A serious reader of Rambam’s Moreh Nevuchim, The Guide for the Perplexed, discovers early on that it is no ordinary book. Rambam informs us in the first few pages that in writing the book, he was guided by the halachic injunction against teaching the esoteric foundations of the Torah—Ma’aseh Bereishit (Creation) and Ma’aseh Merkavah (the Vision of the Chariot)—except to a select few. Even to the few, halachah dictates that these “secrets” may only be taught in a skeletal fashion. This restriction, Rambam explains, is not arbitrary. The Torah’s deepest truths cannot be taught directly because they can be understood only when, through a flash of Divinely inspired enlightenment, a student who is ready to absorb them comprehends them and internalizes their meaning.

More than once, Rambam writes that his central purpose in writing Moreh Nevuchim is to present these truths in a manner that is consistent with their nature and with the requirements established by Chazal. Rambam goes so far as to swear his future readers to secrecy. He forbids them to pass on to others what they have learned from their study of Moreh Nevuchim. The only exception Rambam makes is for ideas that have already been expounded upon by well-known Torah sages who preceded him.

It is important to grasp over passages or ideas in Moreh Nevuchim that seem absurd. If they are absurd, then they are deliberately absurd. Let us look at an example. Rambam, basing himself on the Talmudic dictum that “anyone who is not wise, courageous and wealthy is incapable of prophecy,” writes that what the entire Jewish people experienced at Mount Sinai—where even infants heard the voice of God—could not have been prophecy. The people, unlike Moshe Rabbeinu, only heard a voice, without being able to distinguish the words. But, as Rambam notes, the Talmud teaches that all those present at the Revelation understood, “from the mouth of God,” the first two of the Ten Commandments—Anochi and Lo yihiyeh lecha—both of which mandate the belief in one God. How, in the absence of prophecy, Rambam asks, was this understanding possible? His answer: These two commandments are basic principles that can be arrived at through intellectual inquiry, and therefore could be understood even by one who is not a prophet. No serious student of Rambam can fail to be astonished at this explanation. Does Rambam mean to say that the infant in his crib who was incapable of prophecy was able to prove—through his own intellectual efforts—the philosophical truth of God’s unity, a determination that to this day remains beyond the intellectual reach of atheists and polytheists everywhere? Moreover, if this infant was so intellectually adept, could he not similarly deduce other seemingly more obvious commandments—such as the injunctions against murder and adultery? Also, if the Jewish people arrived at the truth through intellectual inquiry, what purpose was served by the Divine voice that, as Rambam quoting the midrash informs us, was heard by each person only as his neshamah (soul) left his body?

My objective here is not to provide an explanation for this particular problem but to give you, the reader, a glimpse into how Moreh Nevuchim should be approached. Ascertaining Rambam’s intent in this case requires analyzing everything he wrote on the concept of neshamah in Moreh Nevuchim and elsewhere, and reconciling what may at first seem to be his contradictory interpretations of the terms. It involves understanding how Rambam conceived of the “truth,” and of how man, through his
Throughout Mani’s teachings, it is evident that Rambam had tremendous respect for Aristotle. This is not surprising. Similar to the Torah perspective, at the pinnacle of Aristotle’s worldview is a single, abstract “first cause,” which is characterized by perfect unity. The symmetry and order of the natural world are expressions of its unity. Still, although Rambam cites Aristotle extensively throughout Mani’s works, Rambam explicitly refutes the notion that his intention in writing the book is to teach the philosopher’s physics or metaphysics. The books on these subjects are ade quate, and it in any matter they are made words, the blessing means that man’s self valid—Rambam’s assertion that the word physical self (tauvis) is an expression of his Divine essence (tavnit). Rambam believes that the principle underlying the relationship between one’s physical form (tauvis) and one’s inner essence (tavnit) and some of its wider-ranging ramifications are esoteric. Therefore, he refers to the relation between these ideas indirectly—through a disguised contradiction.

Of the natural world. The Torah, which among other things, examines the will of God and the way in which the natural world is an expression of that will, illuminates dimensions of being beyond nature. Rambam uses the order of nature as a basis for teaching how the Torah understands the Divine will. An instructive example of how Rambam uses the “science” of his day as a vehicle to convey fundamental truths about God and Creation is his discussion of the order of the planets. In this discussion he draws from ancient cosmology to support a particular theological position. Yet, while Rambam refers to ancient cosmology, his opinions are based on Torah sources. Thus, Rambam concludes his discussion of the planets by stating “whether it be true or not, the ancients grouped all the planets together.” Rambam’s wording is strange: What value could this belief of the ancients have if it were not true? By writing “whether it be true or not,” Rambam is telling us that the actual physical position of the planets is relatively unimportant to his overall thesis, a theological thesis which is based on rabbinical sources.

Aristotle’s thought does not, in every instance, serve as a basis from which Rambam expounds his teaching. When Aristotelian limited view of reality conflicts with the Torah—as it does regarding creation ex nihilo, miracles, the nature of prophecy, and the character and extent of Divine providence—Rambam rejects the philosopher’s ideas and contrasts them with those of the Torah, only in the geometric or structural sense, is never applied to God, who has no physical form. But, according to the Mishnah Torah, and in actual practice, one of the blessings said under the chupah is, “Asher yatzar et ha’adam betzalmo, betzalmut demut tavnito.” On a first reading, this blessing seems to mean the following: “He [God] who created man in His image, the image [tavnit] of His physical form (tauvis).” Both Riva and Radboc, who without directly referring to Rambam accept his interpretation of the word tauvis, address the difficulty of describing God using Rambam’s definition. Resolving this difficulty, they explain that the blessing should be read with a pause, thereby dividing the phrase “betzalmut demut tavnito” into two parts. In their reading of the blessing—a reading that is implicit in Rambam’s assertion that the word tauvis is never attributed to God—tauvis refers to man. Man’s tauvis, his physical form, was made to reflect the image of God in which he was created. In other words, the blessing means that man’s physical self (tauvis) is an expression of his Divine essence (tavnit). Rambam believes that the principle underlying the relationship between one’s physical form and one’s inner essence is esoteric. Therefore, he refers to the relationship indirectly—through a disguised contradiction.

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