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INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

I first encountered *The Guide for the Perplexed* when I was nine years old. It was at Yehuda Halevy Synagogue in Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood where my parents prayed. After the services one Shabbat morning, while waiting for the bustling committee members to bring out the *kiddush*—whisky and pickled herring for the grownups, potato chips and ice pops for the children—I wandered over to the expansive pine-wood bookcases at the back of the sanctuary and stopped at a shelf marked "Jewish Philosophy." I did not know then what philosophy was, but I had a vague notion that it was something important and that I would learn more about it someday.

The book's cover was plain, with dark blue letters on the spine: *The Guide for the Perplexed*. I took it down and began to turn the pages, my eyes lighting here and there on words and phrases that I couldn't understand: "physics . . . metaphysics . . . homonyms . . ." My interest was piqued, and I turned, meaning to sit down with the book in one of the back pews, but found myself instead facing a rabbi in the synagogue, who was towering over me.

The rabbi looked at the book and then at me, a mixture of pride and concern in his kind gray eyes. He gently removed the book from my hands, replaced it on the shelf, and murmured, "Not yet, Micah," and then guided me by the arm to the Kiddush tables, by now laden with goodies. As I tore the wrapper off an ice pop I

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wondered, what could be in this book that would make the rabbi take it away from me?

In my early teens, I saw the book again, in the library of a small town in the south of Israel. There were several shelves in the Jewish philosophy section, and I saw that they were divided between shelves marked "Up to Maimonides" and "After Maimonides." Once again my curiosity was aroused. Why was Maimonides so important that Jewish philosophy was not the same after him? Why didn't books written before *The Guide for the Perplexed* even sit on the same shelf as books that had been written afterward?

I was born in Israel into an American family. Growing up in Jerusalem, I felt that my American home was in a different universe from Israeli society. It wasn't just a language gap; there was also a huge gap in culture, and even in body language. As a kid who wanted to fit in, I decided, at a very early age, "I am Israeli." I spoke English with an affected Israeli accent and tried to hide from my friends the secret of my American-ness, wanting desperately to broadcast the message, "I am one of you."

But there was an even bigger secret that I was hiding; my background was not just American, it was also part Christian. My mother had become a Jew by choice, but her amazing family, including a beloved grandmother who talked to Jesus all day long, and cousins who were priests, were also part of my life. I was torn, but I also yearned to just submerge myself utterly in one world—the Israeli world.

Early on, I sensed that Maimonides—who is also known as the Rambam, an acronym for the name Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon—would be my guide. Later, as an academic, I discovered that the Rambam wasn't just a teacher to Jews but also a major influence on Christian thought. I began to understand that he was a teacher to the different worlds that had formed me. The Rambam did not just change the face of Jewish philosophy; he also transformed Western thought.

Philosophy was not the only area that occupied Maimonides. In addition to *The Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam also wrote the

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Mishneh Torah, the most important book on halakhah, or Jewish law. The fourteen volumes of the Mishneh Torah include minute details about sacrifices, kashrut, the Jewish holidays, and family law. The Rambam deduces from the Talmud and Rabbinic literature clear halakhic decisions, reorganizes them, and creates an almost perfect order out of the apparent talmudic disarray. No one since has achieved anything like it.

In the eighteenth century, the great Torah scholar Jacob Emden concluded that the Rambam could not have authored *The Guide for the Perplexed*; someone else must have written it and attributed it to Maimonides. Emden was wrong, but his underlying question was on the mark: How was it possible that the author of the *Mishneh Torah* also wrote the *Guide*? The two books are so profoundly unlike one another. The *Mishneh Torah* is all law, whereas the *Guide* is entirely a world of thought. The *Mishneh Torah* deals with matters such as how one separates meat from milk. The *Guide* asks questions such as "Is there a God?" The Jew nourished by the *Mishneh Torah* is an obedient Jew. The Jew who springs from the *Guide* is a thinking Jew.

Much of my life experience has been characterized by a sense of being caught between worlds. Maimonides did not live between worlds, but rather was able to fully inhabit each of the worlds that he lived in. He was neither a philosopher who dabbled in *halakhah* nor a halakhic man with an interest in philosophy. He was a philosopher *and* a halakhist in the fullest sense of both words.

