The Garden of Eden and the Origins of the West: Reading Maimonides’ Guide to the Perplexed

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Abstract: Maimonides’ *Guide to the Perplexed* answers a question posed by an inquirer who asks: prior to eating the apple man did not know the difference between good and evil, and must have been animal-like intellectually. After he sinned, man was intellectually developed and became more like God. But then, why does the Bible say that man was created possessing the image of God even before he sinned? How can something be a punishment if as a result of sinning man became more like God?

Maimonides’ first answer was that man was intelligent already at the time of creation. Being made in the image of God meant that he possessed intellectual faculties. But this knowledge was very specific. He had knowledge of pure rationality, but was not given all other types of knowledge. After sinning, his punishment was losing his capacity for pure rationality and instead gaining lower levels of knowledge based on sensation, which awoke his desires.

Maimonides’ second interpretation is based on the Jewish Midrash. In this interpretation, the story and its participants are an allegory teaching us about the nature of the human soul. In Maimonides’ view, man was created as an androgynous. This means that within every person there is a male element and a female element. Adam represents the intellect. Eve is the substance, the integral animal component of man. Thus, in the story of the Garden of Eden it is the woman who is subject to temptation. Eve’s temptation takes the forms of passion, desire, and imagination.

The serpent is also an allegory representing Satan, the imaginative faculty which creates appetite and desire. Some people can free themselves from the animalistic lifestyle, but most people cannot do that. Therefore, every human society needs a code of moral norms in order to regulate behavior and prevent anarchy.

Keywords: Adam, be’tselem elohim, creation, Eve, faith, Garden of Eden, good and evil, *Guide to the Perplexed*, knowledge, human perfection, the Inquirer, Maimonides, Midrash, mefursamot,mekubalot, muchashot, muskalot, original sin, Samael, scripture, the serpent, tree of knowledge

The biblical story of the Garden of Eden has long been discussed and interpreted socially, philosophically and politically. In modern times, it has been often discussed as an insight into the link between the quest to resurrect paradise lost and totalitarianism. In some religions it is ultimately an admonition seen as a warning that man’s failure to strictly apply the word of God without question is the source of ruin.1

These valid and important interpretations highlight just how rich the short story of creation actually is and how insightful it remains today, yet they generally avoid a key element far more prevalent in medieval debates on the story, which in some ways was richer; it grappled with the problem that man, in eating the fruit against the explicit command of God not to do so, was at first glance rewarded with knowledge. Moreover, because knowledge was acquired against God’s will, it sets it up as a violation of faith. Does the Bible, then, believe the pursuit of knowledge is an evil rejection of God’s will or that knowledge is pursued at the expense of faith? In fact, why did God not want man to possess the faculty of knowledge? And if man was created “in the image

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of God,” then why did he not possess knowledge to begin with? In cropping the question in these ways, it also raises key questions about man’s nature and his being shaped “in God’s image,” about the relationship between faith and reason, and about the free will of man. In the medieval period in the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian worlds, the struggle to reconcile reason and faith as well as science and religion, dominated the debates. This debate displayed its importance in that it set the stage for the emerging European Renaissance, the essence of which extended the late Judeo–Islamic attempt to reconcile faith and reason. And yet, this aspect of the debate surrounding the story of creation, which governed great prominence in the medieval and Renaissance periods, receded and is generally scantily addressed in the current era of the Enlightenment.

MAIMONIDES AND THE GUIDE TO THE PERPLEXED

Among the greatest pre-Renaissance scholars, the pinnacle of the intertwined Jewish and Islamic attempt to reconcile faith and reason are the Islamic scholar, Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes, and the Jewish thinker Rabbi Moshe (Moses) ben Maimon, known more popularly by the acronym RAMBAM or by his father’s lineage, Maimonides. This article deals with the works of Maimonides. Although Averroes represents a sophisticated culmination of the attempt by a half millennium of Islamic thinkers to address the nature of God, faith, and reason, those thinkers and their works essentially became a dead end in their own house in the thirteenth century. Islam was reverting to strict interpretation, and scholars, such as al-Ghazali, ultimately rejected the idea of independent reason. Books were burned in the suppression, and Averroes’ contributions survived at first only in their Hebrew translation and became studied more in Renaissance Europe than in the Islamic world.

In contrast, Maimonides immediately became, and to this day, remains a staple of Jewish learning. Few would argue that his insights remain one of the pillars defining modern Judaism, and few philosophers and even fewer theological students in Judaism fail to devote at least some space to interpreting Maimonides.

Moreover, Maimonides, along with some of the Muslim thinkers who may have been intellectually orphaned in their own context, contributed directly and substantially to Christian thought, which followed from the thirteenth century onward and which led to the emergence of the Renaissance. To this day, Maimonides remains a foundation of theological and philosophical thought studied generation after generation by both Jewish and Christian thinkers; as such, his works represent an important step on the road to the modern world.

Maimonides’ most important book of Jewish philosophy was the Guide to the Perplexed. In his introduction, Maimonides implores the reader to swear he will not share the mysteries of his book with other people, which would thus add a layer of interpretation and transmission to his work. He wanted people to read his book itself. By doing this Maimonides hoped his teaching would be studied directly, without the interference of intellectual middlemen.

It was a futile request. Over the years the book drew generations of readers and interpreters, yet, in many ways, the book remains a hidden treasure whose various mysteries seek explanation even today.

