

GUIDE 1:63
MOSAIC PROPHECY AND MAIMONIDEAN ESOTERICISM

This chapter is part of Maimonides' discussion of divine names and divine attributes. He connects these ideas with his investigation of prophecy, particularly the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy. We will review R. Hasdai Crescas' critique of Maimonides' claims. We will also demonstrate Maimonides' own approach to Jewish esotericism, following several chapters in which he had disparaged contemporary shamanism and talisman makers.

QUESTIONS

Maimonides begins with an older style of rabbinic exegesis, the method of propounding questions which he answers later. This is hard to follow, so I will unravel the significant questions followed by the answers. His questions relate to the third and fourth chapters of Exodus, about Moses' first prophetic experience at the burning bush. He quotes very selectively within these passages. I have arranged Maimonides' quote-shards in textual order:

“3:13: And Moses said unto God, Behold, [when] I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What [is] His name? What shall I say unto them?

3:14: And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM (*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*)....:

3:16: Go, and gather the elders of Israel together....:

3:18: And they shall hearken to thy voice....:

4:1: And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee.

4:2: And the Lord said unto him, What [is] that in thine hand? And he said, a rod.”

***First Question: Moses asks for God's name:
Was the question appropriate?***

According to Maimonides, most Jews were ignorant of the existence of an acosmic or supercosmic God. The reason for this was that Sabeian idolatry dominated the world (See note below on the Sabeans). The Sabeans believed that the gods functioned within the universe as a whole and were not radically distinct from it. Thus, since Zeus was the son of the siblings Kronos and Rhea, who were the son and daughter of earth and sky, Zeus was very much a part of the universe. Aristotle's god was also in this cosmos, and eternal with it. Maimonides would have regarded Aristotle as a type of Sabeian.

Moses told the elders of the Jews that he was on a mission from a different kind of God, whose existence was radically other than the universe. They might have reacted with disbelief, as Pharaoh did:

“5:2: And Pharaoh said, Who [is] the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord; neither will I let Israel go.”

It is not courteous to speak like this to God. It would be improper to deny that you knew of this supercosmic God, even if it were true. Rather than boorishly admitting that they knew of no such God, Moses suggested that the elders would ask for His “name.” That is because this name would reveal as much of the divine essence as they could humanly grasp. Moreover, this name would reveal to them that unlike all the other deities, God exists absolutely and necessarily. Unlike them, His existence does not depend on the universe or anything in it. Moses’ plea for the name of God was an oblique request to learn this great difference. His question expressed man’s desire to transcend the cosmic limitations of knowledge.

***Second Question: Moses asks for God’s name:
What does the name have to do with his status as a prophet?***

According to the law, a prophet’s validity must be tested (Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah* 10:1). He must perform miracles or at least predict the future. A false prophet is liable to the death penalty. Conversely, a Jew who fails to follow the command of a true prophet is also liable to the death penalty.

The elders were right to test Moses’ claim of prophecy. But how could giving them a name prove that he was a prophet? It is not as though the name was a password or abracadabra whose mere utterance would open doors. Maimonides does not mention the story of the ageless daughter of Asher, Serakh bat Asher, who did know the secret password of the redemption from Egypt. Her password, however, was the phrase “I have indeed remembered,” *pakod pakadti*, from Exodus 3:16, not *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. This was not one of the statements from Exodus chapter three that Maimonides quoted. (On Serakh bat Asher, see *Exodus Rabbah* 5:13. Thanks to Sheila Segall for this reference).

The name as name was not the important thing: If the elders already knew the name, Moses told them nothing that they did not already know; if they did not know it, it could prove nothing.

Moses used the *meaning* of the name to prove that he was a prophet. Still, why would that demonstrate that he was one of the prophets?

The answer is that the name was his prophetic certification. It is the name that is not a name. *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* is the concept that God exists unto Himself, and through Himself, requiring no cause. Part of Moses’ mission was to spread this concept. Its uniqueness was his prophetic certification. Once Moses taught it to the elders, they accepted his prophetic status.

***Third Question: Why does Moses need reassurance that the elders will listen?
Why does God then say, “What is that in thy hand? And he said: A rod”?***

God had told Moses at Exodus 3:18, “And they will hearken to thy voice,” but at 4:1 Moses complains, “Behold, they will not believe me nor hearken unto my voice.” God’s statement should have been enough to assure Moses that he would be spared the usual judicial verification of his prophetic status. But no name or promise would have convinced *Moses* that the elders would accept a new type of prophetic mission that they had never seen before, especially since Moses had seen nothing like this either.

