

Conditions for Attaining True Knowledge of God: According to the *Guide of the Perplexed* III:52-54

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1. Introduction

Moses Maimonides (Moshe ben Maimon, Hebrew acronym: Rambam, 1138-1204) is one of the greatest thinkers of the medieval period, who had numerous roles in his life, such as a Rabbi, Jewish community leader, medical doctor, and philosophical scholar. He wrote many books in various fields,¹⁾ and his most important philosophical work is *the Guide of the Perplexed* (Arabic: *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, Hebrew: *Moreh nebukhim*, Latin: *Dux neutrorum*) written in Judeo-Arabic (hereafter referred to as the *Guide*). The *Guide* was written for his disciple, Joseph ben Judah (c. 1160-1226), after his disciple left for Aleppo in 1185. There are three parts in the *Guide*: the first part (total 76 chapters) deals with the explanation of Hebrew vocabulary, especially vocabulary relating to God's existence, His oneness, His incorporeality, and His eternity, which are the first four of Maimonides' thirteen principles (*qawā'id*) of Judaism in his *Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Sanhedrin*, Chapter 10 (*Helek*); in the second part (total 48 chapters), Maimonides demonstrates God's creation, such as the spheres and the angels, the creation stories in the *Torah*, and the prophets and the prophecies; in the third part (total 54 chapters), he discusses both philosophical matters, such as form and matter, or deprivation and evil, as well as metaphysical subjects, such as God's providence, the commandments of God, and the soul and body of human beings. He posits his concluding chapters in the last part of the *Guide*, from chapter 51 to chapter 54.

In the introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides explains that the external meanings of the parables of the prophets are useful for the welfare of human societies, whereas the internal meanings of it are useful for individual beliefs. In the *Guide*, part three, chapter 54, Maimonides insists that man's ultimate aim is to acquire true knowledge of God; however, it is only attainable through satisfying several requirements to this end. In this presentation, I will examine these conditions, which Maimonides believes to be necessary for attaining true knowledge of God, by focusing on his concluding chapters, namely, the *Guide*, part three, chapters 52 to 54.²⁾

2. Perfection from Four Aspects

In chapter 54, Maimonides analyses the perfection of man from four aspects. The first one is the perfection of possessions that an individual obtains for himself; for example, money, clothes, tools, slaves, lands, and other similar objects, on which people spend much time trying to reach this perfection.³⁾ Maimonides argues that there is no relationship between such an individual and this kind of perfection, because these possessions exist outside of that person, and each of these possessions exists on its own. For example, a great king could become a mean and despised man if he lost the link between his property and himself, even though he himself has not been changed at all. Since this perfection cannot be perpetuated, a man cannot achieve any assured reality through that perfection.

The second one is the perfection of the body's constitution and shape, that is, the perfection of an individual's temperament and body; it should be well balanced and proportioned.⁴⁾ This, Maimonides states, cannot be the final goal of man's perfection, because this bodily perfection is possessed by all species of animals in common. Furthermore, even if one's physical strength reaches its best, if one compares one's physical strength with a lion's, it cannot on any account exceed a lion's power. So it can be said that this perfection merely aims at the body's utility and still lacks certain benefit for the soul of man.

The third one is the perfection of the moral virtues (*faḍā' il al-khulqīya*),⁵⁾ which an individual pursues in order to develop his own character (*akhlāq*). Most of God's *commandments* (*mizvot*) serve to help man attain this perfection.⁶⁾ Maimonides remarks that this perfection is needed only as a preliminary step, and is not a goal in itself, because all these virtues relate only to a relationship between an individual and other people. They only serve to benefit others, or to be used as tools for others, because if a man is alone and does not have any relations with other people, then, all his virtues are not employed for anything, and accomplish nothing within that individual. Therefore, it can be said that this perfection is useful only for others, and is not beneficial for man's own self.

