

Maimonides

His Life and Works

An Accurate Biography of Maimonides, an Overview
of all His Books, as well as Criticism of
His Doctrine from the Beginning to the Present

by

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Dedicated to my dear wife, Sarah-Tsize, and my children - David, Moses, Joseph, Samuel, Isaac, Hannah, Esther and Hillel.

Alon Bakhut¹

To distinguish between the living and the deceased, mention should be made here of two of my dear departed souls, who left the world too soon.

My 15-year-old daughter Havah, may she rest in peace. She died following a lengthy illness accompanied by great suffering, 24 Menahem Av, 5690 [August 18, 1930].

My unforgettable son-in-law, Abraham son of Reb² Moses Naimer, may he rest in peace; he died from a sudden illness [on the] Fast of Gedaliah, 5692 [September 14, 1931].

Two tombstones in the cemetery - two wounds in the heart which absolutely never stop bleeding.

May their souls be bound up in the bond of life.³

¹ Hebrew for "Oak of Weeping". It comes from Genesis 35:8, "And Deborah, Rebecca's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak, and its name was called Alon Bakhut" (Alter, Robert, *The Five Books of Moses* [NY: WW Norton & Co., Inc. 2004], p. 195).

² In Yiddish, "Reb" does not have the connotation of "Rabbi" as much as of "Mr."

³ Based on I Samuel 25:29.

Foreward⁴ from the Author

I do not want to present excuses to the reader – as most authors of all time have done— concerning why I created this work. I also do not wish to call “Heaven and Earth” to witness upon myself that not for my honour and not for the honour of my father’s house have I done this, etc.

I wrote because I think this work is useful and needed to be done, if not by me then by someone else.

It is no exaggeration to say that no Jew who has existed to this very day has aroused such interest as Maimonides. Already in his lifetime, he had thousands of supporters and not a few opponents. No work has received as many commentaries and interpretations as *Moreh Nevukhim*⁵ and *Yad ha-Ḥazakah*.⁶ Maimonides’ illuminating reason, systematic work, and prolific pen have kept each intelligent Jew occupied. Around his work, later on, there developed a terrific struggle of ideas which in fact split the Jewish people into two camps, with very sad results for both sides.

Until this very day, he is not left to rest. In the study hall, Maimonides lives now just as much after the seven-hundredth anniversary of his death⁷ as at the time that he lived. No rabbi can make any argument without mentioning Maimonides. In each halakhic responsum, he is strongly represented. His ideas from *Moreh Nevukhim*, “Eight Chapters,”⁸ “Introduction to *Zera'im*,”⁹ and the “Letters” are every bit as relevant for today’s *Maskilim*¹⁰ and thinkers as in the past.

And yet, Maimonides remains unfamiliar to the broad masses who don’t know him and don’t have the time to study his books - a subject which requires skill and perseverance, at a time that entire libraries have written about him in English, French, German, Italian, Arabic, and many other languages. In Yiddish, there are only small bibliographical works, which hinders deeper delving into his method. Readers still aren’t clued in, and they can’t even obtain a weak idea of his method, and thus opposition to him has grown along with justified veneration.

I had the following objective: to write a series of articles entitled “Maimonides, His Life and Works” which were printed in the *Keneder Adler*¹¹ every Friday. They are now gathered in book form as the reader can see. Reading slowly and with deliberation chapter by chapter; one can gain

⁴ Literally, “some words” or “a few words”.

⁵ Guide of the Perplexed

⁶ Maimonides’ legal code.

⁷ He died in 1204.

⁸ Introduction to his commentary on Mishna Avot.

⁹ *Zera'im* is the name of a Mishnaic Order. The reference is to his Introduction to his Commentary on the Mishna.

¹⁰ Adherents of *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment movement.

¹¹ Montreal Yiddish daily newspaper.

an idea of Maimonides' essence and understand the furor that he provoked in the Jewish camp, whether from supporters or opponents.

In this book can be found his complete biography and the essence of almost all that he wrote - excepting naturally the *Milot ha-Higayon*¹² and medical works, as well as all the Jewish laws with their details and details of details. Concerning these, we would be required to write many times more than Maimonides himself wrote, because to popularize such profound works, one must use lots of words and many explanations. Even with *Moreh Nevukhim* I had to leave certain matters untouched for several reasons that I explain in the book. For that reason also there is a precise description in this book of the dispute concerning Maimonides' works and the arguments of his opponents.

I conclude my foreword with a declaration to critics and fault-seekers that they should forgive me in those many places where the style is too stiff and not literary enough. I wrote the articles for a daily newspaper, where minutes count. Now, when I am submitting the book to the press, I am too weak in health to be able to change, modify, and improve the articles. This must also serve as an apology and justification for the number of print errors which readers will certainly find.

The Author

24 Menaḥem Av, 5693 [August 16, 1933], Montreal, Canada

Acknowledgements¹³

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. H. Wolofsky, editor and publisher of the *Keneder Adler*, for the financial help he gave to publish the book, enabling me to do the printing and the work for free. Without his help, I would never have initiated the venture. He is the one who encouraged me with words and with a generous contribution.

If grateful readers will be found for this completed work, as well as for the books concerning Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon, Philo Judeus, and Rabbi Judah Halevi that I intend to publish, God willing, they should know that the above philanthropist has a big portion in it.

H. K.

¹² A glossary of philosophical terms.

¹³ Literally, "saying thanks".

Chapter 1: Maimonides and His Generation

[p. 9] Jews living in the late twelfth century were afraid. They sensed the start of a Jewish decline, which in their opinion was going to commence quite soon. They did not possess any central authority as they had at one time in Babylonia, with its leaders maintaining control over all the Jewish communities of the Diaspora. Spread out all over the world, Jewish communities were inevitably breaking apart--a decline that portended annihilation.

These Jews saw the beginning of the destruction of the famous *yeshivot*¹⁴ that had flourished in southern Spain: Those in Cordoba, Granada, Seville, and Lucena. These *yeshivot*, which attracted the brightest young minds in all of Spain and produced hundreds of scholars in the generations of Rabbi Samuel ha-Naggid (993-1056) and Rabbi Isaac Alfassi (1013-1103), were now devastated and destroyed under the barbaric rule of the fanatic Muslim rulers, the Almohads.¹⁵

At that time, no Jew was allowed to set foot in southern Spain unless he converted to the Muslim faith. The main Jewish community of Christian Spain was located in Toledo. There were other relatively small communities that were too young to produce great scholars able to gain wide recognition as authorities from Jews all over the Diaspora.

There was no existing authority that could serve as the centre of the entire Diaspora, not only in Spain but everywhere. The Jewish communities of Provence--southern France--were still in the beginning of their growth, and their rabbis only carried the title "disciples of the sages"¹⁶; that is to say that they still needed to remain under the authority of a specific rabbinic sage and Torah centre. The Jewish sages of northern France/Germany--Champagne and Lotharingia¹⁷--confined themselves to Jewish law, not wanting to utilise their reason to encompass all the needs and desires (material and spiritual) that the Jewish Diaspora required. They were unable to create a proper intellectual centre, with a sage in its midst, who would be able to fulfill all the requirements that communities demanded of a spiritual leader. At that time, the Jews of Ashkenaz could not be taken into consideration. Dwelling among half-savages, they were ranked as serfs and constituted the property of the local emperor. Living in such an atmosphere, one cannot speak at all concerning large accomplishments in the spiritual realm.

[p. 10] It is true that, at that time, the Jewish leadership in Babylonia might have accomplished the revival of the Babylonian centre with the support of the Baghdad-based caliph of the Abbasid dynasty. However, such a newly-erected institution would not have had enough influence, even in Asia. How much more so would such a centre not influence European communities that already

¹⁴ Rabbinical seminaries; the singular is *yeshiva*.

¹⁵ Almohads--Berber Muslim dynasty ruling in Spain and North Africa during the 12th and 13th centuries.

¹⁶ "learned men"--generally refers to those who have studied the Talmud and other parts of the Torah at an advanced level.

¹⁷ Including the medieval Jewish communities in Lorraine and especially the Rhineland.

stood on a higher cultural level, both in Torah and in secular wisdom, even compared to the Jewish communities in the era of the first Geonim¹⁸ in Sura and Pumbeditha.

Thus, a Jewish centre for the Diaspora was lacking at that point, ever since the two great scholars--Rabbi Joseph Ibn Migash (1077-1141), the Torah pillar of Spain, and Rabbi Jacob Tam, the great teacher of France (1100-1171)--had passed away. No great scholar could be found in whom Torah and secular wisdom, organizational ability, and love of people were united in one person, in such a way that his word became law for all the Jews of the Diaspora. There were great Talmudists and great sages. However, someone who could combine all these qualities in order to become a central figure did not exist.

At that precise moment, Rabbi Moses ben¹⁹ Maimon appeared, and he illuminated the Jewish firmament from East to West.

He alone combined the qualities of spiritual leader and sage. All the qualities that a leader of the generation should have were combined in him. He was the greatest in Torah, as well as in secular wisdom. He automatically became a Jewish spiritual monarch over all Jewish communities in Asia and Europe, from Spain to Yemen and Africa. Everywhere Jews were located, they bowed their heads in recognition of his spiritual leadership. Maimonides did not have to wait until a later generation, like most great people, to be recognized as being the best; he had this recognition within his lifetime. The way this attitude was expressed in his generation, was that Jews preserved every trivial matter of his life, even the day and hour and minute of his birth, feeling that later generations would be interested in knowing this.

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon was born in Cordoba on March 30, 1135. The Jewish date was the 14th day of Nissan of the year 4895, an hour and a third after the middle of the day.²⁰ His father, Rabbi Maimon, a student of Rabbi Joseph ha-Levi Ibn Migash, was--like his father and grandfather--eight generations one after the other, a great Talmudist in Cordoba. Besides his vast knowledge of Talmud, he was greatly learned in geometry, mathematics, and astronomy. He wrote many books in these disciplines, aside from books dealing with Torah and Talmud.

He was in fact the first teacher of his gifted son, and thanks to him, Maimonides already shone forth in his young years with his Torah genius and secular wisdom.

A story circulates among Jews that Moses, who would later become Maimonides, was a slow learner²¹ in his youth, and because he was different [p. 11] from the rest of the brothers who distinguished themselves in learning, the father hated him very much, and ultimately expelled him from his house. The boy wandered from city to city, lived off alms, and slept in study halls. When Passover arrived, he stayed at a study hall all alone; there was no household to take him in as a

¹⁸ Generally accepted spiritual leaders of the Jewish community worldwide in the early medieval era.

¹⁹ "son of" in Hebrew

²⁰ More recent scholarship has placed Maimonides' birth date in 1138.

²¹ Literally, "a constipated head"

guest for the seders. Remaining alone, he was quite sad and lonely. He went up onto the platform,²² and opened the holy ark.²³ Placing his head in it, he cried in a heartrending manner because he was afflicted with a bad head for learning. He then fell asleep crying. He dreamed that an old man with a bright face came over and said: “God who is in Heaven has heard your voice and will fulfill your desire.” At the same time, he caressed his head. . . . Soon, the boy opened his eyes, closed the holy ark, and sensed that his head had become lighter, as if a stone had been removed from it. From then on, he took upon himself to study with the local *yeshiva* students, who taught him out of compassion, and to his sheer delight, everything came quickly to his head. It did not take even half a year until he came home a scholar, to the great satisfaction of his father.

History doesn't substantiate this story. On the contrary, it relates that he was the most beloved son of his father, and with him he studied from his earliest youth onwards. The era was quite turbulent. Before Moses became bar mitzvah, a disaster occurred to the Jewish community of Cordoba. The city was taken over by the Almohads in 1148, and soon the fanatic king proclaimed a decree for Jews and Christians alike, that they must either be converted to the Muslim faith or leave the country.

At that time some converted to the new faith, while most--among them Maimon's family--chose to go into exile. Maimon settled in Almeria, a port city where he found a resting place for precisely a year, until that city was also taken over by those same fanatics, and he was forced to wander further. This wandering lasted several years. Maimon tried to settle in a number of places but he didn't find rest anywhere. During these years of wandering, the young Moses immersed himself in Torah and secular wisdom. His father taught him Bible, Talmud, and all other Torah subjects, along with mathematics, astronomy, and natural science. At the same time, Muslim scholars taught him philosophy, logic, and medicine, and he excelled in the study of metaphysics. He became acquainted with the greatest scholars of that era, including the son of a tremendous mathematician and astronomer, Ibn Aflah,²⁴ of Seville, a student of the famous philosopher, Ibn Bajja,²⁵ the vizier Ibn Zuhr²⁶ [p. 12] of Seville; and still other scholars of that time. Together, they harnessed Maimonides' intellectual energies, and with his great reasoning ability and brilliance, he arranged, classified, clarified, and subsequently formulated the knowledge anew in a splendidly and fascinatingly comprehensive manner, and in a wonderful, systematic order.

He studied all these disciplines until the eighteenth year of his life, and with this intellectual baggage he emerged as a champion of the Jewish people.

²² *Bimah*--platform where prayer services are conducted and where the Torah is read publicly.

²³ *Aron Kodesh*--Place where the Torah scrolls are kept in the synagogue when not in use.

²⁴ Abū Muḥammad Jābir Ibn Aflah [Geber] (1100-1150).

²⁵ Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Yaḥyà ibn aṣ-Ṣā'igh at-Tūjībī Ibn Bājja [Avempace] (1085-1138).

²⁶ Abū-Marwān 'Abd al-Malik ibn Abī al-'Alā' Ibn Zuhr [Avenzoar] (1094-1162).

An inclination towards order, a devotion to system, and a strong love of logic manifested themselves in Maimonides in his earliest youth.

Frankness, fearlessness in expressing the truth, hatred of narrow-mindedness, and avoidance of flattery and hypocrisy are the main bases upon which Maimonides built his greatness. His mind was clear, grounded in logic. Whatever subject he applied his intellect was thoroughly absorbed, and soon afterwards, he systematized, popularized, and made it intelligible to everyone. In Jewish law as well as in other disciplines, he introduced a wonderful system; from scattered sources, he created an exceedingly beautiful structure, bearing witness to the artistry of its architect.

Not for nothing did Maimonides earn the name “the Jewish Aristotle.” With his reasoning and grounded logic, he had to become a follower of Aristotle in philosophy. Also like Aristotle, he stormed the fortress which the previous Sophists,²⁷ depending on phrases and metaphors and expressing thoughts which are more rhetorical than philosophical, had built in Athens.

Aristotle (384-322 BCE), a native of the Macedonian city of Stagira, dominated the thought of all educated people of the world for centuries. In Maimonides’ generation, he was held in the highest regard by Jewish and Arab philosophers alike, who in those days were the greatest in that area of knowledge. In general, Christians at that time still lagged behind culturally in understanding Aristotle. He, however, found his best, most thorough student and successor in Maimonides. In metaphysics, Maimonides far outdid his master. Studying the *Guide to the Perplexed*, one gets the sense that if Aristotle had heard Maimonides’ arguments, perhaps he might have changed his conclusions. This student understood his master better than all previous disciples, but he did not follow him blindly. In his study of Aristotle, Maimonides’ critical faculties were displayed as brilliantly as elsewhere, and his great analyses were displayed elsewhere in many investigations. In later chapters, we will address these issues more precisely.

Even though Maimonides’ virtues and capabilities would be enough by themselves [p. 13] to make him into a once-in-a-generation marvel, he was also a model for good character traits. Permeated by religious fervor and by devotion to his people, he shared the Jews’ sorrows, wanting to console them as a father to his children. He possessed rock-solid strength to defend his opinions. He was loyal to the truth. He preferred clarity and intelligibility, avoided the temptations of the wider world, and removed himself from falsehood and flattery. These are the main features of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, about whom the saying goes: “From Moses to Moses nobody arose like Moses”: that is, from Moses our Teacher [of the Torah] to Moses ben Maimon, there was nobody who was as tremendous a person as he.

Morality and ethics, good character traits, and good manners: These were the main things he sought to achieve in action as well as in thought. He considered empty speculations in and of themselves almost as nothing, if they did not lead to a good life. He considered living for himself alone as foolishness, a task for crazy people (though, granted, without such people the world would

²⁷ Teachers in ancient Greece specializing in using the tools of rhetoric.

be destroyed). The true goal of life is to do good and to think properly. Good deeds justify the existence of the body, and proper thoughts give the soul immortality.

Since Maimonides was quite deeply serious, analyzing each word and each movement to its foundation, he was not at all able to tolerate frivolity, even in the form of poetry. His standard maxim was: “The best part of the poem was its falsehood.” In his commentary on the Mishna (*Sanhedrin* 10:1, and *Ethics of the Fathers* at the end of the first chapter), he states his opinion approximately in this way:

Those who spend their time writing secular songs and liturgical poems commit a folly, because there is neither utility nor wisdom in them. Even with regard to joyful occasions, one should not recite them, except those that include songs and praises to the Creator, may He be blessed. With such content, there is no distinction whether they are written in Arabic or Hebrew.

This statement of Maimonides applied to weddings and other joyous occasions. However, in prayer, he would not have tolerated even the preferred type of poetry. In a responsum to a congregation that asked him regarding liturgical poems and prayers, he answered:

These are only games. The rhythm and the rhyme lead the prayer away from the correct intention. Moreover, their authors did not consider it to be worthwhile for anyone, using their words, to call upon the Creator to pray for redemption and sustenance and other serious needs.

In this respect, how far he was from Rabbi Judah Halevi (1075-1141), Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), Solomon Ben Gabirol (1021-1070) and other Hebrew poets from Spain, who devoted much of their time to secular and liturgical poetry!

Until Maimonides, the precept that “there is no order to the *Mishna*” ruled. That is to say that Rabbi Judah Hanassi (135-217 CE), compiled all the *Mishnayot*²⁸ in a certain order, yet did not institute a proper order as to what should be presented earlier or later. Even with regard to the Torah itself, the Rabbinic Sages say: “There is no order to the Torah”²⁹; that is, it presents earlier occurrences later, and the reverse. The Talmud [p. 14] certainly did not maintain an order. Thus, for example, the laws on meat and milk can be found in tractate *Avodah Zarah*, and the laws of phylacteries and fringes³⁰ in tractate *Menahot*. When a Jew needed to know a law, he had to either be well-versed in the entire Talmud or else consult someone who was well-versed.

Maimonides--the true personification of a systematic approach--was not able to tolerate this situation, and--early in his life--he decided to introduce order into Jewish law, to systematize all the laws in order to be able to find each law in a set position, in order to define what Judaism meant.

²⁸ Plural of *Mishna*, the first major work of Rabbinic literature.

²⁹ Literally, “there is no early and late in the Torah”. Babylonian Talmud, *Pesahim* 6b.

³⁰ Jewish ritual garments--respectively *tefillin* and *tzitzit* in Hebrew.

His first effort in that area was a commentary on the *Mishna* - a huge undertaking that required expert knowledge of the entire Talmud, with all its back-and-forth discussions, in order to present its complete essence in a few lines. He was all of 23 years old, and until that time, he had already written the following books: 1) *Heshbon ha-Ibbur*³¹ - how the Jewish calendar is put together; 2) commentaries on three Mishnaic orders - *Mo'ed*, *Nezikin*, and *Nashim*; 3) a commentary on the "Four Tractates", which he mentioned in his introduction to the commentary on the *Mishna*; 4) a commentary on the Talmudic tractate *Hullin*; and 5) a commentary on the laws of the Jerusalem Talmud, which he mentioned in his commentary on tractate *Tamid*.

Maimonides managed to accomplish that task by the 23rd year of his life, while wandering and moving with his father from one country to another. He wrote: "I've completed the project while suffering exile, wandering from one side of heaven to the other, starting here and ending there." He mentioned writing while travelling in a ship on the Dead Sea. He stated: "I began to write the commentary on the *Mishna* at 23 years of age, and I finished it at 30 years of age in Egypt."

Studying the marvelous *Mishna* commentary, one doesn't know what to think about first: a mind strong as iron that was able to think calmly while swimming in a sea of troubles, or his exact knowledge of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, as well as the responsa of the Geonim and the remaining books he needed as material for his research, understanding that he certainly could not have had access to them.

The time was very unfavourable for Jews in Muslim Spain. The anti-Jewish decrees were strengthened from day to day. For Jews as well as Christians, there were only two ways: Either accept the Muslim faith or leave the country.

It became impossible to stay any longer in that country. Consequently, Maimon left Spain with his entire family and crossed over to Morocco, where he hoped to find a resting place.

However, this was not to be. In Morocco ruled king Abd al Mu'min (1094–1163), a cruel, fanatical tyrant, who made a decree of forced conversion that was even harsher than in Spain. At that time, there were no Jews whatsoever in and around Fez [p. 15] who had not been forced to convert. The synagogues were laid waste; the communities were destroyed; and there was no public study of Torah! It seemed as if the end of all the Jews had arrived in that benighted country.

And there, Maimon became active.

It is hard to understand what motivated Maimon, with his family, to change his place of residence from Spain to Fez, where the decrees against the Jews were stronger. For while the Jews in Spain had two alternatives--either to leave the country or to be converted--in Fez there was only one recourse--converting to the Muslim faith--if one wanted to live. Beyond that, in Spain one was

³¹ Usually referred to as "*Ma'amar ha-Ibbur*"; the last word is Hebrew for intercalation, or the insertion of a leap month in certain years in the Jewish calendar. The treatise has to do with determining the Jewish calendar.

only required to recite “God is God and Muhammad is His prophet”³² and one could afterward behave as a Jew, whether in synagogue or on the street. In Morocco, however, there was a decree that converts to Islam had to attend their prayer house regularly and pray like all the faithful. For those not attending once or twice, the government would punish them with death.

However, in fact that was what happened, and Maimon was tormented there along with all the Jews, appearing as a Muslim publicly and observing Judaism in secret, under mortal fear of being found out.

For about ten years the decree was maintained, and the secret Jews³³ began to become weak and apathetic. Only those who were self-conscious and strong in character remained stubborn in their faith. However, the simple Jews began to waver. The two-faced life they were forced to lead led them bit by bit to the mosque, and they adopted Muslim customs. In order to justify their actions, they came up with the idea, that the fact that the decree had lasted for so long demonstrated that God had forsaken His people, changed the Torah, and chosen the prophet Muhammad to give a new Torah in its stead to the children of Ishmael.

At that time, Rabbi Maimon wrote a letter of consolation to all the Jews in Arabic, and it was sent to all the secret Jews in all of Morocco. In it he said approximately:

To our Jews who are finding themselves in trouble: The Creator should speedily have compassion on you!

We must know that the troubles that come upon the Jews from the Creator are for a good purpose, and not God forbid with the objective of vengeance and annihilation. As it is written in a verse: “God is good and honest; therefore, He shows the sinner the right way.”³⁴

The Jewish People, whom He chose from all the other nations, will never be replaced with another nation, because “God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind,”³⁵ maintains [p. 16] the Midianite prophet Balaam. It is impossible to believe those who say that the Creator has replaced us with another nation, since until now He did not lead any of them like He did the Jewish People.

Israel in exile is, after all, His beloved child, and He punishes him just as a devoted father punishes his child.

The Torah wasn’t given in hiding or in secret, but rather, for everyone to see. Even if we see how little of our people remains and how the Jews keep on disappearing bit by bit, while at the same time their oppressors progress and grow stronger from day to day, we are not allowed to lose hope,

³² The *shahada*, or fundamental statement, of a Muslim believer.

³³ The author anachronistically uses a later term for secret Jews, “Marranos”, as well as the Hebrew term *Anusim*.

³⁴ Psalms 25:8.

³⁵ Numbers 23:19.

nor to think that God has abandoned us forever. We must only believe that if we continue to hold onto Him, He will help us again, according to the promise made to Moses, His true prophet.

It therefore remains for us only to live, suffer and hope; to study Torah and to fulfill its commandments. Because this is what we have to hold on to, standing in the middle of the stormy waves, in order to not be drowned in the sea of exile.

All of you should be strong to fulfill the commandments of the Torah as much as you can, and as much as it is possible, while not putting your life in danger. And if because of the oppressors a Jew cannot maintain praying three times a day as the Torah stipulates, he should at least say a short prayer silently, if only to remind himself personally, each day, that he is a Jew, a son of the Jewish People. And the One who hears all prayers will receive such a short prayer with satisfaction, as long as it be said wholeheartedly, and in Hebrew.³⁶

This is the essence of Rabbi Maimon's letter of consolation that he distributed to all the communities and thereby revitalized half-extinguished souls.

It is worthwhile to remark that the Muslims were not as "clever" as the Christians in their decrees of forced conversion. The Muslims allowed Jews to circumcise their sons at eight days and also to fulfill all the Jewish laws as long as they went to the mosque to pray and confessed that Muhammad is a prophet. After that, they could be Jews, leading a regular community life, even studying Torah privately. We know of *yeshivot* that existed even in Morocco, and nobody hindered them unless someone informed on them. The Muslims did not make any Inquisition-type investigations.

In Fez, Maimonides befriended highly educated people and in this way immersed himself in philosophy and medicine. An incident forced him to appear in public with a letter.

This was in response to a letter, written by a pious rabbi whose [p. 17] name is unknown, in which he stated that those Jews appearing in public as Muslims and in secret as Jews would be denied the World to Come. This rabbi maintained that someone who studies, prays, and observes all the commandments of the Torah, but merely spoke the phrase "Muhammad is the true prophet", has actually become a convert, belongs no more to the Jewish People, is unsuitable for testimony and making oaths, and the Torah regards him as an idolator with respect to the laws of divorce and marriage.

That rabbi wrote: When a Jew enters their prayer house, even though he absolutely doesn't open his mouth there, and afterwards comes home and prays, he commits a double transgression. The Talmud says with regard to him: Two bad things are done at once "worshipping the idol and worshipping the Temple."

³⁶ Literally, the "holy tongue"; a term used in Yiddish to denote "Hebrew".

The conclusion is that everyone is obligated to sacrifice his life, to die along with his wife and children as martyrs for being Jewish, and not to confess that the “crazy one” (Muhammad) is a prophet. He who doesn’t do that is an apostate, regardless of whether or not at home he observes Judaism and studies Torah.

He further said that an idol is located in Mecca--the Kaaba stone--which Muslims worship. Muhammad himself was an enemy of the Jews, and in his lifetime he killed over 75,000 Jews. His faith was idolatrous and is included in that sort of idol-worship which the Torah law states that one must allow himself to be killed rather than to worship it. One who does not do so is truly an apostate, and he does not have any more a portion in the Jewish God.

The letter hit the local secret Jews hard. They were distressed, tormented, and ashamed.

The wider masses, hearing that despite their suffering and worshipping God they were considered to be apostates, thought: In that case, let’s put an end to all this, become Gentiles, and at least stop the suffering. In any case, all is lost.

Chapter 2: *Iggeret ha-Shmad* [The Letter on Apostasy] by Maimonides

[p. 17] Maimonides realized that there was a danger of Jewish apostasy over all of Morocco--this time, it would be not feigned but actual and voluntary. Consequently, he ventured outside his study room, and for the first time, he appeared in public with something he had written. Here, we are only publishing excerpts from his letter, known as “*Iggeret ha-Shmad*” [The Letter on Apostasy], and from these fragments, the reader will understand the main points of the work.

First of all, Maimonides affirmed that it is a sin to label a community of Jews as transgressors. He brings his proof from Isaiah, who was chastised by God for saying, “I find myself amid a people with unclean lips,”³⁷ though [p. 18] certainly the majority of the people were sinners. The same was true with Elijah. And if those great prophets received punishment as a consequence of their statements, a present-day Jew would certainly be punished.

Jews, Maimonides maintained, never cease to being Jews, even those who sin. This is especially true of the Jewish communities of our country [Morocco], who did not rebel against God to seek worldly pleasures or to get high positions. Their sin stemmed only from their distress: the fear of the sword, the pressure of war. Maimonides stated:

In the Talmud, we find many stories about *Tannaim*³⁸ such as Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos, and others who, in times of danger, concealed themselves under the mask of another religion, saying some words which can be understood in more than one way.

The Muslims do not force us to worship idols, just to say words that those who force us themselves know that we are saying to deceive them, and that we don't believe in them.

Maimonides further expressed himself on the topic of the sanctification of God's name and how far a Jew must go with respect to martyrdom. How and when does a Jew need to sacrifice his life for Judaism? To that, Maimonides answers as follows:

The Sages of the Talmud rule that a Jew is obligated to allow himself to be killed if someone forces him to violate the following three major fundamentals of Judaism: Idol worship--thus denying the unity of God; immorality--the violation of modesty and sexual propriety; and bloodshed--to murder people. The same law of self-sacrifice also applies to other transgressions, if the one under duress does it with the intention of thereby becoming an apostate, and not because of his personal benefit, or in a case in which there is a temporary purpose for this act.

³⁷ Isaiah 6:5.

³⁸ Scholars from the Mishnaic period (second and third centuries CE).

Jews are obligated to fulfill the commandment of martyrdom³⁹ and are warned against blasphemy.⁴⁰ Dying for Judaism, a Jew would fulfill the commandment of martyrdom. However, if someone complies under duress, he commits a tremendous transgression for which neither Yom Kippur nor suffering nor even repentance can atone, but only the day of death, when the deceased one's sin is atoned. On the other hand, martyrdom is a major commandment, and he who sanctifies the Creator's name through submitting himself to torture and death because of His name, receives a great reward in the Other World. Every Jew must be aware of martyrdom. This is how *Sifra*⁴¹ interprets the verse, "I am God who took you out of Egypt"⁴²: On condition that you proclaim My Holy Name before everyone; meaning, to sanctify God's name.

However, if a Jew isn't strong enough to withstand the trial, to endure a day of woe, or to die, when someone forces him to transgress one of the three fundamental negative commandments, and he does indeed transgress any of them in order to save himself, it is not only that he didn't [p. 19] carry out the commandment to sanctify God's name, but he committed a bad deed, a blasphemy. Even so, we do not punish him with any one of the seven capital penalties (stoning, burning, beheading, strangling, premature death, lashes, death at the hands of Heaven). Thus we don't find in the Torah and the Talmud that one should punish a person for one or several transgressions--hard and easy ones alike--if he were forced to do it under threat of suffering or death. The principle of "God exempts one under duress,"⁴³ according to which the Torah exempts persons under duress is valid everywhere.

Moreover, the contemporary decree is not comparable to the previous decree of apostasy which the Talmud discusses. At that time, people forced Jews to transgress in practice: Not to circumcise children, not to observe Sabbath, and not to study Torah, while the current decree doesn't obligate anybody at all to do anything in practice, only to speak words, expressing things that we don't believe. Even the ones who are placing us under duress know that we don't believe in those words. We only say them in order to satisfy somebody's caprice and to gratify his obsessions.

True, one who allows himself to be killed, rather than believing in the prophecies of that man (Muhammad), stands on a higher level and his reward is really tremendous, because after all, he carried out the commandment of martyrdom in its ultimate sense. However, whoever comes to us, and asks, according to the Torah: Should he recite the Muslim confession or should he let himself be killed? Our answer to him is: Confess and remain alive, but then flee from there to a place where you can continue to be a Jew in public.

This is the answer for myself, for my friend and for everyone who asks: Flee from those places and go to those countries where one can be openly Jewish. Absolutely nobody should be afraid,

³⁹ "*Kiddush ha-Shem*"--"sanctification of the Name [of God]" in Hebrew.

⁴⁰ "*Hillul ha-Shem*"--"desecration of the Name [of God]" in Hebrew.

⁴¹ Early Midrashic exposition of the Book of Leviticus.

⁴² Leviticus 19:36.

⁴³ "*Ones Raḥamana Patrei*"--Babylonian Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 54a.

and nobody should hesitate to forsake their children and property, because the Torah with its commandments takes precedence over property, feelings for family, wife, and children, and other conveniences. All these are temporary possessions, while the Torah is everlasting.

However, if someone forces a person to transgress one of the commandments in practice, that person should forsake everything, wandering day and night, until he finds a place where one can worship God without interference. And he will find one! The world is large and wide enough.

In case a person doesn't have the heart to do this because he is too weak, or because the times pose a clear and present danger, and as a consequence ostensibly acknowledges those [Muslim] prophecies, he should know that he is profaning God's name every minute, if not voluntarily, then almost so. He should feel like one who has been reprovved. And yet, he shouldn't lose hope for God's forgiveness, and he should strive to 1) observe the remaining commandments he is able to observe, and 2) always have in mind to flee from the country at the first opportunity.

And he for whom it would be possible to travel to another country and doesn't go because he is waiting for the Messiah, who will doubtless annul all these decrees anyway [p. 20]--he is a sinner. For there is absolutely no set time for the Messiah to come and the obligation of the commandments doesn't hinge upon his coming.

Maimonides ends that letter with an urgent plea for tolerance. Nobody should insult any Jewish sinner, nor any Sabbath violator, nor anyone under duress. They rather have to accept them in the synagogue with respect, to comfort them, and to encourage them to observe the commandments which they have the opportunity to keep.

It is interesting to note that in that terrible time, when various people said to the Jews, "either conversion or death," the Jews in Germany, England, France, and Italy distinguished themselves markedly from their coreligionists in Spain with an extraordinary perseverance, not making any compromise even to a minimal extent. Neither asking any questions nor seeking any permission, hundreds of thousands of Jews went to their martyrdom, and even slaughtered their wives and children with their own hands, afterwards ending their own lives, if they were threatened with the temptation of conversion. History records many stories of entire communities in Germany and France, such as that of the rabbi who called together all the Jews with their families in the synagogue. The stories recall that when the murderers drew near, the rabbi sensed that very soon the Jews would need to withstand temptation. With the adults, the rabbi was certain that they would prefer to suffer from all kinds of afflictions rather than "extend their hands to an alien god."⁴⁴ On the other hand, he was afraid for the small children who would remain without their parents in Gentile hands and who would be brought up as Christians. As a result, he advised that every Jew should slaughter his wife and children with a slaughtering knife, and subsequently kill himself. Entire communities perished at their own hands in such a manner.

⁴⁴ Cf. Psalms 81:10.

Such martyrdom affected a people that naively and sincerely believed in the words of the Torah and the Talmud. Deep belief and extraordinary devotion to their people and God made death by martyrdom quite easy in their eyes.

The Spanish Jews, however, had already absorbed much foreign culture and philosophy; this weakened the fervour of their pure faith. In a confrontation with life, which for them was valuable, many of them were not willing or able to forsake their homes and possessions. A compromise was made as follows: Accept the Muslim faith outwardly and be Jewish privately. This was the price that they paid for staying alive, or to spare themselves from going through a new exile.

Concerning this, Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776),⁴⁵ said: “The Spanish Jews were tempted and did not resist. In France and in Germany, there were no hidden and secret Jews whatsoever. Those Jews said to their tormentors: ‘I want to live as a Jew! If not, I would rather die as a Jew. I’m not hypocritical in any way.’”

For Emden, it was the “damned philosophy” that watered down [p. 21] the passion of Mount Sinai that was guilty. The Ashkenazi Jews knew nothing of it; therefore, their faith was stronger than death and more passionate than the fires of auto-da-fés.⁴⁶ Ordinary Jews, however, were faithful. The proof of this is from Spain itself, where ordinary Jews chose the path of self-sacrifice without questions asked, while enlightened Jews sought excuses for a double-faced life.

This, Emden says, is hinted at in the first chapter of Psalms, which praises every person for whom the verse applies: “His desire is for the Torah, and he studies it day and night.”⁴⁷ This is because the Jewish People is compared to a tree, which is planted beside streams of water that never wither, neither in cold nor hot weather. “Which yields its fruit in season,”⁴⁸ refers to fruit (which the Talmud uses as a symbol for learned people) that is produced only at an auspicious time--how quickly the air becomes unfavourable--that ripens and falls under the tree. On the other hand, “whose foliage never fades,”⁴⁹ refers to its leaves (meaning, the simple masses, not learned but still pious). “Never fades,” that is to say that these never wither; the most powerful heat waves do not affect them, and the strongest winds do not rip them apart during a storm.

This is what Rabbi Jacob Emden says, probably expressing the opinion of all the learned sages of France and Germany. There is, however, another side of the same coin, which the Spanish Jews upheld.

⁴⁵ On Emden’s attitude, see Jacob J. Schacter, “Echoes of the Spanish Expulsion in Eighteenth Century Germany: The Baer Thesis Revisited,” *Judaism* 41:2 (Spring 1992): 180-189.

⁴⁶ The phrase “auto-da-fé” is from the late medieval Portuguese expression for an “act of faith.” An “auto-da-fé” was the ritual of public penance of condemned heretics of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition.

⁴⁷ Psalms 1:2.

⁴⁸ Psalms 1:3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

A large portion of the learned elite sought to defend the Spanish Jews for two major reasons: 1) Islam didn't proclaim as much hatred for Jews as did Christianity; 2) the Muslims utilized less stringent measures against the converted Jews and the latter were less persecuted than under the Christians.

Generally speaking, there is a boundary between Judaism and Islam, but the contradiction between the two is not as sharp and obvious as between Judaism and Christianity. Absolute unity (the Unity of the Creator) is the most important and most fundamental dogma of the Jewish religion. Before being burnt alive, Jews would proclaim, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One,"⁵⁰ with passion. They meant to say: "We cannot accept your triune God,⁵¹ because for us there is only one God."

"One" is the most fundamental principle of the Jewish religion. Denying that is like denying Judaism in totality, even if that person observes all the commandments of the Torah.

And at that moment, the Jews should have pursued a national-religious struggle only with the Christians, not with the Muslims. The latter religion preaches the same oneness of God as Judaism, the only difference being that Muhammad is Islam's prophet. Islam believes in no son of God nor in a trinity, merely in a prophet, born of a father and mother just like everyone. Islam's Monotheism is thus pure, and Jews should not think of Islam as idol worship, but merely as seduction by a false prophet.

[p. 22] When anyone forced a Jew to say the verse, "Allah is Allah and Muhammad is His prophet,"⁵² he was able to say the first half with all his heart, and he only disagreed with the second half. Indeed, Maimonides said that "in this case, the Ishmaelites (Muslims) weren't idol worshippers at all, and they maintain the oneness of God with all their hearts as pertaining to them."

Other than that big difference, Muslims at that time were very lenient with the forced converts. They never established a system of spying, a secret police, and inquisitions for the new converts like the Christians did in order to make the lives of the secret Jews miserable. They were never greatly upset about the private lives of those "converts." The secret Jewish communities were not only able to conduct their religious lives at home, but even in synagogues and *yeshivot* as well, which indeed were overflowing with hundreds of students who zealously studied the Talmud. Only when a denunciation arrived would a government agent conduct an investigation, and just like that, it would be dropped.

⁵⁰ The *Shema*, a fundamental Jewish prayer; Deuteronomy 6:4.

⁵¹ An allusion to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

⁵² The Islamic creed [*shahada*], declaring belief in the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's messenger.

These were the two main reasons that caused the Spanish Jews under Muslim rule to start to lead a double-faced life. The Jews of Christian France and Germany weren't able to think about such a compromise; for them, the only outlet was martyrdom.

Chapter 3: Maimonides' Family Abandons the Country of Apostasy and Travels to the Land of Israel

[p. 22] Informers have never been lacking, and to our shame there were Jewish apostates who wished to put their best foot forward in the eyes of the Muslim religious fanatics. At the time that Maimonides, his father, and his brother were in Fez, Morocco, there was an informer who caused the Almohads to take notice of the *yeshiva*, led by Rabbi Judah ha-Cohen Ibn-Soussan (d. 1165), where Maimonides studied and whose main supporter was Rabbi Maimon. As a result, the *yeshiva* head, Ibn-Soussan, died as a martyr, and it is thought that that all of Maimon's family would have had the same happen to them, were it not for the intervention of the Muslim poet and philosopher, Ibn Mouassa, a friend of Maimonides', who testified that Maimon and his family were faithful Muslims. That way, they were saved from a cruel death.

The longer they stayed in Fez, the more dangerous it was, and on the 4th of the month of Iyar,⁵³ 1165, on a pitch-black night, Maimon's family settled themselves inside a sailing ship, with the aim of reaching the Land of Israel, where observing Judaism wasn't connected with self-sacrifice.

[p. 23] The ship moved calmly over the Mediterranean Sea for five days, but on the sixth day the sea became stormy, tossing the ship about like a toy. there was only a fine line between them and death, and so they all pleaded with God at that point. The son, Moses, made a vow that if they get rescued, those two days (the fourth day of Iyar on which they went aboard the ship, and the tenth day of Iyar, the storm) should be counted as sacred days on which to pray, thanking God for the act of lovingkindness that He performed, as well as giving some charity to poor people. The storm subsided, and on the 3rd of Sivan,⁵⁴ they arrived in Acre. Maimonides declared that day a holiday, and throughout his life he observed three days: The fourth and tenth days of Iyar (the latter being the day of the storm) in which they preoccupied themselves with Torah, prayer, and charity; and the third of Sivan, which was declared a family holiday for himself and his children after him.

The Jewish community of Acre received the family with the greatest honour--most of all, the local rabbi, Japheth ben Elijah the Judge. Maimonides remained friendly with him and always stayed in touch with him.

⁵³ April 25.

⁵⁴ May 23.

They stayed there for a short time, only through Rosh Hashana and Sukkot.⁵⁵ On the third day of Heshvan,⁵⁶ they bid farewell to Acre and departed for Jerusalem. After going through tremendous dangers, they arrived there. Over three days, they visited all the holy sites, including the Western Wall. From there, they departed for Hebron. Maimonides lingered at the Cave of the Patriarchs for an entire day, and in the cave, which Jews were allowed at that time to enter, he remained alone with thoughts from the past.

Jerusalem was in Christian hands at the time, and the situation of those few Jews who were found there was far from good. He, with his younger brother David, decided to leave for Egypt. The older Maimon didn't want to leave the Holy Land, but the two sons left for Egypt and settled themselves in No-Amon (present-day Alexandria). From there, they went to Fustat, which is old Cairo, where they settled themselves more permanently.

Maimonides' reputation seems to have already become great at that time, because approximately several months after arriving in Egypt, Rabbi Maimon died in the Land of Israel. As Maimonides wrote to the rabbi in Acre, "Many letters of consolation came to him from Edom and Arabia, a journey of several months."

However, in Egypt, hardly anyone was fully aware of him. Both brothers were reserved and were not well-known at all. They opened a pearl, diamond and jewelry business, from which they earned their income. David was the businessman and he travelled to distant lands, even [p. 24] going as far away as the East Indies to purchase the merchandise, while Maimonides sat and learned.

Upon arriving in Egypt, Maimonides was still very much a young man, around 31 years old, and all the wanderings and troubles of his life barely hindered his teaching and studying. At that point, he was already the greatest of Talmudists, one of the best scientists, and the most profound philosopher of his generation. His brother David had a big part to play in this, because he was the breadwinner, so that his brother Moses would be able to rest and learn.

However, Maimonides was not destined to be at rest. After his father's death, misfortune befell him, big enough to finish off a regular person. This was the death of his younger brother, who was travelling on a ship which sank. Maimonides wrote to his good friend Rabbi Japheth about that calamity as follows:

Of all the troubles that have befallen me, this last one is the greatest. This is the death of my brother, the righteous one, who drowned while travelling on a ship in the Indian Ocean; he had a lot of money with him - mine, his, and a stranger's, leaving his wife (now a widow) and his little daughter with me. For year I lay in bed with great suffering, almost dying. Since then, it's already been three years, and I'm still mourning for him and can't console myself. And how should I

⁵⁵ Respectively, the Jewish New Year and the Festival of Tabernacles.

⁵⁶ October 18, 1165.

comfort myself? After all, I consider him my prized possession, he was my brother and student, a good friend, and he earned a lot of money so that I could sit and study. He is now off to an eternal life and we are forsaken in a strange country with no shortage of troubles. I am saddened every time I notice one of his books or manuscripts. Were it not for the Torah and wisdom that I study that console me, I couldn't bear it.

Remaining a debtor without the means to live, with a widow and an orphan to feed, he had to look for a livelihood.

He found his way thanks to his all-encompassing wisdom.

Chapter 4: Maimonides as a Physician

[p. 24] At that time, it wouldn't have been hard for Maimonides to obtain a rabbinic position that would give him a respectable income, but he declined such positions. He would absolutely not take a salary for the rabbinate. Therefore, he took up practicing medicine and giving lectures in philosophy for a number of students. Thus relates Ibn al-Qifti (1172-1248), an Arab writer of that era.

How long Maimonides continued his philosophical lectures and whether he had success in that field is unknown. However, he was successful [p. 25] in medicine. At first his practice was small, but then many more people became his patients. Later, his reputation as a doctor became great, and he was considered one of the greatest physicians of his era.

However, Maimonides didn't enjoy tranquility. Once, he became seriously ill and only through a miracle did he recover. At the same time, his wife died from the same disease he suffered miserably from.

Only his tremendously strong nature, his immense confidence, and his drive to learn and know gave him the strength to endure his suffering. Later, he remarried, this time to the daughter of Abul Maali, a noble and influential man from Zoan,⁵⁷ the trustee of one of Sultan Saladdin's wives, the mother of the famous ruler Qadi al-Fadil (1135-1200). That wife gave Maimonides a son, Abraham, who would become his successor as leader of the spiritual life of Egypt. In his newborn son, Maimonides found consolation for all the troubles that had befallen him up until now. His new father-in-law also married Maimonides' sister.

Maimonides had great satisfaction from his student, Rabbi Joseph ben Judah ibn Akin.⁵⁸ He was the son of crypto-Jews, born when his father, Judah, lived disguised as a Muslim. As we know, the Almohads didn't interfere in the private lives of the crypto-Jews; therefore, the father had an opportunity to give his son a good Jewish education. Aside from mathematics and medicine, he knew a good amount of Talmud. He became Maimonides' most distinguished student not because he was so great in learning, but because of his great desire to study - a desire which surpassed all limits. He became fed up with his two-faced life (as a crypto-Jew) and he escaped to Alexandria

⁵⁷ Biblical name for the ancient Egyptian city of Tanis. In the Middle Ages, Jews used the name to refer to al-Fustat (Old Cairo), the city where Maimonides had settled.

⁵⁸ Like nearly all Maimonides scholars of the early 20th century, Rabbi Kruger assumed that Maimonides' disciple was Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Ibn Akin (1150-1220), whereas the actual disciple was Rabbi Joseph ben Judah of Ceuta (1160-1226).

in order to be openly Jewish. From there, he corresponded with Maimonides, and the latter invited him to come over to him in Zoan.

Joseph ben Judah studied with Maimonides for one year, but his admiration of his rabbi stayed with him for the rest of his life. Maimonides also loved him, and in a lengthy letter to his student, he addressed him with many terms of affection.

His son, Abraham, and his student, Joseph, gave him much pride as a consolation for the bad years that he had experienced.

Over the years, Maimonides' medical practice grew much larger, thanks to which he became the personal doctor of Saladdin's vizier al-Fadil. Possibly through the influence of his father-in-law, he would later become the physician of the royal court.

People tell many stories among Jews regarding Maimonides' greatness as a doctor. We would like to relate one of these: [p. 26]

Maimonides heard that in a certain place there was a doctor who could perform marvellous operations, but he didn't want to teach anyone his wisdom. How could one obtain that knowledge? Maimonides disguised himself as a mute person, dressed himself in tattered clothes, went to that doctor's city by foot, and hired himself out at that doctor's office as a wood chopper. The doctor, noticing this mute and obedient person, hired him as an assistant in the operating room. Maimonides obeyed everything, and followed the doctor through thick and thin, but also carefully observed the work that the doctor did. Maimonides always had a good head, and in a short time he knew all the doctor's secrets.

Once, someone brought this doctor a patient with a complaint about his head. The doctor took him inside, into his special room, and he closed the door behind him. However, Maimonides had made a hole in the ceiling earlier, through which he could spy on the doctor's work. From there, he saw how the doctor examined the skull of the patient. The doctor found a small worm stuck in the thin membrane that covers the brain. The doctor took an instrument and wanted to remove the worm, but Maimonides cried "Stop! Because the membrane is quite thin, if you take it out by force, it will stick itself deeper in the membrane, make its way through to the brain, and the patient will die."

The doctor, surprised by the mute person who knew how to speak well, who had been observing him, asked a question: "So then, how can I remove it differently?"

"Get a leaf of cabbage," advised Maimonides, "and carefully put it down. A worm loves cabbage. That alone will cause it to leave the membrane and climb up to the leaf."

That doctor followed his advice, and so it happened. The patient became better soon. Maimonides identified himself, and from then on, they became lifelong friends.

A second story:

Maimonides - together with his friend (also a great doctor, though non-Jewish) - discovered, through their medical knowledge, that one could make a person live forever. How? Take a healthy person, cut him into pieces, put the pieces in a glass container, pour in various medications, close it tightly, and let it stay for four weeks. By that time the pieces will come together, one opens the cap, the person will emerge fresh and healthy, and will subsequently live forever.

But since no other person wanted to be the subject for the first test, they decided to try it out on themselves. They would cast lots, and whoever the lot fell on, would let himself [p. 27] be cut up. The lot fell on the non-Jew, and Maimonides cut him up, packed him in the container, and poured in the medications.

Some days before the deadline, Maimonides saw that the non-Jew was just about ready. He started opening the container, which he shouldn't have done. The other doctor, who knew that that meant his death, therefore stuck out his hand to remind him that they had solemnly promised themselves to protect each other's lives. However, Maimonides didn't take notice of that, opened the bottle, and the other doctor remained dead. Maimonides had to do that, because he recognized that the other doctor had in mind subsequently to pretend to be a god, the proof for which was that he could live forever.

A third story:

Coming from the royal palace, Maimonides encountered lines of patients, and on his way home, he used to give each one of them prescriptions and instructions to be followed. There was a Jew-hater who didn't like Maimonides. He said: "The whole story is a lie! No person, no matter how great, could be treating so many patients in passing them by." In order to convince the authorities of his opinion, he pushed himself into the line although he himself was completely healthy. When Maimonides came over to him, he said: "There's no more medicine for you; you'll die in a month or so."

The Jew-hater told the story as a joke to his friends and they all laughed with him. However, after several days passed, the Jew-hater took the time to reflect: "Possibly I really do have a hidden disease that I don't know about but that he does know about? After all, everyone says that he is indeed a great doctor!"

From one day to the next, the Jew-hater continued to become quite despondent; his friends saw that he had become paler and thinner from day to day, until finally he lay down in bed, and exactly one month later he died, just as Maimonides had foretold.

These are all legends that were transmitted orally. The reader will find out the true historical facts concerning Maimonides' greatness in medicine in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: The Greatness of Maimonides in Medicine

[p. 28] Historical facts, whose authenticity nobody can doubt, prove that Maimonides was very great in medicine, both in theory and in practice.

The first witness was al-Qifti (1172-1248), an Arab author of that time who wrote about Maimonides' great reputation in the medical world, how the grand vizier al-Fadil (1135-1200) made him his personal doctor and granted him a yearly salary from the royal treasury.

Maimonides himself, in a letter to his favourite student, Rabbi Joseph Aknin, writes - among other things - as follows: "I can also let you know that my renown in medicine is quite great in the highest circles, even the chief judge (*qadi al-qudat*); the head of al-Azhar,⁵⁹ and the other chief officials are my regular patients."

The famous physician and philosopher, Abd al-Latif of Baghdad⁶⁰ (1162-1231), who was so widely regarded in the world for his knowledge that even the great Saladdin (1138-1193) relied on him, admitted that the aim of his difficult trip from Baghdad to Egypt was to meet three famous medical scholars, one of whom was Maimonides.

The father of the famous writer Ibn Abu Usaibia (1203-1270) boasted about his medical greatness, seeing that Maimonides was his student.

The famous poet and judge (*qadi*) al-Sa'id ibn-Sinna al-Mulk (1155-1211) dedicated a hymn of praise to Maimonides. In one of his poems, he compares Maimonides to Galen (129-199 or 217 C.E.), the "Father of Medicine." He writes: "Galen healed only the body, while Maimon's son also healed souls." This proves the folly of treating oneself with superstitious remedies that do more harm than good.

It is also a fact that the English king, Richard the Lionheart (1157-1199) - the first leader of the Crusaders,⁶¹ who was in the Land of Israel where he fortified the Philistine city of Ashkelon and it was occupied by the Christians - heard of the wonders of Maimonides' medical art and offered him a position as his personal doctor. However, Maimonides did not accept it.

Maimonides' medical practice was quite large. Knowing how the great people thought highly of him, patients flowed to him from all over. In a letter to his student, Aknin, who was also a well-known doctor with a large practice in Baghdad, he writes: "The patients take up my whole time. I don't even have time to study medical books. [p. 29] And you know, after all, how hard the medical profession is, and how much responsibility it places on people who want to be conscientious and

⁵⁹ Al-Azhar has been a centre of Islamic learning in Cairo for more than a millennium.

⁶⁰ He was known as Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi.

⁶¹ Richard the Lionheart was a leader of the Third Crusade.

consistent. I only give medical advice that can be justified with proper arguments or derived from recognized authorities.”

From this short excerpt, we can have a very good idea of what Maimonides experienced in that particular profession.

He did not like very much to merely prescribe medications. Mostly, he tried to teach his patients the basic rules of hygiene and diet. Only when the hygienic and dietary measures weren't of help did he prescribe a drug.

He was scrupulous and correct, and he surely didn't prescribe a drug to a patient simply to get his money and get rid of him quickly. Money was of secondary importance.

How strongly he was occupied with his patients can be seen from one of his letters, written by him to Rabbi Samuel Ibn-Tibbon (1160-1230), translator of his *Guide to the Perplexed*. He writes there as follows:

I am so busy that I simply don't have any time to eat. My residence is in Fustat, and I must visit the king's palace, in Cairo, a distance of two *tehum Shabbat*⁶² each morning. If either he, one of his children, or his concubine isn't healthy, I can't leave the palace for an entire day. When everyone is healthy, I come home after a half day hungry and tired. There I find all the hallways crowded with sick people, Gentile and Jewish, distinguished and ordinary, judges, policemen, good friends and enemies, men and women - a multitude of people who wait for me. I descend from the donkey, wash my hands and go to them, asking for their forbearance and permission to have a small meal - my only meal all day long - and afterwards I go out to treat them, give them advice, and write prescriptions. This doesn't stop until nighttime, with patients constantly coming in and out. I get so weakened from it that I can't even speak. Every day of the week is like that. The only day that I can deal with community matters is on the Sabbath.

This was Maimonides' answer to Rabbi Samuel Ibn-Tibbon when the latter wanted to undertake the hard and dangerous trip all the way from the South of France to Egypt in order to be able to spend time with Maimonides, whose *Guide of the Perplexed* he translated. Maimonides assessed the situation, letting him know that he could not do any more than meet with him, because he didn't have time to spend time with him discussing philosophy.

The great Sultan Saladdin passed away and his two heirs battled over the throne. Maimonides, though he was connected to the court, was unwilling to be involved in politics. In the end, the elder [p. 30] brother⁶³ succeeded in occupying the throne. He was a playboy in his youth, devoting himself to his lusts. That turned out to be bad for his health in his later years. Then, he requested Maimonides, his personal doctor, to write for him a book on how a person should conduct himself.

⁶² *Tehum Shabbat* is a geographical limitation, of 2000 cubits (roughly 3000 feet) beyond a village, town or city, beyond which Jews should not walk on the Sabbath (plus major Jewish holidays).

⁶³ Al-Afdal ibn Salah ad-Din (1169-1225)

Maimonides then wrote his *Regimen of Health*, an important book about the hygiene of living. In that book, Maimonides states that only one who behaves morally, and withholds from excess in eating, drinking, and women can be healthy. Wine and illicit sexual activity make one old before his time, and dries up the brain and bone marrow.

This was an explicit accusation against the tyrannical Oriental ruler's corrupt way of life. In this, Maimonides perhaps dared too much. Only one who was dedicated to the truth and to his profession could undertake to tell the truth to the ruler, knowing that many doctors telling the truth paid with their heads.

Regarding his greatness in medicine, we will shortly discuss this subject as it appears in his books about halakhah and philosophy. We will now give a short overview as follows:

The task of a physician, according to Maimonides, is to study the reasons and the origins of diseases in people, and to indicate to the patient the dietary and hygienic remedies that he will need to get healthy again. To possess a clear mind, one must have a healthy body. Among a thousand people, one can find only one who dies a natural death. The remaining 999 die out of ignorance and improper advice.

Protecting oneself from diseases in the first place is easier and better than to cure them. Therefore, one must know how to avoid harmful things. A person should only eat at the moment that he is really hungry and should only drink when he is thirsty.

Nonetheless, even then, one ought not to eat too much. A quarter of the food should remain on one's plate in order not to overeat.

A principle: in eating, drinking, working, and sleeping, one must be moderate.

The summer is the best time to eat cold food, and in the winter, warm food. Wine is harmful in young people and more tolerated in older people. While eating, one must never drink water, unless mixed with wine. Sour and unripe fruits are like poison for the intestines. A person needs to sleep eight hours every night, but during the daytime it's unhealthy to sleep. Once every seven days, a person needs to have a bath.

With mild diseases, nature alone heals the body entirely without medicine as long the patient doesn't interfere with his bad behaviour. With serious diseases, the doctor only needs to help nature in its work. Most doctors make a mistake in healing with medications [p. 31] that weaken the strength of the body's resistance to the disease. Such medications harm more than they help.

A Jew isn't allowed to live in any place where there is no doctor present. The doctor must, however, be a scrupulous person and know his profession. The doctor who refuses to help the patients who need it, or who doesn't know his profession, or who doesn't devote himself to diagnosing diseases, is tantamount to being a murderer.

Here is the list of Maimonides' books on medical issues:

- 1) A treatise concerning medicines and their effects, a sort of "*materia medica*".⁶⁴
- 2) An explanation of the causes of diseases.
- 3) A description of how to cure people bitten by snakes.
- 4) A treatise concerning the treatment of hemorrhoids.
- 5) Concerning asthma and its treatment.
- 6) A treatise on sexual intercourse.
- 7) A treatise concerning hygiene.
- 8) Concerning poisons and antidotes.
- 9) A summary of Galen's 16 books and of 5 other books.
- 10) Medical aphorisms of Hippocrates (460-370 B.C.E.) with commentary.
- 11) "Chapters of Moses", medical aphorisms compiled from Galen's works

We also find treatises regarding diseases of the nose and throat, and concerning rheumatism.

In connection with Maimonides' tremendous knowledge of poisons and antidotes, the following story is told:

When Maimonides first became the chief doctor in Sultan Saladdin's palace, the previous doctors, astrologers and sorcerers, with whom the court was always filled, were extremely jealous of him. This is because Maimonides outshone them with his great knowledge, and he thereby robbed them of all their honour and greatness. All of them united to look for ways to free themselves from the learned Jew, and here's what resulted:

They came to the Sultan with a proposal that in order for him to be convinced of who is really the greatest doctor, he should order each one of them to drink a certain amount of a deadly poison. The one who would prove himself successful in healing himself and staying alive will demonstrate his greatness as a doctor.

The Sultan went along with the plan, and Maimonides' enemies made arrangements for him to be the first one needing to take the poison. [p. 32]

⁶⁴ Therapeutic properties of substances used for healing.

At the set time, Maimonides came and calmly drank the poison, but to everyone's great surprise it didn't harm him one bit, because before leaving the house he had already taken the antidote. The rest drank the poison and they all died to the last one.

As great as Maimonides was in medicine, however, he was even greater as a Talmudist and philosopher. His greatness in the medical realm was in accordance with his era and generation, while in Talmud and philosophy he was a trailblazer whose importance and influence have been felt for hundreds of years. He will remain great as long as there are Jews in the world.

Chapter 6: Maimonides' Influence in Yemen

[p. 32] A tremendous misfortune befell the Jews of Yemen, and Maimonides was forced to help them morally.

In that secluded corner of far southern Arabia, a bitter war broke out between the two Muslim sects: the Shia - who only believe in the written word of the Qur'an, but not in the explanations and commentaries, in this way similar to the Karaite Jews; and the Sunnis - who believe in all the above. Although the dispute was a purely Muslim one, Jewish people bore the brunt of it, as usual.

The Shia, gaining the upper hand, made an ultimatum to the local Jews that they should convert to Islam if they want to live.

Tens of thousands of Jews, poor in money and Torah, found themselves in a dangerous situation, not knowing how to proceed. Most of them converted in appearance, just like the Jews of Spain and Morocco. However, there were a lot of ordinary people who stood in danger that time and habit would make true Muslims out of them.

The fear became greater still when a Jewish convert to Islam (apparently not at all an ignoramus), in order to find favour in the eyes of Muslim leaders, gave speeches to the ostensible converts, showing proofs from biblical verses through *remez*⁶⁵ and *gematria*⁶⁶ that with the birth of Muhammad, the Torah of Moses was nullified and the Qu'ran took its place. Those particular speeches made a big impression on the converts who became further rooted in their new faith as well as on those who, until now, were only ostensibly Muslim, but perhaps now they would convert sincerely.

To make matters worse, [p. 33] a fearsome fanatic among the Jews rebelled, and he believed - and made others believe - that he was a prophet of God, announcing the coming of the Messiah, Son of David.

Each difficult time for the Jews was marked with hope of a speedy messianic deliverance. The Jews in Yemen were not an exception in this regard. The air was full of hope. Everyone was certain that the almighty, merciful God of Israel will not let His people be devoured by the Muslims. Most probably, these troubles were sufferings to be endured just before the Messiah's coming - the troubles that pave the way for the Messiah.

⁶⁵ *Remez* (in Hebrew) - allusions or hints.

⁶⁶ *Gematria* (in Hebrew) - "sum of the numerical values of the letters of a Hebrew word, serving to associate it with other words" (Beinfeld and Bochner 2002, p. 201).

The ground was thus prepared - and it indeed didn't take long for a messiah to show up.

The despondent Jews now became thoroughly confused. Some of them converted, while the strongest ones threw in their lot with that messiah. Both ways were dangerous: the converts threatened to destroy the Jewish soul, while those believing in that messiah flirted with staging an uprising against the government - a good pretext to annihilate the Jews by the sword.

The Yemenite scholar, Rabbi Jacob ben Nathanael ibn al-Fayyumi saw the danger, but he himself was too weak to protect these Jews. In his desperation, he called upon Maimonides, whose fame had already spread to Yemen.

Maimonides didn't leave him waiting long for an answer. In a long letter, written to Rabbi Jacob, but targetted at all Jews, he consoles them with heartfelt words so that they shouldn't be weak and despairing. God who created the world with the attribute of mercy would bestow compassion upon His people Israel. Now the situation is bad, but the prophet Isaiah predicted long ago: "That people that lives in darkness will ultimately see a great light."⁶⁷

True, the calamity was tremendous, and it was only getting worse, bringing confusion to the despondent hearts. However, these were just tests with which the eternal people of Israel has been tried since the time of their oldest forefather Abraham. Thus did the Prophets foresee with their prophetic eyes the arising of hatred, which comes from jealousy, because of the Jews' obedience to the Torah, which makes us beloved children to our Father in heaven. From the receiving of the Torah down to the present, there is no king, ruler, or adventurer among the nations of the world who doesn't harbour the intention of destroying our Torah and converting its followers, either with strength and force, or through harmful agitation or good promises.

However, the prophet Isaiah consoled us with the following words: "No weapon formed against you shall succeed, and every tongue that contends with you at law you shall defeat."⁶⁸ Herein lies our consolation: no instrument of murder will succeed on our bodies. Our weak bodies will survive the toughest instruments of torture. Nevertheless, [p. 34] many want to annihilate us with the tongue, and this manifests itself in two ways:

- 1) The Sophists, with their keen minds and even sharper tongues, want to pelt us with questions and doubts concerning the Torah's stories and laws.
- 2) Those who want to be our brothers state that the Torah was holy, given by God, but only until a later prophet arose and brought forth a new one. From then on, the old one became null and void.

Thus says the prophet: "No weapon will destroy you!" Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian, and others who came to the door with swords and spears will not

⁶⁷ cf. Isaiah 9:1

⁶⁸ Isaiah 54:17; translated by Sefaria.org.

prevail over you. “And every tongue that contends with you at law” - and every tongue that will open up a debate with you - “you shall defeat.” Because the new belief in relation to the older one is like a painting compared to real people who live and feel.

Writing about the false prophet, Maimonides warns: Don’t let yourself be persuaded by him. His standing on the side of those who have power says more than one hundred testimonies that there is no truth in him. His proofs and hints are like cobwebs, sufficient only for weak flies to be entangled inside. The Muslims themselves laugh at him and his proofs. They themselves look at him with revulsion, knowing his motives for doing it. No Muslim believes in the false prophet’s proofs. Most of all, it’s ridiculous to assert that Jews intentionally erased the name of Muhammad from the Torah. It is an absurdity even for the learned Muslims, since they know that the Torah has already long since been translated into Greek and Latin, well before Muhammad was born. Even if the Jews should have erased Muhammad’s name from the original, it would have remained in the translations.

Now, regarding the Jew who poses as the Messiah: an honest Jew isn’t allowed to make guesses about the “end of days” when Messiah will come, because the true end of days will never be found out, and all the guesses will never turn out to be the true one. However, we hereby defend the motives of Rabbi Sa’adiah Gaon (882/892-942), whose intention was good, seeing that his generation had little faith and much doubt. Calculating the end of days, Sa’adia intended to calm down those who were anxious, and he did so orally and in writing. What he did was with the intention of holding back weak individuals from disappearing from the Jewish people.

An even greater problem was the transgression of those who wanted to find out about the end of days through the false wisdom of astrology. Beyond the fact that astrology in itself is fake, it leads you to believe in an Almighty who reveals himself through stars instead of believing in God directly through a prophet. Here is just one example among the calculators involved in this astrology: there was someone from al-Andalus⁶⁹ (according to the hypothesis of Heinrich Graetz [1817-1891], it was [p. 35] Rabbi Abraham Ibn-Ezra [1089/1092-1164/1167]) who calculated from the stars that the Messiah will come in the year 4906 A.M.⁷⁰ At that time everyone took him seriously, but when the time came, they made a joke - with a bitter element to it, because in that same year, the Almohads gained much strength and forced the Jews to convert. From that time onwards, there arose several false Messiahs - one in Persia, another in Fez (and soon after him a second one in Fez), and after that, one in Cordoba and one in France - and each one of them caused many troubles for the Jews.

⁶⁹ Arabic word for Spain.

⁷⁰ 1146 C.E.

It's interesting to note that after Maimonides expressed enmity to those who calculate the messianic end, he himself calculated (*Igeret Teman*,⁷¹ Amsterdam edition) that in the year 4976 A.M.,⁷² prophecy will return to the Jews.

Maimonides concluded his letter by asking Rabbi Jacob to distribute copies of it wherever Jews were to be found. However, they should beware of the Muslims while reading it, because there was danger for the reader just as much as for the writer.

Maimonides wrote the letter as a consolation for despondent people. The decree was annulled and the government arrested the false messiah and cut off his head. The Jews needed to bribe their way out with money, but they were satisfied with that outcome.

The name of Maimonides was venerated in Yemen, and in the Kaddish⁷³ at the words *be-ḥayekhon uve-yomekhon*,⁷⁴ they would add *uveḥayei d'Rabana Moshe ben Maimon*.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Epistle to Yemen

⁷² 1216 C.E.

⁷³ Prayer for the sanctification of God's name - recited in Jewish public prayer by mourners and by the one leading the public prayer service.

⁷⁴ "In your lives and in your days" (in Aramaic).

⁷⁵ "And in the life of our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon" (in Aramaic).

Chapter 7: The Commentary on Mishnah

[p. 35] As we already know, Maimonides finished his commentary on the Mishnah at the age of 33.

In this commentary, one of the works of his youth, we can already catch sight of the future world-famous genius at work, proud and confident in his intelligence and believing in his opinions and convictions.

We give the reader here the gist of Maimonides' introduction to his commentary on the Mishnaic Order of *Zera'im*,⁷⁶ which in itself is a great work, demonstrating great mastery of the rabbinic sources and containing an incomparably wonderful system.

We know, begins Maimonides' introduction, that the Creator transmitted the Torah to Moses. Moses transmitted the essential law (the Written Torah), with its commentaries (the Oral Torah), to Aaron, to the latter's sons Eleazar and Ithamar, to the 70 Elders, and to all the Jews - such that everyone heard it from Moses' mouth. In this way, he taught every single one of the 613 *mitzvot*⁷⁷ to them.

[p. 36] In the fortieth year of their wanderings in the desert, on the first day of the eleventh month (Shevat),⁷⁸ Moses gathered all the Jews together and said to them: "We have arrived at the day of my death. Whoever has forgotten a law or commentary can still consult me about it while he has the chance." Then, he answered each of the questions that had been asked, until the seventh day of Adar.⁷⁹ By that time, he had already written down 13 Torah scrolls, one for the Levites as well as one for each of the 12 Tribes, so that each Tribe should have one for itself to study and to know how to conduct oneself. Subsequently, he ascended to heaven at Mount Abarim.⁸⁰

Joshua took over Moses' place in the camp as leader but did not take over his role as lawgiver. Joshua, along with the Elders, needed to follow the Torah of Moses with its commentaries. They obeyed whatever laws they heard from Moses' mouth where doubt or disagreement did not arise. They were allowed to discuss new cases according to the thirteen principles with which the Torah

⁷⁶ "Seeds" - the first of the six orders of the Mishnah, mostly dealing with laws of agriculture.

⁷⁷ *Mitzvot* are religious obligations or commandments in Hebrew; the singular is *mitzvah*.

⁷⁸ The month of Shevat occurs in January/February, and it includes the 15th of Shevat (which includes tree planting).

⁷⁹ The traditional date of Moses' death. The month of Adar immediately follows Shevat, and in some years there are two Adars and in many others just one Adar. The minor holiday of Purim occurs during Adar.

⁸⁰ Mount Abarim, which includes Mount Nebo (where Moses is said to have died), is in present-day Jordan, just east of the Dead Sea.

can be interpreted. However, in most laws no disputes occurred. Only in those laws that required discussion through analogy (comparing one law to another) did disagreement arise. In these cases, they needed to make use of the principle of “going after the majority.”⁸¹ After Moses our Master, the interpretation of the Torah belonged to the Sages, not to the Prophets.

It is necessary to know that prophecy has nothing to do either with those laws that are clear, or with those derived through the 13 interpretive principles. Laws are valid only by means of reasoning, hypothesis, and the interpretive traditions mentioned above. Moreover, the ways in which Joshua and Phinehas⁸² dealt with the laws of the Torah, Rabina and Rav Ashi⁸³ did in a later period.

What prophets are able to do will be explained later. However, it is first necessary to pose the question, who is a true prophet and how does one know for sure that one who claims to be a prophet isn't being deceitful? Maimonides explains as follows:

There are four types of prophets who want people to believe them, and in only one case will we be convinced of his truth. The other three are false prophets, even should they succeed in convincing us otherwise:

- a) One who says that a certain star appeared to him and said: “Serve me in this way and that, and consequently I will do favours for you,” or when he recounts that Baal, Asherah and another idol appeared and said the same thing.
- b) Or he says that God appeared to him and commanded him to serve a certain idol. Both of the above constitute varieties of false prophets; even when they demonstrate wonders, they must be sentenced to death through strangulation - the punishment for a false prophet.
- c) Whoever prophesizes in the name of God and cautions us to observe the [p. 37] Torah with its *mitzvot*, but he prevaricates either to remove a *mitzvah* from the laws of the Torah or to derive another *peshat*,⁸⁴ in contrast to the traditional interpretation - for example, if he teaches that the biblical verse “you shall cut off her hand”⁸⁵ doesn't refer to monetary compensation - he is a false prophet, and he is penalized in the same way (through strangulation).
- d) Whoever speaks of everything in harmony with the tradition of the biblical tradition but orders us to do certain things, like the Prophet Samuel who ordered King Saul to wage war against Amalek, or the Prophet Elisha who didn't allow the massacre of the Aramean army⁸⁶ - one must put him to the test through a wonder, and if the desired wonder comes about, then we must obey

⁸¹ Cf. Exodus 23:2

⁸² Phinehas was Aaron's grandson.

⁸³ Rabina and Rav Ashi were Amoraic figures in Babylonia.

⁸⁴ *Peshat* is the literal interpretation of a biblical verse.

⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 25:12

⁸⁶ II Kings 6:22

the prophet, and whoever obeys the prophet won't be punished with death at the hands of Heaven. However, if the wonder doesn't come about, that is a sign that he is a false prophet, and the outcome is that he is also punished with strangulation.

A prophet must possess the following qualities in order for us to believe in his wonders:

- a) His prophecies should be in the name of God, not in the name of any other star, constellation, or power.
- b) The prophecies should be in accordance with the Torah and its traditional interpretations. The prophet must not allow anything to be removed from the Torah nor any *mitzvah* to be added (except in the "direction of the moment," as will be explained later).
- c) Each predicted wonder must take place. And for each prophecy which contains something that must be done - which isn't either forbidden or permitted - the wonder must be one that comes to pass. Because astrologers and magicians can also sometimes guess what will be in the future, and in order to demonstrate the difference between them and the prophets, the prophets must make sure that all the wonders come to pass in all their details; no detail should be missing. If something is missing, that's a sign that he is a false prophet, and all such people need to be brought to trial.
- d) The wonder isn't the primary thing. One must identify the prophet, first of all, through his good deeds, character, wisdom, faith, asceticism, and many more virtues, and only from such a prophet we may expect a wonder. If he doesn't have all the above qualities, one is forbidden to believe in his prophecies, even when the wonders he predicts materialize.

When a prophet says beforehand that bad things will happen and they don't materialize, it doesn't necessarily prove his falsehood, the proof coming from Jonah's prophecy in Nineveh.⁸⁷ However, when in general he prophesizes that good things will happen, those good things must materialize, for if not, that's a sign of a prophet's falsehood.

(Note: Rabbi Jacob Emden (1697-1776) is hesitant about this last principle. This is because of these words in the Book of Jeremiah: "At another moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom shall be built and planted; but if it does what is displeasing to Me and does not obey Me, then I change my mind concerning the good I planned to bestow upon it."⁸⁸ Thus, it would seem that just as an evil prophecy can be revoked through repentance (as in Nineveh, for example), a good prophecy can be annulled through bad deeds.)

At a given moment, a prophet, concerning whose authenticity there is no doubt whatsoever, can - in an extraordinary case - order to annul a *mitzvah*, like the Prophet Elijah, who offered a sacrifice on Mount Carmel, which was strictly forbidden at the time that the Holy Temple stood. Likewise,

⁸⁷ Jonah prophesized that the city would be destroyed, but it was not destroyed because the city's population repented.

⁸⁸ Jeremiah 18:9-10 (translated by Sefaria.org).

the Prophet Elisha ordered the destruction of all the fruit trees in Moab, contravening [p. 38] the Torah law that forbids cutting down fruit trees for the sake of laying siege to a city.⁸⁹

These cases fall under the category of “direction of the moment” - a decision that applies only for the moment, and nothing more. If one would have asked Elijah, “Are you starting to regularly make sacrifices outside the Holy Temple?”, and if one would have asked Elisha, “Are you allowed to cut down fruit trees?”, and they answered, “yes,” we would be allowed - at that moment - to consider them to be false prophets.

A true prophet is allowed to annul one or another *mitzvah* because of the “direction of the moment,” except for overturning the prohibition of idol worship. One is forbidden to order others to serve idols even once, even for a moment. Except for that one case, a prophet is allowed to annul one or another *mitzvah* because of the “need of the moment,” and Jews must comply with the prophet’s orders, under pain of death at the hands of Heaven for non-compliance.

The strength of a prophet reaches up to that point, but no more. A prophet is allowed, for one time, to order Jews to take up weapons on the Sabbath and to wage war against an enemy, but he isn’t allowed to say that he has a prophetic vision that the measure of a *tehum Shabbat*⁹⁰ isn’t 2000 cubits but rather 2001 or 1999 cubits. If he says so, he would render himself a false prophet. For when it comes to the Torah that has been handed down, he is a Jew just like everyone else, and if a thousand prophets should say that the law is one way and a thousand and one sages say the other way, the latter opinion prevails, according to the principle of “going after the majority.”⁹¹

Prophecy doesn’t have any power to change the Torah on a permanent basis - “[Torah] is not in heaven.”⁹² It is on Earth and it is decided according to human reasoning, not prophecy. The Torah doesn’t say, “You shall come to the prophet” but rather “You shall come to the judge.”⁹³ One must consult a sage, not a prophet.

Having finished his discussion of prophecy, Maimonides proceeds to teach the chain of tradition from Moses our Master to the Talmud, as we will see in the next chapter.

⁸⁹ II Kings 3:4-27; cf. Deuteronomy 20:19.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 5, footnote 4 for the definition of *tehum Shabbat*.

⁹¹ cf. Exodus 23:2

⁹² Deuteronomy 30:12

⁹³ cf. Deuteronomy 17:8

Chapter 8: The Mishnah and Talmud

[p. 38] Joshua remained after the death of Moses our Master to bring the Jews over to the Promised Land, and God told him at the start: “Study the Torah of Moses, My servant.” Joshua transmitted all the details, norms, and interpretations to the Elders and to Phinehas the High Priest. This way, the tradition was passed on in the following order: Moses, Joshua, Phinehas, Eli, Samuel, David, Ahijah, Elijah, Elisha, Jehoiada, Zachariah, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Joel, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Baruch ben Neriah, Ezra, Simeon the Just, Antigonus of Sokho,⁹⁴ Yosé ben Yoezer of Tzeredah⁹⁵ and Yosé ben Yohanan, Joshua ben Perahiah and Nittai of Arbela,⁹⁶ Judah ben Tabbai and Simeon ben Shetah, Shemaiah and Abtalion, Hillel, Simeon, Rabban Gamaliel - up to Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi,⁹⁷ who was also known as “Rabbi” (Our Holy Rabbi).

[p. 39] Until Rabbi Judah came along, the Torah was only written; therefore, it was called the Written Torah. The literal interpretations and specific points were transmitted from memory by the rabbi to his student orally; therefore, it was called the Oral Torah. Only the head judge or prophet would write down these interpretations for his own use, and he would teach them orally to the students. The students, out of fear of forgetting, would write the interpretations down for themselves privately, and these written words were called *Megillat Setarim* (“Concealed Scrolls”).

However, in Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi’s time, the Roman persecutions of the Jews intensified, and there was fear that the *yeshiva* centres would be closed and the Jews would completely forget the Torah. Therefore, Rabbi Judah wrote down all the laws, and divided them into tractates and orders so that each individual would be able to study for himself, wherever he might be, even if he was the only one in the area.

All the laws are divided into six orders of Mishnah, as follows:

The first order: *Zera'im*,⁹⁸ which discusses all the *mitzvot* [commandments] concerning grains and fruit that grow in the Land of Israel, such as mixed species, the Sabbatical year, consuming fruit of young trees, tithes, and the like;

The second order: *Mo'ed*,⁹⁹ about the laws of Sabbath and the Festivals;

The third order: *Nashim*,¹⁰⁰ dealing with the laws of divorce, marriage, levirate marriage, and so on;

⁹⁴ In Hebrew, it literally means “Antignos, man of Sokho.” **Necessary???**

⁹⁵ In Hebrew, it literally means “Yosé ben Yoezer, man of Tzeredah.” **Necessary???**

⁹⁶ Also known as Nittai the Arbelite. **Necessary???**

⁹⁷ Also known as Rabbi Judah the Patriarch.

⁹⁸ Hebrew for “Seeds.”

⁹⁹ Hebrew for “Festivals.”

¹⁰⁰ Hebrew for “Women.”

The fourth order: *Nezikin*,¹⁰¹ having to do with all the civil laws between one person and another;

The fifth order: *Kodashim*,¹⁰² about the sacrifices, the altar, and the Holy Temple; and

The sixth order: *Tohorot*,¹⁰³ dealing with the laws of purity and impurity.

The acronym that one should have in mind for the orders of Mishna is *zman nakat*¹⁰⁴ - *Zera'im*, *Mo'ed*, *Nashim*, *Nezikin*, *Kodashim*, *Tohorot*.

One can divide the types of Mishnaic laws into five, as follows:

The first: those explanations that were passed down from rabbi to student, going all the way back to Moses our Master that are hinted at in a biblical verse and one can derive them by means of reason. There are no differences of opinion with respect to these particular laws. When one says, “Here’s what I know by oral tradition,” it’s already enough of a guarantee of its truth.

The second: these are the laws called “law(s) given to Moses from Sinai.”¹⁰⁵ Even though there are no proofs from biblical verses, nobody disputes them.

The third: those laws that life experience required, and one needed to bring them forth from the Torah with principles of reason. Here, rabbis certainly were entitled to differences of opinion, and the majority prevailed.

The fourth: consisted of those decrees and regulations that the sages of each generation instituted in order to make a “fence around the Torah.”¹⁰⁶ In this case, there could also be a dispute between sages until the regulation is adopted by all Jews; from that time onward one can certainly not abolish it.

The fifth: these are all the civil laws that have to do with the social lives of Jewish people as people and as Jews. Such regulations were made by the following: Moses our Master, the Prophets, Ezra, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, Rabban Gamaliel, and others.

[p. 40] After explaining the continuity of all the Mishnaic “orders,” and demonstrating why one topic comes first, another second, third, and so forth, and how all of them are tied together, Maimonides explains how, based on the Mishnah, the immense structure of the Talmud, which was divided into two units the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, was formed, concluding with Ravina (died c. 420 C.E.) and Rav Ashi (352-427 C.E.), the last of the Talmudic sages, who imitated Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi and edited the Talmud.

¹⁰¹ “Damages” in Hebrew.

¹⁰² “Holy Things” in Hebrew.

¹⁰³ “Purities” in Hebrew.

¹⁰⁴ Literally, “time [that is or has been] taken” in Hebrew; spelled as זמן נקט.

¹⁰⁵ Sinai was the mountain where God gave the Torah to Moses.

¹⁰⁶ Mishna, Tractate Avot 1:1

Rav Ashi, who was the last sage completing the Babylonian Talmud, laid out the following four tasks for the Talmud to accomplish:

- a) To record the Mishnah and all the words, hypotheses, and arguments surrounding the topics that it contains, as well as all the disputes and arguments that each Amoraic figure had with each of his opponents. That was his main intention.
- b) To clarify a legal decision in a dispute between two rabbinic adversaries, going according to either literal or novel interpretations of the Mishnah.
- c) The new topics that the Amoraim derived from the Mishnah through the use of logical argumentation, where they took it from, and who brought forth all the regulations and decrees that were made from the time of the holy Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi up to Rav Ashi's time.
- d) Discourses on biblical verses for a variety of occasions and events; this is what we call *Aggadah*.¹⁰⁷

When it comes to that last task, Maimonides says: “Nobody is allowed to disparage the *Aggadah* in comparison with halakhah (as almost all teachers up to his time and most probably afterwards as well have done), because hidden, marvellous and splendid topics of wisdom are found in them. Looking at *Aggadah* with reason and carefully considering the sages' words, one can derive the greatest wisdom that is beyond the ordinary capacity of human beings. One can extract rare, deep treasures that the sages hid in the text, because they did not want to make public every single important truth for everyone – truths for which great philosophers spent years to discover.”

Looking superficially, it appears as if the Aggadic statements are far from reasonable, but with experience and careful consideration one can catch sight of the brilliant pearls inside these statements in which one can find hidden treasures.

The Sages of the Talmud concealed these profound truths within these aggadic statements for two reasons: First of all, to sharpen the students' minds and to develop their reasoning capacity. Secondly, in order to delude fools so that they never understand them. Those fools strongly revere the incomprehensible; if one would show them the truth in its full glory, they would turn themselves away from it. One is forbidden to reveal any secrets to such people, because their minds are incapable of accepting the truth in its full magnificence and glory.

¹⁰⁷ The non-legal portions of the Talmud.

Chapter 9: The Human Mission

[p. 41] The reasons that our Sages spoke in a concealed language are as follows:

a) The weakness of human understanding to conceive of true reasoning; b) the tremendous lust for This World's pleasures, which confuse an already weak mind; c) the natural aversion to think deeply in this sort of wisdom that has no direct use for the body; and d) the hustle to gain more money and possessions.

The only ones who can study wisdom are those who are interested in wisdom and who prepare themselves with the necessary acquisition of knowledge. Without that basic knowledge, one cannot enter the gate of wisdom.

To that end, Maimonides presents the following parable: Let's ask a smart person who is learned in medicine, in poetry and in other disciplines, albeit he doesn't know any astronomy or mathematics at all. He may very well think that the sun that we see is as big as a plate, even though it's really a very big ball that's over $166 \frac{3}{8}$ as big as our world; and that with regard to the globe of our earth, by which we measure the sun, one could encircle it with a rope that would girdle the sun. This "learned person" would scoff [p. 42] at the following questions: First, how can one, who only occupies one part of Earth, know its size? Second, how can one on Earth know about the sun, which is quite high and shines quite strongly and one can only see its reflection? How can he measure its full extent quite precisely? After studying astronomy, geometry, and advanced mathematics, he will understand these questions quite easily, even though the sun is over 100 times bigger than our planet and about 1000 times farther away from us.

In such a case, is this person to be characterized as someone who is learned in other disciplines, just not in astronomy, or is he plainly and certainly to be included with those who are not learned in all disciplines? To such a person one cannot present any of those matters, because instead of learning them he will laugh at them. King Solomon indeed warned not to speak to a fool without any wisdom, because he will be scornful of your words.¹⁰⁸

Even among scholars, there are different levels of understanding. And the truth that one can reveal to a great scholar cannot necessarily be presented to a lesser scholar. We see, after all, that a rationale that would be accepted as a truth by reasonable people would be ridiculed by fools, and it would be accepted by average people only with a question mark.

Knowing all of that, the Talmudic Sages enclosed important truths in simple words and marvellous stories, in order for the masses not to understand them, and only those scholars who are prepared in that area can open and take out the pearl of the story that is inside.

As a result, nobody is allowed to disparage an aphorism of Aggadah that he doesn't understand or that seems to him to be a waste of time. Rather, he needs to attribute his lack of understanding

¹⁰⁸ Proverbs 23:9

either to his not doing enough studying or not studying in depth. Thus, the Talmud suggests: “Whoever makes fun of the Sages’ words will be punished with boiling-hot excrement.”¹⁰⁹ The wise person’s reasoning should be cold, and not get contaminated with nonsense and superficiality. He should desire to understand these words correctly, and from this attitude it will be seen that there is nothing at all to make fun of.

As an example of how to understand an aphorism from Aggadah, Maimonides presents this quote from tractate *Berakhot* 8a, “From the time the Holy Temple was destroyed, the Holy One Blessed be He has in His world only four cubits of halakha.” Interpreted literally, the quotation absolutely makes no sense. What, then, does it mean? Are all the other disciplines and opinions then for nothing? And is it then possible to think that until Shem and Eber - the first students of divine wisdom¹¹⁰ - came along, the Holy One Blessed be He had no portion in His world? Only upon reflecting more deeply on this aphorism would someone discover its importance.

We know, says Maimonides, that the ancient Sages, after a lot of thinking, established the rule that every creature must have a purpose for the sake of which it was created. Arriving at that decision, the Sages took it upon themselves to classify all the creatures, assigning to each one of them the foreordained purpose of its creation.

[p. 43] For ordinary tools, it was agreed that the aim was clear: the saw, the hammer, the pliers, the needle, the scissors, etc., were all created to serve the artisan in his task. What the Sages indeed needed to discover was the purpose of each type of plant, tree, grass, and mineral, as well as all the variety of beasts, reptiles, insects, and others - each with its own form, one being different from the other with different ways of growing, being born, and reproducing.

Thousands of years have passed since the Talmudic era, and we still don’t know even a part of it, except, perhaps, for a few types of grasses and roots, where we have indeed succeeded in finding out their uses. We understand that each species has its set mission even though we still don’t know its intended purpose.

Only King Solomon knew how to explain the purpose of everything, from the tall cedar tree down to the lowly hyssop, and from the largest beast to the smallest insect plus the fish of the waters.¹¹¹

While each of these specific purposes remains unknown, it can be nevertheless ascertained that all creatures that are to be found in our world (under the sphere of the moon, according to Maimonides’ language) are for the sake of people: horses, donkeys and camels - to bear the burden that man himself cannot and to carry him where he himself can’t arrive so quickly going on foot;

¹⁰⁹ Gittin 57a

¹¹⁰ The *yeshiva* (seminary) of Shem and Eber - pre-Abrahamic offspring of Noah who were still alive at the time of Jacob, the last of the three patriarchs - isn’t mentioned in Genesis itself; it is part of the midrashic interpretation of Genesis.

¹¹¹ Cf. I Kings 5:13

cows - for the sake of their milk; sheep - for their wool; hens - for the sake of their eggs, and on it goes. Thus the same is true as well for each variety of grass and trees, whether because of its usefulness in eating or because of its medicinal importance. Each generation discovers more uses than the previous generation knew. Even with regard to the poisonous plants, if they aren't for eating, they have great medicinal uses.

In short, everything in the world has a purpose: to provide utility for humankind. However, what is the intended purpose when it comes to people themselves?

The answer is that all creatures have one only task: trees, to bring forth their own special sorts of fruit; bees, to produce honey; swallows, to build their nests from mud; spiders, to weave their webs. The remaining actions are only secondary in order to be able to live and to do the tasks in which each of these creatures specializes.

Humankind is the only species that does varied tasks. Humans build and destroy; they weave and unravel. Humans are as smart as a fox and at the same time more stupid than a donkey; they are as merciful as a lion and as cruel as a tiger. Humans are all these things; they possess all the strengths and all the weaknesses, and make use of all of them.

