

GUIDE 1:66 WHAT IS THE MIRACLE OF TORAH?

OVERVIEW: THE NATURAL LAW

““And the tables (tablets) were the work of God’ (Exodus 32:16), that is to say, they were the product of nature, not of art: for all natural things are called ‘the work of the Lord.’” (Guide 1:66)

This chapter is about the first set of tablets that Moses received on Sinai. More generally, the question should be, “What is the miracle of Torah?” This chapter explains what natural law is for Maimonides, and how he relates miracles and nature. In the course of our treatment, we will look at how Maimonides’ doctrine develops through his writings. We will also review some reactions to this doctrine, from his earliest students, through his ancient commentators, and conclude with Spinoza’s pantheistic departure from normative Judaism’s understanding of nature.

This chapter follows several chapters on the names of God and the word of God. In the last chapter, 1:65, Maimonides showed that when scripture refers to the “word” of God it means the divine will, by which God creates directly, without intermediaries. In our chapter, he takes this a step further, by showing that God also created the Torah by this divine will. The will is not a separate entity apart from God Himself.

The chapter is short, and, therefore, complicated. He announces at the outset that the tablets, which contain the Torah, are natural and not conventional, “the product of nature, not of art.” For Jews the distinction sounds odd. That is because Maimonides subjects the law of the Torah to philosophical categories, asking whether that law is man-made. If law is man-made, it is said to be *conventional (nomos)*, in that men legislate it. But religion denies that the Torah is made by man. Since it was not made by man, philosophers called it *natural law (dikaion physikon, δικαιοον φυσικον, ius or lex naturale)*, to distinguish it from conventional law.

This doctrine does not sit well with the Jewish view of Torah, since natural law is a doctrine that emerges from other nations’ consideration of their own law. Thomas Aquinas represents the situation well when he says that the natural law is “nothing else than the rational creature’s participation in the eternal law.” (*Summa Theologica, Prima Secundae Partis, Q91, Art.2, Obj. 3*) Natural law is the way other nations *conform* their laws to the positive inheritance that man and beast have from nature: i.e., self-preservation, parental affection, and so on. Biblical statements also influenced natural law theorists when they formed their idea of what nature wants from law. Nonetheless, natural law is uniquely the province of the “rational creature,” that is, it is the self-imposition of an autonomously determined standard.

The difference for the Jewish nation is that its source of law is prophetic revelation, not legislative or judicial decision. Specifically, it is Mosaic revelation. In general, there is no need to produce new law. Developments in Jewish law are interpretive or specific to local circumstance. The only exception is a later prophet’s extraordinary command, but even this “*horaat shaa*” is only an *emergency* decree. The prophet cannot change the Torah. The Rabbis never sought to produce new legislation in *conformance* with nature and nature’s God. So the natural law project struck Jews as irrelevant.

THE TORAH IS NATURAL?

Given this situation, and the fact that there was never a more accomplished student of Jewish law than Maimonides was, we must assess what he could mean by saying that the Torah is natural. The first point is clear; he denies that the Torah is the product of conventional human legislation or agreement.

The next point is not so clear. He seeks to prove, on biblical textual grounds alone, that when the Bible says something is “made” by God, it is a product of “nature.” He does this by employing the rule of “*gezera shaveh*,” an interpretive technique that proves the meaning of a word used in one place by the way it is used in another. Just as the “tables were the work of God,” so the plants, the animals, the winds, the rains, the cedars of Lebanon, and the heavens, are all called “the work of God.” Indeed, he stresses that the text says that God “planted” the cedars (Psalm 104:16), though everyone knows that the cedars were “planted” by dropping their own seed-cones (Shem Tov). For Maimonides it means that men did not plant the cedars. The implication is that the tablets are as much a divine creation as these commonalities of nature are. They all emerge from the nature of the world God created.

Maimonides then reminds us that when the Bible describes these creations as the “work” of God, it means the same thing as when it says that the “speech” of God creates them. We saw, in the last chapter, that ‘created by speech’ means created by the *will* of God. This will is just God himself, that is, God created them just by wanting them created. However, the Bible says that the “finger of God” carved the letters in the first set of tablets (Exodus 31:18). The Psalmist also states that the universe was created by the “finger” (Psalm 8:4), but he also says that it were created by the “word” (Psalm 33:6). This *gezera shaveh* proves that the “finger” is the same as the “word,” and it follows that God *willed* the creation of both. The upshot is that natural creation is willed creation.

