

## GUIDE 1:21 CROSSING

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

The Hebrew translation of this chapter is easier to understand than the English translations. Both English translations bog down in grammatical jargon.

It is also unclear, at first, what the actual subject of the chapter is supposed to be. The ostensible subject is the word *avar*, which means to pass or to cross, that is, to move positionally from one place to another. There is no lexical chapter on the word *kol*, which means sound or voice, yet much of this chapter is devoted to that word, and *kol* may be the real subject of the chapter. If Maimonides’ object is to bury the word so that casual readers would miss that this is the lexical chapter for *kol*, he succeeded. (See essay below on “Crossing or Voice?”)

## ENCOUNTER

The point of the chapter, however, is clear. We may encounter God (ar. *ittiṣal*) but we do not become God. In other words, we have no access to His essence allowing us to unite (ar. *ittiḥad*) with Him. Maimonides warns that there are limits to our powers of intellectual apprehension and clear dangers confront those who attempt to pass them:

“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 (1:32)—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.’ (Exodus 33:23)”

The passage is meant to suggest the fate of Akiva’s companions in *pardes* who lost their reason seeking knowledge beyond the limits of their comprehension. This shows that for Maimonides unity with God is impossible (but see our analysis in Guide 1:68, suggesting the identity of human and divine psychology). Gideon Freudenthal, who otherwise makes excellent observations about Maimonides’ philosophical mysticism, disagrees, portraying him as a pantheist. Gershom Scholem clarifies the matter, generally denying pantheistic implications in Jewish mysticism. “*Devekut* (‘cleaving to God’) results in a sense of beatitude and mystical union, yet it does not entirely eliminate the distance between the creature and its Creator, a distinction that most Cabalists, like most Hasidim, were careful not to obscure by claiming that there could be a complete unification of the soul and God.” Compare the statement of Maimonides’ son, R. Abraham, “When we say that God spoke to Moshe without an intermediary it means that although he spoke through a medium (*b’geshem nosei*) the medium does not possess its own spirit or intellect like an angel does (*aino bal nefesh v’lo geshem sikhli k’malakh*).” Nonetheless, there was still an intermediary. Even-Shmuel’s summary of this chapter (though missing the major role of *kol*) gets this point right about man’s inability to unite with God:

“The identity of the attributes with the essence and the essence with the attributes cannot be apprehended by men. Even the most percipient among them, Moses, was not granted the “vision of the face” (*raiat panim*) which is the essence of God. If a man discovers God’s way, what he apprehends can be nothing other than the revelation of the divine in this world. United at the level of prophecy are the *middot* of God, his “attributes of action.” This is God’s connection (*gesher*) to man. To man it appears in the world in its triadic aspect of matter/particularized-privation/form; but this form as apprehended by man is

an intellectual apprehension (*ha-saga ha-sikhlit*). From the divine perspective it is the aspect of His essence.”

(G. Freudenthal, “The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon,” in *Maimonides and His Heritage*, ed., Dobbs-Weinstein, SUNY, 2009, p. 122. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Jerusalem, 1974, p. 176. R. Avraham, *Guide to Serving God*, Feldheim, 2008, 585)

### **AVAR: (PASSING, CROSSING)**

1. Physical motion, passing or crossing from place to place, never used in the case of God
2. Sound—particularly the *transmission* of sound
3. “The appearance of the Light and the Divine Presence (Shekhina) which the prophets perceived in their prophetic visions”
4. Drunkenness
5. Substitution (crossing) of one goal for another

