

GUIDE 1:25 INDWELLING

According to Friedlander, this chapter concludes the section, begun at 1:8, of lexical chapters on terms referring to space and motion (see his note quoted in my treatment of that chapter). Two chapters follow (1:26 is methodological, 1:27 revisits “descent,” previously treated in 1:10), and then 1:28 starts a new section that continues to 1:44. That section defines terms relating to parts of the bodies of any living being.

Our chapter begins by referring to the Aristotelian/Maimonidean doctrine of general and particular place in nearly the same terms as in 1:8 (see my treatment there). Maimonides’ lexical term *shakhan* carries some sense of physically being in a historical place. Its variant, *Shekhina*, represents divine influence sensed in a historically specific object or place.

One way to look at this historical localization of divine indwelling is from the standpoint of *chosenness*. The proof-texts address negative and positive aspects of what it means when a people, place or prophet is chosen for the local indwelling of the *Shekhina*.

This chapter also renews interest in the doctrine of time. Time is the number of motion, which is an accident of matter. In one major particular, the Aristotelian and Maimonidean accounts of time diverge. Aristotle believes that the universe is eternal and so time is eternal. Matter is not created or destroyed, but assumes new forms forever. Maimonides disagrees because he believes that God creates the universe from nothing. Time then is merely the inevitable byproduct of the creation of matter. Maimonides is more interested in historical time than philosophical time, because it is in historical time that we sense the presence of the divine indwelling.

Consider Even-Shmuel’s chapter summary, which emphasizes the historical character of the divine indwelling as perceived by us (my trans.):

“The fourth rank of the manifestation of divine action (see my notes to Guide 1:22 for the list of Even-Shmuel’s four Ranks of actions), through which we comprehend God’s existence, is His singular revelation in human history. Divine providential supervision appears in [certain] known places and communities more than others. All students of history (*kol mistakel b’historia*) recognize the appearance of this providence or indwelling in particular regions and peoples. Only because of this do we say of this land (Israel) that it is a historic land, or this people, that it is a historic people.”

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

SHAKHAN: (DWELL)

1. To dwell: The continued stay in a place, whether a *general* place or a *particular* place. When a living being dwells long in a place, we say that it stays in that place, although it unquestionably moves about in it. In such a case it is “generally” in that place, while an inanimate object remains in its “particular” place.
2. Applied *metaphorically* to inanimate objects, i.e., to anything which settles and remains fixed on one object, although the object on which the thing remains is not a place, and the thing itself is not a living being. It follows that there can be an entirely figurative sense of *shakhan*.
3. As a further metaphorical extension of Definition 2, *shakhan* applies to God. It denotes the continuance of His presence (*Shekhina*) or of His providence in some place or object where it manifests itself constantly.

Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And they took Lot, Abram’s brother’s son, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed. And there came *one that had escaped*, and told Abram the Hebrew; for he *dwelt (shokhen)* in the plain of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner: and these [were] confederate with Abram.” (Genesis 14:12-13)

This is from the biblical account of the war of the four kings against the five kings. This war was one of the ten tests of Abraham according to Maimonides (*Commentary on the Mishnah, Avot 5:3*). As we have seen, initial lexical definitions are usually corporeal, and Maimonides registers his disapproval of corporeality by choosing citations that are negative in some way. Abraham, still known as Abram, is *dwelling* among idolators, and inevitably caught up in their wars. The Midrash, (*Genesis Rabbah 42:8*) tells us that the escapee who told Abraham of Lot’s capture was Og. Og was the very long lived king of Bashan ultimately slain by Moses. The Midrash states:

“He did not act from a pious motive, but he said to himself: ‘This man Abraham is vindictive: I will apprise him that Lot is captured; then will he go out to battle and be slain, while I will take Sarah.’”

Not only does living in a bad *neighborhood (shkhuna, from shakhan)* involve Abraham in the wars of the idolators, but it also threatens his family. The Midrash continues in this passage to discuss his circumcision:

“On R. Judah’s view a place called Mamre is meant; on R. Nehemiah’s view, it refers to a person called Mamre. And why was he called Mamre? R. ‘Azariah said in the name of R. Judah: Because he rebuked (*himrah*) Abraham. When the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded Abraham to circumcise himself he went and took counsel with his three friends. Aner said to him: ‘You are already a hundred years old, yet you would inflict this pain upon yourself?’ Eshcol said to him: ‘Why should you go and make yourself distinguishable to your enemies?’ But Mamre said to him: ‘When did He not stand by you—in the fiery furnace, in famine, and in your war with the kings? Will you not obey Him then in this matter?’ Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: ‘Thou gavest him good advice, to circumcise himself: by thy life! I will reveal Myself to him only in thy palace.’ Hence it is written, ‘And the Lord appeared unto him in the palace of Mamre.’”

