

## GUIDE 1:4 SEEING

This is a lexical chapter. (See the explanation of my method of portraying these chapters in Chapter 1:1 above, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”) Below all three lexical entries are two essays synthesizing this material. The three terms are verbs of sight.

### **RAAH (SEE)**

1. Optical perception.
2. Used figuratively in the sense of intellectual perception, particularly when applied to God.

#### Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And he *looked* (*va-yar*), and behold a well in the field, and, lo, there [were] three flocks of sheep lying by it; for out of that well they watered the flocks: and a great stone [was] upon the well’s mouth.” (Genesis 29:2)

The passage is about Jacob meeting Rachel. “And he *looked*” refers to sight taken literally. Note also that in Guide 1:43, the lexical chapter on “eye,” the first meaning of “eye” is a “well.” He, so to speak, sees Rachel, his “well,” understanding “well” as a channel of divine emanation.

#### Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all [they] that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had [*seen*] (*raah*) great experience of wisdom and knowledge.” (Ecclesiastes 1:16)

This is a figurative usage, since the heart does not “see.” This speech tells Solomon’s regret that wisdom has not removed his “vexation of spirit,” a type of perplexity (1:17). He continues, 1:18: “For in much wisdom [is] much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.” The text seems to contradict Maimonides’ general exaltation of wisdom. However, see essay below on Mosaic prophecy.

“(19) And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the Lord: I [Micaiah] *saw* (*raiti*) the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. (20) And the Lord said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth Gilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. (21) And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the Lord, and said, I will persuade him. (22) And the Lord said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade [him], and prevail also: go forth, and do so.” (1 Kings 22:19-22)

The prophet Micaiah prophesizes to Ahab. He tells the evil king that God would send him false prophets. Maimonides is concerned to distinguish false prophets from real prophets (see *Mishneh Torah, Avoda Zara*, Ch. 5). The verse is also about the meaning of “seeing” the Lord in prophecy, see essay below.

“And the Lord *appeared* (*va-yera*) unto him [Abraham] in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day.” (Genesis 18:1)

This is Abraham’s prophetic vision after his circumcision. God does not “appear” to the eyes but only to intellectual perception. This perception filters through the prophetic imagination. In Maimonides’ understanding, it was not God that appeared at all, but God’s angel. This angel is the “active intellect” which will be the focus of much discussion in the Guide. He cites this passage as an “important principle” of prophecy in Guide 2:42 and always associates this principle of angelic mediation with Abraham. He says: “We have already shown that the appearance or speech of an angel mentioned in Scripture took place in a vision or dream; it makes no difference whether this is expressly stated or not, as we have explained above. This is a point of considerable importance. In

some cases the account begins by stating that the prophet saw an angel; in others, the account apparently introduces a human being, who ultimately is shown to be an angel; but it makes no difference, for if the fact that an angel has been heard is only mentioned at the end, you may rest satisfied that the whole account from the beginning describes a prophetic vision.”

“And God called the dry [land] Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw (*va-yar*) that [it was] good.” (Genesis 1:10)

God does not see with corporeal sight. He has immediate intellectual perception. This perception is identical with his essence, that is, His perception and His self are one. He thus knows and in so knowing, *we* say that He approves, that it is “good.” More significantly, the “good” is all of creation, and this “good” is the vision granted Moses (“you shall see My back”). Maimonides generally defines “good” as “fit for its intended purpose.”

“And he said, I beseech thee, *show me (harem) thy glory.*” (Exodus 33:18)

This was Moses’ request to know God. Instead, he is shown God’s creation entire, that is, God’s “active attributes.” He sees all that is “good.” Compare, in the last chapter, Moses’ different *temunah* of God. See essay below.

“Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw (*va-yiru*) the God of Israel: and [there was] under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink.” (Exodus 24:9-11)

This is Maimonides’ example of prophecy gone wrong. The next chapter of the Guide is devoted to his view of this important passage.

### **HIBIT (SEE)**

1. Optical perception.
2. To view and observe with the intellect, to contemplate a thing until it is understood.

#### Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And it came to pass, when they had brought them forth abroad, that he said, Escape for thy life; *Look (tabit)* not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed.” (Genesis 19:17)

“But his wife *looked (va-tabet)* back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.” (Genesis 19:26)

This pair of quotes relate to Lot and his wife leaving Sodom. God told them not to look back, but she famously did, and became a pillar of salt. The “seeing” in this case is corporeal, and it is a very negative reference. Maimonides generally uses very negative proof-texts for the corporeal definitions of lexical terms to express his disapproval of those definitions.