After a lot of consideration, the ancient Sages came to the conclusion that humankind, just like all the creatures, also has only one task, and the rest are there merely to support its existence, things it must do in order to maintain its mission, for which it was created.

[p. 44] Coming to that conclusion, we must say that it is not unfounded that humankind is endowed with reasoning and logic, more so than all the other creatures, only in order for it to excel therein, just as the others have their own physical capabilities. After all, it would be absurd to believe that humankind is endowed with reasoning only in order for it to live like all the unreasoning animals for the sake of eating, drinking, and lust.

Reasoning means to learn: learning and thinking until one can understand the unity of God. That is the purpose of human beings in the world.

However, as explained earlier, human reasoning can't function properly unless humankind eliminates from itself the four aforementioned interferences. One can thus understand that the body and the soul side by side are like Rome and Jerusalem: one cannot rise unless the second falls. The fulfillment of the soul cannot come about unless the body is weak in its demands, and vice versa.

In short, the purpose of all the other creatures is to serve people, and humankind's purpose is to develop its reasoning, in order to raise itself to the point of comprehending pure godliness (the unity of the Creator).

Chapter 10: The “Superior Human”¹¹² and His Worth

[p. 44] The person within whom all kinds of feelings and sensitivities come together - physical and spiritual, lustful and reasonable - can come down on whatever side he wants. This holds true whether he wants to separate himself from all sensual lusts, only holding on to enough of them to keep himself alive and to become a “superior human,” or whether he wants to give his lusts the upper hand, becoming like an animal that lives only for the sake of eating, drinking, and reproducing.

On the other hand, as has been shown earlier, if a person’s main task would be to live like an animal, he would need to have instilled in him no more reasoning than in animals. Having more reasoning, it is to be affirmed that his mission is also different than that of the other beasts.

The reasoning with which humankind is endowed more than all the other creatures indicates to us the way that he needs to go on, in order to serve his true purpose.

In brief, the goal of all creatures is to serve humankind; a human’s goal is to distinguish himself with a reasonable life, far from lusts and close to wisdom. Think how much farther one can develop with reasoning, along with practicing good deeds, getting in the habit of practicing good character traits, and taking from the world only what is necessary to be able to live.

Such a person perfects in himself the purpose of the entire Creation, and God had him in mind when creating the world.

[p. 45] This truth is confirmed not only from our sages and prophets but also from ancient non-Jewish sages, who - with their wisdom - hadn’t even heard or known of our prophets. They also were aware of this rule, and they also said that a person cannot be complete unless there were united in him the thought and practise of good attributes. It is enough to quote the speech of the famous philosopher, Aristotle (384-322 BCE): “The will of God is that a person should be understanding and pious - that is, practising good deeds. A wise person who doesn’t withdraw from lust isn’t wise at all, because the basic building block of wisdom is to take from the world only what is most necessary. A wise person and a lustful person are two extremes that cannot be united in one person in any way, shape, or form.”

The Nazirite,¹¹³ who is far from lust, is one who does good things, but he doesn’t do them in wisdom. He’s also still far from the true way, but at least he is nearer to it in that way than one who speaks philosophy and yet is lustful, because as Aristotle says, “an ignoramus cannot be pious at all.” Whoever disagrees with this, contradicts the rule of the wise.

¹¹² Yiddish “*Oybermensch*,” derived from the German term “*Übermensch*” made popular in the philosophy of the 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It is often translated as “superman.”

¹¹³ A Nazirite is one who, based on chapter 6 of Numbers, abstains from drinking wine or eating grapes, cutting his hair, and being in contact with the dead.

Therefore, the Torah declares in a lot of places, “you shall learn and you shall do”¹¹⁴ - studying comes first and that is the main thing. From wisdom one can attain “action”, but from “action” one can’t achieve wisdom. Regarding the same issue, the Talmud¹¹⁵ says that study is greater because it leads to action; however, actions can’t lead to wisdom.

One question remains: We have determined that divine wisdom didn’t create anything whatsoever without a purpose, that humankind is the purpose of the entire Creation, and that humankind’s goal is to perfect itself in wisdom and to arrive at the truth. So then, why do we see that most people who were created do not think at all, are empty of wisdom and eager for lust, while precisely the true sort of person (according to our reckoning) is almost not to be found, one among many, quite often the only such person in one or even more generations? Concerning that, one can present two answers.

Answer #1

Most people are created with the goal of serving the one outstanding person, just as the multitude of trees, grasses, animals, and birds were created to provide for people - that is, the many exist on a permanent basis for the sake of the individual person.

If everybody became absorbed in wisdom and philosophy, the world would be destroyed in a short time.

Humankind is deficient in a lot of things. Humans cannot eat grass at all, they cannot go around naked, and they cannot sleep outdoors. They must sow grain, harvest, thresh and grind, bake and cook, build houses, weave and sew clothes, and make various utensils and tools. Methuselah’s years¹¹⁶ would not be enough for an individual person to accomplish all these things. From where, then, will he have the time to study wisdom?

[p. 46] Therefore, the masses of people were created so that they would do all these things, in order for the few sages to have for themselves a world with all good things, and they, having everything prepared for them, would be able to devote themselves to wisdom.

How clever is the saying: “If not for the crazy ones, the world would be destroyed.”

And nobody is crazier than humankind! Weak in mind and weaker yet in body, they nonetheless traverse the seven continents from one side to the other, crossing oceans during the winter and tropical areas during the summer, and they put themselves in danger from animals and insects - all in order to earn a few dinars (ancient currency).¹¹⁷ Having saved some coins, they give

¹¹⁴ There is no actual phrase like that in the Torah, but “you shall study” and “you shall do” often occur not far from one another in biblical books like Deuteronomy.

¹¹⁵ tractate *Kiddushin* 40b

¹¹⁶ Methuselah, in chapter 5 of Genesis, lived 969 years, the longest of any biblical character.

¹¹⁷ The dinar is still the name of the currency of several Balkan and Arab countries, and it was a universal currency in Roman times.

them to artisans to build a stone house that should stand in place for many years, despite their knowledge that there already aren't a lot of years left for them to live – a span of time for which a weak hut would be more than enough. Is there a greater foolishness and craziness than this?!

The same is true of material pleasures: They are certainly crazy and foolish, but they are useful for settling the world. Consequently, the Sages call such people *am ha-aretz*,¹¹⁸ because their task is to maintain the soil with all that they have at their disposal.

Someone might ask: After all, do we not see those foolish ignoramuses who live quietly, while others - even scholars - work for them? One merely needs to understand that the ignoramus really isn't so completely quiet, and that he also is working for the one who is the set purpose of the Creation: The ignoramus orders his slave to build a palace and to plant a splendid vineyard. And it will be possible that, when a wandering pious person comes there, he will protect himself under the shadow of one of the palace's walls and thus be saved from death, or the ignoramus will take a glass of wine from his vineyard to give to a pious person whom a snake had bitten, and thus save his life.

It seems to us that the foolish ignoramus is well-rested, but he really isn't. His order to his slave is also a task - to prepare something for the individual pious person, who is the set purpose of the Creation. We don't see that, but the Creator Blessed be He sees it in advance and prepares for it through this particular thing.

Ben Zoma¹¹⁹ expressed that very idea: Standing on the Temple Mount and seeing a multitude of Jews who came for the pilgrimage festivals¹²⁰ in Jerusalem,¹²¹ he proclaimed: "Blessed be the One who created them in order to serve us," because he knew of his importance as the leading one of his generation.

Answer #2

The second reason for the existence of the many ignoramuses is because learned people remain small in number. This is what was decided by divine wisdom, about which one cannot ask "why is it like that?" - exactly like one cannot ask why there are only 9 spheres, 7 fixed [p. 47] stars and 4 elements. We must accept it as fact. The same is true with the fact that there are few scholars and many fools, and that the many were created for the sake of the few.

¹¹⁸ An ignoramus; literally, Hebrew for "people of the soil."

¹¹⁹ Tannaitic figure of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE.

¹²⁰ The pilgrimage festivals are Passover, Shavuot (or Pentecost), and Sukkot (or Tabernacles); during those festivals in Temple times, many Jews travelled to Jerusalem from all over.

¹²¹ tractate *Berakhot* 58a

This is what Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai¹²² says: “I see the people of high attainments and they are small in number. If there are two, I am one of them, and my son is the second.”¹²³ And if he was able to say that for his generation, which had many Tannaitic figures in it, how much more so in the subsequent generations.

Consequently, it is simplest to say that the many were created so that those particular elites don’t stay lonely and cheerless.

Maimonides himself senses the weakness of this particular reason. Because of that, he says: You shouldn’t have in mind that those uses are insignificant and small, because we see after all that the Holy One Blessed be He created wicked people in the Land of Israel and sustained them there in order to protect Jews from wild animals (“I shall not drive them away from you in a single year, lest the Land become desolate”).¹²⁴ And the Sages say this about a part of a verse from Ecclesiastes (12:13) - “for that is man’s whole duty” - all people exist only for the sake of giving happiness for that very individual.

After the explanation that the multitude of creatures were created for the sake of people, and all people were created for the sake of the individual who learns wisdom and practices good character traits (learning comes first, and then actions), it is quite easy to understand the quote, “the Holy One Blessed be He only has in His world four cubits of halakha¹²⁵ alone.”¹²⁶ That is to say that halakha alone was the main purpose of the entire Creation. The rest are only secondary matters, like materiality for a scholar.

Concluding this idea, Maimonides turns back to discuss the method that he utilised in his commentary on Mishnah.

¹²² Tannaitic figure of the 2nd century CE.

¹²³ Tractate *Sukkah* 45b; Hezekiah says in the name of Rabbi Jeremiah who says in the name of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, that the latter has seen the people of high attainments, those who will see God’s presence in the Hereafter. Cf. Soncino Talmud, pp. 209-210 of *Sukkah*.

¹²⁴ Exodus 23:29

¹²⁵ Jewish law

¹²⁶ tractate *Berakhot* 8a

Chapter 11: The Thirteen Fundamental Principles of Judaism

[p. 47] Concluding his discussion about the Aggadic part of the Talmud, Maimonides turns back to the subject with which he had begun: to explain how the Mishnah and its broader commentary, the Talmud were compiled.

Rav Ashi (352-427 CE) gathered together all the commentaries on the Mishnah in 35 tractates. There is no Talmudic tractate in the Order of *Zera'im* (Seeds) except *Berakhot*; the entire Order of *Mo'ed* (Festivals) is present in the Talmud except for tractate *Shekalim*. There is also no Talmudic tractate for *Arayot* and *Avot* from the Order of *Nezikin* (Damages), nor is there one for tractates *Middot* and *Kinnim* from the Order of *Kodashim* (Holy Things), nor is there any from the Order of *Tohorot* (Purities) except for *Niddah* alone.

After the completion of the Babylonian Talmud,¹²⁷ Rav Ashi passed away in Babylonia.

This is how the Sages of the Land of Israel, and Rabbi Yohanan in particular, arranged the Jerusalem Talmud.¹²⁸ The Yerushalmi is composed of 5 complete Orders, but there is no Talmudic tractate from the Order of *Tohorot* in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, except for *Niddah*.

[p. 48] As a consequence, it required a large amount of work and much hardship on Maimonides' part, consulting the Tosefta and *beraitot*,¹²⁹ and sifting through both Talmuds, to find all the scattered halakhot (laws) in order to create a way to understand the Order of *Tohorot*.

Any Talmudist who reads Maimonides' introduction to his commentary on the Order of *Tohorot* is convinced that this statement isn't an exaggeration. And it could be truthfully said that if it were only for this introduction, Maimonides could claim to be universally recognized, just as he is now in the rabbinic world.

The last of the Talmudic Sages died - Rabina II (d. 475 or 500 CE) was one of them - and from then onwards, their rabbinic successors were only allowed to study what had already been written, but not to add to it or to take away from it.

The Geonim¹³⁰ composed commentaries on the Talmud, but only on certain tractates, and they didn't succeed in completing their commentary, whether because of various obstacles or on account of their short lifespans. Other Geonim composed books of readily accessible laws, in

¹²⁷ Known in Hebrew as the *Talmud Bavli* or simply the *Bavli*.

¹²⁸ Also called the Palestinian Talmud; known in Hebrew as the *Talmud Yerushalmi* or simply the *Yerushalmi*.

¹²⁹ Tosefta and *beraitot* were materials written at the same time as the Mishnah but not included in Mishnah.

¹³⁰ The generations of rabbis in Babylonia who lived after the Savora'im (who lived in the 6th century CE), and before the Rishonim (who lived from the 11th to 15th centuries CE).

Hebrew or in Arabic; for example, *Halakhot Gedolot*, *Halakhot Ketanot*, *Halakhot Pesukot*,¹³¹ the *Halakhot* of Rav Aḥa of Shabḥa (ca. 680-ca. 752 or slightly later), etc.

The laws that the well-known Rabbi Isaac Alfasi¹³² compiled included all the aforementioned treatises, because all the laws that Jews needed to know in order to live in exile were to be found there. In that work, Alfasi analyzes all the previous laws, ruling on them on the basis of the previously-mentioned authors and rightly demonstrating their mistakes. About Alfasi Maimonides says, “I could only catch a few of his mistakes; less than ten in number.”

In his commentaries on the Orders *Moed*, *Nashim*, *Nezikin*, and on *Hullin* and four other tractates, Maimonides collected and analyzed the best previous commentaries together with those explanations that he heard from his rabbis, especially from Rabbi Joseph ha-Levi,¹³³ “whose sharp mind and depth in learning intimidates others who are studying.”

Studying Mishnah by itself, without the Talmud, is an impossibility, because the Talmud erases and adds words; it shows that this Mishnah is studied according to one method and the other is according to a second interpretation. The *halakha* (Jewish law) is only valid in certain cases, and in other cases it’s applied differently. In brief: No Mishnah can be understood without having in one’s head all that the Talmud¹³⁴ presented on the topic in various places.

Therefore, Maimonides created his commentary on Mishnah, having four main objectives for its students:

a) To understand the proper meaning of the Mishnah, summarizing the entire Talmudic give-and-take that continues for a number of pages and often over several tractates, which an ordinary person cannot hold in his head.

b) To know the halakhic decision on the spot, something that is not explicitly expressed in the Talmud.

[p. 49] c) The Mishnah with Maimonides’ commentary becomes a brief introduction which will later come in handy for the student who wishes to study each topic at length.

d) It should be useful for people who have already studied the Talmud and want to review it in summary form in order to recall it on a permanent basis.

Having these four points in mind, Maimonides utilized only the shortest and clearest commentaries, avoiding the complicated and long ones, which were, in his opinion, far from the

¹³¹ *Halakhot Gedolot*, *Halakhot Ketanot*, and *Halakhot Pesukot* are all collections of rabbinic halakha from the Geonic era.

¹³² Isaac ben Jacob Alfasi ha-Cohen (1013–1103).

¹³³ Rabbi Joseph ha-Levi ben Meir Ibn Migash (1077-1141), [already in Chapter 1 of this part. Necessary?](#)

¹³⁴ In traditional Jewish contexts, Talmud (especially other than the Mishnah) is very often referred to as *Gemara*, Aramaic for “learning”.

truth and which are still disputed in the Talmud proper. He cites the reasons that these complicated and long commentaries produced a variation in opinion among the Tanna'im¹³⁵ and how the law was eventually determined.

In general, Maimonides was careful to speak as briefly as possible. His words are measured and weighed.

In the end, he gave a chronology of all the Talmudic sages, divided into ten parts, and every sage was listed according to their importance in the Talmud.

This task by itself is enough for us to acknowledge Maimonides' tremendous expertise and ingenious system.

He wasn't always brief. At certain times when Maimonides wished to discuss a topic in general science, or where he wanted to explain a principle of faith, he gladly wrote longer discourses, not being afraid of length.

One of those places where his discourse was quite lengthy is his commentary on the Mishnah in *Sanhedrin*, "All of Israel has a portion in the World to Come."¹³⁶ In this case, Maimonides finds it necessary to define in a precise way: What does the word "Jew" mean exactly, and how can we understand the term "World to Come"?

With regard to the first question, Maimonides established 13 fundamental principles in which a Jew must believe; otherwise, he isn't worthy of the name "Israel." Here they are:

1) To believe with complete faith that the Creator creates and controls all creatures, and that He alone made, makes and will make everything.

2) To believe that the Creator is One, that there is no oneness like His, and that He alone is our God who was, is, and will be.

3) To believe that He is not corporeal at all, and consequently He does not possess material attributes, because there is no connection whatsoever between Him and corporeality.¹³⁷

5) To believe that one must pray only to Him, and not to any other gods except for Him.

6) To believe that everything that the Prophets said is true.

[p. 50] 7) To believe that the prophecy of Moses our Master was absolutely true and that he was the greatest of the Prophets, both those before him and those after him.

¹³⁵ Rabbis who lived in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE and are cited in the Mishna.

¹³⁶ Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 11:1 or tractate *Sanhedrin* 90a. This serves as part of the introduction to the recitation of a chapter of *Avot* on Sabbath afternoons from after Passover to before the Jewish New Year.

¹³⁷ The following principal is missing from the original text: 4) To believe that the Creator is first and last.

8) To believe that the Torah that we have is the same one that was given to Moses.

9) To believe that the Torah will not be changed and that God will give no other Torah in its place.

10) To believe that God knows every person's thoughts.

11) To believe that He rewards with good those who observe His commandments and punishes those who transgress them.

12) To believe that the Messiah will come; even though he delays, one must anticipate him every day.

13) To believe that the dead will be brought back to life, when God will wish to make them alive.

All of these constitute the “articles of faith,” known by the name of the “Thirteen Principles,” which Maimonides obliged the Jews to believe in. According to Maimonides, a Jew who doesn't believe in them doesn't deserve the name “Israel” even if he studies Torah and observes its commandments.

After Maimonides came other sages who disputed Maimonides' 13 principles. Thus Rabbi Joseph Albo (ca. 1380-ca. 1444) proposed only 3 principles. Other great rabbis were of the opinion that Judaism should mainly consist of practicing the commandments along with good character traits, and that it has little to do with thought. Maimonides himself states in his “Eight Chapters,” that “many people don't recognize any commandment or transgression in the mind, but rather, only in the power of consciousness and feeling. This person, however, also sees in the mind good and bad traits: good—in believing; and bad--in not believing at all or in not believing correctly.”

Maimonides was not the first Jew to speak about such principles of faith, but he was the first to establish these principles on the basis of philosophical interpretations - for example, that belief in a corporeal god is directly tantamount to denying God's existence. This was opposed to the opinion that Rabbi Abraham ben David (ca. 1125-1198)¹³⁸ expressed with the following remark: “Greater and better Jews than Maimonides have believed so.¹³⁹” Maimonides was also the first to present specific laws related to the principles.

However, all the speculations and differences of opinion among the great rabbis did not prevent the Thirteen Principles from being adopted by all the Jews who recite them every day after praying.

We now already know Maimonides definition of “Israel.” What about the “World to Come”?

¹³⁸ Maimonides' main early commentator, Rabbi Abraham ben David, lived in Posquières in Provence, a region in the south of France.

¹³⁹ In a corporeal God.

Maimonides gives an extensive explanation of that in the next chapter.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Whereas Rabbi Kruger ends this sentence and chapter with “namely:”, I decided that it is more appropriate to end the sentence with “in the next chapter”.

Chapter 12: What is the World to Come?

[p. 51] “In defining reward and punishment,” says Maimonides, “there are various opinions. Therefore, no person can comprehend it in a precise way without inaccuracies in his mind.” In general, these opinions can be divided into the following groups:

The first group believes that the place of reward for good deeds is in the Garden of Eden. There, one can eat and drink, not having to work like in this world. Every righteous person would have a house built out of precious stones, beds spread with silk, and rivers that flow with wine, oil and fragrant spices. In short, this is a place where all material delights exist. The punishment for transgressions is in Gehenna, a place in which bodies are burnt and tormented with the greatest tortures.

That group reinforces its opinion with a number of biblical verses and Talmudic quotations which, when they are taken literally, appear to show this.

The second group is of the opinion that the time for rewards is after the Messiah’s coming. Then, people will live happily ever after. The Messiah will also live eternally. Ready-made silken clothes will grow out of the ground, there will be freshly-baked rolls on the trees, and yet more such impossibilities. The punishment is that non-righteous people will not be worthy of seeing it. That group also finds biblical verses and Talmudic quotations, whose simple interpretation seems to indicate this.

The third group maintains that the reward will come after the revival of the dead, when people - along with all their relatives, parents and children - will rise from their graves, eat, drink, and live forever. The punishment consists of not rising from the grave during the revival of the dead together with those will indeed become alive again. This group also has a number of proofs from biblical verses in connection with its opinion.

The fourth group is convinced that the reward for doing divine commandments consists of physical delights - to have everything that the body desires in abundance: wealth, houses, Israel’s own land with its own king, successful children, health and strength, and mastery over those who did bad things to them. The punishment would be the opposite of the aforementioned rewards. Since we’re now in exile, the curses from both biblical admonitions¹⁴¹ and other verses demonstrate this.

The fifth group combines all the previously mentioned good things together: Righteous people will live to see the Messiah, who will revive all the dead, and everyone will be brought into the Garden of Eden to eat and drink, staying in good health, and never dying.

Nonetheless, it doesn’t occur to any of these groups to ask the following questions: What is the World to Come? Is that the ultimate goal or just a means for a higher purpose? They only ask

¹⁴¹ Leviticus 26:14-45 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68.

irrelevant questions: [p. 52] Will the dead arise with their previous sickness? Will they be rich or poor? Will the dead rise with clothes or only with their shrouds, or will they be completely naked?

Guilty in that particular superficiality are those students who take the Talmudic quotations and biblical verses literally, not willing to penetrate into their hidden intention. Many of them simply lack wisdom and don't have anyone who could direct their attention to the truth of these matters. Thus, these students - among them, preachers for the masses - mix up necessities, possibilities and impossibilities in one question, and they present this to an audience of ordinary people. It is a real pity for those who are "poor in intellect," and it is even more pity for the profound words which they offend through their trivial studies. It is better, instead, to say like Moses our Master: All people, hearing the Torah laws, will say, "only a great and understanding nation can have such a Torah."¹⁴² Hearing their interpretation, all people will say: "Only a small, foolish nation can think and believe thus."

Others, in turn, having in mind that there is nothing beyond the literal interpretation of these verses, come to disparage them, scoffing at the wise words. Some of them tried to fit these verses into their trivial discipline of astrology, not the more proper philosophy. They are even worse than those naïve ones who take the words in their literal interpretation and have naïve faith in them. However, both these groups - the preachers and the so-called scholars - would have been smarter to keep themselves silent, rather than to humiliate the Prophets and Sages.

The third group consists of the proper ones, who immerse themselves in rabbinic statements in order to draw out their true meaning. "And only for them," says Maimonides, "do I write my explanation about the World to Come, because only they want to understand me." He begins with a parable:

"A child was brought into a schoolhouse in order to study Torah - the main objective for a person, with which he could distinguish himself over all other creatures.

"However, the child doesn't understand this. Consequently, the teacher needs to give him nuts, figs, or sweets. He studies not for the sake of the true purpose - only for the sake of the snacks. He works hard in order to receive this trivial pleasure, which he likes a lot more than the great spiritual goal.

"Later, when he grows beyond a desire for those snacks, the teacher begins to persuade him to study by saying: 'Study, and as a consequence we will buy new clothes and shoes for you.' Some time later, one will persuade him to study with money. Afterwards they will say, 'Study in order to become a rabbi, and you will receive honour from everyone.' So the student studies for the sake of the trivialities, not understanding that all the promises came only because of the real goal of learning, which he didn't understand with his young mind."

¹⁴² Cf. Deuteronomy 4:8

Everyone is like a child in this sense. He studies for the sake of the Garden of Eden, [p. 53] in which he will be presented with the richest colours and he wants to be righteous for the sake of all the good things that he can get.

This, however, is childish and foolish. One promises things to him - and he indeed receives them - because of his foolish mind and needs, having nothing to do with that for which one would expect to get a reward.

The refined man knows that studying for its own sake is the entire goal; therefore, no other reward is to be expected. That is to say, “Torah for its own sake,” not for the sake of another gain. Such a person doesn’t make from the Torah a crown to wear or an axe to make a living. One must serve God; this is the aim of people’s lives, but not for the sake of receiving recompense.¹⁴³ The goal of knowledge is knowledge alone; the remuneration for a commandment is the commandment itself. Regarding the verse “who is quite devoted to His commandments,”¹⁴⁴ says Rabbi Eleazar: “The proper person needs to long for the commandments, not the reward for the commandments.”¹⁴⁵ Whoever says, “I study Torah in order to be rich, to become a rabbi, or in order to have a share in the World to Come,” is a child at heart, because the grown-up person needs to do it out of love of God, of His Torah and of His wisdom as the aim by itself.¹⁴⁶

Rewards that are promised and given are only for those who aren’t really grown up. Really great people don’t even think about that.

After this introduction, Maimonides comes to his opinion regarding the World to Come, saying:

We know that just as someone blind from birth cannot comprehend the pleasures of seeing a rich array of colours, and just as a deaf person cannot comprehend the beauty of music, so our bodies can’t comprehend the true spiritual pleasures.

Being corporeal people, we know of no pleasures other than corporeal that can be comprehended. We simply have no senses whatsoever with which to see, touch, or smell the World to Come, other than with the mind.

We know that there exist delights beyond those that we attain with our senses. People toil and spend a lot of money in order to obtain honour. Others endure great suffering, struggling for freedom; people refrain, with all their strength, from lust for the wife of another man in order to escape from shame. Many don’t eat, drink, or rest until they succeed in taking revenge on their enemy, even though feelings of honour, freedom, embarrassment and revenge have no connection at all to the body that consists of flesh, blood, bones, and muscles. These are, therefore, pure spiritual feelings. And if we can experience such things while being connected with our body,

¹⁴³ Mishnah *Avot* 1:3

¹⁴⁴ Psalms 112:1

¹⁴⁵ tractate *Avodah Zarah* 19a

¹⁴⁶ Taken from the halakhic midrash *Sifré* or *Sifri*.

could we imagine how many spiritual pleasures the soul can anticipate, once it frees itself from the body?

Those spiritual pleasures that are free from the body even while the person is alive push away all the trivial desires of lusts, just like a king, sitting on the throne, pushes away his childish desire to play with a ball. Those spiritual delights [p. 54] are permanent, they never become disgusting, they don't end up with a hangover like after drunkenness, and they don't end up with indigestion like after overeating.

The good promises of the Torah as understood by the superior human can be summed up as follows: If you will perform the commandments, then I, God, will help you with peace and plenty, in order for you to go on your proper path. If, however, you will follow your desires, I will place obstacles in front of you so that you would not be able to observe even a bit of the commandments.

The Garden of Eden is a precious place that the Creator will show people, where the climate is wonderful, with plentiful streams and wonderful (though up until now unknown to us) fruits and vegetables that grow without much work needed for them. This isn't impossible even according to reason, particularly when the Torah already promises it.

The opposite of the Garden of Eden is Gehenna, a word signifying the trouble and punishment that wicked people will receive. However, there's nothing exact written in the Talmud about how this punishment will be experienced.

The revival of the dead is one of the principles which Jews must believe in; otherwise, they can't be called by that name. Only the righteous will benefit from it, not the wicked, who are counted as dead even while still living.

A person must die. Being made up of various elements, the body must end up being decomposed back into those same elements.

The days of the Messiah signify the time that Jews will return, under the government of a Jewish king, to the Land of Israel. In his wisdom, the king will surpass King Solomon; therefore, his authority will extend over everyone in the world. He will create good laws, and he will abolish repression and wars. People will make an easy living and will be freed from troubles and worries. Consequently, lifespans will be prolonged.

However, we shouldn't hope for the messianic era in order to become rich, ride on a horse, hear all kinds of songs, drink the best wines, and eat the best foods - this is how fools think. At that time, however, we will be able to study, know, and understand that the goal of knowing is knowledge, and the goal of true happiness is to arrive at the truth through wisdom.

At present, people are controlled, just like horses with their bridles and reins, through reward and punishment. People in the future, however, will be controlled by the concepts of peace, truth and right.

This is how Maimonides presents the World to Come - the world of the future.

Chapter 13: Physical and Psychological Illnesses

[p. 55] Maimonides begins his commentary on tractate *Avot* with an extensive introduction divided into eight chapters. In the introduction to these eight chapters, he says:

“Notwithstanding the degree to which the sayings in *Avot* are easy to understand, I still feel that in order to correctly comprehend their deep intention, one must immerse oneself in a long commentary with a number of introductions.

“Our Sages say: ‘Whoever wants to be pious needs to uphold the code of conduct of *Avot*.’ The level of piety is followed only by that of prophecy, the highest level that a person can attain.”

“That principle motivated me to create this introduction. You should know that all the things that you will find here are not just made up by me, but rather pearls that are gathered from the Talmud, Midrashim and philosophy, even though I don’t mention the names of the authors nor the names of their books.”

First Chapter: Regarding the Human Soul and its Functions

You should know that there is only one soul, but that its varied tasks and functions led learned people to believe that every person has several souls inside him. For example, Galen (129-200 or 216 CE), who was the first physician, conceived of three souls: one that makes the body grow; a second one that stimulates the senses; and a third one that gives the ability to think. Other learned ones speak of “the parts of a soul” - not in the sense that the soul is divided materially, but only according to the tasks that the one and only soul performs.

Just as a doctor must know in which body part one can find symptoms that lead to illness in order to eliminate the underlying cause, so too the spiritual doctor needs to inquire into which part of the soul the disease has entered, in order to know how to make the person healthy again by instructing what to do and what not to do.

There are 5 parts of the soul: the power that makes the body grow and develop; perception; the power of imagination; emotion; and the ability to think.

One must know, however, that what we’re talking about here is only with regard to the souls of humankind. This is because the kind of food by which people are nourished isn’t the same as the one that nourishes horses or donkeys. Every species gets its food through the mediation of a part of its soul, and souls aren’t equal in ability, except in name only. An example can be taken from three sources of illumination: from the sun; from the moon; and from a burning flame. All three “illuminate”, but the amount of light varies between one and the other, according to the nature of the [p. 56] light source. As a result, the kind of food, together with the means of eating, drinking and digesting, are different in people than in horses, and there is a difference between both of them and eagles, because their souls aren’t equal. Nonetheless, it must be understood, as strange as it

may seem, that as far as eating, drinking, being born, growing up, and getting old are concerned, humankind is equal with all the rest of the animals.

1. The ability to grow and develop is divided into 7 tasks: bringing food into all the limbs and bones; digestion; absorbing in oneself what is being digested; excreting what is useless; growth; giving birth to children similar to yourself; the distribution and absorption of the useful, essential items and the expulsion of the useless liquids.

2. Perception incorporates the 5 senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Touch involves the entire body, unlike the first four senses, which operate from an organ specially created for them: seeing - through the eyes; hearing - with the ears; etc.

3. The power of imagination contains in itself the impression of things that perception acquired through the five senses after they vanish. Sometimes concepts join together, and other times they are completely separated. Yet other times, two concepts are joined together that can never naturally occur: for example, an iron ship that flies in the air, or a person with his feet on the ground and his head in the heavens. The objects “iron ship”, “air”, “ground”, “heavens” and “person” are separate, and only the power of imagination assembles them together, even though in reality they can absolutely never be found together.

With that we have disproved the Sophists’¹⁴⁷ principle that all that one can conceptualize in thought is possible. This is a false principle upon which the Sophists built their foolish and deceptive division between necessities, possibilities, and impossibilities.

4. Emotion - this is the power that arouses either hatred or love for a thing, pursuing a useful thing and escaping from a harmful thing, summoning anger, resentment, cruelty, might, disappointment, and all other sorts of psychic powers. Its instruments are from all the limbs of the body: eyes to see danger, feet to run away from danger, the heart to comprehend, hands to repel harm, muscles to grasp things, and so forth.

5. The ability to think or the power of judgement: One use of this ability is for material things, such as to acquire professions and vocations, and to think of the necessary methods to make things. A second part of this ability is devoted to studying disciplines: to understand what others have written. The power of judgement encompasses both of these aspects: to determine if an action is possible, and, if so, how to do it in the best possible way.

Thus the soul, uniting all the above-mentioned aspects, constitutes [p. 57] the substance of the spirit, and the mind is the soul’s form; without the mind, the soul doesn’t function, since it wouldn’t exist at all. Regarding that, there’s a verse that says, “also, the soul without knowledge is not good”,¹⁴⁸ that is, the soul without the presence of the mind is useless.

¹⁴⁷ Sophists were teachers in Ancient Greece.

¹⁴⁸ Proverbs 19:2.

Second Chapter

Commandment and transgression, or good or bad, could simply denominate actions that a person could decide to do or not to do. As a result, they could only be counted as part of the power of feeling that they are a part of, and of its fellow group, that of emotion. However, they are not part of the power of imagination, and neither are they part of the force that nourishes the body; these latter forces constantly perform their tasks, even while sleeping, and without one being conscious of it. Consequently, their functions are not relevant to the concepts of commandment or transgression.

With regard to the mind, there are various opinions. Nonetheless, Maimonides himself thinks that the mind is relevant to the distinction between good and evil. Thinking correctly constitutes a commandment, and thinking incorrectly is a transgression.

There are some qualities that partake of two kinds, good character traits and mindfulness. The following belong to those good attributes: caution against sin; good upbringing; fairness; simplicity; being satisfied with one's portion; trust in fellow humans; etc. The rational qualities are: the ability to understand the direct and indirect causes of events; correct understanding - even if only after a short afterthought; knowing the definitions - for example, that the whole is more than a part thereof, or that two contrasting qualities cannot be found in one object at one and the same time. All of these are basic, a priori principles that don't need any confirmation and don't need to be confirmed on a regular basis, and through them one can make analytic or synthetic applications.

The rational qualities belong only to the mind; however, those relating to good attributes belong to the power of emotion, helped by the power of perception.

The powers of development and imagination have no part in this, since they only perform their tasks automatically and without free choice on the part of the individual.

Third Chapter

A soul can be sick just like a body. A body, if its powers work together harmoniously, is healthy. But when one of its elements strengthens at the expense of another, bodily harmony is disrupted and the body becomes sick.

When the stomach becomes sick, the afflicted person loses the ability to sense the right taste in his mouth. Sweet items become bitter and vice versa. Other sick people begin to crave some foods that are harmful for their health; children with certain diseases are eager to eat earth, ash, and coals - things that a healthy person would never even dream of taking into his mouth.

Whoever suffers from a fever loses the ability to judge what items are useful and what items are harmful.

[p. 58] However, worse than everything mentioned is when the sick person can't tell that he is sick. He jumps out of bed, complains of those surrounding him who don't leave him alone, shouting: "I'm still healthy! Let me go to my workplace - customers are waiting for me."

Such a sick person requires two kinds of treatment: first, to convince him that he is sick and after that to treat him for the disease.

Precisely the same thing is required when the soul becomes sick, whether because the power of imagination overwhelmed the other functions of the soul, and made the person too emotional, or whether because the mind's reasoning went on a wrong path. Then, harmony is disrupted and the mind begins to have hallucinations, preferring harm over good; many times, this bad situation culminates in suffering.

A doctor treats bodily illnesses, while a sage treats illnesses of the soul.

The first task is to give the sick person a criterion to distinguish between good and bad. This is why King Solomon says in Proverbs (4:19): "The way of the wicked is like darkness, they know not upon what they stumble." After that, the sage can teach the sick person how to conduct himself.

Chapter 14: How to Avoid Extremes, Taking Only the Middle Path

Fourth Chapter: Regarding the Means of Treating Illnesses of the Soul

[p. 58] The only good actions are those that maintain the middle path, avoiding both extremes - one of them being bad and the other one being excessively good. Neither of those two are useful; only the middle path is the best one.

For example, running after lusts under all circumstances, and suppressing every bodily desire, are two extremes that are equally bad. The middle path for this is caution and prudence in the worldly partaking of eating, drinking, sexual activity, and earning money.

Stinginess is one extreme, while extravagance is the other, and both aren't useful. The middle path is philanthropy, to donate wherever and to anyone who needs it, and to save wherever it isn't entirely necessary to spend.

Courage is the midpoint between risking your life for a foolish thing and being scared of every insignificant thing.

Self-respect is the preferred path between exaggerated pride and scorn, when a person is degrading himself through disrespectful deeds.

Standing by principles that a person believes in is the middle path [p. 59] between exaggerated stubbornness and letting go of one's principles in order to live with the surrounding environment.

Pride is a disgusting character trait. Spiritual inferiority is also not beautiful. The midpoint between both of these extremes is modesty.

Being satisfied with what one has is the preferred middle path between greed for money and an overabundance of working and earning money.

These are just some individual examples that can serve as proven paths for all attributes and behaviours: to take the middle path between the two extremes.

Unfortunately, there are no precise terms in Hebrew for these character traits; as a result, mistakes are made in their assessment. For example, shyness in a person is counted as a positive quality, while its opposite - impudence (*azut panim*)¹⁴⁹ - is counted as a bad character trait. One may think that the shy person is called *bayshan*¹⁵⁰ but that's a mistake, because a *bayshan* is located at the other extreme from *az panim* or *kapdan*.¹⁵¹ The *az panim* and the *kapdan* reacts to the smallest slight, and he is willing to curse and punish royally for every transgression. This is one extreme, while the *bayshan* allows himself to consider himself as of no worth and stay silent. This

¹⁴⁹ A person with this character trait is called an *az panim*.

¹⁵⁰ A bashful person in Hebrew and Yiddish.

¹⁵¹ A fussy person or a stickler in Hebrew and Yiddish.

is the other extreme. The *bayshan* thinks he is worth nothing and he thinks the other one is worth everything. Such a *bayshan* cannot learn, and the *kapdan* cannot teach another. The middle path in this case is the *boshet panim*,¹⁵² and according to our Sages, it is a path that will lead someone following it to the Garden of Eden, while the *az panim* will go straight to Gehenna.¹⁵³ Thus, the *bayshan* is very much not the same thing as the *boshet panim*.

In these cases, the lack of precise terms brings about mistakes and mistaken notions: We call someone “kindhearted” when he would give away the shirt off his back, but this is something that is very much a defect in that person. The other extreme is to be evil: not to want to do such good that costs him nothing, requiring no money and no work. Both extremes are useless; only the middle path, to give only up to a fifth of your income as charity, is useful. An old person, or one who is an honourable person, need not allow himself to go through the trouble of returning another person’s lost object, and things like that. The only preferred way is benevolence, which is on the middle path.

We refer to those who put their lives in danger for the sake of trivial honour as heroes, evoking admiration from the spectators. Such people pursue danger, jump, ride, and initiate dangerous sea voyages - where the chances of perishing are fully 99% and only 1% are rescued through a miracle or a fortunate coincidence - and they expect to be crowned with the title of “hero.” However, this is really an extreme of pride; boasting is a shameful character trait.

In this same manner, we find further mistakes: The despised person can be confused with one who is patient, the lazy person without ambitions can be confused with one having modest needs, and the spendthrift can be confused with one for whom money has no importance at all.

[p. 60] These are mistakes, because we believe that only on the middle path can a person be thought of as one who possesses good qualities.

To become someone with good character traits, a person can’t have gone through a given experience just once; he has to go through it many times, until he gets completely used to it and the good character trait becomes a habit and second nature for him. If, afterwards, he takes one extreme - for good or for bad - many times and it becomes second nature for him, this is evidence of a defect in character, for one can become a person of good qualities only upon becoming habituated to the middle path.

The Remaining Chapters of Maimonides’ Introduction to *Avot*

When a person is born, he has neither good qualities nor defects; he is merely a tabula rasa that later on gets filled in from his milieu, his friends, his teachers, his social circles, and his country.

¹⁵² A shy person in Hebrew and Yiddish.

¹⁵³ cf. Mishnah *Avot* 5:24

Those things sometimes cause him to go to one extreme and sometimes to the other, and his soul thereby becomes ill.

The way to treat him is to subdue his tendency toward the extreme that is affecting him and to make an effort to bring him to the other extreme; for example, from extreme stinginess to extreme extravagance many times and on a regular basis. In this example, he would be drawn to stinginess in the first place and he would be guided to extravagance, until he eventually ends up in the middle path, which is kindheartedness (philanthropy). The same is true with the rest of the character traits.

Here is what the great pious figures had in mind in mentioning these things in the ancient holy books: Perceiving in somebody a tendency to worldly desires more than necessary, they took him to the other extreme. He went into the desert, he went barefoot and naked, he ate only to keep his soul alive, and for many days he completely fasted. These were the medicines for that person's soul, in order to put him onto the middle path. However, when fools saw that person's deeds, not understanding his real intention, they thought that fasting, torturing oneself, and wandering around in the desert are good character traits for a person, and they took it upon themselves to imitate him, thinking that they are thus pleasing the Creator. They didn't understand that God does not despise the body and that He didn't create humankind so that they, the fools, would be able to torture and annihilate their bodies.

What did the great pious figures compare it to? To a fool who heard a doctor ordering a sick person to eat nothing, to only drink water, and he gave him bitter medicines to be taken every hour by the spoonful. This is so that that patient, who was dangerously ill from eating too much to the point that he developed indigestion and had a fever, should be saved from death and get better. That fool, however, thought to himself: "If they can make the remedies for a sick person to be in better health, these remedies will make a healthy person like myself as strong as a giant, and he pursued the diet and the medicine for some time." It is understood that this person became dangerously ill; not understanding the reason for this, he later scorned the doctor's wisdom and treatment.

Our good Torah, "which refreshes the soul and makes fools wise,"¹⁵⁴ mentions nothing about mortification. Following the Torah consists of eating, drinking, getting married, living [p. 61] among people, conducting business, working, sowing, and planting - but everything in moderation. Zechariah the Prophet, on the question of whether one should fast, receives the answer: "The good quality doesn't consist in fasting, but only in conducting oneself with justice, lovingkindness and mercy, not robbing the orphan and widow, not doing any evil at all, and having pity on one another."¹⁵⁵ After that, the Prophet says: "Thus said God: 'The fast of the fifth month (Av) and that of the seventh month (Tishrei) will become joyous days for the Jews, and they will love truth and peace.'"¹⁵⁶ "Truth" refers to spiritual qualities, which exist constantly and are indispensable,

¹⁵⁴ cf. Psalms 19:8

¹⁵⁵ cf. Zechariah 8:16-17

¹⁵⁶ cf. *ibid.* 8:19

while “peace” encompasses good character traits, which produce harmonious living among the inhabitants of the world.

Escaping from the world is useless; it’s equally useless to live only for your lusts without a higher goal. The Torah warns against the second extreme just as strongly as against the first one.

A Nazirite¹⁵⁷ needs to bring an atonement offering, because he is a “sinner” on account of his worrying about not drinking any wine. You need to eat, but only those foods that are permitted. You must live with a woman and have children only by means of a marriage ceremony, and one may not engage in intercourse continually. You’re allowed to have private property, but you need to give away tithes, gleanings, defective clusters, forgotten sheaves, and the rear corner of the field.¹⁵⁸ You aren’t obligated to let yourself be trampled by anybody. However, you must withdraw yourself from revenge, bearing a grudge,¹⁵⁹ and the redemption of blood (to murder your relative’s murderer).¹⁶⁰ You must force yourself to help your enemy to load the burden on his donkey or to help unload when his donkey lies under its burden. You must maintain your self-worth and still respect your parents, those who are older than yourself, and obey judges. You must have the character trait of humility, but you don’t need to be fearful of anybody when it comes to a lawsuit, and you needn’t be afraid to punish your friend when you see him do evil.

All these examples are there to help you to understand the entire Torah that demands from all of us to follow the middle path. Escaping from the world, not getting married, distributing one’s entire estate to the poor, or to synagogues or to schools - those aren’t desirable actions; they constitute an extreme, and this is against the intention that the Torah seeks to teach us.

A sick soul needs to be treated just like a sick body. In both cases, the required equilibrium must be achieved, and both extremes must be eliminated.

¹⁵⁷ A Nazirite is one who, based on chapter 6 of Numbers, abstains from drinking wine or eating grapes, cutting his hair, and being in contact with the dead.

¹⁵⁸ These concepts, from Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22, Deuteronomy 24:19-21 and 26:12-13, and Mishnah *Peah*, respectively correspond in Hebrew to *ma’aser*, *leket*, *ollilot*, *shikhekhah*, and *peah*.

¹⁵⁹ cf. Leviticus 19:19 for both of these concepts

¹⁶⁰ cf. Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19

Chapter 15: All Actions Should be Done for the Sake of a Purpose

[p. 62] Maimonides specifies how to discern one criterion for all the various kinds of action.

As explained earlier, a person isn't allowed to hide himself in an isolated corner of the world, using only as much as needed to keep himself alive. He should be a person of the world who derives benefit from everything and who is a good and useful member of society in all its aspects.

However, all worldly benefits - though permitted if enjoyed in a moderate fashion - themselves need to have only one objective: to develop the mind to its highest level until it attains godliness as much as a person's mind can attain, as well as to immerse oneself in worthy deeds. Every benefit, action, and movement needs to be weighed and measured with that criterion: it either leads directly to the aforementioned purpose or it doesn't. If it does, one needs to do it; if not, one needs to avoid it.

An example of this is the healing of the body: a person needs to eat in order to maintain a healthy body. However, when a disease has developed, and that person's remedy consists of fasting, he shouldn't eat. Along the same lines: one should eat good food because it provides the required nourishment and strength for the body, but when that objective can be met only through drinking bitter remedies, they need to be taken with the same satisfaction as with the consumption of delicious foods. This is because all these things are only the means of serving one goal: to maintain a healthy body.

It is the same with respect to healing the soul. Eating, drinking, wearing nice clothes, earning money, visiting foreign countries, and seeing rare animals and beautiful buildings, statues, and images - all of these should serve the same purpose, to have a complete and satisfactory soul in order to devote oneself with all one's senses to study the lofty truths concerning God and His ways.

In this case, that one great objective justifies all these pleasures. That one purpose controls and indicates what someone should or not do.

This is because only an animal or a person without much understanding considers every bodily pleasure as a goal in itself. As a result, such a creature eats such foods and in such proportions that the consumption harms him afterwards. However, a person with understanding must weigh and measure every pleasure to see whether it's directly useful for the set purpose. Thus, he would refuse to pursue harmful pleasures even though they might be tempting at that moment, and on the contrary he wouldn't avoid painful things even though they may be unpleasant at that moment, for the sake of the ultimate goal, which he always keeps his eye on.

[p. 63] Nutritious and delicious foods, nice clothing, a nice house, and other comforts aren't at all an aim for such a person, but they are rather just the means to have a calm, satisfactory body. On the other hand, satisfaction of the body is also not at all his purpose; it is rather only a means

to maintain a satisfactory soul. That soul should be able to submit itself to worship the Creator on the right path, as explained earlier.

An artisan, even though he knows his work well, can nonetheless not accomplish much when his tools aren't in good condition. So too, the soul cannot accomplish anything in its domain when the body, along with its limbs and forces, isn't in good condition with respect to health and tranquility.

Thus, everyone must aim directly at the set purpose. Eating, resting, and earning money are there in order to attain the required tranquility. The study of disciplines such as mathematics, astronomy, mechanics, and geometric diagrams is meant to sharpen the mind and make a person capable of easily comprehending divine wisdom. Strolling as well as observing beautiful gardens, buildings, paintings, sculptures, monuments, and other objects of that kind are there in order to relax the mind for a short while, so that later on one would be able - with more enthusiasm - to devote oneself to real wisdom with complete desire and diligence.

It's mentioned in the Talmud¹⁶¹ that when the Sages were tired out from studying, Rabbi Judah ha-Nassi (ca. 135-ca. 217 CE) used to make a witty comment in order to keep them alert.

Constantly keeping an eye on that goal, we can then avoid deeds that are not useful, so that all our deeds become holy - serving a greater purpose. The number of people who can raise themselves to such a level is quite small, but those select individuals serve God through all their mundane deeds; the level that they reach is almost like that of the Prophets. Our Sages attest to this in a verse in Proverbs (3:6), "in all your ways know Him." The Talmud (tractate *Berakhot* 63a) remarks about it as follows: "Even when the deed comes out of a transgression, if only that deed aims at the set purpose, it was meant for the sake of Heaven." All these ideas are hinted at either in that brief comment or in the much-cited words from Mishnah *Avot* (2:17), "All your deeds will be for the sake of Heaven."

The Sixth Chapter

Regarding the difference between one who is truly pious in temperament and another who still is tempted by sin but who nonetheless fortifies himself against the evil inclination: the philosophers are of the opinion that the truly pious one, with his natural inclination towards good deeds and repulsion of evil, is to be more respected than one who covets illicit actions even though he suppresses his desire. They explain that it's because the latter person demonstrates the illness of his soul, while the naturally pious one is healthy, both in deed and in thought. The one who conquers his evil inclination¹⁶² is someone who rises in his stature, but nonetheless remains below the pious one with respect to his good qualities.

¹⁶¹ Such behaviour is ascribed to Rabba in tractate *Shabbat* 30b.

¹⁶² cf. Mishnah *Avot* 4:1

Superficially, the philosophers' opinion can be demonstrated from a few biblical verses. Proverbs (21:10) states, "the soul of the evildoer desires evil"; from there, it seems that even in pursuing evil - though the person doesn't actually do it - a person may deserve the name of "wicked." In Proverbs (21:15), it is also said: "Performance of justice [p. 64] is a joy to the righteous, and destruction to workers of iniquity." That is to say, whoever does justice with joy is righteous and whoever does the same but with displeasure is wicked. From that, one can see that the thought put into performing a divine commandment is very important.

On the other hand, we see sayings by the Sages that place the one conquering his inclination above the naturally pious one, because "the reward is in proportion to the exertion."¹⁶³ Thus, the harder it is for one to come to perform a commandment, the more reward one gets for it. It's also said that the greater a person is, the greater is his evil inclination. There's even more: A person is totally forbidden to say, "I don't want to eat pork"; he must say instead, "I would very much like to do so, but what can I do when God tells me not to?"

To resolve the contradiction between these sayings, Maimonides divides the commandments into two parts: rational commandments, and heavenly but non-rational commandments. The first group are of the kind that the rational mind itself is against, such as to not steal or rob. The second group are forbidden by the Torah but are beyond the mind to fathom. It wouldn't at all occur to anybody that not eating any pork and not wearing any wool-linen mixture are prohibited. Here's how this division of the commandments intersects with the issue of whether the naturally pious person is superior to one who has to conquer his evil inclination. In connection with the rational prohibitions, it is certainly better when someone doesn't pursue them at all. But in connection with the non-rational prohibitions, it is indeed more reasonable to desire them and to then avoid them, because "our Father in Heaven ordered us not to do them."

This is in accordance with the way that the Tanna¹⁶⁴ introduces the example of the commandments precisely along the lines of "I want to eat pork and wear wool-linen mixtures" – all heavenly/irrational commandments - and not "I want to steal and rob," which amount to rational commandments, because concerning the rational commandments, it's indeed so much better not to wish to do those, as is the case of the pious one by nature.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Mishnah Avot 5:26

¹⁶⁴ Singular for the Tannaim, rabbinic figures who lived at the time of the Mishnah.

¹⁶⁵ cf. *Sifra*, Leviticus 18:4, paragraph 140

Chapter 16: A Person's Free Choice

[p. 64] Many words are spoken in the *Aggadot*, Midrashim, and even in the Talmud regarding the categories of prophets: Some of them perceived God through fewer partitions, and others through more partitions. Thus, one could classify them according to each prophet's distance or closeness to God, may He be blessed. Whoever "saw" through fewer partitions was on a higher level of prophecy than the one who saw through more partitions.

It was said about Moses our Master that he saw through only one clear, transparent, and luminous partition (a clear prophetic vision).¹⁶⁶ The word "partition" should be understood according to Maimonides' explanation as follows:

We have explained previously personal strengths and weaknesses, those related to character traits and those related to mindfulness. The types of deficits related to character traits include stubbornness, a dishonest [p. 65] mind, and little understanding; those related to mindfulness include pride, lust, wrath, boldness, etc. In this case, these weaknesses are partitions that prevent contact between people and God, as Isaiah the Prophet says: "Only your sin separates you from your God."¹⁶⁷

And you should know that only one who was bestowed with all spiritual and corporeal qualities was able to reach the level of prophecy. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 92a and *Nedarim* 38a) says: "Prophecy can only rest on those who are rich, smart and strong." The word "smart" should be understood to be mean those rational qualities that were listed in the second chapter of the Eight Chapters.¹⁶⁸ "Rich" should be understood as someone who is satisfied with what he possesses and who doesn't worry about what others have and he doesn't. After all, thus says a Tanna¹⁶⁹: "Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his portion."¹⁷⁰ "Strong" should be understood as one who has enough strength to fight his evil inclination, to control his actions, and to go only on the middle path, and not fall into any one of the two extremes.

We cannot, however, expect perfection even among prophets, because "there is no person of the world who only does good and doesn't sin."¹⁷¹ In Gibeon, God appeared to Solomon, signifying that he was a prophet. However, a verse from Nehemiah (13:25) testifies against him that he sinned through lust for women. The same was true of King David, who was a prophet, and yet the Holy Temple could not be built in his time, because he had too much blood on his hands, even if it was shed in necessary wars, while he was merciful to his people. Regarding Elijah, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 113b) says that his excessive "zealotry for the Lord of Hosts" caused some people to want to remove him from the world, because with his extraordinary zeal he wanted to have many

¹⁶⁶ cf. *Yevamot* 49b

¹⁶⁷ cf. Isaiah 59:2

¹⁶⁸ Maimonides' introduction to *Avot*, as first discussed in Chapter 13.

¹⁶⁹ Singular for the Tannaim, rabbinic figures who lived at the time of the Mishnah; in this case, it is Ben Zoma.

¹⁷⁰ *Avot* 4:1

¹⁷¹ *Ecclesiastes* 7:20

Jews annihilated, even though they were worthy of it. It was the same for Samuel, who had a defect in being afraid of Saul, and for Jacob, who was afraid of Esau.

In all these cases, these weaknesses are “partitions” which hinder communication between God and the prophet. Even though they are gross defects, the prophet would totally not be aware of what they were. The proof is from Elisha, for whom - through anger - prophecy went away until the anger was removed by means of a musician playing his instruments. Because of the sad episode of Jacob’s loss of Joseph, the Holy Presence was removed from him until news came of Joseph still being alive, when prophecy came back to Jacob, according to the way the Targum¹⁷² of Onkelos (ca. 35- ca. 120 CE) interprets the words, “their father Jacob’s spirit was revived.”¹⁷³

Every defect is a partition, and there are as many partitions as defects. The only one not having defects in that sense was Moses our Master, who had no partition other than the connection between his soul and his body. As a result, when he desired to see the entire truth and to experience God clearly, not obstructed by partitions - according to his spiritual perfection - he [p. 66] received the answer: “Nobody can ‘see’ Me and live at the same time. The body is your partition, your defect; but you can indeed see me in an obscure and unclear way, the way that one sees another person from the back: recognizable, but not enough to bring it into memory to recall the image later when seeing it a second time. However, to see clearly the way that one sees someone else in his face - you cannot attain that level while alive.”¹⁷⁴

In sum: everyone could be a prophet, just as everyone can see the sun, if only there weren’t partitions that block out the light. Among people, there are various levels:

- a) Those who aren’t prepared for prophecy, neither in actions nor in their intellect, who lie as if in prison - blocked off with thick walls and a roof, without windows through which the spiritual light could penetrate, and
- b) Those who are prepared for prophecy, who only have mild weaknesses, who indeed see the spiritual light but not clearly, and the vagueness of that light is according to the number of partitions and the degree of readiness.

Temporary weaknesses are temporary partitions, as described earlier.

Moses our Master, may he rest in peace, reached the highest level, having only one partition, a defect from which no living person can free himself while alive. The Talmud also speaks of some of the Tannaim on whom the Holy Presence could rest like on Moses our Master, but that was only

¹⁷² The translation of Scripture from Hebrew to Aramaic.

¹⁷³ Genesis 45:27

¹⁷⁴ cf. Exodus 33:20-23

a weak analogy. Reaching Moses' level can never be attained by anybody, since concerning Moses himself, the Torah clearly states: "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses."¹⁷⁵

Eighth Chapter: Regarding the Human Soul and the Creation of Humankind in General

It is senseless to believe - says Maimonides - that a person should be born entirely good or entirely bad, just as it would be foolish to believe that a person can be born a ready-made tailor, carpenter, or mechanic. However, it is indeed possible for someone to be born with a certain inclination towards one thing, and to be lacking in another thing. For example, one may be born with a sharp mind, a good perception and a powerful memory. For that one, it's easier to learn than for one who doesn't have those advantages, and for the one with a good memory, it would be easy to study things that one must remember by heart, just as for the one with a good mind it would be easy to study intellectual disciplines, where intelligence plays as big a role as memory. Here, it is the same sort of thing: if someone is born with a strong character, it's easier for him to become a hero than one whose nature is to be more timid; nonetheless, even a weak person can develop in himself the character trait of courage, the one with a good memory can develop a sharp mind, and the one with a good mind can develop a powerful memory. The difference is only in making the effort for this development. The one having an inborn inclination will arrive at it more easily and with less effort, while another person will need to work harder for it, but it's not at all impossible for anyone to make the effort.

If this is so, then we might conclude that a person is forced to act from an innate power that he cannot change. However, in this way, the entire Torah - with its commandments, along with reward for good deeds and punishment for [p. 67] bad deeds - fails. Why should the righteous one deserve a reward for good actions when he was born for it and he can do nothing else? And how could a just God punish the wicked one for his evil actions that he was forced to do on account of the way he is by his nature, which is determined by the same Creator who made the righteous one?

While we are on the subject, we should add a reference to the astrologers who want to persuade us that every person is born with his temperament which the stars, at the moment he was born, gave to him, and that constitutes his innate destiny. We are speaking here about fatalism, which asserts that everything that a person does he must do, and whatever happens to him must happen. At that moment, all laws (religious, civil and criminal) fail. Why should the Torah decree the preventative means of making a "*ma'akeh*" (parapet or fence) on a roof so that "a person should not fall down,"¹⁷⁶ knowing that if this happens, it is because it is decreed that the person would fall down from the roof? Why should the murderer deserve the death penalty if it's decreed from above for the victim that he is the one who should be killed and the other one should be seen as the murderer? Why should one punish whoever plundered money and swore falsely, if it is thus destined that "one should lose his money and the other should receive it"? Must we then believe

¹⁷⁵ Deuteronomy 34:10

¹⁷⁶ Deuteronomy 22:8

that the Creator decreed that a person should commit a transgression, knowing that to fulfill a commandment a person has free choice to either do it or not, according to the principle of “everything is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven”¹⁷⁷?

But if so, how does one correctly understand the concept “everything is in the hands of Heaven”?

¹⁷⁷ tractate *Berakhot* 33b

Chapter 17: When a Person Has Self-Control

[p. 67] The aforementioned question, how one correctly understands the concept “everything is in the hands of Heaven,” can be explained as follows: All natural occurrences, both for the world in general and for humans in particular, come from God. A person cannot make it rain nor can he hold it back. He cannot make it either warm or cold, he cannot clean the air, make himself grow tall, short, broad-shouldered, or narrow-chested, nor can he modify the other qualities or deficits that pertain to him, except for movement and rest. “Except for fear of heaven” - that refers to spiritual actions and good character traits - which are handed over entirely to a person’s choice.

Thus, a person’s responsibility to God for his actions is established, given that he is completely responsible for himself. This brings to mind the verse from Jeremiah (Lamentations 3:38): “It is not from the mouth of the Most High that evil and good emanate.” In other words, the verse states that God dictates neither good nor evil actions, [p. 68] just the person himself; therefore, he is rewarded for his good deeds and punished for his bad deeds. To that end, “let us search and examine our ways,”¹⁷⁸ for we alone have to take responsibility for ourselves.

There are holy books that state that every movement, whether a person is sitting, standing or moving, was preordained by divine providence. This, however, doesn’t contradict our earlier assertion. We should certainly understand that the apple, tearing itself off from the branch, falls to the ground, because such is its nature - everything falls to the ground. But in this instance, we’re dealing with God, who created the world with such a nature. This means that the apple falling really is preordained - from the six days of Creation onwards - when it detaches itself from the branch.

Our material world was created by God in six days. From then onwards, there has been “nothing new under the sun”¹⁷⁹ - in other words, what has been will be. One of the fundamental rules of existence is “cause and effect.” Every appearance and action has its own cause and its own “reason” behind it. When one sits down, there was certainly a reason to be seated; consequently, one could say in truth that such was God’s will. This is an example applicable to all events and movements. The mistake is only in thinking that God’s will changes on a moment’s notice, while in truth it was established right at the start of Creation. A smart person can anticipate in advance what conditions will hold in several days’ time and take the required preventative steps. The smartest people are able to anticipate things a long time in advance; it is written that a wise person is “one who considers the consequences of an action”¹⁸⁰ - he sees now what will be in the future. It is natural to believe that the Creator, who is the “source of all wisdom,” for whom there is no past, present, or future, should have foreseen and determined each and every naturally created law from the first six days.

¹⁷⁸ Lamentations 3:40

¹⁷⁹ Ecclesiastes 1:9

¹⁸⁰ Mishnah Avot 2:13

Our Sages attributed even those things that depend on miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea,¹⁸¹ the abyss in which Korah was engulfed,¹⁸² and Balaam's donkey's ability to speak,¹⁸³ to the "primordial condition" - to the things that were created "on Sabbath eve at twilight."¹⁸⁴ All of these potential miracles existed from the very beginning, in order to be ready for the right moment. Only shortsighted people see these things as a new innovation, while those who understand know when they were created.

Thus, one needs to understand - concerning the concept of "destined" or "decreed" - that both the "reason" and the "determination" are created by God, and in this sense, everything comes from Him and only from Him.

However, a person can move when he wants, rest as he wishes, and do the work that he wants. As a result, he must also suffer the consequences [p. 69] of his evil actions that happen in accordance with the strictly natural law of "cause and effect."

This, says Maimonides, is hinted at in the Torah that relates that once Adam ate from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge,¹⁸⁵ he convinced himself of his free choice to do good or evil - a quality which he was the only one at that time to possess, because angels cannot do anything at all except that for which they were created. Other earthly creatures also can do only that which is embedded in their character. Thus, since Adam could also stretch out his hand to take from the tree that gives eternal life - God concluded that it is now the time for him to be punished (to be expelled from the Garden of Eden) in order for him to have an initial lesson of reward and punishment for his actions. Now he cannot say: "What am I guilty of, since I must behave as it was decreed on me?" Now, knowing that he transgressed an explicit prohibition, having no ability to remain in the Garden of Eden, and not expecting an eternal life, he must conclude that he himself was responsible for his death.

Others ask: We certainly find a decree of preordination from Heaven concerning the Egyptians who were destined to afflict Abraham's offspring for 400 years.¹⁸⁶ Does that mean that they were forced to do so and yet they were later punished? The answer is that this is true in a general way; nevertheless, every individual Egyptian had the choice to not be among those who imposed the affliction. Thus, we know generally that in the world there are righteous and wicked people, and

¹⁸¹ *Yam Suf* is more correctly rendered directly from Hebrew as the Sea of Reeds. The parting of that body of water, which allowed the Israelites to cross over into Sinai on the way to the Land of Israel, took place soon after the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. See Exodus 14-15.

¹⁸² Korah was a Levite who was envious of Moses, Aaron, etc. and wanted a similar position to those leaders and instigated a rebellion. He, the other ringleaders, and their followers were punished by being swallowed up in an abyss. See Numbers 16-17.

¹⁸³ Balaam was sent by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Israelites when the latter were on their way to the Land of Israel. At one point in this story, his donkey spoke when Balaam beat it when the donkey refused to go further on the road. See Numbers 22-23.

¹⁸⁴ Mishnah *Avot* 5:8

¹⁸⁵ See Genesis 3.

¹⁸⁶ Genesis 15:13

the choice is left to each individual person to choose what to be. This can also be considered as an answer to the difficulty in the verse, “this people will rise up and stray after the foreign gods of the land,”¹⁸⁷ and yet no individual is obligated to be one of those who want to worship idols. It would obviously be ridiculous to hear someone say, “in the Torah there are judicial punishments for the violation of the Sabbath, murder, prostitution, etc., but I must transgress them in order for all these recorded punishments not to have been written in vain.” This is ridiculous because everybody understands that among any group of people sinful individuals may be found, but no person is obligated to behave like those individuals.

The forms of divine punishment, which logically emanate from human free choice, are diverse. Sometimes punishment comes through suffering, at other times it's through losing one's property, and at still other times it consists of taking away the possibility of the person doing the transgression. Examples of this include the Sodomites at the house of Lot where the angels were staying (whom God made blind);¹⁸⁸ Pharaoh threatening Sarah (and was punished with boils);¹⁸⁹ and Jeroboam's hand that became lame.¹⁹⁰ Sometimes the punishment is effected by completely taking away from a person the power to choose, so that he should not be able to repent, and thus avoid - for the moment - the punishment that ought to come to him. This is what Elijah the Prophet had in mind with the words, “therefore You have turned their hearts backwards.”¹⁹¹

Having established and consolidated the reality of a person's free will with logical proofs and biblical verses, Maimonides comes to the hardest question that bothers every thinking person. We're speaking here of “foreknowledge and free choice” - a question [p. 70] about which entire books have been written. Maimonides himself, it seems, only touched upon this issue in his introduction to *Avot*, so that “the aim of the entire introduction could be completed.” Therefore, he presented it in summary form. He himself wrote that “in several lines one cannot resolve this question.” He could only promise to come back to it in another place - which he did, when he wrote his *Yad ha-Ḥazakah*¹⁹² and, specifically, *Sefer ha-Mada*.¹⁹³

The question is this: If it is determined that the Creator knows whatever it will be, He therefore also knows which person will be righteous, and who will be wicked. If so, His foreknowledge forces people not to be able to behave differently. Thus, how could one believe in “foreknowledge” and “free choice” at the same time?

As previously stated, Maimonides' answer is short, accompanied by an assurance that he will write a more detailed answer at another point. In the meantime, he states:

¹⁸⁷ Deuteronomy 31:16

¹⁸⁸ Genesis 19:11

¹⁸⁹ Genesis 12:17

¹⁹⁰ I Kings 13:4

¹⁹¹ I Kings 18:37

¹⁹² Maimonides' legal code.

¹⁹³ Literally “Book of Knowledge,” the first section of Maimonides' legal code.

Consider my words well: The science of metaphysics has established that God, may He be blessed, does not know by means of human perception the way a person does, does not live like a person, and does not think like a person. This is because people experience accidents (incidents) that they perceive variously from their experience of the senses, illuminated with consciousness and the power of imagination. Subsequently, these experiences return as a vessel, a mold, into which perception - whether sensual or spiritual - is poured. Such an idea is far from monism,¹⁹⁴ or homogeneity, and it is - in any event - other than the Creator, who constitutes simple unity, without any combination. With humans, “intelligence” is separate from “person” and vice versa; that is, they are two separate things. However, with respect to God: God and life, God and His knowledge, and God and His understanding are one and the same. We can’t know, comprehend, or understand this, just like the human eye can’t look at the sun in the middle of the day. If we could comprehend His knowledge, we would also be able to comprehend His existence - because He and all His attributes are, after all, one simple unity - and just as the latter comprehension is impossible, so too the first is impossible.

This is Maimonides’ short answer; the only thing that one can take away from it is that we imagine that God’s knowledge would exercise its influence over human choice. However, Maimonides shows us that God’s knowledge is different than ours; as a result, it would seem that God’s foreknowledge is also not forced upon us.

This answer itself is, nonetheless, not sufficient, and Rabbi Abraham ben David (ca. 1125-1198)¹⁹⁵ reproached Maimonides for posing questions of that nature, without having an adequate answer.

This is how his answer was understood at that time, having in mind that in addition, [p. 71] Maimonides made use of the Sophist system¹⁹⁶ to conceal the lack of logic with sonorous phrases and metaphors.

However, in the 20th century, we have access to the writings of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), John Locke (1632-1704), David Hume (1711-1776), and above all Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804), who elevated philosophy to the greatest heights that the human mind can achieve. Just now, therefore, we are beginning to understand the depth of Maimonides’ response to foreknowledge and choice. It is only now that we see how far his ideas have gone, jumping over an 800-year gap, while standing within Aristotle’s scholastic system, and with his generation, which still had absolutely no idea of transcendental philosophy and the art of critical thinking.

¹⁹⁴Monism is a theory or doctrine that denies the existence of a distinction or duality in some sphere, such as that between matter and mind, or God and the world.

¹⁹⁵ Rabbi Abraham ben David was Maimonides’ main early commentator and lived in Posquières in Provence, a region in the south of France.

¹⁹⁶ Sophists were teachers in ancient Greece. They were skilled in what became known as Rhetoric.

We will only be concerned with that issue in a later chapter¹⁹⁷ that discusses *Sefer ha-Mada*, where Maimonides deals with the question more broadly.

¹⁹⁷ Miswritten in the Yiddish original as “article”.

Chapter 1: *Mishneh Torah* or *Yad ha-Ḥazakah*?

[p. 75] With the exception of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103), we don't find many of the sages of Spain who attempted to produce a single book on the basis of the Torah and the Talmud¹⁹⁸ for all Jews. All of these sages attempted to explain a part of the Torah, but not the Torah in its entirety. The only one who actually did it for the entire Torah was Maimonides.

Most probably, this objective was already set for his spiritual eyes beginning with his commentary on Mishnah. Writing that commentary, Maimonides already considered the *Yad ha-Ḥazakah* in conceptual form.

A system requires completeness. Presenting the material in full, one can introduce order, give each topic its proper place, and know which should come first and which comes afterwards.

In this case, the pursuit of completeness impelled him to compose his list of commandments [*Minyan ha-Mitzvot*]¹⁹⁹ which required hard work, even if he already had at his disposal some books on that very topic.

It took him ten years of work to write his *Mishneh Torah*. However, even scholars from that era admitted that with regard to that work, fifty years would have been too little.

This is because whoever isn't a scholar on that high level absolutely cannot imagine how hard and with what depth he worked on it, and how clear he was in his interpretation of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, Sifra, Tosefta, the responsa of the Geonim²⁰⁰ like Rabbi Alfasi, and subsequent compositions. All of this Maimonides placed in order so as to derive correct principles, and to refine, analyze, systematize, and come up with the correct law. Maimonides bequeathed all this to every Jew in an easy Mishnaic language, with each law in its proper place, so as not to have to look things up more than necessary, and "not to have to resort to looking up another book," as he himself said.

Maimonides himself justly remarked in a letter to the sages of Lunel,²⁰¹ "only great people like you know what I have accomplished in this composition (*Mishneh Torah*) assembling, in one unit, scattered laws found all over the Talmuds."

What isn't to be found there?! The simple Jew will find the law that he needs to know in his daily life in order to observe it together with the principles that he must believe in, the character traits that a person must practise, the hygienic rules that he must observe in order to have a healthy body - all of that is written in easy language, easy to understand, and a pleasure to study.

¹⁹⁸ Comprised of Mishnah and Gemara, which are mentioned in the original text instead of "Talmud."

¹⁹⁹ Literally, "the Counting of the Commandments." *Mitzvot* are religious obligations or commandments in Hebrew.

²⁰⁰ Generally accepted spiritual leaders of the Jewish community worldwide in the early medieval era.

²⁰¹ A town in Provence, in the south of France.

[p. 76] And in the same simple words, the great scholars [*Geonim*] discovered hidden insights, amazing exegetical innovations, and unique decisions. From that time until the present, all these words have been a source for finely-argued points that have spurred hundreds of compositions that have seen the light of day. No Gaon²⁰² or rabbi would think of ascending to the *bimah*²⁰³ without a passage from Maimonides on his lips. They ask questions of Maimonides, and after hours of learned discourse regarding those words, they show how Maimonides' words "shine like diamonds."

In his display of learning, Maimonides never missed the opportunity to introduce students to secondary disciplines that are a part of the subject. Starting from the first Mishnah in tractate *Berakhot*, where the *amud ha-shahar*²⁰⁴ is mentioned, he taught his readers not just laws, but also astronomy, anatomy, hygiene, medicine, philosophy, and still other disciplines.

Wanting to build a complete structure, where not a single thing would be lacking, Maimonides didn't leave out a single thing. With the same clarity with which he articulated the laws of a Torah scroll, phylacteries²⁰⁵ and *mezuzot*,²⁰⁶ divorce and marriage, as well as the laws regarding the Sabbath, holidays, the *sukkah*²⁰⁷ and the *eruv*²⁰⁸ - he compiled the laws of kings, the Sanhedrin,²⁰⁹ rebellion against God,²¹⁰ as well as the laws of the *sotah*,²¹¹ *terumah*,²¹² the vessels of the Holy Temple, the way that sacrifices were performed, and the way that the service in the Holy Temple was carried out. In short, nothing is omitted and everything is quite clear and simple, beautiful, and intelligible.

Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* is divided into 14 books. This is hinted at in the very name *Yad ha-Ḥazakah*.²¹³ It is arranged according to the following order:

1) *Mada* (Knowledge), the principles of faith in which Jews must believe. This book contains: *Yesodei ha-Torah*, the fundamentals of the Torah; *Hilkhot De'ot*, the laws of ethics; *Hilkhot*

²⁰² Singular of "Geonim."

²⁰³ A platform where prayer services are conducted and where the Torah is read publicly.

²⁰⁴ Dawn, or the first hour or two of daylight; literally in Hebrew, it means "the dawn pillar."

²⁰⁵ A Jewish ritual garment known as *tefillin* in Hebrew, and generally worn by men.

²⁰⁶ Little parchment scrolls deposited in doorposts of Jewish homes, containing four key passages from the Pentateuch.

²⁰⁷ A booth built for the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, which falls a few days after Yom Kippur.

²⁰⁸ A nearly invisible boundary, made up of wires, railroad tracks, highways, etc., within which observant Jews can carry items on the Sabbath. Otherwise on the Sabbath, observant Jews are enjoined from carrying items outside.

²⁰⁹ The Jewish supreme court that existed up until the destruction of the second Holy Temple.

²¹⁰ e.g. Deuteronomy 9:7

²¹¹ A married woman suspected of adultery who undergoes a trial by ordeal.

²¹² Biblically mandated agricultural gifts, effective in the Land of Israel, that must be consumed by the priestly caste.

²¹³ This system of the equivalence of numbers with words is called *gematria* in Hebrew. In this case, י or *yad*, the י equals 10 and the ט equals 4; thus, *yad* equals 14 in Hebrew letters. Word for word, *Yad ha-Ḥazakah* means "the strong hand" in Hebrew.

Talmud Torah, the laws of Torah study; *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim*, the laws of withdrawing oneself from idol worship; and *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, the laws of repentance.

Yesodei ha-Torah discusses 10 subjects: a) to believe in one God; b) not to express the thought, God forbid, that there is a god other than Him; c) to believe in His complete unity; d) to love Him; e) to fear Him; f) to sanctify His name - that is, to renounce your money, your property, or often even your life, when you are forced to commit transgressions or to convert from Judaism; g) to avoid the desecration of God's name; h) not to destroy items which bear His holy name; i) to obey a prophet who speaks in His name; and j) not to challenge a true prophet.

The next part - *Hilkhot De'ot* (dealing with ethics) - contains eleven commandments: a) to emulate the Creator's ways and His actions; b) to love scholars; c) to respect judges; d) to love converts to Judaism; e) not to hate your own brother; f) to punish a friend who doesn't go on the right path; g) not to humiliate a person; h) not to oppress less fortunate and defenceless people; i) not to engage in any slander; j) not to take revenge; and k) not to bear any grudge.

[p. 77] *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* – there are two commandments: a) to study Torah; and b) to give honour to those who can study.

Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim consists of 51 commandments. These include all the laws of how to withdraw oneself from idol worship, to not worship idols yourself, not to let anyone incite another into idol worship, to persecute missionaries,²¹⁴ and to annihilate a city that becomes idolatrous. Within these subjects, the laws also include not using any magic, not consulting the dead, not tattooing the body, a man should not dress himself like a woman, not to tear off skin while mourning the dead, and not to shave a beard or men's sidelocks. All of these are because they are non-Jewish practices, and Jews are commanded not to conduct themselves like non-Jews.

(Note: It is impossible to go into all the details even concerning the specifications of the content alone. What has been written so far, however, is enough to show the average reader how broadly each topic is treated. From now on, moving forward, we will describe the other books very briefly.)

2)²¹⁵ *Ahavah* (Love of God) deals with the commandments that speak of the Jews showing love towards the Creator. These commandments are: the laws of reading the Shema,²¹⁶ phylacteries, *Tefillah*,²¹⁷ the priestly blessing, *mezuzot*, Torah scrolls, fringes,²¹⁸ blessings, and circumcision.

²¹⁴ This reflects the reality of Rabbi Kruger's times in which there were Christian missionaries of Jewish origin who laboured to convert Jews away from their faith and to make them Christians.

²¹⁵ That number is omitted in the original Yiddish volume, probably from simple oversight.

²¹⁶ A fundamental Jewish prayer, affirming the Jews' faith in God.

²¹⁷ The literal Hebrew word for "prayer". In the literature of the Sages, it very often refers specifically to the *Shmoneh Esrei* or *Amidah*, which - along with the Shema - is the most fundamental of Jewish prayers.

²¹⁸ Referred to as *tzitzit* in Hebrew; these are Jewish ritual garments generally worn by men.

3) *Zemanim* (Times) consists of those commandments that occur at certain times: the laws of the Sabbath, the *eruv*, Yom Kippur, holidays in general, leavened and unleavened foods,²¹⁹ *shofar*,²²⁰ *lulav*,²²¹ *shekalim*,²²² the blessing of the New Month, fast days, the public reading of the Scroll of Esther on Purim, and Hanukkah.

4) *Nashim* (Women) includes all the laws that are related to marriage, such as: the marriage ceremony, the divorce ceremony, levirate marriage,²²³ the *sotah*, and the *ketubah*.²²⁴

5) *Kedushah* (Holiness) comprises the commandments that Jews ought to observe as constituting a holy nation. Within that are included the laws of family life, the degree to which relatives cannot be married; as well as the laws of birds and animals, concerning whether or not their meat can be eaten.

6) *Hafla'ah* (Utterances), in which people restrict themselves through an oath, a vow, or a decree.

7) *Zera'im* (Seeds) discusses the laws of *terumah*, *ma'aser*,²²⁵ and the rest of the laws having to do with crops grown in the Land of Israel.

8) *Avodah* (Divine Service) consists of the laws of the Holy Temple, its vessels, and the altar. This is a domain concerning which Maimonides himself states: "Concerning this, nobody - rabbis no more than ordinary people - knows about this range of topics now that everyone is in exile. Studying the Book of *Avodah*, everything is presented in front of one's very eyes, and one gets a clearer idea of what took place there at that time."

9) *Korbanot* (Offerings) enumerates which sacrifices were offered and how they were made.

10) *Taharah* (Ritual Purity) deals with the laws of ritual impurity and purity, blemishes, and ritual baths.

11) *Nezikin* (Torts) has to do with all the civil laws between one person and another.

[p. 78] 12) *Kinyan* (Acquisition) is concerned with all kinds of acquisitions. This includes the laws of buying, receiving a gift, and giving things away, as well as the laws of partnership and everything else that has a connection to that.

²¹⁹ Essentially, the laws of Passover, including the fact that leavened foods are prohibited on that holiday.

²²⁰ Essentially, the laws of Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year), including the *shofar* (ram's horn).

²²¹ A *lulav* is a palm branch for ritual use on Sukkot.

²²² *Shekalim* is the plural of *shekel*, a monetary unit in both ancient and modern Israel. Based on a commandment from Exodus 30:11-16, a half-shekel is donated by every observant Jew just before the holiday of Purim in late February or in early/mid-March.

²²³ *Ḥalitzah* and *yibum*, the two parts of levirate marriage, are mentioned in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

²²⁴ A marriage contract that is usually written in Aramaic.

²²⁵ The system of giving tithes that is effective in the Land of Israel.

13) *Mishpatim* (Civil Laws) concerns itself with payments, loans, and entrusted deposits, as well as the duties of workers to their employers and vice versa.

14) *Shoftim* (Judges) concerns itself with the Sanhedrin, its tasks, its division into the greater and lesser Sanhedrins, these courts' duties to the people, and the people's duties to these courts.

From the brief summary of the contents of the *Yad ha-Hazakah* (also known as the *Mishneh Torah*), everybody can see how it really includes everything that Jews needed to know when they were established in their homeland of the Land of Israel and the Holy Temple was in existence as well as its supreme court at the Hall of Hewn Stones²²⁶ and the smaller courts in the provincial cities of the Land of Israel.

²²⁶ Probably located on the northern wall of the Holy Temple, this is where the Sanhedrin met during the Second Temple era.

Chapter 2: *Ma'aseh Merkavah*²²⁷ (Metaphysics)

[p. 78] In his introduction to *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides establishes the tradition, demonstrating that the written Torah along with the “commandment” (the oral Torah) were transmitted from rabbi to disciple over 40 generations, one after the other, from the time that Moses our Master received it from God on Mount Sinai until Rav Ashi, who completed the Babylonian Talmud.

Those who are counted as transmitters of tradition are comprised of prophets, Tannaim,²²⁸ heads of courts, exilarchs,²²⁹ and judges of the Great Sanhedrin, all of whom extensively taught that tradition - each in his own time - to thousands and ten of thousands of students, and they transmitted it to their children. Their novel insights, comments and safeguards were placed together in both Talmuds, Sifra,²³⁰ Sifré,²³¹ and Tosefta,²³² from which we discover all the laws for living, including what is forbidden and what is permitted, what is ritually pure and what is ritually impure, as well as what action is legally liable and what is legally exempt.

Establishing the direct lineage of the tradition which extends from Moses our Master to Rav Ashi, and the fact that everything comes from God Himself, Maimonides describes the objective of his work and the benefits that it will have for all Jews, and then he begins the book itself, stating:

The basis of all fundamentals and the pillar of the disciplines is the knowledge that there exists a First Cause, and it is this First Cause that produces the entire creation in heaven, on the earth, and everything that's between them. We cannot establish that anything could exist if He himself did not exist. However, He can exist even when no other thing exists, because His existence is necessary, while theirs is only possible thanks to His presence.

Here, the First Cause is the God of the world; He is the One who moves the spheres with infinite and continuous strength. This is because the spheres are continuously moving themselves, and there can be absolutely no movement without a Mover.

[p. 79] God does this work without a hand, because He possesses no body, and is thus without the limbs that a body needs to have.

²²⁷ The “Account of the Chariot” - the vision of the divine contained in chapter 1 of Ezekiel. It was considered in rabbinic literature to contain the ultimate secrets of divinity.

²²⁸ The generations of the Talmudic sages who lived at the time of the Mishnah.

²²⁹ Leader of the Jewish community of Babylonia, the original and prototypical Jewish diaspora in what is now Iraq where the most common form of the Talmud was authored; this was from the Parthian to Abbasid periods. Such a leader claimed direct descent from King David. In Aramaic, the daily language of Jews in Babylonia and other parts of the pre-Islamic Middle East, an exilarch was called *resh galuta*, literally “head of the exile.”

²³⁰ Halakhic Midrash for Leviticus.

²³¹ Halakhic Midrashim for Numbers and Deuteronomy.

²³² Tannaitic supplement to Mishnah.

He is One. To deny His Oneness means to deny God altogether. His Oneness is the basis of belief.

However, His Oneness isn't the way we would imagine "one" when talking about corporeal things. He isn't one in terms of category, knowing that there are many categories; nor is He one in terms of body, because every bodily substance is limited by accidents²³³ in terms of height, breadth, and depth, and the body can be separated into various parts. God is, however, just one Unity - an infinite, indivisible, and formless Unity.

If there were other gods they would have bodies, because those similar beings become differentiated only by means of difference in accidents and forms. Being material substances, their forces would be limited by boundaries, and would cease. Observing the regular movement of the spheres is proof that the Mover is without a body, and therefore only One - an indivisible Unity, without the changes that take place with a material being. He doesn't experience changes from togetherness to separateness, from standing to sitting, place, and dimension; in terms of time, from beginning to end, from sitting to standing, from life to death, from wakefulness to sleep, from foolishness to wisdom; changing from anger to good, from joy to sadness, from silence to talking, and from decision to regret.

If this is the case, we must understand that all the biblical verses that ascribe to God limbs such as hands, feet, and eyes, as well as psychological emotions such as anger, regret, joy, or revenge, are merely parables and metaphors. This is in order for common people to have at least a weak and incorrect notion of God's existence and nature.

(Note: This topic is discussed quite extensively in the first part of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*,²³⁴ which we will later have the opportunity to talk about in the section "Maimonides as Philosopher".)

All that God created in His world is divided into three parts:

- 1) Those created things that have matter and form (*golem* and *tzurah*), which come into being and ultimately die - for example: people, animals, and plants.
- 2) Those created things that have matter and form, which remain in existence on a permanent basis. These are comprised of the heavenly bodies like stars, comets, and the sphere in which they are located and with which they move. (People believed like that at that time. Present-day astronomy has a quite different understanding of this.)
- 3) Those created things without a body, only with a form (*tzurah*). These are the angels.

²³³ A philosophical term denoting anything that comes into existence and ceases to exist.

²³⁴ *Moreh Nevukhim* in Hebrew

The verses from the Prophets that relate how they saw angels of fire, with wings of amber²³⁵ and other forms, must also be understood allegorically, just like those verses that speak about the Creator Himself.

Not having any bodies at all, angels obviously can't be divided into different types. [p. 80] So, why then are they called by ten different names? We can only grasp that the difference is merely in their qualities, and how far their understanding of God's greatness reaches. According to their ability, they are divided into ten levels - between the *Ishim*²³⁶ on the lowest level and the holy *Hayot*²³⁷ on the highest level.

However, no angel can grasp Him as He is Himself, with regard to His greatness, wisdom, unalterability, and unity.

That's because His knowledge isn't like our knowledge, which comes from outside us. He doesn't live the way we live; rather, He, His knowledge, and His understanding are all one. No mouth can express this, and no mind can understand this; even the highest level of the angels cannot grasp this to the utmost extent as He Himself can.

Here - says Maimonides – the topics are very deep and broad; what we described here is only a drop in the sea compared to what has not been written down. The Talmudic sages call it “the account of the Chariot,”²³⁸ and they warned readers to not preach it to many people, but instead, a rabbi should orally transmit it to his most outstanding student. This only refers to the chapter headings; the student should clarify the rest as much as he can, according to his understanding.

Belief in the unity of the Creator is an obligation for every Jew. Without it, no single Jew is observant of all the divine commandments.

Understanding that there is a God over the world is considered a positive commandment,²³⁹ as in the verse, “I am the Lord, Your God.”²⁴⁰ If one believes that there is a second god, one transgresses a negative commandment,²⁴¹ as in the verse, “You shall not have other gods besides Me.”²⁴²

The knowledge that God is not at all a body in the physical sense is a positive commandment, as in the verse, “Hear o Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”²⁴³ The Torah itself states,

²³⁵ *Hashmal* in Hebrew; cf. Ezekiel 1:27

²³⁶ *Ishim* (literally, “persons” or “men”) are the closest class of angels to mortal beings.

²³⁷ *Hayot* (literally, “animals” or “beasts”) are the angels carrying the holy Chariot, as discussed in Ezekiel 1.

²³⁸ In Hebrew, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*; see the first footnote of this chapter.

²³⁹ Literally in Hebrew, a “commandment of ‘do it!’.”

²⁴⁰ Exodus 20:2

²⁴¹ Literally in Hebrew, a “commandment of ‘don’t do it!’.”

²⁴² Exodus 20:3

²⁴³ Deuteronomy 6:4; this is the fundamental basis of the Shema prayer service, and *shema* means “hear” or “listen” in Hebrew.

“Since you saw no corporeal shape when the Lord your God spoke to you on Mount Sinai out of the fire.”²⁴⁴ In the book of the Prophet Isaiah (40:25), does it not state, “To whom can you liken Me”? If He were a body then one would surely know how to compare God to other things, specifying a characteristic - like, for example, the speed of a deer as against a hare, the size of an elephant compared to a fox, and so on. A second verse states, “The Lord is the God in heaven above and on the earth below, there is no other.”²⁴⁵ If He were a body, He would not be able to be in two places at the same time.

God’s existence, unity, and incorporeality, in Maimonides’ reckoning, is one of the most important principles “upon which everything depends.” Before Maimonides, there were also great scholars who spoke about fundamental principles in the area of belief. However, he was the first one to codify philosophical concepts, to make them into established laws, and even to sort those laws into positive and negative commandments. For him, issues of belief were few. However, he demanded that people of understanding devote themselves to this material and study these questions in order to understand the fundamental principles with their reason.

[p. 81] This particular tendency provoked a sharp criticism against Maimonides; the first to criticize him was Rabbi Abraham ben David (c. 1125-1198), known by the name of “Rabad III,” as readers will discover in the last part of this book, “Criticism of Maimonides.”

²⁴⁴ cf. Deuteronomy 4:15

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 4:39

Chapter 3: *Ma'aseh Bereshit*²⁴⁶ (Cosmology)

[p. 81] After the “Account of the Chariot,” Maimonides dedicates two chapters to the “Account of Creation,” which we nowadays call “cosmology” - the teaching concerning the cosmos. There, he mainly writes regarding a) its elements and the principles upon which it is established, and b) its laws.

