

GUIDE 1:3 FORM AND SHAPE

I continue to re-arrange these chapters in dictionary format, giving the full biblical quotations where Maimonides only gives them partially, with my comments. (See my explanation in Chapter 1:1 above, “Introduction to the Lexical Chapters of the Guide.”)

Maimonides’ purpose in this lexical chapter is to explain the difference between the *intellectual conception* of anything and the *physical shape* of anything (form vs. shape, *temura* vs. *tavnit*). He needs to do this in order to explain the following passage:

“Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of *similitude* (*temunah*) on the day [that] the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image, the *similitude* (*temunah*) of any figure, the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of male or female: The *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any beast that [is] on the earth, the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any winged fowl that flieth in the air.” (Deuteronomy 4:15-17)

Maimonides does not take the emphasized words synonymously. See my essay on this passage appearing after the dictionary sections below.

TAVNIT (SHAPE)

1. Maimonides gives this as his *only* definition of *tavnit*: “The build and construction of a thing—that is to say, its figure, whether square, round, triangular, or of any other shape.” The term is never used in speaking of the qualities of God. (Derived from the verb *banah*, “he built”).
2. Blueprint, the pattern of a construction.
3. Purely imaginary shapes in prophetic dream visions. Maimonides does not give either Definition 2 or 3 as separate definitions, but I have, since the proof-texts themselves seem to demand it (see Friedlander’s explanatory note 3, p. 39, *ad loc.*).

Instances Of Definition 1 and 2, Contextualized

“According to all that I shew thee, [after] the *pattern* (*tavnit*) of the tabernacle, and the *pattern* (*tavnit*) of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make [it].” (Exodus 25:9)

“And look that thou make [them] after their *pattern* (*tavnit*), which was shewed thee in the mount.” (Exodus 25:40)

Rashi reminds us of a Midrash, where God showed Moses the pattern of a menorah of fire “upon the mount” since Moses could not build the menorah merely from the verbal commandment he received. Maimonides thus subtly contrasts the use of *tavnit*, the *physical pattern* of a thing, from *temunah*, the formal, universal, intellectual conception of a thing. See essay below on *temunah*.

“The likeness of any beast that [is] on the earth, the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any winged fowl that flieth in the air.” (Deuteronomy 4:17)

The verse takes “likeness” as the purely physical likeness of a sculpted idol. See essay below.

“Then David gave to Solomon his son the *pattern* (*tavnit*) of the porch, and of the houses thereof, and of the treasuries thereof, and of the upper chambers thereof, and of the inner parlours thereof, and of the place of the mercy seat.” (I Chronicles 28:11)

This is similar to the pattern of the tabernacle and the menorah mentioned in the Midrash above.

Instance Of Definition 3, Contextualized

“And he put forth the *form (tavnit)* of an hand, and took me by a lock of mine head; and the spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the inner gate that looketh toward the north; where [was] the seat of the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy (*ha-kina ha-maknei*).” (Ezekiel 8:3)

This is Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple defiled by the people’s idolatries. Maimonides wants us to understand “the form of an hand” as a prophetic dream image of Ezekiel’s, not a physical attribute of God. In Guide 2:46 Maimonides explains this passage as “processes of a prophetic vision, and not real things that could be perceived by the senses of the body.” He also understands the “hand” of God upon the prophet to mean the “terrible and fearful” moment when, by surprise and against his will, the prophetic vision seizes the consciousness of the prophet (Guide 2:41).

Leo Strauss commented that “hand” gets no lexical chapter, but failed to explain why. My interpretation is that when man does God’s will he becomes the “hand” of God. God’s will is done when man follows the law, codified in Mishneh Torah. Note that “hand,” *yad*, is the real name of the Mishneh Torah, *Yad ha-Khazaka*, “the Strong Hand.” In Hebrew the letters of *yad* represent the number of books in Mishneh Torah, fourteen. By absorbing “the Strong Hand,” the Jew makes himself the “hand” of God.

TEMUNAH (FORM):

Maimonides presents the following definitions of the perception of “form” in ascending order of incorporeality, progressing from 1) human sensory perception, to 2) the prophetic “sense,” to 3) the special perception enjoyed by Moses. Maimonides also seems to be using the term to distinguish the notions that idolators imagine of their gods (see essay below).

1. Perceived physical shape: “Outlines of things which are perceived by our bodily senses, i.e., their shape and form.”
2. “The forms of our imagination (*ha-tzura ha-dimyonot shel adam*), i.e., the impressions (after-images) retained in imagination when the objects have ceased to affect our senses.” Also, dream images.
3. “The true form of an object, perceived only by the intellect (*ha-inyan ha-amiti ha-nasig b’sekhel*): it is only in this third signification that the term is applied to God,” with respect to Moses’ special prophetic power.

Instance Of Definition 1, Contextualized

“Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of *similitude (temunah)* on the day [that] the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image, the *similitude (temunah)* of any figure, the likeness of male or female” (Deuteronomy 4:15-16)

See my essay on these verses, below.

Instance Of Definition 2, Contextualized

“In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up: It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an *image (temunah)* [was] before mine eyes, [there was] silence, and I heard a voice, [saying], Shall mortal man be more just than God?” (Job 4:13-16)

This is a dream-image, an image I view in sleep. Maimonides wants us to take this like the after-image of an object that had been presented to sight (Friedlander note 20, p. 40, *ad loc.*). This agrees with Rashi, who cites the tradition that what Eliphaz perceived was not really a prophetic vision, but more like his own inspired nightmare.

Rashi says he perceived: “like a person who shouts into a barrel, that the voice of the barrel shouts toward him. That is an echo, not the voice itself.”

Instance Of Definition 3, Contextualized

“With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the *similitude* (*u'tmunat*) of the Lord shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” (Numbers 12:8)

Maimonides retranslates: “He comprehended the true essence of the Lord.” The verse contends that Moses’ apprehension of God is unique. Rashi, based on Midrash, explains Moses’ “similitude” of God is the same vision in Exodus 33:23: “and you will see My back” which Maimonides understands as the *consequences* of divine action, *what God does*. But Maimonides *here* defines the vision differently as the “*comprehension of the true essence of the Lord*,” (*iniano u-perusho v'amatat hashem yasig*), *what God is*, a more perfect apprehension than “you will see My back.” Friedlander, note 3, p. 40 anticipating an objection, denies this contradicts Guide 1:37, which says, “no man can have a conception of the real existence of God.” Moses differs from all other prophets and all other men. Moses transcended his physicality when he fasted forty days on the mount. Maimonides wants us to understand here that Moses achieved unity with the active intellect, a more sublime notion than just the apprehension of God’s creations. This definition of *temunah*, then, represents Moses’ special power of perception on Sinai, unencumbered by physicality. Moses did not receive prophecy through any intermediary, that is, He receives it through a direct connection with God (*Mishneh Torah, Ysodei ha-Torah, 7:6*. But see R. Abraham ben Ha-Rambam, *Guide to Serving God*, p. 585).

HOW MAIMONIDES USES THE CONCEPTS OF SHAPE AND FORM

The first word of the chapter in the Hebrew translations is *hoshvim* (Kafih and Schwarz. Ibn Tibon: “*y’hashev*.” Pines: “It is thought”). Friedlander translates:

“*It might be thought* (*hoshvim*) that the Hebrew words *temunah* and *tavnit* have one and the same meaning, but this is not the case.”

The italicized “It might be thought” is an acceptable translation. But it can be translated “some think.” If so, the term indicates that there are people who think the words mean the same thing. Maimonides appears to have in mind Onkelos, the Aramaic Bible translator. Both terms, *temunah* and *tavnit*, are important and need to be explained or distinguished because they both appear in an important verse (Deuteronomy 4:15-17):

“(15) Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of *similitude* (*temunah*) on the day [that] the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: (16) Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image, the *similitude* (*temunah*) of any figure (*semel*), the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of male or female: (17) The *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any beast that [is] on the earth, the *likeness* (*tavnit*) of any winged fowl that flieth in the air.”

Onkelos treats these words synonymously. He translates them in both instances as *demut*, that is, “form.” The King James Version above uses two different but essentially synonymous words “similitude” and “likeness,” perhaps following Onkelos’ lead. Rashi follows this tradition. This is the tradition Maimonides disparages when he says that “some think” the terms have the same meaning.

