

Maimonides on Moses Seeing God's Face / Back

***Guide to the Perplexed: Part One, Chapters 37 and 38* On Exodus 33:12-23**

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I) Introduction

Exodus 33: 12-23 presents a conversation between Moses and G-d shortly after the incident of the golden calf, after which Moses returns enlightened. It is an intriguing and important account. However, its profuse anthropomorphic language, problems apparent from especially that of “faces” and “backs” in verses 12-13 and also including “Said,” “Pass,” “Your Glory,” and “Place.” At a simple reading they appear to challenge the doctrine of G-d’s non-corporeality, which Maimonides views as paramount in the understanding of G-d’s perfect nature as it pertains to his metaphysics of spheres and intelligences. The vast majority of Maimonides’ *Guide to the Perplexed* is devoted to deconstructing apparent contradictions to this keystone principle of disembodied intellect. Chapters 37 and 38 present Maimonides in perfect form as he addresses Exodus 33.

As always, Maimonides’ *Guide to the Perplexed* fights words with words and organizes a linguistic defense. Maimonides addresses the seemingly literal and corporeal terms and calls upon figurative uses seen elsewhere to substitute for these terms and suggest an elegant alternative. The figurative meaning of words is used not only to support non-corporeality but also to incorporate Maimonides’ metaphysics of intelligences and spheres into his theology even as Maimonides presents the conversation as a metaphysical progress and promotion of epic proportions.

Maimonides, of course, views G-d’s non-corporeal perfection as necessarily immutable, therefore His mind cannot actually be changed and He cannot actually be negotiated with. Maimonides presents this account as דברה תורה כלשון בן אדם, a parable encoded in Torah to teach about the metaphysics and the difference between Providence, Presence, and Essence.

II) Text and Commentary

¹² Moses said to the LORD, “You אמר (say) to me, ‘Lead these people,’ but You have not let me know whom You will send with me. אמרת (You said), ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’” ¹³ “If You are pleased with me, teach me דרכך (“Your Ways”) so I may know You and continue to find favor with You. Remember that this nation is Your people.”

Moses opens with a vague request to see G-d’s “ways.”

¹⁴ The LORD יאמר (said), “פני (My “face”—Providence) will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

G-d offers His Providence.

¹⁵ Then Moses said to Him, “If פניך (Your “face” Presence) does not go with us, do not send us up from here. ¹⁶ How will anyone know that You are pleased with me and with Your people unless You go with us? What else will distinguish me and Your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

Moses wants more than that; he now wants G-d’s Presence.

¹⁷ And the LORD ויאמר (said) to Moses, “I will do הדבר הזה (“this thing [you have asked],” i.e., Presence), because I am pleased with you וְאֵדָעָךְ בְּשֵׁם (“and I know you by name”).

G-d assents to make known His Presence.

¹⁸ Then Moses said, “Now show me כבודך (“Your Glory,” presumed to mean “Your Essence”).”

Moses wants more still; Moses wants to know G-d’s Essence.

¹⁹ And the LORD ויאמר (said), “I will cause all טובי (“My Goodness”) to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

G-d makes a counterproposal. Note that G-d’s “Goodness” is not the same as His Essence.

²⁰ But,” he ויאמר (said), “you cannot see פני (My “face” Essence), for no man may see Me and live.”

G-d will not show Moses his Essence.

²¹ Then the LORD ויאמר (said), “There is a מקום (“place” rank, as in a position in the hierarchy of the Intelligences and spheres) near Me where you may stand on a rock.

G-d offers to elevate Moses’ mind to a higher level, to the Tenth Intelligence.

²² When כבודי (“My Glory,” still read as “My Essence”) passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with My hand until עברי (“I have passed by”).

From this heightened position of transcendent intellect at the Tenth Intelligence, Moses still cannot see G-d’s Essence.

²³ Then I will remove My hand and you will see אהורי (My “back” wake, as in that which follows after G-d); but פני (My “face” Essence) must not be seen.”

Moses now understands the order of the intelligences and spheres and the intricate nature of the workings of the universe as set in motion by G-d. Moses’ mind is enlightened with knowledge of how the universe works. In this manner Moses can indeed see G-d’s “goodness” as well as His

“wake,” in that he can see the ripple effect/logical entailments that necessarily follow from G-d’s essence.

III) Complementary Texts

Regarding פְּנִים (“Face”), Maimonides discredits the literal meaning and offers multiple substitutes from multiple texts. *Guide to the Perplexed* Part 1, Chapter 37 Maimonides shows uses of the term to refer to life, G-d’s anger, status [see מְקוֹם], and presence -- as when G-d and Moses speak “face to face,” meaning ‘in each other’s presence without an intermediary,’ and “G-d’s voice” as ‘protection and providence.’ In the context of Exodus 33 Moses asks for פְּנִים repeatedly even when it has just been granted, suggesting multiple meanings at work. Further, G-d’s willingness to grant פְּנִים seems to decrease with each use, hence the idea of the ‘negotiation.’ Given this idea of increasingly large requests, all in the same vein, Maimonides selects three related meanings for the same term “Face”: “Providence” is used in verse 14, “Presence” in verse 15, and “Essence” or “true nature” from verse 20 onward. This progression demonstrates the differences in their potency, and gives an otherwise repetitive conversation a logical progression.

