

GUIDE 1:30 CONSUME

Maimonides begins his lexical treatment of the root *akhal* by eliminating the possibility that it could mean “eat” in the gross sense of the animal actually chewing and swallowing. He prefers the more abstract notion of “consume.” He frames an animal’s eating upon the Aristotelian notion of *generation* and *corruption*, so that mastication and digestion are mere details of the process. By this means, he avoids having to label *akhal* a homonym, as he had to with *etzev* in the last chapter. God does not eat, but he is the “formal” cause of generation and corruption. Having sublimated the term “consume” from physical eating, he can then make it a purely spiritual process.

He claims his definition is so frequently used and so well known that it *replaced* the primitive meaning of “eating.” At the beginning of the chapter, after mentioning the primitive meaning but giving no examples, he then says, “It was afterwards observed that eating includes two processes (i.e., generation and corruption),” *v’khen clal (sakar) ha-lashon b’musag akhila shnei inianim*. His language assumes that there was a moment when scientific lexicography replaced the primitive meaning with his definition. “The figurative meaning of these expressions has been so general and common, that it was almost considered (i.e., as though it were) its primitive signification,” *u’l’fi sh’nitrava ha-shimush hazei bilshon v’nitpashat ad sh’naaseh c’ilu hu ha-hanakha harishonah*, that is, it replaced the primitive signification.

We will then interpret any instance of *akhal*, and for that matter of eating, drinking, hunger or thirst in the Bible, under the category of generation and corruption. We described this process in our treatment of 1:11 and 1:17, but, briefly, the idea is as follows.

AKHAL: GENERATION AND CORRUPTION

Aristotle had explained that there must be a substance subsisting through all change. This substance is matter. Matter, purely in and of itself, is the *potential* for existence of a thing. That thing comes into existence when matter is *formed*. The capacity for matter to receive form is the *privation* which always accompanies matter and which gives it its resemblance to femininity.

An animate being requires the ingestion of food to maintain its form. The process causes the ingested thing to be corrupted at the same time it is regenerated to become part of the ingesting being’s system. This being is itself *altered*, alteration being the *quantitative* change in a being. By contrast, the food as food is destroyed, a *qualitative* change.

In the process of quantitative change, mere alteration over time goes over to become qualitative change. When the change is qualitative the being changes into another being, its matter loses its former form and gains another form. We call these changes *generation and corruption*. Generation and corruption go together. Man’s death brings the *corruption* that *generates* dust. The matter adopts another form. *Akhal* is the single name for this process, including both its quantitative and qualitative aspects.

We first glimpse *akhal* from the vantage of its destructive power, *corruption*. Foreign enemies, wars and rebellions cause destruction. This definition links with last chapter’s *etzev*—“anger”/“provocation.” The people who rebelled against the Torah thereby caused divine withdrawal and contraction, which they experienced as pain and punishment, the *akhal* of destruction.

The other side of this dialectical process reveals itself in *akhal*’s generative power. By *consuming* knowledge the being generates its true form, acquiring its active intellect. This *generation* comes from the consumption of learning. Intellectualization brings the mind into the dynamic of Torah, the expression of divine will. By this means, we are regenerated, improved, and made permanent.

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

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AKHAL (TO EAT)

1. Consume: Corruption, in the Aristotelian sense. All modes of destruction, or loss of form.
2. Consume: Generation, in the Aristotelian sense. Learning. All modes of intellectual growth or the acquisition of intelligence, including the activation of the passive intellect. Thus, hunger, the precondition of eating, signifies the absence of intellect or knowledge and/or the desire to obtain them. We extend Definition 2 to include drinking, as well as the opposite of eating/drinking: hunger/thirst.

Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And ye shall perish among the heathen, and the land of your enemies shall *eat* (*v’akhla*) you up.”
(Leviticus 26:38)

This, the first and most corporeal use of *akhal*, is obviously figurative since countries do not eat. See my essay below, *Tokhakha*.

“And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, [is] a land that *eateth up* (*okhelet*) the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it [are] men of a great stature.” (Numbers 13:32)

The verse is from the report of the “spies,” *meraglim*, which Moses sent to survey Israel. They slander the land by bringing a terrifying report of it to the tribes. But there is an element of truth in their report. If the people rebel against Torah, the land will not be their friend. Their withdrawal from God leaves them in a land that “eateth up the inhabitants thereof.”

