



LECTURE #1:

THE LIFE OF MAIMONIDES IN LIGHT OF HIS WRITINGS

Rabbi Eli Hadad

Maimonides (known as the Rambam, **Rabbi Moses ben Maimon**) stands out as the most important Jewish figure of the Middle Ages. No Jew of the post-Talmudic era even compares to him. Popular Jewish tradition has gone as far as to assert that "From Moses [our Master] to Moses [the son of Maimon] there has not arisen anybody like Moses [the son of Maimon]." There are, however, many sides to Maimonides. In the world of the *yeshivot*, he is known as the great arbiter of Halakhah and author of the *Mishneh Torah*, a systematic halakhic code that summarizes and codifies all of Jewish law. In academic circles, he is known primarily as the great thinker who authored *The Guide of the Perplexed*, a philosophical work that was meant to remove the confusion created by the clash between philosophy and religious faith. Historians relate to Maimonides as the highly influential communal leader who served as *Nagid* – leader of the Egyptian Jewish community. In the world at large he is also recognized as one of the most famous physicians in human history.

Our objective in this lecture series is to study the thought of Maimonides, as reflected in his various writings, and compare it to what we know about his life and work. And also the opposite, to examine his life and understand it in light of his thought and literary oeuvre. Our starting assumption is that Maimonides strove to realize in his own life that which he called upon others to do in his various writings, and therefore his life may be viewed as a thoroughgoing application of his thought and rulings. Obviously, the constraints and vicissitudes of life did not pass over Maimonides, and he too was forced, at times against his will and to his detriment, to live his life in a manner not of his choosing. But even the choices and decisions that he made in the framework of these constraints were presumably in line with his fundamental outlook.

MAN'S GOAL IN LIFE - TO ACHIEVE UNDERSTANDING

In several places in his writings, Maimonides discusses man's ultimate aim in life, painting a portrait of the perfect man. According to this description, man's fundamental goal is to know and comprehend God via his intellect. The comprehension of God is not a matter

of simple faith, but rather it requires a grand intellectual effort that develops through a systematic progression from the study of logic, through the physical sciences, to metaphysical knowledge, and ending with the intellectual apprehension of God. We shall examine several passages in Maimonides's writings and try to elicit from them his position on this issue.

Already in the introduction to his earliest work – his *Commentary to the Mishnah* – Maimonides presents the position that he would hold fast to until the end of his life. At the beginning of the work, Maimonides writes:

Anything that exists has of necessity a purpose for which it exists, for there is nothing that exists in vain.¹

This assertion is first formulated in positive terms and then explained by way of a negation of its opposite. To paraphrase his words, one might say: Everything has a purpose, **for** there is nothing that has no purpose. At first glance this assertion seems to be nothing more than a tautology, but a precise reading of his words, with careful attention paid to the fact that he identifies that which **lacks a purpose** with that which exists **in vain**, clarifies his argument. Everything that he says is based on the assumption that vain existence – that is, existence that has no purpose – is impossible. Maimonides gives expression here to his great faith in the rationality of the world and the wisdom that is concealed behind the entirety of being. Nothing exists without a purpose, nothing exists in vain. The idea of the purposefulness of the world in Maimonides's thought requires a separate discussion. For our purposes it suffices to say that this assertion is based on seeing the world as the handiwork of God, on the simple assumption that God's actions cannot be in vain and futile.²

In order to clarify this position, Maimonides distinguishes between artificial things, the handiwork of man, and natural beings, the handiwork of God. Common to all existing things is that they all have a purpose, but there is a difference between them with respect to the possibility of knowing what that purpose is. The purpose of artificial, man-made articles is clear. Anything fashioned with deliberation is made for a certain purpose, and "what ends in

¹ *Introduction to the Mishnah*, ed. Shilat (Jerusalem, 1992), p. 55.

