

GUIDE 1:26 THE TORAH SPEAKS IN THE LANGUAGE OF MEN

Friedlander's note on this chapter is a good summary, as far as it goes:

“The remarks on those anthropomorphic expressions which signify motion, or any other relation to space, are in this chapter brought to a conclusion with a discussion on the principle followed in the Bible, by which some terms including corporeality appear to have been applied to God figuratively, while others of an equally material character were excluded. According to Maimonides, all expressions which were believed by the common people to imply some kind of perfection were admitted, such are the terms explained in the preceding chapters. The expressions, on the other hand, which appeared to imply a notion of imperfection, are never used in the Bible with reference to God. Onkelos, in his version, observed a far stricter rule, and thought it necessary to paraphrase all the anthropomorphisms employed in Scripture. As, however, his principal object in paraphrasing such passages was to prevent misinterpretation and inferences leading to the belief that God possesses material properties, he retained the literal rendering where no such fears could be entertained. In Chapter 1:27 this method of Onkelos is fully discussed.”

Maimonides begins by invoking what he claims is a Talmudic principle:

“You, no doubt, know the Talmudical saying, which includes in itself all the various kinds of interpretation connected with our subject. It runs thus: ‘The Torah speaks according to the language of man,’ *dibra tora ki lshon bnei adam*, that is to say, expressions, which can easily be comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator.”

This is an excellent example of Maimonides turning traditional materials to his own purpose, since ‘The Torah speaks according to the language of man,’ does not mean what he says it means in its original setting. Kafih cites twenty instances of the phrase in the Talmud (*ad loc.*, footnote 1, page 40). The phrase is a rule of legal interpretation that a doubled word or other verbal emphasis involving an apparently unnecessary term in the Torah does not extend the commandment or refer to something other than the commandment. The rule preserves *context* from the vagaries of human expression. The rule is the Talmudic sages’ reaction against Rabbi Akiva, who strove to interpret every non-substantive grammatical particle in the law. A fine example of this traditional use of the dictum is from the Talmud, *Baba Metzia* 31b:

“‘Thou shalt furnish (*ha’aneik ta’anik*) him [a freed slave] liberally (Deuteronomy 15:14).’ I know only that if the house [of the master] was blessed for his [the slave’s] sake, a present must be made. Whence do we know it even if the house was not blessed for his sake? Scripture teaches, ‘Thou shalt furnish him liberally’ under all circumstances. But according to R. Eleazar b. ‘Azariah, who maintained: If the house was blessed for his sake, a present is made to him, but *not* otherwise; what is the purpose of [the otherwise superfluous] *ta’anik*? — The Torah employs human phraseology (speaks in the language of men).

‘And thou shalt surely lend (*v’ha-avat t’aviteinu*) him sufficient for his need (15:8).’ I know this only of one (a poor man) who has nought and does not wish to maintain himself (at your expense); then Scripture saith: Give him by way of a loan. Whence do I know it if he possesses his own but does not desire to maintain himself (at his own cost)? From the verse, ‘Thou shalt surely lend him.’ But according to R. Simeon, who maintained: If he has his own but refuses to maintain himself (therewith), we are under no obligation toward him, why state ‘surely?’ — The Torah employs human phraseology.”

If the slave in the first example was a net loss, you do not have to go further into the red with a parting gift despite the emphatic double “give” in the Torah, because Torah merely speaks in the language of men, and R. Eleazer

reads the passage naturalistically. Again, you should “surely” lend to the poor, but R. Simeon does not extend this emphasis to mean that we have to lend to the undeserving poor. (Maimonides rules against R. Eleazer and for R. Simeon: Mishneh Torah, *H. Avadim* 3:14, Rabinowitz note 106 in Mossad Ha-Rav Kook edition; *H. Matanot Aniyim* 7:9, note 35.)

This is a good rule of interpretation in its original context. In the Talmud it always means that we read the passage as it appears without interpreting every word, that is, we read the *pshat* and not the *d'rush*. When Maimonides uses the rule to justify reading biblical anthropomorphisms as metaphors, he is knowingly *reversing* the procedure, reading the verse according to his *d'rush* and *against* the *pshat*. He uses the dictum anti-contextually (Others have noticed the change, see Y. Frank, *The Practical Talmud Dictionary*, p. 66, Feldheim, 1991). Thus, when Maimonides blandly says that *dibra tora ki'lshon bnei adam* means “expressions ... easily ... comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator,” our antennae should rise.