Maimonides deploys several historical arguments to show why the elders would know nothing of a uniquely transcendent God who sends a prophet on a mission to give law to the world. Mosaic prophecy was unlike any prophecy that came before. Moses was on a mission from God to bring the law to humanity (*bnei adam*). Before Moses, the prophets Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, “and those who preceded them” only prophesied for themselves or their immediate family (See also Guide 2:39). The Patriarchs did not claim a prophetic mission from God to lay down law. The public profession of the Patriarchs was to get converts by teaching (Genesis 12:5. See Rashi, *ad*

loc.). They also received personal and tribal guidance, and tidings of the future of their families. Noah and Joseph are not exceptions. Noah gave the Noakhide Laws just to his children; Moses with the Torah made those laws universal. Joseph, the prophet king of Egypt, gave laws for Egypt only, not the world. Mosaic prophecy was unique, and the elders needed a unique means to verify it.

In those days, Maimonides alleges, few recognized a transcendent entirely non-material God over and beyond the powers of the spheres (Crescas vociferously disagrees: see below). Moreover, even after Moses confirmed God's absolute existence through the teaching of the name, he remained unconvinced that the elders would accept his universal prophetic mission. He needed to show them a miracle. After all, though Maimonides does not mention this, Moses was asking the children of Israel to risk their lives for the sake of an idea.

This is why he needed to reveal the miracle of the staff. But more than that, we will see that the staff that became a snake was also part of the education that the elders and Moses received in the subject of *Maaseh Bereshit* (below, "The Uniqueness of the Name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*").

CRESCAS VS. MAIMONIDES

R. Hasdai Crescas' (c. 1340 – c. 1410) response to these claims of Maimonides was aggressive and passionate, but, on reflection, seem merely quarrelsome. As is frequently the case with the rabbinic anti-Maimonideans, he, almost willfully, chooses to ignore Maimonides' real argument in order to substitute his own sensationalized version of it (on the anti-Maimonideans, see Jose Faur, "Anti-Maimonidean Demons," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 6, 2003, pp. 3–52, and <http://www.chayas.com/antirambam.pdf>).

Crescas begins with an ominous salute, only to launch his catalogue of horrors (*ad loc.*, my translations):

"All the words of Maimonides are 'apples of gold in settings of silver,' weighing in the scale of justice as momentous and perfect, and so it is strange that he would say that Israel was drawn to the Sabeian faith, and did not conceive of the existence of God, or, worse, that they did not conceive that the [early] prophets were inspired by the divine word, or, as appears from Maimonides' words, that the wise men of Israel had forgotten the existence of God, such that Moses would have to prove it to them by teaching them the proofs for God's absolute existence."

Crescas then proceeds to demonstrate, through biblical quotations, that even in the depths of Egyptian oppression the Jews remembered God and His name (according to Crescas, that name was the Tetragrammaton, not *Ehyeh*), that they had sufficient faith to undergo mass circumcision at the first Passover (*Sifri* on Ex. 12:6; *Targum* to Ezek. 14:5 – 6; *Artscroll Ezekiel* 241 – 246); that Aaron, Miriam, and several of the Elders were themselves prophets; and that the Levites never succumbed to idolatry. He goes on to quote several passages from Exodus to show that the Jews cried out to God in their oppression, never having forgotten God. He rounds this all out with several citations showing that the Jews and their leaders knew the Tetragrammaton.

He then, bewilderingly, supports all of this with some selective quotations from Ezekiel 20:4-9, to show that God sent the prophet Aaron to them, completely ignoring the context there that in Egypt the Jews had indeed largely fallen into idolatry (a good general overview is *Artscroll Ezekiel*, 317 – 320). He does not mention the story of Serakh bat Asher, which would have shown how much they had forgotten.

His charges, however, are baseless. Though Maimonides does use words like those that Crescas complained of, Crescas fails to give the full sentence that those words appear in, let alone their general context. Maimonides had never said that the Jews in Egypt had entirely succumbed to idolatry or to the "faith of the Sabians." Nor did he say that they all failed to conceive the existence of God. Compare Maimonides' comprehensive summation of the matter in *Mishneh Torah, Avoda Zara* 1:3 (Touger trans.):

“When the Jews extended their stay in Egypt, however, they learned from the [Egyptians’] deeds and began worshiping the stars as they did, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, who clung to the mitzvot of the patriarchs - the tribe of Levi never served false gods. Within a short time, the fundamental principle that Abraham had planted would have been uprooted, and the descendants of Jacob would have returned to the errors of the world and their crookedness. Because of God's love for us, and to uphold the oath He made to Abraham, our patriarch, He brought forth Moses, our teacher, the master of all prophets, and sent him [to redeem the Jews]. After Moses, our teacher, prophesied, and God chose Israel as His inheritance; He crowned them with mitzvot and informed them of the path to serve Him, [teaching them] the judgment prescribed for idol worship and all those who stray after it.”

