

GUIDE 1:39 HEART

The first problem with *lev*, *heart*, is that we do not think about the *heart* the way the ancients did. We associate thought, mind, will, and so on, with the area around the top of the head, with the brain. The ancients associated these things with the heart.

The *heart* as the place of the mind or soul has some justification; after all, it pumps the blood. “The blood is the life” (Deut. 12:23). The heart is over the diaphragm, the seat of breath, which is spirit. The blood and the diaphragm pump life through the body. The heart as the center of the body is the source of life itself. All meditation traditions focus on the heart/diaphragm area.

The second problem is the proliferation of terms for the higher activities. Thought, counsel, idea, will, understanding, opinion, intellect, knowledge: all in some sense mean the same thing, and each quite definitely has its own meaning. It is no better in Hebrew or Arabic, which have their own versions of these slippery terms. I expand my lexical entry on this term *lev* to include what I think Maimonides meant by these terms and canvass the views of the translators. I abbreviate them as follows: *English*: F-Friedlander, P-Pines; *Hebrew*: K-Kafih, S-Schwarz, T-Ibn Tibon, H-Al Harizi. The original term is in its Judeo-Arabic script.

Diagramming Maimonides’ definitions reveals a result that is not readily apparent from bare reading. What we find is a ladder of notions, starting with the most material, the actual heart muscle, then to the metaphor of “center,” and up through the mental state of fancy, then opinion, will, and finally intellect at the apex.

There is a little trick at the end. After reaching the state of actual knowledge, the final definition given for *lev* is “the powers of the body.” In this return to the body, *lev* means that the active intellect commits the “the powers of the body” to devotion to God, just as the prophet must go back down the ladder to the people, and as Socrates must go back down into the cave.

The chapter is almost entirely made up of proof-texts, with little commentary. Maimonides wants his student to supply that commentary. The core of the chapter is Job’s *turn* from opinion to truth. Maimonides takes the Book of Job as a sort of forerunner to the Guide, about how Job’s *heart* turns from Aristotle’s opinions about the philosophic godhead to the truth of the God’s miraculous providence.

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

LEV (HEART) Homonym.

1. *The heart muscle.*
2. *Middle.* Maimonides says: “This organ being in the middle of the body, the word has been figuratively applied to express ‘the middle part of a thing.’” Analysis yields: “mediation.”
3. *Imagination, fancy* (אלפכרה, thought-P, F; *makhshava*-K, T, S, H; possibly *hirhorei*, K, footnote 8. Even-Shmuel, *ad loc.*: *mekhshav*). I am following Kafih’s suggestion in footnote 8 since in our usage it more closely fits Maimonides’ quotes. Kafih there justifies *makhshava* (thought) over *hirhorei* (fancy) due to its use in Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara* 2:3, but the meaning in both locations is nearly the same. In any event, Maimonides also uses *hirhorei* there. Efron reserves *makhshava* for *intellection* only in the phrase *makhshava sikhlit*, taking it as its opposite, as in *makhshava b’dimionot*/imagination. See his excellent long note, pp. 72-73, and 25, *Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim*.

4. *Opinion* (אֵלֶּרֶא, opinion-P; counsel-F; *dea*/knowledge-K, S; *etza*/counsel-T, H; *haskamat he-hamon*/mass agreement-A). The translators are in complete disarray. Harizi starts out with “mass agreement,” like “opinion,” but ends up using “counsel,” as Tibon and Friedlander do. Schwarz and Kafih go with *dea*, “idea,” and then include *daat*, “knowledge.” “Knowledge” is incorrect because opinion is not real knowledge, knowledge produced by the active intellect. Pines has it right with “opinion.” Friedlander’s “counsel” seems furthest off, following Ibn Tibon too literally. While *dea* is usually knowledge, it can mean opinion, which is how Efron takes אֵלֶּרֶא, *ibid.*, p. 25.
5. *Will* (אֵלֶּרֶאדָה, will-P, F. *ratzon*- K, T, S, H; *hefetz*-H).
6. *Intellect/Knowledge* (אֵלֶּעֶקֶל, intellect-P; understanding-F; *sekhel*-K, T, S, H).
7. *The powers of the body*. The heart is the source of bodily powers; indeed, Maimonides saw it as the channel from soul to brain. See discussion in Abraham ben Maimonides, *Guide to Serving God*, 437-441. In this sense it is distinguished from the heart *muscle*, Definition 1. See Rosner, *Medical Legacy of Moses Maimonides*, Ch. 10; also, Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, trans. and notes, L. E. Goodman, 1966, 106-8.

