

GUIDE 1:15 THE PROPHET STANDS

This is the third chapter in which Maimonides considers some variant of the word “stand,” in this case, *natzav* and *yatzav*. He notes that *natzav* and *yatzav* have the same meaning as the word *kima*, “rise, stand,” defined in 1:12, and *amad*, “stand,” defined in 1:13. I suggested that *kima* is *amad* without *feet* (*regel*, see 1:28): “Foot” refers to the *causative* element in God’s *permanent* (“standing”) relation to the world.

Our chapter also serves as the second lexical chapter for *alah* and *yarad*, “ascent” and “descent.” The occasion for that seemingly tangential departure is Maimonides’ citation of the Parable of Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28), which includes references to the angels *ascending* and *descending* the ladder, as well as to God’s *standing* above it. We had learned in Guide 1:10 two significant definitions of *alah* and *yarad*. In Definition 3 the words refer to our ascending or descending in thought to subjects above or below us. Definition 4 illustrated God’s action in prophecy: when He emanates prophecy upon the prophet, it is *descending*, but when He concludes the prophecy, the emanation *ascends* from the prophet. Although the subject is the same, the actions of the two definitions move in opposite directions. In our chapter, Maimonides relates back to chapter 1:10: the prophet *ascends* and then *descends* Jacob’s ladder, “in accordance with our explanation of the term *yarad*, descent [in 1:10].” That “explanation” could only be Definition 3, not 4. That is because the prophet *ascends* to prophecy just as, in Definition 3, we rise to a notion above us. Definition 4 cannot work because in that definition God *descends* to bestow the prophecy to which the prophet is *ascending*. But in the parable of Jacob’s ladder it is only the angels that ascend or descend, and our chapter defines “angels” as “prophets.” We explained in 1:10 that Maimonides had to divide the definitions of *alah* and *yarad* between these two chapters to avoid this traffic snarl of the prophecy *descending* from God as the prophet *ascended* to it.

What is really happening is that our chapter supplies an *extra* definition for *alah* and *yarad*. It is an extra definition because the prophet’s ascent to prophecy is really not the same as my mind rising to a higher notion, although they are analogous.

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This is a lexical chapter. See explanation in Chapter 1:1, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”

Maimonides begins with a grammatical point. He notes that “the two roots *natzav* and *yatzav* are distinct” (Y*Tz*V and N*Tz*V), although “you know” they have the same meaning in all declensions. The lexicographer Yehuda Even-Shmuel says, *ad loc.*, that the two roots Maimonides had in mind were *natzav* and *hityatzav*. Without getting into antique Hebrew grammar, we now view them as having the same root, the first radical varying with the tense.

NATZAV and YATZAV (STAND) Homonym

1. To stand or to place oneself.
2. Continuance and permanence: always used in this fashion when applied to God, not to physical position. Also, God’s permanent causative relation with the world.

Instances of Definition 1 Contextualized:

“And his sister *stood* (*va-tetatzav*) afar off, to wit what would be done to him.” (Exodus 2:4)

The context is that Moses’ sister, Miriam, had just placed him in a basket floating in the Nile. Mosaic prophecy is the main topic in this group of chapters, but there seems to be no other purpose for this citation. We are suspicious, since, following his discussion of the major topic of Jacob’s Ladder, Maimonides says “To return to our subject,” *v’akhazor l’inyanenu*, a remark he typically makes to divert attention from the subject of his real

interest. The only subject he could logically “return” to is this first group of four quotations, which portray the non-anthropomorphic use of “stand” as “permanence.” He wants the uncritical to think that he is only interested in that not particularly compelling issue. Were that the center of his interest, he would only need the first and last of these first four proof-texts. Clearly though, his real interest is in the last two proof-texts in our chapter, about standing upon a rock or a ladder. The subject of those passages is prophecy and *Maaseh Merkava*. Therefore, it may be that the first repetitive group of four quotes follows Elihu’s principle of quotational camouflage for the *Maaseh Merkava* material that must be concealed. See my essay “Elihu on Prophecy” in chapter 1:13 above.

“1: Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? 2: The kings of the earth *set* themselves (*yityatzvu—stand*), and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, [saying], 3: Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. 4: He that sitteth (*yoshev*) in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.” (Psalms 2:1-4)

Maimonides referred to line 4, “He that sitteth (*yoshev*) in the heavens shall laugh” in Chapter 1:11, which was about the closely related term *yashav*, “sit,” where we said that the context is God’s laughter at the evil strategies of the nations of the world. The Talmud, *Berakhot* 7b, takes the Psalm to refer to the war of Gog and Magog. The nations *stand* against God, *enthroned* permanently over the world, who laughs at their hubris.

“So they gat up from the tabernacle of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, on every side: and Dathan and Abiram came out, and *stood* (*nitzavim*) in the door of their tents, and their wives, and their sons, and their little children.” (Numbers 16:27)

Korah (Korakh), soon to be swallowed by the earth, is standing with his allies against Moses and his people. This proof-text and the previous one both stand for Definition 1 because neither the “kings of the earth” nor Dathan and Abiram are *permanent* in their stance. Their standing is corporeal, hubristic and brief. These quotations provide pejorative context for the physical use of the term.

