

GUIDE 1:7 PROGENY OR DEMONS?

This is a lexical chapter on *yalod*, “birth.” Maimonides insistently turns the definition of this most corporeal of terms to figurative extensions.

YALOD (BIRTH)

1. Procreation.
2. Figuratively used for the creation of natural things.
3. Figuratively used for things occurring in time, as though they were things that were born.
4. Figuratively used to refer to the consequences of opinions and doctrines, especially bad ones.
5. The creation of *intellectual progeny*, that is, of a student, one who is the intellectual product of another, or who has been instructed or provided with an opinion.

Instances Of Definition 1, Contextualized

“If a man have two wives, one beloved, and another hated, and they have *born (ve-yaledu)* him children, [both] the beloved and the hated; and [if] the firstborn son be hers that was hated. Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit [that] which he hath, [that] he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, [which is indeed] the firstborn.” (Deuteronomy 21:15-16)

This text leads to the discussion of the “stubborn and rebellious son” (at line 18) and a discussion of those humans who have not reached the stage of “the image of God.” This connects with Definition 2, that is, those humans have not developed the intellect that they share with God, as explained in Guide 1:1. See essay below.

Instances Of Definition 2, Contextualized

“Before the mountains *were brought forth (yulladu)*, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou [art] God.” (Psalms 90:2)

This text and the next demonstrate that *yeled* can be used figuratively. Both texts are positive and uplifting in spirit, and Maimonides will interpret the term in this light when necessary.

“For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and *maketh it bring forth (holida)* and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater” (Isaiah 55:10)

When the subject is inanimate, such as mountains, rain, the earth, Maimonides can give *yeled* a positive interpretation. He does not make much of it here, but the two lines before this proof-text are favorites of his and demonstrate the divide between God’s intellect and ours: “For my thoughts [are] not your thoughts, neither [are] your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For [as] the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Instance Of Definition 3, Contextualized

“Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may *bring forth (yeled)*.” (Proverbs 27:1)

Maimonides brings this quote to demonstrate that birth may be used figuratively for the occurrence of things in time.

Instances Of Definition 4, Contextualized

“Behold, he travaileth with iniquity, and hath conceived mischief, and *brought forth (ve-yalad) falsehood.*” (Psalms 7:14)

The verse discusses David’s wicked enemies. Maimonides uses the passage to demonstrate that opinions and doctrines followed blindly lead to evil consequences. By contrast, the human in the “image of God” transcends mere received opinion through his active cognition. Others follow “falsehood,” and worse. Maimonides’ real interest, though, is to distinguish those who are not “in the image of God” and the dangers they pose to the community, these include foreign enemies, idolators, and others in the grip of physicality. See essay on “demons” below.

“Therefore thou hast forsaken thy people the house of Jacob, because they be replenished (*malu*: full) from the east, and [are] soothsayers like the Philistines, and they please themselves in the *children (yalde) of strangers.*” (Isaiah 2:6)

The Jews have joined the Philistines, and become their intellectual progeny, not Abraham’s. Rashi provides the traditional gloss:

“‘For they are full from the east’: Their hosts have become full of the deeds of the Arameans who dwell in the East, who were sorcerers and used the name of pagan deities. ‘And with children of gentiles they please themselves’: They cohabit with the daughters of the heathens and mingle with them, and they would bear children to them, with whom they are always pleased, and they occupy themselves [with them] and long for them and bother with them.”

Maimonides retranslates “they please themselves in the children of strangers,” as “they delight in their opinions.” He also quotes the retranslation by the Aramaic Targum, “they walk in the customs of the gentiles.”

Instance Of Definition 5, Contextualized

“And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and *begat (va’yoled) [a son] in his own likeness, after his image (bi’dmuto k’tzalmo)*; and called his name Seth.” (Genesis 5:3)

This case contrasts with the one above, since Seth is clearly in the image of God, and is not a “stubborn and rebellious son.” He is the intellectual progeny of Adam. See essay below.

