



## GUIDE 1:11 ENTHRONED

This is a lexical chapter (See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide”). Maimonides uses the term “sit” to summarize his doctrine of God’s relation to His creations.

### **YASHAV (SIT)**

1. Sitting. The term may not be used for sitting on a chair (Guide 1:9). It can only mean sitting on a throne.
2. Immobility, changelessness, especially when applied to God, and when portraying God’s relationship with any other being.

#### Instance Of Definition 1, Contextualized:

“So Hannah rose up after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the priest *sat* (*yoshev*) upon a seat (*ha-kissay*) by a post of the Temple of the Lord.” (I Samuel 1:9)

This passage precedes Hannah’s famous prayer for a child. We have already learned that neither “seat” nor “chair” are permitted definitions of *kissay*. “Throne” is a permitted definition. Maimonides has in mind the traditional interpretation of this passage, as articulated by Rashi: “The defective spelling (of *yoshev*, without a *vav*) denotes that on that day, he (Eli) was seated on a huge chair, for he was appointed judge over Israel.” The word *kissay*, “seat,” is otherwise superfluous since we know that Eli *sat*. Tradition therefore interpreted Eli’s *kissay* as throne.

#### Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“He maketh the barren woman to keep house (*moshivi akeret ha-bayit*, lit. ‘to sit in the house’), [and to be] a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the Lord.” (Psalms 113:9)

The passage is difficult to translate. JPS 1917 has: “Who maketh the barren woman to dwell in her house.” Maimonides makes it a metaphorical reference to Jerusalem’s higher calling: “In the promise that Jerusalem should remain constantly and permanently in an exalted condition.” “House” can mean “wife” (Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, 168). Thus, it could mean that He makes stricken Jerusalem a fruitful wife, producing a nation of priests. This theme repeats an idea from the prior chapter: God sanctifies a place by causing his emanation to descend (*yarad*) upon it.

“And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one Lord, and his name one. All the land shall be turned as a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem: and it shall be lifted up, and inhabited in her place, (lit., ‘she will rise and sit in her place,’ *v’raama v’yashva*) from Benjamin’s gate unto the place of the first gate, unto the corner gate, and [from] the tower of Hananeel unto the king’s winepresses.” (Zechariah 14:9-10)

This passage also refers to the permanent establishment of Jerusalem as a place of divine communion. Maimonides wants us to translate “sit” as “fixed eternally.” *Raama*, “she will rise,” is close in meaning to *kima*, “rise,” the term defined in the next lexical chapter. Maimonides probably included this passage to combine the meanings he gives “rise” and “sit,” to say that Jerusalem is *confirmed* (“rise”) as the *eternal throne* (“sit”) for man’s communion with God.

“Thou, O Lord, *remainest* (*teshev*, sit) for ever; thy throne (*kisakha*) from generation to generation.”  
(Lamentations 5:19)

The verse combines the idea of sitting with the idea of *throne*. When we associate *sitting* with God, it means, according to Maimonides: “He who is everlasting, constant, and in no way subject to change; immutable in His Essence, and as He consists of nought but His Essence, He is mutable in no way whatever; not mutable in His relation to other things: for there is no relation whatever existing between Him and any other being.” In this instance, he invokes Definition 4 of *throne* from Guide 1:9, not Definition 3; that is, *throne* is the divine essence,

not the divine emanation. The verse has “sit” and “throne” together with God, meaning that His eternal essence is permanent, i.e., immutable, not subject to change.

“A Song of degrees. Unto thee lift I up mine eyes, O thou that dwellest (*ha-yoshvi*, sits) in the heavens.”  
(Psalms 123:1)

The discussion turns to God’s relations with his creatures, beginning with the heavens. God is *unchanging* in His relationship with the heavens. The “heaven,” which is God’s “throne,” takes *throne* according to its Definition 4, a place created by God on which His emanation descends. We learn from God’s “sitting” in the heavens that his relation to the rotating spheres is a relation in which neither He nor the spheres change. In the Maimonidean/Aristotelian view, the particular individuals rotate eternally but otherwise do not change. This includes the stars, the planets, and the spheres to which they are attached. Their movements are eternal and unvarying. This immutability is the *fundamentum* they have in common with God. There is no “relationship” without such a *fundamentum*. The relation that God has with the heavens is that He is their unmoved mover. God cannot have a relationship with the evanescent, mutable individual creatures of the world. That would imply change in God (see “Generation and Corruption,” below).

