

## GUIDE 1:61 TETRAGRAMMATON

### OVERVIEW

Turning now to the names of God found in Jewish tradition, Maimonides explains how these names square with his strict position on attributes. He begins by saying that no other divine name is secret but the Tetragrammaton, the unique four-letter name of God: “All the (other) names of God, may He be exalted, that are to be found in any of the books derive from actions. There is nothing secret in this matter” (Pines trans. Kafih: *v'zeh ma sh'ain bo neelam*). Lately some have interpreted “secret” to mean “holy” and to take the statement as a declaration of the arbitrariness or conventionality of Hebrew, but this is unnecessary. What he means appears from the entire context of our chapter, which is that these other names have no secret, esoteric or magical meaning. Maimonides’ views on the nature of language are complex, but they do not place him in opposition to its divine origin. Since all other divine names derive from actions (i.e., the Merciful One, *khanun*, from acts of mercy), they cannot be essential attributes eternal with God. They therefore lack any supposed power they might have over God. The one underived name, the Tetragrammaton, is such a direct referent to the divine essence that it cannot be, and, indeed, must not be, invoked as a separate power.

### IS LANGUAGE CONVENTIONAL OR NATURAL? MAN-MADE OR DIVINE?

In the medieval period, two distinctly different debates about language entwine and entangle, a philosophical debate and a religious debate. (On all of this in much greater detail, see Josef Stern, “Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language,” in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, R. S. Cohen and H. Levine, editors, 2000, 173-226; Harry A. Wolfson, “The Veracity of Scripture from Philo to Spinoza,” *Religious Philosophy, a Group of Essays*, Harvard, 1961, 216-245).

The philosophical debate is whether language is natural or conventional. Do names express something significant about the things they name, or are they assigned to things by agreement of men irrespective of the nature of the thing, as Aristotle suggested (*De Interpretatione* 2, 16a19-29)? On the surface, at least, Maimonides agrees with Aristotle. In one very loaded line in the chapter on *Maaseh Bereshit*, Guide 2:30, he says of Adam giving names (Gen. 2:20): “languages are conventional, and...not natural (*heskemim lo tiviim*) as has been assumed by some.” As we will see, this sentence conceals Maimonides’ complex view of the notion of “conventional” that he inherits from the Muslim philosopher Al-Farabi (872-951).

The religious debate is whether God or man creates language. This is not at all the same question as the division over the natural or conventional origin of language. All religious thinkers agreed that God endowed man with the tongue and the physical potential for language. Nonetheless, since “Adam gave names” the Bible itself seems to endorse human creation of the actual languages we use. Already Yehuda Ha-Levi in the *Kuzari* denies that words derive from sounds of nature (the Epicurean view), and therefore admits that language is “conventional.” But what does he mean? Ha-Levi denies that any one person could have created language. Therefore, God must have invented it and taught it to Adam, though the divine inventor intended that words in some way express the nature of the things they name. Thus, when Ha-Levi asserts that language is an invention (*muskam*, convention, synthesis, Gr: συνθήκην) and not natural, but invented by God, he thereby answers the question of its conventionality and its divine origin at once. However, Hebrew is different from other languages, which do not express the nature of things as well (*Kuzari*, 1:55, 4:25). Ha-Levi was nothing if not clever, but his response will not suffice for Maimonides.

Maimonides does not produce a sustained essay on this subject. However, Josef Stern argues convincingly that he follows in the steps of Al-Farabi. Al-Farabi understands the Aristotelian conventionality of language to imply a two-stage complexity. In the first stage, concepts in what Stern calls “internal speech,” i.e., thought, do in fact express the essence of things. That accounts for the observation that all speakers of all languages think of the

things of the world with the same thoughts, whether these thoughts are forms, ideas, or pictures in the mind. Internal speech is thus *natural* and *universal*. The laws of logic, not the laws of grammar, rule internal speech.

In the second stage, men assign words in their respective languages to refer to these ideas, just as we tie a string on a finger to remember something. The assignment of these terms is purely conventional, even if, in a few cases, they happen to be onomatopoeic. Thus, *tzipur* is the Hebrew for bird, and the word seems to derive from the “tzip-tzip” sound that a bird makes. Still, according to the Farabian/Maimonidean account, we first get a notion of the bird, a notion shared universally, and only later, and then only in Hebrew, we assign it this name that sounds like a birdsong, as a verbal mnemonic indicator of the universal notion of bird-ness. The term *tzipur* does not “express” bird-ness, rather, it *reminds* us of bird-ness.