Let’s follow the thread of Maimonides’ thought. He begins by listing five definitions of *avar*. The second and fifth definitions are important for the purposes of this chapter. The fourth is significant in a general way for the concept of prophecy. The first definition is obvious: moving physically from place to place. The second definition is completely non-obvious: the *transmission of sound* through the air, but Maimonides gives scriptural sources for this use. The word “sound” is the Hebrew *kol*. Next, Maimonides gives Definition 3, *avar* as a metaphor for the *presence* of God. This idea lies behind his second and fifth definitions, since *sound*, Definition 2, turns out to be the indwelling presence of God, His Shekhina; while *crossing*, Definition 5, turns out to be the *substitution* of the indwelling presence for Moses’ request to know God’s essence. Definition 4 of *avar* is drunkenness, in the sense of “*crossing* the line.” He quotes a passage from Jeremiah where the prophet describes his experience of prophecy as one intoxicated. It is the ecstatic overcoming of the prophet’s physical senses, important later in the Guide. The Definition 5, *crossing*, is also non-obvious. Just as Jonathan, David’s friend, sent his servant off in one direction, while he shot the arrow in another, *avar* means the *substitution* of one goal for another. The lesson of Definition 5 is that even Moses cannot know God’s essence, but receives a *substitution*: knowledge of God’s actions, of His creative and providential role in the world. This is identical to His *presence*.

#### Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“So *went* the present *over* (*va-ta’avor*) before him (Jacob): and himself lodged that night in the company. And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two women-servants, and his eleven sons, and *passed over* (*va-ya’avor*) the ford Jabbok.” (Genesis 32:21-22)

“And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids. And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph hindermost. And he (Jacob) *passed over* (*avar*) before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother (Esau).” (Genesis 33:1-3)

The context is Jacob’s final meeting with his feared brother Esau, after long separation. He begins by sending a present *over* to Esau to appease him. The text continues to invoke *crossing*, not just Jacob crossing from the rear to the front of the camp, but Jacob also crosses the women and children before Esau, hoping this will appease him. This points toward *substitution*, Definition 5. Maimonides further says that *avar* is physical movement in a *straight* line, *yashar*. This implicates the Aristotelian doctrine of space: sublunar elements move in a straight line

up or down to resume their “proper place,” unlike the superlunar *fifth element* whose movement is circular (see on this concept my notes on 1:8).

“And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? They be almost ready to stone me. And the Lord said unto Moses, *Go on (avor)* before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go.” (Exodus 17:4-5)

Rashi quotes Midrash *Tanchuma Beshallah* 22: “And see whether they stone you. Why have you slandered My children?” When people cried for water, Moses told God that he expected them to stone him. God tells him to test his fear. In that sense, crossing before terror is a shared idea with the prior quote. Crossing before terror is also what the people do every time they seek the *substitution* of Moses, the Sanhedrin or a king for their own prophetic access.

#### Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“And Moses gave commandment, and they caused it to be *proclaimed (va-ya'aviru kol)* throughout the camp, saying, Let neither man nor woman make any more work for the offering of the sanctuary. So the people were restrained from bringing.” (Exodus 36:6)

This is the moment when the people had brought everything needed to build the Tabernacle. This contrasts with the next proof-text in which the Tabernacle is defiled. Maimonides takes *avar*, usually “passing” to mean the *transmission of sound, va-ya'aviru kol*, as if to say “the sounding of a sound.” It gives him the opportunity to read “sound,” *kol*, into *avar*, with implications for the idea of God’s voice, Logos, which he takes up at the end of the Guide chapter. See essay below.

“Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons did unto all Israel, and how that they lay with the women that did service at the door of the tent of meeting. And he said unto them: ‘Why do ye such things? For I hear evil reports concerning you from all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report which I hear the Lord’s people do *spread abroad (ma'avirim)*.’” (1 Samuel 2:24, from JPS 1918, better than KJV here)

In this passage, Maimonides’ interest is in the idea of the *spreading* of the bad report, that is, in *sound*, so that he can translate the use of *avar* in Exodus 34:6, his last proof text, as the created voice of God. Turning to the context of the passage, it is obvious that the high priest’s sons, who brought fornication into the Tabernacle, are not his intellectual progeny. The text goes on to contrast Samuel, who is not Eli’s son, with Eli’s own sinful sons. Samuel is his real progeny.

