

GUIDE 1:20 ELEVATION

This is a lexical chapter. See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.” It contains a general introduction to the problem of attributes.

The terms *ram* and *nasa* have the same meanings, first, a corporeal sense of spatial elevation, and then an incorporeal sense of elevation in rank. The two meanings, corporeal and incorporeal, are said to be homonymous. This is supposed to mean that there is no shared middle ground or progression between their corporeal and incorporeal meanings. Maimonides devotes a paragraph to *ram* and a second to *nasa*; so to retain consistent presentation, I present them in that order, though they carry the same meanings. The idea is that in prophetic discourse these terms cannot mean the physical elevation of some object, but, rather, that it is in some way exalted. This perhaps trivial observation provides Maimonides the opportunity to begin a series of chapters on the nature of God, His relation to his attributes, and to His creation.

RAM: (HIGH) Homonym

1. Elevation in space.
2. Elevation in dignity, i.e., greatness, honor, and power. This is the only sense used when used of God, in which case it is a divine attribute.

Instance of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and *bare up* (*v'yisu*) the ark, and it was *lift up* (*va-taram*) above the earth.” (Genesis 7:17)

Maimonides only quotes, imprecisely, “and it (he adds, ‘the ark’) was lift up above the earth.” For the corporeal use of *ram* we have come to expect a negative sort of quotation. The passage describes the fortieth day of Noah’s voyage, when the waters destroyed the world.

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“Then thou spakest in vision to thy holy one[s], and saidst, I have laid help upon [one that is] mighty; I have *exalted* (*harimoti*) [one] chosen out of the people. I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him.” (Psalms 89:19-20)

Not that God raised David up on a podium, but that He made David king. The passage begins a block of four quotations about the commencement and corruption of the Jewish monarchy, reminding us again of the motif of intellectual progeny. After Solomon, few kings were David’s intellectual progeny, and the next two kings mentioned were not his physical progeny either. The repetition of such motifs in the proof-texts of the Maimonidean lexicon is difficult to explain in terms of modern thematic organization. I am reminded that in Aggadic literature and in Hebrew poetry, *piyutim*, repetition acquires sublimity. Although this proof-text and the next two are nearly identical in language, notice that in this one David was “chosen,” while Jeroboam and Baasha were not. It means that he alone of these kings was the intellectual progeny of the prophet (Samuel, as Samuel was the non-filial progeny of Eli).

“Then the word of the Lord came to Jehu the son of Hanani against *Baasha* (King of Israel), saying, Forasmuch as I *exalted* thee (*harimotikha*) out of the dust, and made thee prince over my people Israel; and thou hast walked in the way of Jeroboam, and hast made my people Israel to sin, to provoke me to anger with their sins.” (I Kings 16:1 and 2)

“Go, tell *Jeroboam*, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Forasmuch as I *exalted* thee (*harimotikha*) from among the people, and made thee prince over my people Israel, And rent the kingdom away from the

house of David, and gave it thee: and [yet] thou hast not been as my servant David, who kept my commandments, and who followed me with all his heart, to do [that] only [which was] right in mine eyes.” (I Kings 14:7 and 8).

I have placed these two quotes together since they are meant to be taken parallel. In both cases, the lexical term is *harimotikha*, a form of *ram*, which means “I (God) exalted thee” (first, Baasha, second, Jeroboam, in reverse temporal order). The language in both cases indicates humble origins, “out of the dust (*afar*)” and “from among the people.” Neither Jeroboam nor Baasha came from royalty and their origins are obscure. Both Tenth Century chiefs of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) rose on the force of their personalities and their arms. Jeroboam founded Israel and set the low standard of rule. Both led revolutions against their predecessors. Both instituted idol worship. Both were overthrown by other revolutionaries who slaughtered their families. The texts employ similar prophetic language to show that the houses of both would shortly be “expunged” (*u’viarti*, 14:10, *mavir*, 16:3). Dogs and fowl would eat their dead in the field (14:11, 16:4). The Talmud notes the pattern (*Gittin* 88a, quoting Deuteronomy 4:25), “When thou shalt beget children and children’s children, and ye shall have been long in the land, and shall corrupt [yourselves], and make a graven image,” that:

“The land of Israel was not laid waste until seven courts of justice had sanctioned idolatry, namely, Jeroboam..., Baasha, (etc.)...as it says, ‘she that hath borne seven languisheth, she hath given up the ghost, her sun is gone down while it was yet day, she hath been ashamed and confounded (Jeremiah 15:9).’ Where is this intimated in the Torah? In the verse, ‘when thou shalt beget children and children’s children.’”