These first two quotes of Definition 1 are about the land “eating” them, the next two about the “sword” “devouring” them, followed by two quotes about God as a devouring “fire.”

“If ye be willing and obedient (*u’shmatem*), ye shall *eat* (*tokhelu*) the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be *devoured* (*tuklu*) with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken [it]. How is the faithful city become an *harlot*! It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers” (Isaiah 1:19-21)

The same idea as above, that rebellion in the land causes destruction, but this time the land is not doing the eating, the sword of the enemy consumes. This proof-text uses the root *akhal* twice. In the first instance, not quoted by Maimonides, the reward for willing obedience (*u’shmatem*—listening/learning) is “eat(ing) the good of the land.” He would presumably interpret that “eating” as the consumption of Torah that sustains the Jews. The final line in Isaiah reminds us of Maimonides’ interpretation of the Parable of the Married Harlot (Proverbs ch.7). The people, like the troubled young man in the Parable, are “devoured” for their rebellious promiscuousness.

“And the children of Benjamin gathered themselves together after Abner, and became one troop, and stood on the top of an hill. Then Abner called to Joab, and said, Shall the sword *devour* (*tokhal*) for ever? knowest thou not that it will be bitterness in the latter end? How long shall it be then, ere thou bid the people return from following their brethren?” (2 Sam. 2:25-26)

Maimonides chose these verses to show the entirely figurative way in which *akhal* is used: swords do not eat. The context is the civil war between David and Saul’s son Ishbosheth, with Joab fighting for David and Abner fighting for Ishbosheth. Joab traps Abner, but Abner falsely sues for peace. Joab falls for the ruse, lets him go, and a “long war” results (3:1). Before this parley took place, Abner had slain Joab’s brother, Asahel. This sets up a cycle of vengeance resulting in Joab’s blameful killing of Abner. David, on his deathbed, orders Joab’s execution. See, generally, *Sanhedrin* 48b-49a for issues involved in the “trial” of Joab which the Talmud claims

Solomon held before executing him. Although Joab was generally a loyal general to David, his decisions were not all sound, nor entirely in David's interest.

“And [when] the people complained, it displeased the Lord: and the Lord heard [it]; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and *consumed* (*va'tokhal*) [them that were] in the uttermost parts of the camp.” (Numbers 11:1)

These next two quotes are central for they call God a devouring fire. This first quote is the better for Maimonides, since it is still possible to consider that the *esh ha-shem*, the “fire of the Lord” is not God but his creation, that is, some angel or force created for the purpose of executing judgment on the Jewish rebels (*Targum* retranslates “fire from God”). “The people complained” at Taberah because the journey to Israel through the Sinai desert was taking too long. Rashi summarizing Midrash, explains the dispute: “They said, Woe is to us! How weary we have become on this journey! For three days we have not rested from the fatigue of walking. —His (God's) anger flared, [He said,] I meant it for your own good—that you should be able to enter the Land immediately.”

“But I must die in this land, I must not go over Jordan: but ye shall go over, and possess that good land. Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make you a graven image, [or] the likeness of any [thing], which the Lord thy God hath forbidden thee. For the Lord thy God [he is] a *consuming* fire (*esh okhla hu*), [even] a jealous God.” (Deuteronomy 4:22-24)

The text actually says that God *is* a consuming fire, not, as in the last text, that the fire is *of* God. But God is not the element of fire, nor does God eat (*Targum*: “God's word is a consuming fire”). Maimonides must explain this seeming corporealization. He takes it metaphorically: “that is, He destroys those who rebel against Him, as the fire destroys everything that comes within its reach (Pines: “in its power,” Kafih: *mishtaletet alav*).” He thus reverts to Definition 2 of *etzev* in the last chapter (a *determination* by God to punish man for *idolatry, without warning*), treating the fire of God here as he treated the anger of God there. But recall what he said above. All such destructions are part of the process of formation and loss of form in the generation and corruption of things. This process, of which they are participants, constantly recreates the Jewish people.

