

GUIDE 1:41 SOUL

The theme of this lexical chapter is *nefesh*, which Maimonides variously defines: animating soul, blood, intellect, the surviving soul, and will. The soul is that which animates all animate beings, without which they no longer survive.

Just beneath the surface, the main idea is *repentance*, Heb.: *teshuva*. Why does Maimonides suppress this theme in this lexical chapter? Because Maimonides believes in the explosive idea that following the commandments is not enough to be good. One must also cognize abstract ideas in the divine science to be good. This will become clearer when we understand what Maimonides means by “good.” The process of *teshuva* necessarily involves such cognition, which, when verbalized, is called “confession.”

THE DIVISIONS OF THE SOUL

Shemona Perakim, “The Eight Chapters,” is Maimonides’ major work on ethics. It is the Introduction to the *Pirkei Avot* section in *Commentary on the Mishnah*. In *Shemona Perakim*, the term *nefesh* connects Maimonides’ psychology to his ethics, using some of the same proof-texts from our Guide chapter. The Guide quotes *Shemona Perakim* five times, and Maimonides expects his reader to be familiar with it.

Shemona Perakim applies a medical model to moral concerns. The physician should address all of a person’s problems: not just physical sickness, but psychological sickness as well. Moral sickness flows from a bad mixture of the divisions of the soul. Just as a physician should know the human body, the Maimonidean psychologist should know the divisions of the *nefesh*/soul. Maimonides builds upon the foundation laid by the Second Century physician Galen, who identified three division of the soul: the natural, vital and psychic. Butterworth and Weiss, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, Dover, 1983, p. 61, note 1, explain the Galenic system:

“The natural power is strengthened by nourishment, the vital power by music and cheerful news, and the psychic power by pleasant odors. These three powers have a bodily basis in spirits of fine vapor. The natural spirit is the vapor in the liver’s blood; the vital spirit is the vapor in the heart’s blood; the psychic spirit is found in the vapors of the brain.”

Medieval Muslim psychology extended these rather mechanical ideas with functional concepts developed by the Aristotelian school. As received by Maimonides this system featured five divisions of the soul: nutritive, sentient, imaginative, appetitive, and rational.

The Nutritive and Sentient Souls: Maimonides makes an important distinction. One might have thought that we share with animals the nutritive soul since all animate beings require nourishment (nourishment is the topic of the first two proof-texts below). This is an error. The term “nutritive soul” is equivocal when used with both men and animals. The same is true of the “sentient soul.” The donkey’s nutritive soul has nothing in common with the human nutritive soul other than the name. “Rather, every single species having a soul possesses a unique soul, different from the soul of another species,” *ibid.* p. 62. In explanation, he brings an important allegory. The light from the sun, the moon or a candle illuminate a dark place. We might think that the illuminations are identical. In fact, they are not. Since the *cause* of light is different in each case, (and, since, for Aristotelians, causation equals definition) there is no commonality between the different illuminations. Similarly:

“...The cause of a man’s sensation is the soul of the man; the cause of a donkey’s sensation is the soul of the donkey; and the cause of an eagle’s sensation is the soul of the eagle. There is no notion common to all of them (the sensations) except through equivocation. Grasp this notion, for it is extraordinarily marvelous. Many pseudo-philosophers stumble over it and therefore cling to repulsive views and opinions,” *ibid.*

Consider that this same paradigm would certainly apply to his notion of the homonymity of lexical terms used with both God and man. To say that “reason” or “life” are synonymous as “light” from moon or candle, despite their respective sources, reduces the real impact of this claimed equivocality.

The Imaginative Soul: The specific action of the imagination is *combination*. It combines notions, even if they cannot rationally combine. Thus, the vibrant imagination produces boats floating in air and thousand eyed animals. Maimonides’ antagonists, the Mutakallimun Muslim theologians, erred in holding everything imagined to be possible. They did not grasp that the imagination also combines impossibilities. The rational soul must recognize both the limits and the uses of the imaginative soul. Later in the Guide, we will learn the importance of the properly directed imagination in articulating prophecy.