The point is that the idolatrous Baasha was indeed Jeroboam’s intellectual progeny even though they were not related: “you have gone in the way of Jeroboam.” (16:2)

“Be thou *exalted* (*ruma*, raised up), O God, above the heavens; [let] thy glory [be] above all the earth.” (Psalms 57.6; 57:5 in KJV)

Not that God is physically raised but that He is supreme. The traditional explanation of the Psalm is that it took place when David hid in the cave from Saul. He offers this Psalm thanking God for saving his life without having to kill Saul. It is an apt counterpoint to Baasha, who slaughtered the house of Jeroboam.

NASA: (TO LIFT UP) Homonym

1. Elevation in space
2. Elevation in rank and dignity.

Instance of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“*And they laded* (*va-yisu*) their asses with the corn, and departed thence.” (Genesis 42:26)

The quote tells of Joseph’s brothers’ first trip back to their father from Egypt. Having loaded their beasts they later learn that Joseph’s steward had placed the brothers’ money back in their sacks. Thus starts a sad chain of events leading to Judah’s confrontation with Joseph and the revelation that he is their brother. This qualifies as negative context for the corporeal meaning that the money was physically raised upon the asses, not that it was in any way exalted.

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“He shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed [shall be] in many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted (*ve-tinase*).” (Numbers 24:7)

In our proof-text, the kingdom “shall be exalted,” by which Maimonides does not mean that it is physically raised as on a plateau. “His king shall be higher than Agag,” is Balaam’s prophetic anticipation of Saul’s defeat of Agag, king of Amalek. The passage is part of Balaam’s song of praise of the Jews, “How goodly are thy tents, O

Jacob!” It is an example of prophecy settling upon non-Jews. Maimonides believes that prophecy is universally available. Balaam was a prophet of the second class in the classification of Guide 2:45. The term “prophet,” when used of these inspired men of the second class, is meant in a “wider sense” than when used of biblical prophets: he says that they are “almost” prophets. It may be that “when he was good” Balaam was momentarily a prophet in the “wider sense,” but Maimonides expects his prophets to prophecy on a regular basis. Abraham Maimonides says that Balaam’s illumination here was an influx of perfect and complete prophecy (*zakha l’hitgalut shlema u’gemura*, see *The Guide to Serving God*, p. 396).

“In all their (the Jews) affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them: in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bare them, and *carried them (va-y’nasem)* all the days of old.” (Isaiah 63:9)

Rashi says, “It speaks of the Shekhina anthropomorphically, to convey to the ear what it can hear.” Maimonides quotes the passage again at 2:29, where he catalogs other examples of parabolic speech in Isaiah. Explaining this passage there, Maimonides says that Isaiah “gives an account of God’s past kindness to us.” God does not physically carry the Jews; rather, he exalted them triumphant over their enemies. Chapter 63 in Isaiah foretells the coming of the Shekhina, as the destroying angel, trampling the Jewish vineyards, the blood of grapes staining its garment. Isaiah then recalls the good things God did for the Jews, swiftly returning in verse 10 to the subject of their rebellion and apostasy.

“And they [the band of Korach] gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, [Ye take] too much upon you, seeing all the congregation [are] holy, every one of them, and the Lord [is] among them: *wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above (titnasu)* the congregation of the Lord?” (Numbers 16:3)

Not, why do you stand on a podium, but why do you act holier-than-thou, *exalting* yourselves? This passage is from Korach’s speech inspiring rebellion against Moses. Maimonides answers Korach’s question in Guide 2:35 where he proves that Mosaic prophecy is uniquely superior to all other prophets. Abraham Maimonides (*ibid.* 117) stresses that Korach was also a humble and pious man, but was not content to serve God except in the capacity of high priest. He did not recognize Moses’ prophetic superiority or its source in Moses’ humility. Moses was vindicated because he was more humble: fearing to be compared to Korach he “fell on his face” (16:4). The true prophet “lifts” himself, so to speak, by lowering himself in his own estimation.

