

## GUIDE 1:42 LIFE AND DEATH

### “LIFE” IS NOT A HOMONYM

Maimonides’ important point in Guide 1:42, the lexical chapter on “life” and “death,” is his unspoken concession that the life of God and the life of man share some common feature.

His purpose in the lexical chapters is to have us interpret certain scriptural terms against their usual sense. The *homonym* is the most radical of these attacks on meaning, divorcing this sense. Maimonides clearly labels many of his lexical terms homonyms, usually in the first sentence of each chapter (*shem m’shutaf*, Ar.: אָסֵם מִשְׁתַּרְך). The significance of the homonymous terms is that when they describe both man and God these terms sound the same but carry no shared meaning. He never articulates the negative, i.e., he never says that a term is *not* homonymous, forcing us to draw out that implication, as here.

*Mavet*, “death,” is obviously non-homonymous since scripture never says that God is dead, according to Maimonides’ rule that scripture never attaches to God a disgraceful attribution (Guide 1:47). But scripture attributes *life* to God, *elokim khayim* (Duet. 5:26). Since all three definitions of *life* given below involve *change*, how can he attribute life to the *Immutable* One? How can life *not* be a homonymous term?

The fact that Maimonides did not pronounce *life* homonymous is a major concession supporting my claim that he adheres to a moderate rather than a radical “negative theology.” Those who prefer to interpret his negative theology radically deny that the “essential attributes” of life, wisdom, existence, power, etc., have any common meaning when applied to God. This would make Maimonides’ God into a Zen nothingness, the Zoharic *Ayn Sof*, or the “God of the philosophers.” That *life* is not a homonym shows that we *do* share, in some inarticulable sense, this attribute with God. It is only because of this shared sense that monotheistic religion is possible. It is unimaginable that Maimonides would have thought otherwise. (I have even gone so far as to argue that he encouraged the masses to accept radical negative theology, while expecting intellectuals to grasp the more complex shared reality of the essential attributes. See on 1:35.)

### INTRODUCTION: LIFE AND GOOD, DEATH AND EVIL

This chapter expands the core concept of the last chapter: what it means to be *good*.

Goodness is the name applied when something is fit for its purpose. A person is good when his soul has attained its intellectual form. This idea is suppressed in the lexical chapters because it implies that a man is not good just having performed the commandments of the Torah.

Maimonides’ esotericism does not stem from fear of persecution. Rather, unprepared readers will react impatiently to ideas that are hard for them to hear. This is opposite to his purpose, which is to aid their enlightenment.

“Life” and “death,” *khai* and *mavet*, expand this concept because the Torah links them to the terms “good” and “bad.” Moses relates the new covenant to the people at Moab, saying:

“See, I have set before thee this day *life* and *good*, and *death* and *evil*. I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, [that] I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing...therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:15-19)

A major interpretative tradition from the Talmud, explains life and death in terms of theodicy (*Kiddushin*, 39b-40a). Why are the good punished and the evil rewarded in this life? Because, in the world to come, the good will be rewarded and the evil souls *cut off* (*karet*).

The Talmud reinterprets many biblical passages according to this idea. The Talmud reinterprets its Mishna: “He who performs one precept is well rewarded, his days are prolonged and he inherits the land.” Rabbi Jacob in the Talmud protests that “there is no reward for precepts in this world, ...reward...is dependent on the resurrection of the dead.” Rabbi Jacob was the grandson of Akher. “Had Akher interpreted this verse as R. Jacob, his daughter’s son, he (Akher) would not have sinned.” Meaning, he would not have become a heretic. But Akher interprets literally: God rewards precepts now. A son did his father’s bidding to bring young birds from the nest. Following the Torah, he shooed the mother bird (Deuteronomy 22:7). According to the Mishna, he should have been “well rewarded.” Instead, he falls off his ladder and dies. “Now, what happened to Akher? Some say, he saw something of this nature.”

