

GUIDE 1:1 OPEN THE GATES

Maimonides begins Chapter 1 of the Guide with the motto, “Open Ye the gates, that the righteous nation that keepeth faithfulness may enter in” (Isaiah 26:2). He means that he wrote the Guide for the righteous man of religion perplexed by his encounter with the sciences who needs the gates of understanding opened.

The motto is close in thought to the ideas quoted a page previously in the Guide’s Introduction, from the Talmud, *Sabbath*, 30a, where Solomon discovers the formula to open the gates to the Holy of Holies. Maimonides had concluded the Introduction with just such a promise to open of the gates of understanding:

“This book will then be a key admitting to places the gates of which would otherwise be closed. When the gates are opened and men enter, their souls will enjoy repose, their eyes will be gratified, and even their bodies, after all toil and labor, will be refreshed.”

We learn the meaning of such captioning mottos by seeing how Maimonides uses those passages elsewhere in the Guide. Maimonides mentions the motto in only one other place in the Guide, chapter 3:7. He says there (Pines trans., p. 428):

“This is something that frequently occurs in the speech of the prophets—I mean the use of figurative expressions of the opening and also of the opening of gates.”

After which he quotes the motto in Isaiah. That same chapter, Guide 3:7, is concerned with Ezekiel’s vision of the divine chariot, the *merkavah*. This is where Maimonides provides the “chapter headings” to the obscure subject of the *Maaseh Merkavah*, i.e., the mechanism of divine providence in the world. Maimonides begins that very difficult chapter with the following peculiar statement:

“One of the points that require investigation is the connection between the vision of the *merkavah* and the year, month, and day, and also the place of the vision. A reason must be found for this connection, and we must not think that it is an indifferent element in the vision.”

“A reason must be given...” But Maimonides does not tell us when and where Ezekiel’s vision takes place. Nor is it obvious what importance the time and the place of the vision have. This is certainly not obvious from the text of Ezekiel 1:1-3:

“Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth [month], in the fifth [day] of the month, as I [was] among the captives by the river of Chebar, [that] the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. In the fifth [day] of the month, which [was] the fifth year of king Jehoiachin’s captivity, the word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was there upon him.”

The rabbinical tradition supplies the account that Maimonides points to. The Chaldeans captured King Jehoiachin three months after he ascended to power. They took him together with the Jewish upper classes to Chaldea. Precisely thirty years before the date of his captivity, Jehoiachin’s predecessor King Josiah presided over the discovery of a Torah scroll mysteriously opened to passages in Deuteronomy forecasting the punishment of exile. A national wave of repentance and religious enthusiasm followed this discovery, which remained a blessing for the people when they were exiled. Six years after the date of Ezekiel’s prophecy, Nebuchadnezzar would destroy the Temple. God opened the heavens for Ezekiel six years earlier so that he could see the destruction of the Temple and prophesy it. Perhaps the Jews could still avoid the destruction. If he failed, the rest of his prophecy (the rest of the book of Ezekiel) would foretell the plan for the construction of the new Temple.

There is a link in thought between the opening of the gates of the Temple and the opening of the heavens in this vision. The Temple represents the indwelling of God among the people. The destruction of the Temple represents the Jews' exile from God. But the blessings of David for Solomon, and the blessing of Josiah for Ezekiel, grant the people the ability to open those locked gates of inspiration.

The motto from Isaiah, "Open Ye the gates, that the righteous nation that keepeth *faithfulness* may enter in," refers to the people who are faithful to the prophecy of Moses. Maimonides' specifically bases his reply to Aristotle on the crucial issue of the creation of the world on *Mosaic* prophecy. In Josiah's day, the Jews rediscovered that prophecy, which is the Torah. That prophecy brought the blessing of Torah to Josiah's people and opened the gates of understanding for Ezekiel. This motto, as with all such commencement mottos used by Maimonides, is important, and carries the germ of the whole book. He means to recover prophecy for the Jews by recovering the true understanding of Mosaic prophecy.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LEXICAL CHAPTERS OF THE GUIDE

The most important thing for readers of the Bible to understand is that terms implying divine corporeality must not be so interpreted. Therefore, Maimonides prepared a lexicon of those terms with their permissible interpretations, supported by proof-texts.

