

GUIDE 1:18 ENCOUNTER

According to Maimonides three words, *karav*, *nagash*, and *naga*, carry similar meanings in prophetic writings. The basic meaning is “contact” or “approach.” This approach occurs on the corporeal level and then is analogized to the intellectual level, Definitions 1 and 2 below.

We will see, however, that he does not treat the term *naga*, “touching,” the way he does the others, so I entered a third definition. While the other two are words of approach, *naga* is, unavoidably, more physical. Maimonides frequently quotes Aristotle that the sense of touch is a disgrace to man (*Nichomachean Ethics* 3:10 1118b 1-4), and usually couples this observation with some prurient reference. Since “touch” is a corporeal activity, Maimonides chooses proof-texts that are negative in character. His *naga* passages depict the visitation of divine punishment on men.

Our chapter begins a new group of lexical chapters involving *touching* and *filling* (the next chapter) which balance the series of chapters leading to the bridge chapter, 1:17. That chapter concerned the role of sexual metaphor in prophecy, and the need to conceal that metaphor. The chapters preceding 1:17 were about *rock*, *standing*, *erectness*: all masculine in connotation, symbolizing *form*. As expected, we now enter a series of chapters that are about *matter*, connoting femininity. Friedlander, note 3, p. 69, also recognizes this as a new section, but portrays the next series of lexical terms as illustrative of the *descent* of the divine manifestation to certain physical places, such as “filling” the Tabernacle, or “sitting” on a throne, etc. Yehuda Even-Shmuel, *ad loc.*, agrees but shows that terms denoting “filling” and “sitting” really are about matter. Where Maimonides says, “When a being is without corporeality it cannot occupy space (place),” *ki b'histalek ha-gashmut, ystalek ha-makom*, Even-Shmuel explains that the philosophical definition of “matter” is dimensionality and magnitude: these determine space or place, i.e., that which is “filled.”

The highest form of “approach” is our encounter with God. Maimonides’ says that our contact with the divine is a “union of cognition with the cognized,” calls to mind chapter 1:68. In that chapter, he repeats Aristotle’s formula for God as “the knowledge, the knower, and the known.” Man and God achieve contact mind to Mind. Indeed, only “mind” exists at the level of actualized intellect, for, “when a being is without corporeality, it cannot occupy space.” Thus, in 1:68, after reviewing his argument for the unity of mind, I concluded:

“The fascinating point is that this is the sole difference Maimonides finds between the structure of the mind of God and the structure of the mind of man: only purely external accidents deprive the human psychology of its likeness to the divine psychology.”

The subtle issue that intrudes is whether can there be a “relationship” between two such unequal powers, the mind of man and the mind of God. This question is particularly salient since Maimonides spends so many chapters in Book One of the Guide denying that there is anything “with” God (1:51-60 on attributes). What emerges from the selection of proof texts below is that some mediation must occur between God and His creatures. What is the nature of this mediation? The mediator is the “active intellect.”

Man *activates* his intellect when he “comprehends anything which he had not comprehended previously.” This is Maimonides’ succinct explanation of Aristotelian psychology. When man learns he activates his potential for knowledge, his “potential intellect,” thereby acquiring knowledge, his “acquired intellect.” The *act* of acquiring knowledge and contemplating it is the state called “active intellect.” Medieval philosophy hypostatized this *state*, that is, understood it as a higher being. This being receives such names as *Shekhina*, Angel, Metatron, Created Light (or *ha-nivra*), etc. Maimonides refers to this idea in our chapter when he invests Sinai with the emanation of active intellect:

“If, however, you wish to take the words ‘And Moses shall draw near’ to mean that he shall draw near a certain place in the mountain, whereon the Divine Light shone, or, in the words of the Bible, ‘where the glory of the Lord abode,’ you may do so.”

He means that while a direct mind to Mind relation of man and God is doubtful, God creates mediating gradations so that there can be an “approach.”

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

KARAV (TO COME NEAR)

NAGASH (TO APPROACH)

NAGA (TO TOUCH)

1. Contact, touch; nearness or approach in space.
2. The approach of man’s knowledge to an object, “as if it resembled the physical approach of one body to another.” It is the “union of cognition with the cognized” (Pines’ translation), *hitkhabrut ha-yedia b’moda*. This contact takes place only thru comprehension:
“Not in reference to space....Wherever a word denoting approach or contact is employed in the prophetic writings to describe a certain relation between the Almighty and any created being, it has to be understood in this latter sense [*viz.*, to approach mentally]. For, as will be proved in this treatise (2:4), the Supreme is incorporeal, and consequently He does not approach or draw near a thing, nor can aught approach or touch Him; for when a being is without corporeality, it cannot occupy space, and any idea of approach, contact, distance, conjunction, separation, touch, or proximity is inapplicable to such a being.”
3. *Naga*, “touch,” when used with God, means that He visits punishment upon the guilty.

Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And it came to pass, as soon as he *came nigh (karav)* unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount.” (Exodus 32:19)

Moses’ approach to the camp is a grossly physical approach to a people that have made themselves grossly physical. The Jews have descended to the pursuit of corporeality. Maimonides thus begins with this most negative passage, on the principle of *ascending in holiness* (Talmud *Berakhot* 28a).

“And when Pharaoh *drew nigh (hikriv)*, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid: and the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord.” (Exodus 14:10)

This is the terrifying moment of the Exodus when Pharaoh was on one side and the sea roared on the other. Rashi, *ad loc.*, quotes Midrash (*Mechilta; Tanchuma Beshallach* 9), that the Jews “seized the art of their ancestors” (i.e., they prayed), and continues by recalling moments when Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did the same. Maimonides chose this passage to contrast the physical *approach* of the Egyptians to the Jews, against the spiritual *approach* of the Jews crying out to God.

“Then Zipporah took a sharp stone (*tzur*), and cut off the foreskin of her son, and *cast [it] (va-taga—*and caused it to touch) at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband (*khatan damim—*bridegroom of blood)[art] thou to me.” (Exodus 4:25)

This quotation compresses several sexual references in one verse. Moses' wife Zipporah has to perform emergency circumcision on his son. She removes the foreskin, casts it at Moses "feet," and says "a bridegroom of blood art thou to me." The term "foot," of course, is a euphemism for penis. Maimonides will return to circumcision two quotes down. Circumcision is the covenant of loyalty between God and the Jewish people. It dedicates the *forming* principle to the true *Form* of the world, God.

"In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, [is] the Lord of hosts: the whole earth [is] full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe [is] me! for I am undone; because I [am] a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, [which] he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: *And he laid [it] (va-yaga')* upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched (*naga*) thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." (Isaiah 6:1-7)

This seems to be the reverse of the Talmudic account of the origin of the *philtrum*, the vertical indent in the midline of the upper lip (*Niddah* 30b). In that story, the angel touches every infant's lip, making it forget its inborn knowledge. With Isaiah, by contrast, the touch purges him of corporeal hindrances preventing him from uttering prophecy. He *reacquires* his previously potential knowledge (unlike the infant, who forgot it). He activates his knowledge, and he also perfects his imagination. He has now reached the level of the vision of the chariot, and his famous prophecy is his version of the *Maaseh Merkava*. The inclusion of this proof-text with the corporeal definitions of *naga* is questionable since this touching occurs entirely in Isaiah's vision. See essay below, "Gradations."

"Then Judah came near (*va-yigash*) unto him, and said, Oh my lord, let thy servant, I pray thee, speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not thine anger burn against thy servant: for thou [art] even as Pharaoh." (Genesis 44:18)

Maimonides writes that this verse stands for "*nagash* in the first sense, viz., to approach or move towards another person." He knows more than he is telling about this famous opening verse to *Parashat Vayigash*. See my essay "The Midrash on *Vayigash*," below.

Instance of Both Definitions 2 and 3, Contextualized:

"We would have healed Babylon, but she is not healed: forsake her, and let us go every one into his own country: for her judgment *reacheth (naga)* unto heaven, and is lifted up [even] to the skies." (Jeremiah 51:9)

This is the first quote that Maimonides produces for the incorporeal meaning of our three lexical terms. The idea is that God knows the iniquity of Babylon and will punish her for it. All instances of *naga*, "touching," when used with God, are examples of the visitation of divine punishment. Since Maimonides places it as the first quote of Definition 2, I have also, since it does signify knowledge of the known, but it really stands for Definition 3, visitation of punishment. It should be recalled that the visitation always precedes the punishment (Guide 1:10).