Thus, typically, for medieval philosophy, Platonic and Aristotelian accounts converge. Religion is comfortable with this convergence, since notional referentiality is part of that mental life that we in some un-nameable way share with God. Harry Wolfson explains, linking this Maimonidean expansion to Yehuda Ha-Levi’s account:

“The term ‘conventional,’ as we have seen, may mean not only ‘arbitrary’ but also ‘man-made’ or ‘God-made’ and the term ‘natural’ may mean not only to be expressive of the nature of things but also to be grown up spontaneously without a founder. Accordingly, what Maimonides may mean by his statement here (‘*And Adam gave names...*’ this teaches us that languages are conventional, and that they are not natural, as has been assumed by some,’ Guide 2:30) is merely the assertion that languages are ‘conventional’ in the sense that they are founded by somebody, that is, Adam, who was taught by God; and are ‘not natural’ in the sense that they have not grown up spontaneously without a founder. The ‘some’ in the expression ‘as has been assumed by some,’ would thus refer to the Epicureans [who held that languages are natural in the sense that they arose without a founder].” (Wolfson, *ibid.*, 235).

But to what does the unique name of God refer?

## THE CONVENTIONALITY OF NAMES

There are two ways of looking at Adam’s naming of the animal species, even if we view those names as conventional markers of universal concepts. Either the names remind us of something true about the animal itself, or, conversely, the name is merely a conventional “handle” with no intrinsic or organic connection to the animal. We do note the many ways we use names, on a continuum, with close organic reference at one end, and pure referential sound at the other.

Thus, originally, names of men told you something about them. Yaakov and Yitzhak, deriving from *ekev* and *tzakhek*, that is, “heel” and “laughter,” tell you about their unusual birth stories, as recounted in Genesis. By the middle ages, your being named Yaakov or Yitzhak meant nothing other than that perhaps a grandfather or other relative had the same name, depending on the custom. When Jews began to integrate into modern European life in the 18th century they shed or shelved their Jewish style names, such as Yaakov ben Yitzhak, and frequently took on last names that referred to their work or their place. Diamond or Gold conveyed that the bearer was a jeweler; Rothschild recalled the red shield that decorated the ancestral home. Into the 19th and 20th centuries, parents chose names just because they were popular and sounded pleasing. Thus, I am called Scott, *despite* my Scottish gentile ancestry within distant history. Had my parents wished to refer to that ancestry they would not have spelled it with two “t”s. They told me that they chose it because it was popular and had only one syllable (to balance my tri-syllabic last name). Thus, my name tells you nothing about me.

## NAMING GOD

Naming God is another matter altogether. Does the name of God tell us anything about Him? If it does, then Maimonides has a problem with predication and attributes, as the last ten chapters made clear.

Maimonides might want us here to think of the name of God as an empty referent, or at least as unreferential, just as in modern naming practice the name tells nothing about the person named. This would take it out of the magical sphere. Also, in this way, the name of God functions like the negative attributes in the preceding chapters. In 1:58 he said that negative attributes “do not give us knowledge in any respect whatever of the essence the knowledge of which is sought” (Pines’ translation). In the same way, the name of God, the Tetragrammaton, is entirely underived from any other entity or action, and, therefore, gives us no knowledge in any respect whatever of the essence of God. This is the position ably argued by Shem Tov in his commentary to our chapter.

This raises a deeper question. Why does God have a name at all? If names are in some intrinsic way linked to the subject, then it follows that the name is a power in connection with the subject, and perhaps a power over the subject. Maimonides strongly attacks the magical misuse of the names of God, partly because it implies that the magician has power to compel God. While the theurgical abuse of these names is not quite the same thing as polytheism, it is the thin edge of the wedge.