THE PERPLEXED ISRAELI AND THE PERPLEXED AMERICAN

I initially wrote this book for Israelis. Over the past decade, a hunger for Jewish cultural identity has emerged, particularly among the secular. Israeli rock stars perform arrangements of verses from Psalms. Popular Israeli television shows feature Jewish themes. The Israeli film *Footnote*, nominated for an Oscar as Best Foreign Film of 2012, was about Talmud scholars. Today there is a profound and exciting awakening in Israel. But this is not a return to traditional

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Judaism; there is no great wave of secular Israelis suddenly becoming religious. Rather, more and more Israelis are becoming Jews. Back in the generation of the founders—of Israel and of Israeli-ness—the dominant sense was of the emergence, in the words of one of them, of "a new psychological strain of Jewishness." Zionism attempted to do more than just establish a new state; it also sought to establish a new kind of person.

The "new Jew" would be different from the old Jew of the exile, because he would shake off the restraints of exilic Judaism, including, in particular, obedience to halakhah. The new Jew would be a free man. He would not be constrained by the force of any higher authority—neither the nation-states of Europe nor the books of Rabbinic law. Secularization was an essential part of the revolution wrought by Israel's founders, whose mission was not merely to defend Jews but also to replace Judaism. The secular did not press any claim to ownership of Judaism (in particular, the halakhic variety); on the contrary, they wanted to shake themselves free of it. They left Judaism to the haredim, the punctiliously orthodox, who felt that it really belonged to them. And so now in Israel there is one group of Jews who tend to be doctrinaire about Judaism living alongside another group who are inclined to be apathetic about it. This combination of dogmatism and ignorance has come to be a distinguishing mark of Israeli culture.

But the atmosphere is changing. The young, secular community in Israel is beginning to embrace its Judaism again. Whereas for the founding generation Judaism was a burden to be cast off, today, for more and more Israelis, Judaism is a no longer a threat but is instead a source of inspiration and enrichment.

The book in your hands seeks to explain another book, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Apparently, tens of thousands of Israelis were hungry to know what Maimonides said, because my book, in its original Hebrew, became a best-seller in Israel almost from the day it was published.

The big questions about God, existence, and the universe are not, of course, just Jewish or Israeli questions. They are questions that

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most of us start to ask from the time we are able to ask questions at all. The Rambam attempted to prove God's existence; he also asked how God could be interested in people. Maimonides considered whether there are any limits to reason and also explained how people can satisfy their thirst to know God. The questions he asked are eternal and the answers original.

Modernity suspends us between worlds. In the tension between worlds, perplexity is born. For American Jews, characteristic perplexities include the gaps between their secular and Jewish lives, between involvement in contemporary intellectual life and commitment to Jewish tradition, or between the arguments of universal ethics and the moral claims of Israel and the Jewish people. Maimonides addressed earlier versions of these perennial perplexities in the *Guide*, and his seminal solutions still illuminate the contemporary incarnations of these issues that we face today. Studying the *Guide* can help us to have an enriched and nuanced religious awareness that is also in tune with how we live in the modern world.

The Rambam believed that the great truths transformed a person only if one reached them through genuine effort. Therefore he buried his central ideas deep within *The Guide for the Perplexed*. And that is why the difficulties that readers face in understanding the *Guide* are typically the result of deliberate decisions by the author. For seekers of insight, the *Guide* is no shortcut. Maimonides does not supply his readers with easily accessible answers to the central questions of existence. Rather, he leads his readers toward discovering the answers for themselves.

THE SECRET

In the world of *kohanim*, or priests, proximity to the inner sancta of the Temple—the Holy and the Holy of Holies—reflected one's place in the social hierarchy. In the intellectual world of Maimonides, it is access to *knowledge* that determines who is important. According to Maimonides, in the ancient world there was a small group of people who held a monopoly on true knowledge, but following a

series of historical catastrophes, the possessors of the secret were lost, and the secret along with them. Only hundreds of years later did Maimonides succeed, according to his own testimony, in recovering the lost true knowledge.

