

GUIDE 1:38

RECEPTIVITY

OVERVIEW

This chapter is short enough that we can include it all here:

“The Hebrew term *akhor* is a homonym. It is a noun, signifying *back*. Comp., ‘Behind (*akharei*) the tabernacle’ (Exod. 26:12); ‘The spear came out behind him (*akharav*)’ (2 Sam. 2:23). It is next used in reference to time, signifying *after*: ‘Neither after him (*akharav*) arose there any like him’ (2 Kings 23:25), ‘After (*akhar*) these things’ (Gen. 15:1). In this sense, the word occurs frequently. The term includes also the idea of following a thing and of conforming with the moral principles of some other being. Comp., ‘Ye shall walk after (*akharei*) the Lord, your God’ (Deut. 13:5); ‘They shall walk after (*akharei*) the Lord’ (Hos. 11:10), i. e., follow His will, walk in the way of His actions, and imitate His virtues: ‘He walked after (*akharei*) the commandment’ (*ib.* 5:11). In this sense the word occurs in Exodus 33:20, ‘And thou shalt see My back (*akhorai*)’; thou shalt perceive that which follows Me, is similar to Me, and is the result of My will, i.e., all things created by Me, as will be explained in the course of this treatise.”

On its surface, the chapter defines *akhor* as: 1) the *back* of a person or thing; 2) *after*, an adverb of time; or 3) imitating another’s moral conduct. The first two senses would only be homonymous with God since He has no physical back and no relation to time.

Otherwise, the surface of the chapter is murky. The shorter chapters of the Guide are the hardest to understand.

The *first real* purpose of the chapter is to test the imagination of the student of the divine science. We previously learned the intellectual qualifications for the science. In addition to the acquisition of a perfected mind, Maimonides also expects the student to possess a perfect imagination. We can train the imagination. The student should be able to canvass the proof-texts in this chapter and rapidly assemble the meanings that Maimonides wants to convey. This is necessary because the student of divine science must be able to connect disparate hints on his own.

The *second real* purpose of the chapter is to convey that the student must be perfectly *receptive* to the messages he will receive from God. These messages may come through emanations, from angels or from other channels of divine inspiration, including the Guide. *Receptivity* implies both an imaginative and a moral dimension. In addition to the perfectly attuned imagination, the student must be morally receptive. This implies that he always practice *imitatio dei*. He must not just do what he thinks is right, or what he is told is right, but what really is right. He must always embrace that which is intrinsically good.

A few students of divine science become prophets. Those students that will not become prophets will be the elite leaders and teachers of the people. They have immense responsibility. God corrects their shortcomings, sometimes brutally. The greater they are the harder they fall.

Akhor, “back,” is obviously the opposite of last chapter’s *panim*, “face.” If *panim* represents the *presence* of God, *akhor* must represent His *absence*, the “withdrawal of the face.” Maimonides does not explicitly list this meaning here. Nonetheless, divine absence haunts the chapter, especially the Hosea quotations. This should be apparent to the imaginative student who can canvass the implications of the proof-texts: the elite will experience the harsh correction of their errors as divine absence.

This chapter stands as one more warning. If the student is not prepared to be perfectly receptive, he should not enter the gate.

The chapter also returns to the dispute with Onkelos discussed in our last chapter. Onkelos' interprets "And thou shalt see My *back*" to mean that men only perceive material things, i.e., those things that God *rejects*, "beings, from which, as it were, *I turn away*, and which *I leave behind me*." Maimonides retorts, "And thou shalt see My *back*" means "Thou shalt perceive that which *follows* me, is *similar* to me...," i.e., that you *can* perceive purely intellectual existents. The italicized last part of the phrase "Thou shalt perceive that which follows Me, *is similar to Me...*" receives a better translation from Pines: "has come to be like Me" (*nitdama*, Judeo-Arabic נִתְדָּמָה). Maimonides' point is that we can raise ourselves above materiality through *imitatio dei* (cf. Guide 1:21, 1:54).

* * *

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

AHKOR (BACK): Homonym.

1. A noun meaning the *back* of a person or thing. We cannot use *akhor* with God in this sense.
2. An adverb of time meaning *after*. It is possible that as *akhor* it means "immediately after," but as *akhorei* it means "a long time after." It is the reverse durational sense of *before* in Definition 5 from the last chapter.
3. Following and *conforming* to the moral principles of some other being. This means imitating the conduct or virtues of another. *Akhor* also means *what God does*.