Akher had an *incorrect* idea. He failed to understand the ultimate reward of the immortal soul transcends temporal bodily enjoyment. His incorrect idea leads him to *turn* from all correct ideas. Incorrect ideas are evil, while correct ideas are *good*, because the soul achieves its intellectual form when it cognizes correctly. By contrast, the soul of the heretic dies in the world to come. Akher is the opposite of Job. Akher turns from good ideas and his soul is cut off. Job turned in *teshuva* from bad ideas to correct ideas and achieved *life*.

Maimonides, thus, takes the traditional theodicy and reframes it in his own terms. Both Job and Akher were morally good, indeed, at one time Akher was intellectually good. Nevertheless, being morally good and performing precepts was not enough. Man must cognize intelligibles in divine science or his soul does not achieve its intellectual form and is not *good*. Life and death depend upon striving to know God. It is the Maimonidean version of the Socratic “know thyself.” This was the clear message of *Shemona Perakim*. That treatise connected *teshuva* with *health*. One recovers from the sickness of existence when the physician of the soul causes the patient to turn in *teshuva* from incorrect ideas to *good* ideas.

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

### ***KHAI* (LIVING)**

1. A sentient organism (lit. “growing” and “sensing”)
2. Recovery from a severe illness
3. Acquisition of wisdom

### ***MAVET*: (DEATH)**

1. Death and severe illness
2. Loss of wisdom, acquisition of false ideas (there is no specific proof-text given for Definition 2, but that is how Maimonides interpreted Proverbs 8:33-36 and Deuteronomy 30:15, below)

#### Instance of Definition 1, *KHAI*, sentient organism, Contextualized:

“And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth [upon] the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are

they delivered. Every moving thing that *liveth (khai)* shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things. But flesh with the life (*b'nafsho*) thereof, [which is] the blood thereof, shall ye not eat." (Genesis 9:1-4)

In this first case, God grants Noah the right to eat those beings that "grow and sense," *higdil ha-margish*. The verse clearly concerns only animals. We saw last chapter that God restricted the Adamites to vegetarianism. The reason was that animal blood too closely resembles the lifeblood of man. Still, the term *nefesh hayah* (Gen. 9:10) in man is homonymous with that of animals: the terms sound similar but differ in meaning (*Shemona Perakim*, ch. 1). Before Noah, man came to idolatrous ideas when imbibing the vital spirit of the animal. It is not until Noah that God deems man capable of achieving the *correct idea*, that man's soul and the animal's soul are completely different, and must be kept separate. Only then does God permit man to eat meat.

Instances of Definition 2 KHAI, recovery from illness, Contextualized:

"The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was *recovered (va'ykhi)* of his sickness. I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years. I said, I shall not see the Lord, [even] the Lord, in the land of the living: I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world." (Isaiah 38:9-11)

*Life* is the recovery from mortal illness. Recovery is caused by *teshuva*, i.e., the *turning* to correct ideas, which are good, and which are life. We mentioned Hezekiah briefly in connection with Josiah in 1:38. The rabbinic tradition favors both kings, but Hezekiah is more successful than Josiah. Hezekiah is a *baal teshuva*, i.e., a penitent, who is not as certain of his righteousness and his people's righteousness as Josiah is. When confronted by the invader Josiah mistakenly insisted on that righteousness and ignored prophet Jeremiah's warning. Since idolatry still existed in the land, Josiah had the wrong idea. As a result, the Egyptians slaughtered Josiah and his men. Compare Hezekiah. The invader in Hezekiah's time was the Assyrian Sennacherib. A miracle occurred, attested by both the biblical and the archeological record. God destroyed Sennacherib's army when Hezekiah prayed in *teshuva*. Then, "the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand" (185,000; 2 Kings 19:35). Tradition says our proof text occurs just before Sennacherib's destruction. Hezekiah had contracted a terrible disease. The prophet lets Hezekiah know that his sickness is fatal, but Hezekiah cries out in penitence to God. God forgives Hezekiah. On recovery, Hezekiah wrote the brilliant psalm of praise that begins in this passage and continues to 38:20. His *teshuva* saved Jerusalem. Hezekiah instituted a religious revival, culminating in the celebration of a great Passover. The revival of the Passover is also central to the *teshuva* of Joshua, in the next proof-text.

