



LECTURE #9:
CREATION OF THE WORLD
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We concluded the previous lecture with the distinction drawn by Maimonides between the philosopher and the prophet. Whereas the philosopher sees man's ultimate objective in the apprehension of God, and focuses his energies on the attainment of this objective, the prophet is not satisfied with his personal achievement, but rather sees himself bound to lead his nation toward this goal. In order to achieve this aim, the prophet accepts the obligation to carry out his mission, to go down to the people and lead them to the apprehension of God, each individual in accordance with his ability.

We saw earlier that it is precisely the prophet's profound comprehension of God that leads him to this conclusion. This deep and scrutinizing study brings him not only to apprehend God by way of His negative attributes that elevate Him above all comprehension and any comparison to what exists in our world, but also to recognize Him as the prime cause of reality. This, in effect, is the deeper meaning of God's revelation to Moses in the cleft of the **rock**, as Maimonides notes in his *Guide* (1:16), in his explanation of the term *tzur* ("rock"):

Rock [tzur] is an equivocal term.

That is to say, the word has several meanings, **entirely different one from the other**, as opposed to **a borrowed term**, namely, a metaphor, where there is a similarity between the various meanings. We have already clarified that according to Maimonides the Torah and the Prophets are written in part as parables, "like apples of gold in settings of silver." One way that the Torah conceals its esoteric truths is by using words having multiple meanings. It is for this reason that the story relating to the cleft in the rock is formulated the way it is, the term "*tzur*" intentionally chosen because of its multiple denotations. Maimonides explicates the various meanings of the word "*tzur*."

It is a term denoting a mountain... It is also a term denoting a hard stone like flint... It is, further, a term denoting the quarry from which quarry-stones are hewn...

In derivation from the third meaning of this **equivocal** term (quarry), the word was applied to God, who is also designated by the term "*tzur*."

Subsequently, **in derivation** from the last meaning, the term was used figuratively to **designate the root and principle of every thing**... On account of the last meaning, God, may He be exalted, is designated as the **Rock**, as he is **the principle and the efficient cause of all things other than himself**. Accordingly it is said: "The Rock, His work is perfect" (Deuteronomy 32:4); "Of the Rock that begot you, you were unmindful" (Deuteronomy 32:18); "Their Rock had given them over" (Deuteronomy 32:30); "And there is no Rock like our God" (I Samuel 2:2); "The Rock of Eternity" (Isaiah 26:4).

The last verse cited by Maimonides to illustrate the meaning of the term *tzur* relates to God's revelation to Moses in the cleft of the rock:

The verse, "**And you shall stand upon the rock**" (Exodus 33:21) means: **Rely upon, and be firm in considering, God, may He be exalted, as the first principle. This is the entryway through which you shall come to Him**, as we have made clear when speaking of His saying [to Moses]: "Behold, there is a place by Me" (*ibid.*).

Seeing God as the first principle and prime cause of all reality, including the material world, brought Moses to see God as the source of the lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness through which the world is governed. As a result, Moses understood that he must lead his people in the same manner that God leads His world. This is the difference between the prophet and the philosopher: while the philosopher sees the apprehension of God as the ultimate objective of his life, the prophet adds to that the task of leading the people.¹

¹ A distinction must be made regarding this issue between Aristotle and Plato. According to Aristotle, the philosopher plays no role in governing the state, whereas Plato is known for his position regarding the philosopher-king whose job it is to serve as a political leader. I believe that it is possible to demonstrate that Plato approaches the Torah's position on this matter, even according to Maimonides in his discussion cited below regarding the creation of the world.

CREATION OF THE WORLD

It is with respect to the question of the creation of the world that Maimonides sets prophecy against philosophy in most explicit fashion. Maimonides devotes a considerable portion of his *Guide for the Perplexed* (II, chapters 13-31) to counter the philosophical claim prevalent in his day that the world was not created, but rather has existed from eternity.

In his *Guide* (II, 13), Maimonides presents three opinions regarding the source of the world.

1. The opinion of those who believe in the Law of Moses that the world was created *ex nihilo*.
2. The opinion of Plato that the world was generated from some primeval matter, out of which God fashioned the world and the laws of nature.
3. The opinion of Aristotle that the world as we know it, with all its components and laws, has existed from eternity.

