

HOW I WAS TAUGHT TO READ THE GUIDE

"WHEREOF ONE CANNOT SPEAK,
THEREOF ONE MUST BE SILENT."
- LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

BY **RABBI YAMIN LEVY** TEACHER

Maimonides had one goal in mind when investing his limited amount of time¹ to writing the *Mishne Torah*. His goal was to ensure the survival of Judaism for generations to come. He wrote to the sages of Lunel that he did not compose the *Mishne Torah* for personal glory, rather he devoted his intellectual and creative output to provide a clear practical code of Jewish law that is available to all who seek to know how to observe *halakha* (Letter to R. Jonathon of Lunel Responsa 49). Similarly, *The Guide for the Perplexed* was written with one objective in mind. To provide the excellent student a guidebook to prophecy hence preserving the Jewish esoteric knowledge that, according to the tradition Maimonides inherited,² had been lost:

*"It already has been explained and that even the measure apprehended by someone to whom this knowledge had been opened via his understanding, he is forbidden to teach or explain, per a prohibition by law, except face to face to a qualified individual. Then he could mention to him only headings of chapters. **This is the reason that this knowledge has totally disappeared from the nation of Israel. Nothing could be found of it, whether little or much**" (Guide, Introduction to Part Three).*

Revelation, as in God communicating with a human being, is a cornerstone of Judaism: *"It is one of the foundations of our faith that God graces man with prophecy"* (Yesode HaTorah 7:1). If Torah is to be taken seriously revelation cannot be an occurrence of a past era. Prophecy

and the skillset required to be a prophet must not only be explained but also taught. The "enchanted mystical" teachings that were prevalent during the early Middle Ages were regarded by Maimonides as vulgar, clumsy, and theologically unsound. The theology he endorsed required a universe with no other entity but God. In this economy of spiritual ideas and Jewish mysticism there is no room for angels, demons, powers, *segullot* or the supernatural.

To be clear for Maimonides a mystical experience with a transcendent God can only be achieved through perfection of the intellect, perfection of the body, an elevated imagination, perfect moral conduct, and the grace of God (Guide 2:32 & 34). Short of that, induced mystical experiences are a figment of people's imagination at best or lies and deceptions at worst.

It has been incorrectly suggested that Maimonides could never endorse a direct experience with God because of God's absolute transcendence³. This school of thought teaches that it is solely the philosophical understanding of God (or more accurately what God is not, Guide 1:58-59) that brings one to ultimate human perfection. While Maimonides did indeed write that knowledge of God is the *"foundation of foundations and the pillar of wisdom"* (MT Yesode HaTorah 1:1) that is, however, just the beginning. For Maimonides, the human being can and does discern God through revelation:



Rabbi Yamin Levy is the senior Rabbi at the Iranian Jewish Center / Beth Hadassah Synagogue in Great Neck, NY.

He is the founder and director of the Maimonides Heritage Center based in Israel and New York.

He has authored and edited several books as well as published extensively in English, Hebrew, and Catal. He published an award-winning novel called Sababa that deals with the Israeli Arab conflict. Rabbi Yamin Levy has an active Youtube channel and corresponds via email with learning communities around the world.

¹ See to Letter to Ibn Tibbon edited by Leo Stitskin, published in Tradition Fall 1961 for a sense of Maimonides' time limitations.

² Rab Hayye Gaon (939-1038) Responsa edited by Simcha Emanuel (Jerusalem: Ofeq institute 5755/1995) no 115. Also, Osar HaGeonim, Qiddushin, Teshubot 399

³ For a discussion on angels in Maimonides' worldview see Menachem Kellner, Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Portland Oregon, (Littman Press 2006), pages 12, 121, 181 and 211.

"Moreover, every perfect man – after his intellect has attained the cognition of whatever in its nature can be grasped – when longing for another apprehension beyond that which he has achieved, cannot but have his faculty of apprehension deceived or destroyed – unless divine help attends him" (Guide 1:21, Pines p. 49).

