Parshat Ha'azinu and Rosh Hashanah

In parshat Ha'azinu, Moshe tells the Jewish nation that God's judgments are all just: The Rock, perfect in His work, for all His ways are justice; a God, faithful, without iniquity" (Devarim, 32; 4). Maimonides, in his Guide for the Perplexed, 1:16, explains that the word 'rock' is used to refer to God because He is the beginning and the cause of everything else other then Him, just as the word rock refers to the quarry from which other rocks are hewn. It is interesting to note that this is the term for God that was chosen to be used in the declaration of Independence of the state of Israel as a compromise between those who did not want any mention of God in the document, and those who wanted God to be mentioned explicitly. While this compromise may appear to diminish the role of God in the founding of the Jewish state, according to Maimonides' explanation of the use of this term to refer to God, His role in human history, and, in this instance, the establishment of the state of Israel, is actually made very prominent by this choice of terms.

Elsewhere in the Guide (3:17) Maimonides cites our verse as a source for a fundamental principle of the Torah, that God is just. He writes: " …it is in no way possible that He, may He be exalted, should be unjust, and that all the calamities that befall men and the good things that come to men, be it a single individual or a group, are all of them determined according to the deserts of the men concerned through equitable judgment in which there is no injustice whatever. Thus if some individual were wounded in ther hand by a thorn, which he would take out immediately, this would be a punishment for him, and if he received the slightest pleasure, this would be a reward for him- all this being according to his deserts. Thus He, may He be exalted, says : 'for all His ways are justice etc.' But we are ignorant of the various modes of deserts"

This formulation of Maimonides reflects what he writes later in that section of the Guide (3: 24) that the notion espoused by some rabbis in the Talmud (Berachos 5a) that God sometimes afflicts a person out of love, even though that person hasn't sinned, is in contradiction to our verse, which says tha God is without iniquity. Maimonides, there, points out that we find opinions in the Talmud that explicitly reject the notion of 'afflictions of love,' such as the opinion brought in the Talmud Shabbat, 55a, that there is no death without sin. This is one of several instances in the Guide in which Maimonides rejects a well-known opinion in the Talmud or Midrash for theological reasons and explains his right to take this position by saying that the opinion he rejects is a minority one.

Maimonides' statement that while all of God's ways are just, we are ignorant of the various modes of deserts, is reflected in his description of divine judgment in his Laws of Repentance. He writes there (3:1) "Each and every person ahs merits and sins. A person whose merits exceed his sins is righteous. A person whose sins exceed his merits is wicked. If they are equal, he is termed as 'beinoni' (intermediate status). The same applies to an entire country… The same applies to the entire world. Further in that chapter (3:2) Maimonides writes, "The reckoning is not calculated (only) on the basis of the number or merits and sins, but also takes into account their magnitude. There are some merits which outweigh many sins… By contrast, a sin may outweigh many merits… The weighing is carried out according to the wisdom of the Knowing God. He knows how to measure merit against sin." As we approach Rosh Hashanah, we all pray that our individual judgment, and that of the collective of the Jewish people, come out favorably. We always need to remember, however, that God's judgments, whether we understand them or not, are always just. May this knowledge serve to motivate us to act in accordance with His will, fulfilling the mitzvoth of the Torah faithfully, so that we emerge victorious in our judgment. I wish a ketivah vechatimah tovah to all.