Maimonides explicitly objects to the view of Aristotle, constructing his argument in a series of steps:

1. He first points out that **there is no demonstrable proof**, unequivocally proving the eternity of the world.
2. He then demonstrates the **possibility** of the view that posits the newness of the world, that is, that the world was created *ex nihilo*.
3. Finally Maimonides presents arguments that **support** and incline towards the position that the world was created.

The logic of the Middle Ages recognized three levels of proof:

1. **Demonstrable proof**, namely, irrefutable proof that proves a position beyond all shadow of a doubt.
2. **Dialectical proof**, namely, proof that one can conceive of the logical possibility of a certain conclusion as well as its opposite. Each of the contradictory conclusions is possible, though at times support may be adduced that gives greater weight to one of the alternatives.
3. **Rhetorical proof**, which does not actually prove anything, but rather uses society's preconceptions to establish a given position.

Maimonides was apparently of the opinion that proofs regarding the matter of the creation of the world versus its eternity belong to the second level of proofs. From a logical perspective, one can conceive of the possibility of each of the two positions.² Maimonides does not believe that there exists demonstrable proof that the world was created *ex nihilo*, just as there exists no proof to the opposite position. But he maintains that the newness of the world is a **logical possibility**. Moreover, it is legitimate to incline toward this position and prefer it to the alternative. This is the limit of what may be expected of **reason** in this matter. **Prophecy**, however, and especially the prophecy of Moses have unequivocally established, according to Maimonides, that the world was created out of nothingness.

THE DISAGREEMENT ABOUT HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE POSITION OF MAIMONIDES

The sincerity of Maimonides's stated position regarding creation was not accepted by all his readers and commentators. From his earliest commentators down to the scholars of our own day, those who have addressed the issue have disagreed about the matter. Some commentators inclined to accept that Maimonides concealed his true position on this topic. Some have argued that his true opinion is like that of Aristotle. Among other things, they base their opinion on the fact that in his introduction to the *Guide* Maimonides proclaims that he intends to conceal certain esoteric truths from the masses. These commentators regard the issue of the eternity of the world as the secret truth that Maimonides most wished to conceal. Others have suggested that Maimonides leans toward the view of Plato, and that this position is hidden between the lines. In contradistinction, there are commentators who have tried in various ways to demonstrate that there are weighty arguments supporting the position that Maimonides truly and sincerely clings to the Torah's position. But this position must be understood on a deeper level, and not in simplistic fashion.³

² Interestingly, about six hundred years later the German philosopher Immanuel Kant showed how the question whether or not the world was created is an antinomy, that is to say, proof can be brought to both alternatives, but it is impossible to arrive at a logical resolution that irrefutably proves either one of the possibilities.

³ For a summary of the various ways to understand the secrets of Maimonides, see Aviezer Rabitzki, "*Sitrei Torato shel Moreh ha-Nevukhim – ha-Parshanut be-Dorotav u-be-Doroteinu*," *Mechkarei Yerushalayim be-Machshevet Yisra'el* 5, Jerusalem, 1986, pp. 23-69; and again in his book, *Al Da'at ha-Makom*, Jerusalem 1991.

This lecture is not the proper forum in which to discuss the various approaches to this issue. I wish only to mention one point that, in my opinion, supports the opinion that Maimonides was indeed faithful to the Torah's position on this topic. We shall present this support from a slightly unconventional perspective that connects us to the previous lectures dealing with Maimonides's literary-halakhic project. That is to say, from the understanding that Maimonides's project continues the prophetic mission started by Abraham and continued by Moses.

THE CONFUSION REGARDING THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

In his *Guide* (II, 25), Maimonides explains why he takes such a firm stand against the opinion of Aristotle and argues in favor of the creation of the world. But first he rules out one possible explanation:

Know that our shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.

Maimonides opens with the declaration that he did not arrive at his position because he felt obligated to interpret Scripture according to its plain sense. Over the course of the chapter, he clarifies what brought him to his position by contrasting the way he treats two different issues - the corporeality of God and the creation of the world. The common denominator of the two is the fact that Scripture's pronouncements relating to each of these issues seem to contradict the opinions of the philosophers. There are many passages in the Torah that describe God as a body in contradiction to the philosophical conception that denies all corporeality from God. Similarly, there are many Scriptural verses that point to the creation of the world, thus contradicting the philosophers' claim regarding the world's eternity.