Instances of Definition 1, Contextualized:

"And thou shalt make fifty taches (attachments) of brass, and put the taches into the loops, and couple the tent together, that it may be one. And the remnant that remaineth of the curtains of the tent, the half curtain that remaineth, shall hang over the *backside* (*akharei*) of the tabernacle." (Exodus 26:11)

The passage is about the construction of the Tabernacle, the place of God's indwelling among the Jews in the Sinai desert. Maimonides quoted Exodus 26:3 before in Guide 1:6. Guide 1:6, about *man* and *woman* (*ish* and *isha*), is also short, the second shortest in the Guide. (The shortest chapter is the chapter on *man* (*ish*) Guide 1:14.) Maimonides' interest in Guide 1:6 was solely in the feminine side of this sexual equation, and his single non-corporeal proof-text was Exodus 26:3: "The five curtains shall be coupled together *one to another* (*isha el akhota*); and [other] five curtains [shall be] coupled *one to another* (*isha el akhota*)."
Isha was there defined as a principle of *receptivity*, i. e., that which is prepared to receive something else. The idea is that since the curtains were neither male nor female, calling them female, *isha el akhota*, "woman to her sister," figuratively connotes their mutual receptivity. Moreover, in our proof-text, the placing of the "taches into the loops, and couple (*v'khibarta*) the tent together," continues the thought of the parts of the tent *receiving* each other. The lesson is that student of the divine science should always be *receptive* to divine messages so he can be a Tabernacle for the divine indwelling. The back of the Tabernacle corresponds to the western wall of the Temple, which is the part receptive to the divine indwelling (Ezekiel 43:7).

"And Abner said again to Asahel, Turn thee aside from following me: wherefore should I smite thee to the ground? how then should I hold up my face to Joab thy brother? Howbeit he refused to turn aside: wherefore Abner with the *hinder end* (*b'akharei*) of the spear smote him under the fifth (*khomesh*) [rib], that the spear came out *behind* (*mei'akharav*) him; and he fell down there, and died in the same place: and it came to pass, [that] as many as came to the place where Asahel fell down and died stood still."

(2 Samuel 2:22-23)

The *khomesh* is variously defined as "the fifth rib, where liver and gall bladder are joined"; the hip or thigh; the groin (perhaps because *fifth* member is there); or the belly (see Rashi, Targum Jonathan, Koehler-Baumgartner, and Even-Shoshan). This quote leads into a series of proof-texts in the Lexicon about Joab. The point of these texts is that a good general is not merely loyal but does the right thing. Joab, however, lacked complete

receptivity to David's desires and welfare. See essay on Joab below.

Instances of Definition 2, After, Contextualized:

"And like unto him was there no king before him [Josiah], that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after (*v'akharav*) him arose there [any] like him." (2 Kings 23:25)

The tragedy of Josiah illustrates that God holds the elite to the highest standard of receptivity. See essay on Josiah below.

"After (*akhar*) these things (The War Of The Five Against The Four) the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I [am] thy shield, [and] thy exceeding great reward. And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house [is] this Eliezer of Damascus?" (Genesis 15:1-2)

The surface meaning is that the word *akhar* is an adverb of time. The context is that Abraham has been victorious in a war. Killing is dangerous moral business, as Joab learned. By contrast, Abraham was wonderfully *receptive* to divine messages and was always able to distinguish the right course of action. He even is willing to debate God on the subject of morality: "And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt Thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (Genesis 18:23). Rashi explains the meaning of Abraham's question above, about his childlessness, summarizing Midrashic material:

"*After these things*: Wherever the term *akhar* is used, it signifies immediately afterwards; *akharei* signifies a long time afterwards (*Gen. Rabbah* 44:5). *After* this miracle had been wrought for him, that he slew the kings, he was worried and said, 'Perhaps I have received reward for all my righteous deeds.' Therefore, the Omnipresent said to him, 'Fear not Abram, I am your Shield' from punishment, that you will not be punished for all those souls that you have slain, and as far as your being worried about receiving reward, your reward is exceedingly great. (from *Aggadat Bereishit* 16:2; *Tan. Buber, Lech Lecha* 15; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, Ch. 27)"

The concept implied here is the ancient notion that God rewards the good deeds of sinners immediately but their punishment comes later. Abraham is concerned that his miraculous victory *now* will cut him off from any further reward *later*, that is, that he will remain childless. That is not the case. God will not punish Abraham for his killings because he has been both a good general *and* has done what is intrinsically good. Maimonides discusses this proof-text again in Guide 3:18. He cites it there for his special doctrine of providence:

"Consider how the action of Divine Providence is described in reference to every incident in the lives of the patriarchs, to their occupations, and even to their passions, and how God promised to direct His attention to them. Thus God said to Abraham, 'I am thy shield' (Gen.15:1); . . . (listing other cases). It is clear that in all these cases the action of Providence has been proportional to man's perfection. . . . When we see that some men escape plagues and mishaps, whilst others perish by them, we must not attribute this to a difference in the properties of their bodies, or in their physical constitution, 'for by strength shall no man prevail'; but it must be attributed to their different degrees of perfection, some approaching God, whilst others moving away from Him. Those who approach Him are best protected, and 'He will keep the feet of his saints'; but those who keep far away from Him are left exposed to what may befall them; there is nothing that could protect them from what might happen; they are like those who walk in darkness, and are certain to stumble. . . . There are in Scripture many more passages expressing the principle that men enjoy Divine protection in proportion to their perfection and piety...every person has his individual share of Divine Providence in proportion to his perfection."

Providence is God's reciprocation for the receptivity of the student of the divine science, as it was for Abraham. The providential protection Abraham received, in the phrase "I am thy shield," is, according to Abraham ben Maimonides, the same protection that Moses receives in the final passage quoted in our chapter, "I...will cover thee with My hand" (*Guide to Serving God*, p. 523).

Instances of Definition 3, Contextualized:

“Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the Lord your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. **Ye** shall walk after (*akharei*) the Lord your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him.” (Deuteronomy 13:4-5)

This announces the doctrine of *imitatio dei*. See essay below where we review some Maimonidean and Platonic materials on this doctrine.

“I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I [am] God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee: and I will not enter into the city. **They shall walk after** (*akharei*) the Lord: He shall roar like a *lion*: when He shall roar, then the children shall tremble from the west.” (Hosea 11:9-10)

Obviously, when the Bible says that God roars like a lion, it is speaking figuratively. Maimonides says this quote illustrates that we should “follow His will, walk in the way of His actions, and imitate His virtues.” I explain its real purpose after the next quote, also from Hosea.

“11: Ephraim [is] oppressed [and] broken in judgment, because he willingly walked *after* (*akharei*) the commandment. 12: Therefore [will] I [be] unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness. 13: When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah [saw] his wound, then went Ephraim to the Assyrian, and sent to king Jareb: yet could he not heal you, nor cure you of your wound. 14: For I [will be] unto Ephraim as a *lion*, and as a young lion to the house of Judah: I, [even] I, will tear and go away; I will take away, and none shall rescue [him]. 15: *I will go [and] return to My place*, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek My face: in their affliction they will seek Me early.” (Hosea 5:11-15)

Maimonides brings these two quotes from Hosea ostensibly for the doctrine of *imitatio dei*, but they are unnecessary for that purpose. They are significant because he referred twice to Hosea 5:15, italicized above, in Guide 1:23 and 1:24. See my essay on 1:23 “The Hiding of the Face.” We explained there that the Hosea passage stands for the *withdrawal* of divine providence. The student of divine science who *fails* to practice *imitatio dei* and who is not always receptive to the divine message will face harsh correction: “the Hiding of the Face.” In this proof-text, “Ephraim” did not follow the divine law but rather, as Rashi says, followed the new commands of the prophets of Baal, with the result that God “will go and return to My place.” We saw in 1:29 that divine governance of the world is of one piece but perceived in history as a series of expansions and contractions of providence, like respiration. In 1:30, we saw that in the mode of contraction, when God withdraws His face, the people are *consumed*, (*akhal*). Just so, these two Hosea quotes portray God as a lion, who, through harsh correction, will *consume* the people. Moreover, *hiding of the face* may result in illness beyond even Maimonides’ medical help: “He could not heal you, nor cure you of your wound” (line 13, above. Abraham ben Maimonides, *Guide to Serving God*, 215).

“And he said, Thou canst not see My face: for there shall no man see Me, and live. And the Lord said, Behold, [there is] a place by Me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while My glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with My hand while I pass by: And I will take away Mine hand, and thou shalt see My back parts (*akhorai*): but My face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:20-21)

Students of Maimonides should by now be familiar with this passage. He says here: “Thou shalt perceive that which follows me, is similar to me, and is the result of my will, i.e., all things created by me.” In 1:21, he explained that Moses sought to know the essence of God, but instead received knowledge of those *consequences* of God’s acts, that is, what God *does*. *Akhrai* can mean consequences. These consequences are the Thirteen *Middot* (Exodus 34:6-7), the actions of God that we understand as moral attributes (Guide 1:54). We are supposed to make ourselves like God by adopting those moral virtues. Failure to do so results in punishment such as inflicted on Ephraim, above.