I have taken apart his lexical chapters and rearranged them in something like dictionary format to make them easier for the reader to analyze. I supply the full quotations of Maimonides' proof-texts, and, in brackets, my comments. Maimonides only supplies fragments from his selected proof-texts. For instance, in this chapter, his first definition of *tselem* is "form," like the Platonic forms. He quotes Genesis 1:26 in support of this definition, but he only quotes a phrase from the verse. I have highlighted this phrase in greyscale background, returning it to its place in the actual proof-text (I use King James version, KJV, when possible):

"And God said, Let us make man *in our image (b'tsalmenu)*, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." (Genesis 1:26)

I italicize the English words for the specific lexical term translated, as well as their original Hebrew. This will be my procedure throughout the lexical chapters in the first book of the Guide.

Maimonides uses quotations from scripture to document his definitions. He generally gives more than one definition of each term. There is usually a gradation in those definitions from corporeal to purely intellectual. Since he generally does not provide the full quotations, reading these chapters is hard. He also does not explain why he chose these particular proof-texts. He relied on a public that knew these texts from memory, and who knew their traditional Jewish interpretation.

In his lexical chapters (generally Guide 1:1 through 1:40, with some exceptions, and with some "late lexical" chapters occurring later in the Guide), Maimonides is concerned with two types of terms, those that are *amphibolous*, and those that are *homonymous*. A term is *amphibolous* when used similarly in two statements or senses, but in one the term is used *essentially* and in the other *accidentally* (i.e., it is always vs. it may be intermittently). Two terms are *homonymous* when they sound the same, but have two completely unrelated meanings. The distinction is critical because all of these terms are used of God, and we want to know whether the terms have anything in common when applied to men. In other words, can we have any relation with God at all? My argument is that unless he explicitly states that a term is used homonymously that he meant it to be amphibolous. This is a major battleground of the Guide.

Why does he begin the Guide this way? He has just composed a readable and fascinating *Introduction*. But his first chapter and most of the next forty-four chapters are lexical in nature. These lexical chapters are difficult to

read. Maimonides placed them at the beginning to put off the truly unqualified reader. This is one way in which he observes the rule against public teaching of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava*, yet produces a book containing that teaching.

David Bakan maintains that the lexicon serves another purpose. Maimonides will later explain that the way prophecy works is that the prophet's imagination receives divine emanation in the dream state. The prophet must come to understand that emanation, so that he can teach it to the public. By producing different meanings for these terms, relating them to each other, and even by rearranging their letters, the prophet's subconscious produces strange parables. These parables reveal the content of the emanation to those who know how to interpret them (*Maimonides on Prophecy*, Jason Aronson Publ., 1991).

It is important to note the type of proof-texts that Maimonides provided. They are either *pejorative* or *non-pejorative*. I mean by this that the quotations themselves or the stories the Bible couches them in, when pejorative, relate bad things or castigate bad people. Maimonides chose these pejorative texts for definitions of his lexical terms which are *corporeal* so that he could express displeasure with those definitional options in the range of definitions that he provides, especially when those terms used of God. God may not ever be regarded as corporeal.

Another type of proof-text contains sexual or prurient content. These may or may not be corporeal in nature, and may indicate the presence of an esoteric topic. He usually chose these materials to make some point about the process of creation, and in these quotations, *matter* is always taken to be female and *form* to be male.

In assembling his proof-texts, Maimonides usually follows the principle that "In holy matters men must ascend (*ma'alim*) and not descend (*moridin*)" (Talmud: *Berakhot* 28a, invoked in Guide 1:10). He arranges his definitions and proof texts in the order of ascension to holiness. That is why they frequently begin with the most physical or anthropomorphic use of a term. It also explains the odd way he arrays the proof-texts themselves, frequently treating later verses before previous verses.

As you read these biblical quotations, you should try to pick up a narrative flow or account. Maimonides uses proof-texts as an artist uses oils. He does not pile them on for effect the way lawyers do. Each quotation gives a different coloration to the picture he presents, expressing one or another of the many ideas encapsulated in each term, each of which points to a different but important feature of our relationship with God. I try not to impose meaning on these quotations, but to discover their teaching phenomenologically.

A number of the lexical chapters begin with an initial sentence declaring a biblical term "homonymous," *shem mshutaf*, i.e., susceptible of *completely* different meanings. The first of these is Guide 1:12, which commences "The term *kima* is a homonym" (*kima shem mshutaf*). I show in the heading of my dictionary treatment when Maimonides begins by saying that the term is homonymous. In other chapters, he says that the term is homonymous but only in the body of his chapter. When that is the case, I also do so.

