

GUIDE 1:2 GARDEN OF TRUTH

INTRODUCTION

This should have been the first chapter.

Where the first chapter is lexical and turgid, this second chapter is luminous and tantalizing. By interposing that different, though fundamental, first chapter, Maimonides may hope to dissuade the less qualified from reading this chapter. Those readers have a limited attention span, and will think that the rest of the book is like the first chapter. Some of the materials in this chapter would be inappropriate for the reader.

This chapter is Maimonides' interpretation of the Garden of Eden account in Genesis. How should we value his account?

The Mishneh Torah teaches that God wants man to choose to live a moral life according to Torah. Having attained this level, Maimonides wants man to apply his mind to the deeper understanding of the Torah. Man will then recover Adam's lost access to truth unmediated by conventional opinion. He can then attain the prophetic stage of human evolution. It is the purpose of the Guide to help him reach that level.

THE MELUMAD'S WONDERFUL QUESTION

Maimonides says that a non-Jewish scholar (*melumad*/עלומי) has asked a question about the Garden of Eden. The scholar meant his question to be mildly humorous. He compared the story of the Garden of Eden to the pagan myth of Orion, jokingly disparaging both the book of Genesis and that myth (The Hebrew for Orion is *kesil*, which is also the word for fool, Jastrow p. 653-4, a not so subtle hint to his audience about the *melamed*). He seems to be a worldly intellectual, more philosophical than religiously Muslim in his inclination. He would be a familiar figure in either Cordoba or Cairo, a man who could be as comfortable with a Jewish intellectual as with Islamic thinkers.

The scholar says that Adam received the blessing enabling him to tell good from evil, what we call *discernment* (*v'lo tevuna v'lo yavdil beyn tov la'ra*). But discernment is a blessing of the intellect, the "the noblest of all faculties...the highest endowment..." Adam lacked discernment before eating the forbidden fruit. In this respect, he was no different from the animals. God *punished* him for eating the fruit by granting him the gift of *discernment*, an odd recompense for transgression. The scholar compares Adam to Orion. Orion cheats on Artemis, so she turns him into a heavenly star. Since a star is a "separate intelligence," a more spiritual being than fleshly man, it is peculiar that he should be "punished" with eternal spirituality.

(The idea that the snake brought blessing is Ophitic. Ophites thought of the snake as embodying divine power. Maimonides' scholar has not been identified. Shlomo Pines recognized a kindred statement in the writing of Emperor Julian, perhaps inspired by Porphyry, but the object there was to criticize God for commanding Adam against learning the *good*, which in the Platonism has intrinsic value. Pines, "Truth and Falsehood Versus Good and Evil," *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Twersky, 1990, Harvard, 120-121).

Maimonides first reaction was completely *ad hominem*, and perhaps meant to conceal his purpose. He accused the scholar of immorality. He tells the scholar not to come to the Torah after drinking and fornication (*ha-mishteh v'ha-tashmish*), reading the Torah like a mere book of history or poetry. Still, Maimonides insisted on calling him a *scholar*, and says that the scholar's question is *wonderful* (*muflaah*/אמתראצ'א). As we follow Maimonides' answer, we must keep asking why *he* thought it a great question.

Maimonides explained that the scholar has his facts wrong. Adam already had discernment. Adam could tell truth from falsehood. God punished him by substituting the lower discernment of good from evil for his higher discernment of truth and falsehood. Adam traded knowledge of truth for conventional moral *opinion*.

Maimonides' *Treatise on Logic*, (Israel Efros translation, New York, American Academy for Jewish Research, 1938, Chapter 8), lists four kinds of knowledge generally accepted without proof: 1) sense perception; 2) axioms or innate ideas; 3) opinion (Gr., per Efros, *eudoxa*); and 4) good authority. He provides examples of *opinion*: the opinion that sexual immorality (*gilui ha-erva m'guna*) is bad, and the opinion that "compensating a benefactor generously" is good. The problem with knowledge derived from conventional opinion is that:

"There is difference and rivalry for superiority, since there are propositions that have become known among one people and not among another."

Maimonides explains that when "Adam's eyes were opened" to see that he was naked, it was not that he had been blind before, for he saw then what he sees now. Rather he began to look at everything in a new way, the way of conventional opinion, the way of right and wrong. Maimonides provides two statements to illustrate this paradigm shift: "the heavens are spherical" and "the earth is flat." It is wrong to say that the first statement is "good" and the second "bad," but rather the first is *true* and the second *false*. Nakedness was a fact. Only after leaving the realm of truth for the realm of opinion did public nakedness become *bad*, a species of sexual immorality.

Still, Maimonides has not dealt with the justice of the scholar's challenge. He had asked how we could consider the gift of moral awareness to be a punishment. Maimonides wants us to question further. After all, Maimonides cannot be arguing for the moral neutrality of public nakedness. That would be precisely the sexual immorality that he had just accused the scholar of committing.

We must ask what kind of law Adam received. The Torah is given to flesh and blood man *after* the sin. Can this Torah, which deals broadly and in detail with moral conduct, be a conventional moral code? Is it just a species of conventional opinion? This would seem to be the implication of Maimonides' argument up to this point.

Moreover, having chosen to transgress, man now has free will. Without free will man cannot choose the Torah. Clearly, free will is something to be desired. What kind of *punishment* is it that rewards choiceless and Torah-less Adam with free will and Torah consciousness?

PRE-LAPSARIAN ADAM, POST-LAPSARIAN ADAM, AND PROPHETIC ADAM

We will understand the answer to these questions when we consider that there are three stages of human development. Those stages are pre-Lapsarian Adam, post-Lapsarian Adam, and Prophetic Adam. The stage of post-Lapsarian Adam is the necessary step to Prophetic Adam.

