

GUIDE 1:54 THE THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL PROBLEM

PREFACE

The previous three chapters were an introductory course in the philosophy of divine attributes. The theme and conclusion of the course was that the attributes were all attributes of action. Following this chapter come six chapters that are the advanced course in attribute philosophy, the theme of which is Maimonides' famous doctrine of negative attributes. Our chapter is a kind of conclusion for the introductory course. Here Maimonides shows that the philosophy of action attributes is a natural outgrowth of Judaism.

He claims that this is his only purpose in this chapter, but the most important parts of the chapter are not about the philosophy of action attributes at all.

This chapter is about the relationship between the attributes of God and the political governance of the city. On a deeper level, the subject is the intellectual connection the ruler must make with God to govern the city rightly. The purpose of this government is to produce more people who can make that intellectual connection with God. The subject of this intellectual connection erupts at several places in the chapter, especially where Maimonides claims he digressed from his intended purpose.

Maimonides comes to this discussion of political philosophy because of the linked problems of idolatry and civil war. When the nation of God flirts with idolatry, it undermines the reason for its existence. The nation needs an inspired leader, perhaps a prophet, to end idolatry's threat to the nation. What caused Moses to understand this was the civil war over the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:27-28).

COMMENTARY MODE

This chapter is a commentary on a section of the Torah. Commentary is not Maimonides' usual mode of expression. In this he differs from most rabbinic writers, who prefer commentary. The only commentary among his major works is his *Perush al HaMishnah*, the Commentary on the Mishnah, his first great work (There was a commentary on some of the Talmud, most of which is lost, written in his twenties. See Davidson, *Maimonides the Man and His Work*, p. 140-146). We should pay attention to Maimonides' departure from his usual essay mode. He uses commentary persuasively to ground his theory of attributes in Jewish tradition. The passages he comments will be easier to follow if we see the unbroken text from Exodus 33-34:

Exodus 33:

“12) And Moses said unto the Lord, See, Thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and Thou hast not let me know whom Thou wilt send with me. Yet Thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in My sight. 13) Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found grace in Thy sight, *shew me now Thy way, that I may know Thee, that I may find grace in Thy sight: and consider that this nation is Thy people.* 14) And He said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest. 15) And he said unto Him, If Thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. 16) For wherein shall it be known here that I and Thy people have found grace in Thy sight? is it not in that Thou goest with us? So shall we be separated, I and Thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth. 17) And the Lord said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken (to forgive the people): for thou hast found grace in My sight, and I know thee by name. 18) And [only then] he said, I beseech Thee, *shew me Thy glory.* 19) And He said, *I will make all My goodness pass before thee*, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious

to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy. 20) And He said, Thou canst not see My face: for there shall no man see Me, and live.

21) And the Lord said, Behold, there is a *place* by Me, and thou shalt *stand* upon a *rock*: 22) And it shall come to pass, while My *glory* passeth by, that I will put thee in a *cleft of the rock*, and will *cover* thee with My hand while I pass by: 23) And I will take away Mine hand, and *thou shalt see My back parts: but My face shall not be seen*.

Exodus 34:

1) And the Lord said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest. 2) And be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning unto Mount Sinai, and present thyself there to Me in the top of the mount.

3) And no man shall come up with thee, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mount; neither let the flocks nor herds feed before that mount. 4) And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tables of stone. 5) And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. 6) And the Lord *passed by before him*, and proclaimed,

The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, 7) Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation."

Maimonides begins our chapter:

"The wisest man (*rabban shel hakhamim*—'the master of the wise'), our Teacher Moses,"

Maimonides calls Moses the "master of the wise." Usually, Maimonides calls Moses the "master of the prophets." He chooses the former designation because what Moses learned about God's attributes did not require prophecy. However, as we will see, the entire encounter occurs in prophecy and is about the "governor of a country, if he is a prophet."

MOSES' REQUEST

Maimonides explains what Moses was seeking from God in Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah* 1:10, where he wrote (M. Hyamson, trans.):

"What was it that Moses sought to comprehend, when he said 'Show me, I beseech Thee, Thy glory?' He sought to have so clear an apprehension of the truth of God's existence that the knowledge might be like that which one possesses of a human being, whose face one has seen and whose image is imprinted on the mind and whom, therefore, the mind distinguishes from other men. In the same way, Moses, our teacher, asked that the truth of God's existence might be distinguished in his mind from other beings, and that he might thus know the truth of God's existence, as it really is. God replied that it is *beyond the mental capacity* of a human creature, composed of body and soul, to obtain in this regard clear knowledge of the truth. The Almighty, however, imparted to Moses, what has been vouchsafed to no man before or since. Moses attained so much knowledge of the truth of the Divine Existence, that God was, in his mind, distinct from other beings, in the same way as an individual, whose back is seen, whose physical form and apparel are perceived, is

distinguished in the observer's mind from the physical form of other individuals. And Scripture hints this in the text 'Thou shalt see My back parts but My face shall not be seen.'

