GUIDE 2:10
MAIMONIDES' REVELATION OF OUR TETRADIC UNIVERSE

Overview: Maimonides' Prophetic Moment

Maimonides had a strange and extraordinary vision.

At the end of the last chapter, Maimonides wrote that he would, in Guide 2:10, reveal what he called his *near-prophetic* illumination. He saw that the forces governing our universe come in patterns of *four*, meaning that the universe has an innate tetradic (four-ness) or fourfold character. He wants us to know about his vision without being explicit. Instead, he left several hints (in 2:9 and 3:22). This tetradic revelation came to him while he meditated on obscure allusions in rabbinic and philosophic texts about nature:

> "I shall first set forth for your benefit a preface needed *for the purpose* (*inyan*) that *I have in view* in this chapter (Guide 2:9) …. This number [four] is for me a very important basis for *a notion that has occurred to me* (*l'inyan sh'ala b'daati*) and that I have not seen *explicitly* (*b'ferush*) stated by any philosopher. I found, however, in the dicta of the philosophers and the discourse of the Sages *indications* that drew my attention to it (*ma sh'ha-irani alav*). I shall accordingly mention them and explain the *notion* (*ha-inyan*) in the following chapter." (Guide 2:9, Pines trans.)

Guide 2:9 was the chapter where he reorganized astronomy into four *super-spheres* that moved the heavens. This "notion" of a tetradic universe was the *purpose* of that chapter.

In Guide 3:22, he tells us more about his near-prophetic vision (*k'ayn khazon*). The prophet Zechariah had spoken of *four* chariots and the *four* heavenly winds that *present themselves* (*mehityatzev*) to the Lord (Zech. 6:1,5). Maimonides connected them with Job's *four* angelic "sons of God" that "*present themselves* (*l'hityatzev*) before the Lord" (Job 1:6, 2:1). The key was the recurring number four. It unlocked his astonishing breakthrough:

> "Understand this notion and consider how extraordinary it is and see how these notions came to me through *something similar to prophetic revelation*."

(Pines trans. of Guide 3:22. *v'haben inyan ze v'hitbonen kama mufla hu, v'reyei heyakh husgo li inyanim elu k'ayn khazon*).

Maimonides came to discuss those four winds, four chariots, and four angels in our chapter, Guide 2:10. He connected his four super-spheres to the four sublunar elements (fire, air, water, and earth) and to the four forces that the super-spheres emanate upon those elements. Still, he shrank from describing his vision:

> "In consequence, *when I knew this* (about the connection of the super-spheres to the elements) *it occurred to me* (*v'ala b'livi kaasher ydati zot*)… [that] each sphere is also specially assigned to one of the four elements, the sphere being the *principle* (*makor*) from which the forces of that particular element exclusively derive and that in virtue of its motion causes the element *to move in the motion of generation* (*tenuat ha-havaya b'tenuato*)." (Guide 2:10, Pines trans., 270)

About two-thirds of the way through our chapter, he *began* to unveil the wonder of his vision, writing:

> "This number four is marvelous and worthy of reflection."

(Goodman and Lieberman, 205, *The Guide to the Perplexed: A New Translation*, 2024, Stanford. *v'ze mispar ha'arbaa hu nifla u'makom hitbonenut*).

Grasping the nature of the universe and our part in it is crucial for the training of prophets and for our own insight. That it struck him as a *vision* is itself a key unlocking the prophetic core of the Guide.

(**Super-sphere**: James Arthur Diamond, in *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment*, p. 113, coined the term "supersphere" for those "spheres" in Medieval cosmology that include other spheres, translating the Arabic *alkurra*.
Prophecy: "Did Maimonides Believe that He Had Attained Prophecy?" Abraham Joshua Heschel, Hebrew, in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew section, NY: Am. lAcademy for Jewish Research, 1945, 159-188; English trans by David Silverman in *Prophetic Inspiration After the Prophets: Maimonides and Other Medieval Authorities*, Ktav, 1996. It is fascinating that Heschel agrees with my finding that Maimonides attained something like prophecy even though Heschel never referred to our chapter, Guide 2:10, which relates that prophecy. Heschel does, however, confirm my thesis of the centrality of prophecy in the Guide. See also "The Epistle to R. Yonatan ha-Kohen of Lunel" in *Maimonides, Letters and Essays*: ed. Yitzhak Shailat, Ma'aleh Adumim, Israel, Maaliyot Press of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe, 1987-8, 2:553, where Maimonides thought that he had a "divine gift.")

PROVIDENTIAL PERVASIVENESS

External causation. Divine providence reaches all creatures.

The philosophers thought providence was limited to species or universals but not individuals. Maimonides, however, saw that it extends to every living being created by God.

The philosophers were correct, however, in thinking that our world could not itself be the source of this providence. Where does it come from? Maimonides wrote, at the beginning of our chapter,

> "IT is a well-known fact that the philosophers, when they discuss in their works the order of the Universe, assume that the existing order of things in this sublunary world of transient beings depends on *forces which emanate from the spheres*."

The philosophers' point was that the source of providence must be *external* to our earth. That was because nothing causes itself, *nihil est causa sui*.

As Maimonides explained in his Aristotelian Proposition XVIII: "Everything that passes from potentiality to actuality has a *separate external* change-agent." Bernard Wuellner, in the *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*, wrote, "Every contingent being [i.e., every created thing] requires a cause *distinct from itself* to explain its existence." Put differently, an effect has nothing that its cause did not grant.

Maimonides concluded, in Guide 1:72: "The sphere...sends to every being the forces that are in it." The idea is biblical. God had admonished Job that divine rule comes from the heavens:

> "Canst thou bind the sweet influences of *Pleiades* or loose the bands of *Orion*?
> Canst thou bring forth *Mazzaroth* (constellations or zodiacal signs) in its season? or
> Canst thou guide *Arcturus* with his sons?
> Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven?
> Canst thou set the dominion thereof in the earth? (*Im tasim mishtaro ba'aretz?* lit., *Does your writ run the world*?)"

(Job 38:31-33. See Goodman, *Theodicy*, 385, his translation of R. Saadia Gaon's commentary to Job. Aristotelian Proposition XVIII can be found in the *Introduction* to Vol. 2 of the Guide. See Wuellner *Dictionary*, p. 17. As to the failed cosmology of "spheres" see my chapter-essay to Guide 2-4, especially at the end of "The Problem of The Paradigm.")

Particular providence. The Midrash responded to these ideas: "There is not a single blade of grass that does not have a *mazal* (star/constellation) in the firmament that strikes it and says to it: '*Grow*!'"
(*Gen. Rabbah* 10:6.).

Was this proclamation of individual star-driven providence justified by the science that the philosophers and the rabbis both seemed to accept? After all, saying that external forces run our world is not the same as saying that providence assigned a star to each *individual* blade of grass. Does the divine providential apparatus affect individuals or only species? Was this outrageous claim well-founded? What brought the rabbis to this concept of pervasive providence?

Maimonides suggests the answer. Two specific stars change things on Earth. Those forces are evident to all, justifying the *blade of grass* Midrash. They are the sun and the moon.

It seemed clear to Maimonides (though it isn't) that the moon's waxing increases the *volume* of the seas while its waning causes their diminution. He was on firmer ground when he wrote that the moon's waxing and waning had something to do with the rise and fall of the tides.

Similarly, the elevation of the sun increases warmth while its setting cools.

The super-spheres of the sun and the moon both change individual things in our world. They do this because the moon emanates its force on the element of water while the sun affects the element of fire.

Even philosophers accepted this evidence. It inspired Maimonides' tetradic revelation:

> "In consequence, *when I knew this, it occurred to me* (*v'ala b'livi kaasher ydati zot*) that while the four spheres having stars [super-spheres] have forces that *overflow* [*emanate*] *from them as a whole* (*sh'shofim m'klalutan kokhot*) toward all the things subject to generation — these spheres being the causes of the latter — *each* sphere is also *specially assigned* to one of the four elements, the sphere being the *principle* from which the forces of that particular element exclusively derive and that, in virtue of its motion, causes the element to move in the motion of generation." (Pines trans., p. 270)

Each super-sphere rules one element. Maimonides derived from the cases of the sun and the moon that:

> 1) The super-sphere of the sun governs the element of fire,
> 2) The super-sphere of the five wandering planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) governs the element of air,
> 3) The super-sphere of the moon governs the element of water, and
> 4) The super-sphere of the fixed stars governs the earth element.

He explained that the super-sphere of the five wandering planets governs the air element because the *irregularity* of the motions and retrogressions of those five planets (see last chapter) manifests itself in the infinite *variability* of the winds and breezes on Earth. This theory seems to be Maimonides' innovation.

Regarding the earth element, just as the "fixed" stars move so *slowly*, that same slowness is manifest in the element of earth, the slowest and most recalcitrant to change of the four elements. Those stars are "slow" since each constellation takes 2160 years to move from its current zodiacal house.

> "The sphere of the fixed stars moves the earth [element]. Perhaps the earth is so sluggish in moving to receive the action being brought to bear upon it, as well as in undergoing combinations, because of the slowness of the fixed stars in their motion. The Sages gave an indication of the fixed stars' being specially assigned to the earth in their saying that *the number of the species of plants is the same as the number of the individual stars* belonging to the totality of stars."

This influence of the stars on the earth justifies the "blade of grass" Midrash. The grasses sprout from the soil of the earth element. Since the number of plants and the number of fixed stars is *uncountable*, it seemed reasonable to assume that one of those myriad stars governed a single one of the innumerable vegetables.

Maimonides expressed no doubt that this idea was consistent with and justified by the accepted scientific paradigm. Not only were the rabbis justified in saying that the emanations of a particular star governed a single blade of grass, but that this providential regime extended to everything:

> "They have thus clearly expressed it that even each *individual being* in this world has its corresponding star." (*…ishi ha-havaya yesh lehem kokhot kokhavim m'yukhadim lahem.*)

Rabbi Efodi's Objection. R. Efodi rejected the literal interpretation of this last statement by Maimonides:

> "[By saying] 'each generated individual,' *ishi ha-havaya*, Maimonides *meant* the generated species, *minei ha-havaya.*"

R. Efodi was wrong. His tendentious reading, which misled many, would make Maimonides more Aristotelian than he was. Worse, it would make his God the God of the philosophers rather than the God of Judaism, a "god" who does not affect His individual creatures. Maimonides might have asked those for whom providence extended only to species what God demanded from Job, "Dost thou know the laws of heaven? Does your writ run the world?"

