



LECTURE #7:  
 THE PROPHET AS POLITICAL LEADER  
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In his *Guide of the Perplexed* (II, 37), Maimonides lists three classes of people that divide up according to the Divine overflow that reaches them: **men of science, prophets, and political leaders.**

You should know that the case in which the intellectual overflow overflows only toward the rational faculty and does not overflow at all toward the imaginative faculty – either because of the scantiness of what overflows or because of some deficiency existing in the imaginative faculty in its natural disposition, a deficiency that makes it impossible for it to receive the overflow of the intellect – is characteristic of **men of science engaged in speculation.**

If, on the other hand, this overflow reaches both faculties – I mean both the rational and the imaginative – as we and others among the philosophers have explained, and if the imaginative faculty is in a state of ultimate perfection owing to its natural disposition, this is characteristic of the class of **prophets.**

If again the overflow only reaches the imaginative faculty, the defect of the rational faculty deriving either from its original natural disposition or from insufficiency of training, this is characteristic of the class of **those who govern cities, while being the legislators,** the soothsayers, the augurs, and the dreamers of veridical dreams. All those who do extraordinary things by means of strange devices and secret arts and withal are not men of science belong likewise to this third class.

Schematically, the various classes may be presented as follows:

		Imagination	
		No Overflow	Overflow
Intellect	No Overflow		Political Leader
	Overflow	Philosopher	Prophet

If the Divine overflow only reaches a person's intellect, he is a philosopher who engages in speculation. If it overflows only towards a person's imaginative faculty, he belongs to "the class of those who govern cities, while being the legislators."<sup>1</sup> And if the overflow reaches both the person's intellect and his imagination, he falls into the class of prophets.

How does this comparison enhance our understanding of the role of prophecy? It seems that Maimonides wishes to use this comparison to demonstrate that a prophet is a combination of a philosopher and a political leader.

The difference between a philosopher and a political leader expresses itself, among other ways, in their respective abilities to communicate with the masses, to influence them, and to increase their understanding. It is very difficult for a philosopher who inclines to abstract conceptual formulations to explain his ideas to the average person who thinks in terms of concrete reality. Moreover, the philosopher's constant preoccupation with intellectual abstractions makes it difficult for him to understand the base motives of ordinary people driven by their passions.

In contrast, a political leader lives in the natural environs of the masses. As we have seen in the previous lecture, fundamentally speaking, the imagination belongs to the realm of the senses. Thus, a political leader is able to understand the world of the masses and explain himself to them in concrete, tangible terms. The tangible world in all its diversity is very familiar to a political leader, and it is reflected in his imagination. Moreover, he recognizes its influence on the human soul through the masses who are deeply impressed by this concrete reality. This familiarity allows him to control people's activities and to influence them through appropriate formulations and the use of rewards and punishments that shape people's conduct.

Defining a prophet as a combination of a philosopher and a political leader reflects his ability to bring the abstract word of God grasped by his intellect to the masses in their own language. The Divine overflow first reaches his intellect, and from there it proceeds to the imagination. On the one hand, he climbs by way of his understanding to the loftiest

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<sup>1</sup> Maimonides also includes in this category "the soothsayers, the augurs, and the dreamers of veridical dreams; all those who do extraordinary things by means of strange devices and secret arts." This is not the place to explain why these are included here. It suffices to say that the common denominator of this group lies in the ability of each of them to have considerable influence over other people.

comprehension of God, and elevates himself thereby to understand the foundations and essence of reality. On the other hand, he is able to translate this knowledge into concrete terms that are familiar to the common man, moving him to act in certain ways that shape his life and lead him to his ultimate objective.

## JACOB'S DREAM

According to Maimonides, the role of the prophet is described in the prophetic vision of the patriarch Jacob (Genesis 28:12-13). In the introduction to his *Guide*, Maimonides notes that this dream is a prophetic **parable**, where "each word has a meaning." The dream is comprised of **seven** subjects, each one having a precise intended meaning, as follows:

And he dreamed, and behold

1. A ladder
2. Set up on the earth
3. And the top of it reached to heaven
4. And behold the angels of God
5. Ascending
6. And descending
7. And behold the Lord stood above it

In his *Guide* (1:15), Maimonides explains the parable as follows:<sup>2</sup> The ladder represents reality with all its levels; thus it is set upon the earth, and its top reaches heaven. The earth refers to the sublunar world, and heaven represents the world of the celestial spheres with all its levels. The Lord standing above the ladder is a parable for God's constancy and permanence at the top of all reality, the first and permanent cause of all existence. Maimonides adds:

The angels of God are **the prophets...** How well put is the phrase "ascending and descending," in which ascent comes before descent. For after the ascent and attaining of certain rungs of the ladder that be known comes the descent with

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<sup>2</sup> This parable has been explained in different ways in different passages in Maimonides's writings (the *Guide*, II, 10, and *Mishne Torah, Hilkhhot Yedodei ha-Torah* 7:3). These explanations do not match what Maimonides says here. In his epistle to R. Chisdai ha-Levi (*Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Shilat, II, p. 683), he relates to this contradiction. R. Shilat, however, presents that epistle as of uncertain authorship; it is evident from the introduction that he inclines to think that the epistle is a forgery.

whatever decree the prophet has been informed of – with a view to governing and teaching the people of the earth.

