

GUIDE 1:16 ROCK

This is a lexical chapter. See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”

***TZUR* (ROCK) (Homonym)**

1. A mountain or a stone.
2. A quarry, and then, figuratively, the root, origin and cause of anything, particularly with respect to God. By extension, a name of God. By further extension, *tzur*, in the sense of Aristotelian form (This last is not explicit in the chapter).

Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock (*ba-tzur*), and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.” (Exodus 17:6)

God instructs Moses to bring water to his thirsty people miraculously by striking Mount Horeb with his staff. Maimonides actually says: “*tzur*...is the name of *the* mountain,” *tzur...hu shem ha-har*, in both Kafih and Schwarz translations (Pines has “a mountain,” Friedlander, “a rock”). This proof-text is shared with the last chapter, where we learned that “I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb,” meant that God’s relation to Moses at that place was “stable, permanent and constant, not the erect position of the body.” We are meant to link this to Definition 2, *tzur* as “cause,” so that the entire passage, in which Moses strikes the rock, splitting it (see Rashi), drawing water for the people, is an image of the prophetic process, like Jacob’s Ladder. In both cases, God “stands” over the place, the prophet draws forth divinely emanated prophecy for the people. Springs of water always represent the prophetic channel.

“At that time the Lord said unto Joshua, Make thee *sharp* knives, (“Knives of stone”: *kharvot tzurim*) and circumcise again (*shuv mol*) the children of Israel the second time.” (Joshua 5:2)

Maimonides merely notes that the knives were flint (*khalamish*). The context was Joshua’s mass circumcision of the Jews. According to rabbinic tradition, the term *shuv mol* is a more complex process than the original sort of circumcision practiced by Abraham, a fact Maimonides the urologist would know. By bringing a reference, however tangential, to the male genital organ, we recall its figurative sense as “form” or “cause” (especially as “formal cause,” one of the four causes). This links to the next chapter, about the metaphor of male and female for matter and form.

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“1: Harken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord: look unto the *rock (tzur)* [whence] ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit [whence] ye are digged. 2: Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah [that] bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him.” (Isaiah 51:1-2)

Maimonides writes, “It (*tzur*) is next employed to signify the quarry from which the stones are hewn.” He notes Isaiah’s rhetorical device:

“From this latter meaning of the term another figurative notion was subsequently derived, *viz.*, ‘the root and origin’ of all things. It is on this account that after the words ‘Look to the rock whence ye are hewn,’ the Prophet continues, ‘Look unto Abraham your father,’ from which we evidently may infer that the words ‘Abraham your father’ serve to explain ‘the rock whence ye are hewn’: and that the Prophet meant to say, ‘Walk in his ways, put faith in his instruction, and conduct yourselves according to the rule of his life! for the properties contained in the quarry should be found again in those things which are formed and hewn out of it.’”

Rashi is more explicit: “And who is the rock? He is Abraham your forefather. And who is the hole? She is Sarah who bore you.” This proof-text and Maimonides’ treatment ties our chapter to the next chapter, 1:17, about sexual imagery in Plato’s form-matter physics. It also links to 1:28, the “foot” chapter. Maimonides defines *rock*, like *foot*, as “cause”: specifically the masculine causative form as it in-forms feminine matter. We took this as the genital implication of “Knives of *stone*,” *kharbot tzurim*, in Joshua 5:2, knives for circumcision. Since Sarah is the “hole,” “that bore you,” by parallelism *rock* could be a figure for phallus, as *foot* is its euphemism. The general idea would then be: make yourself intellectual progeny of Abraham, and you make yourself a forming channel for God’s creative emanation, i.e., a prophet, a lawgiver, the former of the people. The world has already been formed from matter, but the Jewish people have not yet been formed. The creation of the Jews is more than merely *procreation*, but true *re-creation* of the patriarchal consciousness in each Jew.