The higher goal is not simply knowledge but apprehension of God. According to David Blumenthal ("Philosophic Mysticism," pp. 96-114) for Maimonides intellectual and philosophical study is the prerequisite for love and awe of God as is stated clearly in *Yesode HaTorah* 2:2 which itself is the prerequisite for the experience and apprehension of God. In chapter 51 of the third section of the *Guide* Maimonides presents the palace metaphor where he describes seven levels of human spiritual perfection. Maimonides encourages those who have achieved the penultimate level of perfection to strive for the ultimate goal, "to reflect on Him and think of Him". The seventh and final level of spiritual perfection is achieved by exclusively focusing and meditating on God and not mere intellectual and philosophical knowledge. Maimonides writes:

"The first thing you must do is this: Turn your thoughts away from everything while you read the *Shema'* and during *Tefilla*, and do not content yourself with being devout when you read the first verse of the *Shema'*, or the first paragraph of the *Amida*. When you have successfully practiced this for many years, try in reading the law or listening to it, to have your heart and all your thoughts occupied with understanding what you read and hear. After some time when you have mastered this, accustom yourself to have your mind free from all other thoughts when you read any portion of the books of the prophets or when you recite a blessing, and to have your attention directly and exclusively to the perception and understanding of what you recite." (Guide 3:51)

Blumenthal refers to this as "post-cognitive worship". Maimonides refers to this seventh level of spiritual perfection as that of the prophets of Israel who apprehended God and were privy to direct revelation from God. By focusing one's thoughts on God the prophet transforms the "potential into actual". True knowledge as Maimonides writes in *Guide* 1:68 occurs when one is actively thinking and imagining about that which it seeks to know. When one actively imagines the form or essence of something, and the form enters the mind, the object can be said to exist in-actuality and not merely in potential.

"Thus, in us too, the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellect, and the intellectually cognized object, are one and the same thing wherever we have an intellect in actu." (Guide 1:68)

God does not exist in matter therefore God and the essence of God are not separate entities as Maimonides

writes: "He is the knower, He is the known, and He is the knowledge" (*Yesode HaTorah* 2:10) when one is fully engaged - focusing on God – one apprehends the infinite. This of course assumes the individual meets the criteria of a prophet and has correct understanding when he / she meditates on God exclusively. If successful, he / she enters into a state referred to by Gidon Freudenthal as a "Mystical Union" with the divine.

Hakham Jose Faur based on Maimonides' own words frames this experience as a "genuine worship of God" an experience that "must involve the active participation of the human intellect" (Faur, *Homo Mysticus*, p. 55).

"When you perceive God and His actions according to what the intellect determines, you then consign yourself to Him, march toward His nearness, and strengthen the link between you and Him which is the intellect." (Guide 3:51)

While in a meditative state focusing heart and mind on God "the individual", writes Maimonides in as clear terms as possible, "is with God and God is with him" (Guide 3:51).

God is not hidden from the human being it is the human being who is distant from God (Faur pp. 53-55). God's remoteness is a function of human limitations when the human being is not utilizing his / her intellect and rational faculties correctly. God is ever present, constantly gracing the human being with "His light" (Faur). Maimonides' proof text for this teaching is Deuteronomy 31:18, "And I shall surely hide My face on that day because of all the evil that they did."

For Maimonides "all the evil that they did" refers to the lack of spiritual effort and intellectual discipline on the part of the people. *Deus absconditus*, writes Faur is the "human hiding from God, not God [hiding] from humans" as the verse in Isaiah says:

"Woe to those who think deeply to hide counsel from the Lord, while their deeds are in the dark saying, 'Who sees us and who knows us?'" (Isaiah 29:15)

This insight is the key to understanding Maimonides' philosophy on divine providence. For Maimonides, the human being experiences divine providence in proportion to his / her level of intellectual and spiritual perfection



(Guide 3:17). In 3:51 Maimonides describes a heightened level of divine providence when one is actively meditating on God. In other words, divine providence is the natural result of one who has achieved prophetic status such as *Moshe Rabbeinu* and *Abraham Abinu*, two examples Maimonides mentions in that chapter. This also explains how it is that there are varying degrees of prophetic experiences. Moses apprehended God at the highest level possible while other prophets experienced their revelations at varying degrees and in varying states of being (Guide 2:35; MT *Yesode HaTorah* 7:1). The essence of God is unknowable and constant while the variable to prophecy is the various levels of comprehension of the human being. As a result, prophecy is experienced in varying degrees.

ciplined approach to the pursuit of the divine, while less dramatic than the immediate promise of imaginative visions and mystical experiences, is the only genuine avenue to the infinite.