“He that *sitteth* (*yoshev*) in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.” (Psalms 2:4)  
The literal context is God’s laughter at the hubristic and evil strategies of the nations of the world. However, Maimonides quotes the passage for the same reason as the previous passage: “sitting in the heavens,” means that God is unchanging in relation to heaven’s unchanging existence.

“[It is] He that *sitteth* (*ha-yoshev*) upon the circle of the earth (*khug ha-aretz*), and the inhabitants thereof [are] as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in.” (Isaiah 40:22)

By “circle of the earth,” Maimonides understands the lunar sphere rotating the earth, for the earth is *stationary* in his cosmology. Maimonides retranslates the passage: “Who remains constantly and unremittingly over the sphere of the earth; that is to say, over the things that come into existence within that sphere.” Next, he introduces a different shade of Definition 2: “The verb is also employed in descriptions of God’s relation (the term “relation” is used homonymously) to existing *species* of *evanescent* things: for those species are as constant, well organized, and unvarying as the individuals of the heavenly hosts.” In the Aristotelian/Maimonidean view, the universal forms of the species are permanent, while the individual instances are mutable. Since God is unchanging, he can have no relation with individual creatures but only their universal forms. This still does not complete God’s catalog of relationships. Elsewhere we learn that God extends providence to those who are with Him in thought (Guide 1:51), and to those who adhere to the Torah in the right way (*Letter on Astrology*). This works because of the principle of the unity and permanence of the active intellect. The conjunction with the active intellect raises man above the level of mutable matter (on all of this see essays below).

“The Lord *sitteth* (*yashav*) upon the flood; yea, the Lord *sitteth* (*v’yeshev*) King for ever.” (Psalms 29:10)  
Maimonides explains the meaning of God’s relation to his physical creations: “Despite the change and variation of earthly objects, no change takes place with respect to God’s relation (to the earth): His relation to each of the things which come into existence and perish again (*havim o nifsadim*, generation and corruption) is stable and constant, for it concerns only the existing species and not the individuals.” There is then some (homonymously meant) “relation,” *yakhas*, with the natural species but not with its changing individuals. Fundamental to this thought is the Maimonidean notion of time. Change occurs in time. According to Aristotle, time is the number of motion, which is an accident of matter. Since God is incorporeal, He has nothing to do with time. God creates the world and its constitutive natural processes without any relation to time. This concept cannot be expressed verbally. It is not, as some critics have it, that He creates the world and forgets about it or leaves it to run on its own. That would imply an *initial* creation, which is a temporal concept. God’s relation is to the universe He creates, to all of it. Through all its mutations, it is a single creation, upon which He *sits* stably and unchangeably. The relationship occurs beyond time (see my essays below).

## PROVIDENCE AND NATURE

Maimonides makes a controversial point in this chapter:

“He who is everlasting, constant, and in no way subject to change; immutable in His Essence, and as He consists of nought but His Essence, He is mutable in no way whatever; not mutable in His relation to other things: for there is no relation whatever existing between Him and any other being, as will be explained below....The verb is also employed in descriptions of God’s relation (the term ‘relation’ is here used as a homonym) to existing species of evanescent things: for those species are as constant, well organized, and unvarying as the individuals of the heavenly hosts....His relation to each of the things which come into existence and perish again is stable and constant, for it concerns only the existing species and not the individuals. It should therefore be borne in mind, that whenever the term ‘sitting’ is applied to God, it is used in this sense.”

This statement continues the discussion of providence and nature from the last chapter. Here his focus is on nature. God’s relationship with the natural things is with their species, with the universals of each particular individual.

The statement seems to demand a reading that God has no relationship with individual man. Some critics take it this way. But this denies individual providence. We know, from other passages in the Guide, that God does have a providential relation with *some* men. This is the meaning of the theme of intellectual progeny recurring in the past few chapters. The intellectual progeny of Adam and Moses benefit from divine providence. Those less than human beings who are not progeny are classed with the natural things, and their fate is determined by nature.

