

GUIDE 1:47 AND 1:48 HOW TO REWRITE THE TORAH

OVERVIEW

It is useful to consider chapters 47 and 48 together.

The Torah is for the whole people. Because of that, it is “written in the language of men.”

The message of the Bible must reach the greatest number of people, despite the risk that we might have to reinterpret some of its statements. Some problems flow from this universality. Nonetheless, law must ignore individual preferences and individual needs to secure the greater legislative good (3:34). Every nation faces this problem.

Scripture must reach the largest number of people with the most urgent message about God, even at the risk of creating the *educational* contradiction Maimonides mentioned in his Introduction to the Guide. The teacher gives the students one explanation at the inception of their studies. This account is not in itself untrue, but is certainly incomplete. Therefore, the teacher later teaches a different but necessarily deeper account that brings the sharpest students closer to the sublime truth.

What are we to do about the anthropomorphic attributions in the Bible? There are three approaches. The first is the popular approach. Even the lowest class of the people senses the problem of divine corporeality. Still, they are satisfied as long as the Bible does not make gross attributions to God. The second approach is Onkelos’ Aramaic translation of the Torah, the “*Targum*.” Onkelos generally uses distancing and sublimating language to avoid divine corporeality. He does not stop at merely gross attributions, as in the first approach. The third approach is Maimonides’ way. He disapproves of rewriting the Torah to avoid anthropomorphism. Instead, we must *actively interpret* the text using the method of his lexical chapters. He disapproves of Onkelos’ project of translating the Torah precisely because of its public nature. It cannot reach the deepest true understanding. This true understanding is only for the mind of the properly trained interpreter.

Ultimately, we cannot verbalize the deeper message of Torah. In this, Maimonides is in the same situation as the mystic. In *The Heart and the Fountain*, (Oxford, 2002, pp. 3-6) Joseph Dan, the great scholar of Jewish mystical experience, explains, “Mysticism is that which cannot be expressed in words, period.” He goes on to say, “A non-mystic is someone who believes that when truth is explained to him in words, he should understand the truth. The mystic is someone who knows that real truth, meaningful truth, can never be fully expressed in words....*the mystics and the religious are two kinds of believers who are separated by a common language*” (his italics). While we can reach some understanding of this truth, we can never reach God’s essential nature. The Bible is the best expression of these truths available to us in writing. Our responsibility is to seek out these truths beyond the letter of the text.

THE EXTERNAL SENSES

The Torah attributes certain senses to God, the so-called “internal” and “external” senses. It was common in ancient thought to refer to the internal and the external senses (see, e.g., the excellent glossary of scholasticism in *Selections from Medieval Philosophers*, Richard McKeon, editor, Scribner, 1958, vol. 2, p. 494, “*sensus externi*” and “*sensus interni*”). The external senses are the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, in that order of descent. The internal “senses” are the faculties of thought, understanding, and imagination. The internal senses are no more properly attributable to God than the more obviously corporeal external senses. All are means of perception.

The public has an untutored idea of what senses they can appropriately attribute to God. We attribute only what we regard as excellent to God. We regard only certain senses as perfections. Since sight, sound and smell are excellent senses, and operate at a distance, we accept these as divine attributions. This is praise of God, and so He sees all, hears all, and enjoys the odor of subtle scent, all very good things for us. Still, it seems too gross to consider God touching or tasting as we touch or taste (but see Guide 1:18, which featured two such scriptural passages). Besides, we never saw God touching or tasting anything (*sh'harei einam ro-im oto*). Elsewhere, Maimonides said that touch (and, presumably, he would include taste) is a “disgrace” for us (Guide 2:36), and, therefore, could never be attributed to God.

The truth, of course, is that all of these senses are corporeal. To include one is to include all, to deny one is to deny all. But the “Torah speaks in the language of men,” (Guide 1:26), and so we end up with a seeing and hearing God who enjoys the odor of the sacrifice but never touches or tastes it. This language of Torah was a concession so that the people could grasp a more sublime idea of divinity than their neighbors had. This language is merely figurative, since human senses are subject to passion, change and pain, but God does not suffer these affections. Still, we project sensory perception on God in order to praise His omniscience.