² In the *Guide* (III, 25), Maimonides explains this assertion, arguing that purposeless acts cannot be attributed to God, as it follows from the verse, "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold it was good" (Genesis 1:31).

creation, starts in thought." Everything made by man then is fashioned for a certain purpose; a tailor sews a garment so that it may be worn, a carpenter builds a table off of which to eat a meal, a builder builds a house to be lived in. The existence of anything fashioned by man is justified by its purpose.

In light of the assumption mentioned above, it is clear that all natural beings must also have a purpose, for God does nothing in vain. Clarifying that purpose, however, is difficult, for that involves the uncovering of God's wisdom. Is it possible to establish with any degree of certainty why certain plants or animals exist? Despite this difficulty, Maimonides asserts that all plants and animals in the material world were created for the sake of man. This does not necessarily mean that they serve man directly, but only that their existence is in some way necessary for the existence of the most complex material being, i.e., man.³

What remains is the question: Why does man exist and what is his purpose? To this, Maimonides provides the following answer:

[Man's] purpose is but a single activity. The other skills [man possesses] serve only the purpose of assuring his survival, to insure the [fulfillment] of that one activity. This [cardinal] activity is the following: to grasp in his mind the secrets of the fundamental truths, and to understand the verities [in life] as they are.⁴

Maimonides means to say that only when man activates his intellect does he realize his **purpose** as a human being. The rest of man's activities are solely **means** of assuring his survival. His survival, however, is merely a means to fulfill his human destiny, that is, to think and use his intellect. All of man's activities may then be divided into two groups, intellection on one side, and all other human activities on the other. Rational thinking is the purpose of man, whereas all other human activities, such as eating, sleeping, working, and the like, and even activities to which great importance is attached, such as helping others, are merely the means that allow man to achieve his purpose.

³ Maimonides does not accept the assertion that man is the ultimate end of all existence, but only that he is the end of all beings "below the lunar sphere," that is, the end of all beings in the material world. Even this assertion Maimonides tempers in his *Guide*. See for example, *Guide* III, 13.

⁴ *Introduction to the Mishnah, ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

MAN IS INTELLECT

Maimonides goes even further in his *Guide of the Perplexed* (I, 1), where he states that man is not a combination of various components that together create a single person. For this reason the intellect cannot be described as one of the various elements of which man is comprised, and not even as the most noble of his elements. Rather, it and it alone is man. **Man is intellect**, and for this reason, the Torah states that man was created "in the image of God."

The term **image**, on the other hand, is applied to the natural form, I mean to the notion in virtue of which a thing is constituted as a substance and becomes what it is. It is the true reality of the thing in so far as the latter is that particular being. In man that notion is that from which human apprehension derives. It is on account of intellectual apprehension that it is said of man: "**In the image of God created He him.**"

A precise clarification of the meaning of the term "natural form" would require a deep analysis of Maimonides's understanding of the structure of the material world. For our purposes, it suffices to say that "natural form" refers to the basic essence of a natural being, that internal essence that makes each thing what it is and not something else.

Here too a comparison with man-made articles may help us clarify the matter. The essence of a chair, for example, is the fact that it can be sat upon. A chair that cannot be sat upon is a contradiction in terms. From this it follows, for example, that a chair's color is not part of its essence. Similarly it makes no difference whether it is made of metal or of wood. Obviously if it is made of a very flimsy material that does not allow for sitting, it is not a chair. In parallel manner, man's essence is his intellect, the rest of his components, physical and even spiritual, such as his emotions, imaginations, and desires, are not essential to him as a human being.

From this it follows, according to Maimonides, that when the Torah speaks of man's image ("*tzelem*"), it is not referring to man's external form, but to his inner essence, that which was called during the Middle Ages, "natural form." Man's having been created "in the image of God" means that man's inner essence is similar to that of God. Just as God comprehends and knows Himself and all of reality without a body, so too man can comprehend and know the verities of the world by way of his intellect alone, without any physical organ.

