

GUIDE 1:15 THE PROPHET STANDS

This is the third chapter in which Maimonides considers some variant of the word “stand,” in this case, *natzav* and *yatzav*. Terms for “standing” that are nearly synonymous appear in at least three lexical chapters of the Guide. Maimonides notes that *natzav* and *yatzav* have the same meaning as the word *kima*, “rise, stand,” defined in 1:12, and *amad*, “stand,” defined in 1:13. In that chapter we suggested that *kima* is *amad* without *feet* (*regel*, see 1:28). We explained that “foot” refers to the *causative* element in God’s *permanent* (“standing”) relation to the world.

Our chapter also has an *undeclared* purpose as the second lexical chapter for *alah* and *yarad*, “ascent” and “descent,” where it specifically denotes *prophetic* ascent and descent. The occasion for this apparently tangential departure is Maimonides’ citation of the *Parable of Jacob’s Ladder* (Genesis 28), in which the angels *ascend* and *descend* the ladder, while God *stands* above it.

It should also be recalled that, in Guide 1:10, Maimonides arrived at two significant definitions of *alah* and *yarad*. In Definition 3 the words referred to *our* ascending or descending in thought to subjects above or below us. Definition 4 illustrated *God’s action in prophecy*: when He emanates prophecy toward the soul of the prophet, we say, in the language of men as expressed in Scripture, that God *descends*. But when God concludes His prophetic message, Scripture says that God *ascends* from the prophet. Although the subject of the motion is the same, *i.e.*, the mental and emanational flow, the actions in the two definitions move in opposite directions.

In our chapter, instead of God’s action, we are concerned with the prophet’s own ascent and descent. Here it is the prophet who *ascends* and then *descends* Jacob’s ladder. Maimonides writes that this is “In accordance with our *explanation* of the term *yarad*, descent [in 1:10].” That “*explanation*” could only be Definition 4 of Guide 1:10, because it was about prophecy, not as, in its Definition 3, about us mere non-prophets ascending in contemplation. In Definition 3 of 1:10 we *ascend* in thought to a subject that we are trying to grasp.

Maimonides made room for the prophet’s ascent in our chapter 1:15. In the Parable of Jacob’s Ladder *angels* ascend or descend. Here Maimonides defines “angels” as “prophets.” But this could lead to confusion because we do not know whether the angels are delivering messages on behalf of God, or by the prophets on behalf of men. It all depends on whether we adopt the point of view of God or of men. We need to decide the meaning of ascent or descent each time those terms occur in Scripture.

We explained in 1:10 that Maimonides divided the definitions of *alah* and *yarad* between chapters 1:10 and 1:15 to avoid this semantic traffic snarl between the prophecy *descending* from God while the prophet *ascended* to it. In 1:10, we learned that God figuratively *descends* when bestowing prophecy. In Guide 1:15, we learn that the prophet *descends* to provide this gift to mankind.

What is new is that our chapter supplies an *extra* definition for *alah* and *yarad*. It is an extra definition because the prophet’s ascent to prophecy is qualitatively different from my mind rising to a higher notion, although they are analogous.

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

Maimonides begins with a grammatical point. He notes that “the two roots *natzav* and *yatzav* are distinct” (Y*Tz*V and N*Tz*V), although he says that “you know” that they have the same meaning in all declensions. The lexicographer R. Yehuda Even-Shmuel explained, in his contemporary commentary on the Guide, *ad loc.*, that the two roots Maimonides had in mind were *natzav* and *hityatzav*, nonetheless, we now view them as having the same root, the first radical merely varying with the tense.

NATZAV and YATZAV (STAND) Homonym

1. To stand or to place oneself.
2. Continuance and permanence: always used in this fashion when applied to God, never to physical position. Also, God’s permanent *causative* relation with the world.

Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And his sister *stood* (*va-tetatzav*) afar off, to wit what would be done to him.” (Exodus 2:4)

The context is that Moses’ sister, Miriam, had just placed him in a basket floating down the Nile. It is true that the unique prophetic character of Moses is an important topic in this group of chapters. His existence hangs in the balance, exemplifying human impermanence.

“Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth *set* themselves (*yityatzvu—stand*), and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against his anointed, [saying], Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. He that sitteth (*yoshev*) in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.” (Psalms 2:1-4)

Maimonides referred to line 4, “He that sitteth (*yoshev*) in the heavens shall laugh” in Chapter 1:11, which was about the closely related term *yashav*, “sit.” We explained the context is God’s *sitting in laughter* at the evil strategies of the nations against Israel. The purpose, then, of this passage is to contrast how the transient nations “set themselves” against God, who holds them in derision. The Talmud, *Berakhot 7b*, takes this Psalm to refer to the war of Gog and Magog. The nations *stood* against God, *enthroned* permanently over the world, but He laughed at their hubris.

“So they gat up from the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, on every side: and Dathan and Abiram came out, and *stood* (*nitzavim*) in the door of their tents, and their wives, and their sons, and their little children.” (Numbers 16:27)

Korakh and his allies, soon to be swallowed by the earth, *stand* in opposition to Moses. This proof-text and the of the previous one both illustrate Definition 1 because neither the “kings of the earth” nor the will of Korakh are *permanent*. This first definition, the most physical definition, describes their stance as corporeal, hubristic and brief. These quotations provide what I call the *pejorative* context for the term, that is, its merely physical use.

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“For ever, O Lord, thy word is *settled* (*nitzav—stands*) in heaven.” (Psalms 119:89)

Maimonides comments that the word of the Lord “remains forever,” unlike the fleeting words of Korakh. If we take “word” as a divine attribute (as I have explained in Guide 1:9), it can only be understood in the Maimonidean fashion, i.e., that the *word* is identical to the divine essence, not a separate eternal *logos*.

“And he (Jacob) dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord *stood* (*nitzav*) above it, and said, I [am] the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed.” (Genesis 28:12-13)

Maimonides quotes two parts of this passage, but not in order. He writes, addressing his second quote-shard:
“[God] appeared as eternal and everlasting ‘above it,’ namely, above the ladder, the upper end of which reached to heaven, while the lower end touched the earth.”

He understands the ladder as a figure for the prophetic process. God “stood above it,” *i.e.*, above the ladder of prophecy. This calls to mind God’s relation to the world as the “rider on the *aravot*” (Guide 1:70), which means that God is the ruler of the universe, but also that He transcends the universe. He causes all changes in the universe without physical contact, for He *stands* “above it.” See essays below.

“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 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: but My face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:20-23)

Maimonides retranslates “...And thou shalt stand upon a rock” in the next chapter, 1:16 as, “be firm and steadfast in the conviction that God is the *source* of all things, for this will lead you towards the knowledge of the Divine Being.” He defined “rock” there as “cause” or “source.” It means that Moses, infused with divine emanation, becomes the mediating channel between man and God. Rashi quotes here an important Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 68:9: “(God) is speaking of the place where the *Shekhina* is, and He says that there is *a place by Me*, but He does not say: *I am in the place*, for the Holy One, blessed is He, is the place of the world, but the world is not His place.” In other words, just as the *Shekhina* mediates between God and the world, God has put Moses in the “place” of the *Shekhina*, where he will “stand on the rock,” channeling the divine emanation, giving Torah to the people.

JACOB’S LADDER AND PROPHECY

“How suggestive, too, is the expression ‘ascending and descending on it’! The ascent is mentioned before the descent, inasmuch as the ‘ascending’ and arriving at a certain height of the ladder precedes the ‘descending,’ *i.e.*, the application of the knowledge acquired in the ascent for the training and instruction of mankind. This application is termed ‘descent,’ in accordance with our explanation of the term *yarad*.”

In the account of Jacob’s ladder, we had learned that God “stands” above the ladder, in the sense that He *permanently presides over access to Himself* (Guide 1:10: “He is stably and permanently at the top of the ladder”). Maimonides now focuses, in our chapter, on the *ascent and descent* of the prophet, rather than that of God.

We can compare prophet’s progress to what happens in the Plato’s Cave parable in the *Republic*, 514a–520a, where the cave prisoner strives to ascend to the true light that illuminates the puppet show of everyday life. The Maimonidean prophet must also do what is necessary to ascend to the divine light. However, afterward, the prophet must descend to bestow the light he obtained. Maimonides stresses the non-physical character of this descent in the definition of *descent (yarad)* given in Guide 2:10, that is, the refocusing of the prophet’s mind upon what is below it, *i.e.*, the plight of the people. It is the same point made in the *Introduction* to the Guide, that prophetic inspiration is a three-step process: Solomon, the prophet-king, ascends in thought to receive the vision, descends to teach it to the world, and thereby gains the merit to rise again.

