

## GUIDE 1:3 FORM AND SHAPE

I continue to re-arrange these chapters in dictionary format, giving the full biblical quotations where Maimonides only gives them partially, with my comments. (See my explanation in Chapter 1:1 above, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”)

Maimonides’ purpose in this lexical chapter is to explain the difference between the *intellectual conception* of anything and the *physical shape* of anything (form vs. shape, *temura* vs. *tavnit*). He needs to do this in order to explain the following passage:

“Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of *similitude* (*temunah*) on the day [that] the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image, the *similitude* (*temunah*) of any figure, the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of male or female: The *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any beast that [is] on the earth, the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any winged fowl that flieth in the air.” (Deuteronomy 4:15-17)

Maimonides does not take the emphasized words synonymously. See my essay on this passage appearing after the dictionary sections below.

### **TAVNIT (SHAPE)**

1. Maimonides gives this as his *only* definition of *tavnit*: “The build and construction of a thing—that is to say, its figure, whether square, round, triangular, or of any other shape.” The term is never used in speaking of the qualities of God. (Derived from the verb *banah*, “he built”).
2. Blueprint, the pattern of a construction.
3. Purely imaginary shapes which happen to occur in prophetic dream visions. Maimonides does not give either Definition 2 or 3 as separate definitions, but I have, since the proof-texts themselves seem to demand it (see Friedlander’s explanatory note 3, p. 39, *ad loc.*).

#### Instances Of Definition 1 and 2, Contextualized

“According to all that I shew thee, [after] the *pattern* (*tavnit*) of the tabernacle, and the *pattern* (*tavnit*) of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make [it].” (Exodus 25:9)

“And look that thou make [them] after their *pattern* (*tavnit*), which was shewed thee in the mount.” (Exodus 25:40)

Rashi reminds us of a Midrash, where God showed Moses the pattern of a menorah of fire “upon the mount,” since Moses could not build the menorah merely from the verbal commandment he received. Maimonides thus subtly contrasts the use of *tavnit*, the *physical pattern* of a thing, from *temunah*, the formal, universal, intellectual conception of a thing. See essay below on *temunah*.

“The likeness of any beast that [is] on the earth, the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any winged fowl that flieth in the air.” (Deuteronomy 4:17)

The verse takes “likeness” as the purely physical likeness of a sculpted idol. See essay below.

“Then David gave to Solomon his son the *pattern* (*tavnit*) of the porch, and of the houses thereof, and of the treasuries thereof, and of the upper chambers thereof, and of the inner parlours thereof, and of the place of the mercy seat.” (I Chronicles 28:11)

This is similar to the pattern of the tabernacle and the menorah mentioned in the Midrash above. It is a physical pattern of a sacred space, and, like the patterns of those sacred objects, it is derived from prophetic inspiration.

### Instance Of Definition 3, Contextualized

“And he put forth the *form (tavnit)* of an hand, and took me by a lock of mine head; and the spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the inner gate that looketh toward the north; where [was] the seat of the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy (*ha-kina ha-maknei*).” (Ezekiel 8:3)

This is Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple defiled by the people’s idolatries. Maimonides wants us to understand “the form of an hand” as a dream image of Ezekiel’s, certainly not a physical attribute of God. This is a clearly negative, pejorative definition. Maimonides uses such definitions to indicate to us that we should avoid applying such terms as *tavnit* to God, or to interpret them so they do not apply to God.

*The Hand of God:* Sometimes the Bible uses the phrase “hand of God,” but without the addition of the term *tavnit*. Leo Strauss noted that “hand” gets no lexical chapter, but failed to explain why. When the “hand of God” comes upon a prophet, Maimonides says that it refers to the “terrible and fearful” moment when, by surprise and against his will, the prophetic vision seizes the consciousness of the prophet (Guide 2:41): “Under such circumstances the senses cease to act, and the [Active Intellect] influences the rational faculties, and through them the imaginative faculties, which become perfect and active.” In Guide 2:46 Maimonides explains this passage as “processes of a prophetic vision, and not...things that could be perceived by the senses of the body,” *lo sh’hem maasim mtziutiim b’khushim ha-galuim*. The prophetic process, and the role of the active intellect, is a central theme of the Guide, which we will have much more to say about in future chapters.

Perhaps we could also hazard the understanding that when man does God’s will he becomes the “hand” of God. Put differently, the hand of God is the Torah. God’s will is done when man follows the law, codified in Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah. Note that “hand,” *yad*, is the alternate title of the Mishneh Torah, *Yad ha-Khazaka*, “the Strong Hand.” In Hebrew, the letters of *yad* represent the number of books in Mishneh Torah, fourteen. By absorbing that “Strong Hand,” the Jew makes himself the “hand” of God.

### **TEMUNAH (FORM):**

Maimonides presents the following definitions of the perception of “form” in ascending order of incorporeality, progressing from 1) human sensory perception, to 2) the prophetic “sense,” to 3) the special perception enjoyed by Moses. Maimonides also uses the term to distinguish the notions that idolators imagine of their gods (see essay below).