DISPUTE WITH ONKELOS

Onkelos, who usually strives to avoid corporeal attribution to God, relents, and translates ‘finger of God’ into Aramaic (*ktivin b’etzbaa d’hashem*) literally. Maimonides disapprovingly interprets Onkelos to mean that this finger was a miraculously created instrument that God used to carve the stone. (Thus, Rashi to Talmud *Pesachim* 54a, referring to *Kiddushin* 21b, “the great awl,” *martzea ha-gadol*, see explanation of Mordechai Dov Rabinowitz, note 10, p. 184, in *Rambam L’am, Avot*, Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1995).

It is a beautiful picture. But it cannot be the reality, because God needs no instrument to create. It posits two miracles where only one is necessary.

Maimonides highlights two places where Onkelos instead translates to remove physical instrumentalities from God: Moses’ first encounter with Mount Moriah, and the account of his miraculous staff. In the case of Mount Moriah, Onkelos translates “mountain of God” as “the mountain where the glory of the Lord was revealed.” (Exodus 3:1). By replacing “mountain of God” with “glory of the Lord,” he obviates the need for God to have a mountain. This works, because (according to Maimonides), Moses did not begin to have unmediated, face to face, discussion with God until after the burning bush. The “glory” is, to use Wolfson’s phrase (see last chapter), a *created communicative word*, which mediates Moses’ encounter. Onkelos translates the “staff of God” (Exodus 4:20) as “the rod through which Moses did miracles *from before (min kedem)* the Lord.” This translation removes the need for God to have a staff. God did not need a miracle mountain or a miracle staff to produce His miracles.

Maimonides protests against Onkelos that, as he has shown, the ‘finger of God’ must mean the will of God. He then argues that since the creation of the cosmos is clearly a greater miracle than inscribing a stone, and since God did not need any instrument to create the cosmos, why would He need an instrument to create the lesser miracle of the tablets of the law? Onkelos should have translated ‘finger’ as ‘word’ (*memra*), as he did with the creation of the cosmos, to show that God produced neither the one nor the other with an intermediary. God creates by willing. It is only because Onkelos is confused about what the natural miracle of Torah is that he ascribes a ‘finger’ to God.

DISPUTE WITH CRESCAS

“I cannot see why Onkelos preferred this explanation (that God needed a miracle finger to engrave the tablets). It would have been more reasonable to say ‘written by the word of the Lord,’ in imitation of the verse ‘By the word of the Lord the heavens were made.’ Or was the creation of the writing on the tables more difficult than the creation of the stars in the spheres? *ha'im nirei lakh mtziut ha-katav b'lukhot mufla yoter m'mitziut ha-kokhavim b'galgalim?*” (Guide 1:66)

Maimonides' attempted deduction from the spheres to the tablets is a form of Talmudic argument called *kal v'khomer*, i.e., “easy to hard.” Logicians call these *a fortiori* (“even more so”) or *a maiore ad minus* (“greater to lesser”) arguments.

I have always had difficulty with *kal v'khomer* arguments since I never know which is supposed to be the easy part. They rarely state what criterion they use. These are informal arguments because they are enthymematic, that is to say, incomplete arguments. For these reasons, Jewish law rejects the use of *kal v'khomer* arguments to secure criminal convictions (*ayn onshin min ha-din*). Maimonides' brief and sketchily drawn assertion provides an excellent example of the pitfalls of this kind of logic.

His claim seems to be that the miracle of the creation of the universe was more difficult and miraculous than the divine carving of the tablets, and, so, since God used no instrument to fashion the universe, why would He need one to carve the tablets? Especially since the latter was a one-time local small-scale event irrespective of how wonderful it clearly was.

Crescas disputes the claim, contending that the miracle of the Torah was the greater miracle. He writes:

“It would be better to say that the writing on the tablets was more miraculous, since, before the encounter at Mount Sinai, few believed in the divine word. However, after hearing the word from God (at Sinai), according to His will, which [expressed itself through] the created voice (*dibbur ha-nivra*), it verified this belief. Thus this great conception was established, for on hearing the sound they (the Jews) understood His word, ‘When the voice of the horn waxed louder and louder’ (Exodus 19:19), and ‘The mountain burned with fire unto the heart of heaven’ (Deut. 4:11). For nothing like this could be possible without divine will, upon which God acted, as He desired, at the moment He desired. Moreover, it says ‘We have seen this day that God doth speak with man and he liveth’ (Deut. 5:19). This means that we grasped the true conception. In a similarly [miraculous] manner was the creation of the script on the tablets, which, it follows, we consider to be a greater miracle than the creation of the stars in the heavens. That is because the tablets came as a result of divine will and intent (in the moment), while, as we believe, the divine will and intent created the stars and the spheres in advance (*l'mafrea*).” (My trans.)