The Appetitive and Rational Souls: The appetitive soul is the seat of all desire and repulsion, as well as the emotions and bodily actions that flow from desire and repulsion. There is no moral conduct unless this part of the soul is under the control of the rational part.

The Rational and the Immortal Souls: We perceive concepts through the rational soul. This soul divides into its practical and the theoretical parts. The practical part includes both planning and executing the satisfaction of our appetitive soul’s desires and repulsions. The theoretical part grasps the essence of the eternal things. The latter part is the only part that may achieve immortality, and only to the extent that it cognizes concepts in divine science.

The Meaning of “The Good”: Despite these divisions, the soul is a unity. Concluding his taxonomy, Maimonides makes the following provocative statement (*ibid.*, p. 64):

“Know that this single soul, whose powers or parts are described above, is like matter, and the intellect is its form. If it does not attain its form, the existence of its capacity to receive this form is for nought and is, as it were, futile. This is the meaning of his (Solomon’s) statement: *Indeed, without knowledge a soul is not good* (Proverbs 19:2). He means that the existence of a soul that does not attain its form, but is rather *a soul without knowledge, is not good.*”

A thing is “good” when it is *fit for or serves its purpose* (Guide 3:10, 3:13, 3:25, all quoting “Behold, it was very good,” Genesis 1:31, below). That is how it “attains” its form, by becoming more purely like it. The term “form” abstracts the common feature from individuals of a species. Thus, intellect is the common feature possessed, at least potentially, by all men, distinguishing their souls from other animals. Since “the intellect is this form,” if the soul does not cognize it is not good, since it is not serving its purpose. A man’s soul “attains its form” when his potential intellect cognizes and thereby acquires its actual intellect. It then *fits its purpose* and is, therefore, “good.”

Maimonides thus elevates the term “good” from a moral category to the truth dimension. Goodness is a fact, not a moral judgment. While Job may have followed the law “he was not wise,” that is, his soul was not serving its ultimate purpose by cognizing intelligibles in divine science. He could not do so, for his thought foundered on contradictions, such as the unjust oppression of the righteous. That Job was not “good” is then a *fact*, in the truth dimension, with no moral connotation of good/bad, paradoxical as that might sound. He did not become good until he humbly paused before those apparent contradictions, and recognized that there could be no irrationality in God’s providential regime.

TESHUVA

The rest of *Shemona Perakim* applies ideas about psychological imbalances from Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, with certain trademark Maimonidean twists. His ultimate solution of these ethical/psychological disorders is repentance, *teshuva*. Maimonides wrote a book on this topic as well, the section of Mishneh Torah called

Hilkhot Teshuva. “Turning” is the central idea of the Hebrew term *teshuva*, a *turning* back to one’s true self. There is a system of retributive justice integral to *teshuva* (see essay below, “Repentance and the Divine Will”).

Teshuva is what connects our chapter to the prior succession of chapters. Job “turns” only when he appreciates God’s “hovering” providentially over creation (*yekheraf*, Guide 1:39, Job 27:6; *merakhefet*, Guide 1:40, Genesis 1:2). In the case of Job, it means he finally becomes wise, i.e., good, when his soul is in-formed by his intellect, which is its *purpose*.

Teshuva, according to Maimonides, involves a series of acts. First and foremost, the penitent must *confess* his transgression (Mishneh Torah, *H. Teshuva*, 1:1). Confession is a verbal act flowing from an intellectual cognition. Secondly, the penitent must *change*. Job does both, thereby becoming “good” by becoming wise, since only then was his soul fitted for its ultimate purpose. All men must make this “turn,” transforming their *potential* intellect to actual intellect. This is the message of this chapter.