The fourth aspect is the true perfection for man. It aspires to attaining rational virtues (*faḍā' il al-nuḥqīya*)⁷⁾, in other words, it works to conceptualise the intelligible (*mu'qūlāt*) to obtain true opinions concerning divine matters. This is man's final goal, Maimonides argues, as it completes the true perfection within each individual serving for that individual man alone. It grants eternity to that person, and it makes a man as he ought to be. Maimonides insists that we should not take pride in the aforementioned three perfections: possession, bodily health, and character, as both prophets and philosophers have warned us. Rather, we are expected to desire and to be proud of knowledge of Him to be exalted (*ma'rifat-hu ta'alā*), because it is the true science (*'ilm al-ḥaqīqī*).

3. Difference between ‘Wisdom’ and ‘Intellect’

How then can man obtain true knowledge of God? Firstly, let us see how Maimonides elucidates the meaning of wisdom at the beginning of chapter 54. He explains that the term ‘wisdom’ (*ḥokhmah*) in Hebrew has four meanings. One meaning is apprehension of the true realities (*idrāk al-ḥaqā’iq*), which means, to apprehend the reality of God. It is also applied to the acquisition of moral virtues. Another meaning is the acquisition of art (*ṣinā’ā*), in other words, to acquire skills and techniques for practical works. The last one is applied to the aptitude for stratagems and tactics. Based on the above explanation, ‘the wise’ (*ḥakham*) can be defined as one who has the aptitude for rational virtues, moral virtues, practical skills, and stratagems and tactics. So, a man who has knowledge of the Law (*‘ilm at-sharī’a*)⁸ can be called ‘the wise,’ because he has an aptitude for both rational and moral virtues. Concerning the rational matter in the Law, a man accepts it as the truth without it being demonstrated as such through the method of speculation.⁹ Besides, a man accepts wisdom from the books of the prophets and the sayings of the Sages, and this wisdom demonstrates the rational matter in the Law as true. Through this, we can understand that the knowledge of the Torah and wisdom of the Sages are different kinds. The Sages mention that man is required firstly to obtain knowledge of the Torah, then the wisdom [of the Sages], and lastly the legal science of the Law (*fiqh at-sharī’a*) in order to judge what he ought to do through inference (*istikhrāj*). In other words, firstly, a man needs to accept the opinions (*āṛā’*) of the Torah, and secondly, these opinions should be demonstrated, and lastly, required actions should be clarified.

In chapter 52 Maimonides expounds what the intellect is. He argues that those who have decided to achieve human perfection should know that the intellect (*al-‘aql*) is always with us, connecting man with God.¹⁰ Through this intellect, namely, the light from above, God watches over us, while we understand Him through this light. It is only after understanding this point, Maimonides explains, that a man comes to perceive humbleness, fear of God, and shame before Him. Because of this esoteric understanding, referring to the way of the Sages (*ḥakhamīm*), their secret (*bāṭin*) conduct at home comes to be the same as their public (*ẓāhir*) conduct outside of their home. Through the above considerations, it can be concluded that by way of the intellect from above, man can obtain true knowledge of God, with the help of both the knowledge of the Law and the wisdom of the Sages.¹¹

4. Two things to Learn through the Law: Fear and Love for God

As we understand from the above, we are first required to have knowledge of the Law. In chapter

52, Maimonides explains two things which the Law teaches us. He points out that the purpose of all actions prescribed by the Law is to fear God and to tremble before the commandments of God. The Torah says: “*If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this Law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and fearful Name, the Lord thy God*” (Deut. 28:58). From this verse, it can be understood that the intention of “*all the words of this Law*” is to fear God, and that this purpose can be achieved by observing “*all the words of this Law*”, which means, to keep His *commandments and prohibitions* (‘*aseh ve-lo ta ‘aseh*).¹²⁾

Maimonides maintains that the Torah also teaches us to understand His being and His unity; however, he insists that the opinion of the Torah, in the first place, demands of us *love (ahavah)*. The next verse in the Torah emphasises this point: “*And thou shalt love the Lord with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might*” (Deut. 6:5). Considering the above explanation, these two purposes in the Law, *love (ahavah)* and *fear (yruah)*, are achieved: firstly, through loving God by understanding Him through the opinions taught by the Law including the apprehension of His being; and secondly, through fearing God by doing all the actions prescribed by the Law. Furthermore, we shall come to understand that these two things, to love and to fear God, are what the Law teaches us as a preparatory step to attain true knowledge of God, which is the final goal of human beings.

