incorporeal nature. Maimonides lists as the third of the thirteen basic articles of faith the belief that God has no physical image or substance. In his *Code* (Hilkhot Teshuva 3:7), he declares that "one who says that there exists a single Master but he is a physical body and possesses an image" is considered a heretic according to Jewish doctrine and has no share in the world to come. Likewise, Maimonides devotes a considerable portion of the first section of his *Guide* to this issue, and addresses at length the numerous Scriptural references to physical actions performed by God. He insists that the Torah employed these descriptions in reference to the Almighty allegorically, because ordinary men have no other means of relating to an existing entity. He invokes in this context the Talmudic adage, "The Torah speaks according to the language of men," meaning, the Torah must employ terms and devices which can be understood by all. Since "the multitude of people do not easily conceive existence unless in connection with a body" (*Guide*, 1:25), the Torah metaphorically enlists bodily attributes in describing God. It speaks of God as talking, knowing, working and living, "to establish in our minds the notion of the existence of a living being, the Maker of everything," and Scriptural descriptions of God's ears and eyes, for example, "are mere indications of the actions generally performed by means of these organs" (1:46). In this manner, Maimonides interprets many verses in the Torah that appear to ascribe physical properties to God as anthropomorphic, rather than literal.

There are indications that this article of faith was not universally accepted as a requisite belief of Judaism. Ra'avad, in his critique of the *Code*, makes the following comment on Maimonides' condemnation of one who believes in God's corporeality: "Why does he call such a person a heretic, when several people greater and better than us followed this belief, in accordance with what they saw in the Scriptures and,



especially, based on what they saw in the words of the Aggadot [Midrashim] which [can potentially] corrupt [readers'] views." Ra'avad here does not appear to embrace the notion of God's physical being, but does excuse those who arrive at such a conclusion. Ra'avad's position becomes clearer in light of a passage in another Medieval work, Rabbi Yosef Albo's *Sefer Ha'ikkarim*, which cites the Ra'avad's comments somewhat differently (2:41): "Although this is indeed the correct belief, one who believes that He is physical due to his literal understanding of the formulations of the Scriptures and Midrashim – it is not proper to call him a heretic." Clearly, Ra'avad accepts the doctrine of divine incorporeality as a principle of Jewish faith. He merely disputes Maimonides' unforgiving attitude towards those who believe otherwise. According to the Ra'avad, the misleading references both in the Bible and in rabbinic writings to God's performance of seemingly physical acts suffices to excuse those who wrongly conclude that the Almighty possesses physical attributes.

Interestingly enough, there is evidence that rejection of Maimonides' firm stance in this regard contributed to the bitter "Maimonidean Controversy" that erupted some thirty years after his death. Several prominent French scholars embarked on a campaign to ban Maimonides' works in light of material contained therein which they deemed objectionable and even heretical. Nachmanides, then a rabbinic leader in Spain, wrote a letter to the French rabbis opposing the ban, and part of this letter addresses the role played by the issue of divine incorporeality in this controversy. The letter appears in a work entitled, "Iggerot Kana'ut," and the relevant section for our purposes is cited by Rabbi Menachem Kasher, in his *Torah Sheleima* (vol. 16, appendix 35). Nachmanides writes, "I have heard from others that you object to *Sefer Ha'mada* [the first section of Maimonides' *Code*] because it claims that there is no shape or structure above." He proceeds to strongly defend Maimonides' position denying divine corporeality and cites numerous earlier sources to this effect. He adds that the Torah itself admonishes against this belief: "Be most careful for your own sake, for you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb [Sinai] out of the fire" (Devarim 4:15). The Torah here emphasizes that even when God revealed Himself, as it were, to the Israelites, they did not behold any physical image or form. Clearly, then, the Torah itself militates against the belief in a physical image ascribable to the Almighty.

With this fundamental article of faith in mind, let us return to the Torah's description of the "glory of the Lord" which "abode on Mount Sinai" and "filled the Tabernacle." If, indeed, God has no physical form or essence, what was this "glory" that appeared at Sinai and in the Mishkan? Was it God Himself, or some "artificial" representation of His presence?

Maimonides and Sa'adya

Consistent with his general aversion to the personification of God, Maimonides explicitly interprets "glory of the Lord" in these contexts as something external to God Himself, "the material light," which God caused to rest on a certain place in order to show the distinction of that place." Citing the aforementioned verses describing the "glory of God" at Sinai and in the Mishkan, Maimonides explains that God created some substance – "the material light" – as a means of displaying the distinction of these places in the given contexts. This was not some physical manifestation of God



Himself, but rather a substance He created to indicate the religious significance of the given location within the respective settings of the Revelation and the Tabernacle.