Instance of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“Then said Joab, I may not tarry thus with thee. And he took three darts in his hand, and thrust them through the heart (*b'lev*) of Absalom, while he [was] yet alive in the *midst* (*b'lev*) of the oak.”
(2 Samuel 18:14)

See my essay “Joab” in the last chapter. King David’s general Joab is at war with the rebel prince Absalom. Absalom’s hair gets caught in an oak as he rides under it. David’s soldiers see Absalom hanging but do not kill him since David had said to deal “gently” with him. Joab comes to the scene and takes it upon himself to finish the prince off. He fails, since he only spears him in the *middle*, not in the *heart*, and in the next line, Joab’s bearers finish Absalom off. The verse uses the word *lev* twice. The second time it must mean the *middle* of the oak, since an oak does not have a “heart.” Since it means *middle* there, it should also mean *middle* the first time, that is, the middle or abdomen of Absalom, and not his heart. Furthermore, if Absalom really did have three darts thrust through his heart he should have died. Rashi agrees that *lev* here means the *middle* of Absalom. Why does Maimonides put this under Definition 1, *heart* instead of under *middle* in Definition 2? He chose this particular quote (ignoring every other line in the Bible using *lev* for the heart muscle) to show that in real prophetic discourse *lev* should never mean “heart.” This marginalizes the corporeal definition. Note his return to the corporeal heart in Definition 7, at the end of our chapter, when he enjoins us to devote to God all the “powers of the body” which flow from the heart.

Instances of Definition 2, Middle, Contextualized:

“And ye came near and stood under the mountain (Sinai); and the mountain burned with fire unto the *midst* (*lev*) of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness.” (Deuteronomy 4:11)

“And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him (Moses) in a flame (*b'labat*) of fire out of the *midst* (*mitokh*) of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush [was] not consumed.” (Exodus 3:2)

In the first proof-text, since heaven has no heart, *lev* must mean “middle.” Similarly, in the second, the angel is not in the “heart” or “flame” of the fire, but in the middle of the fire. In both, the “middle” is really the mediating channel. For these two passages, see notes below on “Mediation.”

Instances of Definition 3, *Imagination*, Contextualized:

“But he went in, and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, whence [comest thou], Gehazi? And he said, Thy servant went no whither. And he said unto him, Went not mine heart (*libi*) [with thee], when the man (Naaman) turned again from his chariot to meet thee? [Is it] a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? ” (2 Kings 5:26-27)

Definition 3 makes *lev* the imagination. In this proof-text, it is the *prophetic* imagination of the prophet Elisha.

“And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart (*levavkhem*) and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a *whoring*: That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God.” (Numbers 15:39)

The passage is about *tzitzit*, the sacred fringes Jews wear on the four corners of their garments. Their purpose is to stimulate the imagination toward the prophetic experience. But Abraham ben Maimonides repeatedly connects “seek not after your own heart” with prurience and thoughts of “procreation” (*ibid.*, 451, 457, 477): “You must restrain your imagination from invoking images harmful to observance and conducive to sin, such as images of beautiful women and the details of their jewelry and clothing.”

“And ye have seen their abominations, and their idols, wood and stone, silver and gold, which [were] among them: Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose (*l'vavo*) heart turneth away this day from the Lord our God, to go [and] serve the Gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood. And it come to pass, when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his *heart*, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the *imagination* of mine *heart* (*b'shrirut libi elekh*), to add drunkenness to thirst: The Lord will not spare him.” (Deuteronomy 29:17-18)

Opposite to the *tzitzit*, which stimulate the prophetic imagination, the pagan abominations stimulate the idolatrous imagination. On these three passages for Definition 3, see essay below, “Imagination: Toward Prophecy or Idolatry.”

Instances of Definition 4, *Opinion*, Contextualized:

“All these men of war, that could keep rank, came with a perfect *heart* to Hebron, to make David king over all Israel: and all the rest also of Israel [were] of one *heart* (*lev*) to make David king.” (1 Chronicles 12:38)

The people agree to make David king. The agreement is like a social compact, as in Harizi’s translation, “mass agreement,” *haskamat he-hamon*, i.e., public opinion. In verse 12:33 we learn that the people were *not* of “two hearts,” *lev va-lev*, in their opinion of David. Pines correctly translates *lev* throughout this section of our chapter as “opinion.” Opinion is the concern of politicians. Morality is also subject to opinion. Opinion can be good or bad, but it cannot reach the level of truth, since opinion is not fact. Philosophy is the work of raising opinion to the level of truth. Thus, Aristotle always considers all previous opinions on a question, finding some good in all of them, while sifting them with criticism to arrive at the truth. Moral opinions are what we are left with after Eden, as explained in Guide 1:2. The path back to Torah is the path back to the truth perspective, that is, to knowledge, not to opinion.