“And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if [one] *look (v’nibat)* unto the land, behold darkness [and] sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.” (Isaiah 5:30)

This is about the nations designated by God to punish Israel. They “look” to the land they will take. Maimonides may want to incorporate by reference the rest of this chapter of Isaiah. Verse 5:13 says, “Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because [they have] no knowledge.” 5:18 shows the result when knowledge is not properly cultivated: “Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope.” This is polar opposite to Solomon’s linking the cords of the parables together to draw forth knowledge. When we fail to “see” with our intellect, others “look” upon us to punish us.

### Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“He hath not *beheld* (*hibit*) iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the Lord his God [is] with him, and the shout of a king [is] among them.” (Numbers 23:21)

We cannot see “iniquity” with the eye. The term is, therefore, figurative. Maimonides remarks on this passage that God inspired Balaam, the gentile who was “almost a prophet,” to speak thus “when he was good” (Guide 2:45). This suggests that his other counsels when he was bad were, therefore, not prophetic in nature.

“And it came to pass, when Moses went out unto the tabernacle, [that] all the people rose up, and stood every man [at] his tent door, and *looked* (*v’hibitu*) after Moses, until he was gone into the tabernacle.” (Exodus 33:8)

Maimonides writes: “In addition to the literal understanding, the phrase was explained by our Sages in a figurative sense. According to them, these words mean that the Israelites examined and criticized the actions and sayings of Moses.” Maimonides refers to several aggadic accounts that explain what it means to “look after Moses.” Those accounts take it in two senses: *non-pejorative*: that is, to study what he did; and *pejorative*: to criticize the way he *physically* looks, i.e., fat; or, in another account, to accuse him of leaving the camp because he was allegedly an adulterer. Maimonides prefers the former non-pejorative sense, but recognized the existence of this critical examination.

“And He brought him forth abroad, and said, *Look now* (*habet-contemplate*) toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and He said unto him, so shall thy seed be.” (Genesis 15:5)

This passage is a prophetic vision. The entire chapter, Genesis 15, is all part of Abraham’s vision, including, in Maimonides’ special interpretation, Abraham leaving his tent to look at the sky. Only *in the vision* does God lead Abraham out of his tent to look at the stars. God thereby expresses disapproval of Abraham’s astrological speculations (see *Bereshit Rabba* 44:12). Abandoning astrology is a necessary stage before the receipt of prophecy, especially for Maimonides, who wrote a famous disapproving *Letter on Astrology*.

“Moreover he said, I [am] the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to *look* (*mehabit*) upon God.” (Exodus 3:6)

Moses’ humility is important in Maimonides’ general theory of Mosaic prophecy. Humility is a prerequisite to prophecy; indeed, it is prerequisite to any learning. Moses’ reward for his humility is, according to Maimonides, knowledge beyond that afforded any other man.

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

Maimonides says, “This verb, when applied to God, is employed in this figurative sense,” in other words, one can never “behold” or “see” God, even when speaking of Moses. The context is Miriam’s accusation against Moses for marrying a Cushite. God punishes Miriam’s slander with leprosy, which Moses cures through prayer. The point of the quote is that Mosaic prophecy is on a higher order (the level of “similitude”) than that of all other prophets. See essay below.

“[Thou art] of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not *look* (*habet*) on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, [and] holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth [the man that is] more righteous than he?” (Habakkuk 1:13).

God refuses to look upon the people’s iniquity. Compare the Balaam quote above, Numbers 23:21. Same phrase, different intent: In this case, it is a principle that we must figuratively interpret all biblical statements that attribute corporeality to God (Guide 1:49). Thou “canst not look upon iniquity” means we may never apply any negative attribute to God, including any attribute that readers commonly take as negative or pejorative.

## **KHAZAH (SEE)**

1. Optical perception.
2. Mental perception.

### Instance of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“Now also many nations are gathered against thee, that say, let her be defiled, and let our eye look (*ve-takhaz*) upon Zion.” (Micah 4:11)

Essentially the same idea as in Isaiah 5:30, above: the enemy nations look covetously on the land of Israel.

### Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw (*khazah*) concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, [and] Hezekiah, kings of Judah.” (Isaiah 1:1)

This verse commences the book of Isaiah, exemplar of prophets other than Moses. He foresees the eventual universal acceptance of Torah. What he “saw” he saw with prophetic mental rather than optical perception.

“After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision (*makhazeh*), saying, Fear not, Abram: I [am] thy shield, [and] thy exceeding great reward.” (Genesis 15:1)

This is the second reference to Abraham’s vision of the stars, leading to the “covenant between the parts.” Maimonides has a special interpretation of this entire chapter. Unlike most commentators, he sees the whole chapter as part of a prophetic vision.

“Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and [there was] under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw (*va-yekhezu*) God, and did eat and drink.” (Exodus 24:9-11)

Maimonides says “Note this well,” his usual sign that he will have more to say about a subject later in the Guide, or that we are to contemplate and find out his meaning. In this case, the next chapter, Guide 1:5, is devoted to this example of prophecy gone wrong.

## **MAIMONIDEAN PROPHECY: AN INTRODUCTION**

On its surface, this chapter teaches us that we may take the terms for “seeing” used in the Bible, *raah*, *hibit*, and *khazah*, either literally or figuratively.

If that were all the chapter had to teach, no more than six proof-texts would have been necessary, one to show that each term can be taken literally, and another where it is used figuratively. Instead, Maimonides brings twenty proof-texts. But Maimonides does not pile citations like a lawyer, to overwhelm an adversary. He has a purpose for each quotation, though it is not always easy to see it.

Bearing this in mind, we can discern his purpose in this chapter. Maimonides omits a verse here, for the lexical term *raah*:

“Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the *seer* (*raah*): for [he that is] now [called] a prophet was beforetime called a *seer* (*raah*).” (1 Samuel 9:9, invoked by Maimonides in Commentary on the Mishnah, *Introduction to Zeraim*, Fred Rosner translation, p. 52, Feldheim, 1975)

The real point of this chapter is that we see with our eyes, but the *seer* sees with prophetic vision. Maimonides is not here interested in the subject of corporeal sight, except to contrast its baseness compared with prophetic

vision. Elsewhere Maimonides considers corporeal sight a usually reliable source of data, joining with Aristotle to oppose sense data skepticism. However, sense data is not his concern here. That is why all his quotes about physical sight are negative. There is one possible exception, the first quote, Genesis 29:2. In that verse, Jacob saw a well in the field, which Maimonides may take as a euphemistic reference to Rachel's femininity, or it may have to do with the image of wells in prophecy, as used in the Parable of the Well in the Introduction to the Guide.

All the rest of the quotes fall into the class of figurative uses. We can also take each proof-text as an index pointing to salient issues in Maimonidean prophecy (The general discussion of prophecy takes place in Book Two, from chapter 33 to the end of Book Two).

Maimonides' contemporaries had a broader understanding of prophecy than we do now. Foretelling the future is but a small part of the ancient concept of prophecy. Prophecy, *navua*, concerns all communication from God to individual men. We discussed the act of prophecy in our essay on the Introduction to the Guide, especially as it concerned the production of parables in the imagination of the prophet. We will have many occasions to discuss it in the coming pages.

Maimonides believes there is usually some intermediary in this communication. Moses, Maimonides' prophetic hero, comes closest to prophecy without an intermediary.

Most of the proof-texts in this chapter refer to Maimonides' discussion of his eleven degrees of non-Mosaic prophecy, found at Guide 2:45. In order of appearance in the texts above, the following inspired figures are quoted or referred to: Solomon, Micaiah, Abraham, Moses, the Elders of Israel, Balaam, Habakkuk, Micah, and Isaiah. Solomon is of the second degree, that is, one who is inspired to poetry, politics or science. Balaam, "when he was good" is included in this class, despite his non-Jewish status, perhaps to emphasize that a non-Jew can attain prophecy. Maimonides distinguishes first and second degree figures as being prophetically inspired but not quite prophets.