JOAB

Maimonides uses the example of Joab to illustrate that the agent of God must not only be loyal, but good. In our proof-text (2 Samuel 2:22-23), Joab's brother Asahel dies when Abner jabs him fatally in his *homesh*. In Guide 1:30, the chapter on the *consumption* of man by divine punishment, we see the immediate result of Asahel's death, a long war resulting from Joab's gullibility (2:25-26). Joab revenges himself in the next chapter of Samuel, 3:27 by smiting Abner in his *homesh*. In the following Guide chapter, 1:39, we learn that Joab thrust three darts through the Absalom's heart. In Guide 1:29, the chapter on the *expansion and contraction* of divine providence, we learned of Joab's betrayal of David's chosen successor, Solomon

This, briefly, is the story. Joab was David's general and Abner was Saul's general. After Saul died, civil war broke out between Saul's son Ishbosheth and David. Asahel, Joab's headstrong brother, pursued Abner to kill him, hoping to end the war with one stroke. Abner knew Asahel was no match for him, and warned him away, hoping to avoid a cycle of vengeance with Joab. Asahel was not dissuaded. Perhaps only hoping to wound him, Abner struck Asahel in the *homesh* with the back end of his spear, killing Asahel. Two lines later, Abner, cornered, proposed peace, which Joab naively accepted, but the result was a "long war." Then, following good-faith peace talks between Abner and David, Joab captures Abner. He then fatally smote Abner in his *homesh*, though David had not desired Abner's death. This compromised David. David publicly cursed Joab's descendants with leprosy, lameness, starvation and death by sword (2 Samuel 3:29). Later, pursuing David's rebel son Absalom, Joab found Absalom accidentally caught swinging by his hair from an oak. Joab then wounded Absalom meaning to kill him, but his troops finish the job. When David's other son Adonijah rebels, Joab supports him against David's chosen successor Solomon.

On his deathbed, David charges Solomon to execute Joab for his misdeeds in the royal service. The Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 48b-49a, wonderfully imagines Solomon's trial of Joab. Solomon accuses Joab of wrongly killing Abner, Absalom and Amassa (2 Samuel 20:4-12, David's nephew), and of supporting Adonijah. Joab persuasively defends himself. He adds that if Solomon kills him, the curse that David pronounced on Joab's descendants will transfer to Solomon's descendants. Not persuaded, he has Joab executed. The result is that Solomon's descendants did inherit David's ancestral curse.

The message of the story of Joab is that he was loyal but did not do what was intrinsically right. This was a disservice to his master. The student of divine science must be zealous in his pursuit, but must also conduct himself rightly. He must imitate God's virtues expressed in the Thirteen *Middot*. He should be perfectly receptive to the divine message.

The curse on Solomon's house leads us to consider the tragedy of a king in Jerusalem who tried to pursue the will of God: Josiah.

JOSIAH

Maimonides mentions the tragedy of Josiah in connection with the word *after*. "Neither *after* him (*v'akharav*) arose there any like him." The key incidents of Josiah's life link with the word *after*, which we expect the student of divine science to realize. Second Kings 23:25 teaches that before Josiah no king arose like him who turned to God with all his heart, soul and power, "according to the law of Moses," and not *after* him either. Similar language is used of Hezekiah: "He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that *after* him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor [any] that were before him (2 Kings 18:5)." But God rewarded Hezekiah with the great miracle of the destruction of Sennacherib's invading force. The difference in outcomes is that Hezekiah "trusted" God. Why did Josiah not receive such a reward?

Upon the discovery of a Torah scroll hidden away from his idolatrous ancestors, Josiah began his great monotheistic reform. He destroyed all *open* idolatry in the kingdom. He caused the people to celebrate the greatest Passover since Samuel's time. 2 Chronicles 35:19 recites: "In the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah

was this Passover kept.” The next line collapses thirteen years, since the text itself (2 Chronicles 34:1) says he reigned thirty-one years:

“20: *After (akharei)* all this, when Josiah had prepared the Temple, Necho king of Egypt came up to fight against Carchemish by Euphrates: and Josiah went out against him.”

If Rashi (on Genesis 15:1) is right, *akharei* here means “long after” and not just “after.”