The Bible says that God sees, hears and smells. Here is Maimonides’ explanation: we should read all of these statements as meaning that God *knows* the acts and speeches of men. Obviously, a non-corporeal being does not perceive corporeal things *through* corporeal senses. God knows all, immediately, with a knowledge that is not separate in Him, for He is the knowledge, the knower and known. He knows, but His knowledge is different from our knowledge. Furthermore, when the text says that God “hears” prayer, we must actively reinterpret the text to mean that He *answers* the prayer (1:45). The activity that we call “God hearing prayer” is a unified divine essential activity combining the knowledge of God with his creative providential *response* or *denial*.

THE INTERNAL SENSES

Divine “Imagination” in Scripture. While making this proof, Maimonides casually mentions that scripture never joins imagination to God as an attributive term, in the same way and for the same reason that people do not think of God touching or tasting. That is, they consider it too gross to imagine that God imagines.

Commentators have replied with two such *damiti* (“I imagined”) passages in Numbers and Isaiah: “...Surely *as I have imagined*, so it will be...,” and, “...*as I imagined* to do to them, so will I do to you.” They defend Maimonides for omitting these passages for two reasons. Either those were speeches of prophets rather than speeches of God; or they are about thought and not imagination (my trans. of Isaiah 14:24 and Numbers 33:56; Friedlander on 1:47, note 1, p. 164; Kafih, note 18, p. 71).

Abarbanel, Shem Tov, and Efodi, among the ancient commentators, justify the term *damiti* appearing in these scriptures by reference to another passage, Hosea 12:11, “...by means of the prophets have I used images,” (my trans. of *bi'yad ha-neviim admah*). They argue that in these two instances, *damiti* is a *conclusory statement*, a *paal yotze*, i.e., it expresses a prophetic conclusion, since it is, literally, “by the hand of the prophets” that God “imagines.”

Maimonides then says that just as the five external senses are equally corporeal from the divine point of view, we can say the same of the internal senses: imagination, thought, and understanding. The mind, it would appear, is in no better or worse position than the imagination. Of course, the Bible attributes knowledge to God frequently. Still, it is no more consistent to grant God sight and deny Him touch, than to grant Him knowledge but deny Him imagination. Maimonides leaves it at that, for he will come to these points again, but let’s consider this idea.

Imagination Cannot be Attributed to God. The problem with imagination is that it is always either fantasy or representation or both. Fantasy and representation both imply falsity. Fantasy is obviously an account at odds with truth. Representation portrays the likeness of truth, but truth is truth and the portrayal merely a portrayal.

God makes apples, not paintings of them. If the painting were a *true* portrayal of the true apple it would not be a painting of an apple, but the apple itself. Thus, the attribution of imagination to God is the attribution of falsity to God, which is not allowable.

Maimonides apparently thinks that all men have this profound insight, which is why they felt it too gross to attribute imagination to God. That is why Torah refrains from the attribution of imagination. The Torah does not make attributions unless people think of them as perfections because “Torah speaks in the language of men.”

Can Knowledge be Attributed to God? On the other hand, knowledge and understanding are great perfections of men, and easily attributed by men to God. Maimonides will argue to the contrary that knowledge and understanding are *homonymous* terms used one way by men, differently for God. “God knows but *not* through knowledge,” is the special formula Maimonides will use. The homonymy of these terms could mean that they are so different as to share nothing but the sound and spelling. It is more likely that he means that thought is essential to God but accidental for man. This means that in God, it is always active, while in men it is usually potential, and always subject to passion, affection, suffering and change.

Active Interpretation. The result is that we must do more as active interpreters. It makes no more or less sense to say “God sees all” than to say, “God knows all”: both, according to Maimonides, have equal status as internal and external senses, that is, as means of perception. Not only must we abstract from statements like “God sees all” to understand “God knows all,” but we must go further and understand “God knows all” with a knowledge that is different from human knowledge.

