

2

The Challenge of Monotheism

Etymologically *mono + theism* implies belief in or worship of a single deity. But belief in a single deity is at most a necessary condition for monotheism. A religion that recognized Zeus as the only deity would not be considered monotheistic even if its adherents insisted that besides him, there are no other gods. It matters little whether a person worships a single god or a large number *if* that god is nothing but a glorified version of something found on earth. To qualify as monotheistic, a religion must not only worship one deity but conceive of that deity in a particular way. According to Maimonides (*GP* 1.57, p. 133), to say that God is one is to say that God has no equal. But having no equal does *not* mean that God is the wisest, most durable, or most powerful force in the universe. That much could have been said of Zeus. Rather it means that nothing is comparable to God, can serve as a surrogate for God, or can stand as a rival to God. Thus Isaiah 40:25: "To whom then will you liken Me, that I should be equal?"

Infinite or Finite; Creator or Creation

Behind Maimonides' claim is the conviction that if God were a bigger, stronger, more durable version of humans, in worshipping God we would again be worshipping our own reflection. The crux of monotheism is not only belief in a single deity but belief in a deity

who is different from everything else. In one passage (*GP* 1.56, p. 130) he goes so far as to say that it is *not* true that God's power is greater than ours, God's knowledge more extensive, or God's will more universal. It is not true because to say that it is would imply that there is a measure of comparison, that even though God is at the top of the scale, it makes sense to put us both on it. We can compare my strength to that of an Olympic athlete, or an Olympic athlete's to that of a horse or bull. We can compare armies, empires, and the horsepower of automobiles. But we can commit no greater sin against monotheism than to compare any of these capacities to the power to create a whole galaxy out of nothing—or for that matter, to the power to create even one atom out of nothing.

In a word, God's power is infinite. No matter how many times we magnify the strength of a finite creature, we will never arrive at anything more than an enhanced conception of a finite creature and will not even get close to the idea of divinity.¹ In Maimonides' terms (*GP* 1.35, p. 80): "There is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between Him and the things created by Him."

Similar considerations apply to the idea of unity. If by *oneness* we mean an accident that attaches to ordinary substances, then following Avicenna, Maimonides insists it is just as ridiculous to say that God is one as it is to say that God is many (*GP* 1.57, p. 132). God's unity must be so unlike everything else that for God and God alone (*GP* 1.51, p. 113),

there is no oneness at all except in believing that there is one simple essence in which there is no complexity or multiplicity of notions, but one notion only; so that from whatever angle you regard it and from whatever point of view you consider it, you will find that it is one, not divided in any way and by any cause into two notions.

An obvious consequence of divine unity is that God cannot be material, because everything material is divisible. In fact, God cannot admit of any form of composition whether beginning and end, essence and existence, or genus and specific difference.

A more subtle consequence of divine unity is that God cannot be conceived in hierarchical terms. Although the Bible often depicts God as a monarch presiding over a heavenly court, and there are passages where Maimonides himself uses similar comparisons, this way of thinking is misleading if it implies that we can begin on the lower rungs of the scale, determine what accounts for the intervals, and extrapolate to God. As we saw, God is not a superior version of something else. The problem with hierarchical conceptions of reality is

that they assume that everything can be measured by one set of criteria. Instead of recognizing two vastly different conceptions of wisdom and power, for example, they imply that God has more of the things that we have, so that the difference between God and us is analogous to the difference between a poor person and a rich one. One of the consequences of Maimonides' negative theology is that the differences between one creature and another are as nothing compared with the overwhelming difference between any creature and God. If it is true that God is "off the scale," then ultimately the only difference that matters is that between God and everything else.²

In a later age Hermann Cohen summed up these arguments by saying that the distinguishing feature of monotheism is not oneness but uniqueness (*Einzigheit*, *RR*, pp. 35–58). Pagan gods struggle against nature or are conceived according to categories that arise out of it: the thunderbolt, the hunt, the harvest, or sexual passion. But the unique God stands apart from nature, which means that categories like wealth, home life, or social function are totally inapplicable. Thus monotheism is not only a claim about God but a claim about the rest of the universe as well: that it owes its existence to something whose perfection it cannot share.

