

GUIDE 1:10 ASCENT AND DESCENT

This is a lexical chapter (See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide”). The terms *ascent* and *descent* introduce the theme of divine providence and its interplay with prophecy.

ALAH (ASCENT) **YARAD (DESCENT)**

1. Ascending and descending of a physical body.
2. Ascending and descending in greatness and power.
3. Intellectual processes: When we reflect on something beneath ourselves, we are said to descend, and when our attention is raised to a subject above us, we ascend.
4. Prophetic influence or “overflow” *from* God is called *yerida*, “descending,” while termination of the prophetic communication or the departure of the divine glory from a place is called *aliyah*, “ascending.”
5. Descending: used when divine punishment is visited upon man. Maimonides returns to *descent* (*yarad*) in 1:27, to show that Onkelos, the early Bible translator, usually rendered it with Aramaic euphemisms for divine “manifestation.”

Instances of Definition 2, Contextualized:

“The stranger that is within thee shall *get up* (*yaalei*) above thee very high, and thou shalt *come down* (*tered*) very low.” (Deuteronomy 28:43)

This verse is from the chapter known as the *tokhacha* (“rebuke”), Deuteronomy 28:15-68. That chapter tells of the punishments Israel will suffer for breaking commandments. The verse is an excellent choice for Definition 2 because it uses variants of both terms *alah* and *yarad*, while introducing the theme of divine providence. See essay below.

“And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe [and] to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on *high* (*elyon*) above all nations of the earth” (Deuteronomy 28:1).

This verse commences the short list of blessings preceding the *tokhacha* in Deuteronomy 28. By adopting the Torah, the people receive special providential beneficence. All others are subject to the natural forces. Notice that Maimonides gives us this verse out of order in relation to the verse above. This is his observance of the principle of “ascending in holiness.” See below.

“And the Lord *magnified* Solomon exceedingly (*lema’alah*) in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed upon him [such] royal majesty (*vayiten alav hod malkhut*) as had not been on any king before him in Israel.” (I Chronicles 29:25)

The passage is from the conclusion of First Chronicles, about the death of David and his son’s succession. It thus continues the theme of *intellectual progeny* (see Guide 1:7). Although this proof-text is only supposed to illustrate Definition 2 it certainly points to Definition 4 of *yerida*, inasmuch as the latter part of the verse, unquoted by Maimonides, is about the divine bestowal of “royal majesty” (*hod malkhut*) upon Solomon, who was “almost a prophet” (2:45). Definition 4 is about the providential bestowal of prophecy by God through a process of emanation, figuratively conceived as a *downward* motion.

Instance of Definition 2 and 3, Contextualized:

“In holy matters men must *ascend* and not *descend* (*maalin b'kodesh v'ayn moridin*).”

(Talmud, *Berakhot* 28A)

This rule is from the Talmud, not the Bible. Schwarz, footnote 3 *ad loc.*, gives sixteen citations for the rule in Talmud. In this particular case, the rabbis' concern is the succession crisis in the Yeshiva between Gamaliel and Eleazar b. Azariah. After Eleazar was promoted to head the Yeshiva, the question arose whether he could be deposed without committing a descent in “holy matters.” The Talmud passage is thus an example of Definition 3, about intellectual ascent and descent. The passage also links to the immediately preceding proof-text about the Solomonic *succession* (Definition 2).

The rabbis generally took the rule of ascending in holiness as a precept of personal or societal *conduct*. The idea is that our actions should always move toward intellectual and moral improvement. Maimonides, however, also seems to take it as a rule governing textual *content* and organization. He usually tries to set his definitions and proof texts in the order of ascension to holiness. That is why they frequently begin with the most physical or anthropomorphic use of a term. It also explains the odd way he arrays the proof-texts themselves, especially in this chapter, frequently treating later verses before previous verses. He does this with the two *tokhacha* chapter verses, above (Deuteronomy 28), and he does it again with the two verses about the Tower of Babel, cited below (Exodus 19).