This does not materially differ from what he says in our chapter, nor does it depart in any significant way from the traditional understanding. The tradition accepted that the Jews had sunk to the “forty-ninth level of impurity” in Egypt. Had they reached the fiftieth level they would have been unredeemable, even by Moses (*Zohar Khadash, Yitro* 11:51a; Malbim to *Yitro*).

Moreover, the issue, intentionally ignored by Crescas, was not whether the people still could conceive the existence of God, *m'shaarim b'mitziuto*, but whether they recognized God in his super-cosmic aspect.

Regarding the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy, Crescas disregarded the reason that Maimonides gave, that Moses was the first prophet on a mission from God to bring law to the world. Crescas lamely repeats that there were other prophets, which Maimonides never denied.

Crescas' argument that the Jews already knew the Tetragrammaton is a hopeless confusion. Maimonides' claim was not that they were ignorant of the Tetragrammaton, but that they did not know the meaning of the name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*.

Maimonides claimed that Moses taught the elders how the form of *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* demonstrated God's absolute existence. The elders then accepted Moses' *general* claim to prophecy. The elders, or at least Serakh bat Asher, probably accepted his general prophetic status just because they remembered this Abrahamitic teaching. One way to interpret Maimonides' position harmoniously with this would be to say that the Jews knew about God's absolute existence from Abraham, but that the universal Sabean influence caused most to forget about this, the bad coinage driving out the good.

What the Elders did not know was that God would ever have sent anyone on a mission to bring law to the world, and, as the obvious corollary, that they should risk their necks for this notion. Maimonides wrote:

“You must not be misled by the statements that God spoke to the Patriarchs, or that He had appeared to them. For you do not find any mention of a prophecy which appealed to others (that is, to all humans, *bnai adam*), or which directed them. Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, or any other person before them did not tell the people, ‘God said unto me, you shall do this thing, or you shall not do that thing’ (*asoo o al tasoo*, i.e., positive and negative commandments), or ‘God has sent me to you.’ Far from it!”

In order to convince the elders that this absolutely existent God sent Moses on this unique universal mission the sign of the staff was needed, since it taught what had been concealed by Sabian ideology, the existence of a single super-cosmic provident God (see below on the meaning of the staff: “The Uniqueness of the Name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*”).

Near the end of his commentary, Crescas raised a further issue, about Abraham's proofs for God's existence. If those proofs were merely logical, anyone could have figured them out. Why had Moses not done so?

“Furthermore, how could anyone think that a great and wise man like Moses, who was worthy of prophecy, and to whom no other prophet could compare, who spoke with God ‘face to face,’ and ‘the similitude of the Lord doth he behold,’ that such a one as he did not know the proofs for God’s existence? Had not the wise men of the [gentile] nations developed proofs for His existence..., and even though they had not received the Torah, yet, as children of Abraham they believed with complete faith in God, for we believe that Abraham advanced many proofs for the existence of God, and for the creation of the world (*Genesis Rabbah* 38:13, 39:1; Guide 2:13), and wrote books, which contained the arguments for God’s existence, so that Aristotle did not arrive at this level on his own...”

This was Crescas' best argument. He was correct when he said that Aristotle and Abraham both believed in God's existence, and both developed proofs for it. He was also right to say that if they could do so, Moses would certainly have been able to do the same. Maimonides' claim, however, was that Moses learned of God's super-cosmic existence, for which no Aristotelian proof would have prepared him. The miracle of the staff was the proof that God created the universe and continuously provided for it.

Shem Tov (flourished c. 1461-89) neatly responded to Crescas' criticisms, without mentioning him:

“When God appeared to Moses and commanded him to tell the people what no one had told them till that time, he first said that they would ask me to verify for them that there exists a God in the universe, and then I would tell them that He sent me. This was [necessary] because all the people other than a few among them, like the tribe of Levi, and a few others, did not [any longer] conceive of God’s [super-cosmic] existence nor did they believe in Him, because the extent of their knowledge did not go beyond the cosmic sphere, its forces and its powers. They were not able to extricate themselves from *sensibilia*, considering that nothing existed but matter. The early philosophy of those times was limited to the knowledge of the sensible things and did not rise to the perfection of the intellect [beyond the sense-data of the material universe]. (My trans.)