"And their children, [whom] he raised up in their stead (*beneihem heikim takhtam*), them Joshua circumcised: for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them by the way. And it came to pass, when they had done circumcising all the people, that they abode in their places in the camp, *till they were whole (khayotam)*. And the Lord said unto Joshua, This day have I rolled (*galoti*) away the reproach of Egypt from off you. Wherefore the name of the place is called Gilgal unto this day." (Joshua 5:7-9)

Joshua performs the second mass circumcision of the Jews when they are at war and surrounded by enemies. God miraculously holds the enemy off while the Jews recover. In response, Joshua institutes a religious revival, inaugurating a great Passover celebration and reinstating circumcision. The elders who had feasted at the vision of the *Merkava* died in the desert. Their survivors "had not circumcised...by the way." Joshua and the survivors become the new elders of Israel. They are the true intellectual progeny of Moses because they turned, *rolling*, back to his correct ideas. They were "raised up in their stead," really, "raised up instead" (*takhtam*) of the elders who died in the desert. Because Joshua brings the prophetic message down to the people and turns them, he is blessed with further prophecy (Joshua 5:13, Guide 2:42).

“When the plague of leprosy is in a man, then he shall be brought unto the priest; And the priest shall see [him]: and, behold, [if] the rising (*se'ait*) [be] white in the skin, and it have turned the hair white, and [there be] *quick raw* flesh (*u'mikhyat basar khai*) in the rising (*ba-se'ait*).” (Leviticus 13:9-10)

Maimonides said that *khai* in Definition 2 means “recovery from a severe illness.” This proof-text stands for the *opposite* case: it clearly shows the subject leprous and *deteriorating*. Biblical leprosy is a physical manifestation of spiritual sickness, typically caused by *slander*. One form of leprosy is *se'ait*, a “rising.” When there is such a rising, and *healthy* flesh appears in it, that healthy flesh is itself a symptom that beneath the healthy flesh leprosy is getting worse. Rashi (quoting *Torat Kohanim* 13:69) says “And even though *mikhya* is mentioned only in connection with the *se'ait*, nevertheless, in all [major] manifestations of biblical leprosy and their related categories, it is a sign of uncleanness.” Maimonides expects any reasonably well educated Jew of his time to note this surprisingly contradictory textual juxtaposition. The reader should also stop and consider its meaning. We cannot judge *health* or *life* by its surface appearance. The Talmudic section *Kiddushin*, considered above, talks about the *living who are dead and the dead who are living*. When the evildoer succeeds, it is not apparent that he is the living who is dead, because we do not see that God cut his soul off from the world to come. The slanderer who perverts the God-given power of expression, perverts the power that makes him a *Homo Logos*. He may appear healthy but is deeply sick, for his soul is *dead*. This Maimonidean crux should also make us think of how we must look beneath the surface level of such texts to find the prophetic truth that cures.

Instances of Definition 3 *KHAI*, acquisition of wisdom, Contextualized:

“So shall they (the wisdom of the Lord) be *life* (*khayim*) unto thy soul (*l'nafshekha*), and grace to thy neck.” (Proverbs 3:22)

“For whoso findeth Me findeth *life* (*khayim*), and shall obtain favour of the Lord.” (Proverbs 8:35)

“For they [are] *life* (*khayim*) unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh (*u'l'khal bsaro marpei*)” (Proverbs 4:20-22)

“See, I have set before thee this day *life* (*khayim*) and good, and *death* (*mavet*) and evil.” (Deut. 30:15)

“Ye shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you, that ye may *live* (*tikhyun*), and [that it may be] *well with you* (*v'tov lakhem*), and [that] ye may prolong [your] days in the land (*v'ha-arakhtem yamim*) which ye shall possess.” (Deuteronomy 5:33—JPS 1917 has 5:29)

“[But] thou shalt in any wise let the dam go, and take the young to thee; that it may be well with thee (*l'maan yitav lakh*), and [that] thou mayest prolong [thy] days (*v'ha-arakhtem yamim*).” (Deut. 22:7)

On all of these passages (including their relevant surrounding scriptural text), see essay below, “Correct Ideas are Life and Incorrect Ideas are Death.”

