

GUIDE 1:28 FOOT

This chapter begins a new section in the lexicon. Friedlander supplies an introduction to this section, note 2, *ad loc.*:

“The next group of homonyms (1:28-1:45) explained by Maimonides, consists of those which signify part of the body of man or of an animal. He begins with *regel*, ‘foot,’ because it is related to expressions of motion, and after having made some remarks on the necessity of employing figurative language in speaking Of God, and also on the importance of obtaining a correct notion of the incorporeality of God, he continues with ‘face,’ ‘back,’ ‘heart,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘soul,’ ‘life,’ ‘wing,’ (*panim, ahor, lev, ruakh, nefesh, khaim, kanaf*) and concludes with *ayin*, ‘eye.’ It is rather difficult to define what place ch. 29 (*etzev*, pain/anger) and 30 (*akhal*, eat) occupy in this group, and equally difficult to see the reason why the author introduced them here. The reader is probably to be prepared for the theory that any belief involving corporeality of God is equal to idolatry. For this purpose he begins with the explanation of *regel*, and shows the consequence of the insufficient preparation and imperfect conception of the idea of God, in the instance of the nobles (elders) of Israel. According to tradition, as accepted by Maimonides (ch. 5), they were punished without having received any warning. By introducing next (ch. 29) the phrase *va-yit’atzev el libo*, ‘And God was angry’ (because of the wickedness of the generation of the flood, *dor ha-mabul*), ‘without telling the people,’ he tacitly invites the reader to compare the causes of God’s anger in both instances, and to conclude that a misconception of the nature of the Supreme Being is actually a sin. It can be avoided by suitable studies, which are necessary for the mind as food is for the body (ch. 30). According to Abrabanel and others, Maimonides explains in ch. 30, the word occurring in the commandment given to Adam, ‘of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely *eat*, but of the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil, thou shalt not *eat* of it,’ that the reader is in fact expected to read between the lines (i.e., the necessity of studies leading to the proper interpretation of corporeal terms), has expressly been stated by Maimonides in the Introduction.”

This section, from 1:28 to 1:44 contains eleven lexical and five non-lexical chapters. Chapter 1:45, the lexicon on *sh’ma*, “hearing,” begins a brief section discussing the attribution of sensation to God. *Sh’ma* is the last term in the lexicon proper, although other chapters that I term “late lexical” scatter through the Guide. (See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”)

Definition 3, below, carries with it the most concealed idea in the Guide, which Maimonides only barely hints at, and which reputable commentators do not mention. The reason why foot means cause is that foot is a euphemism for masculine physicality in the male/female metaphor of form and matter. He cites the proof-texts below to assert that foot means cause but *refrains* from naming this phallic significance. His problem is that these texts use *regel* in an ambiguous manner that does not necessarily lead to his asserted equation of foot and cause. We must search beyond his explicit statements for his true meaning. By failing to do so we fail to see the masculine significance of *regel*, and, like Onkelos and Even-Shmuel, confuse it with the feminine principle of hylic matter. (See essay “In-forming Hyle” below.)

REGEL: (FOOT) Homonym

1. The foot of a living being.
2. An object which follows another, i.e. consequentiality.
3. Cause.

Instance of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart [from her], and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges [determine]. And if [any] mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, *foot for foot (regel takhat regel)*.” (Exodus 21:22-24).

Maimonides cites this text as an example of the Bible taking the term *regel* literally. He is pulling our leg, pun intended. This quotation is the one anciently given by the rabbis as the ultimate example of *not* taking the Torah literally. It means that the court compensates an injured foot with *money*, not the perpetrator's foot (Abraham ben Maimonides, *ad loc.* to 21:24 *Perush al Shemot*, p. 50, writes, *damei shen takhat shen*, i.e., the *value* of a tooth for a tooth). When Maimonides says that *regel* is a *homonymous* term, he means that the Bible sometimes *properly* employs it in its corporeal sense. But then, only be the second foot in “foot for foot” could be meant; i.e., the injured foot is a physical foot while the second foot is not. In Mishneh Torah, he writes:

“Despite the appearance of these rules (“foot for foot”) in the written Torah, they were *explained (meforshim)* by Moses from Sinai, and [as such] the laws of Moses are our law and so administered in successive courts...and in every court from the time of Moses until now.” (*Nezikin, Hovel u'Mazik* 1:6. my trans.)