Maimonides believed in the existence of a secret body of ultimately inaccessible knowledge whose study is the purpose of one’s life. A man’s life is measured by his ability to approximate and get close to understanding this secret. The closer one gets to attaining this knowledge, the more one’s mental and emotional suffering is resolved and the society of political hardships is alleviated. Knowledge is salvation.

Maimonides believed that this body of secret knowledge determined social hierarchy. If in the world of the Bible one’s ability to access the holiest parts of the temple—the holy of holies—defined his place in the social ladder, in Maimonides’ intellectual world one’s ability to access the ultimate specialized knowledge is what determined the social pyramid and divided society into less and more important people. According to Maimonides, in ancient times there was a small group of people who held the monopoly of knowledge. But because of a series of historic catastrophes, the people who knew the secret and the secret itself were lost. Only hundreds of years later Maimonides, according to his own writing, was able to unveil the lost secret. Maimonides believed that his historic role was to pass the secret to the limited few who could understand it in the next generations but still preserve it as a secret. This was the reason for writing the Guide to the Perplexed, which he authored between 1187 and 1191.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DOUBT

One of the most interesting questions examined in the Guide to the Perplexed is the issue of the existence of God and how God’s greatness does not empty religion of any meaning. For if God in his omnipotence predetermines all, then what role is left for belief of man, because that can only acquire its own meaning if it’s a matter of free choice by that man? One of the book’s answers to these questions is that there is always a place for doubt. Namely, Maimonides believed that doubt has an important and healing effect on one’s spiritual and intellectual development. In the twenty-first century, when much of the intellectual discourse is dominated by the ideas that everything is relative and determined by a specific narrative, Maimonides’ views are a breath of fresh air. He took on this modern shibboleth almost a thousand years ago, when he argued that complete relativism is turning a weakness into an ideology. When people turn lack of understanding into an ideology, the experience of lack of understanding is a jump into certainty, and it turns into a certainty about uncertainty. Uncertainty itself becomes an ideology, and any ideology is in danger of turning into dogma.

Maimonides realized how confusing these ideas were to the reader. Nevertheless, so anchored was he to the role and importance of indulging doubt that he told the reader not to fully accept the certainty of any chapter of the book, including the chapter on the role of doubt. He argued that perplexity is
very important because one must be humble about his own ideas. One must not become an idealist because an idealist identifies himself by his ideas. For an idealist, doubting his ideas is to doubt who he is as a person. This is how dogma is created. When opinion determines identity, man is no longer open to new ideas. But for Maimonides, this was a grave condition. Because the center of everything is not one’s ego but the understanding of the truth, erasing the line between a man’s identity and his ideas removes from the man the ability to indulge doubts about his ideas.

Any study of Maimonides’ treatment of truth, the concepts of knowledge and the role of God should begin at the beginning: Genesis and the story of man’s conduct in the Garden of Eden. This is the subject of this article.

MAN AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Maimonides discusses the story of man in the Garden of Eden in several places in the Guide to the Perplexed. The first is in part I, chapter 2:

Some years ago a learned man asked me a question of great importance; the problem and the solution which we gave in our reply deserve the closest attention... “It would appear from Scripture at first sight,” said the objector, “that man was as originally intended to be perfectly equal to the rest of the animal creation, which is not endowed with intellect, reason, or power of distinguishing between good and evil. But Adam’s disobedience to the command of God procured him that great perfection which is the peculiarity of man, viz., the power of distinguishing between good and evil—the noblest of all the faculties of our nature, the essential characteristic of the human race. It thus appears strange that the punishment for rebelliousness should be the means of elevating man to a pinnacle of perfection to which he had not attained previously. This is equivalent to saying that a certain man was rebellious and extremely wicked, wherefore his nature was changed for the better, and he was made to shine as a star in the heavens.4

This is a challenging question: Prior to the sin man did not know the difference between good and evil (God ordered him not to eat from the fruit of the tree of the distinction between good and evil) and must have been animal-like in terms of his intellectual development. After he sinned, man knew good and evil and was thus intellectually developed and became more like God. But why does the Bible say that man was created possessing the image of God even before he sinned and gained this intellectual development? And, moreover, how can something be considered a punishment for a sin if as a result of it being committed, man became more like God?5

Maimonides answers this provocative question of “a man who deals in the sciences” first by disproving his interpretation of the biblical text and second by presenting his alternative interpretation to the story of the Garden of Eden.

Maimonides’ answer to the person who asked the question opens with an ad hominem attack on him. Maimonides writes:

Such was the purport and subject of the question, though not in the exact words of the Inquirer. Now, mark our reply, which was as follows: “You appear to have studied the matter superficially, and nevertheless you imagine that you can understand the book which has been the guide of past and present generations, when you for a moment withdraw from your lusts and appetites, and glance over its contents as if you were reading a historical work or some poetical composition. Collect your thoughts, and examine the matter carefully, for it is not to be understood as you at first sight think, but as you will find after due deliberation; namely, the intellect which was granted to men as to the highest endowment, was bestowed on him before his disobedience. With reference to this gift the Bible states that “man was created in the image and likeness of God.”6

From Maimonides’ point of view, the Inquirer’s question set up front the limits of the interpretation to the story of the Garden of Eden that he could offer in his answer. Namely, Maimonides underscores that the Inquirer’s assumption—that man was created in animal-level form, and only then was raised to divine-level thinking—casts the question in such a restrictive way that it obstructs his ability to reach a proper answer. Therefore, Maimonides proceeds to revisit and reexamine the elements of the story that must be correctly understood to disprove the Inquirer’s interpretation. However, because the answer to the Inquirer is also directed at the reader of the Guide, one should assume that much of Maimonides’ answer holds in it a broader interpretation, something that helps us as readers get closer to understanding the ultimate “secret.”

