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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





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.<sup>1</sup> 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





## 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 *disorganization* 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 1

# GOD

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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 Yesodei 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











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 Bible<sup>8</sup> and reinforced by early mystical literature.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more appropriate—just as the perfect ones have enjoined

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.

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.<sup>12</sup> 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*.<sup>13</sup>

*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.<sup>14</sup> One of the fundamental questions in ontology—the

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.)



Let us return, then, to the issue that will accompany us throughout part 1 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.