The problem for Jewish intellectual history is that shortly after Maimonides’ time comes the publication of the *Zohar*. Mostly avoiding the magical use of names, The *Zohar* reminds us of an important sense that these names sublimate the almost inevitable appearance of dualism and even triadism and decadism in the discussion of divinity. The very notion of creation by an ineffable God wholly other than His creation tends to move to some sort of division whereby this *Ayn Sof* can create without being Itself a creator. Shem Tov claims that this is the reason we do not utter the name. He writes, “the greatness of this name means that it teaches many secrets of existence, therefore, because of this greatness we refrain from pronouncing it,” (my trans. *ad loc.*, 92a: *v’gedulat ze ha-shem yorei al inyanim rabim b’sitrei ha-mitziut, v’lakhen raui l’gadli v’l’hashamer m’likroa oto*).

Maimonides’ answer to the problem of origin is creation *ex nihilo*. When you ask how that is supposed to work, he says that it is a miracle that passes understanding. He thereby preserves the unity of God as the omnipotent willing creator. The Zoharic reaction was to conceive of the divine names as hypostatized states in the mind of God Himself (a Philonic theory). As we have seen, such states or “modes” are not consistent with Maimonides’ sternly unitary understanding of God. At best, they are projections of what we barely grasp in momentary flashes of inspiration.

## SHEM HA-MEFORASH

The most significant name is the Tetragrammaton, *y\*h\*v\*h*. The term anciently applied to this name is “*shem ha-meforash*.” *Shem ha-meforash* is the tag used universally in Hebrew for the Tetragrammaton, but we do not understand its meaning well. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* says: “The exact meaning of the term is somewhat obscure.” It goes back at least to the Mishnah (see, in general, Talmud, *Sota* 38a). *Shem ha-meforash* is usually translated as the “articulated” name, from the term *meforash*, “to explain, to express” like the *meforshim*, who are the rabbinic commentators, or explainers. Differently, Friedlander, note 3 to Guide 1:61, argues that it means “to make clear or to separate, i.e., *shem ha-meforash* “clearly” indicates the name that is “separated” from all others, “distinctly indicating the special object of our thought.” Kafih may have the right answer (note 3, p. 101). Reading the Aramaic *Targums* of Onkelos and Jonathan on various biblical passages, he discovers that they translate *ha-meforash* as *ha-mufla*, or *ha-peli*, i.e., “the wonder/secret/miracle” (see Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1181), so that *shem ha-meforash* is the wonderful name, name of wonder. This may accord with Rashi’s take on the Tetragrammaton itself. He says it is the “concealed name,” (*ad loc.* to Exodus 3:15). It is a name concealed and revealed, for what it expresses is inexpressible.

Maimonides takes a somewhat different approach. He argues that *meforash* means “underived,” in that it directly *expresses* the divine essence to which it refers. It names that essence without linking to any other entity, state or action. Here is his definition of *shem ha-meforash* at the beginning of our chapter:

“... one name: namely, *Yod, He, Vav, He*. This is the name of God, may He be exalted, that has been originated without any derivation, and for this reason is called the articulated name (*shem ha-meforash*). This means that this name gives a *clear unequivocal indication of His essence*, may He be exalted (in which there is no associationism, i.e., *shituf*). On the other hand, all the other great (*kedusha*) names give their indication *in an equivocal way (b’shituf)*, being derived from terms signifying actions...which...exist as our own actions.” (Pines’ translation, my emphases and my parentheticals. The translation is difficult, but I prefer Pines’ “clear unequivocal indication of His essence” over Friedlander. Kafih translates the passage as: *...shem ekhad v’hu yud he vav he, sh’hu shem m’yukhad lo yitalei, u’lefikakh nikra shem meforash, inyano sh’hu morei al atzmo ytalei horaa brura sh’ain bo shituf. Aval shaar shemotav ha-kedusha morim b’shituf...*).

Shem Tov reads Maimonides very closely and discovers two different meanings expressed in Maimonides’ statement, (my two italicizations) the first of which he criticizes. The first meaning for *meforash* is that the Tetragrammaton gives a *clear unequivocal indication of His essence*. Shem Tov correctly understands this to mean that God’s existence is absolute, i.e., that His existence is identical with His essence. There is no doubt that this is Maimonides’ view, although his diffidence about expressing it in our chapter accounts for the difficult language.

