

GUIDE 1:27 PROPHETIC DREAMS

In the last chapter, we showed that Maimonides does not interpret the dictum “Torah speaks in the language of men,” the way the Talmud does. According to him, it means that the Torah’s language requires interpretation.

This understanding carries certain dangers. Traditional rabbinic thought could only have been suspicious. Before Maimonides can advocate the radical interpretation of the words of Torah, he must find traditional support. In this chapter, he argues that his canonical predecessor was Onkelos, the Aramaic translator of the Bible. He claims that Onkelos usually translates anthropomorphisms as manifestations of divine providence or of the *Shekhina*. Maimonides must therefore explain any *departures* by Onkelos from that practice of radical reinterpretation.

He does so in this chapter, 1:27, and again in 1:48. Here he is concerned with terms suggesting divine “motion,” while in 1:48, somewhat less successfully, he treats inconsistent translations of terms suggesting divine “sensation.”

His fascinating solution here is that biblical anthropomorphisms can sometimes be justified from the subjective viewpoint of the prophet. Prophets other than Moses receive their visions in dreams. From their point of view, the angel who speaks in their dreams in the name of God *is* God. Therefore, Onkelos can unhesitatingly translate dream narrations of divine motion literally, from the point of view of the dreamer. Moreover, when neither text nor translation suggests the intercession of an angelic mediator, Maimonides argues that this is merely an omission, it being “understood” that there must have been such a mediator.

In this chapter he reviews a series of biblical quotations concerning God “going down,” *yarad*. He then considers Onkelos’ translation of them. We contextualized the first three in our treatment of 1:10, where Maimonides defined divine “descent” as either the emanation of “prophetic influence from God” (Definition 4), or the “visitation” of divine punishment (Definition 5). Onkelos translates *yarad* as the manifestation of providence or of the *Shekhina*. However we choose to take it, the term *yarad* is only a metaphor and not divine physical motion. This is Maimonides’ general rule of interpretation. Here he assembles several interpretive strategies to support that rule.

RULES OF INTERPRETATION

First Rule: Translate Dream Narration Literally. Maimonides notices that Onkelos sometimes fails to translate the offensive language with non-corporeal euphemisms. Usually, when Onkelos wants to translate “the Lord came down,” he translates with some variant of “the Lord manifests Himself.” But in the following passage Onkelos departs from this rule: he allows the suggestion of divine motion.

“And Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices unto the God of his father Isaac. And God (*elokim*) spake unto Israel in the visions of the night (*mar’ah layil*), and said, *Jacob, Jacob*. And he said, *Here [am] I*. And He said, I [am] God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation: *I will go down (yarad)* with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up [again]: and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes.”
(Genesis 46:1-4).

Onkelos translated “I will go down with thee into Egypt” literally, as though God had actually said that He would physically descend (*ana ekhot imakh l’mitzraim*). Notice, though, that God spoke to Israel (Jacob) “in the visions of the night.” The utterance therefore took place in prophetic dream vision. Onkelos, according to Maimonides, translates literally actual statements when they occur in dream narrative, just as the prophet heard them. It is not that God actually spoke; rather, Jacob *dreamt* that God had said that He would descend to Egypt. It would have been ridiculous of Onkelos to translate the passage euphemistically, as though it had said, “*I will manifest myself*

before thee when you descend into Egypt,” rather than “I will go down with thee into Egypt.” Dream speech is not so nebulous. Thus, we have a rule: we can translate statements about God heard in dreams literally. By translating dream speech literally, Onkelos does not thereby alter objective reality outside the dream.

(Nachmanides opposed Maimonides’ interpretation, while Abarbanel categorically opposed Nachmanides. A lucid account is David Silverberg, “I Shall Descend to Egypt with You”: Onkelos’ Translation of Biblical Anthropomorphisms, Maimonides Heritage Center, online PDF; or, alternatively, at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/maimonides/files/>).