Crescas means that the cosmic creations, which are naturally regular, are less miraculous than the specific sudden occurrence type of miracle, such as the giving of the tables of the testimony. He wisely refrains, however, from drawing Onkelos' conclusion (according to Maimonides' *kal v'khomer*), that, being more miraculous, God required special means to create the writing, such as a miracle finger or awl.

Whatever the merits of both positions (which are quite unclear to me), our real question is how to judge the “natural” miracles as against the “unnatural” miracles. The answer is that we must first understand who Maimonides' real adversary was.

Consider that our chapter, Guide 1:66, is five chapters away from Maimonides' small treatise against the Kalam theology, 1:71-1:76. The Kalam had an atomistic, “occasionalist” conception of the universe, in which, at every moment, Allah miraculously recreated every atom. This dangerous but influential notion destroyed nature and any possibility of a science of nature. His intent, therefore, was to refute Kalam theology by showing that even

the “unnatural” miracles were in some sense natural. Crescas, by contrast, represents the conservative rabbinic reaction to Maimonides, which sought to escape foreign rationalistic doctrines that could lead believers astray.

For all of his naturalism, Maimonides never rejects “unnatural” miracles. Still, he always seeks to push even those miracles back to the creation week, to the Sabbath twilight (*beyn ha-shamashot*), in order to flee the notion that God changes at particular historical moments (Shem Tov).

Maimonides says, “This shows how generally it was assumed by our forefathers that the writing of the tables was produced in the same manner as the rest of the creation,” *k’shaar kol maaseh bereshit*. Just as the “heavens are the work of Your fingers,” that is, of the divine will, so the tablets written “with the finger of God” were created by the divine will.

By interesting contrast, Narboni, Efodi, and Shem Tov retreat to a reprehensibly scientific position, as follows. There allegedly exists on Sinai a type of agate, which, when split, displays the appearance of a bush, in Hebrew, *sneh*, and therefore this mountain on which Moses saw the burning bush is called *Sinai*. These stones can be split many times and continue to display the same image. I have also seen such stones, but I would not argue, as these ancient commentators do, that such stones can change to reveal different letters and come together naturally in the form of tablets of engraved testimony, as a miracle prepared, in advance, at the creation of the world.

THE SCIENCE OF MIRACLES

It still sounds strange to call the Torah “natural.” We generally understand the giving of the tablets and the Torah to be miracles. Does that contradict their being natural?

The question is how to categorize miracles. Maimonides wrote on the subject throughout his life. He refers at the end of our chapter to his early work, *Commentary on the Mishna*, Avot 5:6. Later, in Guide 2:29, he returns to the issue. Finally, in the *Letter on Resurrection*, his last work, he proposes his taxonomy of miracles. At each stage his understanding deepens, but his basic premises remain the same.

In the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides interprets the following Mishnaic text from Avot:

“Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath [of the first week of creation] at twilight, and these are they: [i] the mouth of the earth, [ii] the mouth of the well, [iii] the mouth of the donkey, [iv] the rainbow, [v] the manna, [vi] the rod [of Moses], [vii] the *shamir*, [viii] the letters (*ha-ketav*), [ix] the writing (*ha-mikhtav*), and [x] the tablets (*ha-lukhot*). Some say also the evil spirits, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham our father. Some say also the tongs too, made with tongs.” (*Avot* 5:6, some editions 5:5)

Maimonides comments:

“The sages did not believe in the periodic change of the Divine Will. Rather, they believed that at the beginning of the fashioning of the phenomena, He instituted into nature (*sam ba’teva*) that through it there would be fashioned all that would be fashioned. Whether the phenomenon which would be fashioned would be frequent, namely, a natural phenomenon, or would be an infrequent change, namely, a sign (a miracle, “*nes*,” “*mofet*”), they are all equal. Therefore, they said that [at twilight] on the sixth day He instituted into the nature of the earth that Korakh and his company would sink [into it], and concerning the well, that it would bring forth the water, and concerning the donkey, that it would speak, and similarly for the rest. The *letters* (*ha-ketav*) refer to the Torah which was written before Him, may He be blessed...; and it was not made known how this was accomplished (*v’ain anakhnu yodiim heikh*), as it was said, ‘...and I will give you the tablets of stone...and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them’ (Exodus 24:2). The *writing* (*ha-mikhtav*) refers to the script that was upon the tablets, as it said, ‘...and the writing was the writing of God engraved upon the tablets’

(Exodus 32:16). Perhaps you will say that since all the wonders *were instituted into the nature of those phenomena* (*husmoo b'tivei ha-davarim hem*) after the six days of creation, why then did He single out these ten? Know that He did not single them out in order to say that there is no other sign (miracle) which was instituted into the nature of the phenomena except these [on the eve of Sabbath]. However...the rest of the wonders and signs were instituted into the nature of the phenomena through which they were fashioned at the time they were fashioned [during the six days]. They stated, by way of illustration, that when the waters were parted on the second day, it was instituted into [their] nature that the Red Sea would be parted for Moses, and the Jordan for Joshua....When the sun was created on the fourth day, it was instituted into its nature that it would stand still at that certain time when Joshua would address it. Similarly for the rest of the wonders, except for these ten which were instituted into the nature of those phenomena [on the eve of Sabbath] at twilight.” (Trans. by Arthur David, *The Commentary to Mishnah Aboth* 5:6, New York, 1968, p. 100-101)

Neither God nor nature, His creation, ever will change. The miracles, which are extraordinary changes in nature, were already programmed into the system. The Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 5:5, supports his interpretation. It states that God made “a stipulation” (*tennai*) with the Red Sea at creation to divide before the Israelites, and further stipulations with nature to support the other miracles that Maimonides listed. Indeed, the Midrash indulges expansive language to support subsequent miracles, saying, “Not with the sea alone did God make a stipulation, but with everything which was created in the six days of creation” (*lo im ha-yam b'levad ha-tana hkb"h, ele im kol ma sh'nivra b'sheset ymei bereshit*).

What is the distinction between these two types of miracles inserted by God in nature? R. Yosef ibn Akinin (c. 1150–1220, philosopher, poet, younger contemporary and likely student of Maimonides) explains:

“The distinction between these ten miracles created on the [eve of the Sabbath] at twilight of the first week of creation, from the rest of the nature altering miracles that [were inserted in nature] at the time of creation [during the first six days], is that the latter were accomplished through *the intercession of an intermediary* (*shaliakh*). Examples are the plagues of Egypt and the division of the Red Sea at the hand of Moses. The same is the case with the rest of the miracles performed by the prophets in order to foster belief in God and in the prophecy of the prophets that He has sent. Not so these ten that God created at twilight. And, specifically, why at twilight? To increase their importance (*l'godel khashivotam*).” (My trans. from *Sefer Musar*, of Ibn Akinin, 154, quoted by Rabinowitz, in *Rambam L'am, Perush L'Masekhet Avot*, 175, note 2)

He distinguishes the two types of miracles based on whether God accomplished them directly, not on whether one is, in any sense, more natural than another is.

In Guide 2:29 Maimonides states his doctrine, as he understood it from the Midrash:

“When I, however, said that ‘no prophet ever announced a permanent change of any of Nature’s properties,’ *I intended to except miracles* (Kafih: *mtokh zhirut b'nisim*, Schwarz: *zeh kdei l'hishamer mpnei nisim*; Pines: “merely to be cautious with regard to miracles.” the meaning is uncertain). For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, the pure and noble hand into a leprous one, without the existence of any natural cause that could effect these or similar phenomena, these changes were *not permanent*, they have not become a physical property. On the contrary [our sages say], *‘the Universe since continues its regular course’* (*olam k'minhago holekh*, Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 54b). This is my opinion; this should be our belief. Our Sages, however, said very strange things as regards miracles: they are found in *Bereshit Rabba*, and in *Midrash Koheleth*, namely, that the miracles are to some extent also natural: for they say, when God created the universe with its present physical properties, He made it part of these properties, that they should produce certain miracles at certain times. The sign of a prophet consisted in the fact that God told him to declare when a certain thing will take place, but the

thing itself was effected according to the fixed laws of Nature... [It is] impossible that there should be a change in the laws of Nature, or a change in the will of God [as regards the physical properties of things] after they have once been established.” (He then quotes in full the section from *Genesis Rabbah* 5:5 about God’s “stipulation” with nature.)

Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, New York, 1964 (orig. 1933 German), p. 170, thinks that when Maimonides says “I intended to except miracles” that “Maimonides no longer seems to maintain this extreme position, which would exclude any interference of God in the order of nature.” Still, he admits, these “eruptions, however, are not conceived as a subsequent suspension of the natural order but as part of the overall divine plan...” In a footnote, he admits it is “difficult to determine ... whether Maimonides maintains his view.”

With due respect to this great teacher, I cannot see the Guide passage as other than a deepening of Maimonides’ views, since apart from the “except” clause, he still maintains that God willed the miracles in the original creation plan. The critical point is that God is so radically independent of time that it is an irrelevant consideration for Him. God wants the world as it is, sown, so to speak, with its miracles and its prophets who learn from God when they will occur.

LETTER ON RESURRECTION

Maimonides had not yet revealed his science of miracles, although he began to lay the foundation for it in these works. He completed his account in the *Letter on Resurrection*. His taxonomy of miracles in the *Letter* is one of his most important and interesting statements. In chapter 10, he works out the rules for the two types of miracles, the supernatural miracles and the natural miracles:

1. SUPERNATURAL MIRACLES

- These occurrences are not possible in the normal course of nature, and so Maimonides classified them as “supernatural miracles.”
- *Impermanency*: The touchstone of their non-natural character is that they are impermanent. In Guide 2:29 Maimonides interprets “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9) to mean that all things under the sun, that is, all the things of nature, are permanent. An occurrence out of the normal course of nature is impermanent, and is a supernatural miracle. God placed these supernatural miracles in nature at creation, and so they are, in that sense “natural,” although he called them “supernatural” (*ha-nimnaim ba-teva*, see *Rambam L’am, Iggerot*, 389).
- Examples: The writing on the first set of tablets, Moses staff; Korakh’s ingestion by the earth.

2. NATURAL (POSSIBLE) MIRACLES

- All of these are occurrences that are possible (*efsharim*) within the normal course of nature.
- *Despite their being “possible,” there must also be one of three specific conditions to qualify as “natural miracles:”*
 1. They occur at a specific time; or,
 2. They are rare, since they occur in connection with a specific place, nation or severity (“rare” is not the same as “impermanent”: the supernatural miracles are one-off events); or,
 3. They are permanent.
- Examples:
 - Splitting of the altar of Jeroboam. Kings 1:13:3. (example of 1 above.)
 - Plagues of locusts, hail and pestilence (together) in Egypt. (example of 2)
 - Samuel’s rainmaking. Samuel 1:12:17-18. (example of 2)
 - The greatest miracle: The blessings and curses of the Jews. Lev. 26, and Deut. 28. (example of 3)

The context of this discussion is the future miracle of the bodily resurrection of the dead. Some had accused Maimonides of abandoning this belief, despite his clear ruling in *Commentary on the Mishnah (Sanhedrin, in The Thirteen Principles of Judaism)*, to the contrary. He proceeds in the *Letter on Resurrection* to reject the misreadings of these critics, heaping scorn on them. Still, he admits, despite his belief in resurrection, that he has no idea how it will occur. Nobody knows. Resurrection is a *supernatural* miracle; therefore, it is *impermanent*. It will occur once, and that is all anyone will ever know of it.

There is a greater miracle than the miracle of resurrection. The Torah prescribes the very life of the Jew. It sets forth the blessings and curses which will occur in nature if he performs the commandments or violates them. It is the *permanent* fact of his life, and is therefore the greatest miracle of all. It is the explanation for history's unique treatment of the Jews.

How does this fit with Ibn Aknin's distinction, above, between miracles of the twilight of the first Sabbath that God directly creates, and those of the six other days of creation that require an intermediary? God directly creates the first tablets of the Torah, a one-time manifestation, a supernatural miracle of the twilight. Despite the fact that Moses broke them, the supernal Torah endures. Moses then becomes the intermediary for the natural miracle, the *permanent* miracle of the second set of tablets. It is permanent because the Torah permanently imposes its special providence for the Jewish people, including its blessings and curses. This natural miracle, according to Maimonides in the *Letter on Resurrection* and elsewhere, is more important than the supernatural miracles.