Maimonides believed that his historical role was to decipher this secret, to transmit it and yet, paradoxically, to keep it hidden. This is why he wrote *The Guide for the Perplexed*, in which the exalted knowledge is withheld. The book, which draws together his main philosophical ideas, was written between 1187 and 1191, when Maimonides was in his early fifties. By means of a complex, esoteric system, Maimonides conceals beneath many layers the great philosophical secrets of Judaism. The book transformed Jewish philosophy.

It was not just Jewish philosophy that changed in the wake of the *Guide*, but kabbalistic teachings too. There are those who claim that the phenomenon of committing kabbalistic wisdom to writing, which had not previously been widespread and which gathered momentum in the thirteenth century, was a reaction to the *Guide*. This was a book that simultaneously awakened the two major strains of Jewish thought: philosophy and Kabbalah. But, the impact of the *Guide* was not limited to Jewish thought. The revival of Christian philosophy that began in the thirteenth century and reached maturity in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and his followers was also influenced by the *Guide*.

For more than eight hundred years, scholars, philosophers, and commentators have been trying to unravel this text. A work that deals with the great riddles of existence has, down through the ages, become a riddle itself.

At the end of the introduction to the *Guide*, where we become acquainted with the techniques of concealment that are deployed throughout the book, Maimonides makes a surprising move. He begs the reader who believes that he has successfully deciphered the secrets and reached the transformative truth to swear that he will not share with anyone else what he has uncovered. Maimonides asks

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that his own unmediated teaching be the sole instructor. He wished there to be no courses on the *Guide*, nor any commentaries, articles, or books. Maimonides wanted anyone who sought to penetrate his secret to do so by means of a direct, personal encounter with his text. But the hundreds of books and thousands of scholarly articles and lectures written about the *Guide* are evidence that Maimonides failed in his effort to restrain his readers. The author lost control over his book.

The oath Maimonides adjured his readers to swear has been broken in every generation. Some have argued that an oath without the agreement of both sides has no force or effect. Others have claimed that since books had already been written explaining the secrets of the *Guide*, the wall has been breached and the oath already broken. Perhaps an intellectual passion burning inside readers of the *Guide* moved them to break the chains of this prohibition and interpret hidden matters. The book that is in your hands, which addresses the secrets of the *Guide*, continues the venerable tradition of the breakers of the oath.

In recent years there have been a number of books on Maimonidean philosophy, and considerable academic research on many and diverse subjects that are covered in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, including politics, mysticism, and *halakhah*.² There have also been several important biographies of Maimonides within which the *Guide* is discussed. (I am a product of the Israeli academy, and ask forgiveness of my English-speaking readers from the outset if this book does not cite much of the excellent scholarship on Maimonides produced in North America over recent decades.) However, it is remarkable that there has not been a single work written originally in Hebrew that deals exclusively with the *Guide*, the most important work of Jewish philosophy ever written.

This book does not presume to reveal all the secrets; many will remain unresolved. Nevertheless, I hope that my book will enrich the discussion around *The Guide for the Perplexed* and awaken curiosity about it and about the message enfolded within it.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Maimonides was a virtuoso of organization and structure. His Mishneh Torah established an astonishing order out of the halakhic unruliness of talmudic literature. The Guide for the Perplexed, on the other hand, often appears to be an almost chaotic work. There are chapters that appear to be unrelated to other chapters, and within a chapter, the author may digress to discuss seemingly peripheral issues. It is a demanding read. Maimonides's words on a particular subject sometimes are fragmented into half-utterances, and these may be dispersed throughout the Guide in a way that seems very far from any sort of orderly, all-encompassing system. A lightning bolt of truth may appear from unexpected places throughout, but afterward the reader may be back in darkness. Entering the chambers of the Guide is like coming into a room where no object is in its proper place. It is as if a storm has passed and utterly upended the normal order of things. But it is a deliberate disorder. All of the disarrangements in the Guide are carefully planned.

Maimonides spent ten years writing the fourteen books of the *Mishneh Torah*. It took him five years to complete the *Guide*: five years dedicated to the *dis*organization of just one book. So the reader of the *Guide* must first and foremost be its organizer. As Maimonides recommends, in order to understand the *Guide*, we must order it anew.