There are nine spheres and they comprise that which we generally call “heaven.” A sphere refers to a globe that constantly moves in a set, circular orbit, containing the star located within it. Each one of the seven planets (fixed stars) - now known as Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Mercury, Venus, and Mars²⁴⁷ (with later astronomers adding an eighth, our own Earth) - fits inside a sphere (which constantly moves itself in orbit). The eighth sphere is a separate one for the 12 signs of the zodiac²⁴⁸; these signs are the constellations that are classified according to their appearance similar to the following forms: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces.²⁴⁹ The ninth sphere is the one that makes all the eight others move.

All of these spheres are clear and transparent, colourless and weightless. What we see as the blue colour in the sky is because of the distance, when our eyes stop reaching even farther, on account of the ethereality of the uppermost air in the atmosphere. The spheres are close to one another. At times, one goes past the limits of the other. There is no empty space between any of them.

The eighth²⁵⁰ sphere contains within itself the 12 aforementioned constellations of the zodiac, which we call *mazalot* in Hebrew, and they also move around, albeit very slowly. In their case, the orbit that the Sun or the Moon go through in one day takes them precisely seventy years.

Among the stars that we see with the naked eye, there are other celestial bodies that are smaller than our Earth, and still others that are several times bigger than that. Our Earth is 40 times bigger

²⁴⁶ The “Account of the Creation” - the creation of the world and of the universe as mentioned in chapter 1 of Genesis.

²⁴⁷ The traditional Hebrew names for these planets (except Uranus and Neptune, which weren't discovered until the 18th and 19th centuries) are *Tzedek* (Justice), *Shabtai* (Saturday), *Kokhav* (Star/Planet), *Nogah* (Brightness), and *Ma'adim* (Red), respectively. *Levanah* (White), which is also mentioned in the list in the Yiddish original, is the Moon, and is not a planet as such.

²⁴⁸ Known in Hebrew as *mazalot* (*mazal* - also meaning luck - in singular).

²⁴⁹ In Hebrew, these signs are respectively known as *Taleh* (Lamb), *Shor* (Bull), *Te'omim* (Twins), *Sartan* (Crab), *Aryeh* (Lion), *Betulah* (Virgin), *Mozna'im* (Balance), *Akrav* (Scorpion), *Keshet* (Rainbow), *G'di* (Goat), *D'li* (Bucket - used to draw water from a well), and *Dagim* (Fish).

²⁵⁰ Rabbi Kruger wrote “ninth,” but as he said in a preceding paragraph, the ninth sphere moves all the others and the constellations are in the eighth sphere.

as the Moon,²⁵¹ while the Sun is 170 times bigger than the Earth.²⁵² This means that the Sun is approximately 6,800 times bigger than the Moon.

[p. 82] Maimonides believed that all these spheres and stars are conscious; each one, according to its level, has a knowledge of its Creator and of itself. Their knowledge is less than that of the angels, but greater than that of humankind.

The matter from which our world is created has no similarity whatsoever to that of the spheres and stars. Earlier, God created primordial matter and simultaneously also created four types of forms (*tzurot*). The lightest of all these forms of matter stems from the constant movement that exists very high up that joined with the form (*tzurah*) of fire, together making up the element of fire. Afterwards comes the element of air, referring to the sort of matter that is somewhat heavier than fire but lighter than water that joined itself with the form of air, together making up the element of air. In the same way, the heavier form (air) joined itself with the form of water. The last of the elements is the heaviest - earth. These are the elements: earth is entirely below the other elements and is covered with water; the air rises above both of those, and fire is higher than all of these. Other than these four elements, there are no other forms of matter.

These four elements have no consciousness and work unconsciously. This encompasses the fire up above, and it is as true of air, the water beneath, and all that comes from earth (such as a stone, a piece of wood, etc.). All of them fall automatically without thought and without free choice. The biblical verses that state that snow, fire, hail, and steam should praise God are no more than a metaphor, indicating to the people that they should praise the Creator considering the mute, automatic elements that do his will, and persuading themselves of His strength to create all these powerful forces.

The four elements together compose all the objects that we have in the world: earth, trees, and living things (including people) - each with its own form, but made up of the same four elements. These forms change from one to another over time, incorporating different elements, and creating a variety of forms. Their matter is one and the same: a mixture of the four elements.

Furthermore, whatever elements are assembled must eventually come apart. This is because each element was created with a natural instinct to exist separately. In some cases the combination lasts a long time, and in others a short time - in any event, a separation must occur, constant movement mixes the elements, and over time they separate from each other.

Thus, the process of modification never ceases, with chemical bondings and combinations always taking place. We are referring here to the same elements, but with other forms.

²⁵¹ The Moon actually has approximately 1/50 Earth's volume.

²⁵² Sun is actually 1.3 million times the volume of Earth.

A person can never see matter without form, nor can he see form without matter. One can always see them only at the moment when both form and matter are combined. Form and matter are divisible only in abstract reasoning.

[p. 83] (Note: Present-day philosophers think the opposite, that we see only the form, while it is impossible to see matter alone. With that particular opinion, the philosophers support the school of thought that starts with Bacon, Locke, Hume, and Kant.)

When dealing with form, two points of view need to be understood: a) physical appearance that differentiates one from another like it, and b) psychological capability that makes someone think differently and deal with things differently than someone else.

A person is composed of matter and form in the corporeal senses of the word. His form makes him able to know how to distinguish between many people. In the spiritual sense, a person's form is his living soul. And in order for him to separate himself from other living creatures, his mind is imbued with reason; thus, reason is the form of the living soul, and concerning it, the Creator stated: "Let us make man in our image."²⁵³

With respect to the living soul (*nefesh*): Since it is the same in all creatures and is dependent on matter, one might believe that it would be lost together with the dissolution of the four elements, that is when a person dies. However, the soul (*neshama*) that is the form that arises in the form of the mind - not being dependent on the body - will never be lost. With regard to this form, King Solomon states: "The body goes back to the earth whence it originally came, and the soul to God who imbued it in him."²⁵⁴

(Note: According to this interpretation, it appears that Maimonides already had a precise idea of a subconscious which great psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and his successors have investigated.)

When a person of understanding thinks through everything, and he discovers the wisdom of God - the Creator of all from the supreme spheres of the *mazalot* to the lowliest creatures of our world - a fear strikes him at first, then afterwards a sincere love for this large, infinite force, and he decides to worship Him only on account of that force, not expecting any other reward.

This topic, which takes up two entire chapters in *Sefer ha-Mada*,²⁵⁵ is only a precis of what Maimonides writes, and he himself says that what he wrote is only "a drop in the bucket" compared to what ought to be written. He calls it *Ma'aseh Bereshit*, which is mentioned in the Talmud (tractate *Hagigah*, chapter 2).

²⁵³ cf. Genesis 1:26

²⁵⁴ cf. Ecclesiastes 12:7

²⁵⁵ Literally, "the Book of Knowledge"; the first part of *Mishneh Torah*.

A person should study the “Account of the Chariot” (metaphysics) and even the “Account of the Creation” only after earlier familiarizing himself with the Talmud and only after he knows all the laws concerning everyday life.

Chapter 4: Character Traits and Hygiene

[p. 84] After describing the laws related to prophecy and prophets, which we discussed in earlier chapters,²⁵⁶ Maimonides devotes two entire chapters to ethics - or, as he calls it, *Hilkhot De'ot*.

He had already laid the main foundation for this subject in his “Eight Chapters” introduction to Mishnah *Avot*, as indicated in an earlier chapter, demonstrating that a person must take the golden middle path, only in rare cases inclining towards the extremes. Subsequently, he states:

A person needs to get accustomed to be sparing in words. This is not only true in normal conversations, but even in discussing Torah and wisdom as well. A rabbi needs to teach his students using as few words as possible. A multitude of words causes sin. Speaking too much is a sign of foolishness. Everyone must get accustomed to the character trait of speaking little, but with much content.

That little bit also needs to be presented calmly, without shouting, and without hurrying to answer without thinking. It is obvious that one must avoid flattery and deception even for a non-Jew; when the non-Jew desires meat from a kosher-slaughtered animal, one may not sell him non-kosher meat from a *nevelah*.²⁵⁷ One may not invite him to eat, knowing in advance that the non-Jew is full and will not eat; one should not attempt to give a present, if he is certain that the non-Jew will not accept it. One may also not say, “For the sake of your honour I am now opening a new cask,” while he needs to have it opened in any case. People may call it *derekh eretz*²⁵⁸ or courtesy, but as far as Maimonides is concerned, this is instead in the category of *genevat da'at*:²⁵⁹ lying and deception, against which the Torah and the Prophets warn us in many places.

Nobody may make jokes and witticisms in a mocking way, nor reprimand anyone, nor may anybody be sad; they should rather be satisfied and greet every single person with a bright countenance and a friendly smile.

Moreover, one should not chase after wealth; one should not have ambitions to take over the world; and one should also not sit with idle hands and hope that God will help him while he doesn't work at all. However, one should work only as much as is necessary, being satisfied with that which he has, and he should spend the rest of his time studying Torah.

It is important to withdraw from disputes, envy, lusts, and chasing after honour. These weaknesses drive people away from the world.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁶ It says “articles” in the Yiddish original, but for the purposes of this book, it is “chapters.”

²⁵⁷ An animal slaughtered in an improper manner according to Jewish law.

²⁵⁸ Literally in Hebrew, “the way of the earth”; it translates better as “proper behaviour.”

²⁵⁹ Literally in Hebrew, “theft of knowledge”; it translates better as misrepresentation or deception.

²⁶⁰ cf. Mishnah *Avot* 4:28; 2:16 to a lesser extent.

One would think that if envy, lust, honour, and other desires are bad, then one should withdraw himself from any of these and go to the other extreme - not eating any meat, not drinking any wine, not getting married, not living in a house, only going clothed in sackcloth and sleeping under the skies. All this is precisely what non-Jewish priests do. That behavior is also not good. The Nazirite²⁶¹ needed to bring an offering, because he refrained from wine that [p. 85] the Torah allowed us to drink. The same is true with all other permitted pleasures. As the Talmud states, “As if what the Torah forbade isn’t enough, do you need to add still more of your own?”²⁶²

However, the permitted things must also be done with moderation, and only with the objective of maintaining a healthy body, in order to be able to worship God and to study His Torah. As a result, no one is allowed to eat even delicious foods, if they are harmful for one’s health; one is only allowed to eat those foods that are nutritious and not harmful to anybody. In brief: No action is allowed solely for one’s benefit; only that which can serve a higher aim is permitted.

Doing this serves people for the purposes of eating, conducting business, sleeping, and also doing still other ordinary activities, because the importance of the objective sanctifies the simplest of means. King Solomon expresses that thought in Proverbs: “In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths smooth.”²⁶³

A healthy soul in a healthy body is the ideal. A person can’t study if he is hungry or thirsty or cold; a sick body doesn’t allow people to think. Therefore, one should make sure that he isn’t lacking anything good, and he should avoid things that can make him sick.

Continuing here in *Hilkhot De’ot*, Maimonides presents to us a chapter on hygiene, from which we are only quoting briefly:

A person may not eat unless he’s hungry, he may not drink before he’s thirsty, and he may not hold himself for even a moment when he is about to make bowel movements.

One may not eat too much, and one should instead leave behind a fourth of what he was to eat; one should drink very little water in the middle of eating, and whatever is being drunk should be mixed with a small amount of wine. Later, when the food starts to be digested, one may drink, but only as much as is required and not more.

One should be used to having bowel movements before eating. And nobody may sit down to eat if he has just arisen from sleep; rather, he should go on a long walk after getting up, or do some work, or do physical exercise, until the body is warmed up. It is recommended to rest a bit after eating.

²⁶¹ A Nazirite is one who, based on chapter 6 of Numbers, abstains from drinking wine or eating grapes, cutting his hair, and being in contact with the dead.

²⁶² Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedarim 9:1.

²⁶³ Proverbs 3:6

One must eat while sitting down calmly, not while lying down, going around the room, riding, or doing any work. One also needs to rest after eating until the food starts to be digested. Making too much movement soon after eating triggers bad and severe illnesses.

Of the 24 hours in a full day, one needs to devote a third to sleep, and one should calculate that these eight hours should end at sunrise. A person should not sleep on his face, nor on his back, but rather on his right side at the end of the night and on his left side at the beginning of the night. One should not lie down soon after eating; rather, one should wait for 3-4 hours, and one should not sleep during the daytime.

One needs to start meals with fruits and vegetables that loosen the intestines, such as figs, grapes, plums, beets, and all kinds of cucumbers. One then needs to wait a while until these foods go through the upper stomach, after which one eats the main meal. Afterwards, one can eat fruits that harden the intestines, [p. 86] such as pomegranates, apples, quinces, and others. One doesn't need to eat a lot of those foods.

The rule is to eat easily digestible foods first, and afterwards foods that are harder to digest. Consequently, poultry should be eaten before meat from cattle and other larger animals; eggs should be eaten before poultry; and mutton should be eaten before fat meat.

In the hot season, one needs to eat cold food, avoiding spicy foods and using vinegar. In the cold season, one needs to eat fatty dishes, spicy foods, mustard, and all other types of foods which provide more warmth.

These are some dishes that are never suitable for consumption: old, salted large fish; dried salted cheese; preserved meat; mushrooms; wine that isn't aged; and old food that already has a bad smell. The following are not so bad and one may eat them at times in small amounts: large fish, cheese, milk if later than 24 hours after milking,²⁶⁴ meat from large bulls and large goats, beans, lentils, bread made out of barley, unleavened bread,²⁶⁵ cabbage, salads, onions, garlic, mustard, and radishes. One may eat a little bit of these foods, but only during the winter and not during the summer.

The following foods aren't so good for consumption, but are better than the above-mentioned ones: waterfowl (geese, ducks), really small doves, dates, bread fried in fat, bread from flour that doesn't contain any bran. One needs to avoid all of these except as health remedies.

One should equally avoid fruit from trees and should not eat them even when they are dried; unripened fruits are especially hard on the body. Carobs are never good. Sour fruit is unsuitable for consumption, though a little bit during the summer and in warm regions is all right. Figs,

²⁶⁴ Bear in mind that Maimonides is referring to a time long before refrigeration.

²⁶⁵ *Matzot* (*matzah* in singular) in Hebrew; those are eaten on Passover instead of regular, leavened bread.

grapes, and almonds are always good, but one ought also not eat those on a regular basis, despite the fact that they are better than all the other fruits.

Honey and wine are not suitable for consumption by young children but are good for older people, especially during the winter.

Above all, a person needs to get used to eating vinegar on hot days. The rule is during the summer to eliminate one third of the food that one eats during the winter.

Maimonides' hygienic advice is very interesting in terms of how every individual should conduct himself while eating, drinking, walking, sleeping, going to the bathhouse, and many more things. We marvel at these, knowing that in spite of all the tremendous progress that medicine and hygiene have undergone since his time, one can obviously still make use of his advice in many cases in the present day.

The wonder is even greater, given the importance Maimonides attributes to bran at a time when people didn't have any concept of the newly discovered vitamins,²⁶⁶ found in all produce, to which are attributed the highest nutritional power for people.

²⁶⁶ The first vitamin was discovered in 1912.

Chapter 5: Character Traits and Proper Conduct

[p. 87] There is a rule when it comes to health: As long as a person has enough physical exercise, whether through work or walking until feeling tired, the stomach stays regular and open; as long as a person doesn't overeat until getting stuffed, he will not get sick even after eating bad and hard-to-digest food.

Therefore, a person has to be careful to have regular bowel movements. If he doesn't, or if he has them but with difficulty, he may expect to not be well.

Among Maimonides' recommended remedies for this, there are those that we don't use nowadays, but salt, olive oil, and honey dissolved in warm water for older men are even today as good as in that time.

A person needs to eat nutritious and easy-to-digest foods. However, that alone is still not enough to maintain a good stomach. Whoever is sluggish, constantly sits in one place, doesn't work, or doesn't immediately follow the call of nature to make bowel movements, or ignores a constipated stomach will get sick, even if he protects himself with the appropriate foods and he conducts himself according to all the hygienic rules. Eating to the point of satiety is like a deadly poison for the body; it triggers all sorts of diseases. This is true the more one eats food, whether one eats bad or even good foods, and certainly when one eats too much. This is what King Solomon had in mind when he stated, "He who guards his mouth and tongue guards himself from trouble."²⁶⁷ That is, whoever protects the mouth that he eats with and the tongue that he speaks with guards himself from trouble.

A person ought to keep his body pure through washing and bathing every week, meaning once in seven days.

One may not go to the bathhouse soon after eating, nor when one is hungry; rather, one does so when the food begins to be digested. One needs to begin by washing the whole body with quite warm but non-scalding water, and after that, the head should be washed with somewhat hotter water. Afterwards, one washes oneself with somewhat cooler water, a third time with still cooler water, and finally with cold water. However, one shouldn't use lukewarm water and certainly not cold water on his head. He shouldn't wash himself with cold water during the winter, and he shouldn't stay for too long in the bathhouse; instead, after initially being sweated, one should leave.

Leaving the bathhouse, a person needs to put on clothes in the changing room and cover his head in order to not catch a cold. Even in the summer, one ought to protect oneself. A person needs to rest and cool himself down for a while, and subsequently he needs to leave. One should not eat until one is sufficiently cooled down. A little nap after the bath is a good idea.

²⁶⁷ Proverbs 21:23

Right after the bath, one should not drink any cold water; a person may most certainly not do so in the bath. If thirst bothers him greatly, he should mix water with honey or wine.

[p. 88] Sexual activity is natural and permitted, but only to a certain extent and only insofar as it is necessary. Excessive sexual activity is harmful for the eyes, hair, and bones, and it shortens one's years. Great doctors maintain that 999 out of a thousand deaths are from sexual activity and only one in a thousand deaths are from other diseases.

Maimonides assures us that whoever conducts himself according to these directives will live out his life and will not need to visit a doctor, unless he was born sickly, or unless he violated these health regulations too much and for too long, or an epidemic broke out. Absent these secondary causes, he will live a long and healthy life.

On the other hand, one must remember that this list of regulations is for healthy people. For people who are unwell, it's a whole different story concerning how to eat, what to eat, how to lie in bed, and what to drink. Everyone who is unwell has his own specific treatment. In those places where there is absolutely no doctor present, the sick person should conduct himself according to these prescriptions as much as those who are healthy.

A learned person may not live in cities where the following ten things aren't present: a doctor, a bloodletter,²⁶⁸ a bathhouse, a toilet, water from a river or a spring, a synagogue, a teacher, a scribe, a charity collector, and a *beit din*²⁶⁹ that has the right to arrest and prosecute violators.

A healthy soul goes along with a healthy body. Whoever possesses such a soul is called a wise person. One can recognize this through his opinions and knowledge as well as through his conduct.

A wise person may absolutely not be a glutton; rather, he should eat in order to be satisfied. He should eat in his own house, not in somebody else's house - unless it's for a meal for the sake of a divine commandment.²⁷⁰ He should not drink any wine except for the little that is necessary for eating; if he drinks to the point of getting drunk, he is thereby desecrating God's name.

Whoever wants to become worthy of being "wise" must get used to speaking calmly, not shouting, receiving everyone in a friendly way, not being haughty in the manner of a proud person, not speaking about anything except in a positive way, always finding merit in everyone, and not walking quickly in the street. Such a person must not be too bent down like Nazirites²⁷¹ but also not raise his head in arrogance. He must keep himself pure, no stain should be on his clothes, he

²⁶⁸ Bloodletting was a method of medical treatment in vogue before the advent of modern medicine, including in Maimonides' era.

²⁶⁹ A court of Jewish law

²⁷⁰ *Seudat mitzvah* in Hebrew; for example: a circumcision, a bar mitzvah, or a wedding.

²⁷¹ A Nazirite is one who, based on chapter 6 of Numbers, abstains from drinking wine or eating grapes, cutting his hair, and being in contact with the dead.

shouldn't go out with shoes that have multiple patches, he must treat his wife decently, and he should care for her and their children more than for himself.

A reasonable person needs, above all, to learn a trade that can give him a livelihood. Afterwards, he needs to buy a house in which to live, and immediately after that he needs to get married. Only fools do precisely the opposite: as soon as the fool gets married, he looks to buy a house, and after that he starts to look for a source of income, or lives from charity.

A person ought to give charity, but in moderation. He may not donate his entire wealth to charity and subsequently become a burden on respectable people.

[p. 89] A person's commercial dealings need to be honest, and his word and pledge must be sacred. He must live within his means, and he must not take anything on credit; if he does buy on credit, he soon pays for it. He's not involved in guaranteeing loans for anyone, and he doesn't commit his goodwill for this purpose in order to not later need to violate God's name by not being able to keep his word. He shouldn't make anyone feel constricted; he shouldn't impinge on another's source of income, and if someone does that to him, he should forgive him and not bear any grudge against him, and he shouldn't even think of revenge. Moreover, concerning just this thing, there is a verse that states in the name of the Creator: "You are My servant, Israel, of whom I can boast."²⁷²

One's personal nature becomes influenced by the surroundings in which one finds himself; consequently, a wise person needs to select a pleasant milieu for himself. Failing that, it is better for him to reside alone, separate from other people.

Everyone is obligated to love every Jew and to protect the latter's property like his own. Whoever hates a Jew transgresses a negative commandment. One certainly must love a convert to Judaism, because God Himself loves him.

Upon seeing a Jew stray from the straight path, it is a commandment to rebuke him with words, but not in public so as not to humiliate him; instead one must rebuke him privately. Even when that person does not accept the rebuke the first time, one is obligated to repeat the rebuke a second and a third time, until that person strikes him; starting from that moment, he is exempt from the obligation.

Every person needs to be careful not to oppress any widow and orphan, and in this there is no difference whether they are poor or rich. Even the widow or orphan of a king merits the same treatment. It is understood that we consider a child an orphan whether he is orphaned from a father and a mother, or only from one of them. Only a teacher may punish an orphan, but he may only do so in a lighter manner than he punishes other children whose parents are living. The law protects such orphans until they grow up and can earn their own living.

²⁷² cf. Isaiah 41:9

Slander and gossip²⁷³ are dangerous transgressions. These transgressions harm three people: the one who tells it, the one who listens to it, and the one who is being talked about. Slander can destroy the world.

What has been discussed here is a summary of Maimonides' ethics, selected from the Talmud and Midrash, and presented in his marvelous order.

²⁷³ *Lashon ha-ra*; in Hebrew, it literally means "the evil tongue."

Chapter 6: Foreknowledge and Free Choice

[p. 89] In his “Laws of Repentance,”²⁷⁴ Maimonides concludes that each and every person has the free choice to do good deeds or evil ones. If that person, however, were compelled in his actions by any cause, he could not be rewarded for performing a divine commandment and he could not be punished for committing a transgression. As a result, the entire issue of repentance for sin and pleading with God for forgiveness would be invalid.

[p. 90] Thus, the concept of human free will plays a big role and forms the basis of divine reward and punishment. That is because if it’s true, as the fatalists say, that everything is predetermined, and nobody can act differently from the way it is decreed for him, then all those warnings in the Torah, “Do this, and don’t do that,” cannot be valid, since a person is not in control of himself.

Someone may ask: How can I believe in free choice, knowing that without the Creator’s will, absolutely nothing can take place? The answer is that it is God’s will that a person should have free choice, for He created the human species with such a nature, just as He created fire to exist on high, and He created water to exist down below, and He created planets to move in a perfect circle.

That person will then ask: The Creator obviously knows all that will be, and if God knows that a certain person will be wicked, he obviously cannot be righteous, because His knowledge cannot be false. This means that God’s foreknowledge robs people of free choice. Thus, if I were to believe in free choice, I would have to deny His foreknowledge. How can I believe in both at the same time? To resolve this difficult question of “foreknowledge and free choice,” Maimonides says this:

Know that this question is broader than the Earth and deeper than the sea. Many fundamental principles and exalted reasoning depend on it, but you need to remember our description in the second chapter of *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*,²⁷⁵ that the Creator’s knowledge isn’t like that of people. People and their knowledge are two separate things, whereas He and His knowledge are as one, and we can’t conceive of it just like we can’t conceive of the totality of His essence. This is what the prophet Isaiah states in His name: “My thoughts aren’t like yours and my ways aren’t like yours.”²⁷⁶ Just so, no one can understand how foreknowledge and free choice could go together, but we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is so, and not just through faith - rather, we can understand through scientific proofs - that a person is solely responsible for his actions.

Concerning this statement, Rabbi Abraham ben David (ca. 1125-1198)²⁷⁷ remarks: Here, Maimonides did not observe the custom of the Sages, who don’t ask any questions before they know the answer in advance. For what purpose are people left in doubt? After all the twists and

²⁷⁴ A part of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* that deals with issues of repentance.

²⁷⁵ A part of *Mishneh Torah* that deals with the fundamentals of the universe, prophecy, etc.

²⁷⁶ Isaiah 55:8

²⁷⁷ Rabbi Abraham ben David was Maimonides’ main early commentator and lived in Posquières in Provence, a region in the south of France.

turns, why did he have to leave the matter to faith; why broach the subject at all? Rabbi Abraham ben David himself answers that, after entrusting free choice to people, God's knowledge isn't constrained, like the foreknowledge obtained through astrology, which a person can distinguish with his reasoning. The Creator, who knows the power of the constellations, also knows the power of a person's conscience, whether or not He will be able to differentiate between good and evil. Perforce, such knowledge does not stand in the way of free choice.

Over a number of years, most thinking people were on the side of Rabbi Abraham ben David [p. 91] in terms of that question, being of the opinion that Maimonides, who did not have a sufficient answer, concealed himself underneath the wings of faith. However, in our time, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) created his *Critique of Pure Reason* theory which followed and expanded on what Maimonides posited, and thus now Maimonides' thought has been revealed in its greatness.

The philosophers both before and after Maimonides - until nearly our time - believed that human perception, both through the senses and through reasoning, is justifiably true - something that nobody can doubt. Certainly, some skeptics had doubts about sensory experience, but everyone conceded authenticity to the mind's perception. In their opinion, all of existence is the mind's creation. Reasoning and creation are as one; therefore, human reasoning - as a part of a whole - has the potential to comprehend everything that can be found in the world and beyond it. Logical conclusions are as true as the mathematical ones, depending on the person's subjectivity. It occurred to absolutely nobody to think: perhaps our mind is only fantasy, depending on us and justified by sensory experiences; what could be deceptive about that? Rationalism was certain in its power and in measuring itself to achieve that truth having to do with God and the universe prior to creation.

The Empirical School²⁷⁸ overthrew rationalism from its greatness, proving the inconsistency of its opinion that reasoning, without the help of experience, can produce the absolute truth about the important philosophical questions and that the less the senses interfere the more we can reach the pure truth.

John Locke (1632-1704) was just about the first to establish the Empirical School. In his work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690, he firmly established a rule that whatever is familiar we experience through the five senses and whatever is less familiar we rely on reasoning alone, being more worthy than our perception. His doctrine is called "sensualism," and its fundamental idea is: "There is no sort of understanding that is prior to the senses." Even ideas first come to the mind from an outside sensation, which meets the inner reflection, and

²⁷⁸ In philosophy, empiricism is a theory that states that knowledge comes only or primarily from sensory experience. It is one of several views of epistemology, along with rationalism and skepticism. Empiricism emphasizes the role of empirical evidence in the formation of ideas, rather than innate ideas or traditions.

thereby starts to create blended ideas such as desire, belief, comparison, combination, reflection, and so forth.

George Berkeley (1685-1753), treading in Locke's path, came up with "subjective idealism;" that means is that there is no outside material world. Everything that we see is no more than ideas in our subjectivity, in our "I."

David Hume (1711-1776) was also skeptical. He thought that the mind is very limited. All that we have actually understood comes from experience. [p. 92] However, experience proper doesn't possess in itself any certain principles upon which one could rely. The notion of cause and effect, upon which all our knowledge is based, grew out of habit, and its entire theoretical basis is a form of belief that when one thing happens, another thing happens. The mind doesn't understand the reason why it "must" be so, even though we experience that it is so.

Kant is the one whom Hume "woke up from his sleep," as he expressed it; however, he did not follow his master with closed eyes. Instead, he created an entirely new system that invalidates dogmatic rationalism, along with his master's empirical skepticism. According to Kant's opinion, each theoretical perception must be based on experience; the human mind - in theory - cannot go beyond experience. On the other hand, experience itself - for him - isn't a simple replication of the outside world in the human senses. Rather, it is a product of the following two factors: processing that which occurs in the object, which has an effect on our senses, and from there, how the effect would be received by the subject; that is, those human perceptive capabilities that treat the outside material and make from it human experiences with the help of thinking categories and rational representations of "place" and "time." In summary: only these resolutions constitute certain truths, when - prior to the experience - the mind was unconsciously worked upon in an intense way in the experience. It can be stated even better: we can trust our mind only so far as its conclusions become a part of the process that first created the human experience.

Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, analyzes all the sides of human perception, thoroughly searching all the powers of our point of view, and he comes to the conclusion that both the forms of perception and the forms of thought are only for us and in us alone, and they don't have any existence outside of us. Experience is intertwined with time and place - a prior form of perception that takes its inspiration from our limited senses and ideas. Consequently, we have absolutely no ability to understand those things that are to be found outside ourselves. All of existence, in its entirety, is "a thing as it is in itself,"²⁷⁹ and we don't know anything about what it is.

Kant divides all our forms of discernment into four classes, and each of these can in turn be divided into three parts - for a total of 12 parts - as follows: 1) quantity, which is divided into unity, plurality, and totality; 2) quality, divided into negation, reality, and limitation; 3) relation, divided into substantiality, cause and effect, and one thing that has an effect on the [p. 93] other; and 4)

²⁷⁹ A translation into Yiddish of the German "*Ding an sich*." In Kant's philosophy, it signifies "a thing as it is in itself," not mediated through perception by either the senses or conceptualization, and it is therefore unknowable.

modality, divided into possibility and impossibility, existence and non-existence, and contingency and necessity.

The categories themselves are, however, not entirely able to encompass the basic laws of experience, even when one adds to them perspective, unless it's with the help of "the strength of fantasy" that has an effect on perception and unites perception with understanding. Only at the moment when all three of the powers of theoretical perception work together is human experience created.

From all the basic causes of "pure understanding" that Kant first introduced, it is worthwhile to reflect on that which he calls "analogues of experience," whose basic principle is that experience is possibly only a thought in the imagination that all things that we are informed about are necessarily tied one with the other. From that principle three fundamental principles emerge, upon which all the natural sciences rest:

1) Since appearances do not change themselves, the substance remains in its result, not increasing and not diminishing.

2) All changes occur in accordance with the law of "cause and effect."

3) All substances that can be comprehended within the framework of "time and place" regularly effect each other.

Considering these three fundamental clauses, you will find that there is not the slightest trace of feeling in them; for this reason, they can't stem from those effects that the outside world makes upon us. Instead, they are assembled from *a priori* forms, categories, and schemes that the discerning subject creates from himself under the effect of the surrounding world. That is to say that the mind doesn't revolve around the experience nor does it reflect its laws; rather, the experience revolves around the mind, and the experience dictates to a person how to think. Therefore, we understand why with us, by natural necessity, the result is that which is created in our nature.

If that's the case - if all appearances and natural laws come from our perceptive processes, and if emotions are also not more than our answers to outside effects - then how can we know anything concerning the outside world? How can we know the correct form, nature, or colour of the object, of the thing that has overcome all the schemes brought over from our subjectivity? How can we believe in the existence of a unity or a plurality? Is law controlled by causality and cause-and-effect, or is it free from it? Is its existence a necessity or only a contingency?

[p. 94] For Kant, science cannot give a positive answer to these questions, because "the thing as it is in itself" lies beyond the limits of our experience. We can only know the thing as it appears to us, but not as it is in truth.

This, very briefly, is Kant's doctrine of perception that is now understood as a 100% truth in the world of thought. If that is the case, then the law of cause and effect is also a human conception, and is not "as the thing is." As a result, the question of God's foreknowledge and human free choice - which is essentially built on the basis of God's foreknowledge hindering free choice - falls apart.

Maimonides came to that same conclusion, even if from another vantage point.

Maimonides' understanding is in the form of a compromise between two schools of thought that prevailed in the world of ancient thinking. One school of thought - held by figures such as Empedocles (c. 494-c. 434 BCE), Democritus (c. 460-c. 370 BCE), Anaxagoras (c. 500-c. 428 BCE), Socrates (c. 470-399 BCE), Plato (428/427 or 424/423-348/347 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), and others - asserted that the human mind, with the help of logic, mathematics, and geometry, can conceptualize all of existence, starting out from the world and ending with the spheres, divinity included.

The second school of thought, held by Zeno (c. 495 or 490-c. 430 BCE) and supported by such famous philosophers as Heraclitus (c. 535-475 BCE)²⁸⁰ and others, asserted that our conception of all that exists is only an idle fantasy, a sort of mirage, a *fata morgana*,²⁸¹ in which the mind and the senses deceive us. All of existence consists only of "being" and "becoming," without any change, without colour, without taste, and without form. After that, Zeno deduces from these facts that no change in the world is possible; we are only deceived by our senses to think that change happens. The Ionian school of thought²⁸² goes so far as to assert that, indeed, "being" exists, while "becoming" is merely an incorrect conception. The Skeptical school of thought went quite far, to the point of doubting everything, not only in the world of existence but even in one's own self as well.

Maimonides positions himself between both extremes, maintaining that the human mind can indeed attain a certain truth of which nobody can be in doubt. However, the mind itself is limited in its capability and can grasp only part of existence. This is the part in which a person finds, sees, feels, and has a useful experience. However, that existence which is far from him, for example those spheres that are unbeknownst to him, and even more, metaphysical truth - there, the mind doesn't have any approach, and therefore, one's conclusions have to be wrong and untrustworthy. In the first part of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, chapter 31, he states:

Know that the human mind has a limit to how much much it can achieve. Where does it stop? The limit is different according to each person and his comprehension. With regard to physical

²⁸⁰ We are not sure of the true meaning of "*heloten*" which modifies Heraclitus in the original Yiddish text. Possibly, that term refers to the subjugated group, known as "helots," that comprised the majority of the population of Sparta.

²⁸¹ A form of mirage seen in a narrow band directly above the horizon.

²⁸² The Ionian school of pre-Socratic philosophy was centred in Miletus, Ionia (present-day Turkey), in the 6th century BC. It included such thinkers as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Archelaus.

capacity, for example, one person can only see for a quarter mile, [p. 95] another can see for a half mile, and a third can see for two miles; one person can carry two loaves of bread, another can carry five, and a third can carry ten. On the other hand, no one can see for 100 miles, just as no one can pick up a big stone wall. The same thing is true with respect to intellectual topics: one person can understand subjects all by himself, another must have someone explain these subjects to him in order to understand them, and the third one will still not have a grasp of these subjects even when someone explains them to him. Nonetheless, even among intelligent people, there is a limit beyond which the mind cannot go.

In this case, the limitation of the mind is the result of Maimonides' theory of perception, which is genuinely empirical. In Maimonides' opinion, all human feelings and forms of thought aren't innate to experience. At birth, the soul is merely like a smooth piece of paper upon which experience writes down the rules and the mind summarizes these rules. Our perception is thus *a posteriori* (from the later to the earlier), not the way that Kant wants to have all our concepts to be innate, or *a priori* (from the earlier to the later). Therefore, in Maimonides' opinion, with our limited experiences that we have accumulated from our milieu, we cannot form an opinion about the world that is outside of us. Maimonides clearly expresses this idea in the third part of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, chapter 21, about which we will write later.

After that, Maimonides expresses this idea even more clearly in the second part of the *Guide*, at the end of the 24th chapter, in this way:

I already said and I repeat it now, that all that Aristotle states in connection with our world is correct, knowing from experience that here the principle of cause and effect is successful along with the rest of the rules of natural logic. However, absolutely nobody knows what happens outside of this world, aside from that which is recorded about it from prophecy. In any case, we strive to understand this with reason; however, in this matter, even the smartest ones remain powerless. I state metaphorically: "The heavens are the Lord's, but He gave the Earth to mankind."²⁸³ A person can only comprehend the Earth, but heaven remains for the Creator alone to understand.

In the second part of the *Guide*, chapter 17, Maimonides goes still further. He invalidates the power of reason to derive the root causes of creation from the laws that regulate those things that already exist. He states:

Every created thing, even if only in form, whose material existed earlier, is different in character after its development than it was previously. Therefore, it would be foolish to attempt to determine from later experience the way its character existed previously. Whoever does so must arrive at wrong conclusions. For example: a child with brilliant capabilities was born on a desert island and was educated there, not having seen a woman in his life. Later on, he asks an adult: "How does a person get created?" The adult explains to him how a person [p. 96] is created inside a woman's uterus (at the same time describing how a woman appears), where he is contained for nine months,

²⁸³ Psalms 115:16

is fed through the umbilical cord until the time comes when there is an opening in the body and he emerges from it, breathes through the mouth, eats, drinks, and excretes waste through the backside. The smart child will laugh at him: who do you want to fool with such stupidities! Should I believe that a person can lie for nine months locked up without air and light, without movement, and without eating - and live? On the contrary, should a person devour the smallest bird would it not be choked right away? With these, and yet more such questions, everyday experience will show him to be correct. And obviously we know that the child isn't correct, because - as we stated - one cannot judge from experience with respect to that which will happen after that. And here lies the failure of Aristotle's speculations in connection to the world being created, which are built on the experience of the world after Creation.

In the third part of the *Guide*, chapter 15, Maimonides even attempts to attack Aristotle's four well-known principles upon which he built his logic, demonstrating that Aristotle's most important axiom, that one cannot bring together two opposite things in one place, is not as absolutely impossible as one might think. Furthermore, he did that only to prove how uncertain our reasoning is to judge things that are beyond our experience.

In summary: Maimonides' opinion is that the human mind works only with its little bundle of experiences gathered in a person's few short years in his limited environment. Consequently, the human mind's conclusions can have a certain worth in his little world, but it is certainly not enough to be able to determine how God guides His world, in which it is both possible and impossible to find two opposite things in one place and time, such as, for example, God's foreknowledge and human free choice.

In the first part of the *Guide*, chapter 31, Maimonides states: One must teach the multitudes, especially the youth, that the Creator has no body whatsoever and that there is absolutely no parallel between His creatures and Himself. He lives, but not the way creatures live; He is wise, albeit not with their type of wisdom. He "exists" - but just not with their type of existence. God's difference from them isn't quantitative - that is, how we might compare a small mustard seed with the sun, even when it should be one million²⁸⁴ times bigger than it is, and the kernel is one million times smaller. Rather, the difference is qualitative. Therefore, it is the greatest nonsense to ask on the basis of our ideas in relation to possibilities and impossibilities: how does the Creator do this?

We see that Kant's opinion with regard to human perception is different from that of Maimonides. Nonetheless, both come to the same conclusion, that the human mind is limited by certain regulations, forms of judgement, outlooks, and deliberations, concerning which there really is no way that one can go beyond to conceive [p. 97] not what one sees, but rather, things "as they are in themselves." One of the principles of judgement is the rule of cause and effect, and in furtherance to this, we question knowledge, since it is cause that inevitably leads to effect in impeding free choice. However, this rule itself is only ours, stemming from our lived experience -

²⁸⁴ The text states "1000 times 1000."

as Hume remarks - while God's knowledge may absolutely not be bound by the way that we imagine it.

In the end, this is what Maimonides had in mind with his few concise words: "God's knowledge isn't like our knowledge" and "not through faith, but rather through rational proofs." Maimonides' entire theory of perception, which he discussed in his *Guide to the Perplexed* and also in his *Milot ha-Higayon*,²⁸⁵ is concentrated and expressed in these words. These words arrive at the same conclusion as the philosophers of our time, even if from an entirely different direction.

²⁸⁵ A glossary of philosophical terms.

Chapter 7: The Influence of *Mishneh Torah* on the Jewish World

[p. 97] We are now just about at the end of *Sefer ha-Mada*,²⁸⁶ leaving out only the subjects that Maimonides touched upon in his “Eight Chapters” introduction to tractate *Avot*, and here he elaborates on them.

At the same time, we have to interrupt ourselves, without being able to go any further in our summary. The rest of the books deal with the laws with all their various levels of detail that are of great importance for scholars but not for the average reader. The writer of these lines had in mind to present summaries of *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* and *Hilkhot Melakhim*,²⁸⁷ in order to show how much this code of laws endures to the present day. On the other hand, I gave up that thought because of lack of space and especially because of a fear of deviating from the main goal of writing only about Maimonides and his accomplishments.

We have certainly said at the conclusion of the previous section that Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* made a great impression on Jews all over the world, and it was quickly distributed to all Jewish communities, near and far.

This is because a book of this sort had never before appeared! *Mishneh Torah* is a comprehensive law book, where all possible questions concerning ethics and law - religious, civil/criminal, constitutional, and educational/scientific - are dealt with thoroughly and exhaustively. Maimonides did not neglect anything, even those laws that only have a theoretical application and now that we are in exile have had no practical significance. Examples of those include the laws of purity and impurity, of the misappropriation of consecrated property, of kings, of the Sanhedrin, of sacrifices, of the vessels of the Holy Temple, and so on. Maimonides quite often brings in customs that are practiced in [p. 98] different communities, as well as his own customs. Examples of the latter include the law of writing a Torah scroll, in which he lets everyone know that he wrote his own, or about how he conducts himself at the concluding meal on the eve of the 9th of Av.²⁸⁸

Moreover, scholars who studied the Talmud²⁸⁹ and were unable to clarify a law when it came time to carry it out because of the extensive legal deliberations that stretch out over many folios²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ The first book of Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*.

²⁸⁷ Two parts of *Sefer Shoftim* (Judges), the last book of *Mishneh Torah* and not to be confused with the biblical Book of Judges (also *Sefer Shoftim*) in the Prophets; these two parts are respectively the laws of the Sanhedrin (the ancient Jewish high court) and of kings.

²⁸⁸ A major fast day that takes place on the 9th day of the Jewish month of Av that commemorates the destruction of both Holy Temples in Jerusalem, among other tragedies facing the Jewish People.

²⁸⁹ The original Yiddish text says *Gemara*, which is the lengthy commentary to Mishnah and which forms the basis of the Talmud (both Babylonian and Palestinian) as a whole.

²⁹⁰ In a typical printed volume of the Babylonian Talmud, a folio (or *daf*) is either side of the same sheet, while a page (or *amud*) is only one side of that sheet.

and, quite frequently, over several tractates²⁹¹ - were as eager for *Mishneh Torah* as one who swims in a great sea and seeks something to hold on to.

Such scholars comprised most of the scholars and most of the communities. They became the book's strong adherents and admirers, leading Maimonides to almost be considered a second Moses our Master. It is indeed said about him: "From Moses (Moses son of Amram) to Moses (Moses son of Maimon), such a Moses did not appear." No honorific title and no praise, in the eyes of such adherents, was too great for Maimonides - "the glory of the generation," "the crown of the exile," "the angel of God," "the divine person," "the symbol of wisdom," and yet more such titles.

The Talmud claims that in Torah discourses every sort of person can find the meaning that he likes; this was true for Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. The average religious Jew finds there the laws of practical halakha, written in understandable and simple language, in the right place. With respect to astronomy, there is a precise explanation of the preparation for blessing the new Jewish month (the New Moon). For ethics, there is an entire complex set of guidance²⁹² regarding character traits and proper behaviour. For the priests who hope each day for the coming of the Messiah (as the law requires), there is a precise prescription with respect to the Holy Temple, the vessels to serve with, and how to make offerings. Every Jew, when the right time will come, will observe the laws of tithes, agricultural gifts, first fruits, second tithes, priestly gifts, and the rest of the commandments carried out only in the Land of Israel.

In the *Mishneh Torah*, Talmudists found most everything imaginable. Pondering Maimonides' simple words, they discovered profound intentions, clever hypotheses, and extraordinary choices among the different opinions of the Tannaim and Amoraim²⁹³ who, in the Talmud, didn't conclusively decide the law.

An entire literature has been created about the *Mishneh Torah*. Its words have been counted and collected, various books have been written to establish rules for its use; a part of them have been printed at the beginning of *Yad ha-Hazakah*,²⁹⁴ and still more have been published in scores of books, which each scholar must know of before he dares to browse in the huge book that is *Mishneh Torah*.

Here, we will relate some of these in order for the reader to see for himself the way that the scholarly world has accepted the *Yad ha-Hazakah*:

²⁹¹ Individual volumes of the Talmud (Babylonian and Palestinian alike).

²⁹² The Yiddish original uses the expression *Shulkhan Arukh*, based on the work of that name that was written by Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488-1575) and which is considered a major halakhic work to this day, as a way to colloquially mean a "complex set of rules/guidance" in Yiddish.

²⁹³ The Tannaim were the earlier figures from the rabbinic period and contributed to the Mishnah, and the Amoraim were the later figures from that period and contributed to the Gemara.

²⁹⁴ Literally "the strong hand," it is the subtitle for the *Mishneh Torah* and thus those two terms are exchangeable.

1) Whoever decides upon a law from Maimonides' statement, not knowing the source in the Talmud [p. 99] from where he obtained it, can easily make a mistake and permit something that is in fact forbidden, and vice versa. Because Maimonides' words are deep, that person can think that he understands, when such is not the case (Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet (1326-1408) section 44; responsum by Rabbi Asher ben Jehiel (c. 1250/1259-1327), section 31).

2) Maimonides is among the greatest authors (*Shitah Mekubetzet*,²⁹⁵ tractate *Ketubot*, chapter 3) and we have absolutely no right to reject his words, even when the Talmudic passages prove the opposite in front of our eyes. In such a case, we ought to blame our weak comprehension and understanding when we studied that passage (Rabbi Levi ibn Habib (c.1483-1545),²⁹⁶ Responsa, section 12).

3) All that Maimonides wrote is the extreme of accuracy, and one can be meticulous and dispute small details in his words, just as with respect to the words of the Talmud itself (*Mishpetei Shmuel*,²⁹⁷ section 120).

4) One cannot ask a question from a hypothesis of the *Tosafot*²⁹⁸ regarding a statement by Maimonides, since the custom is to ask something from a work of more importance regarding a work of lesser importance, because Maimonides isn't less important than the *Tosafot*, and in fact he is probably more important (*Teshuvot H'avot Ya'ir*,²⁹⁹ section 192).

5) Even one of as great of understanding as Rabbi Abraham ben David³⁰⁰ states: Maimonides accomplished a tremendous task, collecting all the laws that are spread out throughout both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds (tractate *Kilayim*, chapter 6). In Rabbi Abraham ben David's principles, it is stated: Nobody may think, God forbid, that Rabbi Abraham ben David, with his comprehension, intended to diminish Maimonides' honour with his critique. He only did so in order to demonstrate that Maimonides also, as a human being, is not free from mistakes, and to prevent many Jews from being influenced by Maimonides' opinions in the *Guide to the Perplexed* (responsum by Rabbi Menaḥem Azariah da Fano (1548-1620), number 25).

Moreover, there are rules with regard to Maimonides' language. Sometimes he classifies a law according to how the Sages decided upon it, and at yet another times, he refers to it as a "law given

²⁹⁵ A Talmudic commentary by Rabbi Bezalel ben Abraham Ashkenazi (c. 1520-c. 1592).

²⁹⁶ The original Yiddish text has the typo of "Ralbam" when it most probably means to say "Raalbach," Rabbi Levi ibn Habib.

²⁹⁷ A responsum written by Rabbi Samuel ben Moses Kalai (Kal'i) (c. 1500-1585).

²⁹⁸ One of the two main Talmudic commentaries, along with that of Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac; also known as Rabbi Solomon Yitzḥaki) (1040-1105). The *Tosafot* were written by a group of rabbis who thrived in France and, to some extent, in Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe in the latter half of the Middle Ages, in the decades and centuries after Rashi's life.

²⁹⁹ A responsum written by Rabbi Yair Ḥayyim Bacharach (1639-1702).

³⁰⁰ Rabbi Abraham ben David was Maimonides' main early commentator and lived in Posquières in Provence, a region in the south of France.

to Moses from Sinai.”³⁰¹ Tremendous differences in the interpretation of the law arise from how they are classified. Based on Maimonides’ doubts, big or small, entire books with minute argumentation have been written. Maimonides established doctrines concerning the laws that are not explicitly written in the Torah, but rather are inferred from Rabbi Ishmael’s thirteen principles.³⁰² Maimonides’ opinion about *sefaika d’oraita lehumra*³⁰³ is that such a law is only rabbinic in origin, while a law that is from the Torah proper may be interpreted in a lenient way. This is true, as well, for his position on instances of the formula *im timatzei lomar*,³⁰⁴ when the law is indeed such and when it isn’t - these are all difficult topics that have preoccupied the greatest Talmudists from that time until the present. There is really no answer nor any minute argumentation or differentiation nor any discussion in Torah discourses about this, nor any other rabbinic analysis, into which a statement of Maimonides would not be integrated.

There are certainly skeptics regarding Maimonides’ greatness in medicine, and one may rest unsatisfied with his philosophical speculations from the *Guide to the Perplexed* or *Sefer ha-Mada*. However, the *Yad ha-Hazakah* as a whole is accepted by all Jews, in all places, and in all generations, as the greatest work that any person has created. The fact is that the Maimonides of *Mishneh Torah* carries the burden of the Maimonides of the *Guide to the Perplexed*, holding his important place in Jewish life for all the generations after him.

[p. 100] A story that characterizes the Jewish position on Maimonides circulates among ordinary people:

A young man came to Rabbi Tevele Minsker for ordination,³⁰⁵ and during a conversation, that young man expressed a heretical idea. Rabbi Tevele told him that a Jew who intends to become a rabbi may not speak like that.

“Rabbi,” answered the young man, “this is not my idea; Maimonides says so in the *Guide to the Perplexed*.”

“I will tell you a story, my child,” says the rabbi. “A driver brought a great merchant to a big wholesale store. The merchant was inside the store, and the driver stood waiting next to the door. He noticed how the merchant, selecting merchandise, had an altercation and smashed a window. Soon, the owner ran over to him and asked: ‘Are you scared? Don’t be afraid, what is a window worth? Nothing, just as long as you haven’t hurt yourself. Here is a glass of water for you, since you were frightened. But you know what? Here’s a glass of wine for you.’

³⁰¹ Sinai was the mountain where God gave the Torah to Moses; this expression refers to laws that were given in former times but are not explicitly mentioned in Scripture.

³⁰² Part of the introduction to *Sifra*, the halakhic Midrash for Leviticus; devout Jews recite this in the morning prayer service.

³⁰³ A Talmudic principle, in Aramaic, in which we deal with a doubt as to whether something is from the Torah; accordingly, we interpret it in a strict way.

³⁰⁴ Literally in Hebrew, “if you conclude by saying.” This phrase appears quite often throughout the Talmud.

³⁰⁵ Rabbi David Tevel of Minsk (1792-1861), who was among the most respected scholars of the 19th century.

“The driver, seeing what the merchant received for shattering a window, took his whipstick and smashed a window pane. He soon found out that the employees ran out of the store and beat him hard. To his question, “Why was the merchant given wine and I received blows?” They smirked and said: “What an idiot! How could you be compared to the other one? The merchant obviously patronizes the store often. So what if he broke a window? But why should we suffer from your action? What have you purchased?”

“So,” said the rabbi, “it is just the same with you. Maimonides bestowed the Jewish people with his Commentary on the Mishnah, his *Yad ha-Hazakah*, and yet more. Thus, one must suffer his *Guide to the Perplexed*. But why should we suffer your remarks? What have you bestowed?”

The story explains, without any further comment, how much the Jewish scholarly world has given respect to the *Yad ha-Hazakah*.

Chapter 8: Introduction to *Moreh Nevukhim* (*Guide to the Perplexed*)

[p. 100] Maimonides wrote the *Yad ha-Hazakah* for all Jews who wholeheartedly believed in the words of the Torah and the Talmud. He wrote it in order for them to know how to observe the laws, interspersing the *Yad ha-Hazakah* with comments here and there to refine their notions about the essence of the Creator and to emphasize His unity and incorporeality.

At the same time, however, there were Jews who studied [p. 101] philosophy and other non-Torah disciplines in a serious way. Their pure faith was seriously harmed, doubts took over their mind, and it was for them that Maimonides wrote *Moreh Nevukhim*, which means the *Guide to the Perplexed*.

The opening chapter - in the form of a letter to Maimonides' beloved student Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Ibn Aknin,³⁰⁶ who came from North Africa and spent one year with him in Egypt and afterwards departed for Aleppo, where he practiced medicine - makes clear what led him to write that composition. From the letter, we find out that the *Guide to the Perplexed* wasn't written in order to present a philosophical system for beginners. Maimonides also didn't write it for the masses, nor for those who really don't believe in God at all, nor for those who wholeheartedly believe in God. Rather, he wrote it for those who are religious but who have been exposed to philosophy and find themselves in a dilemma, not being able to reconcile verses from the Prophets with logical philosophy.

For someone who is Jewishly religious, who observes the divine commandments with the right intention, but who also studies philosophy with understanding, and who understands how to classify topics and is accustomed to logical conclusions - it becomes hard for someone like him to understand those verses from the Torah and those parables from the Prophets that are in conflict with logic, and doubt comes to him on account of what he has believed in until now - the literal sense of the biblical word. The *Guide to the Perplexed* is aimed at just that sort of person.

Why do such people find themselves in a strange dilemma? It is because belief in the literal sense of scripture may mean renouncing philosophical wisdom, which later causes as much harm to faith as philosophy itself. In the end, he will have to come to the conclusion that Torah and philosophical wisdom are two separate things. This means, God forbid, that a believer in God must be a fool, and a wise person cannot be a believer in God, which, of course, isn't so. Thus, one ought to show this person the way to the truth.

A person can reach the highest truth if only he has the proper desire for it. One can come to the truth through either one of two paths: 1) through revelation, just like with our Torah that Moses

³⁰⁶ Like nearly all Maimonides scholars of the early 20th century, Rabbi Kruger assumed that Maimonides' disciple was Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Ibn Aknin (1150-1220), whereas the actual disciple was Rabbi Joseph ben Judah of Ceuta (1160-1226).

our Master received when the Creator revealed Himself in front of 600,000 Jews at Mount Sinai, and 2) through reason which a person gains through sensory experience. Human reason, deriving from the senses and experience, is the highest authority with respect to the truth. Whatever is opposed to them cannot be the truth. Revelation is obviously and certainly the truth; consequently, both conclusions must always agree, and one needs only to know how to reconcile the contradictions between them.

How does one reconcile the two truths? How does one unite the Torah with philosophy? Here, Maimonides makes use of the same means that the Alexandrian Jewish philosophy of Philo's school used,³⁰⁷ but he expanded it to create a comprehensive system. The means [p. 102] to accomplish this involve interpreting contradictory verses in an allegorical manner by means of parables and metaphors, in such a fashion that they would agree with philosophy. Maimonides states in the opening chapter of the *Guide*:

Know that to understand the words of the Torah, the metaphors of the Prophets, and the sayings of the Talmud, one must further contemplate the innermost intention of the plain explanation of scriptural words. A lot of mistakes occur because not everyone knows the true meanings of the Hebrew expressions, and they don't sufficiently understand the fundamental origins of the names of objects and concepts. There are words that, in principle, have more than one meaning; such a term is called a *shem meshutaf*.³⁰⁸ There are also terms that contain a borrowed meaning - a *shem mush'al*.³⁰⁹ Following this, it's easy to understand all the verses that indicate that the Creator possesses what supposedly are limbs as well as emotions like anger, regret, and similar character traits that indicate that He is, God forbid, corporeal with all the strengths and weaknesses that a body possesses. Taken in that sense, the terms are certainly well understood: God sits, stands, is angry, takes revenge, and so forth. According to the philosophical conception, there is no contradiction.

The allegories are divided into two main categories: those in which each word has a specific intention and a separate meaning, and those that need to be understood only in general terms. In the second category, the details aren't important; they are included irrespective of whether it might be better to bring the true intention into the open or to deliberately ignore it. An example of the first type is the story of the ladder that Jacob saw in a dream.³¹⁰ That belongs to the first category because "the ladder" has one meaning, "standing on the ground" has another, and "its tip reaching heaven" has a third meaning. On the other hand, the parable in Proverbs concerning the prostitute³¹¹ belongs to the second category, and it is only significant in general terms; in the end,

³⁰⁷ Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE-c. 50 CE) was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria, Egypt.

³⁰⁸ Hebrew for an "equivocal term."

³⁰⁹ Hebrew for a "borrowed term."

³¹⁰ Genesis 28:10-22, especially 28:12 (the verse that describes the ladder in the dream)

³¹¹ e.g. Proverbs, chapter 7

the details are not important. It is only a parable concerning material that alters its form like a prostitute does with men, and it leads the mind away from the straight path.

There are seven circumstances that arouse questions in Talmudic students:

- 1) If the author of a rabbinic book presented two opinions from two different people on one topic, not specifying the names of both of them. The student, being of the opinion that the topic reflects the opinions of one person, finds a contradiction, until he is informed of the truth;
- 2) When the author himself changes his opinion in a second place, without specifying the change;
- 3) When, in the exposition of the subject, plain words are blended with illustrative parables; contradictions are found when the entire topic is taken literally, but they vanish after differentiating between the plain meaning and the parable;
- 4) On account of ambiguous terminology - for example: “the kid³¹² will be slaughtered and roasted,” and “the kid will not be slaughtered and will not be roasted.” Thus after discovering that in the first case a “kid” (*g'di*) refers to an actual young goat and in the second case it refers to the astrological sign of Capricorn, there is no more contradiction.
- 5) [p. 103] When one needs to explain a profound topic through an illustrative parable and the parable itself is too hard, one must then conceal the correct meaning of the difficult topic and make it intelligible, in order to spur the student’s understanding. It thus results in a parable, and right afterwards, they present the correct explanation of the difficult topic, with an entirely different meaning than that which was presented earlier as an assumption (*hava amina*)³¹³;
- 6) When there is no contradiction among two fundamental reasonings, unless they divide amongst themselves and there needs to be added a second introduction, if not several introductions, to each - until the contradiction becomes strikingly obvious. Such a mistake can be made by an author, whether through superficiality in analyzing each one of the introductions, or in forgetting the first in writing the second;
- 7) When the author is compelled to refrain from expressing the whole truth to the masses - in such a case, the work of concealment must absolutely yield contradictions because of its inauthenticity, while the one who understands this engages in analysis and discovers the hidden meaning.

Talmudic contradictions come from the first and second of these reasons. (The Talmud questions: does the first clause contradict the last clause? And here is the answer: The first clause is according to one authority and the second follows another opinion. As one example, the first law was according to Rabbi Meir’s opinion, and the second law was according to Rabbi Judah’s opinion. This sort of contradiction also includes such Talmudic statements as: “Rabba retracted

³¹² *G'di* in Hebrew.

³¹³ A Talmudic term that literally means “I would have thought”; it can be translated as an assumption that turns out to have been mistaken.

that statement”³¹⁴; Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi taught us in our youth, “When one party takes possession of the silver coins, the other party acquires the gold coins,” and he taught us as we got older, “When one party takes possession of the gold coins, the other party acquires the silver coins,”³¹⁵ and Rabbi Judah went on to explain the contradiction.)

The apparent contradictions regarding the plain and simple meaning of the Prophets belong to the third and fourth of the above reasons. Non-legal discussion in the Talmud (*Aggadah*) belongs to the sixth reason; therefore, one doesn’t need to ask any questions on contradictions in the *Aggadah*. Finding a contradiction in the Prophets, according to the seventh reason, one must analyze the problem until one gets it right. The contradictions in the *Guide to the Perplexed* belong to the last of these reasons.³¹⁶

Here, Maimonides directs us to understand these valuable principles well and to always remember them in studying the *Guide to the Perplexed*.

Maimonides did not arrive easily at his decision to release the *Guide to the Perplexed* to the public. On the one hand, he was afraid for the masses of Jews who did not study any philosophical disciplines and were confused about things that are possible and things that are impossible. On the other hand, he was afraid for the traditional rabbis, who took every verse and every word literally - like all the sages from Babylonia, Germany, and France - and who laboured with their entire strength to discuss how to practice the correct law. He knew fully well that his audience, educated in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, wasn’t like Philo’s audience in Alexandria, which was weak in Talmud study but which was strong in philosophy. What Philo’s community could contemplate, Maimonides’ community could not. In his opening paragraph, Maimonides justifies himself with these words:

God knows to what extent I was afraid to write on precisely such topics - real secrets of the Torah - about which nobody from our people in exile has written yet. However, my conclusion was made, relying on the verse, “It is a time [p. 104] to act for God, for they have violated your Torah,”³¹⁷ and I do it for His sake, as well as following the aphorism, “Let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven.”³¹⁸

Because there are people who harbour doubts and can’t reconcile both truths - that of the Torah and that of philosophy - I desired to save them for Judaism. As well, I am the person who was pressed in my mind, not finding any means to teach the true path to distinguished people without harming ten thousand fools along with it. I chose to explain to the former, not worrying about the

³¹⁴ *Ketubot* 11b or *Bava Batra* 24a or *Shabbat* 27a (not certain which of these sources these quotes come from).

³¹⁵ *Bava Metzia* 44a-44b.

³¹⁶ No examples are given for the fifth reason.

³¹⁷ Psalms 119:126

³¹⁸ Mishnah *Avot* 2:17

latter's criticism. I want to teach that person, taking him away from his doubts until he becomes healed and he understands that both of these truths can be harmonized.

Knowing how risky his pioneering path was, Maimonides told anybody who studies the *Guide to the Perplexed* four things:

- 1) To study the work in order, not skipping certain chapters, because each chapter expands onto the next one, so that without the first chapter, the second chapter cannot be understood. Without the second, the third cannot be understood, and so on.
- 2) Not to be satisfied only with the general idea, but rather to think through each word, because in this work there is no excess word, and more is implied than is written;
- 3) Not to study quickly, not to study on a conjectural basis, and not to be hasty in asking questions and in rejecting concepts. If the reader finds something useful, he should thank God; if it isn't intelligible, he should consider the work as if it's not written at all; if the reader concludes that there is something harmful in it, he should not accept it, and he should give the author the benefit of the doubt;
- 4) Not to talk about the topics with anyone who either cannot or is not willing to understand philosophy.

Finally, after all the explanations, justifications, and warnings, Maimonides begins the work itself, starting by explaining terms from the Torah.

Chapter 9: Maimonides' Allegory

[p. 104] Almost the entire first part of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* is devoted to explaining, in an allegorical way, the meaning of the biblical verses that show the Creator as a body and that treat Him as one who possesses corporeal characteristics. In that work, Maimonides displays a deep knowledge of languages and an excellent sense of philology. We will try to convey a portion of it in summary form.

Chapter 1

This chapter deals with "image" and "likeness" in the verse, "Let us make Man in our image, after our likeness,"³¹⁹ which only refers to humans' similarity to the Creator from the perspective of reason and intellectual perceptions that don't come only through sensory experience, as is the case with animals, but also through the mediation of reason. This is how the Creator or the angels function, entirely without the mediation of the senses. [p. 105]

Chapter 2

To resolve the expression, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil,"³²⁰ Maimonides poses a question early on that someone once asked him: how did the first man (Adam), even though he was better endowed with the notions of good and evil than all the other creatures, end up committing the transgression of eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge? Maimonides' answer is: Adam's greatest gift from the Creator was reason. Soon after his creation, Adam received his reason; as a consequence, God ordered him not to eat any sorts of animals. Rational conceptions are included within the parameters of "truth and falsehood." He should have behaved according to his superior reason, according to which his mind would be able to express the correct objective truth, and that would have enabled him to live in an eternal Garden of Eden, where one could live forever. Because only "truth" and "falsehood" exist for the "superior human,"³²¹ which are the opposite of "good" and "evil," which come from humans' own biases, the "superior human" places the fact before him, and he judges it on the basis of how much it can be useful or harmful. However, Adam transgressed God's admonition because "the fruit was beautiful to look at and delicious to eat."³²² His pure mind was obscured. Therefore, he could now no longer think in terms of "truth" and "falsehood," but rather of "good" and "evil." Here, his distorted way of thinking brought about differences of meaning, each with its own subjective reasonings and decisions, thus becoming an authority ("You will be like God," which the *Targum Onkelos* [c. 35-120 CE]³²³ translates as "you will be like the great ones," and as Maimonides adds: the same term is used

³¹⁹ Genesis 1:26

³²⁰ *Ibid.* 3:5

³²¹ Yiddish "*Oybermensch*," derived from the German term "*Übermensch*" made popular in the philosophy of the 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It is often translated as "superman."

³²² cf. Genesis 3:6

³²³ Onkelos' translation of the Bible in Aramaic; it appears right next to many of the original Hebrew biblical texts, and it is more or less a literal translation, with some exceptions here and there.

equally for angels, judges, and rulers of cities) over conclusions of the mind that have no objective existence whatsoever (“truth” and “falsehood”) but rather only a subjective existence, vacillating between its own “good” and its own “evil.” In this way, Adam lost the right to live in the Garden of Eden.

Chapter 3

“He looks at God’s image (*temunah*).”³²⁴ *Tavnit*³²⁵ (shape) means the thing that we see with our eyes; therefore, it would never be mentioned in connection with the Creator. However, *temunah* has three different meanings: 1) the form of a thing that one sees with his eyes; 2) the conception of something that already is no longer around except insofar as the imagination has kept it as a memory; and 3) an intellectual conception. The latter meaning is found in the verse, “He looks at God’s image”³²⁶; this means that Moses was able to create for himself a proper notion of divinity.

Chapter 4

“And they envisioned (*va-yehezru*) God,”³²⁷ “And they saw (*va-yiru*) the God of Israel,”³²⁸ “For he was afraid to look (*me-habit*) at God.”³²⁹ These three actions - envisioning, seeing, and looking - are also used for intellectual understanding: “And God saw (*va-yar*) that it was good”³³⁰ - He convinced himself of the goodness. “He looked at (*hibit*) no iniquity in Jacob”³³¹ - God’s intellect did not discover any sin among the Jews (because one cannot “see” injustice, but one can instead conceive of it and understand it). “And they looked (*ve-hibitu*) after Moses”³³² - as the Talmud³³³ explains: they made up weaknesses concerning him. “My heart has seen (*ra’ah*) much of wisdom and knowledge”³³⁴ - that is, understanding (because one must “understand” wisdom, and not “see” it) and it is only in that sense that one ought to understand the aforementioned verses.

Chapter 5

“For he was afraid to look (*me-habit*) at God”³³⁵; as opposed to “the nobles of the Israelites... [p. 106] [who] envisioned (*va-yehezru*) God and they ate and drank.”³³⁶ The previous chapter

³²⁴ Numbers 12:8; the more proper relevant expression is “*u-temunat Hashem yabit.*”

³²⁵ Exodus 25:9; in fuller form, “The shape (*tavnit*) of the Tabernacle and the shape (*tavnit*) of all its vessels.”

³²⁶ Numbers 12:8

³²⁷ Exodus 24:11

³²⁸ *ibid.* 24:10

³²⁹ *ibid.* 3:6

³³⁰ e.g. Genesis 1:10

³³¹ Numbers 23:21

³³² Exodus 33:8; in reference to the Israelites.

³³³ The original Yiddish text says *Gemara*, which is the lengthy commentary to Mishnah and which forms the basis of the Talmud (both Babylonian and Palestinian) as a whole.

³³⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:16

³³⁵ Exodus 3:6

³³⁶ *ibid.* 24:11

demonstrated that the Torah speaks about an intellectual vision, and Maimonides cites Aristotle's opinion that immersing oneself in lofty matters need not be considered audacious, but rather its opposite: to endeavour to achieve with reasoning all that a person can achieve. That should be a defense for every searcher for truth, on condition that the searcher should first familiarize himself with the necessary philosophical disciplines, become someone with good character traits, dull his lusts, and know all the ways of thinking, protecting himself from every contingency that can cause him to make mistakes. Moses our Master, may he rest in peace, was afraid to reflect (*habet*) about these matters, not being certain whether he already possessed the necessary good qualities, and thus the Creator bestowed upon him quite an abundance of understanding in order to become certain until he gained the courage that made it possible for him to think more clearly ("he looks (*yabit*) at God's image"³³⁷). However, the nobles of the Israelites, who wanted to be "seen" eating and drinking, were worthy of the sentence which Aaron's sons - Nadab and Abihu - received. These two men, who thought of "eating and drinking," truly received a "burning of the soul." That is to say, being preoccupied with bodily pleasures prevented them from making correct judgements, and the result was a damaged soul.

Chapter 6

"God is a Man (*ish*) of war."³³⁸ The usual notion of "man and woman"³³⁹ (*ish ve-ishah*) among people also applies to other creatures ("Of every clean animal you shall take seven pairs, a male with its mate"³⁴⁰). Subsequently, it also applies to each thing that needs to join with another of its kind ("Five cloth panels shall be attached to one another, a woman to her sister"³⁴¹). Later, it is applied to the form (man - *ish*) that joined with matter (woman - *ishah*), and the aforementioned verse needs to be understood only in this way. The Creator is the centre of all materials that contend with each other, that change, that assume and detach their forms, getting from others or violently reacting to those others, such as: a grain plundering the soil, a creature eating grass, a human eating meat, and so on.

Chapter 7

"The Rock that begot you (*yeladekha*),"³⁴² and "I have fathered you (*yelidetikha*) this day."³⁴³ *Yeled*, in the original meaning, means a child who was born, and that notion was applied to a new emergence ("Before the mountains were brought forth (*yuladu*)"³⁴⁴), which comes out of the ground ("causes it to bring forth (*ve-holidah*) and sprout"³⁴⁵); to new occurrences ("For you do not

³³⁷ Numbers 12:8

³³⁸ Exodus 15:3

³³⁹ e.g. *ibid.* 35:29, 36:6

³⁴⁰ Genesis 7:2; *ve-ishto* is literally "and his woman," but in this case, it is better translated as "and its mate."

³⁴¹ Exodus 26:3

³⁴² Deuteronomy 32:18

³⁴³ Psalms 2:7

³⁴⁴ *ibid.* 90:2

³⁴⁵ Isaiah 55:10

know what the day will bring forth (*yayled*)³⁴⁶; and to new intellectual perceptions (“He gives birth (*ve-yalad*) to falsehood”³⁴⁷). On a related note, with regard to the verse, “They content themselves with the children (*be-yalday*) of foreigners,”³⁴⁸ the *Targum* of Rabbi Jonathan ben Uziel (flourished 1st cent. BCE-1st cent. CE)³⁴⁹ interprets it as, “They go according to the laws of the nations” (i.e. they turn to the newfound ways of the foreigners). Therefore, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi (ca. 135-ca. 217 CE) was considered by a disciple just like a father who engendered him, and in the same sense, the disciples of the Prophets were referred to as “sons of the Prophets.”³⁵⁰ Knowing beforehand the true meaning of “image” and “likeness,” it’s easy to understand that which only someone who was born after Seth - the only one up until that point who had the correct perception of God - could write: “And Adam begot (*va-yoled*) in his own likeness, after his image.”³⁵¹ This means that only Seth was newly spiritually created, just like Adam. This is because we know very well that the normal human form doesn’t entitle anybody to the name “human,” since he is really only a two-legged wild animal, and indeed even worse than a wild animal, [p. 107] since his mind could come up with more evils than those wild animals having only their instincts possess. One must understand the two previously-mentioned verses in that sense.

Chapter 8

“Blessed be the glory of God from His place (*mimkomo*).”³⁵² *Makom* (place) means a location and is applied to someone’s level (filling his father’s place, as in, that he stands on his father’s level, in his father’s place), and in the Talmud it is stated: “The difference of opinion still remains as it was (*bimkomah*),”³⁵³ that is to say, in the same situation. Thus, one must understand the aforementioned verse and the rest, where *makom* is mentioned in connection with the Creator: His level and eminence in existence. The same is true of the word *sham* (there), which makes no sense except for an intellectual location, as in the verse, “God placed there (*sham*) the man whom He had formed”³⁵⁴ – i.e. on his level. The verse, “Behold, there is a place (*makom*) near Me, and you shall stand erect upon the rock,”³⁵⁵ needs to be understood in that sense.

Chapter 9

“The Heaven is my throne (*kis’i*).”³⁵⁶ *Kisay* is a chair, and because kings, judges, and other people in power sit on it, God Himself also gained the attribute of importance. (In other languages,

³⁴⁶ Proverbs 27:1

³⁴⁷ Psalms 7:15

³⁴⁸ Isaiah 2:6

³⁴⁹ Rabbi Jonathan ben Uziel’s translation of the Bible in Aramaic; it appears near a number of the original Hebrew biblical texts, and it tends to be a more elaborate translation than that of Onkelos.

³⁵⁰ e.g. II Kings 2:3

³⁵¹ Genesis 5:3

³⁵² Ezekiel 3:12

³⁵³ Mishnah *Mikvaot* 4:1

³⁵⁴ Genesis 2:8

³⁵⁵ Exodus 33:21

³⁵⁶ Isaiah 66:1

there is a separate name for a royal seat - a “throne” - but in Hebrew a *kisay* means both a chair and a throne). Consequently, the Holy Temple also has the significance of a throne (“O Throne (*kisay*) of Glory exalted from the beginning, O place of our Temple!”³⁵⁷); in that sense, Heaven is called a throne (“Thus said God: Heaven is my throne (*kis'i*)”³⁵⁸). The person oriented towards Heaven who understands God as the only Creator and Mover of all heavenly bodies also perceives the essence of His throne. Both the throne and Heaven are attributes of God’s greatness and sublimity, and don’t constitute a thing existing outside His essence. This is what Moses our Master had in mind when stating: “For I shall raise my hand to Heaven”³⁵⁹ - referring to God; “Heaven will have mercy and protect me,”³⁶⁰ meaning that God will have mercy; “For the hand is on the throne (*kes*) of God”³⁶¹; and other verses of that kind.

Chapter 10

“And God ascended (*va-ya'al*) from upon him.”³⁶² The actions of ascending (*'alah*) and descending (*yarad*) consist of five meanings:

- 1) When a thing is moved to a higher place, it is designated as *'alah*. When a thing is moved to a lower place than before, it is designated as *yarad*;
- 2) *'Alah* - when someone is distinguished through wealth or honour. *Yarad* - when he becomes poor or he falls down from his honour;
- 3) When someone distinguishes himself with his thoughts of sublime matters - *'alah*; *yarad* - when he becomes engrossed in base matters;
- 4) *'Alah* is when the Creator remains invisible and inconceivable with respect to humankind, which cannot see Him on account of its narrow conception of things. *Yarad* is when the Creator lowers himself, as it were, to talk with a prophet, or to reveal himself to people, as in - for example - at the Receiving of the Torah, which is what the following verse has in mind: “And God descended (*va-yered*) upon Mount Sinai”³⁶³;
- 5) *Yarad* is when the Creator needs to presage to a prophet the punishments to be meted out to a person, a state, or an entire area (“And God descended [*va-yered*] to see the city and tower,”³⁶⁴ or “Let us descend [*nerdah*] and there confuse their language”³⁶⁵). This is because in accordance with

³⁵⁷ Jeremiah 17:12

³⁵⁸ Isaiah 66:1

³⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 32:40

³⁶⁰ Tractate *Avodah Zarah* 18a

³⁶¹ Exodus 17:16

³⁶² Genesis 35:13

³⁶³ Exodus 19:20

³⁶⁴ Genesis 11:5

³⁶⁵ *ibid.* 11:7

God's greatness, He didn't really need to view what the people in that place³⁶⁶ were doing down below. They were therefore certainly not punished for that, as the verse states: "What is man that You should be mindful of him."³⁶⁷ This is, as it were, a descent from a higher level, according to the notion that we must partake in some of His greatness. Thus, when the prophecy ceases, [p. 108] the verse states: "And God ascended (*va-ya'al*) from Abraham."³⁶⁸ Moreover, just as it is written concerning Him, "And God descended (*va-yered*),"³⁶⁹ so it is written in connection with Moses, "And Moses ascended (*'alah*) to God."³⁷⁰ That which is a descent (*yeridah*) for Him is an ascent (*'aliyah*) for Moses.

Chapter 11

"[O You] who sits (*ha-yoshvi*) in Heaven."³⁷¹ The original meaning of *yashav* is to sit, and the term is applied to sitting quietly without a change in situation. In this case, the latter definition needs to be understood when that word is applied to the Creator; for example: "But You, O God, are enthroned (*teshev*) forever"³⁷² - You remain the same, whether Jews are in the Land of Israel or in exile. "Your throne"³⁷³ endures for every generation"³⁷⁴ - Your honour remains eternal. "It is He who is enthroned (*ha-yoshev*) on the circle of the earth"³⁷⁵ - the centre of Earth remains unchanged on account of the eternal natural laws that prevail there. "God sat (*yashav*) at the Flood"³⁷⁶ - even though all of nature was irrevocably altered during the Flood of Noah's time, God remained seated, unchanged.

(Note: In that chapter, Maimonides gives a hint that divine providence comes only for a species, not for each individual; this is what Maimonides' commentators want to infer from his words. However, Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437-1508)³⁷⁷ wishes to teach otherwise. In any case, we will eliminate that entire discussion, since we wish only to give a brief explanation of Maimonides' terminology. We will instead talk about Maimonides' entire philosophical system in a separate article.)

Chapter 12

³⁶⁶ In the Tower of Babel story.

³⁶⁷ Psalms 8:5

³⁶⁸ Genesis 17:22

³⁶⁹ e.g. Exodus 19:20

³⁷⁰ Exodus 19:3

³⁷¹ Psalms 123:1

³⁷² Lamentations 5:19

³⁷³ *Kisakha*; cf. the above discussion of Chapter 3 of the *Guide to the Perplexed*.

³⁷⁴ *ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Isaiah 40:22

³⁷⁶ Psalms 29:10

³⁷⁷ Often referred to simply as Abrabanel.

“Arise (*kumah*), O God, and may Your enemies be scattered.”³⁷⁸ Arising (*kimah*) is the opposite of sitting. At one time it also had the meaning of confirmation, as in: “And Ephron’s field arose (*va-yakam*)”³⁷⁹ (that field was confirmed as belonging to Abraham), “And the house that is in the [walled] city shall arise (*ve-kam*)”³⁸⁰ (the house of that city should be confirmed for the one who purchased it), and “And the kingdom of Israel will arise (*ve-kamah*) in your hand”³⁸¹ (kingship over Israel will be confirmed for you). The following verses belong to the first type (standing [*kimah*] - changing the relationship, as opposed to sitting [*yeshivah*] - the constant standstill): “Now I will arise (*akum*),’ God will say,”³⁸² “You will arise (*takum*) and have mercy upon Zion,”³⁸³ “And I will rise up (*ve-kamti*) against the house of Jeroboam,”³⁸⁴ “Arise (*kumah*), o God, and may Your enemies be scattered,”³⁸⁵ and yet more verses of that type.

Chapter 13

“And His feet will stand (*ve’amdu*) on that day.”³⁸⁶ Standing (*’amidah*) has four meanings:

- 1) Rising and standing (“Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand [*ya’amod*] before Me,”³⁸⁷ “When he stood [*be-’amdo*] before Pharaoh,”³⁸⁸ “He stood [*’omed*] over them”³⁸⁹);
- 2) Stopping (“For they stood still [*’amdu*] and did not respond,”³⁹⁰ “And she ceased [*va-ta’amod*] bearing children”³⁹¹);
- 3) Being stable for a long time (“So that they will stand [*ya’amdu*] many days,”³⁹² “His taste remained [*’amad*] in him,”³⁹³ “Then you will be able to stand [*’amod*]”³⁹⁴);
- 4) Remain standing while transformed (“But as for you, stand [*’amod*] here by Me”³⁹⁵ - remain standing with your sublime thoughts, and you will be with Me). “And his feet will stand (*ve-’amdu*)

³⁷⁸ Numbers 10:35

³⁷⁹ Genesis 23:17

³⁸⁰ Leviticus 25:30

³⁸¹ I Samuel 24:21

³⁸² Psalms 12:6; Isaiah 33:10

³⁸³ Psalms 102:14

³⁸⁴ Amos 7:9

³⁸⁵ Numbers 10:35

³⁸⁶ Zechariah 14:4

³⁸⁷ Jeremiah 15:1

³⁸⁸ Genesis 41:46; in reference to Joseph.

³⁸⁹ *ibid.* 18:8; in reference to Abraham.

³⁹⁰ Job 32:16

³⁹¹ Genesis 29:35; *va-ta’amod* literally means “and she stood,” and this is in reference to Leah.

³⁹² Jeremiah 32:14

³⁹³ *ibid.* 48:11

³⁹⁴ Exodus 18:23; in other words, “Then you will be able to endure.”

³⁹⁵ Deuteronomy 5:28

on that day on the Mount of Olives”³⁹⁶ is also of that same type, and Maimonides promises to explain this in later chapters.

Chapter 14

The name *Adam* comes from the word *adamah*,³⁹⁷ because the first man was created from the ground; therefore, he was called by that name, which is a proper noun. However, it also became a name of a species, for all of humankind; in that case, it can also come with a *hay*³⁹⁸ (something that a proper noun cannot do), and thus one can write “Man (*ha-adam*) has no superiority over beast,”³⁹⁹ “Who knows of the spirit of the sons of man (*ha-adam*),”⁴⁰⁰ or “My spirit shall not abide in man (*ba-adam*) forever,”⁴⁰¹ with a [p. 109] *kamatz*⁴⁰² under the *bet*⁴⁰³ that cuts out the need for the *hay*. That term also designates a lesser type of person (“The sons of man and the sons of an [outstanding] individual alike”⁴⁰⁴) making use of that interpretation, which is taken from Abrabanel. This shows that Adam - with respect to the first man - has a meaning associated more with the name of a species than as a proper noun, because humankind itself was one just as the sun is one. Consequently, if it is considered as a species, then the incorrect meaning that Moses Narboni (ca. 1300-ca. 1362-68) and the Ephodi (Profiat Duran; ca. 1350-ca. 1415) derive from Maimonides’ words fails. From these words, those commentators want to find an allusion to the eternity of the world (*kadmut*), in accordance with the esoteric message (*sod*) of Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089/1092-1164/1167). Later on, Maimonides will have the occasion to talk to us about the sort of additional allusions in his words that really aren’t correct.

Chapter 15

“And behold, God was standing erect (*nitzav*) upon him.”⁴⁰⁵ *Natzov* or *yatzov* has a meaning, first of all, of rising and being erect - “And his sister stationed herself (*va-tetatzav*) at a distance,”⁴⁰⁶ “They went out standing erect (*nitzavim*),”⁴⁰⁷ “The kings of the earth stood erect (*yityatzvu*),”⁴⁰⁸ However, it is also used to classify a stable situation, as in “Your word stands firm (*nitzav*) in Heaven”⁴⁰⁹; that is, the Creator’s incessant work through His “word,” confirming the eternally

³⁹⁶ Zechariah 14:4

³⁹⁷ Hebrew for ground, soil, or earth.

³⁹⁸ A Hebrew letter corresponding to a “h.”

³⁹⁹ Ecclesiastes 3:19

⁴⁰⁰ *ibid.* 3:21

⁴⁰¹ Genesis 6:3

⁴⁰² A vowel that, in Yiddish-inflected Hebrew, corresponds either to a low “a” or an “o.”

⁴⁰³ A Hebrew letter corresponding to a “b.”

⁴⁰⁴ Psalms 49:3

⁴⁰⁵ Genesis 28:13; in reference to Jacob.

⁴⁰⁶ Exodus 2:4; *va-tetatzav* literally means “and she stood erect.”

⁴⁰⁷ Numbers 16:27

⁴⁰⁸ Psalms 2:2

⁴⁰⁹ *ibid.* 119:89

moving heavenly sphere. Regarding the verse, “A ladder was set (*mutzav*) earthward,”⁴¹⁰ a comparison can be made with the philosophical disciplines that are divided into different levels,⁴¹¹ which the Prophets - who are called angels (“And He sent an angel”⁴¹²; “And an angel of God went up from Gilgal”⁴¹³ - referring to prophets in these verses) - must go through, starting with knowledge of nature and finishing with the loftiest heights, where “God stands erect (*nitzav*)”⁴¹⁴ is located. Right after experiencing the entire process of ascent, they go down to the people, to teach them the way of living. Thus, the Torah relates with regard to Moses our Master, of blessed memory: “And Moses ascended to God,”⁴¹⁵ and subsequently, “Moses descended from the mountain to the people.”⁴¹⁶

Chapter 16

“Behold, there is a place near Me, and you shall stand erect upon the rock (*tzur*).”⁴¹⁷ *Tzur* has three meanings: 1) a mountain; 2) a hard stone; and 3) a quarry, the place from which great stones are hewn. The latter definition was used by Isaiah the Prophet, who stated: “Look unto the rock (*tzur*) from which you were hewn,”⁴¹⁸ considering the source from which you emerge. That is, your origin (from Abraham our Forefather) will make you understand that you need to go in His good ways, because the chiselled stone must be the same as the source (*makor*) from which it was hewn. Thus, we call our Creator the Rock of Israel (*Tzur Yisrael*), because of the part of the soul that we have from Him. As well, because the whole world is for Him only an attribute and emanation, and we come from the world, it is therefore our obligation to reflect upon Him and to distinguish ourselves in order to reach His essence as much as it’s possible for us. This is what the verse, “Behold, there is a place near Me, and you shall stand erect upon the rock (*tzur*),”⁴¹⁹ has in mind. “True,” says the Creator, “it is impossible to attain My essence, because of the loftiness and profundity of the thought. Nonetheless, one little bit of a place is certainly present within it, and that is “standing” on the rock (*tzur*), and the level to be attained will be according to your standing on it; that is, in accordance with your notions of the origin whence you came, in order to come to emulate His attributes: Just as He is gracious and merciful, so too you should make an effort to have those character traits. Through Abraham’s rock, one can improve oneself in character traits; from the Rock of Israel, one can improve oneself in knowledge.

[p. 110] Here, we must stop investigating each succeeding chapter separately, explaining the terminology according to its order in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, which extends until almost the

⁴¹⁰ Genesis 28:12

⁴¹¹ Corresponding to the rungs of the ladder.

⁴¹² Numbers 20:16

⁴¹³ Judges 2:1

⁴¹⁴ Genesis 28:13

⁴¹⁵ Exodus 19:3

⁴¹⁶ *ibid.* 19:14

⁴¹⁷ *ibid.* 33:21

⁴¹⁸ Isaiah 51:1

⁴¹⁹ Exodus 33:21

end of Part I. This is, first of all, because of a lack of space; secondly, I'm afraid to test the reader's patience. Instead of that, we will give a precise survey of the entire book in a number of articles, and we will attempt to convey the chapters' perspectives, which Maimonides intentionally distributed in a dispersed way and out of order, so that only great scholars would be able to understand.

In the seventeenth chapter, Maimonides makes that point, and there he justifies his decision by positing that even non-Jewish philosophers concealed their words from the masses, and all the more so we Jews, whose wisdom is divine, ought to know only that for which we prepared ourselves earlier with wisdom and knowledge.

This is because the Creator stands on the top of the ladder, and one can only reach Him by going from level to level.

Chapter 1: The *Medabrim*⁴²⁰ and Maimonides' Critique of Them

[p. 113] In the first part of the *Guide to the Perplexed* (chapter 71), Maimonides gives an overview of the history of religious philosophy approximately as follows:

In former times, Jews possessed the true philosophy, along with the correct meaning of all the divine commandments and admonitions,⁴²¹ not only because of received oral tradition, but also using all the reasoning involved in the great philosophy of our time. However, Jews later believed only in the biblical text itself; Jewish philosophical reasoning become lost in three ways:

- 1) Because of the exile that obscured reasoning because of constant persecutions and troubles;
- 2) Because the subject itself belonged to the category of “the mysteries of the Torah” that only a few had the right to study; and
- 3) The long time from the biblical period until the present, during which scholarship diminished, until people entirely stopped studying philosophy.

Philosophy remained in Greece.

When Islam made one tremendous Arab nation out of scattered nomadic tribes, subsequently conquered half of the known world, and educated a united caliphate under the sovereignty of the Quran,⁴²² Baghdad became the “Athens of the Middle Ages.” Syriac Christian scholars were brought there, and through them the Arab nation became acquainted with the rich heritage that the ancient Greeks left behind in the domains of philosophy and science.

The Arab nation became the centre of wisdom quite rapidly. However, together with it, a sharp contradiction started to develop in educated circles between purely scientific notions, the firmly grounded principles of philosophy, and the religious points of view that are found in the Quran. The Quran, with its expressive language that is characteristic of the Orient, often talks about the Creator as anthropomorphized using metaphors from this world, as if He were a simple, mortal being. For example: “Regarding God’s feet, hands, and nose”; “God laughs,” “He is offended,” “He is angry,” and so on. Philosophy cannot agree with any of these things, and yet the Quran must obviously be true. After all, every Muslim must believe that the Quran is written with divine inspiration, that it is true, and that the prophet Muhammad is true. In order to save itself from that contradiction, every philosophical educator and believing Muslim had to look for a way out of the dilemma, to seek a solution, and to enact a compromise between faith and the ideas of scholars.

⁴²⁰ Muslim *Qalam* theologians, as explained below. In Hebrew, it literally means “those who speak.”

⁴²¹ That is, in former times, these ideas were transmitted orally but not in writing.

⁴²² The Muslim holy book; it is also transliterated as the Koran or the Qur’an.