The point of Maimonides' argument in *Mishneh Torah* is that while divinity is intellectual and rational, we cannot comprehend its rationality. We know His actions, not what caused them. In the same vein, Maimonides begins our Chapter 1:54:

"Moses asked two things of God, and received a reply respecting both. The one thing he asked was, that God should let him know His true essence; the other, which in fact he asked first, that God should let him know His attributes. In answer to both these petitions God promised that He would let him know all His attributes, and that these were nothing but His actions. He also told him that His true essence could not be perceived, and pointed out a *method (makom iyun)*, by which he could obtain the utmost knowledge of God possible for man to acquire. The knowledge obtained by Moses has not been possessed by any human being before him or after him."

(*Makom iyun*, Jud.Ar. מוצע ינר, a place of meditation/ understanding/ speculation, Friedlander's translation following Ibn Tibon, as does Schwarz' Hebrew. Kafih translates as *mabet, to see*, that is, God showed Moses a place to see from; however, his footnote endorses the Ibn Tibon translation).

As we read this encounter in the Torah, we should apply what we learned in the lexical chapters. When God stands Moses on a rock to see all His goodness pass before him, we retranslate all of the key words: place, stand, rock, see, goodness— according to Maimonides' rules. Thus, "place" is a level of intellectual attainment; the "rock" is the source we derive knowledge from; to "see" means to understand; "goodness" is the panoply of God's creations and their noetic interrelations. These abstractions clarify that the encounter is at the highest level of intellect, i.e., the prophetic level.

R. ABRAVANEL ON MOSES' THIRD REVELATION

R. Don Isaac Abravanel (15th C.) understands Maimonides to mean that God granted Moses three revelations on Sinai. The first two revelations followed his two requests. When he asked to know God's ways in order to better govern the people, God revealed His actions in the world, which Moses grasps as the Thirteen Attributes (see below). When he asked to see God's glory, God revealed that Moses could not see it, since Moses' corporeality and God's ineffability combined to prevent this "vision of the face."

God granted Moses a third revelation, but not in response to any request. This is significant, for the following reason. There is a difference of opinion between Maimonides and R. Abravanel about the nature of prophecy. Maimonides held that the adept with perfected intellect and imagination would receive prophetic emanations from God, unless God chooses to cut off this flow. R. Abravanel strongly maintained that the prophetic state requires the help of God from the start. He thought he proved his point here. R. Abravanel contended, from Maimonides' own words here and elsewhere, that this third revelation was entirely due to divine assistance, not any preparation by the prophet.

Thus, "the wisest man, our Teacher Moses," *rabban shel khakhamim, moshe rabeinu*, could know the first two revelations purely through intellectual speculation. Moses "the master of the prophets," *rabban shel neviim*, as the Guide names him elsewhere, was not needed. The first revelation of the actions of God, particularly those actions necessary to govern a country, could have come to a non-inspired philosopher; we will see, however, that they actually did come to Moses in his prophetic role (see "Why a Prophet is Needed" below).

The second revelation, that no man would ever grasp the indefinable essence of God, was, according to R. Abravanel, one that any tyro in philosophy would know. He questioned why Moses would have even asked it, *v'eikh lo yada adon ha-khakhhamim raban shel nviim ma sh'hagia elav ha-katan sh'b'filosofim*. R. Abravanel eventually answers that this question might not have been beyond the bounds of prophecy. The limits of prophecy are not the limits of philosophy, even assuming that there are limits to prophecy. R. Abravanel also explains that both requests are one, since Moses really wanted to know which aspect God would permit: the divine actions or the divine essence (paralleling the distinction between action and essential attributes).

The third revelation, which comes entirely through prophecy, and with divine aid, is suggested by Maimonides' statement that:

“He (God) also told him that His true essence could not be perceived, and pointed out (*ha-iru*) a *method* (*makom iyun*, מוצע נטר) by which he could obtain the utmost knowledge of God possible for man to acquire. The knowledge obtained by Moses has not been possessed by any human being before him or after him.”

What was this *method* or *place of revelatory understanding* that was vouchsafed to Moses? Let's look back at the text of Exodus 33:21-23:

And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by Me (*hinei makom iti*), and thou shalt stand upon a *rock* (*nitzavta al ha-tzur*): And it shall come to pass, while My glory (*kavod*) passeth by (*b'avor*), that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock (*b'nikrat ha-tzur*), and will cover thee with My hand while I pass by (*v'sakoti khafi aleikha ad avri*): And I will take away Mine hand (*v'hasiroti et kapi*), and thou shalt see My back parts: but My face shall not be seen.