It should be noted that the entire objective of the *Guide of the Perplexed* is to deal with the contradictions between the Torah and philosophy. The "perplexed" to whom the book is directed is a person who clings to the Law of Moses, knows its laws and statutes, and acts accordingly, and in addition has studied the works of the philosophers and found that their conclusions are in accord with reason. This situation leads him to a perplexing dilemma: Should he ignore his faculty of reason which matches the position of the philosophers, and thus remain loyal to his religion, or should he forsake his religion, and faithfully follow the dictates of his reason? Maimonides tries to provide the confused reader with a way to hold fast onto both. These two issues – the corporeality of God and the creation of the world – may, therefore, be seen as two particular instances that sharply express the objective of the entire book.

Maimonides points out that he acted differently in each case. Regarding the corporeality of God, he adopted the philosophical view that God is not a body, and thus was forced to reinterpret Scripture not in accordance with its plain sense. Regarding the eternity of the world, on the other hand, he held fast to the Torah's view that the world was created, in sharp contrast to the view of the philosophers. We see, then, that Scripture does not pose a problem for Maimonides. This position is based on two arguments.

First, argues Maimonides, the number of verses that indicate that the world was created is no greater than the number of verses that imply that God is a body. He seems to be saying that accepting the doctrine of the eternity of the world would not have required him to explain large sections of the Torah not in its plain sense. Moreover, Maimonides implies that the corporeal descriptions of God are far more prevalent in the Torah than the verses that indicate that the world was created. In this respect, the exegetical task regarding creation would have been no more difficult than that regarding God's corporeality.

Second, adds Maimonides, since the gates of figurative interpretation are never shut, he can interpret Scripture according to either position, that which advocates the creation of the world, or that which assumes its eternity. In order to reinforce his position, he points to a precedent in which he had acted in this manner. In order to defend his position that God is not a body, he toiled and labored to interpret certain verses not in their plain sense, and he saw nothing illegitimate in this approach. Had he wanted to do so, then, he could have interpreted the biblical verses according to either opinion. On the contrary, reinterpreting the verses that point to the creation of the world would have been easier than reinterpreting the verses that imply God's corporeality.

The problem, then, is not one of exegesis. We must, therefore, find a different explanation as to why Maimonides adopted the position that the world was created.

CREATION OF THE WORLD AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE TORAH

Two causes are responsible for our not doing this or believing it:

One of them is as follows. That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively, for it is known that such texts are of necessity fit for figurative interpretation. However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently in this case the texts ought not to be rejected and figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments. This is one cause.

The **second** cause is as follows. Our belief that the deity is not a body destroys for us none of the foundations of the Law and does not give the lie to the claims of any prophet. The only objection to it is constituted by the fact that the ignorant think that this belief is contrary to the text; yet it is not contrary to it, as we have explained, but is intended by the text.

On the other hand, the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it – that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything - destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out, unless – by God! – one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic internalists; this, however, would result in some sort of crazy imaginings.

Maimonides offers two reasons for adopting the view that the world was created:

1. The idea that God is not a body has been irrefutably demonstrated, whereas the world's eternity has not been demonstrated.

We saw earlier that, according to Maimonides, only dialectical proof is possible in this regard. He makes great effort to demonstrate that there is no irrefutable proof to Aristotle's position. Rather, Aristotle inclined toward this view, while Maimonides claims that the contrary argument carries greater weight. The implication is that only when Scripture contradicts what follows from logical demonstration should the verses be interpreted not in their plain sense. When, however, opposed to Scripture there stands a position that is not logically necessary,

but rather there are two possible positions, preference should be given to the plain sense of the biblical text. We have arrived then at a meta-exegetical argument, that is, a fundamental rule that serves as the basis for the exegetical process itself: Interpreting verses not in accordance with their plain sense should be limited to those instances where the plain sense of the verse absolutely contradicts reason. We would have no difficulty explaining the verses in accordance with the view that the world has existed from eternity, but such an interpretation would contradict the principles of exegesis.

2. Maimonides adds a second, and what appears to be the primary reason. The conclusion that God is not a body does not contradict the principles of the Torah, whereas the belief in eternity destroys the Torah's very foundations.