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

"Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; [but] ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment [is] God's: *and the cause that is too hard for you, bring [it] (takribun)* unto me, and I will hear it." (Deuteronomy 1:17)

Maimonides says, "This is equivalent to saying, 'Ye shall make it known unto me,'" i.e., Moses is not talking about the physical approach of the litigants, but that they must make their issue comprehensible to him. The reason they made it known to Moses was to bring it to the mind of God. The passage recounts the beginning of the Sanhedrin. Prior to the Sanhedrin, Moses judged the people, that is, he acted as prophet-king, resolving the problems of the people through his mediation between them and God. The Sanhedrin represents the beginning of

political institutions among the Jews. Still, the Sanhedrin did not solve the theological-political problem, for the hard cases had to be resolved in the light of prophecy. Thus, the “approach” here is not just the approach of the minds of the people to the mind of Moses, but to God by way of Moses. It is mediation through a king to the King, mind to Mind. This must be the case because the tradition disapproved of Moses’ statement “bring it unto me and I will hear it.” The Talmud criticized his presumption in thinking he could resolve all cases on his own. “Because of this (presumptuous) statement, Moses was punished” by making him forget the law in the case of the daughters of Zelophehad (*Sanhedrin* 8a, referring to Numbers 27:1-5).

“And Abraham *drew near* (*vayigash*), and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?” (Genesis 18:23)

This proof-text comes from Abraham’s debate with God whether Sodom should be destroyed if it had a significant number of righteous people. Maimonides says, “This took place in a prophetic vision and in a trance, as will be explained” (i.e., in 1:21, and 2:41). Maimonides repeatedly returns to Genesis 18 to illustrate his doctrine that all the actions taking place in a vision of prophecy are part of that vision, no matter how corporeal they seem. The other purpose for bringing this passage is to emphasize that Abraham, like Judah, engaged in prayer, meditation, and prophetic approach to God in moments of crisis (*Genesis Rabba* 49:8). See essay, “the Midrash on *Vayigash*,” below.

“Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people *draw near* (*nigash*) [me] with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.” (Isaiah 29:13).

Isaiah inveighs against the substitution of lip service for the service of the heart. Maimonides follows this proof-text with several passages on false or feigned worship. In the case of ancient Israel, the meaning would have been that the people turned in faith to the gods but feigned worship of the one God. Since God knows the heart, the Jews cannot conceal their spiritual adultery. On a different level, Maimonides contrasts the spiritual reality of intellectual attachment against the corporealized form of verbal service.

“The Lord [is] *nigh* (*karov*) unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth.” (Psalms 145:18)

Maimonides explains that God is spiritually, not physically nigh. He says there should be no “perplexity” (Kafih: *pikpuk*, Shwartz: *navokh*) over this or like passages: “for when a being is without corporeality, it cannot occupy space,” *ki b'histalek ha-gashmut yistalek ha-makom*. In other words, what occupies space is *matter*. No spiritual or intellectual activity takes place in space as such because neither participates in matter.

“Yet they seek Me daily, and delight to know My ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of Me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in *approaching* (*kirbat*) to God.” (Isaiah 58:2)

This is another prophecy from Isaiah against insincere worship. When he says “they delight to know My ways, as a nation that did righteousness,” he really means “as if they were a nation that did righteousness.” The prophet speaks of their *delight* “in approaching to God” with heavy irony. Approaching God is a very good thing for Maimonides (see notes on “Encounter” below) but all such approach requires a combination of spiritual discipline and intellectual pursuit, the opposite of the hypocritical service that Isaiah decries.

“(27) For, lo, they that are *far* from thee (*r'kheikha*, the opposite of our term *karav/kirvat*/approach) shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a *whoring* (*zonei*) from thee. (28) But [it is] good for me to *draw near* (*kirvat*) to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works.” (Ps. 73:27-28)

Maimonides says, “All such phrases intimate a spiritual approach, i.e., the attainment of some knowledge, not, however, approach in space.” There is another idea here as well. The previous line in this Psalm, 73:27, presents a contrasting state of spiritual distance, even of spiritual adultery. This passage is about false worship, like the two Isaiah quotes above. The Psalmist warns that false worshippers, those who go a whoring after other gods,

shall perish. Similarly, all material things decompose. Corruptible matter pursues *any* other form or god, which is why Maimonides likened matter to the Married Harlot (Proverbs 7).