Abraham was childless, which he complained of to God (Genesis 15:2). While there is a temporal hiatus between the war and his circumcision (Genesis 17), it is true that he did not father Isaac until after his circumcision. The lack of circumcision obstructed the flow of his creativity. Perhaps this childlessness let Og to think he had some chance of success with Sarah (especially since his childlessness led to his separation from her, see Rashi to Genesis 13:18). Circumcision symbolizes the covenant of loyalty of the Jews to God. Because Abraham lacked the covenant of loyalty to the one true form and “dwelt” with idolators like Og, he is vulnerable to the corporeality of his neighbors.

“And it came to pass, when Israel *dwelt (bishkon)* in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine: and Israel heard [it]. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.” (Genesis 35:22)

This, too, is a negative sexual reference. Jacob and his family also dwell in a bad neighborhood, where the *Shekhina* does not dwell. The beloved matriarch Rachel has just died; and the family is doing poorly. The Talmud, *Shabbat 55b*, sublimates Reuben’s act: not that he “lay with” his father’s concubine, but that he “disarranged” his father’s bed. The point, however, is that Jacob’s spiritual creativity depended on his relationship with Rachel and he had not found a way to replace her. In both this quote and the prior one, the disruption of the marital relationship allegorizes the disruption of the intellectual connection with God. These are “neighborhoods.”

Instance of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“And Job spake, and said, Let the day perish (*yovad*) wherein I was born, and the night [in which] it was said, There is a man child conceived (*hora*). Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud *dwelt (tishkan)* upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it.” (Job 3:2-5)

This is Job bewailing his fate. A calendar date comes once every year forever. Job would have the date of his conception (“there is a man child conceived”) *removed* (“perish”) from the calendar. Rashi explains: “‘Man child

conceived’: That my father impregnated (*iber*) my mother.” Job continues, complaining of the day of this conception (3:10-12):

“Because it shut not up the doors of my [mother's] womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes. Why died I not from the womb? [Why] did I [not] give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? Why did the knees prevent me? Or why the breasts that I should suck?”

This also suggests disturbance in sexuality. But this quotation moves the focus to the chosen one who regrets the responsibilities of chosenness (compare Jonah), which was probably Maimonides’ real reason for selecting it. However, Maimonides’ *explicit* comment emphasizes his chapter’s apparent themes: “there is no doubt that the cloud is not a living being, and that the day is not a corporeal thing, but a division of time.” That is, clouds do not “dwell” on days, since clouds are not living beings that have an abode, and a day is not a place of abode but a measure of time. This warrants Maimonides’ conclusion that the Bible can use *shakhan* in an entirely figurative sense.

Instances of Definition 3 Contextualized:

“And Moses went up into the mount, and a cloud covered the mount. And the glory of the Lord *abode* (*va’yishkon*) upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the Lord [was] like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount: and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights.” (Exodus 24:15-18)

When the Bible uses *shakhan* (*va’yishkon*) with God, it does not refer to God himself, but to His *Shekhina*, or to His *Providence*. See essay below on the “Indwelling of the Shekhina.”

“And I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar: I will sanctify also both Aaron and his sons, to minister to me in the priest's office. And I will *dwell* (*v’shakhanti*) among the children of Israel, and will be their God.” (Exodus 29:44-45)

This verse is about the historical consecration of Aaron and the Tabernacle. This passage and the previous establish that when used with God *shakhan* means His *indwelling*, i.e., His *Shekhina*. Rashi agrees with Maimonides that God does not “dwell,” and that the passage must refer to His *Shekhina*. The word *Shekhina* derives from our term *shakhan*. Maimonides says that *shakhan*, in the divine context, could also mean God’s providential care for some object (*hashgakha*), especially when this takes place over historical time (*ha-tamida*). R. Abraham ben Maimonides reiterates this teaching of his father, *ad loc.*, “*And I will be their God*: The permanence of providential supervision over them [the Jews] is [directly] connected to the permanence of the [historical] sanctuary” (my trans., p. 86, *Commentary on Exodus—tamidot ha-hashgakha ha-pratit behem sh’hi keshura b’tamidot ha-mikdash*). The permanency of the phenomenon, its staying power, is the carryover from the figurative use of Definition 2. The *historical persistence* of God’s providential care is what we call chosenness. The passage means that God will closely supervise and care for the people, rewarding their actions with miracles like the giving of manna, and immediately punishing their faults. Divine providence *replaces* their *natural* fate. But when God’s providence ceases to “dwell,” they are abandoned to that natural fate.

“And for the precious things of the earth and fulness thereof, and [for] the good will of him that *dwelt* (*shokhnei*) in the bush: let [the blessing] come upon the head of Joseph, and upon the top of the head of him [that was] separated from his brethren.” (Deuteronomy 33:16)

This passage is from Moses’ song of praise for each tribe. This mention of a variant of *shakhan* in connection with Moses’ burning bush makes us think of Maimonides’ later discussions of the stages of prophecy (Guide 2:45). The term *shakhan* does not appear in the actual account of the burning bush, Exodus chapter 3, and so he turns to this proof-text from the end of the Torah. Moses begins his career like other prophets. The bush appears to him in a *vision* or *dream*. Since God that does not “dwell” in a bush, it must be the *Shekhina*, or, as Maimonides now says, a created light, or *ha-nivra*, that Moses sees in the bush. It is an intermediary. At 3:45 he says, “Even Moses our Teacher received his first prophecy through an angel: ‘And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in the flame of fire’ (Exodus 3:2).” That Moses had not yet reached the height of his powers appears also at Guide 1:5, where Moses’ fear to gaze at the light is later rewarded by his receiving a higher level of prophecy,

without an intermediary, such that “The similitude of the Lord shall he behold” (Numbers 12:8). He grows in his prophetic powers. Ultimately, his prophecy does not take place in visions at all, as it does with other prophets, but in a state of complete wakeful awareness. The chosenness of the greatest prophet consists in his being a constant sanctuary for the divine indwelling.

