



Only in silence is heard the beating of the heart of God  
-Father Bernardo Olivera

## **Parashat Va'Etchanan**

### **Silence not Symbols When it comes to the Mitzvah of Knowing God**

By Rabbi Yamin Levy

Maimonides devotes the better part of his Moreh Nevuchim, Guide for the Perplexed to teaching the principle called negative theology. The goal of this principle is to generate clarity and theological equanimity about God. Attempting to perceive or understand God's essence writes Maimonides is a futile exercise. The goal turns on itself and one actually loses touch with the genuine perception of God's existence. As Rambam writes:

Praise be He, who at the moment that the minds glance at His essence, their understanding turns faulty. At the moment of glancing at the necessary correlation between His will and His actions, knowledge turns into ignorance. When the tongues attempt to exalt Him with attributes, **all verbosity turns into ineptitude and faultiness.**<sup>1</sup>

All we can discern is that the continuation of this conditional world requires a being whose existence is necessary<sup>2</sup>.

The close to thirty chapters in the Guide devoted to semantic functions as they relate to knowledge of God is an extension of Maimonides' battle against idolatry which for him goes beyond the worship of physical images and includes the realm of mental or imagined images as well. In order to fulfill the first of the Ten Commandments<sup>3</sup> correctly

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<sup>1</sup> Guide 1:58 References to the Guide of the Perplexed are from the S. Pines translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) The Munk, Kafih and the new Michal Schwartz editions have all been consulted.

<sup>2</sup> Guide 1:31-33, 1:50, 1:60

<sup>3</sup> According to Maimonides the first of the Ten Commandments is belief in God. See Sefer HaMitzvot Positive 1 also MT Yesodei HaTorah 1:1. also TB Makot 23b Ibn Ezra Shemot 20:2 and Shadal Shemot 20:2. There is a school of thought that does not regard belief in God as a commandment but rather as a prerequisite to the commandments see Yehuda Halevi Kuzari 1:12, 1:19-25 also Crescas Or Hashem, Ramban and Abrabanel. For Maimonides one believes in God because he/ she is covenanted by the law. In other words the law mandates belief and not the other way around.

God must be completely purified of attributes, complexity (duality) and physicality to truly be imageless. One is not truly worshipping God if He bears false attributes. Indeed Maimonides asserts any hint of attributes leads one on a dangerous path away from monotheism<sup>4</sup>.

Rambam maintains that when positive attributes are ascribed to God two errors are committed. Besides introducing multiplicity to God's essence, positive attributes assume a comparison to physical beings whose existence is contingent and created. What then may one say about God other than the fact that "God is"? The answer to this question is Maimonides' introduction to Negative Theology<sup>5</sup>.

Maimonides expanded upon the classical principle of negative theology which was first introduced in the late fifth century by an anonymous author writing under the name Dionysius of Areopagite (also known as pseudo-Dionysius)<sup>6</sup>. Negative theology is a system that attempts at describing God by describing what God is not rather than what God is (as in cataphatic theology or analogia entis). The basic premise of this system is that God is so far beyond human understanding and experience that the only statements that can be made regarding the nature of God are statements that describe what God is not<sup>7</sup>.

For Maimonides the ever-present tension between that which is knowable and that which is unknowable is amplified by the centrality knowledge of God plays in the Maimonidean world view. Knowledge of God is the basis for a relationship with the almighty<sup>8</sup>. In fact knowledge of God is the ultimate goal of religious life and the absolute *raison-d'être* of Judaism. Any attempt to draw near to God without knowledge - be it through the

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<sup>4</sup> Guide 1:50

<sup>5</sup> Guide 1:58

<sup>6</sup> Aspects of negative theology can actually be found earlier in some subtle statements of the Cappadocian Fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>7</sup> For example instead of saying that God is good one would say God commits no evil. On the inability of knowing God see Isaak Franck, Maimonides and Aquinas on Man's Knowledge of God: A Twentieth Century Perspective, *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1985) 1-70; Seymor Feldman, A Scholastic Misinterpretation of Maimonides' Doctrine of Divine Attributes in Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. By Joseph Buijs (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988) 267-283; Warren Zev Harvey, Maimonides and Aquinas on Interpreting the Bible, *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Religion* (1988) 43-65. Diana Lobel: Silence is Praise to You: Maimonides on Negative Theology of Expression and Religious Experience, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 76:1 Winter 2002; Kenneth Seeskin, Sanctity and Silence: The Religious Significance of Maimonides' Negative Theology, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 76:1 Winter 2002