Maimonides’ God is a non-corporeal, non-numerical unity. God can have no relation with numerate individual corporal natures. God only enters into relations with spiritual or conceptual entities. Since they are not corporeal, they are outside of time and change. Our mind, as opposed to our brain, is also non-corporeal. To the extent that we truly activate our intellect through the act of cognition, we suppress our individual corporeal nature and enter a relation with God.

In his *Letter on Astrology*, Maimonides says that there is a separate providence for Jews (who follow Torah in the right way) and non-Jews. Nature governs all material things, and all who do not embrace Torah. Nature, *teva*, is the set of rules and processes that God “stamped” on the world. The term *teva* means “stamp, impress.” In *gematria*, the Hebrew letters of *teva* exchange numerically for the letters of the name of God. Thus, His stamp is on nature. When Jews, according to Maimonides, actualize their intellectual form, they receive special providential supervision from God. This works because their minds obtain a relation with Him. Otherwise, they place themselves in thrall to the rules and processes by which God governs all of nature.

## MODALISM: AN INTRODUCTION

“The stable One...undergoes no manner of change...in His essence—as He has no *modes* besides His essence with respect to which He might change.”

This is Pines’ translation. Unlike Kafih, Friedlander or Schwarz, he takes the Arabic *hal* to mean “mode” (see his footnote 7, *ad loc*). H. A. Wolfson explained Modalism well. The idea comes from the 10th century Muslim theologian and philosopher Abu Hashim (Sometimes spelled Abu Hisham). Modes are a minor variation on the theory of attributes. The “will,” “wisdom,” and “power,” of God, taken as attributes, are separate entities eternally *with* God. When taken as modes, they are like ideas in God’s mind, modes of thought. To Maimonides this is a distinction without a difference. Maimonides rejected both attributes and modes when applied to God. (Wolfson on modes: see p. 30-31 and index references to modes in *Repercussions of the Kalām in Jewish*

*Philosophy*, Harvard, 1979; and his *The Philosophy of the Kalām*, 1976. *Kalām* is the usual term for Muslim theology.)

Maimonides treats the subject of divine attributes fully in Guide chapters 1:50-60. The attributes (*middot*) of God divide into essential attributes and action attributes. The attributes of action are such attributes as mercy and justice, reflecting our view of what God *does*. The essential attributes include unity, wisdom, will, power; usually five to seven in number. What are the essential attributes and what is their relation to God?

The Christians, adopting the Philonic Logos, made the attribute of wisdom the “word of God.” John 1:1 identified the *incarnated* “word” as Jesus, the “word” eternally with God. The repercussion of this idea in Islam recast the Qur'an as the “inlributed” word (Wolfson's coinage), eternal with God. The Mutazilites (early Islamic theologians) were uncomfortable with this idea since it involved the “association,” *shirk*, of another being with Allah. *Shirk* is the paradigmatic heresy in Islam. This idea of *shirk* later emerges in Judaism as the Hebrew *shituf*.

By Abu Hashim's time the *eternal* Qur'an was the doctrine of the faith. Before Abu Hashim the Mutazilites had argued that the “word” inlributed in the Qur'an was “identical” with God. The problem was that this Dualism looked too much like Trinitarianism in Christianity. Instead, Abu Hashim argued that the essential attributes had “modal” existence, that is, they only existed as concepts, not as beings. He may have been thinking of the Aristotelian controversy over the real versus conceptual existence of universals. By the famous formulation, “God is wise in virtue of wisdom,” Abu Hashim meant that “wisdom” exists as a mode of divine thought.

By itself, the formulation does not seem alarming, but Maimonides develops a devastating argument against even this fallback position in his chapters on attributes. His alternate formulation is quite strict, “God is wise but *not* in virtue of wisdom.” This means that we use the term “wisdom” only homonymously in the divine context. What it means to men and what it means to God are two completely different things. He contends that the Jewish “*Kalām*” unilaterally disarmed itself in the battle with Islam by adopting their doctrines of attributes and modes. By contrast, he recognized and exploited the Muslim contradiction between strict monotheism and their belief in attributes. Moreover, even Abu Hashim's modal fallback position fails to resolve the problem. If we reduce attributes to conceptual modes, they remain eternal, and define God. But God cannot be defined.

Maimonides invokes the concept of modes in our chapter in order to deny any version of the attributes of God. He contends that God's unity is perfect simplicity. It remains to be seen whether he maintains this position consistently, about which I express doubts. See essays on 1:50-60.