THE INDWELLING OF THE SHEKHINA

“12. And the Lord said unto Moses, *Come up to Me into the mount*, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them. 13. And Moses rose up, and his minister Joshua: and Moses went up into the mount of God. 14. And he said unto the elders, Tarry ye here for us, until we come again unto you: and, behold, Aaron and Hur [are] with you: if any man have any matters to do, let him come unto them. 15. And Moses went up into the mount, and a cloud covered the mount. 16. *And the glory of the Lord abode (va'yishkon k'vod ha-shem)* upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. 17. And the sight of the glory of the Lord [was] like *devouring fire* on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. 18. And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount: and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights.” (Exodus 24:12-18)

Maimonides says that when the Bible uses *shakhan* with God, it never refers to God, but to either His *Shekhina*, or His *Providence*. Kafih (note 13 *ad loc.*) maintains that the first and third proof-texts under Definition 3 refer to the Shekhina, and the second to divine providence. Munk, the great French translator, divides the three citations as the Shekhina, providence in a particular place, and providence in a certain object. Friedlander, note 2, *ad loc.*, disagrees with both:

“The difference between the last two is not discernible, and still less clear is the distribution of the three instances quoted by our author, between the three kinds of manifestation. In truth, Maimonides does not even seek to decide which of the various explanations is applicable to each instance, but rests satisfied with having shown that a figurative interpretation can be given, by which anthropomorphism may be avoided.”

I tend to agree with him. God’s indwelling with the people after the inauguration of the Tabernacle and the investiture of Aaron is accompanied by visualized manifestations as the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire (Ex. 40:38), which seem like supernatural light. Maimonides sometimes calls the “created light” (*or ha-nivra*) the *Shekhina*, never identifying these corporeal images directly with God.

R. Abraham ben Maimonides agrees, but provides a deeper explanation. All the phenomena associated with the divine indwelling exist for no other purpose than to identify a place where Moses can channel contemplation for mystical contact:

“God said to Moshe, ‘Come up to Me into the mount,’ (Exodus 24:12).... This was to allow total retreat (*hitbodedut ha-shlema*—complete meditation), through which Moshe would achieve the desired Encounter (*ha-pegia*), and God would bestow upon him that which He did. Because Moshe desired *solitude*, he later moved his Tent of Meeting out of the camp, as it says, ‘And Moshe took the Tent and placed it outside the camp, far from the camp [and he called it the Tent of Meeting]’ (Exodus 33:7)” (P.499, *The Guide to Serving God*, trans., Yaacov Wincelberg. Rav Wincelberg comments, note 19: “In his commentary on the Torah, R. Avraham disagrees with those who say that Moshe did this as a reaction to the sin of the golden calf. He explains that it was for the sake of retreat.”)

I think the point of the proof-text is that while the sight of the glory of the Lord was like “a devouring fire...in the eyes of the children of Israel,” Moses, by contrast, is “called to,” and directly engaged with God, a higher level of prophetic experience since non-visual.

DIVINE DESCENT?

H. A. Wolfson noted that Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – 40 CE), the great Jewish Platonist, had a problem with our proof-text. He notes that the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of scripture, replaces the term “abode,” *v'yishkan*, with a word meaning “came down” (“And the glory of the Lord *came down*” rather than “and the glory of the Lord *abode*.”)

Wolfson notes that the corporeality suggested by God “coming down” upon Sinai troubled Philo (*Crescas Critique of Aristotle*, p. 490). The notion is anthropomorphic because it violates the doctrine of proper place. Only those things made from the four sublunary elements “come down” since vertical motion characterizes only of those elements. Were God to “come down” he would have to be composed of fire, air, water or earth, which is obnoxious to belief. Just as God does not “dwell” neither does he “descend” in any physical sense.

Philo’s problem is that an earlier passage, Exodus 19:20, really does say that *God comes down* on Sinai, *va'yared ha-shem al har sinai* (Guide 1:10 and 1:27 both cite this passage in their discussion of *descent*). This forced Philo to reinterpret the phrase *va'yared ha-shem* to mean that the *kavod*, the “glory” which “comes down” to *dwell* on Sinai is either the “presence of His manifested powers” or “the subjective human apprehension of God.” Wolfson argues that Maimonides could have read this in Philo. In that case, the *kavod* that comes down to dwell is either *what God does* or *what we saw in the vision* at Sinai. This latter vision is the divine emanation received by the imagination in historical time, what Maimonides calls the “created light.”

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