Second Rule: Translate *Elokim* as “Angel.” Maimonides now states that “in my opinion” when the text says “And *Elokim* spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said, etc,” *Elokim* means *angel*, not God. This is possible because the term *Elokim* is ambiguous. *Elokim* can mean either God, angel or judge in Hebrew. Maimonides holds that an angel spoke the entire passage. The angel relates to Jacob, in his prophetic dream, a promise that God intended for Jacob. Moreover, only the angel descends with Jacob to Egypt. Prophecy, in this view, does not come to non-Mosaic prophets directly from God, but from an agency created by God to inspire them with prophecy.

Maimonides has a persuasive proof for this point of view. He quotes a text, also about Jacob, with closely parallel language:

“And it came to pass at the time that the cattle conceived, that I lifted up mine eyes, and saw in a dream, and, behold, the rams which leaped upon the cattle [were] ringstraked, speckled, and grisled. *And the angel of God (malakh elokim) spake unto me in a dream (khalom), [saying]: Jacob; and I said, here [am] I. And he said, Lift up now thine eyes, and see, all the rams which leap upon the cattle [are] ringstraked, speckled, and grisled: for I have seen all that Laban doeth unto thee. I [am] the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, [and] where thou vowedst a vow unto Me: now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred*” (Genesis 31:10-13).

In both cases, Jacob dreams that his name is called, he replies, “Here am I.” In the previous case (Genesis 46:2) he was called by *elokim* who spoke to him in “visions of the night,” and in the second case (Genesis 31:11) by *malakh elokim*, the “angel of God,” who spoke to him “in a dream.” But in this second case, the “angel of God” says that “I am the God” to whom Jacob vowed a vow. Clearly, the angel is not God, no matter what he says. Maimonides brings this latter case to prove that sometimes angels speak to prophets in dreams *as though* they were God, in the grammatical first person.

This is the second rule of interpretation. Whenever possible, we should try to identify the heavenly speaker as an agent or angel (*malakh* can mean either an agent or an angel) speaking for God, quoting God, but not as God himself.

Third Rule: Restore Omitted “Angels.” Maimonides argues, less convincingly, that the text sometimes omits the word “angel” where the reader would expect it. Both English translators confusingly call this the omission of the *nomen regens* (See also Guide 1:21). What they mean is that the Bible regularly omits “angel” of God or “messenger” of God where it should be obvious that God is speaking through a messenger or angel.

In Hebrew, when two words join as a compound, they are in “construct state” (*smikhut*). We do not really have it in English: it would be like compounding “king-throne” instead of “the throne of the king.” “Angel of God” in construct state is *malakh elokim*, not *malakh shel* (of) *elokim*. The first word of the construction is called by Latinate grammar the *nomen regens*, the “ruling term,” since it *governs* the second word (Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, p. 247, 89a). Maimonides claims that the Bible merely omitted the first word of the phrase *malakh elokim* whenever we find *elokim* alone speaking to the prophet in his dream. The “angel of God” and not God Himself descended to Egypt.

Maimonides thus removes the grossly corporeal divine attribution of motion from God, demonstrating several strategies to remove such corporeal attributions. He shows that Onkelos consistently pursued this same project, (explaining away his irregularities) and that he is Onkelos' worthy inheritor. He thus feels that canonical tradition supports his radical reinterpretation of biblical text.

LEVELS OF PROPHECY, LEVELS OF ANGELS

Finally, the last sentence suggests a new idea:

“Prophecy with its various degrees and the nature of angels, will be fully discussed in the sequel, in accordance with the object of this treatise.”

This refers to Guide 2:45, where Maimonides details eleven levels of prophecy. That chapter does not include a twelfth level, which would be Mosaic prophecy. At the beginning of that chapter, he says that the first two levels are not really full blown prophecy but “steps leading to it.” That leaves *ten* levels: nine levels of non-Mosaic prophets plus the unmentioned twelfth level of Mosaic prophecy.