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This is a lexical chapter. See the explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”

NEFESH (SOUL) Homonym

1. The animating soul of all animate beings. Not applicable to God.
2. Blood. Possibly the “nutritive” soul.
3. Reason/rationality, especially “practical” reason, as opposed to “theoretical” reason. The potential intellect.
4. The surviving soul, in which the “theoretical” reason achieves immortality. The acquired/active intellect, which is immortal.
5. Will. This is the only definition used with God.

Instance of Definition 1, *Life Force*, Contextualized:

“And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which [is] upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which [is] the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat (*l’ekhol*-for food). And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein [there is] life (*nefesh khayah*, i.e., living soul), [I have given] every *green herb* for meat [food]: and it was so. And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, [it was] very good (*v’hinei tov meod*). And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.” (Genesis 1:29-31)

This is not the first use of *nefesh* in the Torah, which occurs at 1:20, the fifth day, when God created the animal creatures. Maimonides does not use that passage since he wants to underscore a specific point: man was to be herbivorous. God mandated vegetarianism until the time of Noah, when He allowed the eating of meat. We explain the reason in the next proof-text. The other feature of the above passage for Maimonides is the idea that just before the first Sabbath, upon the conclusion of the actual creation, everything is said to be “very good,” *v’hinei tov meod*. In Guide 1:54, 3:10, 3:13 and 3:25, he argues that “very good” means *eternally* fit for the purposes intended. It is not a moral but a factual statement. The idea is that, *contra* the Kalam theologians, the universe is *eternal*, because it is “very good.” Some of Kalam asserted that the universe would end. They did not understand that creation is “very good” and not just “good.” Things that are *only* “good” are fit for their purposes for a time, but not eternally. When Moses saw all God’s “goodness” pass before him (Exodus 33:19, Guide 1:54) he saw the *permanent* nature of all things, their relationships, and their divine governance. In 3:10, Maimonides explains that since it is all “very good” we cannot attribute evil to God: “no evil comes from above.” Evil is

impermanent. Rabbi Meir explained that *v'hinei tov meod*, “and behold it was very good,” could be understood as *v'hinei tov mavet*, “and behold (even) death is good” (Midrash *Genesis Rabbah*, section 9:5). Death permits the successiveness necessary for the continuance of the species. As a corollary, at 3:25, Maimonides explains that we can never attribute any vain, purposeless or unimportant act to God. His acts are all purposeful and rational, though we do not understand their purposes. This is another attack on a key Kalam principle: they held that the universe is irrational. They did not understand that since it is “very good” it is rational through and through.

Instance of Definition 2, *Blood*, Contextualized:

“Only be sure that thou eat not the blood: for the blood [is] the life; and thou mayest not eat the *life* (*ha-nefesh*) with the flesh.” (Deuteronomy 12:23)

Rashi explains the traditional understanding, which Maimonides shares: “Since it says ‘Only be sure’ (*rak khazak*, i.e., resist temptation), you learn that the (Israelites) were *inclined* to eating blood. Therefore, it is necessary to state, “‘Only be sure...; And thou mayest not eat the *life* with the flesh,’ this is an admonition against *ever min ha khai*, (the eating of) a limb from a live animal.” Maimonides juxtaposes his first two proof-texts to emphasize that God originally meant men to be vegetarian. God only allowed meat after Noah. The command to avoid blood and not to eat “the life” preserves man from bestiality. Man must not imagine he makes himself more vital by eating blood or consuming the vibrant limb of a living beast. Such imaginations lead to idolatry, as he explains in Guide 3:46:

“For the eating of blood leads to a kind of idolatry, to the worship of spirits. Our Law declared the blood as pure, and made it the means of purifying other objects by its touch.... (quoting three passages about ritual purification by blood sprinkling). Also the blood of those beasts that were killed for common use, and not for sacrifices, must be poured out, ‘Thou shalt pour it upon the earth as water’ (Deuteronomy 12:24). We are not allowed to gather and have a meal round the blood, ‘You shall not eat round the blood’ (Leviticus 19:26). As the Israelites were inclined to continue their rebellious conduct, to follow the doctrines in which they had been brought up, and which were then general, and to assemble round the blood in order to eat there and to meet the spirits, God forbade the Israelites to eat ordinary meat during their stay in the wilderness: they could only partake of the meat of peace-offerings. The reason of this precept is distinctly stated, viz., that the blood shall be poured out upon the altar, and the people do not assemble round about.”