In trying to educate his readers, Maimonides offers a series of interpretations of the story of the Garden of Eden. Through these interpretations he gradually moves the reader from what he believes is the wrong understanding of the story into a full comprehension of its meaning. He presents first the interpretation of the Inquirer, which he believes is the least correct understanding of the story. Second, Maimonides offers his first interpretation in which he presents the philosophical axioms, which in his view should serve as the basis for understanding the story. Third, and only in the second part of the Guide, Maimonides presents his interpretation to the story as a full philosophical allegory. At this stage the reader will learn that even the heroes of the story are themselves only symbolic portrayals of the powers of the human soul and mind.

MAIMONIDES’ FIRST INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY

Maimonides begins by presenting, and then critiquing the Inquirer’s interpretation to the story of the Garden of Eden. The Inquirer, Maimonides notes, did not interpret the biblical text but reached his conclusion on the basis of his reading and understanding the text at its face value. The Inquirer argued that after sitting and eating the apple, man acquired the distinction between bad and good. This distinction can only be performed by one’s mind and reason. Because after he sinned man received this ability of distinction, it means that only after eating the apple he was given mind and reason. Therefore, Maimonides says, the Inquirer would argue that prior to eating the apple man did not possess full intellectual powers and did not have reason.

According to this conclusion, thus, the Bible tells a very strange tale. It argues that God’s first intention in creating man was to create him as one of the animals, and only after he disobeyed God, man developed from an “animal” into “man” and ascended the ladder of the natural order. His
sin was thus repaid by a reward and not by a punishment, as one would have expected under a just structure of sin and punishment.

Maimonides then proceeds to change the central focal point of the question from the question of sin and punishment to the philosophical view of man. At the center of the discussion he does not put the problem of whether the Bible shows us that disobeying God turns a sinner into a full human being, but another question. Maimonides shifts the focus of discussion and notes that before we can properly ask why the sin turned man from animal to intelligent, one must first ask what man was before he sinned. Is the assumption really correct that the biblical story tells us that man was created not perfect, at animal-level, and lacking full human qualities but then acquired them only after he committed a sin? Maimonides then poses the question: What is human perfection and what is its relation to the distinction between good and evil that the biblical story discusses? He goes further: Was man created without the ability to morally distinguish good and bad? Finally, he asks that if man had indeed been created without the faculty of distinguishing good and evil, then how could God order man not to eat from the tree of knowledge? For if man didn’t know already how to distinguish between good and bad, then how could he choose between them? Moreover, how can it be that disobedience to God made man more human, after he acquired the ability to morally distinguish good and bad?

The problems raised by these series of questions seem to Maimonides so central that he puts it at the core of his interpretation, which he presents to the reader of the Guide. But Maimonides does not put at the center his inquiry the question of man’s acquiring the ability to engage in moral distinction, but rather the question of the nature of man’s perfection. The question Maimonides raises is much more radical than just asking why was man created lacking moral distinction. He asks: Was man created as “non-man” and turned into “man” following his sin?

Maimonides starts by disproving the Inquirer’s argument that concludes that man was created at the level of an animal, lacking his own unique capability of distinction, which is the mark of the human mind. This argument, Maimonides believes, contradicts the description of the creation of man in Genesis 1:26. According to this description, God said, “Let us create humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” This description of the creation of man provided in Genesis chapter 1, which holds man was created in the image of God, suggests man possessed the highest level of perfection at creation. Maimonides argues that this final level of perfection means that man was created as an intelligent being, which is the reason that the biblical text described him as being created in the image of God. As such, this description and its implication contradict the Inquirer’s argument that man was created at the level of an animal. According to Maimonides, the Inquirer, it seems understood the concept of “the image of God” as a physical shape, believing that man is similar to God only in his physical form. Only later, in the Inquirer’s description of man after the sin, namely, after his eating the apple, does the Inquirer admit man received the gift of intelligence and thus becomes similar to God beyond the mere physical shape.

But Maimonides uses the fact that man was given a divine command not to eat from the tree of knowledge as a proof that man already possessed intelligence prior to the sin. Without this intelligence, God would not have given him such a command. This command could not be given to the animals or to anyone who lacked intelligence, because they would not be able to distinguish between following the command and disobeying it. Here Maimonides emphasizes the fact that the divine command was given; its actual content was not the issue. If the command was given, then God assumed man’s capability to understand. For if man indeed lacked the faculty to discern between good and evil, then he could not benefit from the warning or would simply ignore the commandment for which he then was going to be punished for breaking or rewarded for following. As the commentator Avraham Bar Haya wrote: “the Holy Blessed Is He does not warn nor commands nor punishes nor acquits but those who have intelligence and who distinguish between good and evil. This thing is clear and known to every man and must not be long drawn out.”

After establishing that man was created as an intelligent being, Maimonides turns to disproving the Inquirer’s question. The Inquirer’s question was based, most likely, on Genesis 3:22, which states: “And God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.” Based on the fact that after the sin man acquired the distinction between good and evil, the Inquirer concluded that this is when man became intelligent. After the sin, therefore, man became unlike an animal and more like God. So how did man possess the image of God before the sin? And in which way was he punished?