Instance of Definition 1 of *MAVET*, Physical Death, Contextualized:

“But it came to pass in the morning, when the wine was gone out of Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart (*libo*) died (*va-yamat*) within him, and he became [as] a stone. And it came to pass about ten days [after], that the Lord smote Nabal, that he died.” (1 Samuel 25:37-38)

“ . And it came to pass after these things, [that] the son of the woman (of Zarepath, *tsarpata*), the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him (*lo notra bo neshama*). And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?” (1 Kings 17: 18)

On these passages (including their relevant surrounding scriptural text), see essay below, “Recovery From Illness.”

## CORRECT IDEAS ARE LIFE AND INCORRECT IDEAS ARE DEATH

“The Lord by *wisdom* (*b'khokhma*) hath founded the earth; by *understanding* (*bi'tvuna*) hath he established the heavens. By his *knowledge* (*b'daato*) the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew. My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion. So shall they be *life* (*khayim*) unto thy soul (*l'nafshekha*), and grace to thy neck.” (Proverbs 3:19-22)

“Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed [is] the man that heareth Me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of My doors. For whoso findeth Me findeth *life* (*khayim*), and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against Me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate Me love *death* (*kol m'sanai ahavu mavet*).” (Proverbs 8:33-36)

“My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart (*levavekha*). For they [are] *life* (*khayim*) unto those that find them, and *health* to all their flesh (*u'l'khal besaro marpei*). Keep thy heart (*libekha*) with all diligence; for out of it [are] the *issues of life* (*totz'ot khayim*).” (Proverbs 4:20-22)

Definition 3 of *khayim* is knowledge or its acquisition. Maimonides quotes three similar passages from the book of Proverbs, because the theme of Proverbs is the benefit of knowledge and the danger of ignorance. The first proof-text links *knowledge* to creation and life. The second links *Torah* to life, and its rejection to death. The third adds a link between knowledge and *health*. Knowledge is the cure for the diseases of the soul.

Note the use of the language of creation in the first Proverb. It should call to mind the anagrammatic connection we made in 1:40 between the *yekheraf* and *merakhefet*. *Yekheraf* emphasized Job's *turn* when he recognized that God's providence *hovered*, over the “face of the waters,” *merakhefet*, that He miraculously created.

The Wisdom Cure: Rashi explains “The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth” to mean that He founded it with Torah, “which is discernment and knowledge.” Maimonides discusses this verse, in the context of applying God's wisdom as a cure for disease, in *Mishneh Torah, Avoda Zara*, 11:12:

“One who whispers a spell over a wound, at the same time reciting a verse from the Torah, one who recites a verse over a child to save it from terror, and one who places a scroll or phylacteries on an infant to induce it to sleep, are not in the category of sorcerers and soothsayers, but they are included among those who repudiate the Torah (*ha-kofrim ba-tora*); for they use its words to cure the body whereas these are only medicine for the soul, as it is said, ‘they shall be life unto thy soul.’ On the other hand, any one in the enjoyment of good health is permitted to recite verses from the Scriptures or a Psalm, so that he may be shielded by the merit of the recital and saved from trouble and hurt.”

Thus, Torah itself forbids using wisdom as an amulet or abracadabra, but it encourages us to raise our souls to the level of *providential protection*. That is *teshuva*: turning to God by cognizing divine truth.

In the second passage above, Proverbs again links wisdom to life. The verse goes on to link *death/mavet*, the other lexical term in this chapter, to those who hate to hear the instruction. Prophetic instruction can save them from death. Josiah did not listen and died; Hezekiah heard and lived. The one who findeth God findeth life. He obtains the “favour of the Lord” for by aligning his mind with God's wisdom he merits providential protection.