“O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth; O God, to whom vengeance belongeth, shew thyself. *Lift up thyself (hinasei)*, thou judge of the earth: render a reward to the proud.” (Psalms 94:1 and 2)

Not that God physically lifts Himself but that He assumes His role as judge. This passage is the opening of the Psalm for Wednesday, the Fourth Day, when God created the sun and moon. It is a song of vengeance against those who worship those creations of the Fourth Day. This ties in the real theme of the chapter, the meaning of God’s relation to his creations. Maimonides’ theory of prophecy (Mishneh Torah, *Avodah Zara* 1:1) is that idolators honor the sun and moon at first only as servants of God: by honoring the servants they honor the Master. Later they forget that subtle distinction and worship them in their own right. See essay below.

“For thus saith the *high and lofty One (ram v’nisa)* that inhabiteth eternity, whose name [is] Holy; I dwell in the high and holy [place], with him also [that is] of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.” (Isaiah 57:15)

This passage is good for Maimonides because it uses both *ram* and *nisa* synonymously. Isaiah 57:15 is preceded at 13 with a rant against the Jews’ collections of idols, which cannot save, carrying on the idea of the prior Psalm about idolatry of the sun and moon. The danger is that the attributes easily become gods in their own right. The passage again stresses humility in comparison to the loftiness of God. Abraham Maimonides repeatedly quotes this passage for his theme that we rise through self-abasement. Indeed, quoting his father, R. Abraham insists that “wherever you find God’s greatness you find His humility” (*Guide to Serving God*, 133; Talmud *Megilla* 31a). Maimonides says that the passage denotes “elevation in rank, quality, and power, and not elevation in space.” This leads him to consider those three things, “rank, quality, and power” *romemut, gedola v’oz*. He continues by

mentioning other attributes: “ability, perfection, goodness, and others” *ha-yakholet v’ha-shlemut v’ha-tov v’zulatan*. He then asks how do so many ideas emerge from one idea of elevation? This is the opportunity for him to introduce his ideas on the essential attributes, as well his general approach to current views on emanationism. See essay below.

INTRODUCTION TO ATTRIBUTES

“You may be surprised (*u’shema yikashei lekha*) that I employ the expression, ‘elevation in rank, quality, and power,’ and you may say, How can you assert that several distinct expressions denote the same thing? (*heyakh ata osei inyanim rabim mei’inyan ekhad?*) It will be explained later on that those who possess a true knowledge of God do not consider that He possesses many attributes, but believe that these various attributes which describe His Might, Greatness, Power, Perfection, Goodness, etc., are identical, denoting His Essence, and not anything extraneous to His Essence.”

This concluding paragraph is the real introduction to Maimonides’ upcoming discussion of attributes, 1:51-60. In the next chapter he begins with the divine attribute of Voice (*Logos, Kol, Memra, Word*). He asserts that these attributes do not exist of themselves, but “denote” His Essence.

He begins by stating the philosophic problem. Friedlander translates, “How can you assert that several distinct expressions denote the same thing?” Better: “How can you derive many ideas from one idea?” (*inyanim* = Ar. *ma’ānī* = attributes, see Efron, *Dictionary*, p. 96). He asks the same question at 2:22, “It is impossible that anything but a single simple thing should proceed from a simple thing.” The classic formula is: “From what is one and simple only what is one and simple can come to be” (See Arthur Hyman’s famous article of the same title, p. 111, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed., Lenn Goodman, SUNY, 1992).

The problem begins with Plato’s Socrates, who found all things patterned as copies from perfect forms, and who found the source of all in the Good. But were the forms in the Good, or separate from it? Were they real or just names? What was their status vis-à-vis God? Philo (20 BCE - 40 CE) tries to answer these questions. He locates the forms in the “word” of God, that is, in the “mind” of God, which is the created entity he called Logos. Logos is Torah, the creative word (IV *Questiones in Genesis* 140). The Logos is the first-begotten son of the uncreated Father (*On the Confusion of Tongues*, 63). In Plotinus (c. 205–270 C.E.) the Good, God, creates this intelligence through emanation, just as sunlight emanates from the sun.