Instances of Definition 1 and 3, Contextualized:

“And Moses *went up* (*alah*) unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel.” (Exodus 19:3)

Maimonides does not bring this proof-text for Definitions 1 and 3 in order, but throws it to the end of our chapter. Maimonides provides Definition 3 in one sentence, without quoting a text, just after the Talmud quote, above: “The two words (*alah* and *yarad*) are also applied to intellectual processes, namely, when we reflect on something beneath ourselves we are said to go down, and when our attention is *raised to a subject above us* we are said to rise.” It is only at the end of our chapter that he cites this verse as the example for Definition 3. What he means is that when “Moses went up to God” he went up in his mind, “raised to a subject above us.” Next, he invokes Definition 1, physical ascension. He cannot avoid the physical definition, since Moses really did climb the mountain, a historical occurrence. However, he says:

“...in addition to its *literal* meaning that Moses also ascended to the top of the mount, upon which a certain *material light* (the manifestation of God's glory) was visible; ...we must not imagine that the Supreme Being occupies a place to which we can ascend, or from which we can descend. He is far from what the ignorant imagine.”

Once again, as in Guide 1:5, he mentions the created material light (*or ha-nivra*) at the very end of a chapter, in connection with a physical definition of a term. He does not invoke this material light in a disparaging sense. The light appears in the imagination of the prophet in the moment of vision. See our section “The Created Light” in 1:5 above.

Instances of Definition 4, Contextualized:

“And I will *come down* (*v'yaradti*) and talk with thee there: and I will take of the spirit which [is] upon thee and will put [it] upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear [it] not thyself alone.” (Numbers 11:17)

This passage concerns the beginnings of the institution of the Sanhedrin, after the “burning” at Taverah. God talks “with thee,” Moses, not with the seventy elders, but afterward God “will take of the spirit which [is] upon thee and will put [it] upon them.” This is an apt illustration of the bestowal of prophecy, and of the political significance of prophecy. Definition 4 teaches that the Bible figuratively conceives the divine bestowal of prophecy as a descent.

Maimonides also placed this verse in our chapter because the rabbinic tradition grasped this succession from Moses to the Sanhedrin as a descent in holiness (Definition 3). Before this, Moses guided the people through his uninterrupted access to revelation, a level of prophecy the elders could not obtain. By contrast, the following proof-texts ascend in holiness because they are about the revelation at Sinai.

“And the Lord *came down* (*vayered*) upon Mount Sinai on the top of the mount: and the Lord called Moses [up] to the top of the mount; and Moses *went up* (*v'yaal*).” (Exodus 19:20)

This passage and the next, and the passage at the end of our chapter, all came from Exodus 19, about the initial reception of the Torah on Sinai. The thought is that when it says “And the Lord *came down*,” God does not physically descend but causes his divine emanation or *Shekhina* to descend upon Sinai. That is why Maimonides includes this passage under Definition 4. God’s emanative influence (*shefa*) can rest upon a person, making him a prophet, or upon a place, making it a sanctuary where divine communion can occur (Guide 1:9).

“And be ready against the third day: for the Lord will *come down* (*yered*) in the sight of all the people upon Mount Sinai.” (Exodus 19:11)

The idea is not that God descends, but that prophecy descends upon the people, “in the sight all the people,” meaning that they become “seers,” i.e., prophets.

“And God *went up* (*va'yaal*) from him (Jacob) in the place where He talked with him.” (Genesis 35:13)

The subject is the revelation during which God changes Jacob’s name to Israel. With this verse, Maimonides shifts to the topic of God’s *ascension* from revelation. At the conclusion of prophecy, God figuratively ascends from the prophet. That is why the passage, “And Moses went up unto God” (Exodus 19:3), is not an example of Definition 4, since in Definition 4 *ascension* indicates God’s *conclusion* of revelation to Jacob. By contrast, in Exodus 19:3, Moses ascends in thought (Definition 3) to *commence* the reception of the Torah.