Only in the imagination does the blood of animals have this quality, for in reality, as explained above, the blood of the animal soul shares no common feature with the human’s vital soul. The nutritive soul, to which the blood is central, though applied to both men and animals, is homonymous term.

Instance of Definition 3, *Intellectual Soul*, Contextualized:

“So Zedekiah the king swore secretly unto Jeremiah, saying, [As] the Lord liveth (*khai ha-shem*), that made us this *soul* (*ha-nefesh*), I will not put thee to death, neither will I give thee into the hand of these men that seek thy life.” (Jeremiah 38:16)

The minions of King Zedekiah of Judah threw Prophet Jeremiah into a pit for predicting the capture of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar’s siege tightens, forcing the King to seek Jeremiah’s advice. Jeremiah fears more punishment since he only has bad tidings. To allay his fear, the King swears not to kill him by the *intellect* they both share. Since Maimonides has placed this as an example of Definition 3, we must understand that the soul they both share is the rationality and intellect that God endowed man. Nevertheless, the two men’s minds are different. Zedekiah “did evil in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 24:19; Jeremiah 52:2). He ignored Jeremiah’s advice to surrender. The enemy captured the city, blinded the King, and exiled him. Jeremiah and Zedekiah share, to some extent, the human rational soul, however, this shared reason was not the *immortal* soul (see next proof-text). Since Zedekiah “did evil in the sight of the Lord,” he had not acquired any of the immortality that Jeremiah’s soul shared with God.

Khai ha-Shem. The critical feature of this verse for Maimonides is the oath “as the Lord liveth,” *khai ha-shem*. *Khai*, “life,” is the lexical subject of the next chapter. Maimonides addresses this oath in several places, most significantly for us in the final pages of *Shemona Perakim*. He explains that the Kalam err in thinking God and His attribute of life are two separate things. If that were the case, the attribute of life would be eternal *with* God.

That would create multiplicity, but God is one and simple. The Kalam thought that the attributes had independent significance, going so far as to make the Divine intellect an eternal attribute called the Qur'an. All of this Maimonides rejects. He takes their adage, "God is living in virtue of life," and negates it by saying, "God is living, *but not* in virtue of life." All of the divine attributes are identical with Him: when *we* use these terms they are homonymic anthropomorphisms. The proof is in this proof-text. Maimonides asserts that we may not use the expression *khei ha-shem* (the life of God), as we do *khei nafshekha* (the life of the soul) or *khei faro* (the life of Pharaoh), but we must rather vocalize *khai ha-shem* (God lives), as scripture does here. Otherwise, we introduce multiplicity into the divine, which is not wise.

Instance of Definition 4, *Eternal Soul*, Contextualized:

"Yet a man is risen to pursue thee (David), and to seek thy soul: but the *soul (nefesh)* of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God; and the souls of thine enemies, them shall He sling out, [as out] of the middle of a sling." (1 Samuel 25:29)

This is the story of David, Nabal and Abigail. David seeks to quarter his soldiers with the cheapskate Nabal, who rejects his request. The enraged David swears that he will slaughter Nabal and his men. Nabal's wife Abigail, through her large gifts and larger prayers, persuades David to abandon his oath to slaughter Nabal's men. When niggardly Nabal learns of her largesse, he dies from the shock. Abigail marries David. Maimonides comments here that *nefesh* "denotes also the part of man that remains after his death." The passage shows that David is a righteous man whose soul will not die like the souls of his evil enemies. Rather it will be "bound up in the bundle of life" in the world to come. The phrase "bound in the bundle of life" is common in Jewish funerary observances. Maimonides explains, in Mishneh Torah, that when we mention *nefesh* in connection with the honorable dead, it represents the acquired intellect, which is the form of the soul of man (*H. Teshuva*, 8:3). This survives death, "death being only incidental to the body," to achieve eternal bliss in the world to come, and is the "recompense than which there is none higher, a bliss beyond which there is nothing more blissful." It is the true reward for *teshuva*/repentance, for it is the return to our true self.