#### Instances of Definition 3 Contextualized:

“And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, *behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed (avar)* between those pieces.” (Genesis 15:17)

Maimonides says: “Figuratively it denoted the appearance (*l'khalot*) of the Light and the Divine Presence (Shechinah) which the prophets perceived in their prophetic visions... This took place in a prophetic vision, for the narrative commences, ‘And a deep sleep fell upon Abram.’” What *passed* was the Created Light, the *or hanivra*, the angel inspiring Abraham’s prophetic vision.

“For I will *pass (ve-'avarti)* through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord.” (Exodus 12:12)

Maimonides says that “I will pass” means “I shall reveal myself.” Not that anyone actually sees *God*. Instead, the *presence* of God, the Shekhina, appears to those whose prophetic insight allows them to see it—the Egyptians cannot see it. But the verse itself contrasts this revelation of God’s presence with God’s own acts, as the *Passover Haggadah* says on the end of this passage: “I, by Myself, and not through a messenger.” The Shekhina passes over the land, causing the decree to be known, but God *executes* the decree.

#### Instances of Definition 4 Contextualized:

“Mine heart within me is broken because of the prophets; all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine hath *overcome* (*avaru*), because of the Lord, and because of the words of his holiness.” (Jeremiah 23:9)

Maimonides says that *avar* expresses “that a person has gone too far, and transgressed the usual limit, in the performance of some act.” It is the word for sin, *transgression* (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, pp. 1038-1040). The experience of prophecy comes to non-Mosaic prophets in a dream or vision. The prophet’s senses are stupefied as though he were drunk. His bones shake: it is an ecstatic yet terrifying state.

#### Instances of Definition 5 Contextualized:

“And he (Jonathan) said unto his lad, Run, find out now the arrows which I shoot. [And] as the lad ran, he shot an arrow *beyond him* (*leha’aviro*).” (1 Samuel 20:36)

The context is Jonathan’s famous subterfuge to inform David of Saul’s murderous wrath. Maimonides says, “It is also used figuratively to denote: to abandon one aim, and turn to a different aim and object.” See next quote and essay below.

“And the *Lord passed by* (*va’ya’avor* יְהוָה) before him (*panav*), and proclaimed (*va-yikra*), The Lord, The Lord (יְהוָה יְהוָה), merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.” (Exodus 34:6)

This verse is the classic Torah statement of the divine essential attributes. Just as Jonathan in the prior quote *substituted* his lad’s expected target for another, so God *crossed* Moses’ request, the “vision of the face,” with another, the “vision of the back.” In the course of the chapter, Maimonides gives a variety of interpretations of the passage, eventually saying that we may choose any of them. We may do so, because they end up at the same place. See essays below.

### MOSES ON SINAI

“And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. 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. And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. And the Lord said, Behold, [there is] a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth (*ba’avor*) by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts (*akhorai*): but my face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:18-23)

“And the Lord passed by (*va’ya’avor* יְהוָה) before him, and proclaimed (*va-yikra*), The Lord, The Lord (יְהוָה יְהוָה), 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].” (Exodus 34:6-7)

The Consequences of Divine Action: Moses ascends Sinai, receives his mission to create the species Homo Judaicus, and requests, for his own sake, and for the sake of his mission, to know God, that is, to know His essence. This Maimonides calls, “The apprehension of the face.” This is denied Moses since his physicality prevents his unification with the Divine. However, God instead secures him “The apprehension of the back,” a lower revelation (*hasaga l’mata*). This revelation is of the *consequences* of God’s activity, what we speak of as His “attributes of action.” We know God by what He does. Moses received the revelation of the totality of creation including all its inner relations (see on this Guide 1:54, closely associated with our chapter).

The “vision of the back” includes the term *akhor*, which means “back,” but also “after” and “because” (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, p. 41) leading to the idea of what comes after, i.e., *consequences*. Thus, when God “passes” before Moses, it really means that God “crosses” Moses by *substituting* the lower consequential apprehension for the higher essential one he aimed at. This is good for Maimonides, since no physical passing has to occur. There is not even a dream of passing in a prophetic trance, since all Moses’ prophecies occur while awake.