Were the passage dealing with the angels whose basic location is in the world of the spirits, their descent should have been mentioned before their ascent. Here the prior mention of ascent proves that we are talking about people who are God's messengers (*mal'achim*). These messengers start out by climbing up towards and comprehending the spiritual world, beginning with the lower rungs of reality, namely, the material world, and going up to the higher rungs, the spiritual worlds. Following this ascent they must descend once again in order to teach and govern the people on the earth.

It may now be possible to understand the initial refusal to prophesy that we encounter in the various biblical passages describing the dedication of a prophet. Even Moses tries to escape the mission cast upon him by God. This attempt to be released from his assignment reflects the tension, in which the prophet finds himself following his ascent, after he has reached his elevated comprehension. He has no desire to withdraw from this comprehension in order to lead the masses. We have already noted several times that man's ultimate objective is the knowledge and comprehension of God. At this point then the prophet realizes his goal as a human being. Why should he give up this achievement in order to lead his people? We must delve more deeply into the prophet's sense of mission that leaves him split between his desire to realize himself and his commitment to bring the Divine command to the rest of the people. It is clear, however, that without the overflow that reaches his imaginative faculty, he cannot fulfill this mission. The imagination is the primary instrument of the prophetic mission.

### **APPLES OF GOLD IN SETTINGS OF SILVER**

Anyone who reads the books of the Prophets knows that they contain many stories, bold images, parables, and concrete descriptions of God. On the other hand, it is clear that God is neither a body nor a force in a body. How, then, can the prophets, who reach a true comprehension of God, describe Him in such a concrete manner? The solution is reflected in the words of Maimonides cited above: The prophet's language of parables is but a translation of their intellectual comprehension into verbal imagery. The overflow that overflows from the intellect to the imagination transfers the prophetic apprehensions from the realm of the intellect to the realm of the imagination. There exists a correspondence between the concrete images described in the prophetic books and the abstract concepts that constitute their source.

This quality has two advantages.<sup>3</sup> The first advantage has already been mentioned. This quality allows the prophet to create a meaningful dialogue with the masses of people, who cannot appreciate intellectual abstraction. But it also has a second advantage. Individuals who are capable of profound thought are able to translate the concrete images back into abstract concepts, and achieve through them a true comprehension of God. The prophet, then, speaks in a double language that may be understood in two ways; one layer of his words is directed to the masses, and another layer offers hints to those unique individuals, who strive to understand the profundity of the prophetic parables and thus comprehend God.

In the introduction to his *Guide*, Maimonides clarifies the deeper meaning of a well-constructed prophetic parable:

The Sage has said: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings [*maskiyot*] of silver" (Proverbs 25:11). Hear now an elucidation of the thought that he has set forth. The term *maskiyot* denotes filigree trceries; I mean to say trceries in which there are apertures with very small eyelits, like the handiwork of silversmiths. They are so called because a glance penetrates through them; for in the Aramaic translation of the Bible the Hebrew term *vayashkef* (Genesis 26:8) – meaning, he glanced – is translated *va-istekhe*. The Sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes.

This is a parable about parables, a parable about prophetic parables. A prophetic parable is designed like a globe of delicate silver filigree-work, in which there rests a golden apple.

Now see how marvelously this dictum describes a well-constructed parable. For he says that in a saying that has two meanings – he means an external and an internal one – the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver.

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<sup>3</sup> In effect, Maimonides alludes to a third advantage of the imaginative faculty, that it is not directed only toward the community at large, but also to the prophet himself. The translation of intellectual concepts into images allows for the prophet's quicker and more immediate understanding of God's word. See *Guide* (III, 38), regarding the prophet's intuition.

A prophetic parable is comprised of two layers of meaning, both having considerable importance, the internal meaning having greater value than the external one. The external meaning is compared to silver, whereas the internal one to gold. A parable, then, is not merely an instrument; it itself has value and meaning.

Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in the internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold.

The external portion of the parable is directed to people who are not keen-sighted, whereas its internal portion is directed to the keen-sighted. Keen sight is a metaphor for intellectual ability; the masses who are incapable of profound thought will only understand the external layer of the parable that parallels the silver filigree-work. Only select individuals who are capable of profound thinking can penetrate the silver filigree-work and grasp the parable's deeper meaning, that which parallels the golden apple.

The parables of the prophet, peace be on them, are similar. Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of humane societies, as is shown by the external meaning of Proverbs and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is.

