

## GUIDE 1:59 SILENCE

### OVERVIEW: THE PROBLEMATIC

“The following question might perhaps be asked : Since there is no possibility of obtaining a knowledge of the true essence of God, and since it has also been proved that the only thing that man can apprehend of Him is the fact that He exists, and that all positive attributes are inadmissible, as has been shown, what is the difference among those who have obtained a knowledge of God? Must not the knowledge obtained by our teacher Moses, and by Solomon, be the same as that obtained by any one of the lowest class of [students], since there can be no addition to this knowledge?”

A provocative question, indeed! If Moses attained no higher level than the worst student, what could possibly have been the point of his travails? Why reach for higher consciousness if there is none?

Two answers are given. The first, which is unsatisfactory, is the surface meaning of this chapter. Maimonides responds that there are certainly grades of higher consciousness, and that “everyone,” rabbis and philosophers, “those in the past and those in the future,” agree that this is true. We reach higher consciousness by finding one more thing we can provably deny of God. Thus, the seeker masters a particular science, through which he learns that a common or likely predication is impossible to make about God. A man’s “*khasidut*” or pious quest could be through mastering particle physics, in order to show in one more way that God is not corporeal.

This explanation is unsatisfactory from Maimonides’ own view because there is then no reason why rabbinics would be superior to the more important work of science. That he is willing to leave this possibility on the table, as he does, should provoke his religious audience to pursue the question.

On looking at this again, we find a second message, the message of silence.

After portraying the dangers of affirmative attributes once more, he turns his critical eye toward his own community. While, the last chapter’s target was Islamic attributism, including the inlibrated *Logos* of the uncreated Qur’an, he now criticizes his own Jewish community for its attributism. They must realize that praise of God in terms of human perfections is just an insult to Him. It is almost better to say nothing at all. In support, Maimonides invokes several famous passages from the Bible about the virtues of silence.

By silence, he means meditative contemplation. In this *hitbodedut* state, we bring our intelligence into contact (Ar. *ittiṣal*, *wuṣul*, see in Guide 1:18) with the divine intelligence by removing impediments to the flow of His intelligence into ours. We do this by removing the corporealizing limitations of imagination and individuality. The real message of the *via negativa* is the stripping away of the physicality blocking our access to the active intellect. The active intellect is the “form and likeness” we share, in some unutterable way, with God (Guide 1:1). The true positive aspect of God is intelligence (1:68).

In this regard, Moses is the exemplar. Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights on Sinai, ascending from the cave-like darkness of the human condition to the sunlight of clarity, from whence to bring prophecy back to the Jews. A death is involved, whether it is the death of the body, the death of individuality, or the death of that incessant imaginative engine pushing to make everything like us (see Guide 3:51, “the kiss of death”). The people recognize and fear this, for in the sequel they demand that the transfigured Moses intercede so they might not die from meeting God.

This is the meaning of Maimonides’ problematic. Not that Moses was a scientist who discovered new ways to deny common descriptions of God. Rather, he found the nerve of the *via negativa*: to silence that imaging engine making God like us rather than unique unto Himself. We will never understand what it means for God’s

attributes to be identical to His essence. On its surface, it seems tautological, and it is, in a sense, for all true statements about God are reducible to the statement that God is God. Still, the *via negativa* dissolves the tautology by allowing the *positive* flow of divine intellect to the prophet. This flow is so overpowering that without this method the seer could not see it:

“He has overpowered us by His grace, and is *invisible* to us through the intensity of His light,” like the sun which cannot be perceived by eyes which are too weak to bear its rays.”

### THE FIRST ANSWER

The question that Maimonides raised, whether there are distinctions among those who seek knowledge of the divine science, is the question of what, if anything, can be known about God. Since, for Maimonides, we need knowledge to approach God, but since the divine essence is unknowable, it is hard to see a distinction between the levels of Moses or Solomon or any other person. The question is more than a problem, it is a problematic, the type of eternal philosophical concern where we learn much, but which we do not really solve, because the question continues to produce more problems.