The term אַחֲרָיִם (“Back”) is similarly reimagined in *Guide to the Perplexed* Part 1, Chapter 38 as what is behind G-d not physically but ontologically, meaning the basic metaphysical workings of the universe. Maimonides presents an image that just as man’s back follows after him when he walks, so do nature and science –the ways of the universe-- follow G-d as He emanates. It is presented as a sort of cause and effect.

As for the term מְקוֹם (“Place”), in *Guide* Part 1, Chapter 8, Maimonides deconstructs this seemingly corporeal designation by establishing the idiom that “A certain man has a certain place with regard to a certain manner” or “He occupied the place of his ancestors in wisdom or piety,” by which “place” is understood not as a geographical designation but as an assignment of rank or position. In the case of Exodus 33 Maimonides interprets Moses’ new “place” as a new spiritual rung in the hierarchy of the intelligences and spheres. Here it refers to the Tenth Intelligence.

Regarding עֹבֵר (“Pass”), Part 1, Chapter 21 of the *Guide* uses Biblical sources such as Jeremiah to present instances in which passing by is not literal, as when drunkenness is described as “when a man whom wine has caused to overpass,” or instances in which voices, words, or time and other such noncorporeal things are said to “pass.” To Maimonides, to “pass” can simply refer to accomplishment or entailment without admission of physical repositioning or mutability. Here it simply refers to the starting and finishing of the process of Moses’ enlightenment.

Part 1, Chapter 65 of the *Guide* tackles the issue of אָמַר (“say”) and its various forms, citing verses such as “Then I said in my heart” (Eccles. 2:15) and showing how “He tried to kill David” (II Samuel 21:16) is sometimes translated as “He said to have slain David,” equating the two actions linguistically. This in context shows that “say” is not only synonymous with “speak” but also can be used in much the same manner as “think,” “wish,” or even “want.” It is an intellectual act rather than a physical one. It is by this paradigm that, when discussing G-d,

“said” can be understood as “emanated,” and even “commanded” can be understood as “entailed.” This is further corroborated in Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 7:6, wherein it is further reinforced that prophecy is a mental discipline of varying strengths, with Moses alone mentally equipped to commune consciously and without an intermediary. Here “speech” is G-d’s emanation to Moses, manifested in thought.

כבודך (“Your glory”) is addressed in Maimonides’ Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 1: 10, where it is explained as Moses wanting to know that which separates G-d from the rest of His creation; This supports the interpretation “your essence.” That the nature of G-d’s Intellect is unfathomable to the human is further supported by Hilchot Teshuvah 5:5, which says of reconciling foreknowledge and free will that “human knowledge cannot comprehend this concept in its entirety for just as it is beyond the potential of man to comprehend and conceive the essential nature of the Creator, as Exodus 33:20 states, “No man will perceive Me and live,” so, too, is it beyond man’s potential to conceive the Creator’s knowledge.”

The term יָדַעְתָּ בְּשֵׁם (“know you by name”) as used in verse 17 is defined in *Guide* 3: 51, among other places, as the protection granted by G-d to those with proper apprehension of Him.

IV) Conclusion

That a clever thinker such as Maimonides should be able to linguistically work around a seemingly contradictory motif, even something so teeming with physical terminology as Exodus 33, is itself unremarkable. But what is fascinating is the way Maimonides does this, and the fact that he actually takes it one step further. Maimonides does present a case for noncorporeality, but he also displays a coherent and consistent narrative that actually embraces his metaphysics rather than simply being compatible. His argument is thorough, providing alternative (and perhaps more likely) explanations for every seemingly physical designation, and his exegesis provides a compelling story.

Maimonides’ thought process is deep, as shown by his ability to completely disregard the spatiotemporal and think strictly conceptually. Something as seemingly physical as “face” becomes “essence” or nature, as presented to (or hidden from) others, a completely noncorporeal concept with just a slight flourish of human metaphor. The idea of “back” as “wake” is especially brilliant, demonstrating both an understanding of logical entailment and also a powerful creativity. In this manner *Guide to the Perplexed* exceeds its own mission statement, and functions as a both logical and creative work without parallel. Maimonides’ commitment and devotion to showing the Tanakh to be in accordance with the science of his age are inspired, earning him the status his name carries even today.

V) Works Consulted

JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh. 2nd ed. Print.

Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Volume 1. Print