“4: [He is] *the Rock (ha-tzur)*, his work [is] perfect: for all his ways [are] judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right [is] he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4)

“17: They sacrificed unto devils (*la-shedim*), not to God; to gods whom they knew not, to new [gods that] came newly up, whom your fathers feared not. 18: *Of the Rock (tzur)* [that] begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee. 19: And when the Lord saw [it], he abhorred [them], because of the provoking of his sons, and of his daughters.” (Deuteronomy 32:17-19)

“30: How should one chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, except *their Rock (tzuram)* had sold them, and the Lord had shut them up? 31: For their *rock* [is] not as our *Rock (ki lo k’ztureinu tzuram)*, even our enemies themselves [being] judged.” (Deuteronomy 32:30-31)

These three prooftexts are all from Moses’ poem at the end of the Torah called *Haazinu* (from its the first line: *haazinu ha-shamayim*, “Give ear, ye heavens”). He invokes these passages to explain that “It is in the latter sense (Definition 2) that the Almighty is called ‘rock,’ the origin and the *causa efficiens* of all things besides Himself.” In other words, by virtue of its meaning as *cause*, “Rock” is a *name* of God. See essay below on *Haazinu*.

“[There is] none holy as the Lord: for [there is] none beside thee: *neither [is there] any rock (tzur)* like our God.” (1 Samuel 2:2)

The passage is from Hannah’s prayer for a child, the future prophet Samuel. The passage is used explicitly by Maimonides to add support to the definition of Rock as a name of God, contrasting it with the other pagan deities. They do not possess God’s causative power because they do not create *ex nihilo*. Moreover, the passage implicitly understands *tzur* in its other sense of *metaphysical* “form.” God is the ultimate source of the forms. (See my essay on Guide 1:3, “How Maimonides Uses the Concepts of Shape and Form.”) Maimonides knew that this understanding is explicit in the Talmud, *Berakhot* 10a:

“Come and observe how the capacity of human beings falls short of the capacity of the Holy One, blessed be He. It is in the capacity of a human being to draw a figure on a wall, but he cannot invest it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. But the Holy One, blessed be He, is not so; He shapes one form in the midst of another (*tzar tzura b’tokh tzura*), and invests it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. And that is what Hannah said: ‘There is none holy as the Lord, for there is none beside Thee, neither is there any *tzur* (rock, form) like our God.’ What means, neither is there any *tzur* like our God? There is no artist (*tzayyar*—former, artist) like our God....To whom did David refer in the five verses beginning with ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul’? He was alluding only to the Holy One, blessed be He, and to the soul. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, fills the whole world, so the soul fills the body.”

The soul (in Maimonides, the mind), is the form of man, and God is the form of the world (1:69). Rashi summarizes the Talmudic passage (*ad loc.* to 1 Samuel 2:2): “There is no artist like our God, Who makes a form within a form.” Thus, “rock” could imply the whole system of Aristotelian hylomorphism, as understood by the neo-Platonic Aristotelians of Maimonides’ day.

“Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord God [is] *everlasting strength (rock of eternity, tzur olamim)*” (Isaiah 26:4)

Maimonides again demonstrates that “rock” is a name of God, implying His eternality (“for ever”) as well as His role as ultimate cause. His son, Abraham ben Ha-Rambam, reads *tzur olamim* as the “...First Cause Who

activates all intermediate causes, thus called ‘the power of the worlds’ (*tzur olamim*), blessed be His name... all causes are attributed to His doing, function according to His will, and are subservient to His desire.” Taking *tzur* in a slightly different sense as God’s formation of prophetic consciousness, Rabbi Abraham emphasizes the first part, “Trust (*bit’khu*, rely) ye in the Lord,” to mean that Isaiah makes it obligatory to rely on messages received from God’s prophets (*The Guide to Serving God, HaMaspik l’Ovdei HaShem*, trans. Wincelberg, p. 237, 309, Feldheim, 2008).