Instances of Definition 5, *Will*, Contextualized:

"He sent a man before them, [even] Joseph, [who] was sold for a servant...He (Pharaoh) made him (Joseph) lord of his house, and ruler of all his substance: To bind his princes at his *pleasure (be-nafsho)*; and teach his senators (lit. "elders") wisdom (*u'zkenav ykhakem*)." (Psalms 105:17, 21-22)

Just as he did in the last couple of chapters, Maimonides identifies his lexical term with the concept of *will*, especially when used with God. Here it is the will of Pharaoh to make Joseph's will his own will in the administration of the royal estates. In Guide 3:54 Maimonides explains that *u'zkenav ykhakem*, "teach his elders wisdom" means to impart moral wisdom "that is developed by old age alone." The point is that the young but prophetic Joseph was able to impart the wisdom usually associated with age to those "elders" of Pharaoh's court.

"To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David. Blessed [is] he that considereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him, and keep him alive; [and] he shall be blessed upon the earth: and Thou wilt not deliver him unto the *will (be-nefesh)* of his enemies. The Lord will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing: Thou wilt make all his bed in his sickness." (Psalms 41:1-3)

Considering the poor is a form of humility, self-abnegation. Thus, we act in place of God, who is usually their only support. It is a way of making His will our will. Divine providence saves us from "the will of (our) enemies" when we align our will with God's will. This is a frequent Maimonidean trope.

"And Abraham stood up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, [even] to the children of Heth. And he communed with them, saying, If it be your *mind (nafshekem)* that I should bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and intreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar," (Genesis 23:7-8)

This passage is about the purchase of the patriarchal burial ground of Makhpela, at Hebron. Abraham is able to acquire rights in the land because he aligns his will with the wills of the indigenous inhabitants. He exchanges their material desires (his money) for his spiritual needs (remembrance of the souls of his dead).

“Then said the Lord unto me, though Moses and Samuel stood before me, [yet] my *mind (nafshi)* [could] not [be] toward this people: cast [them] out of my sight, and let them go forth.” (Jeremiah 15:1)

“And I will raise me up a faithful priest, [that] shall do according to [that] which [is] in mine heart (*bi-lvavi*) and in my mind (*u-b'nafshi*): and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever.” (I Samuel 2:35).

“And they *put away* the strange Gods from among them, *and served the Lord*: and His *soul* was grieved for the misery of Israel (*v'tiktzar nafsho b'amal yisrael*).” (Judges 10:16)

See essay below for these three prooftexts.

REPENTANCE AND THE DIVINE WILL

Maimonides' concern, in the bulk of our chapter, is the apparent contradiction raised by the scriptural accounts of divine retribution. The final three proof-texts perfectly reflect both the dilemma and Maimonides' solution to it. If God is one, perfect and eternal, then how can we explain passages in which He seals men's fates and then repents of it?

Five principles explain these cases (*Shemona Perakim*, ch. 8; *Mishneh Torah*, *Teshuva*, ch. 5-6).

1. The Identity of God and His Thought. Maimonides always begins by stressing the identity of divine essence and intellect. This identity is so sublime and obscure that we can never comprehend it. We can no more conceive His thought than grasp His essence. Thus, we do not understand how God can know all creatures and their acts, past and future. What we do not understand, we ascribe to divine will, Definition 5 of *nefesh*. “How” He knows, “when” He knows, belong to this subject of *will*.