God designed *Pre-Lapsarian* Adam with a built-in capacity to make choices, which capacity remains merely passive until he chooses to eat the fruit. *Adam Kadmon*, (primordial pre-Lapsarian man) is an unusual spiritual entity that contains this creative potential, but this power is passive, inactive. Angels do not have this capacity. He also contains within his unity the first *division*, the differentiation into male and female principles, Adam and Eve. The power to choose is activated after the actual differentiation into Adam and Eve.

After that differentiation the snake appears. The snake represents choice, creativity, and sexuality, but also the abuse of those powers. The snake desires Eve and is jealous of Adam's sway over her. The Midrash, *Bereshit Rabba* 18:6 (Soncino), says:

“...*And they were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more subtle, etc.*’: Now surely Scripture should have stated (immediately after the former verse), ‘And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin’ (Genesis 3:21). Said R. Joshua b. Karhah: It teaches you through what sin that wicked creature inveigled them, viz. because he saw them engaged in their natural functions, he [the serpent] conceived a passion for her.”

The snake convinces her that she will not die from eating the fruit. Eve knows she is free to make this first moral choice, to eat or not to eat, only because she has *already* been given the unactivated capacity of moral discernment.

God thus built an incongruous element of choice into this situation. Maimonides’ problem is framed by one peculiar sentence:

“He [Adam] therefore transgressed a *command* with which he had been charged on the score of his *reason*... (*l’fikhakh hamarei et hatzvui asher mahmat sikhlu n’tzaveh bo*)”

The sentence does not make sense. What can it possibly mean to transgress a *moral command* that Adam is charged with by *reason*? In other words, what is reasonable about not eating a fruit? It is a *category mistake*. Adam, who only knows the true and false, is told not to eat the fruit. But the fruit is not false, it is a true existent, and it is truly edible. In a true-false binary fact matrix, the command “do not eat from the tree” is incongruous. We do not give a kosher law to robots or to angels. The conclusion must be that God *wants* Adam to make that first choice. When Adam chooses he activates his inherent powers of free will and creativity.

In the beginning, Mind is complete unity, which has not acquired self-recognition. Only by differentiation and activation of its capacity for volition can there ever be a post-Lapsarian man who can achieve prophecy, obtain the Torah, and seek to acquire unity on a higher level. The purpose of the Guide is to create that prophetic man.

Maimonides’ problem is that he must not *say* that God *wants* Adam to make the choice. That might be too troubling for the perplexed reader. That is why he concealed this chapter after a difficult lexical chapter. It is also why he does not come out and make his point at the end of this chapter, but buries it in further lexical considerations.

LEXICAL ISSUES

Maimonides interrupts his telling of the scholar’s wonderful question. He does so to address the term *elohim*. There is a conflict of two verses. The first says that God created man in his image. In the second, before the transgression, the snake tells Eve (Genesis 3:5):

“For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be *opened* (*v’nifk’khu*), and ye shall be as *gods* (*elohim*), knowing good and evil.”

This latter verse seems to be the inspiration for the scholar’s question: i.e., why does God “punish” Adam by making him a god? Was he not already in the image of God? Maimonides’ answer is that the scholar, not having come from a Torah tradition, does not know that Onkelos, the authoritative Aramaic translator of the Bible, defines *elohim* not as “gods” but as rulers (*k’ravrvavia*). Maimonides approves this translation, as he usually approves Onkelos’ work. But he allows that the term can also mean “angels” or “judges” (Rashi, following *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 13, translates: “Creators of worlds”). Maimonides seems to choose the translation “judges” and so regards Onkelos’ “rulers” as the political leaders who make conventional judgments that become the moral law. That is one level.

After the transgression, Adam has his intellect “removed” (*n’shlala*), and in return gets moral discernment. He is now a judge, a previously non-existent category. Kafih, in a revealing footnote to his translation (note 7), points to an *agada* in the Talmud, *Moed Katan* 17a, which ends by telling that an adulterous excommunicate scholar was not buried among the “pious” scholars (*khasidei*), but was buried among the judges (*dayanei*). This *agada* makes it clear that though Adam is now counted with the *elohim*/judges he is not a *hasid*, a perfect man.

Nonetheless, he was *nifk’khu*, his “eyes were opened.” Maimonides correctly explains that the root *pakakh* does not mean the removal of blindness but rather the receipt of new sources of knowledge. This term is not pejorative, but rather indicates a very great gift.

Was it a good thing or a bad thing? Or was it beyond good and evil?

Maimonides refrains from answering clearly. He ends the chapter in a complicated pirouette of contrasting ideas. First, he tells us that when Adam’s eyes were opened he received a great gift. Then Maimonides switches gears and tells us the bad part of Adam’s fall, which is the loss of good food and the need to sweat to raise poor provender. He is “brought to the level of the dumb beast” (Ps. 49:13). Switching gears again, Maimonides exclaims, “May the Almighty be praised, whose design and wisdom cannot be fathomed!” Here he praises God for the wonderful gift to man, ending on a positive note. How should we interpret this paragraph?

This last paragraph suggests Maimonides’ doctrine of *cunning design*. God, according to Maimonides, builds complex and cunning designs into creation to achieve His wonderful ends. What seemed bad turns out to be good. God gives Man the will to choose to live a better life and the intellect to do so. But the human condition is a *problematique*, a perplexity. It is Maimonides’ understanding that God gives man the inherent capacity to choose, and wants him to choose, to exercise free will. God wants man to choose to receive the Torah, and, with the help of Moses and Maimonides, learn its secrets, so that he may transcend his lowly state to become prophetic man.

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