Maimonides argues that the biblical story teaches us that even before he sinned man was fully mature intellectually. In part I chapter 1 of the Guide, Maimonides explains that toa’r Elohim ("in the image of God") rather than be’tselem Elohim (“in the physical appearance of God”). The true meaning of this phrase, using the word “be’tselem,” is that man was created already possessing a rational faculty.”

On account of this gift of intellect man was addressed by God, and received his commandments, as it is said “And the Lord God commanded Adam” (Gen. ii, 16)—for no commandments are given to the brute creation, or those who are devoid of understanding. Through the intellect man distinguishes between the true and the false. This faculty Adam possessed perfectly and completely.

To answer the Inquirer, Maimonides proceeds to disprove the argument that acquiring this distinction between good and evil amounts to acquiring intelligence. Maimonides focuses on the difference between knowing good and evil and knowing truth and falsehood. Even though man, before he sinned, could not distinguish between good and evil, he could distinguish between true and false and therefore was an intelligent being, which could be given a commandment by God. Indeed, good and evil are judgments derived from
Maimonides, like Aristotle, thus believed in a system of different types of knowledge.12

1. Rational knowledge (muskalot): This kind of knowledge is objective and unchanging, relating to truth and falsehood and is entirely independent of man. The laws of nature fall into this category. The statement “the earth is round” is an example of this type of knowledge.

2. Sensory knowledge (muchashot): This kind of knowledge is based on the senses. We know that the man’s hand is warm because when we touch it we can sense its warmth.

3. Knowledge acquired via tradition (mekubalot): An example would be the knowledge acquired from the Bible.

4. Accepted convention (mefursamot): These are universally accepted ethical norms, established by common consent. The Ten Commandments, as apart from the first two which relate to God, fall into this category. Morality and moral code are also a part of the category of mefursamot. The idea that killing is bad is one such idea. Maimonides gives an example of sentences of the type of mefursamot by noting that human society usually uses the terms “nice” and “indecent” to judge these kinds of norms. Exposing one’s private parts is considered indecent by society, but it might not be inherently morally wrong. These norms, however, are considered different from mekubalot in that humans have an inherent sense of them, and they are often found across cultures, albeit with some variations. But though they verge on universal, they are not related to the intellect nor are they matters of true or false. Not killing is an accepted norm—but not a matter of true or false. Judaism itself, therefore, is a system of accepted conventions (mefursamot), but they have a superior nature, Maimonides believed, because they were instructed by God.

Returning to the story of the Garden of Eden and to the question of the Inquirer, Maimonides proceeds to explain why, in his view, the story is completely logical. This is a story about a change for the worse in the condition of man and not, as the Inquirer suggests, an improvement in his condition as a result of committing the sin. Man, according to Maimonides, was not elevated to a higher level following his sin, but on the contrary, was demoted after he ate the apple.13 As a result of his sin, man was downgraded from the world of understanding and knowledge (true/false) to the world of judgment (good/bad).14 According to Maimonides, before he committed the sin, man was in the most wholesome state of his existence. He possessed physical wholesomeness, perfect virtues, and perfect intelligence. He possessed knowledge of the muskalot, namely, he possessed rational knowledge. By possessing this level of knowledge, man prior to eating the apple was “a little lower than God.”15 This means that man was created only one level below the ultimate intelligence, which Maimonides calls “the acting intelligence” possessed only by God. This was man’s condition before the sin.

At his creation, man did not possess the power of understanding the mefursamot, the lowest level of knowledge and ethics based on social conventions. Maimonides believed that the category of mefursamot as a set of social rules of behavior were set up according to the criterion of “the good” as set by human imagination. The power of imagination, not theoretical or purely rational intellect, is what determines the “values” that stand at the center of these mefursamot.

For Maimonides, the idea that in his initial state of near perfection man did not at all understand the mefursamot can be seen in the fact that man was unaware of even the most famous of the mefursamot, that of not exposing his body.16 As it is written in Genesis 2:25 “and they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.” This sentence demonstrates that Adam and Eve did not understand that exposing one’s private parts is obscene and indecent. If they did not understand the most famous axiom in the mefursamot, it is not likely that they understood any of the other ones.17

Maimonides understood the story of man in the Garden of Eden as revolving around the knowledge of muskalot (pure rationality) and mefursamot (convention). Before eating from the apple, man knew the muskalot only and had a theoretical intellect. He didn’t know the mefursamot and, therefore, did not yet possess the power of imagination. As a result of eating the apple, man at the first stage lost the ability to understand the muskalot, which he had before the sin, and in the second stage, he gained the understanding of the mefursamot, which he did not have prior to committing his sin.18

The first stage of the sin, the first result of man’s actions against God’s command, was falling prey to sensual desires and imagination. As Genesis 3:6 states “and when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eye, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.” According to Maimonides, the human disobedience was not just in eating from the tree of knowledge but already in the tendency for sensual desires that preceded it. Moreover, the punishment given to man reflected that rebellion and came even before he ate from the tree of knowledge. The punishment was taking away man’s elevated intellectual abilities, the understanding of the muskalot and reducing him only to the understanding of the mefursamot.19 What was taken away from man was the ability to understand the world through a pure use of his theoretical intellect, without the help of his senses. The two contradictory forces that Maimonides viewed as clashing in the story were theoretical intellect versus desire. This is a contradiction that is a central theme in Maimonides’ writings:
the life of study and intellect versus the life of chasing after desires.  