## GENERATION AND CORRUPTION

“He who is everlasting, constant, and in no way subject to change.”

This sentence from our chapter literally reads: “The Permanent One does not change in any of the fashions of the fashions of change” (*ha-yatziv asher lo yishtanei b'shum ofen m'afnei ha-shinui*). Kafih says that the line refers to the four types of change listed in the Introduction to Book Two of the Guide, Fourth Proposition. Maimonides writes there:

“PROPOSITION IV.

Four categories are subject to change :

- (a.) Substance. – Changes which affect the substance of a thing are called genesis and destruction (*ha-haviya v'ha-hefsed* generation and corruption).
- (b.) Quantity. – Changes in reference to quantity are increase and decrease.
- (c.) Quality. – Changes in qualities of things are transformations (i.e., I am cold now but will be hot later).
- (d.) Place. – Change of place is called motion.

The term ‘motion’ is properly applied to change of place, but is also used in a general sense of all kinds of changes.”

It is obvious that God does not change by increase or decrease, by change in accidental qualities, or by change of place. It is the first category, substantial change, which interests Maimonides, since he makes at least five references to it in our chapter. The category of substantial change is the category of the *generation and corruption* of all physical beings. God has *no relationship* with beings subject to such “substantial change.” God can have no relationship with the changing things without Himself changing (Aristotle, *Categories* 10:12b21).

Maimonides’ concept of substantial change becomes important in his critique of Muslim theology, chapters 1:71-76 (See Aristotle’s *On Generation and Corruption* for the source). Here is a summary of the doctrine.

All *non*-substantial change is mere *alteration*. The Pre-Socratics (and their Muslim epigones) conceived all change as the alteration of indivisible atoms grouping and ungrouping in the vacuum of space. Aristotle disagreed. He contended that such atomic alteration could not explain organic growth.

He explained organic growth in the following manner. The movement of the heavens, especially the diurnal activity of the sun, cause changes in the four terrestrial elements. Since it seemed that water transformed to air (not water vapor, as we think) they posited the transformation of elements and therefore of all things. Underlying such elemental transformations there must be some substance: that substance is unformed matter. All these changes led to the *agent* of form meeting the *patient* of matter, which means that *actuality* transforms *potentiality*. By their encounter, the patient somehow becomes the agent and the agent the patient.

At a lower level of abstraction, the agent being finds stuff that is *actually* food but *potentially* flesh. The being’s nutritive soul causes its physical body to transform the food to flesh. Nourishment causes the body to increase in size. The increase is organic, not just the mere alteration stemming from the clumping and unclumping of atoms. Organic change always changes every part of the being, whereas atomic alteration affects only the individual atom. The principle of organic change is that the being is *preserved*, whether the change is of increase or decrease. At the final moment of substantial organic change, when quantitative increase or decrease goes over to qualitative change, generation and corruption occur simultaneously. The old being is destroyed as a new substance results: man becomes dust and dust becomes man. In the moment of privation of form, matter acquires new form.

All of this is natural. Moreover, as we said above, nature is God’s stamp. Though God creates the process, He is not involved in the actual individual changes. By such involvement He would change, which is impossible. He creates the universal forms, but not the individual actualities of their in-formed matter. He relates to the world and its forms as a whole in the timeless now (Guide 1:72).

Another kind of change is the movement of the heavens. Though the movement of the spheres is *change of place* (the fourth kind of change, above), it does not mean that the celestial actors themselves change. They rotate eternally, never changing or dissipating. Their heavenly matter is neither generable nor corruptible. Their matter is the unique Fifth Element, defined as the substance that is *unlike* the four terrestrial elements. God has a relation with the immutable spheres: He is the ultimate cause of their movement, their unmoved mover. God also has some kind of relation with the souls animating the spheres.

Finally, God has a relation with terrestrial intellectual life. The mind, activated from its merely material potential state, is incorporeal, eternal and unchanging. To the extent that man acquires his active intellect, he has a relation with God. The Guide is largely about the process by which man acquires his active intellect.

*Yeshiva*, “sitting,” according to Maimonides, is the figurative term that prophecy employs to portray God’s unchanging relation with all of these unchanging things.

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