Instances of Definition 2 Contextualized:

“For ever, O Lord, thy word is *settled* (*nitzav—stands*) in heaven.” (Psalms 119:89)

Maimonides comments that the word of the Lord “remains for ever,” unlike the word of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. If the “word” is taken as a divine attribute, it can only be understood in the Maimonidean fashion, i.e., as identical to the divine essence, not as a separate eternal *logos*.

“And he (Jacob) dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord *stood* (*nitzav*) above it, and said, I [am] the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed.” (Genesis 28:12-13)

Maimonides quotes two parts of this passage, but not in order. He writes, “[God] appeared as eternal and everlasting ‘above it,’ namely, above the ladder, the upper end of which reached to heaven, while the lower end touched the earth.” He understands the ladder as a figure for the prophetic process. That God “stood above it” also calls to mind His relation to the world as the “rider on the aravot” (Guide 1:70). He causes all changes in the spheres of the universe without any physical contact, for he *stands* “above.” See essays below.

“And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. And the Lord said, Behold, [there is] *a place by me*, and thou shalt *stand* upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:20-23)

Maimonides retranslates “and thou shalt stand upon a rock” in our next chapter, 1:16 as, “be firm and steadfast in the conviction that God is the source of all things, for this will lead you towards the knowledge of the Divine Being.” He defined “rock” there as “cause” or “source.” It means that Moses, infused with divine emanation,

becomes the mediating channel between man and God. Rashi quotes here an important Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 68:9: “(God) is speaking of the place where the *Shekhina* is, and He says that there is *a place by Me*, but He does not say: *I am in the place*, for the Holy One, blessed is He, is the place of the world, but the world is not His place.” In other words, just as the *Shekhina* mediates between God and the world, God has put Moses in the “place” of the *Shekhina*, where he will “stand on the rock,” channeling the divine emanation, giving Torah to the people.

JACOB’S LADDER AND PROPHECY

“How suggestive, too, is the expression ‘ascending and descending on it’! The ascent is mentioned before the descent, inasmuch as the ‘ascending’ and arriving at a certain height of the ladder precedes the ‘descending,’ i.e., the application of the knowledge acquired in the ascent for the training and instruction of mankind. This application is termed ‘descent,’ in accordance with our explanation of the term *yarad*.”

In the account of Jacob’s ladder, we had previously learned that God “stands” above the ladder, in the sense that He permanently presides over access to Himself. Maimonides now focuses in our chapter on the ascent and descent of the prophet rather than of God. The prophet’s progress is like Plato’s Cave parable in the *Republic*, 514a–520a. The prophet must do what is necessary to ascend to the light, and, subsequently, for theological-political reasons, must descend to bestow the light he obtained. He stresses the non-physical character of this descent by pointing to the definition of *descent* (*yarad*) given in Chapter 10, that is, the refocusing of the mind upon what is below it. It is the same point made in the Introduction to the Guide, that prophetic inspiration is a three-step process: Solomon ascends in thought to receive the vision, descends to teach it to the world, and thereby gains the merit to rise again.

We then reach several interesting sentences that require close attention. First, Maimonides says:

“By means of this ladder all may climb up who wish to do so, and they must ultimately attain to a knowledge of Him who is *above* the summit of the ladder, because He remains upon it permanently.” (Kafih: *u’bo m’tapes v’ola kol mi sh’ola ad sh’yasig mi sh’alav b’hekhalat keyvan sh’hu yatziv v’kayam al rosh ha-sulam*. Pines has, “Everyone who ascends does so climbing up this ladder, so that he necessarily apprehends Him who is upon it, as He is stably and permanently at the top of the ladder.”)

The translation is difficult, not to say tortured, both in this rescension by Friedlander, as well as by Pines, who in footnotes gives a more literal translation. The line is also difficult for Kafih. Friedlander’s footnote explains that there are two ways of taking the line. Either it means that man can strive and apprehend Divine knowledge; or it says tautologically that God is permanently on the ladder because He is eternally on the ladder. The former seems the better reading. The point to be taken, I think, is that God’s relationship to man is a relation of immanence. If He were entirely supernal to man so that there was no relative term between them, there could be no ladder. However, “all may climb up who wish to do so.” This strengthens our conviction that on the issue of divine attributes Maimonides is not an absolute negativist, but only a moderate negativist (see 1:40-1:50). A sentence or two later Maimonides says that man can reach a certain rung of the ladder (*l’maalot msuyemet*), perhaps indicating some limit to his knowledge.

Next, we learn that the angels who are climbing the ladder are the prophets:

“It must be well understood that the term ‘upon it’ is employed by me in harmony with this metaphor. ‘Angels of God’ who were going up represent the prophets. That the term ‘angel’ was applied to prophets may clearly be seen in the following passages: ‘He sent an angel’ (Numbers 20:16—Moses): ‘And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim’ (Judges 2:1—Phineas).”