R. Abravanel explains that we cannot understand this passage without checking its key terms in the Guide's Lexicon. His first point is that Maimonides' *makom iyun*, i.e., place of revelation, was none other than “there is a *place* by me,” *hinei makom iti*. *Place*, according to Guide 1:8, which quotes this passage, is a level of attainment of perfection, especially regarding God. *Makom*, as we showed in 1:16, becomes a stand-in for the eternal feminine principle, the Presence, *Shekhina*. It is the *place* of His *glory*, as we learned from Maimonides' retranslation of Ezekiel 3:12 “Blessed [be] the glory (*kavod*) of the Lord from His place (*mekomo*)” should be taken as “Blessed be His glory *as to the exalted degree of his existence*,” *k'l'omar maalato v'romamut kvodo b'mtziut*. In 1:64 *glory* becomes the *created emanation* of God, the active intellect, that divine emanated intelligence which is our mediator with God.

In Guide 1:8, *tzur* becomes, the “mountain which was pointed out to Moses for *seclusion* and for the *attainment of perfection*,” (*nosef al ha-makom ha-hityakhadut v'hasagat ha'shlemut*). Kafih says that he could translate the Arabic term for seclusion as *hitbodedut* / meditation. This prophetically meditative “seclusion” brings Moses to the degree “attainment of perfection,” whereby he became God's intellectual progeny (see my essay in 1:8).

Tzur, in 1:16, means “cause,” or “source,” as in, “the rock when ye are hewn” (Isaiah 51:1), because the intellectual “properties contained in the quarry (i.e., God) should be found in those things which are formed and hewn out of it.”

Tzur also has the meaning of “form,” as in Maimonides' concept of the *tzur olamim* (“Rock of Ages”), that God is the “form of the world” without which it no longer persists. In 1:16, taking all these ideas together, Maimonides promises that divine knowledge comes from standing on this rock:

“‘And thou shalt stand upon the Rock’ (Exodus 33:21), i.e., be firm and steadfast in the conviction that God is the *source* of all things, for this will lead you towards the knowledge of the Divine Being. We have shown (1:8) that the words: ‘Behold, a place is with me’ (Exodus 33:21) contain the same idea.”

Next, in Guide 1:21, we learned that the terms *avor* and *avri*, from Exodus 31:22, “My glory *passeth* by...while I *pass* by,” cannot mean that God Himself passed in any spatial sense. When “The Lord *passed* by before him and proclaimed” the Thirteen *Middot*, the Midrash takes it to mean that He wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl (“passing” it over Himself), to show Moses this order of divine praise. Pushing the text a step further, Maimonides contends that God *exchanged* or *crossed* the vision that Moses sought of His essence for the vision of His actions.

Now we can begin to understand how R. Abravanel distills Maimonides’ account of Moses’ third revelation (my translation):

“‘He [God] pointed out a *method (makom iyun)*’: Maimonides already said that our master Moses sought two requests, the revelation of the divine essence, and the revelation of the divine actions. God acknowledged the prior request about the actions, but also revealed that the latter request about the essence was impossible of fulfillment. God, instead, on His own initiative, revealed to Moses the *makom iyun*, i.e., an unsought for level of understanding, by which he could know of what was possible for a human *qua* human to know. What Moses would apprehend on this level no man before or after him could apprehend. We learned about this level in Guide 1:16, on the homonymous term *tzur*, as it appears in the phrase, ‘thou shalt *stand* upon a *rock (nitzavta al ha-tzur)*,’ meaning that God supported and stood Moses on the understanding that He is the origin of all things. This is the highest level that God revealed to Moses, the level of ‘behold, a place is with me (*hinei makom iti*).’ As explained in Guide 1:8, this is a level of understanding and a divine intellectual emanation. ‘Thou shalt *stand* upon a *rock*’ means that Moses will understand how God is the origin of the world, the cause of all action, and the renewer of all things: it is the revelation of God’s relationship with the world. It is not the apprehension of the divine essence nor of the divine actions of His creations, rather, this third revelation reveals how everything in the world is necessarily dependent upon God. God revealed this third revelation, but not because Moses sought it. We know that this *makom iyun* is implied when he was told *hinei makom iti*, ‘a place is with Me....’”

R. Abravanel next explains the most significant subject of Moses’ third revelation, that God is the necessary ongoing renewer of the world and formal cause of all things:

“‘Thou shalt *stand* upon a *rock (tzur)*’ refers to God who is the *form of the world (tzur olamim)*. The *tzur* mentioned in *b’nikrat ha-tzur*, ‘in the cleft of the rock,’ is a homonymous usage meaning mountain or stone, in which latter sense it suggests unformed matter, ...and that God is the first cause of all things [formed of matter]. In this manner all of nature is related to Him (Guide 2:48).”