Man is intellect; a man who lacks intellect is not a man. There is no comparing a man engaged in thought with a man engaged in his other activities. When a person thinks, he realizes and expresses his human essence in actual practice, and when he engages in any of his other activities, he is not man *in realia*, but only *in potentia*. For all of his other activities are like "those of a beast, with respect to his food and most of his circumstances."⁵

THE PURPOSE OF UNDERSTANDING – KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Maimonides defines the activity of the intellect as "understanding the verities [in life] **as they are.**" That is to say, understanding the world as it is and not as man's imagination or feelings are liable to distort it. This is the precise definition of **true knowledge** as opposed to false imagination - absolute correlation between the facts and the image created by the intellect. More precisely, we may say that the intellect does not take hold of the perceptible object, but rather of its rational essence. This essence is called in the language of the Middle Ages *muskal*, "fundamental truth." If so, the activity of the mind is to "grasp the fundamental truths" with the intellect, rather than comprehending the tangible facts by way of the senses.

For example, a man who was bitten by a black dog may be greatly influenced by the dog's color that he comprehends through his sense of vision. In the wake of this he may develop a fear of black animals, such that he may begin to sweat at the sight of a black cat cutting across his path. Clearly, understanding the facts in this manner does not constitute true knowledge. The deep impression left by the color results from the person allowing himself to be excessively swept away by his senses, and from the memory of his childhood fears that overwhelmed him when he was left alone in the dark. His imagination draws a connection between the color of the dog and his fear of darkness, and only intensifies the fear.

An intellectual understanding of the world would not be overly impressed by the color black; it would restrain the person's imagination and fears, and identify what truly brought about the biting. Through a precise identification of the dog and its kind and the biological mechanism that causes a dog to attack, it is possible to truly identify the reason for the bite. This understanding is a scientific understanding of the universe, and not merely an impression of the senses. This is the intellect's understanding of dog as a rational truth and not its comprehension of it as a sensible fact.

⁵ *Guide I, 2.*

In truth, the intellect cannot comprehend the tangible fact, but only the rational truth that lies behind these tangible phenomena. The senses identify the sensible data, but it is the intellect that must penetrate the sensible phenomena and distinguish the abstract rational truth from all its material coverings, which is the true cause of these phenomena.

Knowing the entirety of existence in an intellectual manner is the purpose of the intellect. Using modern terminology, this knowledge may be called scientific knowledge of all the components of reality. Maimonides, however, does not view scientific knowledge of the world as the ultimate objective of the intellect; rather, its ultimate object is the knowledge of God.

The prime verity to grasp is the unity of the Holy One, blessed be He, and all that pertains to that Divine matter. Other verities serve only to exercise one toward the attainment of Divine knowledge.

True scientific knowledge of the world cannot stop at the intermediate stages; it strives to know and comprehend the primary and fundamental cause of all these phenomena.

We saw earlier that the notion of purpose rules Maimonides's thought. Just as it is possible to divide up the natural beings and say that animals are means and man is the purpose, so too it is possible to categorize man's activities and assert that thought is the purpose and all other human activities are merely means. Here Maimonides argues that such a distinction may be made even with respect to the various acts of thought themselves. The knowledge of God is the objective and all other wisdom and sciences are merely the means by which to achieve it.

THE LOVE OF GOD

The aspiration to know the prime cause of all reality characterizes the active nature of human thought that strives to understand the root of all existence. According to Maimonides's interpretation, this aspiration, which begins with knowledge of the natural world and aims at knowing God who exists beyond it, is called by the Torah "the love of God."

When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an

exceeding longing to know His great Name. As David said: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalms 42:3).⁶

The duty to love God is not a *mitzvah* performed with one's emotions, but rather a *mitzvah* performed with one's intellect. It marks the intellect's striving to acquire understanding to the very limits of its ability. This idea is found in Maimonides's *Book of the Commandments*, repeated in his *Mishneh Torah*, and reiterated in his *Guide of the Perplexed*. In his *Book of the Commandments*, Maimonides counts the duty to love God among the *mitzvot* performed with the intellect and not with the emotions.⁷ In the *Mishneh Torah*, he asserts that "one only loves God with the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge, will be the love."⁸ And in the *Guide of the Perplexed* he explains that this *mitzvah* embraces the knowledge of all the sciences.