[R. Kafiḥ note 6, *sub voce* rejected R. Efodi's reading, as did R. Even-Shmuel, note 2. R. Efodi was the pen name of R. Yitzhak ben Moshe. He was also called Profiat Duran. He lived c.1350 – c.1415. Maimonides saw Job as a Gentile philosopher.]

Maimonidean organicism. The whole trend of thought in these passages is to recognize the pervasiveness of divine providence in each creature. Maimonides' confirmed this with his *Organicism Doctrine* announced in Guide 1:72. Though this providential pervasiveness touches every individual being, the whole still functions as one organic body:

> "Although the influences of the spheres extend over all beings, there is besides the influence of a particular star directed to each particular species; a fact noticed also in reference to the several forces in *one organic body*; for the whole Universe is like *one organic body*, as we have stated *above*."
>
> [R. Friedlander's translation of Guide 1:72. Pines translates the last part, "– as is the case with regard to the forces of a *single body* – inasmuch as all that exists is, as we have mentioned, *a single individual*." *K'fi sh'ha-matzav b'kokhot ha-guf ha-ekhad, l'fi sh'kol ha-mtziot dvar ekhad k'fi sh'hizkharnu.* Both translators are correct; R. Friedlander emphasiz*es Organicism*, while Pines emphasizes *individuality*.]

Every individual creature is a unit, just as any military division is called a *unit*. R. Even-Shmuel explained:

> "Every individual body (*geshem ekhad*) is comprised of many forces (*kokhot*) but has one general force in it that makes it one individual *unit* (*l'khativa*). Though each organ in it has its own specific force (like the power of sight, or the power of hearing), a single general emanation bestows many forces." (R. Even-Shmuel, 3:137, my trans.)

The emanation from the spheres is a general emanation, just as sunlight or electricity is a general force. Each sphere's single emanated force powers many entities. Maimonides explained why this point is necessary: "*…For the whole Universe is like one organic body, as we have stated above*" (in Guide 1:53 and 72). In

other words, just as you are one whole being with many functions, so is the universe, and so is each force that emanates from each heavenly body in that universe.

From One Thing Only One Thing Comes. This answers a question that had troubled religious thinkers: if God is one and simple (*i.e.*, non-composite), how do the many come from the One? What is the relation of the single simple divine power to its universe of creations? Maimonides states the question in Guide 2:22, quoting from a paraphrase of Aristotle. The issue arose because:

> "Aristotle and all philosophers assume as an axiom that a *simple* element can only produce one simple thing, whilst a *compound* can produce as many things as it contains simple elements…. In accordance with this axiom, Aristotle holds that *the direct emanation from God must be one simple Intelligence*, and nothing else." (Guide 2:22)

Although Maimonides was drawing on Avicenna's ideas here rather than Aristotle's, the question remains *whether anything other than what is one and simple can come from something that is one and simple*. Maimonides' solution was to agree that from one thing, only one thing comes, but that *the universe is just that one thing.* "Know that this Universe, in its entirety, is nothing else but one individual being" (Guide 1:72).

God creates one *organic* universe with interconnected parts. One of those parts is man, but each person is also an organically interconnected unit. Each person's microcosm corresponds to the macrocosm of the universe, just as the universe corresponds to its Maker.

Creation is the act of the One creating the single universe, which Maimonides viewed as a single sentient being. This one universe holds all its variety in its single organic whole (cf. Leibniz' monad).

The Miracle of Pervasive yet Particular Providence. Thus, when Maimonides wrote, in our chapter,

> "Although the influences of the spheres extend over all beings, there is, besides the influence of a particular star directed to each particular species, a fact noticed also in reference to the several forces in *one organic body*, for the whole universe is like *one organic body*…"

This was his vision of divine providential rule. The heavenly body radiates its emanation, a general causative force, on every individual creation and all its parts. Moreover,

> "Each sphere is also specially assigned to one of the four elements, the sphere being the *principle* (*makor*) from which the forces of that particular element exclusively derive and that in virtue of its motion causes the element to move in the *motion of generation* (*tenuat ha-havaya*)."

Thus, in addition to the grand general emanation from the heavens, each super-sphere governs a particular element. The sphere actualizes and causes the element to exist and to move. It also causes its regeneration in each compound and mixture on Earth. Divine providence is *pervasive* yet remains *particular*.

In Guide 1:72, he marveled at God's being perfectly transcendent yet perfectly immanent. How He rules the universe while His providence extends to "all parts," is a "complete mystery," which elicits an outburst of feeling: "*May He whose perfection has dazzled us be glorified!*" The name for this miracle of *pervasive yet particular providence* in the history of Jewish esotericism is *Maaseh Merkava*, the "Account of the Chariot."

[**Motion of Generation:** Pines footnote 8: "According to Aristotelian terminology, the process of generation *is* a motion," *see* Maimonides' Aristotelian Prop. V, *Introduction* to Vol. II of the Guide. **Dazzled:** This was from Pines' English translation. R. Kafiḥ translated the passage: *ytalei mi sh'ha-eiratenu shlemuto*. Michael Schwarz has: *hashva l'mi sh'shlemuto m'sanveret et eineinu.* **One and Simple:** See Arthur Hyman, "From What is One and Simple only What is One and Simple Can Come to Be," in Lenn E. Goodman, ed., *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 111-135, and my chapter-essays on Guide 1:52, 53 and 72. **Organicism** is the perennial philosophy that the universe and its parts are living entities, like any living organism. All its components express the interconnected dynamic nature of the whole, each contributing to its vitality and functionality. The concept of *macrocosm and microcosm*, central to the Scholastics, was an early version of Organicism. The universe (macrocosm) and the individual human being (microcosm) reflect each other. Understanding human beings can lead to understanding the universe and *vice versa*. **R. Yosef ibn Tsadik** (d. 1149) explained this in his *Olam Katan* (*The Microcosm*), which predates the Guide, detailing the microcosm's correspondence with the macrocosm. R. Yosef's thinking was somewhat like Maimonides', though his view was a sort of Jewish *Kalām*, which Maimonides rejected (Guide 1:71, 1:73-76). R. Yosef is more neo-Platonic than Maimonides was, though the neo-Platonized Aristotelianism of the era influenced both. R. Yosef sat with Maimonides' father as a judge in the Jewish court of Cordova. He could have been one of Maimonides' early teachers.]

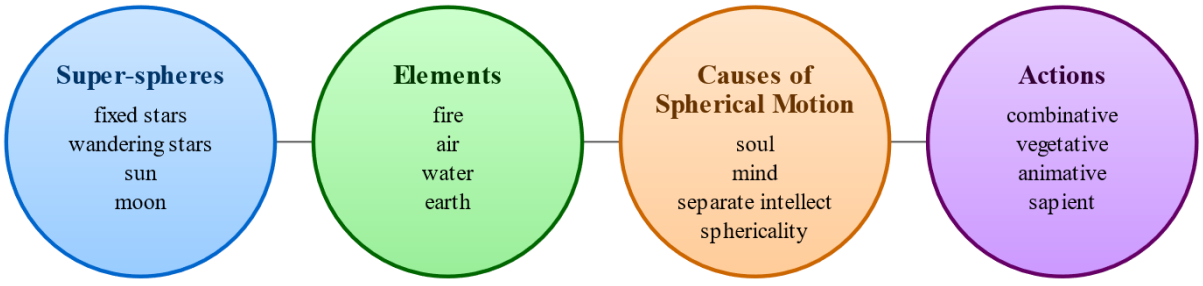
The Vision of Universal Four-Ness

Having come this far, Maimonides revealed more tetrads essential to his vision of the universe's design:

> "*The arrangement of the universe may therefore be assumed* (*v'kakh efshar sh'yehei ha-seder*) to be as follows: there are four *spheres*, four *elements* set in motion by them, and also four principal *properties* which earthly beings derive from them, as has been stated above. Furthermore, there are four *causes* of the motion of every sphere, namely, the following four essential elements in the sphere; its spherical shape, its soul, its intellect, by which the sphere is capable of forming ideas, and the Intelligence, which the sphere desires to imitate. *Note this well* (*v'havein ze heitav*)….
> These are the four causes of the motion of the spheres. The following are the four principal *forces* directly derived from the spheres: the nature of minerals, the properties peculiar to plants, the animal faculties, and the intellect. An examination of these forces shows that they have two *functions*, namely, to produce things and to perpetuate them; that is to say, to preserve the species perpetually, and the individuals in each species for a certain time."

Perhaps a chart of what R. Narboni called this "four by four" system would be helpful:

The Natural Tetrads: Four by Four



Manifestations: Two by Two

Kinds of Things	Individuals
Generation Preservation	Generation Preservation

In the prior chapter, we examined the First Tetrad, which are the four super-spheres. In our chapter-essay on the Introduction to Vol. II of the Guide, we discussed the Second Tetrad, which are the four elements (Props. XVII and XXV). We will discuss the Third and Fourth Tetrads below.

When Maimonides wrote "Note this well," *havein ze heitav*, he made one of his indications of important *esoteric* material. He concealed the fullness of his vision due to the prohibition of public teaching of the *Maaseh Merkava*. The word "this" in "Note *this* well" is a key word. I read "*this*" to mean the pervasiveness of the divine design, which weaves together corporeal and incorporeal forces, including one power that he has not mentioned thus far: our transcendent mind. (Public teaching: see my *Commentator's Preface* and the second *Mishna* in *Hagiga*)

The Third Tetrad: The Four Causes of the Motions of the Spheres.