God Passes Before Himself: Maimonides takes a different interpretive path in this passage and than we might expect, supported, as he notes, by an aggadic statement in the Talmud, *Rosh Ha-Shana*, 17b:

“And ‘the Lord passed by *before him (al panav)* and proclaimed’ (Exodus 34:6). R. Johanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing [that God *passed* before any creature]; this verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, *drew His robe round Himself (sh’nitatef)* like the reader of a congregation and showed Moses the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them.”

Where it says that God passed “before his face” (*al panav*), Maimonides would capitalize the word “His,” that God passed before *His own face*, not before Moses’ face, relying on this Talmud passage for support. In the passage, God teaches Moses the order of his attributes in the same way that the reader leads the synagogue, standing before the Ark of the Torah, *crossing* his own head with his prayer shawl, while Moses is in back listening. Moreover, according to Maimonides, the first word of the Thirteen Attributes, יהוה, God, repeated twice, makes God the subject of the sentence, while only the second is one of the attributes. Thus, where the passage (Exodus 34:6 and 7) reads:

“And the Lord passed by (*va’ya’avor יהוה*) before him (*al panav*: lit., before His face), and proclaimed (*va-yikra*) The Lord, The Lord (*יהוה יהוה*), 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].”

Maimonides would read that the Lord (יהוה, initial use in the sentence) “passed” before His own face by crossing or substituting the “apprehension of the back” for the “apprehension of the face”; and then the Lord “proclaimed” (*vayikra* יהוה, second use): ‘the Lord (יהוה, third use), merciful and gracious,’ etc.

### MAIMONIDES “CROSSES” US

Maimonides’ object in this preceding interpretation is to make the giving of this prophetic vision an entirely intellectual act. The “passing” takes place within God himself as he replaces Moses’ desired vision with a lower attainable one. Based on what we already know, this should have been Maimonides’ only purpose in this account.

Maimonides begins by distinguishing his account from that of Onkelos (c. 35-120 C.E.), the ancient Aramaic translator of the Bible. Maimonides usually likes Onkelos’ *Targum* since it systematically spiritualizes each corporeal reference to God in the Bible. Instead of the hand, eye, nose, or arm of God, the Targum tends to translate using three favorite terms: the “indwelling” (*shekhina*), “the glory” (*ykra*), or “the word” (*memra*).

Onkelos goes further than substituting these three terms for hand or eye. Even when God “passes” or “stands on” something, he assumes that the Torah has *deleted* one of his three substitutional terms. He then adds it back. God does not *pass* by Moses; rather God’s *Shekhina* passes by him. This should not be hard to understand. But

both English translators introduce the confusing grammar jargon “*nomen regens*,” to explain Onkelos’ process of substitution.

So, when the Torah has God *pass* by Moses, Onkelos has the “Indwelling” (*Shekhina*) pass by. Maimonides claims to like this interpretation, and says that God created every such substituted entity.

Maimonides now asserts that these three Targumic substitutions are precedent for him to introduce his own fourth one: *kol*, “voice.” We should understand what Maimonides is getting at here, which is the philosophic problem called Logos. He *substitutes* the problem of Logos for Onkelos’ problem of the anthropomorphic misapplication of physical terms to God.

### THE VOICE OF GOD: LOGOS

Maimonides makes his case for *voice, kol*, as a synonym for *Shekhina*, Glory or Word.