Yehuda Even-Shmuel takes this one step further, tying it into the need for the name and the need for the staff:

“Since the people of those ages had not risen above the apprehensions of the sense, they had not arrived to the first intellectual perfection. Because of this they were given over to materialism, since they viewed the cosmic sphere as the foundation of all things, as the highest manifestation of matter. But this manifestation was from the world of experience, from sensation. Thus, when Moses came to teach them [about the super-cosmic God], since there was nothing like this in the world of experience, he sought from God a new ‘name’ for this new idea....

“Thereupon God gave him the sign’: of the staff, a tangible witness to his mission, but not to its missionary, since [the elders] recognized the man of mission from his intellectual demonstration [of *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*].” (My trans.)

Thus, according to Even-Shmuel, the first step was for Moses to verify his general prophetic status by giving the elders the “new name for a new idea,” the absolute existence of God. The second step was to prove that he was a new kind of prophet by showing them a new kind of miracle, the staff that became a snake.

THE SABEANS

Maimonides contends that few men knew the truth about God before Moses because they were under the influence of Sabeanism. The word “Sabean” is difficult to derive (it has nothing to do with the “Sabeans” from Sheba, that is, from the southern rim of Arabia). The term usually refers to a religion that arose in Haran, in present-day Turkey, and occurs in the Qur’an in that context. Scholars generally understand Sabeanism to be a syncretism of Christian, Gnostic, Magian and Pythagorean elements, which is sometimes related to the Mandaean religion.

The Muslims claim that there are two kinds of Sabeans, the *sābi’ūna hunafāh* and the *sābi’ūna mushrukūn*, and that the former are “people of the Book” and therefore can be *dhimmi* living in peace with the Muslim community though subject to their special *jizya* tax and other signs of subservience. The latter are regarded as polytheists and treated as such. The term *mushrukūn* derives from *shirk*, which, as we have seen, is the heresy that Allah requires a *partner* (Heb.: *shituf*).

Maimonides uses the term to designate polytheists exclusively, and thus understands *all* Sabeans, contrary to the Islamic doctrine, as *sābi’ūna mushrukūn*. He states elsewhere that he had read all the extant works of the idolatrous Sabeans. The work he frequently refers to is the book *Nabatean Agriculture* attributed to Ibn Wahshiyya (c. 904). Jaakko Hameen-Anttila of the University of Helsinki translated and analyzed large parts of it in his book, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, Brill 2006, which excludes the agricultural passages and concentrates on the religious, philosophical and folkloristic aspects of this huge text (about 1400 large printed pages). According to some, the *Nabatean Agriculture* may just have been Muslim anti-pagan propaganda; others say that it actually was a volume of ancient Mesopotamian lore.

The important point for our purposes is that Maimonides thought he found in the *Nabatean Agriculture* a rationale for the explanation of obscure matters in Jewish doctrine. He argued that many otherwise inexplicable laws and practices could be explained, at least on one level, as reactions to the practices of the idolators, during Israel’s long struggle against the pagans. See Guide 3:29, where he says:

“Those who were able to think, and were philosophers in those days, could only raise themselves to the idea that God is the spirit of the spheres: the spheres with their stars being the body, and God the spirit. ...All the Sabeans thus believed in the eternity of the Universe, the heavens being in their opinion God. ...The great book on this subject is the book, *On the Nabatean Agriculture*, translated by Ibn Wahshiyya. In a succeeding chapter, I shall explain why the Sabeans had their religious doctrines written in a work on agriculture. The book is full of the absurdities of idolatrous people, and with those things to which the minds of the multitude easily turn and adhere [perseveringly]; it speaks of talismans, the means of directing the influence [of the stars]; witchcraft, spirits, and demons that dwell in the wilderness. There occur also in this book great absurdities, which are ridiculous in the eyes of intelligent people. They were intended as a criticism and an attack on the evident miracles by which all people learnt that there exists a God who is judge over all people.”

By the last sentence above he meant that the proliferation of this worldly sorcery blinded men to the “evident miracles” of creation and ongoing divine providence. This latter teaching was the very heart of Moses’ prophetic mission.