Maimonides extends this theory in explaining the common term "Shekhina," which the Rabbis often employ as a reference to God's presence. For Maimonides, of course, there can be no such thing as "God's presence," since "presence" by definition presumes a physical quality. He therefore defines "Shekhina" as "the appearance or manifestation of a certain light that had been created [for the occasion]" (*Guide*, 1:27; see also 1:25). Whenever the Sages speak of someone beholding the Shekhina, they refer, in Maimonides' view, to some form of "light" created by God, rather than God Himself.

Maimonides' comments in this regard echo the position of Rabbi Sa'adya Gaon, in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. Addressing the problem in explaining several verses that refer to the "glory of the Lord," Rabbi Sa'adya writes, "God has a special light which He creates and makes manifest to His prophets in order that they may infer therefrom that it is a prophetic communication emanating from God that they hear" (2:12). Earlier in his work (2:7), Rabbi Sa'adya addresses the argument raised by some Christian theologians on the basis of the appearance of God's "glory" in the Mishkan and at Sinai. They draw an analogy between these phenomena and their claim to the divinity of the physical being of their messiah. The fact that the Tabernacle, for example, could contain God provides a precedent for the possibility of God assuming a physical shape in the form of a human being. Sa'adya firmly rejects the assumption that the Mishkan, or Mount Sinai, became divine by virtue of the presence of "God's glory." In truth, he argues, God's "glory" was a substance He created as a symbolic representation of His presence.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, in his classic work, *The Kuzari*, defines "glory of the Lord" as "the ethereal entity controlled by God's will to appear in an image before a prophet" (4:3). Halevi proceeds to classify the appearance of God's "glory" in the Mishkan as the lowest level of divine "glory," as it could be perceived even by ordinary men who are not endowed with prophetic power. In any event, he, too, chose not to define the "glory of the Lord" as a manifestation of the Almighty Himself, and to instead identify it as a substance created and controlled by God's will.

Nachmanides

In his commentary to the Book of Bereishit (46:1), Nachmanides elaborates on Maimonides' metaphoric reading of numerous verses that appear to personify God, and amidst this discussion he addresses as well Maimonides' approach to the terms "glory" and "Shekhina." Nachmanides emphatically rejects the notion that these concepts refer to a substance created by God: "Heaven forbid that the entity called 'Shekhina' or 'kavod' ['glory'] is created external to the great Name, may He be blessed, as the rabbi [Maimonides] thought." He later adds, "Many passages in the writings of our Sages indicate that the term 'Shekhina' refers to the Almighty, may He be blessed." According to Nachmanides, the "glory" of God that appeared at Sinai and in the Mishkan was, indeed, a manifestation of God Himself. Although clearly, as Nachmanides himself explicitly stressed in the aforementioned letter protesting the ban on Maimonides' works, God Himself is incorporeal, He can assume a physical quality and form when He appears to the prophets.



Rabbi Kasher (ibid.) cites a number of other Medieval scholars who likewise adopted this position. Rabbenu Yosef Bekhor Shor, an exegete from the Tosafist period, writes explicitly in his commentary to the Book of Bereishit (1:26) that God would appear to a prophet as a human being "in order not to terrify him with something which he is unaccustomed to seeing." Furthermore, Rabbi Kasher cites excerpts from a rare document entitled *Ketav Tamim* written by a contemporary of Maimonides, Rabbi Moshe Bar Hasdai, who vehemently opposed Maimonides' position in this regard. Basing himself on dozens of citations from traditional rabbinic literature, Rabbi Moshe Bar Hasdai argued that God's incorporeality does not preclude the possibility of His assuming a physical form and performing physical acts. In his view, Maimonides and Sa'adya denigrate the Almighty by considering Him incapable of assuming corporeal qualities.

Additionally, Rabbi Kasher cites a debate from the Geonic period suggesting that this controversy perhaps preceded the time of Maimonides. The Talmud (Berakhot 6b) records the account of Rabbi Yishmael Kohen Gadol, a high priest at the end of the Second Temple era, who testified to having seen "Akatriel, God, Lord of Hosts" upon entering the innermost sanctum of the Temple to perform the Yom Kippur service. Rabbi Kasher cites a commentary by Rabbi Yehuda Barceloni to the early Kabbalistic work, *Sefer Yetzira*, who records a debate among the Geonim in identifying "Akatriel." Sa'adya Gaon, expectedly, claims that this is the name of an angel sent by the Almighty to speak with the high priest. Most other Geonim, however, identify Akatriel as an image through which the Almighty Himself appeared. Accordingly, the debate between Maimonides and Sa'adya on the one hand, and Nachmanides and Rabbi Moshe Bar Hasdai on the other, appears to have origins already in the Geonic period.