Maimonides specifically mentions Micaiah in Guide 2:45 as a prophet of high degree, the seventh degree. In that class are those who "see" God speaking to them. In such a vision, according to Maimonides, the speaker is really an angel of God. Maimonides invokes Micaiah to point to the Guide's discussion of angelology and the role of the entity called "active intellect." This is essentially a discussion about the need for mediation between God and man. Maimonides also uses Micaiah's prophecy ("I, Micaiah, saw the Lord...") to stress that we should interpret such statements figuratively; otherwise, a vision in which God is "seen" reflects corporeality on Him. We must interpret such statements because, as Habakkuk says, God "canst not look upon iniquity." Maimonides takes Habakkuk's statement as an *interpretive principle*: in all uses of "seeing" God or of God "seeing," we reinterpret "seeing" as "perceiving" (Guide 1:48).

Maimonides accords Abraham the eleventh degree of prophecy, the highest of the non-Mosaic degrees. In this type the angel, the mediator, "speaks" to the prophet in the vision. In Guide 2:45, and in several other places, especially in connection with Abraham, Maimonides advances the principle that all physical occurrences in a prophetic dream or vision are occurring *in the dream*, even if on the surface it seems like the prophet is awake and moving about.

### **MOSAIC PROPHECY AND THE ELDERS OF ISRAEL**

At the summit of the prophetic pyramid is Moses. Mosaic prophecy is different from all other types of prophecy. Special treatment of Mosaic prophecy is found in many places in the Guide, but principally at 2:33-35. Certain proof-texts in this chapter act as an index pointing to features of Maimonides' doctrine of Mosaic prophecy.

Two of the quotes above are from Exodus 33. In that passage, Moses speaks to God after the sin of the Golden Calf. He asks to see God's glory, which, in Maimonides' interpretation, is a request to know God (Mishneh

Torah, *Ysodei ha-Torah* 1:10, and Commentary on the Mishnah, *Shemona Perakim* Ch. 7). But Moses cannot know God because he remains human, and corporeal. Instead, because of his humility (“And Moses hid his face”), together with his intellectual perfection, he is vouchsafed the vision of all God’s “goodness,” that is, his *creation* (hence the quote from Genesis 1:10). Moses receives access to God’s “active attributes,” known as the “thirteen *middot*” (Genesis 34:6-7). This introduces the discussion of divine attributes and the *via negativa*, Guide chapters 1:31-40.

The verse where Moses “sees” the “similitude” (*temunah*) of God, Numbers 12:8, distinguishes Moses from the prophets of the other eleven degrees. In *Shemona Perakim*, Ch. 7, Maimonides explains that the prophets of different degrees are separated from God by numerous *veils*, which correspond to their lack of moral and intellectual perfection. The prophet attains his higher degree of prophecy due to the fewer veils of moral and intellectual defect he suffers from. At certain points in his prophetic career, Moses rises beyond the ability to see God’s “back,” that is, beyond even the revelation of the consequences of divine action. He actually attains the level of the third meaning of *temunah*, defined in Guide 1:3 as “the true form of an object, perceived only by the intellect: it is only in this third signification that the term is applied to God,” *ha-inyan ha-amiti ha-nasig b’sekhel v’lfi ha-inyan ha-zeh ha-shlishi n’amaret bo ytaleh temunah*. (See David Shatz’ discussion in “Worship, Corporeality, and Human Perfection,” p. 242, *The Legacy of Maimonides*, ed. Y. Levy and S. Carmy, Yashar Books, 2006).

The quote from Ecclesiastes 1:16, regarding the “great experience of wisdom and knowledge” which “increaseth sorrow” (Eccles. 1:18) relates to Moses’ humility. As I pointed out above, it is unusual for Maimonides to write negatively of increasing knowledge. Nonetheless, there are limits to what we can know about God and his cosmos. Maimonides expects us to recall Ecclesiastes 7:16, where Solomon speaks in the same vein: “Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?” And at 5:1 he says: “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil.” Moses was distinguished by his “humility,” which for Maimonides means the prudent recognition of the limit of human cognition.

We will have much more to say about “foot” as a prurient euphemism, especially in the next chapter, which is about the vision of the Elders of Israel. We will see that the elders of Israel had gained knowledge but not the *humility* that should precede it: the result was the increase of sorrow and vexation of spirit that comes from making oneself over wise.

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