



LECTURE #8:  
ASCENT FOR THE SAKE OF DESCENT  
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We wish to return now to one of the questions that has arisen time and again over the course of these lectures. Why did Maimonides devote the greater part of his time to his halakhic enterprise, rather than to the intellectual comprehension of God, when, according to his own words, it is the latter which is man's ultimate objective?

In our last two lectures, we noted the parallel between Maimonides's halakhic enterprise and a prophet's mission. After the prophet reaches the highest level of comprehension and merits the apprehension of God, he is asked to go back down to the masses in order to educate and lead them. This is the meaning of Jacob's dream in which the angels of God ascend the ladder and then are asked to go back down. This is by no means a simple matter for the prophet. After having reached such a high level, he aspires to remain constant in his apprehension of God, and therefore finds it difficult to fulfill the command to go back down to his people. The refusal on the part of many prophets to carry out the mission assigned to them in their initial prophecy reflects this difficulty. In general, the prophet's commitment to his mission won out, and in the end, he went down to the people. What drives a prophet to execute his mission at the cost of his own personal descent?

The words of Maimonides suggest that it is precisely the profound comprehension of God that leads the prophet to the conclusion that he must go down to the nation to lead and educate them. It is through his profound comprehension of God that the prophet recognizes that he must waive his high level of apprehension, in order to fulfill his obligation toward the people. He acquires this recognition through great afflictions and it is accompanied by shocks that lead him from his initial state in which he had been wholly dedicated to the intellectual apprehension of God, to the next state in which he is asked to act on behalf of the public at large.

*The Guide of the Perplexed* concludes with a chapter that has bewildered Maimonides's commentators (III, 54). In all his writings, Maimonides asserts that the

apprehension of God is man's noblest objective. Even in this chapter, this principle is stated in the clearest terms. It would appear, however, that at the end of the chapter, Maimonides changes his tune and sets the moral acts of practicing lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness as man's ultimate objective. Before proposing our solution to this difficulty, let us first present the contradiction that arises from this chapter itself.

#### ULTIMATE PERFECTION – INTERNAL CONTRADICTION IN THE WORDS OF MAIMONIDES

Maimonides notes that, according to the **philosophers**, man has four types of perfection, the one more elevated and lofty than the other. The first type of perfection, lowest of them all, is perfection of possessions, that is, expanding one's ownership of material possessions. The second type of perfection is perfection of the body's constitution. The third type is perfection of the moral virtues. The fourth type, the loftiest of all, is perfection of the intellect.

The fourth type is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues – I refer to the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the Divine things. **This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection**, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent duration; through it man is man. If you consider each of the three perfections mentioned before, you will find that they pertain to others than you, not to you, even though, according to the generally accepted opinion, they inevitably pertain both to you and to others. This ultimate perfection, however, pertains to you alone, no one else being associated in it with you in any way. "They shall be only your own" (Proverbs 5:17).

Therefore you ought to desire to achieve this thing, which will remain permanently with you, and not weary and trouble yourself for the sake of others, O you who neglect your own soul so that its whiteness has turned into blackness through the corporal faculties having gained dominion over it, as is said in the beginning of the poetical parables that have been coined for these notions; it says, "My mother's sons were incensed against me; they made me keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard I have not kept" (Song of Songs 1:6). It says on this very same subject: "Lest you give your splendor unto others, and your years unto the cruel" (Proverbs 5:9).

In this passage, Maimonides explicitly states that intellectual perfection is man's ultimate objective and the only true perfection. He also establishes a scale by which to grade

the various types of perfection. The more that the species of perfection pertains to the person himself, nobody else being associated in it, the more is that species of perfection essential to him. Perfection of possessions and perfection of morals are types of perfection that pertain both to the person himself and to others, whereas only intellectual perfection is his unique perfection. Maimonides entertains no doubts about this, but rather he cites a verse from the book of Jeremiah which, in his opinion, proves that the prophets agreed with the philosophers on this matter.

