

## GUIDE 1:70 ARAVOT

In the last chapter, we saw that Maimonides' knowledge of philosophy armed him for the battle against its pagan elements better than the creaky theology of Kalām did. Now he claims that his version of Aristotelianism is friendly to monotheistic religion.

The purportedly intended student of our chapter was a philosophic intellectual (but see "Intended Audience," below). It is supposed to persuade him that religion anticipated philosophy. To that end, Maimonides culled Biblical, Talmudic and Midrashic texts for passages that articulated its cosmological doctrines.

His approach differed from the modern one, from either side of the divide between Jerusalem and Athens. Now both sides reject each other. The philosophers champion a value-free worldview which is either noisily atheist or more quietly agnostic. The religious orthodox resist contact with philosophy for fear of atheist contamination. The result is that they both practice bad philosophy. The term "Kalām" has come (*via* the writings of Leo Strauss) to stand for bad religious philosophy.

Maimonides took an entirely different approach. He scrutinized the philosophy of his day, neo-Platonized Aristotelianism, and discarded its pagan ("Sabeian") components. In the last chapter we showed how he adopted such planks as four cause theory, in-formed matter, corporeal and incorporeal form, remote causation, teleological causation, the untraversability of the infinite causal series, and providential (but not eternal) emanation. There is nothing obviously irreligious in these ideas. Now, and in the next chapter, he will claim that they were Jewish all along.

### THRONE AND CHARIOT

This is all a backdrop for a close discussion of the *Maaseh Merkava*, i.e., the chariot, the Jewish name for providence. There were three ways of dealing with this concept: anthropomorphically, cosmologically or as an incorporeal entity.

The Qur'an has passages that show Allah mounting or seated on a pre-existent throne borne by four angels. H. A. Wolfson explains, in *Repercussions of the Kalām in Jewish Philosophy*, that the Jews, in their early encounters with Islam, learned of these anthropomorphic passages in the Qur'an. This brought them to recall similar material about thrones and chariots in the Bible and Talmud. They also learned of Muslim scholars who opposed the literal interpretation of these Qur'anic verses. Those scholars contended that the throne signified the outermost cosmic sphere rather than a physical "throne." A similar tradition developed with Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) who rejected the literal interpretation of throne and chariot, in favor of cosmological interpretation. (*Repercussions*, Harvard, 1979, 113-116; Qur'an, 7.52, 20:4; Biblical and Talmudic sources: 1 Kings 22:19, Ezekiel 1:5, *Pesakhim* 54a;).

Maimonides apparently joined that tradition, due to his opposition to anthropomorphism. The problem, however, was that the Sabeans thought of the outer sphere as their god's chariot. Their

gods were the souls of the spheres. As such, they were part of the spheres and subject to their nature. His concern was that if the Rabbis accepted the cosmological definition of *Merkava* as the outer sphere, they would thereby join the Sabean philosophers who subjected God to nature. (See my note “The Sabeans,” Guide 1:63).

Maimonides resolves the issue here, but in an obscure way. On the one hand, he does not reprove the philosophers for making the *Merkava* the outer sphere, merely noticing that our scriptures show God “over” the sphere rather than “in” it. His second, obscure, response took the *Merkava* entirely out of the cosmological realm.

### **A LATE-LEXICAL CHAPTER WITH A HIDDEN LEXICAL TERM**

Our chapter is what I call a late-lexical chapter, in that it comes after the conclusion of the Lexicon proper, Guide 1:45.

It deals explicitly with two related terms: *rakhav* (“ride”), and *merkava*, (“that which is ridden”). As usual, Maimonides follows a regular format. He tells us *his* definitions for each word. He then determines whether those definitions are homonymous. If they are homonymous, they have nothing in common but their sound. Typically, his first definition is corporeal in nature, while the latter ones are not, and may apply to God. I reorganized his treatment to look more like a dictionary while contextualizing his proof-texts (See the explanation of my methodology in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”).

Nonetheless, the bulk of the chapter, four-fifths of it by my count, deal with a third term, *aravot*. Nowhere does he hint that it deserves full lexical treatment. To the contrary, he states, rather flatly, in the first paragraph, that *aravot* is “the uppermost, all-encompassing sphere.” This seems to concede the interpretation of Ibn Ezra and the Muslim scholars. Further on, without the slightest suggestion that there is a problem, he produces material that contradicts their position.

The only way to solve the problem is to include *aravot* in the Lexicon with two definitions. Maimonides expected his student to make this leap, but the commentators I have seen do not. We can easily show that there are two meanings for *aravot*, 1) the outer sphere, and 2) the source of all forms. *Merkava* has essentially the same meanings. One is corporeal, the other is not.

The difficult question is whether those definitions would be homonymous. If they are, then there could be no possible way of discussing them together. The answer is that neither his treatment of these definitions, nor the underlying texts, particularly the Talmudic text, treated them homonymously. This conclusion makes possible man’s reach from the first corporeal definition to the divine level.