Pharaoh Necho merely wanted to cross the land to get at his enemy, Assyria. The Talmud, *Taanith* 22b, comments: “For there could be no more friendly army than that of Pharaoh-Necho.” But Josiah, the religious reformer, is sure that he has been doing the will of God. He responds by boldly quoting Torah to Pharaoh: “a sword will not pass through your land” (Lev. 26:6), i.e., God will prevent Pharaoh’s advance through Judah. Necho responds (line 21) “forbear thee from [meddling with] God, who [is] with me, that he destroy thee not.” Necho’s interpretation of the will of God is better than Josiah’s interpretation, as Josiah ends up perforated with three hundred arrows from Pharaoh’s men. Where did Josiah go wrong?

We learn the reason from Isaiah 57:8: “And *behind (v’akhar)* the doors and the posts hast thou set up thy symbol...” Midrash *Lamentations Rabbah* 1:18 explains this to mean that the idolators would inscribe their idols on the insides of their divided doors. Even when seen from inside, only half an idol would appear on the *back* of each door, but when closed, the whole idol would appear to those inside. Prophet Jeremiah pleaded with Josiah to let Necho pass to attack the Assyrian enemy, prophesying that the Egyptians would themselves descend to civil war (“I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians,” Isaiah 19:2). Jeremiah knew the Jews were not as righteous as Josiah imagined, and warned Josiah not to test God. Josiah ignored the advice, to his fatal end. The great poet Eleazar Ha-Kalir (6th?—8th? cent.), who Maimonides was likely familiar with, wrote a famous *kinnah*: “And Jeremiah lamented over Josiah.” using the word *akhar* significantly (Artscroll *Complete Tisha B’av Service*, Feuer and Gold, 183-185):

“The sin of that generation’s scorners clung to him—
those who stood [idols] *behind (akhar)* the door...
As iniquity increased He *withdrew (akhor)* His right hand
and He has not yet returned His hand through the *opening (ha-khor)*—cf. Song of Songs 5:4)”

Unlike Hezekiah, who trusted the Lord, Josiah trusted himself and his text. He did not receive the prophet’s message. His hubris prevented the humility that would have made him *receptive*. The correction of the elite is harsh, as though God withdrew His hand and hid His face. This is Josiah’s terrible lesson for the would-be student of divine science.

IMITATIO DEI

Maimonides quoted Deuteronomy 13:4-5, “Ye shall walk *after* the Lord...,” to remind us that *akhor* means we should conduct ourselves as God conducts himself. Kafih assembles a group of materials to establish the doctrine (*ad loc.*, Note 7). He recalls that Maimonides mentions it in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*:

“By this injunction we are commanded to be like God...as far as it is in our power...the Sages comment as follows (from *Sota* 14a): ‘Just as the Holy One...is called Merciful, so shouldst thou be merciful; just as He is called Gracious, so shouldst thou be gracious; just as He is called Righteous, so shouldst thou be righteous; just as He is called *Khasid* [a term bespeaking kindness, goodness, etc.,] so shouldst thou be a *khasid*.’ This injunction has already appeared in another form in His words, ‘Ye shall walk *after* the Lord’ (our proof-text), which the Sages explain as meaning that we are to imitate the good deeds and lofty attributes by which the Lord...is described in a figurative way—He being indeed immeasurably exalted above all such description.” (Positive Commandments 8, Chavel translation, 11-12, the Talmudic source in *Sota* 14a)

Kafih next mentions Mishneh Torah, *Deot* 1:5. That passage contains Maimonides' extension of Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1105-1107. Maimonides holds that the one who chooses a particular virtue and *exceeds* the mean we call a *khasid*. He expects the student of divine science to go beyond the mean, *lifanim m'shurat ha-din*, in his imitation of divine conduct.

Finally, Kafih shows that the Platonic version of the doctrine of imitation of God is similar to the Maimonidean conception, in a fine passage from the *Theatetus*, 176a-c (Fowler):

"But it is impossible that evils should be done away with, Theodorus, for there must always be something opposed to the good; and they cannot have their place among the gods, but must inevitably hover about mortal nature and this earth. Therefore we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise.... Let us give the true reason. God is in no wise and in no manner unrighteous, but utterly and perfectly righteous, and there is nothing so like Him as that one of us who in turn becomes most nearly perfect in righteousness. It is herein that the true cleverness of a man is found and also his worthlessness and cowardice; for the knowledge of this is wisdom or true virtue, and ignorance of it is folly or manifest wickedness; and all the other kinds of seeming cleverness and wisdom are paltry when they appear in public affairs and vulgar in the arts."

Copyright © 2017, Scott Michael Alexander, no copying or use permitted except in connection with the Maimonides Group at YahooGroups.com

scottmalexander@rcn.com