

From Moshe to Moshe

By Rabbi Meir Triebitz

Prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu

In his discussion of the seventh of his thirteen principles Rambam discusses the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu¹:

I would have preferred to elaborate upon this wonderful idea – to unlock the verses of the Torah and explicate the expression “mouth to mouth” (Bamidbar 12:8) as well as that entire verse and other verses like it. However I realized that these ideas are very subtle and require extensive elaborations, introductions and metaphors. All of this is in order to explain the existence of angels, their different levels in relationship to the Creator, the concept of the soul and its powers, and to discuss the language used by prophets relating to the Creator and the angels. A hundred pages – even if I wanted to be brief – would not suffice for all of this. Therefore I will leave this for some other work – either a book explaining Midrash which I intend to

¹ In principle 7 of the Thirteen Principles (based on Rambam’s commentary on the Mishna) it states, “I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moses is absolutely true. He was the chief of all prophets, both before and after Him.”

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write, or a book about prophecy which I have already begun, or a book explaining the fundamentals.²

At first thought it seems that Rambam never realized his goal of writing a book on the subject of the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu. The only place in his entire literary corpus which he devotes to a discussion of this nature is in Mishne Torah. There, the discussion is limited to a single Halacha³.

² *Commentary on the Mishna* 'Introduction to Perek Chelek' ed. Shilat; Jerusalem 5757 p. 143. All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

³ See Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah chapter 7; halacha 6

"All the Prophets, from the first to the last, prophesized in these ways, with the exception of Moses our Teacher, chief of the Prophets. In what ways did Moses differ from the other Prophets? Firstly, whereas the other Prophets received their prophecies in a dream or vision, Moses received his while awake and standing, as it is written, "And when Moses was in the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice speaking to him, etcetera". Secondly, the other Prophets received their prophecies via an angel. Therefore, what they saw was by way of parable and riddle. Moses, on the other hand, did not receive his prophecies via an angel, as it is written, "With him I speak mouth to mouth", "And the Lord spoke to Moses face to face", "...and the outward appearance of the Lord does he behold", that is to say that what Moses saw what not by way of parable, but he saw each prophecy absolutely clearly without any parables or riddles. The Torah said about him, "...manifestly, and not in dark speeches" showing that when Moses received a prophecy he did not do so by way of riddles, but did so with clarity, and saw everything absolutely clearly. Thirdly, the other Prophets were scared [of their prophetic visions] and would shy away, but Moses wasn't and didn't. Scripture says, "...as a man speaks with a friend" - just as a man is not scared to listen to his friend, so Moses had the capabilities to understand his prophecies and to stand unafraid. Fourthly, none of the Prophets prophesized whenever they wanted to, but whenever G-d wanted to He would visit Moses and bestow upon him prophecy. Moses did not have to attune his thoughts or otherwise prepare himself, for the reason that he was always prepared and stood like a ministering angel. Therefore, he would receive prophecies at any time, as it is written, "Stand still and I will hear what the Lord will command concerning you". In this G-d trusted him, as it is written, "Go say to them, 'Return to your tents'. But as for you, stand here by Me, and I will speak to you, et cetera". From here we see that whenever any of the other Prophets had finished prophesizing they would return to their houses

From the following passage in the *Guide* it appears that Rambam himself seems to have changed his mind about writing a book on the topic, because he states that he has dealt with the topic sufficiently.

I have already explained to all the four differences by which the prophecy of *Moses our Master* is distinguished from the prophecy of the other prophets... Accordingly there is no need to repeat it; moreover it does not enter into the purpose of this Treatise.⁴

In Rambam's own words his discussion of Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy is limited to these two places. By his own admission it seems that he never wrote the work that he envisioned writing and described in his *Commentary on the Mishna*.

This requires explanation. How could it be that Rambam, whose literary efforts cover virtually every halachic and philosophical concept within Judaism, did not realize the goal that he explicitly set for himself in his *Commentary*? The prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu is the basis of all faith and knowledge about God, Torah and Mitzvot, yet Rambam only devotes one Halacha to it in Mishne Torah and a brief discussion in the *Commentary*! Furthermore, why isn't there even a single chapter devoted to this topic in *Guide*? In fact, in the section on prophecy, Rambam repeatedly points out to the reader that he will not discuss Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy at all! He writes:

[and families] and other bodily needs, like everybody else, so they therefore did not separate themselves from their wives. Moses, on the other hand, did not return to his home, and separated himself from his wife, and all that resembled her, for ever. His mind was [always] connected to G-d, and G-d's glory never left him at all; light emanated from his face, and he was holy like an angel."