There have been numerous attempts to reorder the book, and this book is one more effort to organize the thoughts of the *Guide* for the curious, confused, or skeptical contemporary reader. Two kinds of readers are likely to be interested in my book: those who want to understand what Maimonides has to say in the *Guide*, and those who are involved in the big questions of human existence and want to know what the *Guide* has to offer them on their journey. And so this book is organized as such:

Part 1 considers the existence of God.

Part 2 addresses questions about who wrote the Torah and the reasons for the commandments it contains.

Part 3 deals with the issue of perplexity and with the role and therapeutic purpose of doubt.

The conclusion to part 3 offers a midrash that brings the *Guide* into dialogue with the post-ideological, doubt-ridden sensibility of the twenty-first century. It takes the skeptical questioning of postmodernism seriously, while arguing that the Rambam provides us with intellectual resources that can help us to avoid postmodernism's skeptical answers.

Two central questions infuse these discussions. One is the issue of the ideal life: What is the right kind of life to live? The second is political and of two parts: What are the conditions for creating an ideal society, and what sort of society should we strive to establish?

PART 1

God is the greatest threat to religion. This paradoxical idea is central to *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

The absolute perfection of God voids religion of meaning, in the sense that the greatness of God renders absurd the thought that God needs our worship. Many eighteenth-century European philosophers were deists, and deism—the belief in God without religion—pervades much of the Western world today. Surveys show more than 60 percent of secular Israelis believe in God.¹ They are not atheists; they believe in God, but not in religion. Their preference not to commit to a religion isn't *despite* belief in God; rather it is *because* of belief in God.

Rejection of religion is not necessarily rejection of God. Sometimes it is a deeper expression of belief in God. The *Guide* seeks to grapple with this profound theological problem.

1

THE GOD OF MAIMONIDES

Proving the Existence of God

Many of us are conditioned during childhood to think of God as a reflection of ourselves. We imagine God as being like a person. It may be an image of a wise old man, or a glowing, celestial figure, full of light, but often it is some enhanced and ennobled version of the human form. Moses led a vigorous, even violent assault against idolatry, against physical representations of God. He enjoined future generations to continue waging war on idolatry until it was obliterated. In Maimonides's world, the worship of statues and images had all but disappeared, but the inner statues and images of God in the human imagination still stood firm. Maimonides, who saw himself as heir to the biblical struggle against idolatry, sought to explode our inner pictures of God.²

He understood the enormity of the challenge. Ideas that are formed in childhood are particularly hard to uproot. Images from the early, formative stages of cognitive development are deeply influential. In Maimonides's view, the greatest enemies of the educator and the theologian are those who plant false ideas in the minds of children.³

How does one break into human consciousness and smash the idols that are found there?

The tool that Maimonides deploys to uproot our internal images of God is reason. The battle against idolatry is a struggle of reason against the imagination. And it is Maimonides's other great work, the *Mishneh Torah*, a book all about law and reason, that we turn to first to begin to understand his argument for the proof of God. Arguments that the Rambam develops at length in the *Guide* are stated with unparalleled clarity and conciseness in the *Mishneh Torah*, making this a good place to begin our study.

In the seminal first chapter of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides uses pure intellect to shatter our pictures of the imagined God. He demonstrates the existence of God, and the God whose existence he demonstrates is a divinity that is not physical. When, through the power of reason, the reader internalizes the idea of the abstract God, the corporeal God will disappear.

Proving the Unity of God

The Foundation of Foundations and the Pillar of all Wisdom is to know that there is a First Cause, that He brought everything else into existence, and that everything that exists, from the heavens to the earth and everything that is in them would not exist, were not His existence true. (*Mishneh Torah* [hereafter *MT*], *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah*, 1:1)

The opening section of the *Mishneh Torah* is called *Hilkhot Yeso-dei HaTorah*, or "Laws of the Foundations of the Torah." Here Maimonides sets out the foundation upon which all the other foundations rest.

For many, faith is distinct from knowledge. Belief begins where knowledge ends. But for Maimonides, faith *is* knowledge. It is only forged through rationally apprehending the existence of God. The first commandment of the Torah is to be acquainted with the proof—the foundation of all foundations.