It would seem from what he says in the continuation that Maimonides is referring here in the main to the Torah's principles regarding providence, the reward and punishment promised to those who observe the Torah and those who transgress its commandments, and primarily the question of the possibility of miracles. According to Aristotle's understanding of eternity, miracles are impossible.

THE GOD OF ARISTOTLE AND THE GOD OF ABRAHAM

According to Aristotle, since the world follows necessarily from God, the world must exist from eternity. The existence of God necessitates the existence of the world alongside Him. While the world follows from God, and God serves as its prime cause, God's existence did not precede that of the world. From a logical perspective, God precedes the world, because He is its cause, but it is impossible that the world should not exist as a result of God's existence. It is not God's will that the world should exist, but it necessarily exists because of Him. What demonstrates more than anything else that the world is a necessary consequence of God is the regularity of the world. The universal order that finds expression in the constancy of things points to the Divine wisdom that is the cause of this order. But the God of Aristotle does not want this regularity, nor did He choose it; rather, it is caused incidentally to God's thinking about Himself.

This is the basic definition of Aristotle's God: "Mind contemplating itself." God is the most elevated being, the mind that is engaged in the most elevated activity, namely, thought, thinking about the most elevated thing, namely, God. In other words, mind contemplating itself. The God of Aristotle dwells within Himself and turns exclusively to Himself. The world is an incidental consequence of this self-thought. This explains why God does not relate

to the world, nor does He want it or take an interest in what transpires there. The world with its natural order is immutable, and from eternity it has been shaped with this order. The natural order itself cannot be changed, for it is the eternal consequence of God's thought about Himself. Therefore, miracles are impossible, for they constitute a change in the law of the universe. A miracle would be a change in that law, but since that law is a necessary result of the eternal thought of God, it cannot possibly change.

The Aristotelian philosopher is fashioned in the image of his God. His essence is mind, and his entire objective is to contemplate the most elevated thought. As opposed to God, he does not contemplate himself, but rather his God, for God is the most elevated thought.

A miracle points to God's "interest" in the world. It indicates that the world is not merely the necessary consequence of Divine wisdom, but also of Divine will. Had God contemplated Himself alone, He would have dwelt within Himself forever, and the world would never have been created. The creation of the world indicates that God looks beyond Himself, a phenomenon that we call will. The creation of the world attributes to God will, and not only wisdom. While in God the two are inseparable, when we look at the world, we can identify these two different aspects. The world's order points to God's wisdom, whereas miracles point to His will.

The prophet who walks in the path of Abraham and Moses – he too imitates his God and acts in His image. Through the creation of the world, it became clear that thought is not the exclusive objective, but rather there exists an aspect of will that is directed toward the lower worlds and their leaders. The prophet follows in God's footsteps to lead man, and he is not satisfied with the apprehension of the rational truths. Thus, the attainment of prophecy leads the prophet not only to ascend the ladder, but also to descend it and serve as a political leader of his people. The creation of the world serves as the foundation of the Law of Moses in that it supports the prophetic mission.

Fundamentally, Maimonides is prepared to accept the position of Plato:

If, however, one believed in eternity according to the second opinion we have explained – which is the opinion of Plato – according to which the heavens too are subject to generation and corruption, this opinion would not destroy the foundations of the Law and would be followed not by the lie being given to miracles, but by their becoming admissible. It would also be possible to interpret figuratively the texts in

accordance with this opinion. And many obscure passages can be found in the texts of the Torah and others with which this opinion could be connected or rather by means of which it could be proved. However, no necessity could impel us to do this unless this opinion were demonstrated.

In view of the fact that it has not been demonstrated, we shall not favor this opinion, nor shall we at all heed that other opinion, but rather shall take the texts according to their external sense and shall say: The Law has given us knowledge of a matter the grasp of which is not within our power, and the miracle attests to the correctness of our claims.

Plato's opinion, as opposed to that of Aristotle, allows for miracles; it sees God as relating to the world, and so it does not contradict the foundations of the Torah. Indeed, Plato views the philosopher-king who leads the state as the ideal man. In this respect, Plato's teachings are closer to those of the Torah than are those of Aristotle. But as Maimonides concludes, this opinion has not been demonstrated, and so it is preferable to follow the plain sense of Scripture on this matter.