> "Furthermore, there are four *causes* of the motion of every sphere, namely, the following four essential elements in the sphere; its spherical shape, its soul, its intellect, by which the sphere is capable of forming ideas, and the Intelligence, which the sphere desires to imitate…. These are the four causes of the motion of the spheres."

The four causes of the motion of any sphere form Maimonides' third tetrad. They are:

1. The sphere's *Sphericality*;
2. The *Soul* of the sphere, which is responsible for its motion;
3. The *Intellect* or mind of the sphere. It is always with the sphere. It can think of higher entities, including the Separate Intellect, its object of desire;
4. The transcendent *Separate Intellect* which rules the sphere.

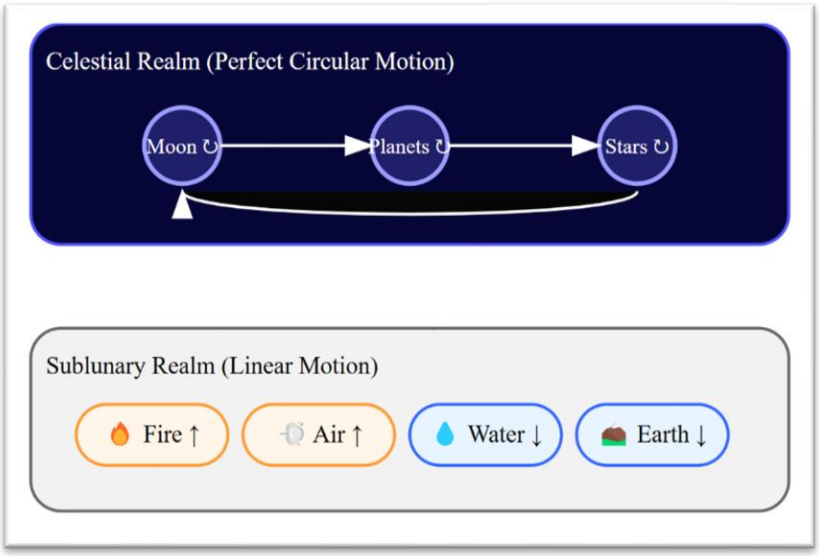
It follows that the sphere has two intellects. The first is the sphere's *immanent* intellect. It remains with the sphere's physical body, just as our mind stays with us wherever we go. The second intellect, the Separate Intellect, is different from the sphere. It is "separate" since it has no connection with anything physical.

The sphere must have a *spherical body* and a *soul* to keep it in continuous rotation.

> "The explanation … is this: the sphere could not have been continuously in motion, had it not this peculiar form; *continuity of motion is only possible when the motion is circular*. Rectilinear motion, even if frequently repeated in the same moment, cannot be continuous: for when a body moves successively in two opposite directions, it must pass through a moment of rest…. The necessity of a continuous motion constantly repeated in the same path implies the necessity of a *circular* form. The spheres must [also] have a soul; for only *animate beings* (*baal nefesh*) move freely."

Maimonides explained that animate beings move because they have what he called a *soul* (Guide 2:4, and my chapter-essay). The sphere must also have a particular *shape*. Just as a cartwheel must be round rather than square if the cart is to move, so the sphere must be spherical to move in continuous and unbroken motion.

Those spheres are physical, but since they *only* move in *rotation* their physicality is unique.



Unlike the spheres, the elements' motion is straight up or down, always returning to their "proper places."

Thus, the band of fire surmounts the air, which is over the water, below which is the band of earth. Because their motion is straight-line motion, and since there can be no infinite line, it can only continue if it halts and returns at some point. Things go up and down repeatedly, but not uninterruptedly. (No infinite line: Aristotelian Props. I, II, III)

Rectilinear motion by itself produces no mixtures. For the four elements to combine, as they do in nature, they must *swerve* into each other. That can only happen with the advent of rotatory motion from the spheres.

The *matter* of the sphere is different than that of those four elements. It is composed of the heavenly *fifth* element, quintessence, which has only two qualities that we know of: transparency and rotatory motion. Its rotation keeps it in eternal uninterrupted motion.

But Why Does the Sphere Move? Although the sphere has a soul as its mover and is spherical, it still needs a *reason* to move. The reason is its desire for its Separate Intellect. Maimonides described this desire for this second intellect:

> "There must also indubitably be something *inciting to motion*, namely, a conceiving and a desire for that which has been conceived, as we have mentioned. This can only come about through an intellect... [The Separate Intellect]. Thus, there must indubitably be a *certain being* of which a conception is made and for which there is desire, as we have explained." (Pines trans.)

The first of the sphere's two intellects is always *with* the physical sphere (though not *in* it). The sphere's innate intellect can *recognize* the perfect Separate Intellect, love it, and *conceive* a *desire* "inciting to motion" toward it. The problem is that the Separate Intellect does not exist on the plane of physical motion. Being incorporeal it is not on the space/time/motion continuum. The sphere cannot *move toward* its desire.

Since the sphere cannot *approach* the Separate Intellect it does the next best thing: it imitates the Separate Intellect's *perfection* by moving in *perfect* eternal rotation. Rotation is the *perfect motion* because only rotation can be uninterrupted and eternal. It is the closest "approach" the sphere can make to the *perfection* of the Separate Intellect.

This, then, is the Third Tetrad, the four causes that explain why the sphere moves:
1) its Sphericality, 2) its Soul, 3) its immanent mind, and 4) its Separate Intellect.

Lenn Goodman explained that these are, respectively, the Four Aristotelian Causes of its motion:
1) its Material Cause, 2) its Effective Cause, 3) its Formal Cause, and 5) its Final Cause or Purpose.

(Goodman trans. of Guide 2:10, note 86).

The Fourth Tetrad: The Four Actions of the Spheres in Our World. Each of the four super-spheres governs one of the four elements and integrates it in our world.

> "There are thus four causes of the motion of the sphere and *four sorts of general forces proceeding* [emanating] *from it toward us* (*arbaa ofanim min hakokhot haklaliim hashofim mimenu eleinu*). These are, as we have explained, the *force* causing the generation of the minerals, the *force* of the vegetative soul, the *force* of the animal soul, and the *force* of the rational soul." (Pines trans., 271)

How does this work? Initially, the super-spheres broadcast a general force. This *formative power* can configure the as-yet undifferentiated hylic matter, which has only a potentiality for existence. When this first (but still conceptual) configuration occurs, it is what Medieval scholasticism called "corporeal form," *forma corporeitatis*, usually *tzura gashmit* in Hebrew.

That emanation, together with the general swerve provided by the rotation of the spheres, in-forms matter that is prepared to receive that signal. Those forces generate combinative, vegetative, animating, and sapient forces. These general forces emanate from the spheres to the elements, blending them and preparing them for their ultimate manifestation in mineral, vegetable, animal, or human forms. They are the final tetrad.

The Twice Doubled Force. These four forms are *generated* and *preserved* in our world in their *kinds* and in the *individual*s of those kinds by a *general formative power* that creates and maintains the things of our world. This *twice-doubled* cycle complements the *four-by-four* tetradic forces coming from heaven to earth:

> "Now if you consider the activities you will find that they are of two species. They cause either the *generation* of all that is generated or the *preservation* of what is generated – I mean to say the preservation of its *species* [type or kind] in a permanent way and the preservation of its *individuals* for a certain duration."

This cycle combines *creative* and *providential* energies, *i.e*., *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava*. It brings forth the *enduring kinds* of things on earth as well as the *perishable individuals* of those kinds.

This force is *doubled* because it *causes* and *preserve*s those kinds forever and their individuals for their lifetimes. All creatures and all species depend on this force of nature.

Nature: the Wonder of the Divine Decree. Surveying his vision to this point, Maimonides expresses wonder at the intelligence of its design:

> "*Understand this well* (*v'havein ze heitav*)…. These are the four causes of the motion of the spheres, …. which cause either the generation of all that is generated or the preservation of what is generated. *This is the meaning of* "*nature*," (*zehu ha-inyan ha-teva*), which is said to be *wise*, having governance, caring for the bringing into existence of animals [animate beings] by means of *an art similar to that of a craftsman* (*b'umanut k'ilu makhshavtia*/בצנאעה כאלמהניה, i.e., intelligent design), and also caring for their preservation and permanence through the bringing into existence of formative forces, which are the cause of the existence of living beings, and also nutritive forces which are the cause of their lasting for whatever duration is possible. What is intended hereby is the *divine decree*, from which these two activities derive through the intermediary of the sphere." (Pines trans., 271-272.)

When he says, "*This* is the meaning of nature," the term "this" refers to the entire structure he has portrayed, from the *divine decree* at the top of the system, through the angelic intellects whose spheres emanate the formative forces actualizing all nature's manifestations. Maimonides conveyed his astonishment at how

divine action is both transcendent and immanent, pervasive yet particular. This led him to write that the spectacle dazzled the eyes. It was the "notion" that came to him "Through *something similar to prophetic revelation*," the revelation of his *Merkava* vision.

Nonetheless, one detail, our own human Active Intellect, was still missing from this portrait.

THE LADDER OF JACOB

> "This number four is wondrous and should be an object of reflection (*v'ze mispar ha-arbaa hu nafla umakom hitbonenut*). They [the rabbis] said in *Midrash Tanḥuma*: 'How many steps were in [Jacob's] ladder? — *Four*.'" (Pines trans.)

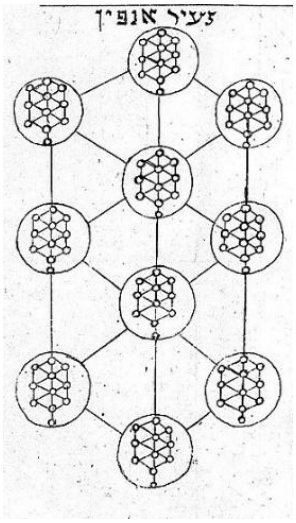
The Strange and Wondrous Number Four. The number *four* relates to other numbers in striking ways.

Four is the source of the decimal system because the sum of the first four prime digits is ten (1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10). But it is also the root of *any* number. Lagrange's Theorem, known from antiquity, states that *any natural number is the sum of four squares*. In ancient times, the Pythagoreans thought that the number *four* evoked the material world, that is, the world of nature and physicality, while *three* represented the spiritual world.

