

This week's parsha deals with holiness and the need to emulate G-d. In this chapter of the Moreh Nevukhim Rambam outlines the principle way in which man is expected to emulate G-d. He uses the narrative of Moshe requesting knowledge of G-d to illustrate what type of knowledge of G-d is necessary and then connects that type of knowledge with a certain type of emulation of G-d as well.

Guide for the Perplexed Book 1 CHAPTER LIV (selection)

THE wisest man, our Teacher Moses, asked two things of God, and received a reply respecting both. The one thing he asked was that God should let him know His true essence: the other, which in fact he asked first, that God should let him know His attributes. In answer to both these petitions God promised that He would let him know all His attributes, and that these were nothing but His actions. He also told him that His true essence could not be perceived, and pointed out a method by which he could obtain the utmost knowledge of God possible for man to acquire. The knowledge obtained by Moses has not been possessed by any human being before him or after him. His petition to know the attributes of God is contained in the following words: "Show me now thy ways, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight" (Exod. xxxiii. 13). Consider how many excellent ideas found expression in the words. "Show me thy ways, that I may know thee." We learn from them that God is known by His attributes, for Moses believed that he knew Him, when he was shown the way of God. **(What does this mean about Moshe's later request to know G-d's essence?)** If Moshe expresses here the fact that G-d is known only through his ways The words "That I may find grace in thy sight," imply that he who knows God finds grace in His eyes. Not only is he acceptable and welcome to God who fasts and prays, but everyone who knows Him. He who has no knowledge of God is the object of His wrath and displeasure. The pleasure and the displeasure of God, the approach to Him and the withdrawal from Him are proportional to the amount of man's knowledge or ignorance concerning the Creator. **(What other kinds of things might we have thought would determine pleasure and displeasure, approach and distance from G-d? Commitment to halakha? Ethical norms? Religious feelings? Why does Rambam pick "knowledge" of G-d?)** We have already gone too far away from our subject, let us now return to it.

Important points of the paragraph to think about:

Moshe ultimately does attain the highest level of knowledge possible for a human being. That makes this narrative extremely important insofar as it illustrates Rambam's position on the limits of human knowledge. Think about how Rambam may have come to the conclusion that the exact boundaries of human knowledge are what he says they are.

We see in this paragraph Rambam's general principle that man's closeness to and distance from G-d is dependent on his knowledge of G-d. Are they directly proportional or does knowledge of G-d lead to some other factor that causes distance from and closeness to G-d? Think about how

Moses prayed to God to grant him knowledge of His attributes, and also pardon for His people; when the latter had been granted, he continued to pray for the knowledge of God's essence in the words, "Show me thy glory" (ib. 18), and then received, respecting his

first request," Show me thy way," the following favourable reply," I will make all my goodness to pass before thee" (ib. 19): as regards the second request, however, he was told," Thou canst not see my face" (ib. 20). **(It seems that Rambam is saying that Moshe's first request was to know G-d for some functional purpose. This means that it must be a more limited extent of knowledge. The second request is to know G-d simply for its own sake. This is a more extensive knowledge of G-d. G-d then responds to the first request by granting that thing that Moshe wanted to achieve using knowledge of G-d namely forgiveness for the people. G-d responds to the second request by granting Moshe knowledge of G-d for its own sake but only to the extent requested in the first request not that of the second request.)** The words "all my goodness" imply that God promised to show him the whole creation, concerning which it has been stated," And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Gen. i. 31); when I say" to show him the whole creation," I mean to imply that God promised to make him comprehend the nature of all things, their relation to each other, and the way they are governed by God both in reference to the universe as a whole and to each creature in particular. This knowledge is referred to when we are told of Moses," he is firmly established in all mine house" (Num. xii. 7): that is," his knowledge of all the creatures in My universe is correct and firmly established" for false opinions are not firmly established. Consequently the knowledge of the works of God is the knowledge of His attributes, by which He can be known.

The fact that God promised Moses to give him a knowledge of His works, may be inferred from the circumstance that God taught him such attributes as refer exclusively to His works, viz., "merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness," etc., (Exod. xxxiv. 6). It is therefore clear that the ways which Moses wished to know, and which God taught him, are the actions emanating from God. Our Sages call them middot (qualities), and speak of the thirteen middoth of God (Talm. B. Rosh ha-shanah, P. 17b) **(Let's remember that so far ways, attributes, actions and middot are the same thing):** they used the term also in reference to man; comp." there are four different middoth (characters) among those who go to the house of learning" ;" There are four different middoth (characters) among those who give charity" (Mishnah Abot, v. 13, 14). They do not mean to say that God really possesses middot (qualities), but that He performs actions similar to such of our actions as originate in certain qualities, i.e., in certain psychical dispositions not that God has really such dispositions. **(Rambam is willing to say that G-d performs actions that are similar to some human actions, but not that he has any essential qualities that are similar to anything human. Let's keep our eyes out for why this is the case.)** Although Moses was shown all His goodness, i.e., all His works, only the thirteen middot are mentioned, because they include those acts of God which refer to the creation and the government of mankind, and to know these acts was the principal object of the prayer of Moses. **(How does Rambam know that this was the crux of Moshe's request? We're about to find out. Let's follow the logic really closely)** This is shown by the conclusion of his prayer," that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight, and consider that this nation is thy people" (Exod. xxxiii. 13), that is to say, the people whom I have to rule by certain acts in the performance of which I must be guided by Thy own acts in governing them. We have thus shown that" the ways" used in the Bible, and" middot" used in the Mishnah, are identical, denoting the acts emanating from God in reference to the universe.

Important points of the paragraph to think about:



We see in this paragraph Rambam's principle that G-d's essence cannot be known, while his actions can be known. We also see that middot or characteristics, taken in the literal sense, belongs to the domain of essence, but taken in the proper sense simply means actions. This is called the doctrine of attributes of action. Knowing all this, let's think about how to clearly define what Rambam means by "essence", and then to examine why it is of such importance to say that G-d's essence cannot be known.

Until next week!
,Moshe Goodman