We then reach several interesting sentences that require close attention. First, Maimonides says:

“By means of this ladder all may climb up who wish to do so, and they must ultimately attain to a knowledge of Him who is *above* the summit of the ladder, because He remains upon it permanently.”

(R. Kafih: *u'vo m'tapes v'olei kol mi sh'olei, ad sh'yasig mi sh'alav b'hekkhet, keyvan sh'hu yatziv v'kayam al rosh ha-sulam*. Pines has, “Everyone who ascends does so climbing up this ladder, so that he necessarily apprehends Him who is upon it, as He is stably and permanently at the top of the ladder.”)

The translation is difficult, not to say tortured, both in this recension by R. Friedlander, as well as by Pines, who in footnotes gives a more literal translation of the underlying Arabic (Note 7: “...so that he apprehends Him who is upon it necessarily...). The line is also difficult for R. Kafih. R. Friedlander’s footnote explains that there are two ways of taking the line. Either it means that man can strive and apprehend Divine knowledge; or, tautologically, that God is permanently on the ladder because He is eternally on the ladder. The former seems the better reading.

The point to be taken, I think, is that God’s relationship to man is a relation of immanence. If He were entirely ineffable to man so that there was no relation between them, there could be no ladder. However, “All may climb up who wish to do so.” This strengthens our conviction that on the issue of divine attributes Maimonides is not an absolute negativist, but only a moderate negativist (see 1:40-1:50). A sentence or two later Maimonides says that man can reach a certain rung of the ladder (*l'maalot msuyemet*), indicating some limit to his knowledge.

Next, we learn that the angels who climb the ladder are the prophets:

“It must be well understood that the term ‘upon it’ is employed by me in harmony with this metaphor. The ‘Angels of God’ who were going up represent the prophets. That the term ‘angel’ was applied to prophets may clearly be seen in the following passages: ‘He sent an angel’ [Numbers 20:16—the angel is Moses]; ‘And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim’ [Judges 2:1—the angel is Phineas].”

We know from his later discussion of prophecy, that while the prophet should be able to complete the ascent and receive the light, God can prevent this from happening. Nonetheless, if our interpretation is correct, man has in his own power the ability to ascend, at least as far as his physical constitution and “complexion” permits. Maimonides was an emanationist, but like his neo-Platonist contemporaries he was no determinist. In this they departed from the determinism of the original neo-Platonists. He believed that divine influence is a *willed* flow of goodness, radiating to all unless occluded by other forces.

(Prophets as angels: Maimonides repeats the two cited passages about Moses and Phineas in Guide 2:42, making the same point about angels being prophets, quoting Midrash, *Leviticus Rabba* 1:1 both times. His definition of angels is at 2:6 and 2:7, although prophets are only one of his definitions there. **Willed elimination:** Harry A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, v. 1, 129 – 249, Harvard, 1973. **Man’s ability to approach God:** Lynn Goodman, “God and the Good Life: Maimonides’ Virtue Ethics and the Idea of Perfection,” in *Die Trias Des Maimonides, Jewish, Arabic and Ancient Culture of Knowledge*, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin, 2005, P. 129. **Complexion:** Gad Freudenthal, “The Biological Limitations of Man’s Intellectual Perfection according to Maimonides,” also in *Die Trias*, p. 137, especially 141, 145 – 149.)

THE PROBLEM WITH PROPHECY

Our problem is that the inspiration we occasionally have comes in unconscious or semi-conscious states, and then only intermittently and reflectively. As we learned in the *Introduction*, we only see flashes, as though reflected in amber. This universal inspiration is called the *ruakh ha-kodesh* (i.e., sacred breath, sacred inspiration, or the spirit of holiness). The *ruach ha-kodesh* is the ground level of all states of inspiration and prophecy.

Prophecy is distinguished as a regularized type of this divine inspiration. It is, in principle, automatically available to the adept, but mostly prevented because of the exigencies of exile. Maimonides, disagreeing with other rabbis, did not think it always would be unavailable or blocked, even in exile. The ability of the adept to reach prophecy is his responsibility; he must attach himself permanently and constantly to the Divine in thought. Thus, discussing Moses, who prophesied under the same theological-political circumstance of exile, he says:

“To return to our subject. The phrase ‘stood upon it’ indicates the *permanence and constancy* of God, it does not imply the idea of physical position. This is also the sense of the phrase ‘Thou (Moses) shalt stand upon the rock.’” (Exodus 33:21)

Moses need not physically stand on a rock at all, but “stands” permanently attached in thought to God. Nonetheless:

“The ascent is mentioned before the descent, inasmuch as the ‘ascending’ and arriving at a *certain height (l’maalot msuyemet)* of the ladder precedes the ‘descending...’”