MAIMONIDES’ SECOND UNDERSTANDING OF THE STORY: THE GARDEN OF EDEN AS AN ALLEGORY

According to Maimonides, the Inquirer was wrong to assume that not knowing good and evil is a deficiency. It actually signifies an advantage. God himself does not know good and evil, only true and false. Being naked, for example, is not “false”; therefore, there is nothing inherently wrong with it. Man was created to be inherently occupied with the life of the intellect. Because he initially had no passions, he had no need or concern with the mefursamot.

In giving this interpretation Maimonides starts hinting that the simple reading of the story of the Garden of Eden does not teach us about the basic nature of the story. In part II, chapter 30 of the Guide to the Perplexed, he writes:

... The account of the six days of creation contains, in reference to the creation of man, the statement: “male and female He created them” (1:27), and concludes with the words: “Thus the heavens and earth were finished, and all the host of them” (2:1), and yet the portion which follows describes the creation of Eve from Adam, the tree of life, and the tree of knowledge, the history of the serpent and the events connecting therewith, and all this is having taken place after Adam has been placed in the Garden of Eden. All our Sages agree that this took place on the sixth day, and that nothing new was created after the close of the six days. None of these things mentioned above is therefore impossible, because the laws of Nature were then not yet permanently fixed. There are, however, some utterances of our Sages on the subject [which apparently imply a different view]. I will gather them from their different sources and place them before you, and I will refer also to certain things by mere hints, just as has been done by the Sages. You must know that their words, which I am about to quote in almost perfect and, most accurate, and clear to those to whom they were said. And I will therefore not add longer explanations, lest I make their statements plain, and I might thus become a “reveler of secrets,” but I will give them in a certain order, company with a few remarks, which will suffice for readers like you.

The Jewish sages (chazal) said that on day six of creation, Adam and Eve were created, and thus the creation of heaven and earth was finished. But the Bible seems to contradict that statement because the following section describes the creation of Eve from Adam, the trees in the Garden of Eden, and more. As Maimonides noted, none of this was impossible “because the laws of nature were not yet fixed.” According to Rabbi Slifkin, Maimonides claimed here that the story of the sin in the Garden of Eden was part of creation—part of an account of the fundamental nature of reality, not a historic account of something that actually happened to an individual.  

When the story of the Garden of Eden occurred, history did not yet exist.

In Maimonides’ second interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden all the participants in the story, including Adam, Eve, the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, and even the serpent, are an allegory to the various parts of the human soul. Maimonides explains to his readers that the three major figures of story, namely, Adam, Eve, and the serpent, are not real figures of people and animals but represent the powers of the human soul. The events of the Garden of Eden are not real; they instead hint to the struggles of the human psyche.

These parts of the story demand greater interpretation, and to decode them, Maimonides uses the stories of the Jewish sages. When Maimonides faces difficulties providing a philosophical interpretation, which is directly based on the biblical text, he offers the utterances or commentary (Midrash) of the sages and uses it to explain the text. When it comes to the story of the Garden of Eden, Maimonides also relies on the commentary of the sages. Because the story is part of the greater story of creation, it holds in it some of the deepest secrets of the Torah. But to protect the secrets, the sages used the same method already used in the Bible to communicate their messages through parables. The allegorical meaning of these parables is completely clear to those individuals who were meant to receive and understand the secrets of the Torah. These secrets are philosophical truths that cannot be shared with the masses. The sages were so committed to hiding them that they used not only parables but also other methods of clouding the understanding of the reader, such as comments and clues that are meant to confuse the uneducated reader. The result is a highly esoteric and difficult text.

In Leo Strauss’ view, Maimonides, like other esoteric writers, presupposed that they were basic truths that should not be pronounced in public by any decent man because they could do harm to many people. According to Strauss, Maimonides expressed this problem in Jewish terms by referring to the legal prohibition against disseminating the “secrets of the law” to the general public. Because of this prohibition Maimonides could not write a conventional book because many people could understand and it would be equal to giving a public teaching. Therefore, he chose to write an esoteric book that could only be understood by a small number of talented readers.

In his interpretations of the events in the Garden of Eden, Maimonides focuses on several issues. The first such issue is the creation of man as “male and female.” According to Genesis 1:27, when God created man, he first created him on the sixth day as “a male and female.” Only later, in Genesis 2:21, after man was already put in the Garden of Eden and was given the commandments regarding the tree of knowledge, does God decide to create Eve out of man’s ribs. As such, the Biblical text gives two different accounts of the creation of Eve.

Assuming that the Bible does not provide the reader with useless information, Maimonides, like many other interpreters of the story, was faced with a question: What does the story of the creation of Eve in Genesis chapter 2 add to the story of the creation of man and woman in Genesis chapter 1? How should one understand the creation of Eve in Genesis chapter 2? In other words, if “man” is both male and female, does Genesis chapter 2 speak of the same “female” or is Eve? This question is different from the question “Who is man” and in which manner was he created in the image of God, which stood at the center of Maimonides’ first interpretation to the story of the Garden of Eden? Furthermore, Maimonides asks what are the “tree of life” and the “tree of
knowledge?” What do they symbolize? And finally, who is the serpent and what does he symbolize?

THE CREATION OF MAN AS “MALE AND FEMALE”

Trying to explain the creation of man, Maimonides uses a commentary given by one of the sages. This commentary explains:

Adam and Eve were at first created as one being, having their backs united; they were then separated, and one half was removed and brought before them as Eve.” The term mizal’otav (literally: “of his ribs”) signifies “of his sides.” The meaning of the word is proved by referring to zel’a, “this side” of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:20), which Onkelos renders setar (“side”), and so also mizal’otav is rendered by him “mi-sitrohi” (of his sides). Note also how clearly it has been stated that Adam and Eve were two in some respects, and yet they remained one, according to the words, “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). The unity of the two is proved by the fact that both have the same name, for she is called ishshah (woman), because she was taken out of ish (man), also by the words, “and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). How great is the hindrance of those who do not see that all this necessarily includes some [other] idea [besides the literal meaning of the words]. This is now clear.