[p. 114] In this case, the pressure from this contradiction created, in the 9th century, a religious-philosophical school of thought called *Qalam*⁴²³ (with the Hebrew/Aramaic meaning of *memra*⁴²⁴ or *ma'amar*⁴²⁵). Its task was to protect and resolve religious principles that opposed the logical consequences of philosophical speculation. Among the representatives of that particular school, who bore the name of *Mutakalimun* (teachers of God's word), there emerged a division over time, and one school separated itself from the rest, a group of free-thinkers called *Mu'tazila*. This school disavowed Muslim fatalism, which teaches that everyone is forced by Heaven to perform their deeds, whether good or bad. The bad deeds were ascribed by the *Mu'tazila* to free will; that is, everyone is free to fulfill divine commandments or transgress them. Therefore, one could imagine reward and punishment in the other world. This idea was opposed by the orthodox *Ash'ariya*.

The *Qalam*, the *Mutakalimun*, and the *Mu'tazila* developed an entire system of religious-philosophical teachings. In Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, they are called by the name *Medabrim*.

Maimonides is on the side of very few of the *Medabrim* in terms of their philosophy, and he takes every opportunity to contend with them. In his opinion, the first *Medabrim* - whether Greek-Christian or Muslim - didn't take philosophy into account with respect to things as they are. Instead, they racked their brains to find out what they needed to found, in order for it to be compatible with their previously set opinion. They didn't build their theory in accordance with the facts; rather, they twisted the facts in order for it to be compatible with their theory. The result is that they took - from philosophy and logic - those lines of reasoning that were suitable to their faith, or at least not opposed to it, and they rejected the rest of the philosophy that was opposed to it. The *Medabrim* wanted everyone, including themselves, to be persuaded that their conclusions were not influenced by their religious beliefs. However, whoever studies their books sees the falsehood of that assertion. Though they themselves did not realize it, they adopted that which was suitable to their faith and rejected that which wasn't suitable to their faith.

The *Medabrim*, in accordance with their opinion, blended the philosophy of Aristotle (384-322 BCE) with subsequent interpretations, having in mind that everything came from it. The Arabs, therefore, didn't receive - in translation - Aristotle's philosophy in its pure form (which, in their opinion, is the last word of truth in connection with our world: "Beneath the sphere of the moon"⁴²⁶) that the Greek and Syriac Christians transmitted to them. The truth, really, is as follows: In translation, the Arabs encountered Aristotle's philosophy mixed in with that of Plato (428/427 or 424/423-348/347 BCE) and the teachings of Pythagoras (c. 570-495 BCE). Even Aristotle's

⁴²³ The study of Islamic doctrine.

⁴²⁴ "Aphorism" or "argumentation" in Aramaic.

⁴²⁵ "Aphorism" or "quotation" or "argumentation" in Hebrew.

⁴²⁶ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 3:10

two greatest commentators, Averroes (1126-1198)⁴²⁷ and Avicenna (c. 980-1037),⁴²⁸ weren't exceptions to that.

[p. 115] The Jewish philosophers from Rabbi Saadiah Gaon (882 or 892-942) until Maimonides' time made use of those same pieces of evidence in relation to God's existence, the unity of the Creator, and the other principles as the *Medabrim*; therefore, Maimonides also did not hold back criticism from them. It's possible that this is the reason that Maimonides doesn't even mention their names, with the exception of the "Andalusian" philosophical system that probably stemmed from his predecessor, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Daud (1110-1180),⁴²⁹ author of *Emunah Ramah*,⁴³⁰ the first Aristotelian among the Jews. This was opposed to the previous Andalusian Jewish philosophers such as Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1021/1022-c. 1070) and others who adhered to Plato's system.

The entire philosophy of the *Medabrim* - their pieces of evidence and their arguments - was possibly altered for people who didn't know the difference between the logical ways of thinking based on facts and the vain ideas of the Sophists.⁴³¹ Maimonides illustrates it in this way:

We should be able to establish that the world was created (*mehudash*)⁴³² on a temporal basis. One would require no better evidence for the existence of God, given the main principle that no created thing can be without a creator. However, we cannot confirm God's existence in this way through undisputed evidence, because the issue itself stands well beyond the capacity of human reasoning. This means that we should not establish the evidence of God's existence on a weak foundation, because this is what would result: If the world is temporally created, then God exists; if the world is eternal (*kadmon*), there might not be a deity, God forbid.⁴³³ For this reason, I hold as true the proofs that Aristotle and his successors established for the existence and incorporeality of God, even though in their opinion the world exists eternally. This is not because I believe like them in the world's eternity - I differ in opinion from them on that matter - but nonetheless I make use of their arguments. For example, if the world is created temporally, there must obviously be a creator - and this is God; if the world is eternal, it must be the attribute of an incorporeal being, one and only, the immutable first cause from which that attribute emanates - and this is God.

Maimonides indeed did this, as we will later show, in speaking about the same topic. He stated that first of all, we must demonstrate with proofs based on the nature of the world that are generally supported, without any contradiction. Everyone should agree to that which doesn't come into conflict with reason and our senses. In terms of God's existence, there is absolutely no difference

⁴²⁷ Latinized name of Ibn Rushd.

⁴²⁸ Latinized name of Ibn Sinna.

⁴²⁹ Also referred to as the "Rabad," but not to be confused with the Rabbi Abraham ben David from Provence (1125-1198) who is the one who most people refer to when talking about the "Rabad."

⁴³⁰ Hebrew for "The Sublime Faith."

⁴³¹ Sophists were teachers in ancient Greece. They were skilled in what became known as Rhetoric.

⁴³² Literally, "renewed" or "anew" in Hebrew.

⁴³³ Literally, "precedence" or "precedent" in Hebrew.

whether the world exists eternally or temporally. The Aristotelian proofs, in Maimonides' opinion, support all the previously discussed, carefully considered conditions. Having established that argument, he took it upon himself to demonstrate that the world is a temporally created one - as opposed to Aristotle's opinion.

In the next chapter, the reader will see the arguments of the *Medabrim* on the unity of the Creator and Maimonides' demonstration that there isn't very much coherence or logic in the arguments of the *Medabrim*.

Chapter 2: God's Existence - Existence of the Highest Authority

[p. 116] The ontological proof of the existence of God that was produced in the earliest period people began to think philosophically goes like this:

We are able to imagine an unlimited power that is all-encompassing, the highest level of all-mightiness, all-knowingness, and all-goodness. Among the qualities having to do with being “all-encompassing,” “existence” must be included out of necessity. The reasoning is as follows: Let us compare two conceptions of two all-encompassing beings, one that has all possible virtues but that doesn't exist in reality, and the other that has all those virtues in addition to having the quality of existence. It is quite obvious that the second being is even more complete than the first. From that, we conclude that, in that case, “completeness” must also include the virtue of existence.

Here, we refer to this perfection in one being as God, and as a result, He must exist.

God represents universal power. The idea of faith is based on that foundation, and this is admitted even by the greatest philosophers. God is the first and original cause of all that exists, He is the Master of the World, the Guide for everything, and the One that drives the constant movement of the spheres without interruption.

In chapters 68 and 69 of the first part of the *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides elaborates on the idea of God's existence. Here, we give the gist of these chapters - especially chapter 69 - in summary form:

Philosophers classify that which we by faith call *Hashem*⁴³⁴ as “the First Cause of everything.” Others designate Him under the name of the “Initiator.”⁴³⁵ Here is the difference between those two positions. “Cause” means to say that the world is caused by God. This does not imply that He precedes the temporally created world. Rather, it implies that the “cause” exists from the beginning onwards in its power. This must be considered a characteristic, just as a person must have a hand or a foot. That is to say, the world isn't created through God's word, but rather through His own existence. That thought encompasses a veritable pantheism, which posits that God is the world and the world is God. However, by using the term “Initiator,” it is understood that God is external to the world. He preceded it, and He created it through His word when - at a given moment - it pleased Him to create it. In summary: “Cause” can mean an eternally existing world, while an “Initiator” means that the world was created by God at a certain time.

On the other hand, in Maimonides' opinion, one can call God “First Cause” or alternatively “Reason.” The reasoning is that He can be called a First Cause even when creation is potential,

⁴³⁴ Literally *heh*, the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. For Orthodox Jews, *Hashem* signifies “the Name” of God.

⁴³⁵ “Maker” and “Efficient Cause” can be other translations of the medieval philosophical Hebrew word *po'el* that Maimonides uses in this part of the *Guide to the Perplexed*.

without [p. 117] being preoccupied with the issue of a temporal creation of the world that is totally without a direct cause or means, but rather is formed through an entire chain of causes and reasons. Nonetheless, God is the ultimate cause - “Initiator” and Creator alike.

Furthermore, as much as it is known that everything created must have matter, form, an initiator, and an objective, we can say that the First Cause (God) is the Initiator. He is the One who gives form, is the supporter (form⁴³⁶), and is also its original reason, in such a way that everything is from Him and every single thing is His achievement. This is because every natural form previously had a form from which it proceeded. That form was preceded by a yet earlier one, and so it went back in time, probably for hundreds of thousands of times, until the Ultimate Cause that gave rise to those proximate and intermediate forms in the first place. And that is its First Cause, as the philosophers define it - not arising out of anything, and being the ultimate cause of the world’s entire development.

This is how we can precisely understand what underlies the words “God is the ultimate cause of the temporally created world.” This is because every purpose is caused by something previous to it. For example: what is the carpenter’s purpose in sawing wooden planks? The answer is: to make a throne. What is the purpose of a throne? That someone should sit on it. What is the purpose of sitting on the throne? In order to show the sitter’s sovereignty. What is the purpose of sovereignty? In order to keep everyone in fear. And what is the purpose of fear? That one should obey the sovereign’s order. What is the purpose of obeying his order? In order for the world to conduct itself in an orderly fashion and to endure. What is the purpose of the world with respect to that existence altogether? Here, we must go to the ultimate answer: that is what the “First Cause” wanted, to create a world that should endure, and it thus appears that all the other, indirect reasons stem from Him, whether we call Him a “cause” or an “initiator.” We don’t have to accept the opinion that calling Him the “cause” attests to the world’s eternal existence (*kadmut ha-‘olam*⁴³⁷) insofar as He is eternal, while calling Him the “initiator” attests to the world’s createdness (*hiddush ha-‘olam*⁴³⁸). Both can be well attested with regard to the world’s createdness; one term is just as good as the other.

And yet, even though both terms have one and the same meaning, we must reject the way that the *Medabrim*⁴³⁹ (practitioners of the *Mutakalimun* school of thought, based on Muslim religious principles) call the “first being” by the name “initiator,” even though the word is conducive to making obvious the notion of createdness (*hiddush ha-‘olam*), because therein lies a weakness. That is because in using the term “initiator,” one can be mistaken and be of the opinion, God forbid, that the creation of the world and of the spheres doesn’t signify anything at all, if it has also existed

⁴³⁶ The original Yiddish text has *tzurah*, which is “form” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴³⁷ Literally, “antiquity of the world” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴³⁸ Literally, “renewal of the world” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴³⁹ Muslim *Qalam* theologians; in Hebrew, that term literally means “those who speak.” *Qalam* was a religious-philosophical school of thought whose task was to protect and resolve religious principles that opposed the logical consequences of philosophical speculation.

to the present. Do we not see, then, that houses and furniture remain in existence, while their creators have been gone from the world for a long time? However, we call Him the First Cause, understanding that He is the original reason for all forms and changes; that is, the existential cause of the here-and-now. Furthermore, we certainly understand [p. 118] His eternal existence at the same time as well, because without Him, movement would have stopped its continuity; the chain of modifications that take place in the temporally created world would have been interrupted, and everything would have come to nought. Using the term “cause,” it is understood at the same time that He is the Creator of the world and that He is also its Mover and Guide.

This is because we cannot say that movement is only an accident and that it’s not always caused by the power of the First Mover, since the rule is that whatever happens by chance must ultimately cease, even when the second movement comes from a first mover, that makes the second movement subsequent to the earlier one, and thus one after the other, because the first movement is also obviously only a temporal one, as we know, and a consequence brings about the second from the the first movement. That one is a consequence of a still earlier one, until we finally come to the first, which gave the first impetus that caused movement. Let’s even say that everything has a dynamic energy inside it, with no need to resort to an external force; if so, it obviously cannot be that the power inside of it should be stronger than the sum of power it possesses. In case one might say, ‘The power that moves a sphere is from the outside, merely placed in it, just as the soul is placed in people, that comes from outside it and yet is placed in it, and that is what moves it.’ The answer is that that power is not equal to the soul, which influences the body, and moves it, but the soul itself could also move from the body. The soul moves the body, but when the body rests, so does the soul; that means that movement is accidental. However, we see - after all - that the heavenly spheres and planets never rest - that must come from an external power, something that influences others but which would itself never be influenced. Therefore, we must logically agree with the concept of the First Power, which we call “Cause,” or God, Creator of the world and its Director, as the first and constant Initiator of our world, who stands outside of it.

Here is another proof of God’s existence:

We can imagine the nature of all the possible beings in one of three ways: 1) all of them never come into being and, as a result, aren’t destroyed either; 2) all of them come into being, with the nature of coming into being when it is not existent; or 3) part of them come into being in such a way that they can be annihilated, and part of them exist and can never be annihilated.

Concerning our world, we cannot apply the first case, seeing that everything in it exists, and we ourselves exist. The second case also cannot be, because all that there is cannot exist when it ceases existing. This would mean that when every existing thing needs to come to nought, whatever creates existence could, by necessity, also cease to exist. We must therefore come to the third case, and thus the portion of existing things that didn’t - and could never - become non-existent inevitably exists [p. 119] on its own, not because of an external cause. He is the One that creates the second part: existing beings that are able to exist when it is gone. Here, we have a proof that

there is something that exists whose existence is unavoidable (*meḥuyav ha-metziyut*⁴⁴⁰), because of its own nature, without a secondary cause. In this case, the rational proof is solid. One can never contradict it, unless whoever opposes it completely doesn't understand how rational proofs (*darkhei ha-mofet*⁴⁴¹) are constructed.

⁴⁴⁰ Literally, "that which exists necessarily" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴⁴¹ Literally, "ways of proof" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

Chapter 3: Unity of the Creator

[p. 119] Maimonides dedicated chapter 75 of the first part of the *Guide to the Perplexed* to the question of the unity of the Creator. There, he brings the five rational proofs of the *Medabrim*⁴⁴²; for more on this, see chapter 1 of the third part of this book. He analyzes these proofs, showing their inconsistencies, and then he goes on to express his opinion.

First Proof

Here is the first proof that is used by most *Medabrim* (Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon [882/892-942] also makes use of it in his *Emunot ve-De'ot*⁴⁴³): If there should be two gods, it would be possible that one thing should, at one and the same time, be able to include two opposites - such as cold and warm, dry and humid, and soft and hard. This is because one god would want substances to be cold and the other would want those substances to be warm, or one god would want to put a particular body at rest and the other would want to move that body. Knowing that there is no such thing as one thing with two opposites inside, and seeing that an object can either be hot or cold, or either hard or soft - neither "not cold" and "not warm" put together nor "not hard" and "not soft" put together - we must say that everything is done from only one power.

The intention is simple: Seeing the constant harmony and the consistency of the principle that "there cannot be two opposites in one thing and at the same time," we must admit that everything is done by someone and in accordance with his single will.

However, Maimonides is dissatisfied with that proof, because that argument accepts the doctrine of the atoms - that is to say that the entire world, together with the spheres, was created with the same microscopic points (*'atzamim fardiyim*⁴⁴⁴), and the difference between the lower world and the higher spheres only came about through the diversity of positions and movements. Nonetheless, be that as it may, if we accept Aristotle's position that the spheres are constituted entirely from another material, which belongs to the fifth element, entirely different from our four elements.⁴⁴⁵ Only then can one obviously say that there are two gods - one that rules over our [p. 120] world, created out of four elements, and therefore a visible order is present; and a second that guides the spheres, also alone, and therefore one also finds a marvellous order there, even though both are led by two different powers.

Second Proof

⁴⁴² Muslim *Qalam* theologians; in Hebrew, that term literally means "those who speak."

⁴⁴³ In English, "The Book of Beliefs and Opinions."

⁴⁴⁴ Medieval philosophical Hebrew for "atoms."

⁴⁴⁵ These elements are earth, air, fire, and water.

As shown earlier, existential harmony cannot be possible if the world is led by more than one god. One could ask: Is it possible that both of these gods agree on one opinion and work together? Except that this is not a valid question, because we can imagine such a thing only in one of two ways: either establishing that both gods are equal to one another in every sense and in that case they are obviously in fact one, or that they are indeed somewhat different from one another and therefore somewhat equal to one another. Rather, in that case, we must obviously say that both gods possess a diversity of powers and characteristics, and such complexity can't be possible without an assembler. This means an ultimate cause that is existentially unavoidable because of itself alone (*mehuyav ha-metziyut mi-tzad 'atzmo*⁴⁴⁶), and this Ultimate Cause is one; therefore, it is that which we call "God."

Against that proof that the aforementioned Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon also brings, Maimonides claims that it would have been valid if one accepts the position that one cannot attribute any positive quality to the Creator (*to'arim mehayvim le-matzuy ha-rishon*⁴⁴⁷). However, the *Mu'tazila* themselves state that one can attribute three positive qualities to the Creator - wisdom, possibility, and will. Thus, we can obviously imagine two creators, though one is different from the other only through one of these three qualities. If we accept their position, could this be a second proof of God's unity?

Third Proof

Here is a proof that is similar to one of the earlier ones: some *Medabrim* assert that the influence of the Creator on our world comes through the mediation of His "will," and not through any power attributed to Him. Instead, we are talking about something that exists separately, a divinely created power stemming from Him, with that power guiding the world.

In this case, the divine power must be only one and must stem from one creation. If there were two powers from two gods, they cannot do one and the same task - unless they are united in all aspects, in which case they are actually one after all. Consequently, if we are dealing here with the ability to be created only out of one, then who can make us accept the opinion that this power was created from two gods, when it is natural to believe that it was created from one?

This proof also doesn't please Maimonides, because the existence of "will" is still not held as certain by all philosophers; some don't entirely understand it and yet others deny it. In the best-case scenario, it is subject to many questions and doubts that one can't solve. So then, how does one undertake to explain something that is incomprehensible with a thing that is itself incomprehensible? The belief in unity cannot rest on such a weak foundation.

Fourth Proof

⁴⁴⁶ Literally, "[whose] existence is required on its own merit" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴⁴⁷ Literally, "attributes that are obligated for the First Existence" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

Here is the cosmological proof: From where do we accept the [p. 121] proof of God's existence in a complete manner? Only from that proof in which "every creature must have one who created it." For example, if we didn't have a temporally created world for ourselves, we would certainly not believe in the existence of a Creator. In addition, the stronger proof points only to one god, not implying more; that is, it forces us to believe in one Creator, not in more than one, whose existence is a necessity (*meḥuyav ha-metziyut*⁴⁴⁸). You may ask: it's true that one god is indeed a necessity, but is there still not a possibility of two gods? What about the rule, "there is no creature without a Creator?" Would that obviously have significance only to preclude the possibility of there not being another god, but not to preclude the possibility of two gods? The answer is: quite rationally, the former is a necessity and the latter is a possibility (*efshar ha-metziyut*⁴⁴⁹). As we have already determined earlier, we can't imagine the Creator as a possibility but only as a necessity. As a consequence, there is no Creator in the scenario with two gods. Thus, there remains only the One and Only God.

Maimonides also doesn't like that proof. He states: The principle of the *Medabrim* still merely affirms that with less than one Creator it is impossible, not that two or more cannot be possible. This means that we have positive proof of God's existence with the first possibility, while with the second possibility we only have a doubtful proof - possibly yes, possibly no. However, the problem obviously isn't God's existence, but rather our flawed knowledge of how to confirm His existence. If we would have more knowledge, we might affirm the second possibility of how God might possibly exist with as much certainty as the first possibility. For that reason, the term "possibility of existence" (*efshar ha-metziyut*) wouldn't be suitable. Perforce, this fourth proof of unity cannot at all be considered a proof.

Fifth Proof

One of the *Medabrim* (Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon also makes use of that proof) states: We must say that the Creator is one god. If we were talking about two gods, there must be one of two possibilities: either a) having in mind that only one god didn't have all the power to create without both gods in collaboration; this would obviously mean that there is a limit to the god's creative potential - what the god can do and what he can't - and we obviously can't imagine such a creator. Or b) that just one god was able to create everything, and at that moment the second god is superfluous. We must state that only one Creator is the one who created everything.

However, Maimonides objects to that as well, because the rule that "something that one cannot do, can be considered incapacity," cannot be held even for one Creator. Can we then say that our Creator is limited in His powers because He cannot create a god that is His equal and that He cannot destroy Himself? And in that case, after all, gods could indeed be two, both having created, though one god cannot do that, and thus he cannot be limited by these possibilities.

⁴⁴⁸ Literally, "[whose] existence is necessary" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴⁴⁹ Literally, "[whose] existence is possible" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

As we see, this reasoning cannot sustain itself, and therefore, Maimonides says that rather than presenting such proofs, it would be better to believe naively the way that all [p. 122] believers do, believing in the tradition he received from his grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

Maimonides' proof of God's unity, in summary, is as follows: As he explained earlier (in the previous chapter, "God's Existence"), everything that was created from primordial matter through constant movement must have a Mover that is external to it, incessant, and independent of anyone; in other words, a Mover that remains alone and motionless. That power cannot be a body nor any power in a body, but rather a spiritual being; as such, He cannot be enumerated the way that material things, which can change their position and quality, can be. That which we actually see as forms in a plurality is only because of the material on which these forms rest. Here's the question: After all, we see the spheres that are counted as *sekhelim nivdalim*,⁴⁵⁰ are they to be counted as unity or plurality? The answer is that they can only be considered in this respect on account of one being the cause of the other; that is, when one - the cause - was present earlier in time than the second (the one caused by it). The First Mover must obviously, in accordance with this logic, be the first in time, and if we accept that there is afterwards a second mover, there must be one from the second. Either the second is a cause, in which case there is by necessity absolutely no god, or the first is a cause, with the other being the one caused by it - with there absolutely being no god. We must state that the First Mover that is the cause of everything, can only be one.

This is the true proof of the unity of the Creator, even accepting Aristotle's opinion that the primordial material existed from time immemorial, and only through movement was everything clothed with forms, and this is what creation means.

However, Maimonides doesn't go that far; in his opinion, creation also concerned itself with the material, and this proof is therefore able to be affirmed, according to his opinion.

⁴⁵⁰ "Separate intelligences" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

Chapter 4: The Qualities With Which One Can Label the Creator

[p. 122] Maimonides, in writing about the existence and unity of the Creator, didn't have excessive work cut out for him, because both Jewish and Arab scholars had already accepted this concept long ago as an undeniable truth. However, it was hard for him to combat the custom of extolling the Creator with praises and good qualities, such as strong, wise, merciful, etc. On one side are the anthropomorphists, who talk in expressive language, and on the other side are the biblical verses in their plain meaning that talk of the Creator as a person who can become angry, become good, be forgiving, and have regret.

[p. 123] Maimonides came out with a strong attack against both of those camps from the perspective of Aristotle's logical speculation, which he laid out over eleven entire chapters of the first part of the *Guide to the Perplexed* (chapters 50-61), the gist of which we will describe here in a very summary fashion.

The word "belief" needs to be understood in one of four ways: 1) that which is expressed with the mouth; 2) that which is imagined in the mind (that is, to understand what one says); 3) to believe in that which can be conceived; and 4) that which is understood, said, and believed should correspond with reality. If a concept lacks even one of these four points, one can't boast of believing it as the truth. For example, if one says that he believes while not understanding, or that he believes in something that doesn't correspond with reality and logic, that is just like the Christians who state that they believe in one God that is truly three, despite the fact that logic and reality affirm that one god can never be three gods, and three gods can never be one.

In short, it seems that in believing in God's complete unity - without any addition or subtraction - one cannot possibly attribute to God the previously described qualities that the verses express, understanding those attributes in their plain meaning, as we will see further. Believing in the qualities and attributes on the one hand, and in unity on the other hand, is like saying that three is one and vice versa. The reasoning is as follows:

What we refer to as an attribute (*to'ar*)⁴⁵¹ can have one of two meanings: a) an inherent attribute or b) an accident. In the first case, the attribute only describes the way that the *me-to'ar* (the thing designated with that attribute) appears to be, or as it is in its essence. For example, the person (the *me-to'ar*) is a living creature that speaks (the attribute); in this case, the type of attribute can add nothing to the essence of the Creator, just as the aforementioned attribute contributes nothing to that person. This is precisely as if somebody should say that "a person is a person," since if he weren't "living" or "speaking," he is obviously not at all a "person."

⁴⁵¹ In medieval philosophical Hebrew, *to'ar* is often translated as "attribute," as in the case of this chapter. However, *to'ar* can also mean "form" or "figure."

In accordance with that explanation, we can possibly ascribe such qualities to the First Cause encompassing its inherent attributes, since we may still call the First Cause whatever name we want, as long as it encompasses the notion of the Creator. But how is that useful? Just as in the first example: “a person is a person,” it is the same idea in different words.

However, if we want to ascribe attributes to Him that belong to the second type (accident) - such as being wise and strong - both of them being qualities that occur with a *me-to'ar* - that would certainly be a great mistake. A smart person can make a blunder, and a strong one can become weak. Someone who is angry can become good. All this means that qualities come and go. The first case is a mishap, the second case is a limitation, and believing in the unity of the Creator, we must imagine Him as a unity that is the same at all times, and from whatever vantage point He must be simple, not consisting of any distinct parts, and indivisible with respect to reason; never a plurality, either in reality or in reasoning.

[p. 124] In sum: inherent attributes are allowed, but useless. Accidents pertaining to attributes are wrong and aren't allowed because of God's unity. Whoever mistakenly thinks that we can ascribe accidental attributes to God is equal to those who say “one” god and have in mind “three.”

We can delve further into the subject, and at that point we find four types of attributes:

1) Natural attributes, such as: “A person is a living thing that speaks,” which is the same as stating, “A person is a person,” as explained earlier: even though it's not harmful, it's useless. Yet, upon thorough reflection, we also find certain harmful things in this point. This is because in our example, “a person is a living thing that speaks,” the *me-to'ar* is marked by the following restrictions:

He is “a living thing that speaks,” but he is neither an angel, nor a *sekhel nifrad*,⁴⁵² nor a god. Such a limitation defined by what he is not may be suitable for people, but not for the First Cause, in whose existence all the possible qualities and attributes are found. If we should be able to find terms that include in themselves all the possible qualities, we would be able to express it concerning Him. However, such an attribute is nowhere in our language. Every positive attribute is connected to a negative, and just as we may not ascribe any negative attribute (*hisaron*⁴⁵³) whatsoever, we're not allowed to ascribe any of these attributes either, except to state: the First Cause is a first cause, and we thus explain, after all, no more than before; by necessity, it is a superfluous task.

2) If we should ascribe accidental qualities to God - such as that Reuben protects himself from a sin and Simeon is sensitive,⁴⁵⁴ or Reuben is a talented artist, and Simeon is a good doctor - the

⁴⁵² A “separate intelligence” in medieval philosophical Hebrew, such as the heavenly spheres.

⁴⁵³ A “weakness” in Hebrew (medieval philosophical or otherwise).

⁴⁵⁴ Very often in rabbinic discourse, including the present-day Haredi world, the paradigm of Reuben and Simeon is used when describing a scenario involving two people, particularly men or boys, derived from the Talmud or other Jewish holy books.

former qualities are natural while the latter ones are acquired. Another example consists of qualities that are constant in people, in which they excel compared to others, as in when Reuben is stronger and Simeon is weaker. Yet another example is psychological strengths and weaknesses, as in when Reuben is prone to anger while Simeon is kindhearted. Or, there are physiological qualities, such as that Reuben is taller and Simeon is shorter. In all these cases, the attributes are certainly not suitable to the Creator, since all of these are acquired attributes, and these are possible only with a person whose entire existence is accidental: he can come into being or not. However, the Creator is something whose existence is necessary, an unavoidable existence, and for that reason isn't "accidental" in any way. Those who want such attributes to actually apply to Him - instead of praising Him with these attributes, they blaspheme Him and put Him completely on the same level as people, submitting Him to incidents, accidents, and qualities that happen by chance.

3) One is also forbidden to praise God even with inherent attributes, because as previously stated, there is no attribute that could include His whole existence. Moreover, if it cannot encompass the entire entity, then a part of it remains left out; that certainly means a limitation and a division, and one who believes in the unity of the Creator is forbidden to admit to such an idea.

4) There are attributes that only designate the connection of one thing to [p. 125] another: Reuben lives in a certain city on a certain street. With that, Reuben's connection to a certain place is proven. That kind of attribute does not change the *me-to'ar*, and there is nothing there that can take away from the essence. This is because Reuben, for example, can be Jacob's son, Simeon's brother, Levi's partner, Judah's father-in-law, living in the city on that street, in that house, and all the attributes having to do with connectedness have neither increased nor diminished nor changed him. It would seem, at first glance, that one could indeed ascribe such attributes to the Creator; but it is not so.

This is because we're not allowed to attribute to God any belonging to a place or time, as we do to a material being. Time is created through movement - a time when the substance is present here and absent there, and subsequently, there it happens and here it doesn't. Without movement there is no time whatsoever. Changing position creates time; thus, that which doesn't modify itself nor move itself - since everywhere He is present in one and the same "being" - doesn't have any connectedness whatsoever with time and place. There can be no relative connectedness with God either, because creatures are entirely of another, accidental existence and He is quite other than that (for Whom existence is necessary). We should definitely desire to find a certain connection between Him and the creatures: in any case, is He not - after all - their cause and are they not His created ones? The answer is: Yes, there is a bit of connectedness from that perspective; however, here we need to be careful to not fall into error. This is because if one states: "Jacob is Reuben's father"; it requires the first person to be related to the second just as much as the second is related to the first. Jacob cannot be a father, not having Reuben as a son, just as much as Reuben couldn't have become a son, not having Jacob as a father. If Reuben, Jacob's only son, should die, Jacob ceases to be a father. This means that the son gives something to the father. It is not like that in the

relationship of creatures to their Creator; they add to Him nothing more after being created than that which He was previously.

(This idea is expressed in the words of *Adon Olam*:⁴⁵⁵ “Lord of the Universe, Who reigned before any form was created,” and further down, “And when all things have ceased to be, He alone will reign in awe.” That is, God was the same before He created everything, and He will be the same when everything will cease.)

Thus, in Maimonides’ opinion, the attributes of “Creator” and “Maker” are most appropriate of all. However, this is only on condition that we always understand them in terms of the results of the task of Creation. The results often come across in such a fashion, while He remains One; the results are myriad, while the worker is immutable. For example, an architect can build many houses with various sizes and forms. The tasks are many, but he works as one on the various tasks; the artisan is unchangeable.

The question arises: How can it be that the Immutable, Unitary One is able to create many types of handiwork? For the answer, we can take - as an example - fire, which [p. 126] fuses, makes hard, blackens, bleaches, cooks, and burns. Only someone who doesn’t know the nature of fire can make the mistake to be of the opinion that these are all different powers in fire while someone of understanding knows that the nature of fire is one; the difference lies only in how it takes effect. And if one can find such an example in an unknown power, is that not certainly possible with respect to the Creator’s actions?

A second example can show that the positive qualities that exist because of these actions aren’t added and don’t show any modification. For that reason, one can ascribe such attributes to the Creator - this is human reason.

Reason is one attribute, but it does much work. It enables people to build, weave, spin, sow, cut, sew, and learn the most difficult languages and the most profound philosophical disciplines. It is impossible to enumerate all the actions that get done through precisely this power, while reason itself remains one and immutable. And if we see that in us, we can certainly imagine the same attribute in the Creator, at the same time maintaining His simple unity and immutability.

The *Medabrim*,⁴⁵⁶ however, do want to ascribe to God four positive qualities - not because of actions, but rather attributes existing in His essence itself. These are: He lives, He knows, He is wise, and He has will. They do not understand these four qualities as the result of actions. Rather, they are unique qualities that define His essence. They state: If these attributes should be created by Him (that is, by His actions), this obviously means that He created His life, His wisdom, His

⁴⁵⁵ Literally, “Lord of the Universe” in medieval philosophical Hebrew. This prayer, attributed to Solomon ibn Gabirol (who flourished in the 11th century), is recited every day during morning services and late at night upon retiring to bed, and on Sabbaths and holidays, additionally at the end of the Mussaf service.

⁴⁵⁶ Muslim *Qalam* theologians; in Hebrew, that term literally means “those who speak.”

potential,⁴⁵⁷ and His will, just as we should state that He alone created Himself. First, there is no logic in such a statement. Second, where did He have life, will, potential, and wisdom before He created them, in order to create those for Himself? Third, in that case, we must obviously admit that there was a time when He didn't yet have those four qualities. This goes against the accepted truth that His existence didn't depend, at that moment, on time and on any additional attributes. As a result, they wanted to believe that these four qualities were not created, but that they instead arose from Him Himself and there lie in His nature in the first and highest instance.

The intellectual proof of the *Medabrim* is as follows: He lives, since otherwise, we can obviously not imagine the Creator. If He doesn't "live," that means that he's dead. And insofar as he isn't dead - he's living. The same is true with respect to wisdom: He is no fool whatsoever (this is, after all, axiomatic), and we must admit His wisdom. His potential and His will give proof to the temporally created world, which wouldn't be able to exist unless He had potential and will to create.

Maimonides, however, demolishes this entire argument, and he demonstrates that even these [p. 127] enumerated attributes can also be different, such as through His actions that aren't understood. He states thus:

First of all, we ought to understand that the first two qualities, "living" and "wise," are basically only one quality. This is because each person who lives feels it through his senses. However, the Creator - who has no senses - comprehends Himself, which means that He "lives" in the sense of His own comprehension of Himself, and in the same way He is also "wise," since that which He conceives is Himself. This is because His character is obviously not like that of people, in which the soul conceives of the body and the body is the one being comprehended. In any case, after all, He alone is the conceiver and the one being conceived, all rolled into one. It is beyond the shadow of doubt that the *Medabrim*, in saying that He is wise, were - at that moment - not of the opinion that He comprehends Himself, but rather that He comprehends His creations, and in this case we already find in this an action, even in accordance with the notion of the *Medabrim*.

The same thing is true in connection with the other two qualities: "will" and "potential." This is because this formulation doesn't allow us to state: "God has willed Himself," or "He knew Himself." These words would obviously be spoken without any reasoning, but only show the connection between Him and His creatures, that He is "able" to create that which He created, and to "will" the creations to emerge from nothingness to existence. This refers to His actions, as we have already explained earlier. If so, these qualities are not in Him, but only with respect to His creations, referring to His actions as we have already remarked. Moreover, these ascribed qualities need to be understood in terms of the thirteen divine attributes⁴⁵⁸ - in particular, being "merciful,"

⁴⁵⁷ In the original Yiddish text, it is written as *meglichkayt*, which literally means "possibility," but in this context, "potential" is used instead.

⁴⁵⁸ See Exodus 34:6; these divine attributes were uttered in the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf, and they form an integral part of the penitential service just before and during the High Holy Days and on fast days.

“gracious,” “slow to anger,” and being the Creator. “Merciful” - this entails seeing the attribute of mercy in the world, which was created from Him, the same thing being true with the rest of the attributes that we find in His world. He is a Creator because of the temporally created world; this means that the attributes are only taken from His actions, but not that He possesses added qualities, which could also disappear or be altered.

(Speaking of that subject, Maimonides dedicated chapter 54 of the *Guide* to Moses our Master’s request “let me know, now, Your way,”⁴⁵⁹ and on the thirteen divine attributes in general. Unfortunately, we can’t convey even the gist of that profound chapter, in order to not stray too far from the subject at hand.)

One might ask: It is accepted that we need to throw out all the added attributes of God. However, we must obviously admit that He exists (*nimtza*)⁴⁶⁰ and that is not only a quality but also an accidental thing; this is because existence itself is a temporary accident for every *nimtza*. And if so, how can we ascribe to God the attribute of *nimtza*? The answer is: that attribute is an accident only among creatures that either can or cannot exist, but not with respect to the Creator, whose existence is necessary (*meḥuyav ha-metziyut*).⁴⁶¹ It can be understood by all: an accident happened that those who came [p. 128] into existence did not exist earlier and did not come into existence subsequently. The Creator, though, doesn’t exist in accordance with the human rules of existence, just as He doesn’t live in accordance with the rules of created beings’ living. Similarly, He knows - but not in accordance with our ways of knowledge. God has potential - but different from the framework of our potential. That is to say that in this case, the functional attributes aren’t caused by peripheral reasons as is the case with people. Rather, they emerge from His essence, without making any modification in Him proper, even though a big modification comes to whatever receives His actions. In that same sense, we need to understand the attribute of “primordial” (*kadmon*)⁴⁶² - not a priority which implies the way something previously came before something else, but rather something particular that doesn’t fall under time. In general, His existence is excluded from the conception of time. All the attributes that are ascribed to Him in the Prophets and even in the Torah itself⁴⁶³ need to be understood in metaphorical terms, inasmuch as one can mistakenly understand the verses - using a literal approach - deriving from them that He is corporeal.

As we come to that thought, it is explained to us in quite a profound manner: in truth, we can only state negative attributes concerning the Creator, and with that, we will quickly come to the truth. In the process, we will not offend His honour, nor will we ascribe powers to Him, nor will

⁴⁵⁹ Exodus 33:13

⁴⁶⁰ “Existential being” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴⁶¹ Literally, “[whose] existence is required” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴⁶² “Precedence” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴⁶³ i.e. the Pentateuch

we point out imperfections in Him, as one can do in yielding to the temptation of praising Him with positive qualities.

In order to conceive of this, we need to understand that an attribute - a classification – never concerns only the one we speak of, without any connection to a second partner. For example: seeing one move from afar, you may ask: who is the one who moves toward us? A second person might answer: this is a living thing. That answer is true; however, you still don't know everything about who is moving over there, because living things are omnipresent - people and domestic animals, wild animals and birds. However, you do know that the one approaching isn't a stone or a tree, which are different entities. The answer to the question could have been a negative one, with the same results. For example, when one answers, "no stone and no tree," you will also know from it the same as you know now. Whether what you see is a person, or an animal, you do not know from both answers alike. The difference lies only that in the positive answer you don't need any introductions to know concerning the division of the objects into three parts - inanimate objects, living plants (soil and plants themselves), and living creatures - whereas in the negative answer, you must know these things early on. Something different will then become clear to you as to what this object doesn't include, but it will remain unknown what this object indeed is.

We also know that the Creator is *meḥuyav ha-metziyut*, and only Him, while others are only *efshar ha-metziyut*.⁴⁶⁴ Thus, the negative attribute is closer to the truth than the positive attribute. This is because in the positive attribute, after all, we compare Him with the rest of the creatures, and as previously explained, that is blasphemous rather than praiseful. For this reason, when we praise Him with those negative qualities - [p. 129] i.e. He has no body whatsoever, He is not composed of many powers, rather He is just one simple unity and so forth - we already have from it alone a clear notion of His essence, without having to be doubtful about whether it's this or that, or something else entirely. This is because we clearly know that everything that the human mind can conceive isn't God, who of necessity remains One, entirely different from all creatures.

Furthermore, Maimonides presents a parable in chapter 60 of the first part of the *Guide to the Perplexed*: A person wants to create for himself a notion regarding the existence of a ship, having never seen a ship. One will explain to him that it is not a mineral, and a second person will explain that it is not a living creature. A third person will explain that it is not a tree, and a fourth person will explain that it wasn't created in its proper form, but rather that it was built out of wood. A fifth person will explain that it is not a ferry, and the sixth person will explain that it is neither a log, nor is it four-cornered nor is it round like a wheel. Indeed, that last piece of information, together with the earlier ones, almost perfectly describes to him what a ship looks like. This shows that through negative attributes, through explaining what a ship is not, one can conceive it just as well as through the affirmative attributes. As previously explained, one cannot depict the Creator with "necessary attributes"; therefore, it is much better to deal with describing what is not there. He is not "there," nor is He "not knowing," nor "powerless" nor "unwise," nor "not created," nor

⁴⁶⁴ Literally, "[whose] existence is possible" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

limited in time and place, nor conceivable in His essence itself - He is only known through His actions.

The philosophers state correctly: “He is strong, without knowing His strength. He is hidden from the eyes through His omnipresence, just as our eyes can’t look at the sun when it illuminates the entire world on a bright, sunny day.” Concerning that, Maimonides cites the verse, “For You, silence is praise.”⁴⁶⁵ This refers to silence, through which God is praised. However much He is praised by everyone, at the end of the day every mortal being can be compared to creatures with similar qualities. Thus, the best praise of God is silence.

It’s no wonder that this notion aroused sharp criticism against Maimonides on the part of almost all the great Jewish scholars who believed in the biblical verse literally. With this verse, Maimonides stretched a point and interpreted until it would agree with Aristotle’s opinion and thus Maimonides could be philosophically consistent. He certainly had in mind to reconcile the two truths,⁴⁶⁶ and he himself didn’t notice that he simply compelled the Torah to accept the sovereignty of philosophy.

From this stemmed Maimonides’ opposition to all liturgical poetry,⁴⁶⁷ which he found blasphemous and even heretical, let alone fantastical and foolish - an opinion that opposed the ideas held by all of the great Jewish figures.

These ideas will be discussed in more detail in the last part of this book, “Criticism of Maimonides.”

⁴⁶⁵ Psalms 65:2

⁴⁶⁶ Referring to Torah and Aristotelian philosophy.

⁴⁶⁷ In Hebrew, *piyyutim* (in plural; *piyyut* in singular), which are at the heart of certain liturgical services, especially during the High Holy Days, on fast days, and during certain festivals.

Chapter 5: Monism⁴⁶⁸ Finds Its Highest Expression in Maimonides

[p. 130] Now we will discuss Maimonides' intellectual aspirations to achieve ultimate unity in the Creator, despite the multifacetedness of His actions. Maimonides also made use of his cosmological explanation, connected with the existence of our world together with all the upper spheres.

Maimonides, just like every other deep thinker, fought against the duality that appears in almost all branches of human perception. On the physical level, there is the duality of the material and the spiritual, of matter and strength; on the psychological level, there are the contradictions between body and soul; on the sociological level, the opposition between the individual and society; on the theological level, the existence of good and evil, of light and darkness, and of edible fruits and poisonous ones. For all these reasons, dualism - the doubling of appearances - has always tormented the inquiring thinker, not letting him go farther, until he succeeded in unifying dualism - duality - into a monism (oneness).

“Monism” strives to discover one reason for both appearances in each set, in accordance with the negational system, as - for example - in an antithesis between the material and the spiritual. This is true when either 1) the material is the reason for the spiritual, or - in other words - the father brings forth the spiritual under certain circumstances, or 2) the spiritual is the father of the material, or 3) the spiritual and the material both came from a third entity that is neither spiritual nor material. This comes about entirely through a system of synthesis that asserts that such sets of two as the spiritual and the material, details and generalities, good and evil, and light and darkness aren't more than one and the same thing with two sides, like two sides of the same coin, in which one side can't be divided from the other, indicating that it's one and the same thing.

In the second part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides makes use of both aforementioned systems to explain the marvellous concept of monism in the entire Creation. He says thus:

The entire Creation is one organic unit, just like Reuben and Simeon,⁴⁶⁹ two people whose basic foundations are equal, and the difference is only in their forms. The difference between Reuben and Simeon is like the difference between Reuben's head and Reuben's hand, that between both of those and Reuben's feet, and that between Reuben's feet and Reuben's lung, and on it goes. All creatures are like that, whether the biggest animals or the smallest insects, created from the four elements - fire, air, water, and earth. All of them are joined together in one unit, and there is no

⁴⁶⁸ Monism is a theory or doctrine that denies the existence of a distinction or duality in some sphere, such as that between matter and mind, or God and the world. All of that is spelled out in this chapter.

⁴⁶⁹ Very often in rabbinic discourse, including the present-day Haredi world, the paradigm of Reuben and Simeon is used when describing a scenario involving two people, particularly men or boys, derived from the Talmud or other Jewish holy books.

emptiness whatsoever in between all of these [p. 131] and the central point in this cosmology, the Earth's sphere. Water is above earth, air is above water, and fire is above air.

(Monism can actually work even in our days, in which the position of Copernicus [1473-1543] controls our understanding of the visible world, the difference being only in the reason for what is apparent.)

The heavenly bodies are created from a fifth element, entirely different from the four aforementioned elements. That element begins just as our earthly ether ends, and all the spheres and circles are formed from it. One sphere is next to the other and in the other, like rings of a chain, without any emptiness in between.

All these globes - circular spheres - are moving in a set circular motion, one sphere going through a bigger orbit, and the other sphere through a smaller one; one sphere moves itself slowly and the other sphere moves itself faster. However, it is always just like a well-timed clock which "isn't even one minute behind" nor "even one minute ahead." This is the main basis of their caused "movement;" however, their relative quickness and slowness come from the various forms.

The fifth element is divided into a bit of matter, from which our four elements were later formed. They are dead elements, without energy, and without consciousness. They never move themselves without the coercion of a mover. Movement in our world can be through one of the following reasons:

- 1) a stone, a branch, or a fruit which falls down, on account of the nature of each of these things, falls back to the natural place from which it emerges - from the earth - just like fire (which comes from heaven), naturally raises itself (the ancient scientists believed like that);
- 2) living creatures move away from danger through instinct upon learning of a fire or of a flood, or to look for food somewhere else because of hunger, or to flee from a wild animal that wants to devour them;
- 3) when the mind makes itself do something, for example, to see one's parents, visit a sick friend, or attend a funeral or a happy occasion; in the same way, earthly movement must have a compelling reason, and as the impetus winds down, the movement ceases.

However, the spheres - whose movements aren't forced by any reason (in Maimonides' time the law of gravity was unknown; it was later discovered by Sir Isaac Newton [1642-1726/27] in the year 1687) - are different. Moreover, they don't gravitate towards a certain point and rest there; instead, they always rotate in an established circle. It can hereby be concluded that they possess within themselves a mind, according to whose behest they move themselves, just like the third example in our illustration above of how movement comes about (to visit the sick, seeing one's parents, etc.).

Nonetheless, we need to understand that the mind can move, but it doesn't have a necessity to do so. Here is what that means: the mind enables the body to go from one place to another, only when it would be useful from the perspective of its desire [p. 132] to do that. As a result, given that the spheres are moved by their mind, we must also give them a passionate feeling, the will to attain something. The sphere's passion is to reach God, to compare itself to Him, according to how much it is possible according to its level. As is well known, the Creator is unchangeable, and the sphere also strives towards that unchangeability. Not being able to reach to that level, since it is made of matter - in all its details - it nonetheless maintains its incessant movement.

Indeed, it is in that sense that one ought to understand the aphorism, "God moves the spheres." He does so not with His strength as a person would do, but rather, because He is the Cause of all movement. There is a parable of a poor man who gives something to a rich person, hoping to receive a donation in turn. True, the rich man causes the poor man's movement, because if the poor man didn't want the donation, he wouldn't have come to it. This obviously doesn't mean that the rich man pushes for it, or even that the rich man - with his donation - becomes the direct cause of the poor man's movement; rather, he is indeed an indirect reason for it.

The first sphere is, therefore, motivated by its mind and its passion to move towards its Cause; that is the Creator. The second sphere that emerged from the first received its movement from the first, in the way that the first sphere received it from the Creator, and thus one sphere after the other. Every lowly creature strives to rise above itself, with the help of the intellectual energy within it, together with its passion. We have nine spheres: a diurnal sphere, a sphere of the fixed stars, and seven spheres of the seven wandering stars,⁴⁷⁰ and the centre of it is the "Active Intellect," a universal mind, through whose help our possible intellect emerges in reality, that which produces all the temporary material forms, which were previously only in the realm of possibility.

This is because otherwise we cannot imagine any process. The one that is the cause must have in his intellect that which he is going to produce in reality. The one that is the cause of the ear of grain is obviously a kernel which has within itself the type of an ear of grain in potential. As a result, that which gives form gives us an abstract form, and the creator of our intellect gives us an abstract intellect.

That particular theory is taken from Aristotle (384-322 BCE), with the exception of the "direct movement" which Aristotle ascribes to the Creator, while Maimonides states that He is only the reason for it, the indirect cause, because Aristotle's opinion ascribes something of a defect in the Creator's immutability. (See the commentary of *Shem Tov*⁴⁷¹ in the fourth chapter of the second

⁴⁷⁰ The seven moving astronomical objects in the sky visible to the naked eye: the Sun, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

⁴⁷¹ Literally in Hebrew, "Good Name"; that commentary was written by Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-ca. 1290 or 1295).

part of the *Guide to the Perplexed*.) Aristotle also says that “the First Cause” contacts the creatures but they don’t contact Him. Maimonides doesn’t think that way, stating instead:

The rule is that God doesn’t contact anything directly, but rather through an intermediary, just like He brings forth through fire, and that fire comes through the movement of the sphere. Thus, the sphere moves only with the mediation of the mind, together with passion; the higher sphere moves the lower one, and [p. 133] all that in a set order. Maimonides doesn’t want to state, like Aristotle, that the Creator Himself moves all of them, since we must then obviously admit to the collaboration of the higher and the lower movement. And if so, God would obviously be aided by the lower spheres (i.e. something else), which would constitute a certain limitation in His potential, through connecting His all-powerful intellect in the first sphere to the collaboration of the rest of the spheres.

As we see, Maimonides’ concept of divine “unity” is much loftier than Aristotle’s.

Everything is moved - not through Him directly - but rather is caused by Him, just as He is the reason for the entire Creation. The prophets call the “reason” that causes the abundance of existence and movement “angels,” and philosophers call them “separate intellects” (*sekhalim nifradim*⁴⁷²), and both prophets and philosophers are in agreement that in this case, the *sekhalim nifradim* are the intermediaries between God and creatures. In biblical verses, the Talmud, and Midrash, there are an infinite number of sayings that show that every action is called an “angel.” This is true, above all, of the biblical verse, “let us descend and there confuse their language.”⁴⁷³ A Midrash states: “As it were, the Holy One Blessed be He does nothing until he contemplates the host above.”⁴⁷⁴ These words go together with the thoughts of Plato (428/427 or 424/423-348/347 BCE): “The First Cause looks at the ideal world, and from it he gives that influence to existence.”

Maimonides’ monism is, therefore, the highest expression of unity that unifies creation: the angels, the spheres, and our world, with one being the cause of the other. The Creator has so much effect on the largest creation that He is able to transmit that effect to the lower spheres from Himself; the second, third, and so forth, one after the other. Their appearances are diverse, but their cause is one and unique.

Up until this point, Maimonides’ opinions got along well with those of Aristotle, with the exception of number of details. However, concerning the question of whether the existing world was created in one act or whether it has always existed, he departs completely from his master.

⁴⁷² “Separate intelligences” in medieval philosophical Hebrew, such as the heavenly spheres.

⁴⁷³ Genesis 11:7

⁴⁷⁴ Based on Sanhedrin 38b (of the Babylonian Talmud) and on Genesis Rabbah 12.

Chapter 6: Whether the World Is Temporally Created, or Has Eternal Existence

[p. 133] Establishing that all that exists - from the upper “separated intellects” (*sekhalim nifradim*⁴⁷⁵) to the lower world upon which we live - is the direct outcome of the one Creator and His constant abundance, the question arises: How was the world created? Maimonides brings three opinions:

1) The opinion of the Torah that God created everything that exists, except God [p. 134] Himself, from absolutely nothing, when only He Himself was present and there was nothing else that was present - “absolutely no angel, nor sphere, nor anything on that sphere.” Through His free choice, in the manner of “something from nothing” (*yesh me’eyn*⁴⁷⁶), God created whatever exists. Even “time” itself was also created, because time is the expression of movement; without movement, time would not be possible. Movement requires for itself a “something,” and before that “something,” there was nothing that existed that would move itself; as a result, there was still no concept of time at that point. And the scholars who maintained that there should have been an “order of time” for the creation of the world are as if they believed in an eternally existing world, or in a corporeal god that needs to move itself, and its movement should have created the concept of time.

All this is the opinion that the world is a temporally created one. Abraham our Father already proclaimed that for the world, and it is confirmed through his oath in the name of God, “Maker of heaven and earth.”⁴⁷⁷

2) A second opinion, of which Plato is one of its proponents, is that the world was created at a certain time. However, it wasn’t created purely from nothing; that is an impossibility, just as it is impossible for a thing - at one and the same time - to be and “not to be,” to be cold and to be hot, and that the diagonal of a square should have the same length as the straight line of its side. These are natural impossibilities, which have a constant nature (*le-nimna’ teva’ kayam*⁴⁷⁸), and that means absolutely no limitation in God’s possibilities and potentials, similar to God not being able to suppress Himself or to create a second god to be equal to Him. Those who are of that opinion say that there exists eternal matter, or matter (*homer kadmon*⁴⁷⁹) as primordial as God Himself, with the difference that God is its reason, and that material (primordial matter) is - compared to Him - like clay in the hands of a potter, or iron in the hands of a smith, who can manufacture it in different forms, according to His will: as He desires, at some times He forms out of it heaven and earth, and at other times He forms out of it something different.

⁴⁷⁵ “Separate intelligences” in medieval philosophical Hebrew, such as the heavenly spheres.

⁴⁷⁶ Hebrew for “ex nihilo.”

⁴⁷⁷ Genesis 14:22

⁴⁷⁸ “What is impossible has a constant nature” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴⁷⁹ “Eternal matter” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

Matter is eternal; therefore, it can never disappear. The emergence of all entities didn't come from nothing; consequently, matter cannot disappear into thin air. The heavenly bodies were also formed from the same materials and they are not, therefore, subject to the process of genesis and destruction.

The difference between the Torah's opinion and that of Plato is only with respect to primordial matter. The former maintains that, whether in matter or in form, these things are created by the one uncreated Creator, while the latter maintains that the Creator only needed to create the forms and add them to eternally existing material.

3) The third opinion comes from Aristotle. He is of the same opinion as Plato, [p. 135] that primordial matter is eternal, but he adds that movement and time are also eternal. The worlds above and below are consequently eternal, and they are not subject to the laws of coming into being and destruction. The heavenly spheres exist on an eternal basis, together with their forms. They were always thus and they will always remain thus. Our world exists eternally, except that its creatures remain eternal in matter, but they change in form. Matter changes form on a regular basis, throwing off one form and putting on another. Thus, that process is also eternal, and takes its course on a regular basis in accordance with a certain established order, without any modifications over a period of time.

Aristotle came to the conclusion that the world exists on an eternal basis, because he did not want to ascribe to the First Cause a temporal modification in will. If the world should have been created temporally, that would mean that the Creator didn't want to create earlier, but at a given moment He did wish to do so.

To defend the Torah's opinion and oppose that of Aristotle, Maimonides devoted 19 chapters of the second part of his *Guide to the Perplexed* (from chapter 13 to the end of chapter 31). The truth is that Plato's opinion is also opposed to our traditional belief that Creation was *ex nihilo*, or as Maimonides called it, "out of nothing."⁴⁸⁰ However, his postulates were primarily set against Aristotle's opinion, which wanted to infer the eternity of the world. Maimonides' aim was to prove that 1) the world was created by God at a certain date, 2) for the Creation there was no matter in existence except the Creator Himself, and 3) creating something out of nothing is not only possible for the Creator but even inevitable ("the theory of *ex nihilo* includes nothing that is impossible, and indeed some thinkers regard it as an established truth," *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapter 13).

According to Maimonides, the strongest proof that Aristotle brings forth with regard to eternity [*kadmut*],⁴⁸¹ is built upon a logical formula as follows: every actual change was previously a potential possibility. Its natural possibility to become always preceded its actually becoming something. The fruit on a tree is possible until it actually appears, not having the possibility that it

⁴⁸⁰ In medieval philosophical Hebrew, "*lo mi-davar*"; it literally means "not from a thing."

⁴⁸¹ "Eternity" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

would never become a reality at all. It was from this that the *kadmut* (eternal existence) of the world was derived. Thinking about a possible future creation, one could think of it only in one out of three ways: it is either necessary, or possible, or impossible. In the first case, it is a sure proof of *kadmut*. This is because necessity, by its very nature, can obviously not be non-existent. If it's impossible, it would never be able to be created, in accordance with the rule that the impossible has a constant nature, "*le-nimna' teva' kayam*," as mentioned earlier. There remains the second of the aforementioned three cases, the possible. The question arises: what does the subject of possibility include, unless we say that world is eternal [*kadmon*]? This is because each possibility is an adjective (*to'ar*⁴⁸²) and [p. 136] a predicant (*nasu*), which must have a subject (*nosei*) for whom the adjective is defined. In our case, it is the world, and that means its perpetual existence.

One of the philosophers among the *Medabrim*⁴⁸³ maintains that one could dispute Aristotle's proof with the following answer: The world is indeed created out of possibility, albeit that the subject of possibility is the Creator, who could have but needn't have created the world. Maimonides, however, didn't need that answer, since that confused two separate possibilities: 1) the possibility of Creation on the part of the Creator, and 2) possibilities of being created with respect to the created (that is, it is either possible or not that God should create). However, it is also possible that that thing should be created, and possibly not. The commentary of *Shem Tov*⁴⁸⁴ (part 2, chapter 14) explains this with a parable of a builder who can build a house, and yet he doesn't build it, since he lacks the bricks or lumber. This means that possibility and inevitability depend only on the creatures themselves - as opposed to the wise man among the *Medabrim* who wants to attribute possibility to the Creator, in order to thereby reject Aristotle's logical proof.

Here's Aristotle's second proof: If the world was created from "nothing" at a certain moment, we must obviously say that before it was actually created, God created it in potential. If so, the Creation made a modification in the Creator, now becoming a Creator in actuality instead of hitherto in potential. In that case, we would still ask: Why was it not created until now? And why wasn't it created a number of days, months, or years later? If, indeed, we do succeed in finding a reason why creation happened precisely now, we restrict the power of the Creator at the moment, ascribing a reason outside of Him in making the Creation a reality. If there was no such reason, but rather that His will was precisely now, not earlier and not later, we must obviously admit that it stems from modifications in His will - an imperfection of creatures, that cannot be ascribed to a Creator. Believing that God is the highest and first cause, not being in need of outside help and inalterable, we must also admit that the world has an eternal existence, and its constant existence comes from God's constant abundance upon it. In simpler words: God isn't its creator, but He is indeed its constant preserver and the provider of its abundance.

⁴⁸² "Attribute" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁴⁸³ Muslim *Qalam* theologians; in Hebrew, that term literally means "those who speak."

⁴⁸⁴ Literally in Hebrew, "Good Name"; that commentary was written by Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-ca. 1290 or 1295).

Here's Aristotle's third proof: We see that the world is supplied with all the necessary things and that, year by year, people attain more qualities in it. We have proved that in the world there is no excessive thing that's missing and that nothing is lacking in it; in other words, that the world is complete in all its qualities. In order to be complete in all its qualities, it must also possess the quality of perseverance. For that reason, we must believe in the world's eternal existence.

In summary, these are Aristotle's main proofs about the world's eternity. Maimonides [p. 137] combats them with counter-arguments, and he finally comes out with a defence of Aristotle's position: just as there are no real intellectual proofs concerning the creation of the world, so too there are no undisputed proofs for its eternity. Alexander of Aphrodisias (flourished in the early 3rd century CE)⁴⁸⁵ also admits to that. The proofs for and against eternity balance each other equally, and Aristotle tipped the scales to the side of eternity. However, we - who believe in the Torah - only have to prove the possibility of creation in order to tip the scales in the way that the Torah calls upon us to believe.

Before Maimonides goes into detail in rejecting Aristotle's proofs of the world's eternal existence (*kadmut ha'olam*), he puts in place a general rule, namely:

Every new thing that was already created, whether in matter or in form, comes into existence from non-existence. Even if the matter of that thing did indeed exist earlier, and only the form has been changed, the thing itself isn't equal in its nature after evolving from what it was earlier - the way it was either at the start of its transition from potentiality to actuality, or just beforehand. There are three levels: 1) a thing that was not yet created; 2) when it is in the process of being created; and 3) when it already completely finished. It's obvious that there's no comparison between the second and third levels, and both of those aren't equal to the first level. Consequently, it's foolish to make conclusions and bring proofs from the third type that would apply to the first two. In this case, the rule is necessary, so that we will not apply the laws of the completely temporally created world to the time of its creation and development. Those who ignore this rule accept incorrect notions and unreasonable conclusions that cause errors in thinking.

To illustrate this rule, Maimonides presents a parable about one who was brought up on a deserted island, who had himself not seen any women, did not know of the process of childbirth in practice, and became an adult and a person with understanding. This person starts to analyze: How do people come into being? When somebody describes to him the entire process of a fetus spending nine months inside the body of a woman, eating what she eats, growing and developing slowly until the time comes for it to get out of the womb, start to grow, eat through the mouth, breath air through the nose, etc. At this, the "smart" one will obviously scoff and ask legitimate questions, like: How can a person live completely shut off in the pregnant woman's belly without air and light? Without eating, drinking, and making bowel movements? He would ask those and further questions based on the nature of his experience, even though that other person correctly

⁴⁸⁵ A Peripatetic philosopher and the primary ancient Greek commentator on Aristotle's writings.

explained the process of birth to him and he was wrong in his assumptions. His mistake emerges from comparing the character of a person after being born to his character before he was born.

In this case, Aristotle made the same mistake concerning the subject of the creation of the world: We, believing that the world was created at a certain moment by God's will, imagine the process of Creation according to the way it [p. 138] is written in the Torah. For us, its stories are so trustworthy that it is as if we saw it with our own eyes. Aristotle came and proved to us the impossibility of such a creation, according to presently existing universal laws. We tell him: "It might be true now; once it's already created and set up according to the established natural laws, it indeed cannot be possible. However, there is no proof whatsoever that the same natural laws applied at the time of the world's creation and development."

For example: Aristotle established that only the forms change while matter remains the same, and he demonstrates from our physical world how things appear and disappear. We say: "True, it is indeed that way now, when matter exists, but it's no proof to state that it is as if it happened similarly to a seed of grain that disappears or like a presently existing person who dies. It's possible that it goes according to entirely different rules from those now existing."

The same thing is true with regard to the first proof of eternal movement and energy: "It might be true now that according to established natural laws we can scarcely imagine an action without a certain cause that stands behind it. However, after all, we are speaking about that movement which existed earlier than present-day nature, which was created through movement, and that other motion maybe had a completely different nature from the present-day one."

Aristotle will ask: Given that the world wasn't created according to present-day, existing natural laws, we then ask you, the believer [in creation], which rules were valid then? Our answer is: we will never claim that the world had to be created, only that its creation is "possible." Thus, our belief needn't to be disturbed through proofs derived from presently existing nature. And as long as the philosophers cannot convince us of the impossibility of a temporally created world, we are allowed to stick to our belief, even if we do not know the fundamental laws of its creation.

After the general rule, Maimonides starts to reject Aristotle's main arguments one by one:

1) Aristotle states: If the world were temporally created at a specific date, God's actions must obviously become divided into two parts: before creation there was potential, and once created there was actuality. Believing that one is forbidden to ascribe to God any change, we must state that the world is eternal. Maimonides responds to that argument as follows:

The entire intellect is based on the difference between "potential" and "actuality," which has much to say concerning a person and anything that can be disrupted in its activities by various obstacles. The parable concerns [p. 139] one who wants to build a house: intention is the vanguard for each action that produces the "potential." Later, a person needs to prepare the materials, the site, and the money to carry out his idea; after preparing all the tools, he creates it "in actuality." The form

of the house was created earlier “in potential,” and the embodiment of the form in matter made it “an actuality.” In summary: The difference between potential and actuality is appropriate for a person who is limited in his means, time, and possibilities, but it’s not suitable for the Creator, for Whom there are no obstacles. For God, each “potentiality” is simultaneously an “actuality” as well, and He’s also not put together from matter and form, the form that thinks and the matter that does. Therefore, the creation of the world at a certain date (the transformation from “potentiality” to “actuality”) is no modification of His essence whatsoever, in the way that those same levels are observed in people.

A second proof, similar to the first one, concerns the “Active Intellect,” whose existence Aristotle admits:

According to Aristotle’s system, the universe is composed of many heavenly spheres that find themselves in permanent movement. That movement can, in Aristotle’s opinion (with which Maimonides agrees), be produced only through non-material substances. This means through eternal, immortal, and spiritual forces; these forces are called *sekhelim nivdalim*, independent spirits or intellects. Just as it is with the spirits, so it is with the spheres. For this reason, Aristotle maintains that the stars also possess spiritual substances within themselves, which cause their routes of permanent movement. The highest intellect that leads to movement that is controlled by it is called an “independent intellect.” That role is played by the First Cause (*‘alat ha-‘alot*). That abundance is so plentiful in the upper realm that it transmitted a sufficiency to the realm below itself - and that one to an even lower one - in order, until the very last sphere at the centre, which is connected with our world under the sphere of the moon. That is what’s called the “active intellect,” and we, the creatures, receive divine spiritual abundance from it. When a person becomes engrossed in the sciences and studies philosophical speculations, he unites his individual intellect with the “Active Intellect,” and with that he comes to acquire for himself the influence of the “Active Intellect.”

Thus, the concept of the “Active Intellect” was transmitted from the Arab Aristotelians, who received - as already explained earlier - Aristotle’s system in a neo-Platonic interpretation. Maimonides also was of such an opinion, and on that basis, he poses an apposite question [*“minei u-vei”*],⁴⁸⁶ stating:

Aristotle obviously admits to the existence of an “Active Intellect,” and after all, it never occurred to him to say that the “Active Intellect” is an “actuality” when it [p. 140] does have an effect and a “potential” when it doesn’t, knowing the difference between a corporeal action and a spiritual one, and that in the spiritual realm the “potential” and the “actual” are as one. If we ascribe that particular idea in reference to the “Active Intellect,” why should we not say that the world is indeed

⁴⁸⁶ Literally in Aramaic, “from it and in it.” It is a question of immediacy that is asked on various occasions in the Talmud, much of which is written in Aramaic.

a temporally created one at a certain time and yet that should not indicate a modification in the Creator's essence?

We know - warns Maimonides - that the reader will suspect us of Sophism⁴⁸⁷ here. This is because as a matter of fact, the allegory of the "Active Intellect" isn't comparable to the object of that allegory (the Creator). The "Active Intellect" always influences; the "not influencing" on the part of the Active Intellect comes because of the person, who wasn't prepared to accept that influence. Consequently, we can indeed say that there is no modification in the Creator but rather in the person who may receive that influence. Our answer is: We have demonstrated, concerning a thing that can have an effect, that even though it doesn't have an effect at a certain time, we obviously cannot consider that a modification. The stated reason is, after all, only a rationale for it to not have an effect, without changing the fact that it can be possible for the Creator to previously be a "Creator in potential"; subsequently, by means of a certain reason that we don't know about, He could become a "Creator in action," without thereby impeding His immutability. The argument against us would be stronger if we wanted to proceed according to the premise of the certainty of the creation of the world. However, after all, we want only to show that the creation of the world is possible, and yet, the Creator remains immutable. As far as that proof is concerned, the example of the "Active Intellect" is not necessary.

2) The issue is that, if the world existed when it was created, since God wanted it like that - and (until that moment) it did not exist, since He previously didn't want it like that - then He obviously showed a modification of will in His nature, and from this Aristotle affirms the "eternity of the world." Maimonides resolves this issue as follows:

The modification of will in a being created in time can only be when the action was on account of a certain objective which is outside of that being. For that reason, we ask, why did God until now not create but now He did so? The answer needs to emphasize certain pursuits that have been done up until now, but which were now not tolerated, and how now they were eliminated. However, knowing that there are certainly no obstacles for the Creator that would prevent Him from producing His Creation "from potential to action," Creation in time ought to be not considered as a modification in will.

⁴⁸⁷ The practitioners of Sophism were teachers in ancient Greece. They were skilled in what became known as Rhetoric.

Chapter 7: Intent and Will

[p. 140] The third argument that Aristotle presented for the eternal existence of the world is this:

If the world were temporally created, and it was created by “the First Cause” with His wisdom, as explained earlier, His wisdom wasn’t an additional quality [p. 141] beyond that which He already had, and it is as constant as God Himself. From this, it must follow that God’s wisdom was always expressed in a complete way with all its possible qualities, the quality of existence included. The question is: How can it possibly be that the world was created at a certain date, not existing earlier? We must therefore state that the world is eternal, just as God with His wisdom, which produced it. Here, Maimonides refutes the argument as follows:

The creation of the world at a certain date, and not earlier, is no limit whatsoever on God’s wisdom and possibilities, similar to His creation of the nine spheres and a certain number of stars and comets, and no more, because this is what His wisdom determined. Thus, in a similar way, the world could be created at that moment - not earlier and not later.

From that, it is to be understood that Aristotle’s proofs aren’t conclusive with respect to eternity and, therefore, we believe in the world’s createdness, especially because we have proofs for it that are near to the truth, as Maimonides claims:

a) Aristotle himself maintains that the existence of the world is as necessary (*meḥuyav ha-metziut*)⁴⁸⁸ as God Himself. Consequently, just as we don’t ask about the one, incorporeal God, “where was He created from, precisely how, and why?”, so we also can’t ask about “the manner and way” of His Creation, because, in Aristotle’s opinion, it must be so, precisely in the way that His wisdom must be so.

Aristotle himself admits that God is the cause, and the world is influenced by that cause. Nonetheless, according to Aristotle, it emerged without intention on God’s part entirely as a result of His wisdom, while we - believing in Creation - also confess to an intent and an aim that God had in the act of Creation. Nonetheless, we are unlike Aristotle, who believed not only in a certain goal in connection with classes and types of creatures, but also in an aim for the creation of the universe as a whole.

b) As we already explained earlier, the matter of the universe is made up of several disparate elements that also have modifications, and it’s impossible for that ensemble to come into being without a secondary reason - beyond matter - that does the entire task.

Now we ask Aristotle: Assuming, as you have said, that all creatures of various classes and types were created from one common material, can you explain to us the reason for their differences? Aristotle’s answer is: The difference isn’t in matter but rather only in form; part of the material

⁴⁸⁸ Literally, “[whose] existence is required” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

has been converted into a certain form, and another part of the material has been converted into another form. Matter in its originality is one and the same for everything.

We further ask: If matter is one and the same, how did one part of it take its form from minerals, another part from water, the third part from fire, and the fourth part from air? The answer is: change comes from rapidity in movement, from its slowness, and from [p. 142] its distance from - and nearness to - the centre of the Earth. Fire came into being from being near the diurnal sphere; under it was air; and still further below was water; and so forth.

We ask: Is the material from our earth also the same from which the diurnal sphere was created? Aristotle's answer is negative: No. It was created from another element, separate from our material elements.

We also know that the remaining eight spheres are created from the same element as the diurnal sphere; as a result, its form is also from another form. That could be explained in accordance with the old rule: "A change in the task - a change in forms." It is also well-known that the movement of the spheres goes in a circle while our material objects go in a straight line - either from bottom to top (such as fire) or the opposite - from top to bottom (such as a stone). We also find that very sort of change in the upper spheres; that is, just as earth and water go from top to bottom and fire and air go from bottom to top, so it goes in the spheres as well. Even though they move in a perfect circle, one sphere nevertheless goes from east to west, and another moves the opposite way, from west to east. One sphere might move slowly and another might move quickly. Thus, is it not obvious that the difference between the spheres, despite not having any composite elements, refutes Aristotle's theory in connection with our earthly matter and its diversity?

Coming to the conclusion that it wasn't movement that caused diversity in the forms and actions, the question remains: Then who made it? We must, even unwillingly, admit that God did it, and that He certainly did it with intent and in accordance with a certain aim. Thus, as a result, Maimonides maintained that the world is temporally created, with an intention and with a certain goal. In any event, we conclude that the world is created with a preordained goal, and not merely like the relationship between cause and effect.

Aristotle apparently sensed this issue, even though he didn't mention it. We understand this from his struggle to formulate a precise theory for the diversity of spherical movements, from which - if it proved successful - we would be able to reject the proof about intention and will with respect to Creation. However, those are only Aristotle's conjectures. Not only do we now see the holes in the argument in accordance with the latest developments in astronomical science, but even he himself didn't believe in it. Aristotle only requests of his readers not to interpret his attempt as effrontery in wanting to clarify such a difficult topic; but rather, to marvel at his brave attempt.

We, who believe in Creation, need not struggle with this at all. We believe that the Creator created the world with a certain intention. What was that intention? It is a folly to ask about it, knowing in

advance that a person's limited intellect can only reach so far. It's enough for us to know that it's so – and most probably it needs to be so.

And therein lies the greatest difference between us, who believe in Creation, and Aristotle, who believes in eternity. Aristotle's theory, which believes in a fortuitous creation, leaves a lot of unresolved issues in connection with the diversity [p. 143] of the spheres, while we, who believe in a creation in time, need not exert ourselves at all in order to find the reasons, knowing that the Creator had an intention even though we humans can't discover it.

From that entire speculation, we derive two important principles: 1) that diversity in the spheres demonstrates a certain intention that the Creator had with respect to His creation, and 2) that each thing that harmoniously maintains its diversity must be created, and not be randomly in existence.

c) However, the rule that the world was created by the Creator - with a certain intent and a set desire - needs to be understood thoroughly, since others say it only with their mouths and really mean something else.

This is because there are some Aristotelians who believe in the eternity of the world but who, at the same time, also believe that God is its cause; nonetheless, they don't believe in its beginning in time. Their argument is: If there were a certain date for the world's emergence, which did not apply to Him, it means a lack in God prior to the Creation and an acquired quality afterwards. Not wanting to ascribe to Him qualities along with deficits, one must say that the world is eternal.

True, Maimonides had settled the issue, but the Aristotelians say that one ought not at all to engage in such an exceedingly difficult solution. Let's say that the Creator and the world are two separate things. He is its intentional creator, and the world is what is created; however, neither of them forces us to separate them in time, saying that the emergence of the Creator doesn't have a date and that of the world does have a date. Both are in constant existence, and this would hereby remove all the previously listed difficulties. About that, Maimonides answers as follows:

Our notion of "intent" isn't the way that the Aristotelian philosophers understand that same word. Their version of "intent" refers to something forced; that is, the Creation is necessary in Him, just as beams of light "must" emerge from the sun. Alternatively, God's existence is - God forbid - impossible without the existence of the world. Whereas we believe that His intent and will are free, to will or not to will, and He created the world with such a will.

It is a fine opinion Aristotle has concerning God's "will," according to which that "will" is understood as a "must."

All of us, together with Aristotle, believe in procedure: The first intellect influenced the second; the second influenced the third, and so forth in proper order up until the "Active Intellect," the universal intellect. That is no more than His attribute, as long as we believe in God's intent and will.

As we see, Aristotle's proofs certainly aren't as strong on eternity as those of Maimonides on Creation. True, one can reject the latter; however, [p. 144] Maimonides' proofs obviously also reject those of Aristotle. In any event, both proofs remain equal, and faith may tip the scales "to the side of Creation."

In the last three chapters, from 26 to 28 (of the second part of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*), Maimonides brings forth all the statements that might be considered to be proven with regard to primordial matter. He resolves them and concludes that faith in the "creation of the world on an *ex nihilo* basis" is the foundation of our belief and our universal morals.

The reader will find out the connection between universal morals and the creation of the world (according to Maimonides) in the upcoming chapters.

Chapter 8: Seeking a Purpose in Creation

[p. 144] As we've seen earlier, Maimonides spoke out against Aristotle's opinion of eternity, laden with the most difficult intellectual theories. Maimonides didn't relinquish the struggle until he established belief in the creation of the world, which is the foundation of every positive belief in general, and our own belief in particular.

Because of that goal, Maimonides includes all sources (verses and rabbinic statements), which - on the surface - may teach opinions about the world's eternity. These include the verse, "and the earth remains forever,"⁴⁸⁹ and the well-known statement of Rabbi Eliezer the Great, "What place were the heavens created from?... What place was the earth created from?"⁴⁹⁰ (For a more in-depth analysis, see chapters 26, 27, and 28 of the second part of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*.)

With that, Maimonides achieved the most important position upon which our belief stands. This is because believing, like Aristotle, that all that exists must therefore be because of the essence of the First Cause, that nature cannot be modified, and that a miracle can never be possible, it would be impossible to believe in the revelation at Mount Sinai, the events of the forefathers, the miracles before the exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds afterwards, the stories of the manna,⁴⁹¹ the quail,⁴⁹² the punishment of Korah,⁴⁹³ and in general, all the stories of the Torah and the Prophets. As a result, belief in reward and punishment comes to naught, since in any such case of sin, it is, after all, second nature for that person, just like it is in the nature of earth to rest, or water to flow, or fire to burn.

It might happen that a person would believe, like Plato, in the existence of a primordial matter that would also extend to the belief that the heavenly bodies are also subject to the process of modification of form. This would, in truth, neither be against the Torah nor against the miracles of its narratives, but in any event, it wouldn't be the same way that the matter is conveyed in the Torah.

However, believing that the world was created by the Creator, all the stories from the Torah - along with the miracles it narrates - at once become possible, [p. 145] and the following questions that a person could ask are no longer valid: Why did God indeed make one person into a prophet, and not someone else? Why did He choose the Jewish people to give the Torah to, and not any other people? Why on that specific date, and not earlier or later? Why did He order them to observe

⁴⁸⁹ Ecclesiastes 1:4

⁴⁹⁰ *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* (Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer), III. That midrashic work was probably composed in the 9th century CE but has traditionally been attributed to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (who thrived in 1st and 2nd centuries CE).

⁴⁹¹ See Exodus 16:4-36.

⁴⁹² *ibid.* 16:12-13; Numbers 11:31-32.

⁴⁹³ Korah was a Levite who was envious of Moses, Aaron, etc. and wanted a similar position to those leaders and instigated a rebellion. He, the other ringleaders, and their followers were punished by being swallowed up in an abyss. See Numbers 16-17.

only these commandments, and not others? Why did - on the one hand - He create an evil inclination that doesn't allow a person to observe the commandments, and on the other hand He warns him to observe the commandments? Isn't it better to create, *a priori*, the type of person who would like to carry out the commandments as much as he desires to eat? What, in general, is the goal of giving the Torah? Because we now have one answer for all these questions: the Creator wanted this; or in His wisdom He decided to create this, just as He created the world in general, even though we do not know why it was so, why it wasn't able to be otherwise, since we're unable, in general, to understand the depths of His wisdom.

Maimonides hereby confirms all the miracles of the Torah, which depart from the natural way and, as a consequence, one cannot explain them rationally. Here, it is worthwhile to note that his explanation of those miracles is entirely different from what the sages before him and after him believed and would believe. They maintained that the Creator was prepared every time, when necessary, to change the existing nature that was established from the six days of Creation. They said: A miracle means an incidental nature, and nature means a long-existing miracle. Maimonides doesn't want to have anything to do with that position, since such a thing must cause one to believe in the modification of the will of God, which is against Maimonides' philosophical conception of the essence of the Creator. Rather, the Creation was set up *a priori*, such that - at a certain moment - the Sea of Reeds would split itself, the earth would open its mouth to swallow up Korah and his collaborators, it would rain with manna from heaven, and water would come forth from a rock.⁴⁹⁴ Maimonides makes use of the verse, "and the sea returned to its strength in the morning,"⁴⁹⁵ and the Sages remark on it, "to its initial condition."⁴⁹⁶ He stated that this refers to the condition that the Creator made at the start of Creation, to eventually split the waters that were gathered during Creation. This sign is an indication that the prophet⁴⁹⁷ prophesized; that is, the Creator let the prophet know beforehand the moment in which the miracle would occur. The miracle, therefore, isn't inherent to the event, because such a sign was obviously set up *a priori*; rather, it is in the prophet's prophecy, which sustains the belief that he is a true prophet, with God-given capabilities. (Regarding that point, see also Maimonides' commentary on tractate *Avot*, in the fifth chapter on the Mishnaic verse, "ten things were created on the eve of Sabbath at twilight."⁴⁹⁸)

At the end of chapter 29 (of part II of the *Guide to the Perplexed*), however, Maimonides makes a concession to Aristotle, admitting to the eternity of the currently existing universe. With that, the Torah meets with philosophy "halfway," or as Maimonides states in that chapter, "we agree with Aristotle in one half of his opinion." At the same time that we keep on believing that the world was created on a certain date, we confess that its subsequent existence is eternal. This is because its becoming doesn't require its cessation in order to be, and the verses from the Torah

⁴⁹⁴ See Exodus 17:1-7.

⁴⁹⁵ *ibid.* 14:27

⁴⁹⁶ Exodus Rabbah 21:6

⁴⁹⁷ Referring here to Moses.

⁴⁹⁸ Mishnah *Avot* 5:6

also do not compel us to [p. 146] believe in that. Regarding the verses in the Prophets that show the opposite, Maimonides compares them with the verses that show that the Creator possesses limbs, anger, vengeance, resentment, etc. In the face of such verses, “the gates of interpretation are never locked.”

And if that’s the case, then nature arising out of Creation is eternal and unaltered, unless it is changed through a previously established condition as explained earlier, even though the Creator could modify or even suppress Creation entirely if His will would issue such a decree. These modifications are in a few instances, while nature as a whole remains permanent and immutable.

Being convinced that the world was created according to an intent and a will, we must add a moral objective to its creation. Maimonides states: “For every creator who had an intent to create, we must be willing, even against our will, to believe in a purpose that the Creator had in the work of Creation.” The cornerstone is thereby established for a positive religion that has in mind to give every person a moral objective in life.

And herein lies the profound difference between Aristotle and Maimonides. Aristotle, believing in the necessity of Creation, only finds purpose in the harmony of its parts, one in relation to all others and all others in relation to that one. Regarding that, Maimonides states that the specific purpose of Creation is essentially not at all an objective thing, but rather, definitely in our subjective outlook, which determines a certain purpose from our understanding. We, believing in the creation of the world, can’t be satisfied that such a purpose would be the mechanical harmony in the movement of the spheres; rather, we want to find a free-will moral purpose, like the purpose in which human thought rejoices by doing a good deed for someone who is suffering, like feeding the hungry or clothing the naked. Maimonides is hereby freeing himself from philosophical materialism or realism, and he’s moving towards a religious orientation, which seeks a moral objective in Creation.

In Maimonides’ opinion, what is the purpose of the creation of the world? Other theologians would have found it the development of humankind; Maimonides wouldn’t accept that. In the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, in chapter 13, he states the following:

A person shouldn’t deceive himself to be of the opinion that everything was created on account of him - everything, even the *sekhelim nivdalim*,⁴⁹⁹ the spheres, and the angels! He should only try to compare his small, limited mind with the large intellects of the spheres - he will directly comprehend the truth and clearly understand how foolish it is to believe that everything that exists is only on account of him, an insignificant human being.

(“It shouldn’t be believed that all things exist for the sake of humans... You must not be mistaken and think that the spheres and the angels were created for our sake. Behold, the greatness of the

⁴⁹⁹ “Separate intelligences” in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

verse [p. 147] ‘behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket’⁵⁰⁰ has already been made clear to us. Now compare your own essence with that of the spheres, the stars, and the *sekhalim nivdalim*, and you will comprehend the truth.” From the *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 13.)

Maimonides, rejecting the other suggested purposes, finally comes to the conclusion that with regard to that question, it’s impossible to find any answer aside from “this is how His wisdom decided.” In other words, it means that the issue is inexplicable for the human intellect, unless we find the purpose not in creatures, but only in the Creator, as the verse states, “God made everything for His sake.”⁵⁰¹ That is to say, the purpose is the act of Creation itself, and just as we shouldn’t try to find a purpose in His existence, so we shouldn’t attempt to find a purpose in His creation.

⁵⁰⁰ Isaiah 40:15

⁵⁰¹ Proverbs 16:4

Chapter 9: Optimism and Pessimism

[p. 147] Aristotle's assertion - that the world is a necessary reflection of the endless power that we call "God" - does not require a fixed objective for the world's creation, just as one doesn't look for such a thing with respect to God's existence in general. If we were to apply such a search for an objective, it would be that the details of Creation are interdependent, one being the cause of the second, with one complimenting the other. This is all because of one purpose - that there should exist a world such as we see before our eyes. There is no purpose for the world's existence as a whole; we shouldn't search for it, since it does not exist.

However, Maimonides - stating that the world was created by the Creator - couldn't be satisfied merely with the interdependence of the details of Creation in order to make up an entire world, but rather also sought to find a goal for its existence as a whole. This is because "no creator does anything, without having an aim for the sake of which it creates." One must find a certain purpose that applies to the temporally created world.

Such a purpose, states Maimonides, certainly exists, even though we don't know it. This is a logical consequence of our knowing that ours is a temporally created world.

Admitting that the world was temporally created by the Creator, and seeing the miraculous order that controls the entire Creation, except with respect to humankind, one could ask oneself the following question: Why does a lack of order dominate humankind's physical, social, and political life? In the third part of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, chapters 13 and 15-16, he states the following:

The average person goes around with the idea that humankind lives through a lot more hardships than good times; most poets and thinkers, in their works, want to show the constant miseries as well as the few good [p. 148] moments in life that come as a surprise. And not just the average person, but even a tremendously learned person could harbor such a pessimistic thought, like - for example - the scholar Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi (854-925; known as a doctor and thinker,⁵⁰² who lived at the same time as Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon [882 or 892-942]). Al-Razi is counted as the first pessimist in Arthur Schopenhauer's [1788-1860] opinion, and he wrote a book in which he recounts all sorts of misfortunes befalling people, against which the good moments are like a drop of water compared to the sea. He comes to the conclusion that it would have been better to not be born at all.

Maimonides calls these claims "foolish and crazy"; Al-Razi's primary mistake is to mistake the trees for the forest, the "tree" being Al-Razi himself. On the basis of his construction of a narrow-minded egoism, an incorrect result must emerge.

⁵⁰² Also known as Rhazes or Rasis.

Pessimism comes from egoism. The pessimist thinks that the entire universe was created only for him and revolves only around him, such that there is absolutely no existence except for him. Therefore, when things don't go his way, he gets angry and decides that the entire world is useless.

Such a person should, however, put himself above his personal interests and consider the entire universe. Then he will realize his smallness in comparison with the universe. He will be convinced that his problems come neither from the incorporeal intellects (*sekhelim nivdalim*),⁵⁰³ nor from the stars and spheres, nor from the four elements of the world. Rather, his problems come from his own foolishness, wickedness, or negligence, which blight him by themselves, as the verse states, "a man's foolishness corrupts his way, and his heart rages against God."⁵⁰⁴ Thus, a harmonious kindness prevails in all of existence, because the other creatures go on the straight path of the nature that God created. It is only humankind with its free choice that - in committing a misdeed (whether because of foolishness or wickedness) - brings woes upon itself.

The Creator created everything to be good. No evil whatsoever came forth from Him. There are troubles that come about because of the body, created from earthly elements that modify their forms. All of existence is built upon that element: Absolutely no new thing may form, unless the old thing disappears, in which case an unavoidable death comes out of it; if those specific entities don't disappear, the species would no longer be able to exist. It is as if a person who wished to avoid the trial of doing something wrong desired to turn himself into an angel without a body; the result would be that humankind should cease, and this would constitute two opposites in one object.

There are natural misfortunes, such as to become a handicapped person, without a hand, without a foot, without eyes, or without speech. Other misfortunes include earthquakes, conflagrations stemming from thunder and lightning, and so on. However, these are rare instances, not even one-thousandth of the overall number that we know of.

[p. 149] The most frequent and major problems are those that people do to themselves. Those problems can be avoided by living a normal life, conducting oneself in a healthy way with respect to food and drink, not being jealous of others, not hurrying to seize the world for oneself, not building one's success at the expense of someone else's misfortune, and in general to consider that one is a small ring in the great chain that we call "existence."

Asserting that one Creator created everything according to a previously set goal, and that He was there prior to everyone and everything, brings up an important question which clearly ought to have everybody's attention.

The question is: Is everything preordained in terms of cause and effect, or does a person have free choice to do something but also its opposite? If we believe in the first possibility, then the

⁵⁰³ "Separate intelligences" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

⁵⁰⁴ Proverbs 19:3

concepts of reward and punishment become invalid, along with human diligence as well as other attempts by people to improve themselves in their character traits and in their studies. If we believe in the second case, we must then limit the Creator's power over humankind.

Engaging in this difficult and deep speculation raises a second question: How can one reconcile God's comprehensive knowledge of all the details of Creation with our free choice? Is God's knowledge completely inclusive, even though from ancient times up until now the question of "why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer" has remained unsolved? All these questions are tied up and interconnected in such a way that they are not allowed to be answered separately.

Thus, this question led to quite a lot of incorrect opinions. The "errant" ones state as follows: The confused world order can be thought of in one of two ways - either 1) the Creator knows nothing of individual people with their daily events, and for that reason everything occurs according to blind chance, or 2) His knowledge comprehends all species and their individuals with each and every individual being separate, and He pays attention to everything.

It is a given that that the second case is more appropriate to His essence. Nonetheless, we do see that the righteous suffer and the wicked triumph; the righteous suffer from hunger, destitution, violence, and persecution, while the wicked are satiated, satisfied, and powerful. Therefore, we must state one of two things: Either God is not concerned about these individual details - overseeing things only in order to ensure the outcome of the hard-fought struggle for life such that the strongest should triumph ("whoever is stronger prevails,"⁵⁰⁵ or as one would say in English, "the survival of the fittest") - or He indeed knows all, but he cannot establish a better order in the world.