Schwarz, note 2, *ad loc.* to our chapter, assembles references showing that Maimonides followed an early medieval interpretive tradition. Bachya Ibn Pakuda (c. late 11th Cent.) used the phrase as Maimonides does in *Duties of the Heart* (*Hovot ha-Levavot, Yikhud*:10, p. 112 in the *Lev Tov* edition). Those medieval interpreters used the dictum to mean that the Torah was dressed in language tailored to the broadest spectrum of readers, and, therefore, we must not take it at its apparent meaning. Still, how can Maimonides so smoothly change the meaning of the dictum, especially since as a *halakhist* he ruled in Mishneh Torah (e.g., *H. Matanot Aniyim* 7:9) favoring those expressing the dictum in its original context? What is Maimonides getting at?

The point is that this chapter is really about divine attributes. It reflects back on the prior section (1:8—1:25) to question why the Torah attributes motion to God. After all, movement is no more admissible of God than is eating. We never say that God eats. Neither alimentation nor motion is a divine attribute. Maimonides forces us to consider whether God has any attributes at all.

Moreover, he will now begin a section of bodily terms that we can never literally ascribe to God (1:27—1:34: foot, face, back, heart, wing, eye, and so on). The following chapters, through the divine attributes section (1:51—1:60), begin with the grossest ascriptions of corporeality and rise to consider the most subtle ones, as though Maimonides were peeling away the layers of an onion.

The “language of men” rule points to the major problem of Part I of the Guide. God is so far beyond description that any description must fail, yet the Abrahamitic imperative demands that we attempt description. But the Abrahamitic imperative also demands that we comprehend God’s ineffability. It follows that men inevitably resort to the language of anthropomorphism. The conflict between what we can say and what we must say causes perplexity and is the reason for the lexical chapters of the Guide.

ARE SOME ANTHROPOMORPHISMS JUSTIFIABLE?

Maimonides finds a peculiarity in people’s common perception of anthropomorphic attributes:

“But there is not attributed to God anything which the multitude consider a defect or want; thus He is never represented as eating, drinking, sleeping, being ill, using violence, and the like.”

Apparently, some divine ascriptions are too gross even for the most vulgar Jews. This much is the advance of Abraham’s heritage from the Canaanite background. But the Jews do not feel that the language of locomotion, “to descend, to ascend, to walk, to place, to stand, to surround, to sit, to dwell, to depart, to enter, to pass, etc.” implies any defect. People do not hesitate to ascribe such actions to God despite their obvious corporeality, and neither does the sacred text. How can this be justified?

Motion is an accident attendant upon corporeal matter and is therefore divisible in units of measurement of time or distance. Non-corporeal existences are not divisible. Terms of motion therefore should not apply to God. But people do apply these terms to God in order to show that God is *alive*. Since living beings move, people apply this “perfection” of living beings to God: indeed, if they could not apply them to God, they might conclude that God does not exist.

Maimonides also mentions the concept of *rest*, the opposite of *motion*. Surely, if we could say that God moves, we ought to be able to say that He rests. That is why the Torah could employ the word *shakhan* (see the previous chapter) to describe divine action. This despite the fact that motion and rest are only corporeal attributes. The language of men makes both motion and repose divine characteristics.

The Torah was written in this human language. Since the Torah cannot be rewritten, the assumption must be that people will always associate movement with life. Bachya Ibn Pakuda argued that if we were to eliminate all anthropomorphisms, the Torah would be too abstract for anyone to understand. The prophets had to clothe spiritual ideas in the language of tangible things for people who could not grasp purely spiritual concepts. Maimonides’ position runs deeper. Man is a peculiar synthesis of mind and body. Our mind is somewhat corporealized by this synthesis; nonetheless, the Torah was written for our compromised species. The assumption must be that man’s permanent condition is one of corporealized thought requiring a Torah in corporealized language.

We interpret the words as metaphors since we know better—we know that the non-corporeal is indivisible.

MAIMONIDES BETWEEN THE RAAVAD AND SPINOZA

This result ought to trouble the reader, who should not be lulled by Maimonides’ smooth prose. Even if we agree with him, we should recognize the seriousness of his claim that we must actively reinterpret this human-language Torah.

In response, R. Abraham Ben David (the Raavad, c. 1125–1198, Provencal Talmudist and opponent of the Mishneh Torah) had famously written of those who believed in the literal sense of scripture:

“Why does Maimonides call him [who says that God is corporeal] a heretic (*min*)? Many men, even greater and better than Maimonides believed it.”