His second meaning for *meforash* is “underived,” which Maimonides emphasizes in this chapter. Unlike the other names, which, like attributes, derive from human actions, the divine name is underived, just as the divine identity is unreferential. In this way, the name of God is like the essence of God.

Shem Tov is happy with the second meaning since “underived” is a negation, and fits with Maimonides’ negative theology. He is unhappy with the first meaning because it is an affirmation of divine *existence*, and since that existence is completely unlike our existence, Maimonides should have expressed it as a negation. Shem Tov suggests ways of saying this negatively that Maimonides could have used. He goes further, saying that everywhere else Maimonides uses *meforash* he means ‘underived’, using such negative language in order to obviate attempts to justify attributism.

I agree that Maimonides does use the term *meforash* as one more club to beat up the attributists and those who use names for theurgical purposes, but he now begins to turn from concern with negation to other philosophical interests. Moreover, as I have repeatedly shown, his negativism is moderate, not radical, and for the most part limited to the negative expression of affirmations. We should not view his affirmation of divine existence several times in our chapter as a departure from his larger theological program.

### ADONAI: THE METONYM

By the term *shem hameforash* we also mean that the Tetragrammaton is read but not spoken, that is, its expression is internal, in internal speech. It is well established in Talmud that the utterance of the Tetragrammaton is prohibited except in the Priestly Benediction, (Numbers 6:23-27), and by the high priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur (Talmud, *Sota* 38a, *Yoma* 39b, *Mishnah Yoma* 6:2, *Sifre Numbers* 6:23-27).

Even today in the synagogue, we read the name *y\*h\*v\*h* silently but pronounce it as *Adonai*. There are two reasons Maimonides gives to explain why we use this name *Adonai* as the metonym for the Tetragrammaton. First, the name *Adonai* lost its derived meaning as “Lord” *because* we always substitute it for the Tetragrammaton. Secondly, *Adonai* is more specific to God than the other derived names. Another reason is the

tradition that maintains the vocalization of *Adonai* is the same as the actual ancient vocalization of the Tetragrammaton. Maimonides does not give this reason because he maintains that we have lost the knowledge of Hebrew vocalization. Kafih (notes 4 and 16) explains that the vocalizations were changed and mixed up (and then lost) in order to confound those who would seek the derivations of the divine names and use them for magical purposes (also see Schwarz' note 12, *ad loc.*).

### ADONAI: THE MYSTERY

Genesis 18:1-4: “And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw [them], he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, And said, *My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant (vayomer adonai im na matzati khen b'einekha al na ta'avor me'al avdekha)*: Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.”

Guide 1:61 (our chapter): “Even the name *adonay*, ‘Lord,’ which has been substituted for the Tetragrammaton, is derived from the appellative ‘lord’....  
“*An angel is also addressed as adonai; e.g. Gen. 18:3; ‘adonay... pass not away, I pray thee...’ I have restricted my explanation to the term adonay, the substitute for the Tetragrammaton, because it is more commonly applied to God than any of the other names which are in frequent use.*”

Guide 2:42: “This important principle was adopted by one of our Sages, one of the most distinguished among them, R. Hiya the Great (*Bereshit Rabba*, xlviii.), in the exposition of the Scriptural passage commencing, ‘And the Lord appeared unto him in the plain of Mamre’ (Genesis 18:1). The general statement that the Lord appeared to Abraham is followed by the description in what manner that appearance of the Lord took place; namely, Abraham saw first three men; he ran and spoke to them. R. Hiya, the author of the explanation, holds that the words of Abraham (18:3), ‘My Lord, *adonai*, if now I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant,’ were spoken by him in a prophetic vision *to one of the men*; for he says that Abraham addressed these words to the *chief* of these men. Note this well, for it is one of the great mysteries [of the Law].” (...*ki hu sod min ha-sodot.*)

Mishneh Torah, Ysodei Ha-Torah, 6:9: “All the names [of God] written in [the passage concerning] Abraham [and the angels] are *sacred*. Even [the name of God in Genesis 18:3]: ‘My Lord, if now I have found favor in thy sight...’”

Maimonides' brief statement in our chapter about the meaning of *Adonai* in Genesis 18:3 conceals his entire lore of angelology in relation to prophecy.