“Keep therefore and do them [the commandments]; for this [is] your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, surely this great nation [is] a wise and understanding people. For what nation [is there so] great, who [hath] God [so] *nigh (krovim)* unto them, as the Lord our God [is] in all [things that] we call upon him [for]?” (Deuteronomy 4:6-7)

This quotation, from Moses’ speech to the people, is one of Maimonides’ favorites. He uses these verses in Book Three of the Guide to show that there are reasons for the commandments (3:31). The passages link prophecy to law and place both in the category of wisdom. God is nigh to the Jews through his Torah given to Moses, the prophet-king.

“*Go thou near (kerav)*, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear [it], and do [it].” (Deuteronomy 5:23, 5:27 in KJV, 5:24 in Judaica Press)

The occasion for this passage is the giving of the Ten Commandments. The people ask Moses to intercede as their emissary with God since they believe they will die if they receive prophecy directly. This passage connects to the earlier quotation about the inauguration of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin mediates between the source of law and the governed people. The Jews need mediators who can bring prophecy to politics so that their laws align with God’s purposes in the universe. Moses can “go near and hear” not because he physically goes anywhere but because he can approach God mind to Mind.

“And Moses alone shall *come near (ve-nigash)* the Lord: but they shall not *come nigh (yigashu)*; neither shall the people go up with him. (Exod. 24:2).

Maimonides writes:

“If, however, you wish to take the words ‘And Moses shall come near’ to mean that he shall draw near a certain place in the mountain, whereon the Divine Light shone, or, in the words of the Bible, ‘where the glory of the Lord abode,’ you may do so, provided you do not lose sight of the truth that there is no difference whether a person stand at the centre of the earth or at the highest point of the ninth sphere, if this were possible: he is no further away from God in the one case, or nearer to Him in the other; those only approach Him who obtain a knowledge of Him; while those who remain ignorant of Him recede from Him. In this approach towards, or recession from God there are numerous *grades* one above the other...(in) what constitutes the difference in our perception of God.” (My italics)

Maimonides does not discount the idea that Sinai is a place where the divine light (*or hanivra*) has emanated. He has previously shown that this is an acceptable understanding, that the light is a created intermediary. There is a similar passage in the next chapter. The meaning is there can be a physical place or even a mental “place,” conducive to a certain type of meditation. (See *The Guide to Serving God*, by Abraham ben Ha-Rambam, Y. Wincelberg, Feldheim, 2007, “Hitbodedut,” p. 409, on meditation in the Temple.) In such a place where the prophet “approaches alone” to God, he can learn what he can of God and His works, thereby actualizing his potential intellect. Nonetheless, the student cannot reach that *mediating* place unless he understands that God has no “place.” Moses alone shall approach since he achieves “unity of the cognition with the cognized.” The people may not “approach” Sinai to make a corporeal fetish of the place.

Instances of Definition 3 Contextualized:

“Bow thy heavens, O Lord, and come down: *touch (ga)* the mountains, and they shall smoke.” (Psalms 144:5)

The Psalmist’s passage is about the visitation of divine punishment upon the wicked. This is the only way these prophetic texts employ the term *ga*/touch with God. Of our three lexical terms, *ga (naga)* illustrates the most corporeal form of physical approach.

“But put forth thine hand now, and *touch* (*v’ga*) his bone (*atzmo*: his bone/himself) and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face.” (Job 2:5)

The context is Satan’s debate with God in the book of Job. Would the righteous but unintellectual Job remain devoted if God gratuitously inflicted punishment upon him? The passage illustrates again that, for Maimonides, God engages in *naga*, “touching,” only in the sense of the visitation of punishment upon man. His contention is that Job could save himself through appropriate intellectual training. Job had not actualized his *intellectual* attachment to the divine. His righteousness was only a moral response rote-learned from tradition (3:22-23).

GRADATIONS

“In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the Temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, [is] the Lord of hosts: the whole earth [is] full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe [is] me! for I am undone; because I [am] a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, [which] he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he *laid* [it] (*va-yaga*’) upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched (*naga*) thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.” (Isaiah 6:1-7)

The inclusion of this passage by Maimonides among *corporeal* meanings of *naga* is questionable since this touching occurs entirely in Isaiah’s *vision*. R. Hasdai Ha-Levi, a contemporary of Maimonides, noticed this use of the grossly physical *naga* in this most spiritual of settings and wrote the master for an answer. One of Maimonides’ students responded, in a letter included in collections of Maimonides’ own letters. Maimonides probably suggested this response to the writer and perhaps dictated it:

“You inquired about the meaning of the verse in Isaiah (6:7), “And he touched therewith upon my mouth and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips.’ Does not this allude to something corporeal coming into contact with another material object? This statement may appear obscure unless we realize that every prophetic utterance stresses a specific gradation in the scale of values. When he says: ‘then flew unto me’ this represents an advanced *gradation*; ‘one of the seraphim,’ a lower degree; ‘and he touched therewith upon my mouth and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips’ this reflects the lowest level. Generally, then, a vision may be delineated as a spiritual entity which is first apprehended by the subtle, abstract mind as a pure concept and then upon its descent, its extension increases and thickens until converted into a physical object.’ It is similar to a cloud of vapor which initially appears to have no bodily properties but as it changes to drops of rain it assumes a physical form. Thus, in symbolic form, the prophet describes this process of a vision. He begins with the statement: ‘Then flew unto me,’ symbolizing an entity completely devoid of any bodily properties. Then he proceeds: ‘And he touched therewith upon my mouth,’ indicating that he came in contact with another object outside himself, a physical one in order to cleanse the prophet of his corporeality which might impede the implementation of his mission. The phrase, ‘one of the seraphim,’ refers to a combination of the incorporeal and the material. For the term ‘one’ connotes a spiritual unit and ‘seraphim’ denotes corporeality implying the destruction of the material element in a body (the seraphim were fire angels)...For the prophetic vision was experienced in such a variety of gradations.” (Translation: Leon Stitskin, pp. 109-110, *Letters of Maimonides*, Yeshiva, 1977. Emphasis, mine)

In other words, Maimonides includes the Isaiah text here to illustrate the *gradation* of corporeality into incorporeality. In prophetic vision there is a range of grades or levels, twelve in number (Guide 2:44). Maimonides writes about these grades in 1:59:

“The following question might perhaps be asked: Since there is no possibility of obtaining a knowledge of the true essence of God, and since it has also been proved that the only thing that man can apprehend of Him is the fact that He exists, and that all positive attributes are inadmissible, as has been shown, what is the difference among those who have obtained a knowledge of God? Must not the knowledge obtained by our teacher Moses, and by Solomon, be the same as that obtained by any one of the lowest class of philosophers, since there can be no addition to this knowledge? But, on the other hand, it is generally accepted among theologians and also among philosophers, that there can be a great difference between two persons as regards the knowledge of God obtained by them. Know that this is really the case, that those who have obtained a knowledge of God differ greatly from each other; for in the same way as by each additional attribute an object is more specified, and is brought nearer to the true apprehension of the observer, so by each additional negative attribute you advance toward the knowledge of God, and you are nearer to it than he who does not negative, in reference to God, those qualities which you are convinced by proof must be negated.”

So that by a peculiar process of negative intellectual meditation, one can know more about the One whose essence is unknowable. Referring to the grades of prophets, he says in 2:32:

“For we call also prophets all those who reveal something unknown by surmises, or conjectures, or correct inferences. Thus ‘prophets of Baal’ and ‘of Asherah’ are mentioned in Scripture. And God says, ‘If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams,’ *etc.* (Deut. 13:1). As to the revelation on Mount Sinai, all saw the great fire, and heard the fearful thunderings, that caused such an extraordinary terror; but only those of them who were duly *qualified* were prophetically inspired, each one according to his capacities. Therefore, it is said, ‘Come up unto the Lord, thou and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu.’ Moses rose to the highest degree of prophecy, according to the words, ‘And Moses alone shall come near the Lord.’ Aaron was below him, Nadav and Avihu below Aaron, and the seventy elders below Nadav and Avihu, and the rest below the latter, each one according to his degree of perfection. Similarly our Sages wrote: Moses had his own place and Aaron his own.”

The term “qualified” used in this passage refers first to moral training in the Torah, and secondly to intellectual training, as in the Guide. There had in the past been schools of prophets where these qualifications could be acquired (1 Sam. 19:18-24, 2 Kings 2:3, 15; 4:38, 6:1, *inter alia*).

The gradations in prophecy come from the level of divine knowledge reached by the prophet. They are represented poetically by Jacob’s Ladder. Jewish esotericism also features mediating grades of approach to God and of emanation from Him, hypostatized as the Sefirot.