Challenges to Maimonides From Onkelos

Nachmanides challenges Maimonides' view on the basis of several references to the word "Shekhina" in the ancient Aramaic translation of the Torah by Onkelos. Earlier in the Book of Shemot, God responds to the sin of the golden calf by refusing to accompany the Israelites along their journey to the Land. He tells Moshe, "Set out from here...to the land... I will send an angel before you... But I will not go in your midst, since you are a stiff-necked people, lest I destroy you on the way" (Shemot 33:1-3). Moshe, however, petitions God to accompany the people directly, rather than through the medium of an angel. He demands, "If Your countenance does not go [with us], do not make us leave here" (33:15). Onkelos translates the term "Your countenance" (*panekha*) in this verse as "Your Shekhina." According to Maimonides, then, Moshe here begs that God allow some "material light" representing His presence to accompany the nation to the land. However, as Nachmanides argues, Moshe here specifically requests that God annul the decree that He will send only an intermediary to lead Benei Yisrael, rather than accompany them directly. Clearly, then, Onkelos employs the term "Shekhina" as a reference to God Himself, rather than to a "material light" invented by God to represent Him.

The refutation to this proof, however, is obvious. If Maimonides denies that God could ever perform any physical act, then clearly he could not possibly accept the literal meaning of Moshe's petition that God "go in our midst" (34:9). What else could

this mean, according to Maimonides, other than the appearance of the "Shekhina" – a representation of God external to His essence? In Maimonides' view, this is the only possible way for God to "go" – in the figurative sense, through some sort of "artificial" representation. As Don Isaac Abarbanel explains in his commentary to the *Guide* (1:27), the accompaniment of an angel, as God had initially decreed, would mean the absence of *hashgacha* – direct providence over the people. Moshe therefore pleads to God to instead send them His "Shekhina," which represents His direct protection and providence. Thus, Onkelos here indeed employs the term "Shekhina" in this context as a reference to the "material light" created by God, rather than God Himself, as the Shekhina's presence represents the most direct form of God's providence over the people.

Nachmanides' second proof, however, is far less surmountable. In that same dialogue between Moshe and the Almighty, Moshe requests, "Let me behold Your glory" (33:18), to which God responds, "you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live" (33:20). Onkelos translates the word *panai* ("My face") in God's response as "the face of My Shekhina." Seemingly, God refers here to the impossibility of beholding His essence. After all, the "material light" that He creates to represent a place's distinction, to which the term "Shekhina" refers in Maimonides' view, indeed can be seen to the prophets. Furthermore, Maimonides himself addresses these verses explicitly and explains that Moshe here prays "for the knowledge of God's essence (*Guide*, 1:54). Later in the *Guide* (1:64), Maimonides clarifies that "glory of God" at times refers to the divine essence, rather than the "material light," and he cites Moshe's request and God's response in this dialogue as examples. It is indeed problematic, therefore, that Onkelos would employ the term "Shekhina" as a translation for "My face" in this context, where God clearly refers to His essential nature, rather than a physical representation.

Finally, Nachmanides challenges Maimonides' definition of "Shekhina" from the ancient translation of Yontan Ben Uziel to a famous verse in the Book of Yechezkel (3:12), where the prophet records having heard a "great roaring sound" that declared, "Blessed is the glory of the Lord in His place." Yonatan Ben Uziel, as we cite in our daily prayers, translates this exclamation as, "Blessed is the glory of the Lord in the place of the residence of His Shekhina." Now as mentioned, Maimonides acknowledges that "glory of the Lord" can at times denote a created substance, whereas in other instances it refers to God's essence. In this context, Nachmanides reasons, Maimonides must interpret "glory of the Lord" to mean the divine essence, for otherwise the angels described by Yechezkel will have "blessed" a physical substance, which is tantamount to foreign worship. It emerges, then, that the prophet – as translated by Yonatan Ben Uziel – speaks of the "glory of the Lord" in reference to the divine essence, and in this context describes as well "the place of the residence of His Shekhina." Apparently, Nachmanides argues, "Shekhina" here refers to God's essence, rather than an external substance.

In truth, however, this translation of the verse does not appear to pose any challenge to Maimonides' position. As Abarbanel (*ibid.*) explains, Maimonides would interpret the verse to mean that God's essence is blessed and praised in the place that houses His Shekhina – the Temple, which contains the "material light" representing God. Abarbanel writes that the enthusiasm and exuberance that overcome those who visit the site of the Shekhina elicits an immediate response of praise and blessing to



God. The fact that "glory of the Lord" in this verse refers to the divine essence in no way compels us to interpret the word "Shekhina" as the divine essence. It is indeed hard to understand why Nachmanides saw in Yonatan Ben Uziel's translation of this verse a proof against Maimonides' definition of "Shekhina."