“And he left off talking with him, And God *went up* from (*me'al*) Abraham.” (Genesis 17:22)

The Midrash, explaining this passage, states that “the Patriarchs are [God’s] heavenly chariot” (*Genesis Rabbah* 47:6, 82:6). When the prophet’s intellect is activated in the divine communion of revelation, he unites with the emanated intelligence, the active intellect, which equates to the *merkavah*, the divine chariot. Thus, Maimonides links several themes: prophecy, the Account of the Chariot, and God’s ongoing providence over His creations. Compare his *extra* definition of *alah* and *yarad* in Guide 1:15, where he says that the terms represent the ascent and descent of the prophet himself. See essay below.

Instances of Definition 5 Contextualized:

“Go to, let us *go down* (*nerda*) and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” (Genesis 11:7)

Maimonides reserves Definition 5 for the *descent* experienced when God punishes men. This quote and the next are from the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Maimonides explains that before God *descends* to punish malefactors, He first “visits” them (*pakad*). Thus, we should divide the text: “Let us go down” is the visitation, “and there confound their language” is the actual punishment. Rashi (on the next passage), quoting Midrash, explains that “He (God) did not need to do this (i.e., visit), except to teach judges not to condemn a defendant until they see the case and understand it.”

“And the Lord *came down* (*vayered*) to see the city and the tower, which the children of men (*bnei ha-adam*) builded.” (Genesis 11:5)

This quote precedes the one above in Genesis 11, and illustrates the actual visitation before the punishment, although it does not use the term “visit,” *pakad*. Maimonides’ odd textual arrangement constitutes an ascent, so to speak, because the visitation is better than the actual punishment.

More importantly, the verse invokes the term “children of men” *bnei ha-adam*, to describe the denizens of Babel. The Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 38:9, explains the significance of this phrase, as quoted and explained by Rashi:

“The sons of whom else [could they have been]? The sons of donkeys and camels? Rather, [this refers to] the sons of the first man, who was ungrateful and said: ‘The woman whom You gave [to be] with me’ (Genesis 3:12). These [sons of Babel], too, were ungrateful in rebelling against the One who lavished goodness upon them, and saved them from the Flood.”

See essay below, together with what I wrote on 1:7 in the section “Demons.” The “sons of men” receive a different *kind* of providential supervision than that granted to the Patriarch’s intellectual progeny.

“I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.” (Genesis 18:21)

This quote is from the account of Sodom in Genesis 18. God “visits” the “children of men” of Sodom who had sunk far below their human potential, thus removing themselves from the providential supervision that benefits those true to the Torah; indeed, when divine punishment comes, these “children of men” even lose the benefit of the general “providence” provided all other beings by nature.

PROVIDENCE: INTRODUCTION

Maimonides introduces his theory of divine providence in our chapter. At this early stage of the Guide, he develops the *exoteric* description of providence. The *esoteric* description of the mechanism of providence is the *Maaseh Merkava*, the account of the chariot found in the prophetic books of the Bible. He gives this esoteric mechanism systematic treatment in Book Three of the Guide.

His keynote is a non-lexical verse: “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?” (Psalms 8:4). We can divide the text in two parts.

The first half, “What is man (*enosh*), that thou art mindful of him?” notes man’s inferiority. Despite his inferiority, the psalmist exclaims that God remembers man for good: “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels.” This first half of the verse calls man *Enosh*.

The second half of the verse, “and the son of man (*ben adam*), that thou visitest (*tifkdenu*) him?” employs the term *tifkdenu*, “visitest him” (a variant of *pakad*, “visit,”) which Maimonides says is always used *before* God punishes man. In this half of the verse, man is called “*ben adam*.” Recall my essay “Demons,” on Guide 1:7. In that chapter, Maimonides wrote:

“Those sons of Adam who were born before that time were not human in the true sense of the word, they had not ‘*the form of man*’ (*ha-tzura ha-enoshit*) ...It is acknowledged that a man who does not possess this ‘form’ (the nature of which has just been explained) is not human, but a mere animal in human shape and form (*sh’eino adam eleh baal khai b’tzurat adam v’tavnito*). Yet such a creature has the power of causing harm and injury, a power which does not belong to other creatures. For those gifts of intelligence and judgment with which he has been endowed for the purpose of acquiring perfection, but which he has failed to apply to their proper aim, are used by him for wicked and mischievous ends; he begets evil things, as though he merely resembled man, or simulated his outward appearance. Such was the condition of those sons of Adam (*benei adam*) who preceded Seth...i.e., demons (*k’lomar shedim*).”