However, knowing that one can't attribute any weakness to Him in connection with setting up a better order in the world, and also that one cannot assert that God "doesn't care" that the wicked devour the righteous, we must logically come to the first conclusion. That is, His knowledge only has to do with the general but not with the specific. He cares that humankind should exist, in order for nothing to be lacking in His world, but He doesn't care for specific humans, and He is satisfied with the individual's [p. 150] disappearance, if only that action helps with the preservation of the species. However, Maimonides states regarding that position:

Whoever has that in mind has no understanding or perception that in his wanting to avoid a small foolishness, he falls into much bigger ones. Not wanting to ascribe to the Creator either a certain weakness or an indifference to the evildoing of one person to another, they suspect that He lacks knowledge of what transpires - the greatest defect in God that one could imagine. True, some of these thinkers perceived this problem and justified their position as follows: Since God's knowledge is purely intellectual, not like the knowledge deriving from human senses, there logically can't possibly be any divine knowledge with regard to the details, which come into being

⁵⁰⁵ Tractate *Bava Batra* 34b. That describes a situation in which it is undecided who takes possession of a given object, such as cattle or money, and possession of it is determined by power rather than justice or morality.

and cease. That is because this would lead to a modification in His knowledge, while the species is eternal and immutable - precisely like God's knowledge.

However, in believing this, they are convinced of His seeing and knowing. The issue of "modification" in His knowledge amounts to nothing, because the entire world was - after all - "in potential" before its creation, but later - after its creation - it turned into something "in actuality" and it really didn't occur to anyone to think about a modification in His knowledge because of that. Consequently, the detail agrees with the rule.

The correct answer to the above questions is that all of the supposed disorder appears only when one looks at events through one's own egoistic lenses. If we were objective and able to simultaneously include the entire cosmos in one glance, we would be able to find a marvellous order in the universe, as will be explained later.

Considering all the arguments, Maimonides proposes four opinions about "providence" and expresses his opinion, believing that that is the opinion of the Torah.

Chapter 10: General and Specific Divine Providence

[p. 150] To settle the question of how much knowledge can be attained by the Creator concerning the world, and to what extent He takes care of the entire human community and every single individual, Maimonides introduces five opinions. Four of them are philosophical, which aren't correct according to him. The fifth is from our Torah, which he affirms to be correct. Here are the first four:

1) The opinion of Epicurus (341-270 BCE),⁵⁰⁶ who believes that there is absolutely no divine providence and that everything is by chance, in accordance with the random movement of atoms, but without anyone making a plan, without a guide, and without anyone paying attention to it. That is the opinion of the Greek philosopher Democritus (c. 460-c. 370 BCE), according to what we know from his works. Maimonides ascribes that to Epicurus, however. Whoever's opinion it is, Aristotle rejected it, since the marvellous [p. 151] order that prevails in Creation doesn't allow us to believe in random development.

2) The Aristotelian opinion is that there is providence over some things but not on others. The highest worlds (heavenly spheres), whose individual existence is - as already explained previously - eternal and immutable in Aristotle's opinion, are constantly under God's supervision. This is what Alexander of Aphrodisias (who flourished in the 3rd century CE)⁵⁰⁷ understood from Aristotle's explanation. Aristotle's conception of "providence" should be understood in the sense of "influence," because he states, after all, that the world wasn't created by God; rather, it emanated from His essence, like a flame from fire or like smoke from burning items. From that "influence," the upper bodies are attracted to the Almighty. For that reason, they are under God's direct supervision not only as a whole, but also for each individual separately. Thus, they are eternal, whether as a species or as individuals, just as His influence is eternal; on the other hand, divine providence ends there. The world that is underneath the sphere of the moon is an emanation of the spheres. Therefore, they are individually subject to the process of coming into existence and ceasing existence, while the species remains eternal and unchangeable, just like the heavenly bodies from which they get their influence. For example: in order for a plant to grow, it would only be furnished with as much supervision as is necessary to keep the species going; then each individual plant is left to chance. An animal needs to be able to grow, to know where to look for food, to have enough understanding to run away from harm, to protect itself from assailants, to have young and raise them, and so forth. Having accomplished these things, such an animal is left to chance, since that species already exists, and nobody cares for the individuals. The same is true of humankind ("the one who is capable of speech"); it should develop itself intellectually and produce good laws, as that is necessary to keep its species going, but not more.

⁵⁰⁶ A Greek philosopher who rejected Platonism; he and his followers ate simple meals and discussed a wide range of subjects. This is not to be confused with the Hebrew word for a heretic - *apikoros* or *epikoros* (in plural, *apikorsim* or *epikorsim*), which is of Greek origin.

⁵⁰⁷ A Peripatetic philosopher and the primary ancient Greek commentator on Aristotle's writings.

Maimonides, in chapter 17 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, illustrates Aristotle's opinion with the following examples:

When a tempest blows, it is entirely natural for it to cause some leaves to fall and to break branches off a tree; for rocks to roll down a mountain; to blow waves of dust, thereby covering plants to the point of destruction; and for the sea to let loose, such that the waves would overturn a ship, break it up, and all or some of the passengers would drown. Such is the nature of a tempest, and these are its results, no matter whether it would destroy a worm or it would drown a person; whether an ox relieves itself on an insect's nest and covers it, crushing all of the insects to death with its dung; or whether a wind blew away a house of worship, where hundreds of pious people were praying. It also doesn't matter whether a cat devoured a mouse, a spider entangled a fly, or a hungry lion confronted a prophet, devouring and [p. 152] eating him, because what happens in any of these specific cases is only a coincidence, or - as is stated more accurately - a natural process, a result of cause and effect.

Below are the rest of the opinions to be explained, as distant as they might be from every conception of belief in general, and from Jewish belief in particular.

3) The Asharites (those who believe in the *Ash'ariya* sect from the Muslims) accepted the extreme end of Aristotle's opinion. They - who held a literal interpretation of the Quran⁵⁰⁸ and were counted as the conservative element of the *Mutakalimun* school of thought,⁵⁰⁹ in opposition to the progressive *Mu'taliza*⁵¹⁰ - were of the opinion that with regard to our world there's no random thing whatsoever; they thought, rather, that everything is preordained by God. Given the previous example given by Maimonides in accordance with Aristotle, they state that the wind that tore asunder the house of worship didn't come by chance. Rather, it had to come at that moment, and it had to break up that ship and drown its passengers, since their deaths were also preordained, and the wind was only the messenger. This is because a person doesn't even move a finger without a preordained conclusion, and people's legs were preordained to bring them to the place where they would need to die. One goes, since he was decreed not to stay; and the opposite can also be true - the other stays, since he has no free will to go. It emerges that free will is entirely absent, chance is entirely impossible, and nobody has any possibility to do something or not to do it, even to be able to perform the divine commandments - if it isn't preordained for that person to be like that. One may ask: And if so, then why does the sinner have to be punished, when - really - he was compelled to commit his misdeeds? They answer: That itself was also preordained - that the lawgiver should warn him, and that he should do the opposite, and therefore, he will be penalized.

The Asharite way isn't only against faith, but it's also against intellect and ethics. Everyone can understand that speaking against that position is superfluous.

⁵⁰⁸ The Muslim holy book; it is also transliterated as the Koran or the Qur'an.

⁵⁰⁹ Practitioners of the Islamic religious-philosophical school of thought called *Qalam*, the study of Islamic doctrine.

⁵¹⁰ A group of Muslim freethinkers.

4) The *Mu'taliza* took the middle path on the following profound issue: That a person is free in his choice, and thus, it is possible for him to receive a reward or a punishment. However, they also believe that God knows everything and pays attention to everyone, and that He knows when the insect's nest is stepped upon and when the leaf of a tree falls to the ground. He also knows, in advance, people's free choice. Therefore, a person is subject to reward and punishment. Seeing how children, not having sinned, are born with certain imperfections, from which they suffer all their lives, the *Mu'taliza* answer that that is without a doubt for the sake of the children's own good, even though they cannot discover the reason why with their intellect.

Maimonides asks concerning that: Aside from the ancient question of whether everything is done with God's consent and decision, how can we imagine free choice? One could further ask: If a righteous person's suffering is for him to go on the right [p. 153] path, in order to make amends in this world and to come out purified in the next world, why does the sin of this person get punished? Does he then thereby not do God's will? If anyone should be punished, it should obviously be the punisher.

As we see, not one of the four opinions above can be adopted by a reasonable mind, and, moreover, they are against faith. Maimonides, as a result, is now looking for a new way to deal with divine providence that could be maintained in a logical way and that could also be consented to in relation to our Torah's opinion specifically and in relation to faith in general.

Chapter 11:⁵¹¹ Divine Providence Over Human Beings

[p. 153] Maimonides explains what one needs to understand by the term “divine providence” as follows:

Our Torah’s opinion is that a person is free in his actions to do what he wants, and all beings that are alive - wild animals, domestic animals, and birds alike - can move themselves according to their will. However, freedom of movement and action itself is with the Creator’s knowledge and consent. Thus, *a priori*, God created biological species - people included - such that they should be free in their action.

Believing in complete choice, all problems that arise with respect to people may be justified as a result of a person’s badly chosen deeds. The Creator didn’t create any evil, just like whoever started a fire didn’t do anything bad to the fool who stuck his hand in it and burned himself, instead of cooking his food over it and making use of it. This is because that person, after all, was free in his action and could do both things; consequently, he has only himself to blame for his troubles.

As we see, this is neither like Aristotle’s opinion, which contends that everything is only by chance; nor like the *Ash‘arite*⁵¹² fatalists, who contend that everything comes from preordination; nor like that of the *Mu‘taliza*,⁵¹³ who attribute it to God’s wisdom, such that everything is reckoned for the sake of humankind’s good path. All these opinions thus affirm that the individual person has no divine direction: his good deeds cannot help him and his bad deeds cannot harm him. The only valid opinion is that of the Torah, which makes the person himself the main factor in his destiny. For that reason, since a person can choose, he is able to do good, and he doesn’t have anyone whatsoever, except himself, to blame when things turn out bad for him.

One may ask: If all living creatures have free choice, do they really need to also be subject to reward and punishment? Maimonides’ answer is: The *Mu‘taliza* indeed think like that, and even one of the eminent Jewish scholars (here, he means Rabbi Sa’adiah Gaon [882 or 892-942], even though [p. 154] his name isn’t mentioned) is of that opinion, but in the Bible and in the works of the Sages,⁵¹⁴ this isn’t mentioned. Therefore, Maimonides contends that it is only with respect to humankind that the Creator’s divine providence watches over every individual separately, and only the individuals of that species engender the appropriate results of good or bad deeds, but not the rest of the creatures on this earth. In connection with the latter, Maimonides agrees with Aristotle that divine providence is only respecting the species as a whole, not on each individual of that species separately. In the third part of Maimonides’ *Guide to the Perplexed*, in chapter 17, he states:

⁵¹¹ Mislabeled in the book as “Chapter 12.”

⁵¹² A group of conservative Muslim thinkers.

⁵¹³ A group of Muslim freethinkers.

⁵¹⁴ Of the Mishnah, Talmud, etc.

I want to start out by saying that I don't believe that divine providence issued a decree that a leaf should fall from a tree, that Reuben's⁵¹⁵ saliva should float in the air until it reaches a gnat and drowns it, or that a fish should catch a waterbug in the water. All these and other similar incidents aren't more than chance occurrences, just as Aristotle states.

From those words, we can understand that Maimonides agrees with Aristotle's opinion in two matters:

1) That God's divine providence in the higher worlds prevails for the entire collectivity and also on each individual separately, but in our earthly world it only prevails for the collectivity - that is, the species - but not on the individual, who would be left to chance. The difference between those two cases is that, according to Maimonides, whatever divine providence is exercised with respect to humankind is also exercised in the uppermost world.

2) That divine providence comes as a result of divine influence, and it comes about because of the preparation of the human mind to accept the universal intellect. Consequently, only humankind can do the preparatory work; for that reason, the Creator's providence and influence can rest on humankind, and divine providence determines humans' actions that result in "reward and punishment." That is the consequence of Aristotle's basic argument, but it opposes his opinion.

We understand from this that within humankind itself, there are several types of divine providence and very many types of divine influence. Both of these things come in accordance with people's preparation to accept the universal intellect, according to which divine influence arises. It is obvious that concerning foolish people who are already evil and also rebellious, who don't understand any more than an animal and do more evil than animals - such people don't receive any divine influence and, as a result, they also don't receive any divine providence.

In this instance, one could quote the following verse: "He guards the steps of His devout ones, but the wicked are stilled in darkness."⁵¹⁶ That verse is saying that God pays attention to every step of his devout people, but the wicked are cut off in the darkness. Nobody can see them and there's no space for them, precisely like the rest of the creatures that are subject to chance, and one might even possibly kill them, except that the Torah forbade it in order for people to not let themselves get used to the character trait of cruelty, similar to the warnings against causing unnecessary cruelty to animals,⁵¹⁷ the sending of the mother bird from the nest,⁵¹⁸ and still others of that nature - not for their sake, but for us people. This is so that we should not get accustomed to cruelty, and instead to instill in us the character trait of mercy.

⁵¹⁵ Very often in rabbinic discourse, including the present-day Haredi world, the paradigm of Reuben and Simeon is used when describing a scenario involving two people, particularly men or boys, derived from the Talmud or other Jewish holy books.

⁵¹⁶ I Samuel 2:9

⁵¹⁷ BT tractate *Bava Metzia* 32b, based on Exodus 23:5 and Numbers 22:32.

⁵¹⁸ Deuteronomy 22:6

Note that one needs to understand Maimonides' words as follows:

For it is the intensity of the influence of the divine intellect [p. 155] that has inspired the prophets to speak, guided the righteous in their actions, and perfected the wisdom of the pious. In the same proportion that the ignorant and disobedient are deficient in that divine influence, their condition is inferior, and their rank is relegated to that of all the other animal species, such that they are "like the beasts that are silent."⁵¹⁹ For this reason, it was not only considered a light thing to kill them, but it was even directly commanded for the benefit of humankind. (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 18)

According to the explanations of Maimonides' commentators - *Shem Tov*,⁵²⁰ *Ephodi*,⁵²¹ and Rabbi Ḥasdai ben Abraham Crescas⁵²² - Maimonides was of the opinion that ordinary people aren't merely allowed to kill them but that it's even a divine commandment to do so. Such a strong judgement with respect to the majority of humankind may be suitable for the haughty philosophers of Aristotle's school of thought but not for a Jewish thinker, and it aroused great opposition to Maimonides and his philosophy. The truth is as we've explained it. It's possible that it is in accordance with Maimonides' thought in his introduction to his commentary on the Mishnaic tractate of *Zera'im*, where he demonstrates that the purpose of humankind is for the sake of the individual scholar while the rest of humankind exist only because of that scholar. If so, "for the benefit of humankind" refers to the requirements of that individual who receives for himself the most divine providence and influence. That idea - even though it's far from traditional Jewish thought as expressed in the words, "all of Israel has a share in the World to Come"⁵²³ - nonetheless, at the very least, affirms his position that justifies their existence.

Maimonides explains the parable with the sinking ship as follows: Aristotle is right, stating that the sinking of a ship or the collapse of a house due to a big storm is a natural occurrence, and the deaths of the people in both cases aren't more than naturally occurring results. However, Maimonides believes that God's providence was indeed such that precisely these people should, at that point, find themselves in that house or in that ship. They were already destined for death earlier, and He made them come there and die. Not knowing the source of all of the chain of reasons, one causing another, we must nonetheless believe that the Creator was the one who gave the first impetus to the process that would arrive at the final result.

⁵¹⁹ Psalms 49:13 and 21

⁵²⁰ Literally in Hebrew, "Good Name"; that commentary was written by Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-ca. 1290 or 1295).

⁵²¹ A sobriquet of the Catalan rabbi Profiat Duran (c. 1350-c. 1415), also known as Isaac ben Moses ha-Levi, the name *Ephodi* comes from the Hebrew word, *ephod*, which is an outer garment worn by priests and kings in ancient Israel and which appears in two of his works.

⁵²² Another Catalan rabbi; he lived from c. 1340 to c. 1410 or 1411.

⁵²³ Mishnah tractate *Sanhedrin* 10:1, or BT tractate *Sanhedrin* 90a.

This type of divine providence, says Maimonides, is indicated in the Torah through countless verses - in the stories about the forefathers,⁵²⁴ Adam, Noah, the Exodus from Egypt, and so forth, as well as in the admonitions to every individual of what to do and what not to do, with the punishments of “and I will set My face against that man,”⁵²⁵ “and I will destroy that soul,”⁵²⁶ and “Whoever has sinned against Me, I shall erase him from My book,”⁵²⁷ and yet more such verses that show God’s providence over each separate individual. One can obviously not explain the reality of prophecy otherwise.

However, in connection with the individuals of the other creatures, animals and plants alike, it’s certain that they are left to chance, as Aristotle states. Therefore, the ritual slaughter of animals is allowed as well as to make use of animals for all types of hard labour. Habakkuk the Prophet, seeing how people rob and murder their fellows, complains: “Why, God, did you make people abandoned like fish out of water, and like insects that are absolutely neglected and abandoned?”⁵²⁸ [p. 156] One clearly sees the difference between individual people and individual creatures: The former must be situated under God’s individual providence, and the latter must be subject to chance.

There are verses such as, “You open Your hand, and satisfy the desire of every living thing,”⁵²⁹ and “He gives to an animal its food,”⁵³⁰ along with quotations of that sort from the Sages, such as “[the Holy One, Blessed be He,] sits and sustains [everything], from the horns of wild oxen to the eggs of lice.”⁵³¹ Using all these verses and quotations, Maimonides reinforces his opinions about divine providence over entire species, and he therein agrees with Aristotle, according to the way Alexander of Aphrodisias (who flourished in the 3rd century CE)⁵³² understands Aristotle. When the Torah warns us not to abuse any living creatures,⁵³³ nor to take away the mother bird along with its eggs or chicks,⁵³⁴ nor to let a donkey remain weighed down by its burden for a long time,⁵³⁵ and yet other similar admonitions, their purpose is not for the animals’ benefit but rather for ours, in order to get us used to practicing the character trait of mercy.

⁵²⁴ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

⁵²⁵ Ezekiel 14:8

⁵²⁶ Leviticus 23:30

⁵²⁷ Exodus 32:33

⁵²⁸ cf. Habakkuk 1:14

⁵²⁹ Psalms 145:16

⁵³⁰ *ibid.* 147:9

⁵³¹ BT tractate *Shabbat* 107b; cf. BT tractate *Avodah Zarah* 3b.

⁵³² A Peripatetic philosopher and the primary ancient Greek commentator on Aristotle’s writings.

⁵³³ cf. Deuteronomy 12:20

⁵³⁴ cf. *ibid.* 22:6

⁵³⁵ cf. Exodus 23:5

Chapter 12: Prophecy and Prophets

[p. 156] As we know from previous discussion, Maimonides' opinion about divine providence is equivalent to that of Aristotle. The difference is that Aristotle thinks that concerning our world, divine providence is only according to species, even with respect to humankind, while Maimonides maintains that every human individual falls under God's providence. However, this providence is only apparent on those individuals who have reached a high level in the development of their intellect. Maimonides' main argument against Aristotle's assertion is as follows:

According to Aristotle himself, the divine intellect - better expressed as the divine influence - must [p. 157] have something upon which to rest. That is, the object should be in existence and we see that only individuals exist in reality, while the "species" is just a notion, an idea, an imagination in our mind derived from experience, according to which we are accustomed to classifying living things into species and kinds. And if so, how can God's supervision rest upon something that doesn't exist? We must therefore say that divine supervision is upon each separate individual, as stated in Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* (part 3, chapter 18):

It is wrong to say that divine providence extends only to the species, and not to individual beings, as some of the philosophers teach. For only individual beings have real existence, and individual beings are endowed with divine intellect; divine providence, therefore, acts upon these individual beings.

This argument isn't entirely valid here, since we can ask the same question about the division of the species of other living creatures which are "only in our intellect" and which don't have any existence outside of our intellect. The individuals, however, do exist in reality; must they be affected by divine influence - contrary to both Maimonides' and Aristotle's opinions? However, our task isn't to ask questions on this subject, but rather to express Maimonides' position on that matter; we won't discuss that subject anymore. It's enough for us to know that the Creator is interested in human individuals. As a result, reward and punishment can certainly be possible - with God ordering someone to conduct himself in a certain way, and warning against bad results when he conducts himself otherwise.

We thus have gained the possibility of both Torah from Heaven and prophecy. The former is where the Creator indicates the correct path to every individual, and the latter is where one keeps warning against going on the wrong path, which would inevitably lead to bad results in the future.

Prophecy is an influence from God on the human intellect, through the active intellect (universal intellect), which is a reflection of the Creator's knowledge. And just as there's no limit whatsoever to His knowledge, and thus He can know what will be just like whatever already was, the human intellect - if only it's prepared well enough - can see the future just as well as the past. The question is, what exactly are the necessary preparations in order to be able to become a prophet? Maimonides answers as follows:

There are three different opinions about the characteristics that a prophet ought to possess in order to merit the level of prophecy:

1) The opinion “of the foolish multitude among the gentiles, and even of some Jews” that God chooses a particular man and makes him prophesy. According to this opinion, it doesn’t make a difference whether this person is wise or a fool, young or old, just as long as he has numerous good character traits. No one, not even a fool, dares to say that God chooses to turn a wicked person into a prophet; however, they do say that He takes a wicked person and turns him into a good person in order to be able afterwards to turn him into a prophet.

In short, they think that one cannot conceive of prophecy in terms of intellectual understanding and that it is, rather, accomplished by a pure, supernatural miracle; therefore, in this case, prophecy wouldn’t have required any preconditions nor any preparations by that person. A miracle can happen everywhere [p. 158] and under all circumstances, for supernatural existence doesn’t have any limits between the possible and the impossible. (For more, see the commentary of Don Isaac Abrabanel [1437-1508]⁵³⁶ to the *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapter 32).

2) The opinion of the philosophers is that prophecy is a certain perfection in human nature. Such perfection can only rest upon someone who has learned and studied a lot, to the point that his aptitude for prophecy (which exists as a possibility) becomes an actuality.

According to that opinion, an ignoramus cannot be a prophet, and someone of that nature cannot go to bed one night as an ordinary person and wake up a prophet the following morning. He must be able to become a prophet in a more gradual fashion, with respect to his rational and moral qualities, unless other obstacles - such as diseases or unfortunate events - come in and hinder prophecy even among those who are prepared for it. Without such external obstacles, the perfect person must be a prophet, just as the perfectly healthy person who eats must acquire blood, marrow, and similar things from that food.

3) The opinion of our Torah, according to Maimonides, is similar to the philosophical one, with one important difference - that such people with all required character traits can exist and yet not emerge as prophets unless God chooses them. Preparation alone is not enough; God’s will is necessary as well.

That specific condition is a reality, even though we don’t understand why. According to nature, everyone with the necessary preparations can be a prophet.

Consequently, according to Maimonides, the miracle isn’t in one’s becoming a prophet, since that is obviously the natural result of the preparation in his education and character traits; rather, the miracle is in not being able to become a prophet, even though one has all the necessary qualifications. Philosophy indeed asserts that such a thing can’t be possible; rather, everyone who

⁵³⁶ A medieval Spanish commentator who was often referred to simply as Abrabanel.

is prepared must become a prophet, since that characteristic is quite precisely like igniting a piece of wood so that it turns into a fire and pouring water over the fire to extinguish it. Nevertheless, Maimonides, who believes in miracles that often intrude into nature and change its entire process, asserts that thought in the name of the Torah, built upon its stated facts, in the following ways:

1) That “the sons of the Prophets”⁵³⁷ were numerous and made up whole groups that followed every prophet (“a band of prophets”⁵³⁸ with Samuel, which Saul encountered; “the sons of the Prophets” who were with Elijah and Elisha⁵³⁹), and yet among them they didn’t become prophets in the end. Here, we have evidence that, despite their preparation, they didn’t reach all the way to prophecy, probably because God’s will did not make that happen. For that reason, the verse that contains the Hebrew verb *hitnabei* (pretending to prophesy) is relevant with regard to Eldad and Medad, “they prophesied but didn’t do so again,”⁵⁴⁰ as opposed to the Hebrew verb *hinabei*, which pertains to more established prophets.

2) Baruch ben⁵⁴¹ Neriah, who was Jeremiah’s most distinguished student, certainly prepared all that was necessary, and yet he didn’t become a recognized prophet, concerning which he strongly complained. Jeremiah [p. 159] needed to say to him in God’s name that he shouldn’t look for any greatness. (“Greatness” is understood to refer to “prophecy.”)

One may ask: The prophet Jeremiah was obviously determined to be a prophet even before he was born (“before I formed you in the belly I knew you...I appointed you as a prophet unto the nations”⁵⁴²). Does that not mean that he became a prophet even before he made the necessary preparations? The answer is that his statement referred to his natural capability to be able to perfect himself in the necessary qualifications in order to become a prophet.

Another question: The prophet Jeremiah himself emphatically stated, “For I am just a youth [*na’ar*],”⁵⁴³ and does “a youth” not mean immature? The answer is that *na’ar* in Hebrew can also mean a grown man who is already perfectly developed in wisdom. Joseph the Righteous is called a youth⁵⁴⁴ even though he was thirty years old at that point; “Joshua bin⁵⁴⁵ Nun” was called a “youth,”⁵⁴⁶ even though he was at the very least 57 years old. The same thing is true, so it seems, with respect to Jeremiah, even though we don’t precisely know how old he was when he started to prophesy.

⁵³⁷ Really, “the disciples of the Prophets.”

⁵³⁸ I Samuel 19:20

⁵³⁹ These last two prophets appear decades later, in I and II Kings.

⁵⁴⁰ Numbers 11:25; this is actually the verse *before* Eldad and Medad appear on the scene.

⁵⁴¹ “son of” in Hebrew

⁵⁴² Jeremiah 1:5

⁵⁴³ Ibid. 1:6

⁵⁴⁴ cf. Genesis 41:12

⁵⁴⁵ Another, much rarer Hebrew word for “son of.”

⁵⁴⁶ Exodus 33:11

Moreover, one shouldn't be led astray by seeing the verse in Joel, "I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophesy."⁵⁴⁷ This is because right away, the prophet Joel interprets the content of these prophecies as "prophetic dreams," "visions" (illusions), and "prophecies" that are given because of divination, veridical dreaming, or soothsaying. Such people could also be called "prophets." Examples of these include the "prophets of Baal,"⁵⁴⁸ the "prophets of Asherah,"⁵⁴⁹ and the verse - in the Torah itself - "if there should arise in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of a dream."⁵⁵⁰

There's yet more: Even during the Revelation at Mount Sinai, where everything was a miracle, everyone prophesied only according to his level. "And Moses alone shall approach [God]"⁵⁵¹ is one level, the highest; only Moses himself reached that level. Aaron was on a level just below that; Nadab and Abihu⁵⁵² were on a yet lower level; the seventy elders⁵⁵³ were one level below Nadab and Abihu; and last were the masses who only saw the fire, heard the sound of the ram's horn; each one heard God's words according to their own level.

Until now, we have spoken about a certain preparation without which a person could not at all become a prophet. But what is that preparation? What methods does one need to use and what must one achieve through this preparatory work?

⁵⁴⁷ Joel 3:1

⁵⁴⁸ e.g. I Kings 18:19; Baal is the name of the leader of the Canaanite gods, the equivalent of Zeus.

⁵⁴⁹ e.g. commentary by the southern French medieval rabbi David Kimḥi (Radak; 1160-1235) on I Kings 18:19; Asherah is the name of the Canaanite goddess of motherhood and fertility.

⁵⁵⁰ Deuteronomy 13:2

⁵⁵¹ Exodus 24:2

⁵⁵² The two eldest sons of Aaron who were killed upon making an unauthorized offering amid the celebrations of the dedication of the Tabernacle, as recorded in Leviticus 10.

⁵⁵³ As recorded in Numbers 11:16-17 and 24-25; the seventy elders constituted the first iteration of the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish great court, amid the wanderings of the Israelites in the Wilderness.

Chapter 13: Intuition and the Power of Judgement

[p. 159] Coming to the question of what are the qualifications by which a person could attain prophecy, Maimonides writes as follows:

They know that the essence of true prophecy entails an intellectual abundance that comes from the Creator through the mediation of the universal intellect (the active intellect) [p. 160] first on a person's logical thoughts, and then on his imaginative power.

We understand "imaginative power" to mean the power that illuminates the regular working of our five senses, ties together things perceived from those senses, engages in the connection between all those senses, learns from past events for the future, and illuminates every one of these intellectually, bringing together one aim and one purpose.

A superhuman, or - as we call him - a "prophet," is only a person in whom both of the previously mentioned powers harmoniously work: logic (the power of speech) and proper imagination (the power of imagination). This is the highest level that humankind can reach.

Thus, a person can't attain perfection only through study, thoughts, and good character traits; one can only become a sage by being perfect in wisdom and logic, but one can't become a prophet that way. In order to become a prophet, one must be born for it. One example is the prophet Jeremiah: "Even before he was born he was already designated to become a prophet" (see Jeremiah 1:5 for more).

This is because one can develop the mind through much study and thinking, while the power of judgement and imagination - which is necessary for perception - depends entirely on the corporeal senses. The human mind, where all the sensory experiences are concentrated, must be in the best shape possible, in order to be able to properly control these senses, arrange them, and take out the proper content, aim, and purpose from them. In order to attain the proper results, all the senses must work harmoniously and the mind must not be impeded by innate feelings such as pride, honour, and lust, and not even from temporary ones such as anger, sadness, brokenheartedness, and so forth.

One with innate evil characteristics can work on himself by means of long practice to become someone having good character traits, but he cannot become an exemplary person. To achieve that, one has to be born for it and to be endowed with God-given strength in order to be able to become a prophet, when he - the talented one - will have already developed his intellect through much study, and his conduct through practicing good character traits.

In sum: To be a prophet, one must be born for it. One can only work on the area of wisdom that is necessary for it. Whoever wasn't born with that characteristic remains a sage, but he can't attain prophecy (Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapter 36).

Every person possesses the quality of perception, just as every person can think. According to Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) theory, as seen in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (concerning which Maimonides, as it were, already knew centuries before it was actually formulated), sensuality⁵⁵⁴ - which comes from the senses - and understanding - which comes from the intellect - are two different sources. Our perception (i.e. recognition) comes from the connection between those two.

For example, I see in front of myself a group of five people, as well as a second group of six people. [p. 161] As long as I just "look" at both of them, I initially - at that point - only have unknown perceptions when I think, at the same time, that "this is a group of five" and "that is a group of six." I have just then understood what I had earlier only seen. How did that happen? Analyzing the content of my idea, I find in it at least one element that definitely comes from the sensory experience; that is the perception of "being."⁵⁵⁵ This is because I can only intuit certain elements from sensuality, but I can never see "being." I see the person, but I don't see his "being"; that is certainly a concept that I must reflect upon. Thinking deeply about it, I discover that the rest of the elements of my idea are also essentially no more than concepts; generally, "this" is a concept, a "group" is a concept, "six" is a concept as well, and "person" is also only a concept.

According to Kant's transcendental aesthetic, that concept - just like that intuition - entails a certain synthetic methodology of our perceived subject, which connects various elements to one whole in our consciousness. The distinction between intuition (through the senses) and a concept (through the intellect) is only that intuition has all the individual parts in itself, while a concept has its individual parts among themselves. Intuition sees the person's height and weight, vision and hearing, complexion and body, clothes, etc., while a concept has its individual parts among themselves: generally, a person includes in himself everyone, of various heights and weights, skin colours, races, creeds, ages, and sexes. In the process of intuition, we have directly to do with the individual person who remains in sight, or with the individual image of a person who remains in our memory. However, in the process of "thinking," we don't only have to do directly with the individual person. Between him and understanding stands our perception of "person," that earlier included all the types of people of the world in all their aspects, and as an "indirect" result, it also includes the individual person who remains in sight. That thought, first of all, takes into account the concept, the representation of everybody in general. At first, one thinks: "This is a person"; that is, "perception emerges from whatever belongs to that concept with respect to that person in general." What is, therefore, the essence of perception? What, accordingly, could be done to make the process perfect? One could consequently arrange inside that concept an individual intuition or an individual imagination; both the individual intuition and the concept are necessary for perception to emerge. Perception stands still only within the individual intuition that is "hidden,"

⁵⁵⁴ The Yiddish word, *zinlichkayt* (cf. *sinnlichkeit* in German), is defined differently here than in the first part of this book (Chapter 13), on p. 57, where it instead means "rationality" or "mindfulness."

⁵⁵⁵ A Kantian way of saying "everything in existence."

not having any concept of that thing. It only holds on to the concept, letting go of the individual intuition from sight, when it is “empty.”

However, the inner structure of the individual intuition in a concept is still [p. 162] not enough to create a perception from it. This is because that itself is a process which takes place in “time” just as substance (matter) must fit into “place.” Time, however, passes continuously. Every instant is a unit of time unto itself, which is born at the place at which the previous instant elapses and fades, to make way for the next. As a result, all perceptive processes are born and then disappear with every instant. Perception is, therefore, not one and the same, but rather, an entire series of instantaneous processes that repeat themselves hundreds of times with the same subject matter, just like an image of a person in a mirror that moves or just like images in a film. Once perception assumes that this is a person, the same perception from the second instant already is not experienced; it rather makes use of the previous result. One may ask: How is this possible? How does he know the results of the second moment from that of the first moment, which is indeed past and has disappeared forever? How does the latter instant know what the first instant discovered and begins where the first instant left off?

The answer is: There is an “I” that counts, measures, and sets aside in himself the earlier experiences. The two perceptions get from the “I” the results that the earlier perception left behind with him before the coming one. Who is the “I”? Whether it is what Kant calls “consciousness” or what the Kabbalists call a *yehidah*,⁵⁵⁶ the result is one and the same. Thus, the *yehidah* is the central point of all the intellectual connections, intuition, experience, and concepts. The “I” is what makes possible the results of perception that get “developed” jointly from intuition and thinking.

Maimonides thinks along those lines as well; he also thinks that “there’s nothing in the intellect that wasn’t previously in the senses.” The “imaginative power” uses intellectual pictures as imagined in one’s mind in which the senses left a mark on a person’s intellect and mind. Thus, the person matches up all the pictures in his mind and draws new valid general principles in connection with the future, built upon past experience. That is the way of wisdom.

However, there is a higher level yet: putting aside the senses to rest, after finishing their task, and starting the work with logic alone. Only then does the intellect receive the biggest influence from the “active intellect,” each one according to his level. The senses need to be entirely inactive at that time, while possessing a huge emotional power - where the task itself is felt, becoming entirely free from the senses (what we call “the expansion of the material”) - or when a person sleeps, and together with him, his senses as well. In the first case, the result is prophecy, and in the second case, it is a proper dream that one has inside himself which, according to the Talmudic sages, is one sixtieth of prophecy.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁶ Literally meaning “unit”; the highest level of the soul in Kabbalistic thought.

⁵⁵⁷ Cf. Babylonian Talmud tractate *Berakhot* 57b.

[p. 163] In prophecy itself, there are various levels. Every level is according to the prophet's innate preparation and the extent of his personal accomplishment. The Sages have correctly remarked: "A dream is the *novelet* [unripe fruit] of prophecy."⁵⁵⁸ That is to say: *Novelet* signifies a fruit that has fallen from a tree before becoming ripe; so too, a dream isn't a mature prophecy.

Dr. Simon Bernfeld (1860-1940), in his *Da'at Elohim*,⁵⁵⁹ comments about this: Here, Maimonides came to the same conclusions as present-day psychologists. The testimony of the great scholars (in whose correctness nobody doubts), that in a dream one achieves such intellectual matters that - when one was awake - in no way would one be able to reach, is hereby confirmed. Some scholars made dreams into a marvellous apparition for adherents of spiritualism.⁵⁶⁰ However, present-day psychologists explain it in a simple way, just as Maimonides states, that the intellect reacts to the sensory pictures in one's mind, upon which it builds fresh intellectual images in the mind, and it is accompanied by correct hypotheses in connection with the future in accordance with the previous mental pictures that have passed, taken from experience. This can only take place for the intellect during sleep, when the senses don't impede it with constantly new perceptions.

With this, Maimonides opens the way to understanding the subject of prophecy and its levels.

⁵⁵⁸ Genesis Rabbah 17:5

⁵⁵⁹ "Knowledge of God" in Hebrew, and his best-known work (published in 1897 in two volumes).

⁵⁶⁰ Spiritualism is a movement that believes that not only is there an afterlife but also that the spirits of deceased persons interact with the living.

Chapter 14:⁵⁶¹ Prophet and Prophecies

[p. 163] The highest level of prophecy is when the prophet sees in a state of alertness what the rest of us see in a dream. Thus, this means that the prophet's senses don't impede him at all in what he thinks, making fresh impressions on him. Only one prophet attained the highest level of prophecy: Moses our Master, as the Torah testifies in the weekly portion of *Beha'alotekha*,⁵⁶² where the different levels of prophecy are enumerated: "In a dream I shall make Myself known to him,"⁵⁶³ "in a clear vision and not in riddles."⁵⁶⁴ We will later explain Moses' greatness in all of these things.

After the previous introductions, we can imagine the prophet's spiritual form. When a person is born with a clear mind (in which all the intellectual functions work in complete harmony), and his body has the right balance (whereby one sense isn't stronger than the other), the result is that he is certainly a well-balanced person. Thus, he doesn't suffer from any pain from a temporary or natural illness that stems from an innate defect (if so, he cannot become a prophet, since sadness can't go together with prophecy: "prophecy doesn't descend when one is sad"⁵⁶⁵). Such a person is prepared to become a prophet, if he actualizes his innate qualities through much study, accustoming his mind to thinking properly and clearly, perfecting [p. 164] himself in good character traits, going on the middle way in every behaviour, and practicing each of these behaviours in everyday life.

Having brought his spiritual balance from potential to actuality, from theory to practice, his main aspiration must be to unlock all the secrets of existence along with its laws and reasons. Together with these lofty subjects, his entire intellect needs to be actualized, until he reaches all the way to the subject of God's existence. This is demonstrated by His actions which a person can strive to achieve, beyond which he needs to stop, knowing that beyond that, human understanding can never be achieved.

The material world - with its appealing aspects - needs to be entirely pushed to one side. This means that the prophet must have no passion for animal-like desires, and no lust for fame, honour, or victory. Rather, his entire intellect should be engaged to achieve the truth in its absolute, complete clarity.

Thus, the prophet isn't allowed to have commonality with the people around him. Honour shouldn't please him, just as abuse shouldn't give him any grief. The prophet's attitude towards others ought to be like that of people in general to animals - either to derive use from them or to defend himself against attacks by them.

⁵⁶¹ Mislabelled in the book as "Chapter 11."

⁵⁶² Numbers 8-12

⁵⁶³ cf. Numbers 12:6

⁵⁶⁴ Numbers 12:8

⁵⁶⁵ Cf. BT tractate *Shabbat* 30b

Thus, such an exemplary person, when he contemplates such a matter, can certainly achieve that level in its complete profundity.

And knowing that a prophet must be perfect in three qualities - 1) innate characteristics that come forth at birth, 2) much study and thinking, and 3) good character traits and the cessation of thoughts about all material matters, such as lust, victory, fame, honour, etc. - we can imagine the difference between one prophet and another, in accordance with the three groups of characteristics that every one of them possesses.

The reason why prophecy can't rest on a prophet who is angry, cheerless, etc. hereby becomes understandable as well. It is because, as earlier explained, the corporeal powers play an important role here, and they get weakened by means of one of the bodily passions; therefore, prophecy disappears from the prophet who is suffering.

As we have already explained, prophecy is expressed through the assistance of two powers: a) logic, which comes from much study, and b) imagination (imaginative power), an innate ability. People are thus divided into three levels:

1) sages - learned people who can think logically but lack imagination of such a nature that the abundance of the active intellect can access the logical intellect to a large extent but cannot access the imaginative power at all;

2) prophets - those who possess both aforementioned powers, and the abundance of the active intellect comes onto both of them equally; and

3) visionaries - those whose imaginative power is large because of an innate ability but who lack the logical kind of thinking, whether because of their natural inability or because of not studying. These visionaries are [p. 165] controlled only by the imagination, which confuses the logical intellect; therefore, they are always emotional, full of ecstasy, enthusiasm, and excitement. From these arise the following:

a) revolutionaries - those who dream about overturning the old order and creating a new one, not taking into consideration the impossibility that stands in their way;

b) poets - those who dreamed of an ideal world and lived in a previous era before people of intellect started thinking about this. These fantasies later become lighthouses signalling to the logical thinkers who come later to guide the world-ship to a secure port, whether juridical, economic, political, or social;

c) magicians, miracle workers, and con artists - using certain hidden powers that only a strongly imaginative person can discover;

d) mystics - those who dream while awake and see extraordinary hallucinations in their sleep. Many of them delude themselves into thinking that divine providence destined them to become

messiahs, world redeemers, prophets, and even demigods. All the false messiahs belong to that sort. One ought not to blame anybody for being deceived, but one ought rather to regret that they, unfortunately, were deceived; no angels appeared to them in a dream. This is only the product of their exaggerated imagination, the dominance of imagination over logical intellect. As a result, they get confused between foolishness and wisdom, between dreams and reality, and between fantasy and possibility; and

e) scholars, who possess an excessively strong imaginative power - among them are various spiritualists⁵⁶⁶ who believe in connecting the souls of the departed with their living relatives. People are inclined to believe in them, on account of their renown as scholars, as well as their reputation as honest people, whom one can in no way suspect of deception. On the other hand, their teaching is obviously not true, despite their truthful intention, because the strength of their imagination confused their cold, logical intellect and outweighed it in their dreams.

It is worthwhile to remark that a large part of that theory is accepted by contemporary great psychologists, such as Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), and others.⁵⁶⁷ Regarding people who are especially imaginative, the scholar Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799) states: “There are unlearned visionaries who corrupt the world because of their great influence on surrounding people, and they have indeed brought many problems to humankind.” This is precisely what Maimonides states.

We have already explained the ways and means of creating “perception”: it starts with the senses - eyes to see, ears to hear, and fingers to touch. With these sense perceptions, one “feels” something; that “feeling,” or “intuition,” is brought to the “ego” that hides the affect and sketches of the senses and experiences, and it hands them over to the intellect, which classifies them and brings forth new results from the manufactured classes of senses that were [p. 166] gathered from both the earlier and current sensory results. Arriving at that level can actually wipe the logical intellect clean of intellectual concepts that absolutely have nothing to do with the senses; for example - geometrical rules, concepts from “time and place,” matter and form, etc.

However, the three powers (the senses, imagination, and logical intellect) are still not enough to produce the senses without the help of a fourth⁵⁶⁸ power. That is the *ko'ah ha-doheh*, which is a dynamic power, a type of driving force, in the form of “will.” “Will” is a kind of “subconscious” (as the contemporary psychoanalysts of Freud’s school assert) that constantly pushes the three producers of perception (the senses, imagination, and the logical intellect) to work, just like the dynamic power that makes trees, grasses, and living creatures grow. It is only thanks to that power

⁵⁶⁶ Spiritualism is a movement that believes that not only is there an afterlife but also that the spirits of deceased persons interact with the living.

⁵⁶⁷ There is one other such psychologist identified by name, Piri, but I cannot identify him.

⁵⁶⁸ The text states “third.”

that the process of perception is constant and non-stop. The ability to receive the results is present in those three, albeit only in potential. “Will” drives them, however, to bring them to actuality.

Most people possess a weak “will”; therefore, it’s hard for them to create such mental pictures, to be able to see the future out of the past. However, considering a person in whom the dynamic power is strong, such a person creates mental pictures with an astonishing dexterity, he ties together one mental picture from experience with another, the second one as a result of the first one, the third from the second, the fourth from the third, and so forth in a continuous way, until he gets to the end of the chain of causality. Such is a prophet; the last result is prophecy.

As we see, Maimonides makes us understand prophecy in accordance with the natural laws of psychology. The wonder is only how the prophet can, in the blink of an eye, experience all the causes and effects in order to obtain the end result that we call “prophecy.”

Chapter 15:⁵⁶⁹ The Difference Between Moses Our Master and the Rest of the Prophets

[p. 166] Prophets are unique individuals, among the best people around, and every single one establishes a type - his own type.

At this point, we should set aside the general description of the prophet that takes into account his marvellous powers - innate and acquired alike - as we already explained earlier, powers that work in a rare harmony that the average person cannot entirely grasp. The prophets themselves are divided into different types in accordance with each one's level, how much each one of them studied, and how strongly their imaginative power works.

However, all the prophets who came both before and after Moses our Master (leaving aside only Moses himself) received their prophecy either in a dream or through a mediator (in the form of an angel). The lowest level is when a prophet falls asleep - that is, when the sensory [p. 167] functions are interrupted, divine abundance comes first to the logical intellect. God then transmits it to the imaginative power, which would make from it an actual image, which the prophet would see and relate, saying "I saw." Indeed, it is for this reason that a prophecy is called a "vision" ("that he visioned")⁵⁷⁰ - the same as "he saw." The greatest level is when the prophet enters into such a state of ecstasy that he can free himself from the senses that exist in reality, and divine abundance comes in a condition of wakefulness, also in the same order: first on the logical intellect, and from there onto the imaginative power.

That rule is in accordance with Maimonides, in that it's not so much that "seeing" signifies physical vision, just as with speaking. Rather, it means a spiritual condition, a spiritual sensation, when the imaginative power surpasses the senses: The prophet sees with closed eyes and hears without ears, although his senses would be able to work as soon as he would wish to use them.

The difference between prophecies in a dream and those while awake is only in that in a dream, the senses stop working similarly to all people: by falling asleep. Consequently, the miracle isn't in the silence of the senses, because they indeed remain silent among all sleeping people. Rather, the miracle is in the reality of the imaginative power that is quite strong in such a sleep, with no comparison with the same power in average people. However, in the second case, when the prophet sees this reality, there are two kinds of miracles that occur:

- 1) that the imaginative power is so strong that it's able to interrupt the work of the senses in a sleepless state; and
- 2) in interrupting the senses, the prophet stays awake and is not asleep - a situation that the normal intellect, which judges everything from the earlier experience, can't understand.

⁵⁶⁹ Mislabeled in the book as "Chapter 12."

⁵⁷⁰ e.g. Isaiah 1:1

Prophecy, coming to the imaginative power (whether in a dream or awake), is transformed into an image. Examples include a boiling pot with its face to the north side,⁵⁷¹ a stick of an almond tree,⁵⁷² and sheep that wander on the mountain as they do when there's no shepherd around.⁵⁷³ The logical intellect then needs to accept the necessary moral lessons from these parables. The prophet himself talks of most of these prophecies in the language of images in order to make the necessary impression on the listeners, knowing the nature of ordinary people for whom the parable makes a stronger impression than simply a dry moral lesson. Ezekiel's prophecies belong to the second type of prophecy - to eat filthy food or to bake on dirt and to lie for many days on one side.⁵⁷⁴ Or the order to Hosea to get married to an immoral woman,⁵⁷⁵ or the order to Isaiah to go around naked and barefoot.⁵⁷⁶ No person of knowledge can be of the opinion that the Creator would have ordered those superhumans in such instances to act against their nature and, to that end, degrade themselves in front of respectable people right in front of their eyes. The only way to understand this might be to think that these are just rhetorical parables and metaphorical prophecies, which need only to be accepted in accordance with their subject matter, leaving the details of the parables to fill out the expressiveness of the imagery.

[p. 168] This is what the Talmudic sages mean in stating that all the prophets used to start their prophecies with *koh* ("thus"), as in - for example - *koh amar Hashem*,⁵⁷⁷ the only exception being Moses our Master, who made use of the word *zeh* ("this"), as in - for example - *zeh ha-davar asher tzivah Hashem*.⁵⁷⁸ That is because *koh* implies a prophecy similar in terms of the content but not in terms of the exact words, while *zeh* implies exactly that way, whether with respect to the content or the words. For that reason, even letters, punctuation, and the most minute details are interpreted homiletically in the Torah of Moses, something that wouldn't be done with the speeches of the other prophets.

With that, we arrive at the prophecies of Moses our Master, who constitutes a separate kind of prophet among all the other prophets, both "the ones coming before him and those coming after him."

Maimonides devotes chapter 35 of the second part of his *Guide to the Perplexed* to the prophecies of Moses our Master. First of all, he notifies us that his attempt to rationalize prophecy, such that it should be accessible to the human intellect, is only in connection with the prophecies of the prophets other than Moses our Master. However, Maimonides regards Moses' prophetic power as completely miraculous, something the intellect cannot completely explain. Therefore, he

⁵⁷¹ see Jeremiah 1:13

⁵⁷² see *ibid.* 1:11

⁵⁷³ see Ezekiel 34:5-6

⁵⁷⁴ see *ibid.* 4:9-13

⁵⁷⁵ see Hosea 1:2

⁵⁷⁶ see Isaiah 20:2

⁵⁷⁷ e.g. II Kings 1:4; in English, "thus said God."

⁵⁷⁸ Exodus 35:4; in English, "this is the word that God has commanded."

doesn't talk about it either openly or in a hint. He explains it this way: "But as for the prophecy of Moses our Master, I won't discuss it in these chapters with even one single word, neither explicitly nor implicitly." Only in name is Moses our Master a prophet, equal to the other prophets, but he isn't together with them in one category. Right at the start of his prophecy, God expressed Himself to Moses through these words, "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El-Shaddai, but I didn't make Myself known to them with My name of God."⁵⁷⁹ Not having arrived at a precise explanation of the difference between those two divine names, it's nonetheless clear that Moses our Master, may he rest in peace, attained a higher level even than the earlier patriarchs, and how much more so than those prophets after him.

Maimonides refuses to explain the nature of Moses' prophecies, but he does enumerate four qualities in which Moses' prophecies were superior to those from the other prophets:

- 1) his prophecies came from the Holy One, Blessed be He, without the intermediary of a dream or ecstasy, but rather in a direct way ("I shall speak to him mouth to mouth"⁵⁸⁰);
- 2) all the rest of the prophets needed to be oblivious to their senses, neither seeing nor hearing, nor feeling; but Moses was able to utter prophecies even when going about, as the verse states: "when Moses would come"⁵⁸¹;
- 3) the other prophets were frightened ("fearful and rejoicing"⁵⁸²) at a time of prophecy, but Moses was calm, just as one person talks to another ("as a man would speak with his fellow"⁵⁸³); and
- 4) all the rest needed a certain amount of preparation, whether through seclusion or through clever means (such as playing a violin), but Moses our Master, may he rest in peace, was able to do it at any time he needed to do so ("stand and I will hear what God will command you"⁵⁸⁴) except when the cause was on account of the Jews before the sin of the spies.⁵⁸⁵ Thus, according to the Sages, Moses didn't receive any prophecy then.

All these benefits actually come from one cause: Moses' not needing help [p. 169] from the imaginative power. The intellect itself (the power of speaking) did the entire task because of its great abundance upon him, which no other prophet received. For that reason, the words and even the letters and punctuation in Moses' prophecies were also counted; there were no superfluous words; and he didn't need to make use of the language of imagery like the other prophets, whose prophecies would be aided by the imaginative power.

⁵⁷⁹ Exodus 6:3

⁵⁸⁰ Numbers 12:8

⁵⁸¹ Exodus 34:34

⁵⁸² cf. commentary by *ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbalah* on Exodus 19:16

⁵⁸³ Exodus 33:11

⁵⁸⁴ Numbers 9:8

⁵⁸⁵ see Numbers 13-14

Chapter 16:⁵⁸⁶ Torah from Heaven

[p. 169] One of Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith is "Torah coming from Heaven."

The term "Torah" needs to be understood as a legal code given by God, through Moses our Master, who was the first and only one of his kind in the world.

This is because the great people before Moses our Master, such as Abraham our Forefather for example, immersed themselves in universal problems and in their resolutions - whether through prophecy or logic - and they used to explain these things to their circles of friends and students. However, none of them came with a mission from God for the people like Moses our Master. The aforementioned patriarchs used to merely explain their own issues, character traits, and behaviours that would be useful for the people of that time as people and as world citizens, while Moses came up with an understandable legal code that contains an entire system. Such a legal code includes the duties of one person to the public, the duties of a father to his children and vice versa, as well as a position on the intellectual domain - how to think, what to believe, and so forth.

[p. 170] We call all of these things "righteous statutes and ordinances."⁵⁸⁷ One ought to understand the words "righteous ordinances" as follows: Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁵⁸⁸ already established that a person should take the middle path in all behaviours, not going in one direction or the other - neither to the right nor to the left but rather in the middle. That is, no extreme is suitable; even for good people and for the pious, it's still not suitable. The Torah as a whole aims, with its statutes, to direct people on the aforementioned middle path: On the one hand, the Torah removes them from drunkenness, immodesty, and other lusts, as the directives of Greek belief encourage. On the other hand, the Torah preaches against the other extreme of asceticism.⁵⁸⁹ This means that a person doesn't escape to the mountains and doesn't feed himself only on grass, roots, and herbs, and it doesn't demand that he not get married, nor drink any wine, nor eat any meat, and yet more such penances that extremely ascetic legal codes require of their followers, such as Jewish Essenes, Sabians,⁵⁹⁰ or Christian and Indian⁵⁹¹ ascetic sects. The statutes that move people away from both extremes can be properly called "righteous ordinances."

⁵⁸⁶ Mislabelled in the book as "Chapter 13."

⁵⁸⁷ Deuteronomy 4:8; "statutes" (*hukim* in Hebrew) are divine commandments for which there's no rational reason and which are beyond human reason, while "ordinances" (*mishpatim* - literally, "judgements" - in Hebrew) are divine commandments whose meanings make sense and for which humans have great understanding.

⁵⁸⁸ Aristotle's main work on ethics; in Rabbi Kruger's Yiddish original, this is referred to as *Sefer ha-Midot*, literally "Book of Character Traits" in Hebrew.

⁵⁸⁹ In the Yiddish original, Rabbi Kruger uses the term *nezirut*. That term hearkens back to the concept of a Nazirite, who is one who - based on chapter 6 of Numbers - abstains from drinking wine or eating grapes, cutting his hair, and being in contact with the dead.

⁵⁹⁰ Rabbi Kruger refers to them as "Greek Sabians," but the Sabians were actually from southern Arabia (Yemen and surrounding areas).

⁵⁹¹ As in South Asian religions - i.e. Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Here, "Indian" is not to be confused with Native Americans, First Nations, and the like.

The main objective of the divine constitution is to unite a certain number of people in one and the same action and in one uniform way of thinking.

The rule is that a person is a social animal. This means that it's human nature to live together with other people, unlike other living creatures where each animal of its kind can live separately from each another.

Here, we come across a wonderful phenomenon: Creatures of one kind are obviously all equal, with one being like the other, all with one nature, with the same capabilities, with the same character traits, and eating the same type of food. There is no difference between one lion and another one; all the tigers eat the same kind of food and all of them are cruel, while all foxes are cunning. Because of their common temperament, they obviously can live together, even though each one of their kind goes its separate way. People are the opposite: each one is a world unto himself, and each one has a separate individuality. In a similar vein, each of their forms are different from one to another, and their opinions vary from one to another, yet people are social. It is sad for people to be alone, and one person necessarily embraces everyone else, despite his difference from all of them.

The answer for why things are the way they are is that precisely because of their individualities and differences of opinion, people had to find a means of living together and develop such a way of living. Because of this, they weren't able to exist separately; rather, one had to turn to the other for help as long as there was no pressure for one to devour the other alive. The social instinct is [p. 171] one of many means that are necessary for the existence of humankind - an instinct that was derived from the impulse to live.

We know its usefulness. One may ask now: How did various people with different temperaments and opinions come to an agreement with regard to one book of statutes for all of them? The answer is: We cannot imagine anything other than to believe that a prior leader came and influenced them to accept for themselves a constitution whose aim is to reconcile opinions, trim individual extremes, shorten one person's opinion and stretch someone else's, eliminate sharp edges and fill in depressions. Thus, the laws - when they are accepted with good will by the masses - smooth out the wrinkles and are suitable for everyone. These laws make it possible for a large society to conduct itself uniformly, despite the naturally opposed individualities of the members of that society.

Maimonides draws the following conclusion from this: The Torah, even though it isn't at all "natural," nonetheless has its source in a natural necessity.⁵⁹² This runs counter to the later opinion that at a certain time, people gathered together with the aim to create a constitution according to which all people - big and small, privileged and disgraced, masters and slaves - would conduct themselves equally. In order for the Torah to be connected with everybody, even illustrious people

⁵⁹² As Maimonides states in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (part 2, chapter 40), "The Torah, although it is not natural, is nevertheless not entirely foreign to nature."

had to give up a portion of their sacred rights, transmitting authority over themselves to one ruler. The democratic system, which required a people's government through a selected number of representatives, was built on that supposition. Maimonides rejects that opinion. He states, rather, that a constitution is created *a priori* by a ruler against the will of the people - whether by a hero and victor, who imposed laws with force, or by a spiritual ruler, to whose personality the masses submitted. Later, however, the laws were developed according to the nature of that community, as well as the climate and the economic circumstances of its country. Our Torah was also given *a priori* from a higher power (the Creator) against the will of the Jews, but later it developed itself in accordance with Jewish strength and the Jewish way of life.

The difference between all these legal codes, composed by people, and our legal code that comes from Heaven, consists in this: The other legal codes had, as their main goal, to abolish civil injustice among people - to avoid robbery, theft, and violence, with no consideration for the cultural situation of the people, nor from a desire to equalize its manner of thinking so as to obtain logical results from words of truth. However, our heavenly Torah, beyond striving to equalize social justice, also aims to give its followers proper ideas about divinity, wisdom, and the aim of living and creation. In sum, the Torah unites [p. 172] civil, political, economic, and religious-philosophical laws. Moreover, it's different from all the other legal codes which have to do only with social topics, not being concerned with faith and opinions.

A person cannot create such a Torah; rather, it was created by the one God Who made the people along with all that is around and over them. The Torah is from God - an author Who does not need to seek in it His own ulterior motives or feelings of dominion and pride.

One recognizes the tree from its fruit, and the Torah bears witness to its Creator.

Knowing how to observe the divine commandments themselves - without understanding their reasons - isn't enough, since then the Torah's worth would only be that of an earthly legal code, whose aim is only to control actions, not thought. It is therefore up to us to clarify the reason for every divine commandment separately.

Maimonides comes to that last conclusion in chapter 25 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, and in the subsequent chapters, he gives reasons for most of the divine commandments.

Chapter 17:⁵⁹³ Reasons⁵⁹⁴ for the Divine Commandments

[p. 172] Maimonides, wanting to explain the reasons for the divine commandments and asserting that all of them are aimed at one purpose (perfection in deeds and knowledge), dedicates chapter 25 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed* to explain the character of these actions in a general way. He states:

Each action must belong to one of the following four categories: 1) futile; 2) frivolous; 3) vain; and 4) useful. Futile actions occur when people play with their hands, feet, or foreheads while studying or thinking; this action extends the finger, shakes the feet, and creases the forehead. He does something totally different with his mind and he does the aforementioned actions without intent and without any purpose. The following belong to the second type: dancing or making other movements in order to make people laugh about such movements - not for health reasons or to help digest food, but rather simply for frivolousness. "Vain" actions are those actions that one does in desiring to achieve a certain goal, but because of external obstacles the person wasn't able to achieve it. We hear of people saying things like "I went in vain to look for someone, and I didn't end up meeting him at his house," and "I worked hard, but it was in vain, and nothing came of it." The things that belong in the "useful" category are those actions that are truly good and the one doing these achieved his purpose through his endeavours.

Every person of understanding will concede that the actions of the Holy One, Blessed be He, don't belong to the first three of those categories, but rather to the fourth one, whether on account of their usefulness or because of their necessity. In other words, in living organisms, all the limbs perform useful work [p. 173] and all foods maintain the metabolism for the sake of the preservation of these organisms. Animals and people have senses so that they could utilize them to obtain whatever is necessary and avoid whatever is harmful, etc.

To sum up: Every natural function is good and serves a useful purpose, irrespective of whether we know of its purpose or not. This is because regarding a number of body parts and a still larger number of grasses and herbs, of whose usefulness we didn't have an idea in earlier years, we certainly know more about them, and so it will no doubt be concerning what we don't yet know. In truth, believers agree with philosophers regarding the reasonableness of the entire Creation.

However, there is a group that considers itself extremely pious and which holds that there's no rational connection whatsoever between one thing and another, but rather that everything comes from God's will. For example: With respect to its potential, the sun certainly ought not to illuminate the Earth, just as a person does not at all have to see with his eyes or hear with his ears, but rather, he could hear with his eyes and see through his ears. It could be bright without the sun,

⁵⁹³ Mislabeled in the book as "Chapter 14."

⁵⁹⁴ The Yiddish word used for this, *tzvekmesigkayt*, literally means "effectiveness" or "usefulness" or "suitability," but here, the better meaning is "rationale," "motive," or especially "reason" - corresponding to *ta'am* in Yiddish or Hebrew.

but all that we ourselves experience is the result of His will, without any reason and without any purpose. Supporters of that particular position understand the Creator's actions to be in the category of "without purpose," and they themselves do not sense the blasphemy of such a thought. This is because if a human does such an action - for which he is rebuked - at least while doing the action, he doesn't think at all about its purpose; while if the Creator is thinking like that, and He does the opposite, He is only carrying out His will.

Truthfully, these things have something with which to support themselves. This is because regarding all the questions that the philosophers ask concerning the purpose of the creation of the world, we only have that one answer: "Such is what God wanted." Does this mean, then, that we ourselves concede to not knowing the purpose of Creation beyond God's will? Their mistake, however, is in taking it upon themselves to judge the parts in terms of the whole. We don't know of any other purpose in the entire Creation except for His "will," but we do know of the rational connection of its parts, causes, and effects, the influences of food on the body, the influences of physical exercise on health, and so forth, in such a way that His will doesn't oppose the wisdom-laden connection that prevails in all of existence.

That same difference of opinion is also present in connection with the essence of the divine commandments in the Torah. Some believers say that there, only His "will" prevails; thus, He wants us to do these things without any goal beyond that. At the same time, the majority of those involved in Torah study and wisdom believe that there are reasons for every divine commandment, either with one commandment as a cause of the other - for example, ritual fringes, which lead to "you shall see it and remember"⁵⁹⁵ (looking at the fringes, you will think of carrying out all the divine commandments) - or as a goal in itself, to [p. 174] control actions and opinions. This is true even about the "statutes"⁵⁹⁶ - such as not wearing wool-linen mixtures,⁵⁹⁷ not eating meat and milk together,⁵⁹⁸ and sprinkling ashes from the red heifer,⁵⁹⁹ etc. - about which the Sages state, "you aren't allowed to reflect in order to understand its reason." However, our Sages also believe that they have a certain goal, but that the Creator surmised that our limited intellect could in no way discover it; for that reason, they say to not reflect on it at all.

The Sages suggest that this idea may be reflected in the words of the Torah, "for it is not an empty thing from you."⁶⁰⁰ If you think that there is an empty, futile divine commandment, the cause is "from you," from your side, from the little divine connection that you get and the lack of wisdom on your part to comprehend.

⁵⁹⁵ Numbers 15:39

⁵⁹⁶ "Statutes" (*hukim* in Hebrew) are divine commandments for which there's no rational reason and which are beyond human reason.

⁵⁹⁷ *Sha'atnez* in Hebrew; Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:11.

⁵⁹⁸ Stated in a few places in the Pentateuch; e.g. Exodus 34:26.

⁵⁹⁹ This is for the purification of those who have been in contact with corpses; Numbers 19.

⁶⁰⁰ Deuteronomy 32:47

The divine commandments in general are divided into four classes:

- 1) Those commandments in which the goal is understandable to everyone, such as the commandments of charity, showing mercy, loving others like oneself, not stealing, not robbing, not murdering, and not coveting someone else's property. All of these have one overarching goal - to make individuals into good members of human society, for the benefit of everyone as well as himself.
- 2) Those commandments in which the goal isn't understandable to the masses, such as not eating the fruit of a tree that's three years old or less,⁶⁰¹ not wearing wool-linen mixtures, not cultivating grapevines together with other crops,⁶⁰² and so forth.
- 3) Commandments that have a reason, though the Torah deliberately never put it in writing, in order for them to be observed better. The proof is from King Solomon with two commandments - not to have too many wives and not to procure many horses.⁶⁰³ The first admonition is there "because they would turn their hearts away from the commandments," and the second is there "in order to have nothing to do with Egypt." Solomon, knowing these reasons, stated: "I indeed want to do both of those prohibited things, but being a wise person, I don't think they'll harm me." But they did harm him. From this, we can see that each person has the possibility, right in front of his eyes, to draw a lesson from the consequences of becoming a second Solomon, so as to not pursue the reasons for such a commandment, and to not forsake the warning against transgression.
- 4) Those commandments that don't have any reason and people are warned not to look for the reason - such as the red heifer, for example - the reason for which even King Solomon didn't know, since a person (with his limited intellect) can't find it out, even though it indeed has a reason and a goal.

Thus, the idea of finding a certain reason for each divine commandment is - at first glance - derived from the statement in *Midrash Rabbah*: "What does it matter to the Holy One, Blessed be He, whether one slaughters an animal in the throat or in the neck? We must state that the goal of all the divine commandments is not anything other than to purify the people."⁶⁰⁴ That wonderful statement, which is in opposition to all the statements that seek to find understandable reasons, makes the impression of wanting to support every commandment only by divine "will," because He wants it like that, and people must comply with it. Maimonides explains it, however, in such a way that it will agree with the rest, as follows:

We ought to know that we can find out the reason for each divine commandment only in a general way, but not in its details; the latter only have disciplinary value ("in order to purify the people"⁶⁰⁵).

⁶⁰¹ *Orlah* in Hebrew; see Leviticus 19:23-25.

⁶⁰² See Deuteronomy 22:9.

⁶⁰³ See *ibid.* 17:16-17.

⁶⁰⁴ cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 44

⁶⁰⁵ *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 26

Therefore, we should look for a reason for the sacrifices [p. 175] in general, to discover the purpose of the sacrifice, and to leave the details to the One giving the command Himself. Concerning whoever takes it upon himself to investigate the matter in order to find a reason why the sacrifice is of a lamb rather than of a ram, a bull, or an entire young goat - it appears to me as though he would go “completely crazy,” and instead of one doubt, he increases the number of doubts for himself. The same is true of ritual slaughter: we need to find a goal in the permission to kill a living creature in order to eat its flesh, and that the death should take place as quickly and easily as possible. The laws of ritual slaughter exist based on that. However, in case someone demonstrates that ritual slaughter of the neck is still better, still quicker, and still easier, our answer ought to be: This is our discipline, such is what the Creator wants us to do, and people need to obey.

We have to understand that the writer of that statement regarded ritual slaughter as a parable, even though it's not exactly the same as the allegory of the parable. This is because in truth, great scholars of our time have already demonstrated the advantage of ritual slaughter over all other methods of killing animals, in such a way that - on that topic - there is a satisfactory reason for the details as well. According to Maimonides, the main thing is to prove that one needs to search for a reason only concerning the generalities of every divine commandment, and not its particulars.

In general, before Maimonides goes into the details (i.e. in each and every divine commandment), he finds in the entire Torah the intent to provide people with well-being of the soul and of the body. “Well-being⁶⁰⁶ of the body” can be understood to mean practical actions, good character traits, proper decorum, conducting business honestly, and being friendly to people. “Well-being of the soul” consists in the proper manner of thinking, along with grasping the right concepts from abstract topics in connection with God and all of existence.

The well-being of the soul certainly takes precedence in terms of eminence, just as the soul itself takes precedence and is the most important part of a person. However, the well-being of the body takes precedence in time and place. The person, as an inhabitant of our earthly world, must first of all be provided with all material needs in order to be able to devote himself to thinking. Those who are hungry, thirsty, and naked cannot think. Whoever is in constant danger and is afraid of thieves and robbers can't be engaged in ideas.

As a result, the entire Torah is composed of those laws that have to do with organizing human society economically, socially, and politically, as well as suppressing theft, robbery, and other crimes that one person can commit against another. We see, after all, that large countries that have organized their material life exist to this day, even those that lag well behind in matters of faith, while Jerusalem - which had spiritual qualities - was destroyed, not having organized the proper well-being of the body (see *Shem Tov*,⁶⁰⁷ chapter 27, third part). And it is precisely the essential

⁶⁰⁶ *Tikkun* in Hebrew and Yiddish; that word can also be translated as “reparation” and “fixing.”

⁶⁰⁷ Literally in Hebrew, “Good Name”; that commentary was written by Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-ca. 1290 or 1295).

thing - the well-being of the soul - whose description is abbreviated and mentioned either in summary form or else entirely by allusion.

Chapter 18:⁶⁰⁸ The Struggle Against Idolatry

[p. 176] As explained earlier, the Torah generally includes all the character traits and knowledge that a person needs to have for his body and soul.

For the soul, this entails a number of divine commandments that control ways of thinking and belief. The commandment “you shall love God”⁶⁰⁹ belongs to that type. As Maimonides explains in his *Yad ha-Ḥazakah*,⁶¹⁰ one can arrive at that level after first intellectually taking in all of existence, which includes the entire universe - Earth and the upper spheres, all the living creatures, grasses, and plants with their structures, living and growing. At the moment in which that is achieved, one obtains a fear of God’s Majesty that results in an endless love for the great Creator who brought forth - and maintains - these natural phenomena.

The divine commandments that belong to the aforementioned type are only substantiated through commands to “do such and such,” avoiding explanations, formulas, and introductions. This is what the masses will do whether they are able to arrive at that love of God with their own intellect or cannot conceive of it, whereas the elites will be able to do that with their own intellect.

The rational admonitions of “you shall not steal,”⁶¹¹ “you shall love your fellow man as yourself,”⁶¹² “and “you shall not place a stumbling block before the blind,”⁶¹³ and so forth, all belong to the divine commandments that aim against a person doing harm and in order to habituate oneself to good character traits. They are intended for the well-being of the body and are divided, as already stated, into two parts: 1) not to commit any crime, since God doesn’t want anybody to suffer and therefore would punish the person committing it; and 2) to do good, since that pleases Him and therefore such a deed would reward the person. A large portion of these are clear. Nobody questions why one tells us to believe in one God and to love Him, just as it doesn’t occur to anyone to question the admonitions against theft, murder, vengeance, and illicit love; all these commandments have the goal clearly right in front of one’s eyes. However, there are divine commandments that don’t show their intent on the surface, and for that reason they couldn’t be classified in any of the three earlier types. Thus, the divine commandments are explained by Maimonides, applying the reason for each commandment separately, in such a way that everyone would understand the purpose of observing them. On the other hand, Maimonides gives an exact

⁶⁰⁸ Mislabelled in the book as “Chapter 15.”

⁶⁰⁹ Deuteronomy 6:5

⁶¹⁰ Another name for the *Mishneh Torah*, also authored by Maimonides. The origin of this other name for the *Mishneh Torah* is connected to the system of the equivalence of numbers with words that is called *gematria* in Hebrew. In this case, י or *yad*, the י equals 10 and the ט equals 4; thus, *yad* equals 14 in Hebrew letters. Word for word, *Yad ha-Ḥazakah* means “the strong hand” in Hebrew.

⁶¹¹ Exodus 20:13 or 20:15; in that section of Exodus, the Ten Commandments, there are different ways of breaking up the verses.

⁶¹² Leviticus 19:18

⁶¹³ *ibid.* 19:14

description of Sabian⁶¹⁴ belief (veneration of the sun, moon, and stars), which he calls “the religion of the Sabians.” In both chapters 29 and 30 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides writes as follows:

It is well-known that Abraham our Forefather was brought up in the religion of the Sabians. The adherents of that religion believed that there is no one god that creates, and the things that govern the world are the stars and the constellations. Each constellation is a god for a certain area and rules over a certain time, after which power passes to another, then to a third, and on it goes consecutively. Two large objects [p. 177] rule over them: the moon, and - above it - the sun, which rules over the Earth and the heavens together.

In very ancient Sabian history, Abraham our Forefather is mentioned; he rebelled against the accepted faith system, wanting to demonstrate the existence of the one and only God, whom nobody can see, and who was the One who created the sun, moon, and stars. It is recalled how King Nimrod debated with Abraham, eventually arresting him and - seeing his stubbornness - ordering to have his property confiscated and exiling him to the far east.⁶¹⁵ In that document, the king’s argument was delivered precisely and Abraham’s argument was very weak, in order to create the impression that the king had defeated him in the debate.

Maimonides continues writing:

There is no doubt that at that moment, Abraham was considered a heretic all over the world, because of his speaking out against the Sabians, who at that time were distributed all over the world. He certainly had to put up with great hardships and persecutions from the ignorant and gullible masses just like every prominent figure who emerges with a new and true word for the world. Abraham had to patiently endure everything, knowing now that he wouldn’t be the last to suffer for telling the truth. However, he hoped for the future, when truth would prevail, everyone would bless him, curse those who curse him, his name would become famous, and all the people of the world would bless him along with his children.⁶¹⁶ And it has indeed become so. From what had been a very widespread idolatrous belief, next to nothing has remained; only a few peoples in forsaken regions still believe in it, while the entire world now believes in the God of Abraham.

Sabian philosophers understood existence as follows: The world is an eternally existing one like the gods themselves; the gods - that is, the stars - are eternal and exist - like people - with a body and a soul. The body is what we see with our eyes; the soul that creates the body’s constant movement is the power that we call God, and it doesn’t have any existence outside the body.

Those same philosophers deluded themselves into thinking that Adam was also born, like every other person, of male and female. Seth, his son, was also such a “heretic,” going in the way of his

⁶¹⁴ A general designation for pagans as formulated by the Quran as well as Maimonides; not necessarily a specific ethnicity or religion, and not to be confused with the Sabeans, a South Arabian people in and around Yemen.

⁶¹⁵ English translations of the *Guide to the Perplexed* instead mention Syria.

⁶¹⁶ See Genesis 12:2-3.

father's moon worship; he indeed constantly preached that one should serve it. He wrote a number of volumes about cultivating the soil: Noah moved away from Sabian idol worship, and he didn't worship any idols during his lifetime; therefore, he was punished. In the Sabian books, he was strongly criticized.

In general, their history is full of lies and ridiculous follies. One example is Adam. In travelling from the torrid zone near India to Babylon, he brought along marvellous things: a tree that blooms and grows [p. 178] like all trees, though its branches, flowers, and roots are made out of gold, along with a tree made of stone. He also brought along two leaves, each of which could cover two people. Adam spoke of a tree, which is itself as high as a man, but under its branches it could protect one thousand⁶¹⁷ people. That and yet more foolish tales, which became even greater than the ones of those who say that the world eternally exists according to the eternally set natural laws, can be found in their belief system: no wonder that they are impossibilities according to nature!

Reinforcing the dominion of the stars over the world, the foolish adherents of the Sabian belief system considered building wooden idols for the stars, silver idols for the moon, and golden idols for the sun; they allocated territories for each star; and they built temples. They installed the idols in the temples and believed that the star-gods would influence the world through them, or that through them they would inform the people about the future for everyone's use. Beyond that, their priests indicated certain trees, which are the ostensible intermediaries between people and the stars. If one would only serve each of them in such and such a manner, it would have a positive effect on the world, the god would appear in a dream to reveal what the future will bring, and the god would help someone in need.

Abraham was born and raised amid such foolish perceptions of the world. Arriving at a pure intellect, his first task was to call the name of the Lord, God of the world - hereby explaining the two main elements of faith, the existence of God and the creation of the world. This is what the Torah has in mind when relating, "and he proclaimed the Name of the Lord, God of the Universe."⁶¹⁸

Thus, the struggle which Abraham our Forefather started with debate, reached its climax later in the Torah with deeds. This consisted of God ordering Moses to destroy idolatrous images, to cut down the Asherah⁶¹⁹ trees, and to annihilate the sorcerers, ventriloquists, necromancers, and practitioners of the other occult arts with which the Sabians distinguished themselves.

This way, the Torah's strong admonitions to eradicate all idol worship, along with places of idol worship, altars, and images are understood. These admonitions are against "soothsayers,

⁶¹⁷ In the original *Guide to the Perplexed*, it is ten thousand people; Rabbi Kruger writes one thousand people.

⁶¹⁸ cf. Genesis 21:33

⁶¹⁹ Asherah is the name of the Canaanite goddess of motherhood and fertility.

enchanters, sorcerers, charmers, those who inquire of ghosts or familiar spirits,⁶²⁰ necromancers,⁶²¹ and the like. Whoever studies the Sabian religious books discovers that all of these were practiced by the Sabian adherents.

The Sabians concentrated all their rituals on working with animals and the soil, since those were the main elements of people's economic existence. Just as every person knows from experience the positive influence that sunbeams bring to fruits and vegetables, so he sees that all sorts of produce grow better on moonlit nights, and it wasn't hard to persuade the masses of the sun's divinity and that of the moon. Therefore, they instituted lots of processions, ceremonies, divine services, and all kinds of prayers to request from the gods good harvests and - through the processions - to obtain a good year. Of course the [p. 179] gods would grant the request when one served them as told, but they would send a curse on the fields when people rebel against them. Then the heavens wouldn't yield any rain, and the soil wouldn't yield any of its fruit.

Consequently, the earth and animals became the intermediaries between the gods and the people. As a result, one directed his worship to a high mountain, as well as to sheep and cattle. The latter two were holy in Egypt. The "holy" bull Osiris⁶²² was almost a demi-god. One wasn't allowed to shear sheep, nor to slaughter them for meat, nor to utilize their milk; even cats and mice were venerated. In the Land of Canaan, every mountain was considered holy.

In order to accustom Jews to the belief in one god, the Torah commanded them to ritually slaughter a sheep for the Passover sacrifice,⁶²³ and it commanded them that all sacrifices should be of bulls, sheep, and goats. Coming into the Land of Israel, they should annihilate idolatrous places of worship on the mountains.

Moreover, if the Jews do precisely the opposite of what idol worship requires, the produce will grow well and the trees will bear their fruit. However, if the Jews worship idols in order to get an abundant harvest, it will be exactly the opposite: no grass will grow for the livestock, the heavens will withhold rain, no produce will grow in the fields, one's life will be shortened, and the Israelite idol worshippers will be driven out of their good land.

With this introduction, Maimonides explains all the admonitions against idol worship in a general manner. Later on, we will have the opportunity to write about this when we come to the subject of certain admonitions for which one superficially sees absolutely no reason. Nevertheless,

⁶²⁰ Referred to in the original biblical Hebrew as *ov* and *yidoni*. In the original and parallel verse of Leviticus 19:31, these words appear as *ovot* and *yidanim*, in the plural.

⁶²¹ cf. Deuteronomy 18:10-11

⁶²² Actually, Osiris was the Egyptian god of fertility, agriculture, vegetation, life, death, the afterlife, and resurrection.

⁶²³ According to Exodus 12:1-20, that sacrifice is to take place on the 14th of the month of Nissan, before the festival of Passover starts.

knowing the era in which the Torah was given, and how the Sabian priests used to be engaged in worshipping their gods, these admonitions become understandable.

Chapter 19:⁶²⁴ Sacrifices

[p. 179] Maimonides dedicates chapter 32 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed* to explaining the reason for sacrifices in general, and he begins expressing himself in the following way:

When you observe the artistic work of the Creator in creating a living organism and its body parts, you can understand from there how the mind ought to work.

The “central station” from which movement proceeds to all the body parts, is the marrow of the brain, which is very soft, forming a mass. Towards the back, it becomes more solid; the spinal cord - still more solid; and the further from the centre it is the more solid it is. The nerves are different: thoroughly delicate - like, for example, that which moves the eyelids, or those of the cheeks that make smiles, and others of that sort - they proceed from [p. 180] the brain. However, the more solid body parts like tendons - whose task is to move the feet, hands, shoulders, and other hard body parts - proceed from the spinal cord. The same thing is true with the muscles; even though they come from the spinal cord, they are all still too weak to move the hard body parts. Divine wisdom set those up in the blood vessels, which get hardened almost like cartilage; the muscle continues further, until the border of the second body part where it is connected. There it is again soft, elastic and flexible; by means of that type of muscle, both body parts are connected and one could bend and twist the other. That metaphor is easy for everybody to understand, since no intellect is required for it to be understood; one can see it right in front of his eyes.

A second metaphor: This concerns every creature whose species must suck right after being born.⁶²⁵ This is due to the softness of the baby’s digestive apparatus that doesn’t let solid foods be digested. It requires milk that it gets from its mother’s breasts until its organs gradually get harder so as to be able to digest solid foods.

The same is true in connection with spiritual sustenance, which our Torah prepared for the people of Israel when its concepts were still immature, not grown up and not established. It wasn’t all at once that the Jewish people were able to transition from idolatry to pure religion; rather, the Jewish people got used to it on a gradual basis, level by level.

The idol worshippers concentrated their idol worship on sacrifices of living animals: sheep, swine, goats, and even mice and field mice, scorpions and tortoises. Concerning this, priests were appointed who pretended to know how to sacrifice and who intended at the time of their action to receive the genuine and proper influence from the star or constellation. The Torah couldn’t come suddenly and state, “stop the sacrifices, because the essential thing is a pure heart, proper intent, and good character traits.” Nobody would accept that, and people would look at that prophet in the

⁶²⁴ Mislabeled in the book as “Chapter 16.”

⁶²⁵ This is referring to mammals, which include humans but also deer, cattle, dogs, lions, whales, kangaroos, etc.

same way as if a prophet would come to us today and preach against praying and fasting, because God doesn't need the action but rather only the thought. The transition from one extreme (action without thought) to the other (thought without action) was too radical for people to be able to follow. For that reason, the Torah didn't annul the concept of sacrifices, but rather, desired to change its course so as to go on the proper path - not to worship idols, but rather the true God; not to propitiate the gods, but rather to elevate one's own thoughts to the Creator. Instead of false intentions, the Torah devoted its energies to direct them in the proper way. It transmitted these implicit intentions to the priests, who made those sacrifices, and in order for them to be able to be occupied with those concealed intentions and with worship of the pure God, the Creator made commandments concerning heave offerings,⁶²⁶ tithes,⁶²⁷ and other priestly gifts; the priestly income would come from these things.

[p. 181] Maimonides feels that he has violated one of the most important principles in the Torah by giving a reason for the sacrifices, which moved the people of Israel from the first level to the second. According to his reasoning, there's no essential intent and purpose for the sacrifices themselves; rather, they are a means of removing the Jewish people from idol worship and its sacrifices. Despite the verse, "they shall not slaughter their offerings to the demons,"⁶²⁸ and some statements in the Talmud that hint about it, common Jewish opinion is nonetheless against such an interpretation, which takes away the reason for the sacrifices and gives them a commonplace meaning. Therefore, writing to his student, Maimonides explains with the following words:

I know how hard it will be for you to digest my words, and you will ask: "In sacrifices there are obviously so many services, as well as distinct laws as to when, where, and how much to sacrifice. Are all of these there for their own sake, or are they merely a means to an end? Why could the Creator not utilize a direct path to wean us from idol worship?"

My answer is that in the Torah itself, we have a similar case, explaining the fact of God causing the Jews to change direction through the desert – using a difficult and far-flung route, instead of the easy and near one through Philistine territory. The reason for such a complicated route is because the wisdom of the One Above assumed that people who until now worked as slaves with brick and mortar could not suddenly become heroes in struggling against giants.⁶²⁹ Cowardice was thus in their blood and had become second nature for them. As a result, divine wisdom took them on the long route through the desert, where they could strengthen themselves in courage through living in freedom; in addition, the desert's difficulties would harden their character. As is well

⁶²⁶ *Terumat* in Hebrew.

⁶²⁷ *Ma'asrot* in Hebrew.

⁶²⁸ cf. Leviticus 17:7; the Hebrew word used for "demons" in this case, *se'irim*, normally means "he-goats." Indeed, Robert Alter (*The Five Books of Moses*, 2004, p. 617) refers to *se'irim* as "goat-demons," associated with the scapegoat or Azazel of the previous chapter of Leviticus.

⁶²⁹ See Numbers 13:28, as in "the children of Anak"; *anak* is the Hebrew word for "giant."

known, a luxurious lifestyle brings on weakness, and a hard life plants courage and bravery in people.

One may ask: Why all that commotion, when the Almighty was able in principle to place the necessary courage in them? The same question could be asked about the sacrifices. And there's a third question: For what purpose are good promises necessary for people to observe the divine commandments, and punishments for transgressing them, when God was able in principle to create people with a will to do good and an aversion to evil?

There is one answer for all three of these questions: The Creator who knows everything indeed was able to go straight to the first intention, to bring the people of Israel straight from Egypt to the Land of Israel through Philistine territory and also to create in them a natural desire to perform the divine commandments. However, at that point, it would have obviously been necessary for Him to modify the nature of all the people, and divine providence didn't want that. Displaying a miracle on one occasion, or to one person, is fine; but not an all-encompassing miracle for everyone! This would mean that God would have to modify the entire world.

Thus, Maimonides explains the limitation of sacrifices: they are made in a certain place, on a certain altar built in a certain form ("earthen altar"⁶³⁰) and only through one [p. 182] person (a priest). Such a person is entirely forbidden from making sacrifices⁶³¹ everywhere, he's limited to a specific time, and he's limited in terms of what mode of expression and what kind of style. That is because prayer is the first priority, while sacrifice is only the means to an end: first, to arouse the proper intent; and second, to move away from idol worship.

Therefore, the prophets were strongly against sacrifices. Samuel said to Saul: "Is God's desire for burnt offerings and sacrifices? Rather, His desire is for obedience."⁶³² Isaiah states: "'What need do I have for your multitude of sacrifices?' says God."⁶³³ The prophet Jeremiah says in the name of God: "I didn't speak with your ancestors who were taken out of Egypt concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices; rather, I commanded them to follow Me, so that I will be their God, and they will be My people."⁶³⁴ Many people could ask: Does this mean that those large portions of the Torah that deal with sacrificial commandments should not even exist? God's answer would be: "I haven't spoken with them about the sacrifices as a purpose in itself, but rather as a means to move away from idol worship and towards obedience to God. However, as it stands now, you are engaged in idol worship in any case and you aren't observing My commandments; as far as the sacrifices as a goal by themselves are concerned, I never commanded that to you."

⁶³⁰ Exodus 20:21 or 24

⁶³¹ Rabbi Kruger wrote *tefillah* (prayer), but his clear intention was the sacrificial service.

⁶³² cf. I Samuel 15:22

⁶³³ Isaiah 1:11

⁶³⁴ cf. Jeremiah 7:22-23

Afterwards, Maimonides explains the verses from Jeremiah differently, but we aren't dealing with this, since the intention is the same as the previous explanation.

The reason is because Maimonides' discussion of the sacrifices at that time provoked much commotion among traditional Jewry. The commentators struggled mightily to explain sacrifice in such a way that it would agree at least somewhat with the common Jewish conception. Rabbi Moses Narboni (ca. 1300-ca. 1362-68), whose opinion we have utilized in our explanation, is closer to the truth than the rest. The *Shem Tov*⁶³⁵ defends himself as follows: "I have only explained Maimonides' commentary and his reasoning. However, on this subject, I have an entirely different opinion than his, and God knows..." Even the courageous commentator Narboni states: "I, as a commentator, am only obligated to explain what Maimonides writes, but not to ascertain whether it is the truth."

The excuses of these commentators could also be considered that of the writer of these lines.

⁶³⁵ Literally in Hebrew, "Good Name"; that commentary was written by Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-ca. 1290 or 1295).

Chapter 20:⁶³⁶ Torah in⁶³⁷ the Struggle Against Idolatry

[p. 182] Just as the sacrifices - in Maimonides' opinion - were aimed against idolatry, so it was with all the laws regarding the behaviour of the people with the goal of controlling their lusts: to not get involved in eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse. This is because just as idolatry harms thought, so physical desires harm individuals physically and spiritually, resulting in a depraved society that is engrossed in unfulfilled lusts that engender sighing and moaning, worry and jealousy, hatred and war. All of these come from the making of pleasure, instead of a means to be able to be calm in order to devote oneself to a spiritual life, as a purpose for its own sake (see chapter 33, part 3, Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* for discussion at greater length).

[p. 183] In chapter 34 (in the same part of that book), Maimonides explains that all the regulations, laws, and reasons are appropriate for the majority, not taking into consideration those unique individuals who not only don't benefit from them but also suffer from them. For example: the command, "according to two witnesses ... shall a matter be established,"⁶³⁸ knowing that two people won't agree to tell a lie; perforce, that command ought to be an attempt to confirm the truth. However, it may happen that we would be required to sentence a person through two false witnesses, when the court, in its investigation, couldn't discover their falseness. The one being sentenced ought not to state, "the Torah is (God forbid) wrong, because the law was given for the community, for all times and generations, and cannot therefore be changed for the sake of an individual or a certain moment." If we would indeed make such an exception, the Torah and its divine eternity would be separated.

After these two necessary introductions, especially the second, where it's implied that no divine commandment can be annulled even when - in a certain generation or with respect to a certain person - its stated reason isn't valid, and he would thereby cease to be under the control of the divine commandments in this particular case. As previously stated (in chapter 35), the commandments are divided into 14 classes, namely:

1) Knowledge

This is to know that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is One, indivisible, incorporeal, immutable, eternally existent, and He is the One who gave the Torah through Moses our Master as His messenger, ordering us to believe in the true prophet, to respect learned people, those older than oneself, and to study Torah. All these divine commandments are quite understandable for everybody: Without faith in one Creator, the Torah would become unviable, the Prophets would become unviable, as well as authority, good character traits, and manners. Without respect for learned people, nobody would follow them; without believing in God, one would never have been

⁶³⁶ Mislabeled in the book as "Chapter 17."