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“Ho, every one that *thirsteth*, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and *eat* (*ve'ekholu*); yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for [that which is] not bread? And your labour for [that which] satisfieth not? *Hearken diligently* unto me, and *eat* (*v'ikhlu*) ye [that which is] good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.” (Isaiah 55:1-2)

The rest of Maimonides' quotations take *akhal* as the consumption of Torah through learning. By this means our intellectual form is generated and preserved. Maimonides cites this passage as two separate proof-texts, as shown above. He says that the language of eating gives figurative expression to the process of acquiring knowledge and learning, *l'mada u'l'lmod*. It stands for all intellectual apprehension by which the human form is best preserved, *l'hasagot ha-siklot asher behem yatmid kiyom ha-tzura ha-enoshit b'ofen ha-yoter shalem*. This “form” is the intellect, preserved through acquisition of the highest intelligibles, not through sense or experiment, but only through pure meditative speculation.

“[It is] not good to *eat* (*akhol*) much honey: so [for men] to search their own glory [is not] glory.” (Proverbs 25:27)

“My son, *eat* (*ekhal*) thou honey, because it is good, and the honeycomb, which is sweet to thy taste; so shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto thy soul: when thou hast found [it], then there shall be a reward (*akharit*—lit., *future*), and thy expectation shall not be cut off.” (Proverbs 24:13-14).

See essay “A Taste of Honey,” below.

TOKHAKHA

“And ye shall perish among the heathen, and the land of your enemies shall *eat* (*v'akhla*) you up.”
(Leviticus 26:38)

This proof-text is from the *Tokhakha* (“rebuke”), Leviticus 26:14-41—the harshly detailed prediction of Israel’s punishment when they rebel against God. Rashi explains that this particular line of the *Tokhakha* refers to those Jews who will die in the Diaspora.

This, the first and most corporeal proof-text for *akhal*, is obviously figurative. Countries do not eat. All the quotes for Definition 1 of *akhal* link to Definitions 2 and 3 of *etzev* in the last chapter: the people’s rebellion and provocation are a withdrawal from God. The people trade the rule of divine providence for the rule of corporeal nature. They experience this withdrawal as pain and punishment. They then project their own provocation as *divine* anger.

Abraham Ben Maimonides, commenting on the *Tokhakha*, writes, “This means that the harm of the wicked will only materialize if God removes His providence from the victim” (*Guide to Serving God*, p. 219). The proof-text from the *Tokhakha* personifies this loss of divine providence as the *foreign land’s* assimilation and destruction of the Jews. *Akhal* “consume” extends now to punishment as the destruction of a people: the enemy *consumes* the Jews.

Maimonides introduces the passage with this comment, consistent with his concept of the destructive power of generation/corruption:

“It was afterwards (after we liberated ourselves from the primitive concept of *akhal* as ‘eating’) observed that eating includes *two processes*—(1) the loss of the food, i.e., the destruction (*corruption*) of its form, which first takes place; (2) the growth (*generation*) of animals, the preservation of their strength and their existence, and the support of all the forces of their body, caused by the food they take. The consideration of the first process led to the figurative use of the verb in the sense of ‘consuming,’ i.e., ‘destroying’; hence it includes all modes of depriving a thing of its form”

Definition 1 relates to the first of these two processes, national destruction, while his Definition 2 relates to the second process, growth through increase of wisdom. But these processes are really one since corruption and generation are always concomitant. The idea of the verse would then be that the destruction of the *Tokhakha* is the necessary concomitant of the *generation* that will occur when the Jews cleave to their true form, God, as told in the few brief verses of hope preceding the *Tokhakha*. This is also made clear at the end of the poem, Leviticus 26:41-42: “...if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land.”

A TASTE OF HONEY

“[It is] not good to *eat* (*akhol*) much honey: so [for men] to search their own glory [is not] glory.”
(Proverbs 25:27)

“My son, *eat* (*ekhal*) thou honey, because it is good, and the honeycomb, which is sweet to thy taste; so shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto thy soul: when thou hast found [it], then there shall be a reward (*akharit*—lit., *future*), and thy expectation shall not be cut off.” (Proverbs 24:13-14).

