

GUIDE 1:29 WITHDRAWAL

PREFACE

The word *etzev* presents a range of meaning which the reader should know before addressing Maimonides' definitions of the term. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, p. 1101, derives its meaning from the idea of "cutting, shaping." The Talmud uses the term in this sense to identify the shaping of an infant's body by physical manipulation. Jastrow canvasses the following meanings: "grief"; a "form" (i.e., an "idol") which is *shaped*; "trouble, toil, and that acquired through toil"; "pain." Jastrow does not list "anger" or "provocation." Alkalay, *Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*, p. 1939, and Even-Shoshan, *Milon Ha-Ivri Ha-Merkaz*, p. 532, are in accord except they add the meaning "nerve" going on to "nervousness" and "neurosis." Matityahu Clark, *Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew, Based on the Commentaries of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, Feldheim, 2000, p. 190, locates the Hirschian *leitwort* as "hold back; renounce" essentially, *withdrawal*.

The translators of this chapter translate Maimonides' definitions according to the system shown below: "pain; anger; provocation." Nonetheless, the English biblical translations for his Definition 2 and 3 proof-texts generally take the term *etzev* as some variant of "grief." Maimonides instead translates them as "anger" or "provocation," the extreme of provocation being *rebellion*.

His problem is that these texts identify God with an *emotion*, whether it is grief, anger or provocation. But God must be beyond all emotion. The idea of "emotion" is from "motion;" cf. "passion" from Latin *passio* rendering the Greek *pathos*, literally: "what befalls one." But God is not moved: He is not the passive object of any subject, neither does anything befall Him. Maimonides must therefore find a way to understand the term in his second and third definitions without these anthropomorphic attributions.

Hirsch's suggestion of "holding back" going on to "withdrawal" is a useful way to grasp Maimonides' outlook in this chapter. The proof-texts suggest a historical pattern from the Edenic expulsion to the Mosaic redemption in which God repeatedly "repents" of His creation and changes the rules of existence. These repentances are withdrawals of providence in which man is left to his natural physical fate. In the first proof-text, the transgression of Eve causes God to repent creating Eden, creating the first *pain*, the inevitable index of corporeality. This is a divine *withdrawal* of providence. In the final proof-text, the growing population of those fallen men (*nefilim*) who are not Adam's intellectual progeny (see 1:7) make God repent creation to cause the flood. This is also a *withdrawal*. The solution to Eve's sin comes with Moses on Sinai, as does the promise never again to destroy the world by flood (since before the Torah, this promise had only been spoken by God "to His heart"). The Torah is the expansion of providence that cures these prior withdrawals of providence.

The last proof-text below, "And it repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart" (Genesis 6:4-6), focuses the general problem of God's "repentances" (cf.: "hiding of the face," Guide 1:23). Since the Divine world is beyond temporality, we cannot ask why God would, so to speak, change His mind. Change only occurs in time. His creation is a single atemporal act, and Divine thought is atemporal unity. We impose time on the structure of divine creativity because we are accustomed to temporality. Our *perception* of the universal regime is one of temporal expansion and contraction, like breathing: the exhalation and then the *withdrawal* of the divine spirit. Although it is a constant process, a unified system, we experience it as repeated generation and destruction. We *project* our experience of providential withdrawal onto God as divine "anger." (See 1:36 for an explanation of projection in my essay "The Psychology of Idolatry."). The truth is that our rebellion contracted that providential expansion: it contracts against us through our rejection of it. Our state of mind causes the acceptance and rebellion, as Maimonides puts it in 1:54: "The pleasure and the displeasure of God, the approach to Him and the withdrawal from Him are proportional to the amount of man's knowledge or ignorance concerning the Creator."

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

ETZEV: (PAIN, ANGER, PROVOKE) Homonym

1. Pain
2. Anger. With the phrase “grieved in His heart,” *va-yitatzev el libo*: a *determination* (“anger” rather than “grief”) by God to punish man for *idolatry, without warning* (“in His heart”). See essays below.
3. Provoke, cause anger. With the phrase “grieved in his heart,” *va-yitatzev el libo*: provocation or rebellion by man against God’s will, projected back on Him by us. Heart (*lev*) is a homonymous term meaning *will*.