2. Absolute Human Free Will. Yet, “we know beyond a doubt that a human being's activities are in his own hands and the almighty neither draws him on, nor decrees that he should act thus or not thus” (*Teshuva*, 5:5). Maimonides rejects Islamic fatalism and its Jewish imitators.

3. All Sins are Punished. There is always punishment for sin, and “God knows the way in which punishment shall be expected” (*Teshuva*, 6:1-2). How will this justice work out in this world and the next?

“In the case of some sins, justice requires that the sinner should be punished for his sin in this world, corporally or pecuniarily or through his little children; for a man's little children, who have as yet no understanding and have not arrived at the age of religious obligation, are their father's quasi-property (*k'kinyano hem*) and the text, *every man shall be put to death for his own sin* (Deut. 24:16) implies that one is not personally liable till he is an adult. Again, there are sins where justice requires that the punishment be inflicted in the life hereafter and the transgressor suffers no hurt here on earth. Other sins again there are, for which the penalty is exacted here and hereafter. The foregoing only applies in the case the sinner has not repented. But if he repented, repentance serves as a shield against punishment. And as one sins, prompted by one's own mind and of his free will, so one repents, prompted by one's mind and will.”

4. Repentance Denied. The hardest part of this system of justice to explain, and which scripture ascribes to “will,” is the *denial* of repentance. This is a special form of punishment. Maimonides writes that twenty four sins hinder repentance and five of them completely bar the transgressor from *teshuva*. In the latter, man voluntarily places himself outside of any *process* of repentance: i.e., he leaves the community; opposes the sages; mocks the law; condemns teachers; resists rebuke. The denial of repentance is a punishment balanced “measure for measure” against these five transgressions. The reason is that the punishment for certain sins is the closure (*noalin*) of man's will to repent (*Teshuva* 4:2). In these cases, it looks like man lost the free will that he possessed under Principle 2. Moreover, God appears in these dramas as an enraged actor who changes men's fate. In the case of the “hardening” of Pharaoh's “heart,” and the three final proof-texts of our chapter, the punishment

appears as a *fate*, a removal of the free will guaranteed by Principle 2—despite that it flowed from the sinner's own choice.

5. Teshuva Transcends All. Nonetheless, after enumerating the twenty-four sins that hinder repentance, including the five that completely deny it, he writes, at the very end of that chapter (4:6):

“All offenses enumerated above, and their like, though they hinder repentance, do not prevent it, *sh'myakvin et ha-teshuva einan monin otah*. If a person repents of them he is accepted as a penitent and will have a portion in the world to come, *harei ze baal teshuva v'yesh lo khelek l'olam haba*.”

Again, though it looks like God condemns men, and sometimes regrets having done so; they are the real cause of these events.

With the background of these five principles, Maimonides' choice of the three proof-texts for *nefesh* as divine will (the first three were of human will) fall into place. The first is from Jeremiah:

“Thus saith the Lord unto this people, Thus have they loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the Lord doth not accept them; He will now remember their iniquity, and visit their sins. Then said the Lord unto me, *Pray not* for this people for [their] good. When they fast, *I will not hear* their cry; ... I will pour *their* wickedness upon them (*v'shafakhti aleihem et raatam*) ... Then said the Lord unto me, though Moses and Samuel stood before me, [yet] my *mind (nafshi)* [could] not [be] toward this people: cast [them] out of my sight, and let them go forth.” (Jeremiah 14:10-12, 16, 15:1)

The context is a series of droughts associated with the reign of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, who reinstated pagan worship in the Temple (15:4). God warns Jeremiah: prayer will not save the unrepentant Jews. Several times he prays for their forgiveness. God repeatedly tells him not to pray. God rejects him each time, since the Jews themselves have not performed a full repentance. Even were Moses and Samuel to stand in their graves to intercede for them, God will punish them.