THE UNIQUENESS OF MOSAIC PROPHECY

In Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei HaTorah*, 7:6 we learn of nine ways in which Mosaic prophecy was superior to that of all other prophets:

1. *Wakefulness*: All others prophesied by means of dreams and visions.
2. *Directness*: All others received it from a messenger.
3. *Actuality*: All others received it in the form of a parable or allegory.
4. *Clarity*: His prophecy is clear without mystery; he saw with clear vision.
5. *Fearlessness*: He communed with God without fear: ‘As a man speaketh to his friend.’
6. *Willfulness*: He prophesized at will, all others prophesize only when the occasion supervened.
7. *Readiness*: He did not need to prepare himself or prophecy, for he was always prepared.
8. *Constancy*: He prophesied at all times.
9. *Marital Separation*: Moses did not return to his ‘tent’ but separated forever from his wife.

Additionally, in this chapter, we learn why his prophecy was superior to that of the Patriarchs “and those who preceded them”: he alone was on a mission from God to bring law to the world (*bnei adam*, the people of the world, not just the Jews; Jud. Ar.: אֱלֹהִים, “humans;” Kafih note 20; Joseph Blau, *Dictionary of Medieval Judeo-Arabic Texts*, Jerusalem, 2006). No one, in this telling, had ever done this. Anyone “who made claims” about God fell into two categories: he was either like Abraham, who showed by logical demonstration that there is one God for the world; or he was like the Sabeian priests who claimed to bring down emanations from the gods of the spheres through magic. Neither Abraham nor the pagan priests brought law to the world. Because Moses was a lawgiver, he was also the first prophet-king, and since Maimonides understands all prophets to be philosophers, he was a philosopher-king as well.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE NAME *EHYEH ASHER EHYEH*

The name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* is variously translated “I am that I am” or “I will be what I will be.” The justification for the latter translation is that *Ehyeh* is in the imperfect tense. The imperfect tense is the usual way the ancients expressed the concept of futurity.

In prior chapters, Maimonides had remarked that any attributive or predicative statement about God is nearly tautologous, for whatever term we describe God with is really just Himself. Thus ‘He is wise’ only means that His wisdom is identical with His essence, so that ‘He is wise’ just means ‘He is Himself.’ But when *we* speak of wisdom, we only speak of wisdom as we know it, as an accident of our existence. Sometimes we possess this attribute and sometimes not. Divine wisdom, by contrast, is an unanalyzable aspect of divine unity. We have no words to describe this absolute and simple unity in our grossly physical language. It is beyond words.

But this tautologous pointer to God’s non-numerical unity is not the whole story behind the name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. Maimonides, in our chapter, supplies a series of hints pointing to its hidden meaning.

First, He explains that *Ehyeh* is a predicating term looking for another predicate: not just ‘I am,’ but ‘I am’ something. This is highlighted by the significant use of the copulative *asher* which means “that/which/who.” But now Maimonides’ argument takes a strange turn.

Maimonides reminds his Judeo-Arabic audience of the otherwise irrelevant information that the Hebrew *asher* is translated into Arabic as *alladhi* and *allati*. But Maimonides’ intended audience for the Guide already knows this. Why did he do this?

The answer is that the Hebrew copulative term *asher* is neuter. The twin Arabic terms are male and female. The implication should be obvious. An imaginative reference to sexuality is intended. As David Bakan has shown in

Maimonides On Prophecy, Maimonides' sexual suggestions esoterically suggest the process of creation *ex nihilo*. These must be concealed from the uninitiated. Maimonides says in Guide 1:46: "We have no intellectual cognition of our bringing somebody other than us to existence except through sexual intercourse" (Arabic: *mubashara*. Pines' translation, p. 99, note 8). Since men know that birth is the creation of something "new," procreation becomes the metaphor for divine creation. Maimonides has on several occasions rendered form and matter as male and female. Moreover, just as a parent passes something of himself to his child, so God endows man with mind.

The staff of Moses suggests the same idea, procreation as metaphor of divine creation. The staff which becomes a snake suggests the snake in Eden (*Genesis Rabbah* 20:11: "The serpent was thy [Eve's] serpent [i.e. seducer], and thou art Adam's serpent").

The snake thus reminds us of Maimonides' treatment of the Eden account in Chapter 1:2 of the Guide, where he argued that Adam exchanged the truth dimension of life for the moral dimension. The snake thus suggests Moses' recovery of the truth. Its return to the form of a staff suggests the tree of life, which is the Torah, the truth that Moses brought to the world.

Maimonides uses these grammatical and metaphorical hints to communicate the lore forbidden to be taught in public by the second Mishnah in Talmudic tractate *Hagigah*. I think he purposely meant to contrast his esoteric method with that of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, as well as the shamans and the talisman makers criticized in the prior chapter. To summarize these hints, the name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* is unique as a *conceptual* description of God: 1) because the name displays His essential unity with His existence; 2) because it suggests God's power of creation from nothing; and 3) because Moses' acquisition of the name represents the recovery of the lost Edenic truth dimension, unveiling God's super-cosmic dimension. These aspects of God's transcendence were hidden from the Sabeian stargazers. Moses' unique prophetic mission included the revelation of these secrets to the elders of Israel.

ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE

Another hint about the name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* is Maimonides' unnecessary translation of *Ehyeh* into two Arabic words, "*kaan*," being/essence, and "*wajad*," existence (This feature does not appear clearly in the English translations. Kafih purposely left them untranslated, see his footnotes 29 and 30). Thus, the essence of God and His existence are identical. Friedlander translates the passage:

...in Hebrew no difference is made between the verbs 'to be' and 'to exist.'... This (*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*) is, therefore, the expression of the idea that God exists, but not in the ordinary sense of the term (*sh'hu mitzui sh'lo b'mitziut*, He exists but not through existence); or, in other words, He is 'the existing Being which is the existing Being,' that is to say, the Being whose existence is absolute. The proof which he was to give consisted in demonstrating that there is a Being of absolute existence, that has never been and never will be without existence. This I will clearly prove (Guide 2:Introduction, Prop. 20, and 2:1).

Shem Tov recognized here a terse summation of the debate over essence and existence in Arabic philosophy. Avicenna had argued that essences do not exist until the accident of existence happens to them. In other words, essence precedes existence. The great exception was God, whose essence and existence are the indissoluble non-composite unity.

This flew in the face of the generally recognized Aristotelian doctrine that the definition of a thing was its essence. Averroes took up that doctrine in opposition to Avicenna (see, for example, *Tahafut al Tahafut*, Van Den Bergh trans., v. 2, 237-239). If the definition of things constitutes their essence, then their definitions must always include existence, even if this is not expressly stated. In infinite time, what could exist will exist, and existence is not an added accidental attribute. For example, the definition of man, *zoon logikon*, the thinking

animal, necessarily implies that such a thinking animal exists, and its existence is not extrinsic to this definition. To put Averroes' point differently, definitions do not define things that cannot exist.

Shem Tov takes up his challenge and defends the Maimonidean/Avicennian position, that existence happens to essences, in his commentary to our chapter (my trans.). He begins by explaining this position:

“The explanation of the idea that ‘He exists, but not through existence,’ is that existence is His essence, not like with the rest of the existent things in which their essence is something other than their existence. For those things only exist because of an agent, while God’s existence is not through [the agency] of existence. His existence and His essence are one. This follows the thinking of Avicenna that existence is an accident occurring to essences in the moment of their origination, the origination that existence produces in their essences. By contrast, God’s existence is His essence. He is the existent that is existent. Since [in *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*] the predicate is its own object and its existence is its own essence, it will be the necessary existent. If the predicate were separate from its object it would not have necessary existence.

Next, Shem Tov turns to deflect Averroes' critique, reminding us that, apart from God, everything is created. So, even if all definable things must exist, they still require a cause for their existence:

“Even according to the true understanding of Aristotle, who conceives that existence and essence are always identical [even in material things], that existent things do not exist because of another, nor do they exist because of any part of those things, nor are they dependent upon any other, [yet] those material beings subject to generation and corruption still have their existence dependent upon various things, such as their form and matter. Their agents necessarily combined with the separate heavenly causes, which are the cause of the whole. And even if the prior cause never comes into direct contact, yet that cause confers life, and is the cause of their sustained existence, such that they do not exist by themselves. The separate intellects preceded them. The separate intellects are the cause that grants existence to the beings and they are their first cause, while the First Cause exists only because of Itself, not because of any other. Were it otherwise, and were there no First Cause existent in Itself, there would be an infinity of causes and effects, which [Maimonides] will later prove to be false. There must therefore be something which has absolute existence, ‘that has never been and never will be without existence.’”

In other words, even those who take a naturalistic view of definitional essences must explain the particular existence of things. They can only do so by virtue of the causes that confer their existence upon them. This is true whether we take “existence” as an accident or explain it without reference to the theory of substance and accident. Existence, therefore, *whatever* it is, is separate from essence in created beings, just because the creatures are separate from their causes. The antinomy of essence and existence is the necessary characteristic of all creatures.