He first claims that this substitute for the Tetragrammaton derives from *adonut*, “lordship.” He then uses the example of the two names given Abraham's wife, *Sara* and *Sarai*, to show that the *ai* sound at the end *Sarai* and *Adonai* implies plurality and honor, in the sense of the “royal we.”

Next he says that in Genesis 18:3, ‘My lord (*adonai*)... pass not away,’ Abraham is no longer talking to God “who appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre,” but to one of the three men/angels standing by him in his tent. In other words, he is asking this guest on behalf of the other two not to leave before he could demonstrate his hospitality.

Finally, Maimonides says, “However, I have only told you that *adonai* is the metonym for the name that is the most specific of the known names of God” (my trans). The point of this statement is that while Maimonides is not reticent to call *adonai* a derivative of *adonut*, yet the name is now so specifically identified in the public mind as the substitute for the Tetragrammaton that it has lost its derivative nature.

The most interesting thing about his statement is its beginning, that in Gen. 18:3 Abraham addressed the angel, rather than God. Maimonides does this to show that not only was the name *adonai* derivative of lordship, in the sense that the angel is a ruler, but also that it was in the past not always exclusively used as a name of God, as it is now.

This statement conceals a large difference of opinion about who Abraham addressed, a difference of opinion appearing even in Maimonides' own Mishneh Torah, quoted above. The possibilities are that Abraham could be addressing God, or one angel of the three, or all three angels. We will see that there is a sense in which Maimonides agrees with all three positions at once, but we require some background.

The problem is in the grammar as well as with the context of 18:3. Grammatically, *adonai* could be a contraction of *adonai sheli*, "my lords." Abraham would then be addressing all three travelers. However, the text shifts into singular with *b'einekha, al na taavor, avdekha* ("in your sight," "please do not pass," "your servant") setting up the possibility that he is only talking to one person. Rashi's first interpretation of 18:3 is that Abraham began by addressing all of the men with the plural *adonai*, but then directed his request to one of them, their leader (Rashi's second interpretation is that Abraham spoke only to God). Maimonides, in our chapter, disagrees. Abraham expressed the royal "we" when he called the leader of the men *adonai*, so that the whole line read singular. *Adonai*, then, refers to their chief.

But Maimonides had advocated the opposite position, that *adonai* in 18:3 refers to God. In Mishneh Torah, in the halakhic context, he ruled that *adonai* in 18:3 was "sacred," (*kodesh*), that it represents the divine name.

If Abraham directed his plea, "My Lord ... pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant," to the travellers (or one of them) it meant that he did not want them to leave before he had an opportunity to serve them. If, on the other hand, he directed it to God, it meant that he did not want God to depart from his prophetic vision while he served the travellers. The tradition phrases this division by asking whether *adonai*, in 18:3 is "sacred" or not (*khol*). The *halakha* asks whether it was a capital offense for a scribe to erase this name. If "sacred" it must not be erased, and if not, it could. Maimonides is capable of calling it "sacred" in a halakhic context, as he does in Mishneh Torah, but with a broader meaning in the general religious context, as he does in the Guide.

In Mishneh Torah, in the halakhic context, ruling that the term is sacred, he wrote,

"All the names [of God] written in [the passage concerning] Abraham [and the angels] are sacred. Even [*adonai* in]: 'My Lord, if I have found favor in Your eyes' is also sacred" (Touger trans.).

Maimonides means that it refers to God and must not be erased. Support for this comes from *Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus* 11:5: "When he (Abraham) acted with special courtesy, the Holy One, blessed be He, acted towards him with special courtesy.... On which occasion did he act with special courtesy?—When he said: My Lord... pass not away, I pray Thee, from Thy servant..." (Soncino). In other words, he asked God to wait, and God did. This is supported by *Targum Onkelos*, which translates *adonai* as *y\*h\*v\*h* at 18:3. Strong support also comes from Talmud, *Shabbat* 127a and *Shevu'ot* 35b.

However, in our chapter, he argues (but does not rule), that *adonai* in 18:3 is not sacred. In Guide 2:42, also quoted in full above, he supports our chapter's conclusion:

"R. Hiya, the author of the explanation, holds that the words of Abraham... were spoken by him in a prophetic vision to one of the men; for he says that Abraham addressed these words to the chief of these men (citing a competing Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* - 48:10). Note this well, for it is one of the great mysteries [of the Law]."