This far literate writing cannot go. Writing is itself a corporeal reifying expression. We must ascend to a higher spiritual understanding of the text. Ultimately, then, there is no benefit in rewriting the Torah. We have reached the stage where language breaks down and cannot communicate the incommunicable.

CRITICISM OF ONKELOS

Maimonides, in our chapter 1:48, studies Onkelos’ attempt to rewrite the language of Torah (see also 1:27).

In general, Maimonides finds consistency and high-mindedness in *Targum*. Wherever Onkelos finds corporeal attribution, he sublimates it. Still, Maimonides has a divided opinion of Onkelos. On the one hand, he needs Onkelos as his canonized predecessor for the right to interpret the Torah systematically. In this vein, he must resolve any inconsistencies that crop up in the *Targum*, which would weaken its authority as the Torah’s interpretation. On the other hand, no public rewrite can reach its true meaning. Only the individual’s active reinterpretation according to the method of the Lexicon approaches that meaning.

Onkelos on Hearing. When it comes to sensual attribution, meaning here only the external senses, Onkelos maintains his sublimating mode. Thus, he translates “hearing” consistently in two ways; either that God intellectually *perceives* the audible statements without audibly hearing them, or, in the case of prayer, that He *accepts* or does not accept them. The famous instance is Exodus 22:

“Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely *hear* their cry (*Targum* from ‘and they cry...’: *im mikval yikval kadamay kabala ekbal k’vilteh*—!); And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.” (Exodus 22:22-24)

Onkelos’ translates God’s “hearing” as God’s accepting the cry of the widows and orphans. Maimonides quoted this passage with approval in 1:45, the lexical chapter on hearing. He believes that God miraculously provides for the widow and orphan. His only problem was with the sensual corporeality of God’s “hearing” their cry, not with

God accepting their prayer or answering it. Maimonides had explained how we must reinterpret the figure of God's "hearing" and when the literal interpretation indicates, "God accepts the prayer," as in the proof-text, we interpret that God *answered* the prayer. Conversely, if it indicates that God does not "hear," we interpret that God *denied* the prayer. He expects us to remember this method of active reinterpretation and contrast it with Onkelos' method of rewriting. Onkelos does not go this far. Because of the public nature of his project, he cannot go far enough.

Onkelos on Sight. At least, in the case of hearing, Onkelos is consistent. By contrast, he translates sight inconsistently.

This initiates Maimonides' critique. He maintains the critique on two levels, the explicit level and the implicit level. Explicitly, Maimonides needs to resolve inconsistencies so that Onkelos can remain his precedent for actively reinterpreting Torah. This explains his concern with the state of Targumic manuscript evidence. On the implicit level, Maimonides wants us to compare what we have already learned from the Lexicon about active interpretation and contrast that with Onkelos' public translation, to Onkelos' detriment

The problem with "sight" is that *Targum* usually translates it by *khaza*, but does not do so always. *Khaza* appears in both Hebrew and Aramaic, with, apparently, the same meaning. Maimonides included the *Hebrew* version of *khaza* in the lexical chapter on sight, 1:4. He defined it there to mean optical perception or intellectual perception, with only the latter meaning attributed to God. He did not call it homonymous, which means that even when the term means "optical perception" its meaning can slide over to plain "perception." If it were a homonym, then the physical meaning could not be suppressed, and, therefore, could never be attached to God, even metaphorically.

Now, since *khaza* was not homonymous, at least in Hebrew, there would be no reason to avoid using it for God, since we could always say it only meant "perception," not "physical sight." Jastrow's *Dictionary*, similarly, p. 445, translates it as "to see, to recognize." Nevertheless, *Targum* is not consistent, and frequently substitutes the reflexive formulation that "it was revealed before Me," *glei kadam hashem*, instead of *khaza*, "recognize (know)."