The first answer that Maimonides gives is that there are indeed distinctions, for there are levels of understanding according to the number of negations we intelligently make. Shem Tov recites “Moses is a level unto himself, Aaron is a level unto himself,” *moshe m'khitza bifnai atzmo, aharon m'khitza bifnai atzmo*, by which he means that not only does Moses know more than Aaron, but that Aaron could not reach his level. Moses was able to negate more predications.

Maimonides maintains that the negative attributes explain why each student can reach for a greater understanding of God. First, each negation specifies something about its object, to some extent, whether that object is another person or thing, or whether that object is God. In this respect, it is like an affirmation. However, unlike affirmations, the negations do not actually name anything about the divine nature. In my view, the negations are positive attributes taken in negative sense (Alexander Altmann and Diana Lobel agree, see her “Silence is Praise to You: Maimonides on Negative Theology, Looseness of Expression, and Religious Experience,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 76:1, Winter 2002, pp. 32-33).

Secondly, each negation that you make brings you closer to God than someone who does not negate, so long as each negation results from prior scientific inquiry proving that the thing negated cannot be predicated of God.

Maimonides then shows how the distinctions among perceivers emerge, first giving a three level paradigm, and then working through five examples. The paradigm is that there is first a person who can negate one thing of God. That person is on a higher level of perception than another person who harbors doubts whether he can negate that property from God. Both are higher than someone who not only fails to negate but also affirms some property that God could not possess. His five-step example illustrating this paradigm is as follows:

1. Maimonides can negate, through proof, corporeality from God;
2. A second person doubts whether corporeality can be negated or not;
3. A third one affirms corporeality; worse yet, he prays to God believing that God is corporeal;
4. The fourth proves that we must negate both passion *and* corporeality from God;
5. The fifth negates more than just two properties.

In this example, 1 is better than 2, who is much better than 3. 4 is better than 1, and 5 is better than 4.

But is it really true? Isn't this a purely mechanical and quantitative response to a problem that cannot be solved in a mechanical and quantitative manner? And in the end, haven't you returned to affirmations, affirming, in a roundabout manner, that God is purely intellectual (incorporeal) and actual (*in actu*, the opposite of passivity)?

## THE PROBLEM WITH ALL AFFIRMATIONS

Why is it that affirmations distance you from God? There are two reasons. First, by affirming properties of God you attempt to add to the perfectly simple and single divine essence. Second, any perfection you would add is only a perfection for us, by no means a perfection for God.

Maimonides says of these affirmations,

“The perfections are all to some extent acquired properties (Kafih: *tekhunot m'suyamot*, note 22, ad loc.; Ibn Tibon: *ktzat kinyanim*), and a property which must be acquired does not exist in everything capable of making such acquisition.”

By this important statement, he makes several claims, the first of which is that the affirmations or perfections are members of the category of properties. Properties are all accidents attaching to a substance, and therefore we can conceive and define the substance independently of its accidentally acquired properties. God is the ultimate substance, in that He is not subject to any other powers, properties or accidents.

When Maimonides says that a property “does not exist in everything capable of making such an acquisition,” there are several reasons why this should be so (see, generally, Efodi, ad loc., Friedlander, note 2, p. 215).

One reason is that not all properties are perfections. Shem Tov explains, “Every perfection is a property, but not all properties are perfections,” *sh'kol shlemut hu kinyan, v'lo kol kinyan shlemut*. All properties manifest as contradictories, and one cannot have both contradictory properties at once. Thus, a person can be either merciful or cruel, but, according to this theory, not both at the same time (perhaps a clearer example would be between hairy and bald). The point, though, is that one of the contradictories is conceived as a perfection and the other a defect. This is one reason why these acquisitions are *ktzat kinyanim*, “to some extent...properties”: sometimes we have them, and sometimes not. It follows that they are only properties “to some extent” and which “do not exist in everything...” Some properties men never acquire, such as unaided flight (Efodi, Shem Tov). Clearly, God is not subject to properties, for if He were, we would have to say that He was subject to defects and contradictions.