A Reconsideration of the Debate

Before concluding, it is perhaps worthwhile to step back and consider whether or not we must indeed approach this debate as a fundamental difference of opinion concerning a critical principle of Jewish belief. After all, Nachmanides, Bekhor Shor and Rabbi Moshe Bar Hasdai all emphasize that God Himself has no physical properties; they accept only the possibility of His assuming a physical form. They disregard the logical inconsistency of an incorporeal being assuming a corporeal form, because, as Rabbi Moshe Bar Hasdai emphasizes, it is only the inherent limitations of human reason that render such a phenomenon impossible. God, of course, is not confined by these limits. In their view, by subjecting the Almighty to the rules of science and logic accessible to humans, we undermine His omnipotence and impose on Him human limitations. (Cf. Rabbi Kasher's concluding remarks in the aforementioned essay.)

In truth, however, how different is this position from the approach of Maimonides and Sa'adya, that God's "glory" and "Shekhina" is something created, rather than God Himself? When, in Nachmanides' view, the incorporeal God assumes a physical form, is that form not a type of "creation"? And when a non-physical God performs an act of "seeing," can anyone equate that act with the biological phenomenon of human vision? It would appear that even those philosophers who prefer the literal, rather than metaphoric, reading of the Scriptural references to God's physical attributes must resort to a degree of anthropomorphic interpretation. Likewise, even if we identify a visible image as the physical manifestation of God's essence, we must still acknowledge some distinction between the image itself and the Creator. After all, as God Himself declares, "for man may not see Me and live." One might therefore question the philosophical import of this debate, once both camps agree that the visions beheld by the prophets and the substance that filled the Tabernacle were nothing even resembling facsimiles of God Himself.

We should note, however, that two other questions, which incidentally arise from this debate, perhaps lend a greater degree of importance to this controversy. The first involves Judaism's response to the Christian belief in the divine nature of Jesus. As mentioned earlier, Sa'adya enlisted Judaism's rejection of divine corporeality as one basis (among several) for objecting to this belief. The opposing view, of course, which allows for the possibility of God's manifestation in human form, effectively negates Sa'adya's argument.

Secondly, many of Maimonides' opponents strongly disapproved of what they perceived as the open-ended license he – and Sa'adya – took in interpreting verses metaphorically. Rabbi Kasher cites a letter from Rabbi Shlomo of Montpellier (known as "Rabbenu Shlomo Min Ha-har"), who led the movement to ban Maimonides' works, in which he focuses almost exclusively on this issue as the basis for his opposition and fury. The cavalier dismissal of the literal reading of Scripture, as Maimonides' opponents viewed his approach, could easily result in the widespread disregard of



Torah observance in general, as the Torah's laws and teachings would be relegated to the realm of analogy and fable. Though it is improbable that this concern itself led them to accept the possibility of God assuming a physical form, it very likely helped fuel the passion that characterized this campaign.

Conclusion

The very sensitivity surrounding the issue of divine incorporeality, and the vehemence with which Maimonides and others militated against the concept of a physical deity, underscores the vast difference between Jewish belief and that of the ancient Greeks. Greek mythology portrays the gods – including Zeus, the so-called king of the gods – as humans. They are subject to every physical and emotional sensation and experience familiar to human beings. They, too, experience pain, jealousy, despair, desire, and pleasure. Maimonides' unyielding objection to even a remote association between God and physicality emphasizes just how differently Judaism approaches the entire concept of a divine being and religion in general. Jews believe that a physical world does not preclude the possibility of living a spiritual life; to the contrary, Jewish law is intended to lend spiritual meaning to an otherwise entirely physical existence. The ancient Greeks, by contrast, did just the opposite, lowering the concept of a divine being down to the physical realities of our world, rather than attempting to elevate physical life to a higher standard. The natural result of this "corporealization" of the incorporeal was the glorification of sensuality, physical beauty, and bodily pleasure that emerged as a defining characteristic of ancient Greek culture.

The Jewish belief in a non-physical deity signifies that Jews view the body and physicality as a means, rather than an end unto itself. The ultimate goal is to bring a Godly dimension into everyday, physical life, rather than impose a physical dimension onto God. It was therefore emphasized that no physical attributes can possibly be ascribed to the Almighty, and, in Maimonides' view, He is indeed incapable of performing physical actions or experiencing physical sensations in any manner even remotely resembling the human condition.