What we should learn is that the *natural* miracles are the most important ones. While everyone else and everything else proceeds according to their nature, history absolutely changes for the Jew in accord with his fidelity to Torah, for Torah is his nature. It is a *natural miracle* since the facts of Jewish history are indeed *possible*, therefore natural. Because the iron logic of that history's connection to the *mitzvah* system links his personal and historical fate to his choices, it is miraculous. It is miraculous despite its being natural, since science will never discover its hidden mechanism.

The *natural* miracle of the Torah is greater than the *supernatural* miracle of the resurrection. My knowledge or ignorance of the details of the resurrection, a *supernatural impermanent* event, a new thing under the sun, may bear some relation to how I live my life. Nonetheless, my knowledge of the Torah is knowledge of my own nature, and I act against that nature at my risk.

DEUS SIVE NATURA

A danger lurks in this rational systematization of God's miraculous work.

The identification of God and nature allusively suggested by Maimonides' opening sentence, "all natural things are called 'the work of the Lord,'" reflected Midrashic and Talmudic trends, and also follows from such hints in Genesis as the multiple recurrence of the name *Elohim* in the creation of nature. It is a commonplace of Jewish tradition to gematrically identify nature and God, *ha-teva* and *elohim* (the letters of each term add to 86). *Teva* means "to sink.... to coin (in which the impression is sunk in metal), shape," semantically moving from "stamp" to "nature" (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 518, 519). Jews terminologically resolved their discomfort with the Greek notion of a lawful independent nature (*physis*, φύσις) by viewing nature as something that God shaped. "Nature" bears His stamp.

Moshe Idel, in "*Deus Sive Natura*—The Metamorphosis of a Dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza" (p. 87, in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. Cohen and Levine, Kluwer, 2000), argues that our chapter is one of the links that led Spinoza to his notorious pantheistic identification of God and nature. If he is right, history ironically brought the concept of nature back to this Hellenic notion that Judaism had sought to escape.

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), argued that there was no distinction between God and the totality of real phenomena. By rejecting the idea that God is over and above a universe that He creates or moves, Spinoza thereby rejected divine transcendence. He goes so far as to make God a *material* cause. (Wolfson, *Spinoza*, 1924, ch. 9, 303. However, Wolfson modifies Spinoza’s anti-transcendentalism, calling it “transcendent immanent,” 323).

Spinoza makes the famously controversial claim that the whole is “God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*)”, essentially identifying them: “...the eternal and infinite Being, which we call God or Nature...” (*Ethica IV, Praef*). Idel charts the course of this transition from the Maimonidean position, which strongly emphasized divine transcendence, to Spinoza’s obliteration of transcendence:

“The Maimonidean understanding of the natural and the divine as two related and overlapping categories was engendered by the penetration of the Greek notion of spirituality, in our case, the source of the forms that represent the spiritual dimension of any creature. By applying the notion of total spirituality to God, and by envisioning the spiritual element in the natural realm as coming from above (In medieval Aristotelianism it was considered to stem from the Agent Intellect), the gap between the divine and the created was at least, in principle, bridged. Maimonides subscribed to the concept of the intermediary spiritual chain of the separate intellects that transmits the divine flow to the lower world, the last of these intellects functioning as the vicar of God in the mundane realm. Our emphasis on the affinity between the two realms, the divine and the natural, complicates the well-known assumption of the Maimonidean theology regarding the incomparability of God to any other being. This problem, which cannot be neglected, complicates the understanding of the topic divine-natural [*sic*] in Maimonides’ thought... Without wishing to minimize this crucial question, I will nevertheless present the texts that seem to follow the path alluded to by the hints of ‘the great eagle.’ It seems that the ultimate conclusion regarding this quandary was drawn by Spinoza in rejecting the principle of emanation that was so important for the medievals, thus allowing a simpler relationship between the natural and the divine. This daring idea of Spinoza was not presented in a clear fashion by any of his Jewish predecessors, no matter how they formulated the gematria which links God and nature.” (*ibid.*, 89, 90, parentheses are Idel’s)

I imagine that Maimonides’ astonished reaction to learning of “this daring idea of Spinoza” would have been to remind us sharply that when men substitute their own unguided thought for divine revelation they make themselves gods, which is precisely what the men of the enlightenment did.

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