

GUIDE 1:32
TRANSCENDING THE LIMITS OF CORPOREALIZED INTELLECT

The chapter makes two points: first, the material intellect can be injured by traversing its limits; and second, those limits can and should be traversed as the intellect sheds its material connection to become what it truly is, entirely non-corporeal.

This chapter is heavily penetrated by Talmudic material from the second section of Tractate *Hagigah*, the *fons et origo* of Jewish mysticism. Maimonides takes it for granted that his readership is familiar with those passages, and so his fragmentary quotes are more mystifying than necessary to the modern reader. I reproduce the material quoted in this chapter in full with my comments.

THE LAW OF DIVINE STUDIES

There is a law that governs the learning and teaching of divine things. That law is the introduction to the second section of *Hagigah*, from the *Mishna*. You should notice immediately that the law links the forbidden in sexuality to the hidden in divinity:

“*MISHNA*: The [subject of] forbidden relations may not be expounded in the presence of three, nor the work of creation in the presence of two, nor [the work of] the chariot in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge. Whosoever speculates upon four things, a pity for him! He is as though he had not come into the world; [to wit:] what is above, what is beneath, what before, what after. And whosoever takes no thought for the honour of his maker, it were a mercy if he had not come into the world.” (Talmud *Hagigah* 11b, Soncino trans. throughout)

“Forbidden relations” (*gilui arayot*) are the Torah’s lists of forbidden conjugations, including incest, adultery and homosexuality. The link between sexuality and divinity is that the metaphor of conjugality is our best image for Creation and the continued involvement of God in the world. Those are the two other two listed subjects, the Creation (*Maaseh Bereshit*) and the Divine Chariot of Ezekiel (*Maaseh Merkavah*). The limitation to three, two, or one student, variously understood by the Talmud’s commentary, for our purposes just means that the subject is not to be taught in the public forum. The Hasidic revolution overturned this rule. Several reasons for the rule against public teaching are given, one commonly accepted is that a gaggle of boys would giggle and thus trivialize the material. Maimonides explains somewhat differently, *Mishneh Torah, Ysodei Ha-Torah* 4:11: “Why is the subject not taught in public? Because not every one possesses the breadth of intellect requisite for obtaining an accurate grasp of the meaning and interpretation of all its contents.”

The phrase “Unless he is a sage (*hakham*—wise) and understands of his own knowledge (*mevin mdaato*),” means that the student must have the intellect and maturity to enter the study, that he have prepared himself in the scholarly prerequisites, and that he can figure things out on his own.

There are strict limits to the study: the “before,” “after,” “above,” “beneath,” which it was death to pursue. These limits are meant to keep us from transgressing the “honor” of the Creator by making ourselves out to be the creators. The Talmud *Hagigah* discusses the nature of these limits:

“And R. Aha b. Jacob said: There is still another Heaven above the heads of the living creatures, for it is written (Ezekiel 1:22): ‘And over the heads of the living creatures there was a likeness of a firmament, like the colour of the terrible ice, stretched forth over their heads above.’ Thus far you have permission to speak, thenceforward (that is, about the ‘above’) you have not permission to speak, for so it is written in the *Book of Ben Sira*: ‘Seek not things that are too hard for thee, and search not things that are hidden from thee. The things that have been permitted thee, think thereupon; thou hast no business with the things that are secret.’” (*Hagigah* 13a)

This is the warning over the lintel. It would seem to be absolute. But the Mishna itself only says not to “expound” the secret things. Nonetheless, there is a legal way to teach the student:

“*Nor [the work of] the chariot in the presence of one.* R. Hiyya taught: But the headings of chapters may be transmitted to him. R. Zera said: The headings of chapters may be transmitted only to the head of a court and to one whose heart is anxious within him (he possesses humility). Others say: Only if his heart is anxious within him. R. Ami said: The mysteries of the Torah may be transmitted only to one who possesses five attributes, [namely], (Isaiah 3:3): ‘The captain of fifty, and the man of rank, and the counsellor, and the cunning charmer, and the skillful enchanter.’” (*Hagigah* 13a)

The most important requirement, one not mentioned in the Mishnah, is the desire or eros for divine knowledge, which we encourage, despite its dangers. Still, the student must be *mevin mdaato*, able to figure things out on his own. He must also possess humility, which, for Maimonides, means to pause before apparent contradictions. For safety’s sake, and because of our corporeal limits, we only give him hints on each topic, “chapter headings.” He must extract and connect the truth through his own meditations.