What, then, is the proper relation between God and the created order? If this line of argument is correct, it can only be separation. Physical separation is out of the question because it implies a common space in which God and everything else are located. Rather separation means that whether we take the most powerful ruler, the largest galaxy, or the most towering intellect, God is still in a different category. Note, for example, that the quote from Isaiah cited earlier is preceded by the observation that the nations of the world, the beasts of the field, and the cedars of Lebanon are as nothing before God. So monotheism requires that we look at the universe in terms of a fundamental dichotomy: God and everything else, Creator and creation. According to Alexander Altmann:³

the different shades of being in all created beings are neutralized, as it were, and reduced to one single level compared with the totally other Being of God. The only ontological distinction which matters from the theological point of view is the one between created and uncreated being.

In view of the overwhelming difference between Creator and creation, it is no accident that much of the symbolism of Judaism consists of a series of bifurcations: God and the created order, heaven and earth, Egypt and the Promised Land, the Sabbath and the other days

of the week, Israel and the other nations of the world, milk and meat, wool and flax. The best example of this symbolism is in the prayer said at the close of the Sabbath:

Blessed are Thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who separates the sacred from the profane, light from darkness, Israel from the other nations, the seventh day from the other six days of labor. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who separates the sacred from the profane.

Indeed the Hebrew word for holiness (*kedushah*) means to treat as separate. We may conclude that from a theological perspective, everything is either/or, and nothing is both/and.

Separation and Mediation

The most immediate consequence of the either/or principle is that nothing can straddle the fence that separates God from the created order. This does not rule out the possibility of creatures superior to humans, but it does require us to say that if such creatures exist, even they are nothing when compared with God. According to Genesis 1:14–19, the heavenly bodies are part of the created order and nothing more. While they may have enormous influence over weather and crops, they have no powers not granted to them by God.

Like Christianity and Islam, Judaism has an elaborate angelology. But for the most part, care is taken to ensure that angels are not subjects of worship in their own right. In the Bible, angels generally have two functions: to carry messages from heaven to earth, and to enhance the majesty of God by providing a heavenly retinue. It is noteworthy, however, that they do not receive names or separate identities until the book of Daniel (8:16; 9:21), which is very late. Although rabbinic literature contains a dispute on when angels were created, the important point is *that* they were created at all.⁴ Like humans, angels do not rival God. Commenting on biblical passages where God appears to address a heavenly court, Maimonides points out that God is not really talking, or deliberating, or consulting the opinions of other beings, "For how could the Creator seek help from that which He created?" (*GP* 2.6, p. 263).

While some accounts make angels closer to God than humans are, there are numerous passages in rabbinic literature where God becomes angry with angels or rejects their advice altogether.⁵ It is well to remember that whatever advantages they have, they cannot perform commandments. With one exception, no prayers are directed to them and no ceremonies undertaken on their behalf.⁶ Thus the stan-

dard view seems to be that expressed at *Berakhot* 13a: "If trouble befall someone, let him not cry to Michael or Gabriel; let him cry to Me and I will answer him at once." This view is reiterated in the Passover *Haggadah*, which reads:

I will pass through the land of Egypt: I Myself and not an angel. And I will smite every firstborn: I Myself and not a Seraph. And on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I Myself and not a messenger. I, the Eternal, I am the One, and none other.⁷

There is even a tradition according to which angels are inferior to humans when the latter behave in a righteous fashion.⁸

More important than angels is the prophecy of Moses. According to Exodus 33:11, Moses did not need heavenly messengers and was allowed to speak to God "face to face." In fact, Moses must intercede between God and the people, because the people are afraid that if they see God, they will die (Exodus 20:16).⁹ So rather than angels, Moses is the closest thing to a being with one foot in the divine order and one foot in the created one. But here too there is a powerful corrective: He cannot enter the Promised Land. Instead of completing his journey and celebrating the end of over 40 years of leadership, he goes off to die in an unmarked grave. Hence the greatest prophet is only a prophet, not a demigod. He is not even mentioned in the *Haggadah*, which celebrates the Exodus from Egypt. We can therefore agree with Solomon Schechter, who followed in the footsteps of Maimonides, when he said that the establishment of an intermediary is really the setting up of another God and hence the cause of sin.¹⁰