Now R. Abravanel explains how divine aid is the precondition for this level of prophecy:

“In this chapter Maimonides gives us three revelations. The first is impossible to attain in itself, the second is possible to attain in itself. The third revelation is impossible in one way but possible in another, since it is only possible with the help of God, and this was precisely what God revealed to Moses. That is why, at the conclusion of this vision God tells Moses that I ‘will *cover* thee with my hand while I *pass* by,’ where the term ‘cover’ represents the divine accompaniment that Maimonides

defines as ‘a special aid from heaven’ (Guide 1:21). Respecting the second revelation, which was possible in itself, that Moses will know the ways of God, the text of Exodus next says ‘And I will *take away* Mine hand, and thou shalt see My back parts,’ i.e., without divine aid he can observe the divine actions which are the “ways.” Moses will know, through the prophetic light within him, all of the existences that it is within his nature to grasp, due to the greatness of his intellect and the depth of his perception. However, the third revelation will not be due to any amount of preparation (*hakhanato*) but purely through the miracle of divine aid.”

R. Abravanel misinterprets Maimonides in Guide 1:21. Maimonides does not say there that preparation is unnecessary to prophets. He says:

“In asserting that God withheld from Moses (the higher knowledge) I mean to say that this knowledge was unattainable, that by its nature it was inaccessible to Moses; for man, whilst able to gain perfection by applying his reasoning faculties to the attainment of what is within the reach of his intellect, either weakens his reason or loses it altogether as soon as he ventures to seek a higher degree of knowledge--as I shall elucidate in one of the chapters of this work--*unless he be granted a special aid from heaven*, as is described in the words, ‘And I will cover thee with my hand until I pass by.’”

At the back of Maimonides’ mind is his discussion in Guide 1:32 of the four who went to Paradise, three of whom lost their wits because they were unprepared for the revelation. They failed to exercise intellectual and moral humility. The fourth, R. Akiva, was prepared and therefore merited the special aid of heaven. He was able to achieve a higher degree of knowledge beyond the normal reach of human intellect: the revelation of the *Merkava*.

God did not grant this third revelation to just anyone. He granted it only to Moses, because Moses was the master of the wise and the master of the prophets. He displayed intellectual humility. God revealed it only to the man who ascended the mountain and attained the first two revelations.

The important point that R. Abravanel did recognize was that beyond the revelation of God’s action in the world, and the revelation of His ineffability, was this third revelation, the revelation of divine providence. This is the revelation of God’s ongoing sustenance of all creatures. Moses sees that just as his prophetic nature was hewn from the rock of his Creator, so the existence of all things depends on the *tzur ha-olamim*, the form of the world.

THE EFFICACY OF PRAYER—AN ASIDE

Moses now asks the right question: how should we approach God? Maimonides writes:

“His [Moses] petition to know the attributes of God is contained in the following words: ‘Show me now Thy way, that I may know Thee, that I may find grace in Thy sight’ (Exod. 33:13). Consider how many excellent ideas found expression in the words, ‘Show me Thy way, that I may know Thee.’ We learn from them that God is known by His attributes, for Moses believed that he knew Him, when he was shown the way of God. The words ‘That I may find grace in Thy sight,’ imply that he who knows God finds grace in His eyes. *Not only is he acceptable and welcome to God who fasts and prays, but everyone who knows Him.*”

There is a problem in the last sentence. R. Michael Friedlander’s English translation above provides a generous reading including fasting and prayer as means to intellectual unification with God (he justifies his

translation, note 2, p. 192). Unfortunately for R. Friedlander (and R. Abravanel), what Maimonides probably means is: “He who only fasts and prays is not acceptable.”

The Arabic is *la men sam wa sala feqata*, (لا من صام وصلى فقط), which R. Kafih Hebraizes: *lo mi sh'tsam v'hitpalel b'lvad*. I believe it reads like Pines' English translation: “...He who knows God... (is) *not* he who merely fasts and prays, but everyone who has knowledge of Him”, because the text forces Kafih, in footnote 6, to supply the following irrelevant apologia for Maimonides (my trans.):

“Maimonides' intent in referring to prayer as such here is to castigate those whose prayer is mere words but no thought to God's true essential unity. He is generally referring to those whose leaving the synagogue is no different from their entering, continuing to gossip and slander (*rchilut* and *lashon hara*), coming on as argumentative big shots. It would have been better if they were in their graves than alive and praying.”

Kafih would not have written this had he thought he could interpret the Arabic as Friedlander does. His defense, though, is unnecessary. Maimonides demonstrated his exaltation of prayer in *Mishneh Torah, Tefila*. He invests real prayer with considerable intellectual preparation and meditation—about three hours for each prayer service (nine hours a day!). At *Tefila* 1:1 he called prayer “intellectual devotion” (*avoda sh'b'lev*).