We first apply ourselves to the explicitly defined terms *rakhav* and *merkava*. Maimonides’ proof-texts for his definitions teach the rules that Jews must apply to the entire subject of this chapter, which is how Jerusalem and Athens differently view the cosmos.

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## **RAKHAV (RIDE) Homonym**

1. To ride, as on a horse.
2. To dominate, rule, govern.

Maimonides' first proof-text, about Balaam and his ass, is very corporeal in nature, as is typical for his initial definitions. It presents a negative and cautionary message, as corporeality always does for him. This passage also suggests the themes that he will emphasize in the rest of his assembled proof-texts.

Maimonides' frequently uses his scriptural citations to tell a different story than the apparent intent of his own text. Why else would he use eleven proof-texts when he needed only three, especially if we are to admit his claim that he never used more words than necessary? (On his claimed purity of writing see *Treatise on Resurrection*, Rosner trans., 7:35, p.40; Guide, *Introduction*, "Directions for Study," Friedlander trans., v. 1, p. 20; Herbert A. Davidson, *Maimonides: The Man and His Works*, scoffs at his claims).

Part of this goes to who his real audience is (see below, "Who Is the Intended Audience for Guide 1:70?"). The Rabbis, not the philosophers, were the intended audience for his scriptural citations. He uses them to signal a cautionary message to the Rabbis. Ancient rabbinic culture favored memorization more than we do. He expected the Rabbis to recall not just his quote-shards but their context and traditional interpretation (he never tells where they are from). I place in grey-scale the few words he actually quoted.

### Instance of Definition 1, *Riding a beast*, Contextualized:

"And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab. And God's anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him. **Now he was riding (*rokhev*) upon his ass**, and his two servants [were] with him. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way." (Numbers 22:21-23)

Balaam was the great prophet of the Sabeans. We should recognize that, for Maimonides, Aristotle was also a Sabean, indeed, the highest representative of Sabean philosophy. It was natural for Maimonides to view Balaam as Aristotle's precursor, especially since tradition regarded Balaam as the best of philosophers (*Eikha Rabba*, 2). Both Balaam and Aristotle believed, as Sabeans, in a nature-bound god who did not create the universe. What happened to Balaam stood as a warning of what could happen to Aristotelians. It should come as no surprise that Balaam saw only his ass when the acosmic angel stood before him. The seer could not see what he could not understand.

The theme, then, here, and throughout the proof-texts, is how God bars access to prophecy to those who fail to recognize Him as Creator. This is strikingly different from our chapter's ostensible cosmological account. The philosophers did not have the tools to recognize this theme, but the Rabbis should have grasped it instinctively.

### Instances of Definition 2, *Dominate, Rule, Govern*, Contextualized:

"**He made him ride (*yarkivehu*) on the high places of the earth**, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and He made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock." (Deuteronomy 32:13)

The tradition is virtually unanimous in insisting that the “high places of the earth” can only mean the land of Israel (*Sifrei, Rashi, Radak, Ibn Ezra*). This passage is part of a *tokhekha*, i.e., a dirge of rebuke against the Jewish people for abandoning God. The *tokhekha* pattern is a brief series of promises and lovely descriptions, swiftly becoming a torrent of abuse. It begins with this rhapsodic verse, but, as soon as we reach line 15, “Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked,” it plunges downhill. The surface message was that “riding” has no necessary connection to horses, but Maimonides’ real message was that we ride high only when we recognize the Creator’s dominion. Otherwise, we become the ridden.

“If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, [from] doing thy pleasure on My holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honor Him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking [thine own] words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; *and I will cause thee to ride (v’ hi rkavtikha ) upon the high places of the earth*, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken [it].” (Isaiah 58:13-14)

Maimonides’ brief comment here: “that is, you shall have dominion over the highest (people) on earth.” But he knew that the language of the previous Deuteronomy passage inspired the parallel lyrics of Isaiah’s *tokhekha*.

Once again, the “high places of the earth” refers to Israel. Israel is “high” *because* its inhabitants “feed” from “the heritage of Jacob,” by keeping the Sabbath. The tone turns black at 59:2 (two lines later), when we hear that their “iniquities have separated” them from their God. Their “hands are defiled with blood” and their “lips have spoken lies,” perverting justice. The result is that they “hatch basilisk’s eggs and weave the spider’s web.” They perform the commandments by rote and without kindness, especially when it comes to the poor. “Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness,[but] we walk in darkness: we grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if [we had] no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night,” blind and ridden, like Balaam.

“[As for] *Samaria*, her king is *cut off* as the foam upon the water.... [It is] in My desire that I should chastise them; and the people shall be gathered against them, when they shall bind themselves in their two furrows. And Ephraim [is as] an heifer [that is] taught, [and] loveth to tread out [the corn]; but I passed over upon her fair neck: *I will make Ephraim to ride (arkiv efraim)*; Judah shall plow, [and] Jacob shall break his clods. Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for [it is] time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you. Ye have plowed wickedness, ye have reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies: because thou didst trust in thy way, in the multitude of thy mighty men.” (Hosea 10:7, 10-13)

Maimonides explains: “I (God) shall give him (Ephraim) rule and dominion; in this same sense it (“ride”) is said of God,” that is, just as Ephraim’s riding means rule and dominion, whenever God “rides,” it must be taken to mean rule and dominion.