Maimonides writes of the third passage: “Such instances are numerous. In accordance with this metaphor, true principles are called life, and corrupt principles death (*ha-deot nakhonot khayim, v'ha-deot ha-nfsadot mavet*).” Literally, he means: *correct ideas are life and incorrect ideas are death*. It is the key passage in the chapter. You can read verses in Torah to strengthen health because they are a “health to all flesh.” They are a “health” because

they are correct ideas, and cognizing correct ideas is the way the soul (“thine heart”) achieves its intellectual form, and thereby saves itself from “death.”

The Meaning of Good and Evil: This brings Maimonides to the most famous linkage of life/death and good/evil, Moses’ speech to the Jews in Deuteronomy, Maimonides’ fourth proof-text:

“See, I have set before thee this day *life (ha-khayim)* and good, and *death (ha-mavet)* and evil; In *that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God*, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, [and that] ye shall not prolong [your] days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it. I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, [that] I have set before you *life and death, blessing and cursing*: therefore *choose life*, that both thou and thy seed may live.”  
(Deuteronomy 30:15-19)

Wisdom is the *good* in this covenant at Moab: “See, I have set before thee set before thee this day *life and good*” since, as we learned in the first passage, “they (wisdom) shall be life unto thy soul.” Maimonides makes the point explicit: “(in this passage God is) showing that ‘life’ and ‘good,’ ‘death’ and ‘evil,’ are *identical*” (*hinei bi’er ki ha-tov hu ha-khaim, v’ha-ra hu ha-mavet*).

Maimonides interpreted this famous passage differently than tradition does. The Rabbis thought that the key to walking in the ways of God meant “to keep his commandments and statutes.” While Maimonides certainly expects that basic level of adherence from his students, his focus is on “I command thee this day to love the Lord.” In Guide 3:28 he writes: “We have already shown in the Mishneh Torah (*Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2) that this love is only possible when we comprehend the real nature of things, and understand the divine wisdom displayed therein.” In other words, to be good, it is necessary to love, and love comes from studying divine science.

Free Will: The choice of “life” is a choice given only to beings that have free will. Maimonides cites the “choose life” passage in *Shemona Perakim*, chapter 8, as proof of man’s free will, against the Kalām fatalists:

“The truth about which there is no doubt is that all of man’s actions are given over to him. If he wishes to act he does so and if he does not wish to act he does not; there is no compulsion whatsoever upon him. Hence it necessarily follows that commands can be given. He said: ‘See I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil...choose life.’ *He gave us choice about that...* It necessarily follows that there can be instruction and learning...”

We find the same idea in Mishneh Torah, *Teshuva* 5:3, which nicely sums up the issues:

“This matter [of there being a free will] is a very important principle, and is a support of the Torah and meritorious deeds, as it is written, ‘See, I have set before you on this day life and good, and death and evil.’ It is also written, ‘Behold, I set before you on this day a blessing and a curse.’ This is to say that one has the free will to do what one wants, whether it is good or bad...If the Almighty did decree upon everybody to be righteous or wicked, or if there was something which guided one from birth to one of the many ways, knowledges, temperaments or ways of acting, like the stupid astrologers think, then how could we have been commanded by the Prophets to do one thing and not the other, to improve our ways and not to follow the wicked people?...Do not consider and ponder *how* one can have a free will and do what one wants, for there are things in the world over which one has not control, as Scripture says, ‘Whatever the Lord wishes He has done in heaven and on earth’ (Psalms 135:6)—recognize that *everything was made according to His wishes, even though our actions can affect them*. What does this mean? Just as it is the Creator’s *will* that the fire and wind rise up, that the water and earth sink down, that

the spheres move in circles, and that all creations will do what He wants them to do, so is it also the Creator's *will* that men should have a free will and should be allowed to do what they want without having to be forced or directed, but should always want to do [what they do] out of their own minds, which the Almighty has given to them. Therefore, one is judged according to one's actions, whether they are good or bad."