Thus, in the Psalms passage, the “son of man” is “visited” (before punishment) because he had not lived up to his human potential. By contrast it is Enosh, who is the son of Seth, and the grandson of Adam, (Genesis 4:26, 5:6), that God “art mindful of.” Enosh is Adam’s intellectual and moral progeny. He achieves the ‘the form of man’ (*ha-tzura ha-enoshit*). This is so despite his other faults, amply portrayed in the tradition. The Talmud, *Shabbat* 118b, recites of Enosh:

“R. Hiyya b. Abba said in R. Johanan’s name: He who observes the Sabbath according to its laws, even if he practices idolatry like the generation of Enosh, is forgiven, for it is said, ‘Blessed (“Happy” in JPS 1917: *ashrei*) is man [*Enosh*] that doeth this ... that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it (*mekhalelo*)’ (Isaiah 56:2): read not *mekhalelo* but *makhulo* [he is forgiven].”

The Midrash, *Genesis Rabba* 23:6, on Enosh, reminds us of Maimonides’ anthropology:

“‘And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enosh’ (Genesis 4, 26). Abba Cohen Bardela was asked: ‘[Why does Scripture enumerate] Adam, Seth, Enosh, and then become silent?’ ‘Hitherto they were created in the likeness and image [of God],’ he replied, ‘but from then onward Centaurs (*keintorin*) were created.’”

The Psalm, then, embodies the principle of divine providence. Those who are intellectual progeny of Adam, Abraham, and Moses are those God “art mindful of.” Those who are not such progeny, who in some sense are less than human, are “visited” and punished by God. They are called *beni adam*, but not *enosh*. Maimonides links our chapter 1:10 to Guide 3:17 with this Psalm. Guide 3:17 details the way providence works:

“It may be by mere chance that a ship goes down with all her contents (Maimonides’ brother died by shipwreck), ... or the roof of a house falls upon those within; but it is not due to chance, according to our view, that in the one instance the men went into the ship, or remained in the house in the other instance: it is due to the will of God, and is in accordance with the justice of His judgments, the method of which our mind is incapable of understanding. I have been induced to accept this theory by the circumstance that I have not met in any of the prophetic books with a description of God’s Providence otherwise than in relation to human beings. The prophets even express their surprise that God should take notice of man, who is too little and too unimportant to be worthy of the attention of the Creator: how, then, should other living creatures be considered as proper objects for Divine Providence! Comp. ‘What is man, that thou takest knowledge of him?’ (Ps. 144:3): ‘*What is man (Enosh), that thou art mindful of him?*’ (*ibid.* 8:8). It is clearly expressed in many Scriptural passages that God provides for all men, and controls all their deeds (many citations)... All that is mentioned of the history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a perfect proof that Divine Providence extends to every man individually. But the condition of the individual beings of other living creatures is undoubtedly the same as has been stated by Aristotle... I hold that Divine Providence is related and closely connected with the intellect, because Providence can only proceed from an intelligent being, from a being that is itself the most perfect Intellect. Those creatures, therefore, which receive part of that intellectual influence, will become subject to the action of Providence in the same proportion as they are acted upon by the Intellect.”