Earlier in our chapter, Maimonides opaquely references these levels from Guide 2:45:

“Through this your attention will be drawn to the fact that there is a great difference between that which is said to happen *in a dream* or *in the visions of the night*, that which is said to happen *in a vision* and *apparition* (vision), and that of which it is said without qualification ‘And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,’ or, ‘And the Lord said unto me.’” (Pines translation, p. 58)

This terminology keys to the list in Guide 2:45:

- 1) “*In a dream, or in the visions of the night*” refers to levels four through seven, in which the prophet hears, speaks to, or is spoken to in a dream-vision, respectively. In those three levels, the speaker is *always* an angel, although in the fourth and fifth levels it is not clear to the prophet that the speaker is an angel, and in the seventh, the prophet thinks that the angel is God.
- 2) “*In a vision and apparition*” (*b'makhazei u'va'mara*) refers to levels eight through eleven, in which the prophet has a vision while awake, perhaps in a trance-state, in which he sees allegorical figures (i.e., the Covenant Between the Parts), hears words, sees a man speaking, or sees an angel speaking, respectively. Again, in all of these cases an angel is speaking, whether the prophet recognizes it or not.
- 3) “That of which it is said without qualification ‘*And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,*’ or, ‘And the Lord said unto me.’” The italicized phrase refers to level three, the lowest class of actual prophets, in which the prophet sees an allegory in a dream. In the dream, the allegory is interpreted, like many of the allegories of Zechariah. The phrase “*And the Lord said unto me*” refers to level two, which is not really a level of prophecy. It is a type of divine *inspiration* received by David and Solomon. When they said that God spoke to them, it meant, according to Maimonides, that they received prophecies through the medium of another prophet, such as Nathan in the case of David, and Ahijah in the case of Solomon.

When “God spake unto Israel *in the visions of the night*, and said, *Jacob, Jacob*. And he said, *Here [am] I*. And He said, I [am] God, the God of thy father...*I will go down (yarad)* with thee into Egypt,” Jacob *dreamt* that God *spoke* to him. This can only occur in level seven:

“(7) In a prophetic dream it appears to the prophet as if God spoke to him. Thus, Isaiah says, ‘And I saw the Lord, and I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ (Isaiah 6:1-8). Micaiah, son of Imla, said likewise, ‘I saw the Lord’ (1 Kings 22:19).”

But even in level seven, the prophet only *thinks* it is God speaking, when it really is an angel:

“You will perhaps ask this question: among the different degrees of prophecy there is one in which prophets, e.g., Isaiah, Micaiah, appear to hear God addressing them (level seven); how can this be reconciled with the principle that all prophets are prophetically addressed through an angel, except Moses our Teacher, in reference to whom Scripture says, ‘Mouth to mouth I speak to him’ (Numbers 12:8)? I answer, this is really the case, the medium here (i.e., with the non-Mosaic prophets) being the imaginative faculty that hears in a prophetic dream God speaking; but Moses heard the voice addressing him ‘from above the covering of the ark from between the two *cherubim*’ (Exodus 25; 22) without the medium of the imaginative faculty.”

Thus, the translator may deploy any of the Maimonides’ interpretive strategies to get to the same result: an angel speaks to Jacob, and the angel descends, not God.

Yehuda Even-Shmuel tries, unsuccessfully, to explain how an incorporeal angel could “descend,” in a commentary note: “an angel, despite being incorporeal, since it is *created*, may possibly be rendered in corporeal terminology” (my translation, p. 116). The truth is that in “the language of men” we are not as concerned with corporeal terminology so long as the prime principle of monotheism remains uncompromised.

HIERARCHICAL CLASSIFICATION

In addition to his list of 10 prophets levels suggested by Guide 2:45, Maimonides also prepared a functional classification of the ten levels of angels (Mishneh Torah, *Yodei Ha-Torah* 2:7). *Elokim* is the fourth angelic rank from the bottom in Guide 2:45. There may not be a direct correspondence between the lists. The main idea of these lists seems to be their denary or base-10 nature. Both lists suggest a parallel with the ten *sephirot* of Cabala. We can also link the idea to the levels of access to the “Palace of the King” in Guide 3:51. The point of the *levels* is their potential accessibility. Man is free to reach for these higher levels. But note that there is no twelfth Mosaic level in this list of human prophets, since only Moses transcended his corporeality.

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