Just as the cosmos is "good" because it fits its purpose, so man is good when he exercises free will properly. He can only exercise it properly by when he has correct ideas. Then his soul achieves its intellect and "lives."

The First Perfection and the Second Perfection: Maimonides, at the end of our chapter, puts two proof-texts together, both using some variant of the phrase, "that it may be well with thee":

"Ye shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you, **that ye may live (*tikhyun*)**, and [that it may be] *well with you (*v'tov lakhem*)*, and [that] ye may prolong [your] days in the land (*v'ha-arakhtem yamim*) which ye shall possess." (Deuteronomy 5:33—JPS 1917 has 5:29)

"If a bird's nest chance to be before thee in the way in any tree, or on the ground, [whether they be] young ones, or eggs, and the dam sitting upon the young, or upon the eggs, thou shalt not take the dam with the young: [But] thou shalt in any wise let the dam go, and take the young to thee; **that it may be well with thee (*l'maan yitav lakh*)**, and [that] thou mayest prolong [thy] days (*v'ha-arakhtem yamim*)." (Deuteronomy 22:6-7)

Maimonides uses the famous passage about shooing the mother bird (the second passage) to explain Deuteronomy 5:33 (the first passage). Only the first text uses a variant of our lexical term *life*. Maimonides here cites the traditional linking of these terms (*righteous/life, wicked/death*) in Talmud *Berakhot* 18b: "The righteous even in death are called living, while the wicked even in life are called dead." He tells us "Note this well." The Talmud *divides* the text to place one clause in this world and one in the world to come. Maimonides explains this division his own way in Guide 3:27, introducing his major doctrine of the First and Second Perfections:

"The general object of the Law is *twofold*: the well-being of the *soul* (which he calls "the *second* perfection), and the well-being of the *body* ("the *first* perfection"). The well-being of the soul is promoted by correct opinions communicated to the people according to their capacity. Some of these opinions are therefore imparted in a plain form, others allegorically: because certain opinions are in their plain form too strong for the capacity of the common people. The well-being of the body is established by a proper management of the relations in which we live one to another. This we can attain in two ways: first by removing all violence from our midst: that is to say, that we do not do every one as he pleases, desires, and is able to do; but every one of us does that which contributes towards the common welfare. Secondly, by teaching every one of us such good morals as must produce a good social state...."

Next, he reminds us of the way the Talmud *divides* quotations:

"You know the interpretation of our Sages, 'that it may be well with thee (*l'maan yitav lakh*, i.e., in this world), and [that] thou mayest prolong [thy] days (*v'ha-arakhtem yamim*),' (*ibid.*), i.e., in the world that is all eternal."

He then shows us *his* way of dividing, using a similar passage:

"Scripture clearly mentions the *twofold perfection*, and tells us that its acquisition is the object of all the divine commandments. Comp. 'And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always (*l'tov lanu kol ha-yamim*, i.e., eternally), that he might preserve us alive as it is this day (*l'khayotenu k'ha-yom ha-zei*)' (Deuteronomy 6:24). Here the *second* perfection (soul) is first

mentioned because it is of greater importance, being, as we have shown, the *ultimate aim of man's existence* (*ha-takhlit ha-sofit*). This perfection is expressed in the phrase, 'for our good always.'

Our proof text is very similar and he wants us to reconstruct it the same way. If you walk in the ways God commanded you, it may be "well with you (*v'tov lakhem*)." *V'tov lakhem* in Deut. 5:33 is like "that it may be well with thee (*l'maan yitav lakh*)" in 22:7, and expresses achievement of the *first perfection* (body). "Ye may prolong [your] days (*v'ha-arakhtem yamim*)" in both verses expresses achievement of the *second perfection*, the well-being of the soul, by which he means *the achievement by the soul of its intellectual form*. Or, to put it differently: performing the commands of the Torah creates a man and a society that has achieved the *first perfection*. The *first perfection* is the prerequisite to the achievement of the *second perfection*, the acquired intellect. Maimonides does not consider the *first perfection*, as such, to be the intrinsic purpose of man's creation.