The **prophets** too have explained to us and interpreted to us the self-same notions – just as the philosophers have interpreted them – clearly stating to us that neither the perfection of possession nor the perfection of health nor the perfection of moral habits is a perfection of which one should be proud or that one should desire. The perfection of which one should be proud and that one should desire is knowledge of Him, may He be exalted, which is the true science. Jeremiah says concerning these four perfections: "Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me" (Jeremiah 9:22-23). Consider how he mentioned them according to the order given them in the opinion of the multitude. For the greatest perfection in their opinion is that of the rich man in his riches, below him the mighty man in his might, and below him the wise man in his wisdom. [By the expression, "the wise man in his wisdom,"] he means him who possesses the moral virtues; for such an individual is also held in high esteem by the multitude, to whom the discourse in question is addressed. Therefore these perfections are arranged in this order.

A person should not glory in the perfection of moral habits referred to by the prophet as wisdom, nor in the perfection of the body described as might, nor in the perfection of possession called wealth. Wisdom, might, and wealth are **perfections**, and they should not be negated. This is why prophecy rests only on one who is "wise, mighty and wealthy." They are, however, lower than the highest perfection of all, namely, knowledge and comprehension of God. Thus, we see that both the philosophers and the prophets agree that the knowledge of God is man's true perfection. Maimonides continues his discussion of the verse in Jeremiah, as if by the way:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We have already noted that in his introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides calls upon the reader to reflect well upon his words and pay attention to those places where ideas are brought, as it were, by the way. It should be noted that in the previous chapter, Maimonides

As we have mentioned this verse and the wondrous notions contained in it, and as we have mentioned the saying of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, about it, we will complete the exposition of what it includes. For when explaining in this verse **the noblest ends, he does not limit them only to the apprehension of Him, May He be exalted**. For if this were his purpose, he would have said: "But let him that glories glory in this, that he understand and knows Me," and have stopped there; or he would have said: "That I have no figure," or "that there is none like Me," or something similar. But he says that one should glory in the apprehension of Myself and in the knowledge of My attributes, by which he means His actions, as we have made clear with reference to its dictum: "Show me now Your ways" (Exodus 33:13), and so on. In this verse, he makes it clear to us that those **actions** that ought to be known and **imitated** are lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness (Jeremiah 9:23).

In this passage, Maimonides makes it absolutely clear that man's ultimate objective is not only the intellectual comprehension of God. He explicitly states that according to the prophet one should not suffice with intellectual apprehension, but rather one should also strive **to imitate God's actions**, which are lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness. This imitation does not restrict itself to theoretical knowledge, but rather explicitly relates to moral acts and conduct.

As was mentioned earlier, this stands in explicit contradiction to all his previous discussions of the matter, and even to what he said about the four species of perfection in this very chapter. Perfection of the morals was mentioned above as being inferior to man's intellectual perfection. Here, however, moral perfection, i.e., the practice of lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness, is presented as a higher level than intellectual perfection. Only after man apprehends God does it fall upon him to recognize His actions and imitate them. Maimonides emphasizes that he is not talking about the speculative knowledge of God's essence, that He is one, that He has no body, or that there is no resemblance between Him and any of His creations. The prophet is not relating here to the knowledge of these speculative truths. Rather, he is talking about recognizing God's actions and walking in His ways. Walking in His ways involves the practice of lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness, which are moral traits.

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defined the terms, "lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness," and so his discussion of these terms here cannot be accidental, but rather intended.

Did Maimonides change his position at the end of his book? Some have suggested that indeed we are dealing here with a change in outlook, that now Maimonides sets the moral goal above the intellectual goal.<sup>2</sup> Others have limited this to tension between extremes.<sup>3</sup> Yet others see here a move toward halakhic action which is the pinnacle of human activity.<sup>4</sup> According to the most creative solution to this contradiction, we are dealing with a circular process; moral perfection leads to intellectual perfection, which leads to greater moral perfection, and so on. It is difficult, however, to accept these explanations, when Maimonides does not as much as hint to such solutions, nor do we find anywhere else in his writings that moral perfection is loftier than intellectual perfection.