The number four appears often in Judaism: The *Tetragrammaton*, the four matriarchs, the four species taken on *Sukkot*, and, on Passover, the four cups, four sons, four questions, and four expressions of redemption.

Even though the prophets of the Bible repeatedly emphasize the number four, and though Maimonides meditated on it for several chapters, R. Even-Shmuel wrote that "We have not exhausted" its tetradic implications. He presumably meant that just like the ten-based system of *Sefirot*, where each *Sefira* is a molecular formation of another ten *Sefirot* (re-cast as *partzufim*), similarly, the Maimonidean tetrads might mirror in themselves endless tetradic formations.

(***Partzufim***: *Zohar* 3:127b-145a, Gershom Scholem, *Kabbala*, 1978, *s.v.*, *Partzufim*. In Cabala, there are tetradic systems. Examples: the four worlds, letters, levels of the soul, flags, and rivers in Eden. **Lagrange**, Joseph-Louis, 1736–1813. Lagrange's Theorem: also known as *Lagrange's Four-Square Theorem*, and *Bachet's conjecture*, it was known to the 3rd Century mathematician Diophantus of Alexandria, author of *Arithmetica*. Formula: $p = a^2 + b^2 + c^2 + d^2$, as in $3 = 1^2 + 1^2 + 1^2 + 0^2$, or $31 = 5^2 + 2^2 + 1^2 + 1^2$. *Wikipedia*: "The squares form an additive basis of order four." The **Pythagoreans** were familiar with the idea, as well as that the sum of the first prime digits is ten).



Knorr von Rosenroth, 1684, Wellcome Images, Wikimedia Commons

Behold a Ladder… Maimonides grasped the number four as the key to Jacob's prophetic ladder vision.

> "He dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it." (Genesis 28:12)

Maimonides contemplated the ladder through the prism of Midrash, specifically, *Midrash Tanhuma*, quoting from the manuscript before him:

> "In *Midrash Tanḥuma,* the following passage occurs: *How many steps were in Jacob's ladder? – Four*" (*b'midrash tankhuma amru: kama maalot hayu basulam?—arba*).

This Midrashic reference ties Maimonides' tetradic vision to Jacob's prophetic vision. The ladder is the perfect symbol for the natural order as it descends through the divine emanations in cascades of tetrads. It is the archetype of the divinely instituted natural order and our role in it. R. Yehuda Even-Shmuel called it "The ladder of existence (*sullam ha-mitziot*)." It is the Great Chain of Being and the *scala naturae*. This idea resonated through Western thought from its original biblical appearance, coursing through Midrash, Talmud, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and medieval Neoplatonism.

Philological Problems. There is a problem with this picture. Our received version of *Tanhuma* does not state the number of steps in the ladder. Maimonides anticipated difficulties. His text continues:

> "Some read in the above passage: "*How many steps were in the ladder? — Seven*."

"Some" may very well have read that; however, modern editions of this Midrash reveal no explicit statement of the number of steps in Jacob's ladder, whether four, seven, or any other number.

Nonetheless, as Guide commentators suggested, some text suggesting a ladder of four steps appeared in medieval Jewish libraries. Thus, the Midrashic–Cabalistic encyclopedia *Yalkut Reuveni* tells us, "The secret of the *four steps* that Jacob saw in the ladder were the Four who entered *Pardes*."

This *Yalkut* passage aligns well with the message of our chapter that meditation on nature's ladder of existence leads the prophetic adept to the revelatory world, just as such contemplation elevated Rabbis Akiva, Elisha, Ben Zoma, and Ben Azzai to Paradise. But the point of the several commentators citing *Yalkut* was to show that its author counted the number of steps in the ladder the way Maimonides did, presumably reading from Maimonides' Midrashic source.

We know that Maimonides' family library of Tannaitic manuscripts showed variations that no longer appear. But early sources, like *Yalkut Reuveni*, support the idea that those variations were real and not imagined.

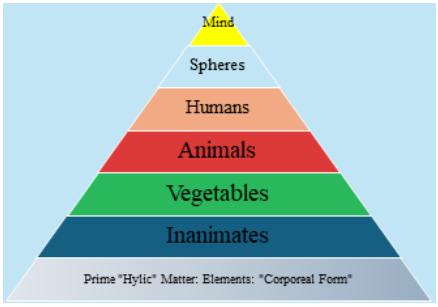
(*Yalkut Reuveni*, *Malakh*, of R. Reuven Katz, p. 99, 1660. The Hebrew reads: *sod dalet shaleivot sheraa yaakov b'sulam, hem Arba sh'nikhnesu l'pardes.* For the account of the four visionaries see Talmud *Hagiga* 14b, and Guide 1:32.)

Seven Steps. Despite Maimonides' preference for the idea of four steps, he does not dismiss the idea that the ladder could have had seven steps. That fact prompted his commentators to take the idea seriously. Seven-based systems of organization (heptadic) are as entrenched in Judaism as tetradic systems: seven planets, seven days of the week, seven diatonic notes, the seven sisters of the Pleiades, the seven branches of the menorah, the seven *aliyot* on Sabbath, the seven blessings of the married couple, *etc*.

R. Shemtov ibn Falquera (1225 – c.1290) assigned the seven steps to the primary colors of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. He connected this with the seven heavens of *Hagiga* 12a. The *Zohar* hinted that the ladder itself is one of the seven steps, counting 1) the ladder as the throne of glory; 2) heaven, and 3) earth ("*Its base was on the earth*") — which, together with the four directions of the heavens ("*Two ascending and two descending*") — make seven.

(R. Falquera, in R. Even-Shmuel comm. on Guide 2:10, 3:146 note 14. *Zohar*, *Raya Nehemya*, *Naso*, 123b).

The modern exegete R. Even-Shmuel tried his hand at this, analogizing the seven steps to the seven levels of existence in the Great Chain of Being:



1) Prime matter, elements, and then their four composite forms:
2) Inanimates,
3) Plants,
4) Animals, and
5) Humans, all in the lower world. Above them comes:
6) The spheres, and
7) The intellects.

Note that in this version of R. Even-Shmuel, all the levels are *in our universe*. All are natural, none transcendent. In this, he followed R. Efodi and others like him (whether they counted four or seven levels).

Not everyone would interpret this way. R. Narboni rejected this model, arguing that part of the ladder must transcend our world. He was correct (although he did not articulate it clearly). R. Even-Shmuel also came to this view.

Not the Number of Steps, but the Number of Angels. Maimonides showed the way back to his tetradic system from those seven heavens, dissipating the philological fog.

> "Some read in the above passage: 'How many steps were in the ladder? — Seven.' But all readings and all *Midrashim* unanimously express that the *angels* whom Jacob saw ascending the ladder, and descending, were only four; two of whom were going up and two coming down."

The point was not the number of steps, whether four or seven. The real subject, we learn, is the number of angels that ascend and descend the steps. Maimonides claimed rabbinic unanimity that there were four angels, two ascending and two descending. (Talmud, *Hullin* 91b, *Bereshit Rabba* 68:12.)

The Epistle to Rabbi Ḥasdai ha-Levi. Jewish tradition related these four angels to the four elements. The Cabalist classic, *Tikkunei Zohar*, teaches that:

> "'*And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it*'—[meaning] two ascend: wind and fire, which are light; and two descend: water and dust, which are heavy; and they are: Michael — water, Gabriel — fire, Nuriel — wind, Raphael — earth" (69:105b).

Maimonides, in Guide 1:72, described the motions of these elements:

> "The straight [rectilinear] motions found in these four elements, when they move to return to their place, are of two kinds: one motion is towards the encompassing region [i.e., the outer sphere of the universe], which applies to fire and air; the other motion is towards the central point [the center of the earth], which applies to water and earth."

Does this create an interpretive traffic jam? Does our chapter's physical/metaphysical/divine interpretation of the four angels conflict with the argument in Guide 1:15 that the angels are *prophets*, or with Mishneh Torah's *political* explanation, that they are the four empires that oppressed the Jews: Babylon, Media, Greece, and Edom? (*Ysodei* 7:3 with *Vayikra Rabbah* 29:2.)

The question was raised in Maimonides' lifetime and answered in the *Epistle to Rabbi Ḥasdai ha-Levi*. The text expects us to accept various legitimate interpretations and coordinate them appropriately:

> "Regarding your question about the vision of angels ascending and descending upon the ladder: In Guide 1:15, we explained it as referring to the *prophets*, while in Guide 2:10 [our chapter] we explained it as referring to the *elements* [i.e., the elemental forces]. This distinction should not be difficult for you when you see how the complex and the simple come into full view. In our account of the elements, we said that the simple elements affect the prophets. For there is no prophet who ascends unless the fire element within him dominates, nor does he descend unless the earth element within him dominates. For by the fire of desire he ascends to grasp [knowledge], and by the cold dryness of the earth he descends to rest in what he has grasped, until he ascends again, never more to descend, just as Elijah, of blessed memory, ascended in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). And as we mentioned when we said (Guide 1:15), 'How fortunate is it that they said, *ascending and descending*, — for the ascent precedes the descent.' We noted how well chosen were the words of the parable that the ascending precedes the descending. Our idea was that man is created from the substance of the earth, and therefore, his ascent always precedes his descent, for he begins very low, as 'dust from the ground' (Genesis 2:7)."

R. Yosef Caspi (1280-1345) joined in: "This is the intention of Maimonides: that he wants one thing to have many meanings. It is a profound meditation upon his method of interpretation of prophetic parables and the allegories found in the words of the Sages."

Indeed, this "profound meditation," like Maimonides' similarly multivalent approach in the Guide's Lexicon chapters (1:1-40), helps diffuse the "contradictions" beloved of academics (see my *Introduction II: Contradictions*). R. Even-Shmuel justly wrote: "Since Maimonides concealed its meaning, he freed us to choose the appropriate interpretation from those that he specified in his revealed text," (*u'm'keivan sh'histir ha-rambam et peirusho, ha-rashut b'yadeinu l'vkhor b'perush ha-matim b'yoter l'davarim sh'amar baniglei*.)