⁶³⁷ The title for this chapter is mislabeled as "The Struggle Against Idolatry" when really, those two extra words "Torah in" should have prefaced the rest of that title.

⁶³⁸ Deuteronomy 19:15

able to accept the truth (like now: through an oath); without prayer to a higher power at a time of trouble, a person would be crushed by his natural problems. This means that if people believe that their troubles come about by chance, these troubles would seem twice as bad, further delaying the consequence of the punishment. (This is how Maimonides interprets the verse, “if you walk with Me by chance ... then I, too, will walk with you in a fury of chance.”⁶³⁹). The issue of repentance also belongs to this class; one is required to understand and know that every person has his weak moments, whether due to lust, honour, or earning a livelihood, that cause him to sin. If the sinner would not have any penitential outlet, so that he would be despairing of any remedy for his sin, he would gesture with his hands and say that “it’s a lost cause”; thus, he might well sin even further. However, through repentance, he can ultimately control himself even better than if he hadn’t sinned in the first place. This class of divine commandments is certainly obvious with respect to the major issues that accompany this particular type of commandment.

2) Admonitions Against Idol Worship and Magic

All of these admonitions have one goal: to break Jews away from idolatry (including worship of the stars and constellations) that the Sabeans practiced amongst themselves in Chaldea,⁶⁴⁰ Egypt, and Canaan, undergoing certain rituals through which they believed they would be able to help some [p. 184] people and even entire countries. One example is to take a certain number of plants (whether 3 or 7 or 10), going out to a field at a certain time when “this or that” constellation is correctly positioned. Other examples include taking several hairs from a certain animal and scraping dust from a cow’s horn. The idolators danced around those and yet other similar items from creatures, grasses, or minerals; they shouted, shrieked, wept, or laughed, and recited certain incantations. This was followed by a certain ceremony whereby the people made the plant, animal, or mineral materials into a molten image, or alternatively to burn the ash and let the cinders be scattered. There is a condition that a certain number of young women dressed in men’s red clothing, and the same amount of young men dressed in women’s clothing, would perform these ceremonies. Alternatively, there might be ten virgins, dressed in red, who would move forward over a certain area, with one pushing the other, and they would then move backward over the same area... It’s impossible to enumerate all the wild ceremonies that they used to perform. To do that would require us to translate all their books, which number in the hundreds.

As mentioned above, women occupied the main position in this entire procedure; therefore, there is a command from the Torah that “you shall not let a sorceress [*mekhashefah*] to live,”⁶⁴¹ not “a sorcerer [*mekhashef*].” Concerning all these wild ceremonies, dances, processions, fumigations, and burnings of various reptiles, beasts, fish, mice, leaves, and herbs - which was just foolish and for which there was no reasoning whatsoever - the pagan priests used to attempt to

⁶³⁹ cf. Leviticus 26:21,24, and 28; this is actually a mash-up of parts of those three verses. The word *keri* - which is unique to this passage in Leviticus - is translated here as “by chance,” but some other Pentateuch translations have instead “casually” or “contrary.”

⁶⁴⁰ A part of lower Mesopotamia.

⁶⁴¹ Exodus 22:17

perform all of them, persuading the masses that these rituals help prevent disease, miscarriage among women, hail that damages fruit, frost that damages crops, wild animals that prey on domestic animals and people; as well as to ensure that rain falls at the right time, that vineyards shouldn't be infested with worms, and so forth. All of these are misfortunes that come upon people and their property.

The Torah came out against all of this with strong commandments, such as: to not worship the sun, moon, or stars, because they cannot exert influence - not directly, not through trees, not through idols, as well as not through wild orgies, incantations, dances, and fumigations. According to the Torah, doing such things will result in the opposite of what is hoped for: there will be no rain, locusts will blight the fields, people will become sick, serpents and wild animals will run amok, and there will be hunger and thirst, as well as other sorts of mishaps. All these calamities, which idol worship makes great efforts to prevent, will come to pass precisely as predicted by the Torah. This won't be out of divine revenge, which one is forbidden to attribute to the Holy One, Blessed be He; rather, it is only to demonstrate the worthlessness of idol worship.

As a result, admonitions were directed by the Torah against every action of idol worship, especially those which have no relation to the intellect, and their usefulness isn't established from experience. This is because these idolatrous practices come only from foolish superstitions, from which "wise and discerning people"⁶⁴² must be removed. However, one can practice those things that are reasonable or useful, such as - for example - the principle from the Talmud: everything that can heal, even when it's used for idol worship, is permitted ("anything that contains an element of healing does not contain [an element] of the [prohibition against following the] ways of the Amorite"⁶⁴³). Maimonides, in chapter 37 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, brings forth many statements that back up this opinion.

[p. 185] In this way, Maimonides deals with the prohibition of cutting the edges of the head and the beard ("the shaving of the corner of the head and of the corner of the beard"⁶⁴⁴), as well as the prohibition against wearing wool-linen mixtures,⁶⁴⁵ since the putting together of flax and the wool of a sheep in one piece of clothing was one of the idolatrous ceremonies. The same was true for the prohibition of cross-dressing, beyond the previously mentioned reason, since in the Sabbeans' *tumtum*⁶⁴⁶ book, one discovers - as a remedy for a certain disease - that a woman would dress up in men's clothes with weapons and stand with her face looking towards the planet Mars, and a man would dress up in women's colourful clothes and stand with his face towards the planet Venus.

⁶⁴² Deuteronomy 4:6

⁶⁴³ BT *Shabbat* 67a; cf. BT *Hullin* 77b.

⁶⁴⁴ *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 37; cf. Leviticus 19:27.

⁶⁴⁵ *Sha'atnez* in Hebrew; Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:11.

⁶⁴⁶ *Tumtum* is a rabbinical term meaning one who has neither male nor female genitalia that are visible.

Maimonides thus explains the prohibition of deriving benefit from idol worship, in order for Jews to not feel regret when it comes to eliminating it. Even to break and recast an idol - and even to do something that is otherwise legal but is connected to idolatry⁶⁴⁷ - is forbidden, because of the possible misconception that one part of idol worship is mixed in other things and brings good luck and blessings, just like someone who is fooled into thinking that his luck came from the proceeds of selling idols. Similarly, if a person worships an animal god, he might be fooled into thinking that his cow will give more milk; he might be similarly fooled that moving into a house where a “lucky one”⁶⁴⁸ dwelled will bring good fortune. To move away from this foolishness, the Torah gave orders through the making of a covenant, invoking the testimony of Heaven and Earth to implore that nothing related to idol worship be accepted (“no part of the banned property may adhere to your hand”⁶⁴⁹), and the Torah warned: By accepting profit from selling idols, you shouldn’t think to become wealthier; on the contrary, through that bit of idolatry, you know that you have much to lose (“and you shall not bring an abomination into your house and become banned like it”⁶⁵⁰).

It’s interesting to note that the idolatrous priests, more than themselves being deceived by their opinions, sought to entice their regular supporters by intimidating them into thinking that if they don’t perform a certain remedy, their tree will be withered, or it won’t yield its fruit, or the house will burn down, or their child will die. And it could obviously happen once in a long while⁶⁵¹ that these predictions might come to pass, which truthfully would have been only a coincidence. These priests used to spread their doctrines everywhere and thus terrify the naïve, especially the women; therefore, everyone was affected by this form of worship.

One of the means of spreading such idolatrous opinions was for parents to lead their children through fire, in which idolators intimidated the parents into thinking that the children who don’t perform that ceremony would have to die within the year. What wouldn’t merciful mothers do for their children? In particular, when that ritual isn’t connected either with expenditure of money or with suffering. Thus, the Torah came forth with a strong penalty against that prevalent foolishness; the penalty for “one who causes his son or his daughter to pass through fire”⁶⁵² is stronger than for the other idolatrous ceremonies, because of the popularity that particular idol worship gained among parents.

In Maimonides’ time, it was the fashion - even among Jews - that old women would make a fumigant from certain herbs that gave off a foul smell when placed over a fire, and these old women would pass a newborn child through the fumigant smoke above the fire. In Maimonides’ opinion,

⁶⁴⁷ For example, selling idols to idol worshippers.

⁶⁴⁸ i.e. an idol

⁶⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 13:18

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid. 7:26

⁶⁵¹ The Hebrew word that Rabbi Kruger writes for this is most probably a misprint of *shmita*, a one-year period every seventh year in which the Torah commands farmers in the Land of Israel for their fields to lay fallow.

⁶⁵² Ibid. 18:10

this was a vestige of ancient fire worship. Protesting [p. 186] against those abhorrent customs, he remarks: It's striking that even 2000 years after the Torah began the fight against idol worship, there still remained a vestige.

The Asherah tree⁶⁵³ was prohibited, because some idol worshippers used to serve it in order for their fruit to not be damaged. They used to harvest a small amount of their fruit to make an offering to it, and the rest of it was consumed in a temple devoted to that kind of idol worship. If that weren't done, then ostensibly, no crop would grow and the fruit of the trees would be damaged.

⁶⁵³ Asherah is the name of the Canaanite goddess of motherhood and fertility; in ancient times, trees were often planted for the worship of that goddess.

Chapter 21:⁶⁵⁴ Reasons for *Orlah*⁶⁵⁵ and *Kilayim*⁶⁵⁶

[p. 186] The idolators would take the first fruits of a tree and would eat them in their temples with grand ceremonies. Therefore, the Torah forbade *orlah* - fruits from the first three years - such that one would neither eat them nor derive benefit from them. Why three years? Because one can plant a tree by means of regular planting, sinking,⁶⁵⁷ and grafting.⁶⁵⁸ A number of people distribute the first fruits up to the end of the first year, some other people up to the end of the second year, and yet other people up to the end of the third year. For that reason, the Torah prohibited *orlah* for all of those three years, even though there are those who don't plant trees that mature that quickly but rather sow seeds of those plants that take more than three years to grow to maturity. Nonetheless, the majority of people plant trees, and the Torah disregards the handful of those who plant from seeds. To convince ourselves that idolatrous priests are false in intimidating us into thinking that if one doesn't do things the way that idol worship requires the tree will wither at the end of the first year, we demonstrate against their falsehood by means of fruits from the fourth year, "to eat the fruit for God"⁶⁵⁹ - and not for idol worship.

Here's a second reason for the prohibition of *orlah*: The idolatrous priests would order their supporters to gather certain items; they were left to rot, and they would plant a tree next to those items. One should wait for a certain minute, when the sun stands at a certain point, and after much magic and many incantations, the putrefied dung is strewn around it, and thus the fruit would grow quite well. In order to prevent the Jews from doing that, they were warned not to eat the fruit for the first three years; the Jews therefore wouldn't need to accelerate the growth of the fruit through those idolatrous remedies.

Grafting means to pair up one species of tree with another. That used to be done through a horrid ceremony in which a beautiful girl would have sexual intercourse with a man, and at the same time she had to insert the new branch in the old trunk. Therefore, grafting was forbidden by the Torah, together with mixtures from seeds - also on account of the idolatrous ceremonies that [p. 187] the priests would conduct, consisting of five types of seeds, at the same time making circular movements in honour of the five planets, and other ceremonies in which they were making seven circular movements for all the seven stars. The prohibition was the same: to turn Jews away from idolatrous ceremonies.

3) Character Traits and Good Manners

⁶⁵⁴ Mislabelled in the book as "Chapter 18."

⁶⁵⁵ untithed fruit

⁶⁵⁶ forbidden mixtures

⁶⁵⁷ Bending the shoot into the ground, such that the end of the shoot turns upwards and then emerges from the ground independently.

⁶⁵⁸ cf. Mishnah tractate *Shevi'it* 2:6

⁶⁵⁹ That is, such fruit is sanctified and cannot be eaten just anywhere. In Hebrew, as mentioned by Rabbi Kruger in the original text, it's called *neta revai*, literally "the planting of the fourth [year]."

These consist of maintaining the character traits of mercy, liking friends, treating converts in a friendly way, criticizing friends who don't behave decently, treating widows and orphans with mercy - and yet other similar good character traits. One doesn't need to explain any of these qualities in great detail, because each person understands these qualities' usefulness for human society.

4) The Laws of Priestly Gifts

Since the tribe of Levi doesn't have any portion in the Land of Israel, one must financially support the entire tribe with heave offerings and tithes. Being freed from physical labour, they would be able to devote themselves to heavenly things, such as explaining the Torah, making decisions related to Jewish law, and "differentiating between pure and impure."

For that reason, the tribe of Levi has always been counted among those classes that must be supported in the community's reckoning of who is among the poor (the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow).⁶⁶⁰

However, when it comes to the second tithe, since one can only consume it for food, or - alternatively - its redemption money can be used only to buy food that one may eat only in Jerusalem, it will certainly be easy to give some of it to the needy on a gradual basis. In any case, the owner can't eat it up completely during the week in Jerusalem⁶⁶¹ and knows that there is bound to be a lot of leftover food. As a result, he doesn't feel the need to keep it away from poor people.

The obligation of going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year - Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot - is in order to gather all the Jews of every class, tribe, and lineage in one place. This would thereby strengthen national unity, and conditions would be conducive for people to befriend one another.

Regarding fruits from the fourth year, which one should only consume in Jerusalem: Even though that can be similar to idolatrous customs - as explained earlier with respect to the subject of *orlah* - nonetheless, the Torah has sanctified it as a heave offering, a dough offering, the first fruits offering, and the first of the shearing of wool⁶⁶² that one must deliver to the Israelite priest⁶⁶³ and have in mind to deliver every "first" offering to God. All of this is in order to get accustomed to the character trait of generosity, and to reduce the appetite for food and for acquiring money. That character trait would also express itself in the priestly gifts from the "peace offerings,"⁶⁶⁴ such as "the shoulder, the cheeks, and the stomach."⁶⁶⁵ The cheek is the first part of the animal's body; the shoulder (the right foreleg), that which stands out as the first extremity of the body that

⁶⁶⁰ cf. Deuteronomy 14:29 and 26:13

⁶⁶¹ During the three pilgrimage festivals.

⁶⁶² cf. Deuteronomy 18:4

⁶⁶³ *Kohen* in Hebrew; not to be confused with an idolatrous priest.

⁶⁶⁴ *Shelamim* in Hebrew.

⁶⁶⁵ Deuteronomy 18:3

had originally been formed in the mother's womb; and the stomach, the first site of the intestines. This symbolically means that the needs of heaven come before everything else, while individuals come afterwards.

The commandment of first fruits, beyond the aforementioned reason, includes the character trait of humility, not to become arrogant yourself, seeing your crops growing and your trees yielding their fruit. At such a moment, everyone must recall the past, [p. 188] when his ancestors, poor homeless Arameans (small in number and power), came to Egypt, where they were tormented through hard, servile labour. Only thanks to God, to whom one now brings the first ripe fruits, were these first fruits obtained in a country that flows with milk and honey, and whose agricultural products can be easily obtained. Now, their descendants thank the kindhearted Creator for the good things that have been done by God with the baskets of ripe fruit which everyone - rich and poor (even King Agrippa) - must themselves wear on their shoulders, all the way to the Israelite priest.⁶⁶⁶

The command to not forget that “you were a slave in the Land of Egypt”⁶⁶⁷ repeats itself at each opportunity. The laws of the male firstborn also belong to this type. They mandate that the firstborn of people and animals alike be delivered to God through an Israelite priest, beyond the aforementioned things that are also “first.” The reason for this is derived from the “memory” that Pharaoh liberated the Israelite slaves when God killed every firstborn in Egypt. From humans, one needs to redeem the firstborn boy, giving the Israelite priest 5 shekels.⁶⁶⁸ The firstborn of domestic animals, such as cattle, sheep, and goats,⁶⁶⁹ are sacrificed; those three species were always in existence in the Land of Israel among the Jews of the past, a people who were shepherds. However, as shepherds, they had few horses and camels. The proof for it is that among the booty that Jews brought over from Midian after the Jews' raid of Midian,⁶⁷⁰ no horses and camels were mentioned. What the Jews possessed instead were cattle and “flocks”⁶⁷¹ that included sheep and goats together, and also donkeys, the only species to ride on and with which to perform agricultural work. For that reason, the law of the firstborn is irrelevant for horses and camels, but rather, only for kosher animals and also for donkeys, for which one can't give an offering but can nonetheless redeem. Moreover, in order for the animal's owner to be compelled to redeem it with money, which belongs to the Israelite priest, the Torah commanded *arifa* (breaking the animal's neck).⁶⁷² Therefore, the law states: the divine commandment of redemption comes before *arifa*, since in principle, the latter came on account of the former.

⁶⁶⁶ See Deuteronomy 26:1-11.

⁶⁶⁷ e.g. Deuteronomy 5:15

⁶⁶⁸ The name of the ancient Israelite currency, as well as the modern Israeli one, is the *shekel* (*shekalim* in plural).

⁶⁶⁹ cf. Numbers 18:17

⁶⁷⁰ See Numbers 31.

⁶⁷¹ The word *tzon* is often translated simply as “sheep” in Hebrew, but in this context it's used in the sense of “flocks” or “small cattle.”

⁶⁷² e.g. Exodus 13:13; *arifa* takes place if the donkey isn't redeemed.

The laws of the sabbatical year and the Jubilee aren't in need of any explanation. Everyone understands how necessary it is for a country for natural riches to not be concentrated in just a few hands, leaving most of the people in perpetual poverty, which would later compel them to be enslaved by the rich minority. If everyone would comply with the Torah's principles - including "the land cannot be sold forever,"⁶⁷³ "a slave can be sold only after a number of years,"⁶⁷⁴ and "once in seven years, all the obligations must be wiped clean"⁶⁷⁵ - society would have a totally different appearance.

The laws of devoted property⁶⁷⁶ (handing over a field as consecrated property⁶⁷⁷) and of valuations⁶⁷⁸ (estimating the value of somebody or of one or more of his children and handing over the money as consecrated property) are aimed at habituating every person to honour the obligations for which he is responsible to his God, the Holy Temple, and the religious representatives (the Israelite priests) and not to think only about himself.

The character traits of mercy, kindness, and fairness are included in the admonitions that [p. 189] may require one to take an oath for a pledge, as well as with regard to all the laws concerning slaves, even Canaanite servants, whom one may not beat with cruelty. This is exemplified by the following verses: "one shall not take a lower or upper millstone as a pledge,"⁶⁷⁹ "what someone wears during the day and what someone wears during the night [as the minimum subsistence level],"⁶⁸⁰ and "the least [valuable of his] vessels."⁶⁸¹ On a related note, if one broke off a slave's tooth, let alone that one broke off a limb such that it doesn't grow back, the owner must release the slave as a penalty for his cruelty. If a slave-owner beats the slave to death, he would be judged as severely as others who commit murder. One shall not hand over a runaway slave back to his master, but rather, should shelter him⁶⁸² and - in the longer run - help the runaway slave settle in a suitable way, and he should not oppress the runaway slave. By contrast, one who committed a crime against another person and wants to protect himself from its consequences by means of his distinguished lineage, or by holding on to "the corners of the Altar," so that one should not take him away from the Altar to his death,⁶⁸³ is unworthy of protection and pity, since mercy for a murderer is cruelty to society at large. Whoever is of the opinion that there is a virtue in saving any person's life, no matter whether he's honest or a murderer, is a fool - and a harmful one at that.

⁶⁷³ cf. Leviticus 25:23

⁶⁷⁴ cf. Exodus 21:2 and Deuteronomy 15:12

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ In Hebrew, *herem*.

⁶⁷⁷ In Hebrew, *hekdesh*. This referred mainly to property devoted to the needs of the Holy Temple at the time that it existed; subsequent to the Temple's destruction, it has referred to property set aside to fulfill any divine commandment.

⁶⁷⁸ In Hebrew, *arkhin*.

⁶⁷⁹ Deuteronomy 24:6

⁶⁸⁰ e.g. *Rabbeinu Bahya* on Leviticus 27:8

⁶⁸¹ BT tractate *Gittin* 50a

⁶⁸² cf. Deuteronomy 23:16

⁶⁸³ cf. Exodus 21:14

Chapter 22:⁶⁸⁴ Reasons for Civil Laws and National-Religious Holidays

5) Damages

[p. 189] This class of divine commandments includes all the laws that have to do with conduct between one person and another. This also includes personal responsibility for every harm - whether from beasts, or from fire, or from a pit, or from anything else that results from one person not watching out for the other so as to prevent such harm. Such responsibility covers personal harm with respect to money, or health, or both.

Here, we see the rationality of the law, which treats with consideration one causing a misdeed just as much as one victimized by it. An example is an animal's tooth and foot (the damage that one's animal does with its teeth by eating produce, or trampling items with its feet). In a public domain, where everyone goes about and may go about, the damaging party is exempt, first of all because in the public domain it's impossible to watch over the animal, and secondly because the damaged party is himself responsible, seeing that he put something of his there. However, the damaging party is indeed responsible if his animal infiltrated the domain of the damaged party, which the damaged party was able to stop, and the damaging party needed to supervise his animal so that it shouldn't go in there. Nonetheless, for the damage caused by a horn (i.e. through goring), the damaging party is responsible even when he gets to the street, because he needs to know that he has an ox that can gore and he thus needs to guard it, while the passers-by, who may walk there, don't know to guard against it.

Moreover, in damages, there is also a difference between an animal not known by its owner to do damage⁶⁸⁵ [p. 190] and an animal whose propensity for doing damage is known by its owner.⁶⁸⁶ The former only pays half the damages, since his animal only exceptionally causes damage, and it's possible that his goring is only a chance occurrence, having taken place just once or twice. However, if such an event occurs three times consecutively, the animal's propensity to gore is already established as a fact, and thus the owner ought to have supervised it well. By not watching over the animal as he ought to have done, he is obligated to pay the entire damages. If that same animal killed a person, the property owner must pay for that life; one must kill the ox and must not even derive benefit from its meat, in order for the damages to be even greater than the loss of its value, so as to make the property owner sufficiently careful not to bear such great monetary damages in the future.

One need not explain the use of returning a lost object that one found to the one who lost that object. This is because aside from it being a good moral quality in and of itself to find a lost object and return it to its owner, returning the lost object reinforces reciprocity between these two people. Thus, in case he later loses something, one will be more likely to return it to him. (That same idea

⁶⁸⁴ Mislabeled in the book as "Chapter 19."

⁶⁸⁵ *Tam* in Hebrew.

⁶⁸⁶ *Muad* in Hebrew.

is expressed in the Mishnah, “these are the precepts whose fruits a person enjoys in This World but whose principal remains intact for him in the World to Come.”⁶⁸⁷)

The divine commandment of establishing three cities of refuge to which fugitives who killed a person inadvertently would escape because such a fugitive is in danger of being killed by an avenger of blood,⁶⁸⁸ whose anger wouldn’t allow him to believe in any justification for the killing - that also doesn’t need any explanation; everyone can understand it.

The tremendous procedure of bringing a heifer with its neck to be broken⁶⁸⁹ from the city closest to the location of the murder victim is aimed at bringing the murder to the attention of those living there, among whom the murderer is almost certainly located, or at least one whom the people suspect may be the murderer. The field where the heifer with the broken neck will be brought can therefore not ever be sown again. Consequently, the field owner will use all available opportunities to look for the murderer in order to save his field, knowing that as soon as he finds out who the murderer is, they certainly wouldn’t bring a heifer to that field to break its neck. Thus, nobody would spill the blood of the heifer while keeping silence, and would-be murderers would dare not put their life in danger anymore, knowing that later one would certainly find and punish them.

6) Punishments

This consists of punishing the criminal. The purpose of the punishments is understandable for everyone.

The main rule is that the punishment must fit the crime. If it’s murder, the murderer is put to death; if there is only monetary harm, the convicted person needs to make up for the harm done through the theft by restoring both what he took and an extra amount of equal size.

(It’s advisable to consult Maimonides’ *Guide to the Perplexed*, chapter 40⁶⁹⁰ of the third part, with regard to the topic of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,”⁶⁹¹ which he explains, and what the commentary of *Shem Tov*⁶⁹² states concerning it.)

A second rule: The penalty for a sin that is easy to commit is greater, in order for people to be deterred from committing such an act again. For that reason, a robber is obligated only to give up the principal (how much the robbery is worth), since robbers are so few. The property owner sees him and he appears across from him; even [p. 191] if he escapes, one knows who he is and the court can find him. Thus, the difficulties of committing robbery make the number of robbers very low. On the other hand, if a criminal is classified as a thief, the task of stealing becomes easier

⁶⁸⁷ Mishnah *Peah* 1:1; BT tractate *Shabbat* 127a

⁶⁸⁸ In Hebrew, *goel ha-dam*; see Numbers 35:19.

⁶⁸⁹ In Hebrew, *egla arufa*; see Deuteronomy 21:1-9.

⁶⁹⁰ Actually, chapter 41.

⁶⁹¹ Exodus 21:24

⁶⁹² Literally in Hebrew, “Good Name”; that commentary was written by Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-ca. 1290 or 1295).

since the property owner does not see that criminal appearing across from him. And when the thief escapes, he can't be found; for that reason, a thief needs to pay double. It's easier yet to steal sheep, since they are found standing in a field with a small number of shepherds, and there are no people present other than the shepherds as there are in cities. Furthermore, thieves are in the habit of selling or slaughtering the sheep right away, in order for it to be impossible for them to be caught; therefore, such a thief - after selling or slaughtering the sheep - must pay four times as much. It's yet easier to steal cattle, since with regard to sheep - because of their usual habit to graze one right next to the other in a group - it's easier for the shepherd to keep guard over them and harder for the thief to steal them. However, cattle graze in a more scattered fashion, and stealing them is thus easier; as a result, the thief - whether selling or slaughtering them - needs to pay five times as much. (Maimonides' explanation isn't like the reason the Talmud presents for the thief to pay fourfold and fivefold.)

In general, penalties are classified according to the following rules:

- 1) the greatness of the crime and the damage that arises from it;
- 2) a crime that is more frequent and which people commit more, requiring a bigger penalty to deter people from committing that crime again;
- 3) a crime for which, because of a strong temptation, only a still larger penalty can deter the criminal from doing that act again; and
- 4) a crime that one can do secretly, about which other people wouldn't find out, and the transgressor would be out of the court's reach. For such transgressions, one must pay a large penalty, in order for a one percent chance of being caught to be enough to prevent anyone from doing that transgression.

With this introduction, Maimonides explains the following punishments: The four types of death penalty by order of a court of law⁶⁹³; being cut off,⁶⁹⁴ i.e. death by the hand of God; lashes for insubordination⁶⁹⁵; and lashes for transgressions of different types. This indicates that each punishment is appropriate according to the greatness of the transgression, in accordance with the above introductions. We leave out the details, because that would distract us from the framework that we established for ourselves in this book.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹³ stoning, burning, beheading and strangulation

⁶⁹⁴ *Karet* in Hebrew

⁶⁹⁵ *Makat mardut* in Hebrew

⁶⁹⁶ i.e. *Sefer Shoftim* (Book of Judges) of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*; not to be confused with the prophetic biblical book of the same name.

7) Property, Inheritance, and Kinship

This division is entirely devoted to civil laws regarding property, inheritance, and kinship, for which nobody needs any explanation, seeing that the subject is well understood by everyone.

8) Seasons

Regarding the holidays that are celebrated during set times of the year, first comes the Sabbath. Beyond the Torah's reason of "six days did God create Heaven and Earth and all that are in them, and on the seventh day He rested,"⁶⁹⁷ and beyond the Sabbath's proof concerning the creation of the world, the cornerstone of all of faith, there is a further reason: in order to release people from their work for a seventh of their lives to enjoy rest and to be able to reflect upon sublime matters.

Yom Kippur,⁶⁹⁸ the day of forgiveness, is a day when people partake of nothing from the world and are preoccupied with serving God.

[p. 192] Passover lasts seven days, which correspond to the seven planets; on those days, we celebrate the Exodus from Egypt as a holiday.

Shavuot⁶⁹⁹ is the day of the Giving of the Torah. We conduct ourselves as if we're expecting a well-beloved guest, counting the days until he will actually come. This is our counting of the Omer.⁷⁰⁰ The Giving of the Torah lasted only one day; therefore, Shavuot is also only one day. However, if Passover were to be only one day, Shavuot would pass by unnoticed. Rosh Hashana⁷⁰¹ (the Day of Judgement) and Yom Kippur (the day of repentance) are similarly each for one day.

Sukkot⁷⁰² lasts for seven complete days at the end of the harvest season; similarly, all the nations celebrated the end of the harvest season, as Aristotle mentions. On that holiday, it is taught to us that we should remember past miracles by sitting in booths⁷⁰³ - and that we should thank God for our present-day houses and fields with vineyards, instead of living in deserts. That time of year, in which the heat is less and there's no rain falling quite yet, is the best time to sit in the booths. Also on Sukkot, we display the four plant species,⁷⁰⁴ all native to the Land of Israel, which keep their greenery and freshness for all of the seven days. These species are symbolic of the joy that the Israelites felt in leaving the desert for greener areas; instead of the terror of the desert sands, there were green plants which included the four species.

⁶⁹⁷ cf. Exodus 31:17

⁶⁹⁸ the Day of Atonement

⁶⁹⁹ the Festival of Weeks

⁷⁰⁰ The sheaf of the wave offering that is given on the second day of Passover; it is from that point that 49 days are counted right up until just before Shavuot.

⁷⁰¹ The Jewish New Year; literally in Hebrew, "the head of the year."

⁷⁰² Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths

⁷⁰³ *Sukkot* (*sukkah* in singular) in Hebrew.

⁷⁰⁴ These species consist of palm branches, myrtle branches, willow branches, and a citron.

Chapter 23:⁷⁰⁵ Crimes and Criminals⁷⁰⁶

[p. 192] The prohibition of eating blood is also aimed - like the rest of that type of admonition - at turning oneself away from idol worshippers who would drink blood and deliver an offering to the priests. Plus, on account of tremendous habit, the Torah warns to “only be strong not to eat the blood”⁷⁰⁷ - i.e. to manage to overcome the generally accepted custom to eat blood.

As far as the punishment of being cut off⁷⁰⁸ for eating fat, for eating leavened bread on Passover, for not fasting on Yom Kippur, and others of this type of commandment in which one is ordered to not do something are concerned, all of these have one goal: to control Jews’ actions, whether those that commemorate historic events, or those that make them turn away from idol worship and confirm belief in a created world by means of one Creator who has existed forever and ever, and is immutable.

The same punishment applies to one who eats the remainder of the offering,⁷⁰⁹ makes a rejected offering,⁷¹⁰ or to an impure person who eats something holy; this is all intended to add even more importance to the offering.

However, a death sentence by order of a court of law is only applied to the greatest transgressions, whether undermining the foundations of religious belief or those of good manners. These major transgressions include [p. 193] idol worship, sexual immorality, homicide, violating the Sabbath, statements by false prophets, or a rebellious elder.⁷¹¹ The last two of these go against the Torah, whether one preaches idol worship (in the case of false prophets) or compromises the integrity of the Torah (in the case of the rebellious elder), as we will explain later.

These same punishments are brought upon those who possess tremendous audacity, such as a) hitting or even just cursing one’s father and mother⁷¹² - an action that compromises the basis of family life, which is the primary basis of discipline in human society - and b) the wayward and rebellious son⁷¹³ - whose desire to gorge himself and guzzle will lead him to commit theft and murder. The same reasoning also applies to whoever digs under a house to steal something⁷¹⁴ (i.e. breaking in) and steals somebody and sells him (i.e. when one captures a Jew and sells him as a slave). Breaking into a house, in this case, entails having the intention to kill the property owner

⁷⁰⁵ Mislabelled in the book as “Chapter 20.”

⁷⁰⁶ This whole chapter is an elaboration on the sixth class of divine commandments that deal with punishment, as outlined in part of the previous chapter.

⁷⁰⁷ Deuteronomy 12:23

⁷⁰⁸ in Hebrew, *karet*

⁷⁰⁹ *notar* in Hebrew (referring to an offering that remains on the third day after the slaughter); Leviticus 19:6

⁷¹⁰ *pigul* in Hebrew (referring to an offering that is eaten on the third day after the slaughter); Leviticus 19:7

⁷¹¹ *zaken mamre* in Hebrew; Deuteronomy 17:8-13

⁷¹² See Exodus 21:15 and 17.

⁷¹³ *ben sorer u-moreh* in Hebrew; Deuteronomy 21:18-21

⁷¹⁴ *ba-maḥteret* in Hebrew; cf. Exodus 22:1 and Jeremiah 2:34

should the owner stand in the thief's way. Kidnapping a person and selling him⁷¹⁵ refers to a struggle with the one who is captured, or that one is handed over to death from his buyer's hand.

Not all the sexual offences are punishable by death: just those that are easy to commit, more attractive, and shameful. Those who commit the other sexual offences only receive the punishment of being cut off.

As well, not all forms of idol worship are punishable with death by order of a court of law. It's only the fundamental forms of idol worship - such as praying to idols, or prophesying in their name, or using magic - that are punishable in that manner.

The people should pay attention to the need for judges and policemen. Judges are there to determine the penalty, while the policemen are there to enforce it. Beyond the local judges of every city, there needs to be a high court in Jerusalem which has the last word with regard to a legal decision. At the same time, there certainly have to be established laws with regard to witnesses, as they are interrogated and are punished for stating false testimony (i.e. colluding witnesses⁷¹⁶).

The king that Jews may appoint must be of Jewish descent; he should himself be able to read publicly from the Torah; and the court should give him the authority to force the people to implement what he ordains.

Knowing that the Torah is eternal, but that time doesn't stand still, the Jewish people change concepts and lifestyles for themselves. First, from a nation wandering in the desert, it became a nation with possessions tied to the earth. Second, the Jews changed from farmers to businesspeople. Third, they transitioned from being citizens of one country to being exiled to foreign countries. Thus, in order to avoid any possible modification that an individual or a group might desire to carry out due to certain changed circumstances, the Torah warns in a stern fashion: "You shall not add to, and you shall not subtract from, the word that I command you."⁷¹⁷ Otherwise, people might think that the Torah wasn't given by God, but rather made by people; people might thus think that the Torah isn't eternal at all.

The Torah, however, is indeed eternal; therefore, courts of law from each generation may make safeguards in order for the divine commandments to be protected, and the safeguards themselves remain [p. 194] eternal. These same courts of law may also abolish a certain divine commandment, by means of a "ruling of the hour" (a temporary legal ruling) but not on a permanent basis (for future generations).

Thus, the authorities only permitted the Great Court of Law (the Sanhedrin) - the highest jurisdiction - to temporarily annul a commandment or a part thereof, but these authorities forbade an individual to do this, even if he might be the best Torah scholar among the Jews. If this were to

⁷¹⁵ Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7

⁷¹⁶ BT tractate *Sanhedrin* 27a

⁷¹⁷ cf. Deuteronomy 4:2 and 13:1

be allowed to every individual, the entire aim that the Torah set out for itself - to make out of all the individual Jews a unified nation with one Torah - would have been annulled.

With that, the great punishment (the death penalty) for a rebellious elder is understandable. This occurs when one member of the Great Court of Law goes public with his opinion contrary to the ruling of everyone else or at least the majority of them, thus violating the negative commandment to not “pervert [the law] in support of the many”.⁷¹⁸

A person can transgress through one of the following four circumstances: being compelled by somebody to do something (*anus*),⁷¹⁹ not knowing that such and such is a transgression (*shogeg*), knowing clearly that that is a transgression but not being able to withhold the temptation (*mezid*), and doing it entirely out of spite, in a demonstrative way (*be-yad ramah*).⁷²⁰

The *anus* isn't to be punished and doesn't have the spirit of sin inside of him. An example is the law of the young betrothed woman who is raped by someone in the field, where her cries couldn't be found reverberating in anyone's ears such that someone would be able to come to help her.⁷²¹ From that, one infers in every circumstance that nobody can consider the *anus* as someone committing a transgression.

By contrast, one can certainly think of the *shogeg* as someone committing a transgression. This is because if a person considered carefully before committing such a sin, he wouldn't have erred. This is therefore only an act of negligence, without having evil intent; as a result, no penalty is brought upon him, and he indeed only needs to bring a sin offering.

Here lies the distinction between an individual and the representatives of the general public - namely, the court of law: If an individual acts or makes a ruling to others that they should behave in accordance with his interpretation, against the majority in a court of law, he would be a *mezid* even while seeming to be a *shogeg*. As a result, the death penalty is brought upon a rebellious elder, even though his making the legal ruling wasn't against the Torah, but rather, in accordance with his opinion. Only the Great Court of Law, if it turns out to have made a mistake in the law, would consider him a *shogeg*, but such a *shogeg* is close to being a *mezid*, for which the private individual would indeed be punished and for which the Great Court of Law wouldn't be.

The *mezid* was already explained earlier, and his punishment is in accordance with the transgression. This could consist of death by order of a court of law, or flogging (for transgressing a negative commandment for which an action was involved), or individual lashes for

⁷¹⁸ Exodus 23:2; this is in a case where a judge voices an opinion according to his understanding of the law and of the evidence, and he must not change his opinion even if the majority disagree with him, if he considers that majority to be perverting the law either by mistake or intentionally.

⁷¹⁹ Pronounced ah-NOOS in Hebrew.

⁷²⁰ cf. Numbers 15:30

⁷²¹ *na'arah me'orasah*; Deuteronomy 22:23-29

insubordination (for transgressing a negative commandment for which an action wasn't involved), or a monetary fine.

Worst of all is one who transgresses in a spiteful fashion, thereby showing that he aims only to transgress in pure opposition to the Torah, without deriving any benefit from it. An example is idol worship, in which the sinner thinks that the world is eternal. This is also true for other, similar transgressions, for which the punishment wouldn't have otherwise been quite as severe; but if he does it in a demonstrative way, death by order of a court of law is brought upon him. In such a case, the death penalty can be promulgated even for [p. 195] eating meat and milk together, for wearing a wool-linen mixture, or for rounding the corners of one's hair. No death penalty comes for the sake of those transgressions (death as an innate punishment); rather, it comes for the sake of heresy (death for apostasy). The proof is from the two and one-half tribes⁷²² that remained on their side of the River Jordan and built an altar. In that story, the other tribes contended that the two and one-half tribes committed a tremendous sin, assuming that that meant they were withdrawing from following the Torah, and the other tribes were later reassured upon learning of the true intention of the two and one-half tribes.⁷²³

This is the reason why the death penalty is brought upon a wayward city⁷²⁴ for merely stating, "let's go and worship idols." Such also needs to be the law if a Jewish community decides to transgress a certain divine commandment. Thus, the punishment isn't the death penalty on account of the sin, but rather, the death penalty on account of heresy.

Amalek's punishment isn't on account of revenge, but rather to intimidate the neighbouring nations into not wanting to follow Amalek's example of attacking an exhausted nation from behind in order to avoid its punishment. Thus, if one wicked nation is found, those around it should be fearful of aiding it in such an act.

Amalek assaulted Jews with the sword; its punishment is, likewise, with the sword. As for Ammon and Moab, who turned away the Jews on account of coldness and alienation, the punishment is that their descendants won't be able to enter into the Jewish people.

⁷²² The tribes of Reuben and Gad, plus a portion of the tribe of Manasseh.

⁷²³ Joshua 22:9-34

⁷²⁴ *ir ha-nidahat* in Hebrew; Deuteronomy 13:13-19

Chapter 24:⁷²⁵ The Animal Inside People⁷²⁶

[p. 195] The warnings in connection to military life in a camp are entirely understandable, knowing what cleanliness in such places entails, when an entire army dwells compactly together.

Global civilization has one goal for itself: to restrain the animal in people.

This is because people possess pernicious and brutal character traits on account of their natural tendencies. They are more cruel than tigers and more poisonous than snakes. No animal devours its own kind; humankind alone does this. We don't find cannibalism anywhere beyond human cannibalism.

Fortunately, the Creator imbued in people a soul with a tendency to do good and to regret having done evil. Thus, that feeling - which contemporary philosophers⁷²⁷ call the "categorical imperative" - lays the cornerstone for civilization and ethics, statutes derived from society. It is that feeling that has acted like a policeman, forcing individuals to restrain their natural tendencies under the pressure of justice and public opinion.

However, the "animal inside people," which in peacetime is kept under [p. 196] wraps, runs wild and free during wartime, when that same public opinion is put to the test, and the war hero becomes the darling of the community. At that moment, that soldier is released from all human laws. Blood is less than water, and ethics is trampled under the soldier's rough feet. Lives are made cheap. Borders are wiped off the map. The distinction between what is mine and what is yours is erased, and all is now mine.

Even in our own time, moral laws are disregarded in the army. In previous eras, the soldier was worse than an animal, thanks to his reasoning and his weapons, which an animal doesn't have and he does.

To control such evil acts, the Torah commanded certain laws, all with the goal of remembering the verse, "for the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp,"⁷²⁸ so that the soldier shouldn't make any mistake. That is to say that a soldier may think that God remained at home in the Temple, and here in the camp you're free to do what your animalistic nature desires, but no - the same verse goes on to say, "Your camp shall be holy."⁷²⁹ This verse was given to signify that at home, you are commanded to be holy, and you should also be like that in the military camp. The soldier should remember that power and strength alone don't bring forth victory; it is only with God's help that victory comes, since He loves you on account of the ancestry of the forefathers and your

⁷²⁵ Mislabelled in the book as "Chapter 21."

⁷²⁶ The first half of this chapter is a continuation of the previous chapter's elaboration on the sixth class of divine commandments that deal with punishment, as outlined in part of chapter 22.

⁷²⁷ For example, Immanuel Kant.

⁷²⁸ Deuteronomy 23:15

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

own good deeds. For this reason, the soldier should be careful, as that same verse continues, “He should not see a shamefully exposed thing among you and turn back from you”⁷³⁰ - upon noticing your scandalous conduct, He will forsake you.

To reinforce that principle and in order to remember it, the order came to have a set place for a toilet and to immediately conceal the excrement. Thus, one got used to complying with all hygienic measures; neglecting to follow those measures would bring about cholera and other epidemic diseases in the camps. Someone with seminal emissions had to leave the camp until the sunset of the next day,⁷³¹ thereby avoiding the evil sexual act that is rampant even in present-day armies, and especially in the past. The Torah commandment specifies not to destroy fruit trees the way non-Jewish soldiers do. The commandments are also there in order to avoid the destruction of the enemy’s property in general, not for the purpose of war but rather only to do damage.

Concerning the law of a beautiful captive woman:⁷³² One is allowed to take a beautiful woman (even the wife of another man) into captivity for himself; the Torah thus gave freedom to the evil inclination. However, even that freedom must be restrained by the Torah ordaining a number of good character traits:

- 1) sexual activity with the woman should not take place in the camp, but rather only upon first bringing her into his house;
- 2) sexual activity should only be done once, in order to satisfy the evil inclination;
- 3) he should not interfere with her emotions every time she isn’t calm and the sadness is still fresh in her heart, mourning her father and mother. He must allow her to cry over the loss with tears and other signs of sadness, rather than calming her down. Just as singing and dancing are emotional responses to a sudden happy occasion, so sadness is an emotional response on the part of one who has experienced a tremendous misfortune;
- 4)⁷³³ in the month of her sadness, she can conduct herself however she wants, even worshipping idols in her house (a rare tolerance that has no parallel even today, [p. 197] thousands of years later); and
- 5)⁷³⁴ later, even if he doesn’t love her anymore, she isn’t allowed to be sold as a slave and he can’t even make her his own maidservant, “since she was his wife.” Even though she was captured against her will, she is nonetheless a wife, and as such, she has the legal status of his other wives: this means to either free her or at least not to sell her.

⁷³⁰ Ibid.

⁷³¹ cf. Leviticus 15:16 and Deuteronomy 23:11-12

⁷³² cf. Deuteronomy 21:10-14

⁷³³ Misprinted as point #3.

⁷³⁴ Misprinted as point #4.

(The seventh and eighth classes of divine commandments - laws of money and of holidays - were already explained two chapters ago. The ninth class of commandments - the love of God - also belongs to the latter category.)

10) Laws Having to Do With the Holy Temple, its Vessels, and its Clergy (Priests and Levites)

In human nature, there is a propensity to build temples - and erect monuments with statues - on the highest mountains, such that they would be seen and revered by everyone looking up at them from below. This is what the idol worshippers would do; therefore, Abraham our Forefather chose Mount Moriah. This is because if only one could bring forth the right intention, one may leave behind a respectable form of divine service.

(It seems that Maimonides derives this from the simple meaning of “on one of the mountains which I shall tell you,”⁷³⁵ that the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave Abraham the option to choose “one of the many mountains,” and Abraham our Forefather chose the highest of them, Mount Moriah, from which to proclaim the unity and omnipotence of the Creator.)

It is for that reason, however, that the same Abraham our Forefather venerated the western side instead of the eastern side of the mountain that was venerated by the idol worshippers. The idolators would - in their worship - demonstrate the sun’s dominance and omnipotence that appears as it rises, while Abraham needed to display the sun’s weakness and transience, which one sees in its setting on the western side. Leaving the eastern side holy would certainly have defeated this purpose.

A proof for this can be found in the Prophet Ezekiel, who saw the sinners of Jerusalem in his time, as they jostled themselves onto the eastern side of the Temple Mount towards the sun, with their backs to the Sanctuary.⁷³⁶ This proves that as soon as the sinners turned away from pure belief and turned themselves into idol worshippers, the eastern side of the mountain became holy instead of the western side.

The fact that the Torah didn’t explicitly state the name of Mount Moriah, but merely hinted at it in the words, “the place that God will choose,”⁷³⁷ is because of the following three considerations:

- 1) the nations of the world, knowing that that place had a lot of meaning for the Jews, would concentrate all their warlike powers on it so as to not allow the mountain to fall into Jewish hands;
- 2) those who owned the place at that time would ravage it, and for Jews it would remain a ruined site; and

⁷³⁵ Genesis 22:2

⁷³⁶ cf. Ezekiel 8:16

⁷³⁷ See, for example, Deuteronomy 12:26 and 15:20.

3) being the strongest of all these considerations, each of the twelve tribes would [p. 198] demand that the Sanctuary should fall into its portion, and this would lead to conflict between the tribes.

Therefore, the secret was first revealed after the Israelites appointed a king, whose word became law for everyone, and whose command removed all quarrels.

Idol worshippers used to build temples in the name of a certain star or constellation, and they would install their statues there. Against that backdrop, the order was issued for us to build a Holy Temple in the name of the true Creator. We placed therein the two tablets which contain the words “I am the Lord your God” and “you shall not have any other gods in My presence,”⁷³⁸ which sustain the full notion of the unity of the Creator.

It is well-known that the fundamental belief in prophecy takes precedence over belief in the Torah, because without prophecy no Torah is possible, and the prophet receives his prophecy only through the mediation of an angel. Belief in angels, consequently, comes prior to belief in prophets. The first prophecy of Moses our Master, at the burning bush, came through an angel. Therefore, an angel comes first, prophecy comes second, and the Torah comes last. As a result, in order to oppose the Sabians (worshippers of stars and constellations) - who ascribe divinity to constellations and trees (as explained earlier) and who believe that there’s no god beyond those that are physically present - the Torah needed to demonstrate the existence of God, who doesn’t have any body and who doesn’t have any force in a body, but rather is the One who created everything and who stands apart from everyone. Following Him there are separate intelligences [*sekhalim nivdalim*],⁷³⁹ which are also incorporeal intellects. They receive upon themselves the abundance of the unique God, but they aren’t like Him - one simple unity. Rather, these incorporeal intellects are divided into the large and the small, in such a way that they have number and extent. These are the beings that bring prophecy to the prophet - no Asherah tree⁷⁴⁰ and no constellation or star could bring prophecy to the prophet.

This is the reason for the two cherubs on the Ark of Testimony,⁷⁴¹ where the two tablets are found. (Cherubs refer to the angels, and two constitutes the start of plurality so as not to arouse mistaken thoughts of their divinity were there to be only one angel.)

The Holy Temple’s beautiful tables and vessels, the physical perfection and sartorial beauty of the Israelite priests⁷⁴² (a priest with bodily defects is disqualified), and the lovely songs and musical instruments performed in the Temple are all there for the following reason: in order to arouse, in the worshipper, the requisite sincere feelings towards the Holy Temple and to glorify the Temple. We must also consider the incense that brings forth an overpowering smell (according to the

⁷³⁸ That is, the first two of the Ten Commandments, as mentioned in both Exodus 20:2-3 and Deuteronomy 5:6-7.

⁷³⁹ That is, the angels.

⁷⁴⁰ Asherah is the name of the Canaanite goddess of motherhood and fertility; in ancient times, trees were often planted for the worship of that goddess.

⁷⁴¹ See, for example, Exodus 26:33.

⁷⁴² *Kohanim* in Hebrew.

Talmud, it was sensed as far away as Jericho). There is an additional reason: in the Temple, where one slaughtered animals and incinerated the meat with fire, a bad smell must come forth, and the incense removed that bad smell.

This is how Maimonides thinks it through, giving the same reasons for all the vessels and the entire service in the Holy Temple - apart from the showbread,⁷⁴³ for which he couldn't find any reason despite his best efforts.

⁷⁴³ *Leḥem ha-Panim* (literally, "bread of the faces") in Hebrew; based on a commentary on Exodus 25:30.

Chapter 25:⁷⁴⁴ Reasons for Sacrifices in General

11) The Reasons for Sacrifices, Explained Separately For Each Specific Commandment

[p. 199] According to the *Targum* of Onkelos (c. 35-120 CE)⁷⁴⁵ on the Torah, the ancient Egyptians used to worship the constellation Aries. Therefore, it was strictly forbidden for them to kill a sheep, and they despised whoever feeds sheep, shears their wool, and milks their milk. With that, the following verse can be explained, “behold, if we were to sacrifice the abomination of Egypt before their eyes, will they not stone us?”⁷⁴⁶ (Can it be, then, that they wouldn’t stone us to death, seeing that we are killing off Egypt’s sanctity?)

We also know that there are sects of idolators (the Sabians) that worship demons, and they thought that the demons presented themselves to people in the form of goats, from which they took the name of *se’irim*, associated with both goats and demons. (A Torah verse states, “they shall no longer sacrifice their offerings to the demons,”⁷⁴⁷ and once more in the Torah, in the weekly *sidra* or *parashah* of *Ha’azinu*,⁷⁴⁸ “they sacrificed to the demons.”⁷⁴⁹) Thus, for that reason, those sects of idol worshippers considered it a great sin to slaughter goats, eat their meat, and use their hides and their milk.

We also know that almost all idolators considered it a great transgression to slaughter cattle, and up to this day there are still people in India who don’t slaughter any cattle, oxen, and the like, even among those who slaughter sheep and goats.

The best piece of evidence that slaughtering sheep isn’t life-threatening (as the Egyptian priests had wished to fool their followers into thinking) is that the Torah commanded that one should slaughter a lamb for the Passover sacrifice, smearing its blood on the outer doorposts, thereby demonstrating that its ritual slaughter is merely a means of survival. Thus, one completely prevents “the destroyer from coming inside the house to afflict its residents.” Becoming politically and economically freed from Egypt, the Jews needed to show that they had also become spiritually freed from those dangers.

The idolators, wanting to give more importance to their worship, devoted themselves to sacrificing lions, bears, and other wild animals, just as described in their *Tumtum*⁷⁵⁰ book. The

⁷⁴⁴ Mislabelled in the book as “Chapter 22.”

⁷⁴⁵ Onkelos’ translation of the Bible in Aramaic; it appears right next to many of the original Hebrew biblical texts, and it is more or less a literal translation, with some exceptions here and there.

⁷⁴⁶ Exodus 8:22

⁷⁴⁷ Leviticus 17:7; the Hebrew word used for “demons” in this case, *se’irim*, normally means “he-goats.” Indeed, Robert Alter (*The Five Books of Moses*, 2004, p. 617) refers to *se’irim* as “goat-demons,” associated with the scapegoat or Azazel of the previous chapter of Leviticus.

⁷⁴⁸ *Sidra* and *parashah* are, respectively, Aramaic and Hebrew for the weekly section of the Torah to be read on Sabbath morning. That of *Ha’azinu* is found towards the end of Deuteronomy, the last Book of the Pentateuch.

⁷⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 32:17

⁷⁵⁰ *Tumtum* is a rabbinical term meaning one who has neither male nor female genitalia that are visible.

Jewish Torah only required a pure thought and good character traits; this was facilitated by the sacrificial service [*avodah*], which ordained to bring as sacrifices only domestic animals, those species that are easy to obtain. Since not every Jew is wealthy enough to make a sacrificial offering of an animal, one is allowed to bring a bird. The bird should be, though, of the easiest type that one can get and the most suitable of that type, which is the dove (possibly because of its sexual modesty, as the Talmudic sages state). If one is still poorer, [p. 200] it's sufficient to obtain baked goods from those types that one would bake at that time, in an oven or on a pan. The very poor can make a flour offering. As for whoever isn't able or willing to do even that, his solution is to make a pledge that he should not need to be bound by his word, which he can't keep.

In the same book (*Tumtum*), it is written that one should only make an offering with leavened bread and the sacrificial meat should be seasoned with honey. For that reason, Jews are warned against using both of these types ("for you shall not turn to smoke any leaven nor any honey as a fire-offering to God"⁷⁵¹). The Torah indeed commands us to use salt for every offering ("on each of your offerings you shall offer salt"⁷⁵²) - in opposition to the idolators' ban on the use of salt in an offering.

Because the main thing is a good heart and proper character traits, the acquisition of the sacrifice must therefore come from a good place - neither from the hiring of a prostitute nor the price of dogs,⁷⁵³ both of which were customs with idol worshippers, when a woman would prostitute herself for a price and the money would be devoted to the temple, and also not from stolen or robbed goods but rather from one's own goods or from one's own flock or dove's nest. The sacrifice should come from a pure heart. Therefore, the sacrificial item may not be one that is defective, and one may not replace a bad object with a good one and vice versa, since doing so can instill a thought of deception. The same intention is also in force to add a fifth of the value of the misappropriated sacrifice over and above what a person has taken,⁷⁵⁴ in order to redeem it from the status of consecrated property,⁷⁵⁵ since in this case it goes against one's interests, which would be to want to economize and evaluate a lesser value for the consecrated property.

To accustom people to cleanliness and to look upon the sacrificial offering with due respect, the order came for the entire sacrifice to be washed clean ("and he shall wash the innards and the feet in water"⁷⁵⁶) even though those body parts had, in any case, already been burned in fire in the altar. It is inevitable for burning flesh and entrails to become pungent and cause a bad odour. In order to avoid this, which can lead to a repugnance for these body parts, one is commanded to

⁷⁵¹ Leviticus 2:11

⁷⁵² *ibid.* 2:13

⁷⁵³ cf. Deuteronomy 23:19

⁷⁵⁴ cf. Leviticus 5:16

⁷⁵⁵ In Hebrew, *hekdesh*. This referred mainly to property devoted to the needs of the Holy Temple at the time that it existed; subsequent to the Temple's destruction, it has referred to property set aside to fulfill any divine commandment.

⁷⁵⁶ Leviticus 1:13

offer frankincense with it to drive out the bad smell. This is just like the incense offering, which had the same goal in the Holy Temple. That same intention was present in the other admonitions: Only people descended from illustrious figures should be able to eat it, only a priest, and moreover, he also shouldn't be impure, nor should he be uncircumcised. At the same time, he shouldn't have any bad intention (e.g. to eat the sacrificial meat beyond its proper time and place), and the meat should be fresh. As a result, sacrificed meat can be eaten only on the day of the sacrifice plus the following night, and the peace offerings [*shelamim*] (and, on a lower level, offerings of lesser sanctity [*kodashim kalim*]) only on the day of the sacrifice, the following night, and the morrow. The trespass offering [*me'ilah*] that a "stranger" [non-priest] was obliged to bring for illicitly eating sacrificial meat - also has the same goal, to give more importance to holiness.

One must burn the flour offering [*minḥah*] offered by a priest. If not, the priest would have brought the flour offering, to be consumed by himself, and it would be as if he hadn't sacrificed anything.

All the laws of the Passover sacrifice are understandable, knowing that [p. 201] the Torah thereby wanted Jews to demonstrate hurriedness, indicating the "haste"⁷⁵⁷ of the exodus from Egypt through their actions.

This is because unleavened bread takes a shorter time to bake than leavened bread. After the Passover sacrifice, everyone in the house should eat in as much haste as people who are preparing to go on the road, with girded loins and staffs in one's hands, and the portions of the Passover lamb aren't separated but rather are taken from the whole, and no bone from the lamb gets broken. Breaking the bones is a task that one doesn't do if one doesn't have enough time; neither can one extract all the hidden pieces of bone marrow. One also can't send any part of the bone or its marrow from one house to another. Nobody from that house should appear outside so that the multitudes [of Egyptians] outside don't get upset and agitated on account of the plague of the firstborn and hurt any person [of the Israelites] who ventured outside.

That admonition, originally based on the Passover sacrifice but perpetuated ever since, is in order for one to not rely on someone else to obtain the meat from the Passover sacrifice but rather to take care of it for himself if possible. If one expects to be invited by someone else but ends up without an invitation, he will remain without a Passover sacrifice.

No uncircumcised person is allowed to eat from that sacrifice, since the divine commandment of circumcision was one cause which led to the redemption. This is because the Jews of that time were close to the Egyptians and their idol worship. A large proportion of them even stopped observing Abraham our Forefather's commandment of circumcision, in order to emulate the citizens of that country. The blood of the Passover sacrifice was the foremost impetus for the deliverance, hereby demonstrating the mingling of the spiritual redemption and the blood of circumcision - in order to demonstrate their return to Jewish roots. This is expressed in the words

⁷⁵⁷ Exodus 12:11; in Hebrew, *be-ḥipazon* (literally, "in haste").

“in your bloods, live!”⁷⁵⁸ (two kinds of blood instead of “in your blood” in one, as a material noun⁷⁵⁹ ought to come forth).

Blood was considered among the idolators as a food of the demons, whom they worshipped. Eating blood was considered eating with the gods at the same table, thus becoming friendly with them; one thereby gained their confidence to obtain predictions and prophecies. Some of them maintained that consuming blood was a sin; for that reason, they would take the blood in a vessel, setting it aside for the demons, and they would just eat the meat alone. Thus, creating a good friendship between people and those demons requires participation on an equal basis; the latter would then appear to their followers in dreams and predict the future. Because of that superstition came a strict command against eating blood (“and I shall set My face upon the person consuming the blood”⁷⁶⁰), and one must sprinkle the blood from the sacrifice and spill out the blood from meat slaughtered for non-sacred uses.⁷⁶¹ However, in any case, one must not bring blood into a vessel and keep it there, the way that idolators do.

“You shall not eat over the blood”⁷⁶² was aimed against the idolatrous custom of sitting around the spilled blood of the sacrifice and making a meal there.

⁷⁵⁸ Ezekiel 16:6

⁷⁵⁹ A material noun, according to www.yourdictionary.com/material-noun, “refers to a material or substance from which things are made such as silver, gold, iron, cotton, diamond and plastic.”

⁷⁶⁰ Leviticus 17:10

⁷⁶¹ *Hullin* in Hebrew.

⁷⁶² Leviticus 19:26

Maimonides can't explain the use of wine for the altar. Instead, he states a reason that he heard from someone else: everything that is important, and that which kings and nobles value, should also be utilized for the sacrifices. These offerings thus consist of wine, meat,⁷⁶³ and musical accompaniment.

This is the brief explanation of the reasons for the sacrifices in a more specific manner.

⁷⁶³ Rabbi Kruger, in the Yiddish original, mentions *ketoret* (incense), but according to the *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 46 (from which this entire chapter, as well as the previous one, of Rabbi Kruger's book is derived), it is indeed meat.

Chapter 27:⁷⁶⁴ Reasons for Proper and Improper Foods, and Purity and Impurity Laws

12) The Laws of Purity and Impurity

[p. 205] Before Maimonides goes into the details, he provides a general introduction with the following words:

Know that the laws of our Torah only have the intention of making it easier for people to conduct themselves better. If someone finds obstacles in the details of any of these laws, he only needs to learn about the influences and customs of that time and compare them with the laws of the Torah. Note the difference between burning one's own child as a sacrifice and sacrificing a dove or a handful of flour. This is only one example out of all the other things that could be compared with each other. The prophets express this in the following words: "My people, what wrong have I done to you, and how did I tire you?"⁷⁶⁵ or "Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness? Why have My people said, 'We roam away from You; we will no longer come to You?'"⁷⁶⁶ or "What iniquity did your fathers find in Me, that they distanced themselves from Me?"⁷⁶⁷ - these and yet more verses come to show that the Torah didn't come to implore in a burdensome way, but rather, to make it easier for people to observe these laws. A person must remember these premises when studying the laws of impurity and purity.

After the introduction, Maimonides states as follows:

Habit leads to indifference. If, for example, a commoner had been on the way to the king's palace, and it was open at any time, he would have entered it entirely without enthusiasm. Therefore, the Torah commanded even the High Priest, "and he shall not come at all times into the Holy of Holies,"⁷⁶⁸ and how much more so an ordinary person. This is similar to the command, "let your feet be scarce in your fellow's house,"⁷⁶⁹ which comes to teach that you should enter your friend's house as infrequently as possible as a guest.

For that reason, it was forbidden for impure people to enter the Holy Temple, because there exist many kinds of impurities: whether we're talking about someone who touches a carcass [*nevelah*];⁷⁷⁰ or someone who touches any one of the eight types of creeping animals⁷⁷¹ that render impure things that are regularly found in and around the house, and which often fall into foods or

⁷⁶⁴ Mislabelled in the book as "Chapter 24."

⁷⁶⁵ Micah 6:3

⁷⁶⁶ Jeremiah 2:31

⁷⁶⁷ *ibid.* 2:5

⁷⁶⁸ Leviticus 16:2

⁷⁶⁹ Proverbs 25:17

⁷⁷⁰ See Leviticus 11:24-28. This refers to the carcass of either a non-kosher animal altogether or that of a kosher animal that dies of its own accord.

⁷⁷¹ In Hebrew, *sheratzim* (singular: *sheretz*); see Leviticus 11:29-30. This refers to small, ground-dwelling mammals such as weasels or mice or voles, as well as reptiles (e.g. snakes) and amphibians (e.g. frogs).

drinks; or a menstruant woman [*niddah*]; or a woman or man with flux;⁷⁷² or a leper;⁷⁷³ or a man with normal discharge of semen [*keri*]; or one undergoing sexual intercourse;⁷⁷⁴ and still other types of impurities that occur frequently and that, most of the time, make it impossible for someone to enter the Holy Temple except quite rarely. As a result, upon entering the Holy Temple, one attains proper enthusiasm and a genuine feeling of being honoured.

[p. 206] For that reason, the law is arranged in such a way that the more frequent the impurity, the harder and longer-lasting is the process of purification from it. This is the situation when one is under the same roof as a dead body, something that can happen especially often with the bodies of close relatives. Therefore, the purification is with the ashes of the red heifer, which itself is hard to obtain, and even then, one would have to first wait for seven days. Menstruant women or people with flux occur more frequently than being in contact with somebody else's impurities; therefore, the former impurity lasts for 7 days while the latter one lasts for only one day. The impurities of flux (for both men and women) and childbirth end with the impure person in question bringing a sacrifice, since these impurities occur more rarely than the impurity of menstruant women. All of these impurities - flux (for both men and women), a menstruant woman, a leper, a dead body, a carcass, creeping animals, and a man spilling his seed - are filthy things and happen often. The distancing from these impurities is necessary for the following four reasons:

- 1) avoiding frequent entry into the Holy Temple, as explained earlier;
- 2) avoiding repulsive objects, which aesthetic sensitivities cannot tolerate;
- 3) getting used to purity, so that it becomes second nature, such that it is hard to break off from it; and
- 4) if an object is indeed impure, the person shouldn't be sealed off from the world and from his everyday occupations.

This is because idol worshippers make a big deal out of impurity. A menstruant woman had to be in a separate house the entire time that she was impure; one would burn the site upon which she trod; whoever spoke a word to her would become impure; and even when a wind blew from her onto someone else, that other person would become impure as well. All of the following items that get separated from the body of someone experiencing any of the above categories of impurity are considered impure: hair, nails, and blood. Therefore, a barber was impure, because he may remove a strand of hair and some blood (once upon a time, barbers were also bloodletters). Whoever shaved was impure and needed to immerse himself in running water.

⁷⁷² In Hebrew, *zavah* or (for a man) *zav*; flux is a vaginal or seminal discharge - normally with a red, bloody tinge - outside the normal menstrual cycle (for a woman) or normal erection/arousal (for a man).

⁷⁷³ In Hebrew, *metzora*; this is different, though, from what is medically referred to as leprosy.

⁷⁷⁴ All these latter five categories are mentioned in Leviticus 13-15; the leper takes up Leviticus 13-14, while the other four categories are found in Leviticus 15, with many of those being in Leviticus 15:16-20.

Such was formerly the custom. A custom led to habit, which was almost second nature. The laws of purity could not be ignored. However, here is how our impurity laws shine compared to those of the idolators:

Menstruant women don't need to be sealed off separately; all of the tasks that a woman in general does for her household and her husband, a menstruant woman can also do, except - naturally - sexual intercourse, which is indeed unhealthy. The menstruant woman, as another type of impure person, ought to be quite careful to not touch holy objects and to not enter the Holy Temple. On both of these counts, she needs to feel just like other people, to be able to eat unconsecrated food in a state of impurity, and to thus make it possible for her to stay longer than necessary, not being required to become pure.

The command, "and you shall sanctify yourselves and you will be holy,"⁷⁷⁵ isn't at all contradictory to the previously-mentioned words, since it is entirely unconnected with bodily sanctity and purity. This only works, however, with spiritual holiness and purity, as the *Sifra*⁷⁷⁶ states: "Sanctity is a commandment."⁷⁷⁷ Observing a divine commandment is called sanctity, and the opposite is true as well - if one transgresses such a commandment, it is called impurity. Proof for these statements comes from idolatry: "For he had given of his seed to Molech"⁷⁷⁸ for the sake of defiling My Sanctuary and to desecrate My holy name"⁷⁷⁹; from sexual immorality: "Do not be contaminated through all of these"⁷⁸⁰; and from bloodshed: "You shall not contaminate the land."⁷⁸¹ Here, we see three connotations of impurity: 1) concerning the three cardinal transgressions⁷⁸²; 2) something like "her impurity is on her skirts,"⁷⁸³ which works for all transgressions in general and with dirt and filth in particular, the opposite of observing [p. 207] divine commandments, which are referred to as holiness; and 3) the statement of the Talmud, "the words of the Torah are not subject to becoming impure,"⁷⁸⁴ which refers to touching impure objects or being under the same roof as something like a dead body.

The laws of impurity were established in order to make entry into the Holy Temple harder. However, the priests obviously had to be in the Holy Temple; therefore, they were ordered to not be contaminated by dead bodies, aside from those of very close relatives,⁷⁸⁵ because the command

⁷⁷⁵ Leviticus 11:44 and 20:7

⁷⁷⁶ Halakhic *Midrash* of Leviticus; in the Yiddish original, Rabbi Kruger refers to it instead as *Sifre*, which is the halakhic *Midrash* of both Numbers and Deuteronomy.

⁷⁷⁷ The original statement of the *Sifra*, as mentioned in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, is more like "sanctification by obedience to the commandments."

⁷⁷⁸ Also known as Moloch, Molech was a Canaanite deity for which the primary form of worship was child sacrifice through fire.

⁷⁷⁹ Leviticus 20:3

⁷⁸⁰ *ibid.* 18:24

⁷⁸¹ Numbers 35:34

⁷⁸² The cardinal transgressions are idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder.

⁷⁸³ Lamentations 1:9

⁷⁸⁴ BT tractate *Berakhot* 22a

⁷⁸⁵ cf. Leviticus 21:1-2

concerning the aforementioned contamination would make it hard to observe that order, it being against the nature of people in connection with the deaths of their parents, children, sister(s), and brother(s). However, the High Priest, who still needs regularly needs to be in the Holy Temple, is prohibited even from being contaminated by those aforementioned relatives. For that reason, the priests' wives, who don't need to give sacrifices, aren't forbidden to be contaminated by the corpses of very close relatives.

The impurity of leprosy and associated afflictions - aside from what the Sages say that these diseases emerge because of the sin of slander⁷⁸⁶ - has a natural cause in that skin lesions make up most of the infection. Therefore, the one with the lesions must be isolated from other people. The signs of the impurity can also be explained by natural means. However, as for the combination of cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread⁷⁸⁷ that purifies the leper, Maimonides states: "I don't know any reason for that, other than that which is indicated in the *Midrashim*⁷⁸⁸."

13) Proper and Improper Foods⁷⁸⁹

We ought to know that all the foods that the Torah forbade are either disgusting or unhealthy.

Pork is too fatty, and while still alive, pigs eat all sorts of disgusting food, even excrement. We obviously know that the Torah is particular about cleanliness even in military camps, let alone in the city. If Jews had been allowed to eat pork, and pigs would have strolled along the streets, like in "the country of France" (meaning in the Christian countries, as opposed to the Muslim countries - where Maimonides always lived - in which the people don't eat any pork), then it would have been worse than a toilet everywhere.

The prohibition of fat is on account of the type of fat that is difficult to digest and produces cold and thickly congealed blood. It's more appropriate to thoroughly burn it than to eat it.

(Here, this must refer to the protein and glucose that present-day food experts have discovered in fat, which renders the blood thick and leads to hardened arteries and high blood pressure, along with heart and kidney diseases.)

We ought to also know that the signs of fins and scales among fishes, and chewing the cud and split hooves among land animals, aren't by themselves the reason for us being permitted to eat them just as their absence isn't the reason for us being prohibited from eating them. Rather, the Torah - with these signs - presented a way for us to discern species that yield good, nutritious, and easily digestible meat from those that don't.

⁷⁸⁶ In Hebrew, the term is *lashon ha-ra*, which literally means "evil tongue."

⁷⁸⁷ cf. Leviticus 14:4 and 51; that combination also consists of two birds.

⁷⁸⁸ *Midrashim* is the Hebrew plural of *Midrash*.

⁷⁸⁹ Kosher and non-kosher foods, respectively; this is the start of an overview of the Jewish dietary laws.

The Torah itself presents the reason for the prohibition of eating the sinews of the hindquarters. The prohibition of *nevelah* is understandable: such meat might contain a deadly poison that would bring death to a [p. 208] living creature that consumes such meat, and an animal that is slaughtered while sick or wounded [*terefah*]⁷⁹⁰ is on the cusp of the status of *nevelah*, in accordance with the rule in the Talmud that “a *terefah* cannot continue to live.”⁷⁹¹

The prohibition of eating a limb from a live animal is aimed against the idolatrous custom of amputating a certain limb from a living animal and eating it. Moreover, through such a practice, one becomes accustomed to the character trait of cruelty and thereby becomes indifferent to someone else’s suffering.

The prohibition of meat and milk together, at least according to the science of medicine, is because such meat and dairy products are quite hard to digest; it’s not far-fetched to suppose that it might also be connected with idol worship. Such food was eaten either in an idolatrous ceremony or, as a custom, on their holidays. That hypothesis is reinforced, seeing that twice in the Torah the admonition comes about in connection with a holiday - “three times in the year all your males shall appear in the presence of God”⁷⁹² - and it ends with “you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”⁷⁹³ And even the third time, it’s also like that: “Nor may the fat of My festival offering be left until morning. The best of the first fruit of your soil shall you bring to the house of the Lord, your God; you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹⁰ The Yiddish word for “non-kosher”, *treyf*, comes from the Hebrew word *terefah*.

⁷⁹¹ BT tractate *Hullin* 42a and 140a

⁷⁹² This verse actually appears three times in the Torah - see Exodus 23:17 and 34:23, and Deuteronomy 16:16.

⁷⁹³ Exodus 23:19 and 34:26. This verse is also mentioned in Deuteronomy 14:21, though there, it’s not directly connected with texts about the three Pilgrimage festivals; rather, it’s connected with the repetition of the dietary laws first outlined in Leviticus 11.

⁷⁹⁴ Exodus 23:18-19; in truth, this is the first of three times in the Torah with this general theme.

Chapter 28:⁷⁹⁵ Dietary Laws and Marriage

[p. 208] Adam, the first man, was only allowed to eat grains, fruits, and vegetables. Slightly later, in Noah's time, people were allowed to eat meat.

This shows that people, by nature, are vegetarians; natural foods sprout from the earth. People don't need to eat meat, and the Torah only allowed it in a reluctant way. Below, Maimonides compares what the science of medicine says about eating meat to the Torah's opinion about it.

Allowing the consumption of meat necessitates the process of killing a living creature, so the Torah chose the easiest of deaths, which is ritual slaughter [*shehitah*]. To that end, it prohibited all of those methods that can lead to pain and suffering, such as tearing a limb from a living animal, stabbing [*nehirah*] (tearing the animal in two, instead of cutting it at the trachea). It also did not allow a ritual slaughter gone wrong (in ways like pausing [*shehiyah*], pressing the knife [*derasah*], passing the knife under cover [*haladah*], cutting the animal's throat in a slanting direction [*hagramah*], and tearing loose the windpipe and gullet before cutting [*ikur*]). Thus, we were also forbidden to ritually slaughter the young right in front of its mother's eyes, ordaining "you shall not slaughter it and its young on the same day."⁷⁹⁶ This is because the animal's distress is quite great, and there's no difference between a person and an animal in this sense, for emotions don't come from reasoning (which an animal doesn't have) but rather from the power of imagination, an emotion that all living creatures possess equally. The prohibition of killing an animal and its young, one right after the other, therefore applies only to an ox and a lamb, the types of domestic animals that we're allowed to eat. The young recognizes its mother, and the opposite - the mother recognizing her offspring - is also true.

It's the same reason with respect to sending away the mother-bird from the nest when taking her young.⁷⁹⁷ This is because in general, the eggs on which she sits - and the young birds that need her indeed - aren't [p. 209] suitable for consumption. Sending away the mother and removing the young will make her suffer less than doing the opposite and leaving the young birds without a caregiver. A person, neither being able to use the eggs nor the other young birds, would entirely abandon the nest after the second or third time, after which he would satisfy his sense of curiosity to empty out the nest. This is the moral lesson that one can derive from it: if the Torah protects animals and birds from unnecessary suffering, how much more so can we derive from the Torah that it doesn't want anybody to cause suffering to a person.

The reason for sending away the mother-bird from her nest is related to the Mishnaic statement, "one who says, 'Your mercy is extended to a bird's nest,' ...they silence him,"⁷⁹⁸ since the Torah

⁷⁹⁵ Mislabelled in the book as "Chapter 25."

⁷⁹⁶ Leviticus 22:28

⁷⁹⁷ see Deuteronomy 22:6-7

⁷⁹⁸ Mishnah *Berakhot* 5:3

laws are made for mercy, while these laws are simply decrees. Maimonides, who makes rulings on Jewish law [*halakhah*] in *Yad ha-Ḥazakah*,⁷⁹⁹ justifies himself in this case that the law has no reason other than divine “will,” while in looking for the reason we go in the way of reasoning. Both positions are exhaustively explained by him at the start of the reasons for the divine commandments. Beyond that, it is Maimonides’ custom, even in *halakhah*, to give justifications from other biblical verses as well as from the Talmud. Those who are expert in his books, as well as the many commentaries on these works, can point to many places where Maimonides conducts himself in this way. All these stated reasons are also only according to the plain meaning of the verse, and they can sometimes be completely contrary to the Talmudic interpretation.

Maimonides also views the goal of the biblical law against the unnecessary suffering of animals as part of the laws of the covering of the blood of animals and birds.

Maimonides views the meaning of the prohibition of improper foods as part of the vows of prohibition we place upon ourselves. When a person says, “this bread or meat should be forbidden to me,” it indeed becomes prohibited. Both of these self-imposed food prohibitions have one intent: to control people’s desires, to restrain their lusts, and to temper our appetites for eating and drinking. The Mishnah indeed states: “Vows are a protective fence for abstinence.”⁸⁰⁰

Women are sensitive; every trivial matter leads them to anger and, for that reason, they blurt out vows. Should they be in control of their own vows, they would develop arguments at home such that the husband may eat a certain food but the wife may not, or the mother may eat a certain food and the daughter may not. Therefore, the Torah had the woman submit to the authority of the head of the household: at first it was under her father’s authority and later it was under her husband’s authority. On account of that, when she had married and later on became a widow or a divorcee, she was now entitled to control her vows to the same extent as a man.

The reason for Nazirite asceticism⁸⁰¹ is quite understandable: because wine is most detrimental for people. Whoever abstains from wine by means of a vow becomes “holy” much like the High Priest, and just like the High Priest, the Nazirite isn’t allowed to make himself impure even by being under the same roof as his father’s or mother’s corpse.

⁷⁹⁹ Another name for the *Mishneh Torah*, also authored by Maimonides. The origin of this other name for the *Mishneh Torah* is connected to the system of the equivalence of numbers with words that is called *gematria* in Hebrew. In this case, י or *yad*, the י equals 10 and the ט equals 4; thus, *yad* equals 14 in Hebrew letters. Word for word, *Yad ha-Ḥazakah* means “the strong hand” in Hebrew.

⁸⁰⁰ Mishnah *Avot* 3:17

⁸⁰¹ In the Yiddish original, Rabbi Kruger uses the term *nezirut*. That term hearkens back to the concept of a Nazirite, who is one who - based on chapter 6 of Numbers - abstains from drinking wine or eating grapes, cutting his hair, and being in contact with the dead.

14) Marriage (Including Family Life)

“A person is a social animal,” always being in need of friends around him. Thus says Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*⁸⁰²: A person, when he’s [p. 210] healthy and rich, derives pleasure from human society. In hardship, he is in need of them; when he becomes old and weak, he hopes to be helped by them. Thus, love becomes stronger among relatives, and yet more so between parents and children, to the point that the natural impulse to create a circle around oneself gets its expression in the family unit in which everyone helps one another in happiness and suffering, with compassion, sympathy, and support.

The Torah sought to reinforce whatever secures family ties among family members. Therefore, there is a strict prohibition against the prostitute [*kedeshah*],⁸⁰³ since an illegitimate child born of such a prostitute remains estranged from his father; nobody knows which family unit he belongs to, and he never gets recognized by anybody.

There is a second reason for the prohibition of the *kedeshah*, which is that being habituated to the same woman for a long time leads to a loss of sexual interest. Men lose sexual interest in their own wives but become sexually aroused by a strange woman. In such a case, it would be possible for a man to use prostitution as a means of increasing sexual intercourse, which is - as is well-known - quite harmful.

A third reason for the *kedeshah* prohibition: when one woman is accessible to all men equally, all the men would meet at once, come to blows with each other, and - in many cases - kill each other or the woman in question. As the prophet states: “And they converged by force upon a house of prostitution.”⁸⁰⁴

In order to avoid all of these temptations, the Torah commanded us to marry a woman in public, thereby rendering her forbidden to anybody else. From that, the family structure - which is the foundation of society and which every person is in need of - is established.

A temporary marriage is one in which the husband takes in a strange woman, declaring that she becomes his wife, and after a short time, when they get tired of that union, he will divorce her. In order to eliminate such marriages, one is commanded to go through a certain procedure by means of *erusin*⁸⁰⁵ and afterwards make the marriage known everywhere, by means of a wedding, in which one is required to have ten men present. With all of these things, the marital tie is reinforced.

⁸⁰² Aristotle’s main work on ethics; in Rabbi Kruger’s Yiddish original, this is referred to as *Sefer ha-Midot*, literally “Book of Character Traits” in Hebrew.

⁸⁰³ See Deuteronomy 23:18. The term *kedeshah* can be translated either as “promiscuous woman” or “cult harlot” or “cult prostitute.” That same verse also makes mention of the male equivalent, *kadesh*.

⁸⁰⁴ Jeremiah 5:7

⁸⁰⁵ The Hebrew term for betrothal. Historically, it took place several months before the marriage, but nowadays it’s performed immediately before the marriage itself.

If the husband and wife were to disagree, they may get divorced. However, it shouldn't be arranged simply with words by themselves. It might be customary for her that she would always seek a sin or an excuse to go away, saying that she is already divorced. Alternatively, when she is discovered with an adulterer and she and the adulterer are sinning, they might say that she already got divorced from her first husband. Therefore, the Torah established the law of the "writing" of the *get*,⁸⁰⁶ and this written document should serve as the only attestation for divorce.

Adultery is a terrible concept. It can lead to worse problems. In order to remove any doubt or suspicion that a woman is an adulteress, the Torah ordained the law of the "bitter waters."⁸⁰⁷ This is of tremendous benefit both for the husband, in removing the suspicion his heart set on her, and for the wife, demonstrating that the truth is worth her trouble, even in enduring such a difficult ceremony. If she indeed harbours sinful thoughts, the [p. 211] fear of the "bitter waters" will hold her back from sinning, as she reminds herself how later she will be brought into the Holy Temple and before the members of the Great Sanhedrin, and how everyone will witness the stripping of her clothing that would reveal her chest, the disheveling of her hair, and going through a horrible ceremony in public. The trouble that could shatter many families and family lives would thus be averted by means of this mediation.

A maiden should be married. Therefore, her "seducer" is obligated to marry her, and this is better than her marrying another man. On the other hand, if she doesn't want that marriage, or her parents don't want it, the seducer must pay "the dowry of the virgins"⁸⁰⁸ in accordance with the harm he caused to her.

Thus, a rapist is punished by only having one recourse: to marry the woman and never to be able to divorce her.

The Torah establishes the reason for levirate marriage [*yibum*]⁸⁰⁹ as follows: to maintain the name of the deceased brother of the husband through his lineage. People conducted themselves that way before the Giving of the Torah at Sinai, and the Torah maintained that custom afterwards, with the addition of the ceremony of "taking off the shoe" [*halitzah*]⁸¹⁰: to slap the brother-in-law with a shoe and spit in his face, for not wanting to maintain his brother's name. It's possible that he would seek to avoid this disgrace and marry her in this levirate manner.

⁸⁰⁶ The Hebrew term for a writ of divorce or a divorce document; see Deuteronomy 24:1.

⁸⁰⁷ cf. Numbers 5:18; this is part of the passage of the *sotah*, a married woman suspected of adultery who undergoes a trial by ordeal.

⁸⁰⁸ Exodus 22:16

⁸⁰⁹ This is when a man dies childless and his widow and his brother are encouraged to marry each other. See Deuteronomy 25:5-8.

⁸¹⁰ This is a ceremony to annul the levirate marriage in the event that either party refuses to go ahead with the marriage. See *ibid.* 25:9-10.

Later in chapter 49 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides discusses at length subjects having to do with the laws connected to marrying relatives, defamation,⁸¹¹ animal hybridization, the commandment of circumcision, and not plowing with an ox and donkey together. He states reasons for each of these things separately, and he finishes this discussion as follows:

The rule is that every divine commandment has a deep intent, whether to instill a good character trait or influence, or to avoid bad character traits that accompany idol worship. Even if to us there doesn't seem to be any apparent reason, it's certain that there is a reason for it that surely results in a healing for the soul.

⁸¹¹ The literal translation from the Hebrew *motzi shem ra* is "putting out a bad name."

Chapter 29:⁸¹² Maimonides' Opinion on the Historical Stories in the Torah

[p. 211] Maimonides didn't support the notion of history as an end in itself. Instead, building upon what his predecessor, Rabbi Judah Halevi (1075/1086-1141), used as the basis of his speculation in the *Kuzari*⁸¹³ on historical development, Maimonides utilized Halevi's metaphysical method to explain the Torah, the account of the Creation, and even the story of Ezekiel's Chariot according to philosophy alone.

Maimonides' opinion is that the Torah should have absolutely left out the recounting of historical time from the Creation of the World up to the entry of the Jews into the Land of Israel, since - properly speaking - this narrative contained neither firmly established beliefs nor the teaching of good character traits for people's wellbeing, nor did it explain one of the fundamental principles of the Torah.

[p. 212] Nonetheless, the narratives of Genesis came about in order to establish the cornerstone of the belief that the world does not exist eternally but rather was created by one Creator, and that that same Creator only created one person. (This is the opposite of the idolatrous belief in an eternally existing world, which has - as a result - the eternal existence of a large number of people.) The later stories' purpose is to demonstrate that the period between Adam the First Man and Moses our Master spans 2500 years.

Should these stories appear without details, people wouldn't understand how so many different families emerged from Adam the First Man, with diverse languages and dialects, dwelling in a variety of countries and climates. These details involve specifying the genealogies from Adam and afterwards from Noah along with their branches, and finally, the story of the generation of the Dispersion⁸¹⁴ that led to language diversity, along with specifying the limits of each family and the names of each of the peoples that would evolve later. It is as thus that belief in the creation of the world can be understood without the problem of how children coming from one father become quite different from one another in speech.

The stories of the Flood and, later on, of the destruction of Sodom established belief in reward and punishment. However, the war between the five kings and the four kings⁸¹⁵ - in which the king of Sodom was captured and Abraham (with a small number of men) brought back the loot - shows, first of all, that God can strengthen the hand of those who believe in Him. Second of all, it shows that we - Abraham's children - learn that as far as a family member is concerned, one needs to prepare to give up one's life in order to help a relative who is in need. Third of all, it comes to demonstrate that Abraham's cleverness, in giving up on the loot that really belonged to him, is exclusively in order for the king of Sodom to not go around boasting, "I made Abraham rich."

⁸¹² Mislabeled in the book as "Chapter 26."

⁸¹³ Rabbi Halevi's magnum opus; *kuzari* is Hebrew for "Khazar."

⁸¹⁴ In the aftermath of the Tower of Babel episode; see Genesis 11:1-9.

⁸¹⁵ A war between the five kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, etc. and the four kings on Abraham's side; see Genesis 14.

Jews should learn a lesson from that to not covet money, a character trait that doesn't coexist well with honour.

The entire list of Esau's families' genealogy, along with all of its details, is there because of the divine commandment - to be promulgated later - of erasing the memory of Amalek. This is because Amalek was the strongest in that family unit, and the offspring of Esau later absorbed the people of Seir the Horite, whose country they acquired. If the genealogy hadn't mentioned every family separately, Jews would have needed to annihilate all of Esau's families, given the possibility that perhaps any of them would be descended from Amalek. But now that every family is mentioned separately, the rest - apart from Amalek - are protected from that decree.

The list of all the kings who reigned over Edom, even before the Jews had a king, is there to demonstrate the difference between Jewish kings and non-Jewish ones. This is because we were commanded not to accept for ourselves a king from a non-Jewish people, while the entire list of Edomite kings shows that nobody among them was actually an Edomite; rather, all of these kings were from different [p. 213] countries and peoples. The Torah hereby states: taking a moral lesson from your brothers, the offspring of Esau, how many troubles did every foreign king cause for other non-Jews (because at that time they were the only tyrants known to everyone), and this should teach you the lesson to not take a foreigner as king over yourselves. It is worthwhile to remark that precisely on that subject did the Jews yield to temptation, letting themselves be ruled by Antipater the Edomite (113/114 BCE-43 BCE), Herod's father.

Maimonides himself senses that in this way, one cannot comprehend all the historical stories of the Torah. Therefore, he presents a rule in the following words:

We know that despite what I explained about idolatry in the previous chapters, we know about it only partially, but not entirely, from their books, being distant from the relevant era by many centuries. Therefore, we can't find the opposition to idolatry in many of the divine commandments, but if we would indeed know all their incorrect ways and customs, many of the Torah's commandments would be understandable. Similarly, we don't know the entire story that we would need to know in order to understand the Torah's recounting of events, their causes, why these events were written down, and what their aim was in accordance with our principles.

A second rule that one needs to remember:

Finding out about a historical event from written sources isn't the same as the personal lived experience of that historical event. This is because when one actually witnesses these events with his own eyes and has them recorded in his mind, these memories aren't as complete as when these events are recorded by that person in writing, and surely just reading about the event without actually witnessing it is hardly complete at all. If one were to earlier witness such an event with his eyes and then read about it from a book, one would know how necessary the details are for recording the event and repeating its account. Whoever knows about the event merely from reading about it cannot fully understand it and needs to ask about its details and its difficulties.

The repetition of Rebecca's event in which Eliezer requested a little water from her is to be understood in accordance with that second rule, and so is Eliezer's reporting on that same event for her family. The same thing is true for the repetition of the tribal leaders' sacrificial offerings,⁸¹⁶ and also setting down in writing - all over again - the journeys of the Israelites at the beginning of the weekly *sidra* or *parashah* of *Masei*,⁸¹⁷ journeys that we already know about from earlier in the Torah.

The latter story contains within it yet a another reason for understanding that rule, and quite an important reason at that.

This is because a wonder that comes about through an open miracle is important only for the one actually witnessing it, who can't help but believe it because it takes place in front of his eyes. As for someone who only reads such an account in a written story, the choice is upon him whether or not to believe it. Therefore, it's necessary to present facts and proofs to further reinforce belief in these miracles and make non-belief in these miracles harder.

For the sake of that goal, and for the second time, the Torah - in the portion of *Masei*, when the first generation that by itself experienced it had already died out and the then-current generation had seen only a part of it - [p. 214] enumerated the places along the way in the desert that were, at that time, certainly well-known to everyone. In this enumeration, the Torah specified the events of every place separately, thereby reinforcing belief in the hearts of the new generation.