1. Perceived physical shape: “Outlines of things which are perceived by our bodily senses, i.e., their shape and form.”
2. “The forms of our imagination (*ha-tzura ha-dimyonot shel adam*), i.e., the impressions (after-images) retained in imagination when the objects have ceased to affect our senses.” Also, dream images and images in visions.
3. “The true form of an object, perceived only by the intellect (*ha-inyan ha-amiti ha-nasig b’sekhel*): it is only in this third signification that the term is applied to God,” with respect to Moses’ special prophetic receptivity.

### Instance Of Definition 1, Contextualized

“Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of *similitude (temunah)* on the day [that] the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image, the *similitude (temunah)* of any figure, the likeness of male or female” (Deuteronomy 4:15-16)

See my essay on these verses, below.

### Instance Of Definition 2, Contextualized

“In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up: It stood still, but I could not discern the form (*mareihu*) thereof: an *image* (*temunah*) [was] before mine eyes, [there was] silence, and I heard a voice, [saying], Shall mortal man be more just than God?” (Job 4:13-16)

This is a dream-image, like an image I view in sleep, except that Eliphaz “could not discern” it, and he heard a silent voice (*d'mama v'kol*). Maimonides wants us to take this like the after-image of an object that had been presented to sight (Friedlander note 20, p. 40, *ad loc.*). This agrees with Rashi, who cites the tradition that what Eliphaz perceived was not really a prophetic vision, but more like his own inspired nightmare. Rashi is a usually reliable index to the Midrashic understanding of biblical passages, with which Maimonides would expect the reader to be familiar. Rashi says that Eliphaz perceived “like a person who shouts into a barrel, that the voice of the barrel shouts toward him. That is an echo, not the voice itself.” Again, while this is a definition of *temunah*, it is not the one that Maimonides is looking for.

### Instance Of Definition 3, Contextualized

“With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the *similitude* (*u'tmunat*) of the Lord shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” (Numbers 12:8)

Maimonides retranslates: “He comprehended the true essence of the Lord.” The verse contends that Moses’ apprehension of God is unique. Rashi, based on Midrash, explains Moses’ “similitude” of God is the same vision in Exodus 33:23: “and you will see My back” which Maimonides understands as the *consequences* of divine action, *what God does*. But Maimonides *here* defines the vision differently as the “*comprehension of the true essence of the Lord*,” (*iniano u-perusho v'amitat hashem yasig*), *what God is*, a more perfect apprehension than “you will see My back.” Friedlander, note 3, p. 40, anticipating an objection, denies that this contradicts Guide 1:37, which says that “no man can have a conception of the real existence of God.” Moses differs from all other prophets and all other men. Moses transcended his physical limitations when he fasted forty days on the mount. Maimonides wants us to understand here that Moses achieved unity with the active intellect, a more sublime notion beyond the apprehension of God’s creations. This third definition of *temunah*, then, represents Moses’ special power of perception on Sinai, which was purely spiritual and unencumbered by physicality. Moses did not receive prophecy through any intermediary. He received it through a direct connection with God (*Mishneh Torah, Yodei ha-Torah, 7:6*. But see R. Abraham ben Ha-Rambam, *Guide to Serving God*, p. 585).

## **HOW MAIMONIDES USES THE CONCEPTS OF SHAPE AND FORM**

The first word of the chapter in the Hebrew translations is *hoshvim* (Kafih and Schwarz. Ibn Tibon: “*y'hashev*.” Pines: “It is thought”). Friedlander translates:

“*It might be thought* (*hoshvim*) that the Hebrew words *temunah* and *tavnit* have one and the same meaning, but this is not the case.”

The italicized “It might be thought” is an acceptable translation. But it can be translated “some think.” If so, it means that there are people who think that the words *temunah* and *tavnit* mean the same thing. Maimonides may have in mind Onkelos, the Aramaic Bible translator. Both terms, *temunah* and *tavnit*, are important and need to be explained or differentiated because they both appear in an important verse (Deuteronomy 4:15-17):

“(15) Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of *similitude* (*temunah*) on the day [that] the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: (16) Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image, the *similitude* (*temunah*) of any figure (*semel*), the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of male or female: (17) The *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any beast that [is] on the earth, the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any winged fowl that flieth in the air.”

Onkelos treats these words synonymously. He translates them in both instances as *demut*, that is, “form.” The King James Version above uses two different but essentially synonymous words “similitude” and “likeness,” perhaps following Onkelos’ lead. Rashi follows this tradition. This is the tradition Maimonides disparages when he says that “some think” the terms have the same meaning.

Maimonides, by contrast, seeks different meanings for different biblical terms. He goes to great lengths to do so here. He begins by dividing up Deuteronomy 4:15-17 instead of presenting it as a single quote. He gives 4:17 *first*, which concerns the more corporeal term, *tavnit* (shape), since that verse only uses *tavnit* and not *temunah* (form). That verse clearly refers to the particular *shape* of an animal, not to its “form” either in its Platonic or Aristotelian sense. It tells us not to sculpt the shape of a bird or other animal for the purpose of worship. He then gives us 4:15-16 *last*, about *temunah*, leaving out that part of verse 16 that mentions the *tavnit*-shape of a male or female figure. Maimonides rearranges the passage to demonstrate an upward progression from physical *tavnit* to notional *temunah*.