But nothing is simple. Scholars question the provenance of the *Epistle*. R. Even-Shmuel accepts its Maimonidean authorship. Even if Maimonides did not directly write it, Zvi Langerman was willing to assign it to the school of Maimonides. Thus, even if Maimonides did not write the letter, it reflected his influence on Jewish thought during the medieval period. In any event, the *Epistle* was an early, reasonable response to the interpretational challenges flowing from Maimonides' multiple interpretations of prophetic symbolism.

(Who wrote the Epistle? R. Kafiḥ was not impressed by the claim that Maimonides wrote it; see note 11, *ad loc*., Hebrew, Guide 1:15. Zvi Langermann thinks that it could be unpublished work of Maimonides, or at least that it emerged from his inner circle of followers: see "Maimonides' *Epistle to R. Hasdai*," Hebrew, at *Academia.edu*, printed in *Ta Shma: Mekhakrim b'Madai ha-Yehudit l'Zekharo shel Israel M. Ta Shma*. Leon D. Stitskin, *Letters of Maimonides*, Yeshiva Univ., 1977, pp. 95-101, thinks that R. Joseph Ibn Aknin probably wrote it under Maimonides' direction. Contemporary scholarship conceives that the "Rabbi Joseph" in R. Stitskin's mind would have been R. Joseph ibn Yehuda ibn Shimon of Ceuta, c.1160-1226, not R. ibn Aknin. "**Elements affect the prophets"**: in Guide 1:34 they affect educability by way of the four *humours*, *i.e*., producing one's "complexion of temperament." Also, in Guide 2:40, "Inhabitants of the extreme North or South are… of limited understanding and unable to arrive at a knowledge of God," as opposed to those in the centrally located climate of Israel, "distinguished by wisdom and courage.")

The Problem of the Surplus Fraction.

> "These four angels, the two that went up and the two that came down, *occupied one step of the ladder, standing in one line*. Hence it has been inferred that the breadth of the ladder in this vision was *four-thirds of the world*. For the breadth of an angel in a prophetic vision is equal to one-third of the world; comp. *And his body was like Tarshish*" (*Daniel* 10:6); the four angels therefore occupied

> *four-thirds of the world*…. The saying of our Sages, that the angel is …[a] third part of the universe, or, in the words of *Bereshit Rabba* 10, that the angel is the third part of the world, *is quite clear*; we have already explained it in our large work on the Holy Law [Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei* 2:3]. The whole creation consists of three parts, (1) the pure intelligences, or angels; (2) the bodies of the spheres; and (3) the *materia prima*, or the bodies which are below the spheres, and are subject to constant change."

After hearing these passages for the first time, one of my students (Cary Schachter) brilliantly objected, "How can you have four-thirds of anything?" This is the right question. James Arthur Diamond called it the problem of the "surplus fraction."

Four Angels in a Row. The image that provoked the problem of the surplus fraction is the discovery that the four angels ascending and descending the ladder stand at one moment on one step in a row. This conclusion is not in the biblical text. However, Rabbi Berakhya in *Bereishit Rabba* 68:12 taught:

> "He [God] showed him [Jacob] *the world and a third of the world*. Ascent, no less than two; descent, no less than two," *cf. Hullin* 91b: "When they met each other [on the ladder] there were four."

This requires explanation. First, Jacob beheld "A ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the *angels* of God ascending and descending on it." The word "angels," *malakhei*, is plural, so they could not be less than two. Since they ascend and descend, all four must meet at some point on one step of the ladder.

Secondly, if the angels are incorporeal, how do they occupy space?

The fact that they were *standing together* led to the thought that they were bodies occupying space. Drawing from a verse in Daniel, the rabbis pondered the angels' *size* (whatever that may have meant to them).

A figure dressed in linen and gold appeared in Daniel's vision, identified by Midrash as the angel Gabriel.

> "His body was like *Tarshish*, his face as the appearance of lightning, his eyes as lamps of fire, his arms and feet like in color to *polished brass* (*nekhoshet klal*), and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude." (Daniel 10:6)

The Talmud explained that the mysterious *Tarshish* is a measure of distance.

> "And it is written regarding an angel: 'His body was like *Tarshish.*' And it is learned that *Tarshish* was two thousand parasangs [Persian miles]."

It follows, given that there were four angels in a row, that if each angel was two thousand parasangs the ladder must have been eight thousand parasangs wide. (*Hullin* 91b 9-11)

Tarshish. The problem was that no one recalled what Tarshish *was* or *where* it was. Some speculated that it might have been a Phoenician outpost on the Iberian Peninsula called Tartassos, but none had seen it.

Rashi suggested that we should instead "Translate *tarshish* like the appearance of the sea." According to him, Tarshish was not a city, but was instead the sea, as in Jonah 1:3 "A ship going to *Tarshish*," meaning a ship going to sea. In his comments on Ezekiel 1:16, Rashi also suggested that it was a precious stone the color of

the sea. Aristotle thought it was a river. Rabbi Yaakov Emden read *Tarshish* as an Aramaic contraction meaning *two-sixths, i.e.*, one-third, linking that idea with Rashi's statement:

> "*Trei-shesh* is two thousand from the six thousand that is the world. [Thus] The angel is a third of the world. According to Rashi, *Tarshish* is the sea, and the sea is a third of the world." (*Haggahot Yaavetz* to Hullin 91b, my trans.)

But the Midrash (above) held that since each of the angels was a third of the world, and there were four angels on a rung, what Jacob saw was "The world and a third of the world" in extent.

Maimonides collapsed this speculation (Goodman called it "convoluted," p. 206, note 93) in one sentence:

> "It has been inferred that the breadth of the ladder in this vision was *four-thirds of the world*, for the breadth of an angel in a prophetic vision is equal to one-third of the world; as '*And his body was like Tarshish*"; the four angels therefore occupied *four-thirds of the world.*"

This reference to the physical size of the angel could not have pleased him since it incorrectly suggested that incorporeal forces like angels occupy physical space. He paused for a few sentences to discuss prophecies in Zechariah and Ezekiel but then returned to clean up the damage.

> "The saying of our Sages, that the angel is [a]… third part of the universe, or, in the words of *Bereshit Rabba* 10, that the angel is the third part of the world, *is quite clear*; we have already explained it in our large work on the Holy Law [Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei*, 2:3]. The whole creation consists of three parts, (1) the pure intelligences, or angels; (2) the bodies of the spheres; and (3) the *materia prima*, or the bodies which are below the spheres, and are subject to constant change." (Enumeration in R. Friedlander's original translation.)

It comes out that when the rabbis said that the angel is a third part of the universe, they did not mean that the angel was a third part of the physical space of the universe, but that those intellects were one of the three kinds of things in the universe. That conclusion is far more comfortable for Maimonides and fits his physical/metaphysical cosmology well. But he still had not explained the mysterious *fourth third*.

***The Surplus Fraction Explained*.** The best answer among several proposals is that the surplus fourth is the *Active Intellect* that Maimonides established in the Guide's first chapter as the "image of God" (Gen. 1:27), the *tzelem elokim*. "And God said: 'Let us make man in our image (*b'tzalmenu*), after our likeness."

The *Active Intellect* (*sekhel ha-poel*) is that transcendent intellectual state that is our special connection to the divine. It is no less real than the other three parts of reality that Maimonides identified in the Mishneh Torah: the intelligences, the spheres, and physical bodies. But we cannot classify the Active Intellect with those three parts of our universe. It is not one of the Separate Intellects of the spheres nor one of the angels. The "image of God" *is completely outside of that system*. Jacob's ladder with its four angels that are "four thirds of the world" reaches beyond our world. It is the path to transcendence.

James Diamond called the fourth third the "surplus fraction" and explained that it must be the Active Intellect. Guide translator Lenn Evan Goodman endorsed this solution. While it is not the only interpretation on offer, it is the best. Prof. Diamond wrote:

> "There is still one component missing from the scheme that can be accounted for by the *surplus fraction* of the world that the Midrashic dimensions … reveal. The four angels are the four intellects

> who govern the four spheres …. There remains one intellect who does not preside over the sphere but funnels all the forces of the superior intellects down into the sublunar realm – the Active Intellect. Because it is responsible for sublunar matter, form, and human rational activity (including prophecy), it is the most relevant for men. The fact that it is, as Davidson characterizes it, 'An *eternal cosmic transmitter*, broadcasting an undifferentiated range of forms as well as the substratum that can receive them,' renders it the mirror of all being for men. This angel constitutes that extra third which is the conduit between the higher elusive intellects and ultimately God. In its capacity as the conveyor of thought, form, and governance, by way of being the final outlet for divine overflow to the world of man, it enhances man's ability to glimpse into the divine realm. At the same time, it defines the limits of human thought and maintains the distance required so that any conceptualization of the deity remains free of anthropomorphic corruption."

Our Active Intellect is nothing like the three elements that divide the universe. No angel can rise as high as Moses or Elijah because the angels remain part of the world. That is the meaning of the Ladder Parable: the universe is a step toward prophetic revelation.

(Diamond, in *Maimonides on the Hermeneutics of Concealment*, 116, chapter 5, "The Seven Units of Jacob's Ladder and Their Message." Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on the Intellect*, 124. Goodman translation, 207 note 96. For a catalog of interpretations of the ladder, see R. Even-Shmuel's commentary on the Guide, p. 148, note 19. R. Even-Shmuel seems to agree that the surplus fraction is the Active Intellect.)

A VISION OF THE MERKAVA

> "In all the *Midrashim* it is mentioned and repeated that *there are four camps of angels* (*Pirke d'R. Eliezer* 4:3, *Bamidbar Rabba* 2:9) …. In his parables, *Zechariah* — when describing that *There came out four chariots* (*merkavot*) *from between the two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of brass* (Zech. 6:1)— says in interpretation of this: *These are the four airs* [*rukhot*] *of the heavens which go forth after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth* (Zech. 6:5). They are accordingly the cause of everything that comes to pass …. In regard to his mentioning *brass* (*neḥoshet*), and likewise the dictum *burnished brass* (*neḥoshet kalal*, Ezek. 1:7), perceive in them a certain equivocality [*shituf*]. You shall hear an indication regarding this."
>
> (Pines trans., with his italics. *Rukhot* can mean "airs," "winds," "spirits," or "souls." *Shituf*, in Maimonidean/Tibbonian usage, should instead be translated as *homonymity*.)