Instance of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy *sorrow* (*itzbonekh*) and thy conception; in *sorrow* (*b’etzev*) thou (Eve) shalt bring forth children; and thy desire [shall be] to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed [is] the ground for thy sake; in *sorrow* (*b’itzabon*) shalt thou eat [of] it all the days of thy life.” (Genesis 3:16-17)

These verses use versions of *etzev* three times. Rashi, *ad loc.*, quoting Talmud, agrees with Maimonides’ definition of *etzev* as “pain” (rather than “sorrow”) citing “the pain of child rearing” and the “pain of pregnancy” (*Eruvin* 109b). With this passage, the Torah recounts the creation of the first *pain*. Pain always comes with physicality. Note that Maimonides identifies the term as *homonymous*. It must be homonymous because the Torah uses *etzev* with God, a purely incorporeal being, who, therefore, cannot experience pain. “Pain” and even “anger” must mean *different* things for man and God. (For more on this proof text, see first essay below).

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“Then Adonijah the son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, I will be king: and he prepared him chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. And his father (David) had not *displeased* (*atzavo*) him at any time in saying, Why hast thou done so? And he also [was a] very goodly [man]; and [his mother] bare him after Absalom.” (1 Kings 1:5-6)

Maimonides says *etzev* “denotes anger” in his two proof-texts grouped under Definition 2. Rashi explains, “he who refrains from rebuking his child brings him to his death.” This recalls the idea of *etzev* as the shaping of an infant’s body by physical manipulation (Jastrow, above), which could be expected to “displease” or “anger” the child. The story reminds us that Solomon and not Adonijah was David’s *intellectual progeny* (Guide 1:7 for this motif).

“So Jonathan arose from the table in fierce *anger* (*b’kharei-af*), and did eat no meat the second day of the month: for he was *grieved* (*ne’tzav*) for David, because his father had done him shame.” (1 Samuel 20:34) Jonathan knows that David should be the next king despite King Saul’s desire that the prince succeed him. Maimonides says Jonathan was “angry for (David’s) sake.” Jonathan recognized David as the true intellectual progeny of the patriarchs, shaped by the prophet Samuel. Although KJV takes *ne’tzav* as “grieved,” Maimonides again takes it as “angered.” *Ne’tzav* could mean anger because of its proximity to the term *b’kharei-af*, which clearly means anger.

Instances of Definition 3 Contextualized:

“In all their 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 all the days of old. But they rebelled (*maru*), and *vexed* (*v’itzvu*) His holy spirit: therefore He was *turned to be their enemy*, [and] He fought against them.” (Isaiah 63:10)

The final group of quotes supports the meaning of *provocation*, up to and including *rebellion*. The Jews are the subject of Isaiah’s lament. Divine providence cared for them but their rebellion “turned” that providence into

their “enemy.” This is the basic idea of our chapter: the expansion of divine providence becomes *contraction* when it meets the rebellion of its providential objects. The phrase *maru v’itzvu* (“rebelled and vexed”) is in parallel, and so both terms mean provocation to the point of rebellion. Their divine parent raises the children of Israel, but, like the rebellious son Adonijah, they rebel against His Torah.

“How oft did they provoke (*yamruhu*) Him in the wilderness, [and] grieve (*ya’atzivuhu*) Him in the desert!” (Psalms 78:40)

This text presents the same idea as the prior text, except here the psalmist recalls the Jews’ rebellion against God and Moses in the Sinai desert. It is not that they “grieve” God in the desert, but that they rebel against His will. The text again parallels a form of *etzev* with a form of *maru*, “rebellion,” making *etzev* mean provocation to the point of rebellion.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if [there be any] wicked way (*otzev*) in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalms 139:23-24)

Rashi translates the quoted phrase: “Whether there is a way of vexation (*m’atzva*—provocation) and deterioration (*u’kalkul*) in me.” The psalmist, David, asks God to search David’s heart to see if he really is the intellectual progeny of his patriarchal forebears: Is he a rebel against God? Has he deteriorated from their high level? Surely not! The contrast with real rebels comes in the next quoted verse below.

“In God I will praise his word, in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me. Every day they *wrest* (*y’atzevu*) my words: all their thoughts [are] against me for evil. They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul.” (Psalms 56:4-6)

Not that they “wrest” David’s words, but that they rebel against them. Rashi gives the context of David’s complaint:

“They lurk and lodge in the place they hope I will go, and they watch my steps to spy on me and to lead pursuers there. All this he would complain about the wicked of Israel: that they would lie in wait for him and out of fear of them he had fled to Achish.”

Achish was the monarchy David sought refuge with when he fled Saul (1 Samuel 21:10-15). In general terms, the people of Israel *rebel* against David’s decrees, which are only meant to carry out the Divine will.