According to the sages, “man” was created as an androgynous, namely, a creature who is both male and female. But this interpretation contradicts the description of the creation of the woman in Genesis 2:21, according to which the woman was made only after man was already created. This contradiction is settled by the commentary of the Sage, who said that the word Tzel’a (rib) should be interpreted to mean “side,” like one of the sides of the temple. According to this interpretation Eve was not created out of Adam’s rib, but she is one of the sides, or aspects, of Adam. This explanation fits well with the idea that man was created as an androgynous and male and female are simply different aspects of the same thing.

In giving his interpretation to the story, Maimonides makes the point that Adam and Eve were created as one creature. In this, he starts hinting that the male and female described in the story of creation of man are none other than the same Adam and Eve described in the later story. Unlike the interpretation that views the story of creation as a direct and simple story about the making of the world and the description of the first humans who were created, Maimonides is starting to suggest the allegorical nature of the story.

The second thing that Maimonides emphasizes is that the two different stories about the creation of Eve are not a biblical repetition. Genesis chapter 2 does not talk about the “creation” of Eve but about making her a help to (or against) Adam. The story is the continuation, not a contradiction, of the story in Genesis 1. Although the first story tells us about the creation of Eve, the second story in Genesis 2 tells us about how she stands in relationship to man, as a help to him or against him.

These points explain to us the relationship between Adam and Eve, but they do not explain to the reader who Adam and Eve are.

In the Guide Maimonides adopts Plato’s view that male is form and female is substance. The substance of silver, for example, can take many forms: a candlestick, a ring, a cup, but it could never become a flower or a cow. Maimonides also introduces the concept of a he’eder (the absent alternative, namely, its potential for alternate forms). A chair has female aspect (metal or wood) and male aspect (the shape of a chair) and its potential to be made into something else.

In Maimonides’ view, therefore, the account of the creation of man in Genesis 2 is only an elaboration of the account given in chapter 1. It is telling us that within every person there is a male element and a female element. There is never form without substance or substance without form. Adam represents the intellect. Eve is the substance, the integral animal component of man. Woman is substance, and as such, always requires form, or a partner. Thus, in the story of the Garden of Eden it is the woman who is subject to temptation. Man’s original form and essential form is his intellect. Eve’s temptation is to take on different forms, that of passion, desire, and imagination.

WHO IS THE SERPENT?

In his first discussion of the story of the Garden of Eden, Maimonides mentioned neither the woman nor the snake. But these two figures acquire particular importance. The serpent in the biblical story is mythical, or at least supernatural. This is an animal that can talk and tempt the woman. The story about the snake makes the story of the Garden of Eden into a tale that defies reality and, therefore, cannot be explained in simple terms. Therefore, because the story does not fit the laws of nature and physics, Maimonides interprets it through its hidden meanings and through the use of the commentaries of the sages.

In trying to explain the allegorical meaning of the figure of the serpent, Maimonides makes use of another Midrashic remark of the Sages:

“The serpent had a rider, the rider was big as a camel, and it was the rider that enticed Eve; this rider was Samael.” Samuel is the name generally applied by our Sages to Satan. Thus, they say in several places that Satan desired to entice Abraham to sin, and to abstain from binding Isaac, and he desired also, to persuade Isaac, not to obey his father. At the same time they also say, in reference to the same subject, viz., the Akeda (“the binding of Isaac”), that Samael came to Abraham, and said to him, “What! Have you, being an old man, lost your senses?” This shows that Samael and Satan are identical. There is a meaning in this name [Samael], as there is also in the name nachash (“serpent”). In describing how the serpent came to entice Eve, our Sages say: “Samael was riding on it, and God was laughing about the camel and its rider.”

It is especially of importance to notice that the serpent did not approach or address Adam, but all his attempts were directed against Eve, and it was through her that the serpent caused injury and death to Adam. The greatest hatred exists between the serpent and Eve, and between his seed and her seed; her seed being undoubtedly also the seed of man. More remarkable still is the way in which the serpent is joined to Eve, or rather his seed to her seed; the head of the one touches the heel of the other. Eve defeats the serpent by crushing it head, whilst
Maimonides refers to this commentary to give his reader an expanded version of the biblical story based on religious legends adopted by the Sages. Although in the biblical story there are only four main characters (God, Adam, Eve, and the serpent), the sages’ commentary adds a fifth (Samael). Maimonides uses the additional character and makes him a central element in his interpretation of the story of man’s sin in the Garden of Eden.

The hero of the Midrash, according to Maimonides, is the great Samael in the heavens. Samael, Maimonides recounts, descended to earth to make man sin. His actions were a continuation of the hatred and jealousy that the Angels felt toward the creation of man. Samael found the serpent whose wisdom was directed at doing evil deeds and made him his tool of harming man. This is why the story describes Samael as the rider; he rides the serpent, which in turn acts according to his instructions. Maimonides suggests by this that the key figure in the story is not the serpent, but Samael. The serpent did not act on his own initiative but was only a tool used by Samael to carry out the temptation of Eve.