5. Three specific actions required of us: *Hesed* (loving-kindness), *Tsedaqah* (righteousness), *Mishpat* (judgement)

After having clarified the fundamental purpose of the Law, let us see how the wisdom of the Sages informs us about specific actions which are required of man under the Law. In chapter 53, Maimonides expounds three terms: *hesed* (loving-kindness), *tsedaqah* (righteousness), and *mishpat* (judgement). Based on his *Commentary on the Mishnah, Aboth*,¹³⁾ he explains the meanings of these three terms. Firstly, the meaning of *hesed* (loving-kindness) is applied to the excess of beneficence (*mubālagā fī al-afdāl*). This beneficence implies two notions: one is that to exercise beneficence to a man who has no right at all to claim this benefit; the other is that to exercise more beneficence than which a man deserves to claim. Most of the usage of the word *hesed* in the books of the prophets is applied to the first notion. In this sense, it can be said that every benefit coming from God is called *hesed* as man does not deserve to claim any beneficence from God.

Secondly, the word *tsedaqah* (righteousness) is derived from the word *tsedeq*, which means justice. The meaning of justice is to grant a right to something to all those who have such a right, or to give merit to a man who has such a right according to what he deserves. In the books of the prophets, fulfilling of duties with regard to others imposed upon a man for the sake of moral virtue (*faḍīl al-*

khulq), such as, remedying the injuries or returning of a pledge, is called *tsedaqah*.¹⁴ If a man walks in the way of the moral virtue, he comes to act justly upon his rational soul, as he grants him his own due right which is his soul's proper and valid right. Thus, it can be understood that every moral virtue which is to be observed is called *tsedaqah*.

Thirdly, concerning the word *mishpat* (judgement): this implies the due imposed upon one who is judged, whether it be reward or punishment.¹⁵ To summarize, Maimonides concludes that firstly, *hesed* (loving-kindness) is identical to beneficence. And secondly, *tsedaqah* (righteousness) is applied to every good deed for the sake of moral virtue, through which, one's soul becomes perfect. And thirdly, with *mishpat* (judgement), one might receive punishment at one time, and blessings at another.

In chapter 54, Maimonides examines how the Sages understood the above conceptions in their writings. In *Bereshith Rabbah*, it is said:¹⁶ “One verse says, [*For wisdom is better than rubies,*] and *all things desirable are not to be compared unto her* (Prov. 8:11); whereas another verse says, *And all thy desirable things are not to be compared unto her* (Prov. 3:15). ‘*Things desirable*’ connotes commandments (*mizvot*) and good deeds (*ma’sim tovim*); ‘*Thy desirable things*,’ precious stones and pearls. My desirable things and thy desirable things are not to be compared unto her, for, ‘*But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth, and knoweth Me*’ (Jer. 9:23). Here, Maimonides expounds what the Sages said about wisdom, that it is comparable with neither good deeds, including religious duties and actions for others for the sake of moral virtues (*khulkīyāt al-nāfi‘at*), nor precious treasures which man wishes to possess, because they are not equivalent to the ultimate goal, i.e., to attain knowledge of God, as they exist only as preparations for this final purpose.

6. The Way to Reach True Knowledge of God

From the above mentioned explanation, we can understand that to attain true knowledge of God is the ultimate goal for a man who has chosen to achieve human perfection. It also becomes clear that in order to reach that goal, one is supposed to accept both the opinion of the Torah and the wisdom of the Sages, and to fulfil all actions prescribed by the Law through loving Him and fearing Him. However, Maimonides emphasises that these are just preparatory steps to achieve the final goal, since they are not comparable to attaining knowledge of God. In chapter 52, Maimonides explains the reason why observing actions prescribed by the Law is important. He states that the purpose of all actions under the Law is to fear God, to know Him, and to exercise training for the purpose of achieving human perfection by exercising what the Law repeatedly commands us. In chapter 54,

Maimonides quotes a verse saying: “*That I am the Lord who exercise loving-kindness, judgement, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord*” (Jer. 9:24). Which means, what the Lord wishes to see in man is *loving-kindness, judgement, and righteousness*, all of which are attributes of God which Maimonides discusses in the *Guide*, part 1, from chapter 50 onward.