Instance combining of Definition 2 and Definition 3 Contextualized:

“There were *giants* (*ha-nefilim*) in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the *sons of God* (*bnei ha-elokim*) came in unto the *daughters of men* (*bnot ha-adam*), and they bare [children] to them, the same [became] mighty men which [were] of old, *men of renown* (*anshei ha-shem*). And God saw that the wickedness of man [was] great in the earth, and [that] every *imagination* (*yetzer*) of the thoughts of his heart [was] only evil continually. And it *repented* (*va-yinakhem*) the Lord that He had made man on the earth, and it *grieved Him at His heart* (*va-yitatzev el libo*).” (Genesis 6:4-6)

This is the central passage of the chapter. See essay below, “*Va-Yitatzev El Libo*”

THE CURSE OF EDEN

“Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy *sorrow* (*itzbonekh*) and thy conception; in *sorrow* (*b’etzev*) thou (Eve) shalt bring forth children; and thy desire [shall be] to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed [is] the ground for thy sake; in *sorrow* (*b’itzabon*) shalt thou eat [of] it all the days of thy life.” (Genesis 3:16-17)

Recall Maimonides’ explanation of the Edenic expulsion in Guide 1:2. The loss in Eden is the loss of the intellectual capacity to assess the *truth* of reality. Our exit means that we exchanged our recognition of truth for the mere opinion of the good. We traded intellectual perception for the moral imagination. But intellect is what

we, so to speak, share with God (Guide 1:1), and it is our only path back to God. By contrast, the imagination is, so to speak, the corporeal part of our mental structure. The imagination is the corporealizing part of our mind because it makes pictures out of concepts. It paints an image of reality that is not reality itself.

Having lost the intellectual capacity to discern truth from falsehood, imagination takes over. It combines our sense perceptions through which we experience of the *pain* of physicality. We then *project* this pain in on God in the sublimated guise of the “hiding of the face,” the first *withdrawal*.

The cure will not come until the arrival of Moses at Sinai. In 2:30, Maimonides writes:

“The following is also a remarkable passage (Talmud, *Shabat* 146a), most absurd in its literal sense; but as an allegory it contains wonderful wisdom, and fully agrees with real facts, as will be found by those who understand all the chapters of this treatise. When the serpent came to Eve he infected her with poison; the Israelites, who stood at Mount Sinai, removed that poison; idolaters, who did not stand at Mount Sinai, have not got rid of it. Note this likewise.”

The Torah binds man to his true form, God, through action and thought. The Rabbis inspired by Torah commanded holy and pure conjugal attachment as the way for Jews (Mishneh Torah, *Ishot*, 15:16, 20; *Issurei Bi'ah*, 22:21, but see 21:26). That is because spiritual promiscuity is the reflection of corporeal promiscuity, just as spousal loyalty prefigures divine espousal. The Sinaitic betrothal cures the spiritual promiscuity of Eve. Sinai represents providential expansion following its great withdrawal after Eden.

VA-YITATZEV EL LIBO

“In Genesis 6:6 the word *va-yitatzev* has either the second or the third signification. In the first case, the sense of the Hebrew *va-yitatzev el libo* is ‘God was angry with them on account of the wickedness of their deeds.’ As to the words ‘to his heart’ used here, and also in the history of Noah, ‘And God said in His heart’ (Genesis 8:21: *va-yomer hashem el libo*), I will here explain what they mean. With regard to man, we use the expression ‘he said to himself,’ or ‘he said in his heart,’ in reference to a subject which he did not utter or communicate to any other person. Similarly the phrase ‘And God said in His heart,’ is used in reference to an act which God decreed without mentioning it to any prophet at the time the event took place according to the will of God. And a figure of this kind is admissible, since ‘the Torah speaketh in accordance with the language of man’ (supra 1:26). *This is plain and clear*. In the Pentateuch no distinct mention is made of a message sent to the wicked generation of the flood, cautioning or threatening them with death (but see Friedlander, 103, note 1); therefore, it is said concerning them, that God was angry with them in His heart; likewise when He decreed that no flood should happen again, He did not tell a prophet to communicate it to others, and for that reason the words ‘in his heart’ are added.”

We can take it as a rule that when Maimonides says, “This is plain and clear” it is far from being plain or clear. While not exactly esoteric, its meaning needs to be uncrated.

Maimonides says the “word (*va-yitatzev*) has either the second or the third signification,” i.e., it can mean either anger or provocation/rebellion.

Definition 2—Divine Rage. Definition 2, *anger*, does not seem to fit the context of *va-yitatzev el libo*, especially since it says *el libo*, “to His heart,” which implies that God rages to Himself. But God is impassive, that is to say, always the active subject, never the object of another’s action. Even human rebellion against His will could not make a divine “passion.” Definition 2 therefore presents important problem. Maimonides devotes the major part of this short chapter to it, the paragraph quoted above. He comes to the explanation that this phrase describes an *internal monologue* of divine thought. How does this explanation help him?