Yet sinful or not, some sort of intermediary can be found in practically every corner of Jewish philosophy in the form of *logoi*, *sephiroth*, heavenly spheres, and heavenly intelligences.¹¹ For many medieval thinkers, prophecy is not a direct relation between God and a person but a mediated relation in which forms emanate from God through the heavenly intelligences to the mind of the prophet. But the intelligences do not direct the flow of emanation from one individual to another; they are simply conduits for a kind of causality over which they have no control. In the heavenly realm, they are objects of desire that explain the motion of the spheres in much the way that final causes explain physical motion on earth. In Maimonides' opinion (*GP* 2.7), they exercise free choice; but since they do so in a timeless realm, their will is not analogous to ours. While study of the intelligences may bring us closer to God by acquainting us with heavenly phenomena, it bears repeating that none is an object of worship in its own right.¹² In fact, the view that stars and intelligences

control the destiny of people on earth is one of Maimonides' main objections to astrology. It is true, of course, that the intelligences enjoy a knowledge of God superior to ours, but it is well to remember that in Maimonides' opinion their knowledge is also imperfect.¹³ In short, the intelligences are part of the created order, obey the laws of the created order, and have no claim to divinity.

Beyond the question of angels or intelligences, there is the question of how to interpret passages that describe God's nearness to things on earth. According to Exodus 40:34-35, when work on the Tabernacle was finished, a cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord filled it so that Moses could not enter.¹⁴ We can take the passage to mean that the Tabernacle reflected the honor of God or that a physical manifestation of God entered the earthly realm and took up space. There is, of course, a long tradition that regards the glory of God as a beam of light that illuminates prophet experience. To take an obvious example, Ezekiel (1:27-28) saw fire and brightness when looking on an image and goes on to claim that the earth was illuminated by the glory of the Lord and that the glory of God filled his house (43: 2-5).

Closely connected with the glory of God is the *Shekhinah* or indwelling presence of God. The root *shakhon* means to settle down or dwell, as in Exodus 29:45: "And I will dwell among the Children of Israel and will be their God." Like the glory of God, the *Shekhinah* is said to shine down on earth, emit light, and occupy space.¹⁵ In other contexts, it goes into exile with Israel, feels pain, sheds tears, and enters or departs the world depending on whether Israel is faithful or unfaithful.¹⁶ In mystical literature, the *Shekhinah*, conceived as feminine, takes on sexual connotations even to the point of having holy intercourse with Moses.¹⁷ Although a famous study of this issue by Joshua Abelson tried to show that the *Shekhinah*, or light that it emits, is understood as an incarnation of God, this conclusion is vigorously disputed by Ephraim Urbach, who maintains, "A survey of all the passages referring to the *Shekhinah* leaves no doubt that the *Shekhinah* is no 'hypostasis' and has no separate existence alongside the deity."¹⁸ In fact, Urbach argues that in many cases the *Shekhinah* is nothing but a literary device to allow the rabbis to avoid using the Tetragrammaton.¹⁹

Maimonides' treatment of the verb *shakhon* follows his interpretation of other verbs that imply corporeality: It must be used figuratively when applied to God (*GP* 1.25, p. 55). Accordingly the noun *Shekhinah* is a colorful way to describe God's providence over the earthly realm: When prophets apprehend the goodness of God, the *Shekhinah* or holy presence comes to them. In other contexts, *Shekhinah* refers to the glory of God, in which case it refers to a

beam of light in the created order, not to God in physical form.²⁰ In either case, Maimonides' analysis of the *Shekhinah* implies that it is not a separate entity with a will or intelligence of its own. Enlarging on Maimonides' position, Steven Schwarzschild argues that the coming and going of the *Shekhinah* are nothing but a figurative way of referring to Israel's willingness to obey the commandments.²¹ To say, for example, that the *Shekhinah* comes when the commandments are obeyed and departs when they are not is simply to say that God approves of one and disapproves of the other. Again, there is no need for a hypostasis.