In addition, Maimonides discusses His essence and His attribute in the *Guide*, part 1, chapter 54. He insists that His essence cannot be grasped as it really is, meaning that it is impossible for man to know true reality of God. Nonetheless, His actions are apprehensible as a verse says: ‘*I will make all My goodness pass before thee*’ (Exod. 33:19). “*All My goodness*” alludes to all existing things in another verse, which says: “*And God saw every thing that He had made, and behold, it was very good*” (Gen. 1:31). His actions are not His essence but His attributes, as most of His attributes are descriptions of His actions which are done through His essence, therefore, His attributes are apprehensible.¹⁷⁾

Now, let us return to the concluding chapters of part 3. In chapter 54, Maimonides quotes a verse from Jeremiah: ‘*Thus saith the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me*’ (Jer. 9:23-24). As the Sages understood from this verse, to acquire things for which people compete to win is not perfection, rather, to understand Him and His attributes, that is, to acquire the knowledge of His actions, is to be boasted of. In conclusion, Maimonides states: ‘The perfection of man, that may truly be gloried in, remains in the one who has achieved the apprehension of God according to his faculty,¹⁸⁾ and knows His providence over the creatures manifested in the act of being created and governed. After one has understood this, his way of life will always be seeking *loving-kindness, judgement, and righteousness* through assimilation to His actions.’¹⁹⁾

7. Conclusion

Through the above explanation, it can be seen that there are several steps to be taken by man in order to attain the true reality of God. Firstly, one should not take pride in perfections of bodily matters, i.e., possession, health, character, and wisdom, but should desire only knowledge of God. Secondly, one is first required to accept the opinions of the Torah, then to demonstrate these opinions through the wisdom of the Sages, and then to clarify his desired actions. Thirdly, one is required to love God by understanding Him through the opinions taught by the Law, and to fear God by doing all the actions prescribed by the Law. Fourthly, it is necessary to know that there is nothing to compare

with knowledge of God, whether it be precious treasures which man wishes to possess, or good deeds like religious duties, actions for others, or any kinds of wisdom. Lastly, one should understand that what the Lord wishes to see in man is *loving-kindness, judgement, and righteousness*, and that he keep this way of life through the assimilation of His actions.

As Maimonides explains in the *Guide*, part I, chapters 50 to 54, His essence is not apprehensible. In chapter 53, he quotes a saying from the Talmud: “*The Torah speaketh in the language of the sons of man.*”²⁰ He states that the intention of this saying is to predicate perfection of Him, as these predicates or attributes are pertaining to His diverse actions. Though we cannot understand His essence, we can apprehend His actions through His creation. The only way to attain true knowledge of God is to understand the above matters, and to live one’s own life by seeking *loving-kindness, judgement, and righteousness* through the assimilation of His actions.