“And the Lord said, Behold, [there is] a place (*makom*) by me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock (*v’nitzavta al ha-tzur*).” (Exodus 33:21)

God is the source of all things. He allows Moses to receive the divine glory if he agrees to remain steadfast in contemplation of Him. See below the second essay discussing this passage.

HAAZINU

Haazinu (Deuteronomy 32:1-43) is a long poem combining historical and hortatory themes, one of the finest songs in scripture. When Maimonides quotes three verses from a chapter in scripture, we can be sure that the whole chapter is important to him.

Moses begins by contrasting the evil generation of the flood with God’s subsequent creation, the Jews. Like a father, he raised them, but (line 17) they became rebellious children and sacrificed to demons (*shedim*—see my essay “Demons” on Guide 1:7). They sacrificed to gods who were not eternal like God is, and who did them no good. The poem frequently uses the term “rock,” either synonymously with God, or by ironic antithesis with the idols.

Unlike the rocks of the idolators, “[He is] *the Rock (ha-tzur)*, His work [is] perfect,” *ha-tzur tamim paalo*. This verse (32:4) is cited nine times in the Guide. For Maimonides it means that God created the world but will not destroy it, since it is perfect, and His system of justice is perfect. This separates him from Aristotle’s eternal uncreated world, as well as from Muslim theology’s created but not eternal world. It also differentiates him from the Manichaeism of a perfect God and an imperfect world. He defends this “perfect world” theme against all opponents in Guide 3:25:

“The consequences of that error (that the world is imperfect and purposeless)... are doubts and confusion, which lead many to imagine that some of God’s works are trivial, others purposeless, and others in vain. Those who adopt this absurd idea that God’s actions are utterly purposeless, and refuse to consider them as the result of His wisdom, are afraid they might otherwise be compelled to admit the theory of the Eternity of the Universe, and guard themselves against it by the above theory [that the works of God are purposeless]. I have already told you the view which is set forth in Scripture on this question, and which it is proper to accept. It is this: it is not unreasonable to assume that the works of God, their existence and preceding non-existence, are the result of His wisdom, but we are unable to understand many of the ways of His wisdom in His works. On this principle the whole Law of Moses is based; it begins with this principle: ‘And God saw all that He had made, and, behold, it was very good’ (Genesis 1:31): and it ends with this principle: ‘*The Rock, perfect is His work*’ (*ha-tzur tamim paalo*, Deuteronomy 32:4). Note it. When you examine this view and that of the philosophers, taking into consideration all preceding chapters which are connected with this subject, you will find that there is no other difference of opinion as regards any portions of the Universe, except that the philosophers believe in the Eternity of the Universe and we believe in the Creation. Note this.” (Compare similar language at the end of Guide 2:28)

By using “note it” and “note this,” and even more explicitly, “taking into consideration all preceding chapters which are connected with this subject,” he not only wants us to have in view the central philosophical disputes of the Guide, but to relate them to our chapter defining “Rock.” The meaning is this: *prophecy* is the nerve of his

argument against Aristotle. Prophecy's announcement of the perfection of God's creation overturns perfectly balanced arguments for and against creation. The prophet "stands on the Rock" and is the "rock from which you were hewn." By making himself the channel for the divine emanation, he becomes the creator of his people, who, beyond all argument, *know* from prophecy that God created the world. The knowledge the prophet draws from the "flinty rock" sets them on "high," in the language of *Haazinu*:

"(13) He made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock (*mi'sela*), and oil out of the flinty rock (*v'shemen me'khal mish tzur*)."