Translation by Immanuel M. O'Levy, 1993 from

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/rambam-yesodei-hatorah.txt>

⁴ Section II chapter 35 p. 367

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As for the prophecy of *Moses our Master*, I shall not touch upon it in these chapters with even a single word, either in explicit fashion or in a flash.⁵

Rambam's exaggerated claim that he will not refer to Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy in any way must surely be interpreted as an esoteric message to the intelligent reader for whom Rambam has written *Guide*. The fact is that Rambam does mention aspects of Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy in section II; chapters 39 and 46. In both places Rambam draws distinctions between the prophecy of Moshe and that of other prophets. His declaration in chapter 35 is clearly a rhetorical device through which he is clearly conveying a deeper message. This is a device which Rambam declares in the introduction to *Guide* that will use in his work. He writes:

In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and disclose others. Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one.⁶

Even though in this case there are no mutually contradiction assumptions, Rambam is clearly contradicting himself when he denies that he will discuss Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy, yet goes on to discuss it. Therefore we must delve deeper into *Guide* to uncover his real meaning.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *Guide* Introduction p. 18

The Purpose of *Guide* – The Wisdom of Moshe Rabbeinu

In the introduction to *Guide* Rambam discusses the purpose of the work. He writes that “the purpose of this Treatise... is the science of the Law in its true sense”⁷. Further in the introduction he writes:

You should not think that these great *secrets* are fully and completely known to anyone among us. They are not. But sometimes truth flashes out to us that we think that it is day, and then matter and habit in their various forms conceal it so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first. We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day. That is the degree of the great one among the prophets, to whom it was said; *But as for thee, stand thou here by Me* (Deuteronomy 5:28), and of whom it was said: *that the skin of his face sent forth beams, and so on.* (Exodus 34:29)⁸.

Having made it abundantly clear that the highest level of understanding of the wisdom of the Torah is that of Moshe Rabbeinu, it thereby follows that if Rambam intends his work to communicate the “true wisdom of the Torah” then he intends to reveal the wisdom of Moshe Rabbeinu! Rambam’s declaration that “there are those among us who have achieved the level of the ‘greatest of the prophets’” leaves no doubt in the mind of his reader that he felt himself to be in a position to communicate that very wisdom. We can rephrase Rambam’s declared intention in *Guide*: to elucidate to his reader the wisdom of the Torah as understood by Moshe Rabbeinu!

⁷ *ibid.* p. 5

⁸ *Guide* Introduction, p. 7

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It no doubt comes as a surprise to discover this hidden meaning and intention in *Guide*. Nevertheless a careful reading of the work reveals that this is certainly the most consistent and central theme of the entire book. Throughout the text we find that the purpose of *Guide* is to communicate Moshe Rabbeinu's understanding of the Torah, and its commandments, which constitutes "the true wisdom of the Torah."

Moshe Rabbeinu's Wisdom Uncovered

The bulk of the third section of *Guide* is devoted to *Taamei Hamitzvot* – the reasons for the mitzvot. In almost thirty chapters Rambam devotes himself to what he understands to be the Divine wisdom which underlies the commandments. He precedes his discussion of the reasons for the mitzvot with an argument that all acts of G-d must be presumed to have an underlying logic. G-d does not act without reason. As a consequence His commandment must also have an underlying reason⁹. At the end of this chapter he writes:

I have already informed you of the opinion of our Torah regarding this matter which we are obligated to believe. There is no objection to our assertion that the existence or non existence of anything is in exact accordance with His wisdom, even though we ourselves do not know many details of the wisdom of His actions. On the basis of this belief the entire Torah of Moshe Rabbeinu is built¹⁰.