The rational demonstration of God that appears in the first chapter of the *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah* is the indispensable foundation, without which the whole edifice of Torah would collapse. This proof also appears in the *Guide* (2:1) as part of the series of demonstrations

that Maimonides presents for God's existence.⁴ In addition to God's existence, he also proves God's unity and incorporeality.

First, Maimonides sets out to define the unity of God:

This God is one; He is neither two nor more than two; He is simply one. His unity is not like any other oneness that exists in the world. His is not the unity of a kind that encompasses many other single particulars; and it is not like the unity of a body that is divided into parts and extremities; rather it is a unity that is entirely unlike any other sort of oneness in the universe. (MT, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah, 1:7)

The word "one" here does not correspond to any object in the world. There is no material thing that answers to Maimonides's description of the "one." Any physical object can be divided into secondary parts. My writing table is made up of four legs, the wooden surface that rests upon them, paint, and so forth. It is a cluster of different characteristics. In the material world, there is no oneness; there is only the *designation* of singularity. When we attribute the word "one" to certain objects, we are using a linguistic device.

It is impossible to attach the word "one" in its full meaning to anything in the physical world. Matter itself is divisible into parts, and form contains multiple elements. The only referent that may truly be called "one" is God. God alone is not "a kind that encompasses many other single particulars," nor "a body that is divided into many parts and extremities." God has exclusive rights to the category of oneness. Later we will see how, in the *Guide*, Maimonides created the "Doctrine of Negative Attributes" through which he made God compatible with the world by showing that God is not subject to any kind of verbal description. While, according to the *Guide*, there is no word that can be used to characterize God, in the opening chapter of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides does just that. As opposed to any thing that exists in the world, only God can truly be described as one. It is not just that the world corresponds to God; it corresponds *only* to God.

Oneness Follows from Immateriality

The proof consists of several steps. Let us outline them and then follow them carefully:

- The first step in the proof demonstrates that God's unity depends on God's immateriality.
- 2. The second step demonstrates that God's immateriality depends in turn upon God's infinitude.
- 3. The final step is the proof of God's unity that depends upon God's immateriality.

Now let us trace this three-part movement in more detail:

If God were many, He would have a body and physicality, because items that are co-extensive with each other cannot be counted as distinct from one another except through occurrences that happen to their bodies. (MT, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah, 1:7)

Difference is a necessary condition of multiplicity. Objects that are not distinct from one another are not things; they are a thing. My writing desk is absolutely identical only to itself, because there is no difference between it and itself. It is a logical condition for the existence of multiple things that they are different from one another. However, there is no difference between two objects that are absolutely and essentially identical, and therefore it is not logically possible for there to be a multiplicity of identical objects. The distinction between objects that are the same in essence can only be meaningfully applied by virtue of differences in their physical characteristics.⁵ It follows that if there are objects that are identical in essence, yet they are multiple, then they must also be immaterial. The concept of a triangle, for example, is single. There is no multiplicity of concepts of triangles. But there are many actual triangles. We have triangular roofs, triangular rulers, triangular slices of pizza. There are many physical triangles, but only one concept of a triangle.

If God were multiple, then God would have to be material, for the only way to create a distinction between the different parts of God would be through physical characteristics. The conclusion of the first step of the proof, then, is that if God is not physical, then God must be one.

Now it remains to prove the immateriality of God.

If the Creator had a body, He would have a defined form for it is impossible that there should be a body that is not defined. And anything that is defined is limited in its power. (MT, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah, 1:7)

Finitude is an essential quality of any physical body.⁶ The conclusion of the second step of our proof follows, namely, that the proof of God's immateriality depends on God's infinitude. The third step, then, is the proof of God's infinitude. Maimonides demonstrates this by reflection on the "motions of the spheres":

This Existence is the God of the Universe, the Lord of the world. He moves the spheres through His infinite, unceasing power, for the spheres rotate constantly, and it is impossible that they should move without anything moving them; and He, may He be blessed, moves them, without a hand and without a body. (*Guide*, 2:1)

The astronomical fact that the "the spheres rotate constantly" is at the heart of Aristotelian proofs for the existence of God. From the perpetual motion of the spheres, Aristotelians infer God's existence. A "sphere" in the parlance of medieval astronomy is a ball made of transparent material that supports the stars or planets. The sphere of Mars, for example, is the sphere on which the planet Mars stands. The observed motion of Mars is in fact the movement of the sphere upon which it rests.