As for God's nearness to human beings, Maimonides insists that it too is a figure of speech. Accordingly there is no difference between a person in the center of the earth and, if it were possible, a person in the highest heavenly sphere (*GP* 1.18, p. 45): "For nearness to Him . . . consists in apprehending Him; remoteness from Him is the lot of him who does not know Him." In short, there is God and our attempt to know God. While knowing involves an emanation from God to the heavenly intelligences to the mind of the prophet, once we leave God, we enter the created order and are no longer dealing with divinity. As we saw, the most that can be said for heavenly intelligences or miraculous beams of light is that they bring us closer to God. According to Schwarzschild: "The intermediaries are almost always only temporary and representational functionaries between the only two real agents involved, namely God and the individual."²² So while it may be wishful thinking to conclude, as Schwarzschild does, that "pure and austere monotheism always carried the day in the end," it is nonetheless true that the normal way for philosophers to deal with this problem is to push intermediaries to one side of the either/or dichotomy: They are either literary devices to help us think about God or finite beings in the created order.

Along these lines, Maimonides argues that while obedience to a king requires one to treat the king's emissaries with respect, it does not follow that the same is true of God.²³ Worship of the sun, moon, stars, or any supposed vessel or image of God is tantamount to idolatry. It is important to see, however, that the reluctance to accept intermediaries reflects more than a concern for neatness. A genuine intermediary would be something that draws attention away from God. If Moses had been allowed to enter the Promised Land in triumph, if we knew where he was buried and could erect a shrine, a cult would develop around Moses, and sooner or later he would become an object of worship in his own right.

From a practical standpoint, monotheism is opposed to the ten-

dency to glorify and eventually deify political leaders, movie stars, sports figures, and others who demand worship or adoration on their own behalf. One reason to stress the uniqueness of God is to enable people to see that anything other than God is fallible and subject to critique. That is why the Bible does not hesitate to portray major characters like Jacob, Moses, or David in less than flattering ways. In sum, monotheism involves more than fealty to God; it also involves a critical attitude to the things in God's creation.

The strongest statement of this attitude is the second commandment. As was noted earlier, not only are there no other gods besides the true one, but it is wrong to make any likeness of anything that is in heaven, on earth, or below the earth. The issue, then, is not how awesome or beautiful the image is but how nothing other than God can represent the splendor of God. From a philosophic perspective, the second commandment could be extended to say that not only can things in heaven, on earth, or below the earth not serve as objects of worship, neither can things conjured up by the human imagination. Again, nothing can be an object of worship except something truly unique, and by definition there is only one thing in the universe that fits that description.

Monotheism and Skepticism

If we define monotheism in terms of uniqueness and insist on a strict interpretation of the second commandment, we face an immediate difficulty: How do you characterize something truly unique? Recall Maimonides' claim that there is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between God and the things created by God. If this is true, every time we look for something in the universe with which to compare God, we will fail. But if there is nothing with which God can be compared, how can we ever know God?

One way to understand the problem is to imagine a spectrum with uniqueness at one end and intelligibility at the other. The more unique God is, the harder it will be for God to fit our concepts or be subsumed under our laws. Thus Isaiah 55:8: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways." If our categories always fall short of God, any claim to know God is suspect. As Bahya says, there is an unavoidable paradox: The moment we pretend that God is near to our understanding, we lose God completely.²⁴

We can also understand the problem by returning to paganism. Whatever religious problems might arise in worshipping Zeus or Athena, there is at least one problem that does not: intelligibility. Be-

cause they are nothing but glorified versions of us, we have no trouble imagining what they look like, where they live, or how they act. But once we deny that God is a glorified version of something else, the only way to identify God is as “wholly other.”²⁵ To follow Bahya’s insight, monotheism puts us in a dilemma where any positive claim of knowledge constitutes proof that we have missed the subject of our inquiry.

We can deal with the dilemma in one of two ways: sacrifice uniqueness in the interest of intelligibility or forgo intelligibility and opt for pure and austere monotheism. Although the typical solution is to take the first option, I want to follow Maimonides by taking the second. We saw that if God does not admit plurality, then categories like genus and species, subject and predicate, matter and form, or essential and accidental do not apply to God. But the issue goes much deeper. According to Maimonides, not only is the attempt to divide God objectionable but so is the attempt to present God under a description. To use his word, all categories or descriptions *particularize* their subject. To say, for example, that God is *F* is to imply that *F*-ness is a cause anterior to God or that it makes sense to put God in the same class as other *F* things. In either case, God’s perfection would be conditioned by or conceived through something else and thus be dependent on something else. If it is dependent, then it is no longer unique.