Rambam's claim is clear. The Torah of Moshe is built upon the assumption that G-d's commandments have Divine reasons, and that man is privy to a partial understanding of those reasons. Even though man cannot ultimately understand every aspect of Divine reason, he can understand enough so that the commandment can be given a

⁹ Section III chapter 25

¹⁰ Schwartz ed. p. 511

rational explanation. The Torah of Moshe Rabbeinu, therefore, informs us of commandments which are based upon clear and reasonable concepts.

Further on, in chapter 27, Rambam discusses in more detail the rational basis and purpose of the commandments. In his opinion the purpose is twofold: “perfection of the body and perfection of the soul”¹¹. He writes:

The true Law then, which as we have already made clear is unique – namely, the Law of *Moses our Master* – has come to bring us both perfections, I mean the welfare of the states of people in their relations with one another through the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing and through the acquisition of noble and excellent character. In this way the preservation of the population of the country and their permanent existence in the same order become possible so that every one of them achieves his first perfection; I mean also the soundness of the beliefs and the giving of correct opinions through with ultimate perfection is achieved.¹².

Therefore, what distinguishes the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu is that the revealed commandments inform man of a rational means to reach his physical and spiritual goals. As such, Rambam’s details elaboration of the rational basis for the commandments is none other than the very rational basis of the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu.

This rational nature is expressed in every place where Moshe’s prophecy is mentioned. We have already quoted Rambam’s declaration in the section of prophecy that he will not utter “one word” concerning the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu. Nonetheless, in section II chapter 39 in the middle of the section on prophecy, Rambam writes that the laws of Moshe Rabbeinu are intended to

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 516

¹² *ibid.* chapter 27 p. 511

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produce the ultimate balance in man's actions, thereby guarding him from the twin evils of extremity of either indulgence or asceticism. The scriptural description of such laws as “just statutes and judgments”¹³ is interpreted to mean ‘equi-balanced’. Rambam continues:

When we shall speak in this Treatise about the reasons accounting of the commandments, there equi-balance and wisdom will be made clear to you insofar as this is necessary¹⁴.

After discussing the reasons for the commandments, Rambam closes his work with four chapters of which the central theme is what is considered man's highest state of perfection. In chapter 54 Rambam first lists four levels of perfection, the highest of which is intellectual perfection¹⁵. The paragon of intellectual perfection, writes Rambam, was clearly Moshe Rabbeinu¹⁶. Afterwards, towards the end of the chapter he adds an additional perfection – imitatio Dei. He writes:

It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is¹⁷.

The person Rambam is referring to is none other than Moshe Rabbeinu who, as Rambam stated in section I chapter 54¹⁸ was shown the entirety of the natural world by G-d, and its interconnectedness in a way that he was able to understand G-d's

¹³ Section II chapter 39 p. 380

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 380

¹⁵ *ibid.* Section III chapter 54 p. 635

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 633

¹⁷ *ibid.* Section III chapter 54 p. 638

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 124

providence in great detail. In essence, Rambam is saying that the intellectual and moral perfection that is the goal of mankind is the level reached by Moshe Rabbeinu. In a sense it constituted for Rambam the very reason that he wrote the book. As he concludes:

This is the extent of what I thought fit that we should set down in this Treatise; it is a part of what I consider very useful to those like you. I hope for you that through sufficient reflection you will grasp all the intentions I have included therein with the help of God, may He be exalted.¹⁹

The Reasons for the Mitzvot

A cursory examination and survey of the quotes from the *Guide* brought above would seem to suggest that the main thrust of Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy for Rambam lies in the area of the rational reasons underlying the commandments, or as Rambam refers to it, the *Ta'amei Hamitzvot*. Rambam's discussion of this occupies the bulk of the third section of the *Guide*, beginning with chapter 25 and culminating with chapter 49. Since the *Guide* itself goes on for only five more chapters, the bulk of which are seeming digressions, it would appear that Rambam himself understood these twenty five chapters as a major purpose of his work. While it is true that in his introduction he does write explicitly that the goal of the work is to explain the secrets of the chariot – *Ma'aseh Merkava*, and the secrets of creation – *Ma'aseh Bereishit*, he also writes that the purpose of the work is to explain “the true science of the law.” In addition, there does not appear to be any explicit discussion of *Ma'aseh Bereishit*, save for his discussion of the arguments against eternity theories. Nor does his pithy discussion of *Ma'aseh Merkava* in the beginning of the third section seem anything more than an attempt to avoid the issue. The typical reader who must have been quite excited having read

¹⁹ *ibid.* Section III chapter 54 p. 638

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Rambam's promising introduction must surely have been disappointed after reading the seventh chapter of that third section where Rambam concludes his anti-climactic discussion of the secrets of the chariot with the statement:

We shall accordingly start upon other subjects from among those that, I hope, I shall explain in this treatise²⁰.