Matter is finite, but the motion of the spheres is perpetual and endless. According to medieval astronomy, the momentum and the circularity of the movements produced by heavenly forces testify to their eternity. This is the astronomical background to the Aristotelian inference: if the motion of the spheres is infinite, then the source of

the motion must itself be infinite, because something finite cannot create something infinite—that would be logically impossible. The infinite movement of the cosmos has a source, and that source must, by definition, be infinite.

The proof of God's unity depends on the proof of God's immateriality, which in turns depends upon the demonstration of God's infinitude. The conclusion, then, is that the source of cosmic motion is infinite, and therefore it is non-physical and therefore it must be one.

And the power of our God, may His name be blessed is not the kind of power that bodies have, since His power is infinite and unceasing, for the spheres are in constant motion. And since He has no body, such physical occurrences as would be necessary to ascribe to God—separation and difference—do not pertain to Him; therefore, He must be one. Know that this thing is a positive commandment, as it says, *The Lord our God, the Lord is one* (Deut. 6:4). (MT, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah, 1:7)

Reflection on the motion of the stars reveals the existence of a source for that movement; that source is infinite, non-material, and unitary.

The Foundation of Foundations?

God is the source of all motion, but there is nothing moving God. The immateriality of God negates any possibility that God might change. A God that is above time is also above motion and alteration.⁷

It is written, *I am God who does not change* (Mal. 3:6). And if He were sometimes angry and sometimes happy, He would be changing. And these occurrences only happen to beings with dark, earthy bodies, those who dwell in houses of clay, and their foundation is dust. But He, may He be blessed, is far above all that. (*MT*, *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah*, 1:12)

A static, unchanging God is a God that does not hear prayer, does not pay attention to individual human needs and does not redeem history, for all of these assume change in God. The God that human beings reveal does not reveal Himself.

How can the Jewish religious system be based on the static God of Aristotle? The first chapter of the *Mishneh Torah* seems to undermine the doctrinal foundations of the Torah. But Maimonides does not identify the immutable unity of God as a threat to the Torah; rather, he understands this unity to be the foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all wisdom.

Yet without a God who reveals Himself to people and tells them to fulfill the commandments, what value is there to any of the mitzvot that Maimonides details throughout the *Mishneh Torah*? The God whose existence is provable by reason must somehow be compatible with the world of providence, revelation, prayer, and spiritual reward. However, in the *Mishneh Torah* there is no systematic, comprehensive attempt to mediate between the foundation of the one and other foundational beliefs, that is, between the static God and the dynamic elements of faith. Maimonides devoted another book to this project: *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

THE HIDDEN GOD OF THE GUIDE

The fierce desire to behold God's face is articulated in the Bible⁸ and reinforced by early mystical literature.⁹ This is the impetus behind Kabbalah, as well as large parts of Jewish philosophy. In opposition to this ancient tradition that seeks to characterize and describe God stands Maimonides, who maintains that one can say nothing at all about God. The only possible way to refer to Him is with silence.

The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms, *Silence is praise to Thee* (Ps. 65:2), which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to You is praise. This is a most perfectly put phrase regarding this matter. For whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, on the other we perceive in it some deficiency.¹⁰ Accordingly silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more appropriate—just as the perfect ones have enjoined

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when they said, Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still (Ps. 4:5). (Guide, 1:59)

Godliness, according to Maimonides, cannot be represented in language. One may not attribute any description to God, nor speak a single word about Him. All that one may say about God is what He is not:

Know that description of God, may He be cherished and exalted, by means of negation is the correct description—a description that is not affected by an indulgence in facile language and does not imply any deficiency with respect to God in general or in any particular mode. On the other hand, if one describes him by means of affirmations, one implies, as we have made clear, that he is associated with that which is not He and implies a deficiency in Him. (*Guide*, 1:58)

That is to say, any attempt to praise God in words only diminishes God's stature. God is bigger than language, not just because of the perfection of God but also owing to the limitations of speech. Describing God in words implies placing God in a category that includes other things. For example, if we were to say that God is good, then we would be putting God in the class of good people, like Mother Teresa and the Baal Shem Tov. It may well be that God is better, much better even, than the other members of the group, but the difference between them is merely quantitative. Language places God and the world in the same category.¹¹

The idea that God is beyond language is profoundly important; it means that God is utterly different from the world. The doctrine of negative attributes is founded on God's absolute otherness.