If God does not fall under a category, neither can God manifest any sort of relation. According to Maimonides, relations hold between things in the same or proximate species. Relations, in other words, are accidents that attach to or inhere in things in the same category. We can say that the outermost sphere of the universe is larger than a mustard seed because both are extended; but there is no relation between a quality like heat and a quantity like a hundred cubits long. As Maimonides asks (*GP* 1.52, p. 118): “How then could there be a relation between Him . . . and any of the things created by Him, given the immense difference between them with regard to the true reality of their existence?” As we saw above, it is not true that God’s power is greater than ours or God’s knowledge more comprehensive than ours. So strictly speaking, all the psalms or prayers that describe God as a father, king, or marriage partner are false.²⁶ Even to say that God is the wisest king or most merciful father is to measure God by human standards.

It is well known that Maimonides regards statements like “God is wise” or “God is powerful” as disguised negations. In a nutshell “God is powerful” means “God does not lack power nor does God

manifest it in a conventional way." It says, in other words, that while God is not deficient, the true nature of divine power is beyond our comprehension. Thus terms like *knowledge*, *power*, *will*, and *life* are predicated of God and us in a completely equivocal way (*GP* 1.56, p. 131): "so that their meaning when they are predicated of Him is in no way like their meaning in other applications." The term *knowledge*, for example, typically identifies an achievement of the human mind. As applied to us, it refers to something different from what is referred to by *power* or *will*; but as applied to God, none of these terms can refer to a perfection distinct from that referred to by the others. Thus (*GP* 1.57, p. 132): "He exists, but not through an existence other than His essence; and similarly He lives, but not through life; He is powerful, but not through power; He knows, but not through knowledge." The idea is that if God is powerful *through* power or wise *through* knowledge, once again God would depend on something else.

In fact, Maimonides is so rigorous on the issue of particularizing God that he thinks even negative predicates are guilty of it to some extent. Basically negative predicates have two advantages. The first is that they do not measure God's perfection in human terms; instead of putting God at the top of a scale, they deny that God is even on it. The second is that they do not add anything to God's essence by piling up multiple descriptions. If God's knowledge and power are both beyond our comprehension, we have no grounds for thinking that they refer to two faculties rather than one. Thus Maimonides (*GP* 1.60, p. 145) affirms that someone who thinks that God has positive attributes has not understood God imperfectly but abandoned belief in God altogether.

Still there is a respect in which negative predicates also subsume God under a category.²⁷ According to Maimonides (*GP* 1.58, p. 134), "The attributes of negation have in this respect something in common with the attributes of affirmation, for the former undoubtedly bring about some particularization." In this connection, he asks us to imagine a situation where we know that something is in a house but not what it is. If we learn that it is neither a mineral nor a vegetable, we can infer that it is an animal. By denying that a subject falls under one category, negative predicates typically imply that it falls under a different one. Clearly this will not work for God. By turning to the negative formulation, we are not identifying God by process of elimination but claiming that any attempt at identification fails. The reason is that even a claim like "God is not inanimate" subsumes God under a category and puts God in a class with other things. Once God

falls under a description, even a description that applies to only one thing, there is no possibility of uniqueness in Maimonides' sense.

Similar considerations apply to the claim that there is an essence of God. According to Aristotle, the essence of a thing is what it is in itself (*kath hautō*), and only things whose formula is a definition can have an essence.²⁸ Definitions, according to the usual account, involve genus and specific difference. Since God, as Avicenna argued, cannot fall under a genus, no definition of God is possible. Maimonides therefore feels confident in saying (*GP* 1.52, p. 115), "It is well known among all people engaged in speculation, who understand what they say, that God cannot be defined." If no definition, then no essence either. In short, there is no "what-ness" connected with God, nothing that allows us to bring God within the scope of a category. We should be clear about the radical nature of Maimonides' position. To say that God cannot be defined is to say that even claims like "God is pure intellect" or "God is pure activity," though helpful up to a point, are misleading, for while they distinguish God from other things, they still try to make God fall within conceptual boundaries, to condition the unconditioned.