Yehuda Even-Shmuel takes this one step further in his explanation. He points to the way in which the name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* combines essence and existence, in order to explain the difference between this name and the Tetragrammaton. The *Ehyeh* is what we might call an “analytical” name, at least in form, since it somehow still combines two things that we somehow must analyze. By contrast, the Tetragrammaton is by its nature unanalyzable. This, he says, points to the greater distinction between the two names, that the Tetragrammaton expresses what God truly is, while *Ehyeh* is the best possible way that we can understand that expression. In other words, the latter is of our world, while the former is beyond it.

OTHER NAMES OF GOD: YAH, SHADAI, KHASIN, TZUR

In this spirit Maimonides gives us more hints. These are a series of alternate names of God, which illuminate the esoteric aspect of name *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. These alternate names are *Yah*, *Shadai*, *Khasin*, and *Tzur*.

Yah. The name *Yah* refers to the eternity of divine existence, to its *timelessness*. Maimonides' statement in our chapter is quite brief: "The name *Yah* likewise implies eternal existence." When he says "likewise," he means that the name is likewise derivative, tying it to what he said just above this, that "*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, [is] a name derived from the verb *hayah*..." This emphasizes the derivative character of both *Ehyeh* and *Yah*. *Yah* as a name derives from a syllable of the Tetragrammaton, according to Mishneh Torah (*Ysodai* 6:4). Efodi, by contrast, says that this name is part of *Ehyeh*, "I will be," a concept derived from the notion of futurity, which is why Maimonides says here that "it likewise implies eternal existence."

Even-Shmuel sees a contradiction between Maimonides' account here of derivative nature of *Yah* and his statement in Mishneh Torah that it is part of Y*H*V*H. I did not see the alleged discrepancy that Even-Shmuel claimed to see here, since even if this name is a syllable of the Tetragrammaton, it remains derivative in some sense. But Even-Shmuel's larger point is well taken, which is that all these names, including *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, are, unlike the Tetragrammaton, second-order names. These are the lesser names by which men refer to attributes wholly within the sphere of the cosmos, though they point beyond it. They are derived from those attributes.

Shadai and Maimonidean Anagrams. The name *Shadai* suggests God's *sufficiency*. He is the uncaused cause of all things: sufficient unto Himself.

In the midst of Maimonides' short discussion of the name *Shadai* another odd element intrudes, again connected to the Hebrew relative pronoun *asher*. He says that the letter *shin*, the "sh" sound at the beginning of *Shadai*, is taken from the *shin* in *asher*, which we saw means "that" (or "which" or "who") as in *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. When used as a prefix, the "sh" sound carries that meaning of "that/which/who." Thus, *Shadai* is a combination of "sh" and "dai," meaning "the one *that/who* is *sufficient*."

Maimonides had already over-defined this copulative *asher* with its Arabic masculine and feminine forms. Here he returned with a further explanation of this term! Moreover, he took as his paradigm for *Shadai* the word *shekvar*, although no paradigm was needed.

In *shekvar* the characteristically copulative "sh" sound from *asher* is tied to *kevar*, "already," so that the combination reads "that is already." This *shekvar* comes from Ecclesiastes 4:2:

"Wherefore I praised the dead *which are already dead* (*ha-metim shekvar metoo*) more than the living which are yet alive."

The Hebrew phrase is, in its *form*, virtually the reverse of *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*: i.e., the life that is life *versus* the dead that are dead.

The *Me'am Loez* (*Kohelet*, Aryeh Kaplan trans., *ad loc.*, p. 93), contends that the initials of the words *Ha-metim Shekvar ha-Metoo* spell *Moshe* backwards: "This explains why *shekvar* appears in this part of the verse instead of *asher kvar*, in order to convey an allusion to Moses." *Me'am Loez* thereby imaginatively alludes to the Talmud, *Shabbat* 30a, which explained that the dead righteous intercede to assist our prayers on behalf of the living, as Moses' prayers were answered through the merit of the Patriarchs (Exodus 32:13). Rashi explains:

"(The dead) who have already died before the evil inclination overwhelmed them to repel them from the Holy One, blessed be He, like the early Patriarchs, for Moses was not answered except through them."

This explains why Maimonides sees a link to Moses in *shekvar*, but it is still unclear why he introduced *shekvar*.

I believe the answer is that *shekvar* (שכבר) contains an anagram for cherub (כרוב).