Maimonides repeats the two cited passages about Moses and Phineas in Guide 2:42, making the same point about angels being prophets (quoting Midrash, *Leviticus Rabba* 1:1 both times. His definition of angels is at 2:6 and 2:7, although prophets are only one of his definitions).

We know from his later discussion of prophecy, that while the prophet should be able to complete the ascent and receive the light, God can prevent this from happening. Nonetheless, if our interpretation is correct, man holds in his own power the ability to ascend, at least as far as his physical constitution and “complexion” permits him (Gad Freudenthal, “The Biological Limitations of Man’s Intellectual Perfection according to Maimonides,” p. 137, *Die Trias Des Maimonides, Jewish, Arabic and Ancient Culture of Knowledge*, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin, 2005.). Maimonides was an emanationist, but like his neo-Platonist contemporaries, he was no determinist. He believed that divine influence is a *willed* flow of goodness, radiating to all unless occluded.

Our problem is that the inspiration we occasionally have comes in unconscious or semi-conscious states, and then only intermittently and reflectively. As we learned in the Introduction, we only see flashes, as though reflected in amber. This universal inspiration is called “the spirit of holiness,” *ruakh ha-kodesh*, and it represents the ground level of all states of inspiration and prophecy. Prophecy is distinguished as a regularized type of divine inspiration. It is, in principle, automatically available to the adept, but mostly prevented because of theological-political problems such as exile and the destruction of the Temple. Maimonides, disagreeing with other rabbis, did not think it always would be unavailable or blocked, even in exile. The ability of the adept to reach prophecy is largely his responsibility; he must attach himself permanently and constantly to the Divine in thought. Thus, discussing Moses, who prophesied under the same theological-political circumstances, he says:

“To return to our subject. The phrase ‘stood upon it’ indicates the permanence and constancy of God, and does not imply the idea of physical position. This is also the sense of the phrase ‘Thou (Moses) shalt stand upon the rock.’” (Exodus 33:21)

Moses need not physically stand on a rock at all, but “stands” permanently attached in thought to God. Nonetheless:

“The ascent is mentioned before the descent, inasmuch as the ‘ascending’ and arriving at a *certain height* of the ladder precedes the ‘descending...’”

Here is one final clarification. While all who ascend should reach the top, he retreats a step here to say that they may reach a “certain height” on the ladder. While this complication introduces some ambiguity, I still think that men have the opportunity and power to attain Divine knowledge. Each may receive a different goodness; some may so regularly attain it that they are called prophets; and one, Moses, is able to live at the top in constant converse with divinity.

WHAT IS THE SUBJECT OF JACOB’S LADDER?

Maimonides deals with Jacob’s ladder in two chapters. In our chapter, he says that the ladder angels are prophets. In Guide 2:10, he relates the four angels to the four elements, as well as to all aspects of physics that come in fours.

Rabbi Hasdai Ha-Levi wrote a letter to Maimonides asking whether these two references in the Guide were contradictory. Either the angels are prophets or they are elements. We can take the question in a larger sense, asking whether the parable is about prophecy or physics, or, better, about *Maaseh Merkava* or *Maaseh Bereshit*.

The reply to Rabbi Hasdai could be an opportunity to enter the laboratory of Maimonides’ mind. (Kafih is not impressed by the letter; see note 11, *ad loc.* Leon D. Stitskin, *Letters of Maimonides*, Yeshiva U. Press, 1977, pp. 95-101, thinks that Joseph Ibn Akin probably wrote it under Maimonides’ direction). It says (my translation):

“About your question on the explanation of the ascent and descent upon Jacob’s ladder: in Guide 1:15 we explained that it refers to prophets, but in 2:10 we referred it to the elements. This discrepancy should not be difficult for you to resolve, when you see how the complex and the simple come into full view. In our explanation of the [four] elements we said that the prophet is affected by them. No prophet ascends [the ladder] until his element of fire prevails over the element of earth, nor does he descend unless the element of earth overcomes him. The fire is always striving upward to apprehend (*l’hasig*), but the cold dry earth always tends downward to rest. So [the prophet] strives upward and not to return again, like Elijah, who ascended in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11: ‘And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven’). We noted how well chosen were the words of the parable that the *ascending* precedes the *descending*. Our idea was that man, created of the element of earth [unlike angels], must rise before his descent [to bring the prophetic message to men], since he [begins] very low as a creature of the ‘dust of the ground’ (Genesis 2:7).”

The answer is that there is ultimately no contradiction, since both *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* are two ways of looking at the same cosmos. Man is a microcosm of the universe (Guide 1:72) and the *fourness* of the forces of the cosmos find their compliment in him, for the four elements are reflected in the humors, and so on. Thus the prophet must overcome the elements so that his soul of fire can rise above his corporeality. Moreover, there is no real contradiction between 1:15 and 2:10 because 2:10 does not unequivocally say that the ladder angels represent the elements, in the same unequivocal way that 1:15 says they are prophets. The last few paragraphs of 2:10 throw out a considerable number of strong hints that the parable really is about the *Maaseh Merkava*. This shows us once again that Maimonides did not think that there are real contradictions in divine science.

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