He wants us to distinguish the way we understand God from the way idolaters understand their gods.

Certainly, we can interpret the *temunah* appearing twice in 4:15-16, under the term’s first definition: “Outlines of things which are perceived by our bodily senses, i.e., their shape and form.” That definition distinguishes *temunah* from *tavnit* (shape), but only in the sense that the former depicts shape as *beheld* by the senses; the latter depicts the actual material shape of the object *presented* to senses. That is subtle distinction, *tavnit* expressing the corporeal shape of the object, while *temunah* would be a mode or quality of the faculties of apprehension.

The complication is his comment that *temunah* “is used amphibolously (*m’supak*—ambiguously) in three different senses” (Pines trans.), listing them, as above. Perhaps he wants us to see if the second or third sense can also be used. Otherwise, the distinction he proceeds to draw from his first definition would be of small interest. This is a pattern of interpretation we should become familiar with in Maimonides, where he outwardly emphasizes one definition but wants us to also understand and substitute his other definitions, especially when he says that they are being used *ambiguously* and not *homonymously*. Here he outwardly portrays idolatry as the worship of the *shape* of a created being. But students of Maimonides know that he teaches a more complicated theory of idolatry than the mere adulation of sculptures that happen to be in the shape of creatures:

“During the times of Enosh, mankind made a great mistake, and the wise men of that generation gave thoughtless counsel.... Their mistake was as follows: They said God created stars and spheres with which to control the world. He placed them on high and treated them with honor, making them servants who minister before Him. Accordingly, it is fitting to praise and glorify them and to treat them with honor. [They perceived] this to be the will of God, blessed be He, that they magnify and honor those whom He magnified and honored, just as a king desires that the servants who stand before him be honored. Indeed, doing so is an expression of honor to the king. After conceiving of this notion, they began to construct temples to the stars and offer sacrifices to them. They would praise and glorify them with words, and prostrate themselves before them, because by doing so, they would - according to their false conception - be fulfilling the will of God. This was the essence of the worship of false gods, and this was the rationale of those who worshiped them.... As the years passed, [God’s own] glorious and awesome name was forgotten by the entire population.” (Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara* 1:1-2, Touger trans.).

He wants us to apply Definition 2 to the true nature of idolatry where *temunah* means “the forms of our imagination” (*ha-tzura ha-dimyonot shel adam*), rather than the perceived shape of things, Definition 1. Definition 3, Moses’ “comprehension of the true essence of the Lord,” cannot apply to Deuteronomy 4:15-17.

Thus, he could translate the passage, replacing the term “similitude” with “the forms of our imagination”:

“Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of *imagined form* (*temunah*) on the day [that] the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image, the *imagined form* (*temunah*) of any figure, the likeness (*tavnit*) of male or female.”

Maimonides wants us to recall his doctrine of the real nature of idolatry from Mishneh Torah. The idols were the “imagined forms” symbolized by them, i.e., the pagan gods taken as the souls of the spheres and other natural forces, not the shapes themselves, their physical instantiations. This is what makes idolatry so much more insidious than the mere adulation of graven images. When God spoke to Moses, by contrast, he saw *nothing*, no image whatsoever; no material image, sensory image, after-image, or dream image. He was not in thrall to his imagination.

Idol worshippers are different. What Maimonides meant in the Mishneh Torah passage was that, at least originally, sophisticated idol worshippers did not actually worship the sculpture but what they imagined was the force animating the celestial creature that the sculpture represents. In other words, the sculpture, by itself meaningless, channels the force of the god to the imagination of men. They believed that these divinities were God’s servants or helpers, so to speak, and honor God by honoring them. The sculpture allows them to focus their adoration of these created forces. This notion is the essence of the second meaning of *temunah*. It verges on the philosophic sense of “form.”

Maimonides is saying that at Sinai the people did not envision any imagined idolatrous “similitude,” *tevunah*, of a *created* being to which worship could be directed. The text then turns to discuss the actual sculpted creatures, male and female, bird and beast. Here the text addresses the actual physical requirements of the sculptor who represents the shape, the *tavnit*, of the creature in a manner that the worshipper will recognize and fear: “Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image...the likeness (*tavnit*) of male or female...of any winged fowl...”

The “forms of our imagination,” *tevunot*, not only include that which the idolaters worship, but also the “forms” of all those who employ any mediating concepts in their notion of God.

This distinction will become important in the first volume of the Guide. Maimonides starts by rejecting physical images of God represented in words. He then moves to reject conceptual images of God, including such advanced mediating abstractions as the “essential attributes” of God: power, will, creativity, and so on. Maimonides’ interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:15-17 is that these ways of viewing God through mediations are also “forms of our imagination,” condemned together with idolatry by the Torah.

Having disposed of these two definitions of the ambiguous term *temunah*, we have only one definition left, the unique vision Moses sometimes achieved, the “comprehension of the true essence of the Lord,” the comprehension only achievable through the active intellect in communion with the divine.

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