In the Maimonidean economy of ideas, silence is not a defeat but rather the practice itself. As the verse in Psalms so aptly states: "There is no utterance, there are no words" (Psalms 19:4). While commenting on the Mishna in *Hagiga* 13a Maimonides writes:

*"There are some significances traced in the soul of the perfect individual, that if articulated linguistically or expressed in metaphors would turn coarse and elude one's intent"*⁴

A written record of the esoteric tradition guarantees its loss and is absolute proof of its inauthentic nature. Esoteric teachings, writes Maimonides in his introduction to the *Guide*, are like the "sword at the gates of the Garden of Eden" which is constantly in motion, perpetually revealing and concealing itself. The curriculum and the teachings are purely experiential. The student is part of the transmittal process. Herein lies the key to understanding the Epistle Dedicatory, the apparent *raison d'être* of the *Guide*. Maimonides makes three points to his many readers while addressing his single student. Per rabbinic instruction the student must be qualified.

"Whereupon you read under my guidance texts dealing with the science of astronomy, and mathematics my joy in you increased because of the excellence of your mind and the quickness of your grasp."

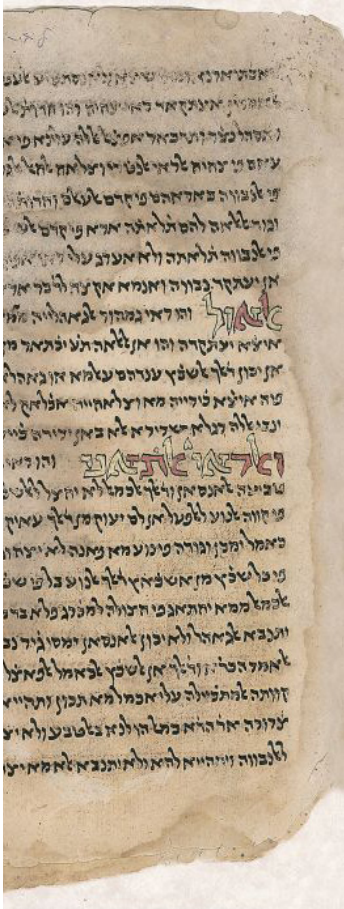
Second, Maimonides informs his student that the *Guide* was written only after the student left. The lessons are processed independently at the student's pace. The esoteric teachings are especially personal and find their fullest expression when the student is ready to receive the teaching. This explains the third and final point in the letter, namely that the student will be receiving the lessons in installments. This is not how the *Guide* was written but this is how it is to be processed and internalized. The truths contained "will reach you" writes Maimonides "wherever you may be." He is not referring to a geographical location of the student but rather to an intellectual place of maturation. Both in the letter and in the introduction to the *Guide* Maimonides alerts his readers that the *Guide* is structured as an intellectual maze designed to be decoded. Ultimately truth and knowledge will be revealed from within the student and not from external texts or teachers. The teacher simply points the way thus the Arabic name for the *Guide*, *Dalālat al-Hā'irīn* which means pointing the way for the perplexed.

Blumenthal notes that Gershom Scholem could not fathom a mystical trend in *The Guide for the Perplexed* because "For Scholem, mysticism had to be dramatic". It had to have its angels and spirits and demons. For Maimonides, union with God and prophecy has none of that. In fact, the paradigm of Maimonides' esoteric pursuit is silent equanimity as described by the Psalmist, *lekha dumiyya tehilla*, "to You, silence is praise" (Psalms 65:2).

Language is a media that is at best limited and certainly not adequate to describe the essence of God or the true nature of a Mystical Union with God. The inner spiritual life cannot be described with images and metaphors at the expense of philosophical and *halakhic* integrity. Every attempt at exalting God through language fails:

"Praise be He, who at the moment that their minds glance at His essence, their understanding turns faulty. At the moment of glancing at the necessary correlation between His will and His actions, knowledge turns into ignorance. When the tongue attempts to exalt Him with attributes, all verbosity turns into ineptitude and faultiness." (Guide 1:58)

Basing himself on Rabbinic texts,⁴ Faur suggests that the most mankind can express in words is to participate in a spiritual dance while contemplating on God and announcing in unison with coreligionists "*Qadosh, Qadosh, Qadosh*" hence affirming God's transcendence. This dis-



⁴ Shemot Rabba 23:1; BT Taanith 31a; TY Megillah 73b
⁵ Similar idea found in Guide 2:29