THE MIDRASH ON VAYIGASH

“Then Judah *came near* (*va-yigash*) unto him, and said, Oh my Lord, let thy servant, I pray thee, speak a word in my Lord’s ears, and let not thine anger burn against thy servant: for thou [art] even as Pharaoh.” (Genesis 44:18)

I noted above Maimonides’ disingenuous and brief response to this proof text, that the verse stands for “*nagash* in the first sense, viz., to approach or move towards another person.” *Vayigash* is the name for the section of the synagogue Torah reading commencing with this passage. The section attracted Midrashic attention, duly headlined in Rashi.

In my treatment of Maimonides’ proof-texts I look for passages from the sea of Midrash that would come to the minds of his educated contemporaries. Rashi (1040-1105 C.E.) is a good indicator of such passages. The Midrash on *Vayigash* exemplifies the type of learned background immediately recollected by the mention of

Judah's "approach" to Joseph. The Midrash's extensive comments on this verse contain core themes of Maimonides' theory of prophecy (*Genesis Rabba*, 93:1-12, pp. 856-867, Soncino). I see five such broad thematic responses in the Midrash:

1. *Mind to Mind*. The Midrash wants us to grasp that Joseph and Judah were great kings of nations who wielded both temporal and cosmological power. It recites many times, as a kind of refrain:

"When kings contend with each other, what has it to do with us? It is fitting for a king to contend with a king! Therefore, 'Then Judah came near unto him.'"

The problem is that Joseph and Judah are obviously *not* kings, but emissaries of real kings. Joseph is the emissary of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, as Judah is the emissary of Jacob, the real king of the Jews. The prophetic idea alluded to here is that prophetic "approach" is a state of the "unity of cognition with the cognized," i.e., an equal meeting of minds, as between two "kings." But it also signals the idea of *gradation*, that in fact they are emissaries, mediators between different powers. The prophet, the possessor of the actualized intellect, is the mediator between man's un-actualized mind and the mind of God.

2. *Judah is Solomon*. At 93:3-4, p. 857, the Midrash recites two passages that Maimonides used in his Introduction to the Guide to illustrate Solomon's contribution to prophecy (see my *Introduction I, supra*). First, Proverbs 20:5, "Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out," inspired the Midrash (*Song of Songs* 1:8) to teach that Solomon linked parables to teach prophecy as though they were linked ropes to draw water from a well (Guide, Pines translation, p. 11). Similarly, according to the Midrash on *Vayigash*, Judah linked his speeches together until he "penetrated (Joseph's) very heart." Secondly, the *Vayigash* Midrash recites Solomon's "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word fitly spoken," Proverbs 25:11, (Guide p. 11-12), to illustrate Judah's ability to communicate the true core of his words to Joseph. This true core includes their prurient aspect (Theme 4 below. In my comments on the Introduction, I explain how the Parable of the Golden Apple implied this aspect).
3. *Joseph Represents Form, Judah Matter*. The *Vayigash* Midrash (93:5, p. 858) compares Joseph to a reaper, a treader of grapes, and a sower of his father's seed; as opposed to Judah, who it compares to a plowman, to the grapes being trodden, and, impliedly, to that which the seed is sown in (quoting Amos 9:13, Genesis 37:7, and Zechariah 9:13).
4. *Sexual Metaphor*. At 93:8, p. 859, the *Vayigash* Midrash looks at the final clause of our text, when Judah says to Joseph, "for thou art even as Pharaoh." The Midrashic author says that just like Pharaoh, the Vizier is a homosexual: "As Pharaoh lusts for males, so dost thou," implying deviant purpose to Joseph's keeping Benjamin hostage. When Joseph reveals his identity, the brothers do not believe him at first. He has them approach, and reveals his circumcision (93:10, 867), since "they did not believe him until he uncovered himself and showed that he was circumcised" (i.e., he follows the law and would presumably not be homosexual). The point is that when our mind pursues *any* mind, that is, any god, rather than the true Form, it is likened to deviant sexuality, *gilui arayot*, a form of spiritual adultery. According to the *Hagigah* rule, the secrets of *gilui arayot* must not be taught in public. The circumcision is the powerful symbol of the Jews' covenant. It marks man's prophetic encounter with God.
5. *Judah's "Approach" is Intellectual Meditation*. Prayer and sacrifice are external forms of internal meditation. The *Vayigash* Midrash (93:6, p. 858) says that *vayigash* means "I (Judah) come whether it be for battle, for conciliation, or for prayer." The Midrash (49:8) to a parallel proof-text in our chapter, "And Abraham approached (*vayigash*)" (Genesis 18:23), repeats this theme, for like Judah, "Abraham approached to speak harshly, to placate, to pray." We saw above that when Pharaoh pursued them at the