Moreover, men do not naturally have perfections—they have to acquire them. All created beings acquire whatever properties they have. This means that the properties must first exist in potential. Men change and are subject to change, such that these properties pass from the state of potentiality to the state of acquired actuality. In this regard, we can distinguish a property from a characteristic (*kinyan* vs. *tekhuna*) due to the impermanence of the former and the relative permanence of the latter (so says Even-Shmuel, explaining Ibn Tibon's translation of “properties” as *kinyanim* not *tekhunot*). Even so, both characteristics and properties are accidents to a substance, which can be conceived independently of them. Again, since God is never in a state of potentiality or change, He is not subject to properties, nor is His simple essence subject to accidental characteristics. These are only perfections in our eyes: God is completely apart from this system. Even-Shmuel says, “God is perfection, not subject to perfections” *ha-eloah hu ha-shlemut, lo baal ha-shlemut*. This is because everything about God is *in actu*, unlike with us, since with us most everything is *in potentia*, and left for us to acquire.

One final point. Since God “is perfection,” He possesses all possible perfections in the obscure unity of His essence. There are, therefore, no further properties for Him to acquire (Efodi).

All of this comes to undermine the mechanical attribution of “negative” versions of positive attributes to God, which was Maimonides' first answer to his problematic.

## A SECOND SAILING? MAIMONIDES RETURNS TO THE PROBLEMATIC

Since he has not really answered the question, but only brought it into higher relief, Maimonides returns to his initial problematic. He now reveals, in our chapter, the practical result of his negative theology, which we need to read back into the previous chapters to grasp his real theory and its intended purpose.

Inasmuch as we only achieve knowledge thru negation, and since negation tells us nothing about the essence, he repeats that God cannot be the object of human comprehension. None but God Himself comprehends what He is, *v'lo yasig ma hu ki im hu*. Our knowledge consists in knowing that we are unable truly to comprehend Him, *v'sh'hasagato hi ee ha-yakholet l'hagia l'khaker hasagato*.

He does not really mean us to take this as the hard version of negative theology, as when Aristotle says that the god has neither vice nor virtue. An even harder version is the double negativism of the Ismā'īlī theologian Sijistānī (c. 932 - c. 1000 CE). Sijistānī rejected the moderate version of negative theology (as later expressed by Maimonides) as “hidden anthropomorphism.” He said that we must first negate corporeality, and then even negate “association with the spiritual or intelligible” (Lobel, 46).

Nor is Maimonides suggesting that God is *Ayn Sof*, at least as the term is frequently taken. His position on that would have been ambivalent. He would have agreed with the application of the literal meaning of the term, which is that God is *infinite* (*ayn sof* = without end). He would not have taken it with emphasis on *ayn*, as is frequently done, to make God is pure negativity or emptiness (Ar. *ta'īl*, void). Neither would he have accepted the suggestion of a kind of bilevel nature to God, whereby God is unknowably transcendent, with a kind of lower version (or, *khas v'shalom*, a second deity) accessible to our understanding (with its suggestion of theurgical possibilities). Rather, God's positivity is limitless.

### HERE COMES THE SUN

This leads him, surprisingly, away from purely deductive philosophy back to metaphor. That is because, even from as early as the Introduction to the Guide, he stressed that the divine science does not work the way other sciences do. We are not going to come to apodictic propositions about this science. What we dimly grasp in a flash is gone the next moment. We must return to the imagination if we wish to portray things beyond the lunar sphere: “Put forth a riddle and speak a parable,” (Ez. 17:2).

Thus, we come to solar metaphors. Maimonides wants to talk about the ubiquity of the divine manifestation. Divine positivity is so strong that we cannot comprehend it, it overwhelms the mind just as the sun's light blinds the eyes.