As I have already noted, statements of this sort in the *Guide* appear to be signals that Rambam is sending out to his alert and enlightened readers, having discarded his unlearned audience. Communicating secrets of the Torah requires a filtering of the audience and this is best accomplished by giving those whom you don't want to know these types of things the impression that they have gotten as much as they can from the work. Rambam alludes to this methodology in his introduction when he tells his reader to pay attention to the sequence of chapters. Anti-climactic statements of the type above, in my opinion, are an example of this methodology.

In section III chapter 25 Rambam asserts that act of God are teleological, i.e. have rational reasons and motivations. One cannot attribute a vain, comically motivated or useless act to God²¹. Acts of God must necessarily be “good and pleasant”²². Not only is this indicated in the verse “And *Elokim* saw everything which He had made and it was very good”²³, but this is the opinion of all those who comply with teachings of Moshe Rabbeinu²⁴. Rambam's discussion in this chapter, however, is limited to acts of creation – i.e. physical acts in the world. This is clear from both the verses and the examples which he musters to support his point. Those who contend that Divine acts can be for no intelligible purpose are guilty of “vain-

²⁰ Section III chapter 7 p. 413

²¹ Section III chapter 25

²² *ibid.*

²³ Bereishit 1:31

²⁴ Section III chapter 25

imagination” and “absurd beliefs”, and are doing so in a desperate effort to avoid at all costs any assumption of cosmic “eternity”²⁵. Imputing reasons for acts of creation imply eternity because logic and reason necessarily precede the act of creation.

In the very beginning of the next chapter, Ramban makes an almost inconspicuous note of the fact that just as the scholars of the law are divided as to the nature of God’s acts, so too are they divided as to the nature of God’s commandments. It is interesting to note that while he does bring both verses and statements of the Talmudic Sages to buttress his own position that commandments, like acts, are rooted in reason, he does acknowledge, albeit 22 chapters later on, that a Mishna which appears both in *Berachot*²⁶ and in *Megillah*²⁷ is in line with the contending opinion, which, in chapter 26 he seems to treat with somewhat more respect. It is clear that the argument that God’s commands can be rationally apprehended is not as obvious as the same argument regarding His natural acts. There is, therefore, no doubt that Rambam himself was aware of the fact that he was making a non-trivial jump from positing the rational, teleological nature of Divine creation to the rational, teleological nature of Divine commandments. The central ontological point of Rambam appears to be that just as the natural world is subject to man’s rational analysis, a central theme in the entire *Guide*, so too is it the case regarding His commandments. It can be safely said that Rambam was positing the legitimacy of a rational science of revelation. Of course Rambam understood this as constituting the basis of the teachings of Moshe Rabbeinu²⁸.

Ramban, in his commentary on the Torah musters arguments against Rambam’s position. An examination of these will help us gain a

²⁵ *ibid.* p. 511

²⁶ chapter 5 Mishna 3

²⁷ chapter 4 Mishna 9

²⁸ Section III chapter 27 p. 511

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deeper insight into this matter. The most striking and telling point of contention is their respective interpretations of a Midrash:

Does God really care if one slaughters [an animal] from the front of the neck or slaughters it from the back? For the commandments were given only to ‘purify’ mankind, as it says “the word of God is pure” (Tehillim 18:31)²⁹

Ramban³⁰ understands this Midrash as saying that the commandments are of no intrinsic interest to God but only come to communicate to man theological and ethical ideas which will guide him in the proper way. One should understand similarly the Mishna in Berachot which admonishes one who claims that the commandment of sending away the mother bird before taking her children is expressing God’s mercy. God Himself is not commanding us because He is personally concerned with the bird, but is only communicating to us the virtue of mercy. One should therefore not ascribe a motivation of mercy in God’s command, but rather a desire to communicate that virtue to man.