What R. Khiya actually said was, “He (Abraham) said this to the greatest of them, viz. Michael,” that is, the *adonai* in Genesis 18:3 was the archangel Michael, chief over the other two angels. This supports the minority view that the term is not “sacred” in a halakhic context. Nonetheless, it is profoundly holy in any other context. *Genesis Rabbah* 48:9, also supports this conclusion, stating that Abraham saw the *Shekhina* and the angels Michael, Rafael, and Gabriel, probably identifying Michael here with the *Shekhina*. This would elevate “my lord” from a traveler, to an archangelic chieftain, to the “presence” of God, which is the *Shekhina*. (The *Zohar* also took it as *Shekhina*, 1:100b, Soncino trans., 1:326).

But even if we were willing to concede, along with most of the modern commentators (Friedlander, Kafih, Schwarz), that the Mishneh Torah can be reconciled to the two statements in the Guide, that does not explain why in 2:42 he said “Note this well, for it is one of the great mysteries.” What is the mystery?

He answers this by his remarkable chapter on angelology, Guide 2:6, read in the light his of theory of the prophetic process. His answer, never explicitly stated, is that in Genesis 18 God teaches Abraham the process of prophecy.

Guide 2:6 does not mention Genesis 18:3, but it does discuss the term *adonai* to explain the phrase *adonei ha-adonim* (Deut. 10:17). Maimonides says that the phrase means that God is the lord of all the angels, as well as of all intelligent forces, especially the separate intellects that guide the spheres. This works well for understanding Genesis 18:3. God had wanted Abraham to come out of his tent of astrological reflections in order to appreciate the real celestial forces God had put in motion (see Rashi to Gen. 15:5). It also relates his speech to the angelic chief back to God, who is the ultimate chief of the angels, *adonei ha-adonim*. It could be that *adonai* is a contraction of *adonei ha-adonim*, which would explain why it is the only metonym for the Tetragrammaton. But there is more.

He proceeds in Guide 2:6 to explain that angels are intellectual forces, even the very “natural” forces that effect change in our world. He then pushes this notion to the point where he identifies the angelic host with the nomic world of the Platonic forms:

“Our Sages explain this in the following manner: God, as it were, does nothing without contemplating the host above. I wonder at the expression *contemplating*, which is the very expression used by Plato: God, as it were, ‘contemplates the world of ideals, and thus produces the existing beings’” (see Friedlander note 1, p. 39, on the difficulty of locating this language in rabbinic literature).

He then goes on to say, “All forms are the result of the influence of the Active Intellect, and that latter is the angel, the ‘Prince of the World.’” This assimilates the active intellect to Michael, but also to Metatron, who are both called Prince of the World (*sar ha-olam*, also sometimes *sar ha-panim*; see my notes, Guide 1:12, 1:64). He also says that our cognitive faculties are angels. Becoming more excited about this, he writes, citing another Midrash:

“In *Midrash-Kohleth* (on Eccles. 10:7) the following passage occurs: ‘When man sleeps, his soul speaks to the angel, the angel to the cherub.’ The intelligent reader will find here a clear statement that man’s imaginative faculty is also called ‘angel,’ and that ‘cherub’ is used for man’s intellectual faculty. How beautiful must this appear to him who understands it; how absurd to the ignorant!”

The “beauty” of the passage would not be obvious if we did not recall his definition of the system of prophecy in Guide 2:36: “Prophecy is, in truth and reality, an emanation sent forth by the Divine Being through the medium of the Active Intellect, in the first instance to man’s rational faculty, and then to his imaginative faculty...”

Now we start to see what is on Maimonides' mind. As far as I know, Efodi was the only commentator who grasped it. According to him, Maimonides meant that while Abraham met three angels, he only addressed one as *adonai* because:

“It is the active intellect, while the two other angels are the human intellect and the human imagination, since these three angels are necessary for every prophet.” *V’hu ha-sekheh ha-poel u’shnei ha-malakhim ha-akherim hem koakh ha-divri v’koakh ha-dimioni ki elu shloshe malakhim m’khayuvim sh’yihui b’khal navi.* (Efodi, pen name of Profiat Duran, c. 1350 – c. 1415; *ad loc.*, at 91b in the standard Ibn Tibon translation of the Guide).