sea, the Jews “seized the art of their ancestors [i.e., they prayed],” and continued by recalling moments when Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did the same. The Midrash also understands Judah’s *vayigash* to mean that he made a sacrifice. It explains (93:7, p. 865), “And Judah *came near* unto him: . . . R. Nehemiah said, It applies to sacrifice, as it says, And the bullock of the sin offering was *brought near* (Lev. 8:14).” *Sacrifice*, that is, a *korban*, from *karav*, “approach,” one of the three lexical terms in our chapter. By identification with the sacrifice, we ascend to the incorporeal. Through prayer and sacrifice, we transcend corporeality and attain prophecy. They are external means through which man encounters God.

ENCOUNTER

This notion of “approach” is the center of the theology of Rabbi Abraham, son of Maimonides. He teaches that the purpose of human existence is to become close to God. He calls this proximity by the Sufic term *wuṣul*. This term takes various translations, including “union,” “bliss,” “perfection,” “clinging to God.” I prefer Yaacov Wincelberg’s choice of “encounter” (*ibid.* p. 33; see also *The High Ways To Perfection of Abraham Maimonides*, Samuel Rosenblatt, Columbia, 1927, pp. 95-101). Encounter is the final goal, where God is the only thought remaining in man’s mind, as in “I have set the Lord always before me” (Psalms 16:8). Encounter describes Moses’ “face to face” proximity with God (Exodus 3:11). In our chapter, Maimonides uses the term “intellectual conjunction,” which is the conjunction with the active intellect (Judeo-Arabic *ittiṣal ‘ilm*. *Ittiṣal* is a variant of *wuṣul*. See Efros, I, *Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim*, AMS Press, 1966, p. 23. *Wuṣul* appears in Guide 1:51 and elsewhere meaning Encounter in the form אלוֹצִלָּה).

There are gradations on the path to *wuṣul*. Rabbi Abraham uses the term both for the ultimate Encounter and also to characterize the attainment of any of the grades along this path. Not only Moses, but all prophets (*ibid.* 577), as well as such religious heroes as Rabbi Akiva and Shimon bar Yochai attained some grade of Encounter. Rabbi Abraham describes it as an ecstatic state of the soul, but also as the highest perfection.

Rabbi Abraham’s book, *Maspik L’Ovdei Ha-Shem*, charts the path through these grades. The highest grade of encounter is *hitbodedut*, which is mystical meditation, in which the “external” forms of meditation bring one to the state of “internal” meditation. He says (my trans, *ibid.*, 491):

“The intent of external meditation is the attainment of internal meditation, which is the highest step on the ladder of Encounter, moreover, it is no other than the encounter itself!” (*v’lo od ele sh’hi-hi ha-hitgalut [ha-pegiah] atzma!*). “External meditation is like a journey, but internal meditation starts as a journey and ends in the Encounter—the last one is equal to all the rest of the grades.” (*hitbodedut ha-khitzonit kama k’masa, v’ha-hitbodedut p’nimit t’khillata masa v’sofa ha-saga [ha-pegiah], u’mashlim k’neged kulam. Ibid.*, 531).

Maimonides speaks of meditation in Guide 3:51: “It has thus been shown that it must be man’s aim, after having acquired the knowledge of God, to deliver himself up to Him, and to have his heart constantly filled with longing after Him. He accomplishes this generally by seclusion and retirement. Every pious man should therefore seek retirement and seclusion, and should only in case of necessity associate with others.”

Even-Shmuel agrees that this chapter is about Encounter, which he calls *devekut*, following Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of *ittiṣal* as *davek* (see Kafih, note 7, *ad loc.*). Gershom Scholem defines *devekut* as “mystical cleaving to God” (Efros calls *ittiṣal/devekut* “human unity with the absolute Being.”). Here is how Even-Shmuel summarizes our chapter (my trans.):

“The unified triad of matter/form/privation in no way relates to the Creator. No one of these principles or their definitions bears any relation to Him. Matter, the source of multiplicity, is defined by place: the materiality of an individual is contiguous to its place. The Creator, despite his ‘proximity’ (*n’gia*) to his

creatures (as ‘the nature of the quarry must exist in what is hewn from it,’ Guide 1:16), is not near them except in closeness of apprehension. Such proximity is purely of intellectual apprehension, *devekut*.”

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