

APPROACHING THE GUIDE: Penetrating Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim*

By Jonathan Blass

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 pages¹ that in writing the book, he was guided by the halachic injunction² against teaching the esoteric foundations of the Torah³—*Ma'aseh Bereishit* (Creation) and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (the Vision of the Chariot)⁴—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,⁵ 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*.⁶ The only exception Rambam makes is for ideas that have

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already been expounded upon by well-known Torah sages who preceded him. Thus, Rambam scatters allusions to Torah truths among diverse chapters of the book. Only a reader who takes seriously Rambam's instruction to compare one chapter to another, and his admonition that no word is superfluous, can hope to discern the author's intent. The serious reader has to search beyond the

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literal meaning of Rambam's words.

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,”⁷ writes that what the entire Jewish people experienced at Mount Sinai—where even infants heard the voice of God—could not have been prophecy.⁸ 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,”⁹ the first two of the Ten Commandments—“*Anochi*” and “*Lo yihyeh 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?¹⁰ 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 midrash¹¹ 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,¹² and reconciling what may at first seem to be his contradictory interpretations of the term. It involves understanding how Rambam conceived of the “truth,” and of how man, through his

intellect, can attain it. It demands that the reader recognize the role Rambam assigns imagination in giving expression to the truth, and how he defines the voice of God. It is also important to observe that the terminology used by Rambam to describe the Revelation at Sinai¹³ is identical to that which he uses to depict Adom before the sin.¹⁴ In *Moreh Nevuchim*, Rambam links Sinai to Adom more than once. At one point, he asserts that someone who “has understood the chapters of *Moreh Nevuchim* as they should be understood ... will be amazed” by the accuracy and wisdom of the Talmudic statement that the people of Israel were cleansed at Sinai of the contamination left in mankind by Chava’s submission to the primeval snake.¹⁵ Through the use of these allusions, Rambam propels the reader to contrast the conditions of the Jewish people at Sinai with those of Man in the Garden of Eden. This example highlights how important it is, as one studies *Moreh Nevuchim*, not to gloss over passages or ideas that seem absurd. If they are absurd, then they are *deliberately* absurd.

Let us look at another example: a contradiction between *Moreh Nevuchim* and the *Mishneh Torah*. In the former, Rambam states categorically that the Hebrew word *tavnit*, which means form only in the geometric or structural sense, is never applied to God, who has no physical form.¹⁶ But, according to the *Mishneh Torah*,¹⁷ and, in actual practice, one of the blessings said under the *chup-pah* is, “*Asher yatzar et ha’adam betzalmo, betzelem demut tavnito.*” On a first reading, this blessing seems to mean the following: “He [God] who created man in His image, the image [*betzelem*] of the visage [*demut*] of His physical form [*tavnito*].” Both Ritva and Radbaz,¹⁸ who without directly referring to Rambam accept his interpretation of the word *tavnit*, address the difficulty of describing God using the word *tavnit*. Resolving this difficulty, they explain that the blessing should be read with a pause, thereby dividing the phrase “*betzelem demut*

tavnito” into two parts. In their reading of the blessing—a reading that is implicit in Rambam’s assertion that the word *tavnit* is never attributed to God—*tavnit* refers to man: Man’s *tavnit*, his physical form, was made to reflect the image of God in which he was created. In other

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words, the blessing means that man’s physical self (*tavnit*) is an expression of his Divine essence (*tzelem*). Rambam believes that the principle underlying the relationship between one’s physical form (*tavnit*) and one’s inner essence (*tzelem*) and some of its wide-ranging ramifications are esoteric. He therefore refers to this relationship indirectly—through a disguised contradiction.

Over the centuries, Rambam has been attacked for being overly influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, and for incorporating these ideas into *Moreh Nevuchim*. But the truths Rambam is safeguarding in *Moreh Nevuchim* are not Aristotle’s. While Rambam uses Aristotelian philosophy as a tool to explain “the truth of the Torah’s esoteric teachings,”¹⁹ he clearly distinguishes between the teachings of the Torah—whose esoteric nature must be preserved through the use of parables—and the doctrines of Aristotelian philosophy. Although Greek philosophers also used allegories to convey certain ideas, according to Rambam, Greek thought, unlike the Torah, “suffers no harm” when taught in a straightforward manner.²⁰

Throughout *Moreh*

Nevuchim, it is evident that Rambam had tremendous respect for Aristotle.²¹ 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 *Moreh Nevuchim*, he 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 adequate, and if in any matter they are inadequate, what I will say on the matter will be no better than that which has already been said.*²²



Letter Requesting Funds to Ransom Captives, Maimonides, Egypt, 1170, MS 8254. Note Rambam’s signature at the end of the letter.