The greatest ongoing miracle was wandering for all forty years in such a formidable desert - which swarms with fiery, poisonous snakes and scorpions - without water, without bread, and without human settlements. Even the Bedouins - born in the desert - must at times come over to settlements, to places where "grain is sown and where fig trees, grapevines, and pomegranates grow"⁸¹⁸ - those things that the Jews weren't able to plant at that point. The Israelites were ordered not to wage any war with the Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites, and with no good intentions, those peoples didn't let the Jews go through their countries.

Perhaps the later generations might explain that miracle by natural means: The Israelites wandered near a settlement, where they could obtain necessities with money or through pillage. Or they would stop over in oases, where they could obtain fruit and water, and even grain, sowing it and waiting until it grows, as the Bedouins do to this day. Or maybe they wandered into those places in which the manna comes down on a regular basis every night until now. Or maybe they didn't leave at all, for the Egyptians indeed were of the opinion that the Israelites lost their way

⁸¹⁶ These accounts take up all of chapter 7 of Numbers and are publicly read on Hanukkah, a holiday commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple, and they are also publicly read in late May or early June on Sabbath morning as part of the annual cycle of the Torah reading.

⁸¹⁷ *Sidra* and *parashah* are, respectively, Aramaic and Hebrew for the weekly section of the Torah to be read on Sabbath morning. That of *Masei* is the last one in the Book of Numbers (chapters 33-36).

⁸¹⁸ cf. Numbers 20:5

upon leaving Egypt and didn't know where to go ("they are confounded in the land"⁸¹⁹). On a related note, the Arab nomads to this day call the Sahara Desert "the confused wasteland" ("the desert of going astray").

To remove all these errors, the Torah - in *Masei* - gave a full account of the journeys, in which the Israelites went forth, rested, and moved further in that direction. The areas known to the people living in those regions were well-known to be desolate - neither having any water, nor any place in which to sow crops, nor having any fruit trees. The manna doesn't appear there, and it hasn't done so apart from the 40 years in which the Israelites were there. The stations were far from any settlement, and furthermore, none of the Israelites were confused. They wandered only on a well-planned basis, in accordance with the indications given by the Pillar of Cloud. Sometimes, the Israelites stayed at one site for only one night; at other times, they stayed at one site for only one day; yet other times, they stayed at several sites for a month, or a year, or up to 18 whole years in the case of one site. Aside from that, the distance for wandering was inherently short: a total of 11 days in going from Mount Horeb⁸²⁰ to Kadesh Barnea, going "by way of Mount Seir."⁸²¹ In that region, it's impossible even for those who don't know the area to lose their way for 40 years. The Torah states the reason why the Israelites were gathered in that region for all these years.⁸²²

Using the same logic, which seeks to give miracles like this a constant existence by instilling belief in such miracles for later generations, Maimonides explains the prohibition of rebuilding Jericho, which is there so that the sunken and crumbling fortress walls would foster belief in the miracle for all future generations.

This is how Maimonides explains the usefulness of those historical stories in the Torah.

⁸¹⁹ Exodus 14:3

⁸²⁰ another name for Mount Sinai

⁸²¹ Deuteronomy 1:2

⁸²² The Torah explains that the 40-year delay was because the Israelites were punished for that long for believing the slanderous report of ten of the twelve spies (except Joshua and Caleb) who were sent to explore the Land of Israel in preparation for eventual settlement there but focused exclusively on the negative features of that area. This story and its aftermath are recounted in chapters 13 and 14 of Numbers and, in shortened and modified form, in Deuteronomy 1:19-43.

Chapter 30:⁸²³ Divine Providence

[p. 215] In chapter 51 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides repeats - in brief - his full opinion concerning divine providence from a scientific perspective.

How can a person achieve the purpose of his creation in the world, and immortality after he dies? Maimonides provides the answer through the following parable:

The king is sitting in his palace, and some of his subjects are in the city⁸²⁴ and others are outside of it. Some of the subjects that are in the city turn their backs on the palace and they turn their faces another way to distance themselves from the king. Some of the other subjects in the city do want to go inside the palace to see the king, but so far they haven't seen even the outside wall of the palace. The rest of the subjects in the city are divided into degrees of ability: there are some who happen not to find the palace's entry gate, merely encircling the wall while trying to find the entry gate; there are others who already passed through the gate but remain in the antechamber; there are yet others who made their way to the same room in which the king was to be found, though they don't immediately have an audience with the king; and, finally, there are very wise people who make their way to the king to stand in front of him and to hear his words.

Now we go to the explanation of the parable:

Those who are outside the city are those coarse people who certainly don't have any religion - neither one that accepts received tradition,⁸²⁵ nor one based on speculation.⁸²⁶ Such people include Blacks⁸²⁷ who live around the equator and Eskimos⁸²⁸ from the far, cold north. They really can't be considered as people, but rather, as the middle ground between apes/monkeys⁸²⁹ and people: somewhat higher than the former and lower than the latter.

Worse yet are those who stand with their backs to the palace and sometimes go quite far away from it. These are the idolators, who either led themselves astray through their own reasoning, or

⁸²³ Mislabelled in the book as "Chapter 27."

⁸²⁴ This word is termed *medinah* in Maimonides' original (*medinah* meaning "city" in Arabic and in medieval Hebrew, as against modern Hebrew, in which it means "country" or "state") and *shtodt* (cf. German *stadt*) in Rabbi Kruger's Yiddish original.

⁸²⁵ The term in Hebrew is *kabbalah* and is not to be confused with Lurianic Kabbalah (a type of Jewish mysticism), which is what many people think of when they think of the term *kabbalah*.

⁸²⁶ For this last word, Rabbi Kruger uses the term *haskalah*, which is the Hebrew and Yiddish name for the European Jewish Enlightenment of the late 18th and 19th centuries. The *Guide to the Perplexed* uses the term *iyun*, which means attention or concentration or inspection or intensive study.

⁸²⁷ The *Guide to the Perplexed* uses the term Cushite, which most narrowly pertains to Ethiopia but which more broadly pertains to sub-Saharan Africa in general.

⁸²⁸ These days, the less pejorative term for those people is Inuit, and such people live in northern Canada, Greenland, and parts of Alaska. The *Guide to the Perplexed* instead uses the term Turanian, which refers to Turkestan or Transoxiana or Central Asia.

⁸²⁹ As far as I'm aware, English is the only language in which a sharp distinction is made between monkey and ape. In Yiddish the relevant word for both is *malpe*, and in Hebrew it is *kof*.

someone led them astray. This is the worst type, having the potential to seduce others into their beliefs, and it's sometimes necessary to annihilate them in order for others to be rescued from their mistaken beliefs.

Those who want to go inside but don't find the palace are religious but uncultured Jews - the ignorant masses. Higher up than them are those who do see the palace but merely go around it; those are the Jews who believe and learn how to keep the divine commandments because of received tradition, albeit without reasoning. Those who are interested in understanding the principles of belief with reasoning are already in the antechamber. However, those who occupy themselves in all that one can achieve with reasoning, and who utilize all their possible capabilities to discover the truth - they are already inside the palace, they stand before the king, and they are thus close to him in the way that a mortal person is able to approach God.

[p. 216] Maimonides adds:

And you should know, my son, that one can make distinctions among those who want to get to the truth with respect to philosophy, as follows:

- 1) Those who continually study the mathematical sciences and logic - the instruments that are useful to reflect upon - only manage to bring themselves, at that moment, just outside the palace;
- 2) Those who understand the entire physical world are those who enter the vestibule;
- 3) However, those who comprehend metaphysics enter the room where the king is, and as they get deeper in wisdom, they are nearer to the Creator.

On a higher level than all of the above categories are those who devote themselves entirely to the concept of metaphysical problems, taking every physical appearance as a proof of God's existence and also to derive from it the manner of His providence over all creatures. These people are the prophets - higher than all the sages, whether Talmudical or philosophical - and the expression "and he [Moses] was there with God"⁸³⁰ is suitable for such people.

(A comment: This is what chapter 51 of the third part of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* teaches, and all the arguments leveled against Maimonides, in this case, boil down to why he placed the believing scholar and genius lower than the philosophical metaphysicist. His defenders sought to prove that he didn't write that chapter at all, but rather that an errant student ascribed this teaching to him, while those who accused Maimonides said that it was necessary to burn that chapter, or at least to cross it out. The way that *Ephodi*⁸³¹ instructs his students, the issue is simple since Maimonides here truly makes no comparisons between the believer in God and the

⁸³⁰ Exodus 34:28

⁸³¹ A sobriquet of the Catalan rabbi Profiat Duran (c. 1350-c. 1415), also known as Isaac ben Moses ha-Levi, the name *Ephodi* comes from the Hebrew word, *ephod*, which is an outer garment worn by priests and kings in ancient Israel and which appears in two of his works.

philosopher. Rather, he delineates both paths until their completion, placing the Jewish philosopher in the account of the Chariot higher than the Jew who is exclusively preoccupied with Jewish law. This is in accordance with Maimonides' opinion in his *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah*,⁸³² chapter 4, based on the Talmudic statement: "A great matter [refers to] the story of the Chariot, and a small matter [refers to the laws formulated in the framework of] the disputes of Abaye and Rabba."⁸³³)

The main point of Torah and moral ethics,⁸³⁴ according to Maimonides, is to draw near - as much as possible - to the source of God's unity and to understand His ways. All the practical divine commandments, which one does with one's limbs,⁸³⁵ merely lead to that particular objective.

This is because we lowly people can't have any connection to the Creator except through the mediation of the intellect, through which He influences us. Knowledge of God is, therefore, an obligation for everybody and is ordained in many places; for example, "and you shall know today and take to your heart,"⁸³⁶ "know that the Lord is God,"⁸³⁷ and "you were shown to know."⁸³⁸ Also, this is what King David ordered his son Solomon: "Know the God of your father and serve Him."⁸³⁹ Knowledge of Him is better than blind belief in Him. Those who believe in Him blindly are compared to those who go around the palace and who never get to see the king. If we don't make use of the intellect that links us with Him, we only have a God in our imagination, which can later be weakened but never be strengthened. However, if we wish to fathom Him using the intellect, comprehension increases from one moment to the next. In such a case, comprehension of God [p. 217] is as great as additional communion with Him, and additional communion with Him is as great as fervent words of love to the Creator, and then such a person can observe "and you shall love the Lord your God"⁸⁴⁰ with all the details and precision involved.

As a result, love of God - which comes after communion with Him - stems from intellectual comprehension of Him, and it puts people in direct connection with its Creator. Thus, if you seek it, He will demonstrate it to you; if you relinquish that bond, He will forsake you.

Thus, a person is free to do whatever he wants - whether to make the bond between him and God stronger or to make it weak until he is completely disconnected from God.

That bond is maintained neither with good deeds by themselves nor with studying wisdom, but rather, by always maintaining faithful thoughts of God. You may be the greatest wise man among

⁸³² A part of *Mishneh Torah* that deals with the fundamentals of the universe, prophecy, etc.

⁸³³ BT tractate *Sukkah* 28a; Abaye and Rabba were *Amora'im* (rabbis who lived later in the Talmudic era).

⁸³⁴ *musar* in Hebrew

⁸³⁵ *hovot ha-evarim* in Hebrew

⁸³⁶ Deuteronomy 4:39

⁸³⁷ Psalms 100:3

⁸³⁸ Deuteronomy 4:35

⁸³⁹ I Chronicles 28:9

⁸⁴⁰ Deuteronomy 6:5

people, but the moment that your thought is preoccupied with food or business, you sever the connection with Him. You aren't with Him - and He's not with you.

Therefore, the pious men of former times⁸⁴¹ would be particular, at every moment, that thoughts about God shouldn't be in vain, and they would always say, "do not let God be absent from your thoughts,"⁸⁴² and King David stated, "I have set God before me always, for He is at my right hand, that I not stumble."⁸⁴³ That is, I always imagine God being in front of me, and I never forget Him, just as I never forget my right hand that helps me so that I shouldn't fall down. And even when performing a certain task, or speaking with my wife and children, these things were without any intention, since I was always preoccupied with thinking about God's providence.

That concept can be found in the commentary of *Shem Tov*⁸⁴⁴ on *Midrash Tanhuma* in the following words: The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave the Torah to the Jews in order to favour them with the World to Come. For that reason, He paired up every mundane task with a divine commandment: someone who builds a house is supposed to install a *mezuzah*⁸⁴⁵ and make a parapet on the roof⁸⁴⁶; someone who goes out to plow shouldn't harness an ox with a donkey; someone who sows shouldn't plant mixed species; someone who harvests ought to leave behind gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and the rear corner of the field⁸⁴⁷; and someone who bakes bread should separate a portion⁸⁴⁸ from the dough. This is akin to a person who fell into the water, and the ship captain threw a rope at him and said to him: "Hold on tightly to it, because at this moment you are being rescued." Thus says the Holy One, Blessed be He: "Every time the Jews are united in performing the commandments, they are alive, as the verse states: 'But you, the ones clinging to the Lord your God, you are all alive today.'"⁸⁴⁹ That concept is in accordance with Maimonides' opinion.

This is truthfully a difficult path to loving God and performing His commandments. Nobody can achieve that level in one leap other than spiritually prominent people,⁸⁵⁰ who are - in general

⁸⁴¹ In Hebrew, *hasidim rishonim*; in Talmudic sources, this refers to those Jews who were especially scrupulous in observing the divine commandments.

⁸⁴² BT tractate *Shabbat* 149a

⁸⁴³ Psalms 16:8

⁸⁴⁴ Literally in Hebrew, "Good Name"; that commentary was written by Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-ca. 1290 or 1295).

⁸⁴⁵ A *mezuzah* consists of a piece of parchment, with the first two paragraphs of the *Shema* prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21), that is wrapped in a decorative case and hung up on doorposts in a Jewish home. It can supposedly serve as an amulet as well, warding off demons and other agents of evil.

⁸⁴⁶ see Deuteronomy 22:8

⁸⁴⁷ These concepts, from Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22, Deuteronomy 24:19-21 and 26:12-13, and Mishnah *Peah*, respectively correspond in Hebrew to *leket*, *shikhehah*, and *peah*.

⁸⁴⁸ See Numbers 15:20; in Hebrew, it is called *hallah*, which Jews have come to use to refer to the ceremonial bread eaten on Sabbaths and major holidays except Passover.

⁸⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 4:4

⁸⁵⁰ In Hebrew, *b'nai aliyah*; these are people who live in This World (*olam ha-zeh*), as opposed to the World to Come (*olam ha-ba*) in heaven, and yet are on a higher spiritual level than other flesh-and-blood people. This concept comes from BT tractate *Sukkah* 45b.

- few in number. Only for someone who reaches that level, which is that of the “superior human,”⁸⁵¹ is there constant divine providence. On such a righteous person good things are always bestowed, just as for a completely wicked person bad things always befall him. Only for the righteous person who isn’t completely righteous and a wicked person who isn’t completely wicked can there sometimes be good - [p. 218] at those moments when there’s no impediment in the intellect to communion with the Creator - and there can sometimes be bad, when indeed there is such an impediment.

And these notions of reward and punishment in the world can be understood according to that explanation, even knowing that there is no modification at all in the Creator.

This is Maimonides’ opinion about worship of God in a very brief way. We advise experts to thoroughly study chapter 51 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed* together with the annotations, according to the *Shem Tov* commentary and the comments of Rabbi Ḥasdai ben Abraham Crescas (c. 1340-1410/1).⁸⁵² This would make it easier for them to see Maimonides in his piously true persona, despite his attempt in the entire *Guide to the Perplexed* to seem to be a cold philosopher who only rules from the intellect and with merciless, incisive logic.

Unfortunately, we can’t deal with even a part of the rest of that brilliant chapter of the *Guide to the Perplexed*, due to a lack of space. We hope, however, that scholars will be able to study it thoroughly, in accordance with our interpretation, mainly in its parable form.

⁸⁵¹ Yiddish “*oybermensch*,” derived from the German term “*Übermensch*” made popular in the philosophy of the 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It is often translated as “superman” or “superhuman.” See chapter 10 of the first part of this book.

⁸⁵² A rabbi in Catalonia.

Chapter 31:⁸⁵³ Immortality of the Soul According to Maimonides

[p. 218] We pray every day in our prayers with the words, “may Your lovingkindness, O God, be upon us, as we have yearned for You.”⁸⁵⁴ That is, “Your lovingkindness should be upon us in accordance with the level of our hope to You.”

Thus, this verse proves the truth of the concept already described in the previous chapter that the extent to which divine providence comes to us depends on the strength or weakness of our utilizing our intellect to keep us bonded with the Creator.

According to Maimonides, there are four levels that a person ought to go through until he comes to the highest level of perfection, which the Patriarchs and Moses our Master achieved:

- 1) Getting accustomed to having the proper concentration in uttering a verse from the prayers.⁸⁵⁵
- 2) A higher level is studying or hearing the Torah, absorbing all the words he reads or hears with his entire thought. That level certainly requires much effort and habit.
- 3) One should direct his thought so that it be free of distractions, even while not praying or studying, and he should constantly think about fear and understanding of God. He ought to maintain that same concentration while doing worldly things connected to his livelihood, family, and health. Hence, he obtains proper control over his thoughts so that he should not run about freely and aimlessly like an animal in the forest or like a bird in the air.
- 4) The following level is the highest: one’s thought should always be connected with the Creator, even while working, or when talking with one’s wife and children, even while sitting in their company, and when speaking to people in general or hearing their words, as the metaphor from Song of Songs states: “I was asleep, but my heart was awake! Hark, my Beloved knocks!”⁸⁵⁶ Not even all the prophets reached [p. 219] that highest level; among the prophets, only Moses our Master alone reached that level. Concerning that, there’s a hint in one verse, “and Moses alone shall come near to God,”⁸⁵⁷ in a second verse, “and he was there with God,”⁸⁵⁸ and in a third, “and you, stand here by Me.”⁸⁵⁹ To get to this highest level, when one’s body is among people, one’s soul should be united with God. The three Patriarchs reached that level, and - therefore - we find their names one next to the other (“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of

⁸⁵³ Mislabelled in the book as “Chapter 28.”

⁸⁵⁴ Psalms 33:22

⁸⁵⁵ This especially refers to the two main Jewish prayers - *Shema* and *Shemoneh Esrei*.

⁸⁵⁶ Song of Songs 5:2

⁸⁵⁷ Exodus 24:2

⁸⁵⁸ *ibid.* 34:28

⁸⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 5:28

Jacob”⁸⁶⁰). Regarding a lasting, non-negotiable covenant, God states, “and I will remember My covenant with Jacob and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham I will remember,”⁸⁶¹ since they - plus Moses - always maintained their link with God while eating, working, traveling, and even sleeping. The thoughts of all four of these forefathers were constantly with Him, to serve Him, and to establish a people that would serve Him. This is what a certain verse states, “for I have embraced him [Abraham], so that he will command his children and his household after him,”⁸⁶² and for the sake of that goal they lived, fed their animals, tilled their fields, sowed and harvested their fields, and made fortunes - like all the people of the world - but they overcame every obstacle that could sever them from the Creator, as Isaiah the Prophet states: “Your iniquities have separated between you and your God.”⁸⁶³

Divine providence comes in proportion to how much intellect one has, and divine providence is also divided into four categories:

- 1) The natural intellect, which every average person possesses, that protects him from innate evils, whether through nature or on the part of a second person who is free in his actions. The natural intellect is aroused from the world intellect (“active intellect” in Maimonides’ language or “subconscious,” as present-day psychologists⁸⁶⁴ call it) in order to avoid all temptations.
- 2) Whoever continues to bind his thought to God in praying or studying Torah receives an extra amount of divine providence to be able to foresee unusual problems and thus to avoid them.
- 3) Whoever keeps on attaching his intellect to eternal concepts on a constant basis, only pausing in order to prepare for his livelihood, is completely protected from all sorts of problems without thinking about it, but only when his thought is connected to the divine, not when he is preoccupied with material matters.
- 4) The superior human⁸⁶⁵ who doesn’t cease to think properly even while eating, drinking, and doing business is constantly under divine providence and protected from all sorts of problems.

In short, someone in the first category obtains much divine providence insofar as he can differentiate himself from an animal in his thoughts. Those in the second and third categories obtain more, but only when their thought functions in the right way. When that thought goes away, so does divine providence, but not as completely as someone in the first category - only as much

⁸⁶⁰ e.g. Exodus 3:6 and 3:15; it is also mentioned in the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer (a key Jewish prayer that, during the week, is composed of 18 original blessings - which is why the prayer is called as such in Hebrew - plus one added later) that invokes the greatness of the three Patriarchs.

⁸⁶¹ Leviticus 26:42

⁸⁶² Genesis 18:19

⁸⁶³ Isaiah 59:2

⁸⁶⁴ e.g. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

⁸⁶⁵ Yiddish “*oybermensch*,” derived from the German term “*Übermensch*” made popular in the philosophy of the 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It is often translated as “superman” or “superhuman.” See chapter 10 of the first part of this book.

as the sun during the day, which can be hidden by a cloud. At that moment, he is compared to a brilliant writer who now isn't able to write; divine providence is indeed upon him, but only in potential. Maimonides states that all the troubles that befall those in the second and third categories come about at such idle moments, when distraction or the concerns of this world [*olam ha-zeh*] take his thought away from wisdom and knowledge. Someone in the third category [p. 220] differentiates himself from someone in the second category only in the proportion of distraction, which corresponds to how long or how intensely divine providence has been forsaken.

This, therefore, causes the philosophical assertion that argues against the role of divine providence in humankind to fail; proof for that philosophical assertion is surely from those multitudes of pious and righteous people who suffer from mishaps. This would be a sign that righteousness doesn't necessarily lead to any reward, but according to that explanation, these problems are understandable. As a result, we can indeed believe in divine providence, and not arrive at the assertion that humans exist by chance, just like all other living creatures.

Thus, the idea is that it's not randomness that leads to problems, but rather that these problems come as a result of people's separation between them and divine providence. This is clearly expressed in the words of the verse, "and I will hide my face⁸⁶⁶ from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles will find them, and they will say on that day: 'is it not because our God is not in our midst that these evils have found us?'"⁸⁶⁷ This clearly proves our causing of God's "hiding His face," since with our earthly actions we make a partition between ourselves and His providence, as the following verse states: "And as for me, I shall surely hide My face⁸⁶⁸ on that day on account of all the evil that they did."⁸⁶⁹

A community falls under the same law as an individual, and just like an individual, a community could be subjected to all the problems that come about as a result of making a partition between itself and its Creator.

However, someone in the fourth category who is "always with God" even while eating, doing business, and spending time with his wife and children is, according to Maimonides, exempt from all troubles. He supports his opinion with a large number of verses, and especially with the chapter of Psalms that starts with the words "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High,"⁸⁷⁰ where various mishaps that can come about through wild animals, diseases, and people are enumerated - from which divine supervision would rescue him. That chapter of Psalms states the reason: "For he has desired Me and I will deliver him; I will raise him for he has known My Name."⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁶ Rabbi Kruger's interpretation of "face" in the original Yiddish text is "divine providence."

⁸⁶⁷ Deuteronomy 31:17; the plural is used in translation, in spite of the original verse being in the singular.

⁸⁶⁸ See footnote 12 here.

⁸⁶⁹ Deuteronomy 31:18; here also, the plural is used in translation, in spite of the original verse being in the singular.

⁸⁷⁰ Psalms 91:1

⁸⁷¹ *ibid.* 91:14

One's control over one's thoughts is very difficult to attain, and it's even harder to do so in one's younger years, when one's temperament is torrential and stormy. It is easier in one's older years, when the fires of passion are weaker, thereby strengthening the intellect. An older person's intellectual light is brighter, his thought is purified, and he can thus certainly concentrate more and free himself with his comprehension. Among such people, coming to the last moments of life, love and comprehension of God are quite strong, to the point of willing freely to forsake the body in order to connect himself with the active intellect, just like in nature a small flame combines with a large fire.

This is what constitutes death by a divine kiss, with which Aaron, Moses, and Miriam died, according to the testimony of the Sages, who found that concept expressed in the biblical phrase "by God's word."⁸⁷² This exact phrasing doesn't exist with regard to Miriam, since she was a woman and such a phrase would thus be disrespectful. [p. 221] During their lifetimes, not all righteous people attained the level of Aaron, Moses, and Miriam; therefore, they didn't reach the level of dying by a divine kiss. Nonetheless, each of them proportionately achieved high levels of comprehension through which he was connected with the source of the intellect, and regarding these people the following verse states: "And your righteousness shall go before you, and God's glory shall gather you in."⁸⁷³ Thus, the well-developed intellect remains eternal, because in not having a body along with its material necessities, the partition that separates him from his Creator is removed forever.

Maimonides finishes chapter 51 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed* with the following words: Keep the concept of divine communion in your head, and you should strive - with all your ability - to increase the number of times that you are with your Creator and to reduce, to as little time as possible, the time you spend preoccupying yourself with something else and distancing yourself from Him. Beyond earning immortality after death, such conduct is the most certain shield against all the troubles of the world.

It's worthwhile to note that thoroughly reflecting on the words of this chapter, one sees here Maimonides' position concerning the immortality of the soul, which is quite different from the conventional opinion of almost all the sages of Israel both before and after Maimonides. That opinion was one of the many arguments against Maimonides that the great rabbis pursued, even during Maimonides' lifetime.

The reader will find material on that subject in the section of this book entitled "The Critique of the *Guide to the Perplexed*."

⁸⁷² Numbers 33:38 and Deuteronomy 34:5, which refer to the deaths of Moses and Aaron, respectively.

⁸⁷³ Isaiah 58:8

Chapter 32:⁸⁷⁴ Fear and Love

[p. 221] A person talks differently and conducts himself in a different way in front of a king than he would be while sitting either by himself or among his own friends. It is for this reason that spiritual people have always wrapped themselves in God's presence, have lived absolutely moral and ethical lives, and have behaved while sitting privately as if they were sitting in front of the Supreme King of Kings.

This is because the fact that one can reflect upon this reality demonstrates the existence of his intellect, which is the reflection of the active intellect that comes directly from the ultimate cause, which is God.

A person can take this concept further, and the clearer the imagination that comes out in fantasy, the closer he finds himself to the presence of the Supreme King of Kings, as the verse states, "in Your light we shall see light"⁸⁷⁵ - through Your brightness, we see the light. The same thing is true for the opposite, where our glimpse of Him is farther away as His providence over us gets smaller.

Being cognizant of the bond between God and a person through the intellect, it is impossible for that person to be able to hide from Him, just as it's [p. 222] impossible to run away from Him. The prophet says in God's name: "'Can a man hide in secret places and that I shall not see Him,' the word of God?"⁸⁷⁶ That is to say: if one should wish to conceal himself in a hiding place, am I then not able to see Him?

The result is, thus, unlike the way that many idolators used to think of their religious ceremonies as a contribution to their gods, whether to appease, propitiate, or flatter them, in order to obtain from them a favour for themselves, or to obtain revenge against their enemy, or things to that effect. Rather, it is to be used as a factor in the ethical perfection of each individual, all of whom would later want to become better people in the world with better ideas, doing more good, and absolutely no wrong.

It is always up to the perfect person to see for himself what he is doing. This leads to decent conduct, to shame before God, and to not do in secret what nobody would do in public because of fear of public opinion or the law.

⁸⁷⁴ Mislabelled in the book as "Chapter 29."

⁸⁷⁵ Psalms 36:10

⁸⁷⁶ Jeremiah 23:24

Therefore, the pious men of former times⁸⁷⁷ put much emphasis on modesty and proper conduct at the table as much as in prayer, in the bathroom as much as on the street - all of that in order to inculcate the concept of “I have set God before me always.”⁸⁷⁸

The concept that He is always with us and around us requires us to not raise our heads and to not go with our heads uncovered, along with the other behaviours that modesty dictates.

One ought to understand all of both the positive and negative divine commandments⁸⁷⁹ in that sense. The commandments aren't so much for the Creator to derive satisfaction from the positive commandments and pain from the negative commandments, since there is no change in God Himself, as we already explained. Rather, it is in order to emphasize the thought that He is always with us; therefore, our actions should be done in a controlled manner. The verse states it clearly: “If you will not observe to do all the words of this teaching⁸⁸⁰ that are written in this book, to fear this glorious and awesome Name, the Lord your God”⁸⁸¹ - that is, if you won't observe the commandments of the Torah, whose goal is to make you fear your God, then bad things will happen to you.

The character trait of fear of God and of committing transgressions, along with the obligation to observe the commandments, gets every person to observe all the positive and negative commandments.

There is a higher character trait which is called “love.” In that case, one certainly doesn't talk about his relationship to the Creator like a slave to his master, but rather as a child of his father, that comes from the depths of the soul. This is entirely without an intent of reward and without a fear of punishment, but rather, as an indication of love to the One Above and all that He represents.

A person obtains the highest character trait of love by searching for the understanding of God, seeking to attain knowledge of “His” oneness, “His” incorporeality, and “His” eternity.

With that, Maimonides has finished his explanation of the parable of those who look for the way to the king, and who is truly the nearest to Him.

Maimonides comes to that conclusion in chapter 54 of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, the last chapter of that work, stating:

[p. 223] Philosophers state that there are four types of acquisitions of perfection about which a person boasts. The first - and the weakest of them (despite the fact that the aforementioned person

⁸⁷⁷ In this case, Rabbi Kruger uses the Yiddish term *amolige ḥasidim*, which corresponds to the Rabbinic Hebrew term *hasidim rishonim*. In Talmudic sources, this refers to those Jews who were especially scrupulous in observing the divine commandments.

⁸⁷⁸ Psalms 16:8

⁸⁷⁹ Respectively, what to do and what not to do.

⁸⁸⁰ *Torah* in Hebrew

⁸⁸¹ Deuteronomy 28:58

wastes his entire time and energy on it) - is the acquisition of property: money, houses, animals, slaves, etc. That is the weakest form of acquisition, and it doesn't have any secure connection for the people who own these things. It gives temporary pleasure to those people, with a person stating things like "this is my money," "this is my house," or "this is my field." Even a king who can say "my city" or "my army" knows that all the acquisitions are outside of himself; he is the same when he has them and remains so when he loses them. Both are easy to split apart; the poor can become rich, and the rich can become poor. This proves that the expression "it is mine" is only imaginary when compared to reality.

The second type of acquisition of perfection is bodily strength, with well-developed muscles, an erect stature, and symmetrical limbs. However, this is also not purely a human quality; rather, such a quality can be shared with all the other creatures. Examples include a lion that can boast of a stately appearance, or a deer with its lovely horns, or a gazelle with its beautiful body and gracious movements, or a peacock with its beautiful feathers. People don't benefit at all from these qualities as such; besides, these qualities aren't perfect. The strongest person can't exceed a lion or elephant in strength, nor can a person exceed a deer in speed, nor can a person exceed a gazelle in gracefulness. In the best-case scenario, it is a quality for people as living creatures, but not at all for people in terms of human perfection.

The third type of acquisition of perfection is for someone to be wholesome in character and to be forbearing in interacting with fellow humans. However, even this perfection doesn't have any purpose of its own; rather, it is a preparation for a higher, more essential purpose. Good character traits and honesty in personal interactions are only useful when among people. People need to be protected from theft, adultery, slander, and gossip, in order to be on the right path, to exercise moderation, to not oppress any orphan, and to love one's fellow man - since all of that promotes both his own happiness and that of human society in general. Let us imagine that there is only one person in the world, or if one is on a desert island in which nobody besides himself can be found; in that case, all these character traits wouldn't have developed the same as they would have if he were with others. This means that the third type of acquisition of perfection only comes into being insofar as it is necessary to be in contact with other people, but not for an individual alone.

The fourth type of acquisition of perfection in truth is just for the individual himself. It isn't dependent on external acquisitions, and it doesn't require him to be in contact with other people. That acquisition consists in the development of the intellect in order to be able to be engaged in eternal divine concepts and to want to acquire metaphysical truth, which leads to love of the Creator and which maintains the direct link from the individual to God through the active intellect.

This is what the philosophers assert. Maimonides finds this in two verses from Jeremiah: 1) "Thus said God: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom..."⁸⁸² - the sage in practical Torah can't [p. 224] boast for himself of his wisdom (this is the third type of acquisition); "...and let not the

⁸⁸² Jeremiah 9:22

mighty man glory in his might...”⁸⁸³ (this is the second type of acquisition); “...let not the wealthy man glory in his wealth”⁸⁸⁴ (this is the first type of acquisition). 2) “For only in this may one glory - that he understands and knows Me...”⁸⁸⁵ - that is, for him to become wiser and to learn more about Me. However, this doesn’t diminish the worth of the third type of acquisition, “...for I am God who does lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness in the land...”⁸⁸⁶ - whatever is necessary for our world. Nevertheless, “...for in these things I desire, the word of God”⁸⁸⁷ - I want the fourth type of acquisition to be inculcated in people as their personal quality, without connection to the earth and its people.

(In the prior chapter of the third part of his *Guide to the Perplexed*, chapter 53, Maimonides explains the terms lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness. In chapter 54, he explains the term wisdom, in such a way that the four types of acquisition of perfection that have been enumerated - together with their levels and their weaknesses - go well with the aforementioned verse.)

Thus, Maimonides confirmed the previous idea that whoever immerses himself in eternal divine concepts is on a higher level than one who studies Torah and observes the divine commandments in their literal meaning and who doesn’t go any farther with his intellect.

We have already shown that this concept was later bitterly resisted by almost all the sages of France, Germany, and Babylonia, and even by many in Spain.

Maimonides concludes the *Guide to the Perplexed* with the following words:

I hope that you, my student (that is, Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Ibn Akinin,⁸⁸⁸ for whom he wrote that book), will think through these matters that have been described, and that we will all deserve that the following verses come to pass: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,”⁸⁸⁹ and “the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelled in the land of the shadow of death, light has shone upon them.”⁸⁹⁰

⁸⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁸⁵ *ibid.* 9:23

⁸⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸⁸ Like nearly all Maimonides scholars of the early 20th century, Rabbi Kruger assumed that Maimonides’ disciple was Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Ibn Akinin (1150-1220), whereas the actual disciple was Rabbi Joseph ben Judah of Ceuta (1160-1226).

⁸⁸⁹ Isaiah 35:5

⁸⁹⁰ *ibid.* 9:1

Chapter 33:⁸⁹¹ A General Survey of the *Guide to the Perplexed*

[p. 224] Those who have studied Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* in the original know that we haven't dealt with the entire book, but only with some individual topics. We have left out most of them. At times, this was because of their depth, which means that they aren't accessible to the average reader - someone who hasn't prepared himself with the necessary elementary knowledge that the study of philosophy requires. Other times, it was because the topics are based on verses and quotations that need to be explained allegorically or philosophically. Some of the topics are simply omitted altogether because their content can challenge an ordinary Jew's belief. Maimonides himself calls these the "crowns of the Torah" and emphasizes countless times that they shouldn't be imparted to everyone, but only to outstanding individuals.

However, in order for the reader who knows the *Guide* just from our articles to have an accurate concept of its entire arrangement and of all the topics, here we sketch its content according to the explanation of Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508),⁸⁹² who states the following:

[p. 225] The *Guide to the Perplexed* is comprised of three parts. The first part is divided into 75 chapters, the second part is divided into 48 chapters, and the third part is divided into 54 chapters. Altogether, they make up 177 chapters.

In the first part, until the 49th chapter, those Hebrew words that contain multiple meanings are explained. From there to the 70th chapter - 21 chapters - Maimonides talks about the "images" with which biblical verses designate the Creator. The 6 remaining chapters 1) tell of the great wisdoms that the Jewish People possessed and then lost for certain reasons; 2) narrate the fact that God rules in His marvellous unity over everything that exists in the universe; and 3) transmit the introductions of the *Medabrim*⁸⁹³ through which they infer the four fundamentals of belief: the existence of God, His oneness, that He doesn't have any body, and that the world is a temporally created one (and not in existence from time immemorial). With that, he concludes the first part.

Maimonides starts the second part by dealing with the intellectual proofs that philosophers (the Arab ones, in accordance with the neoplatonic system⁸⁹⁴) applied to the three fundamentals - the existence of God, the oneness of the Creator, and His incorporeality. They all debated these issues and demonstrated the intellectual correctness of their proof. From there to the twelfth chapter - 10 chapters altogether - he discusses different topics about the existence of angels and the nature of circular spheres insofar as the Torah can be in agreement with philosophy. This was required as a preparation for the account of the Chariot in accordance with the Prophet Ezekiel's prophecies. From there to the 32nd chapter - 19 chapters - a long and deep debate with Aristotle ensued, regarding his opinion that the world exists eternally just like its Creator. Maimonides demonstrates

⁸⁹¹ Mislabeled in the book as "Chapter 30."

⁸⁹² A medieval Spanish commentator who was often referred to simply as Abarbanel or Abrabanel.

⁸⁹³ Muslim *Qalam* theologians; in Hebrew, that term literally means "those who speak."

⁸⁹⁴ Platonic philosophy as interpreted by Plotinus (204/5-270/1 CE).

there - with a rare shrewdness - that the world is a temporally created one, and at the same time, he explains the first portion of Genesis (the account of the Creation, which belongs to the type of story classified as “secrets of the Torah”). The last 15 chapters are devoted to explaining prophecy, its levels, and the highest level of prophecy displayed by Moses our Master, may he rest in peace.

The first seven chapters of the third part deal with the account of the Chariot (considered an even deeper part of the “secrets of the Torah”). From there until chapter 16, the following topics are discussed:

- 1) all troubles and annihilations arising because of people’s bodies;
- 2) the body remaining as a barrier to the understanding of wisdom;
- 3) most problems arising as a result of human foolishness and carelessness;
- 4) optimism being natural and pessimism being abnormal;
- 5) whether a person can find a general purpose for the entire Creation;
- 6) humankind not being the centre around which Creation in its entirety revolves itself; and
- 7) impossibility being a logically consistent principle.

From there to the end of the 25th chapter, Maimonides deals with the question of trials, knowledge of the Creator, and His providence - with a glance at the Book of Job. The entirety of the next 25 chapters is devoted to the reasons for the divine commandments. The chapters from chapter 50 until the end explain how important the Torah’s narratives are, and they conclude with the explanation of how a person [p. 226] can unite with the tremendous world intellect which comes from the Creator in order to attain great truth as well as immortality for his soul.

Don Isaac Abarbanel asks 11 questions about that entire order, and here, we describe the gist of his answer in summary form.

In Abarbanel’s opinion, the entire *Guide to the Perplexed* is a long commentary concerning the 13 principles that Maimonides enumerated in summary form based on the first Mishnah of the chapter of *Ḥelek* towards the end of tractate *Sanhedrin*, which starts with, “all of Israel has a portion in the world to come [*olam ha-ba*].”⁸⁹⁵ The principles are:

- 1) God’s existence;
- 2) His unity;

⁸⁹⁵ In Chapter 10 of the Mishnah of tractate *Sanhedrin*, as part of his introduction to that Mishnah.

- 3) He isn't corporeal at all and isn't affected by physical power (the way that idolators assert);
- 4) He exists eternally, while all the other things that we see were created by Him;
- 5) one ought to serve only Him, not any angel, sphere, etc.;
- 6) He appoints prophets to say the proper words to people;
- 7) Moses' prophecy is the highest level of prophecy;
- 8) the Torah that we have was given by God through Moses our Master, may he rest in peace;
- 9) the Torah is eternal, and it will never be supplanted by a second one;
- 10) the Creator knows all the thoughts of people along with all their deeds;
- 11) there is reward for the righteous, and punishment for the wicked, and thus belief falls under God's providence;
- 12) the Messiah will come, as the Prophets predicted; and
- 13) there will come a time when all the dead will be brought back to life.

In Abarbanel's opinion, in the first part of these principles, Maimonides removed all the doubts that can arise because of the verses in the Torah and the Prophets, as well as the doubts that the proofs of the *Medabrim* can bring. He dedicated the second part of these principles to the actions of the Creator in the past, while in the third part he explains all His actions that are eternal.

Going forward with his system, Abarbanel finds a consistent explanation of the thirteen principles in the *Guide* by way of reason, instead of the way that they were codified in his Commentary on the Mishnah in the form of laws (without any logical explanation), since in the Commentary, Maimonides wrote for Jews who believe in all the words of the Torah. One doesn't need to explain to them "how to believe," but rather, "what to believe in." This task was completed by arranging the principles succinctly. In the *Guide to the Perplexed*, however, he talks to a class of people who were quite damaged in their belief. Their thoughts went back and forth, and their minds were confused between belief and philosophy. Those people were certainly not satisfied with the "what," if at the same time there wasn't the "why" to go along with it.

Thus, Abarbanel explains why Maimonides entirely omitted the principle of the "coming of the Messiah" in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, even though in his Commentary on the Mishnah he discusses it at length. As well, nowhere in the *Guide* does he mention the principle of the revival of the dead, even though he includes it in the 13 principles, which every Jew must believe in. According to Abarbanel, these two principles are inevitable, following the demonstration - by way

of reason - that the Creator knows all the details of people's thoughts and actions, and that He rewards [p. 227] good and punishes evil. In understanding divine providence by way of reason, these two principles - the coming of the Messiah and the revival of the dead - come as logical consequences of reward for the thousands of martyrs who perished in exile in sanctification of God's name.⁸⁹⁶ That which he presented concerning them nevertheless made up two separate principles that are given in order to implant hope in the hearts of the Jewish masses, who don't immerse themselves much in abstract topics. Those people, not having explicitly in mind both of these established principles, would entirely cease to believe in divine providence, seeing for themselves the masses of martyrs⁸⁹⁷ perishing in sanctification of God's name.

However, aside from Abarbanel's answer, one can explain this more simply: as stated earlier, the *Guide to the Perplexed* is written in order to explain these principles by way of reason. The facts are there, the events have already occurred, but the explanation was missing. Those two aforementioned principles are different because they suffer from two weaknesses - 1) that they still need to happen in the first place and 2) there is no intellectual explanation concerning them anywhere. The principles are composed purely of belief. The first one of these principles (the coming of the Messiah) can still partly be rationalized, and Maimonides indeed did so in his introduction to the Mishnaic order of *Zera'im* to the dissatisfaction of the masses of devout believers. However, the second of these principles (the revival of the dead) doesn't allow for any intellect; it is the opposite, as it's moreover counter to the intellect, a sort of impossibility. This is because insofar as the principle itself demonstrates that impossibility can never become possibility ("the impossible has a stable nature"⁸⁹⁸), it remains no more than belief in the same Creator who was able to create "something from nothing"⁸⁹⁹ during the Creation of the world. This is so, even though today, in accordance with nature, such a thing can't be. That is because God can do everything and His ability is unlimited. Thus, we may also believe in the revival of the dead, even though we can't comprehend it with the intellect.

As a matter of fact, this is the gist of Maimonides' statement on the revival of the dead, and this explains his omission of that principle from the *Guide to the Perplexed*, which only has to do with the intellect.

In the *Guide to the Perplexed*, the principles aren't laid out in order as in Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah. Abarbanel explains this; however, because we want to avoid being too lengthy, we omit his explanations. We give only one example: Maimonides explains the fifth principle, that "one ought to only serve Him," all the way at the end of the *Guide to the Perplexed*, since truthfully that is the central principle around which all the others are focused.

⁸⁹⁶ The Hebrew phrase for a Jewish martyr's death is *al kiddush Hashem*, which literally means "upon the sanctification of God's name."

⁸⁹⁷ The literal translation from Hebrew is "holy ones," since these martyrs died in God's Name and sanctification.

⁸⁹⁸ Part 3, Chapter 15 of *Guide to the Perplexed*

⁸⁹⁹ In Hebrew, *yesh me'eyn*; it is known in Latin as *ex nihilo*.

Chapter 1: The Influence of Maimonides on the Intellectual World

[p. 231] The Jewish People is rich in spiritual giants who appear here and there, illuminating the horizon with their brilliance with respect to various disciplines: some in Torah, some in wisdom, some even in statecraft, medicine, astronomy, etc. However, nobody else has combined in himself all these qualities together as much as Maimonides, and certainly not as thoroughly and extensively.

Despite at once being a great Talmudist, a brilliant literary stylist, a marvellous interpreter, a meticulous organizer, an ingenious thinker, a profound astronomer, a practising doctor, a thorough philosopher, the father of logic, and a prolific author, Maimonides had time to be the leader of his community and of all the Jewish diaspora. This began with faraway Yemen and included the communities of North Africa,⁹⁰⁰ as well as Europe - especially in Spain, Portugal, Germany, France, and Italy. He became the centre to which the despondent Jews of Yemen turned when they were forced to be converted. The same thing was true for the North Africans, when a false Messiah arose and confounded their simple minds. All the congregations of Provence, Italy, and all of Europe in general turned their attention to him, looking for a middle path between Torah and philosophy in order for them to be able to study wisdom; this way, they would not have to forsake the Torah, which was holy and dear to them.

There were enough great geniuses among the Jews who were reknowned for their greatness; they wrote books which challenged people's minds, but these works endured only during their generation. The next generation hardly heard of them, and these books either remained in manuscript form deposited in a library somewhere or went missing. Those of Maimonides were among the rare ones that have remained extant until this very day. His books have been translated into all civilized languages and are still as diligently studied today as they were hundreds of years ago.

This is because medieval Jewish philosophy achieves its highest level of development in Maimonides' books. His *Guide to the Perplexed* - by now the steadfast and strong cornerstone of Jewish theology on a philosophical-rational basis - fortified Jewish thought, over many generations, with the power of the Aristotelian world of ideas. Maimonides, more than all the other Jewish thinkers, was the one who caused the Jews to become the [p. 232] intermediaries, the key link, between Greek/Arab philosophy and the medieval Latin Christian world. This included the *Guide to the Perplexed*, which - on the order of the well-known Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich II (1194-1250) - was translated into Latin (at that time the language of Christian culture) already in the first decade of the 13th century. It exerted an immense influence on the medieval Christian

⁹⁰⁰ Rabbi Kruger simply calls it "Africa," but he really means North Africa, from Egypt to Morocco. This excludes places like Ethiopia, which had a large Jewish community of its own for over 2000 years.

thinkers (the Scholastics⁹⁰¹). The following scholars assert this: Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907; in *ha-Mazkir*⁹⁰²); Jacob Guttman (1845-1919); in his book *Die Scholastik*⁹⁰³ and in his *Der Einfluss der Maimonidischen Philosophie auf das Christliche Abendland*, published in the anthology *Moses ben Maimon*⁹⁰⁴; David Kaufmann (1852-1899) in his essay *Der Führer Maimuni's in der Weltliteratur* (collected works in the second part of *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, pp. 152-189); and yet many other scholars who wrote about Maimonides.

The well-known Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200-1280)⁹⁰⁵ brings into his works entire chapters from Maimonides, whom he calls “Moses the Egyptian,” as all the Scholastics of his time called him. The *Guide to the Perplexed* had a yet greater influence on Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) - the second philosophical genius of the medieval Scholastics. Aquinas’ work, dealing with the most important philosophical-theological problems, made use of Maimonides’ logical proofs and hypotheses. Jacob Guttman demonstrates this in the anthology *Moses ben Maimon* (pp. 153-175); Manuel Joel (1826-1890) does this in *Verhältniss Albert dem Grossen zu Moses Maimonides* (1863)⁹⁰⁶ and in his *Etwas über den Einfluss der Jüdischen Philosophie auf die Christliche Scholastik*. The French scholar Émile Saisset (1814-1863), in his book that was published in 1886,⁹⁰⁷ credits the immense influence that Maimonides’ books exert on European reasoning.

In more recent times, the *Guide to the Perplexed* had a tremendous effect on the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). With great enthusiasm, he relates in his works that in the book of the distinguished philosopher, mathematician, physician, and exegete Maimonides, he discovered a lot more philosophical depth than he could imagine.

The influence of the *Guide to the Perplexed* on the Muslim world was just as great. Already in Maimonides’ life, the *Guide* certainly had Muslim commentators, and in the 14th century in Muslim colleges in Fez and other cultural centres, they would diligently study Maimonides’ philosophical works. Joseph Caspi (1280-1345) related this⁹⁰⁸ with the following words: “The same thing is true of the Ishmaelites in Fez and other lands in which colleges were founded in order to study the book of the *Guide to the Perplexed* from the mouths of Jewish scribes” (*Ta’am Zekenim*,⁹⁰⁹ p. 53).

⁹⁰¹ Practitioners of Scholasticism, which put much emphasis on dialectical reasoning in philosophical analysis based on what was taught at medieval universities in countries such as England, France, Spain, and Italy.

⁹⁰² The Hebrew name for the *Hebräische Bibliographie* journal that Steinschneider edited from 1859 to 1882.

⁹⁰³ In full, *Die Scholastik des 13. Jahrhunderts in ihren Beziehungen zum Judentum und zur jüdischen Literatur*, published in 1902.

⁹⁰⁴ Rabbi Kruger seems to have mistakenly attributed those works to Yehuda Kaufman (1886-1976), better known as Yehuda Even Shmuel once he moved to Israel in 1926. He writes that as “Y. Kaufman”, leaving room for interpretation of the first name (e.g. Yaakov/Jacob vs. Yehuda/Judah).

⁹⁰⁵ Also known as St. Albert the Great or Albert of Cologne

⁹⁰⁶ Rabbi Kruger notes it as being from 1876.

⁹⁰⁷ Actually, it was most probably *Précurseurs et disciples de Descartes*, which was published in 1862.

⁹⁰⁸ In his *ha-Musar* (“Ethics”), also known as *Yoreh De’ah* (“Teacher of Knowledge”).

⁹⁰⁹ Written by Eliezer Ashkenazi and published in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1854.

Maimonides defined an entire era among the Jews themselves, and therefore, he was praised and was almost venerated by them. Here, we convey one of the aphorisms that Dr. Israel Zinberg (1873-1939) brings in his wonderful book *A History of Jewish Literature*.⁹¹⁰

[p. 233] 1) An inscription on the monument of Maimonides' tomb. An unknown poet engraved something which reads in the original as follows:

Man - and not man.

And if you were man -

From the angels up above, your mother conceived.

She says to God: Without woman and man,

You created an angel in the lower world.

(Yiddish translation: A mortal man - yet not to be compared to other people; You are a man-child, and your mother became pregnant from an angel of heaven; Otherwise I say to God: You created an angel for the lowliest world without a man and a woman.)

“It’s almost impossible,” comments Dr. Zinberg, “for a Jewish hand to write down such divine words about a flesh and blood person.”

2) The well-known poet Judah Alharizi (ca. 1165-1225)⁹¹¹ writes in his letter to Maimonides:

You are an angel of God and you were created in the image of God.

And if you are constituted as a human, like us,

Because of you, God said:

“Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.”⁹¹²

(Yiddish translation: You are a divine angel, and in God’s likeness, you were created. And if you are like us, God meant to say of you: Let us create a person in accordance with our form.)

3) A poet, whose name we don’t know, writes:

⁹¹⁰ Originally published in Yiddish in the 1920s and 1930s as *Di geshikhte fun di literatur bay yidn*.

⁹¹¹ Also known as Judah ben Solomon Harizi or simply as al-Harizi.

⁹¹² Genesis 1:26

Moses is in the place of a faithful rock

On a nest of honesty you established religions.

Also his [Maimonides'] pen is there in place of the [biblical Moses'] staff,

“And he performed miracles with it.”⁹¹³

(Yiddish translation: Moses is beloved in the Creator's house; he established religion with the cord of honesty. In place of [the biblical Moses'] staff he made use of the pen, and with this he demonstrated miracles.)

4) A later poet, Meir ben Ezekiel ibn Gabbay (ca. 1480-ca. 1540),⁹¹⁴ proclaims with enthusiasm about Maimonides:

How I esteem him, and to whom can he be compared!

For there isn't any land that can contain his value.

If I ascend above to the Seraphim on high -

There I find for him a worthy brother.

(Yiddish translation: To whom can one compare him, for upon the earth there isn't anything to compare to him! Perhaps in the heavens among the Seraphim, there one can find for Him a worthy brother.)

5) Nahmanides (1194-1270), in his famous letter to the rabbis of France with regard to [p. 234] Maimonides, writes as follows:

Behold, I testify before my masters by Heaven and Earth, that we have heard from those telling the truth that in all the lands of the Kingdom of Yemen, many communities were occupied with Torah...and they mentioned the name of the rabbi in every single *kaddish*⁹¹⁵ “in your lives and your days and in the life of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon,” who illuminated their eyes with Torah and established it in the beam of its light.

⁹¹³ cf. Exodus 4:30

⁹¹⁴ Rabbi Kruger mistakenly labels him as Jacob ben Ezra Gabbay.

⁹¹⁵ A prayer that a mourner and/or somebody leading prayer services recites at various points in the prayers when there is a minimum of ten men. The widespread belief that it is a prayer for the dead is erroneous, and in fact there's no mention of death in the *kaddish*.

(Yiddish translation: I invoke for you, my masters, Heaven and Earth that we heard testimony from trustworthy people that many of the communities of Yemen study Torah, and in every *kaddish* they make mention of Maimonides' name, since he is the one who illuminated their eyes in order for them to understand the illustrious Torah.)

This is a historical fact, and not only in Yemen itself; in many communities in the Oriental countries, Maimonides' name used to be evoked, and in synagogues, they would recite special liturgical poems with refrains that were composed in his honour.

Chapter 2: Maimonides and the “Sages of Lunel”

[p. 234] Maimonides’ reputation was great all over the world, but he was venerated in Provence, in the South of France,⁹¹⁶ more than anywhere else. The part of France between the Alps and the Pyrenees still included within it vestiges of ancient Roman, and especially ancient Greek, culture. Its inhabitants who were heretical and even hostile to Papal influence already started - in the High⁹¹⁷ Middle Ages - to evolve in the area of literature and art, and especially in poetry, thanks to the fusion between Romance,⁹¹⁸ Latin, and Spanish elements as well as Oriental Arabic.

This is a brilliant corner of the world that existed in which both material and spiritual needs were well attended to; Jewish communities flourished in the areas of Torah and wisdom. The well-known traveller Benjamin of Tudela (1130-1173) described these Jewish communities as follows:

I arrived in Narbonne, where there is a Jewish community that was already known from quite ancient times for its sages. There, I met many sages and distinguished people, the leading one being Rabbi Kalonymos (d. ca. 1194), the son of the well-known leader, R. Todros, who is descended from King David. Rabbi Kalonymos owns much property and many houses and fields, which the rulers of the country granted in perpetuity. There, one could find R. Abraham, the head of the rabbinic academy,⁹¹⁹ R. Makhir, R. Judah, and a yet greater number of sages. ... A two days’ journey from the city of Béziers one can find the city of Montpellier, quite [p. 235] a convenient place of commerce. There, merchants come together from Edom and Ishmael (Christians and Muslims, respectively), and from diverse countries - such as Algarve,⁹²⁰ Lombardy, the former Roman lands, Egypt, Palestine, Greece, France, England - and yet more merchants from all kinds of cities who conduct their business as far as Pisa and Genoa. ... In Montpellier live many great sages, the leading one being R. Reuben ben Todros. Those Jews are quite rich and generous, and they gladly support those who call upon them for help. ... Four miles from there can be found the city of Lunel, where quite a God-fearing community is found in which they sit day and night studying Torah and wisdom. The renowned Rabbenu Meshullam lived there, and now there are his five sons - R. Joseph, R. Isaac, R. Jacob, R. Aaron, and R. Asher the *Perush*.⁹²¹ The last of these sons removes himself entirely from the world, sitting day and night bent over books, and he fasts on a regular basis and never eats any meat. ... The doctor, Rabbi Judah Ibn Tibbon (1120-ca. 1190) of Spain, also lives in Lunel; all the young men who come there to study Torah from far-flung countries are financially supported in terms of food, clothing, and other necessities the entire time that they are pursuing their studies. There is no greater God-fearing community than that of

⁹¹⁶ In the medieval Jewish context, “Provence” refers to the South of France as a whole more than to the more modern, narrower conception of “Provence” in southeastern France.

⁹¹⁷ Rabbi Kruger renders it as “Deep” in the original Yiddish text, as if to imply the “Dark Ages.”

⁹¹⁸ Originally, before the present-day definition encompassing all the languages descended from Latin, the term “Romance” specifically meant French, Franco-Provençal, Occitan, and other languages of present-day France.

⁹¹⁹ *Yeshivah* in Hebrew and Yiddish.

⁹²⁰ In southern Portugal; Rabbi Kruger mistakenly labels it as “Alhambria,” as if to imply the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Andalusia, southern Spain.

⁹²¹ Literally in Hebrew, “one separating himself” - a Jewish “monk” of sorts.

Lunel, and its scholars are known as the “sages of Lunel.” ... Two miles further can be found the town of Beaucaire, a large place. There, one can find a great rabbinic academy under the supervision of the well-known Rabbi Abraham ben David (ca. 1125-1198; known by the name “Rabad” or “Rabbi Abraham of Posquières⁹²²”) who has a global reputation as a great Talmudist and master. Students come from the most far-flung countries to study at his academy, and all the people of that academy live at his house, because he himself is quite rich and could afford to support all of them on his own account. ... Three miles from there is found the city of Bourg de St.-Gilles,⁹²³ a great city with many scholars. Great merchants are found there. The head of that community is the *Nasi*⁹²⁴ R. Abba Mari bar Isaac (flourished in the mid-1100s), the steward of all of the properties and estates of Count Raymond (ca. 1134-ca. 1194).⁹²⁵

Thus, this excerpt from *The Journeys of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela* truly indicates how the communities of Provence were on a high level economically and spiritually. The scholars and sages there took note of Maimonides as a brilliant star that appeared on the Jewish horizon once in a thousand years. Thanks to the fact that Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089/1092-1164/1167) spent time in that country, the local scholars were familiar with Spanish-Jewish literature and wisdom. Judah Ibn Tibbon and his son, Samuel Ibn Tibbon (ca. 1150-ca. 1230), together with the Kimḥi family, enlarged that literature through original books and translations from the *Kuzari*,⁹²⁶ *Emunot ve’Deot*,⁹²⁷ *Hovat ha-Levavot*,⁹²⁸ *ha-Rikmah*,⁹²⁹ and more. Samuel Ibn Tibbon had a large library that his father left for him, thanks to which - together with his great scholarly merit - he became the greatest authority and most recognized spiritual leader, and he spread the reputation of Maimonides far and wide.

[p. 236] Maimonides, the one who wrote the *Yad ha-Ḥazakah*⁹³⁰ and the *Guide to the Perplexed*, quickly became renowned as the greatest genius, the pillar of fire⁹³¹ that illuminated the way for the Jewish People in exile. The aforementioned R. Aaron, son of Rabbenu Meshullam, writes⁹³²

⁹²² now known as Vauvert

⁹²³ located between Nîmes and Arles

⁹²⁴ Hebrew for president, chair, or leader

⁹²⁵ Raymond V, Count of Toulouse

⁹²⁶ Written by Judah Halevi (ca. 1075-1141), the *Kuzari* translates literally as “The Khazar.” Originally written in Arabic, it is known in full as the *Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion*.

⁹²⁷ Written by Sa’adiah Gaon (882/892-942), originally in Judeo-Arabic. The title translates as “Beliefs and Opinions,” and that book presents the dogmas of Judaism.

⁹²⁸ Written by Bahya Ibn Paquda (ca. 1050-1120), originally in Judeo-Arabic. The title translates as “Duties of the Hearts,” and that book deals with how to properly understand God.

⁹²⁹ Written by Jonah Ibn Janah (985/990-1055), originally in Arabic. The title translates as “The Variegated Flowerbed” and the book was the first complete Hebrew grammar that was produced.

⁹³⁰ Another name for the *Mishneh Torah*, also authored by Maimonides. The origin of this other name for the *Mishneh Torah* is connected to the system of the equivalence of numbers with words that is called *gematria* in Hebrew. In this case, ך or *yad*, the ך equals 10 and the ך equals 4; thus, *yad* equals 14 in Hebrew letters. Word for word, *Yad ha-Ḥazakah* means “the strong hand” in Hebrew.

⁹³¹ Alluding to the “pillar of fire” that lit the way for the Israelites in the Wilderness in much of the Pentateuch.

⁹³² In a letter to his adversary, Rabbi Meir Abulafia of Toledo, Spain.

about Maimonides: “He [Maimonides] extricated his people from the sea of ignorance⁹³³ and engraved his Torah inside their hearts, for ever since Ravina II (d. ca. 499 CE) and his teacher Rav Ashi (352-427)⁹³⁴ there hadn’t arisen anyone equal to Moses [ben Maimon] among the Jews.” Regarding each scholarly question of great importance, one directly turned to Maimonides in Egypt in writing, and the latter’s response was the “*Urim and Tumim*,”⁹³⁵ the highest authority.

For example: Some Jewish communities called upon Maimonides with the question of whether astrology has a scientific worth and whether it is indeed true that the constellations can have an effect on people’s destinies. A number of the sages of Lunel, with Jonathan ha-Kohen in the lead, requested that Maimonides explain to them some difficult portions of *Mishneh Torah*. Hearing that the *Guide to the Perplexed* had appeared, they sent a special agent with a request that he should send his work, if possible in a Hebrew translation, or at least in the Arabic original. Receiving the original was a great celebration; at that point, they directly called upon Rabbi Samuel Ibn Tibbon - a thorough expert in the Arabic language - to translate the work into Hebrew. Ibn Tibbon, having quite a lot of reverence for Maimonides, began to fear undertaking a task of such responsibility. Nonetheless, after praying for a long time, he accepted the assignment.

Samuel Ibn Tibbon, in wanting to perform his assignment in the best way, turned to Maimonides himself for necessary instructions. Maimonides, who - for quite a long time - had intended to translate all his Arabic books into Hebrew, was quite delighted at this news. Soon thereafter, he answered Ibn Tibbon and instructed him on how he would need to conduct himself when performing such a difficult task.

It’s hard to say whether it was on account of the way that the translator Samuel Ibn Tibbon behaved with a tremendous amount of respect towards the *Guide to the Perplexed*, or whether it was other reasons that stood in the way. However one sees it, his translation took a long time - longer than what the patience of the sages of Lunel was able to endure. Therefore, they again called upon Maimonides to do it for them himself. Maimonides answered that he had already thought about it for a long time, and not only about the *Guide to the Perplexed* - he would have liked to translate all his books, originally written in Arabic, into Hebrew. He lacked the time, however, and he concluded: “Nonetheless, among you, we find the distinguished son of Rabbi Judah Ibn Tibbon (Samuel) and he is the most suitable man for this specific task.”

It was exactly at that time that the poet Judah [p. 237] Alharizi (ca. 1165-1225),⁹³⁶ an excellent literary stylist and a person with philosophical knowledge, came to the South of France. He was very much sought out as a translator, and soon, Jonathan ha-Kohen indeed called upon him on behalf of all the Jews in the community of Marseille with a request to translate all of Maimonides’ works written in Arabic. Alharizi came to an agreement, and he indeed translated Maimonides’

⁹³³ In analogy to the deliverance of the Israelites from the Sea of Reeds.

⁹³⁴ Those two personalities are thought to be the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud.

⁹³⁵ Objects on the High Priest’s breastplate supposedly used in divination.

⁹³⁶ Also known as Judah ben Solomon Harizi or simply as al-Harizi.

Commentary on the Mishnah and the *Guide to the Perplexed*. We now have both translations. Alharizi's translation was easier to study, but less precise than Ibn Tibbon's; for that reason, the latter translation became more widespread among Jews.

Both translations were soon reproduced in hundreds of copies, and the sages of Lunel "drank the waters of the source of wisdom with thirst."

However, the very country in which Maimonides' reputation was well-known also produced someone who took upon himself to tarnish that reputation. This was Rabbi Abraham ben David, known by the name of "the Rabad, a person of understanding."

Chapter 3: Objections of Rabbi Abraham ben David to Maimonides

[p. 237] Maimonides' strongest opponent was Rabbi Abraham ben David (ca. 1125-1198),⁹³⁷ but even prior to him there already were strong opponents to Maimonides and his way of interpreting the Torah.

Rabbi Samuel ben Ali (d. 1194/8), head of the rabbinic academy⁹³⁸ of Baghdad, was the first who spoke out against Maimonides. He presided over his academy with great pomp and splendour, sat on a golden chair, and had servants charged with executing his commands. He couldn't stand knowing that one [Maimonides] who didn't receive his Torah education in Babylonia would become the sole authority over the entire diaspora - an honour that ought to belong to him [Rabbi Samuel ben Ali], as the head of the *Geon Ya'akov*⁹³⁹ academy.

The academy's students and supporters sought to diminish Maimonides' worth in Torah, and they also sought to mark his books with the suspicion of heresy.

In Alexandria, a commotion arose when a local rabbinic judge indicated that Maimonides ruled in his *Mishneh Torah* that a man who discharges semen isn't obligated to ritually immerse himself before praying. Rabbi Phinehas ben Meshullam of Provence, the judge in Alexandria, spoke out strongly against that legal ruling; beyond the commotion that his statement aroused among the ordinary Jews, he sent a letter to Maimonides himself. In passing, he enumerated yet more weaknesses in *Mishneh Torah*, as follows:

- 1) That Maimonides didn't specify the sources from which he [p. 238] took the laws. Because of that, one can make a mistake on account of not understanding Maimonides' rationale, and thus not paying attention to the source in order to clarify the law.
- 2) That he doesn't mention the names of the Tannaim and Amoraim,⁹⁴⁰ who were the halakhic masters, and that can lead to their names being entirely forgotten.
- 3) The biggest weakness is that Maimonides didn't warn the student of his *Mishneh Torah* to not rely on its laws, but rather to study much Talmud,⁹⁴¹ in order to be able to judge for himself how much farther Maimonides was from the truth in halakhic decisions.

⁹³⁷ Also known as the Rabad, or really, Rabad III.

⁹³⁸ *Yeshivah* in Hebrew and Yiddish.

⁹³⁹ Hebrew for "Jacob's Genius" or "Pride of Jacob."

⁹⁴⁰ The Tannaim were the earlier figures from the rabbinic period and contributed to the Mishnah, and the Amoraim were the later figures from that period and contributed to the bulk of the Talmud.

⁹⁴¹ The original Yiddish text says *Gemara*, which is the lengthy commentary to Mishnah and which forms the basis of the Talmud (both Babylonian and Palestinian) as a whole.

When he received that letter, Maimonides was ill and wasn't able to answer. Rabbi Phinehas ben Meshullam wrote a second letter and demanded a reply, and then Maimonides answered him and demonstrated that he was correct with an extraordinary coolness and tolerance, while at the same time strongly sustaining the truth.

The above-mentioned head of the academy in Baghdad didn't stop looking for any fault in Maimonides, and as one could surmise, he appointed students to ask halakhic questions so that possibly Maimonides would pronounce an incorrect legal opinion. One of the questions concerned the principle of revival of the dead, which Maimonides treated in an incidental way and in quite a summary manner, which enabled the head of the academy to be suspicious that Maimonides himself wasn't certain about that principle. A second question was whether one may board a ship that floats in one of the great rivers, such as the Euphrates or the Tigris [on the Sabbath]. Maimonides ruled there in favour of leniency, and because of this, Rabbi Samuel ben Ali found an opportunity to dispute and to demonstrate that not only is Maimonides heretical in his legal interpretation, but also that he is simply an ignoramus who is incompetent in law. Rabbi Samuel ben Ali wrote a letter to Maimonides regarding this. Maimonides made replies to both of these questions, making clear his opinion about revival of the dead and refuting Rabbi Samuel's hypotheses to prohibit boarding the ship. This gave Rabbi Samuel ben Ali a sort of lesson, after which he suppressed his desire to further appear in public in opposition to Maimonides' decisions. That helped, but covertly, Rabbi Samuel ben Ali didn't stop conspiring against Maimonides and his *Mishneh Torah*.

Yet another opponent turned up, this time from Aleppo. His name was Zechariah and he began to persecute Maimonides' student, Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Ibn Akin, ⁹⁴² for wanting to open a rabbinic academy to teach the students Maimonides' books. Zechariah, along with Rabbi Samuel ben Ali, enlisted two distinguished leaders of the diaspora against Ibn Akin, but Maimonides warned Ibn Akin concerning this. His letter to his distinguished disciple sheds light on the rare personality of Maimonides, and it is indirectly a defence against all the charges that his enemies used to spread among the Jews against him. Among other subjects, Maimonides writes as follows:

...And regarding your efforts to establish an academy in Baghdad to study *Mishneh Torah*, I allow you to do so, but I don't advise you to do so, out of fear that you [p. 239] shouldn't bring any troubles upon yourself and your purpose would thus not be achieved. Being preoccupied with the students, you wouldn't be able to continue with your business. I wish to dissuade you from trying to obtain anything from the exilarchs, for the bit of money that you earn from weaving, carpentry, or tailoring is more important for me than large gains through the kindness of the exilarchs. You will be humiliated at every interaction with them; if you take something from them, you will be scorned. Therefore, my advice is that you should conduct business for your livelihood, study

⁹⁴² Like nearly all Maimonides scholars of the early 20th century, Rabbi Kruger assumed that Maimonides' disciple was Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Ibn Akin (1150-1220), whereas the actual disciple was Rabbi Joseph ben Judah of Ceuta (1160-1226).

medicine, and study Torah on the true path (i.e. according to Maimonides' opinion) together with Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103). There's a difference between one legal opinion and that of somebody else; think through the Talmud from which both opinions derive and there you will find out who is right about it. However, don't spend any time on the commentaries that seek to explain the incomprehensible matters of the Talmud, because the results lead to little benefit and much waste of time.

Thus, Maimonides' letter clearly shows how Ibn Aknin was innocent of the charge that his intention was to move scholars away from Torah study. Here, it is not Maimonides but rather the Talmud that has the last word regarding a doubtful matter concerning what is the law. However, we also find out that Maimonides didn't like Talmudic arguments that don't directly and clearly lead to formulating the law.

The rumours that Maimonides wasn't at all a strong believer in revival of the dead didn't stop, and he began to receive letters from enemies and good friends alike, demanding that he should clearly express his opinion about that matter. This motivated Maimonides to write his well-known *Ma'amar Teḥiyat ha-Metim*⁹⁴³ - we have already imparted its gist in earlier chapters.⁹⁴⁴

However, the strongest of Maimonides' opponents came from Provence - from the same place where he gained so many supporters. This was Rabbi Abraham ben David. He wasn't satisfied with how Maimonides' opponents attacked individual subjects from his *Mishneh Torah*; rather, he wanted to give a complete critique of the entire book. He noticed deficiencies in many of its laws, and he came up with short remarks for the majority of these laws, like: "He doesn't know what he's talking about," "He's mixed up here," "It's an error," "It's child's talk," "I swear on my head that that person [Maimonides] doesn't understand the law," and so forth. However, Rabbi Abraham ben David does praise Maimonides concerning other laws - like "Well said," "He ruled correctly," or "That person [Maimonides] performed a great task collecting all the laws." From this, we understand how incorrect the accusation of Maimonides' supporters was, that Rabbi Abraham ben David was distracted with envy for Maimonides' greatness. It's better to say that he made his critique out of a great love for the truth. Being a "master of one task," he felt capable of purging the *Mishneh Torah* from mistakes that could bring harm to whoever studies it and rules on laws from it.

The proof is that right at the beginning of *Hilkhot Kiddush ha-Ḥodesh*⁹⁴⁵ in the *Mishneh Torah*, [p. 240] Rabbi Abraham ben David - in his commentary on that section - lets us know that he is refraining from his critique, knowing that Maimonides here is dealing with a topic with which he, Rabbi Abraham ben David, is unfamiliar.

⁹⁴³ Literally, "Statement of the Revival of the Dead." This is one part of Maimonides' Epistles, or *Igrot* in Hebrew.

⁹⁴⁴ See chapter 12 of part I and chapter 33 of part III.

⁹⁴⁵ Literally, "Laws of the Sanctification of the New Month." This is found in the *Sefer ha-Zemanim* section of the *Mishneh Torah*.

(Note: The great scholar Isaac Hirsch Weiss [1815-1905] deals with the entire subject of Rabbi Abraham ben David's objections in depth in *Toledot ha-Rambam*, printed as part of his *Beit Talmud*,⁹⁴⁶ Year 1, page 659, and in his *Dor Dor ve-Dorshav*,⁹⁴⁷ sixth part,⁹⁴⁸ page 266.)

From Rabbi Abraham ben David's specific objections in the *Sefer ha-Mada* section of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, especially with regard to the oneness of the Creator, that "He has no body," as well as with reference to the question of "[God's] knowledge and choice," one can have an idea concerning the motive or motives that forced Rabbi Abraham ben David to come out with his objections, as follows:

- 1) Why did Maimonides attempt to rationalize Jewish belief and to analyze these special dogmas (or principles) that obtained the endorsement of Aristotelian philosophy?
- 2) His interjection of philosophical opinions under the cloak of the Sages' statements and biblical verses.
- 3) The same fear which the sages of Babylon were afraid of - that the *Mishneh Torah* shouldn't make the study of Talmud superfluous.

The latter misgiving forced Rabbi Abraham ben David to prove that the author of the *Mishneh Torah* made mistakes many times in understanding a statement or in not clarifying the law as it appears - therefore, one isn't allowed to rely on him blindly. In Rabbi Abraham ben David's first objection, he says:

Maimonides had in mind to correct it but didn't end up correcting. Why did he often allow a judge to permit or forbid because of a proof from one place, whereas if the judge had known the other opinion his halakhic ruling would have been different? However, Maimonides - in expressing his own opinion and not stating at all the opinion of the other Talmudic rabbi or Gaon - caused the judge to stumble.

The objections of Rabbi Abraham ben David later opened a wide field for scholars to debate a fine point, in order to justify Maimonides' position. Such debate was precisely contrary to Maimonides' intention in creating the *Mishneh Torah*, which was to eliminate unnecessary arguments.

On the other hand, Rabbi Abraham ben David was the first harbinger of the historical struggle of ideas that split the Jewish cultural community into two parties, the Maimonideans and the anti-Maimonideans.

⁹⁴⁶ A journal of Talmudic research.

⁹⁴⁷ Literally, "Each Generation and its Scholars." This is I.H. Weiss' magnum opus.

⁹⁴⁸ Actually, it might be the fifth part, as that work only has five volumes.

Chapter 4: The Outbreak of the Struggle Against Maimonism

[p. 240] Rabbi Abraham ben David's vehement stance against Maimonides gave the first impetus to a historical struggle of ideas that ended up being catastrophic for both sides, as we will see.

Here, we have encountered two spiritual giants from two separate worlds: Maimonides with his well-rounded knowledge of the entire domain of ideas, and Rabbi Abraham ben David, the [p. 241] "master of one specialty" who, from afar, possessed other areas of knowledge but focused on Talmud. Both of them attracted a large following. When Rabbi Abraham ben David died, *kohanim*⁹⁴⁹ dug his grave and carried out the burial rites for him, thereby demonstrating that with respect to such a tremendous deceased person the sanctity of the priesthood was nullified. From that, one sees how venerated he was among Jews in general and with his thousands of students in particular.

Rabbi Abraham ben David was the first to challenge Maimonides for covering the topic of the revival of the dead in an abridged fashion. Even though Maimonides later came out with *Ma'amar Teḥiyat ha-Metim*⁹⁵⁰ - where he answers with irritation and great contempt those who think of themselves as Jewish sages but in fact are "the most foolish people who go astray more than animals and their minds are full of crazy old wives' tales" - the suspicion among his opponents concerning him didn't diminish. And this didn't merely happen with "the most foolish among people" - Maimonides' answer in *Ma'amar Teḥiyat ha-Metim* didn't work to calm suspicions even for such an eminent and truly learned person as Rabbi Meir Abulafia (ca. 1170-1244).

Rabbi Meir Abulafia of Toledo was quite a well-known personality and a great member of a distinguished family; he was the son of the *Nasi*,⁹⁵¹ Todros Abulafia, who himself was a tremendously learned person with much knowledge and worldly wisdom. The aforementioned Aaron ben Meshullam (d. ca. 1210) called him "the one who loves wisdom," "a great scholar," and the "one lighting up people's eyes" (loving wisdom and leading the mission to apply the Torah in practice...lighting up the eyes of the sages for Torah and its implementation). Even the poet Abraham ben Samuel ha-Levi Ibn Hasdai (fl. early 1200s), Maimonides' greatest supporter and who also personally knew Rabbi Meir Abulafia, spoke of him as "the pride of his generation," and he attributed to him a "keen understanding" ("the wonder of his generation, high in intellect at its

⁹⁴⁹ While the priests (*kohanim*; *kohen* in singular) haven't been active as such in worship since the destruction of the Second Temple some 2000 years ago, to this day those who claim descent from *kohanim* still a) are honoured to be called upon to recite the first blessing over the public Torah reading, b) recite the blessing of the *kohanim* right in front of the Holy Ark in each synagogue on major holidays (and on an everyday basis in Israel and among most Sephardic Jews), and c) are prohibited from being in contact with a dead body or from stepping foot inside a cemetery.

⁹⁵⁰ Literally, "Statement of the Revival of the Dead." This is one part of Maimonides' Epistles, or *Igrot* in Hebrew.

⁹⁵¹ A title coming from the leadership of the Palestinian Jewish community from the time of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi ("the Prince") (ca. 135-ca. 217 CE) - and maybe even earlier - to the time of the Islamic conquest of Palestine in 637 CE.

peak”). At the time of his emergence in the dispute, he was already renowned for his Talmudic work *Yad Ramah*,⁹⁵² and - in the area of wisdom - for his *Masoret Siyag la-Torah*,⁹⁵³ concerning the *Masorah*⁹⁵⁴ of the biblical text. He obtained his fame when he was not yet 22 years old.

At that moment, Meir Abulafia sent a letter to Maimonides’ strongest admirers, the “sages of Lunel,” concerning Maimonides. The main claim of the letter is that the author of the *Mishneh Torah* writes about the World to Come while keeping silent on the question of the revival of the dead. The letter strongly offended the sages of Lunel, and on their behalf, Aaron ben Meshullam replied to Abulafia with a quite hostile letter. Yet more hostile was what the well-known patron Sheshet bar Isaac Benveniste (1131-1209) of Spain expressed regarding Abulafia. Benveniste finished his letter with the pungent epigram: “My friend asks me: ‘Why does *Meir*⁹⁵⁵ mean to go on a dark path?’ I answer them: ‘Do you not know that among the Sages night is called ‘light’ just as the blind are called ‘of much light’?’”

Both letters didn’t discourage Abulafia. He replied to Aaron ben Meshullam with quite a long letter, and - not waiting for an answer - he addressed seven prestigious rabbis from France, exhaustively [p. 242] restating the debate that he had with the sages of Lunel. In doing that, he pleaded with those French rabbis, as true Jewish leaders (shepherds of Israel) and as recognized authorities, to express their opinion. At that point, those French rabbis led an entirely separate way of life; generally speaking; they truly had little idea of the sages of Spain in general and of Maimonides’ philosophy in particular. The well-known Tosafist, Rabbi Samson ben Abraham of Sens (ca. 1150-ca. 1230), replied to Abulafia on behalf of those French rabbis. That respondent basically agreed with Abulafia’s letter, and thus the latter didn’t get any clear response. The letter, written by brilliant Tosafists, is full of fine Talmudic argumentation that isn’t directly relevant at all to the subject at hand, but concerning Maimonides himself, Rabbi Samson states: “I’m not coming here to refute the Great Lion [Maimonides] after his death.” Both letters, with the question and the answer alike, were published in Rabbi Meir Abulafia’s Arabic book, *Kitab al-Rasa’il*,⁹⁵⁶ and according to the dates, one can see that the first letter was already written during Maimonides’ life, whereas Rabbi Samson of Sens wrote the reply after Maimonides’ passing.

⁹⁵² Literally in Hebrew, “Upraised Hand”; it comes from Exodus 14:8, in which the Israelites had just left Egypt “with an upraised hand” and were about to cross the Red Sea into the desert. It’s also a play on Rabbi Meir Abulafia’s acronym “Ramah.”

⁹⁵³ Literally in Hebrew, “Tradition of Making a Protective Fence Around the Torah.”

⁹⁵⁴ Also known as *Mesorah*; both versions of the same word literally mean “tradition.” In this case, the word refers to the system of cantillations, accents, and other diacritic marks, as well as precise spellings and grammars in Hebrew (and, very occasionally, also in Aramaic) that has since come to be in use in the canon of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. This system, known as the Masoretic text, was devised by scribes in the Early Middle Ages - mainly in Tiberias - known as the Masorettes, and it served to standardize biblical texts among Jews.

⁹⁵⁵ Literally in Hebrew, “one who lights.”

⁹⁵⁶ Rendered in Hebrew as *Sefer ha-Igrot*, or “Book of the Epistles.”

Thus, the exchange of letters constituted a dividing line between the supporters of Maimonides' modernistic teachings and the simple, naïve teachings of Rabbi Abraham ben David's circle,⁹⁵⁷ which was also the way of all the rabbis of France. However, the dispute didn't escalate into a public fight until the year 1232, when Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier ("Solomon of the Mountain"; fl. first half of 1200s) - along with his two disciples, David ben Saul (fl. first half of 1200s) and Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi (ca. 1200-1263/4) - issued a harsh excommunication against whoever was engaged in philosophy. They promulgated a special warning to not study Maimonides' two books - *Guide to the Perplexed* and the first part of the *Mishneh Torah (Sefer ha-Mada)* - because "in them lurks a danger that could render the foundations of our faith unstable."

Fortunately for our generations, there still remained a letter from Rabbi Solomon, written to one of the Spanish scholars, Samuel ben Isaac (fl. first half of 1200s). From the letter, we can get a more or less clear idea about that historical personality, who provoked such a storm in the cultured part of Jewry that existed at that time. Here, we describe its contents insofar as it's connected to the outbreak of the dispute. Rabbi Solomon writes:

Because of our long-time friendship, I - along with my students - feel it necessary to familiarize you with the reasons that brought about the dispute. We, who lovingly and dearly observe the Torah, given by God, have seen how old and young alike started to disseminate ideas and opinions that neither we nor our parents had heard from them. We have seen them go in a bad direction and lead others astray; they tear down everything that we have by way of oral tradition, and they distort the plain meaning of the Torah by making it a parable. Concerning the accounts of the Creation and of Cain and Abel, every verse becomes allegorical and even an imaginary thing. We ourselves heard that from the translator's mouth (meaning Samuel Ibn [p. 243] Tibbon [ca. 1150-ca. 1230]) as he revealed before everyone that which his rabbi (Maimonides) felt out of necessity must remain concealed. As he explained before everyone, everything - all the stories of the Torah plus all the divine commandments and orders - was only a parable. Many times, I've heard them making fun of the statements of the Sages - and that has made me afraid.

Many times, I got involved with them in fiery debates; we often argued, but it didn't escalate into hatred or war until the dark time when the sages of Béziers intervened in those debates. They came out against us (him and his students) with haughtiness and pride as true enemies who wish to annihilate us. Wanting to shame and mock us in front of everybody in public, they slandered me by intimating that I profaned God's holy people and that I had the audacity to tamper with the memory of the great genius who disseminated Torah among the people of Israel, Rabbi Moses the son of the rabbi and judge Maimon of blessed memory. They did this in order to degrade us in front of everybody, and so that all Jews would turn away from us.

⁹⁵⁷ In many contexts, a *heder* is a religious Jewish school for primary school-aged children where the basics of the Hebrew language and Judaism are taught. However, it could also simply mean a room, chamber, or social circle.

Realizing what kind of difficult position we found ourselves in, I decided to turn to our rabbis in France who were long known as the true disseminators of the Torah among the Jews. Receiving our letter, they also sensed a threat and sent a combative letter to those people and their supporters. They also sent an messenger to that place to make an investigation, and they also received a copy of the *Guide to the Perplexed*. Discovering that our words were true, they girded their loins and everyone came as one on behalf of God and His Torah with such vehement curses and with excommunications, messages, and outcries, that everyone all around - and I among them as well - was amazed.

From that letter, we see the following: First, that in waging war on Maimonides' method, even the stubborn opponents didn't forget to emphasize his personal greatness. Second, that Maimonides' supporters started the dispute. That letter is also corroborated from many other letters, written by others about that subject, which were published in *Ginzei Nistarot*⁹⁵⁸ under the numbers 9-12, sixth part.

⁹⁵⁸ Literally in Hebrew, "Those Who Store Secrets." This refers to the one written by Joseph Isaac Kobak (1830-1913) in 1868.

Chapter 5: French Sages Threaten Excommunication for Maimonides' Supporters

[p. 243] For present-day historians, it's clear that even though the great dispute arose at first from two different outlooks among the Jewish masses, many were nonetheless provoked by those individuals who, in addition, stirred up strife with personal, ulterior motives.

[p. 244] The first of these were the sages of Béziers. As recounted earlier, they summoned Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier (fl. first half of 1200s)⁹⁵⁹ and his two disciples; they slandered him for degrading Maimonides' name, and again for having to look for protection from the French rabbis. Those French rabbis were engrossed in the "four cubits of Jewish law" and absolutely didn't know about the new orientation that was in vogue among the communities and sages of Spain and Provence. The French rabbis needed to get acquainted with that reality, in order to be able to express an opinion. Because of that, Rabbi Solomon sent there one of his loyal disciples, Rabbi Jonah Gerondi (ca. 1200-1263/4), who later authored *Sha'arei Teshuvah*,⁹⁶⁰ a popular book that was rapidly distributed among the Jews from all countries and was even translated into Yiddish.

The sages of Béziers - either one or several of them - sought to discredit that emissary, and they spread a rumour that his family was descended from bastards. This would have meant that one of his great-grandmothers got divorced from her husband, got married to another man, and had children together with the latter man, after which she discovered that there was a flaw in the divorce document. The rabbis determined that she was a married woman pursuing a relationship with another man⁹⁶¹ and that their children were bastards. The Gerondi family was counted among one of the most distinguished in the country; it produced a number of great rabbis and scholars, among them Nahmanides (1194-1270).⁹⁶² That clarifies the strict judgement of Rabbi Jonah Gerondi in *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, that whoever exposes a defect in a family can never atone for it ("and our Sages state, 'one who defames regarding a family flaw is never atoned.'"⁹⁶³).

With a greatly confused heart, Gerondi travelled to France, and he addressed the most senior of the French rabbis, Rabbi Jehiel ben Joseph (fl. 1200s), in order - through him - to clearly make his position against Maimonides' teachings.

At the same time, Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier received yet more active assistance in the person of the poet Meshullam ben Solomon En Vidas Da Piera (fl. first half of 1200s).

Da Piera possessed one of the most tremendous personalities, in which Torah, wisdom, and fear of Heaven were combined in one single person and peace reigned over all. He himself was a poet, loved nature, and gladly spent time with friends over cups of sparkling wine. The same person

⁹⁵⁹ Rabbi Kruger expresses him as "Rabbi Solomon of the Mountain," or "Rabbi Shlomo Me-ha-Har" in Hebrew.

⁹⁶⁰ Literally in Hebrew, "Gates of Repentance."

⁹⁶¹ In Hebrew, such a woman is known as an *eshet ish*, literally "a [married] woman of a[nother] man."

⁹⁶² He is also known as *Ramban*, short for Rabbi Moses ben Nahman.

⁹⁶³ *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 3:111, citing Jerusalem Talmud tractate *Bava Kama* 8:7.

who extolled wine and nature with wonderful verses was also a close friend of Nahmanides and a fervent supporter of the kabbalists Ezra ben Solomon (d. 1238 or 1245) and Azriel ben Menahem (ca. 1160-ca. 1238) - the first kabbalists in Spain.⁹⁶⁴

Da Piera's romantic and poetic soul wasn't able to accept the cold rationalism of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*. Therefore, Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier's contribution appealed more to Da Piera, and he appeared in writing against the rationalists, praising Rabbi Solomon for his courage to take his stand against them.

In a second letter, he made a strong attack on Judah Alharizi (ca. 1165-1225),⁹⁶⁵ because the latter - along with his translation of the *Guide to the Perplexed* into Hebrew - helped to even further spoil the corrupted generation ("gave a snare⁹⁶⁶ to a perverse generation⁹⁶⁷ that is [p. 245] incapable of being cleansed"⁹⁶⁸). He addressed the French rabbis so that they would take a strong position against the sages of Béziers in particular and all of Provence⁹⁶⁹ in general, where they studied Maimonides' books.

That demand didn't get lost. The French rabbis, thoroughly studying the *Guide to the Perplexed* and the *Sefer ha-Mada*, trembled with fear and right away addressed an appeal to all the communities of Provence, threatening them with the harshest excommunication for daring to read such heretical books as the *Guide* and the *Mada*.

The appearances of Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier, his disciples, and his assistants - who now encountered the French rabbis on their side - in the debate provoked a very great agitation in all intellectual circles, mainly in the three large communities of Provence - Lunel, Béziers, and Narbonne. Maimonides was, after all, their "*Urim and Tumim*,"⁹⁷⁰ whose word was sacred for them, whose wisdom was divine and pure truth, and now here come people who speak out against him with such accusations.

With great energy, they spoke out against the "mean people" who fought against Maimonides' influence and made an appeal to all the communities of Provence, Castile, and Catalonia that they should defend the desecrated honour of their tremendous genius and teacher, and that they should throw the presumptuous blasphemers (meaning the supporters of Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier) into excommunication.

⁹⁶⁴ Interestingly, both of these were in Gerona, Catalonia (northeast Spain). Because they lived in the same place at the same time and they had similar names, for a long time they were confused with each other.

⁹⁶⁵ Also known as Judah ben Solomon Harizi or simply as al-Harizi.

⁹⁶⁶ cf. Proverbs 29:25

⁹⁶⁷ cf. Deuteronomy 32:5

⁹⁶⁸ cf. Hosea 8:5

⁹⁶⁹ In the medieval Jewish context, "Provence" refers to the South of France as a whole more than to the more modern, narrower conception of "Provence" in southeastern France.

⁹⁷⁰ Objects on the High Priest's breastplate supposedly used in divination.

At the same time, there was one whose name has remained unknown who wrote quite a vehement letter to the French rabbis. That letter was printed for the first time in the fifth part of *Kerem Hemed*,⁹⁷¹ and we relate it here in the Yiddish translation of Dr. Israel Zinberg's (1873-1939) *A History of Jewish Literature*,⁹⁷² second part, p. 155, since it was quite characteristic of such letters. The writer of that letter showed quite clearly the way that the Jewish rationalist intelligentsia of that era positioned itself with respect to the rabbis and scholars who were great only in Torah study and were not proficient in worldly wisdom. He writes as follows:

Before you French rabbis spoke out so vehemently against the great genius and his books; you were obligated, first of all, to become acquainted with his works. You, however, as it appears, have neither seen the *Mada* nor the *Guide* even once in front of your eyes, and thus you rendered your unfair legal ruling and verdict. It's thus clear that people such as you, who over the years spent time merely in the "four cubits of Talmudic debate," haven't at all comprehended philosophical problems on that level and haven't understood with your mind the wonderful ways of science. Why did you exceed your limitations and also dare to draw conclusions on such high-level matters that you can't comprehend at all? And how did you [p. 246] come to be audacious towards us, who go after the true path of wisdom, as our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon taught, in order to explain it to heretics and unbelievers? You - who accept all the stories of the Torah, even the non-legal discussions [*Aggadot*] of the Midrashim word-for-word. Even God the Creator you make in the likeness of a flesh and blood being, with all the limbs of a person! Are there then still here - among all the nations of the world, with all their stupidities and absurdities - such idolaters as you (in the Hebrew original: "Are there, among the vanities of the nations, any who attribute materiality to God?"⁹⁷³)? And do you still have the audacity to accuse us, who protect the purity of the holy Torah, of heresy and to state that we disavow God's words?

I swear in God's name that among us there aren't any seducers, false prophets, or any heretics who deny God. You are in error; you blindly relied on lies and slanderous incitements, which led you astray. You went forth against us with curses and excommunications, you acted as though you are the greats of the generation and we are small, insignificant people. We would have forgiven you for all that, but there is one thing about which we cannot and must not keep silent. You had the audacity to speak with contempt and scorn against our pride and joy, against the great genius - our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon. Since Rav Ashi (352-427),⁹⁷⁴ there hasn't been such a tremendous figure in the Torah as he. You present yourself to us to degrade such a mentor, rabbi, and guide.

From that letter, it seems clear that the Maimonists made the Talmudic greats of France seem lowly in the public eye, simply because those French rabbis weren't preoccupied with philosophy and other disciplines. We present-day people see, in that type of letter and the scathing aphorisms

⁹⁷¹ Literally in Hebrew, "Vineyard of Delight," it was a Hebrew-language, Galicia-based periodical oriented to the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), and it was published between 1833 and 1843 and again in 1854 and 1856.

⁹⁷² Originally published in Yiddish in the 1920s and 1930s as *Di geshikhte fun di literatur bay yidn*.

⁹⁷³ Jeremiah 14:22

⁹⁷⁴ He is thought to be one of the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud.

that remain extant, the best proof of the rightness of the anti-rationalists and their fight against harmful rationalism.

Chapter 6: Naḥmanides Seeks a Compromise Between the Maimonists and the Anti-Maimonists

[p. 246] At the time that the communities of Provence⁹⁷⁵ spoke out for Maimonism, Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier (fl. first half of 1200s)⁹⁷⁶ - along with his friends - acquired new forces.

The well-known genius and kabbalist Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides; 1194-1270) and Rabbi Jonah Gerondi (ca. 1200-1263/4), a close relative, both came to help Rabbi Solomon. Both Naḥmanides and Rabbi Jonah were cousins, and therefore, Rabbi Solomon was also angry at the sages of Béziers, complaining that they made use of slander concerning the Gerondi family.

In his private letter to individuals and in his public letter to all of the communities of Provence⁹⁷⁷ “from Narbonne to Marseille,” Rabbi Solomon calls the sages of Béziers [p. 247] all sorts of shameful names, such as that they spread slander, that they are a band of wicked people, that they are a group that curses, and that they are required to appear at a court of honour to confront the representatives of the French rabbis or those of Rabbi Meir Abulafia (ca. 1170-1244). The sages of Béziers ignored that demand and on the contrary took it upon themselves to incite people to excommunicate Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier along with his disciples and collaborators. At the same time, Naḥmanides addressed - in writing - the communities of all three Spanish kingdoms (Navarre, Aragon, and Castile) to warn them that sinful emissaries are travelling all around those places - with false documents full of flattery and deception - who disguise themselves as peacemakers, while in reality they stir up strife. Therefore, he requested from all the communities that they shouldn't let themselves be seduced by the words of the falsifiers and that they shouldn't give their approval before they hear testimony from both sides at the court of honour.

Rabbi Meir Abulafia responded right away to Naḥmanides' letter. After all, as we know, he was the first to address the French rabbis concerning Maimonides' books, which he didn't appreciate. From that time onwards, there remained with him many letters that he now rewrote and sent to all the communities of Provence.

In the letters that he now wrote, as a response to Naḥmanides' appeal, Abulafia revealed all the inside motives that forced Maimonides' enemies to appear in the public fight against his teachings. Among other things, he writes:

Since his [Maimonides'] teachings were distributed, the number of these teachings has increased, cutting off the most fruitful branches from the religious laws, and trying hard by way of reason to demonstrate that all the divine commandments and religious laws are only means to arrive at the main objective, which is to grasp knowledge of God's essence and the wisdom of His creation.

⁹⁷⁵ In the medieval Jewish context, “Provence” refers to the South of France as a whole more than to the more modern, narrower conception of “Provence” in southeastern France.

⁹⁷⁶ Rabbi Kruger expresses him as “Rabbi Solomon of the Mountain,” or “Rabbi Shlomo Me-ha-Har” in Hebrew.

⁹⁷⁷ Either Rabbi Kruger or the typesetter for his original Yiddish book mistakenly uses the word *Pravoslavne*, which means “Orthodox Christian.”

The Creator Himself isn't worried at all whether somebody's body is ritually pure or impure, or whether that somebody will have a good time or will torture himself with afflictions and penances. Such people wander on crooked roads and their crooked intellect proclaims them as the only certain guide. They deem the souls which long for divine commandments and good deeds empty and useless. Such people also extinguish the ardour from yearning hearts, and they also seek to destroy the immortal spirit.

Abulafia wholeheartedly accepted Maimonides' great merit. He called him a "man of God" and the "one who opened up everyone's eyes with his *Mishneh Torah*," but he spoke up vehemently against Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, about which he writes:

Page after page, I diligently studied that particular book, and that convinced me that in spite of its good intention to establish the roots of faith, Maimonides nonetheless cuts off its branches with his work. He indeed tries to shape it and completely fill in all the cracks and holes, but at the same time he destroys all its restraints. The dead and the living alike embrace the [p. 248] pages of that particular book. (In the Hebrew original of that letter: "Then I saw, and behold⁹⁷⁸ a shoot⁹⁷⁹ grips onto the roots⁹⁸⁰ of religion⁹⁸¹ - and chops off its branches.⁹⁸² It grips onto the breaches of its foundations - and it breaks its fences.⁹⁸³ Lofty praises of God are in their throats⁹⁸⁴ - but death and life are in the power of the tongue."⁹⁸⁵)

At the same time, Dr. Israel Zinberg (1873-1939) states: "It's interesting to note that an Arab scholar named Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (1162-1231) expressed that same opinion about the *Guide to the Perplexed*. He relates in his autobiography: 'I've read that particular book (the *Guide to the Perplexed*) and I've discovered that it's harmful, since it lends itself more to destroying the very basic foundations of belief that he seeks to establish.'"

The dispute flared up; each side acquired new supporters. The Maimonist propaganda appealed to the scholars of secular disciplines, who had already truly gone astray between faith and reason. For them, Maimonides was the right "mentor," teacher, and guide. There were rich Jews, court Jews and doctors alike, who could allow themselves to derive heaps of benefit from this world [*olam ha-zeh*], if only they wouldn't be tied down with so many laws and customs. The later Maimonists opened a secular path for those rich Jews, implying that the main thing isn't the commandments, but rather the intentions that were entrenched in them; therefore, they have in mind that one can do everything that they wish. These teachings, even though we know that they are as far from Maimonides' notion as the east is from the west, were propagandized by the "bad

⁹⁷⁸ e.g. Deuteronomy 9:16

⁹⁷⁹ e.g. Job 15:30

⁹⁸⁰ e.g. *ibid.* 36:30

⁹⁸¹ e.g. Esther 4:8

⁹⁸² cf. Isaiah 10:33

⁹⁸³ cf. Ezekiel 30:4

⁹⁸⁴ Psalms 149:6

⁹⁸⁵ cf. Proverbs 18:21

disciples” and thus caused every rich ignoramus to lead a heretical life. Nahmanides himself writes in his letter to King James I of Aragon (1208-1276):

Those very rich Jews got rid of all the divine commandments of the Torah, they didn't pray, they didn't recite Grace After Meals, they weren't observant with regard to their wine and food, they didn't observe the Sabbath, and they behaved like authentic Muslims. Where was it heard that a complete ignoramus and a boor should absolutely become a rabbi and authority in matters of faith?

This invective was aimed at two brothers - Bahiel⁹⁸⁶ and Solomon al-Constantini (fl. 1200s) - who occupied high positions with the aforementioned king. Solomon al-Constantini, additionally, was appointed as president and chief judge of all the Jewish communities of Aragon. He, along with another ten members of the community, excommunicated Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier and his two assistants. Right afterwards, the first faction addressed the second faction with an appeal to all Jewish communities in Arab lands to arise and protect “Moses [Maimonides] and his holy Torah” and to defend that great man “who took us out of the quagmire of savagery and superstition.” The appeal also required all the other communities to give their approval to excommunicate “those three agitators and corrupters” (“three innovators of destruction,⁹⁸⁷ and they incite the people and dishonour them”⁹⁸⁸).

[p. 249] Upon that demand, four Aragonese communities - Huesca, Monzón, Lérida, and Calatayud - immediately replied that at that point they ought to excommunicate “the little fox,” the “three sinners of Israel,” and the “vile” Solomon of Montpellier and his disciples for having the audacity to execrate the illuminator of the Diaspora, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon.

Amid the fervour of the dispute, Nahmanides again appeared with a letter, to try to make peace between the hostile factions.

Nahmanides, from his conceptual perspective, ought to have been an opponent of rationalism, but his refined intellect and greatness required him to show the greatest respect for the author of the *Mishneh Torah*, who remained among the greatest geniuses of the Talmudic domain. However, the philosophical ideas of the *Guide to the Perplexed* were completely alien to him. It couldn't have at all been otherwise, given Nahmanides' enthusiastically idealistic soul, which made him the founder of the mystical teaching of the heart [*Torah She-ba-Lev*], which teaches the experience of faith more than just to think of it.

⁹⁸⁶ Rabbi Kruger mistakenly renders Bahiel as Bahya, as in either Bahya Ibn Paquda (ca. 1050-1120) or Bahya ben Asher (1255-1340), both of whom were famous rabbinic personalities. The Al-Constantini brothers were personal doctors for James I of Aragon.

⁹⁸⁷ cf. II Samuel 24:13. It's unclear whether one of the words in that phrase refers to *hodshei* (months) or *hidshei* (innovators). While in the biblical original it refers to “three months,” in Rabbi Kruger's book it might have been a play on that word, such that it becomes “three innovators.”

⁹⁸⁸ cf. Don Isaac Abarbanel's (1437-1508) commentary on Exodus 32:7

In order to quiet down the quarrel, Nahmanides calmly addressed the French rabbis in a long letter. In a fully self-conscious way, he pointed out to those pious rabbis their error in accusing such a tremendous genius as Maimonides of heresy. He also showed them that forbidding Maimonides' works in particular and all philosophical books in general would only reinforce the desire for them. This is because Maimonides was too great an authority and the Spanish communities had gone too far in their absorption with philosophy. Excommunication is out of the question for these communities; for that reason, it would be much better to keep completely silent about it.

Characteristic of Nahmanides is the end of his letter, where he advises the great rabbis: "With peace and love, you - shepherds of Israel - need to feed your flock. This is because nobody can force all the Jews to be purely pious and *Perushim*.⁹⁸⁹"

Who is right? Nahmanides left this unsaid. He praised Maimonides, but he also spoke with great respect of Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier. He suggested to the French rabbis that they should allow the study of *Sefer ha-Mada* but that they should prohibit the distribution of the *Guide to the Perplexed* among the public at large.

Neither side was satisfied with the compromise; it helped only insofar as it stopped the French rabbis in their tracks. From that letter onwards, they avoided engaging themselves in these disputes.

However, in Provence, the dispute flared up once more.

⁹⁸⁹ Literally in Hebrew, *Perushim* means "those separating themselves" - Jewish "monks" of sorts.

Chapter 7: *Radak* Makes Propaganda Trips Against Anti-Maimonists

[p. 250] At the time that the French rabbis were appeased, the Maimonists of Provence kindled a larger fire of dispute against Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier (fl. first half of 1200s).⁹⁹⁰ Those same Maimonists sent the elderly Rabbi David Kimḥi (1160-1235; known for his commentary on the Hebrew Bible under the name *Radak*) back to Spain so that there he would propagandize for them in those distinguished communities. Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier complains about Kimḥi with the following words:

They, the Maimonists, sent a special emissary, so that he should further escalate the dispute so that your communities (of Spain) should revolt against us. They spread among you incorrect rumours about us, and they assumed, concerning us, that we offended against the memory of Maimonides. God is my witness that I would never allow myself to offend the honour of a great genius and his Torah with negative words. This is because his words are highly esteemed and dear to me, and I always mention his legal decisions with great reverence. And it's easy for me to believe that the man with the long beard (meaning, David Kimḥi) will also do the same for you, which his circle allowed itself to do for us. They falsified my appeal to the French rabbis and they assumed, regarding me, that I suggested that one should excommunicate all of Maimonides' supporters.

Rabbi Solomon's fears were unfounded; Kimḥi's propaganda had little success. In many communities, they received him coldly, since the French rabbis, in their appeal, spoke out quite vehemently against his rationalist commentary on the "Account of the Creation"⁹⁹¹ and the "Account of the Chariot."⁹⁹² In the city of Burgos, they received him in such a hostile manner that he had to immediately leave. One of the outstanding representatives of that community, Joseph ben Todros ha-Levi Abulafia (fl. first half of 1200s), appeared immediately afterwards with a special appeal to the communities of Provence. That appeal was especially interesting, since everybody knew that the one making the appeal didn't take any sides in the dispute; he was only a secondary witness who observed the dispute from a broader perspective. Therefore, his words made a great impression in his era, and even now they have great historical worth. He writes:

Very sad things are occurring now in God's holy camp. The parents make the fire, the children throw in fuel, and the flame becomes quite large, until it engulfs the foundations of ancient belief, [p. 251] destroying the holy camp's sturdy walls. People arise who break the constraints of the holy Torah. Everyone comes with their preconceived notions and with new, ingenious ideas, and they all think only how better it would be to discard all prohibitions and to free oneself of all limitations. All the words of the Torah, all that we acquired orally from our forefathers, are only a parable and allegory for them. The miracles and wonders that are mentioned in the Torah become a mockery and a joke. They make night out of day, and light out of darkness. They ridicule the

⁹⁹⁰ Rabbi Kruger calls him "Rabbi Solomon of the Mountain," or "Rabbi Shlomo Me-ha-Har" in Hebrew.

⁹⁹¹ The creation of the world and of the universe as mentioned in chapter 1 of Genesis.

⁹⁹² The vision of the divine contained in chapter 1 of Ezekiel. It was considered in rabbinic literature to contain the ultimate secrets of divinity.

speech of the holy Sages and they still have the audacity to rely on a great authority. They consider themselves the disciples and followers of one of our greatest geniuses, whose equal has not been found since Ravina II (d. ca. 499 CE) and his teacher Rav Ashi (352-427)⁹⁹³ - our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon. They make the illuminator of the Diaspora into their protector, they rely on his tremendous reputation, and they pretend not to know the truth that our great teacher created his *Guide to the Perplexed* only for select individuals who had penetrated all the secrets of Greek philosophy. Thus, the *Guide* became a solid foundation for them; it became the true guide from which they studied how to solidly maintain the eternal truth of our Torah as opposed to the depths of philosophical logic - and at the same time not to become tempted to stray from the correct path.

Nonetheless, the great genius [Maimonides] gave only hints - no more than allusions - even to those few select disciples. At the same time, they were strongly warned that his book shouldn't be given into the hands of those who weren't worthy of it.

However, these people didn't sense the rabbi's [Maimonides'] wish. People came to it [the *Guide*] with scant knowledge, and they gave Maimonides' philosophical book into the hands of the rabble, the simple ignoramuses. They distributed Samuel Ibn Tibbon's (ca. 1150-ca. 1230) translation, and even that of Judah Alharizi (ca. 1165-1225),⁹⁹⁴ to them. These books often corrupted the author's thought, putting in his mouth words that he never stated ("in changing the demeanour⁹⁹⁵ of the author, which he neither commanded⁹⁹⁶ nor spoke").

The consequence: Every callow youth acts like an expert; everyone touches the whole delicate matter with his clumsy hands; every fool - any mere nothing - acts as if he were a true philosopher, critiquing all that is in heaven and on the Earth. They make the pretense that they know all that God thinks, that He reveals all secrets to them, and that no holy things are missing. Everything is ordinary and commonplace - praying, putting on phylacteries⁹⁹⁷ - they consider stupidities which they deride ("those who use holy items as if they were just ordinary items are exempt from prayer and phylacteries, and they descend in holiness and do not ascend in it"⁹⁹⁸).

Maimonides gave the name *Guide to the Perplexed* to his book. However, his minor disciples made a "perplexity of the guides" out of it.

The aforementioned Joseph ben [p. 252] Todros ha-Levi Abulafia divides the rationalist Maimonists into two main sections:

1) the faction of the flatterers - the group of hypocrites - who desecrate the holy words of the Torah and cloak their lowly desires with the mantle of knowledge, so that they could now commit their

⁹⁹³ Those two personalities were considered to be the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud.

⁹⁹⁴ Also known as Judah ben Solomon Harizi or simply as al-Harizi.

⁹⁹⁵ cf. Psalms 34:1

⁹⁹⁶ cf. Leviticus 10:1

⁹⁹⁷ A Jewish ritual garment known as *tefillin* in Hebrew, and generally worn by men.

⁹⁹⁸ Source unknown, but probably Talmudic.

transgressions in public, without being ashamed of anybody, whereas formerly they had to be committed in hiding and without being seen; and

2) the faction of the rich, who became wealthy from the sweat of the poor and want to clothe themselves with all the pleasures of the world, and who are very satisfied with the way in which they can free themselves of all sorts of religious commandments in a rational fashion.

Joseph ben Todros concludes his appeal with the following heartfelt words:

No! The worth of belief wasn't counted in the balance of the cold intellect. This way, the Torah loses its entire taste and smell, and you can come to the wrong conclusions in such a fashion.

You, communities of Provence, must take measures - as quickly as possible - against the growing danger. Do not console yourselves that your country is still - for the time being - a refuge of Torah, that you are skilled in all the hidden corners of the wisdom of Judaism, and that all the ways of God's laws are open for you. Think of the future: "Behold, days are coming"⁹⁹⁹; there will come days when you will surely not be among the living. Your children will come and they will corrupt their hearts with poison from this very new type of heresy, which is much more dangerous than the previous one, that in the old days split the Jewish masses in two with one party continuing as the Karaites. This is because they, the Karaites, only deny one part of our Torah - that is to say the Talmud and the Oral Torah - while the other part that was given to the Israelites as the Written Torah at Mount Sinai is maintained and observed by the Karaites in a literal fashion. By contrast, your present-day enlightened ones reject everything and don't want to recognize any part of it; for them, it's merely a parable and metaphor.

However, this appeal didn't achieve the objective that Joseph ben Todros aimed for. The Provençal rabbis didn't lay down their weapons, and even Kimḥi, notwithstanding his failure in Spain, travelled yet further afield. His goal was to get to a larger community, Toledo, thinking that if that community should succeed in moving to excommunicate Rabbi Solomon, that by itself would already be a great moral gain. However, on the way there, not far from Toledo, he became quite ill and he had to stop in the city of Ávila.

Nonetheless, that didn't hold him back from the quarrel. Lying on his bed he wrote a letter, thereby accomplishing what he couldn't do in person, due to his illness.

⁹⁹⁹ Amos 8:11

Chapter 8: Judah ben Joseph Alfakhar Comes Out Against the Maimonists

[p. 253] Because he was ill, David Kimḥi (1160-1235) sent a letter to the elder of the community of Toledo, to the great and learned physician, Judah ben Joseph Ibn Alfakhar (d. 1235).

Here again, Kimḥi made a mistake in thinking that that scholar would join with him against the anti-Maimonists. It turned out that that letter caused a vehement opponent to rise up against him.

From the exchange of letters between these figures, one would think that it is incorrect to accept what up until now has been the conventional opinion that the anti-Maimonists were “obscurantists and nothing but ignoramuses with uncouth notions of divinity like the ancient idolators.” This is because Alfakhar was great not just in Talmud - he was also a famous scholar in the other disciplines of his time. Moreover, he was blessed with an intellect of integrity, and with a talent to analyze every thought. And thanks to this ability, he had the opportunity to expose all the weak points of Maimonides’ philosophical system; notwithstanding that, Alfakhar valued Maimonides as a powerful thinker and as a first-rate Talmudic scholar.

Already in his first reply to Kimḥi, Alfakhar explains definitively that he agrees with Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier.¹⁰⁰⁰ He writes to Kimḥi:

You make a request to me that I should exert influence on the representatives of our community that they should give their recommendation for excommunication which you carried out against the God-fearing Rabbi Solomon and his loyal disciples. God forbid that I should do such a thing against that God-fearing person, who deserves the greatest praise, since he and his disciples had the courage to publicly speak out in God’s name against whoever transgressed the laws of the Torah and destroyed the foundations of our belief. But, as for your request to express my opinion about Maimonides’ *Guide*, it’s better for me to conduct myself according to the following Talmudic saying: “Speaking is worth one dollar, and keeping silent is worth two dollars.” (“A word is worth one *sela*¹⁰⁰¹ and silence is worth two *sela*.”¹⁰⁰²)

However, in one of his later letters to that same Kimḥi, he forgot about that precept, and he absolutely spoke out publicly against the *Guide to the Perplexed*, in which he perceived a danger to belief. He further spoke out against it on account of the rationalist premises that were adopted by Maimonides’ superficial, mediocre followers.

Nonetheless, writing in a pungent style with sharp words, Alfakhar demonstrates that Maimonides’ fundamental mistake is that he wants to combine two universal outlooks, which have no connection whatsoever between one another and which essentially are entirely incompatible with one another. Alfakhar writes as follows:

¹⁰⁰⁰ Rabbi Kruger expresses him as “Rabbi Solomon of the Mountain,” or “Rabbi Shlomo Me-ha-Har” in Hebrew.

¹⁰⁰¹ A *sela* was a currency in Mishnaic-era Israel that was worth four dinars.

¹⁰⁰² cf. BT tractate *Megillah* 18a

He, Maimonides, wants to completely equate [p. 254] the Torah with Greek philosophy. He takes the trouble to prove that they are like two peas in a pod, and each one is similar to the other like two twin lambs - his whole effort, however, is ineffective. There can never be peace between them. They are too different from one another to be able someday to become two twin sisters. A deep chasm separates them; they encompass different universal opinions, and each one of them argues like the wives in King Solomon's judgement: only the living son is mine, and the dead one is yours. They shouldn't have to, and indeed, they must not talk about peace in a situation where there can be no peace.

Maimonides thus looks for a great unambiguous truth. He nevertheless wants to make peace between the bases of our belief and the premises of Aristotelian philosophy. Where he talks about the eternal existence of the world, he himself strongly admits that if - regarding Aristotelian philosophy - he were to find logically persuasive proofs of the world's eternal existence, he would certainly have known how to interpret the first verses of Genesis in order for them to be harmonized with Aristotle's opinion.

In Rabbi Moses ben Maimon's opinion, the highest authority consists of the intellectual innovations of the syllogisms of Greek philosophy. He forgets, however, that there is really no pure logic. And the logical proofs which philosophy depends on aren't free of the chaff that in Greek bears the name "Sophism."¹⁰⁰³ It's composed of trickery, which misleads honest understanding with clever gimmicks and ideas, and these proofs lead him out of the straight path to entirely false hypotheses.

True, we are all obligated to treat the memory of our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, author of the unparalleled *Mishneh Torah* (for which there's no equal), with great respect. I also know quite well that only a powerful and keen thinker was able to create a work like the *Guide to the Perplexed*. I know as well, however, what kind of danger is inherent in that composition. Maimonides ignited a strange fire on God's altar, he brought hostile thoughts into the Torah of Moses, and still greater is the danger inherent in the so-called "Maimonidean disciples," who speak on his behalf. The number of the ostensibly educated and half-enlightened people who consider themselves Maimonides' admirers - discarding God's word on the basis of their conclusions, their incorrect interpretations, and the words that they absolutely can't understand - keeps on growing. The *Guide* has become the shield and protective coat for all dissidents and heretics. Leaning on the *Guide*, they deny all the wonders and miracles. For these people, it's all a parable and a metaphor. They "sold" these precious biblical verses, with their moral lessons and instructions (more precious than gold and pearls), to the Greeks ("and all its scriptures are more precious than pearls; they sold those¹⁰⁰⁴ to the Greeks").

¹⁰⁰³ The practitioners of Sophism were teachers in ancient Greece. They were skilled in what became known as Rhetoric.

¹⁰⁰⁴ cf. Proverbs 31:1

Alfakhar writes further:

I know that among yourselves, Maimonists, there [p. 255] are also people of broad, comprehensive knowledge. And indeed, I call upon you with the question: Since when did the Torah emerge from Egypt, not from Zion? (This being an allusion to Maimonides' place of residence.) And does God's word not come anymore from Jerusalem? The *Guide* is a new Torah for you. Are you explaining that that is the teaching that Moses gave us? You want to set Maimonides in a higher position than the Prophets. You must then know that God isn't in your camp. Consider this while it isn't yet too late. You must remove the foreign gods from your dwelling places and make your hearts pure; remember that you demolish your protective wall with your own hands, and you alone destroy the foundations of your belief - and the day of ordeal, the dangerous and dark day, will come! Your own children will turn away from you, they will very much supplant their belief, and because of the new belief, they will forget the ancient teachings. And you, who - on the basis of the *Guide* - make your children run away from the people and bring wantonness into the holy camp - you will turn back at that moment, but it will already be too late. You will seek a secure land, but the unruly waves will inundate you, and all around you will only hear the cold jokes of the indifferent ones and the arrogant mockery of the children who have become foreign to us.

Alfakhar's entire letter was permeated with the firm conviction that the Jewish people's faith in the heritage and traditions that have been affirmed for many generations is the only means for the Jewish national group spread out all over the entire world and in all countries to be tied together. The traditional observance of our customs in a literal sense brings together all generations - young and old, parents with their children.

However, rationalism - which relies on a cold intellect - isn't accessible to everybody equally. It creates a dividing line between old and young people and between scholars and unlearned people, and it gives total control to particular individuals, to people of high spiritual development; these individuals are the only authorities over everyone. Thus, national unity is destroyed all around, especially when among two such authorities a difference of opinion arises.

Jewish history, in later years, has proven the rightness of the high-ranking and perceptive scholar Alfakhar. But at that time, those two camps were too engrossed in the dispute to be able to understand those rational words - until they went through the bitter experience towards which the dispute was leading.

Chapter 9: The Denunciation - Maimonides' Books are Burnt at the Stake

[p. 256] More and more, from one day to the next, the conflict became stronger and more relentless. Letters in favour of the Maimonists and against them flowed back and forth without interruption, and one could fill entire books with them.

Besides the polemical letters in which one camp attacked the other, opponents enthusiastically took advantage of a more toxic weapon. That weapon was the scathing epigram. The Maimonists, among whom there were generally more Hebrew lyricists, made much use of epigrams. About 80 of them came to our attention in later anthologies. We will introduce the reader to some of them in a word-for-word Yiddish translation, taken from the second part of Dr. Israel Zinberg's (1873-1939) *A History of Jewish Literature*.¹⁰⁰⁵

The well-known poet Meshullam Da Piera (fl. first half of 1200s) addresses Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* with the following epigram:

Be quiet, o *Guide to the Perplexed*! Shut your lips! Such expressions should not be heard! All those who state that the word from the Torah is a parable, and the vision of the prophet is merely a dream, are transgressors.

That epigram strongly irritated the Maimonists, and from all corners they took it upon themselves to pour forth epigrams against that fanatical poet.¹⁰⁰⁶ We make mention of just some of these:

Those who rebel against the *Guide* utter, "let's rebel" - they make myrrh bitter with bitter waters.¹⁰⁰⁷ They render them bitter and they embitter the bitter. They shoot against the light, and they curse it.¹⁰⁰⁸

The following is a second epigram:

See the *Guide* and understand its superiority - and you shall see a treasure house¹⁰⁰⁹ in the skies.¹⁰¹⁰ Its name guides the rebels and supports them - and it's a guide in the height of its pride.¹⁰¹¹ Yet if

¹⁰⁰⁵ Originally published in Yiddish in the 1920s and 1930s as *Di geshikhte fun di literatur bay yidn*.

¹⁰⁰⁶ The epigrams below, to the extent that they function as epigrams or puns, work much better as epigrams in the Hebrew original than in both Yiddish and English.

¹⁰⁰⁷ cf. e.g. Numbers 5:18

¹⁰⁰⁸ The Yiddish translation that appears in Rabbi Kruger's original book is as follows: "They, the rebels, dare to proclaim a struggle against the *Guide*! They curse and defile the carrier of light. They want to shoot upon the fragrant incense as a poison."

¹⁰⁰⁹ cf. e.g. II Kings 20:13

¹⁰¹⁰ cf. e.g. Psalms 68:35

¹⁰¹¹ Psalms 68:35

you contemplate it well, you will know certainly that among the books of the geniuses there's nothing like it.¹⁰¹²

A third epigram states:

Fool! Muzzle the ornament of your intellect with the bridle of a horse.¹⁰¹³ Take off your shoes,¹⁰¹⁴ o wrongdoer,¹⁰¹⁵ and don't come closer to here¹⁰¹⁶! You don't have the intellect to understand a parable, and how would you be able to understand if it's in a vision or in a dream?¹⁰¹⁷

[p. 257] An additional epigram in which the *Guide* speaks for itself:

I am a fiery serpent.¹⁰¹⁸ Hang me on a pole so that the hands of Moses should revive those who are bitten who would look at it, and then they would be cured and brought back to life as if to be revived after death.¹⁰¹⁹ This is why my name shall be the *Guide to the Perplexed*.¹⁰²⁰

The poet, Meir ben Ezekiel ibn Gabbay (ca. 1480-ca. 1540),¹⁰²¹ proudly explains:

The teachings of the *Guide to the Perplexed* are grace and a good instruction¹⁰²² - but not for the uncircumcised of heart¹⁰²³ and not for the hard ones. They won't understand it until a redeemer comes, as it is said: "and make the heart grow fat and dull."¹⁰²⁴ O wayward and rebellious one,¹⁰²⁵ turn around and don't approach; if you're righteous and yet rebellious, turn and pay attention.¹⁰²⁶

¹⁰¹² Rabbi Kruger's Yiddish translation: "Consider the *Guide* properly; learn to esteem its value. Immediately thereafter, you will comprehend that its dwelling place reaches towards the heavenly heights. The guide for the reasonable ones, it shatters the rebellious ones in its pride. The one who understands it, however, is one who sees and comprehends that among all the books of the geniuses there isn't anything of its equal."

¹⁰¹³ cf. Proverbs 26:3

¹⁰¹⁴ e.g. Exodus 3:5

¹⁰¹⁵ e.g. Leviticus 19:35

¹⁰¹⁶ Exodus 3:5

¹⁰¹⁷ Rabbi Kruger's Yiddish translation: "You fool! Muzzle the mouth of your stupidity with a horse's bridle. Take off your shoes, you wrongdoer, and don't you dare place your feet here! You aren't in a position to comprehend what a parable consists of. How can you distinguish between what gets called a dream and what gets called a vision?"

¹⁰¹⁸ Numbers 21:8; referred to in Hebrew as a *saraf*, or Seraph, which can also denote fiery angels. Robert Alter (*The Five Books of Moses*, 2004, p. 790) translates that Hebrew word as viper.

¹⁰¹⁹ cf. Numbers 21:8-9

¹⁰²⁰ Rabbi Kruger's Yiddish translation: "I am a fiery serpent, which Moses raised high in order to heal all of those who were bitten. I make the eyes bright, and I give them immortality. For precisely this reason, my name really is 'the teacher to the lost ones.'"

¹⁰²¹ Rabbi Kruger mistakenly labels him as Jacob ben Ezra Gabbay.

¹⁰²² Proverbs 4:2 (just the "good instruction" part)

¹⁰²³ cf. Ezekiel 44:7

¹⁰²⁴ cf. Isaiah 6:10

¹⁰²⁵ see Deuteronomy 21:18-21

¹⁰²⁶ Rabbi Kruger's Yiddish translation: "The best teacher is the *Guide to the Perplexed* - it's not, however, for dull-witted hearts and dull minds. They wouldn't understand it until the Messiah comes. The corrupt ones should distance themselves from it - only fair and understanding people know how to value it."

The Maimonists, who had among them people of quite high social standing, exhibited much more activity than their adversaries. The faction of Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier¹⁰²⁷ and his disciples became absolutely crucial. The French rabbis remained peripheral spectators; other sympathizers, seeing that, also remained silent. Thus, on the side of the anti-Maimonists, Rabbi Solomon was left alone along with his disciples in the conflict to fight against the Maimonists, with the potential threat of excommunication. At that point, in his great need, he committed a crime for which his name was emblazoned with shame for all the subsequent generations. He, along with his supporters, came to the Franciscan and Dominican priests, laying down before them the first part of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (*Sefer ha-Mada*) and the *Guide to the Perplexed*. He said the following to those priests:

You look for everything among yourselves in terms of heretical books and destroy them. So too, you should know that among us are such harmful books that Moses of Egypt [Maimonides] wrote. Destroy those as well!

It was exactly at that moment that the fanatical pope Innocent III (1160/1161-1216) cast a suspicion on philosophical knowledge, especially on Aristotle's books, and proclaimed a prohibition on their study and possession. In Montpellier, there was a Dominican monastery that was distinguished for its highly fanatical monks. Maimonides' influence made itself felt even among the Christians of Rome, and in the Vatican itself, a group of them studied the *Guide to the Perplexed* in Latin translation. The priests who hated philosophical knowledge in general and Jews specifically rejoiced at the opportunity. The local spiritual inquisition similarly determined that people should burn Maimonides' two books. Monks went from house to house, gathered together copies of Maimonides' books, and burnt all of them [p. 258] at the stake. Rabbi Solomon's comrade-in-arms, Rabbi Jonah Gerondi (ca. 1200-1263/4), likewise convinced people in Paris that they should burn those books.

A folk tradition recounts that they lit the stake with a candle that was taken from the altar in the famous Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. The priests derived special pleasure from that, and for the Jews it made the pain even greater.

The public burning of Maimonides' books made an astonishing impression. The younger Samuel ben Abraham Sasporta (fl. first half of 1300s) addressed the French rabbis with a long letter, and he requested of them that they should defend the honour of the desecrated books of the great genius, and that they - with their great authority - should publicly declare that Maimonides' persecuted works are clear of whatever is heretical.

An unknown poet - though some speculate that he was Abraham, Maimonides' son (1186-1237) - lamented the books that were destroyed by fire, in a beautiful elegy:

¹⁰²⁷ Rabbi Kruger expresses him as "Rabbi Solomon of the Mountain," or "Rabbi Shlomo Me-ha-Har" in Hebrew.

As foolish as they are, who think that one can destroy words
 With fire like expensive fine gold,
 Yet they themselves are burning fires;
 How then can they come near to the flames?
 You, who caused this
 And aided in the occurrence of this horrible act, should know:
 Just like the prophet from Tishbi,¹⁰²⁸ they are lifted into the flames
 And fly on the wings of Seraphim to heaven.

At the same time, somebody stole into Maimonides' grave and engraved the following words:
 "Herein lies the heretic and unbeliever, Moses ben Maimon of Egypt."

And while Jews from all social strata were sad over that terrible event, the people in the pope's camp were happy. At last, they were successful in taking revenge on a Jew through a Jew.

How did Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier feel at that time? Was he satisfied with his accomplishment, or did he already regret it, seeing how far it went? History is silent about that. However, we do know that all his good friends distanced themselves even more from him over that matter. Only two remained, and even they didn't side with him; they merely had pity over his fate.

¹⁰²⁸ Referring to Elijah the Prophet.

Chapter 10: The Talmud is Burnt in the Same Place as the *Guide to the Perplexed*

[p. 259] The first one who came out to stand up for Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier¹⁰²⁹ was Judah ben Joseph Ibn Alfakhar (d. 1235). He writes in one of his letters to David Kimḥi (1160-1235):

Rabbi Solomon committed a great injustice with his denunciation; however, that led you to persecute him over it. One isn't allowed to bring a person to the last level of despair. Now, you are receiving the reward for your deeds.

He writes later:

True, handing over our spiritual treasures into the hands of our enemies is a great crime; nonetheless, you're a collaborator in that. You persecuted him, you excommunicated him, you chased him and made life miserable for him, and you didn't give him any respite. However, what had to happen, happened. Look, at least put an end to the dispute now; don't distance poor Rabbi Solomon with both hands ("and don't let the disputants reject the destitute with both hands"¹⁰³⁰). However, given that the flame of dispute has already been so strongly ignited, one should know how to calm it down with reasonable words.

Beyond that, Kimḥi related that the denunciation was not merely of heretical books (such as Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* and *Sefer ha-Mada*); rather, he attacked heretics themselves. In accordance with David Kimḥi's assertion, Rabbi Solomon ought to have said to the Dominicans as follows: "You knew that in our community the number of heretics who deny God has greatly increased; here, they introduced the teachings of Moses ben Maimon of Egypt, who wrote heretical books." (His words: "See that the children of our people are mainly heretics and deniers, for they were led astray by the words of our Rabbi Moses of Egypt who wrote for them books of heresy.")

The later troubles helped ensure that nobody should take into account Judah ben Joseph Ibn Alfakhar's (d. 1235) defence nor the gentle words of Joseph ben Todros ha-Levi Abulafia (fl. first half of 1200s) that he wrote to the instigators of the dispute. This is because the Inquisition started to look for Jewish freethinkers, those upon whom suspicions fell; he was arrested soon thereafter. It's no doubt whatsoever that many Maimonists at that time stood in great danger.

We must remember that Saint Louis (1214-1270; also known as Louis IX) reigned at that time, and under his regime, the inquisitor Robert sentenced to burn at the stake 222 men over the course of five years (between 1234 and 1239) only for having the nerve to have their own opinions.

However, the Maimonists, among whom there were many who occupied quite important positions in the government, were successful in [p. 260] demonstrating how far the denunciation was from the truth. Now, they switched roles: the Maimonists were exempt while they arrested the

¹⁰²⁹ Rabbi Kruger expresses him as "Rabbi Solomon of the Mountain," or "Rabbi Shlomo Me-ha-Har" in Hebrew.

¹⁰³⁰ A verse from Rabbi Solomon's letter, not from the Bible or the Talmud.

informers for giving false testimony and afterwards punishing them. Nonetheless, both sides were considered by the Dominicans to be equal with regard to which Jews to punish - so long as Jews would be sentenced.

Hearing that accusation, the stern judge determined that the hangman should remove the tongue of every informer. This is what was done.

That sort of verdict was terrible. However, what was still more terrible was to find out that the aroused disputants - instead of feeling sorry in seeing how far the dispute had come - stood and made fun of the bloody victims, as they squirmed in the hangman's hands. One of the Maimonists - some say that that was the talented translator of the *Ben ha-Melekh ve'ha-Nazir*,¹⁰³¹ Abraham ben Samuel Ibn Ḥasdai (1180-1240) - published the following epigram, in which he writes with great pleasure:

The sinister leaders decided:

The *Guide*, the teacher of light, should be eradicated.

God poured out troubles on them,

Catastrophe upon catastrophe befell them.

They exalted their mouths against the heavens,

Their tongues are now trampled in the dust.

We read of those events and are stunned, not knowing what to be astonished by first: whether with regard to the vicious judge in handing out such a stern sentence for people who didn't harm anybody, or whether with regard to the Maimonists, who completely forgot that the ones they detested were their own flesh-and-blood brothers after all. If the epigram and other letters hadn't shown their triumph over the "enemy," we would certainly have thought that the Maimonist camp would have been in grief, no less than King David was upon the death of his son Absalom - even though the latter sought his life. However, the epigram states otherwise; in that way, it can be found openly in the appeal of the brothers Abraham and Judah Ibn Ḥasdai, and in *Milḥamot Hashem*¹⁰³² by Abraham, Maimonides' son (1186-1237). This shows that even the greatest and most noble in that camp accepted it with satisfaction. How harmful is the power of disputation to be able to transform the best people into wild animals!

What became of Rabbi Solomon of Montpellier? From that point on, he disappeared completely from history. Only in a few letters from several learned scholars was he spoken of as

¹⁰³¹ Literally in Hebrew, "Son of the King and the Nazirite."

¹⁰³² Literally in Hebrew, "Wars of God."

a deceased person with the title of *kadosh*,¹⁰³³ which designated people who didn't die of natural causes. From this is derived the hypothesis that he was also among those who were sentenced. Most probably, they also removed his tongue.

[p. 261] It's quite possible that the aforementioned Baḥiel al-Constantini (fl. 1200s)¹⁰³⁴ was the one who caused the informers to get that horrible sentence, because he really was very distinguished in the eyes of the Aragonese king James I (1208-1276), to whom the city of Montpellier belonged.

After the trial, when the leaders were punished, the dispute subsided for a short time.

Some years later, the famous debate about the Talmud took place in Paris, and in the same place in which they initially had burned Maimonides' books not long before that, they now brought entire wagonloads filled with Talmudic tractates that were burned just like Maimonides' books.

This had a horrible effect on all the Jews. That tone was perpetuated in the elegy *Sha'ali Serufah ba-Esh*,¹⁰³⁵ which is now included among the lamentations for the Fast of the 9th of Av and is recited with tears in people's eyes in all of the Jewish diaspora.

Jonah Girondi (ca. 1200-1263/4), Rabbi Solomon's loyal disciple, who was in Paris the whole time and was spared from that trial, saw God's punishment in that they handed over books from a great genius to burn them, and he was one of the main leaders. That thought did not let him rest, and he took it upon himself in repentance to travel to the Land of Israel, in order to go to Maimonides' tomb near Tiberias and to ask him for forgiveness.

However, he wasn't destined to derive solace from this, since he died while making the preparations for the trip.

During the days of his repentance, he composed his book *Sha'arei Teshuvah*,¹⁰³⁶ which is quite popular among Jews to this day.

¹⁰³³ Literally in Hebrew, "holy one"; in this context, it is better translated as either "martyred" or "sanctified [in God's name]," as in dying in God's name.

¹⁰³⁴ Rabbi Kruger mistakenly renders Baḥiel as Baḥya, as in either Baḥya Ibn Paquda (ca. 1050-1120) or Baḥya ben Asher (1255-1340), both of whom were famous rabbinic personalities. The Al-Constantini brothers were personal doctors for James I of Aragon.

¹⁰³⁵ Literally in Hebrew, "Inquire, [o Torah] Consumed in Fire." This elegy was written by Rabbi Meir ben Baruch (ca. 1215-1293), also known as the Maharam (*Moreinu ha-Rav Meir* - Our Teacher, Rabbi Meir) of Rothenburg, who was the last of the Tosafists (who wrote a major commentary on the Talmud called the *Tosafot*) and a major halakhist whose influence can be felt in Ashkenazic (Central/Eastern European) Jewish halakhic observance to this day.

¹⁰³⁶ Literally in Hebrew, "The Gates of Repentance."

At that time, the words “here is buried our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon the excommunicated and heretical one” were erased from Maimonides’ tomb, and the initial wording “here is buried our Rabbi Moses ben Maimon the chosen one among humanity” was put back on.

The dispute calmed down, but it wasn’t extinguished. As a matter of fact, the conflict has gone on to this day. Maimonides, as author of the *Yad ha-Hazakah*,¹⁰³⁷ has always stood high in everybody’s eyes, whether those of his admirers or his enemies. However, the *Guide to the Perplexed*, along with the first part of the *Mishneh Torah* (*Sefer ha-Mada*), is still very hard to digest for a majority of the Jews to this day, just like in the past.

I don’t even want to make the slightest attempt to follow this struggle of ideas through the generations up to now, because an entire library can be filled with the books that have already written about it. Maimonides will not be forgotten wherever one turns to; whether in *halakhah*,¹⁰³⁸ *aggadah*,¹⁰³⁹ or philosophy, one must encounter his thoughts or the thoughts of his opponents.

However, to at least give the reader somewhat of an idea of the current [p. 262] opinion concerning Maimonides’ philosophical system and to what extent it’s attached to the Jewish religion, I want to impart the opinion of Aḥad Ha’am (1856-1927)¹⁰⁴⁰ in his essay, *Shilton ha-Sekhel*,¹⁰⁴¹ which he published on the 700th anniversary of Maimonides’ death in *ha-Shiloah*¹⁰⁴² in 1905 and later included in the fourth part of his *Al Parashat Derakhim*.¹⁰⁴³

¹⁰³⁷ Another name for the *Mishneh Torah*, also authored by Maimonides. The origin of this other name for the *Mishneh Torah* is connected to the system of the equivalence of numbers with words that is called *gematria* in Hebrew. In this case, Y or *yad*, the y equals 10 and the d equals 4; thus, *yad* equals 14 in Hebrew letters. Word for word, *Yad ha-Hazakah* means “the strong hand” in Hebrew.

¹⁰³⁸ “Law” in Hebrew; the legal portion of Talmudic literature.

¹⁰³⁹ “Legend” in Hebrew; the non-legal portion of Talmudic literature.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Literally, “one of the people” (Genesis 26:10). This was the pen name of the essayist, journalist, and thinker Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsburg, a major Zionist figure.

¹⁰⁴¹ Literally in Hebrew, “Governance of the Intellect.”

¹⁰⁴² A Hebrew-language literary journal based in Warsaw and founded by Aḥad Ha’am himself in 1896. That journal was named after an area to the south of Jerusalem’s Old City that is among the most ancient of Jerusalem’s neighbourhoods and which now serves as the Arab neighbourhood of Silwan.

¹⁰⁴³ Literally in Hebrew, “On the Portion of the Ways.” A Hebrew-language collection of Aḥad Ha’am’s essays, it encompasses four volumes and was published in 1921.

Chapter 11: Aḥad Ha'am on Maimonides

[p. 262] In his essay, *Shilton ha-Sekhel*,¹⁰⁴⁴ Aḥad Ha'am (1856-1927)¹⁰⁴⁵ set himself the task of discovering the essential idea of Maimonides' religious and ethical outlook, which unsettled the minds of the Late Middle Ages - among opponents and followers alike - and which left a deep impression on the reasoning of subsequent generations, down to the present.

Was Maimonides the creator of a new school of thought? Aḥad Ha'am left that question, which many have posed, to those who have a penchant for definitions. He states, so that we shouldn't bring it up to him, that nobody can deny that Maimonides took his fundamental principles entirely from Aristotle, in accordance with the Arab interpretation, in which many neo-Platonic principles were combined. On the other hand, one must admit that Maimonides went farther and deeper in distilling the ethical consequences that emerge from these premises - much deeper than the Greeks and Arabs, the ones who themselves formulated these premises, did. Maimonides is an original creator in this regard, coming up with new "premises" that others didn't express, even though logically they were only waiting for someone to express them.

In order to understand Maimonides' school of thought, one must first familiarize himself with the metaphysical premises on which it is built. At that time, those premises were considered beyond all doubt and were axioms that one wasn't allowed to question. Maimonides himself, expressing them as laws, believed that they are the highest concepts that a person can reach, and - being true and consistent - they will never be changed.

The main principles are as follows:

a) Every object that is in our world consists of matter and form, but one ought not to understand "form" the way that many understand that word - that is, the way the object appears. Rather, form should be understood as the "quality" that an object possesses and whatever else can be made from that object, in comparison with other types that surround it in the world (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 1, chapter 1).

b) One can never find matter without form, nor can one find form without [p. 263] matter; it's rather the intellect that separates them into these two categories. This is because as soon as "form" gives shape to the "essence" to become what it is, it really must have a current existence, and not only exist in the intellect alone. On the other hand, material without form is definitively unviable, because at that point, it lacks the quality (i.e. form) that makes it what it is. However, in the higher worlds, there are forms without matter - something that Aristotle asserts - and Maimonides calls these *sekhelim nifradim* or *sekhelim nivdalim*.¹⁰⁴⁶ All the objects of our world must be composed

¹⁰⁴⁴ Literally in Hebrew, "Governance of the Intellect."

¹⁰⁴⁵ Literally, "one of the people" (Genesis 26:10). This was the pen name of the essayist, journalist, and thinker Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsburg, a major Zionist figure.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Both of these phrases are "separate intelligences" in medieval philosophical Hebrew, and they include such objects as the heavenly spheres.

of matter and form together (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapter 4; *Yesodei ha-Torah*,¹⁰⁴⁷ chapter 1, law 7).

c) The nature of matter doesn't support a permanent form. Rather, matter maintains forms in consecutive transformations: One form is taken off, another is put on. Matter itself consists of "being" and not "becoming," while form isn't subject to modification, and the "not being" is only with respect to its connection to matter. Therefore, the forms of that type exist eternally while the form of the individual disappears. A nation lives eternally in one and the same form, but not individual people, because a person's form functions together with its matter that is limited to the in-between state of "becoming and disappearing" (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 8).

d) The soul of every creation is indeed its form. The body is matter, in which form cloaks itself. For that reason, when the body lets itself go back to the natural basis from which it was originally created, the soul is disoriented, since it exists only together with the body. The soul exists eternally only as a species - as is the case with all other forms - whose nature is described in paragraph c, above (*Yesodei ha-Torah*,¹⁰⁴⁸ chapter 1, laws 8 and 9).

e) The soul is one, but it performs various tasks; therefore, philosophers speak of its parts. However, nobody thinks of saying that it's divided in the same way as matter; rather, they call it "parts" because of its various functions. In that sense, there are five functions: the power that feeds, the power that feels, the power of imagination, sensitivity, and the intellect that reasons. In the first four powers, all living creations are equal with people, even though each species has its own way of using it. It's only the intellect that makes humankind higher than all the animals - being able to think, study, and distinguishing between good and bad deeds (*Shemoneh Perakim*,¹⁰⁴⁹ chapter 1).

The result of all those five premises is that essentially a person's soul is just like that of all animals, as follows: a form combines with matter, and then ceases existing as soon as matter decomposes into the four natural elements.¹⁰⁵⁰ With the decomposition of the body, all five sections that the soul consists of are disoriented. This is how Aristotle's commentators, such as Alexander of Aphrodisias (who flourished in the 3rd century CE)¹⁰⁵¹ and other extreme thinkers, understand it.

There are, however, many supporters of Aristotle's philosophy, as well as [p. 264] supporters of the belief in the immortality of the soul, who understand from Aristotle's words that he would have made an exception for the intellect. The other four sections are indeed natural, and they cease to exist once the body ceases to exist. However, the intellect remains forever, even after death. Maimonides, nonetheless, was too consistent not to notice the contradiction inherent in such a

¹⁰⁴⁷ A part of *Mishneh Torah* that deals with the fundamentals of the universe, prophecy, etc.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Rabbi Kruger mistakenly renders it as *Yesodot ha-Torah*.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Literally in Hebrew, "Eight Chapters"; Maimonides' introduction to tractate *Avot*.

¹⁰⁵⁰ These four elements are earth, air, fire, and water.

¹⁰⁵¹ A Peripatetic philosopher and the primary ancient Greek commentator on Aristotle's writings.

compromise. On the other hand, he also wasn't able to stick to the premise that does away with the soul's existence after death. In order to be fair both to Aristotle and to the Jewish faith, he took a concept from Arab philosophy, expanded on it, perfected it, and made it into a principle of principles of his moral school of thought. With that, he escaped from the narrow perspective inside which faith on the one hand, and Aristotle on the other hand, confined him.

The fundamental concept is as follows: In spite of the fact that the intellect isn't more than one of the powers of the soul that disappears with death, we nevertheless find in it the power of "preparation," which enables one to access the great truths, and only that intellect which didn't really develop the power of preparation and didn't bring it from potentiality to actuality must die. However, if the person used that potential to accumulate wisdom for himself, making actuality out of potentiality, the intellect thereby attains an independent existence, and it indeed remains living eternally, even when the body is no longer there. The soul then joins up with the acquired intellect and it becomes just as eternal. Consequently, we make a distinction between the innate intellect, which emerges at birth and isn't more of a power than any power in the body, and the acquired intellect, which a person obtains through study and thought. Through study, that soul is separated from the body and, for that reason, it remains as much in eternal existence as the heavenly *sekhelim nivdalim* (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 1, chapters 70-72, and in yet other sources).

Now, knowing that the soul provides qualities for every creature, we realize that one with an acquired soul, who remains eternally existent, is a separate type of person in comparison to one who didn't study, and whose intellect, therefore, is just as mortal as the body. His natural soul is the form of the body, while in the intellect the acquired soul is its form, and the natural soul is its matter; it certainly has nothing to do with the body (*Yesodei ha-Torah*, chapter 4, laws 8 and 9).

Maimonides followed the Arab philosophers up to this point. The latter stood still on this issue and didn't go deeper to discover all the consequences that emerged from the premise, as long as they obtained a basis for the immortality of the soul. However, Maimonides didn't stand still in the middle of the way and wasn't afraid at all of the philosophical deductions, as strange in the extreme as they might be.

First of all, Maimonides established the subject matter of that notion and its quality, which results in attaining the acquired soul. If unity with the acquired intellect brings eternity to the soul, they must definitively be of eternal value. [p. 265] Because how could it be that through non-eternal value one should obtain eternity? It's certain that the following concepts don't pertain to eternal value:

a) general knowledge, such as mathematics and logic, that only consists of abstract laws, not explanations of things that are in existence. This is only an instrument of thought, but not thought itself;

b) general knowledge that shows how to do things in order to attain a certain objective but that contains no explanation whatsoever about things that are in existence. Teachings on ethics and asceticism belong to this category; and

c) the knowledge of individual forms, which only have value while being temporarily connected with matter. Biographies of great people and so forth belong to this category.

Those three categories, nonetheless, are useful and otherwise entirely necessary but not of eternal value. For that reason, they don't have the potential to perpetuate the soul, expressing its quality "from potentiality to actuality."

Which divine concepts are of eternal value?

a) the forms of species that are located in our earthly world, which are - as is known - eternal;

b) the celestial bodies (the Sun, the Moon, and the stars), which exist eternally despite their being composed of matter and form; and

c) spirits without bodies, such as God and the angels. Here, the teachings, such as physics and metaphysics, are true teachings and are eternal truths, and for that reason, students can - through them - take the intellect from potential to actuality, which signifies eternal existence.

All this is in reference to the content of the teachings. With regard to the manner of understanding that notion, Maimonides demonstrates that whoever wants to perpetuate his soul isn't allowed to learn only what others have explained, since that by itself isn't more than faith. The intellect thereby doesn't do anything - only that person himself attains the true value. Here, the intellect itself certainly must work; with that, it connects itself with eternity.

These distinctions are widespread in many places, in some places expressed explicitly and in other places only hinted at (see, for example, in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 51).

Chapter 12: The Difference Between Maimonides' *Übermensch* and Nietzsche's

[p. 265] Now let's see the ethical consequence that emerges from Maimonides' position.

The question about the main objective of the entirety of Creation in general is a foolish one for Maimonides, since for all the keen arguments and all the "whys," one must arrive at the answer: "This is what God (or His wisdom) decided." However, at the same time, he agreed with Aristotle that the most accessible purpose for the creation of our world is humankind, because the process of "modifying forms, becoming and unbecoming" indicates an attempt to discover that which is better and more perfect. [p. 266] And knowing that humankind can only attain the highest perfection because of its "acquired intellect," it's thus easy to understand that that is the purpose of the creation of our world.

As a result, we already have a good answer to the question, "on account of what goal was humankind created?". The answer is: Every person should be able to develop the part of his soul which at birth is "potential," and it's up to him to make it into "actuality." In any event, for this person's eternal existence, this study must make an impression on him with the correct lessons that have eternal value (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 13; introduction to Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah of the Order of *Zera'im*).

That is to say that all the things that one does to obtain food, clothing, and shelter, even the things that one does for his people and country, have no value whatsoever for their own sake. Rather, they are only means for some people to be able to perform the task of studying eternal divine concepts and of evoking them in the soul (as mentioned in the aforementioned introduction).

With that, we achieve a new criterion with respect to human ethics. Every action has a certain value - whether positive or negative - only in accordance with helping or hindering a person's efforts towards the purpose, performing that good mission because of which he was created. Every action that helps the intellect change from "potential" to "actuality" is deemed "good"; every action that disturbs this change is deemed "bad."

We can now set up the ethical ladder and consider its steps from top to bottom: the highest level is the study of physics and metaphysics, which are disciplines of eternal value that explain to the student his "I," physically and spiritually. A lower level consists of theoretical teachings - such as the practice of good manners - since they set the stage for the student to achieve the "great purpose." Yet lower is the ordinary task of eating, drinking, clothing, etc., whose existence is justified only on account of the removal of the pain of hunger and thirst, which prevents tasks that involve thinking. A bit of a higher level is the practice of character traits, because that curbs desires and the intellect gets more time and opportunity to acquire eternity. However, even that doesn't have value for its own sake; rather, it is a means that leads to the greater objective (*Guide to the*

Perplexed, part 3, chapters 27 and 54; *De'ot*,¹⁰⁵² chapter 3, law 4; and Maimonides' introduction to *Zera'im*¹⁰⁵³).

Consistent with his position, Maimonides advocates for the principle that in all character traits the middle way is the best. True, he took that principle from Aristotle, but not with the latter's objective: Aristotle sees the purpose of such a principle as achieving the fine politeness that a well-mannered person ought to observe, and it ends there. Maimonides, on the other hand, sees in it only a means to the greater goal. Taking one extreme, right or left, leads one away from the path that leads to eternity, whether because he would be too absorbed in lusts or whether he would harm his body, while the middle path lets him go straight to the purpose (*Shemoneh Perakim*,¹⁰⁵⁴ end of chapter 4 and start of chapter 5).

[p. 267] With that, we could finally explain the purpose of human existence as a whole.

As explained earlier, humanity is composed of two types: one type - which comprises the vast majority - consists of people whose intellect is in potential; the other type - one or two in a generation - consists of people whose intellect exists in actuality. The latter isn't originally created as a type for its own sake; rather, it emerges from the former category, through connection to the disciplines of eternal value.

Nonetheless, the path to becoming a person with an intellect that is "of actuality" is long and hard, full of obstacles; only one or two in a generation could reach that level. All the masses remain "people in potential." The long-standing question remains: what precisely is the objective of the greater multitude that remains in potential? Should we say that God's creation was similar to the task of a poor craftsman who creates vessels and discards the spoiled goods until he creates one perfect vessel with all the right qualities? However, regarding God's natural creation, one cannot say this, seeing the wonderful harmony that prevails in the entire universe and how not a single thing was created without any objective. So why should that consistent principle not be maintained when it comes to humankind? We must thus find humankind's goal in the individual "person in actuality," who is the essence of Creation, and having him in mind, the "masses in potential" were created. They should perform worldly tasks, build houses, plant trees, sow grains, and harvest them, in order for the *übermensch* to be free from all worries and to be able to devote himself to the study of the true disciplines (introduction to *Zera'im*).

From that fact, we obtain as well the usefulness of the "masses in potential"; they exist on account of the one *übermensch*. However, he exists for the sake of himself alone.

With that, we have a new foundation for ethics - the needs of the social fabric.

¹⁰⁵² A part of *Mishneh Torah* that deals with proper behaviour in areas like diet and how to conduct oneself.

¹⁰⁵³ An order of Mishnah and of Talmud in general.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Literally in Hebrew, "Eight Chapters"; Maimonides' introduction to tractate *Avot*.

Because when would any person have separately been able to become an *übermensch*, not needing to turn to society for help? The ethical criterion would then only be an individual one, and everyone would be able to measure himself in accordance with the following formula: “Whatever helps me to reach the ‘true intellect’ - that is my ethical good; and whatever stops me from doing so, that is my ethical evil.” However, when comprehension is inaccessible for the majority of people, and is only for certain individuals or for “the one,” who must necessarily be helped by the majority, a new social criterion certainly appears: “good” means that which helps the majority to perfect themselves in their missions, and “bad” means that which stops them in their tracks.

And neither category can free itself from that social criterion - certainly not the majority, since every single individual, after all, has no aim for his existence except social wellbeing. Even [p. 268] the *übermensch*, who has a purely personal justification for existence, must also strive for the welfare of the society in which his help lies, and in which the more the masses are developed with regard to the material domain the better and easier for the *übermensch* it is to go on his way to eternity. As a result, it appears that although the main objective of all of humanity is “the one,” the wellbeing of society is nevertheless more important than that of the individual, even when he’s an *übermensch* (see *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapters 23 and 34).

In accordance with that perspective, there is a certain ethical objective in all material branches of people’s activities, which improve and facilitate life, helping more or less to create the necessary “environment” that the *übermensch* needs to have. Therefore, Maimonides provides existential justification for fine arts, sculpture, travel descriptions, architecture, and even for fine furniture and pretty clothes. True, they themselves have no “individual worth,” but all of them provide the intellect with a change of pace and some rest after hard work in the true disciplines, and they make him prepared to work subsequently with renewed powers (*Shemoneh Perakim*, chapter 8).

With that conclusion, Maimonides moves towards the ancient Jewish outlook, which established the main objective as the existence of the collectivity, and which made this the purpose of every individual’s life. Thus, despite Maimonides demonstrating that the precise essence of human creation is the *übermensch*, he admits that even the *übermensch* himself must strive to obtain the success of the masses in general.

Superficially, one can possibly find a certain similarity between Maimonides’ *übermensch* and that of Nietzsche. The latter also sees the main goal of Creation in the *übermensch*, and he also justifies his life lived on the account of the lowly masses. However, upon deep reflection, one only sees a similarity in name, not in character.

First, what Nietzsche, the spiritual Greek, sees as perfection is the complete harmony between the body and the spirit, while Maimonides’ *übermensch* has nothing to do with the corporeal, and not even with spiritual qualities but rather with the intellect, which obtains eternity through becoming engrossed in the eternally and consistently true disciplines.

Second, the relationship of Nietzsche's *übermensch* to society is entirely different than Maimonides' *übermensch*. The former looks for an expression for his powers in the world beyond him; he strives to bring about his current wish and doesn't want to have any obstacles in his way. Therefore, he always wages war against society, which wants to restrain him through its moral laws that weren't created for him but rather for the masses. On the other hand, Maimonides' *übermensch* doesn't strive to change the world order in accordance with his wish; rather, he develops his spirit in his personal world. Society isn't his enemy; on the contrary, he lives within its [p. 269] security, knowing that without its help, he can't accomplish anything. All that he desires from it are his material needs in order for him to be able to live peacefully. He wishes it success, knowing that its success is also his success.

So far, we've seen Maimonides' ethical position, based upon philosophical foundations, not having at all mentioned the Jewish faith. On the contrary: His opinion until now was against the Jewish outlook, which sees an *übermensch* in someone with good character traits, whom the Sages of the Talmud praise in terms of one whose "good deeds exceed his wisdom"¹⁰⁵⁵ as opposed to someone who has in himself much wisdom and few good deeds.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Mishnah Avot 3:12

Chapter 13: Moses' Teachings Under Philosophical Control

[p. 269] Maimonides, apart from his philosophy, was a religious person and believed in the divinity of Moses' teaching. At this point, a question can be posed:

In philosophy, there is room to believe in the possibility of revelation. Does that mean that God could appear to one person or several people and transmit a teaching to them? That question depends on a second question: Is the world an eternally existent one and its existence is thus inevitable, as Aristotle asserts, or is it a newly created one through the will of God, in accordance with Jewish tradition? In the first case, the world is conducted according to unchanging natural laws from time immemorial; as a result, no place at all remains above the laws of nature, and consequently, there's also no Torah from God. In the second case, which adds the possibility of a created world, since the Creator made it this way when He wanted, such divine will might come a second time, in giving a Torah from Heaven to people even though it goes against the laws of nature.

In summary: The "createdness" [*hiddush*]¹⁰⁵⁶ of the world goes together with Torah from Heaven, because if the former enables the impossible, the latter can also exist, and regarding the question of why now - not earlier, not later, and so forth - there is an answer: This is what the Creator wanted to do, or His wisdom issued a decree in such a way, and we don't know why. It's enough to know that something was created through His will, and the Creation of the world along with Torah from Heaven would constitute possibilities (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapter 28).

Maimonides came to this conclusion about the Creation of the world after seriously analyzing all of Aristotle's arguments that point to "eternity" [*kadmut*]¹⁰⁵⁷ and he didn't find any definitive answer to it on the part of the intellect. If he had found such a definitive answer, he would indeed have determined that, despite the verses of the Torah that indicate "createdness," he would not hold back from approving of Aristotle's arguments, notwithstanding those verses, "since the gateways of commentaries aren't locked." However, not finding the proofs for "eternity" [p. 270] strong enough - just like the proofs for "createdness," which are also not strong enough - we may rely on the simple meaning of the verses that indicate createdness, "thus not sinning against the intellect" (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapters 16 and 28).

Having affirmed the Creation of the world on a certain date "since this is the way that the Creator wanted," the miracle of a Torah from Heaven indeed became possible on a certain date. This was done through the greatest of the prophets [Moses our Master], who accepted upon himself the divine abundance of God through the "active intellect" (the worldly intellect) that is the mediator between the Creator and the lower world, and he was the one who brought all the forms - the form of the soul included - from potential to actuality. That prophet, more than anyone else,

¹⁰⁵⁶ Literally "renewal," but used as "createdness" or "creation" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

¹⁰⁵⁷ "Eternity" in medieval philosophical Hebrew.

developed his “active intellect” and introduced a similar harmony between intellect and sensation. He was the one who was able to absorb into himself the great abundance of God through the active intellect, and we received the Torah from Heaven in this way, through Moses our Master, greater than all the other prophets (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, from chapter 32 until the end of that part; *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei ha-Torah*, chapter 7).

As already mentioned, one cannot ask questions, such as: Why at that time and not at any other time? Why only to the Jews and not to everybody? Because the answer is only that this is what God wanted. However, we can indeed ask: What is the task of such a Torah and what did it come to correct? Because it couldn't be believed that the Creator would disrupt nature without having an important objective. We do not have to know the aim of all the details, since we cannot penetrate the depths of His wisdom, but in general we indeed would have needed to know how the Torah could help people in reaching the chief objective of their existence (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 27).

It is obvious for Maimonides that the Torah can't bring people directly - neither with its theoretical part nor with its practical divine commandments - to the main goal: to transform the intellect “from potential to actuality.” This is because, as explained earlier, one attains the main perfection neither through good character traits, nor through good deeds, nor even through studying topics that get passed down through oral tradition; rather, one attains the main perfection through working long and hard with the intellect concerning physical and metaphysical truths. We must say that the Torah, along with its divine commandments, is only a means through which it is necessary for people to be able to attain their main purpose. Consequently, the Torah intends to establish such a way of life that could produce that many more people in actuality; therefore, it must not be appropriate just for individuals who engage themselves in it, but rather, to the entire multitude. The whole of society must observe the divine commandments and must obtain the following from them:

- a) Proper ideas in such an understandable form that the multitude can comprehend;
- b) Proper ideas of morality for an individual as much as for society in accordance with which people would be able to live quietly and satisfied; and
- c) Divine commandments that everyone should observe. Each one of these commandments is intended to remind everybody [p. 271] concerning proper intentions and moral obligations. (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapters 23 and 28; *ibid.*, part 2, chapter 34).

Those three tasks - the last one being there to reinforce the former two - that the Torah established should elevate society onto a higher level of thinking and living, and life would then be easier. The war between good and evil, between honesty and falsehood, and between lust and moderation would be eliminated, and thus the individual could find freedom for himself in order to devote himself to the highest objective in life: transferring his intellect from potential to actuality.

This is what Maimonides understood, and this is what he had to understand in accordance with his position concerning the task of divine law (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapters 39-40, and especially in his *Igeret Teman*¹⁰⁵⁸). In that case, the philosophical truth must be in your intellect, and the true ethic for all of mankind must be in your performance of the divine commandments; these lead to the highest goal of perfection.

Arriving at that point, Maimonides began his difficult task, which even for such a spiritual giant wasn't easy. Coming with such an *a priori* idea to the Torah, he encountered many opinions that were the opposite of the fundamental philosophical foundations that he considered to be the logical truth, while the divine commandments also aren't easy to explain in such a way as would result in their preordained purpose. What does one do? One makes compromises between the two sides, just like many have done beforehand and afterwards - a person who is fully invested in the intellect wouldn't be able to do that. He wouldn't allow himself to add anything to faith. As well, he wouldn't be able to take away from the intellect, believing that the intellect is the highest authority of all. However, Maimonides was able to bring in at least a bit of harmony through compiling scattered biblical verses and rabbinic statements supporting his philosophical truths until religion attained the form that he wanted to present.

Aḥad Ha'am (1856-1927)¹⁰⁵⁹ doesn't want to be occupied with the details of Maimonides' interpretation of the verses and elucidation of his opinions. He thinks that for us his work is only a monument upon which someone dedicated gigantic strength, and thus it remains only as a sepulchre for the weakness of the written word contending with a living person who has the intention to elicit from it "yesses" and "nos," and the opposite. This is because after that immense task, Aḥad Ha'am worked hard according to his way, and he transformed the living god of Moses' Torah into an abstract notion of philosophy that doesn't utilize anything except a considerable number of "negatives." Aḥad Ha'am transformed Maimonides, that righteous person according to Jewish concepts, into someone who achieved the "acquired intellect." This involved the extirpation [*karet*] of Maimonides from the Torah – doing away with the form when materiality dissolves, and so forth: everything is in accordance with the philosophical explanation without any change.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Epistle to Yemen

¹⁰⁵⁹ Literally, "one of the people" (Genesis 26:10). This was the pen name of the essayist, journalist, and thinker Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsburg, a major Zionist figure.

Chapter 14: Maimonides' Teachings of Judaism

[p. 272] It was easier for Maimonides to fit the first laws of the Torah into his perspective, because from those laws themselves he discovered the pedagogical reason at the side of every divine commandment, and where the reason was not overtly given, it was easy to explain with the simple intellect.

However, with respect to the higher levels of these divine commandments and in classifying every category of such commandments in accordance with Maimonides' perspective, he had to categorize them on the next level below, such that all of those commandments - ethical and ritual - are only preparations for attaining the highest level, the perfection of the intellect. All of them together serve one purpose.

What does the Torah, with all its divine commandments and statutes, mean in accordance with Maimonides' perspective? We can present the answer as follows:

In accordance with the Torah's theoretical opinions, it is a metaphysics for the masses, and in its practical divine commandments, it is ethics and pedagogy for human society. To bring people to the highest purpose isn't within its potential; its task is only to fashion society (i.e. the multitude), in accordance with the needs of the *übermensch*. Therefore, religion isn't higher than the intellect; rather, religion is lower than the intellect, precisely like the multitude, on account of whom it was created. It is lower than the *übermensch*. The intellect is the highest authority, and religion must comply with it with no questions asked. Why didn't the Creator impart the quality of the intellect to ordinary people along with religion so as to attain the true disciplines and for their souls to become eternal? Why couldn't the Creator truly require of that same person to believe in a matter that is against that same reasoning, which for him is the gift through which the soul obtains eternal existence and the purpose of its being created? For that reason, even if a prophet should demonstrate the greatest proofs "in heaven and on the Earth" and requires of us to believe him on the grounds that he received such truth by prophecy that is against the intellect and the Torah that was established by the intellect, one isn't allowed to believe in him nor to look at his miracles. This is because the intellect that denies His words is to be believed more than the eye that sees His miracles (introduction to the Mishnaic order of *Zera'im*; *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapter 39; and *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 34).

However, the level of the divine commandments doesn't at all diminish the eternal obligation to observe them in practice. Religion is, like nature, God's creation; in both religion and nature, "His" will in the form of immutable laws are laid down on a personal level. And just as the laws of nature are permanent and consistent everywhere, even though their uses are only general and sometimes [p. 273] are quite harmful for particular individuals, so too are the eternal and immutable Torah laws, which are eternally valid at all times and under all circumstances, and are binding for everyone. This is because divine creation is the extreme perfection of its type, and in

what is perfect, alteration won't add any quality to it, but rather the opposite - it makes flaws (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapter 39; and *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 34).

Faith was indeed given by God to the prophet (Moses our Master, may he rest in peace) through divine abundance. However, after having been given, faith left the category of creation and fell under the category of "post-creation," just like the entire world, which one can investigate and whose basic laws one can understand with the strength of the intellect, but in such a way so as to not to be nullified through the strength of prophecy. There are exceptional cases in which the will of the Creator, which He imbued in the nature of existence at the moment of Creation, required that the prophet should be able to modify nature for a certain moment in order to give a proof of the authenticity of his prophecy (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 2, chapter 29; *Shemoneh Perakim*¹⁰⁶⁰). In that sense, the prophet can also nullify a divine commandment from the Torah temporarily, which constitutes a sort of special dispensation, or to modify that commandment according to the needs of the time and place. However, just as the prophet couldn't suppress or modify a law of nature on a permanent basis, so he doesn't have the potential to do it with respect to a divine commandment of the Torah.

And not only that: Even to make a choice between two opinions with regard to the interpretation of a law - where two interpretations interpret it - the prophet can't do that with the power of his prophecy, but rather, with the strength of his wisdom. (According to Maimonides, the prophet must also be a great sage; that is one of the conditions of prophecy.) For example: if one thousand prophets (all as great as Elijah and Elisha) stick to one opinion, and one thousand and one sages express another opinion, we invoke the principle, "going after the majority,"¹⁰⁶¹ which means that the intellect of the majority is greater than the prophecy of the minority, and the law remains the majority's. This is because the Torah isn't in Heaven now, and seeing it upon our earth, the sages possess the main power of interpretation through the power of their intellect, not the prophets with their prophecies (introduction to the Mishnaic order of *Zera'im*; and *Mishneh Torah*, *Yesodei ha-Torah* 9:10).

Maimonides himself presents the essence of his position in chapter 51 of part 3 of his *Guide to the Perplexed* - through the parable of the king who sits concealed in his palace, as our readers certainly remember from earlier chapters.

There are six levels to this, as follows:

1) The savages who completely don't believe. Those are compared to animals, with the difference that the savages could speak but the animals couldn't.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Literally in Hebrew, "Eight Chapters"; Maimonides' introduction to tractate *Avot*.

¹⁰⁶¹ cf. Exodus 23:2

- 2) People who believe but with incorrect opinions. This group is worse than the first one, since they can seduce others, and in the past it was entirely necessary [p. 274] to kill them and to annihilate their opinions, in order for them not to seduce others.
- 3) Those who want to do good but don't know how to. These consist of the common masses who practice the divine commandments.
- 4) People who indeed study but not with their intellect - rather, through oral tradition. Those who study mathematics and logic stand on the same level.
- 5) Those who already reason a bit and study physics.
- 6) Those who engage themselves in metaphysical problems and explain everything with their own intellect.

Maimonides defined his ethical teaching quite clearly - and with such nonchalance - in that classification, even though that should be a matter that is liable to completely unsettle Jewish hearts!

The contemporary thinker indeed revolts against the severe sentence concerning the second group "that harbours wrong opinions." However, knowing how at that time "wrong opinions" ranked as much more harmful than bad deeds among today's people. The zealotry of every faith persecuted people with wrong opinions in a worse way than thieves and murderers, and it is no wonder at all that philosophy also positioned itself with respect to "wrong opinions," in accordance with its way of expression, with the same severity.

However, none of the naïve rabbinic sages have been able to forgive him for his placing the position of those engaged in Torah study on a lower level in comparison with the level of those who are engaged in metaphysical problems, and yet more: the naïve rabbinic sage's position as a devout person is lower than that of one who studies physics. Those who know on how high a level those who were engaged in Torah study stood in the eyes of the Talmudic masters and the sages of medieval France, together with all the Jews throughout the diaspora of the exile, are able to imagine what kind of anger such a division brought upon the *Guide to the Perplexed* and its author.

It's therefore not at all a wonder that the commentators note that "many scholars decided that Maimonides didn't write that chapter. If so, it needs to be set aside, and it would be better yet to burn it."

The naïve defenders haven't at all considered that that chapter is only the gist of his position expressed in *Sefer ha-Mada*, the *Guide to the Perplexed*, *Shemoneh Perakim*, and the introduction to *Zera'im*. Those who were not naïve indeed sought to collect all the chapters.

(Note: In accordance with our explanation of chapter 51 of part 3 of the *Guide*, the clamour is really not so great. Aḥad Ha'am (1856-1927)¹⁰⁶² indeed didn't immerse himself in the study of the *Guide* as much as was called for, and he didn't review the commentaries. As well, he set the authority of the intellect too high. In many places, Maimonides toned down the difference between "above the intellect" and "before the intellect" - such as, for example, in chapter 10 of part 1 of the *Guide*, concerning the verse, "and God descended."¹⁰⁶³ However, here we're conveying Aḥad Ha'am's opinion the way he wrote it in his *Shilton ha-Sekhel*.¹⁰⁶⁴)

¹⁰⁶² Literally, "one of the people" (Genesis 26:10). This was the pen name of the essayist, journalist, and thinker Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsburg, a major Zionist figure.

¹⁰⁶³ e.g. Exodus 19:20 and 34:5

¹⁰⁶⁴ Literally in Hebrew, "Governance of the Intellect."

Chapter 15: Reasoning is the Fortress of Belief

[p. 275] The Supremacy of the Intellect¹⁰⁶⁵ poses the following question: Living in the twentieth century, do we have a concept of the spiritual revolution that that concept embodied for Maimonides' generation?

Everyone knows that the fundamental concept of medieval people was negative, with an almost hostile attitude towards human reasoning, and there was absolutely no trust in reasoning power to become one's sole guide in life. Reasoning was considered a dangerous "inciter and instigator" that leads people away from the straight path, and therefore, every honest person ought to run away from it.

Gentiles of that time sought answers to universal questions about the world and life precisely from that which was "beyond reasoning." The simpler and more reasonable the answer was, the more its truth was suspect. The well-known proverb of one of the Christian apostles, "I believe in it since the intellect wants to 'contradict' it," became the cornerstone of the way of thinking of Christians and Muslims alike.

Jewish scholars didn't relate to reasoning in such a hostile manner, but they didn't trust it too much either. Maimonides writes about that several times in his books and letters, and still more in his *Ma'amar Teḥiyat ha-Metim*.¹⁰⁶⁶ There were a number of sages of Israel even before Maimonides who brought concepts of reasoning taken from Arab philosophy into Jewish teachings. However, they only touched upon individual matters, while the fundamental principle remained as it was - the subservience of the intellect to the written word of the Torah.

The first and most important Jewish philosopher, Rabbi Sa'adiah Gaon (882 or 892-942), explains the relationship of reasoning to religion with the following parable: there was someone who owned a thousand coins, distributed smaller sums of them to several people, and now wanted to know how much remained for himself. The easiest way was to count the money that he had with him. Learning that he had 500, for example, is proof that he had distributed 500. However, there could also be someone who wished to discover the same thing "by way of counting," by adding up the sums distributed, and the total is subtracted from the principal (introduction to his *Emunot ve'Deot*¹⁰⁶⁷). The object of that parable is: tradition [p. 276] "counted what remained." This gives us the truth quickly and surely, while the intellect is the "calculation," which a person can make use of if he has the time and patience, and is certain to not make a mistake. It's obvious that that way of counting is certain. In case the total turns out to be otherwise, it may be that the counting isn't correct or the one doing the counting couldn't count.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Title of Aḥad Ha-am's essay on Maimonides.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Literally, "Statement of the Revival of the Dead." This is one part of Maimonides' Epistles, or *Igrot* in Hebrew.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Originally written in Judeo-Arabic, its title translates as "Beliefs and Opinions," and that book presents the dogmas of Judaism.

Thus, all the Jewish sages from Sa'adiah Gaon to Maimonides and afterward had a relationship to reasoning. That they made a valiant effort to make peace between religion and philosophy was only out of the need to restrain the enlightened ones within the bounds of Judaism. However, at its heart, the Torah was strong enough that one could rely on its truth even there, where it was against reasoning. Even Rabbi Judah Halevi (ca. 1075-1141), with his profound knowledge of the philosophy of his era, categorically explains that whoever maintains the Torah on account of faith, not worrying about reasoning, is more important than the enlightened one (*Kuzari*¹⁰⁶⁸ 2:26). Maimonides, however, completely laughs at that type of philosophy. "They," he says, "don't accept as truth what the intellect demonstrates, but rather religious truths, needing the intellect to agree with it" (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 1, chapter 71).

Knowing that, a person could ask: What led Maimonides to become such an extreme supporter of reasoning in such an era and in such an environment? Here's the answer: "Because he was a proponent of Aristotle, a sensible person like him couldn't remain standing in the middle of the way." That, however, is not enough, knowing that many Aristotelians among the non-Jewish philosophers didn't go so deep and far as to make reasoning their main ruler over life and religion. Maimonides' great admiration of our Torah and Talmud, in which reasoning doesn't get the real place of honour, in no way required him to have such admiration for reasoning, but rather the opposite. It must be said that his inclination towards logic itself moved him from the opposite of reasoning; however, together with a second reason, a movement within him prevailed to make him support reasoning to the last extreme.

Aḥad Ha'am (1856-1927)¹⁰⁶⁹ locates that driving force in the political situation of the Jews of that era.

As is known, the Muslims of Maimonides' generation became strongly intolerant of people who weren't of their faith, and in many countries where they were in power, they would force non-Muslims to convert. Many Jews in Moorish Spain and Morocco had to convert to avoid being exiled, and they observed Jewish practices in secret. These were the *anusim*;¹⁰⁷⁰ the decree affected Maimonides' father, Maimon, along with his entire family. Maimonides, from 13 to 30 years old, had to live in raw fear, in case his family's Jewish practices would be discovered, until finally - when [p. 277] it was finally impossible to hide they emigrated from the countries of those forced conversions. They then moved to the Land of Israel, where the father died, and Maimonides - along with his brother - settled in Egypt.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Written by Judah Halevi, the *Kuzari* translates literally as "The Khazar." Originally written in Arabic, it is known in full as the *Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion*.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Literally, "one of the people" (Genesis 26:10). This was the pen name of the essayist, journalist, and thinker Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsburg, a major Zionist figure.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Literally, "the coerced ones" or "the forced ones." These people were also called the *conversos* or the *marranos*.

Thus, all those years living under a mask made a terrible impression upon Maimonides. Such a pure heart, full of truth, wasn't able to tolerate an environment that was full of falsehood and religious depravity. Pure Judaism had to hide in absolute secrecy, and a Jew needed to appear with a Muslim mask on his face. Why? Because a certain Arab [Muhammad] ordered them to call him a "prophet." He demonstrated wonders, according to a fool's testimony and proofs, and on the strength of those proofs, he imposed nonsense on everyone to have to believe in them as the new truth, even though they were against common sense.

It's therefore no wonder that blind faith, along with the strength of Muhammad's supernatural miracles that oppressed his Jewish brothers and himself along with his father's house, brought confusion into Jewish minds. Many of them began to waver and asked: why indeed not believe in Muhammad's prophecy just as until now we've believed in Moses' prophecy? If the latter demonstrated wonders, it may well be that the former demonstrated similar wonders. And if miracles are the only unambiguous proofs, why say that Islam is false and the Torah is true?

Maimonides talks precisely about the spiritual situation of the Jews in his generation in the essays *Ma'amar Kiddush Hashem*¹⁰⁷¹ and *Igeret Teman*.¹⁰⁷²

In order to demonstrate the difference between true and false prophecy, Maimonides put faith under the control of reasoning, proving that the Torah of Moses was given hand in hand with reasoning, and as a result, every new prophet who came only with wonders alone is a false prophet, since "the intellect is more trustworthy than the eye." It follows that the Jewish religion is surely against all kinds of prophets such as Muhammad and his ilk. With that, Maimonides clarified the brief language of his introduction to the commentary on Mishnah that deals with the issue of the false prophet. There he wrote not only theoretically but also with his heart's blood, immersed in his own and his people's suffering.

Now it's easy to understand Maimonides' avoidance of mentioning the Jewish thinkers from before his era, for which many present-day scholars blame him. This is because those up to him made use of the same arguments as the Arab thinkers - the *Medabrim*.¹⁰⁷³ Obviously, that even further equated both faiths against Maimonides' intention to attribute reasoning only to the Torah of Moses, not to any other religion. For the sake of that intention, he bitterly fought the *Medabrim* and ignored the Jewish sages, their followers.

[p. 278] It's possible that he observed the sort of pain that the *anusim* suffered in being forced to transgress certain divine commandments, on account of which they despaired, thinking that this would lead - in any case - to their being candidates for the fires of Gehenna (see *Ma'amar Kiddush Hashem*). This led him, perhaps unconsciously, to decide that the greatest perfection lies neither

¹⁰⁷¹ Essay on the Sanctification of God's Name (with reference chiefly to martyrdom)

¹⁰⁷² Epistle to Yemen

¹⁰⁷³ Muslim *Qalam* theologians; in Hebrew, that term literally means "those who speak."

in good character traits nor in good deeds, but rather in opinions alone, even when one is forced to transgress divine commandments in practice (*Guide to the Perplexed*, part 3, chapter 26).

Coming to this truth, it seems to us that Maimonides' spiritual persona grew into its full splendour. The stone-cold mask that he put on in writing the *Guide to the Perplexed* disappears, and we see his broad heart, full of respect for the Torah and the Talmud, which he gave of his nights and days to systematize and popularize. We see his great love for his people that suffered from persecution, and this was accompanied by sympathy towards the *anusim* who suffered from transgressing certain divine commandments.

In summary: Maimonides, like all the other sages of Israel before and after him, strove with his enormous labour to make the Jewish faith into a fortress, inside which Jews would discover true protection for the entire duration of the exile. This is the only difference - whereas others discovered certainty in "beyond reasoning," Maimonides came and said: "No, the certainty is that Judaism is the same as reasoning."

His attempt to establish the entire basis of Judaism on dry reasoning wasn't successful. Whatever large goal he set for himself in that area, experience shows that cold logic alone isn't enough to keep all the suffering Jews within the limits of Judaism, except when they are aided by national and religious feelings.

The proof for that comes from reason itself: reason rises to the great heights, where the border between languages and peoples cease, and where the divine commandments and good character traits cease. However, it remains pure logic, built upon intellectual foundations. Maimonides includes the revival of the dead in the thirteen principles entirely without any explanation pertaining to reasoning. What moved Maimonides to accept the legal ruling of the Talmud in the literal sense of the word? Certainly not any *Shilton ha-Sekhel*,¹⁰⁷⁴ but rather, the ardent feeling with which Maimonides was invested. That same Maimonides stated (in his commentary on Mishnah *Avot* 1:17) that everything follows the content, no matter which language one expresses himself in. A good matter remains as such, even when expressed in a foreign language, and a bad matter doesn't become better when expressed in the "holy tongue". This is indeed what common sense states. And thus, we find - in Maimonides' letters to Mar Joseph Ibn Jabir,¹⁰⁷⁵ to the community in Lunel, and to Rabbi Samuel Ibn Tibbon (ca. 1150-ca. 1230) - a strong regret for writing his books (except [p. 279] *Mishneh Torah*) in Arabic and a willingness to translate those into Hebrew. Here, national sensitivities once again prevail over reasoning.

The *Guide to the Perplexed* and *Sefer ha-Mada* are products of the intellect. Their influence was great upon all who escaped from the old house of study to seek out new paths. For such people, Maimonides was the first and strongest guide. Great thinkers - Jewish and non-Jewish alike - went

¹⁰⁷⁴ Literally in Hebrew, "Governance of the Intellect," a reference to the Aḥad Ha-am essay on Maimonides.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Lifespan unknown; he lived in Baghdad at the time of Maimonides.

through that path; we're not only talking about Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) and Solomon Maimon (1753-1800), but also Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677).

However, the *Mishneh Torah* is nourished above all from the emotions; therefore, it has remained a resident in our houses of study to this day.

Both of these together place Maimonides upon the highest pedestal, where he will remain for as long as the heavens spread over the Earth.

THE END