Maimonides receives the doctrine of emanationism in the name of “Aristotle,” really, in Avicenna’s (980-1037 C.E.) rewrite of Plotinus, and presents it in Guide 2:22. “Aristotle holds that the first Intelligence is the cause of the second, the second of the third, and so on, till the thousandth, if we assume a series of that number.” The doctrine holds that God thinks of himself: this reflexive action necessarily emanates a simple singular first intelligence, *possible* in and of itself, *necessary* with respect to its cause, God. This intelligence likewise considers itself. When it considers its *possible* existence, it produces the body of the first celestial sphere. As it considers its *necessary* existence from God, it emanates the soul of the first celestial sphere (sphere, not planet—the planets are “hung” on the transparent spheres that surround us onionlike.). This goes on to the soul of the tenth sphere, the Active Intellect, and our sublunar existence. Maimonides criticized the determinism in this conception:

“Now the first Intellect is undoubtedly simple. How then can the compound form of existing things come from such an Intellect by fixed laws of Nature, as Aristotle (*sic*) assumes? We admit all he said concerning the Intelligences, that the further they are away from the first, the greater is the variety of their compounds, in consequence of the larger number of the objects comprehensible by the Intelligences: but even after admitting this, the question remains, By what law of Nature did the spheres emanate from the Intelligences? What relation is there between material and immaterial beings? Suppose we admit that each sphere emanates from an Intelligence of the form mentioned; that the Intelligence, including, as it

were, two elements, in so far as it comprehends itself and another thing, produces the next Intelligence by the one element, and a sphere by the other; but the question would then be, how the one simple element could produce the sphere, that contains two substances and two forms, namely, the substance and the form of the sphere, and also the substance and the form of the star fixed in that sphere. For, according to the laws of Nature, the compound can only emanate from a compound.”

The solution, he says, is that “A single agent that acts with design and will, and not merely by the force of the laws of Nature, can produce different objects.” He was not the first to take this step, radically transforming the deterministic nature of emanationism. The great problem for religion was the *necessary* character of existence, both in the original Aristotelian version and in those of his philosophical children. Maimonides solves religion’s problem by identifying the contradiction in philosophical creation and solving it. Multiplicity can flow from unity if God wills such a miracle. Maimonides endorses creation as the greatest miracle of all, and makes it the basis of all other miracles. God can and does create a world of multiplicity, not only from what is one and simple, but, better, from *nothing*. Maimonides never endorses Avicenna’s emanationist scheme, although he does accept a more general system of willed emanation in the created world, not in the initial creation *ex nihilo*.

God created the world with its own nature. It is a world of natural cause and effect. Miracles are the exceptions. In that sublunar world, Aristotle’s science adequately explains natural necessity. Above that world, neither Aristotle nor anyone else other than God *knows* anything. In that world, forms somehow providentially emanate being into unformed matter. God emanates intelligence to intelligent beings. Since He is not bound by necessity, He retains the power to withhold emanation, and to change that which He wills to change, though He does not will to do so.

The universe manifests God’s “might, greatness, power, perfection, goodness.” It is all one in Him, a non-numerical undifferentiated unity. They are “identical, denoting His Essence, and not anything extraneous to His Essence.” We, who lack God’s perspective, only see the kaleidoscopic infinity of His works and ascribe them to many attributes, but “those who possess a true knowledge of God do not consider that He possesses many attributes.” Maimonides resembles the Talmudic Rabbi Chanina, (*Berakhot* 33b quoted in *Guide* 1:59) who ridiculed another who verbalized many attributes: “Have you finished all the praises of your Master!”

Yehuda Even-Shmuel’s summary of this chapter comes to the same conclusion from a different angle, that these three chapters express the triad of matter/privation/form. This triad is the dynamic of generation and corruption in our world. He understood that matter was the subject of *Guide* 1:18 and that privation was the subject of 1:19. He showed that God bore no relation to matter or to privation. Now, in 1:20 he completes the triad, taking our chapter’s theme to be form, and God’s non-involvement with form. For Even-Shmuel the attributes are the “forms” that God cannot be characterized by. He writes (my trans.):

“Just as matter and privation bear no relation to the creator, so even form must be negated from Him. However, God is not lacking in qualities; on the contrary, his perfections are infinite, so much so that His lofty plane is over the plane of all other perfections. We do not call these perfections forms or attributes (*taarim*)—since forms are but accidents inhering in particular essences in a more or less regular manner. The essences are subjected to these forms, and exist through them. In respect of God, however, His perfections are His essence and His essence is His perfections. His attributes (if we can speak at all about them) do not exist apart from his essence. Just as the Creator of matter is not matter, and just as the Creator of privations has no privation, so the Creator of forms is not formed (*kakh borei ha-tsurot aino tsura*).”