What Maimonides meant was that prayer is a meditational framework to prepare the mind for unification of the active intellect, not the end in itself. As for fasting, it has no particular role in meditation. Fasting has merit in reversing a temperament of gluttony, but Maimonides rejects fasting as an ascetic practice (*Shemona Perakim*, Ch. 4).

Elsewhere, he maintains that fasting is the response to “distress,” *tzarot*. What is this *tzarot*? He lists twelve types of communal distress, ranging from invasion to drought. He lists four types of personal *tzarot* going from bad dreams to the imprisonment of a friend. He includes the calendrical fasts, which recall communal disasters, as well as Yom Kippur. What is our concern in these situations of *tzarot*? Our transgressions are the underlying cause of these distresses. They prevent devotion to God and, consequently, conjunction with the intellect we share. “Our wicked conduct...brought these calamities upon us,” *maasinu ha-ra'im...sh'garam...lanu otam ha-tzarot*. We fast to “arouse our hearts” to these *tzarot*, and to cause us to turn in repentance (*teshuva*). The process of repentance resolves the *tzarot*, realigning us with God. The fast plays this important role: nourishment links body and soul, therefore, its removal is a punishment for the soul. It functions like any other punishment designed by Torah to rehabilitate the sinner. (*Mishneh Torah, H. Taaniyot* 1:4, 9, 12, 14, 2:1, 5:1, 19; *Commentary on the Mishnah, Yoma* 8:1; *Guide* 1:43).

THE GOOD

Now follows Maimonides' commentary on Exodus 33:16-34:16. Why not just provide the text but dispense with commentary? Because Maimonides uses the text to support his understanding of divine attributes as actions:

“Moses prayed to God to grant him knowledge of His attributes, and also pardon for His people (Ex. 33:16: ‘For wherein shall it be known here that I and Thy people have found grace in Thy sight?’); when the latter had been granted (33:17), he continued to pray for the knowledge of God's essence in the words, ‘Show me Thy glory’ (33:18), and then received, respecting his first request, ‘Show me Thy way,’ the following favorable reply, ‘I will make all My *goodness* to pass before thee’

(33:19); as regards the second request, however, he was told, ‘Thou canst not see My face’ (33:20). The words ‘all My goodness’ imply that God promised to show him the whole creation, concerning which it has been stated, ‘And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very *good* (*tov meod*)’ (Gen. 1:31).”

Note that Maimonides adopts the rabbinic understanding of the good. It comes from Genesis 1:31, where God reviewed His creations and pronounced them “good.” The creations that are “good” are those that God established forever. While the Good is the whole of creation, it is also the Platonic Good:

“When I say ‘to show him the whole creation,’ I mean to imply that God promised to make him comprehend the nature of all things, their relation to each other, and the way they are governed by God both in reference to the universe as a whole and to each creature in particular. This knowledge is referred to when we are told of Moses, ‘he is firmly established in all Mine house’ (Num. 12:7); that is, ‘his knowledge of all the creatures in My universe is correct and firmly established’; for *false opinions are not firmly established.*”

The Good is the true *formal* reality of creatures and creation. Kafih, note 18, *ad loc.*, comments: “It connects the noetic world to the world of the spheres, and the emanation from the world of the spheres upon the lower world.” This noetic reality is the only one that is “established,” i.e., the only one that is true. Corporeality is not “established” because it is transitory. Moses is “firmly established in all Mine house,” because he has that knowledge of the permanent things.

“Consequently, the knowledge of the works of God is the knowledge of His attributes, by which *He can be known.*”

Now Maimonides pulls it all together. Knowledge of the Good is knowledge of His works, by which we learn His attributes. The best part is his optimistic claim that thus “He can be known.”

“The fact that God promised Moses to give him a knowledge of His works, may be inferred from the circumstance that God taught him such attributes as refer exclusively to His works, viz., ‘merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness,’ etc. (Exod. 34:6). It is therefore clear that the ways which Moses wished to know, and which God taught him, are the actions emanating from God. Our Sages call them *middot* (qualities), and speak of the thirteen *middot* of God.”

He has a good source for this last claim in Midrash. *Tanna d’Bei Eliahu Zuta* explains that when the Torah says that God will make all of His “goodness” pass before Moses, God means by His “goodness” the Thirteen Attributes. Maimonides says that the ways (*derachim*) of God and the *middot* of men are “identical” (*ki ha-derakhim v’ha-middot davar akhad*).

MIDDOT OF GOD AND MAN

The Thirteen Attributes (*middot*) are at Exodus 34:6-7:

“And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.”