That would all be fine, except that this could not be Maimonides’ point. While translators usually make *arkiv efraim* mean, “I will cause Ephraim to ride,” the passage should read, “I will cause Ephraim to be ridden.” That is how R. Aryeh Kaplan translated it in *Me’am Lo’ez*, following its author, R. Yaakov Culi (agreed: *Metsudat David*, Radak, Kara, Malbim). Leiser translated, “Now I will make Ephraim draw the wagon.” Rashi seems to read it literally, but only because he takes it as a condition that, “if you wish that I (God) should make Ephraim to ride upon the nations, then Judah must plow and break up his clods with the doing of good deeds,” *im tirtzu sh’arkiv efraim al aku”m, yekhoresh yehuda v’ysaded lo l’atzmo kharisha shel maasim tovim*. This passage does not teach that Ephraim (Samaria, the Northern Kingdom of Israel) has dominion. It teaches that since

the Ephraimites worshipped idols in their “high places,” the Ephraimites “shall be destroyed,” and their dominion shall be “cut off.”

The Rabbinic reader would realize that Maimonides knew this or he would not have quoted it with the prior two proof-texts, all of which concern Israel’s punishment. He would have recognized the reward and punishment trope, and wondered how it fit Maimonides’ declared theme (that traditional scriptures reflect contemporary cosmological postulates in metaphorical language), grasping it, instead, for the warning that it was.

Maimonides changed direction in the next several proof-texts, for now God is the rider.

“[There is] none like unto the God of Jeshurun, [who] *rideth (rokhev)* upon the heaven (*shamaim*) in thy *help*, and in His *excellency (gaavato)* on the sky (*shekhakim*). The eternal God [is thy] refuge, and underneath [are] the *everlasting arms*.” (Deuteronomy 33:26-27; *ayn k’el yeshurun rokhev shamaim b’ezrekh u’gaavato sh’khakim m’ona elokei kedem u’mitakhat zro’ot olam.*)

According to Maimonides, the meaning of “rideth upon the heaven” is that God “rules the heaven.” The “excellency on the sky” (*gaavato shekhakim*) describes the process by which God causes the revolution of the outer sphere merely by being the object of its love. It follows that, on one level, the Maaseh Merkava is about the link between divine psychology and cosmological physics, i.e., God’s world and our world. Maimonides also emphasized the transcendence of divine rule: that God “rideth” over the heavens, not as part of them, thus denying the core of Aristotelian/Ptolemaic cosmological doctrine. This cannot be overstressed: it is the reason for the last three proof-texts.

“Sing unto God, sing praises to his name: *extol him that rideth (la-rokhev)* upon the heavens (*ba’aravot*) by his name J-H, and rejoice before him. A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, [is] God in his holy habitation...  
The chariots (*rekhev*) of God [are] twenty thousand, [even] thousands of angels: the Lord [is] among them, [as in] Sinai, in the holy [place]...  
To him that rideth (*la’rokhev*) upon the heavens of heavens, [which were] of old; lo, he doth send out his voice, [and that] a mighty voice. Ascribe ye strength unto God: his excellency (*gaavato*) [is] over Israel, and his strength [is] in the clouds (*ba’shekhakim*).” (Psalms 68:4-5, 17, 33-34)

Since *rokhev*, ride, occurs in both Psalms and Deuteronomy texts, the Talmud, *Hagiga* 12b, derives that the “heaven” in Deuteronomy is identical to the *aravot* in this passage. The Psalm also repeats the term *gaavato*, which is that “excellency” which draws the highest sphere to Him in love. The Talmud in *Hagiga* proceeds to teach that the *aravot* is one of the seven heavens. Maimonides explained the relationship between the contemporary cosmological doctrine and that page from *Hagiga*:

“(God) rules the *aravot*, the uppermost, all-encompassing sphere. It has also been repeatedly stated by our Sages that there are seven *rekiim* (firmaments, heavens), and that the uppermost of them, the all-surrounding, is called *aravot*. Do not object to the number seven given by them, although there are more *reki’im* (heavens), for there are spheres which contain several circles (*gilgallim*), and are counted as one; this is clear to those who have studied that subject, and I shall also explain it (Guide 2:4); here I wish merely to point out that our Sages always assumed that *aravot* is the uppermost sphere. The *aravot* is also referred to in the words, ‘who rideth upon the heaven in thy help.’ Thus we read in Talmud *Hagigah*, 12b, ‘The high and exalted dwelleth on *aravot*, as it is

said, 'Extol Him that rideth upon *aravot*.'

As we will see ("The Meaning of *Aravot*," below), these seven heavens are not necessarily the same thing as the spheres, despite his saying that it was what "our Sages always assumed." The Talmud page sometimes refers to them as astronomical entities, but mostly as incorporeal forces, preserving both meanings along a continuum, not as homonyms.