“In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips [is] wise. The tongue of the just [is as] choice silver: the *heart* of the wicked [is] little worth. The lips of the righteous feed many: but fools die for want of *wisdom* (*lev*).” (Proverbs 10:19-21)

“The *heart* of the wicked [is] little worth,” is about Jeroboam (Rashi, quoting Midrash *Tankhuma* on *Ki Tissa* 6). The story is from First Kings chapter 13. Jeroboam was the first King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He established centers of idolatry. He built an incense altar to God on a “high place” (that is, not in Jerusalem). A

prophet, identified as Iddo, says the altar will be “rent,” which happens immediately, and the King’s hand becomes paralyzed. Iddo also predicts that Jeroboam will eventually be succeeded by a more worthy king, Josiah (13:2). The King begs Iddo to restore his hand. Once recovered he offers but Iddo refuses gifts. This trope should call to mind the story of Naaman and Gehazi, above (see essay below, “Imagination: Toward Prophecy or Idolatry”). According to the Midrash, the King begged, “entreat now the Lord *your* God,” not, “*my* God,” nonetheless, “the King’s hand was restored him again, and [he] became *as before*.” That is, explains the Midrash, “just *as before*, he was standing and burning sacrifices to idols, so was it in the end.” Jeroboam was *in the end* defeated in war despite superior numbers and strategy. He represents the mere politician for Maimonides: he deals in public opinion, not wisdom, to his great loss.

“Moreover Job continued his parable, and said....My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: **my heart** (*lvavi*) shall not *reproach* (*yekheraf*) [me] so long as I live.” (Job 27:1-6)

Job is the man whose *opinion* changed. He appears twice in this chapter. The term *yekheraf*, as we show below, was about *turning* the imagination from idolatrous adultery to monotheistic betrothal. It is the key to our chapter. See below: “Job’s *Turn*.”

Instances of Definition 5, Will, Contextualized:

“*Turn*, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am *married* unto you: and I will take you *one of a city, and two of a family*, and I will bring you to Zion. **And I will give you pastors according to mine heart** (*k’libi*), which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding. And it shall come to pass, when ye be multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, saith the Lord, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the Lord: neither shall it come to mind: neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit [it]; neither shall [that] be done any more. At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the Lord, to Jerusalem: neither shall they walk any more after the *imagination* of their evil *heart*.” (Jeremiah 3:14-17)

This quote is transitional from the prior Job quote. Jeremiah says: “for I am married to You.” The passage emphasizes marriage as well as to the notion of *turning*. Note the two uses of “*heart*.” The first is Maimonides’ proof-text for Definition 5 of *lev*: “will,” i.e., I will give you shepherds that do My will. The second is “the imagination of their evil *heart*” at the end of the passage, which refers back to Definition 3. Maimonides mentioned this passage in 1:34 with the gloss that most people need to accept dogmas generated by divine science, since most cannot begin the actual study. Those special students who can are the “one of a city, and two of a family.” God has appointed these “pastors,” (shepherds) who will “feed” the people with dogmas from “knowledge and understanding.” Dogma saves the masses from following the “*imagination* of their evil heart,” *shrirut libam ha-ra*. Compare (Deut. 29:18) “I shall have peace, though I walk in the *imagination* of mine *heart*,” *b’shrirut libi elekh*, Deuteronomy 29:17-20 (above, for Definition 3).

And when he [Jehu], was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechav [coming] to meet him: and he saluted him, and said to him, Is thine *heart* (*levavkha*) right, as my *heart* (*levavi*) [is] with thy *heart* (*levavekha*)? And Jehonadab answered, it is. If it be, give [me] thine hand. And he gave [him] his hand; and he took him up to him into the chariot (*ha-merkava*). And he said, Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord. So they made him ride in his chariot (*v’yarkivu oto b’rikhbo*). And when he came to Samaria, he slew all that remained unto Ahab in Samaria, till he had destroyed him, according to the saying of the Lord, which he spake to Elijah. (2 Kings 10:15-17)

Maimonides restates the passage: “i.e., is thy will right as my will is? In this sense the word has been figuratively applied to God.” The passage is about Jehu, soon to be King of the northern kingdom, Israel, after he massacred the Ahabites and just before crushing the Baalites. Important priestly and devout groups supported him, including the ascetic Rechavites. The verse plays on the word “chariot,” *merkava*, and *rekhav*, which have the same consonantal roots. Maimonides will later anagrammatically relate *merkava*, the divine chariot, to *kheruv*, the cherubs of Ezekiel’s vision, and the river *kvar* where he had his vision. Those who do the *will* of God are his *chariot*.

“And this [shall be] a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons [of Eli], 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* and in My mind (*b'levavi u'b'nafshi*): and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before Mine anointed for ever.” (1 Samuel 2:34-35)

Maimonides explains “according to...Mine *heart*,” means “according to My will.” The passage is about the High Priest Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who fornicated before the altar. They were not his real intellectual progeny (see my discussion of this concept in 1:7). Samuel inherited that mantle (although the actual office went to Zadok). Samuel acts according to God’s *will*. Maimonides mentions this proof-text in the same sense in Guide 1:41, the lexicon on *nefesh*, “soul,” which can also mean “will.” In that sense *nefesh* pairs with *lev*, which he takes as “will” here: *b'levavi u'b'nafshi*. Maimonides says in our chapter that the senses of “will” and “intellect” both frequently define *lev*, Definitions 5 and 6, and it is up to the reader to sort out which is appropriate (cf. 1:29, end, for similar language, and see on “Job’s *Turn*,” below). Maimonides clearly prefers intellection as the best description of divine activity but does not rule out divine will. This distinction becomes important later because his Muslim theological antagonists, the Kalām, reduce *all* divine activity to will. They deny any cognizable dimension of reality.