Maimonides begins by comparing another statement in the story of Noah with language to similar to *va-yitatzev el libo*:

“And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in His heart (*va-omer ha-shem el libo*), I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake; for the imagination of man’s heart [is] evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.” (Genesis 8:21)

“The Lord said in (to) His heart” he takes analogously to “it grieved Him at (to) His heart.” The surface meaning, *pshat*, would suggest that God changed His mind again; worse, that He engages in *verbal* (*va-omer*) dialogue with Himself. Maimonides turns to the easier question, and explains that “the Lord *said* to His heart” describes an internal train of thought, not a speech. We are reminded of his explanation (Guide 1:65) that when “And God said, Let there be light” in Genesis 1:3, there was no other being for God to speak to, and therefore “said,” *va-omer*, was meant homonymously with God as “thought/will” and not as speech. Similarly, whenever anyone “speaks to His heart,” this just means thought. Since “heart” means “will” (Guide 1:39), speaking to the heart means *the act of willing*. God, furthermore, kept it to Himself. Genesis 8:21 should be interpreted this way, that there was no prophet to whom He revealed His will to no longer curse the ground. God could only have been “speak(ing) to His heart” until Moses received the revelation of Torah, including this account, at Sinai (Talmud *Hullin*, 100b, *et seq.*, as understood in Kafih footnote 14, *ad loc.*).

This was the regime prior to Mosaic prophecy. He says:

“Similarly the phrase ‘And God said in His heart,’ is used in reference to an act which God decreed without mentioning it to any prophet... In the Pentateuch no distinct mention is made of a message sent to the wicked generation of the flood, cautioning or threatening them with death.”

Likewise, “when He decreed that no flood should happen again, He did not tell a prophet to communicate it to others.” This discussion foreshadows his doctrine in 1:63 that until Moses there was no prophet on a *mission* from God to deliver a *law*:

“[Prior to Moses] no one could establish his claim on prophecy, that is to say, on the fact that God had spoken to him, or had entrusted a mission to him: before the days of Moses no such assertion had ever been made. You must not be misled by the statements that God spoke to the Patriarchs, or that He had appeared to them. For you do not find any mention of a prophecy which appealed to others, or which directed them. Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, or any other person before them did not tell the people, ‘God said unto me, you shall do this thing, or you shall not do that thing.’ or ‘God has sent me to you.’ Far from it! for God spoke to them on nothing but of what especially concerned them, i.e., He communicated to them things relating to their perfection, directed them in what they should do, and foretold them what the condition of their descendants would be; nothing beyond this. They guided their fellow-men by means of argument and instruction, as is implied, according to the interpretation generally received amongst us, in the words ‘and the souls that they had gotten in Haran’ (Genesis 12:5)... God appeared to our Teacher Moses, and commanded him to address the people and to bring them the message...”

Before the Mosaic expansion of revelation, God was only “talking” to Himself, that is, His plan for mankind remained locked in divine thought. This partially explains God’s internal monologue. Maimonides now wants us to agree this is the same meaning as “it grieved (angered) Him at (to) His heart.” God has decided again to change the world, but has not told anyone else. He is only angry “to His heart” for there is yet no *prophet*.

Elsewhere (1:36) he explains that anger is a homonymous term for the divine *determination* to punish *idolatry*: “You will not find the term...applied to God except in reference to idolatry.” Though there is yet no prophet, why was none dispatched? Why would God keep this determination to Himself?

The reason that God only speaks His rage about the idolators “to His heart,” is that He does not want any prophet to publicize it to them. The idolators are so far gone that God *prevents their repentance*. This is their just punishment. See Even-Shmuel, *ad loc.* to our chapter, referencing the Commentary on the Mishnah, *Introduction to Avot, Shemona Perakim*, ch. 8, where Maimonides contends that this prevention of repentance explains God’s “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart. Accordingly, *va-yitatzev el libo* means that God “hardened the hearts” of the adamite idolators so that they could not repent. He hardens their hearts against repentance by keeping His rage, i.e., His determination to extirpate their idolatry, to Himself.