"I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction: [and] the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was the Lord displeased against the rivers? [was] thine anger against the rivers? [was] thy wrath against the sea, that thou didst ride (*tirkav*) upon thine horses [and] thy chariots (*markvotekha*) of salvation?"  
(Habakkuk 3:7-8)

Maimonides quotes *Bereshit Rabba* 68:9 in explanation: "He is the dwelling of His world, the world is not His dwelling....the horse is secondary to the rider, the rider is not subservient to the horse; this is meant by 'Thou didst ride upon Thy horses.'" Maimonides concludes: "Consider and learn how they described the relation of God to the sphere, asserting that the latter is His instrument, by means of which He rules the universe." In Guide 2:29 Maimonides, in a different vein, quoted Habakkuk's question "Was the Lord displeased against the rivers?" He called this "figurative language...referring to the death of the Egyptians in the Red Sea." This links to the discussion of the Lexical term *merkava*, particularly in connection with the story of Pharaoh's chariots, which will be the hidden core of that lexical discussion.

### **MERKAVA (CHARIOT)**

1. The collective noun denoting animals used for riding, a collection of animals.
2. Four horses; four single animals; and, by extension (but unmentioned in our chapter), *four-ness*, the peculiar fourfold nature of all the basic forces and elements of the universe.

#### Instances of Definition 1, a Team of Animals, Contextualized:

"And Joseph made ready his chariot (*va' ye' esor yos ef merkavto*), and went up to meet Israel his father, to Goshen, and presented himself unto him; and he fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while." (Genesis 46:29)

*Ye' esor*, from *asar* or *asara*, means "to harness," (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 98). Maimonides wants us to conclude that harnessing is something done only to the horses, not the chariot. Even-Shmuel dubiously claims that we only harness the beast (*ain osrim ele et ha-behema l'keli o davar*), i.e., we tie the horse to the cart, not the cart to the horse. But none of that is as interesting as the link to Pharaoh's amazing chariots that Maimonides made by placing his proof-text about Joseph just before our next two proof-texts about Pharaoh.

"And he (Pharaoh) made him (Joseph) to ride in the second chariot (*mirkevet ha-mishneh*) which he had; and they cried before him, Bow the knee: and he made him [ruler] over all the land of Egypt." (Genesis 41:43)

Yehuda Even-Shmuel says the *mirkevet ha-mishneh* was "a chariot of two horses," *b'merkevet shel shnei susim*. From whom did he learn this? Commentators follow either Rashi, who said it was Pharaoh's second best chariot, or Nachmanides, who said it was the chariot of the second-in-command. The only apparent purpose for Maimonides' otherwise irrelevant citation was to call to mind *Midrashim* about Pharaoh and Joseph, and then, with the next passage, about Pharaoh and Moses.

“Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: *the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.... Pharaoh’s chariots (markevot)* and his host hath he cast into the sea: his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red sea.” (Exodus 15:1, 4)

Maimonides knew that the Midrash connected the chariots of Joseph and the Pharaoh of the Exodus. Here is Louis Ginzberg’s beautiful rendering:

“In his joy in anticipation of seeing his father, Joseph made ready his chariot with his own hands (eager to honor his father), without waiting for his servants to minister to him, and this loving action redounded later to the benefit of the Israelites, for it rendered of no effect Pharaoh’s zeal in making ready his chariot himself, with his own hands, to pursue after the Israelites.” (*Legends of the Jews*, v. 2, p.120, note 312; *Bereshit Rabba* 55:8; *Mekhilta Beshalakh* 2, in JPS 1933, v. 1, 198-199).

Talmud noted that Abraham also saddled his donkey in the binding of Isaac, rather than having others do it, because “love causes disregard of normal conduct.” Conversely, “hate, likewise, causes disregard of normal conduct,” since Balaam saddled his own donkey out of hate for the Jews (*Sanhedrin* 105b). Maimonides had these *Aggadot* at the back of his mind when he gathered proof-texts about Joseph, Pharaoh and Balaam, to make the point, for those who knew these connections, that when we “harness” the *Maaseh Merkava* in humility, we avoid the disasters that befell those magicians, Pharaoh and Balaam. The Rabbis would also recall that the *merkava* in these accounts was *not* the horses, contrary to Maimonides. The Midrash shows that the *merkava* was the chariot itself, apart from its horses. Pharaoh’s chariots were unusual: they go where their beasts do not! Ginzberg tells the story:

“Now the Egyptians tried to flee to their land in their chariots drawn by she-mules. As they had treated the children of Israel in a way contrary to nature, so the Lord treated them now. Not the she-mules pulled the chariots but the chariots, though fire from heaven had consumed their wheels, dragged the men and the beasts into the water (‘The chariots kept running ahead even in spite of the drivers.... now the chariots pulled the mules’). The chariots were laden with silver, gold....It was the wish of God that these treasures should come into the possession of Israel, and for this reason He caused the chariots to roll down into the sea, and the sea in turn to cast them out on the opposite shore, at the feet of the Israelites. And the Lord fought against the Egyptians also with the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. The former made the soil miry, and the mire was heated to the boiling point by the latter so that the hoofs of the horses dropped from their feet, and they could not budge from the spot.” (*Legends* v.3, 27; *Mekhilta Beshallakh* 5, 32a; my parenthetical interpolation is from Lauterbach’s *Mekhilta* trans., JPS 1933, v. 1, 240-241).