“And it came to pass, when Solomon had finished the building of the house of the Lord, and the king’s house, and all Solomon’s desire which he was pleased to do, That the Lord appeared to Solomon the second time, as He had appeared unto him at Gibeon. And the Lord said unto him, I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication that thou hast made before me: I have hallowed this house, which thou hast built, to put My name there forever; and Mine eyes and Mine *heart* (*v'libi*) shall be there perpetually.” (1 Kings 9:1-3)

Maimonides retranslates the quoted phase as “My providence and My will.” He interprets it the same way in 1:44, the lexical chapter on *ayin*, the “eye.” Rashi interprets the phrase to mean, “My Shekhina.” The context here is that moment when the Temple takes the place of the Tabernacle as the place of the indwelling of the Shekhina.

Instances of Definition 6, *Intellect*, Contextualized:

“Then answered Zophar the Naamathite, and said For vain man would be *wise* (*yilavev*), though man be born [like] a wild ass’s colt. If thou prepare thine *heart*, and stretch out thine hands toward Him; If iniquity [be] in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacles.” (Job 11:1-14)

The passage continues the dialogue with Job begun above, about Job’s *turn* from imagination to intellect. The passage is an interesting choice to begin the treatment of *lev* as intellect since Maimonides usually takes Zophar as the partisan of the will. See “Job’s *Turn*” below.

“Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: [so doth] a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom [and] honour. A wise man’s *heart* (*lev*) [is] at his right hand; but a fool’s *heart* at his left. Yea also, when he that is a fool walketh by the way, his wisdom faileth [him], and he saith to every one [that] he [is] a fool.” (Ecclesiastes 10:1-3)

Maimonides rephrases the quotation: “i.e., his understanding is engaged in perfect thoughts, the highest problems.” The idea that the good inclination is on the right and the evil on the left is also suggested in Maimonides’ account of Job, where he holds that Satan is identical to the evil inclination. They represent the material aspect of man in battle with his intellectual aspect. Man defeats his materiality by continually engaging in “perfect thoughts,” i.e., intellection in the divine science.

“Know (*v'yadata*) therefore this day, and consider (*ha-shevota*) [it] in thine *heart* (*levavekha*), that the Lord He [is] God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: [there is] none else.” (Deuteronomy 4:39)

This passage is from Moses’ speech before the Jordan River. It is about pure intellectual meditation as the basis for man’s relation with God. Maimonides here foreshadows a discussion in Guide 3:32 about the types of divine service man is capable of performing. Man would have the best relationship with God if he could always be

“engaged in perfect thoughts, the highest problems.” But since man remains in thrall to his material aspect, this intellectual meditation is not yet available:

“It is, namely, impossible to go suddenly from one extreme to the other: it is therefore according to the nature of man *impossible* for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed. Now God sent Moses to make [the Israelites] a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6) by means of the knowledge of God ... ‘Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart, that the Lord is God.’” (Guide 3:32)

But, he continues there, since men were trapped by their imaginations in idolatrous forms of worship, sacrificial worship was retained to attenuate such an impossible transition to the pure meditation. He describes that meditation in Guide 3:51:

“The true worship of God is only possible when correct notions of Him have previously been conceived. When you have arrived by way of intellectual research at a knowledge of God and His works, then commence to devote yourselves to Him, try to approach Him and strengthen the intellect, which is the link that joins you to Him. Thus Scripture says ... ‘Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart, that the Lord He is God’”

It is the purpose of the Guide to bring the student to the level of such pure worship.

“He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth [himself], and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: And the residue thereof he maketh a God, [even] his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth [it], and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou [art] my God, they have not known nor understood: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; [and] their *hearts*, that they cannot understand. *And none considereth (yashiv) in his heart (libo)*, neither [is there] knowledge nor understanding (*v'lo daat v'lo tevuna*) to say, I have burned part of it in the fire; yea, also I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; I have roasted flesh, and eaten [it]: and shall I make the residue thereof an abomination? shall I fall down to the stock of a tree?” (Isaiah 44:16-19)

Taking the problem the other way, if man fails to use his intellect he falls victim to his idolatrous imagination. Isaiah’s examples ridicule the illogic of idolatry. Note that this passage reverses the language of the prior proof-text.

“These [are] the words of the covenant, which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, beside the covenant which he made with them in Horeb. And Moses called unto all Israel, and said unto them, Ye have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt unto Pharaoh, and unto all his servants, and unto all his land; The great temptations which thine eyes have seen, the signs, and those great miracles: *Yet the Lord hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day.*” (Deuteronomy 29:1-3)

Maimonides says: “It is identical in its meaning with ‘Unto thee it was shown that thou mightest know’ (Deuteronomy 4:35. *Ata hareta l'daat*). Maimonides’ linkage to Deuteronomy 4:35 repeats at Guide 3:32, where, as mentioned, he discussed the need for gradualism in intellectual attainment. Few men are capable of the highest prophetic relationship with God, but most can understand certain core intellectual principles, such as divine existence and unity. In 2:33 he explains these universal ideas were what “was shown that thou mightest know” at Sinai. Guide 3:51 also links Deuteronomy 4:35 with 4:39 (quoted above), about the “true worship of God” being intellectual meditation. This train of associations depicts a *ladder of attainment*: a process of gradualism by which we expose everyone to universally true dogmas, from which they may be able to move to higher levels of understanding. Even-Shmuel explains from the opposite direction, looking down from atop the ladder, “The intent of these two latter passages is to portray the emanation from the divine intellect upon man” (my trans.).