“Should it, however, be considered necessary to assume here an ellipsis, according to the method of Onkelos, who supplies in some instances the term ‘the Glory,’ (*ykra*) in others ‘the Word,’ (*memra*) and in others ‘the Divine Presence,’ (*Shekhina*) as the context may require in each particular case, we may also supply here the word ‘voice,’ (*kol*) and explain the passage, ‘And a voice from the Lord passed (*va-ya’avor*) before him and called.’ We have already shown that the verb *avar*, ‘he passed,’ can be applied to the voice (*kol*), as in ‘and they *caused it to be proclaimed* (*va-ya’aviru kol*) *throughout* the camp,’ (Exodus 36:6). According to this explanation, it was the voice which called. No objection can be raised to applying the verb *kara* (‘call’, as in *vayikra* קָרָא; קָרָא; *vayikra* and *kria* are variants of *kara*) to *kol*, for a similar phrase occurs in the Bible in reference to God’s commands to Moses, ‘He heard the voice speaking unto him’ [Numbers 7:89: ‘And when Moses was gone into the tabernacle of the congregation to speak with him, then he heard the voice of one speaking unto him (*et ha-kol midaber*) from off the mercy seat that was upon the ark of testimony’]; and, in the same manner as it can be said ‘the voice spoke’ (*ha-davor l’kol*) we may also say ‘the voice called’ (*ha-kria l’kol*); indeed, we can even support this application of the verbs ‘to say’ (*ha-amira*), ‘and ‘to call,’ (*ha-kria*) to ‘the voice,’ (*ha-kol*) by parallel passages, as ‘A voice saith Cry, and it (the voice) says What shall I cry?’ (Isa. 40:6, *kol omer kra, v’amar ma ekra*, in both cases a Voice is speaking, not Isaiah). According to this view, the meaning of the passage under discussion would be: ‘A *voice* of the Lord passed before Him and called, ‘The Lord, The Lord, merciful and gracious, longsuffering!’”

This Voice is the Logos.

Philosophy begins when man observes regularity in the world and seeks its cause or principle. Much of the history of philosophy is concerned to discover the rationale of this ordered universe. There are some exceptions. In the ancient world, some started with the premise of denial of order. These could be found among the sophists, the skeptics, perhaps among the epicureans, and the Kalām. In modern times, after Nietzsche, philosophers *assumed* the *lack* of order.

The pre-Socratic Heraclitus had already ascribed universal organization to a concept of Logos, the Greek term that meant “word” or “reason.” A more complicated statement about the order of the universe comes from Plato. His universal forms in-form the variety of matter presented to sense. These Platonic forms or ideas were difficult to locate, sometimes in the mind of God, sometimes in the Good. Sometimes they exist independently. This vagueness was criticized. Philo, in the first century C.E., located the ideas within the Logos, which he called the “only begotten son of God” investing this Logos with personality. By doing this, he integrated various ideas about “The word” of God found in the Bible. The Jews had conceived the Torah itself as the word of God, the “blueprint of the world,” a completely *extra-deical* created Logos (the terminology is Harry A. Wolfson’s).

Parallel to these developments, Onkelos gave personality to the “*Memra*” or “*Ykra*” or “*Shekhina*” (word, glory, presence) as substitutes for anthropomorphic statements about God in the Torah. We know little of this first century sage except that he was not originally Jewish. This Aramaic translator’s name was historically confused with that of Aquila, the Greek translator of the Pentateuch, due to similarity in spelling. Onkelos was probably Syrian, although Aggadic writings seem to make him a relative of the Roman Titus. The main point is that he was not of Jewish culture, and could have been influenced by Hellenistic concepts of Logos. The Christian founder, John, was also influenced by this concept, and identified Logos with Jesus as a member of the Trinity, i.e., the Logos as *intra-deical*. The Jews, by contrast, saw the Torah as the *extra-deical created* word of God. The Muslims confer this honor on the Qur’an, but make it eternal with Allah, and uncreated.

Maimonides is aware of this history, and as a neo-Platonized Aristotelian does not take a pejorative view of the notion of some kind of Logos. He defined his own position in 1:65, identifying Logos with our human perception of God’s *will*:

“We must not suppose that in speaking God employed voice or sound, or that He has a soul in which thoughts reside, and that these thoughts are things superadded to His essence; but we ascribe and attribute to Him thoughts in the same manner as we ascribe to Him any other attributes. The use of these words in the sense of will and desire, is based, as I have explained, on the homonymity of these terms. In addition they are figures borrowed from our common practices, as has been already pointed out. For we cannot, at a first glance, see how anything can be produced by a mere desire: we think that he who wishes to produce a thing, must perform a certain act, or command some one else to perform it. Therefore, the command is figuratively ascribed to God when that takes place which He wishes, and we then say that He commanded that a certain thing should be accomplished. All this has its origin in our comparing the acts of God to our own acts, and also in the use of the term *amar* (he said) in the sense of ‘He desired,’ as we have already explained. The words ‘And He said,’ occurring in the account of the creation, signify ‘He wished,’ or ‘He desired.’ This has already been stated by other authors, and is well known. A proof for this, namely that the phrase ‘God said,’ in the first chapter of Genesis, must be taken in a figurative sense ‘He willed,’ and not in its literal meaning, is found in the circumstance that a command can only be given to a being which exists and is capable of receiving the command.”