<sup>8</sup> Unlike Bachya or Crescas who would view knowledge of God as the basis for religious life.

imagination or through blind acceptance of authority (taqlid)<sup>9</sup> is a futile endeavor because the being conjured up in one's imagination does not exist and is most certainly not God<sup>10</sup>. The issue is significantly more complex when, based on the Greek model, knowledge must be substantiated by irrefutable proofs in order to be accepted as veritable.

Maimonides responds to the paradox of needing to *know* the *unknowable* by identifying that which can be known and that which cannot be known. One must know states Maimonides that 1. God exists 2. God is a “unique” one,<sup>11</sup> and that 3. God is not physical<sup>12</sup>. For Maimonides these three axioms are provable and indeed he goes to great lengths providing the necessary proofs. Human perfection and a relationship with God is achieved by not only mastering that which can be known about God but one must in addition submit to the fact that there is that which is unknowable about God.

Thus, writes Rambam:

All the philosophers say: We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which He becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to the eyes that are too weak to apprehend it. ....The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum found in Psalms: ***To You silence is praise (65:2)*** which interpreted means: Silence with regards to You is praise. This is a very profound observation. For whatever was intended to have been expressed by way of exaltation and praise of Him will be found faulty when applied to Him sensing that the praise is somehow wanting. Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the

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<sup>9</sup> Guide 3:51

<sup>10</sup> Guide 1:60

<sup>11</sup> To believe in one God is not enough – belief that God is one is critical. As Bahya ibn Paquda emphasizes one must be aware of the true unity of God – not a mathematical one but a unique one. See Guide 1:50 Intro to Guide and 1:3 see also Bahya 1:8-9

<sup>12</sup> See Shem Tov and Moshe of Narbonne on Guide 1:57, 2:1 and 2:4. See also Pines Introduction pages xciv-v; also Alexander Altmann, “Essence and Existence in Maimonides” in his *Studies in Religion, Philosophy and Mysticism*, (Ithaca NY. 1969) pp. 108-127. For a differing opinion see Herbert Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford 1987) pp 281-335, 378-383 also Josef Stern, “Maimonides’ Demonstrations: Principles and Practice” in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10 (2001) pp. 47-84

intellects are more appropriate – just as the perfect ones have enjoined when they said: Meditate with your heart upon your bed and be silent, *Selah*<sup>13</sup>.

The only reliable response to knowledge about God is - silence. For Rambam speech is simply not an adequate media to describe the essence of God. While Maimonides sought to develop the inward spiritual life he could not allow it to be done at the expense of philosophical integrity. Every time an attempt is made to exalt God it fails. The most mankind can expect to achieve is to imitate the heavenly angels who when contemplating God's greatness announce in unison "*Kadosh, Kadosh Kadosh*"<sup>14</sup>. This disciplined approach to the divine while less compelling than the immediate promise of imaginative visions and mystical unions presents the possibility of a genuine awareness of the divine. An awareness guided by an intellect that accepts its own limitations. Again Maimonides turns to the book of Psalms for further validation that, when it comes to speaking about God, all semantic functions fail as in the verse "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still" (Psalms 4:5). The only absolute truth about the ultimate simplicity and uniqueness of God is contained in transcendent silence.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Guide 1:59 Pines translation is different than that of Kafih and Schwartz

<sup>14</sup> The idea of man joining the angels and dancing in unison around God is a rabbinic idea Shemot Rabba 23:15 also BT Ta'anith 31a Yerushalmi Megillah 73b and Moed Katan 83b

<sup>15</sup> See Plotinus, Six Enneads 5:5:6