

GUIDE 1:6 WOMAN

This chapter is one of the shorter ones in the Guide. Maimonides' short chapters are the most difficult. This chapter should be read together with several other chapters. This is a good early example of the high demands Maimonides makes on his reader. It is a lexical chapter.

ISH AND ISHA (MAN AND WOMAN) HOMONYM

1. Human man and woman, as distinguished from male and female animals. Maimonides supplies no proof-text.
2. Male and female of the animal kingdom.
3. "Woman" is defined as that which is prepared to receive something else, a principle of receptivity. Maimonides intentionally gives no male counterpart to this definition.

AKH AND AKHOT (BROTHER AND SISTER)

"Likewise treated as homonyms, and used, in a figurative sense, like *ish* and *isha*."

Instance of Definition 2 Contextualized:

"Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the *male* and his *female* (*ish v'ishto*): and of beasts that [are] not clean by two, the *male* and his *female* (*ish v'ishto*)." (Genesis 7:2)

This verse, from the story of Noah's Ark, really says "man and his woman," not "male and his female" (Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature*, p. 60), And thus demonstrates that the terms were extended to animals. In the next chapter, Maimonides discusses the distinction between humans and animals. His interest in this chapter is solely the third definition.

Instance of Definition 3 Contextualized:

"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*)." (Exodus 26:3)

Rashi writes: "to one another, literally, a woman to her sister. It is customary for Scripture to speak this way concerning a noun in the feminine gender, and concerning a noun in the masculine gender, literally, a man to his brother, as it is said concerning the *cherubim*, Exodus 25:20." Rashi makes a different point than Maimonides. Rashi wants to show that the rule of calling a *pair* "a woman and her sister" has no female particularity, as pairs are also called "a man and his brother." This is not Maimonides' intent, contrary to Friedlander note 4, *ad loc*. We know this because he later returns to the phrase "woman to her sister," in Ezekiel 1:9 and 23 (concerning the paired wings of the being in Ezekiel's vision, Guide 3:2), rather than to Rashi's "man and his brother," Exodus 25:20, which Maimonides never cites in the Guide. He refrains from masculinizing this concept. Receptivity is considered to be feminine. He revisits this concept of receptivity in Guide 1:28.

MARRIED HARLOT OR WOMAN OF VALOR?

The major problem in this chapter is the third definition. The problem is that the feminine principle of receptivity lends itself to mythologization.

Kafih, footnote 3, has brought three references implied by the text together. He says (my translation and emphases):

“This is the aim of the chapter: see what Maimonides said previously in his *Introduction*, ‘Solomon compared matter to the married harlot.’ see Guide 1:17, 3:8 and 3:12.”

Chapter 3:12 is useful, but not essential. The other two references are critical. See my account of the parable of the married harlot (Introduction I). I give a preview of the ideas of 1:17 and 3:8 here.

In 1:17, as in the last chapter, Maimonides cites Athenian philosophers as advocates of Jewish precepts. In the last chapter, he made Aristotle an advocate of *Hagigah*'s requirements for students of divine science. In Guide 1:17 Plato is said to advocate the use of male and female as metaphors for matter and form to *conceal* their meaning. Why does he want Plato's support?

The answer is that Maimonides' thinks that these sexual symbols are crucial for understanding of the process of creation. Nonetheless, they are dangerous. Jews must exercise care when discussing this topic, since even non-Jewish philosophers like Plato concealed these ideas. We must conceal these ideas from the mass of people, especially young people, until they have attained maturity. We thereby prevent them from reading prurient messages into prophetic texts.

They must also be concealed because matter and form are concepts that people might mistake as co-equal eternal principles with God. They could lead people to idolatry or polytheism.

Nonetheless, we need such imaginative symbolism when we attempt to explain God's creativity, since we do not understand how that creativity actually works.

Kafih cited Guide 3:8 because it raises what might be called moral dimension of these metaphysical ideas. It is a large and beautifully written chapter, which argues that the metaphor of male and female is not merely metaphorical. Matter is the cause of our problems, and distancing ourselves from it as much as possible is the solution. He outlines a program of mild asceticism and dedication to intellectual pursuit.

In Guide 3:8, the parable of the married harlot (Proverbs 7:6-27) is paired with the parable of the woman of valor (Proverbs. 31:10) to show the superiority of the student who pursues Maimonides' program over one who indulges in lustful physical pursuits. That moral superiority removes one of the veils separating him from prophecy (*Shemonah Perakim*, ch. 7).

Maimonides employs the definition of *isha*, “woman,” as receptivity, in a slightly concealed way. The receptivity of matter is central to understanding the ongoing providential creativity of God. In the prophetic texts, the procreative union of male and female is the best metaphor in the language of men for divine creation of things. Like any metaphor, it has its limits. It was not meant to be an accurate description or definition.

He discusses divine creation in the next chapter, which is about the metaphor of birth. Divine creation is an interdeical process, or rather, act, in which God does not change.

The student must recognize the sexual metaphor as metaphor and rise above it, rejecting the pagan notion that the female principle is a co-equal partner with God.

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