Maimonides uses anagrams in his interpretations of esoteric prophetic terms (Guide 2:43):

“Accordingly, the word *khobelim* has the same meaning [viz., destroying] as the root *khabal* has in *mekhabbelim keramim*, ‘destroying vineyards’ (Song of Songs 2:15). But the prophet found also in this name *khobelim* the indication that the people despised God, and that God despised them. This is, however, not expressed by the word *khabal*, but by a transposition of the letters *Khet*, *Bet*, and *Lamed*, the meaning of despising and rejecting is obtained. ‘My soul loathed them, and their soul also *abhorred* me’ [*bakhalah*] (Zechariah 11:8). The prophet had therefore to change the order of the letters in *khabal* (destruction) into that of *bakhal* (repugnance). In this way we find very strange things and also mysteries (*sodot*) in the words *nehoshet*, *kalal*, *regel*, *egel*, and *hashmal* of the *Merkava*, and in other terms in other passages.”

Kevar (כבר) is also the name of the river in Babylon where prophecy comes to Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1). That particular prophecy is the *Maaseh Merkava*. *Merkava* and its root *rokev* (rider) are anagrams of *kevar* and *cherub*. A significant feature of *Merkava* prophecy is the role of the cherub. As we will develop in its place, the cherub in the *Maaseh Merkava* represents God’s ongoing creation of living souls that are genuinely new beings. Thus, God is the One “who cherubs”: He is *va’yinafash*, the maker of souls (Exodus 31:17, Guide 1:67).

The *khayot* in the first *Merkava* vision of Ezekiel chapter one become the *cheruvim* of the second *Merkava* vision of Ezekiel chapter ten, but on a lower level, for the *Shekhina* in Ezekiel ten departed from the Temple. “This is the *khaya* which I saw beneath the God of Israel at the river *Kevar*, and I knew they (the *khayot*) were *cheruvim*” (Ezek. 10:20). That the cherub is a lower level of the *khayot*, despite that Ezekiel identified them with the *cheruvim*, is attested in Mishneh Torah, *Ysodai* 2:1, where of the ten angelic levels *khayot* are the first and *cheruvim* are the ninth. They are just above *ishim*, the active intellect, which the *cheruvim* engender.

Thus, *Shadai*, containing the *shin* from *asher* as in the paradigm *shekvar*, suggests that God is ‘sufficient’ for the investment of the living with souls, i.e., the living that are (already) living, *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, as Ezekiel saw at the *Kevar*.

If my reading of cherub into *shekvar* seems forced, ask yourself why else would Maimonides keep returning to the rather shallow well of *asher* to tell his audience things that they already knew? Why would he introduce the irrelevance of grammatical gender into this discussion? Did he not invite readers to look for anagrams in the key terms of *Maaseh Merkava*, of which there is no more significant term than *Merkava* itself, an anagram of the *kevar* and *cherub*? How else to explain his esoteric tagline at the end, “Note well the result at which we have arrived in this chapter?” The same tagline shows up in more or less the same form in Guide 2:10, 2:40, and 3:52, which concern prophecy and providence, the subjects of the *Maaseh Merkava* (Michael Schwarz’ translation of the Guide provides an index of Maimonides’ remarkable taglines). All in all, it does not seem to me farfetched to read Maimonides’ explanation of *Shadai* using *shekvar* as an obvious case where Maimonides invites us to find anagrams.

Khasin and Tzur. Another name of God, *Khasin*, is also difficult. Maimonides says that the word derives from the notion of *power*, from Amos 2:9:

“And I destroyed the Amorites from before them, whose height is as the height of the cedar trees, and they are as strong (*khason*) as oaks, and I destroyed his fruit from above and his roots from below.”

The thought-complex of the name *Khasin* suggested to Maimonides by this passage is the creation of fruit below by drawing on the strength of the Root above. This thought is strengthened by the next term Maimonides mentions, *Tzur*, “rock.” *Tzur* means root or source, as Maimonides teaches in 1:16. He defined *Tzur* there as “Figuratively, the root and origin of anything. Also the cause of anything, particularly with respect to God.”

The hints in this group of four names point to God’s ongoing creative activity. God’s providential action is timeless (*Yah*). He is “sufficient” for the creation of men’s souls (*Shadai*). He is the upper root of the tree of life (*Khasin/Tzur*).

CONCLUSION

This chapter is, therefore, a comprehensive but veiled introduction to the subjects of Mosaic prophecy and *Maaseh Merkava*. We learned that Mosaic prophecy differs from all other prophecies for the following reasons: Moses was on a mission to bring the law to the world. He conveyed those names of God that teach God’s eternal, uncaused, absolute, and necessary existence. He learned the subjects of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava*: both teach that God is the “root” of the world. He is the root of the world because He creates it from nothing and is the cause of the continual production of souls.

Maimonides’ way of making these matters known to the reader is non-discursive and suggestive. The reader must teach himself. This method is very far from the gross and vulgar teachings of the shamans and the talisman makers.

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