There is only one place and one media, according to Maimonides, that can contain and channel the truth – that is “in solitude” – beyond the reach of images, metaphors, and language. The Andalusian philological tradition understood the limitation of language especially when it involved describing the world of the spirit.⁶ For Maimonides such descriptions are self-contradictions, deceptive and fabrications of the imagination. As Wittgenstein noted: “There are indeed things that cannot be put into words – they are what is mystical.”⁷

Of all the prophets in the Bible it is Elijah the Prophet who identifies the mystery contained in silence. The scene on Mount Carmel is remarkable. “The God that answers” says Elijah “let Him be God” (I Kings 18:24). God immediately responds in a fiery demonstration of force, the false prophets of Baal are slaughtered and yet the dramatic test is a failure. Jezebel’s warrant for Elijah’s arrest is reiterated. The king and the people of Israel seem unaffected by the miraculous incident and the prophet must run for his life. He arrives at Mount Horev possibly a hint to *Mattan Torah* and the text describes what happened next:

“Come out He called and stand on the mountain before the Lord. And behold the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind – an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake – fire but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a silent still voice.” (I Kings 19:11-13)

While the fire, wind, lightning, and dramatic showdown with the false prophets makes for powerful theatrics the biblical text exposes for us how God’s message is revealed in the silence. The silence of the prophet is due to the limitations of language. Any attempt at describing the illumination or the flash-experience will be misleading at best, idolatrous at worst. The limitation of language is not a function of the nature of the experience or of the prophet’s inability to describe his or her experience. The prophet is left with knowledge that simply cannot be expressed in words. The prophet enters a meta-linguistic state of cognition.

Hakham Faur in an artful literary fashion reveals this point with a Talmudic story of the third century sage Rab Sheshat. The Talmud informs us that Rab Sheshat was blind.

“Once all the people went out to see the king and Rab Sheshat arose and went out with them. A certain Sadducean came across the sage and said to him: ‘Whole pitchers go to the river but where do broken ones go to?’ Rab Sheshat replied I will show you how I know more than you. The first troops

passed by and people started to shout. The Sadducean said: ‘The king is coming.’ ‘He is not coming said Rab Sheshat.’ A second troop passed by and again a shout arose. The Sadducean said: ‘Now the king is coming.’ Rab Sheshat replied: ‘The king is not coming.’ A third troop passed by and there was silence. Rab Sheshat said: ‘Now the king is coming...’” (Berakhot 58a)

Of the four sages who entered the *Pardes* (*Hagiga* 14b; *Guide* 1:30) R. Aqiba “entered in peace and went out in peace.” The word *shalom* only appears in Maimonides’ presentation of the story suggesting he was alluding to a sense of *shelemuth*, human perfection.⁸ The Talmud links R. Aqiba’s success to the verse associated with Elijah the Prophet, *qol demama daqqa*, “a still and silent voice.” By freeing himself from the noise and drama of the enchanted experiences R. Aqiba is the only one who emerges unscathed by the *Pardes*.

Final Thoughts

HaRambam organized and presented the student the path to, and the way to traverse into, the transcendent reality of religious life. *The Guide for the Perplexed* is the key to the knowledge and guide to the practices of spiritual mysteries attaining an awareness of the mystical dimension of religious life.

To be clear the path to the illuminated dimension is through philosophy. Religious experience on the highest level is predicated on correct philosophic and moral preparation. It is learned and remains within Rabbinic traditional Judaism. Ritual observance, and traditional knowledge must be complemented with philosophic excellence. Therefore, service of God in the Maimonidean worldview has a distinctly intellectual contemplative component. The image is that of the human mind / spirit touching the divine spirit. Philosophy, however, is but a “station on the pilgrim’s path” and the ultimate goal is a place beyond thinking and beyond language. It is a place referred to by *HaRambam* where one “isolates oneself” and “wholly devotes oneself to God” and finds himself “in His presence alone.” *The Guide* is an invitation to the covenantal student to approach the divine and live his /her religious reality. The reality of the numinous, the holy in all its mystery, beauty, and power. ■

⁶ Guide 1:51; 52; 56; 59; and 60

⁷ Wittgenstein Ludwig, *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus*, 4 :121

⁸ Josef Stern, “Maimonides on the Growth of Knowledge and the Limitations of the Intellect”, in *Maimonide Philosophie et Savant*, edited by Tony Levy and Roshdi Rashed, Peeters (France 2004) page 177