Textual Weaving. The reader may notice that I separated the account of Jacob's Ladder above from the Vision of the Chariot, making liberal use of ellipses. I did this because the text of the Guide weaves this material from one allegory back to the other, repeatedly. To clarify these passages, I had to separate them, treating Maimonides' account of the Ladder allegory separately from Zechariah's parables about the camps of angels and the four chariots. In Maimonides' text, these sentences flow in and out of each other.

Thus, Maimonides began by discussing the number of steps on the ladder, then changed the subject to the four camps of angels, then returned to the possibility of seven steps, and then returned to the four angels on one step. Changing the subject again, he came to the brass mountains in Zechariah. He changed course one last time with his explanation that the ladder angels as a third of the world.

Why did Maimonides weave the text in this confusing manner? One reason was the law that proscribed the public teaching of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* in Talmud *Hagiga*.

Another reason was that he wanted his readers to join him in this meditation. When we ascend this mystic ladder we must also weave elements together. Only then do we arrive at the source of revelation at the apex, our connection to God. Since I argue that the overarching purpose of the Guide is the training of prophets, he wants those prophetic adepts to weave this for themselves. They must make these connections on their own. No teacher can do it for them. They can only turn to God for help.

(**Proscription of public teaching**: see my *Introduction I: The Well, The Pearl, and the Golden Apple*, in the section *The Flame of Knowledge.* **Overarching purpose***:* The primacy of the education of prophets by no means negates any of the host of Maimonides' other purposes in the Guide. They all contribute to this main purpose.)

Maimonides' Unique but Precise Reading of Zechariah's Merkava Vision. Before we inspect Zechariah's vision, we should first notice how Maimonides began his discussion of Merkava mysticism.

Most such discussions begin and end with the vision of a *single Merkava* chariot revealed to both Ezekiel and Isaiah. Ezekiel's vision is the most detailed, consuming the entire first chapter of the book of Ezekiel.

To our surprise, the term *Merkava* does not appear in those accounts. Instead, Ezekiel recounts a strange vision of one wheel and then four wheels. Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6:1-13) has neither wheels nor *Merkavas*, although it does have a throne "Which is high and lifted up, and His train filled the Temple." Daniel's version (Daniel 7:1-28) has the throne and wheels, but still no *chariot*.

> "I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head like the pure wool: His throne was like the fiery flame, and His wheels as burning fire." (Daniel 7:9)

Maimonides' vision did not come from the classic *Merkava* vision of Ezekiel. Although Ezekiel features the four wheels that a chariot requires, *Maimonides does not connect Ezekiel's vision to his own Merkava vision*. He grounded his vision *uniquely* in the revelatory field of Zechariah's chariots and metal mountains. Zechariah's vision was the only *Merkava* vision that explicitly featured a *Merkava*.

We think of a chariot in Ezekiel because of a comment in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Ben Sira* (Ecclesiasticus) 49:8: "Ezekiel saw a vision and described the different orders of the *chariot*."

This difference is striking since it is the Guide's first serious engagement with *Merkava* prophecy. Although he comes to explain Ezekiel's vision at the beginning of Vol. III, it plays no role in Maimonides' own vision.

In all of this, Maimonides demonstrated his creativity and independence. Gershom Scholem's two comprehensive articles on *Merkava* mysticism in his *Kabbalah* (1974, Keter Publ.) only mention the source in Ezekiel and the historical developments that flow from it.

Moreover, rabbinic tradition read the Zechariah passage in *political* rather than mystical terms, framing the four chariots as the *four empires* that conquered Israel.

Let's look at the passage in question:

> "*And I turned, and lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and, behold, there came four chariots out from between two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of brass.*
> In the first chariot were red horses; and in the second chariot black horses;
> And in the third chariot white horses; and in the fourth chariot grisled and bay horses.

> Then I answered and said unto the angel that talked with me, *What are these, my lord*?
> And the angel answered and said unto me, *These are the four spirits [rukhot] of the heavens, which go forth from standing before the Lord of all the earth.*
> The black horses which are therein go forth into the north country, and the white go forth after them, and the grisled go forth toward the south country.
> And the bay went forth, and sought to go that they might walk to and fro through the earth: and he said, Get you hence, walk to and fro through the earth. So they walked to and fro through the earth.
> Then cried he upon me, and spake unto me, saying, Behold, these that go toward the north country have quieted my spirit in the north country." (KJV Zechariah 6:1-8)

As Maimonides knew, rabbinic tradition focused on the horses, their color, and their geographical location when it assigned them to the four evil empires. (*Compare* Mishneh Torah 7:3, where Maimonides held that Jacob's ladder's "interpretation…is the rise and fall of kingdoms.")

He instead focused on the fifth line. Zechariah questioned God's emissary, "*What are these, my lord*? And the angel answered …, *These are the four spirits of the heavens, which go forth from standing before the Lord of all the earth*." The angel provides the interpretation of his own parable. But the angel proffered a parable of spirit/winds to clarify a parable of chariots, exchanging one parable for another.

That was all Maimonides needed. Inspired by his vision of the divine tetradic natural order, Maimonides revealed what the four chariot/winds stand for: "*They are, accordingly, the cause of everything that comes to pass...*" (*v'harei hen ilat kol ma sh'mitkhadash*). They are the tetradic system of formative forces.

Mountains of Brass. Four chariots emerge from two brass (*nekhoshet*) mountains. Those peaks are the *form* and *matter* of the universe (R. Shem Tov, 27a) emanating to us in tetradic cascades. The chariots are God's whirling emissaries that are the "*cause of everything*," according to Maimonides.

As we will see, the term *nekhoshet* is richly allusive. We start by assessing its *shininess*.

In Ezekiel's *Merkava* vision, the prophet talks about this burnished brass when he described the four *khayot*: "And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot: and they *sparkled like the color of burnished brass* (*v'notzetzim k'eyn nekhoshet klal*)." (Ezek.1:7)

Rashi helps us to understand these strange words:

> "*And they sparkled* (*nitzotzot*): Because of their brilliance, sparks seemed to emanate from them, as in Talmud *Yoma* (37b): '[Queen Helene] made [for the Temple in Jerusalem] a polished golden candelabrum, etc. When the sun shone, sparks (*nitzotzot*) would [seemingly] emanate from it,' etc. *Notzetzim* is *etincelants* in French, *gleaming*…."
> "*Nekhoshet kalal*. *Kalal* means clarified and gleaming (*mezukak u'meir*)."
> (Judaica Press, A.J. Rosenberg trans., at Sefaria.com)

Talmud *Yoma* spoke of Queen Helene of Adiabene, a Persian province on the northern Tigris, who was a famous convert to Judaism. She had donated a spectacular golden candelabrum to the Temple that picked up the sun's rays so brightly that people used it to tell when morning blessings should commence.

The Ezekiel passage associated brass with radiant reflectivity, *notzetzim*. Maimonides explicitly connected brass and brightness in his discussion of the *khayot hakodesh*, the sacred animated beings of Ezekiel's vision, in Guide 3:2. They picked up light like a mirror.

> "The prophet then states that they are transparent; they are 'like burnished brass' (*nekhoshet kalal*). He also adds that they are *luminous* (*behirot*). Compare 'Their appearance was like burning coals of fire' (Ezek.1:13)." (Guide 3:2)

The term *Neḥoshet* has been defined as brass, copper, or bronze. Man has been making bronze, an alloy of tin and copper, for over 6,000 years. Ancient mirrors were usually burnished bronze. When polished, bronze achieves a good reflective surface. Bronze mirrors were the most *receptive* to light. Even after the Bronze Age passed into the Iron Age, bronze remained the preferred material for mirrors until advances in metallurgy and glassmaking in the middle of the 12th century. That was when Venetian glassmakers began making mirrors by bonding a tin-mercury mixture to clear panes of glass.

Etruscan Bronze Mirror. Metropolitan Museum of Art, via Wikimedia Commons.

Jewish tradition evoked *neḥoshet*'s luster with the terms *notzetzim* or *nitzotzot*, as well as *kalal*. *Neḥoshet*, then, stands for *receptivity* due to its capacity to pick up light. Just because of that receptivity, *neḥoshet* stands for *matter*. Maimonides wrote, "Matter, as such, is, as you are well aware, always receptive and passive." (Guide 1:28)

Matter is a potentiality receptive to form. As matter, *neḥoshet* also represents physicality. Matter's receptivity evokes femininity.

Matter, Femininity, and the Imagination. Maimonides connected matter to femininity and form to masculinity.

In the *Introduction* to the Guide, Maimonides maintained that the "entire book" of Proverbs is based on the analogy between the *Married Harlot* and *matter* (Prov. 7:1-27), with *form* standing for either the husband in that parable or the "young man void of understanding."

> "Accordingly, he [Solomon] likens matter, which is the cause of all these bodily pleasures, to a harlot who is also a married woman. In fact, *his entire book* is based on this allegory. And we shall explain in various chapters of this Treatise his wisdom in likening matter to a married harlot, and we shall explain how he concluded this book of his with a eulogy of the woman who is not a harlot but devotes herself to attending to the welfare of her household and husband." (Guide: Introduction, Pines' trans., p. 13).

The moral: Matter embraces form but will embrace another form in the future. The book of Proverbs *bookends* the contrast of the *Woman of Valor* (Prov. 31:10). She is self-reliant, self-conscious, and loyal to her husband, a metaphor for the union to one true form. She represents matter, her husband form, and adheres to him as Israel must adhere to God.

The term *nekhoshet* conveys all these allusions: matter, physicality, reflectivity, receptivity, and femininity.