Moreover, why would Maimonides cite Exodus 15:4 to show that the horses are the *merkava*, when “horse and rider” had already been “thrown into the sea” in Exodus 15:1? The answer comes from another tradition about Pharaoh’s *markevot* brought down by the Baal ha-Turim (Jacob ben Asher, c. 1269 – c. 1343). When King Josiah destroyed the idolatrous chariots dedicated to sun-worship, “He burned the chariots of the sun in fire,” *v’et markevot ha-shemesh saraf ba’esh* (2 Kings 23:11). “The chariots of the sun” were chariots which raced eastward each morning to greet the rising sun, halting to worship at a shrine dedicated to that deity. Similarly, by having idols imprinted on his chariots, Pharaoh devoted them to idolatry (R. Avie Gold, *Artscroll Baal HaTurim Chumash*, 2004). Pharaoh, in Sabean fashion, made the god of the chariot a force that he could theurgically

manipulate. Pharaoh tried to defeat divine providence with Egyptian magic, unlike Joseph, who harnessed his chariot in humility, a clear warning to all students of *Maaseh Merkava*. Pharaoh's failed exploit recalls the ancient myth of the boy who tried to ride the *Merkava*: "Here Phaëthon lies who drove the Sun-god's car: greatly he failed, greatly he dared."

Instances of Definition 2, a Team of Four Beasts, Contextualized:

"And a chariot (*merkava*) came up and went out of Egypt for six hundred [shekels] of silver, and an horse for an hundred and fifty: and so for all the kings of the Hittites, and for the kings of Syria, did they bring [them] out by their means." (1 Kings 10:29)

Maimonides says, "Hence we may learn that *merkava* denotes here four horses ( $600 \div 150 = 4$ ); therefore I think that when it was stated, according to the literal sense of the words, that four *khayot* (beasts) carry the Throne of Glory, our Sages called this '*merkava*' on account of its similarity with the *merkava* consisting of four single animals." Rashi also concludes that a *merkava* is four horses. Since this one quotation would have made Maimonides' case, that a *merkava* is a quartet of beasts, why weaken the case with the other citations, which conjure opposed meanings? His objective was the same in the other proof-texts, which was to secure our understanding of *Maaseh Merkava* from the philosopher's astrophysical concept of it.

### **MERKAVA AND THE REVELATION OF FOUR-NESS**

At the end of the chapter, Maimonides relates the Throne of Glory to the *Merkava*. As we have seen, his *merkava* was not the chariot, but the horses. His conclusion that a *merkava* is four horses supported his nearly Pythagorean interest in the number four. Four *khayot* also held the Throne aloft in the vision of Ezekiel, which was why the Throne was called *Merkava*.

In Guide 2:10, he identified the *Merkava*'s four beasts with the four Aristotelian causes, also highlighting the four-ness of:

- The four Aristotelian elements;
- The four causes of the motion of the sphere (the sphere's soul, intellect, desire, and God);
- The four natures (the nature of minerals, plants, animals and the intellect);
- The four parts of the whole (the angelic intellects; the matter of the spheres; the sub-lunar hylic matter; God who created them).

He notes, "As to the number four, it is strange, and demands our attention." Four is the number of perfection, the square. He related it to several scriptural images: the four steps of Jacob's ladder; the four chariots of Zechariah 6:1; the four heavenly spirits of Zechariah 6:5. As to the four spirits of heaven, he affirms, "By these four spirits the causes are meant which will produce all changes in the universe." In Guide 3:22, Maimonides said that these ideas "came to me through something similar to prophetic revelation." Maimonides' prophetic revelation was that four-ness was the link between Aristotelian physics and the Jewish account of the *Merkava*. Just because there was that link, these two accounts are neither homonymous nor unbridgeable. ("Prophetic revelation" is Pines' translation. Kafih: *raa heikh husago li inyanim elu k'ayin khazon*. Schwarz has *hashra'a*, or, alternatively, *hitgalut*, instead of *khazon* for the Judeo-Arabic  $\text{חזון}$ ).

### **THE MEANING OF ARAVOT**

If we were to treat *aravot* as a Maimonidean lexical term with his lexical methodology, our first step would be to notice his quote-shard for that term, from Psalms 68:4. Then, based on his treatment, which includes Talmud *Hagiga* 12b, and his comments, we would ask whether there

were more than the one meaning he disclosed, i.e., that *aravot* is “the uppermost, all-encompassing sphere.” We would find that sometimes it is entirely incorporeal. This incorporeal entity qualifies as his second definition, although he does not say so. He expected his reader to puzzle that out.