The God of Maimonides and the God of the Bible

Maimonides's God, who resists all description, seems very different from the God of the Bible, who is merciful, gracious, and a great many other things besides. Actually, however, there is no inconsistency.

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Monotheism, the biblical faith revolution, was not just a mathematical operation. Monotheism did not simply reduce the number of gods from many to one. There was a period in which ancient Egyptians also believed in one God, the Sun God, but that was still an idolatrous culture. The biblical revolution focused more on the uniqueness of God than on His oneness. As opposed to the pagan world, which understood nature to be the place where the gods lived and identified different divinities with particular natural forces, the Bible removes God from nature. 12 This is the true core of the biblical revolution: making a partition between God and the world. God is not a part of nature and is not subject to the laws of nature. He created heaven and earth and is therefore distinct from heaven and earth. But if the Bible takes God out of the world, language still leaves Him in it. Even though it is in opposition to the anthropomorphic, scriptural conception of God, Maimonides's move nevertheless is congruent with the Bible. It brings the biblical theological process to completion: removing God from the world begins with God's liberation from nature in the Book of Genesis and ends with liberation from language in the Guide. 13

Justifying the Doctrine of Negative Attributes

One should read the *Guide* according to Maimonides's instructions and connect the chapters according to their subject matter. The doctrine of negative attributes is set out in chapters 56–59 of part 1, but the justification for the doctrine is based on part 2, chapter 2 of the *Guide*. We will read these chapters in conjunction with one another in order to show the rational basis for negating descriptions of God.

At the beginning of part 2 of the *Guide*, Maimonides presents a series of proofs for God's existence. The doctrine of negative attributes is founded on what is sometimes known in Maimonidean scholarship as the metaphysical proof. In contrast to classical proofs, the metaphysical proof does not flow from reflection on the world (e.g., the motions of the spheres) but rather from a profound conceptual investigation.¹⁴ One of the fundamental questions in ontology—the

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philosophical study of the nature of existence—is, In what class of existent things should we place the world? Maimonides lays out the different possibilities. There are three types of existing things: impossible existents, possible existents, and necessary existents. Impossible existents are objects for which some logical requirement prevents them from existing—that is, an object whose existence would entail a contradiction. For example, a triangle with angles adding up to 190 degrees is an impossible existent. If it had 190 degrees, it would not be a triangle. On the other hand, a possible existent is an object where there no logical barrier to either its existence or its non-existence (e.g., my desk). Finally, a necessary existent is an object that cannot possibly not exist.

In which of these categories of existent should one place the world? By definition, the world cannot be an impossible existent; it exists. Our experience shows that the world is full of possible existents. But is there anything in the world that is a necessary existent? This is a critical question, and its solution is essential for clarifying the nature of God. To arrive at the answer we must look more deeply at the distinction between possible and necessary existents.

Possible (or in modern philosophical terms, contingent) existents may exist, or they may not exist, because they are dependent upon other objects. The existence of my desk depends on the existence of the carpenter who made it, the wood from which it was fashioned, and also upon the fact that no fire has yet destroyed it. The dependency of its existence is the reason why its existence is merely possible.

In light of this explanation, let us ask once again: In addition to the possible existents that populate the world, are there also any necessary existents? Maimonides addresses this question by asking if it is possible to have a world in which there are only possible existents. After he has shown that such a world would be absurd, it follows, then, that in addition to possible existents there must be at least one necessary existent.

This is his proof: If all objects depend on other objects, and these other objects are dependent on still further objects, there is a

problem, because a world composed entirely of possible existents cannot be grasped. Such a world is impossible. One may therefore infer from the existence of possible existents (such as my desk) that there must be at least one necessary existent that underwrites the existence of all the possible ones. This succession of dependent objects eventually requires one metaphysical nail, so to speak, that will hold the whole chain of possible existents in place.