These last two proof-texts about honey qualify each other. The second seems to oppose the first passage, which it actually precedes in Proverbs. Maimonides, following the rule of *ascending in holiness* (see my notes to Guide

1:10), switches the order of the passages so that his first quoted verse tells of the *danger* of the intellectual quest, while the next *ascends* to relate its *sweetness* when pursued properly.

Both passages compare wisdom to honey. We know from Mishneh Torah that honey is dietary trouble:

“(Deot 3:2) A man should direct *all his thoughts* and activities to the knowledge of God....So too, when he eats, drinks, or cohabits, his purpose should not be to secure physical gratification, in which case he would only eat and drink that which was pleasing to the palate, and *cohabit* for the sake of sensual pleasure, but he should have it in mind that he eats and drinks solely to maintain his body and its organs in health and vigour. He will then not partake of everything which the palate craves, like a dog or an ass, but will choose foods that are wholesome to the body, whether these be sweet or bitter and will avoid eating things that are injurious to the body, even though they taste sweet. One, for instance, who is of a hot humour, will not eat...*honey*..., as Solomon said in a metaphorical sense, ‘It is not good to eat much honey.’ Such a person should rather drink an infusion of chicory, even though it is bitter. And so, since life is impossible without eating and drinking, he will be guided in his choice of food and drink by hygienic considerations (*derekh refuah*), to recover and maintain sound health. Thus too, in married life, his purpose in *cohabitation* will be to preserve health or propagate his species. He will consequently not indulge in intercourse whenever the desire seizes him, but only when he is conscious that emission is hygienically necessary or when his purpose is to continue his race. (Deot 4:12) Honey and wine *are bad for young children*, but good for the aged....”

These ideas are at the back of his mind in the discussion of *honey* in our chapter. Notice the close connection between the eating of honey, the direction of “all” thought to the knowledge of God, and cohabitation. Notice also that honey, like the study of *Maaseh Merkava* and forbidden relations, is not for the immature. In 1:32, we will learn that we injure our corporealized intellect when we force it beyond its natural limits, as one is sickened from abusing honey. Nonetheless, Maimonides *does* advocate our pushing those limits. The key is our *humility* in intellectual pursuit, hewing closely to the *rules of learning*, which he explains later.

The key figure who misused the honey of learning was Akher, and we tell his story in our account of 1:32. He is one of a series of figures who approached intellectual activity without humility and got the wrong message, to their detriment. Eve *ate* from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and traded that knowledge for knowledge of truth (1:2). The Elders of Israel (1:5, Exodus 24:10) *feasted* before the vision of the *Merkava* and took the process of divine providence pruriently.

Rashi also understands these Proverbs verses this way. He writes, *ad loc.*: “The topic (eating honey) symbolizes one who [brazenly] expounds on the account of the *Merkavah* and the account of the Creation to the public; the ignoramuses will ridicule the words and ask what is above and what is below.” The rules of learning proscribe the public teaching of divine science, they are limits on the intellectual pursuit. The danger is the desire or *eros* of those who would go beyond their intellectual limits and thereby subject their intellect to their imagination.

In the contrasting second passage, when the student humbly acknowledges his limits, properly qualifies himself and then seeks the rules of learning from the wise he will find the taste of wisdom sweet. Indeed, he shall find his “reward,” (*yesh akharit*—his *future*). Thus, the distinction between the goodness of honey and its dangers resides in the *moral quality* of the student’s intellectual pursuit, that is to say, his *humble* pursuit of esoteric studies.

FURTHER PROOFS THAT AKHAL MEANS “CONSUME LEARNING”

Having made the above extensive presentation Maimonides is not quite satisfied that the reader will accept his Definition 2, that *akhal* means to consume learning as one consumes food, or that it should be generalized to anything similar, such as drinking, together with the hunger and thirst that prompt eating and drinking. He thinks

the point is so important that it bears repeating, especially since the coming chapters, Guide 1:30-35, are about the proper approach to the consumption of knowledge in the divine science.

He provides examples where Talmud and Midrash employed this figurative use of *akhal* as learning.