Maimonides conditionally approves the use of the concept of a created voice or Logos as a substitute for anthropomorphic mediating entities in the Bible, as a concession to human speech and understanding, for, as he frequently says, “The Torah speaks in the language of men.” We will also see that the created voice has a role in the prophecy of non-Mosaic prophets.

### **CROSSING OR VOICE?**

Maimonides presents an array of interpretations for *va’ya’avor* (and he passed) in Exodus 34:6. He says that we are free to choose whichever interpretation suits us, *v’rashai ata l’bkhor eizo deya sh’t’ratze*. He says, “You will surely not find it strange that this subject, so profound and difficult, should bear various interpretations; for it will not impair the force of the argument with which we are here concerned.” Compare this statement with a similar question in the previous chapter, which we interpreted as an invocation of the classic Neo-Platonic question, “How do the many come from the One?” It raises the issue to the level of how these many intellectual and sensual manifestations coexist with divine unity. The reason is that these interpretations end up at the same place. There are no real contradictions in the divine science (see my Introduction II).

The various interpretations revolve around the two terms *avar* and *kol*, “crossing” and “voice.”

His *first* interpretive choice for *crossing* is that God substituted knowledge of the divine modes of action for Moses' desire to know God's essence. Taken together, these modes of action constitute the organizing principle of the world, the Logos, the divine attributes taken together. Being all that Moses can know, and the mediating principle by which he knows, they can be understood as the divine indwelling, the Shekhina, or, philosophically, as the active intellect. Knowing these attributes, he can recognize God when he encounters Him, although Moses does not get to see His face. Here is Maimonides' explanation in Mishneh Torah of what Moses got to see:

“Moses, our teacher, himself saw Him...on Sinai as a Congregational Reader wrapped (*k'shaliakh tzibbur atuf*) [in his *talit*]—all indicating that in reality He has no form or figure. These only appeared in a prophetic vision. But God's essence as it really is, the human mind does not understand and is incapable of grasping or investigating...What was it that Moses sought to comprehend, when he said ‘Show me, I beseech thee, Thy glory?’ (Exodus 33:18)? 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 (33:23), ‘Thou shalt see my back but my face shall not be seen.’” Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah*, 1:9-10

If you take as his *second* interpretive choice this chapter's Definition 2, that what has passed before Moses is a “created *voice*,” i.e., the Logos, the same result holds true. That is because we grasp the Logos as the will or word of God: either a created attribute, or, otherwise, our projection of such an attribute upon God to explain his inexplicable action in creation.

He then suggests a *third* possibility, that the entire matter is a dialog occurring in the mind of Moses: his request for the apprehension of the essence, the impossibility of its attainment by a creature of nature, and the substitution of the apprehension of God's actions—all are moments in Moses' philosophical conversation with himself. “You may take...the whole as a mental operation...perceived by the intellect without the use of the senses.” Moses' activated intellect mediates between man and God. This is also the Logos.

The *fourth* possibility is that the prophet “sees” or “hears” the Shekhina or the Voice of God in a vision of prophecy, and this vision perfects his intellectual understanding, *asher b'raiito t'hyeh shlemot ha-hasaga ha-sikhlit*. He attributes this interpretation to Onkelos.

Each of these four interpretations of Exodus 34:6 returns to the necessity of a mediating understanding between man and God. The four are then all one, but their differences are differences in the prophets themselves. Each represents a different *level* of prophecy. (Maimonides details the twelve levels of prophecy in Chapter 2:45.)



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

*scottmalexander@rcn.com*