At the same time, according to the Sages, Satan, namely, Samael, is but an aspect of man. In the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, Satan takes on different forms to try to talk to Abraham out of sacrificing his son. He is the force driving man away from good, which in Hebrew is known as Yetzer hara (the bad part of man’s inner conscience). When that part of the conscience sinks its teeth into the material aspect of man—the woman—sin occurs.

In the Aristotelian tradition, Satan is sometimes recognized with the power of imagination. This is identifying Samael with Satan, the bad part of our inner consciousness (yetzer hara), the power of imagination and an angel. The philosophical lesson is that Samael or Satan is nothing but man’s own power of imagination. This interpretation fits well with Maimonides’ first interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden in which imagination and desire were only born after Adam and Eve sinned and acquired knowledge of the nefursamot after losing knowledge of the muscalot as punishment for their actions. According to Maimonides, “Satan,” just like the “serpent,” is inherently within us; it is nothing but one of the powers competing over the human soul. But we can control it or reduce its influence by strengthening another force in our soul—the intellect or reason.

But Maimonides further explains the powers of the human soul that are represented in the story of the Garden of Eden. In The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics, based on a method developed by Aristotle and modified by the Arab Muslim Aristotelian philosopher, Al Farabi (Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad Farabi, lived AD 870–950), Maimonides explains that each person possesses five faculties: the nutritive, the sensory, the imaginative, the appetitive, and the rational:

- The nutritional faculty exists in man but also in animals and even in plants.
- The sensory faculty involves all five senses. It too exists in man and in animals.
- The imaginative faculty is based on a combination of imagination and memory (we can only imagine that with which we have some experience). Higher animals, as well as man, have this faculty.
- The appetitive, according to Maimonides, “is that faculty by which a man desires, or loathes, a thing, and from which there arise the following activities: the pursuit of an object or flight from it, inclination and avoidance, anger and affection, fear and courage, cruelty and compassion, love and hate, and many other similar psychological qualities. All parts of the body are subservient to these activities, such as the ability of the hand to grasp, of the foot to walk, of the eye to see, and of the heart to be bold or timid. Similarly, the other members of the body, whether external or internal, are instruments of the appetitive faculty.”
- The fifth faculty, the rational faculty, is unique to man. A person is ideally supposed to have his rational intellect directing him.

In citing the Jewish Sages in describing Satan as riding the snake, Maimonides notes that “riding” can mean “controlling.” As explained above, Maimonides equates the imaginative faculty with Satan. The serpent—the appetitive faculty—was being controlled by the imaginative faculty—Samael/Satan—instead of by the intellect. Man was making decisions based on his desires. But one should try to control these desires.

Some people can free themselves from the animalistic lifestyle, such as the biblical Abraham, who, although as Maimonides points out did not yet have or did not yet keep the rules of the Torah, nevertheless, lived a righteous life. But most people cannot do that. Therefore, every human society needs a code of nefursamot, a convention of moral norms, to regulate behavior and prevent anarchy. Once man is no longer in the realm of the intellect and can fall prey to his passions, imaginations, and desires, order must be imposed.

Now that the reader understands why a moral code is necessary, Maimonides asks what the sources of such morality are. In the Guide, Maimonides discusses three types of leadership that can create a moral code. These types include the leadership of rulers, scholars, and prophets. Rulers can rule the people through their imaginative faculty, but not through rational intellect. If a ruler sets rules, argues Maimonides, they will be based on the notion of self-interest: I will not steal from others so that others don’t steal from me.

Scholars can rule the people via their rational intellect, but not through their imaginative faculty. They are therefore only suited for the elites.

The optimal leadership is that of the prophets. They can lead both via the imagination and via the intellect. This is the leadership of the Torah. It extracts man from his animalistic state and enables mankind to live a life based on rational intellect. The Torah regulates our lives and, therefore, allows us to focus on what is true and false, not what is desirable or undesirable. The laws of the Torah, therefore, are in Maimonides’ view, the basis for a healthy society.
CONCLUSIONS

According to Maimonides, man in the Garden of Eden lived in an idyllic state in which his rational faculty reigned supreme and he did not need laws. Having eaten from the forbidden fruit, he was expelled from the garden and reduced to a lesser state. The description of Adam in the Garden of Eden is not the description of a historic event about the particular person who failed to follow God’s rules. It is an allegorical description of the nature of every human being. The Garden of Eden is not only the place where all of us were created as beings but also the place that laid the foundation for the formation of law-abiding human societies.

Maimonides’ writings on the Garden of Eden are of the utmost importance today as when they were written. In the modern world we tend to assume that reason and revelation, or philosophy and the law, inherently contradict each other. Since the Enlightenment most people believe that authority can either come from philosophy, or it can come from tradition, or from both. “Philosophers,” wrote Leo Strauss, “are men who try to give an account of the whole by starting from what is always accessible to man as man.”42 A religious Jew, on the other hand, is obliged to start from the law, which requires deference and obedience to its every word. Strauss writes that these two authorities, philosophy and the law, are “in radical disagreement with each other” in the age of the Enlightenment. One can either believe in the truth of philosophy or in the truths of the law, but not in both. One requires a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight.44

In writing about the Garden of Eden (and in the Guide as a whole) Maimonides endeavored to create a synthesis between reason and revelation, the law and philosophy. He strove to prove the two need not necessarily contradict each other. Indeed, not only can one combine reason and faith but in fact this was the only way to reach understanding of some of the deepest truths about the nature of man and the political world that he lives in. True faith does not contradict reason. In Maimonides’ interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden, faith dictates that the human natural state of being at the moment of creation was that of pure reason. Ever since Adam and Eve committed their sin, human existence is marked by a “fall from grace,” a decline from a state of pure rationality. It is that decline that makes laws necessary.