But what happens when these children are not the prophet's intellectual progeny? "(15) Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked." They rebelled, sacrificing to "devils," *shedim*, that their fathers did not *know* or fear. They committed "abominations" (line 16) which Rashi says means "homosexuality and sorcery"—underlining the *adulterous* prurient character of their abandonment. God "(19) abhorred [them], because of the provoking of his sons, and of his daughters." He will punish them (24) with "demons" (per Rashi on *u'likhumei reshef*), "with the poison of serpents of the dust," for their "(33) Their wine [is] the poison of serpents (*taninim*), and the cruel venom of asps (*ptanim*)."
Instead of their matter being in-formed by the Rock, as Sarah was by Abraham, they were injected with the poison of the serpent who envenomed Eve to create the first race of demons. That was the primal rebellion of the Adamites, who exchanged the apprehension of intellectual truth for imaginative opinion (Guide 1:2). "(28) They are a nation void of counsel, and there is no understanding in them." Moses warns them that they must make themselves again progeny of God: "(46) set your heart unto all the words wherewith I testify against you this day...to do all the words of this Torah. (47) It is no vain thing for you because it is your life..."

THERE IS A PLACE BY ME, AND YOU SHALL STAND ON THE ROCK

Bakan's Theory of the Relation of *Makom* and *Tzur*. On the passage: "And the Lord said, Behold, [there is] a *place (makom)* by me, and thou shalt stand upon the *rock (v'nitzavta al ha-tzur)*" (Exodus 33:21), Maimonides writes:

"And thou shalt stand upon the Rock,' i.e., Be firm and steadfast in the conviction that God is the source of all things, for this will lead you (*ki hu ha-meivo*—Pines translates: 'this is an *entryway*') towards the knowledge of the Divine Being. We have shown (Guide 1:8) that the words 'Behold, a place (*makom*) is with me' (Exodus 33:21) contain the same idea."

The Maimonidean God is not completely inaccessible. The "place with Me," which is the source of all, is also the way back to Him. The question becomes whether the rock is the place or whether it is in the place.

Guide 1:8, the lexical chapter on *makom*, "place," was about the theme of intellectual progeny (see my essay there, "The Glory of the Lord"). Maimonides connected that chapter to ours by mentioning the "key" to the "entryway":

"These words are a key to this treatise or others" (*hineni omer dvarim elu maftakh l'maamar zei v'zulato*).

And, more elusively:

"We have already remarked that when we treat in this work of homonyms, we have not the intention to exhaust the meanings of a word (for this is not a philological treatise): we shall mention no other significations but those which bear on our subject."

We noted there by way of explanation:

“We have called attention to David Bakan’s theory that the lexicon supplies tools for the subconscious imagination to articulate and comprehend its ineffable prophetic revelation. He maintains that Maimonides rejects the common notion of contextual meaning. Maimonides lexical strategy is a ‘deliberate violation of context’ because ‘the role of context is to conceal deeper levels of meaning’ (*Maimonides on Prophecy*, p. 25). The perplexity and heartache that Maimonides speaks of in the Introduction to the Guide is associated with interpreting visions and dreams in their external senses. ‘Apprehension of internal meanings provides relief’”

Bakan argues (*Maimonides on Prophecy*, p. 86), with weak support, that *makom* should be interpreted as female genitalia. His argument ties, in a Freudian way, Rashi’s the identification of Sarah with “hole” to Maimonides’ term “entryway,” (*meivo*) in our chapter. He notes that the Zohar (1:22a) likens Moses’ prophetic process to sexual intercourse with the *Shekhina*. Bakan also notices that Maimonides in 1:8 calls attention to other unmentioned meanings of *makom*. Bakan quotes Maimonides in 1:8 (using Pines’ translation, p. 34):

“You should examine the prophetic books and other works composed by men of science, notice the meaning of every word which occurs in them, and take homonyms in that sense which is in harmony with the context. What I say in a particular passage is a key for the comprehension of all similar passages. For example, we have explained here *makom* in the sentence ‘Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place’ (*mekomo*): but you must understand that the word *makom* has the same signification in the passage ‘Behold, a place (*makom*) is with me’ (Exod. 33:26), viz., a certain degree of contemplation and intellectual intuition (not of ocular inspection), in addition to its literal meaning ‘a place.’” (*dragat iyun v’hashkafat sh’kol lo hashkafat ayin, nosef al makom*)

Bakan implies that though “rock” is to Abraham, as “hole” is to Sarah (see Rashi above), Maimonides has no lexical entry for “hole” or its physical referent in Sarah, so that *makom* must be the lexical stand-in for that prurient term. Thus, as *tzur* is to Abraham, so *makom* is to Sarah. Maimonides immediately *sublimates* this prurient perception (for “the principle of Rabbi Akiva,” Bakan’s rule of sublimation, see Bakan, *ibid.* p. 32, on Talmud, *Hagigah*, 14a). Maimonides does this by moving this prurient notion of *makom* to a “degree of contemplation and intellectual intuition.”