#### PERFECTION OF THE PROPHET – RESOLUTION OF THE CONTRADICTION

It would appear that the resolution of the contradiction lies in the recognition that there is a difference between moral perfection and the practice of lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the world. Perfection of morals involves perfection of the individual, whereas lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness refer to the ways of running society. It seems that this chapter is not directed to the individual who aspires to reach personal perfection, but rather it is wholly directed at the **prophet** and his actions. After the prophet has reached intellectual perfection, he must proceed to the next stage of activity, namely, the practice of lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the world. In other words, to go down to the people, and teach and lead them. We are not dealing here with perfecting the prophet's personal morals, but with the process of social-political perfection, which the prophet must lead.

What Maimonides says in the continuation of the passage strongly supports this interpretation:

He adds another corroborative notion through saying, "in the earth" (Jeremiah 9:23) – this being a pivot of the Law. For matters are not as the overbold opine who think that **His providence**, may He be exalted, terminates at the sphere of the moon and that the earth and that which is in it are neglected: "The Lord has forsaken the earth" (Ezekiel

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<sup>2</sup> Hermann Cohen, "*Ofeyah shel Torat ha-Midot le-Rambam*," in *Iyyunim be-Yahadut u-be-Va'ayot ha-Dor*, Jerusalem 5738, pp. 17-59. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik has developed this approach in various places in his writings.

<sup>3</sup> Julius Guttman, in his chapter on Maimonides in his magnum opus on Jewish philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> Prof. Yeshayahu Leibowitz in his book, "*Emunato shel ha-Rambam*."

9:9). Rather is it as has been made clear to us by the Master of those who know: "That the earth is the Lord's" (Exodus 9:29). He means to say that **His providence** also extends over the earth in the way that corresponds to what the latter is, just as **His providence** extends over the heavens in the way that corresponds to what they are. This is what he says: "That I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness, in the earth" (Jeremiah 9:23).

Lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness constitute an expression of God's providence on earth, or more precisely, in the material world beneath the lunar sphere. The prophet's comprehension of God should not suffice with his recognition of God's essence which, at the bottom line, can only be formulated in the negative, namely, that God is one, i.e., there is no multiplicity in Him, that He has no body, and that there is no one like Him. The prophet must strive toward a **positive** recognition of God. Since there can be no positive description of the attributes of God (as Maimonides proves in the first part of his *Guide*), the positive description of God must relate to **His actions**. God's actions are the processes taking place in the natural world, of which God is the cause. We can only recognize God's providence by reflection on the world and its processes. The prophet must complete his recognition of God by recognizing His actions in the world, and move thereby from negative to positive recognition of God, namely, knowing His actions.

Then he completes the notion by saying: "For in these things I delight, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:23). He means that it is My purpose that there should come **from you** lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth in the way we have explained with regard to the thirteen attributes: namely, that the purpose should be **assimilation** to them and that this should be **our way of life**.

Anyone who contemplates the deeper meaning of the natural processes, recognizing God as their first cause, is neither able nor permitted to remain in the realm of speculative knowledge. He must draw practical conclusions that demand of him that he act in a similar manner. The simple conclusion is that just as God leads His world in this manner, so too a political leader who reaches comprehension of God must lead his people in the same way. Thus, knowledge of God brings the prophet to lead the state and society in a manner similar to the way God leads His world. This indeed is how Maimonides concludes his discussion of this matter.

Thus the end that he sets forth in this verse may be stated as follows: It is clear that **the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in** is the one acquired by him who has

achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows **His providence** extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and **in their governance** as it is. The **way of life** of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness, through **assimilation** to His actions, may He be exalted, just as we have explained several times in this treatise.