Maimonides spends about half of our chapter 1:48 canvassing nine exceptions where Targum gives some variant of the Aramaic *glei kadam hashem* instead of *khaza*. But Maimonides' explicit concern is with the meaning of *khaza*. He strives to explain why Targum would avoid using *khaza* when "there is sufficient evidence that ... (it) is homonymous, and that it denotes mental perception as well as the sensation of sight." This comes as a surprise, since he never said it was homonymous in Guide 1:4. Shem Tov rushes to explain that it is homonymous only in Aramaic! Maimonides' dubious explanation of its Aramaic homonymity is that *khaza* not only means to know/recognize, but to *assent to* and *fix in one's mind* without cavil (Kafih note 6, and Friedlander's *scholia* canvassing the Judeo-Arabic original, Munk, Al-Kharizi, and Ibn Tibbon, note 2). Essentially, Maimonides thinks the *Aramaic khaza* (in contrast to the *Hebrew khaza*) means that God *identifies* with the perception.

Based on his readings of the manuscript evidence, Maimonides conjectures that Onkelos avoids *khaza* when "seeing" is coupled with "wrong." This is so whether wrong means injustice, evil, injury, oppression, or violence. Onkelos avoids linking wrong to the *khaza*-perception of God, because that would mean that God is *identified* with wrong. The rationale is a passage in Habakkuk:

"[Art] thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, mine Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction. [Thou art] of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, [and] holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth [the man that is] more righteous than he?" (Habakkuk 1:12-13)

God "canst not look on iniquity." Arguably, Maimonides wrenches the phrase from context to establish his nearly Manichean grammatical principle. Nonetheless, he says that *Targum* strives to avoid attributing sight to God

when the sight beholds iniquity because then He would be *identified* with iniquity. Therefore, when “God sees,” and when seeing is linked with iniquity, *Targum* translates “it was revealed before Him,” a sufficient distancing to make the point.

Critique of *Targum*. Maimonides now wants us critique *Targum* by going through each of these nine proof-texts linking the name of God with iniquity. As it happens, we already know how Maimonides would actively reinterpret these passages. It is obvious that in none of them did God identify with the objects of His knowledge, so Onkelos need not have distanced God from those objects.

We skip the first one about Leah for the moment. The passage about “seeing” Laban’s oppression of Jacob only links iniquity in the speech of Jacob’s *angel*, not of God, and for Onkelos to further distance that iniquity is overkill. There follow four linkages of God and iniquity from the beginning of Exodus. In Exodus 2:25 God “saw” the Jews enslaved, but the verse goes on to say that He “knew,” so that “saw” really does mean “knew,” not that God identified with the slave-masters. Exodus 3:7 and 3:9 both involve the mediation of the angel of the burning bush, and we interpret it the way we did with Jacob’s angel. In Exodus 32:19, the Jews knew that the Lord had “seen” the iniquity of their slavery because their mediating “angels” Moses and Aaron told them. In these passages, translation is unnecessary to the mind of the active interpreter.

The rest of the passages are about the iniquity of idol worship. In these cases, there is *nothing* to see optically because no matter what *physical* ritual occurs idolatry is always in the heart. In these cases, God knows and visits punishment upon the transgressors in the same kind of unified action as when He answers prayer. So Exodus 32:9 is about the Golden Calf, and Deuteronomy 32:19 and 36 are from Moses’ song at the end of Torah, where he prophesies the Jews’ slide into idolatry and their inevitable punishment. Deuteronomy 32:19 says that God “saw” this iniquity and abhorred them. Maimonides treated this passage in Guide 1:36. There he said that expressions of divine anger and abhorrence are figures “exclusively used with reference to idolatry” and involve projecting our experience of God’s resultant punishment back on Him as anger. Again, it is obvious that God does not identify with idolatry, and further distancing is superfluous.

The result is that Onkelos’ “it was revealed before him” is in each case unnecessary and may even confuse or deter our own active reinterpretation. By rewriting these passages, we lose the starkness of sensual attribution whose purpose is to force our rethinking.