NAASEI ADAM B'TSALMENU B'DMUTEINU LET US MAKE MAN IN OUR IMAGE AND LIKENESS

Summary of the Chapter's Ideas: Maimonides begins his lexicon with the term "image," from Genesis 1:26: "Let us make man in our image," because it links concerns occurring throughout the Guide. The verse begs the question whether man can be like God in any respect. Since God is entirely incorporeal there can only be an *intellectual* likeness. The term "image" reminds us that Maimonides understands the imagination to be closer to the senses than to the intellect. He always takes the imagination to be inferior to the mind, since it only makes copies of corporeal things, and is, therefore, in some way, itself corporeal. The verse suggests that the notion of resemblance implied in "image" is only an apparent or perhaps accidental resemblance, i.e., a homonymous or amphibolous resemblance.

Finally, he takes “form,” a meaning of the term *tselem* (translated by KJV above as “image”), in the sense of (Gr.) *eidos*, the *form* that the philosophers spoke of. In Plato, the forms are the eternal patterns that infuse unformed matter to create individual things. In Aristotle, the form or “universal” is the definition of each thing, i.e., the form of man would be “speaking animal”. The suggestion of the verse from Genesis, then, would be that God informed us with the form of the intelligent soul. (*Zoon Logikon*, i.e., speaking or discoursing animal, a phrase not actually in Aristotle, but generally taken as a paraphrase of *Ethics* 1098a1-20, not, as frequently seen, *Metaphysics* 1037b13-14)

Maimonides begins by noting:

“Some have been of the opinion that by the Hebrew *tzelem*, the shape and figure of a thing is to be understood, and this explanation led men to believe in the corporeality [of the Divine Being]: for they thought that the words ‘Let us make man in our *tzelem*’ (Gen.1:26), implied that God had the form of a human being, i.e., that He had figure and shape, and that, consequently, He was corporeal.”

Obviously, this is not going to be one of Maimonides’ definitions. Is it farfetched to think that a Jew would interpret the text corporeally? Maimonides’ early antagonist, the *Ravad*, R. Abraham Ben David (c.1125-1198) wrote:

“Why does Maimonides call him [who says that God is corporeal] a heretic (*min*)? Many men, even greater and better than Maimonides believed it, they being apparently supported by some passages in the Bible, and particularly by Aggadic writings, which frequently lead the reader astray.” (*Hasagot ha-Ravad*, on Mishneh Torah, *Teshuvah* 3:7)

The *Ravad* tries to have it both ways, first pointing to those unnamed “greater and better” men who were corporealists, “apparently” supported by passages that “frequently lead the reader astray.” Nonetheless, he admits the prevalence of the scandal of corporealism.

* * *

***TSELEM* (FORM):**

1. “The specific form, viz., that which constitutes the essence of a thing, whereby the thing is what it is; the reality of a thing in so far as it is that particular being.” It is the incorporeal form of each being as understood by Aristotle, but can be taken in its Platonic sense as well. In man, the form is the intellect.
2. In man (as in God but differently), the intellectual apprehension or perception. The human soul.
3. When used for idols, it points to the idea represented by the idol.
4. An amulet to ward off harm.

Instances of Definitions 1 & 2

“And God said, Let us make man *in our image (b’tsalmenu)*, after our likeness (*demut*, see below): and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his [own] *image (b’tsalmo)*, in the *image (b’tselem)* of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Genesis 1:26-27)

This first definition is how Maimonides wants us to understand this quote: not referring to man’s corporeal likeness, but to our intellectual likeness.

Instance of Definition 2 Only

“As a dream when [one] awaketh; [so], O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their *image* (*tsalmam*).” (Psalms 73:20)

The Psalm refers to the ‘image’ of bad men. Friedlander, note 2, p. 30 comments: “The contempt is limited to the soul of some individuals, and does not extend to the soul of all men.” Maimonides could mean that the perceptions of their *imaginings*, which were idolatrous, were condemned.

Instance of Definition 3 & 4

“Wherefore ye shall make *images* (*tsalmei*) of your emerods, and images of your mice that mar the land; and ye shall give glory unto the God of Israel: peradventure he will lighten his hand from off you, and from off your gods, and from off your land.” (1 Samuel 6:5)

Maimonides usually does not give more than a word or two of the quotation itself. This is an excellent example: *tsalmei aflekhem*. Emerods=hemorrhoids. The Philistines made golden idols of hemorrhoids and rats as amulets to ward off harm. This is the most “pejorative” quote imaginable, taking pejorative in the sense I explained above. This is no surprise for Maimonides, since “amulet” is the most corporeal definition of the term *tzelem* that he lists.