God gave the Torah and every word comes from God. What gives anyone the right to interpret its words? Indeed, some hold that there can be no metaphors in the Torah. Can Maimonides be saying that the Torah as it stands is not good enough for the educated readers, especially when it seems that its words grossly attribute corporeality to God? How is possible for the Torah to have been written “down” to the level of vulgar?

In radical opposition to the Raavad’s approach, Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677, the Dutch pantheist philosopher), held that the Bible *must be interpreted on its own terms*. Interpreting scripture was no different from the study of nature: one proceeds from data to principles, employing legitimate inference to deduce the intent of its authors. Although he thought that some of the Torah was authored by Moses (The Book of the Wars of God, the Book of the Covenant, the Book of the Law of God), he argued that most of the Bible appeared only centuries later. He believed that the scribe Ezra set the text in final form. *Encyclopedia Judaica* notes:

“Insisting that religious tenets should be judged only on the basis of reason, Spinoza...rejected the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and the possibility of genuine prophecy. Spinoza then offered a rationalistic metaphysics within which supernatural events could not occur, and within which the Bible was to be examined as a human document expressing certain human developments of the past. Insisting that miracles were impossible, Spinoza argued that nature is governed by eternal and necessary decrees of

God. Nothing can be contrary to natural laws. If one examined rationally what was meant by ‘God’ and ‘nature’ it would be clear that nothing supernatural was possible, since God determined nature lawfully; and if one applied the same methods to studying Scripture as are employed in studying nature—‘the examination of the history of nature, and from there deducing definitions of natural phenomena on certain fixed axioms,’—one would find nothing mysterious or divine in Scripture. Its moral teachings are compatible with those of reason.”

This most important heretic in Jewish history was familiar with The Guide. How far is it from “Torah is written in the language of men,” the way Maimonides interprets it (quoted in Spinoza’s *Epistolae* 19 and 21), to Spinoza’s principle that Torah must be interpreted on its own terms? Men like the Raavad convinced themselves that very little separated the two positions: this may explain the violence of the historical “Maimonidean Controversy.”

The answer is that there is a difference, and Maimonides succumbs to neither the literalness of Raavad nor the license of Spinoza. Maimonides struggles with the same problem as Abraham: we must articulate the God-idea to people, but how do we articulate the inarticulable? This is a problem for all men, not just the unschooled, as we will see as we advance through the first section of the Guide. It is the primary cause of perplexity. This was the stutter of Moses. No thought of man is free from some degree of corporeality, yet some connection, inexplicable in itself, exists between God and Man. This is the real meaning of “Torah is written in the language of men.”

ACTION VS. PASSION

Another reason for the attribution of motion to God is the closeness of the idea of motion to the idea of *action*. God is the subject whose object is the world. From the viewpoint of that object God is the Creator, that is, the One who is always *active*, acting upon the passive world. Nevertheless, *passion* (passivity, receptivity) can never be a divine attribute.

Moreover, divine action occurs at the level of thought. God’s thought is the ultimate cause of all physical motion, but only through a system of subordinated dependencies. The initial motion of the outermost sphere is the proximate cause of all physical motion. The spheres are moved by their souls, the so-called “souls of the spheres.” God creates the souls of the spheres, which express their desire for their Creator through their motion toward Him. This motion can only be rotational since no physical motion attains Him. Their eternal spin is indeed the ultimate result of divine action, but no physical motion *directly* results from divine action.

Even-Shmuel’s chapter summary grasped this implication of the attribute of motion and its difference from divine action:

“Since man apprehends God’s existence through four ranks of divine action revealed in the world: 1) prophetic emanation (*shefa ha-navua*); 2) creation; 3) providential extension and its removal from individual things; 4) the permanent indwelling of providence in a particular place and people—does this provide any warrant to grasp the divine essence as motion, as uninterrupted process [cf. Heraclitus]? But the Creator of motion is not subject to motion. The source of creation is uncreated. Not only is motion the source of external physical propulsion, but also of the internally willed locomotion of all animals. Motion is an accident of animal existence, because, according to our conception, motion is never essential to a thing but is rather an accident attached to its substance. The purpose of all movements willed by any animal is toward completion (*shlemut*), but since God lacks nothing He does not *strive* for perfection. Perhaps you may assert the contrary, that He manifests an attribute of eternal repose? This cannot be! Our conception holds rest correlative to motion. Only because of our defects do we employ ‘human language’ to relate motion or rest to God.”

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