Definition 1—*Aravot* as Outer Sphere: Maimonides cited the “Sages” for the proposition that *aravot* is the name of the outermost sphere, the largest corporeal entity in the universe. *Aravot*, either as sphere, or, more likely, heaven, is an unusual word. Variants of the root *arava*, “arid region, desert,” occur sixty-one times in the Bible, but only once as a heavenly entity. It may suggest *erev*, evening, since the diurnal rotation of the sphere brings on evening, and evening begins the day: “And the evening and the morning were the first day” (Genesis 1:5).

God governs the outermost sphere and, indirectly, causes it to move. This movement causes all the other spheres and everything in them to move. Maimonides here followed Aristotle, except in the number of spheres. He disagreed with the Talmud (seven), Aristotle (fifty-five) and Alfarabi (nine), advancing his version of the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic hybrid model, with eighteen outer spheres and eight spheres that do not revolve the earth (see excellent animation of the classic cycle, Astronomy Education at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, <http://astro.unl.edu/naap/ssm/animations/ptolemaic.swf>). He left open whether these spheres are epicyclical or eccentric. He summarized his cosmological doctrine in Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah*, ch. 3:

“1)...There are nine spheres. The one nearest to us is the lunar sphere. The second above it is the sphere which contains the star called Mercury. Above this is the third sphere, in which Venus moves. The fourth sphere is that to which the Sun belongs. The fifth, that of Mars; the sixth, that of Jupiter. The seventh, that of Saturn; the eighth, that in which move all the other stars that are visible in the sky, the ninth is the sphere which revolves daily from east to west. It includes and encircles all things...

2) Every one of the eight spheres in which the stars move is divisible into numerous spheres (*‘for there are spheres which contain several circles, and are counted as one’*), one above the other, like the several layers of onions. Some spheres revolve from west to east; others from east to west, as for instance, the ninth sphere, which moves from east to west. And between the spheres, no vacuum intervenes. 5) The number of all the spheres that revolve round the world is eighteen. The number of the small spheres that do not so revolve is eight....” (18 great spheres + 8 small spheres = 26 spheres. My parenthetical interpolation is from our chapter.)

His main point about the *aravot* is that God “rides” *upon* this sphere, not *in* it, like the Sabeian gods. Maimonides learned this from a Midrash, only partially quoted, though the entire quote is good for his doctrine (including Definition 2). The entire quote is:

“...The Lord is the dwelling-place of His world but His world is not His dwelling-place. R. Abba b. Judan said: He is like a warrior riding a horse, his robes flowing over on both sides; the horse is subsidiary to the rider, but the rider is not subsidiary to the horse. Thus it says, ‘That Thou dost ride upon Thy horses.’” (Habakkuk 3:8;

*Genesis Rabba* 68:9, Soncino translation)

“Place” yields to placelessness. God rules and causes movement without any physical connection, as remote cause. Just as in the relation of horse and rider, the rider controls the horse and is superior to it. Still, the concept of superiority is imprecise (*ee hakpeda*) since God cannot be compared with any other being.

Definition 2—Aravot as Incorporeal Entity: The part of this Midrash that he did not include was about the warrior’s flowing robe. The flowing robe could be taken to refer to the providential emanation of forms. *Aravot*, Definition 2, would then be the source of the forms in-forming all matter. Maimonides found this in the Talmud, *Hagiga* 12b:

“The *aravot*, in which there are justice, charity, right, treasures of life and peace, treasures of blessing, of the souls of the righteous, of the souls and the spirits of those to be born, and the dew by which God will at some future time revive the dead, etc.” (After these ten items, it adds, five lines later, “There too are the *ofanim*, the *serafim*, the ministering angels, the *throne* of God.”)

These are not material things. They are the forces that cause those things to exist in their proper order. Without these sustaining forms, things would revert to their unformed matter. There are ten of these in the quoted sentence. This is one of the several lists of ten in *Hagiga*, suggesting the ten *sefirot* of the later Cabalists.

The *aravot* was the place of the Throne, and we have seen that the Throne of Ezekiel’s vision was the *Merkava*. What Maimonides did not say here, but removes to Chapter 2:26, is that “Throne” means “feet.” He drew this from Onkelos’ rendering of “feet” as “throne” in the vision of the elders at Exodus 24:10: “And under His feet (*raglaim*), as the work of the whiteness of sapphire.” He defined “feet” as “cause” in Guide 1:28. We have frequently pointed out that “feet” is a euphemism for the male organ. We also learn that under the Throne is “snow,” which he identified in Guide 2:26 as hylic unformed matter.

These are critical ideas in the *Maaseh Merkava*. They show that the souls of men are generated through a process we only comprehend through the metaphor of procreation (see 1:7, on *yalad*, procreate/create). They also show that *aravot* is the locus of those forces of four-ness that in-form unformed matter. Thus, *aravot* in Definition 2 is like the Philonic *logos*, the “place” which was source of the emanation of forms, and therefore, not something spherical, as in Definition 1.