The “captain of fifty” is reinterpreted not as fifty men but as fifty years of age, but exceptions to this are immediately given in the text, so that forty is usually taken as the rule, the age of maturity and calm inquiry. In Chapters of the Fathers (*Pirke Avot* 5:24), forty is the age we understand (*lavina*—compare to *mevin mdaato*) all our teachers taught us, including our divine teacher. The Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 5a-b, relates this idea to the forty years in the Sinai desert and to the redemption of the transgression in Eden:

“Our Rabbis taught: In the verse, ‘O that they had such a heart always’ (Deuteronomy 5:26), Moses said to the Israelites, Ye are an ungrateful people, the offspring of an ungrateful ancestor. When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to you. ‘Who might grant that they had such a heart always?’ (a literal rendering of preceding verse). You should have said: ‘Thou grant!’ [But they proved themselves] ungrateful by saying. ‘Our soul loatheth this light bread’ (Numbers 21:5). ‘The offspring of an ungrateful ancestor’, for it is written, ‘The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the Tree, and I did eat’ (Genesis 3:12, wherein Adam makes Eve an object of complaint.) Yet Moses indicated this to the Israelites only after forty years had passed, as it is said, ‘And I have led you forty years in the wilderness . . . but the Lord hath not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see and ears to hear, unto (until) this day’ (Deuteronomy 29: 3-4). Said Raba: *From this you can learn that it may take one forty years to know the mind of one’s master.*”

THE FOUR WHO WENT TO PARADISE

Maimonides recalls the famous cautionary tale of the dangers of this learning:

“Our Rabbis taught: Four men entered the ‘Garden,’ (*pardes*—paradise) namely, Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, Akher, and R. Akiba. R. Akiba said to them: When ye arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not, water, water! For it is said (Psalms 101:7): ‘He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes.’ Ben Azzai cast a look and died. Of him Scripture says (Psalms 116:15): ‘Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.’ Ben Zoma looked and became demented (affected: *v’pga*). Of him Scripture says: Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it. Akher mutilated the shoots. R. Akiba departed unhurt. ” (*Hagigah* 14b)

Paradise is the grove where divine learning is acquired directly from above the heavens. There is some scholarly controversy over when the term itself became an acronym for the four levels of textual interpretation, *PaRDeS*: *peshat* – surface; *remez* – metaphor; *d’rash* – homiletics; *sod* – esoterics. In any event, the sense is that these four sages jointly entered meditation on the *sod* level of scripture, but did not emerge jointly. Maimonides explains

why, Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah* 4:13: “Although these four were great men of Israel and great sages, they did not all possess the capacity to know and grasp these subjects clearly.” They had not all graduated in the prerequisites to that study. In our chapter, he also suggests that they were not equally humble in the face of an apparent contradiction. That contradiction was their imagination of *hyle* as “water, water.” This corporeal image of transparency reflected a certain feature of this non-corporeal *potentia*, its capacity to take on different forms.

Ben Azzai (a figure sometimes exchanged with or confused with Ben Zoma) does not survive the affair, but may have been the most successful, since he received what is called later the “kiss of death,” that is, the direct translation from corporeality to pure spirituality, like the deathless death of Enoch. Ben Zoma is the figure most closely associated with Jewish esotericism. He later has another experience with *hyle* (previously described by us at Guide 1:5, closely related to this chapter). Rabbi Akiva, because of his humility and scholarly maturity, emerged “in peace.” And then we have the very interesting character known as Akher. “There are three disciples [significant for dreams]. If one sees Ben Azzai in a dream, he may hope for piety; if Ben Zoma, he may hope for wisdom; if Akher, let him fear for punishment” (Talmud, *Berakhot* 57b).