But Maimonides continues to be relevant today precisely because he finds a way to settle this apparent contradiction. Perhaps the most important aspect of Maimonides’ work on the story of the Garden of Eden is that it offers a medium through which to reconcile philosophy and the law, a rationalist Judaism.

Maimonides lived in Muslim Spain at the dusk of its philosophical age. Maimonides had provided a path to reconcile faith and reason, rather than allow for either to deny the other’s validity. He integrated the wisdom of Aristotle with that of the Torah. He recognized the complexity and inner struggle that defines man’s soul, but at the same time he rejected the notion that man was either inherently evil or good. Moreover, he believed that this complex nature of man was part of his very creation and not an added, learned, and thus “reformable” aspect. He noted how, in such a state of in-born complexity and inner struggle, a legal code was required to harness the intellect of man for good if it is anchored to the interplay between revelation and pure rationality. And most importantly, through all this, he clearly argued that man had free will.

Maimonides’ works rocketed to importance in Christian Europe and Jewish thought worldwide soon after he wrote them. His works were read by and influenced Thomas Aquinas (lived 1225–1274), whom many would consider the father of the European Renaissance.

Through these observations we see the key contours taking shape of what we understand now to be the modern West:

- Man is an independent agent; he has free will.
- Man has inherent to him the proclivity to evil and to good.
- Man’s nature cannot be fundamentally changed; it was part of his creation.
- The foundation of law is the reconciliation between reason and convention, ratioality and tradition, law and philosophy to harness man’s complex soul to ensure the good prevails.
- Man must anchor his thought and his world to both faith and reason.

According to one of the greatest scholars of the Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt, the Renaissance, and the classical liberalism that emerged from it, is if nothing else the rediscovery of man. It represented an attempt to reconcile the ancients and their attempt to understand rationality with faith, to value and study the mundane world while still maintaining the humility to understand the limits of man vis-à-vis God. That evolution eluded Muslim Spain, and faith was set in opposition to and eclipsed reason. This led Maimonides’ contemporary Muslim philosophers to wither and survive only transplanted in Christian realms and Jewish communities at the dawn of the Renaissance. In the West, however, throughout the Renaissance, they evolved further and developed into a quest for good government and law. That law, it was understood, needed to be anchored to the attempt to harness man’s contradictory proclivity to good and evil for industry and welfare. Law is needed to build a rational order anchored to faith and to protect reason from eclipsing faith and faith from eclipsing reason. Essentially, the American Constitution, thus, can trace parts of the pedigree of its informing concept back to Maimonides of Cordoba and the story of the Garden of Eden.

In contrast, departing from the foundations Maimonides had laid and on which the Renaissance had built, philosophy in the age of the Enlightenment developed into dangerous excesses. Western political thought, as it descended toward the French Revolution and Robespierre and mass fear, raised reason to supplant rather than enrich faith, injected the mundane word into the divine to replace it, and attempted to reshape and recreate the nature of man down to his very root and essence into perfection. Essentially embracing the view of Maimonides’ Inquirer and ignoring Maimonides critique of it, the ideologies of the modern age often represent attempts by man to return man’s essence to a utopian state. In short, by bringing understanding that the nature of man was inherent to his creation, the ideas of Maimonides laid the
foundations for societies to protect themselves against temptation either to conduct inquisitions or to embrace secular totalitarianism, a barrier that unfortunately much of Europe had failed to uphold over the last 200 years in the age of Enlightenment.

As such, in an age where secular ideologies have wrought havoc on the world for over 200 years, at the end of which the world now faces a rising tide of new religious utopian ideology of equal danger, Maimonides’ works of almost a millennium ago are not now simply still relevant but perhaps more relevant than ever for defending and preserving the West.

NOTES

7. Genesis 1:26. The use of the words “us” and “our” are themselves worthy of robust discussion but are beyond the scope of this paper.
10. Slifkin, 2.
11. Maimonides is quoted in Slifkin, 2.
15. Psalms 8:5. The Hebrew original says that man was “a little less than God.” The King James translation of the Bible, however, says, “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels.” The Hebrew original does not mention angels, only God. Maimonides clearly was aware of the Hebrew original. But Maimonides himself says in some of his writing that the Bible uses the Hebrew word Elohim, which itself is plural and means the Angels, rulers, etc. The sentence in Psalms is very important because it could be viewed as an interpretation to the Genesis statement that man was created in the image of God. Psalms points to the idea that even though his creation of man’s intelligence was not identical to the intelligence possessed by God. It is one stage lower than the intelligence possessed by the divine.
17. Sara Klaine-Barslevi, 84.
18. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
23. Because these were considered such deep secrets, Maimonides, as can be seen in his quote that opens this part of this article, was concerned that he would be considered “a revealer of secrets.”
25. Ibid.
27. For an excellent cross-cultural discussion of the relationship between Adam and Eve and Eve’s special role in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, see Juliana Pilon, Soulmates: Resurrecting Eve (2011).
28. The Hebrew words Ezer Kenegdo are used in Genesis to describe Eve’s relationship to Adam. These words can mean either a help to him or to help against him.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 6–7.
33. Ibid.
34. Slifkin, 7.
36. Ibid., 217.
38. Maimonides, The Eight Chapters, chapter 2.
40. Ibid., 9.
41. Ibid.
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