## REVELATION IN THE CLEFT OF THE ROCK

In the course of this discussion, Maimonides refers the reader to what he said regarding the thirteen attributes through which God revealed Himself to Moses. Maimonides's commentators<sup>5</sup> have pointed to the close connection between our chapter (*Guide* III, 54) and *Guide* I, 54, the chapter in which Maimonides explains how God revealed Himself to Moses in the cleft of the rock by way of the thirteen attributes. Lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness parallel the thirteen Divine attributes of mercy, namely, the ways by which God leads His world.

In the cleft of the rock, Moses presented God with two requests, the first that He should let him know His essence, and the second that He should let him know His attributes. "Show me Your glory" (Exodus 33:18) constitutes a request to know God's essence, and "Show me now Your way" (*ibid.* v. 13) constitutes a request to know His attributes. As for His essence, God answered that this is unknowable, "For no man shall see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). This hints at Maimonides's argument that one cannot know God in a positive sense. Regarding knowledge of his ways and attributes, God answered Moses that He would pass before him His traits, i.e., His ways and attributes. Maimonides explains that these thirteen attributes are God's providence in the world. Thus far, this chapter clearly parallels our chapter. But Maimonides adds:

Scripture has restricted itself to mentioning only those thirteen attributes, although [Moses] apprehended all His goodness – I mean to say all His actions – **because these are the actions proceeding from Him, may He be exalted, in respect of giving existence to men and governing them.** This was [Moses's] ultimate object in his demand, the conclusion of what he says being: "That I may know You, to the end that I

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<sup>5</sup> Eliezer Goldman, "*Ha-Avodah ha-Meyuchedet be-Masigei ha-Amitot*," *Mechkarim ve-Iyyunim*, Jerusalem 5757, pp. 60-135. This is also what emerges from the studies of Shlomo Pines and his introduction to his English translation of the *Guide*.

many find grace in Your sight and consider that this nation is Your people" (Exodus 33:13), that is, **a people for the government of which I need to perform actions that I must seek to make similar to Your actions in governing them.**

Moses requested that God let him know His ways and attributes in order to lead the people. Thus, it turns out that also the *Guide* III, 54 relates to the prophet's leadership and not to the individual's personal development for the sake of self-perfection. It is precisely the prophet's profound apprehension of God that leads him from the knowledge of God's essence to the knowledge of His attributes. Knowledge of these attributes obligates him to imitate God regarding the ways in which He conducts His world. But the transition from the level of speculative apprehension to practical political activity is by no means simple. The prophet must decide to dedicate his energies to the needs of the community, when the process comes at the cost of spiritual descent.

The angels of God, who are the prophets, first ascend the ladder set up on the earth, the top of which reaches heaven, and when they reach the top of the ladder and meet the master of the palace, they reveal that positive knowledge of God who stands beyond the ladder is impossible and that He can only be known through His actions in this world. This theoretical knowledge changes their understanding, teaching them that God Himself leads the lower world, at all its levels, even the sublunar world. This recognition creates a new consciousness for the prophet, that he must not suffice with speculative activity, but rather he must lead the people with the ways used by God in order to bring even the lowliest person to reach his human destiny. Leading people is one of the obligations of the man of God, in order to bring whomever he can to apprehend God. This was recognized by Abraham who began to call "in the name of the Lord, God of the world." This was the way of Moses, father of the prophets, and this was the way adopted by R. Moses ben Maimon in his halakhic enterprise, whose entire objective is encapsulated in the verse with which his books open, "In the name of the Lord, God of the world."

#### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PROPHET AND A PHILOSOPHER

In his *Guide* (III, 54), Maimonides mentions the philosophers' idea of the four species of perfection, adding that even the prophets agreed with them. He notes, however, that the prophets added something to what the philosophers said. Philosophy terminates man's mission with the apprehension of God, making no further demands upon him. Prophecy, however, recognizes that the prophet's mission is not to be satisfied with his own personal apprehension of God. But rather he must strive to spread the knowledge of God in every possible place, to

call out in the name of God wherever it is feasible. Recognizing this, he harnesses himself to this mission by leading the people by way of the Torah, which does not suffice with physical perfection, but requires also spiritual perfection.