Repentance requires confession and change. Confession is the central principle in repentance. Despite its verbal aspect, confession requires pure intent. It then becomes intellectual communion with God. Also necessary is the *turn* from the repented conduct and recompense of its victims. The understanding of the passage is that Moses and Samuel were the great intercessors with God to protect the Jews from the consequences of sin, but God would ignore even them if the people did not perform a sincere and complete repentance first. Their punishment flows directly from their acts, “I will pour *their* evil upon them.” Their sins were serious enough that they were denied repentance under Principle 4. By their own actions they lost their freedom of will. This loss scripture projects upon God, “My will (*nafshi*) could not be toward this people.”

Maimonides treated the next proof-text in Guide 1:39. See my notes there regarding the sons of Eli who were replaced by his real intellectual progeny, Samuel and Zadok, who align their will with God's will:

“Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord: for men (Eli's sons) *abhorred the offering* of the Lord. Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled [at] the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.... Nay, my sons; for [it is] no good report that I hear: *ye make the Lord's people to transgress*.... Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord *would slay* them. Behold, the days come, that I will *cut off thine arm*, and the *arm of thy father's house*, that there shall *not be an old man* in thine house.... and there shall not be an old man in thine house *for ever*.... all the increase of thine house shall *die in the flower of their age*.... And this [shall be] a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas; in one day they shall die both of them. And I will raise me up a faithful priest, [that] shall do *according to [that] which [is] in mine heart (bilvavi)* and in my mind (*u'v'nafshi*): and I will

build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever.” (I Samuel 2:17, 22, 24-35 31-34, 35).

The passages describe events that led to the loss of the priesthood by the clan of Eli, a momentous change in early Jewish history. Worse yet, his sons and progeny are *fated* to die young. Eli’s son’s abused their holy office. These sins are so serious that the sons lose control of their destinies. Because they did not repent God “would slay them.” By causing the “Lord’s people to transgress,” they placed themselves beyond their community and outside the process of repentance. (Eli’s descendants die young? See Talmud, *Rosh Hashana* 18a. God “would slay them”? *Niddah*, 70b. What were their sins? See *Shabbat* 55b, *Yoma* 9a, Rabbeinu Yonah’s *Shaarei Teshuva*, 4:16. Generally, see Radak on 1 Sam. 2:25)

The final passage reverses the trend. In this account, the Jews committed idolatry, and God ignores their vague attempt at repentance. Their actions blocked their repentance. They are “sold” to their horrible fate. But then they turn, confess, and change: they perform a perfect *teshuva*, and their fate changes:

“And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim,... and forsook the Lord, and served not him... And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel, and He *sold* them into the hands of the Philistines.... Israel was sore distressed. And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, saying, We have sinned against Thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Baalim. And the Lord said unto the children of Israel, [Did] not [I deliver you] from the Egyptians, and from the Amorites, from the children of Ammon, and from the Philistines? ... ye cried to Me, and I delivered you out of their hand. Yet ye have forsaken Me, and served other gods: *wherefore I will deliver you no more*. Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation. And the children of Israel said unto the Lord, *We have sinned*: do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto Thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day. And they *put away* the strange Gods from among them, *and served the Lord*: and His *soul* was grieved for the misery of Israel (*v’tiktzar nafsho b’amal yisrael*).” (Judges 10:6-7, 9-16)

Maimonides devotes half the chapter to explaining the four words quoted. He rejects the translation given above. He takes the phrase, *v’tiktzar nafsho b’amal yisrael* to mean that His will was literally “shortened” (*tiktzar*) or cut off *from* continuing the misery of the people. This very circular reading protects God from the emotion of grief suggested by KJV’s not unreasonable translation: “His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.”

He says that since God cannot be the passive object of passion, Jonathan, the ancient Aramaic translator, left the passage untranslated. He alleges, not entirely convincingly, that Jonathan understood *nefesh* under Definition 1, the animal soul, which he would not attribute to God.

Modern editions, however, show a translation by Jonathan, which seems to be the inspiration for KJV: *v’akat nafshia b’amal yisrael*, where *akat nafshia* is Aramaic for grieve, Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1074, 1105, 1109. But Kafih asserts that ancient Yemenite texts at his disposal agree with Maimonides that Jonathan did not translate the passage (footnote 17, *ad loc.*). He passionately condemns variant texts of *Targum Yonatan*, calling them the “work of fools” which it is a “mitzvah to erase.”

At first, the Jews’ devotion to idolatry removed them from the process of repentance. They excluded themselves from the holy community by their acts. God seals their doomed fate. Yet the supervening power of true repentance, Principle 5, retains its force. Man can change his “fate” even at this extremity. This *miracle* is so incomprehensible that scripture frames it as though God changed His mind.

Describing Jonathan’s version, Maimonides says, “He understood *nafsho* in its first signification (i.e., Definition 1, the force that maintains life in any living being) and finding, therefore, in these words sensation applied to God, omitted them from his translation.” But God has no other attribute or part that keeps Him in life. He is His life, a

perfect and simple identity. More to the point, since God has no sensations or feelings He was not moved by the Jews' plight. The preceding verses clearly show that He was not moved. Rather, the Jews turned themselves. They chose to return to His system of retributive justice by performing a perfect repentance. They changed their own fate, a process that scripture calls *v'tiktzar nafsho b'amal yisrael*. Since Jonathan did not realize that *nafsho* here could be translated as *will*, signaling this system, he left it untranslated. The peculiarly inhibited language of the scriptural author of *v'tiktzar nafsho b'amal yisrael*, as well as Jonathan's reserve, register the inexpressible design of divine justice.

Maimonides canvasses three scriptural examples to explain why the phrase says *b'amal yisroel* (in the misery of Israel) rather than, as he would prefer, *min amal yisroel* (from continuing the misery of Israel). In other words, the meaning should be that God shortened His will from continuing their misery, not that He felt it or was affected by it.

He shortened his will from continuing their misery because they repented. Their *teshuva* is the real reason for the phrase. Just in time, they *confessed* ("And the children of Israel said unto the Lord, We have sinned") and *changed* ("And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the Lord"). Just as with Job, when man turns in *teshuva*, by confession and change, God exercises his special providence over them. He "shortens" his will so that their punishment will not continue. This happens when man's *nefesh* achieves its intellectual form. Otherwise, "a soul without knowledge is not good. Job's punishment ended when he repented and became wise. Just so, the punishment of the Jews ended with their repentance. Then their souls "served the Lord" in knowledge.

The commentators Efodi and Even-Shmuel interpret Maimonides' statements about the *will* differently than I have above. Rather than taking *will* as a human expression for what otherwise could not be explained of God's design, they take it as a separate creation of God, a causative agent or angel that punishes Israel's apostasy. In their version, God's intermediary is in some sense moved to cut short its punishing action. In any event, this intermediary is not God. Efodi calls it *ha-emtzaim ha-mashpiim*, a mediating emanation. Even-Shmuel says, "...the divine will is like a separate intellect acting upon the living and determining their fate for life or death, for degradation or suffering, or for peace and tranquility."

This analysis is not impossible, but neither is it necessary, especially since we understand the process of *teshuva* set forth in Maimonides' writings. The narratives he chose to illustrate Definition 5 clearly implicate the five principles of this process. In support of this conclusion, in Guide 2:48 Maimonides emphasizes scripture's literary projection of the processes of human will upon God:

"As regards the immediate causes of things produced, it makes no difference whether these causes consist in substances, physical properties, freewill (*bekhira*), or chance—by freewill I mean that of man—or even in the will (*ratzon*) of another living being. The prophets [omit them and] ascribe the production directly to God and use such phrases as, God has done it, commanded it, or said it....Note this, and apply it everywhere according to the context. Many difficulties will thereby be removed, and passages apparently containing things far from truth will prove to be true."

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