The term “*middot*” is elastic. It includes the attribute of *quality*, i.e., mental disposition (Guide 1:52), which also includes the moral characteristics. When a person performs a good or an evil deed it flows from the good or evil dispositional quality rooted in him. In 1:52 we learned not to attribute such qualities to God.

Maimonides makes brief reference to a couple of typical passages from Tannaitic literature to demonstrate the term *middot*. Here are those passages in full (Mishna, *Pirke Avot*, 5:12, 13—numbers vary by edition):

“There are four different *middot* (characteristics) among those who go to the house of learning; One who goes but does not do receives reward for the going. One who does but does not go receives reward for the doing. One who goes and does is pious. One who does not go and does not do is wicked.

“There are four different *middot* among those who give charity. One who wants to give but that others not give - has an evil eye towards others. One who wants others to give but not to give himself - has an evil eye towards himself. One who gives and wants others to give is pious. One who does not give and does not want others to give is wicked.”

These Mishnaic passages excellently support his doctrine of action attributes since they only speak of the individual’s actions, not his good or evil dispositional qualities. That is, wherever these *middot* may come from, we judge their objective results. Maimonides continues:

“They do not [therefore] mean to say that God really possesses *middot* (qualities), but that He performs actions similar to such of our actions as originate in certain qualities, i.e., in certain psychical dispositions; not that God has really such dispositions.”

The *material* intellect is such a disposition of our mortal being. Though we imitate God, our actions still come from our material intellect. God is neither mortal nor physical, and therefore not subject to dispositions. Our mercifulness is in no way comparable to the source of what we homonymously term His mercifulness. Maimonides had called them “identical,” in that their *results* would be identical.

THE REAL THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL PROBLEM

The above was prologue to the main point of the chapter. Maimonides’ expressed concern had been to show how his theory of divine attributes fits into the Jewish thought. That is only the first step. He now says:

“Although Moses was shown ‘all His goodness,’ i.e., all His works, only the thirteen *middot* are mentioned, because they include those acts of God *which refer to the creation and the government of mankind*, and to know these acts was the principal object of the prayer of Moses.” (my emph.)

Moses needs these specific attributes to govern. God has done many other things, including the creation of plants and animals, but they are not relevant to Moses’ problem, which is the Golden Calf and its bloody aftermath. Maimonides wants to show why the governor of a state needs to know the divine attributes.

Straussians have been interested to find Maimonides’ thinking on political philosophy. It is curious that they fail to pay more attention to our chapter, the first in the Guide devoted to the subject of political philosophy.

That Maimonides finds this urgent is not obvious, for he buried his grave concern in two innocuous words.

About the middle of the chapter, he explains again that the attributes are divine acts seen through our accustomed perspective, this time focusing on the attribute of grace. The term *khen* means grace, kindness,

but, specifically for Maimonides, it stands for *free unobligated giving*. He provides three scriptural quotations to support this, two from Jacob's speech on his final meeting with Esau, and one from Judges 21:22: "Be favourable unto them," *khanenu otam*, where *khanenu* is a variant of *khen*, "grace."

It is no wonder that he leaves us with just those two words from the last chapter of Judges ("*khanenu otam*"), for this is the incident of the concubine of Giv'ah, one of the most horrible stories in the Bible.

**"IN THOSE DAYS THERE WAS NO KING IN ISRAEL;
EVERY MAN DID WHAT WAS RIGHT IN HIS EYES."**

Idolatry, the worst transgression, was rampant in the Jewish tribes (Judges 17 and 18). Lacking a central government, could not rid themselves of it. The immoral and grossly material influence of idolatry had corrupted some, but not all, of the people.