That is, we *always* interpret and never take literally the phrase “foot for foot.” In “foot for foot,” a foot is not just a foot. Neither is it anywhere else in this chapter of the Guide. Freud may have said “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” but if Maimonides wanted a biblical use of “foot” meaning “foot” he could have found much better ones. This should alert us to read this chapter between the lines to divine his full intent.

Instance of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“And Moses said [to Pharaoh], Thus saith the Lord, About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt: And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that [is] behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel. And all these thy servants shall come down unto me, and bow down themselves unto me, saying, Get thee out, and all the people that *follow* thee (that are *at thy feet*, i.e., Pharaoh's feet—*b'raglekha*): and after that I will go out. And he went out from Pharaoh in a great anger.” (Exodus 11:4-8)

Maimonides understands *b'raglekha*, “at thy feet” to mean “those that follow thee” like the KJV. Rashi thinks it a polite phrase: instead of saying to Pharaoh that *Pharaoh* will come, as he in fact did (Ex. 12:31), Moses says Pharaoh's servants, those that are at Pharaoh's feet, will come, begging Moses to leave. Since “following” is close in thought to *consequentiality*, this citation bridges to the idea of *causation*, Definition 3.

Instances of Definition 3 Contextualized:

“And Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favour in thine eyes, [tarry: for] I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake. And he said, Appoint me thy wages, and I will give [it]. And he said unto him, Thou knowest how I have served thee, and how thy cattle was with me. For [it was] little which thou hadst before I [came], and it is [now] increased unto a multitude; and the Lord hath blessed thee since my coming (*v'yvarekh ha-shem otekha l'ragli*): and now when shall I provide for mine own house also?” (Genesis 30:27-30)

Maimonides writes, “i.e., for my sake; for that which exists for the sake of another thing has the latter for its final cause.” Still *l'ragli* need not be translated as cause, as the KJV shows, but can be read as “coming,” that is, “since my feet arrived,” which is how other authorities understood it. Rashi has it both ways: “*because* of the *coming* of my foot the blessing came to you” (*bishvil biat ragli*). The point is that the proof-texts, which supposedly express Maimonides' Definition 3, are ambiguous. He needs something more to show that *regel* means “cause.”

“Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as (*l'regel*) the cattle that goeth before me and the children *be able to endure (ul'regel)*, until I come unto my lord unto

Seir. And Esau said, Let me now leave with thee [some] of the folk that [are] with me. And he said, What needeth it? Let me find grace in the sight of my lord.” (Genesis 33:13-15)

Again, *regel* need not be read causatively. The phrase in question reads *l’regel hamlakha asher l’fanai ul’regel ha-y’ladim*: lit., for the foot of the cattle that go before me and for the foot of the children. It sounds like we are concerned not to damage their tender feet. Rashi translates it as “according to the gait” of the children and animals, which is reasonable; not, as Maimonides takes it, *because* of the children and animals (irrespective of gait). Since *regel* as *cause* is only weakly supported, Maimonides is thinking of a stronger reason for defining *regel* as *cause*, a reason he cannot state explicitly, that *foot* suggests the masculine organ that *causes* procreation. He even tells us that we have to look for another reason beyond those suggested here. He says (Pines trans.), “they are most hidden matters,” (*v’od she’hem devarim n’eilamim me’od*), i.e., things that neither Targum nor Maimonides can publicly explain (see essay below).

“And his *feet* (*raglav*) shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which [is] before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, [and there shall be] a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south.” (Zechariah 14:4)

Maimonides writes:

“Consequently, (taking foot as cause) the words... can be explained in the following way: ‘And the things caused by him (*raglav*) on that day upon the Mount of Olives, that is to say, the wonders which will then be seen, and of which God will be the Cause or the Maker, will remain permanently.’ To this explanation does Jonathan ben Uziel incline in paraphrasing the passage, ‘And he will appear *in his might* (*bi’g’virtei*) on that day upon the Mount of Olives.’”