“All philosophers say, ‘He has overpowered us by His grace, and is invisible to us through the intensity of His light,’ like the sun which cannot be perceived by eyes which are too weak to bear its rays.”

Recall that solar metaphors were the tools that the Neo-Platonists used to portray divine power and providence. Maimonides is a descendant of the Iberian school of Neo-Platonized Aristotelians which included Bakhya Ibn Pakuda (11<sup>th</sup> C.), who said, in a similar vein, using an image to warn against imaginary affirmations:

“He who tries to perceive the sun by observing its orb and focuses his gaze straight on the sun, his eyes will be weakened and his sight lost and he will be unable to benefit from the sun...If, however we strain our minds to perceive the meaning of the essence of His glory, and represent Him in our minds in a form or a likeness, we will lose our powers of mind and perception and not even be able to grasp what is already known to us, as would happen to our eyesight if we gazed straight at the sun” (*Khovot ha-Levavot*, 1:10, 151, Feldheim, Daniel Haberman, trans.).

Divine positivity blinds us because God's existence is manifest in everything. "To be everywhere primarily and absolutely, is proper to God" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, v. 1, q. 8). Narboni explains why we speak of divine positivity (my trans.):

"God manifests Himself through all existence: He is the prime mover, the form and the goal of all things. Because God is ultimately simple and first, He is, therefore, the commencement and providence of all existence."

My interpretation. Maimonides' second answer to the problematic tries to explain why we can approach God through negations. It is a yes answer, because we recognize that God is not too distant from us, but that his positive presence is too strong, overwhelming our ability to grasp it. Since by these negations we comprehend some truths in divine science, I would compare the expression of affirmations by way of negations to our ability to watch a solar eclipse through special filters or mirroring devices.

### THE VIRTUES OF SILENCE

If God's overwhelming positivity makes us unable to say anything about Him, being "overpowered by His grace," perhaps we should not try to say anything at all.

These thoughts lead Maimonides to recite several scriptural statements on the virtue of silence.

"*To You, silence is praise,*" Psalms 65:2. According to Rashi, "Silence is praise to You; because there is no end to Your praise, the more one praises, the more one detracts," which sums up Maimonides' own doctrine of silent praise. Even-Shmuel says, even more succinctly, "In relation to you, silence is itself praise (*b'yakhas elekha, hi hi ha-shavuakh atsmo*).

"*Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still,*" Psalms 4:4. Having recognized that silence is itself praise, Maimonides moves the discussion over to the practice of silence, i.e, the silent meditation:

"For of whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him..., and on the other we perceive in it some deficiency. It is therefore more becoming to be silent, and to be content with intellectual reflection, as has been recommended by men of the highest culture, in the words 'Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.'" (I modified Friedlander's translation).

In silent meditation, using the technique of negations, we do learn about God, but verbalization of those perceptions leads to the improper attribution of properties to God. Recognizing this, Even-Shmuel comments, "do not strive to translate to yourself your thoughts into words," *v'af l'atsmekhem al t'nasu l'targem et makshavotekhem l'milim*.

This raises the question of why we have verbal prayer at all, and why those prayers are so overwhelmingly made of affirmative praises. The lengthy morning recitation *Pesukei d'Zimra* is nothing but page after page of praises. Maimonides responds that, "if we had only to follow our reason, we should never have composed these prayers, and we should not have uttered any of them." Our reason tells us that the verbalization of affirmative praise is not praise at all, since these are only affirmations of human qualities that would be defects to God. "The more one praises, the more one detracts."