DEMUT (LIKENESS):

1. Likeness “with regard to some [shared] abstract relation.”
2. Notional likeness. In the examples given, a pelican represents the notion of sadness, a tree represents transient beauty, and serpent venom represents slander. This differs from the first definition, relating instead to the particular notion being compared. In other words, the first definition focuses on the possibility of our being like God, and what that *likeness* means. This second definition focuses on the *notion* compared: the image chosen for the comparison is in some way *exemplary* of the emphasized notion, but does not really represent a shared characteristic.
3. Incorporeal likeness.

Instance of Definition 1

“Let us make man...after our *likeness* (*k'dmuteinu*).” (Genesis 1:26 quoted above)

Comparative likeness, i.e., we are bodies *with* intellects while He is entirely intellectual and non-corporeal, so we liken ourselves to him just in respect of intellectuality. “This term likewise denotes agreement with regard to some abstract relation.” That is, we are *like* him only in non-corporeal terms abstracted by the intellect. In general, this is restricted to intellectual likeness, but there could also be a kind of abstract comparison in terms of our willing, our creativity, etc. Any likeness is at best amphibolous, that is, He is intellectual *essentially*, whereas we are only *accidentally* thinking beings. Meaning: we are from time to time thinking, *active intellects*, to use the Aristotelian formula. By contrast, His intellectuality is identical and essential with Himself. Perhaps it is safest to say that *likeness* in terms of the first definition is an expression in human language of something we think we see in God, but which, mired in our corporeality, we cannot really understand.

Instances of Definition 2

“*I am like* (*damiti*) a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert.” (Psalms 102:7)

This Psalm is about exile. “I am like a pelican” does not mean that I am befeathered, but rather sad, morose, mournful. In this case, different from the first definition, I am in no way *like* a pelican; rather I emphasize my sadness by poetically conjuring the sad aspect of a pelican. No pelican has ever experienced sadness or

moroseness. My likeness to the pelican is a different type from my likeness to God, however distant that likeness may be. My likeness to the pelican is only *notional*, not in terms of a particular shared real characteristic.

“The cedars in the garden of God could not hide him: the fir trees were not like his boughs, and the chesnut trees were not like his branches; nor any tree in the garden of God was *like (dama)* unto him in his beauty.” (Ezekiel 31:8)

Ezekiel compares Assyria to a tree that will be hacked down: a tree is beautiful but transient. Still, a tree is not really like Assyria, except in a poetic sense. According to Rashi, the “Garden of God” is the world. The whole chapter in Ezekiel is an extended and beautiful allegory comparing Assyria to this fine cedar.

“Their poison [is] *like (k'dmut)* the poison of a serpent: [they are] like the deaf adder [that] stoppeth her ear.” (Psalms 58:5)

Psalms notionally compares serpent’s venom to the acts or words of evildoers. Rashi charmingly comments on the last part: “When the snake ages, it becomes deaf in one ear, and closes the other ear with dust so that it should not hear the incantation of the charmer, adjuring it not to cause injury” (Rashi, translated in Judaica Press). Again, the evil men are not really like snakes in respect of slander, for snakes neither slander nor listen to slander. There may be a quibble on the idea of the snake in the Garden of Eden who slandered God. It may refer to the sexual envenoming of Eve by the snake, as contemplated in Midrash, when she pursued material form (compare the “Married Harlot in Proverbs 7). This could then be about how evildoers poison themselves with their venom by their relentless materialistic pursuit. In any event, the reference is corporeal, and, hence, pejorative.

“His likeness is *like (dimeinu)* a lion [that] is greedy of his prey, and as it were a young lion lurking in secret places.” (Psalms 17:12)

The comparison here is that the evil enemy envies our wealth, just as the lion is “greedy” for its prey. Real lions are not in any way envious the way people are, and the comparison is merely poetic license. It is also broadly pejorative and materialistic in its emphasis, as were all the examples under this definition. Maimonides’ general point would be that imaginative poetry, while beautiful, is dangerous. The imaginative and poetic expressions of the unconscious are fraught with materiality and corporeality.