### RECOVERY FROM ILLNESS

"And Abigail came to Nabal; and, behold, he held a feast in his house, like the feast of a king; and Nabal's heart [was] merry within him, for he [was] very drunken: wherefore she told him nothing, less or more, until the morning light. But it came to pass in the morning, when the wine was gone out of Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart (*libo*) died (*va-yamat*) within him, and he became [as] a stone. And it came to pass about ten days [after], that the Lord smote Nabal, that he died."  
(1 Samuel 25:36-38)

"And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat [many] days. [And] the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah. And it came to pass after these things, [that] the son of the woman (of Zarepath, *tsarpata*), the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him (*lo notra bo n'shama*). And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?"  
(1 Kings 17:15-18)

The first passage is the proof-text for *mavet* (death). The skinflint Nabal became comatose for ten days when he learned that his wife paid his money to put David and his men up for the night. Maimonides brings the second passage apparently in explanation of the first text, although no variant of *mavet* appears in this quote-shard: despite the protestations of the woman of Zarepath, the text itself never states that her son died. The problem is that the rabbis usually explain the second passage to mean that Elijah *resurrected* the son of the woman of Zarepath. In other words, though Nabal's "heart died within him," he was merely unconscious, but when the son of Zarepath had "no breath left within him," tradition pronounces him dead. "Death" does not necessarily mean *death*, while the stoppage of breath clearly does. (according to Radak's contrasting take on both passages, *ad loc.*, Talmud, *Rosh Hashana* 18a)

Maimonides, somewhat confusingly, quotes an unknown Andalusian authority who said:

"that *his* breath was suspended, so that no breathing could be perceived at all, as sometimes an invalid is seized with a fainting fit or an attack of asphyxia, and it cannot be discovered whether he is alive or dead: in this condition the patient may remain a day or two."

Who does the "his" in the above sentence refer to, Nabal, or the son of Zarepath? Some, like Even-Shmuel, hold that the Andalusian authority meant that the son of Zarepath was comatose, especially since the text never said that he died. Even though Even-Shmuel so interprets the Andalusian authority, he did not think that Maimonides accepted the Andalusian's interpretation, but only mentioned it in passing. This is how Even-Shmuel interprets Maimonides, *ad loc.*, (my tr.):

“It is clear Maimonides did not agree to this idea (at least in the case of the son of Zarepath), even though it would not have been considered a terrible heresy (*l’afikorsut noraa*), but in vain did Ibn Caspi and his followers (Efodi, Shem Tov, Geiger) try to saddle him with this view and make of his words an esoteric stratagem (Munk, Abarbanel).”

Just such an attribution may have bolstered the crowd who accused Maimonides of the heresy of not believing in corporal resurrection. In his *Treatise on Resurrection*, Maimonides caustically replies that there is no evidence in any of his works to support the accusation. Apparently, some of Maimonides’ accusers argued that when he mentioned “one of the Sephardim (i.e., Andalusians),” the Sephardi was none other than R. Moshe Ben Maimon ha-Sefardi, i.e., Maimonides himself. But it is unlikely that Maimonides would have worn this type of mask.

Friedlander and Abarbanel think that the Andalusian authority instead explained *Nabal’s* coma, and the word *died* in that passage does not mean actual death (See Friedlander note 3, p. 146, Abarbanel *ad loc.*, to the Guide). It follows that Maimonides agreed with the rabbis that the son of Zarepath did die, and used that contrasting quote to show that the actual word *death* (as in the case of Nabal) should not be taken literally. This is the better interpretation. His real concern was the medical phenomenon of these near-death states: i.e., that death is a continuum with indefinable borders.