The Talmud *Baba Bathra* 22a, employs the figure in its account of a certain R. Adda b. Abba who preferred to study with Rava than with Abaye. He said, “Instead of gnawing bones in the school of Abaye, why do you not (come) eat fat meat in the school of Raba?” R. Adda’s presumptuous remark about Abaye reveals his lack of humility in learning, and, according to the Talmud, he may have died for having said this.

Maimonides also cites a Midrashic passage which explains Ecclesiastes 8:15, “So I commended mirth, that a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry, and that this should accompany him in his labor (*amalo*) all the days of his life which God hath given him under the sun.” The Midrash responds in typical fashion, taking eating as learning:

“R. Tanhuma...said: All the eating and drinking mentioned in this Book (Ecclesiastes) refer to Torah and good deeds. R. Jonah said: The most clear proof of them all is, ‘A man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink, and to be merry, and that this should accompany him in his labor—*amalo*’ (Eccl. 8:15). The last word should be read as *olamo* (his world)—in this world; ‘All the days of his life’ alludes to the grave. Are there, then, food and drink that accompany a man to the grave! But it means the Torah and good deeds which a man does [will endure].” (*Ecclesiastes Rabba* 3:16, with variants at 2:28, 5:23, and 8:16)

Notice that he quotes the part about Ecclesiastes referring to Torah but skips the reference to “good deeds.” He selects only what contributes to his definition of eating as learning. On the other hand, he leaves in the part about “drinking” in order to extend his definition to include drinking. Now eating *and* drinking mean the consumption of learning to regenerate the intellectual soul. It follows that hunger and thirst are the desire for such learning.

Maimonides clarified this metaphor of drinking as Torah learning in Mishneh Torah:

“The words of the Torah have been compared to water, as at is said, ‘Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters’ (Isaiah 55:1); this teaches us that just as water does not accumulate on a slope but flows away, while in a depression it stays, so the words of the Torah are not to be found in the *arrogant or haughty* but only in him who is *contrite and lowly in spirit*, who sits in the dust at the feet of the wise and banishes from his heart lusts and temporal delights; works a little daily, just enough to provide for his needs, if he would otherwise have nothing to eat, and devotes the rest of the day and night to the study of the Torah.” (*Talmud Torah* 3:9)

Thirst and the water that slakes it symbolize the *eros* for wisdom and the Torah that satisfies it. But, as with honey and cohabitation, danger lurks. Humility is the antidote to the dangers of the intellectual quest. We avoid these dangers by taking the proper attitude in learning, which requires *humility* before the subject matter: “him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.”

Similarly, Maimonides quotes Amos 8:11, “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a *famine* in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord,” to prove that hunger *and* thirst in the Bible refer to the desire to overcome ignorance. He recalls Psalms 42:1: “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?” previously treated beautifully in Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah* 2:2, where he wrote about the humble seeker’s thirst for knowledge:

“And what is the way that will lead to the love of Him and the fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great name even as David said ‘My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.’ And when he ponders these matters, he will recoil affrighted, and realize that he is a small creature, lowly and obscure, endowed with slight and slender intelligence, standing in the presence of Him who is perfect in knowledge.”

The student thirsts for knowledge but is humbled before the magnitude of the divine science.

He concludes with a meditation on the famous passage, Isaiah 12:3, “Behold, God [is] my salvation...Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3). He admires the way the *Targum* of Jonathan Ben Uzziel retranslates the passage: “You will joyfully receive new instruction from the chosen of the righteous.” Jonathan sublimates nearly every word in his translation. The water drawn is new learning to be acquired. He implies that this new learning will come in the future when prophecy returns. This learning will come from “wells,” that is, from the wise who are channels of revelation (see Pines’ notes 24 and 25, p. 64, explaining the derivation). These wise men are called by Jonathan the chosen of the righteous, because, as Maimonides says, “righteousness is the true salvation,” *ha-tzedek hu ha-yeshua ha-amitit*. By this, he means to tie Definition 2 back to Definition 1: these righteous leaders are loyal to Torah and humble before it, and therefore they are prophets who act as channels of revelation, unlike the Elders of Israel (Guide 1:5, Exodus 24:10) who brazenly feasted at the revelation.

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scottmalexander@rcn.com