But importantly, the reflective quality of *nekhoshet* suggests the *imagination*. The imagination is the repository of *reflected* images. As such, it is the prophet's tool to translate the ineffable divine word into the imaginative language of men. The imagination equips the prophet to teach the revelation to his public. It also has a negative quality; Maimonides called it our evil inclination, the *yetzer hara.* The imagination's unbridled receptivity, as Married Harlot, is the source of corruption and sin. But when the good inclination (*yetzer hatov*) follows the intellect, it is a Woman of Valor.

He gives a dark hint in our chapter when he writes "You shall hear an indication regarding this." He had in mind his discussion of prophetic language in Guide 2:29, and 2:43. In those passages he discussed anagrams and other word games that the prophetic imagination uses to bring its message to mankind:

> Guide 2:29: "*The prophets employ homonymous terms and use words which are not meant to be understood in their ordinary signification*, but are only used because of some other meaning which they admit, e.g., 'A rod of an almond-tree (*shaked*),' because of the words which follow, 'For I will hasten (*shaked*)' (Jer. 1:11-12), as will be shown in the chapter on prophecy (2:43). According to the same principle, Ezekiel in the account of the Divine Chariot employs… the term *ḥashmal* (Ezek. 1:4); also *regel egel* (1:7), *neḥoshet kalal* (1:7), and similar terms; Zechariah (6:1) likewise adopts this method and says: 'And the mountains were mountains of *neḥoshet*,' and the like."
>
> Guide 2:43: "The prophets, however, are also shown things which do not illustrate the object of the vision but *indicate it by their name through its etymology or homonymity*. Thus, the imaginative faculty forms the image of a thing, the name of which *has two meanings, one of which denotes something different* [from the image]. This is likewise a kind of allegory…. Take, e.g., the allegories of Zechariah (11:7, *et seq*.). He takes, in a prophetic vision, staves to lead the flock; he calls the one *no'am* (pleasure), the other *ḥovelim*. He indicates thereby that the nation was at first in *favor* with God, who was their leader and guide…. But later a change took place. They *rejected* the love of God, and God rejected them, appointing *destroyers* like Jeroboam and Manasseh as their rulers. Accordingly, the word *ḥovelim* has the same meaning (*viz*., *destroying*) as the root *ḥaval* has in *meḥabbelim keramim*, 'destroying vineyards' (Song of Songs 2:15). But the prophet found also in this name *ḥovelim* the indication that the people *despised God* and that God *despised them*. This is, however, not expressed by the word *ḥaval*, but by a transposition of the letters *Ḥet*, *Bet*, and *Lamed* [ח, ב, ל] the meaning of despising and rejecting is obtained. Comp., 'My soul loathed them, and their soul also abhorred me' [*baḥalah*] (Zech. 12:8). The prophet had, therefore, to change the order of the letters in *ḥaval* into that of *baḥal* [treating the Hebrew letters for *B* and *V* as the same by ignoring their pronunciation points: בּ and בּ]. In this way, we find very strange things and also mysteries (*sodot*) in the words *neḥoshet*, *kalal*, *regel*, '*egel*, and *ḥashmal* of the *Merkavah*, and in other terms in other passages. *After the above explanation, you will see the mysteries in the meaning of these expressions if you examine them thoroughly*."

Thus, *khaval* meant "destroying" but could be understood as an anagram of *bakhala*, for the conceptual cluster of despising/rejecting/abhorred, merely by reordering its letters. That is the model.

Maimonides did not apply his decoder ring to all the parables above but instead invited us to decrypt them using his model. *Nekhoshet*, which is usually a metal, can, in the unusual but well-known instance of Ezekiel 16:36, become *nekhushtekh*, which is the thought cluster of shame/nakedness/the lower part of the female body/the source of menstrual flow or of "flow issuing from the woman's body from frequent cohabitation."

Ezekiel and Zechariah called the Jews a harlot for abandoning God and whoring after idol worship.
The hint we should draw from *bakhala* in Zechariah 12:8 is that in both cases, of *bakhala* and of *nekhoshet*, in Ezekiel and Zechariah, God condemned the Jewish people as *abhorrent* because they are *shameful*.

> "Wherefore, O *harlot* (*zona*), hear the word of the LORD: Thus saith the Lord GOD; Because *thy filthiness was poured out* (*hishafekh nekhushtekh*), and thy nakedness discovered through thy whoredoms with thy lovers, and with all the idols of thy abominations, and by the blood of thy children, which thou didst give unto them." (Ezek. 16:35-46).

(Maimonides does not make the connection between *nekhoshet* and *nekhushtekh* explicit, but David Bakan took his hint in *Maimonides on Prophecy*, 1991, J. Aronson Publ., 220. For the thought cluster of *nekhushtekh* in Ezekiel 16:36, see *Artscroll Yechezkel*, 1977 Mesorah Publ., 1:263, citing Targum, Rashi, Radak, and Metsudath David in support.)

Thus, if we read *nekhoshet* as the symbol of the imagination, then the degradation of the imagination to *nekhushtekh* is an apt symbol of corruption. R. Caspi (*c*.1279—*c*.1340) made the point explicit by stating that, in his opinion, *nekhoshet* comes from *hashkhata*, which means "corruption."

The term *nekhoshet* is also close to the term for '*snake*,' *nakhash*, like the snake of the Garden of Eden. The consonants are nearly the same. King Hezekiah of Judah, in his zeal to eliminate idol worship, not only destroyed its shrines, pillars, and groves but also:

> "He broke in pieces the *brazen serpent* (*nakhash ha-nekhoshet*) that Moses had made [Numbers 28:9]; for unto those days the children of Israel did offer to it; and it was called *Nehushtan*." (II *Kings* 18:4, JPS 1917 trans).

Nehushtan is a *hapax legomenon*, *i.e*., a term used only once in the Bible. It is an obvious coupling of snake and brass, *nakhash* and *nekhoshet*. Maimonides associated the snake with the imagination's evil inclination, the *yetzer hara*, in Guide 2:30 and 3:22.

David Bakan recognized this as evoking the erotic dimension. In Guide 2:30, Maimonides had written,

> "With regard to the same principle, in reference to the *Chariot* (*merkava*), there occurs the word *hashmal*, as they have explained, and also *regel egel* [the foot of a calf] and *nehoshet qalal* [burnished brass]. In a similar way, Zechariah says: 'And the mountains were mountains of *nehoshet* [brass].'" (Pines trans., with his brackets).

Dr. Bakan understood *hashmal* and *regel egel* as overt male euphemisms, with *nekhoshet* again female. He wrote, "We take this as a hint by Maimonides of the sexuality associated with the *Maaseh Merkava*."

This negates the condemnations reported by Moshe Idel of many early cabalists (but by no means all of them) that Maimonides allegedly failed to recognize the sexual implications of the image of the *Merkava*. He certainly grasped them but, for obvious reasons, chose not to make them explicit.

("Many early cabalists": Idel cites, among others, Rabbis Ezra of Gerone, Nachmanides, Joshua ibn Shuaib, Shlomo ibn Adret, Menakhem Recanati, Raavad, Yonah Gerondi, etc, all of whom condemned Maimonides on this issue. See Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," p. 45, in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed., Isadore Twerski, 1990, Harvard. But Idel later returned to the subject, listing the pro-Maimonidean cabalists in "Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed and the Kabbalah." *Jewish History* 18, 197–226 (2004). **"We take this as a hint …"**—Bakan, *ibid*, 176-177.)

Despite all this, R. Efodi (*c*.1350-*c*.1415) noted the positive side of *nekhoshet*:

> "When we read 'mountains of brass,' we discerned that their hylic matter was pure, clear, and noble. While we could say that they have a potentiality for corruption, since *nekhoshet* derives from *hashkhata*, they acquire (*yiknu*) eternality and incorruptibility (*ha-nitzkhi v'khavalti-nifsad*) from their status as separate incorporeal entities (*ha-nivdal*)." (My trans of Rabbi Efodi, 27a. By *nivdal* he had in mind the Separate Intellects, *ha-sikhlim ha-nivdalim*).

R. Efodi understood that despite the problems of the imagination, that faculty is vital for the process of prophecy. Maimonides wrote "Prophecy… consists in the most perfect development of the imaginative

faculty," (Guide 2:36: *u'matzav zeh hu takhlit shlemut ha-koakh ha-madama*). Even if a man perfected his mental and moral faculties he would not experience prophecy unless those faculties "combined with the highest natural excellence of the imaginative faculty" (Guide 2:36). It is then, in R. Efodi's words, "pure, clear, and noble."

Lenn Evan Goodman includes these multiple allusions of *nekhoshet* as imagination:

> "It is the glass catching reason's light, the recipient of all prophecy but that of Moses. But it also bears baser impulses, symbolized by the serpent in the garden." (Goodman trans., *ibid.*, 206, note 95).

Mountains of Brass As the Separate Intellects. Rabbi Yehuda Even-Shmuel had a different reading of the brass mountains, emphasizing their mountainous and enduring nature and the fact that there are two of them.

Exploring Maimonides' gloss that the four chariots/four winds are "The *causes* (*ilat*) … *which produce all changes* (*sh'mitkhadash)* in the universe," R. Even-Shmuel suggests that the two mountains must be the "ancient mountains," *i.e.*, the *harerei kedem* of Deut. 33:15 (from Moses' blessing to the tribe of Joseph).

At the back of his mind was Rashi's explanation (citing *Sifrei Devarim* 353:4) that these mountains were *prior* (*kedem*) to *all other peaks*. This warranted R. Even-Shmuel's reading of the mountains as *Separate Intellects*. That is because the Separate Intellects are the *prior* causes of the super-spheres through their actualization of them. The spheres then emanate everything, justifying Maimonides' writing that they "produce all changes in the universe."

R. Even-Shmuel wrote that the *two* mountains in the vision portray the Separate Intellects' *duality of perception*, by which they cognize both the divine world above them and our world below them and, with that knowledge, actualize all potential things in our world.