Here is one final clarification. While all who ascend should reach the top, he retreats a step here to say that they may reach a “certain height” on the ladder. Despite this barrier, I still think that men have the opportunity and power to attain a measure of Divine knowledge. Each may receive a different benefice; some may so regularly reach it that they are called prophets; and one, Moses, is able to live at the top in constant converse with divinity.

WHAT IS THE SUBJECT OF JACOB’S LADDER?

Maimonides deals with Jacob’s Ladder in two chapters. In our chapter, he says that the ladder angels are prophets. In Guide 2:10, he relates the four angels to the four elements, as well as to all aspects of physics that come in fours.

Rabbi Hasdai Ha-Levi wrote an epistle to Maimonides asking whether these two references in the Guide were contradictory. Either the angels are prophets or they are elements. We can take the question in a larger sense, asking whether the parable is about prophecy or the physics of creation, or, better, about *Maaseh Merkava* or *Maaseh Bereshit*.

The reply to Rabbi Hasdai could be an opportunity to enter the laboratory of Maimonides’ mind. It says (my translation):

“About your question on the explanation of the ascent and descent upon Jacob’s Ladder: in Guide 1:15 we explained that it refers to prophets, but in 2:10 we referred it to the elements. This discrepancy should not be difficult for you to resolve, when you see how the complex and the simple come into full view. In our explanation of the [four] elements we said that the prophet is affected by them. No prophet ascends [the ladder] until his element of fire prevails over the element of earth, nor does he descend unless the element of earth overcomes him. The fire is always striving upward to apprehend (*l’hasig*), but the cold dry earth always tends downward to rest. So [the prophet] strives upward and not to return again, like Elijah, who ascended in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11: ‘And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven’). We noted how well chosen were the words of the parable that the *ascending* precedes the *descending*. Our idea was that man, created of the element of earth [unlike angels], must rise before his descent [to bring the

prophetic message to men], since he [begins] very low as a creature of the ‘dust of the ground’ (Genesis 2:7).”

The answer is that there is ultimately no contradiction between the two chapters, since *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* are two ways of looking at the same cosmos. Man is a microcosm of the universe (Guide 1:72) and the *fourness* of the forces of the cosmos find their compliment in him, for the four elements are reflected in the humors, and in many other types of forces in what Maimonides conceived as our tetradic universe (Guide 2:10). The prophet must overcome his base elements so that his soul of fire will rise from his earthy physicality.

Additionally, there is no real contradiction between 1:15 and 2:10 because 2:10 does not unequivocally say that the ladder angels represent the elements, in the same unequivocal way that 1:15 says they are prophets. Thus, while angels *sometimes* are embodiments of elemental forces, prophets are *always* angels bearing divine messages. This demonstrates once again that Maimonides saw no real contradictions in the divine science. The last few paragraphs of Guide 2:10 throw out a considerable number of strong hints that the Ladder Parable really is about the *Maaseh Merkava*, the central subject of that concealed science.

(Angels defined: For a discussion of the complexity of the term angel, see my chapter-essay to Guide 2:6, “Maimonides’ Dynamic Angelology.” **Who wrote the epistle?** The authorship of the Epistle to R. Hasdai is debated. R. Kafih was not impressed by the claim that Maimonides wrote it; see note 11, *ad loc.* Tzvi Langermann seems to think it might be unpublished work of Maimonides, or at least that it emerged from his inner circle of followers: see *Maimonides’ Epistle to R. Hasdai*, Hebrew, at Academia.edu. Leon D. Stitskin, *Letters of Maimonides*, Yeshiva U. Press, 1977, pp. 95-101, thinks that R. Joseph Ibn Akin probably wrote it under Maimonides’ direction. Contemporary scholarship conceives that the “Rabbi Joseph” in R. Stitskin’s mind was probably R. Joseph ibn Yehuda ibn Shimon of Ceuta, c. 1160-1226, not R. ibn Akin.)

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You may contact me with comments, questions or criticism at scottmalexander@rcn.com

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