Bakan’s assertion is plausible but not strongly supported. There is no example I know where *makom* means female genitalia.

Makom = Matter/Shekhina and Tzur = Form/Kavod. At the very least, it seems that Maimonides wants us somehow to complete the parallelism and have *makom* stand for matter and the *Shekhina*. The word *makom* is connected with *meilo*, “fill,” and *kavod*, “glory” in Guide 1:19. The *makom* is the *place filled (malei)* by the emanated *form (tzur)* of God, which is His Glory (*kavod*). *Malei* is defined in 1:19, as “the attainment of the highest degree of excellency.” When the *makom/matter* is filled by glory/form it attains its highest excellency. This is nearly identical with the Definition 2 of *makom* in 1:8 (one’s level of attainment of perfection), and so the phrase “the whole earth is *full (meilo, from malei)* of His glory” in Isaiah 6:4 means “all the earth gives evidence of his perfection, i.e., leads to knowledge of it,” i.e., by witnessing the divine intelligence manifested in nature we learn of divine perfection. This is almost identical in meaning to “Blessed is the glory (*kavod*) of the Lord from his place (*mi’mekomo*),” Ezekiel 3:12, which he says means, “Blessed be the Lord according to the exalted nature of His existence.” In both these cases, the *glory* found in the *place* is the *perfection* or *excellence* of God evident in His work. In Guide 1:64, he defines “glory,” *kavod*, as a *created emanation* of God. It represents the active intellect, the intelligence emanated from God that is our mediator with divine intelligence.

Thus, Blessed be the *kavod* of the Lord from his *makom*, means that the perfection of His emanation of intelligence and form is evident in the excellence of his created works.

In 1:23 Maimonides quotes Isaiah 26:21, “For, behold, the Lord cometh out (*yotze*) of his *place* (*mi’mkomo*) to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity.” He retranslates:

“‘The word of God, which until now has been in secret, cometh out, and will become manifest,’ i.e., something (that) will come into being which had not existed before: for everything new emanating from God is ascribed to His Word...This is a simile taken from the conduct of kings, who employ the word as the means of carrying their will into effect. God, however, requires no instrument wherewith to operate in order to perform anything; the effect is produced solely by His Will alone. He does not employ any kind of speech...”

The creative word (*logos*) of God equates to His will. The will of the Former comes out from the undefined, the secret place which “until now” has been unformed. This created will fills and forms the unformed so it can reach its highest excellence. The highest such excellence is prophecy, the self-recognition of the active intellect. It is the ultimate product of the ultimate source, which is the will expressed by God but undifferentiated in Him.

Yehuda Even-Shmuel, *ad loc.*, essentially understands the chapter the same way:

“The highest attainment of prophecy is the apprehension of God as the “rock of the worlds.” The highest concept is at once the highest percipient, and the source of the apprehension is the source of its apprehenders, which is the Creator of all things, the apprehension and the apprehender together. He is the Creator. While He is not their external [immediate] cause, He is their internal [ultimate] cause. His relation to them is like a rock to its quarry. He is the beginning (“rock”) of all other things, meaning, things have no foundation other than their emanatory source. The conclusion is that the nature of all creatures is from the nature of their creator, ‘for properties contained in the quarry should be found again in those things which are formed and hewn out of it.’”

God is the ultimate cause of the formation of that emanation just as he forms his intellectual progeny, but the recognition must be reciprocal for the prophetic process to occur. That was the moral of *Haazinu*.

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