The answer is similar to the one he will give in Guide 3:32, explaining the nature of the sacrificial system. The divine goal in both 3:32 and in our chapter was to lay the groundwork for intellectual communion with the divine. But you cannot start there. In the case of sacrifice, in 3:32, He quotes the Torah's explanation for leading the people the longest way through the Sinai from Egypt to Israel,

“God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt; but God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea,’ etc. (Ex. 13:17). *He took them by another road in order to obtain thereby His original object.*”

The original object, in both cases, that of sacrifice and of verbal prayer, is the direct silent communion with God, but God had to take them by another road to obtain that object. We could not even conceive of this level had not the Bible used a limited number of affirmations. We must have them, though we may not add to them, as he says in our chapter:

“It has, however, become necessary to address men in words that should leave some idea in their minds, and, in accordance with the saying of our Sages, ‘The Torah speaks in the language of men,’ the Creator has been described to us in terms of our own perfections.”

## POETRY

Opposite of silence is poetry. Maimonides came from Moorish Andalusia, where it seemed as though every Jew was a poet. Ibn Ezra (1092/3-1167) found enough material to compose a history of Jewish Andalusian poets (see also: *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950–1492*, by Peter Cole, Princeton, 2007). The most famous example among Maimonides’ forbears was Yehuda Ha-Levi (c.1075–1141), never mentioned by Maimonides, but casting a long shadow over his thought. The exception is Maimonides himself (and even he is guilty of poetry). It is correct to say that he was in revolt against these verbal torrents.

The tsunami of Spanish poetry found its formidable antagonist in Spain’s greatest son. His lengthy gloss to *Pirkei Avot* 1:17, in *Commentary on the Mishnah*, rejects the suggestion that Hebrew poetry is more worthwhile than Arabic poetry. Indeed, Hebrew poetry is worse than Arabic poetry if it is not strictly religious in intent (see also Guide 3:9). The *Avot* passage contains an interesting denunciation of the poetry readings at drinking parties. Jose Faur explains several Maimonidean *responsas* on post-biblical *piyutim* as disapproval of metricality and rhyme, i.e., the lulling musical structure of poetry as opposed to its intellectual content (*Homo Mysticus*, Syracuse, 1999, p.66).

The aim of poetry is beauty, with truth sometimes falling by the wayside, Keats to the contrary notwithstanding. Worse, poetry enshrines attributism. A once controversial example in Jewish liturgy might be the lovely *Shir Ha-kavod* (*anim zmirot*; see my comments on the *Shir* at Guide 1:46) ascribed to Judah Ha-Hasid (d. 1217), whose praises of God could suggest anthropomorphism and associationism.

Maimonides tells the famous Talmudic story of Rabbi Hanina (*Berakhot* 33b). It was time to say the “*Amida*,” (standing) prayer recited thrice daily:

“Blessed art thou God, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, The Lord, the great, the powerful, the awesome...”

When a novice launched an extended improvisation:

“The Lord, the great, mighty, terrible, majestic, powerful, awful, strong, fearless, sure and honored.’ – He (Hanina) waited till he had finished, and when he had finished he said to him, ‘Have you concluded all the praise of your Master? Why do we want all this?’”

R. Hanina explained: Had not Moses said the first three praises we would have no right to say them. Moreover, we could not have said them in prayer had not the prophets of the Great Assembly (“*Anshei Knesset HaGedolah*” - 410 BCE and 310 BCE) legislated their inclusion. Maimonides thinks that we have no right to improvise and

elaborate, for even these words define God in terms that are perfections only with us. Since God's perfections are identical to Himself, they cannot be like human perfections. R. Hanina brings a parable, close in language and meaning to the parable of the golden apple in fretworks of silver in the Guide's Introduction (see my "Introduction I," above, for the key to its symbols):

"It is as if an earthly king had a million *denarii* of gold, and someone praised him as possessing silver ones. Would it not be an insult to him?"

Maimonides explains why this parable demonstrates the crassness of our praises:

"He does not employ any such simile as: A king who possesses millions of gold *denarii*, and is praised as having hundreds (of gold *denarii*)...but, ....The excellence of the simile consists in the words: who possesses golden *denarii*, and is praised as having silver *denarii*."