Especially important for *Maaseh Merkava* is the location in *aravot* of the “treasures of life.” These “treasures of life” are the forces generating the souls of men. It will turn out that the *khayot*, the four “living creatures” in Ezekiel 1:5, are the prophetic figure for this process of soul generation. These *khayot* are also the four cherubs of Ezekiel 10, cherub being the anagram of the consonants of *merkava*, a team of four “living creatures.” Maimonides only alludes to these ideas here (see Guide 3:1-7). They represent the emanative process of soul creation.

Aravot vs. Shekhakim: Yehuda Even-Shmuel argues that we should interpret the last paragraph of our chapter such that *aravot* represents the highest sphere, which moves the rest, while *shekhakim* represents the rest of the physical cosmos. He wrote:

“The Psalmist used the word *rakhiva*, ‘riding,’ in connection with *aravot* to mean dominion by means of divine power and will. In connection to the rest of the spheres, he used the term *gaava*, “excellency,” which teaches about power only. In the movement of the inner spheres the *will* of God is not involved, but only the *prior will* of God which created the fixed (*ha-kavua*) natural lawfulness (*ha-khokiot*) of this motion. Every time the highest sphere moves in its diurnal motion (*tenuato ha-yomit*) it is responsible for setting everything in motion, the movement of the parts and the movement of the whole.” (My trans., p. 388)

Even-Shmuel draws an excellent opposition between *aravot* and *shekhakim*, on the one hand, and between *will* and *power*, on the other. I would take it further. *Aravot* is a non-homonymous term with a second meaning unacknowledged by Even-Shmuel: it is the emanator of the forms of all things willed by God. If *aravot* is this *logos*, the *shekhakim* would be the physical cosmos. Even-Shmuel’s distinction would still apply, whereby the *aravot* is the realm of divine will *and* power, while *shekhakim* becomes the realm usually ruled by power and not will. The lawfulness of this natural order is the *gaava* of the *shekhakim*, “His excellency on the sky.” Even if we, unlike Even-Shmuel, read *gaava* as the source of the sphere’s motion (i.e., its desire for God), he was right to call it part of natural law, established by God’s “prior will.”

## THE SOUL AND THE MIND

Maimonides inserts here an important discussion about the “souls and spirits” of men mentioned in the *Hagiga* passage. He argues that Jewish tradition anticipated the philosophic distinction between the vitalizing spirit and the mind. The soul (*ruakh, neshama*) born to men is the animating soul. Without it, the body does not endure. When the bodily elements dissipate, this animating soul perishes with them. The enduring spirit, *nefesh*, by contrast, is the intellect that man acquires in the course of his life (see my discussion of Alexander of Aphrodisias in 1:68). This is the intellect acquired when potential knowledge of truth becomes actual knowledge. He announces the doctrine in Mishneh Torah, *H. Teshuva* 8:3-4:

“3) The ‘soul’ (*nefesh*), whenever mentioned in this connection, is not the ‘vital element’ (spirit—*neshama*) requisite for bodily existence (*tsrikha la-guf*) but that form of soul which is identical with the ‘intelligence’ (mind—*ha-dea*) which apprehends the Creator, as far as it is able, and apprehends other abstract concepts (*ha-deot ha-nifradot*) and other things (actualities—*maasim*). It is the psychic form, which we expounded in the Fourth Chapter of the laws concerning the fundamental principles of the Torah (, quoted below). And it is this which, in this connection, is called Soul (*nefesh*). That life, as it is immortal,—death being only incidental to the body, which does not exist in the hereafter—is called ‘the bond of life,’ as it is said, ‘The soul of my lord shall be bound in the bond of life [with the Lord thy God]’ (1 Samuel 25:29). And this is a recompense than which there is none higher; a bliss (*ha-tova*) beyond which there is nothing more blissful. And for this, all the prophets

yearned. 4) How many names have been metaphorically applied to it: ‘The mountain of the Lord,’ ‘His holy place,’ ‘the way of holiness,’ ‘the holy way,’ ‘the courtyards of the Lord,’ ‘the tent of the Lord,’ ‘the beauty of the Lord,’ the temple of the lord,’ ‘the house of the Lord,’ ‘the gate of the Lord.’ The sages metaphorically call this bliss, destined for the righteous, ‘the banquet’ (*la-tova zu ha-mezumenet la-tsadikim seuda*). Its general name is ‘the World to Come.’”

The passage asserts that the immortal soul is the active intellect, for which there are a series of biblical epithets or euphemisms, which are a key to many prophetic passages. Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah*, 4:8-9, explains the relation between the human soul and that intellect:

“8) *The vital principle (nefesh) of all flesh (basar—*as opposed to vegetation) is the form which God has given it. The superior intelligence in the human is the form of man who is perfect in his knowledge (*tsurat ha-adam ha-shalem b’daato*). To this form, the Torah refers in the text ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ (Genesis 1:26). This means that man should have a form which knows and comprehends ideas that are not material, like the angels, which are forms without body (*tsura b’lo golem*), so that (intellectually) man is like the angels.... It does not refer to the vital principle (*nefesh khayah*) in every animal by which it eats, drinks, reproduces, feels and broods. It is the intellect (*ha-dea*) which is the *human soul’s specific form (tsurat ha-nefesh)*. To this specific form of the soul, the Scriptural phrase ‘in our image, after our likeness’ alludes. This form is frequently called *nefesh, ruakh* (soul, spirit). One must therefore, in order to avoid mistakes, pay special attention to the meaning of these terms which, in each case, has to be ascertained from the context. 9) This form of the Soul (*tsurat ha-nefesh*) is not compounded of elements into which it would again dissolve. Nor does it exist by the energy of the vital principle (*ha-neshama*) so that the latter would be necessary to its existence, in the way that the vital principle requires a physical body, for its existence. But it comes directly from God in Heaven. Hence, when the material portion (*ha-golem*) of our being dissolves into its component elements, and physical life perishes (*v’tovad ha-neshama*)—since that only exists in association with the body and needs the body for its functions, this form of the [incorporeal] Soul, is not destroyed, as it does not require physical life for its activities. It knows and apprehends the Intelligences that exist without material substance (*ha-deot ha-prudot min ha-glamim*); it knows the Creator of all things; and it endures forever. Solomon, in his wisdom, said (Ecclesiastes 12:7): ‘And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.’”

This doctrine provoked opposition because its emphasis on the immortality of the *incorporeal* soul seemed to contradict the doctrine of *bodily* resurrection of the dead. But Maimonides had committed himself to the doctrine of resurrection in his Thirteen Articles of Faith (*Perush Ha-Mishnah, Sanhedrin*). He even mentioned resurrection in our chapter, reciting that the “dew” that revives the dead is in *aravot*. His answer to his opponents, in the *Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead*, his final writing, was that resurrection will be a miracle. It will occur but no one knows how. It can no more be explained than the creation of the world or the special providence of the Jewish people. What we can explain and must understand is the immortality of that intellect which comes from the *aravot*, Definition 2.

## WHO WAS THE TARGET AUDIENCE FOR GUIDE 1:70?

Concluding, Maimonides tells us to remember one point about *aravot* as the outer sphere, Definition 1. The best proof for the existence of God is proof from the diurnal movement of this outer cosmological sphere, which causes all other movement. Aristotle argued that we must trace all movement, back to a single unmoved mover, since an infinite causal series is untraversable. Maimonides prefers this proof to the proofs of the Kalām, which he debunks in the next few chapters. This gives him enough common ground with Aristotle to justify his assault on the Aristotle’s doctrine of the eternal uncreated universe in Book Two of the Guide.

This is his message to the Rabbis, who are the audience targeted by our chapter: they should welcome the Aristotelian recognition of the necessity for the existence of one God.

Ostensibly, however, he seemed to direct his lecture to the cosmopolitan intellectuals, asserting that Judaism anticipated their philosophy. For example, he speaks disparagingly of intellectuals who scoff at the Midrash:

“Consider how these excellent and true ideas, comprehended only by the greatest philosophers, are found scattered in the *Midrashim*. When a student who disavows truth reads them, he will at first sight deride them, as being contrary to the real state of things.”

The “student who disavows truth” is the intellectual who rejects Midrash as mere legend. Similarly, when Maimonides recounts the rabbinic cosmology from *Hagiga*, he warned the intellectuals:

“It has also been repeatedly stated by our Sages that there are seven *rekiim* (firmaments, heavens), and that the uppermost of them, the all-surrounding, is called *aravot*. Do not object to the number seven given by them, although there are more *rekiim*, for there are spheres which contain several circles.”

But the intellectuals are not his real audience. He employed this mild subterfuge to dispose the Rabbis favorably to his message, as well as for the following reasons. If he were to tell them directly that philosophy is natively Jewish, he would fail to persuade. By this method of indirection, he hopes to make them pause to consider those necessary philosophic doctrines that strengthen the Rabbis’ case against the most dangerous philosophic idea, the eternity of the universe, with its nature-bound god. This is the point he pounds home to the Rabbis in his proof-texts: God is the rider, not the ridden; do not fail to defend that truth or you become the ridden.

It may be too much to say, as Leo Strauss does of the Guide: “...it is not a philosophic book—a book written by a philosopher for philosophers—but a Jewish book; a book written by a Jew for Jews.” But if it is a book written by a Jew for Jews, not a philosophic book, it seems odd that the Guide’s actual audience divides almost evenly between the two camps. Historically, the strongest opposition to the Guide came from within the rabbinic camp.

It is fairer to say that Maimonides did not consider the question in our light. After all, the philosophers of Strauss' acquaintance are a much different breed than those of Maimonides' world. Atheist philosophers were nonexistent in that Judeo-Islamic universe, unlike twentieth century Berlin or Chicago. Besides, Maimonides did not consider such atheists to be part of respectable dialogue.

Maimonides thought that the Rabbis' interests were broad enough to make the sciences their own. The Guide, therefore, is, in a sense, both a Jewish and a philosophic book. He thought that this study could make the Jews better exponents of religious truths. Ultimately, his goal was for some of them to become prophets, with the Guide as their textbook.

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