THE STORY OF AKHER

His real name was Elisha ben Abuya, and he is an major figure in the Talmud. He was a great rabbi of Akiva’s generation, who understood Greek and became Hellenized:

“But what of Akher? — Greek song did not cease from his mouth. It is told of Akher that when he used to rise [to go] from the schoolhouse, many heretical books (books of the *minim*—heretics? Christians? Greeks?) used to fall from his lap.” (*Hagigah* 15b)

The chief sin the Greek philosophers were accused of was that they misled the youth.

The *sotto voce* implication was that the Greeks were also considered pedophiles. The statements quoted about him may carry such a double entendre. For instance, the statement that Akher emerged from paradise and “mutilated the shoots.” The “shoots” are the youth, and perhaps their *membra* as well.

“Akher mutilated the shoots. Of him Scripture says: (Ecclesiastes 5:6): ‘Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy body to sin’” (*Hagigah* 15a, see our essay in Guide 1:12 “Metatron”)

The cause of his apostasy is variously given, but most famously as the problem of theodicy, especially as understood during a time of terrible persecution by the Roman authorities. It is a law of the Torah that in taking the egg from the nest you must shoo the mother bird (*shiluakh ha-kan*). Elisha ben Abuya saw a pious man climb a ladder to perform that command, fall and die. Another account has him seeing the sages’ bodies desecrated by Romans. In neither example did God protect the righteous. Akher’s disillusionment led him to side with the authorities and offer up his former fellows to the persecutors.

The very heavens denounced him as beyond repentance:

“There came out a heavenly voice and said (Jeremiah 3:14): ‘Return, O backsliding children’ except Akher He answered him I have already heard from behind the curtain ‘Return, O backsliding children’ except Akher.” (*Hagigah* 15a)

He celebrated atheistic and dualistic heresies:

“Since I have been driven forth from yonder world, let me go forth and enjoy this world (Epicurianism? Hedonism?). So Akher went forth into evil courses. He went forth, found a harlot and demanded her. She said to him: Art thou not Elisha ben Abuyah? [But] when he tore a radish out of its bed on the

Sabbath and gave it to her, she said: It is another [Akher]. After his apostasy, Akher asked R. Meir [a question], saying to him: What is the meaning of the verse: (Ecclesiastes 7:14): ‘Also this hath God made in equal measure with the other’? He replied: It means that for everything that God created He created [also] its counterpart. He created mountains, and created hills; He created seas, and created rivers. Said [Akher] to him (explaining his doctrine of dualism): R. Akiba, thy master, did not explain it thus, but [as follows]: He created righteous, and created wicked; He created the Garden of Eden, and created Gehinnom. Everyone has two portions, one in the Garden of Eden and one in Gehinnom. The righteous man, being meritorious, takes his own portions and his fellow’s portion in the Garden of Eden. The wicked man, being guilty, takes his own portion and his fellow’s portion in Gehinnom. R. Mesharsheya said: What is the Biblical proof for this? In the case of the righteous, it is written: (Isaiah 61:7): ‘Therefore in their hand shall they possess a twofold [portion].’ In the case of the wicked it is written (Jeremiah 17:18): ‘And strike them with a double breach.’” (*Hagigah* 15a)

Even after his public apostasies, he had a devoted student who remained among the Rabbanites, R. Meir:

“Our Rabbis taught: Once Akher was riding on a horse on the Sabbath, and R. Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah at his mouth. Said [Akher] to him: Meir, turn back, for I have already measured by the paces of my horse that thus far extends the Sabbath limit. He replied: Thou, too, go back! [Akher] answered: Have I not already told thee that I have already heard from behind the Veil: ‘Return ye backsliding children’ — except Akher.” (*Hagigah* 15a)

Despite his rebellions, his memory was still cherished:

“Akher’s daughter [once] came before Rabbi (nickname of Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi, 135-220 C.E.) and said to him: O master, support me! He asked her: ‘Whose daughter art thou?’ She replied: I am Akher’s daughter. Said he: Are any of his children left in the world? Behold it is written: (Job 18:19): ‘He will have neither son nor grandson among his people, nor any that escapeth in the places of his sojourning’? She answered: Remember his Torah and not his deeds. Forthwith, a fire came down and enveloped Rabbi’s bench. [Thereupon] Rabbi wept and said: If it be so on account of those who dishonour her (Torah), how much more so on account of those who honour her!” (*Hagigah* 15b)

HOW MAIMONIDES USES THE MATERIALS FROM THE TALMUD *HAGIGAH*

Maimonides compares the limits of man’s still material intellect to the limits of our other corporeal faculties. Just as we cannot see the details of distant items, so we cannot understand things beyond our limits. More, we can suffer anaesthesia, i.e., eyestrain, and damage the eye when we try to see too much, so that we cannot even see what we could see before. Similarly, we can so exhaust the mind that we no longer understand what we knew before. Akiva understood these limits. This and only this was the reason Akiva survived paradise:

“If you admit the doubt, and do not persuade yourself to believe that there is a proof for things which cannot be demonstrated, or to try at once to reject and positively to deny an assertion the opposite of which has never been proved, or attempt to perceive things which are beyond your perception, then you have attained the highest degree of human perfection, then you are like R. Akiva, who ‘in peace entered (the study of divine science), and came out in peace.’”

Akiva, like Socrates, knew what he did not know, but also like him, did not refrain from the quest. This epistemological maturity is the “highest degree of human perfection.” Kafih (see his notes 8-9, *ad loc.*) deploys the problem of the *creation* or *eternity* of the universe, thematic to the Guide, as the best example of this epistemological maturity. Do not go beyond the possible, do not try to convince yourself that either position, creation or eternity, is demonstrated when it is not, or that either alternative was proven without its contradictory being disproven. Since perception stops at the lunar sphere, we cannot demonstrate Aristotle’s eternalism nor

reject revelation. I would go further than Kafih. Maimonides wants us to leave the door open to post-scientific or even post-intellectual speculations and meditations, areas that by their nature are beyond the reach of proof.

We noted in the last chapter Maimonides' apparently contradictory statements about the locking of the gates of perception. *Humility* before such an apparent contradiction is the key to this gate. The contrary of this humility is epistemological immaturity, epitomized by Akher:

“If, on the other hand, you attempt to exceed the limit of your intellectual power, or at once to reject things as impossible which have never been proved to be impossible, or which are in fact possible, though their possibility be very remote, then you will be like Elisha Akher; you will not only fail to become perfect, but you will become exceedingly imperfect. Ideas founded on mere imagination will prevail over you, you will incline toward defects, and toward base and degraded habits, on account of the confusion which troubles the mind, and of the dimness of its light, just as weakness of sight causes invalids to see many kinds of unreal images, especially when they have looked for a long time at dazzling or at very minute objects.”

Why? Failure to observe the epistemological limits in a mature fashion forces the mind to go from intellect over to imagination, to become snared in the corporeal images. The result for Akher is not only intellectual but also *moral* failure.

The second lesson is not to take the limits as imperial. Recall the metaphor of honey: eating more than you ought is surely deleterious, but taken with proper caution it is good for you. As Even-Shmuel says (p. 139), the perceptions of wisdom are the food of the mind. The law of *Hagigah* does not ban all esoteric divine investigation:

“It was not the object of the Prophets and our Sages in these utterances to close the gate of investigation entirely, and to prevent the mind from comprehending what is within its reach, as is imagined by simple and idle (*ha-s'khalim v'ha-batlanim*, אלהמהלון אלמתואנון) people, whom it suits better to put forth their ignorance and incapacity as wisdom and perfection, and to regard the distinction and wisdom of others as irreligion and imperfection, thus taking darkness for light and light for darkness.”

Pines translates *ha-s'khalim v'ha-batlanim* as “ignorant and neglectful,” but I am not impressed with his translation or Friedlander's translation, because I do not think the local peasant is the butt of attack. In context I think it was addressed to those who took the rules of the Mishna in *Hagigah* as a prohibition to study anything but the statutory law. The splenetic tone of the passage suggests that Maimonides means to preempt their criticism.