Jonathan (1st century B.C.E.–1st century C.E.) was, like Onkelos, an early Aramaic translator of the Bible, specifically of the prophetic books. He was a pupil of Hillel. His translation generally translates terms denoting those parts of the body by which contact and motion are effected, by “His might,” *g’virtei*. The implication is that such expressions denote acts done by His Will (*g’virtei, ki kulam ha-matara be’hem ha-pa’ulot ha-mufalot al y’dei ratzono*).

Maimonides addressed this passage previously at 1:22. It is a favorite for him, for it shows the great, masculine causative power of God as He splits mountains and destroys the Jerusalem area with his “feet.” In 1:22 he quoted the end of the passage, Zechariah 14:5, “And the Lord my God shall come and all his holy ones with thee,” to refer to the descent of the Shekhina upon the prophets. They then change the world, moving mountains through their prophetic profession. Their prophecy is caused, that is, born of, the power of His “feet” standing on the mount.

“And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled [it] on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words. Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel: and [there was] under *His feet* (*raglav*) as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone (*k’maaseh livnat ha-sapir*), and as it were the body of heaven in its clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink.” (Exodus 24:7-11)

The phrase *k’maaseh livnat ha-sapir* can be translated “like the work of the whiteness of sapphire.” *Livnat* can mean brick (“paved”) or white. Key terms in the passage for Maimonides are *k’maaseh*, “like the work” and *livnat* as “whiteness.” Indeed, Even-Shmuel takes them to be more significant than the term *raglav* (“His feet”), despite the fact that the chapter is about this lexical term. To Maimonides the terms *k’maaseh livnat ha-sapir* suggest the primordial state of unformed matter, *hyle* (See below, but I also strongly urge the reader to re-read our lengthy treatment of this passage at 1:5. Maimonides wants us to read these chapters together, and they are an early example of the Guide’s referentialism).

IN-FORMING HYLE

I pointed several times above that the definition of *regel* as cause is neither obvious nor necessary to the understanding of any of the proof-texts provided. Maimonides usually provides either logical or empirical proof for his definitions, especially where they are distant from the meaning of the subject term. Here he has an explanation but refrains from giving it. His reticence comes from his halachic concern to refrain from writing on prurient matters. He takes seriously the rule of the second Mishnah of *Hagigah* not to teach prurient matters (*sitre arayot*) in public. Because our feet stick out in front of us they are an apt euphemism for the male organ, especially since, as Maimonides will later explain, there are no direct terms for genitalia in Hebrew (Talmud, *Berakhot* 22a-b; Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud* 1448; Bakan, *Maimonides on Prophecy*, p. 215, 219 explaining Guide, 1:49, 3:2, 3:8). Human language cannot describe the ultimate act of causation, creation *ex-nihilo*, any better than through the metaphor of procreation. “We have no intellectual cognition of our bringing somebody other than us to existence except through sexual intercourse.” (Pines translation, Guide page 99, footnote 8. Foot as phallus: discussing “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet.” Exod. 3:5 as leaving conjugal life, see sources assembled by Louis Ginzberg, note 122 to 2:316, *Legends of the Jews*).

Like all metaphors, it fails to completely capture the concept, but it does evoke the mystery of the creation. And, as an extra, the factors of procreation, male and female, are very good stand-ins for matter and form, following the ancient interpretive tradition. Once *foot* becomes *phallus*, it is only another step to sublimate foot as *male causative principle*, and from thence to *cause* generally taken. Of course, I cannot, prove that this is what Maimonides had in mind. However, his frequent recourse to quotations involving *regel*, and his suggestive language surrounding them, are difficult to explain otherwise. Why else criticize Onkelos’ straightforward treatment for failing to explain those concealed “most hidden matters” (*v’od she’hem devarim n’eilamim me’od*) “not grasped by the masses” (*v’lo hasagatam kala al he’hamon*). If foot sometimes just means cause, why should that be a mystery, and what is so hard for the masses to grasp?