Maimonides, by contrast, seeks different meanings for different biblical terms. He goes to great lengths to do so here. He begins by dividing up Deuteronomy 4:15-17 instead of presenting it as a single quote. He gives 4:17 *first*, which concerns the more corporeal term, *tavnit* (shape), since that verse only uses *tavnit* and not *temunah* (form). That verse clearly refers to the particular *shape* of an animal, not to its “form” either in its Platonic or Aristotelian sense. It is telling us not to sculpt the shape of a bird or other animal for the purpose of worship. He then gives us 4:15-16 *last*, about *temunah*, leaving out that part of verse 16 that mentions the *tavnit*-shape of a

male or female figure. Maimonides rearranges the passage to demonstrate an upward progression from physical *tavnit* to notional *temunah*.

He wants us to distinguish the way we understand God from the way idolaters understand their gods. Exoterically, we may interpret the *temunah* appearing twice in 4:15-16, under the term's first definition: "Outlines of things which are perceived by our bodily senses, i.e., their shape and form." That definition distinguishes *temunah* from *tavnit* (shape) only in the sense that the former depicts shape as beheld by the senses; the latter depicts the actual material shape of the object presented to senses. That is very nearly a distinction without a difference. The trick is his comment that *temunah* "is used amphibolously (*m'supak*—ambiguously) in three different senses" (Pines trans.), listing them. Perhaps he wants us to see if the second or third sense can also be used. Otherwise, the distinction he proceeds to draw would be of little interest. This is a pattern of interpretation we should become familiar with in Maimonides, where he outwardly emphasizes one definition but wants us to also understand and substitute his other definitions, especially when he says they are being used ambiguously and not homonymously. Here he outwardly portrays idolatry as the worship of the *shape* of a created being. But students of Maimonides know he teaches a more complicated theory of idolatry than the mere adulation of sculptures in the shape of creatures. He wants us to apply the other definition (Definition 2) in which *temunah* means "the forms of our imagination" (*ha-tzura ha-dimyonot shel adam*). Definition 3, Moses' "comprehension of the true essence of the Lord," cannot apply to Deuteronomy 4:15-17.

Thus, he could translate the passage, replacing the term "similitude" with "the forms of our imagination":

"Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of *imagined form* (*temunah*) on the day [that] the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt [yourselves], and make you a graven image, the *imagined form* (*temunah*) of any figure, the likeness (*tavnit*) of male or female."

Maimonides wants us to recall his famous doctrine of the real nature of idolatry. When God spoke to Moses he saw *nothing*, no image whatsoever; no material image, sensory image, after-image, or dream image. He was not in thrall to his imagination. Idol worshippers are different. Maimonides says in *Mishneh Torah, Avoda Zara* ch. 1, that idol worshippers do not actually worship the sculpture but what they imagine is the force animating the celestial creature that the sculpture represents. In other words, the sculpture, by itself meaningless, channels the force of the god to the imagination of men. They believe that these divinities are God's servants or helpers, so to speak, and honor God by honoring them. The sculpture allows them to focus their adoration of these created forces. This notion is included in the second meaning of *temunah*. It verges on the philosophic sense of "form." Maimonides is saying that at Sinai the people did not envision any imagined idolatrous "similitude" of a *created* being to which worship could be directed. The text then turns and begins to talk about the actual sculpted creatures, male and female, bird and beast. Here the text addresses the actual physical requirements of the sculptor who represents the shape (*tavnit*) of the creature in a manner that the worshipper will recognize and fear.

The "forms of our imagination" not only include that which the idolaters worship, but also the "forms" of all those who employ any mediating concepts in their notion of God.

This distinction will become important in the first volume of the Guide. Maimonides starts by rejecting physical images of God represented in words. He then moves to reject conceptual images of God, including such advanced mediating abstractions as the "essential attributes" of God: power, will, creativity, and so on. Maimonides' interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:15-17 is that these ways of viewing God through mediations are also "forms of our imagination," condemned together with idolatry by the Torah. Having disposed of these two definitions of the ambiguous term *temunah*, we have only one definition left, the unique vision Moses sometimes achieved, the "comprehension of the true essence of the Lord," the comprehension only achieved through unity in the active intellect.

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