A Levite dwelling in Ephraim took a concubine (*pilegish*: considerably less than a wife. See: Mishneh Torah, *Malakhim*, 4:4; *Ishut* 1:4). She was unfaithful, and fled to her father's house. The man still wanted her and followed her. Her father entertained him for some time, and then the Levite left with the concubine. To return home to Ephraim he had to pass the Benjamite fortress at Giv'ah overlooking Jerusalem. Jerusalem was then in the hands of the pagan Jebusites. He could have stopped at Jerusalem but thought it better to lodge among Jews. A wealthy man, he would have paid the Givahite Jews to lodge him for the night, but they inhospitably ignored him. A kind Ephraimite farmer agreed to put him up. They shared a meal which was shattered when the local mob pounded the farmer's door. They demanded the guest be brought out, intending gang-rape (*v'neda'aynu*). The Levite man brought forth his concubine and gave her to them instead. When they finished with her, she dragged herself back to the farmer's threshold, where they found her dead in the morning. The Levite took her corpse back to his home in Ephraim, and cut her into twelve pieces. He sent the pieces to each tribe, calling for retribution. The tribes demanded that the Benjamites give up her killers, but they refused. The tribes vowed never to marry Benjamites, and declared war. Initially, the Benjamites prevailed, because the tribes had not rid themselves of idolatry (Rashi on Judges 20:21). The tribes then turned to God in *teshuva*, and He encouraged them to continue fighting. The tribes ambushed and slaughtered the tribe of Benjamin, killing twenty-five thousand. Only six hundred men remained, and no women. The Benjamites could only perpetuate themselves by marrying gentile idolators because the Jews had rejected them. The other tribes repented because they did not want a tribe "blotted from Israel" (21:6). They arranged for the Benjamite males to lie in wait and "catch" Jewish girls dancing at the divine festival (*Tu b'Av*) at the Shiloh Tabernacle. The Jews could then say they had not "given" their daughters to Benjamin. They "took pity on them," (Judaica Press translation of *khanenu otam*, 21:22), meaning that the Jews let the Benjamite remnant take their daughters *though not obliged to*. Saul descended from one of these marriages. The Book of Judges ends at the conclusion of this terrible story, with the statement: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his eyes" (21:25). What should the leader do when his own people act like Sodomites? What is worse than having to face civil war, a war to destroy one's own brethren?

Maimonides recognized that if the nation could not resolve this ultimate question, it would lose its reason for being, either as a political or a religious entity. Moses confronted the same question.

MOSES ASKS FOR GOD'S "WAYS"

Faced with the the civil war following the incident of the Golden Calf, Moses asked God to show him His "ways":

“This is shown by the conclusion of his prayer, ‘that I may know Thee, that I may find grace (*khen*) in Thy sight, and consider that this nation is Thy people’ (Exod. 33:16), that is to say, the people whom I have to rule by certain acts in the performance of which I must be guided by Thy own acts in governing them. We have thus shown that ‘the ways’ used in the Bible, and ‘*middot*’ used in the Mishnah, are identical, denoting the acts emanating from God in reference to the universe (*v’hem ha-pa’ulot ha-ba’ot me’ito ytalei ba-olam*).”

What a remarkable formulation. I, Moses, need to derive my political rule of the Hebrews from Your rule of the cosmos! Can this be the resolution of his theological-political problem?

Maimonides gives us examples which illustrate the nature of divine governance. God provides for the welfare of embryos of living beings. He creates dispositions in their parents that serve to protect their offspring from the dangers of birth and infancy. We call these dispositions “mercy” and “grace.” We notice similar divine actions, so we say that God, like a human parent, is merciful and kind. But God just does what He does. He “feels” nothing. He is not subject to emotions or change of any kind. He is, therefore, not “kind” or “merciful.” He knows and does what will best advance His “pious men” (*hasidim*). We can make this statement about God, though it sounds strange to say that He feels nothing, because God is not a passive object of emotions. He never changes because of feelings, qualities or *middot*. When catastrophic earthquakes and storms occur, we think that God must be enraged, but He is not wrathful. His acts produce His desired results.

WHY A PROPHET IS NEEDED

Maimonides then says:

“—the governor of a country, if he is a prophet, should conform to these attributes.”

In other words, the governor should perform acts of kindness and severity for the greater good, not out of emotional passion. But why the clause “If he is a prophet”? I would have thought it good advice even if he were no prophet. Wouldn’t this be good conduct for any political leader?

The nation does not always need a prophet to be its leader. Since there are so few prophets, and fewer prophets who are leaders, that is a very good thing. In Maimonides’ political philosophy, only the prophet gives law, and since Moses gave the unchanging law of Torah, we should not need a new prophet.

Prophets are rare. They must be trained. According to Maimonides, three types of people go to three different schools. The very intelligent should go to philosophy school; the very imaginative go to political school; and the few with an excellent intellect wedded to fine imagination go to prophecy school.

The politician does not need profound intelligence, but he does need great imagination to lead the people in the law. As long as there is law, a good politician is sufficient to govern the city.

There is a law for the Jewish city that turns to idol-worship, the law of the *ir ha-nidakha*, the city that *strays* after idolatry (Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara*, ch. 4). It sternly requires the political leadership to destroy the city and its inhabitants. It derives from Deuteronomy 13:15: “Destroy it utterly, and all that is therein,” “And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall do no more any such wickedness as this among you” (13:11). The law has its explicit limit, for, as Maimonides says in our chapter, “When it is said that God is visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, this refers exclusively to the sin of idolatry, and to no other sin.”

The law commands the removal of idolatrous temptations, even violently. The people shall “hear and fear.”

But since the law is clear, a strong leader, a product of the school of politics, will take the steps necessary to enforce it, and will explain his actions persuasively to the people. He need not be a prophet.