I did not quote Efodi at first because I was concerned that the reader would take this as a typical bad example of the allegorization of scripture, which, I confess, was how I took it the first time I read it. But having all the above background it appears like Efodi understood the great mystery of Genesis 18, which is that God appeared to Abraham and taught him the system of prophecy. Thus the name *Adonai* in 18:3 is certainly sacred and must not be erased, because it represents the intercession of the active intellect with God in the process of prophecy.

### DERIVED NAMES OF GOD

Unlike the Tetragrammaton, however, all other names of God are derivative.

Under “derived names” of God (*shemot ngzarim*) Maimonides lists the following: *Dayan, Tzadik, Khannun, Rakhum*, (meaning, respectively, Judge, Righteous, Merciful, Kind) and, dubiously, *Elohim* (Ruler – Guide 1:2; Judge – Guide 2:6). These names derive from actions of God thought to be like actions of men. In other words, they are human projections, and completely conventional. They express a state or action and predicate it of an *unstated* subject (*kol shem ngzar sh’hu morei al inyan v’al munakh sh’lo porash b’shmo sh’bo oto ha-inyan nasu*). This understood subject is God. So, for example, the name *Tzadik/Righteous* shortens a sentence that says “X is righteous,” where X is understood to be God, imputing, as it were, the attribute of righteousness to God. (Compare the unstated *nomen regens* of Guide 1:27, and my comments there. This seems more like an ellipsed *nomen rectum*. These two Latin terms denote the two members of the “construct state” in Hebrew, *smikhut*, see Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar* [1910 Kautzsch-Cowley edition], 413, 414.)

None of these derivative names has the status of the Tetragrammaton, or of *Adonai* when used as its metonym. This distinction has legal consequences. In Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara 2:7*, Maimonides rules that taking these two names in vain is a capital offence, while vain use of the merely derived names only results in corporal punishment.

If the Tetragrammaton has no act or state from which it derives it is an excellent name for God. With this name we cannot confuse God with any attributes. The underived character of the name can express no essential attribute but only the divine essence itself, and only by way of negation.

Nonetheless, Maimonides does, hesitantly, say that the name could mean “necessary existence.” The oblique construction of his sentence reflects his ambivalence about saying this here, where he emphasizes the unique name’s underived nature:

“Perhaps the meaning of the name, though we have little knowledge of Hebrew language now, or of its proper pronunciation, is ‘necessary existence.’” (My trans. *shmo hu morei k’fi ha-lashon, sh’aino b’yadeinu hayom mimena ki im me’at, v’gam k’fi sh’mivtaim oto, al inyan khiuv ha-metziut.*)

Obviously deriving it from *hoveh*, “is,” i.e., existence. *Hoveh* shares its three consonants with y\*h\*v\*h. This would be good for Maimonides, meaning that God is the *necessary existent*. It is probably what he believed. But he hesitates to say this so as not to complicate his teaching its underived character. Instead, he says that the fund



of ancient Hebrew left to us with is small, and we know little of the vocalizations of what terms we do have. While the ancients may have known its derivation, we lack sufficient knowledge to make this judgment. He, thus, explicitly, denies any known connection between the Tetragrammaton and any existing word or root.

Maimonides suggests, however, that this name could mean “necessary existence.” Nonetheless, he is concerned that people will *derive* it from our term for existence as known to us, and then project that existence on God as an attribute. Derivation implies attribution.

Just as in the attribute chapters, Maimonides could not avoid saying that God is an existent, the necessary unique existent that exhausts the “class” of such existents, whose existence is identical to His essence. Divine “life” is not an essential attribute. By applying the admittedly self-contradictory formula “living but not through (the attribute of) life,” which expresses the concealed and inexpressible meaning of the Tetragrammaton, he protects his concept of God from predication by the dreaded attribute.