For our praises only reach the level of silver. They are homonymous, bearing one meaning with us, purely accidental, and one with Him, tautologically essential. Put another way, our silver praise is the fretwork concealing the golden object of our praise. It is not even that good. The fretwork was itself a jewel, but our praises are only words that predicate deficiency in Him. The best that can be said of them is that they "loosely" portray sufficient indications of the truth to those who can think past them.

Therefore, we are told to be silent: that silence is the only praise of Him; that we should commune upon our beds and be silent. At the end of the last chapter, we were left sputtering, stuttering. In this verbose chapter of over two thousand words, he tells us silence is golden. We have reached the very end of speech.

### **SILENT MEDITATION**

Now that we know that the *via negativa* is a method of silent meditation, we return to the original problematic.

In this direct silent contemplation, there are levels of distinction between the perceivers that Maimonides cited, though we cannot hear them. Moses' highest moment was the silence atop the mount, achieved in post-intellectual elevation, after climbing the Sinai of negations.

Shem Tov brilliantly links Maimonides' naming of Moses and Solomon at the beginning of our chapter with the technique of meditation on the negations:

"Indeed this is the way of negations which scripture obliquely implies in saying that 'Moses drew near unto the thick darkness (*ha-arafel*) where God was' (Ex. 20:21), the idea in this is that he approached God with negations rather than affirmations, and therefore it was as though He was in the darkness, and this is what Solomon also said, 'Then spake Solomon, The Lord said that He would dwell in the thick darkness,' (1 Kings 8:12). That is why Maimonides joined Moses and Solomon together here...so that the both prophetic and philosophical knowledge agree in respect of the way of negations," (*ad loc.*, my trans., 87b).

That this silence is the apt response to God's positivity, Moses knew when he said, "The Lord will fight for you, but you shall remain silent," (Ex. 14:14, Judaica Press trans., *ha-shem yilakhem lakhem v'atem takharishun*).

### **A DIFFERENT MESSAGE FOR THE MASSES?**

Why do we, halakhically, even allow such affirmations as "the great, the mighty, the awesome" *ha-gadol ha-gibbor v'ha-nora* in our central, thrice-daily prayer? Rabbi Hanina had explained that were it not for the fact that the Torah used them, and that the prophets of the Great Assembly made them our liturgy, we could not say them.

Both of these requisites together allow these praises, but not either one alone (on the *Amida* prayer and its composition, Friedlander, 216, note 7; Schwarz, 150, note 22). But this still does not tell us what their purpose is.

These approved affirmations are merely a “loose expression” (Ar.—*tasāmuh*, see 1:57) allowing us to lightly sketch in the very basic knowledge that all men must have of God and His providential design:

“It has, however, become necessary to address men in words that *should leave some idea in their minds*, and, in accordance with the saying of our Sages, ‘The Torah speaks in the language of men,’ the Creator has been described to us in terms of our own perfections; but we should not on that account have uttered any other than the three above-mentioned attributes, and we should not have used them as names of God except when meeting with them in reading the Law.”

So that, for hermeneutical purposes, we may engage in such loose expressions, in the “language of men.” We cannot eliminate them from prayer and Torah reading. Otherwise, apart from those sanctioned expressions, we should not speak them, but should be silent. Once again, we seem to have reached the end of speech.

Or have we? At the very end of our chapter, Maimonides returns to the wise Solomon. Had he reached a higher level of consciousness? Maimonides quotes Solomon from Ecclesiastes 5:2: “God [is] in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.” “Few” is not the same as silence. A few words are necessary, and perhaps not just for hermeneutical purposes but also as the stimulus for deeper meditation on the real meaning of those words. Still,

“There is no necessity at all for you to use positive attributes of God with the view of magnifying Him in your thoughts, or to go beyond the limits which the men of the Great [Assembly] have introduced in the prayers and in the blessings, for this is sufficient for all purposes, and even more than sufficient, as Rabbi Hanina said. Other attributes, such as occur in the books of the Prophets, may be uttered when we meet with them in reading those books; but we must bear in mind what has already been explained, that they are either attributes of God’s actions, or expressions implying the negation of the opposite (*shlilat ha-edran*). *This likewise should not be divulged to the multitude; but a reflection of this kind is fitted for the few only who believe that the glorification of God does not consist in uttering that which is not to be uttered, but in reflecting on that on which man should reflect.*”