Rambam, in section III chapter 26, also cites the same Midrash regarding the slaughter of animals and initially admits that it appears to contradict his position. His response is that the Midrash is speaking about the details of the commandment and not referring to the general idea of the commandment itself. While all commandments are issued by God with a rational reason and motivation, the details are arbitrary. Nonetheless, a command of God, just as any act of His, is not preformed for purely pedagogical purposes. God Himself has a reason for the command. In the case of sending away the mother bird, He has a real concern for His creatures. Regarding the Mishna itself, Rambam notes in section III chapter 40 that it is expressing the contending opinion and that there is a dispute among the Sages on the issue.

²⁹ *Bereishit Rabba* 47:1

³⁰ *Devarim* 22:6

The dispute between Rambam and Ramban on the interpretation of the Midrash concerning the commandment of slaughtering an animal may be understood in the background of a more general theological dispute concerning the nature of the God-man relationship. Rambam has established earlier in section I; chapter 52³¹ of the *Guide* that one can only make statements about God's acts but not about Himself. This position is assumed throughout the entire *Guide* and especially in the section dealing with the reasons for the mitzvot. Rambam is including God's commandments within the category of Divine acts. They are fundamentally no different than physical creations. Attributing reasons for the commandments is therefore no different than attributing reasons of any phenomena in the natural world. Just as it is apparent that every thing created in the world has a clear function and purpose which can be established by scientific observation and analysis, so too regarding His commandments. As far as Rambam is concerned giving reasons for the commandments is not describing God in any sense, for that would violate the axioms of negative theology. Rather, it is an objective description of His acts. Ramban, on the other hand, does not, as far as can be gleaned from his writings, ascribe to the position of Rambam regarding Divine attributes and descriptions. As such, he assumes that the Mishna in Berachot which tell us not to ascribe Divine commandments to Divine moral attributes is assuming that God Himself is being described and not merely His acts. Hence, the Mishna is telling us that we cannot infer on the basis of a command, a Divine ethical motive. This is something that Rambam would certainly agree with but he has already ruled it out as being absurd in his negative theology.

The basic theme that arises from this analysis is that Rambam's position on the reasons of the commandments, which he describes as being the basis of the teachings of Moshe Rabbeinu, is based upon a very definitive rational and objective understanding of both Divine

³¹ p. 118-9

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acts and revelation. They are part of God's rationally conceived creation and may be analyzed and understood in the same way as science and philosophy analyze and understand the world. This rational view of God's revelation to man constitutes the teaching of Moshe Rabbeinu and it is the *Guide* which presents this very teaching.

Conclusion

This brings us back to the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu. In both his Commentary to the Mishna in the introduction to Perek Chelek and the Mishneh Torah, Rambam emphasizes the exclusively "rational" nature of Moshe's prophecy. This is in contradistinction to the prophecy of others which carry an "imaginative" component. This distinction is repeated in the side comment in the *Guide* at the end of the section on prophecy (section II end of chapter 45³²). Rambam's division of prophecy in general and Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy into two independent principles in his Thirteen Principles of Faith emphasize the mutual exclusiveness of these two prophetic phenomena.

However, if we survey the Bible, which constitutes the very prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu, wherein lies this rationality? The legal part of the Torah is replete with all types of laws ranging from the so called "rational" to laws which apparently have no reason but are irreducible Divine revelations. How, then, does Rambam's assertion of the exclusively rational nature of Moshe's prophecy square with the irreducibly apodictic nature of the legal part of the Bible which constitutes, clearly, the major aspect of Moshe's prophecy?

The answer to these questions seems clear enough. For Rambam, the commandments found in the Bible are not irreducible and opaque legal injunctions, but rather acts of God which are subject to the same rational laws as are evident in God's creation of the physical

³² p. 403

and natural world. Only through the uniquely rational intellect of Moshe Rabbeinu and his prophecy was the Divine logic in bringing the Jewish people to the religion of reason possible.

In this sense, given that the purpose of the Guide was, in the words of Rambam, to explain the “true nature of the law”, we can now come to the conclusion of our discussion. The Guide to the Perplexed itself, in the Rambam’s mind, in fact was communicating to us the underlying rational weltanschauung which constitutes the very nature of the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu.