Instance of Definition 7, “The Powers of the Body,” Contextualized:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God [is] one Lord: *And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine Heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.*” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

Maimonides says: “I explain ‘with all thine *heart*’ to mean ‘with all the powers of thine *heart*,’ that is, with all the powers of the body (*b’kol kokhot ha-guf*), for they all have their origin in the *heart*: and the sense of the entire passage is : make the knowledge of God the aim of all thy actions, as we have stated in our Commentary on the Mishnah (*Avot*, ch. 5), and in our Mishneh Torah (*Yesodei Hatorah* 2:2).” He thus returns to the physical standpoint of Definition 1. Instead of regarding the heart merely as a muscle, as in Definition 1, he emphasizes the connection of the physical heart to the entirety of the physical being. Put another way, loving the Lord with all the powers of the heart means that the *mind* directs all the actions of the body to imitate the divine actions perceived in the world. Just as the prophet must descend to the physical after reaching the heights of prophecy and devote the physical world to God, so must we always devote “all the powers of the heart” to the service of God, no matter what level of spiritual attainment we reach. He takes it somewhat differently in 3:28 (and in the Mishneh Torah passage) where “thou shalt love” is only possible when we “comprehend the real nature of things, and understand the divine wisdom displayed therein.” This is nothing less than the comprehension of God’s works in the world. In this sense, he means that we can only devote all of our powers to God once we recognize his wonderful organization of all things. Again, in 3:53 he says:

“But the truths which the Law teaches us—the knowledge of God’s existence and unity—create in us love of God, as we have shown repeatedly... The love is the result of the truths taught in the Law, including the true knowledge of the existence of God”

We are commanded to devote “all the powers of the heart” to the true path of intellectual meditation, thereby attaining the level of love.

DEFINITION 2: MEDIATION

The proof-texts for Maimonides’ Definition 2, *middle*, come from the two transfiguring events in Moses’ life, Sinai and the Burning Bush.

“[Specially] the day that thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb, when the Lord said unto me, Gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and [that] they may teach their children. And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the *midst (lev)* of heaven, with *darkness, clouds, and thick darkness.*” (Deuteronomy 4:10-11)

Moses portrays the scene of the revelation at Sinai. In Guide 3:9, Maimonides interprets this vision of God enshrouded in clouds and darkness. Since God is incorporeal, the clouds and darkness must be in the people’s minds:

“His revelation in a thick cloud, did not take place without any purpose, it was intended to indicate that we cannot comprehend Him on account of the dark body that surrounds us. It does not surround God, because He is incorporeal... The phrase does not denote that darkness surrounds God, for with Him there is no darkness, but the great, strong, and permanent light, which, emanating from Him, illuminates all darkness...”

The Jews projected their own darkness onto God. The only appropriate metaphor, and it is only a metaphor, is that God emanates a great “light,” which is the fire in “the midst of heaven.” What the masses apprehended without understanding at Sinai was not God but His mediating creation darkly appearing in prophetic vision. *Lev*, “middle,” thus comes to mean “mediation” or “intermediary.” Only Moses obtained the direct revelation, “face to face,” and he became the mediating channel for that revelation to the people. But Moses did not always enjoy a direct relationship with God.

“And the *angel* of the Lord appeared unto him (Moses) in a *flame (b’labat)* of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush [was] not consumed.” (Exodus 3:2)

The angel in the heart of the fire was Moses' channel before he became the channel. I find interesting Rashi's note on this passage. In explaining *b'labat* as the *middle* of the fire, he quotes two examples, both of which Maimonides cited in this chapter: the passage about Sinai and the passage about the death of Absalom from Second Samuel. He writes:

“*In a flame of fire*: Heb. *b'labat esh*, in a flame of fire, (that is) the *heart (lev)* of fire, like “The *heart (lev)* of the heavens” (Deut. 4:11), “In the *heart (b'lev)* of the oak” (2 Sam. 18:14).”

Rashi was not reading Maimonides, or *vice versa*, so they probably drew on the same interpretive tradition. It makes the angel appearing in the *middle* of the fire as the *mediating* channel between God and man.

Maimonides mentions the Burning Bush passage in two other places, Guide 2:6 and 3:4, about the appearance of an angel to a prophet. The angel is the same as the active intellect. Sometimes this angel appears as fire. Even though Maimonides usually takes Moses' prophetic relation with God as *direct*, he notes (3:45):

“Naturally the fundamental belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law, for without the belief in prophecy there can be no belief in the Law. But a prophet only receives divine inspiration through the agency of an angel.... Even Moses our Teacher received his *first* prophecy through an angel. ‘And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire.’ It is therefore clear that the belief in the existence of angels precedes the belief in prophecy, and the latter precedes the belief in the Law.”