This discovery of the existence of necessary objects has a very important consequence: we can say absolutely nothing about those things of whose existence we are certain. Any characterization of the necessary existent makes it dependent upon some larger category. If we say that it is good, then it depends on the category of goodness. The use of words to describe the necessary existent denies its necessity; the very fact of giving the object a linguistic description testifies to its merely possible, but not necessary, existence.

A necessary existent exists beyond the bounds of language. This is the rational foundation for the doctrine of negative attributes. All that may be known about God as a necessary existent is that God exists, but we can know nothing at all about the nature of God who exists.

I shall say that it has already been demonstrated that God may He be honored and magnified, is existent of necessity and that there is no composition in Him, as we shall demonstrate, and that we are only able to apprehend that fact that He is and cannot apprehend His quiddity. (*Guide*, 1:58)

The wonderful thing about the metaphysical proof is that it demonstrates rationally that there is an area of existence that is not rational. The proof challenges the limits of reason. The existence of a realm that is accessible to reason and serves as the object of its investigation is grounded in a realm that is beyond the bounds of reason. Like the metaphysical proof for the existence of God, the doctrine of negative attributes is a transition from knowledge to knowing that one cannot know.

The doctrine of negative attributes also implies an important normative principle. Maimonides is not content with merely negating

descriptions of God. He demands that his readers invest great intellectual effort in eradicating qualitative statements about God's nature:

These are some of the useful teachings of natural science with regard to the knowledge of the deity. For he who was no knowledge of these sciences is not aware of the deficiency inherent in affections, and does not understand the meaning of what is potential and what is in actuality, and does not know what privation attaches necessarily to everything potential and that which is potential is more deficient than that which is in motion—because in the latter case potentiality is passing into actuality. . . . For this reason, he does not have at his disposal a demonstration of the existence of God, or one of the necessity of negating these kinds of attributions in reference to him. (*Guide*, 1:55)

Maimonides reverses the way people often consider the relationship between science and religion. Learning about science contributes nothing to our knowledge of God; it only rules out things that we might have thought we knew about God. The more deeply a person understands how nature works, the more he understands that it is not divine. Studying science shatters the mythological view of nature.¹⁵

If God cannot be represented in language, then it follows not just that we cannot speak *about* God but also that we cannot speak *to* God. The universe "needs" a God whose existence we can prove, but not a God that we can worship. The perfect, static God of the *Guide* must, it would appear, be entirely indifferent to things that happen in the world. Maimonides describes the unchanging nature of God faced with the absolute destruction of the world that took place at the time of the Flood:

It also says, *The Lord sitteth at the flood* (Ps. 29:10). It means that when the state of the earth is changed and corrupted, there is no change in the relation of God, may He be exalted, to things; this relation remains the same—stable and permanent—whether the thing undergoes generation or corruption. (*Guide*, 1:11.)

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Let us return, then, to the issue that will accompany us throughout part I of this book: the unavoidable tension between God and religion. If basic elements of religion, such as providence, reward, punishment, and prayer, are to be meaningful, then God must be intimately involved. The more perfect God is, the more the metaphysical function of religion is diminished; by contrast, if God is less exalted and transcendent, then the role of religion will be correspondingly greater. We see, then, that the foundational tension in the *Guide* is not the one between Athens and Jerusalem, but rather between Maimonides's religion and his God.

We will see how Maimonides reinterprets the fundamentals of religion in order to make room for absolute divine transcendence. Most of the *Guide for the Perplexed* is devoted to this end. The first seventy chapters are dedicated to liberating God from the limitations of language. Maimonides enumerates and reinterprets the main terms in the Bible that appear to attribute physical or emotional traits to God. ¹⁶ After freeing God from language (and so too from the world), he devotes the next hundred chapters or so to rethinking the intellectual foundations of Judaism, central among them the concepts of creation, prophecy, and providence and the reasons for the commandments. I will discuss the question of creation extensively in part 3 of this book. Now, let us take on the issue of prophecy.