THE CAPTIVE IDOLATOR AND HER REBELLIOUS SON

Kafih, in his commentary, missed the implication of the most important proof-text, the first one: “And they have borne him children.” He says, “I don’t know why Maimonides needs to reach this far, to Deuteronomy 21:15, when there are significant previous similar examples earlier in the Torah” (footnote 1, *ad loc.*, my translation). However, Maimonides has an important, if concealed, point in quoting this passage. The full section from Deuteronomy reads:

“When thou goest forth to war against thine enemies, and the Lord thy God hath delivered them into thine hands, and thou hast taken them captive, And seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and hast a desire unto her, that thou wouldest have her to thy wife; Then thou shalt bring her home to thine house; and she shall shave her head, and pare her nails; And she shall put the raiment of her captivity from off her, and shall remain in thine house, and bewail her father and her mother a full month: and after that thou shalt go in unto her, and be her husband, and she shall be thy wife. And it shall be, if thou have no delight in her, then thou shalt let her go whither she will; but thou shalt not sell her at all for money, thou shalt not make merchandise of her, because thou hast humbled her. If a man have two wives, one beloved, and another hated, *and they have born him children,* [both] the beloved and the hated; and [if] the firstborn son be hers that was hated: Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit [that] which he hath, [that] he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, [which is indeed] the firstborn: But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated [as] the firstborn, by giving him a

double portion of all that he hath: for he [is] the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn [is] his. If a man have a *stubborn and rebellious son*, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and [that], when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them: Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son [is] stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; [he is] a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.”
(Deuteronomy 21:10-21)

The rabbinic tradition emphatically ties these disparate rules to the conduct of soldiers. Soldiers are necessary to establish the people in the land, so that the Torah society can be established. Soldiers must conquer the enemy. Rape and pillage inevitably follow. That is the problem. Since a single cohabitation is enough to establish marriage in Torah law, the status of the soldier is troubling. The maiden is likely an idolator, and would raise idolatrous children. So the Torah allows him one free coupling, and then sets rules for the maiden’s conversion or emancipation within one month.

The Torah understands that the captive maiden’s conversion and marriage may not end happily. A man with two wives (before Rabbeinu Gershom, c. 960–1028 CE, banned bigamy), one of which is the former idolatrous captive and the other born Jewish, may prefer the Jewish wife. But he may not supplant the captive’s firstborn son’s primogeniture in favor of the later born son of the beloved first wife. Finally, the captive maiden’s son, coming from this conflicted background, may become the “stubborn and rebellious son” subject to capital punishment. Rashi, based on Midrash, makes the connection: “If he does marry her (the captive), eventually he will hate her...and eventually he will beget from her the stubborn and rebellious son, therefore these passages were juxtaposed (*l’kakh n’smkhu parshiot halalu*).”

Kafih could not see why Maimonides began Chapter 1:7 with “And they have born him children.” But in Guide 1:6 we saw that ‘female’ symbolizes matter and ‘male’ symbolizes form, and that matter always takes on new forms. Matter is like the “married harlot” of Proverbs 7, who strays from her husband to mislead the young men. Maimonides’ bland quotation of a few words from this section of Deuteronomy conceals a similar story. The youth is drawn to the captive idolator, and could become an idolator himself. This would spell disaster for the youth and his community, unless it successfully assimilates his captive. The Torah recognizes and regulates his lust. But the danger remains that he will produce a “stubborn and rebellious son.” The stubborn and rebellious son is “a glutton, and a drunkard,” that is, one caught up in physicality. He is not the intellectual progeny of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What is the status of children who are not our *intellectual* progeny?

DEMONS

Maimonides cites several negative examples for the word *yalod*, “to bear children.” His major proof-text is: “Therefore thou hast forsaken thy people the house of Jacob, because they be replenished from the east, and [are] soothsayers like the Philistines, *and they please themselves in the children of strangers*” (Isaiah 2:6). The subject is the surrounding gentiles, and their distance from “the image of God.” This subject naturally flows from the law of the idolatrous maiden taken captive from the surrounding nations. The concern is that the soldier will fall into their idolatrous ways.

Maimonides wants to discuss the idolators of the surrounding nations. This leads him to the many failed sons of Adam, who are their forebears, and, finally, to the good son Seth. In the Talmud, *Eruvin* 18b, we learn that Adam produced subhuman progeny for a hundred and thirty years:

“R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar further stated: In all those years [from the expulsion from Eden] during which Adam was under the ban he begot ghosts and male demons and female demons, for it is said in

scripture: ‘And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years and begot a son in his own likeness, after his own image’ (Genesis 5:3). From which it follows that until that time he did not beget after his own image. An objection was raised: R. Meir said: Adam was a great saint. When he [Adam] saw that through him death was ordained as a punishment he spent a hundred and thirty years in fasting, severed connection with his wife for a hundred and thirty years, and wore clothes of fig [leaves] on his body for a hundred and thirty years. [so why did R. Jeremiah say such bad things about Adam?—that statement [of R. Jeremiah] was made in reference to the semen which he emitted accidentally.”