The secret of silent interpretative meditation we keep for ourselves, but we also keep it from the vulgar masses, who will always misunderstand what we do. The remark might justify the Straussian project of seeking an esoteric level of the Guide. But there is no secret, only a necessarily more complex way of grasping the reality.

A better understanding is that Maimonides has a multilevel understanding of texts. This is like his therapeutic model. Since no two patients are alike, the doctor prescribes different medicines for different diseases. Similarly, no two readers are alike, either in their preparation, or in their understanding. In this, Maimonides follows the traditional path, which always recognized different levels of interpretation. These different prescriptions lead each individual to his highest possible level.

Clearly, we must lead the people to believe in God and follow the law. For this they need leaders, and, as we shall see, prophetic leaders. No such leaders will rise unless they find truth about God, through the path of silent meditation through the negations. But for this they must start with the inspired words.



## THE HALACHIC AND MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF COMPOSING NEW PRAYERS AND PRAYERBOOKS.

But not just any words.

“This license is frequently met with in the compositions of the singers, preachers, and others who imagine themselves to be able to compose a poem. Such authors write things which partly are real heresy, partly contain such folly and absurdity that they naturally cause those who hear them to laugh, but also to feel grieved at the thought that such things can be uttered in reference to God..... You must consider it, and think thus: If slander and libel (*lashon ha-ra v'hotzat shem ra*) is a great sin, how much greater is the sin of those who speak with looseness of tongue in reference to God, and describe Him by attributes which are far below Him.”

We discussed poets above. Maimonides' particular concern in these passages and the many more like them in our chapter is with poets who create new prayers and prayerbooks. Rabbi Hanina is a strong voice of protest against changing the words that Moses uttered and the Men of the Great Assembly codified. Maimonides tries in several ways to show how close this activity comes to defamation and heresy but pulls back from saying that these poets violate the law. Still, his condemnation is harsh:

“I shall not say that this is an act of disobedience, but rather that it constitutes *unintended obloquy and vituperation* (*kheruf v'giduf*) on the part of the multitude who listen to these utterances, and on the part of the ignoramus who pronounces them.” (Pines trans, p. 142, his ital.).

It is immoral, but it does not violate a negative commandment. That is because Maimonides assumes that the speaker (or listener) would be ignorant, for had he recognized the defects in this mode of expression he would not so express himself.

The moral issue arises because these are “words (*devarim*) that were not right (*lo khen*) against the Lord,” and because they “utter error (*toeh*) against the Lord” (2 Kings 17:9, Isaiah 32:6, translations are the ones Friedlander uses). The immoral act here is one of uttering falsehoods, which is slander and blasphemy, or thinking falsehood, in which the unbridled imagination approaches heresy. The meaning of his statement is that while the speaker or listener may, in the usual case, avoid transgression, a person who seeks a higher level of religious performance, should shun anything like this. The point is not that these innovations are heretical, though they lead that way, but that they are morally repulsive. One who strives to be righteous, a *khasid*, avoids them. And the community should also strive to maintain the sanctity of the established liturgy.

The reason why these new prayers are so troubling is the same reason why any non-canonized praise is troubling. These praises are built on the affirmation of divine attributes that demonstrably distort our picture of God. They are therefore offensive, just as if we so distortedly spoke of men. Those who multiply affirmations thus make God subject to defects, and thereby make God a “doormat for their tongues” (My trans. Kafih, note 48, Schwarz, note 31, Ibn Tibon: *midras l'lshonotam*).