The value of the silver filigree-work in the moral is the perfection of human society, namely, "perfection of the body," whereas the value of the golden apple is "perfection of the soul," "wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is." The prophet is a political leader, who turns to all strata of society; he relates with his words to both the masses and the elite. Since the ultimate objective of the Torah is perfection of both body and soul, the prophetic parable achieves both of these goals at once.

## **AND YOU SHALL BE LIKE GOD**

In the *Guide* (I, 2), Maimonides expands at length with a wonderful explanation of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. It would appear from his explanation that Maimonides relates to the account as a prophetic parable, golden apples and silver filigree-work, which has

not only an external, but also an internal meaning. Maimonides presents this explanation as an answer to an objection raised against him "years ago" by "a learned man." He asked how it is possible that man achieved knowledge of good and evil only after he sinned. It is astonishing that instead of being punished for his sin, Adam was blessed with the unique human quality of knowing good and evil.

Maimonides answers his questioner by clearly differentiating between knowledge of truth and falsehood, which he defines as "things cognized by the intellect," and knowledge of good and evil, which he defines as "things generally accepted as known." Knowledge of truth and falsehood involves clear knowledge of the facts, whereas knowledge of good and evil involves a **judgmental** attitude toward these facts. It would seem that a judgmental attitude is good, but it can also cause a person to lose track of the absolute truth, for man's judgment is dependent upon his material condition. Instead of seeing the factual truth as it is, a person observes reality from a narrow perspective that stems from his material condition, and issues his judgment about what is good and what is evil.

It follows then that initially man knew only how to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and that following his sin he lost the capacity to recognize the facts alone. At that time he began to view them from his narrow subjective perspective which subjects his knowledge to that perspective. This perspective limits man's judgement of reality; every judgment is in effect infected by the individual's subjective attitude, does this appear good **to him** or bad **to him**. For this reason, he is unable to see the truth as it is.

In our first lecture we illustrated this perspective with an example. A person who is bitten by a black dog may fail to overcome his fear and concentrate on what he saw in its most concrete form, and therefore begin to fear all black animals. The **imagination** has an important role in creating this narrow perspective, for the imagination preserves the sensible data in a person's memory, and if this sensible data is accompanied by a strong experience of fear, they become even more intensified. The intellect must overcome this sensible perspective in order to recognize the truth as it is. But after having eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, material man will always be subject, in some degree or another, to his judgment that will diminish his ability to know reality as it is.

The serpent in the account of the Garden of Eden serves as a parable for the imaginative faculty that seduces the woman, a parable for matter. She gives the forbidden fruit, the fruit of the imagination that leads a person astray, to man, a parable for the intellect that mixes together with the imagination and loses its capacity to see the truth as it is. From

then on, man has been subject to narrow vision stemming from the influences of materiality upon him.

Maimonides opens this chapter (*Guide* I, 2) by asserting that the words of the serpent, "And you shall be as God, knowing good and evil," mean: "And you shall be as political rulers," who are also called *Elohim* in biblical Hebrew.<sup>4</sup> We have seen that political rulers are endowed with a strong imaginative faculty. Thus, by eating of the tree of knowledge, man acquired the imaginative faculty which causes him to judge reality according to his own needs and passions, and not as it really is. This is the basic human condition that must be directed by way of proper leadership.

In his *Guide* (II, 30), Maimonides writes:

Among the amazing dicta **whose external meaning is exceedingly incongruous**, but in which – when you obtain a true understanding of the chapters of the Treatise – you will admire the wisdom of the **parables**<sup>5</sup> and their correspondence to what exists, is their statement: "When the serpent came to Eve, it cast pollution into her. The pollution of [the sons of] Israel who had been present at Mount Sinai, has come to an end. [As for] the pollution of the nations who had not been present at Mount Sinai, their pollution has not come to an end."

The entire Torah comes exclusively to purify man of the serpent's pollution, the serpent of imagination that leads man astray after his passions and cravings. Man cannot be perfected by way of intellectual comprehension alone, for he is not subject to truth as it is, but rather his perspective is always infected by his basic material condition. For this reason a book was given at Mount Sinai that is "a **guide** of the first and the last men" (*Guide* I, 2), to guide men **in their language**. Since man is driven by his imagination, he must be guided in the proper manner by way of his imagination, in order that he be liberated to the extent possible from the burden of the imagination, and that he succeed in some way to touch the essential truths, that is, the knowledge of God.

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<sup>4</sup> As *Chazal* have explained that judges are also called *Elohim*.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that this statement of *Chazal* is not like a prophetic parable that has meaning even according to its plain sense. Here the plain sense is very deplorable, and only the moral has meaning.



Only the prophet, who unites within himself knowledge of God and the ability to speak the language of the ordinary man, can realize this goal. Thus, the prophet, who is a combination of philosopher and political leader, is fit to bring God's commandments to the people, in order to raise them up on the ladder that he himself had previously ascended.