Targumic Inconsistency. Still, even if we are not impressed with this principle of distancing God from “iniquity,” at least, in these nine examples, Onkelos applied it consistently.

Maimonides now notes three cases where *Targum* does not consistently couple “it was revealed before God” with iniquity statements. In these cases, *Targum* inexplicably returns to the unreflexive *khaza*/recognize/identify translation, making God “look upon iniquity,” and, presumably, identify with it. This is a problem, because if Maimonides’ theory of iniquitous distancing is wrong, then there is no explanation to account for Onkelos’ arbitrary interpretational preferences, ruining him as canonical precedent for Maimonides’ project. Maimonides is not one who appreciates the beauty of inconsistency.

Maimonides claims to be unable to find a pattern that would account for all three instances and demands review of all Targumic manuscripts for copyist error. The first two are from the run-up to Noah’s flood and concern God “seeing” the idolatry and evil of the Noahide generation. Onkelos translated “seeing” as *khaza* despite the iniquity thus linked to divine perception. We could explain this Maimonideanly by saying that God *knew their hearts* and immediately and unifiedly punished them with the flood. The fourth case (skipping the third) is inconsistent the other way, that when “God will see for himself the ram” (Genesis 22:8) Onkelos returns to the reflexive *kadam hashem gli imra*, the “ram is revealed before God” despite there being no iniquity involved in a ram. Maimonides conjectures either 1) that *Targum* would not link dumb animals to God, or 2) that God does not perceive individuals of the animal kingdom but only individual intellectual souls, or 3) that God does not allow

himself to be *directly* petitioned in Abraham's prayer to cause a ram *to exist now*. Again, we know how Maimonides had previously interpreted the passage. In Commentary on the Mishnah, *Pirke Avot 5:6*, at an early stage of his career, Maimonides followed the Mishnah's notion that the ram at Isaac's binding was a miracle ram created by God on the evening of the sixth day with a number of other miraculous objects. He argued that God *seeded* certain miracles into nature at the creation of nature (he developed a richer notion of providential miracles later).

The third and more interesting case is in two lines about Leah, one of which we skipped at the beginning of the first nine texts. Maimonides has *concealed* this gross inconsistency by splitting the lines between a full page of other material. The inconsistency is between two *consecutive verses* in the *Targum*. Maimonides quotes both but does not put them next to each other the way I shall to emphasize his point:

“And when the Lord *saw* (*va'yar*) [*Targum: khaza*—‘recognized/identified’] that Leah [was] hated (*snuah*), he opened her womb: but Rachel [was] barren. And Leah conceived, and bare a son, and she called his name Reuben: for she said, Surely the Lord hath *looked upon* (*raah*) [*Targum: arei gli kadam hashem*—‘it was revealed before the Lord’] my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me.” (Genesis 29:31-32)

There is unexplained inconsistency between the two verses, for in each God is said to *look* upon iniquity, but Onkelos translates the concept in two different ways. Maimonides is prepared to pass *Targum's* inconsistency off to bad copyists, a problem he also suffered from. One possible rabbinic solution, unmentioned and thus probably not approved by Maimonides, was to say that when you have four wives, wife number one is called “loved” while wives numbers two through four were technically called “hated,” and no iniquity is meant by it. The better and more Maimonidean approach is to notice that in the first line hatred is not something seen but *known*, as a fact, and not identified with. Thus, *khaza*, in the sense of “recognized” would be appropriate. Moreover, in the second line, Leah is only *poetically* saying that “surely the Lord hath *looked upon*” her affliction, by which she meant that God *answered* her prayer, not that He opened divine eyelids in her direction or identified with her affliction. Again, none of these rewrites is necessary and Onkelos is really impeding the active interpreter.

The broad point remains. We cannot satisfactorily attribute any of the senses to God without doing violence to language. Because truth is incorporeal, corporeal communication is dumb before it and there is no way to articulate this directly in public print. The only access possible occurs when human intellect strives to align itself with divine intellect in the process of active reinterpretation. This is a form of meditation.

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