Does God Change His Mind? There is an even bigger problem with Genesis 6:8. Maimonides is quite aware of the larger issue suggested when that verse commences: “And it repented (*va-yinakhem*) the Lord that He had made man on the earth,” resulting in the flood. Tradition had grappled with this suggestion of God changing his mind (*Genesis Rabba* 27:4):

“‘*And it repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth.*’ R. Judah said: [God declared:] ‘It was a regrettable error on My part to have created him out of earthly elements, for had I created him out of heavenly elements, he would not have rebelled against Me.’ R. Nehemiah interpreted it: I am comforted (*menukham*, same root as *va-yinakhem*) that I created him below, for had I created him above, he would have incited the celestial creatures to revolt, just as he has incited the terrestrial beings to revolt. R. Aibu interpreted: It was a regrettable error on My part to have created an evil urge (*yezer ha-ra*—from ‘*every imagination [yetzer] of the thoughts of his heart was only evil*’) within him, for had I not created an evil urge within him, he would not have rebelled against Me. R. Levi interpreted: I am comforted that I made him from the earth [so as to remain in the earth, i.e. mortal and subject to burial]. ‘*And it grieved him at his heart*’ (*va-yitatzev el libo*). R. Berekiah said: If a king has a palace built by an architect and when he sees it, it displeases him, against whom is he to complain? Surely against the architect! Similarly, ‘*it grieved him at his heart.*’ A certain Gentile asked R. Joshua b. Karhah: ‘Do you not maintain that the Holy One, blessed be He, foresees the future?’ ‘Yes,’ replied he. ‘But it is written, ‘*And it grieved Him at His heart?*’ ‘Has a son ever been born to you?’ inquired he. ‘Yes,’ was the answer. ‘And what did you do?’ —‘I rejoiced and made all others rejoice,’ he answered. ‘Yet did you not know that he would eventually die?’ ‘Gladness at the time of gladness, and mourning at the time of mourning,’ replied he. ‘Even so was it with the Holy One, blessed be He,’ was his rejoinder...”

Thus, we take “It repented the Lord” *in parallel with* “And it grieved (angered) him at heart.” Not that God committed an error, but that creation is all *one*, including its consequences, processes and dynamics. This is the Maimonidean understanding. We read that God “repented,” in Torah language, but we should only take it as divine “gladness at the time of gladness and mourning at the time of mourning.” Though He knows all outcomes, His determination to punish does not represent change of mind. It is all part of the same system, a unified whole. The repenting is the same as the anger, not that God either repents or angers, but that there will be another *contraction*, withdrawal, “hiding of the face,” resulting in punishment of mankind. This removes any thought that God entertains the *passion* of anger.

Definition 3—Projection: Maimonides quoted Isaiah 63:10 and Psalms 78:40, both instances involving God, under Definition 3, rebellion, for man had *provoked* God by his rebellion. Maimonides had said that we could take the phrase “It grieved (angered) Him at (to) His heart” under either Definition 2 *or* Definition 3. Only in the last sentence of the chapter does he discuss Definition 3. For him it means that *we committed acts of provocation* by our rebellion against Him, and *we projected* our provocation upon Him:

“Taking the verb in the third signification, we explain the passage thus: ‘And man rebelled (*va’yimara*) against God’s will concerning Him’; for *lev* (heart) also signifies ‘will.’”

Thus, Maimonides arrives at his preferred reading under Definition 3 for *va-yitatzev el libo*: “And man rebelled (*va’yimara*) against God’s will concerning Him.” It is really a re-write. In this final interpretation, God not only

does not repent or rage; Maimonides twists the phrase so that it describes *human* rebellion. Since God cannot suffer emotion, we must take the provocation/rebellion as a purely human experience projected onto God. Maimonides does this by radically reinterpreting the grammar of the phrase, over-interpreting its reflexive character. Thus, we should *not* take it in parallel with the first part of the verse about God repenting (as opposed to how we took it in Definition 2, above) because Maimonides splits the subjects. Man rebels, God repents. Man projects his own rebellion upon God. In this reading of the whole passage, God “repents,” that is, decides to punish man, not because He is angry or even provoked, but because man has rebelled against God’s will. But this destroys grammatical comprehension. Therefore, Maimonides must radically rewrite the sentence. Not that God “rebelled” to or from His “will,” but that man rebelled against God’s will (*va'yimara ha-adam et ratzon hashem*).

CONCLUSION

The great expansion of Mosaic prophecy cured these withdrawals of providence. We know this for both cases, Eve’s and Noah’s. In the case of Eve, we learn it from Talmud, *Shabat* 146a, and Guide 2:30, quoted above, that at Sinai God removed the poison of the serpent. In the case of Noah, we learn that though God spoke “to his heart”—that He would not again flood the world—He did not publish this news until Sinai. The great change is that after Sinai God has a partner in the plan of creation. Until then the plan was an internal monologue, thereafter a dialogue. His animal creation has achieved spiritual self-recognition. Pain is the punishment for rebellion against our true spiritual nature.

Copyright © 2017, Scott Michael Alexander, no copying or use permitted except in connection with the Maimonides Group at YahooGroups.com

scottmalexander@rcn.com