The terrible acts of the Benjamite citizens of Giv’ah fell outside of the bounds of the law. The morality prevailing among the tribes had sunk well below Torah standards. The tribal divisions prevented the general enforcement of the law. Nonetheless, scripture does not say that idolatry *caused* of the acts of Giv’ah. That is why God did not at first approve the war against the Benjamites of Giv’ah.

The Benjamites argued that they could enforce their own law, but they failed to do so. When the Ephraimite went forth to tell what had happened to his concubine, the Jews as a whole knew they had to avenge her. Nonetheless, the law had no provision to punish the guilty except by the Benjamite court.

A real prophet, certified under Torah law detailed in *Mishneh Torah*, may not rewrite the Torah. He can only make emergency legislation, (*horaat sha’a*, temporary decrees; see Kafih, note 45). The idea is that the ordinary judicial course is comparable to nature, while temporary decrees are like miraculous divine interventions. In exigent circumstances, the ruler who is a prophet makes rulings that are not part of the normal course of justice. It is only in this sense that the prophet-king, Moses-like, legislates. But no one is Moses-like for long, for prophecy comes in flashes (Introduction to the Guide. “Flash” is a common Sufic term). Therefore, the prophet is restricted to legislating emergency decrees, and may not change Torah.

It is not just that there was no king in Israel, for even a king would have no legal support to decree the destruction of Giv’ah, as it was not an “*ir hanidakha*,” an idolatrous city. When there is no law, the nation needs a leader who is also a prophet. He must destroy and punish for the welfare of the community. He acts, but not out of emotional passion. He does not lead a mob but a nation.

Furthermore, Maimonides says that the king should only rarely punish and destroy, since of the Thirteen Attributes, twelve are about mercy. Even the one that is not about mercy is restricted.

Maimonides’ has a unique understanding of the last of the Thirteen *Middot*. At Exodus 34:7, it says that God “*v-nakkeh lo yentakkeh*” (Lit: “And clears but will not clear”) which the rabbis usually take to mean “He will by no means clear the guilty” treating *nakkeh* as “to clean,” i.e., He clears but never *entirely* clears the guilty. The rabbis say this means that if the guilty repent they are cleared, but if not they are never cleared. Maimonides has a different interpretation. First, he restricts it to those guilty of idolatry. Next, He defines *nakkeh* not as “to clean” but “to clean out” in the sense of “to destroy,” so that the guilty will be destroyed, but not completely. Beyond “the fourth generation” a remnant will remain, who God will mercifully allow to live. Similarly, in the story of Giv’ah, the Jews do not completely destroy the city, using strange unlegislated means to save the tribe. The Jews, having no prophet-king, stumble upon these solutions; but because they turned to God in repentance, He showed the way, which was to imitate His acts of mercy.

Moses faced the most terrible situation a leader could face. The people strayed after a golden calf, and Moses had to purge them in civil war. He found the means to do so when God revealed to him the Thirteen Middot, which lay down the pattern for his successful, if severe, rule. Yom Kippur commemorates this atonement for the sin of the golden calf.

SUMMARY

What have we learned? Moses sought the ways of God so that he could govern the people in a God-like fashion. This means that he could show mercy or wrath without experiencing these passions, for “all emotions are bad,” *ki kol hitpaalut ra'a*. This, according to Maimonides, proves that his philosophical doctrine of action attributes comes from ancient Jewish lore and practice.

To reach this level required Moses to “know God,” that is, to achieve intellectual unity, so far as humanly possible, with God. He attains the knowledge of the “good,” which is the comprehension of creation at the noetic level. As a result, he learns the Thirteen Attributes of God, the foundation of our ethics, which we strive to imitate. This is the way of kings and prophets, who must resolve the political crisis of the people. When the way is not clear from Torah, and the circumstances are exigent, the prophet-king, who knows God best, acts at God’s command, striving to emulate His actions.

At the highest prophetic level, Moses received a third revelation, the revelation of God’s role in relation to the universe as its form and sustainer.

Maimonides says that the only purpose of this chapter is to show that the doctrine of action attributes comes from Torah. He says twice that all of these other things digress from his purpose. We should not be misled by these protestations. Their purpose is to shield the unqualified reader from a discussion of *Maaseh Merkava*. All of these digressions are parts of that curriculum: the political need for prophecy, the prophetic process, Moses’ vision, and the nature of providence.

What he reveals by these alleged digressions is the relationship between the philosophy of attributes and the divine science, particularly regarding prophecy and providence. The most significant digression is his solution to the fundamental problem in political philosophy, the problem of civil war, which is the problem of what makes a government legitimate. Ultimately, this legitimacy flows from the lawgiver, the divinely inspired prophet.

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*See maimonides-guide.com for further chapters of **The Guide: An Explanatory Commentary on Each Chapter of Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed***