

A  
Guide  
to the  
Guide

קיצור ספר מורה נבוכים להרמב"ם

# A Guide to the Guide

featuring a short synopsis and  
a chapter-by-chapter summary of  
Maimonides' classic masterpiece

**A Guide for the Perplexed**

with explanatory notes  
for contemporary times by

**Yosef Chaim Elazar Kohn**

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# Contents



<b>Prologue .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>A Brief Synopsis .....</b>	<b>29</b>

## Part I

Introduction: <b>Purpose and Method .....</b>	<b>41</b>
Chapter 1: <b>Image and Likeness.....</b>	<b>47</b>
Chapter 2: <b>Scales of Judgment.....</b>	<b>49</b>
Chapter 3: <b>Shape and Outline.....</b>	<b>52</b>
Chapter 4: <b>Sight and Perception.....</b>	<b>52</b>
Chapter 5: <b>Perceptions of God .....</b>	<b>53</b>
Chapter 6: <b>Male and Female .....</b>	<b>55</b>
Chapter 7: <b>Giving Birth .....</b>	<b>56</b>
Chapter 8: <b>Place and Position.....</b>	<b>58</b>
Chapter 9: <b>The Divine Throne .....</b>	<b>58</b>
Chapter 10: <b>Ascent and Descent.....</b>	<b>59</b>
Chapter 11: <b>The Sitting Position.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Chapter 12: <b>The Act of Rising.....</b>	<b>61</b>
Chapter 13: <b>The Standing Position.....</b>	<b>61</b>
Chapter 14: <b>The Meaning of Adam .....</b>	<b>62</b>
Chapter 15: <b>Taking a Position .....</b>	<b>62</b>
Chapter 16: <b>The Divine Quarry.....</b>	<b>63</b>
Chapter 17: <b>The Creation Account.....</b>	<b>64</b>
Chapter 18: <b>Approach and Touch.....</b>	<b>64</b>
Chapter 19: <b>The Fullest Extent .....</b>	<b>66</b>
Chapter 20: <b>High and Elevated.....</b>	<b>66</b>
Chapter 21: <b>Divine Passage .....</b>	<b>67</b>

Chapter 22:	<b>Arrival and Entry</b> .....	70
Chapter 23:	<b>Departure and Withdrawal</b> .....	70
Chapter 24:	<b>Divine Walking</b> .....	71
Chapter 25:	<b>A Place of Dwelling</b> .....	72
Chapter 26:	<b>Plain Language</b> .....	72
Chapter 27:	<b>Translations and Paraphrases</b> .....	73
Chapter 28:	<b>Divine Feet</b> .....	75
Chapter 29:	<b>Anger and Provocation</b> .....	76
Chapter 30:	<b>Destruction and Growth</b> .....	77
Chapter 31:	<b>The Gates of Perception</b> .....	78
Chapter 32:	<b>Intellectual Health</b> .....	79
Chapter 33:	<b>Preparation for Metaphysics</b> .....	81
Chapter 34:	<b>Five Reasons</b> .....	82
Chapter 35:	<b>Popular Metaphysics</b> .....	87
Chapter 36:	<b>Corporeality and Idolatry</b> .....	89
Chapter 37:	<b>Divine Faces</b> .....	91
Chapter 38:	<b>Following Behind</b> .....	93
Chapter 39:	<b>The Divine Heart</b> .....	93
Chapter 40:	<b>The Divine Spirit</b> .....	94
Chapter 41:	<b>Divine Will</b> .....	95
Chapter 42:	<b>Life and Death</b> .....	96
Chapter 43:	<b>Wings of Concealment</b> .....	97
Chapter 44:	<b>Providence and Perception</b> .....	98
Chapter 45:	<b>Hearing and Knowing</b> .....	98
Chapter 46:	<b>Figurative Senses</b> .....	99
Chapter 47:	<b>Imaginable Metaphors</b> .....	103
Chapter 48:	<b>Observation of Injustice</b> .....	104
Chapter 49:	<b>Metaphors for Angels</b> .....	105
Chapter 50:	<b>True Belief</b> .....	108
Chapter 51:	<b>Unity and Attributes</b> .....	109
Chapter 52:	<b>Five Categories of Attributes</b> .....	110
Chapter 53:	<b>Essence and Attributes</b> .....	114
Chapter 54:	<b>Acts and Attributes</b> .....	116
Chapter 55:	<b>Four Proscribed Elements</b> .....	119
Chapter 56:	<b>The Absence of Similarity</b> .....	119
Chapter 57:	<b>The Absence of Attributes</b> .....	120
Chapter 58:	<b>Negative Attributes</b> .....	122
Chapter 59:	<b>Inappropriate Praises</b> .....	123
Chapter 60:	<b>Closeness to God</b> .....	127
Chapter 61:	<b>The Tetragrammaton</b> .....	130
Chapter 62:	<b>Four, Twelve, Forty-two</b> .....	132
Chapter 63:	<b>Three More Names</b> .....	133

Chapter 64:	<b>The Glory of God</b> .....	136
Chapter 65:	<b>Divine Speech</b> .....	137
Chapter 66:	<b>The Divine Finger</b> .....	139
Chapter 67:	<b>Divine Rest</b> .....	140
Chapter 68:	<b>Knowledge, Knower, Known</b> .....	141
Chapter 69:	<b>Cause and Maker</b> .....	143
Chapter 70:	<b>The Divine Rider</b> .....	146
Chapter 71:	<b>The Mutakallemim</b> .....	147
Chapter 72:	<b>The Universal Organism</b> .....	151
Chapter 73:	<b>Propositions of the Kalam</b> .....	152
Chapter 74:	<b>The Kalam on Creation</b> .....	162
Chapter 75:	<b>The Kalam on Unity</b> .....	165
Chapter 76:	<b>The Kalam on Incorporeality</b> .....	167

## Part II

Introduction:	<b>Aristotle's Propositions</b> .....	173
Chapter 1:	<b>Philosophical Arguments</b> .....	177
Chapter 2:	<b>Points in Agreement</b> .....	181
Chapter 3:	<b>Unproved Theories</b> .....	181
Chapter 4:	<b>Ancient Astronomy</b> .....	182
Chapter 5:	<b>Literal or Metaphor</b> .....	182
Chapter 6:	<b>Diverse Angels</b> .....	183
Chapter 7:	<b>Angelic Free Will</b> .....	187
Chapter 8:	<b>Celestial Sounds</b> .....	188
Chapter 9:	<b>Celestial Positions</b> .....	188
Chapter 10:	<b>Celestial Forces</b> .....	188
Chapter 11:	<b>Astronomical Hypotheses</b> .....	189
Chapter 12:	<b>Incorporeal Causes</b> .....	190
Chapter 13:	<b>Origin Theories</b> .....	192
Chapter 14:	<b>Philosophical Proofs</b> .....	195
Chapter 15:	<b>Aristotle's Doubts</b> .....	197
Chapter 16:	<b>Prophetic Authority</b> .....	199
Chapter 17:	<b>Erroneous Deductions</b> .....	199
Chapter 18:	<b>Three Flawed Proofs</b> .....	201
Chapter 19:	<b>Necessity or Design</b> .....	203
Chapter 20:	<b>Refutation of Chance</b> .....	204
Chapter 21:	<b>Eternal Design</b> .....	205
Chapter 22:	<b>Four Axioms</b> .....	206
Chapter 23:	<b>Objective Evaluation</b> .....	207
Chapter 24:	<b>The Unknowable Heavens</b> .....	208

Chapter 25:	<b>The Need for Allegory.....</b>	<b>209</b>
Chapter 26:	<b>Primordial Substances.....</b>	<b>210</b>
Chapter 27:	<b>Eternity and Durability .....</b>	<b>211</b>
Chapter 28:	<b>The Permanent Universe .....</b>	<b>212</b>
Chapter 29:	<b>Oratorical Styles.....</b>	<b>213</b>
Chapter 30:	<b>The Creation Account.....</b>	<b>216</b>
Chapter 31:	<b>Sabbath Observance .....</b>	<b>222</b>
Chapter 32:	<b>The Torah View of Prophecy .....</b>	<b>222</b>
Chapter 33:	<b>Prophecy at Sinai .....</b>	<b>225</b>
Chapter 34:	<b>Angels and Prophets .....</b>	<b>229</b>
Chapter 35:	<b>The Prophecy of Moses .....</b>	<b>230</b>
Chapter 36:	<b>Qualifications for Prophecy .....</b>	<b>232</b>
Chapter 37:	<b>The Prophecy Impulse .....</b>	<b>238</b>
Chapter 38:	<b>The Essence of Prophecy.....</b>	<b>240</b>
Chapter 39:	<b>Prophecy and Divine Law.....</b>	<b>243</b>
Chapter 40:	<b>False Claims of Prophecy .....</b>	<b>245</b>
Chapter 41:	<b>Prophetic Visions.....</b>	<b>249</b>
Chapter 42:	<b>Prophecies and Echoes .....</b>	<b>251</b>
Chapter 43:	<b>Interpretations of Prophecy .....</b>	<b>254</b>
Chapter 44:	<b>Prophetic Voices.....</b>	<b>255</b>
Chapter 45:	<b>Eleven Levels of Prophecy .....</b>	<b>256</b>
Chapter 46:	<b>Elaborate Prophecies .....</b>	<b>264</b>
Chapter 47:	<b>Prophetic Hyperbole.....</b>	<b>267</b>
Chapter 48:	<b>Causation in Prophecy .....</b>	<b>269</b>

## Part III

Introduction:	<b>The Dilemma of Esoterica .....</b>	<b>275</b>
Chapter 1:	<b>The Four Faces.....</b>	<b>276</b>
Chapter 2:	<b>The Divine Chariot .....</b>	<b>277</b>
Chapter 3:	<b>The Second Vision.....</b>	<b>279</b>
Chapter 4:	<b>The Ofanim .....</b>	<b>280</b>
Chapter 5:	<b>Teaching the Esoteric.....</b>	<b>280</b>
Chapter 6:	<b>Isaiah and Ezekiel .....</b>	<b>281</b>
Chapter 7:	<b>Significant Indications .....</b>	<b>282</b>
Chapter 8:	<b>Form and Substance .....</b>	<b>284</b>
Chapter 9:	<b>A Curtain of Darkness.....</b>	<b>287</b>
Chapter 10:	<b>Good and Evil .....</b>	<b>288</b>
Chapter 11:	<b>The Absence of Wisdom .....</b>	<b>290</b>
Chapter 12:	<b>Causes of Misfortune .....</b>	<b>291</b>
Chapter 13:	<b>The Purpose of Creation.....</b>	<b>295</b>

Chapter 14:	<b>An Infinitesimal Speck .....</b>	<b>299</b>
Chapter 15:	<b>Possible and Impossible.....</b>	<b>300</b>
Chapter 16:	<b>Aware or Unaware.....</b>	<b>301</b>
Chapter 17:	<b>Free Will and Providence .....</b>	<b>303</b>
Chapter 18:	<b>Proportional Providence .....</b>	<b>308</b>
Chapter 19:	<b>Ancient Ignorance .....</b>	<b>309</b>
Chapter 20:	<b>Divine Knowledge .....</b>	<b>311</b>
Chapter 21:	<b>The Creative Knowledge.....</b>	<b>313</b>
Chapter 22:	<b>The Book of Job.....</b>	<b>314</b>
Chapter 23:	<b>Perspectives on Misfortune .....</b>	<b>317</b>
Chapter 24:	<b>The Purpose of Trials.....</b>	<b>318</b>
Chapter 25:	<b>Purposeful Actions .....</b>	<b>321</b>
Chapter 26:	<b>Purposeful Commandments.....</b>	<b>323</b>
Chapter 27:	<b>Spiritual and Physical Perfection .....</b>	<b>325</b>
Chapter 28:	<b>Obscure Purposes .....</b>	<b>326</b>
Chapter 29:	<b>The Sabeian Chronicles .....</b>	<b>327</b>
Chapter 30:	<b>Star Worship.....</b>	<b>329</b>
Chapter 31:	<b>Three Kinds of Benefit .....</b>	<b>330</b>
Chapter 32:	<b>The Sacrificial Service.....</b>	<b>331</b>
Chapter 33:	<b>Inner Purity.....</b>	<b>337</b>
Chapter 34:	<b>General Rules .....</b>	<b>338</b>
Chapter 35:	<b>Commandment Categories .....</b>	<b>339</b>
Chapter 36:	<b>The First Category: Beliefs .....</b>	<b>342</b>
Chapter 37:	<b>The Second Category: Idolatry.....</b>	<b>343</b>
Chapter 38:	<b>The Third Category: Morality .....</b>	<b>347</b>
Chapter 39:	<b>The Fourth Category: Compassion....</b>	<b>347</b>
Chapter 40:	<b>The Fifth Category: Damages.....</b>	<b>350</b>
Chapter 41:	<b>The Sixth Category: Punishment .....</b>	<b>353</b>
Chapter 42:	<b>The Seventh Category: Civil Law .....</b>	<b>362</b>
Chapter 43:	<b>The Eighth Category: Calendar Events</b>	<b>364</b>
Chapter 44:	<b>The Ninth Category: Devotion.....</b>	<b>368</b>
Chapter 45:	<b>The Tenth Category: Holy Temple .....</b>	<b>368</b>
Chapter 46:	<b>The Eleventh Category: Divine Service</b>	<b>374</b>
Chapter 47:	<b>The Twelfth Category: Purity .....</b>	<b>385</b>
Chapter 48:	<b>The Thirteenth Category: Nutrition ...</b>	<b>390</b>
Chapter 49:	<b>The Fourteenth Category: Gender .....</b>	<b>393</b>
Chapter 50:	<b>Genealogies and Narratives.....</b>	<b>400</b>
Chapter 51:	<b>A Pathway to Worship .....</b>	<b>404</b>
Chapter 52:	<b>Fear and Love .....</b>	<b>410</b>
Chapter 53:	<b>Kindness, Righteousness, Judgment...</b>	<b>411</b>
Chapter 54:	<b>True Wisdom .....</b>	<b>412</b>



# Prologue



**M**ore so than any other man, Moses Maimonides towers over the last two thousand years of Jewish history and Jewish thought, which are essentially one and the same. His brilliant Talmudic works represent the culmination of the previous thousand years of Torah scholarship and the foundation of Torah scholarship in the modern era. His pioneering philosophical works sparked furious controversies, but his works have stood the test of time. They have become staples of Jewish learning. They have even impacted Christian and Muslim thought.

According to the epitaph on Maimonides' tombstone in Tiberias, Israel, "From Moses until Moses, there has been no one like Moses." It is unknown who composed this epitaph, but the sentiment it expresses is telling; no one has ever considered it laughable. And yet, during the vast expanse of Jewish history from Moses the Lawgiver in the second millennium before the common era until the appearance of Moses Maimonides in the second millennium of the common era, numerous titans have crossed this stage. Did Maimonides outshine them all? Was he greater than King David, King Solomon, Elijah the Prophet, Ezra the Scribe, Hillel the Elder, Rabbi Akiva?

In order to answer these questions, we must consider the singular nature of Jewish history during the two thousand years of the Diaspora. Nations that occupy homelands define their history by the political, cultural and social winds that affect them. The Hellenic Period, the Hellenistic Period, the Roman Empire, the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, the Napoleonic Era, the Industrial Revolution and so forth. All these define political, cultural and social changes in civilization. Even the Intellectual Revolution and the Scientific Revolution only appear on this list because of their effects on the conduct of

society, not for their own sake. Jewish history in the Diaspora, on the other hand, uses different historical markers.

Originally, Jewish history was also delineated by political changes. The Generation of the Wilderness. The Period of the Judges. The Period of the Kings. The First Temple Era. The Babylonian Captivity. The Second Temple Era. Once the Second Temple was destroyed, however, and the Jewish people were driven into exile, the Jewish nation was no longer organized around a homeland and a political structure. From that point on, until the twentieth century, the progress of Jewish history was measured by the progress and development of Torah scholarship. From that point on, the markers of Jewish history were intellectual.

The Tannaitic Period in the beginning of the first millennium of the common era, and somewhat before, produced the Mishnah and the Midrash. The Amoraic Period that followed produced the Talmud. The Geonic Period edited the Talmud and augmented it with responsa to the far reaches of the Diaspora. The Period of the Rishonim produced voluminous commentaries on the Talmud as well as responsa. The Early Acharonim established authoritative applications of the Talmud and codified them into a formal legal system. The Later Acharonim analyzed and commented on all the scholarship that preceded them. In our times, the Period of the Acharonim still lingers to a limited extent but is rapidly being replaced by a new era of consolidation of the previous scholarship. Torah scholarship was and is the lifeblood of the Jewish people, not only because of the religious instruction it provides but even more so because it is the medium by which humans encounter the mind of God.

Maimonides lived and wrote during the early part of the Period of the Rishonim in the beginning of the second millennium. He was the foremost figure of his generation in scholarship and brilliance. He also distinguished himself by radical divergences that sparked one controversy after another. The body of his work left a deep and lasting impact on Torah scholarship that is practically unrivalled in Jewish history.

His *Commentary on the Mishnah* opened its locked mysteries to the multitudes. His pioneering *Mishneh Torah*,

the first formal and comprehensive code of Jewish law, laid the foundation, in form and content, for the legal codes produced during the Period of the Acharonim. And his *Guide for the Perplexed* created a fusion of Jewish and Greek philosophical thought that caused an enormous firestorm of protest and opposition. None of the great prophets, poets, sages and writers of Jewish history could claim to have made such a profound and lasting effect on the contours of Torah scholarship. From Moses until Moses, there was none other like Moses.

### **The Life and Times of Maimonides**

**S**pain in the twelfth century was a country in turmoil. As part of the Roman Empire, Spain had accepted Christianity nearly a thousand years earlier when Constantine the Great established it as the official religion of the Empire. Christianity continued to be Spain's official religion after it was conquered by the Visigoths during the fall of the Empire.

The birth of Islam in the seventh century presented the greatest threat to Spanish Christianity. Under the vast Umayyad Caliphate, Islam conquered all of the Middle East and North Africa and turned toward Spain. In 711, a large force of Moors crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, and the titanic struggle for Spain ensued.

At first, the Muslim invaders swept across the country and conquered all of it except for the small state of Asturias in the Pyrenees Mountains. They also crossed into France, where they were driven back by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732. That marked the furthest extent of the Umayyad conquest in Europe. The Christian armies regrouped in Asturias, and the long Reconquista began.

For eight centuries, the map of Spain was a kaleidoscopic patchwork of Christian and Muslim kingdoms continually redefined by the ebb and flow of war; cities changed hands frequently as one side or the other gained the upper hand. Finally, in 1492, the Christians captured the kingdom of Granada, the last Muslim foothold in Spain, and the Reconquista was complete.

Although much of Spain was Muslim for eight centuries, it was not always in the hands of the Umayyad Caliphate. In the eleventh century, as the Christian forces of Castile and Aragon were driving back the Arabian forces of the Umayyads, a new Islamic power, the Almoravids, entered the fray. The Almoravid Caliphate was a Berber empire that had wrested the Maghreb of northwest Africa from the Umayyads. Its capital was in Marrakesh, Morocco.

In 1086, the Almoravids crossed into Spain, replaced the Umayyads and defeated the Christians at the Battle of Sagrajas. The Almoravid Caliphate did not last very long, however. In 1147, it was toppled and replaced by the Almohad Caliphate. Jewish life in Spain had flourished under the tolerant Arabian Caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty, but their Berbers successors were harsh and intolerant, the Almohads much worse than the Almoravids.

Moses Maimonides was born in Cordova in 1135, when Spain was going through the convulsions of clashing caliphates. His father, Rabbi Maimon, was one of Cordova's rabbinical leaders. At the time of Moses' birth, the city was under Almoravid rule. In 1148, when Moses was thirteen years old, the Almohads seized the city and imposed a policy of forced conversion.

Some Jewish families chose to give lip service to Islam by signing declarations acknowledging its truth, after which the authorities did not interfere with their private practice of Judaism. Rabbi Maimon, however, refused to go this route. He uprooted his family and left Cordova.

For the next fifteen years, the family was in continuous flight, moving from one city to another in search of security and religious freedom. Eventually, they moved to Fez in Morocco and finally arrived in Egypt in 1166. They settled in Fostat, a suburb of Cairo, where Maimonides completed his *Commentary*.

He writes in the Introduction, "Heaven ordained that we be exiled and driven from place to place. I was compelled to work on the *Commentary* while traveling by land or crossing the sea ... I started it when I was twenty-three years old and finished it in Egypt at the age of thirty-three in the year 1168."

The *Commentary* was written in Arabic so that it would be accessible to ordinary people who wanted to study the Mishnah. After it was translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon, one of the disciples of Maimonides, its popularity spread to the Jewish communities of Europe as well.

In Egypt, Maimonides continued to work on his writings and involved himself in community issues. He also studied medicine and philosophy, studies he had already begun in Spain and Morocco. For many years, he was supported by his brother David, a wealthy merchant. In 1178, after David went down at sea with one of his vessels, Maimonides began to earn his living as a physician. He distinguished himself in his practice, and in 1191, he was appointed official physician to al-Fadil, vizier to Saladin, king of Egypt.

### The First Controversy

Maimonides' next major project after the popular *Commentary* was *Mishneh Torah*, the first formal codification of Talmudic law. The Talmud is the explication of the terse and often cryptic verses of the Torah. For instance, where the Torah forbids the performance of labor on the Sabbath without going into detail as to what defines labor, the Talmud devotes more than an entire tractate to the subject. Altogether, there are sixty-three tractates in the Talmud, which comprise more than twenty massive tomes in the modern editions. In its totality, it is the ancient repository of Jewish law, custom, ethics, theology and living wisdom.

Furthermore, the Talmud is not a code of law presented in the organized form to which the modern world is accustomed. Rather, it is a transcript of wide-ranging and boisterous debates among hundreds of ancient sages over a period of many centuries, full of interesting twists and turns and numerous tangents. A topic may be discussed in one tractate and then arise again in a different tractate in a different context.

Rabbis, therefore, did not have a reference work of legal conclusions they could consult, other than some rabbinical responsa. They had to delve into the Talmud and try to determine on their own which opinions were more

authoritative than others. Moreover, they had to know where to look, because the relevant material was not necessarily where it was expected to be found. Although Talmudic scholarship was and is an exhilarating intellectual adventure, applying it to judicial practice required broad knowledge and a high degree of expertise in the Talmud. Not many rabbis were capable of doing this work on their own.

In *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides compiled a code of law that addressed not only the three orders of the Talmud applicable to life in the diaspora, but also the three orders applicable only to Messianic times. He ruled on everything, religious law, civil law, family law, temple service, agricultural law, ritual purity. Nothing escaped his attention.

*Mishneh Torah*, written in beautiful Hebrew with meticulous organization and great clarity, presented rabbis with a phenomenal tool for the resolution of questions of Jewish law. This in itself was a historic accomplishment, something that had never before been done in Jewish history. But there is also another dimension to *Mishneh Torah*, a dimension of enormous value to scholars seeking to unravel the intricacies of the Talmud and solve the ubiquitous anomalies that emerge from close analytical study.

Talmudic scholars are aware that there are no superfluous words in *Mishneh Torah*. If there is a seemingly unnecessary word or phrase, it is significant. If there is a linguistic difference between one ruling and a ruling on a similar situation, it is significant. If a set of laws is presented in a particular order, it is significant. If it appears that a law is presented before the foundation is laid in a future chapter, it is significant. If a ruling seems inconsistent with a different ruling, based on connections established in the Talmud, it is significant. If the Author omits a law or a detail of a law, ruling neither one way nor the other, it is significant.

The summit point of modern Talmudic scholarship is to discover Maimonides' understanding of the relevant Talmudic passages, which often differs radically with the understanding of the other Rishonim. The discovery of Maimonides' original interpretations of the Talmud almost invariably resolves all

the anomalies in one fell swoop and reveals the extreme precision of his presentation.

This additional dimension elevates *Mishneh Torah* to a work of even rarer genius. On the one hand, it serves as the first formal codification of Talmudic law. At the same time, by virtue of the nuances of the presentation, it also serves as one of the major commentaries on the relevant Talmudic dialogue.

The only other Rishon who produced a multi-tiered work of such genius was Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, known to history as Rashi, who wrote a commentary that appears alongside practically every page of the Talmud. Rashi's commentary is so deceptively simple that all beginners in Talmud study use it in their introductory classes. At the same time, by the insertion of merely a few words or a turn of phrase, Rashi signals an original and highly sophisticated approach to the text that often differs radically from the approaches of other Rishonim. The clarification and explanation of Rashi's views also rank high among the goals of modern Talmudic scholars.

Paradoxically, the two leading commentators on the Talmudic text present their views between the lines, Maimonides between the lines of his code of law and Rashi between the lines of his gloss for beginners.

The publication of *Mishneh Torah* met with rabbinic opposition to the scope and concept of the entire work and also to the philosophical parts in the first volume, foreshadowing the controversy over *A Guide for the Perplexed* years later.

Torah study was, and still is, the mainstay of Jewish life, not only as a means to discover what to do in all situations, but even more for its own sake. Torah study, and Talmud study in particular, is an absorbing, endlessly fascinating intellectual and religious experience. More than anything else, it is the foundation of Jewish identity.<sup>1</sup> The rabbis feared

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1. In our times, the study of the Talmud is at an all-time high. Jewish people in all walks of life devote serious time to Talmud study. The last century saw the appearance of the Daf Yomi program, by which individuals undertake to study one folio of the Talmud every single day without exception. A folio of the Talmud requires hours of study just to understand it on a rudimentary level. There are over two thousand folios in the Talmud. Those who participate in the program complete the Talmud every seven and a half years.

that if *Mishneh Torah* obviated the need to go to the Talmud for practical rulings, the study of the Talmud for its own sake would suffer and decline.

Furthermore, some rabbis felt that it was presumptuous of Maimonides to present himself as the decisor on all questions of Jewish law when many other rabbis might have differing opinions; whereas Maimonides chose to accept the view of one Talmudic sage, other rabbis might very well favor the opinions another.

These rabbis also took issue with the omission of all source citations in *Mishneh Torah*, which they considered especially egregious. Maimonides had omitted his sources for the sake of brevity and ease, but they contended that the omission effectively prevented disagreement by those rabbis whose knowledge of the Talmud was not exceedingly great. Had they known the sources upon which Maimonides based his ruling, they could have studied them closely and perhaps have come to different conclusions.

Finally, some rabbis felt that *Mishneh Torah* threatened their rabbinical positions and livelihoods, because their assistance was no longer as necessary as it had been. People could now find many answers for themselves without consulting rabbis.

In the end, the fears of the rabbis were not realized. On the contrary, *Mishneh Torah* led to a sharp increase in Talmud scholarship. Numerous commentaries were written to identify the sources from which the rulings were drawn. Often there was great disagreement on these points, which led to heated discussion and more commentaries and commentaries on the commentaries. A large and ever-growing body of literature dedicated to analysis of *Mishneh Torah* emerged over the centuries and has become one of the leading fields of Talmudic study.

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Hundreds of thousands of people participate in the program, and the Siyum, the completion ceremony is celebrated in stadiums and arenas all over the world.



## A Guide for the Perplexed

When Maimonides was in his mid-fifties, he wrote A *Guide for the Perplexed*, the book that gained him the highest measure of international fame. It is a singularly Jewish book, yet it borrows heavily from Aristotelian philosophy and addresses questions of universal interest.

Many young people of his time were being drawn to the rigorously rational Aristotelian philosophy, and they began questioning their own Jewish traditions and beliefs; they were perplexed. Maimonides wrote the *Guide* to demonstrate that faith and reason are perfectly compatible, that the basic principles of the Jewish faith are supremely rational. Throughout the book, he establishes and defends the four cardinal principles of divinity, the existence of God, His absolute unity, His incorporeality and the creation of the universe. These are the pillars on which Judaism rests.

In the first part of the book, Maimonides explains that all anthropomorphic references to God in the Torah, such as His eyes, His hands and so forth, are not meant to be taken literally, since God is incorporeal. The Author then goes on to explain the specific significance of each anthropomorphic term.

Regarding the origin of the universe, there are only two possibilities. Either it always existed, or it was created *ex nihilo*, something from nothing. Both of these options are problematic. The idea of creation from nothing is incomprehensible to the human mind.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the idea of the universe having always existed is equally incomprehensible. How could it exist without a cause? Why is it there?<sup>3</sup> Maimonides defends the theory of creation, and this forms one of the major themes of the book.

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2. If we can prove that the world is not eternal, there must be a Creator who is not material and not bound by time and space. We are still faced with the question of how something can be created from nothing. To say that God is God and therefore capable of anything is somehow inadequate.

3. If we assume an eternal world, we are saying that the existence of the universe extends into the infinite past. Infinity, however, is not a huge number. When we say that the number 1 divided by zero is infinity, we do not mean that the number 1 is jam-packed with zeroes. It means that there is no limit to the number of zeroes that can be added to zero without ever reaching the

He also devotes a great deal of attention to the ideas of the Kalam, the school of Muslim philosophers, refuting their views. In particular, he takes issue with the views of the Kalam on divine attributes, which he considers antithetical to the concept of divine unity. According to Maimonides, God has no attributes, only a singular, unified essence from which emanate His power, His wisdom, His will and anything else that might appear as a separate attribute.

The concepts of prophecy and angels also come under intense scrutiny. Maimonides agrees with Aristotle that the exercise of the intellect is the ultimate purpose of existence and that when it is sufficiently refined and developed it inevitably leads to prophecy.

According to Maimonides, any instrument of God's will is considered an angel. On a higher level, angels are beings of pure intellect that cannot be seen. They project images into the human mind that lead to the perception of imaginary manifestations. Furthermore, he contends that a person can only see an angel in a prophetic vision, and therefore, when Balaam saw an angel in the scene in which his ass spoke, the entire episode must have taken place in a vision and never actually happened. This leads to many interesting possibilities and interpretations

The last part of the book reveals Maimonides' intimate knowledge of the ancient pagan religions, as recorded in *Nabatean Agriculture* and *The Book of Tomtom*. He considers idolatry the worst of all transgressions, and he demonstrates how many of the commandments in the Torah were prescribed to combat it.

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number 1. Infinity, therefore, is a concept rather than a number.

According to the Second Aristotelian Proposition, cited by the Author in the beginning of Part II, there cannot be an infinite series of things, which is very understandable. A series of things requires a number, and infinity is not a number. It is an abstract concept. Time is also composed of a series of units, and consequently, time elapsed cannot be infinite. Only time going forward can be infinite, because new time is being created constantly. This process can be unlimited. Time going back, however, cannot be infinite, because there is no new time being created for the past. The idea of an eternal universe is, therefore, more than problematic.

The publication of *A Guide for the Perplexed* brought out Maimonides' adversaries once again, although with different grievances this time. In the beginning, the opposition was more limited, because the book was written in Arabic, which made it inaccessible to the Jewish communities of Europe. However, when it was translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon and discovered by the European rabbis, the controversy exploded.

The method of the book came under attack, because it was a synthesis of the Jewish and the Greek intellectual approaches. The supreme rationalism of the book also drew criticism, as did the Author's views on prophecy, angels and miracles.

The controversy eventually subsided, and the book took its well-deserved place of honor in the panoply of Jewish classics. Over time, it has become the most revered book of Jewish philosophy, metaphysics, rational mysticism and esoterica and is often quoted in the commentaries. Nonetheless, it has never achieved the popularity of other works by Maimonides, primarily because of its virtual inaccessibility even in translation. Unlike the clarity of style in his other works, the *Guide* is very difficult to read.

Perhaps it is less opaque in the original Arabic, but it is difficult to believe that the translations have made such a drastic difference. We have used four different translations for this book, and they are all more or less as difficult as each other. Part of the difficulty is undoubtedly due to the complexity of the subjects discussed. Maimonides also did not want it to be an easy read, as he writes in his Introduction, because he didn't want the full range of his thoughts to be accessible to those who are not equipped for it. Moreover, since he was writing for the benefit of young Jews attracted to the works of the Kalam, it's quite possible that he employed a medieval Muslim writing style for works of this sort that is more elaborate, convoluted and flowery. The translations could not escape this style.

## The Summary

The purpose of this chapter-by-chapter summary is to make the *Guide* more easily accessible to the intelligent reader. It is not an abridged translation; we did not use the text of the Author. Rather, we have presented the Author's ideas in our own words in a linear style more familiar to modern readers. We have tried to capture the essence and salient points of every chapter.

In addition, the original text is full of Biblical and Talmudic references which inevitably weigh down the text. Where the quotations were only there to support the text and not the subject of the discussions, we have omitted the quotations and given the citations in the footnotes. We have also omitted all mentions of antiquated scientific ideas, especially in the field of astronomy. Since this is not a translation, we are free to do so. Maimonides would be pleased.

This summary is a collaboration with my friend and colleague Yosef Chaim Kohn, a brilliant Torah scholar, scientist and mathematician. He has studied the *Guide* for many years and has acquired a broad and profound familiarity with it. For my part, I've written books in many fields, including several books on the philosophy of Talmudic civil law with a strong emphasis on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. I also had an enduring interest in studying the *Guide*, but I found that to do so on my own would require an inordinate investment of time and effort.

Four years ago, my co-author and I met and agreed to collaborate on this summary. He would serve as my guide to the *Guide*. We would study the book together in the *chavrutha* style of Talmudic scholarship, and I would record the fruits of our deliberations.

Considering that neither of us is capable of studying the *Guide* in its original Arabic, we used four different translations<sup>4</sup> which were not always in agreement. Primarily, we used Friedlander's translation, but whenever we sensed

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4. The Hebrew translations by Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon and Rabbi Joseph Kapach and the English translations by Michael Friedlander and Shlomo Pines.

inconsistencies or lack of clarity, we consulted the other translations and chose what we considered the most reasonable explanation of the Author's intent. Most of our explanations and interpretations are embedded in the text of the summary. The additional thoughts and insights presented in the footnotes are the products of our agreement after often heated discussions in the true spirit of *chavrutha* study.

This summary is not a substitute for the original *Guide for the Perplexed*. It is an introduction to the book for the uninitiated who need assistance in penetrating its dense forests of thought. Readers are invited to refer to the original for more elaborate presentations of the ideas conveyed by the summary.

In closing, we would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to my co-author's wife, Charlotte, and the Kohn family and to my wife, Zvia, and our family for their continued support and encouragement during this long and daunting undertaking. We would also like to thank Bracha Royde, our graphic artist for her beautiful and elegant work and to my good friend and agent Richard Curtis for his helpful comments and his suggestion of the title for this book. Most of all, we want to express our humble gratitude to the Almighty for blessing our efforts with success. May our work bring honor to His name.

Yaakov Yosef Reinman

November 2021

A Brief Synopsis  
of Maimonides'

**A Guide for  
the Perplexed**

# A Brief Synopsis



## Corporeal Metaphors

(Part I, Chapters 1-30)

**I**n the Torah, God is often portrayed as having a heart, eyes, hands, feet and wings. He stands. He sits upon a throne. He rides upon the heavens. He rises. He descends. He feels anger, sadness, joy. And so forth. None of these are meant to be taken literally. God has no body or any corporeal aspect. He has no human emotions. He does not occupy space, nor does He exist in time. In these chapters, the Author explains that all of these are simply metaphors used to describe some of His actions.

Since common people find it difficult to imagine a completely incorporeal being, without any form or substance, the Torah presents the concepts in forms more easily acceptable, with the expectation that as their sophistication progresses, the concept of incorporeality will prevail.

What then is the meaning of the statement in Genesis that human beings were created in the image of the Lord? This means that the essence of a human being mirrors the essence of God. Just as the essence of God is a living intellect, so is the essence of a human being a living intellect. That is what sets humankind apart from animals. A fully realized human being is more than an intelligent, speaking creature. The exercise of the intellect is what defines the human being. There is, however, no correlation whatsoever between the human intellect and the divine intellect.

The Serpent told Eve that God did not want them to eat the forbidden but delicious fruit of the Tree of Knowledge because He did not want them to know the difference between good and evil. And then, when Adam and Eve ate these fruits, they became like gods “knowing good and evil.” It cannot be that their punishment was to be enlightened. Rather, before

they ate the fruits, they viewed the world by the standards of truth and falsehood. But when they succumbed to their desires, they fell from this high intellectual level. They saw the world through the prism of good and evil, what was socially acceptable and what was socially unacceptable.

In Part III, Chapter 51, the Author states that people in primitive societies, such as the Kushites of sub-Saharan Africa and the Turks of the Central Asian steppes, are certainly above animals in the sense that they have human mental faculties. But since they are hunters-gatherers and do not engage in intellectual pursuits, they are not fully realized human beings.

## The Study of Metaphysics

(Part I, Chapters 31-49)

**W**e know that a person no matter how strong cannot be expected to lift exceedingly heavy things. There are limits to the physical abilities of the body. Similarly, there are limits to the intellectual capacity of human beings. There are some things that cannot be known that nonetheless engage the curiosity of people. They speculate and argue without any evidence to support their assertions in their attempts to find the truth. Arrogance, ignorance and the lack of intellectual sophistication are the greatest obstacles to the search for truth.

It is important for intellectual well-being for a person studying metaphysics, the world beyond the physical world, to accept that there are limits to his intellectual grasp. Overstraining the intellect can be damaging. “Watch your step when you go to the house of your Lord,” King Solomon advises in Ecclesiastes (4:17). Be careful not to overstep your limits when seeking to increase your knowledge of the Almighty.

Just as coarse bread would be harmful to an infant whose digestive system is not fully developed, so would it be harmful to teach metaphysics to the young and unsophisticated. The study of metaphysics is difficult to grasp by the very nature of the subject. It also requires a high degree of intelligence and extensive preliminary training in logic, mathematics, astronomy and physics. The student of metaphysics must also be even-tempered and moral. Moreover, he has to be able to



concentrate fully on these studies and not be distracted by earning a living and the mundane demands of everyday life.

That is why the Sages concealed their metaphysical teaching in parables, enigmas and riddles. Only those who are more advanced and fully prepared would thus be able to glean their intent.

Although the study of metaphysics should be limited to those who have all the capabilities, there are certain metaphysical concepts that should be taught to the common people. They must be taught that there is only one God who may be worshipped and that He has no body, form, or any other physical aspect. He cannot be compared to His creations in any way. He is not larger or better. Only things in the same class can be compared. Any mention of God's face, heart or spirit has no parallel in the human experience and must be understood as only metaphorical. These and similar terms with which all people are familiar are meant to help people accept God as an unquestioned reality.

## **Essence and Attributes**

(Part I, Chapters 50-76)

**W**hen we try to gain some conception about God, we must understand that this is essentially impossible. Our ordinary point of reference would be ourselves, and by comparison, we would say God is more powerful, greater, wiser and so forth. But this would be completely erroneous. There is no similarity between us and God, and we cannot begin to conceive of His essence.

We can only know Him through His actions, which we describe by anthropomorphic terms such as kindness and anger. God has no emotions. He does not feel rage or pity. These are emotions peculiar to human beings. We call these actions of God merciful because if a person had performed them, they would have come from a feeling of mercy.

Furthermore, God has no attributes superadded to His essence. In a person, attributes such as power and knowledge would be superadded to his essence. The only attributes that can be assigned to God do not define His essence but

describe His interaction with the world. We can only know God through negative attributes. We do not understand the meaning of God's life, but we know He is not dead. We do not understand the meaning of God's knowledge, but we know that He is not ignorant. All we know about His essence is His name, the Tetragrammaton.

In the final chapters of Part II, the Author introduces the school of Muslim theologians called Mutakallemim, which means Speakers. He describes who they are and their approach to philosophical investigation, of which he thoroughly disapproves. He goes on to present their views on establishing the principles of creation *ex nihilo*, something from nothing, the indivisible unity of God and His complete incorporeality.

## Creation and Angels

(Part II, Chapters 1-31)

**T**he Author prefaces Part II with an Introduction presenting Aristotle's twenty-six proposition. He accepts all Aristotle's propositions as proved, except for the final proposition, which claims that the universe is eternal; it was always there. That proposition conflicts with the Torah's view that the universe was created *ex nihilo*, existence from absolute non-existence. The debate between these two points of view occupies a place of prominence in Part II.

The Author also devotes a number of chapters to the nature of various angels and to their exercise of free will. An angel is a disembodied intellect. It has no body. When a person sees an angel in some kind of corporeal form, it is only an image projected into his mind. It is not a reality. The forces of nature are also called angels, because they serve to carry out the divine will. Thus, a wind can be an angel. The jaws of a lion can be an angel. A feeling of lust can be an angel. Anything that acts as a messenger of God can be called an angel.

## The Elements of Prophecy

(Part II, Chapters 32-48)

**I**n these chapters, the Author presents his views about prophecy. He considers prophecy a natural faculty accessible to anyone who attains a high level of intellectual, moral and physical perfection. Such a person will be attuned to the emanations of the Active Intellect. There are, however, eleven levels of prophecy.

On the lowest levels, a person may feel inexplicably moved to do something good and noteworthy to benefit a single exemplary person or the general public. Such a person is considered wrapped “in the spirit of God.” He may also feel moved to speak out, to expound his views on matters of science, political issues and theology. Such a person is considered that “the spirit of God speaks in him.”

On the higher levels, a person enters into true prophecy. He sees allegories in his dream, which he interprets in the very same dream. He hears disembodied voices. He imagines a man speaking to him. He progresses from dreams to waking visions until he reaches a level of encountering an angel speaking to him in a waking vision. The ultimate level, which was achieved only by Moses, is direct communication from God to his intellect without the filter of the imagination in dreams or visions.

It is possible for base people, such as the Philistine King Abimelech and Laban the Aramean, to receive a form of prophecy. In these cases, God places a thought into their heads without actually communicating with them through genuine prophecy.

The prophecies recorded in the Torah are delineated in their beginnings and do not end until the conclusion is evident. For instance, when God appeared to Abraham, his vision commences. All that ensued, the arrival of the dusty travelers, their stay in Abraham’s home, their message to Sarah, all of these transpired in the same vision. The vision may spend many years and traverse many places, just as a dream during a single night may encompass a lot of time and diverse locations.

It is important to note that the language of the prophets in the Torah made ample use of hyperbole and should not always be taken literally.

## Good and Evil

(Part III, Chapters 1-25)

**T**he third part of the work begins with a presentation of the Divine Chariot as described in Ezekiel's prophecy. In his Introduction to this part, the Author explains that the esoteric concepts that can be derived from this prophecy are not for a general readership. Therefore, he has concealed them in his descriptive language. Those who are worthy will discover them by reading between the lines. Everyone else will not even notice them.

Preliminary to a discussion of divine providence, the terms good and evil are defined. All existence is considered good, and all non-existence is considered evil. For instance, light is considered good, because it exists. Darkness, which is the non-existence of light, is considered an evil. The root of all evil in the world is the absence of wisdom.

God produces only good. He never produces evil directly. However, He may choose to produce light for only a limited time, and when that time elapses, darkness will result. God did not produce that darkness. That would be an act of destruction, of non-existence, and God does not produce evil.

The universe God created is a good place. In the greater scheme of things, misfortunes inherent in the fabric of nature are exceedingly rare. Most misfortune that people suffer are self-inflicted or inflicted by other people.

Nonetheless, on the rare occasions when righteous people suffer through no fault of their own, we wonder why a just God allows this to happen. Sometimes, it is the product of chance, since people can also be vulnerable to chance just as animals are. Special providence is reserved for those whose intellect is strongly attuned to the divine intellect. Such people enjoy God's special protection. Otherwise, the suffering only appears as unjust in the here and now, but in the long run, perspectives may change.

Finally, the suffering of the righteous may be a test. Although God knows what is in the heart of the righteous, the purpose of the test is to demonstrate the loyalty of the righteous person to the world at large, to set a good example.

## The Commandments

(Part II, Chapters 26-54)

The final chapters present the full range of the commandments and their purposes. Some are positive commandments demanding action, and some are prohibitions. Most of the commandments are well-explained and understood. A small number, however, are seemingly inexplicable; for instance, the Torah prohibits wearing garments of a wool and linen combination. These are called *chukim*.

The Sages explained that the Torah concealed the purposes of some commandments so that people should not take it upon themselves to decide whether or not to comply. Elsewhere, the Sages explained that some commandments were only given to reenforce the idea of unquestioning observance. There is no conflict, however. All the commandments have purposes that can be discovered through study and analysis. The innumerable minute details of observance do not necessarily have individual significance other than to reenforce observance.

The commandments govern religious and civil law. They fall into two general categories, commandments intended to promote physical well-being and commandments intended to promote spiritual well-being. The first category promotes personal health and a well-functioning society favorable to personal fulfillment and progress.

Spiritual fulfillment is, of course, the more important goal as it provides an understanding of the deeper truths of existence and divinity. It is the purpose of our existence as human beings and the gateway to eternal life. However, a person cannot expect to reach spiritual goals if he struggles with health and social conditions.

The commandments fall into fourteen categories that cover beliefs, idolatry, morality, compassion, damages, punishment, civil law, calendar events, devotion, the holy temple, divine service, purity, nutrition, gender.

A deeper awareness of the existence of God, an understanding of the principles of divinity and the eradication of idolatry, which obscures His existence, are the overriding themes of the commandments. The Author draws on his extreme familiarity with the writings of the ancient pagans and their customs and rituals to explain many of the obscure commandments and the details of their observance.

The only genuine personal achievement, the Author writes in the final chapter, is the acquisition of wisdom. Riches are fleeting. Physical strength is limited. Character refinement is only useful in a social setting. Wisdom, however, is the ultimate perfection of a human being. It is the completely inseparable possession of the possessor. And it provides him with immortality, for only the intellectual aspect of the soul survives death.

The development of the highest intellectual faculties leads a person to true metaphysical opinions about God. Therefore, a person ought not to be distracted by the excessive pursuit of possessions or qualities that are not uniquely his. The ultimate glory for a human being is to gain true knowledge of God.

A Summary of  
Moses Maimonides'  
classic masterpiece

**A Guide for  
the Perplexed**

**Part I**

## Part I, Introduction

### Purpose and Method

**T**his book was written to support the basic premises of the Jewish faith, but before we can begin to examine the concepts of God's existence and His unity, it is important to dispel certain misconceptions that can arise from an unsophisticated reading of the biblical texts. It is the purpose of the first part of the book to explain the true meanings of words that need to be clarified. Many words have multiple meanings, and it is important to know which meaning is applicable and where. It is also important to know when words are used in their literal sense and when they are used in their figurative sense.

This work is directed to those who study the Torah diligently and obey its commandments and, at the same time, have some basic knowledge of logic, philosophy and natural science. Such people may occasionally become perplexed by certain parts of the Torah that seem to conflict with rational thought, and this book seeks to enlighten them by resolving these seeming conflicts. It also seeks to point out and explain some of the parables that appear in the Books of the Prophets that are very perplexing if they are mistakenly thought to be literal. The book does not claim to be exhaustive, but it should nonetheless provide guidance to the students according to their respective levels.

The topics discussed fall into two categories, Maaseh Bereishith, the Workings of Creation, which encompasses natural science, and Maaseh Merkavah, the Workings of the Divine Chariot, which encompasses metaphysics. The book treads carefully when addressing these subjects and presents its ideas in veiled language piecemeal in different parts of the book so that only the more sophisticated readers will penetrate to the heart of the matter.<sup>1</sup>

People who attain a certain level of perfection can sometimes glimpse the truth as a flash of lightning, a burst of

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1. See Author's comments in the Introduction to Part III.



brilliant illumination that slips quickly into darkness. Moses, having attained the highest degree of prophetic excellence, was able to perceive the truth in a series of almost continuous lightning flashes. Thus, he was able to “stand beside” God,<sup>2</sup> and “the skin of his face shone.”<sup>3</sup> Most prophets only perceived these flashes of illumination at varying intervals, depending on their degree of perfection. Others had this experience only once in a lifetime.<sup>4</sup> Some people who do not achieve the level of prophecy also experience occasional illumination but with a lesser degree of brilliance. Most people, however, never experience any illumination at all.<sup>5</sup> This book is not for them.

It is very difficult for a teacher to convey to students with a high degree of accuracy any knowledge he acquired in a field that does not have an established method of investigation. Since he lacks familiar terminology and frames of reference, he has to formulate them himself as he speaks. Inevitably, his explanations will sometimes be more lucid than at other times. The difficulties he encountered in his own studies when he had no well-trodden intellectual path to follow, he now encounters when he tries to convey his discoveries to his students.

The great teachers, therefore, conveyed their thoughts in parables or a series of parables, metaphors and allegories. These can provide more clarity than formulating new terminology and expressions to represent profound and transcendental ideas.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the divine will implanted these strategies in human nature so that choosing them does not involve a conscious decision. The teachers of profound subjects

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2. Deuteronomy 5:31.

3. Exodus 34:29.

4. Numbers 11:25.

5. Job 37:21.

6. This concept may help explain the prophetic process. In Part II, Chapter 36, the Author writes that the prophetic message comes down to the prophet through his intellect and is then channeled into his imagination to form images, which he then interprets using his intellect. Why is it necessary to transfer the message from intellect into the imagination and then bring it back into the intellect? Perhaps it is because the message is too profound to be grasped intellectually. Therefore, it must first be converted into images and metaphors which the intellect can more easily interpret.

instinctively know when to use parables to communicate their ideas.

The Torah introduces many laws designed to regulate our behavior and thereby lead us as individuals and as a society to elevated states of perfection, but first we must form a conception of the existence of the Creator. This involves the study of metaphysics, which is best preceded by a knowledge of the physical world.

The Torah begins with a description of Creation in allegorical, figurative and metaphorical language, because the true description of the events is beyond human comprehension.<sup>7</sup> It simply states that “God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>8</sup> Its very extreme simplicity suggests that this subject is an extremely deep mystery, as Solomon stated, “It is far off and exceedingly deep; who can discern it?”<sup>9</sup> The unsophisticated will understand this according to their level, while the sophisticated will perceive it in an entirely different sense. Similarly, when sophisticated readers encounter passages in the Midrash that involve impossibilities if taken literally, they immediately realize that the passages have some secret meanings.

The key to understanding the Books of the Prophets is, therefore, to interpret the parables properly and to comprehend the exact significance of each of the words they employ. The Sages stated, “To what can the words of the Torah be compared before the time of Solomon? To a well with sweet waters so deep that no man could drink of them. A wise man connected rope to rope, drew up the water and drank. So did Solomon go from parable to parable and subject to subject until he reached the true meaning of the Torah.”<sup>10</sup>

These parables are clearly not needed to illustrate technicalities and legalities of the laws. They are needed to elucidate profound and esoteric subjects regarding which the Sages stated, “If a man loses a precious coin or a pearl in his house, he can find it by lighting an inexpensive candle.” The

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7. Midrash Shnei Kethuvim 1:1.

8. Genesis 1:1.

9. Ecclesiastes 7:24.

10. Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:1.

hidden meaning is compared to a pearl lost in a dark room full of furniture. The parable is like the candle that helps him find it.

The wise King Solomon said, “A word suitably spoken is like apples of gold in a silver netting.”<sup>11</sup> The golden apple is visible through the tiny apertures in the silver netting. The literal meaning of the words, which appears to the eye from a distance as a silver apple, is valuable, but the figurative meaning that becomes visible on closer inspection to the discerning eye, the golden apple, is far more precious. The parables and proverbs of the prophets are useful for the improvement of society in their literal sense, but the hidden meanings are profound wisdom that draw the reader closer to the truth.

Sometimes every word of the prophetic parable is fraught with meaning and symbolism. For example, in the description of Jacob’s dream, the ladder has significance, as does its being positioned on the ground, as does its top reaching the heavens, as does the ascent of the angels, as does their descent, as does God standing above it. At other times, the details of the prophetic parable only provide framework and background, as in the long narrative in Proverbs.<sup>12</sup>

## Comments on Structure

In order to derive the most value from a reading of this book, it is important to keep in mind that the chapters are presented in a specific order. If some point or term seems unconnected to the principal subject, it undoubtedly serves to clarify something within that chapter. A great effort has been made to leave nothing of importance unexplained.

Readers should refrain from adding explanations or interpretations to original ideas presented in this book, nor should they teach things they read in this book to other people, nor should they feel free to raise objections to what

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11. Proverbs 11:25.

12. Proverbs 7:6-26. The predominant idea is that people should not be guided by their animal desires. The symbolism will be explained in future chapters.

they read here, because it is quite likely that they have completely misunderstood the meaning.<sup>13</sup> Readers who encounter difficulties in the book should continue to seek suitable solutions, even if they seem somewhat far-fetched.

If the reader studies the work seriously and comes away with even one solution to a problem that perplexed him, he should consider himself fortunate; the work has been a success. If he claims to have derived no benefit whatsoever, it would be better if he forgot he ever read it.

It is reasonable to assume that all readers will derive at least some benefit from the work. Those readers with a background in philosophy, the thinkers whose studies have at times come into conflict with religion, will derive great benefit from every chapter. The book acknowledges that those pseudointellectuals, who have no knowledge that can be truly identified as science, will object to a great deal of what has been written, either because they will not understand the meaning or because this work exposes the absurdity of some of their notions.

This work has been undertaken with trepidation, because it discusses profound mysteries that the earlier commentators refrained from discussing. However, the circumstances of the times demand that it be written, always with the purest of intentions. It is readily admitted that when writing about a difficult subject, it is worthwhile to illuminate the truth for one intelligent person even at the cost of incurring the displeasure of ten thousand fools.

## Inconsistencies and Contradictions

Seven different types of inconsistencies and contradictions can arise in a literary work.

≈ **The first type** occurs when an author compiles the thoughts and opinions of several different scholars with differing views without ascribing the views to their respective

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13. The Author is probably referring to more casual readers, since we find his original ideas quoted extensively in the rabbinic literature of subsequent generations.

sources. In such cases, it is inevitable that inconsistencies will occur.

≈ **The second type** occurs when an author presents one opinion and then reconsiders and presents a new opinion in the same work without retracting the first opinion.

≈ **The third type** occurs when an author uses certain parables that are sometimes meant to be taken literally and sometimes figuratively.

≈ **The fourth type** occurs when two statements seem to be identical yet arrive at contradictory conclusions. This occurs when the premises on which they are based are not fully reported, and the reader is not aware that the statements have different premises that would account for the contradiction if the writer had reported them.

≈ **The fifth type** occurs when a teacher needs to introduce a difficult subject as a foundation for teaching a more elementary subject. Since the teacher must condense and simplify a complex subject, this may result in a deviation from the precise meaning.

≈ **The sixth type** occurs when an author makes an error that escapes his notice. If he has constructed an edifice of premises whose complexity obscures his miscalculation, his error can be excused. Even the best writers can fall victim to such inconsistencies. If the inconsistencies are easily discernible and yet the author fails to see them, it would be best to avoid his works altogether.

≈ **The seventh type** occurs when an author introduces certain esoteric concepts that must not be revealed fully. The partially revealed concept will not necessarily provide a satisfying explanation of how the author reached his conclusion. On these occasions, he must introduce another premise to compensate. On another occasion, the author might again find it necessary to introduce a compensatory premise, even if that premise is contradictory to the first compensatory premise. On both occasions, the correct solution is presented, although the uninitiated may detect a contradiction. While the sophisticated reader may understand the need for this seeming contradiction, the author must

nonetheless use his literary skills to conceal the contradiction from unsophisticated readers.

Inconsistencies and contradictions appearing in the words of the Sages in the Mishnah and Beraithoth are instances of the first type. The commentary of the Talmud often points out contradictions between the first part of a Mishnah and the second part, for instance, and resolves them by ascribing the statements to different Sages. There are so many such occurrences in all sorts of variations that it is perfectly clear that they are intentional. Inconsistencies and contradictions in the Gemara are also of the first type and sometimes of the second type.

Inconsistencies and contradictions in the Books of the Prophets are of the third and fourth types. Usually, they occur with matters of religion and morals and are resolved by the Sages. In some cases, they relate to the fundamental principles of faith, and the resolution of these inconsistencies and contradictions is the purpose of this work. The seventh type also occurs in the Books of the Prophets, and these must be studied with exceeding care before explanations can be offered.

The fifth and sixth types of inconsistencies and contradictions may arise in the homiletic works of the Sages and the writings of the prominent thinkers. They may also be of the seventh type on occasion.

Any inconsistencies and contradictions the reader may notice in this work are of the fifth or sixth type. Readers should keep this in mind as they navigate the following pages.

## Part I, Chapter 1

### Image and Likeness

**S**ome people think that loyalty to the biblical text requires them to believe that God has some sort of a body, because so many biblical references to God are couched in physical terms, as if He has a face or a hand. God's superiority over mankind, according to them, lies in His being larger and more powerful and in His being composed of some material

other than flesh and blood. One of the purposes of this work is to prove that God has no body or any other physical aspects to His being. At a later point, the incorporeality and unity of God will be proved.<sup>14</sup> First, however, we will identify the various anthropomorphic terms that appear in the biblical text and demonstrate their respective definitions as applied to God.

A good place to begin is with the terms *tzelem*, image, and *d'mus*, likeness. God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."<sup>15</sup> What does this mean? In what sense is man in God's image and likeness?

The Hebrew word for the figure and shape of a thing is *to'ar*, which means form.<sup>16</sup> This term cannot be applied to God. The word *tzelem*, however, does not refer to a physical image or form but rather to the essence of the thing itself. The *tzelem*, the essence, of a human being is his intellectual perception, and in that respect, he resembles God,

This definition is also apparent in the words of the Psalmist, "You despised their *tzelem*."<sup>17</sup> God does not have contempt for their physical form but for what they represent. Idols are called *tzelamim* for this same reason, because they are not worshipped for their physical image but for the concept the image represents.<sup>18</sup>

The word *d'mus*, likeness, resemblance, does not necessarily refer to a physical similarity. It often applies to an abstract relation. "I resembled (*dimisi*) a pelican in the desert,"<sup>19</sup> says the Psalmist. This does not mean that he had wings and feathers. It means that he felt as desolate as a shore bird lost in the desert.

In what way is a human made in God's likeness? The human capacity for intellectual perception does not require him to use

14. For there is no unity without incorporeality. See Part II, Chapter 1.

15. Genesis 1:26.

16. See Genesis 39:6; I Samuel 38:14; Judges 8:18; Isaiah 44:13.

17. Psalms 73:20.

18. See the Author's explanation of the notions of indirect worship of God in *Mishneh Torah*, Avodah Zarah 1: 2:1.

19. Psalms 102:7.

his senses or his limbs. It is completely independent. In this way, it resembles God who needs no instruments whatsoever.

## Part I, Chapter 2

### Scales of Judgment

**W**hile Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, God forbade them to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The serpent persuaded Eve to violate this prohibition. He told her that God did not want them to eat these fruits because then “you would become like *elo-him*, knowing good and evil.”<sup>20</sup> The word *elo-him* can refer to God, but it can also refer to angels, judges and powerful people. In this context, the serpent was saying that God did not want Adam and Eve to become so powerful that they would know the difference between good and evil.<sup>21</sup>

An intriguing question has been posed. It appears from the text that before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit they were like the rest of the animals, lacking intellect,<sup>22</sup> reason and the ability to distinguish between good and evil. How can it be that their transgression was rewarded by endowing them with the noblest characteristics of humankind? It would be comparable to punishing a rebellious person by transforming him into a star.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Genesis 3:5.

21. Considering that God is the Infinite, the serpent could not have been saying that God does not want you to be like Him, to become His rival; there can be no two infinities. Rather, He did not want them to have inordinate power.

22. If they could have conversations, they obviously possessed a high level of intelligence. But there is no indication that they were any better than dolphins or the higher primates. According to the questioner’s assumption, they did not have the intellectual faculty of abstract thinking and reasoning, nor could they make moral distinctions between good and evil. Once they ate the forbidden fruit, they could make these distinctions. Although we are not told that they would gain the faculty of abstract thinking if they ate the fruit, it is understood. The distinction between good and evil is the product of abstract thinking.

23. This is based on the ancient idea that stars are intelligent and superior to human beings. The analogy is reminiscent of the Orion myth in Greek