In other words, universally, the mind in its primitive pre-Torah and pre-philosophic state already accepts the existence of such mediating forces as angels. It is therefore ready to receive prophecy, to channel the emanations of those mediating forces. This is the meaning of Moses at the burning bush.

Philosophers like Aristotle and Plato also accept the existence of angels, though they called them gods. Maimonides explains in Mishneh Torah (*Avoda Zara* 1:1), that pagans wrongly call “gods” the *agencies* created by God to serve Him. In both of these quotes under Definition 2, Maimonides' real concern is with these *intermediaries* of prophecy, that is, those flaming forces in the *middle* between man and God, which appear in man's “heart,” even before thought appears. The problem becomes the uses to which the imagination puts these primordial mediating forces.

DEFINITION 3: IMAGINATION— TOWARD PROPHECY OR IDOLATRY?

Maimonides' discussion of the different uses of the imagination begins with Elisha's wonderful contrast of the conniving servant Gehazi with the righteous convert Naaman:

“But he (Gehazi) went in, and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, whence [comest thou], Gehazi? And he said, Thy servant went no whither. And he said unto him, **Went not mine heart (libi) [with thee]**, when the man (Naaman) turned again from his chariot to meet thee? [Is it] a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed forever. And he (Gehazi) went out from his presence a leper [as white] as snow.” (2 Kings 5:25-27)

Maimonides' Definition 3 makes *lev* the imagination. In this proof-text, *libi* is the *prophetic* imagination of the prophet Elisha. Naaman, the Syrian general, has leprosy, which Elisha cures by bathing Naaman seven times in the Jordan. Naaman offers rewards to Elisha, who refuses them. Naaman takes his leave with sacks of earth from Israel, so that he can pray to God on Israeli soil even in Syria. Elisha's servant Gehazi is greedy for reward. He

pursues Naaman and persuades several talents of silver and a wardrobe from him. In this proof-text, Elisha lets Gehazi understand that Elisha “saw” it all.

Maimonides retranslates Elisha’s statement: “I was with thee in my *thought* when a certain event happened.” *Thought* should be understood as Efros explained it, as *imaginative thought* (*makhshava b’dimionot*) rather than *intellectual thought* (*makhshava sikhlit*), i.e., Definition 3. Elisha prophetically *imagined* Gehazi’s actions.

God punished Gehazi for his greed by transferring Naaman’s leprosy to Gehazi. All three put their imaginations to different uses. Gehazi’s imagination led him astray after material possessions. Naaman’s imagination (through the sacks of Israeli soil) becomes his path to higher meditation. Elisha’s imagination is the prophetic imagination, which is the highest level, where imagination transcends its limitations.

Imagination is a necessary part of human psychology. It represents those spiritual and intellectual forces that can only operate through images. In general, Maimonides regards the imagination as a material or materializing part of the mind. It is necessary for the process of prophecy, but can be as dangerous to the spirit as any other force of matter. Continuing to draw these contrasts with his proof-texts, he depicts the Jewish way with images to set it against the pagan way:

“Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue: And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own *heart* (*levavkhem*) and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring: That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God.” (Numbers 15:38-40)

The passage is about *tzitzit*, the sacred fringes Jews wear on the four corners of their garments, which had a thread of blue. Talmud, *Khullin* 89a:

“Blue resembles the colour of the sea, and the sea resembles the colour of the sky, and the sky resembles the colour of a sapphire, and a sapphire resembles the colour of the Throne of Glory, as it is said: And they saw the God of Israel and there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone (Exodus 24:10).”

Rashi explains that “It is called *tzitzit* because of the [command], *ye may look upon it* (verse 39), as in, *peering* (*metzitz*) *from the lattices* (Song of Songs 2:9).” This should remind us of the golden apple in the filigree of silver, Maimonides’ metaphor for the prophetic experience, and to the King peering through his window at Isaac and Rebecca “sporting” (see Introduction I). It is also like peering through a casement at the youths running to the married harlot (Proverbs 7:6), since our proof-text says of our undisciplined “eyes,” that is, our *imagination*, “ye use to go a whoring (*zonim*).” Imagination is necessary for prophecy, but also for transgression, specifically idolatry, which is like adultery toward God. Maimonides’ next proof-text examines the relation between the imagination and the idol:

“And ye have seen their abominations, and their idols, wood and stone, silver and gold, which [were] among them: Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose (*l’vavo*) *heart* turneth away this day from the Lord our God, to go [and] serve the Gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood; And it come to pass, when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his *heart*, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the *imagination* of mine *heart* (*b’shrirut libi elekh*), to add drunkenness to thirst: The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. (Deuteronomy 29:17-20)

Rashi interprets *b'shrirut libi* as "I follow what my heart beholds," which helps to explain why KJV translates "imagination of my heart." This is the basic idea of Definition 3: following one's fancy or imagination, which can lead to the prophetic imagination of Elisha above, or to the base imagination of Gehazi. Maimonides explains this passage in 3:29. His subject is idolatry, and why we need scientific knowledge about this disease of the mind:

"The knowledge of these theories and practices (of the idolators) is of great importance in explaining the reasons of the precepts. For it is the principal object of the Law and the axis round which it turns, to blot out these opinions from man's heart and make the existence of idolatry impossible. As regards the former Scripture says:...'Whose heart turneth away this day.'"

In Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah, Avoda Zara*, 2:3, he expands on this theme, turning from the overt "theories and practices" of the idolators, to the subtle workings of their imaginations:

"All these prohibitions come under one category—not to turn to idolatry. Whoever turns towards it, by an *overt* act, is punished with stripes. It is not only idolatry to which we must not turn in thought. We are likewise warned not to permit any thought to enter our minds, that might cause one to reject a fundamental principle of the Torah. We must not *turn* our minds to such a thought and thus be drawn after the *imagination of our hearts*. For the mind is limited; not every mind is capable of attaining knowledge of the truth in its purity. If every man were to follow after the vagaries of his heart, the result would be universal ruin, ensuing from the limitations of the human intellect. How so? Sometimes one will be drawn to idolatry. Sometimes he will waver in his mind concerning the Unity of God, as to whether He is One or He is not One. He will speculate on what is above, what below it, what existed before the Creation, what will exist after the world comes to an end. Sometimes he will muse concerning Prophecy, and say to himself 'Perhaps it is true, perhaps it is not'. Sometimes he will harbor similar doubts concerning the Torah as to whether it is of divine origin, or not. And such a person, being ignorant of the logical principles which need to be applied in order to attain positive truth, will lapse into heresy. In this regard, the Torah exhorted us 'And that ye go not about after your heart nor after your eyes, after which ye use to go astray' (Num. 15:39). This means 'You shall not allow yourselves to be drawn, each one after his own limited intelligence, and imagine that his mind is attaining truth.' The sages thus explained the text quoted above (Num. 15:39); '*After your heart* refers to heresy. *After your eyes* refers to lechery.' Although the violation of this prohibition may result in forfeiture of life hereafter, it is not punished with stripes. This is in accordance with the principle that an infraction which does not involve a physical act does not render one liable to that penalty."

Sharpening the contrast between the idolatrous imagination and the intellect's acceptance of Torah, he notes (again in Guide 3:29), the dictum of Talmud, *Kiddushin* 40a: idolators *ipso facto* reject the entire Torah, while those who reject idolatry accept the Torah in its entirety.

JOB'S TURN

"Moreover Job continued his parable, and said, [As] God liveth, [who] hath taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, [who] hath vexed my soul; All the while my breath [is] in me, and the spirit of God [is] in my nostrils; My lips shall not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit. God forbid that I should justify you: till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart (*levavi*) shall not reproach (*yekheraf*) [me] so long as I live." (Job 27:1-6)

Job is the man who changed his *opinion* about divine providence. He appears twice in this chapter and makes appearances in the next several chapters. Maimonides makes the following odd comment about this passage:

“This sentence is preceded by the words, ‘My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go’: and then follows, ‘my *heart* shall never *turn away* (*yekheraf*) from this.’ – As regards the expression *yekheraf*, I think that it may be compared with the same verb in the form *nekherafet*, ‘a handmaid *betrouthed* (*nekherafet*) to a man’ (Lev. 19:20), where *nekherafet* is similar in meaning to the Arabic *munkharifat* ‘turning away,’ and signifies ‘turning from the state of slavery (*avdut*) to that of marriage (*ishut*).’”

What does Maimonides mean by this?

Maimonides discusses his unique view of Job at length in Guide 3:22-23. His heroes in the story are God, Job, and Elihu. (Elihu, we discussed previously, represents the prophetic process, as well as the prophetic method of hiding secrets in texts.) God is not the author of Job’s sufferings, Satan is. Satan represents matter, the cause of all suffering. Job, at first, represents Aristotle (or perhaps Plato), arguing that God forms the world and abandons it, like a watchmaker. Job is not wise, for had he realized God’s providential conduct of the universe, and His closeness to those who strive to approach Him intellectually, he could have no such doubts. But Job, who is “perplexed,” will come to change his mind.

The Book of Job is the forerunner of the Guide of the Perplexed. In the sequence from the end of Job chapter 26 through 27:1-6 (our proof-text), Job begins to see the light, but is not yet convinced. Chapter 26 contains some lovely lyrics foreshadowing Job’s later conversion:

“He stretcheth out the north over the empty place, [and] hangeth the earth upon nothing. He bindeth up the waters in His thick clouds; and the cloud is not rent under them. He holdeth back the face of His throne, [and] spreadeth His cloud upon it. He hath compassed the waters with bounds, until the day and night come to an end. The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at His reproof. He divideth the sea with His power, and by His understanding He smiteth through the proud. By His spirit He hath garnished the heavens; His hand hath formed the crooked serpent. Lo, these [are] parts of His ways: but how little a portion is heard of him? but the thunder of His power who can understand?”