“MATERIAL” INTELLECT?

Finally, Maimonides addresses a concern that we are not treating the subject in its sufficient depth. After all, the Guide is a textbook for prophets, and therefore the object of this curriculum *is* to transcend the limit of the material intellect:

“Do not criticize the words used in this chapter and in others in reference to the mind, for we only intended to give some idea of the subject in view, not to describe the essence of the intellect: for other chapters have been dedicated to this subject.”

Friedlander explains, note 2, *ad loc.*:

“The intellectual perceptions are here called (Ibn Tibon trans.) *ntalot b'khomer*, ‘attached to or connected with matter,’ insofar as the mind is connected with the human body, and is, as it is were, residing in it. The ‘ideas’ of the intellect are generally considered by Maimonides as independent of the body, but he

does not speak here of the intellect in the strictly philosophical sense of the word, as he distinctly states at the end of this chapter.”

We discussed, in the last chapter, the apparent contradiction presented by a mind “attached to” and limited by matter, on the one hand, and the mind whose “gates of investigation” in divine science are not closed. The contradiction is an “educational” contradiction. The first teaching directs the student of divine science on the path of intellectual humility, while the second is for the prophet, the one who has achieved such humility, and whose mind is liberated. The only possible limit for such a mind is true knowledge of the essence of God.

In Guide 1:21, Maimonides addressed this final limit on the intellect. Moses, on Sinai, encountered God but could not unite with Him. He warned of the danger of transgressing the ultimate limit:

“In asserting that God withheld from Moses the higher knowledge I mean to say that this knowledge was unattainable, that by its nature it was inaccessible to Moses; for man, whilst able to gain perfection by applying his reasoning faculties to the attainment of what is within the reach of his intellect, either weakens his reason or loses it altogether as soon as he ventures to seek a higher degree of knowledge--as I shall elucidate in one of the chapters of this work (our chapter, 1:32)—unless he be granted a special aid from heaven, as is described in the words, ‘And I will cover thee with my hand until I pass by.’ (Exodus 33:23)”

The remarkable result, eternally significant, is the miracle of Moses’ revelation. His humble striving receives reward in knowledge beyond the limit of the human intellect: still, he never reaches the level of divinity.

Maimonides does not multiply distinctions like a scholastic, yet he is sensitive to the difference between mind taken generally and mind as dependant upon the individual’s physical existence. In Guide II:Introduction, Proposition XI, he writes:

“Among the things which exist in a body, there are some which participate in the division of that body, and are therefore accidentally divisible, as, e.g., its colour, and all other forces that spread throughout its parts. On the other hand, among the things that constitute the existence of a body, there are some which cannot be divided in any way, as, e.g., the soul and the intellect.”

The material (hylic) intellect has a relation of *inexistence* with the body, i.e., it exists in it, but not a relation of *admixture*, and, therefore it is not divisible with the body. Maimonides’ position is at odds with Aristotle, for whom even this intellect is separate, i.e., neither inexistent nor admixed. Indeed, Aristotle demonstrates the separateness of the intellect by contending that while straining the senses ruins them, stress strengthens thought. Maimonides, by contrast, holds that only the active intellect is entirely separate from the body. Slightly more Aristotelian is Avicenna (980-1037) who held that the intellect is not in matter but possesses a dependence on matter. The position of Albertus Magnus (1200-1280) is perhaps closer to Maimonides. “The soul is intellectual because it operates without using the body and animal because it uses the organic body; but nevertheless its intellectual aspect is overshadowed in that it is inquisitive, not certain like the intellectual aspect of the celestial intellects which are not overshadowed by the disturbances of bodies.” (Avicenna, quoted in Even-Shmuel, *ad loc.*, 136; Albertus in McKeon, Richard, *Selections from Medieval Philosophy*, I, 341, Scribners, 1957; generally, see Wolfson, *Crescas Critique of Aristotle*, 604-8.)

We are only speaking, in our chapter, of the practical realities the human intellect is subject to, not its potential power when liberated from those shackles. But we are too early in the story to reach that prescription for the perplexed.

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