Kafih seems generally to agree that the issue is near-death states, but still thinks that the Andalusian is writing about the *ben zarpata*. Kafih, footnote 10, is a scholarly consideration of this constellation of issues (my translation):

“I do not know who among the (Jewish) Sephardic sages preceding Maimonides made this interpretation. It is clearly unjustified to claim that Maimonides was the Sephardic (i.e., Andalusian) interpreter, and that he wanted to conceal his identity behind this formulation, for two reasons. First, because this type of usage was not part of Maimonides’ means or methodology. Maimonides feared heaven only. He had no concern at all about what other creatures might say, and particularly those appearing in the image of men (*u’b’prat otam shehem k’demut bnei adam b’inei rabeinu*). Second, we already find this interpretation known and widespread in France and the cities of the Provence a hundred years after Maimonides’ era. It is clear to me that this is not due to the influence of the Guide of the Perplexed but from some other source. In *Shita Mekubetset* (Bezalel Ashkenazi, 16th Cent.) to Talmud *Baba Metzia* 114b the commentator says that (the son of the woman of Zarepath) ‘did not really die but fainted,’ in the name of a student of R. Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103).”

I appreciate R. Kafih’s rejection of Maimonides’ alleged fear of persecution, and the suggestion that such ideas were not new with him. Schwartz, footnote 4, mentions a certain Ibn Algazar who wrote a medical book, translated by Moses Ibn Tibon (1240-1283) into Hebrew, which discusses the phenomenon in medieval terms, attributing it to hysterical fainting or asthmatic asphyxiation.

We may understand what is going on better by considering the case Maimonides did not mention here, but which is in the back of his mind: the case of the son of the Shunamite woman (He cites it in Guide 2:35, where he deprecates Elisha’s miracle in comparison to the miracles of Moses).

The account is in 2 Kings 4:18-37 and 8:1-6. Here the prophetic hero is Elisha rather than Elijah. Both prophets begin by miraculously replenishing the oil jugs of poor widows. In both cases, shortly and suddenly thereafter, sons collapse. The son of Zarepath “had no breath left in him,” and requires resurrection. By contrast, the text repeatedly says that the son of the Shunamite woman “died” (2 Kings 4:20, *vayamot*; 4:32, *met*; 8:6, *ha-met*). However, according to Maimonides’ rule that we cannot always take the word “died” literally, the boy could have been comatose, as Radak holds, and as Talmud, Nidah 70b, implies (*contra* Abarbanel, who agrees that the Andalusian only referred to Nabal, but maintained that both the *ben zarpata* and the *ben shunamit* died).

The reason that Maimonides is interested in near-death states is the connection between *teshuva* and *recovery from illness*. The book of Job, which, because of its concentration on *teshuva*, haunts this section of the Guide, features Job's remarkable friend, Elihu (see my "Elihu on Prophecy" in Guide 1:13, discussing Guide 3:23 and Job 33:15-33).

Elihu's new idea is that conjunction with the divine angel, i.e., the active intellect, brings recovery from otherwise fatal disease:

"The new idea, which is peculiar to Elihu and has not been mentioned by the others, is contained in his metaphor of the angel's intercession. It is a frequent occurrence, he says, that a man becomes ill, approaches the gates of death, and is already given up by his neighbors. If then an angel, of any kind whatever, intercedes on his behalf and prays for him, the intercession and prayers are accepted; the patient rises from his illness, is saved, and returns to good health." (Guide 3:23)

The point here is that Nabal's failure to repent blocked his recovery, because, as the Andalusian authority taught, though Nabal was terminally sick, breathing had not stopped, as in the case of the *ben zarpata*. At any point in the ten days of his sickness, Nabal might have repented (Rashi). Divine providence is directly relative to man's ability to remain in contemplation of God. Elihu said:

"Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave, and his life to the destroyers. If there be a messenger (*malakh* = angel) with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man his uprightness. Then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom. His flesh shall be fresher than a child's: he shall return to the days of his youth. He shall pray unto God, and He will be favourable unto him: and he shall see His face with joy: for He will render unto man his righteousness. He looketh upon men, and [if any] say, I have sinned, and perverted [that which was] right, and it profited me not; he will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light." (Job 33:22-28)