Instance of Definition 3

“And above the firmament that [was] over their heads [was] the *likeness (demut)* of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the *likeness (demut)* of the throne [was] the *likeness (demut)* as the appearance of a man above upon it.” (Ezekiel 1:26)

The comparison emphasizes sublimity, which is a type of *incorporeal likeness*, the third definition. It is from Ezekiel’s vision. Maimonides warns against taking it as a corporeal comparison: “The comparison is made with regard to greatness and glory, not, as many believe, with regard to its [the throne’s] square form, its breadth, or the length of its legs : this explanation applies also to the phrase ‘the likeness of the *hayyot*’” (*hayyot* are the ‘living creatures’ of Ezekiel 1:13).

Maimonides is thinking of a vulgar type of mysticism that made much of the imagined size of the limbs of the celestial creatures. This was called *Shiur Komah* (measure of height) mysticism, which assembled impossibly large physical measurements of God or the angels to stun the mind of the reader. See, generally, Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Second Lecture, Schocken, 1995. Maimonides wrote a *Responsa* castigating *Shiur Komah* mysticism (*Responsa* 117, trans. and comm.: Kraemer, Joel L., *Maimonides, Life and World of One of Civilizations Great Minds*, Doubleday, 2008, pp. 313-314). He means to say here that we should discard such gross comparisons and look to these poetic statements only as expressions of *sublimity*. This is not exactly *notional* likeness, as in the second definition above, but a likeness conditioned by *rational discrimination* to separate out the grosser elements. In Guide 3:7, Maimonides provides his own non-corporeal interpretation of Ezekiel’s *merkavah* vision.

TOAR (IMAGE):

1. Shape, figure
2. Form applied by (human) craft, not divine action

Instances of Definition 1

“And he left all that he had in Joseph’s hand; and he knew not aught he had, save the bread which he did eat. And Joseph was [a] *goodly* [person] (*y’fe toar*), and well favoured.” (Gen. 39:6. Judaica Press has: “Joseph was beautiful in *form*, and beautiful in appearance.”)

This is how Potiphar’s wife views Joseph. *Form* in this first definition is purely the material form, and inappropriate for description of God. Maimonides makes this point with a series of pejorative proof-texts beginning with this very negative choice. Rashi pithily brings out the traditional understanding of this passage: “*Joseph was beautiful in form*: As soon as Joseph found himself (in the position of) ruler, he began eating and drinking and curling his hair. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘Your father is mourning and you curl your hair! I will incite the bear against you.’ Immediately afterwards “his master’s (Potiphar’s) wife lifted up her eyes.” (Rashi, *ad loc.*, from *Tanchuma Vayeshev* 8). Of course, as soon as Maimonides starts with the pejorative nature of material form we are into the relationship matter with form, taken poetically as the relationship of the lustful female and the foolish male, as in the parable of the Married Harlot.

“And he said unto her, *What form (ta’aro) [is] he of?* And she said, An old man cometh up; and he [is] covered with a mantle. And Saul perceived that it [was] Samuel, and he stooped with [his] face to the ground, and bowed himself.” (1 Samuel 28:14)

That is, what does he look like? Saul asks the Witch of Endor to describe the apparition of the prophet Samuel. The episode does not turn out well for Saul. The Torah forbids witchcraft, and Maimonides, as we see in the Third Section of the Guide, largely ascribes the evil lure of idolatry to the sexualized witchcraft of temple priestesses. Idolatry is the ultimate act of unfaithfulness, even *adultery* toward God.

“Then said he unto Zebah and Zalmunna, *What manner of men [were they] whom ye slew at Tabor? And they answered, As thou [art], so [were] they; each one resembled (k’toar—as the form of) the children of a king.*” (Judges 8:18)

Gideon had asked the Midian kings: what did my brothers look like when you killed them? This is the Midian kings’ reply to Gideon, before he in turn killed them. The “resemblance” referred to is purely material, as in the prior proof-text.

Instance of Definition 2

“The carpenter stretcheth out [his] rule; *he marketh it out (taar : he forms it) with a line*; he fitteth it with planes, *and he marketh it out (taar) with the compass*, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house.” (Isa. 44:13)

This is Isaiah’s description of an idol maker. Any material *forms* created by men, which men exalt, are like idols.

Both definitions of *toar* are broadly negative, and so Maimonides’ negative prooftexts express his dissatisfaction with all applications of the term. Most people take *toar* as synonymous with *tselem* and *demut*, but he does not. The term does not appear in our chapter’s principal verse, “Let us make man in our own image and likeness.” Only the terms *tselem* and *demut* are properly attributable to God, and only in their non-corporeal definitions.