In Guide 3:51 he tells us more: man’s participation in divine providence is *directly relative* to his ability to fix his thought on God, to “keep God before him always.” Otherwise, he is subject to the law of nature, and not to providential benefit. Animals are only subject to *nature*. To the extent that men are not in the presence of God, they are in the grip of nature. Worse yet, those “children of Adam” who do not embrace their human potential become the subject of divine punishment, falling even below the level protected by the laws of nature. This explains why Maimonides begins our chapter with two passages from the *tokhacha*, that compendium of God’s providential benefits to the Jews, and of their horrible, even unnatural, punishments. The punishment of the evil cities of Babel and Sodom, the coming down, *yerida*, of their destruction, is the subject of three further quotes in this chapter, illustrating the same line of thought.

PROPHECY AND PROVIDENCE

The remaining quotations link providence to prophecy in the lives of Jacob, Abraham and Moses. Just as God brings down providence and punishment, so He also brings down the divine emanation that causes prophecy. Maimonides said this clearly in Guide 1:15, where he *again* considers the definitions of our terms *alah* and *yarad*,

ascent and descent. Observe the interplay between the treatment in our chapter and the treatment in 1:15. In that chapter, he says about Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:10-17):

“How suggestive, too, is the expression ‘ascending and descending on it (*olim v'yordim bo*)’! The ascent is mentioned before the descent, inasmuch as the ‘ascending’ and arriving at a certain height of the ladder precedes the ‘descending,’ i.e., the application of the knowledge acquired in the ascent for the training and instruction of mankind. This application is termed ‘descent,’ in accordance with our explanation of the term *yarad* (in our chapter 1:10).”

Maimonides in 1:15 maintains that the angels on the ladder are prophets. This passage should remind you of what Maimonides said in the Introduction to the Guide about the profession of Solomon (See my *Introduction I*, section C, “The Prophet Must Teach.”) Solomon reached the level of prophetic inspiration, *ruakh ha-kodesh*. He did not himself become a prophet, according to Guide 2:45, although, in his Introduction, Maimonides calls Solomon's parables as “prophetic.” We learned in the Introduction that prophecy is a three-step process. The prophet, having perfected his mind and morals, may, when permitted by God, *ascend* the ladder to revelation. He subsequently *descends*, bringing what he learned to the people, in order to improve their minds and morals. Having completed both steps, the prophet gains the *merit* to receive further prophecy. The prophet is a “chariot,” that is, a focus of divine communion with men. In our chapter, in Definition 4, we learn that God figuratively descends when bestowing prophecy. In Guide 1:15, we learn that the prophet descends to provide this gift to mankind.

The placement of part of the definition of *alah* and *yarad* in 1:15 may explain the purport of the first paragraph of our chapter. Maimonides repeats there what he said in 1:8 that the Guide is not a dictionary. We should not expect him to list all meanings of a term, just those that suit his purpose (*ele nazkir m'otam ha-inyanim ma sh'anakhnu tzarikhim lo l'inyanenu lo yoter*). We must ask, if this is not a comprehensive dictionary, what meaning of *alah* and *yarad* is excluded?

The answer is that our chapter is primarily about providence. The passage in 1:15 is about prophecy. Although the two are connected, he develops one theme at a time. Here he develops God's perspective. In 1:15, he develops man's perspective, specifically the perspective of the prophet. Maimonides thereby avoids confusing the *direction* of the flow: God's providential flow *descends* on the prophet as the prophet *ascends* Jacob's Ladder to receive the flow; the flow *ascends* returning to God as the prophet *descends* to bring the revelation to the people (cf. the discussion of the “downward way” and the “upward way,” in Kalman Bland, *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect*, Ibn Rushd, commentary by Moses Narboni, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1982, pp 3-4). Since the Lexicon is not a dictionary, it makes sense for him to divide the discussion of the ascent of the prophet in prophecy from God's ascent after the bestowal of His providence upon the prophet.

Yehuda Even-Shmuel's introductory comment to our chapter is apt:

“Until now we have seen how man ascends intellectually to God. There is an attainment higher than this, the attainment of prophecy. In prophecy, we witness the path that God takes toward man. Man cannot attain prophecy by his power alone, for God must emanate it upon man. As this emanation grows man ascends to the grade of prophecy, and as it wanes man descends.” (My translation)

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