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Notes

- 1) For example, *Logics (Maqāla fī šinā'at al-mantiq)* and *Treatise on the Calendar (Ma'amar ha-'ibbur)* (1157/1158), which are said to have been written while he was still in Andalus; his great legal masterpieces, *Commentary on the Mishnah (Kitāb al-sirāj)* (1161-1168) and *Mishneh Torah* (1168-77); letters and responsa, such as a *Letter to Yemen (Iggeret Teman)* (1172); and medical writings which were written while he had been working as a court physician of Ayyubid dynasty .
- 2) My translation is based on: Moshe ben Maimon. ed. S. Munk. (1930). *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*. Yerushalaim: Defus Azriel, pp. 465-471 (the critical edition of original Judeo-Arabic); and referred to: Mūsā ibn Maymūn. ed. and translit. H. Ātāy. *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*. al-Qāḥira: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniya, pp. 728-741 (Arabic transliteration); Moses Maimonides. trans. S. Pines. (1963). *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, pp. 629-638 (English translation).
- 3) In the *Guide* II: 32, Maimonides discusses the conditions of being a prophet by quoting a dictum from B.T., Shabbat 92a and Nedarim 38a: 'Prophecy only rests upon a wise, strong, and rich man'. He quotes the same dictum in *Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Aboth (Shemonah Perakim)* chapter 7, explaining that being rich designates the moral perfection of contentment. See, Moses Maimonides. trans. Joseph I. Gorfinkle. (1912). *Eight Chapters on Ethics*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.80.
- 4) In *Shemonah Perakim* chapter 5, Maimonides insists that man should preserve his bodily health in order to acquire wisdom and knowledge of God, because his body is the instrument of his soul.
- 5) In *Shemonah Perakim* chapter 2, Maimonides enumerates examples of the moral virtues, such as, moderation, liberality, honesty, meekness, humility, and contentedness. In chapter 4, he repeatedly explains that these moral virtues are between two extremes, for instance, liberality is the mean between sordidness and extravagance. See also, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ha-Madda* (the Book of Knowledge), *Hilchot Deot* 1 and 2.
- 6) In *Shemonah Perakim* chapter 4, Maimonides argues that the Law of the Lord aims at man's following the path of moderation.
- 7) In *Shemonah Perakim* chapter 2, Maimonides explains that the intellectual virtues belonging to

- rational faculty are; 1) wisdom, which is the knowledge of the direct and indirect causes of things, and 2) reason, consisting of inborn reason, the acquired intellect, and intellectual cleverness.
- 8) In the *Guide* III: 34, Maimonides argues that the Law ought not to be dependent on either time or place, but ought to be absolute and universal.
 - 9) In the *Guide* I: 51, Maimonides enumerates the things which do not need proof of demonstration: the existence of motion, the existence of man's ability to act, the manifestations of generation and corruption, the natures of the things that are apparent to the senses.
 - 10) In the *Guide* I:72, Maimonides wrote as follows: 'Know that it behoved us to compare the relation obtaining between God and the world to that obtaining between the acquired intellect and man; this intellect is not a faculty in the body but is truly separate from the organic body and overflows toward it.'
 - 11) Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan expounds that man obtains knowledge from two directions. She wrote: 'Maimonides indicated that knowledge is a process that proceeds in two directions, from the bottom up and from the top down. From the "bottom up" the acquisition of knowledge involves the extraction of intelligible universals from data gathered by the senses.' See, Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan. (2003). *Happiness in Premodern Judaism – Virtue, Knowledge, and Well-Being*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, p. 210.
 - 12) In the *Guide* III: 35-49, Maimonides expatiates upon God's commandments by dividing them into fourteen classes.
 - 13) *Commentary on the Mishnah, Aboth*, 5:6 and 2:10.
 - 14) See, the *Guide* III: 39, in which Maimonides explains the commandments concerning the weak and the poor.
 - 15) See, the *Guide* III: 41, where Maimonides explains the commandments relating to punishment. In *Shemonah Perakim* chapter 8, Maimonides emphasises that man can decide what to do or what not to do by his own free will, therefore, 'the acquisition of virtues and vices is entirely in the power of man.'
 - 16) *Genesis Rabbah* 35:3, *in fine*.
 - 17) Cf. Exod. 34:6-7; *Guide*, I: 51, 52.
 - 18) In *Shemonah Perakim* chapter 5, Maimonides maintains that perfection of man depends on the faculties of each person's soul; 'If there be found a man who has accomplished this -- that is, one who exerts all the faculties of his soul, and directs them towards the sole ideal of comprehending God, using all his powers of mind and body, be they great or small, for the attainment of that which leads directly or indirectly to virtue -- I would place him in a rank not lower than that of the prophets.'
 - 19) Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan annotates this point as follows: 'Now it appears that Maimonides identifies human perfection not with the possession of abstract, theoretical knowledge, but rather with *action*, as the Torah itself prescribes when it enjoins humans "to walk in God's ways."' See, Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan, *op. cit.*, p. 214.
 - 20) B.T., Yebamoth, 71a; B.T., Baba Metsi'a, 31b.