With regard to all the other correct opinions concerning the whole of being – opinions that constitute the numerous kinds of all the theoretical sciences... the Torah, albeit it does not make a call to direct attention to them... does do this in summary fashion by saying: "**To love the Lord**" (Deuteronomy 11:13). You know how this is confirmed in the dictum regarding **love**: "**With all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might**" (Deuteronomy 6:5). We have already explained in the *Mishneh Torah* that this **love** becomes valid only through the apprehension of the whole of being as it is and through the consideration of His wisdom as it is manifested in it.⁹

The love of God then is the intellect's ceaseless striving to expand its knowledge, to delve deeply into what it knows, and reach its ultimate end, knowledge of the foundation upon which all else depends. Knowing this principle is the first *mitzvah* in the *Mishneh Torah*.

The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all science is **to know** that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. All existing things, whether celestial, terrestrial, or belonging to an intermediate class, exist only through His true existence...

⁶ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:2.

⁷ *Book of the Commandments*, beginning of ninth root.

⁸ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuvah* 10:6.

⁹ *Guide*, III, 28.

Knowing this truth is an affirmative precept, as it says: "I am the Lord, your God" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6).¹⁰

Once again it should be noted that we are not dealing here with belief in God, but with **knowing Him** solely by way of the intellect. Both loving God and knowing Him are duties imposed upon the intellect. They mark man's obligation to realize his human purpose and invest all his energy and talents into comprehending God by way of his intellect, while recognizing that this comprehension is not possible without knowing the world in which God's wisdom manifests itself, this being the way through which to know Him.

If we try to conjure up an image of the person described in these sources, we picture somebody immersed in study, deep in active and constant thought, who tries to embrace with his mind all the scientific knowledge regarding the universe, but does not suffice with this knowledge, but strives to recognize God, who is the cause of all existence. Maimonides goes even further, and in the *Mishneh Torah*, at the end of the Book of Knowledge, he likens one who loves God and whose only aspiration is to know him to "one who is lovesick":

What is the love of God that is befitting? It is to love the Lord with **a great and exceeding love**, so strong that one's soul shall be knit up with the love of God, and **one should be continually enraptured by it**, like **a love-sick individual, whose mind is at no time free** from his passion for a particular woman, **the thought of her filling his heart at all times**, when sitting down or rising up, when he is eating or drinking. **Even more intense** should be the love of God in the hearts of those who love Him. **And this love should continually possess them**, even as He commanded us in the phrase, "with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 6:5). This, Solomon expressed allegorically in the sentence, "for I am sick with love" (Song of Songs 2:5). The entire Song of Songs is indeed an allegory descriptive of this love.¹¹

The duty to love God is demanding and uncompromising, constantly troubling and drawing out man's personality. This is the love of God. It would seem to follow from this that a person should reduce his other human activities to the barest minimum, and engage in them only to maintain the minimal existence of his body. Such a person will certainly not try to expand the scope of his practical activities beyond what is necessary for his existence. It is

¹⁰ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:1-6.

¹¹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuvah* 10:5.

also difficult to see such a person investing himself in public roles that will consume his time and energy. Rather, he will isolate himself in thought and meditation, at most engaging in conversation with his disciples, who in their thirst for knowledge will enrich the thought of their master.

We may add to this Maimonides's assertion that the intellectual apprehension of God is best achieved when a person is in absolute isolation, when he contemplates God without being able to convey his thoughts to another person, this comprehension being indescribable - "Let them be only your own, and not strangers' with you".¹² Such a person's desire to realize his purpose will lead him to live a solitary and meditative life, totally severed from his clamorous surroundings.

In light of all this, how can we account for all the varied aspects of Maimonides's actual life? How can we explain his ceaseless occupation in halakhic writing rather than philosophical contemplation? How are we to understand his serious occupation in medicine and his dedication to leading his people? In our next lecture, we shall outline Maimonides's biographical details and examine his literary oeuvre, with the hope of solving this riddle.

¹² Proverbs 5:17. See also final chapter of the *Guide* (III, 54).