Indeed, Onkelos simply translates foot into non-corporeal terminology as “throne.” A throne is sat on; only bodies sit on chairs; but God is not a body. So Maimonides says that Onkelos has to take the Throne to refer to the Shekhina, a created causative agent. He does this by calling this seat the “throne of glory,” *kursa yakria*, and Maimonides takes “glory” to mean the Shekhina. Reduced to essentials, foot equals Shekhina. Onkelos has thus sufficiently saved the masses from divine anthropomorphism.

Maimonides is still dissatisfied with Onkelos. All Onkelos had to do, according to the purpose of his Aramaic translation of the Bible, was to remove the direct threat posed by corporeality to Judaism. Unlike the Guide, Onkelos directed his Targum to a mass audience. But Maimonides has to explain exactly what the Elders of the Jews saw in their vision of God’s Throne of Glory. This is the mission of the Guide, to explain metaphors and contradictions in biblical prophecy to the perplexed few.

Yehuda Even-Shmuel tries to explain all this merely to mean that Onkelos, in Maimonides’ view, did not see the need to do more than translate “feet” as “throne” (and then, as Shekhina). In his interpretation of that view, Onkelos’ fault was not explaining that “the work of the sapphire brick” meant primordial matter.

Even-Shmuel fails to grasp that Maimonides really rejects Onkelos’ translation of feet as throne in the first place. If the work of the sapphire brick represents *hyle*, making feet into Shekhina does not tell us what the *work* of the sapphire brick is. However, if the foot represents the male causative principle we return to Maimonides’ familiar metaphor of the maleness of form and the femaleness of matter. The foot (as phallus) symbolizes God’s will that matter be in-formed. More to the point, by making feet feminine Onkelos defeats the whole purpose of the image: the *masculine* feet are supposed to be upon the *feminine* sapphire of hyle. He emasculates the symbol. If the feet become the feminine throne, they are just part of the symbol for hyle, and we get no sense of form or of causation. But the chapter’s purpose is to define foot as cause, not that which is the subject of causation.

TRANSPARENCY

Maimonides tells us his concept of the work of the sapphire brick. It describes hyle, the primordial matter which has not yet been formed, not really a thing in itself but a *potential* for being. Others before him in traditional texts recognized this metaphorical solution. Maimonides cites the Midrashic account of the vision of Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus (1st and 2d centuries C.E.). In that vision, God takes *snow* from under the Throne of Glory and casts it down to become Earth. Without addressing the vision in detail here, Maimonides, in 2:26, criticizes what he takes as Rabbi Eliezer's implied view that the hyle (i.e, the snow) is eternal with God. But Maimonides accepts his metaphor that something "white" from under the Throne is considered to be hyle, the *prima materia*.

Ben Zoma (1st and 2nd centuries C.E.), one of the four that entered Paradise, had similar visions of hyle:

"Our Rabbis taught: Four men entered the 'Garden' (*pardes*), namely, Ben 'Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher, and R. Akiba. R. Akiba said to them: When ye arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not, *water, water!* For it is said: He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes. Ben 'Azzai cast a look and died. Of him Scripture says: Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. Ben Zoma looked and was affected (*v'nifga*)." (Talmud *Hagigah* 14a)

A fellow Tanna asks "What and wherefore Ben Zoma?" upon encountering Ben Zoma in deepest meditation. Ben Zoma replies that he is focused on the "space" between the upper and the lower heavens spoken of in the creation account, the *Maaseh Bereshit*. His companion's famous rejoinder: "Ben Zoma is still outside" (15b). The two waters of the "Garden" and the two waters of creation both symbolize matter, hyle, the upper quintessential matter and the lower matter of the earth. In a third passage (15a) he held that bathwater transmits spermatozoa, i.e., that "water" is the medium of creation. Why compare matter to water, snow, marble, and the "work of the whiteness of sapphire"? (*Livnat* can mean "brick" or "white").

Maimonides says that *white* sometimes means *transparent*. We also do this, as the so-called "white" sapphire is not white at all but a colorless rival of the diamond. Transparency implies receptivity to color, as all colors lend the sapphire their color in succession as they pass behind it. Just so, primordial un-informed matter receives each form successively.