Worse, they use these terms for theurgical purposes: “they eloquently continue to praise Him in that manner, and believe that they can thereby influence Him and produce an effect on Him.” In their minds they think they affect God in some way, but if that were the case God would be subject to passion and change, the very things we should negate of God. We do not get to change God. The notion that we could devise invocations to influence God leads people grossly to misunderstand how providence actually works. This is another reason why we could not reveal the Cabalistic pursuits of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* to the public.

When R. Hanina calls the proliferation of affirmative attributes “repulsive and annoying,” Maimonides restates this as “blasphemy and profanity.” The same cannot be said of the entirely commendable activity of multiplying

negative attributes. According Even-Shmuel, if the novice had instead multiplied negations, R. Hanina would not have rebuked him, *lu harbei ze b'taarim shliliim, lo haya R. Hanina goar bo*. In Maimonides' even stricter view, while we should multiply negations in silent meditation, the *khasid* should avoid multiplying even these negations in speech.

The adept should recognize that the approved affirmations in the standard liturgy are action attributes or negations of privations, actively interpreting those words as he meditates on the prayer. Nonetheless, he must not divulge this method to the general readers who have not educated themselves in *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* through the tutelage of the Guide:

“This likewise should not be divulged to the multitude; but a reflection of this kind is fitted for the few only who believe that the glorification of God does not consist in *uttering* that which is not to be uttered, but in *reflecting* (*sh'maskilim*) on that on which man should reflect.” (Italics are Friedlander's)

Otherwise, they would lend themselves to “perverse imaginings” (Pines' trans), that is, that the unlearned will use them for theurgical purposes, if not outright sorcery. For this reason, you may only read over these attributes in the prayers and in the scriptures, and only because they originally appeared in scriptures. The aware individual, on the contrary, “who believes that the glorification of God does not consist in uttering that which is not to be uttered, but in reflecting on that on which man should reflect,” should, in reading them, convert them to action attributes or negations. Having taken that step he can rise to the next higher level in communion with God.

Returning to R. Hanina's parable one last time, Maimonides explains that by praising God for silver when He is so positively golden, we disparage God and shortchange ourselves. The offensiveness of the practice returns Maimonides to Solomon's admonition of silence “let thy words be few,” whose real, positively golden, meaning is expressed in Moses' double-edged admonition, *The Lord will fight for you, but you shall remain silent*. (Ex. 14:14, Judaica Press).

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Yehuda Even-Shmuel captures the meaning of the chapter better than other commentators do in his brief initial summation, which I translate here:

“If the negative attributes (i.e., the absolute attributes) specify, meaning that by use of the negative attributes we come closer to understanding God, it follows that there is a difference in the levels of understanding, according to the number of negations that we negate from God. For example, the negation of corporeality leads to the recognition of God's absolute intellectuality; but, if we failed to negate passion our level of apprehension would be lower than someone who denied both corporeality and passion from God. On the other hand, every affirmation that a person affirms of God results in a lower level of apprehension, because he thereby attributes human perfections to God, and because every affirmation that we make of God makes Him a possessor of such attributes (i.e., perfections), though God is not a possessor of anything other than Himself. *He indeed does have infinite perfections* [in the sense of a non-numerical infinite, and not super-added to His essence], but they are of an entirely different kind than those known to men, so that we have no means of apprehending or expressing them. The little that we do grasp, by means of the *via negativa*, is left to our limited understanding as a specifying property, but when we try to express this in words it comes out as mere ‘profanity and blasphemy.’ It was for this reason that the wise commanded us to be silent (‘Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still,’ Ps. 4:4). This was also the reason why the Rabbis opposed the multiplication of divine attributes by the liturgical poets. According to the wonderful *aggada* of R. Hanina, with which all philosophers and scholars of the divine attributes agree, the rejection of the affirmative attributes results from the recognition that the perfections of God are different from the ‘perfections’ of man not in quantity but quality. When such attributes appear in the books of the prophets they are a necessary concession to the general reader who is insufficiently prepared to comprehend these concerns.”

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