### THE DAY OF THE MESSIAH

Somewhat more effectively, Maimonides cites a Midrash, *Pirke d'R. Eliezer*, 3, which identifies the Tetragrammaton with the Day of Creation: “Before the world was created, there was only the Holy One, and his Name,” which itself refers to Zechariah 14:6-9:

“And it shall come to pass in that day, [that] the light shall not be clear, [nor] dark: But it shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord, not day, nor night: but it shall come to pass, [that] at evening time it shall be light. And it shall be in that day, [that] living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be. And the Lord shall be king over all the earth: *in that day shall there be one Lord, and His name one.*”

As interpreted by Rashi: “They will be the days of the Messiah, and there shall be no subjugation during these days. Before the thousand years are up there shall be a splendrous light, and all the good promised to Israel [will come].” For Rashi the day of the one name is the messianic era, while the Midrash of Rabbi Eliezer assigned it to the day of creation. Maimonides recognized the link between the two traditions. Before creation, there was nothing from which to derive a name, since there were no actions. There was only the Tetragrammaton. The world returns to this entirely spiritual state when the Messiah comes.

After quoting the Midrash, Maimonides says, “This is correct, for all these [other] names have been laid down (*sh'hunakho*) so as to correspond to the actions existing in the world” (Pines’ translation). That is, these other names are conventional corporealized attributions projected on God. However, on the day of the Messiah, Zechariah prophesies, according to the Midrash, that we shall return to the pre-lapsarian state, when there were no derivative names. These other names found in scripture leave some people with the notion that God could possess multiple attributes (*nidma l'miktzat bnai adam sh'yesh lo mispar taarim k'mispar ha-pa'ulot nigzaro mehem*). Zechariah’s great prophecy makes clear that the original and final understanding denies such predication.

Once again, this process requires that we free our minds from the grip of imagination, which locks onto the actions of the material world. “When you contemplate (*t'tbonen*) His essence abstracted and stripped (*m'ortelet u'mupashtet*) from all actions, there are no derived names at all” (my translation). There is only God and the one unique underived name that in some unknown way expresses the divine essence.

Thus, on the prophesied day to come, people will renounce all other names and attributes predicated of God. The world returns to its Edenic state, where truth, not convention, reigns.

### AMULETS

Maimonides writes scathingly, here and elsewhere, about the use of holy names in amulets and for other magical purposes. He was reacting to popular folkloric practices among the *Hasidei Askhenaz* in Europe and the messianic excitements in the Sephardic lands (to which he devoted several epistles). In those troubling times superstition gained ground. He despairs of the decline in contemporary Jewish society, comparing its standards with those of the elite Andalusian circles of his youth.

Maimonides links amulet practices to paganism in Guide 3:37. The Talmud, *Shabbat* 61a-b, and 67a, had also disapproved of amulets unless a particular amulet had thrice proven medically useful. The proliferation of allegedly holy names for healing and protective purposes is associated with these amulets. Just as in 18th century Hasidism, in Maimonides' time there were among the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* "Masters of the Holy Name"—*baalei shem*: non-rabbis who could be consulted for healing abracadabras.

Maimonides wants to separate this popular magic from Jewish esoteric tradition. Jewish esotericism had been an elite and private pursuit. The Guide itself continues the tradition of teaching these materials in an elite and private way.

In Maimonides' time and just after, partially as a reaction to these historical trends, and as a repercussion of the Guide itself, Jewish esotericism sought to recover its elite standing in the work of Spanish Cabalists such as Moses De Leon (c. 1250 – 1305) and Abraham Abulafia (1240 – c. 1291). In the theosophical Cabala of Moses De Leon we rise above lesser magic to engage the forces of *sefirot* in "unifications." By performing the commandments of the Torah these unifications trigger redemption. Abulafia, by contrast, proliferates names, not for magic, but to nullify mental barriers to prophetic influx. Both De Leon and Abulafia were devoted Maimonideans. (For brief background on all of this, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, entries for *baal shem*, Moses Ben Shem Tov De Leon, and index entries for Abulafia, particularly 53-54. For Egyptian and Sefardic mystical trends, 35-36.)

It is by no means clear how Maimonides would have reacted to these developments, especially since his own descendants advocated mystical disciplines, especially meditation. What we know is that he opposed the vulgar reduction of Jewish esoteric tradition to formulas and amulets. We also know that he opposed any practice or conception that promoted multiplicity within divine unity. He advocated an intellectual practice culminating in a post-intellectual approach to or encounter with the divine: the portal for prophecy.

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