The Torah adds breadth and depth to the one-dimensional Aristotelian reality (Minds, spheres and earthly matter) accepted by Rambam²³ as the order 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,²⁴ 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.²⁵

Aristotelian thought does not, in every instance, serve as a base from which Rambam expounds his teaching. When Aristotle’s limited view of reality conflicts with the Torah—as it does regarding creation ex nihilo,²⁶ miracles, the nature of prophecy²⁷ and the character and extent of Divine providence²⁸—Rambam rejects the philosopher’s ideas and contrasts them with those of the Torah, only for the purpose of better understanding the latter.

In fact, Rambam disagrees with the philosopher on almost all substantive theological issues²⁹—on the definition of “Mind,” on the impossibility of identifying God with intellect and on human immortality. Because Aristotle’s thought never rises above the natural world, even

when Rambam agrees with the philosopher on a given issue, the framework of his thought is vastly different.

At the beginning of *Moreh Nevuchim*, Rambam informs his reader that a sense of trepidation has not left him over the fact that he is writing on “esoteric issues that our nation has addressed in no other book throughout this exile.”³⁰ Despite this, he feels compelled to put his knowledge into writing so that it will not be lost upon his death.³¹ *Moreh Nevuchim*, he writes, will answer most questions that arise regarding the “true wisdom of the Torah.”³² It does this by using familiar, philosophical terms. But, as Rambam clearly intended, its messages are disguised so that comprehension is accompanied by a conviction that one has been given a gift, an illumination, whose impact on the soul can never be forgotten.³³ JA

Notes

1. Intro. to *Moreh Nevuchim*, pt. 1.
2. *Mishnah Chagigah* 2:1.
3. Rambam, in *MN* 1, chap. 35, lists what he includes among “*sitrei torah.*”
4. See Rambam’s commentary on the *Mishnah Chagigah* 2:1 for his definition of these terms.
5. *MN*, intro. to pt. 2; chap. 3; intro. to pt. 3.
6. Because of this, I consulted with Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg, Rav Yaakov Ariel and Rav Zvi Tau, and received their blessings before proceeding to teach *Moreh Nevuchim*. Since the writing of *Moreh Nevuchim*, many of the truths hidden by Rambam have been publicized in other works by renowned *talmidei chachamim* (see *Iggerot Re’iyah, iggeret* 414). In addition, Rambam has been accused of harboring secret beliefs that are at variance with basic principles of the Jewish faith, as propounded by Rambam himself! One of the rabbis I consulted felt that for this reason it is a mitzvah to explain *Moreh Nevuchim* in a way that is consistent with Rambam’s own teachings.
7. *Shabbat* 92a; *Nedarim* 38a.
8. *MN* 2, chap. 33.
9. *Makkot* 24a.
10. These questions, among others, are raised by Rashba in *Teshuvot HaRashba* 4: 234.
11. *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 5.
12. See *MN* 1, chaps. 42 and 70; *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 4:9.
13. *MN* 2, chap. 33.
14. *MN* 1, chap. 2.
15. *MN* 2, chap. 30.
16. *MN* 1, chap. 3.
17. *Hilchot Berachot* 2:11; *Hilchot Ishut* 10:3.

This is the wording of the blessing as it appears in the *Mishneh Torah*. (See the notes in the Frankel edition on changes in the wording of the *Mishneh Torah*.) The wording of the blessing, as recorded by Rav Sa’adia Gaon, is slightly different, and therefore avoids the problem of having *tavnit* refer to God: “*Asher yatzar et ha’adam betzalmo uvetzelem demut tavnito.*”

18. *Shittah Mekubetzet* on *Ketubot* 8a.
19. *MN* 2, chap. 2.
20. *MN* 1, chap. 17.
21. See Rambam’s letter to Ibn Tibbon, *Iggerot HaRambam* 1, chap. 2, p. 553.
22. *MN* 2, chap. 2.
23. *MN* 2, chap. 11.
24. *MN* 1, chap. 35.
25. Cited by Rambam in *MN* 2, chap. 10.
26. *MN* 2, chaps. 13–25.
27. *MN* 2, chap. 32.
28. *MN* 3, chap. 17.
29. Although he agrees with Aristotle that the Divine will is expressed in the laws of nature.
30. Rambam’s instruction to the reader at the beginning of *MN*.
31. Intro. to pt. 3.
32. Intro. to *MN*.
33. *MN* 1, chap. 62: “This wisdom can never be forgotten.” In his introduction to *Moreh Nevuchim*, Rambam writes that after an illumination of the truth, “we return to the dark night, almost to how we were before.”