The fact that they are *metal* mountains tells us of their permanent nature, not eroding like other mountains. It means that the Separate Intellects *always* manifest themselves as this duality of perception and actualization. They are, therefore, the "Chosen ministers of God to be the proximate causes of every creation in our lower world." (R. Even-Shmuel *ad loc.* to Guide 2:10, 3:149, Hebrew.)

CLOSING ADMONITION

Maimonides closes our chapter with a ringing admonition.

> "In this manner may those understand the dark sayings of the prophets who desire to understand them, who awake from the *sleep of forgetfulness*, deliver themselves from the *sea of ignorance*, and raise themselves upward nearer the higher beings. But those who prefer to swim (*l'tzlul*) in the waters of their ignorance, and to 'Come down very low,' (Deut. 28:43) need not exert the body or heart [mind]; they need only cease to move, and they will go down to what is lowest in nature.
>
> "*Note* and consider well all we have said."

Maimonides demands that we pursue his interpretational path. If we fail to do so we fall to superstition, forfeiting our divine inheritance. We return to sod and sludge, below even the animals, tumbling to "the sea of ignorance," as in the *Slough of Despond* in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*:

> "This miry Slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore is it called the Slough of Despond:

> for still as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears, and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place; and this is the reason of the badness of this ground."

What intellectual sin caused this *Sleep of Forgetfulness* in the *Sea of Ignorance* that brings us low?

Maimonides here warned against reading his tetradic vision as merely an account of natural physics and biology. Its purpose was not just to detail natural philosophy's most recent explanation of the forces of the universe. Worse yet, we must not turn the angelic forces governing nature into physical idols.

He was right to be concerned. Most commentators saw this chapter as an account of the "elements" (Rabbis Efodi and Caspi) or, more broadly, the *elemental forces* of nature. Apart from Rabbi Narboni, few commentators recognized Maimonides' vision as our path to transcendence.

Maimonides led us to this by concealing the fourth angel, the "surplus fraction," in his final explanation of the ladder angels.

> "The saying of our Sages, that the angel is … third part of the universe, or, in the words of *Bereshit Rabba* 10, that the angel is the third part of the world, is quite clear; we have already explained it in our large work on the Holy Law [Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei*, 2:3]. The whole creation consists of three parts, (1) the pure intelligences, or angels; (2) the bodies of the spheres; and (3) the *materia prima*, or the bodies which are below the spheres, and are subject to constant change."

He left out the mysterious fourth third, though previously emphasizing it as "…The four angels [that] occupied *four-thirds of the world*." It clearly impressed him. It is the most arresting part of his tetradic vision. The missing fourth third is our *Active Intellect*, the "image of God," which we inarticulably share with God. Losing that connection through mere intellectual sloth is the cardinal moral sin against ourselves.

A Soul without Knowledge Is Not Good. In *Commentary on the Mishnah* Maimonides cataloged the parts of the soul, including the imagination. The imagination preserves and stores sense images. It also combines them, sometimes producing fantasies that do not exist in nature, like a man the size of a mountain flying in air, or an insect the size of an elephant.

Already, in this early work, he scorned the *Kalām* (Muslim theology) for making the imagination the touchstone for what is real:

> "They thought, or made people fancy, *that everything that can be imagined is possible*... [despite that the imagination] combines things whose existence is *impossible*..." (*Intro. to Avot*, *Shemona Perakim* 1).

Intellect, by contrast, perceives real-world ideas, pursues sciences, and makes ethical choices.

In *Commentary on the Mishna* Maimonides made a powerful moral statement contrasting the imagination and the intellect. In it, he subtly moved to the subject of the *Active Intellect*:

> "Know that this single soul, whose powers or parts are described above, is like matter, and the intellect is its form. If it does not *attain its form* [the Active Intellect], the existence of its capacity to receive this form is for nought and is, as it were, futile. This is the meaning of his [Solomon's] statement: *Indeed, without knowledge a soul is not good* (Proverbs 19:2). He means that the existence of a soul *that does not attain its form*, but is rather *a soul without knowledge*, is not good."

(Commentary on the Mishnah, *Shemona Perakim*, *Eight Chapters*, *Avot* 1, trans., Weiss and Butterworth, p. 64, in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*).

The worst part of a soul not being "good," that is, a soul in thrall to the imagination, is that since the imagination only portrays corporeal sense-images, it could never *imagine* the incorporeal God. The idolatry of imaged gods springs from the dark well of the human imagination.

A soul without knowledge is not good. We have a moral obligation to awaken to our own intellectual and spiritual life. To thine own self be true.

Maimonides wants to rouse us from this darkness of imagination. He exults,

> "How excellent is this speculation and how great its utility for him who wishes to awake from this dormancy (*ha-alta*—darkness), I mean the state of following the imagination!"
> (Guide 1:73, Pines trans. 211: *kama hashuv iyun zeh v'kama gadolo tovato l'mi sh'ratza l'hitronen min ha-alta ha-zu, k'lomar ha-hemshekhut akher ha-dimyon*)

We see that Maimonides used similarly charged admonitory language about image obsession parallel to the admonition in our chapter, specifically regarding the *Active Intellect*, in Guide 2:6, the chapter on angelology.

> "*How bad and injurious is the blindness of ignorance*! Say to a person who is believed to belong to the 'wise' men of Israel that the Almighty sends His angel to enter the womb of a woman and to form there the *fœtus*: he will be satisfied with the account; he will believe it, and even find in it a description of the greatness of God's might and wisdom; although he believes that the angel consists of burning fire, and is as big as a third part of the universe, yet he considers it possible as a divine miracle. But tell him that God gave the seed a formative power which produces and shapes the limbs, and that this power is called 'angel,' or that all forms are the result of the influence of the *Active Intellect* (*hasekhel hapoel*), and that the latter is the angel, *the Prince of the World* (*saru shel olam*), frequently mentioned by our Sages, and *he will turn away*; because he cannot comprehend the true greatness and power of creating forces that act in a body *without being perceived by our senses*."

This person "believed to belong to the wise men of Israel" was only wise in his own eyes. He is a sophomore, *i.e.*, Gr.: *sophos moros*, i.e., a sophisticated moron, σοφός (wise) μωρός (fool). His thought is shot through with corporeality. He endows divine forces with physical characteristics such as size and heat. He believes angels have a physical body, occupy space, fly, and are ablaze. He accepts at face value statements like "He [God] makes… His servants a fiery flame," (Psalm 104:4), or "The angel is the third part of the universe," never asking whether the fiery flame would consume the pregnant woman or how such a large body could enter her.

The wise fool cannot grasp God's greatness as the Creator who actualizes vital forces. Maimonides explained to this genius that the *force of conception* that confers our shape is incorporeal. It cannot be imaged. When he tells him that *our natural form* comes from a force in our seed actualized by an angel, called "the Prince of the World," which is the Active Intellect, he flees ("…he will turn away"). Had he told him that this intellect is the tenth level of angels, the *Ishim*, *i.e.*, our minds when they *actualize potential knowledge*, *emanating and realizing form*, he would run as fast as his legs would carry him.

(***Ishim***: Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei haTorah* 2:7, "Therefore, they are called *ishim*, ("men"), because their level is close to the level of human knowledge.," *krova l'maala daat bnei adam.* **The doctrine of epigenesis**: There is a formative force in the male and female seed. Aristotle, *Generatione Animalium* 729b1 ff.).

The fool cannot grasp the un-imagable angel of the Active Intellect by which we are in the image of God. As Maimonides warned in the *first paragraph* of the first chapter of the Guide,

> "Some have been of opinion that by the Hebrew *ẓelem*, the shape and figure of a thing is to be understood, and this explanation led men to believe in the corporeality [of the Divine Being]: for they thought that the words 'Let Us make man in Our *ẓelem*' (Gen. 1:26), implied that God had the form of a human being, i.e., that He had figure and shape, and that, consequently, He was corporeal. They adhered faithfully to this view, and thought that if they were to relinquish it, they would *eo ipso* reject the truth of the Bible: and further, if they did not conceive God as having a body possessed of face and limbs, similar to their own in appearance, they would have to deny even the existence of God."

And, he went on,

> "In the phrase 'Let us make man in our *ẓelem*,' the term signifies *the specific form* of man, *viz*., his intellectual perception, and does not refer to his 'figure' or 'shape.'"
>
> ("Intellectual perception," *ha-hasaga ha-sikhlit*/אלאדראך אלעקלי. Pines has "intellectual apprehension; Goodman: "rational awareness," which, in his notes, Goodman rephrases as "discourse of reason.")

Concluding,

> "Man's distinction consists in a property which no other creature on earth possesses, *viz*., intellectual perception, in the exercise of which he does not employ his senses, nor move his hand or his foot. This perception has been compared—though only apparently, not in truth—to the Divine perception which requires no corporeal organ. In this account, i.e., on account of the Divine intellect with which man has been *endowed*, he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty, but far from it be the notion that the Supreme Being is corporeal, having a material form.
>
> [For "*endowed*"—Pines has '*conjoined*,' *ha-nitzmad bo*/אלמתצל ב, as in the medieval formulation, "conjunction with the Active Intellect," the title of a volume by Averroes, bearing a Heb. commentary by R. Narboni.]

God "stands above" Jacob's ladder, meaning He permanently presides. When we attain conjunction with the Active Intellect, the *tzelem* in the image of God, we transcend the world. The angels cannot do this.

Rabbi Yehuda Even-Shmuel learns from Maimonides' admonition that we need three things:

> 1) To arouse ourselves from our soft amnesiac slumber to recover the wealth of human wisdom. We can do so only by seeking the treasure concealed by the corporeal surfaces of the world.
> 2) To abandon the notion that blissful ignorance is more comfortable than knowing, and
> 3) To aspire to our highest levels, as our sages and prophets did.

It is a message we must uncover for ourselves. Maimonides bequeathed it to us with his *Merkava* vision, for he intones that we must "*Note and consider well all we have said!*" *v'lakhen haven kol ma sh'ne'emar u'v'khanehu.* R. Even-Shmuel explained: "When you come to interpret the 'riddles' of prophecy, follow this pathway, and secrets and allusions will be revealed."