But then, returning to his old ways at 27:1, he continues to justify his Aristotelian conception that God forgot him, “My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my *heart* shall not *reproach* me (*yekheraf*) so long as I live.” Then Maimonides starts to talk about the related term *nekherafet*. What he does not say is that this word’s root is an *anagram* of *merakhefet*, “hover,” found in the first proof-text of the next Guide chapter, Genesis 1:2:

“And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness [was] upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God *moved* (JPS 1917: *hovered*) upon the face of the waters.”

We know of Maimonides’ fondness for anagrams from the end of Guide 2:44 (see my note “On the Interpretation of Dreams” in 1:12). Maimonides’ anagrams are a tool for sounding the prophetic imagination, especially, its unconscious level (David Bakan, *Maimonides on Prophecy*, 25-26). The language above from Job 26 about the creation of the world and the incomprehensible power of God suggests *hovering*, *merakhefet*.

When Maimonides translates *yekheraf* in Job 27:6 as “turning away,” he really means that Job *turned away* from the wisdom of Job 26 (recognizing the hovering of providence) back to the unwise opinion expressed in Job 27 (Job’s abandonment by God). Maimonides contrasts Job with the “handmaid” who wisely *turns away* from *avdut*, idolatry, to *ishut*, betrothal. She is the *shifkha nekherafet*, a Canaanite maidservant whose owner marries her to his Hebrew manservant (Mishneh Torah, *Kedusha, Issurei Beea*, 3:13; Leviticus 19:20). Maimonides understands *avdut* here as *avoda zara*, the “strange service” of idolatry. The turn from *avdut* to *ishut* is the turn from opinion to intellectual *betrothal* to God.

Job’s internal dialog continues in Maimonides’ proof-texts in the voice of his adversary Zophar:

“Then answered Zophar the Naamathite, and said, should not the multitude of words be answered? and should a man full of talk be justified? should thy lies make men hold their peace? and when thou mockest, shall no man make thee ashamed? for thou hast said, My doctrine [is] pure, and I am clean in thine eyes. But oh that God would speak, and open His lips against thee; and that He would shew thee the secrets of wisdom, that [they are] double to that which is! Know therefore that God exacteth of thee [less] than thine iniquity [deserveth]. Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? [it is] as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof [is] longer than the earth, and broader than the sea. If He cut off, and shut up, or gather together, then who can hinder Him? For He knoweth vain men: He seeth wickedness also; will He not then consider [it]? For vain man would be *wise (yilavev)*, though man be born [like] a *wild ass’s colt*. If thou prepare thine *heart*, and stretch out thine hands toward Him; if iniquity [be] in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacles.” (Job 11:1-14)

Maimonides makes *yilavev* mean “will be wise,” for his outward lexical purpose here. But in Guide 1:34 he quoted the line with emphasis on the “wild ass’s colt,” which represents for him the uneducated youth, that is, youth’s material or potential intellect. Youth may be capable of intellection but has not yet done so. Zophar rightly says that Job is like a child who has not begun to exercise his intellect. Maimonides’ Job does not complete his turn to wisdom until the end of the Book of Job.

The Guide previews these themes in 1:29 (see my notes there). That was the lexical chapter on *etzev* (pain, anger, provocation) but its focus was on *lev*, in the passage “and it grieved Him at His heart (*va-yitatzev el libo*)” (Genesis 6:4-6). That chapter also makes *lev* mean both intellect and will. *Lev* also signaled an internal dialog prefiguring a perceived turn in outward behavior. There, the change was in God’s will or mind, an inherently problematic change. But the emphasis there was on the withdrawal of providence called “the hiding of the face,” which we projected on God. In our chapter, the concern is with the way in which we provoke or remedy that withdrawal through the uses we make of our imagination.

It is interesting that Maimonides cites Zophar here for Definition 6, where *lev* is “intellect,” instead of under Definition 5, where *lev* is “will,” since he portrays Zophar as the representative of the Asharites who took *will* as God’s defining characteristic (2:33). Asharism is a type of Islamic theology (Kalām) that in some forms remains authoritative. They held a completely transcendental view of God. Allah is so unlike us that we can know nothing of Him. We cannot even make sense of His actions in this world: they are willful, not logical. That is because the Asharites did not think that Nature is real. Everything is miraculous and any thought of natural cause and effect is false. Maimonides battles the Asharite theologians in chapters 1:71-76. Job eventually transcends Zophar’s Asharite view. Though he does not understand everything God does, he realizes that God acts with purpose and rationality. Zophar, by contrast, argues that we can understand nothing of God’s willful actions. When Zophar accuses *Job* of “vanity” (“for vain man would be wise”), he really unconsciously calls *God’s acts* vain and pointless. This is the slashing argument Maimonides will later wield against the Kalām theologians.

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