Maimonides says that the idea of whiteness as transparency arose when he considered Rabbi Eliezer's snow together with the Elder's vision of the whiteness under the "feet." He understood that by employing images of whiteness both passages spoke of hyle. He recognized that the whiteness stood for the receptivity of a transparent body to various colors. The transparency of the waters of creation in Ben Zoma's visions also symbolizes hyleic receptivity.

Maimonides goes on to show that had the text wanted to give us the color of the sapphire it would not have the unnecessary term *k'maaseh*, "like the work" precede "the whiteness of the sapphire. Since "like the work" is neither the work nor not-the-work, it is like hyle, which is not like matter or form as we know them in their accidental conjugations. The action or "work" of hyle is passive and receptive, i.e., feminine, until an "accident" (*mikra*) causes it to be active. Friedlander, note 3, *ad loc.*, p. 100, writes:

"[Maimonides: 'Because matter, as such, is, as you are well aware, always receptive and passive, active only by some *accident*'] i.e., the combination of matter and form; so long as they are not combined and continue in a free state, the one is active, the other passive; when combined they are considered to participate in both qualities. The combination is an accident to the matter as well as to the form; it endows each with properties essential to it."

Hyle is passive until it receives the action of the “feet” in-forming it. The Elders of Israel, who saw a direct mechanical causative action between ineffable God, his “feet,” and formation, took this conclusion wrongly. Their mistake resulted from the corporeality of their imaginations, symbolized by the statement that they “did eat and drink.” Ezekiel did not make this mistake. Ezekiel also saw “the likeness of a throne as the appearance of a sapphire stone,” but did not take God Himself as the form of matter. Ezekiel 1:26:

“And above the firmament that [was] over their heads [was] the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne [was] *the likeness as the appearance of a man* above upon it.”

Unlike the Elders, Ezekiel understood that God *wills* the formation of matter. The actual formation is the result of ramified processes stemming ultimately from this initial will. The Will is an undifferentiated aspect of the divine essence as grasped by us. It is not that the will in itself directly forms matter, but that the will is the ultimate cause of whatever processes end in the formation of matter. The “likeness of the appearance of a man” which forms matter is therefore not man but divine will as ultimate cause. Maimonides noted above his preference for Targum Jonathan’s translation of foot over Targum Onkelos’ translation. Jonathan translated foot as “might,” *g’virtei*, which Maimonides grasped as “will,” *ratzon*.

Maimonides says that primordial matter is the first creation subject to *generation* and to *corruption*. When we read that is it under the “feet” of God, it means that God caused it to exist, but, more accurately, the divine will subjects matter to the successive causative actions of the forms it passively receives, in the mystery of creation, as the masculine is received by the feminine.

EVEN-SHMUEL ON HYLE

I criticized Yehuda Even-Shmuel’s commentary on the Guide for failing to explain the meaning of *regel* in our Guide chapter. He thought the chapter’s intent was to explain hyle, not causation/formation. But hyle is a receptive, feminine principle. By making this feminine principle the core of the chapter, he misses its masculine point, the metaphorically phallic action of the formative foot.

Still, I cannot resist quoting his fine summary paragraph dissecting Maimonides’ doctrine of hyle:

“Until now we have examined those things that are subject to generation and corruption, their relation to God, and God’s manifestation through them. Now we ascend to examine hyleic matter, that which is subject to the succession of possible forms. God is the cause of this matter, its Creator, and so we say that it is generated, i.e., that it exists after not having existed. Its function is to receive, successively, the infinity of all possible forms, and so, therefore, this primal matter cannot be destroyed. From the vantage of the future, it is eternal.

“What distinguishes God, its source, from that which is ‘hewn’ from that source? Surely, the nature of the source is in that which is hewn from it (*teva ha-makor b’nekhtzav*). Still, we find this nature more in hyle itself than in the individual [perishable] material things, since prime matter exists eternally. Nonetheless, from the vantage of the past, it is not completely eternal (having been created). Moreover, it is always subject to privation, for it lacks preparation to meet any particular individual form. Not only that, but when its source is entirely *active*, it is entirely emanative, unrecognizable but through its attribute of action. Then that which is hewn from the source is completely passive, receptive and non-emanative.” (My translation. As for “hewn,” see Isaiah 51:1)