He was certainly aware of this passage, and quotes a parallel text from the Midrash, *Bereshit Rabba* 20:11:

“For R. Simon said: Throughout the entire one hundred and thirty years during which Adam held aloof from Eve the male demons were made ardent by her and she bore, while the female demons were inflamed by Adam and they bore”

Maimonides characteristically sublimates the prurient context of these passages and reinterprets them to mark the difference of those children raised as disciples. The other offspring were like “demons.” His language is strong:

“Those sons of Adam who were born before that time were not human in the true sense of the word, they had not ‘the form of man’ (*ha-tzura ha-enoshit*).... It is acknowledged that a man who does not possess this ‘form’ (the nature of which has just been explained) is not human, but a mere animal in human shape and form (*sh'eino adam eleh baal khai b'tzurat adam v'tavnito*). Yet such a creature has the power of causing harm and injury, a power which does not belong to other creatures. For those gifts of intelligence and judgment with which he has been endowed for the purpose of acquiring perfection, but which he has failed to apply to their proper aim, are used by him for wicked and mischievous ends; he begets evil things, as though he merely resembled man, or simulated his outward appearance. Such was the condition of those sons of Adam who preceded Seth (quoting the Midrash), i.e., demons (*k'l'omar shedim*).”

Because Adam educated Seth, this son, unlike the others, is in the image of Adam, and thus, of God. Seth is in their image only because of his acquired intellect. The other sons were “mere animals in human shape.” Indeed, they were worse than animals. Maimonides recalls the harm only man and no animal can cause by abusing his capacities, “used by him for wicked and mischievous ends.” Seth is the first man to stop the chase after animal form and embody human form. In Guide 2:30, Maimonides says, “The existence of mankind is due to Seth alone.” By contrast, he also says in 2:30: “When the serpent came to Eve he infected her with poison; the Israelites, who stood at Mount Sinai, removed that poison; idolators, who did not stand at Mount Sinai, have not got rid of it. Note this likewise.” The idolators are infected with the poison of materiality and are not “in the image of God.”

This is a moral-political argument. The community has a responsibility to itself and to God to prevent its members from pursuing materialism to their downfall. It has therefore erected rules and boundaries to protect itself. But its greater responsibility is to create “humans,” intellectual progeny who embody Torah and pursue its purpose.

THE SONS OF PROPHETS

Maimonides also interprets “human” to mean one who is fit to receive prophecy. He indicates this possibility in a tangential discussion of the homonymous term *ben*, “son.” He says that he will have a lexical chapter on this term (it does not appear in the Guide). The Bible sometimes used the term *ben* in the phrase *benei niviim*, “the sons of prophets.” He takes this to mean the *students* of prophets, and understands Seth as Adam’s progeny in the same sense (*b'inyan zeh*):

“The pupils of the prophets are called ‘sons’ of the prophets, as I shall explain when treating the homonymy of *ben*, ‘son.’ In this figurative sense the word *yeled*, ‘birth,’ is employed...‘and Adam...begat a son (Seth) in his own likeness.’”

It is not merely that Seth is Adam’s student. It is not even necessary that he be Adam’s actual son. Seth is a *ben navi*, true prophetic progeny of Adam.

Can we become *bnei niviiim*? From Guide 1:1 we learned that “on account of the Divine intellect with which man has been endowed, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty.” And in 1:2: “Through the intellect man distinguishes between the true and the false. This faculty Adam possessed perfectly and completely,” for “Thou hast made him (man) little lower than the angels” (Psalms 8:6). But then, after the expulsion: “Adam unable to dwell in dignity, was brought to the level of the dumb beast” (Psalms 49:13) and was then not a “human.” Adam once reached the highest human level, the level in which God speaks to man “mouth to mouth,” (Exodus 33:11) as he did with Moses. Seth did so likewise because he was Adam’s intellectual progeny. Maimonides says here that Seth reached “human perfection” (*shlemut enoshit*). It is in this sense that he is Adam’s true son, for he is the son of Adam when Adam attained the state of being truly Adam, again, after the “ban” (*nizuf*—rebuke) was lifted, when he returned to intellectual-moral perfection. This is the level of prophecy, the highest grade of man. If this is what Maimonides means by “human,” then the lesson would be that prophecy is attainable by us all.

There remains but one exception. In principle, any human can attain the level of the *benei niviiim*. However, the actual experience of prophecy requires that God not prevent it (Guide 2:32, 3d opinion). Voluntarism and naturalism thus spin out a dialectic of prophecy. Man must choose to make himself “human,” a *ben navi*, and if he does, then God must also choose not to deny man the consequence of his choice.

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scottmalexander@rcn.com