Although God does not have an essence in the usual sense of the term, any reader of the *Guide* can see that Maimonides talks about essence in connection with God throughout the chapters on negative theology. On several occasions he reminds us that God's essence is simple and nothing can be superadded to it. In discussing Exodus 33, he points out that even Moses could not know God's essence as it really is. At *Guide* 1.61, p. 147, he claims that God's proper name (the Tetragrammaton) "gives a clear indication of His essence." Since Maimonides connects the Tetragrammaton with necessary existence, it would seem that, like Avicenna, he regards necessary existence as God's distinguishing characteristic.²⁹ Yet how can this be if God cannot be defined? Is the essence of a necessary being just its existence, or is it better to say that it does not have an essence at all?

One solution is to say that Maimonides typically uses *essence* in two senses: one (*māhiyya*) to talk about contingent things, where existence is superadded to essence; another (*dhāt*) to talk about the absolute identity of essence and existence in God.³⁰ But we must keep in mind that even the strong sense of the term puts God in a category that we can characterize. It is significant, then, that after saying that God exists but not through an existence other than the divine essence, Maimonides makes a larger point about the limits of religious language (*GP* 1.57, pp. 132–33):

These subtle notions that very clearly elude the mind cannot be considered through the instrumentality of the customary words, which are the greatest among the causes leading unto error. For the bounds of expression in all languages are very narrow indeed, so that we cannot represent this notion to ourselves except through a certain looseness of expression. Thus when we wish to indicate that the deity is not many, the one who makes the statement cannot say anything but that He is one, even though "one" and "many" are some of the subdivisions of quantity. For this reason we give the gist of the notion and give the mind the correct direction toward the true reality of the matter.

I suggest that what is true of *one* and *many* is also true of *essence* even in the strong sense: Maimonides says that nothing can be superadded to God's essence in order to emphasize that God is different from everything else. His claim is intended to rule out unacceptable alternatives and direct the mind to the unique nature of the subject. But strictly speaking, God does not have an essence in a sense that we can understand. So Maimonides must use terms in one context that he rejects in another. As Plotinus remarks (*EN* 6.8.13), "Our inquiry obliges us to use terms not strictly applicable."³¹

The idea of pointing the mind in the right direction also helps to explain how Maimonides would square negative theology with the view that God's existence can be demonstrated.³² The answer is that while "God exists" is true and enables us to recognize that the universe contains more than contingent beings, it has nothing in common with ordinary existential propositions. In the first place, it does not have a subject/predicate structure. Although it appears to mention two things, it cannot really do so because God's existence is not separate from God. In the second place, "God" does not refer to a something we can define or comprehend. In a statement like "Bill Clinton exists," there are a number of descriptions I can use to present Bill Clinton to my mind. But we have seen that there are no descriptions that will allow me to do the same with God.³³ In the last analysis, "God exists" would have to be interpreted negatively, and its negativity would have to be qualified so as not to put God in a class with something else. The same is true of descriptions like "God thinks" or "God is the ground of being." They enable us to see something important and to reject obvious falsehoods. But *as* descriptions they are objectionable in principle.

It follows that Maimonides' view of religious language is heuristic: It is a tool to help *us* focus attention or come to important insights, but it is always imprecise and can never culminate in literal truth. As Maimonides points out in discussing the claim that God's relation to the world is like that of a captain to a ship (*GP* 1.58, p.

137), such descriptions "lead the mind toward the view that He . . . governs the existent things" but are not a true likeness because again God "has nothing in common with them in any respect." Even negations only (*GP* 1.58, p. 135) "conduct the mind toward the utmost reach that man may attain in the apprehension of Him." As we saw, the closest Maimonides comes to something that refers to God in an unequivocal way is the Tetragrammaton, which according to Jewish tradition is not supposed to be pronounced.³⁴

I will have more to say about religious language in the next chapter. For the present it is enough to realize that once we get beyond its liturgical or pedagogical function, once the mind has been turned away from the material realm toward God, the purpose of religious language is to reveal its own inadequacy. A person may have to labor in a science for years to see that its terms and categories apply only to the created order (*GP* 1.59, p. 138). In the words of Anton Pegis, "Man must come to *unsay* the whole universe in order to say that *God exists* properly."³⁵ In this way, religious wisdom is really a kind of learned ignorance. What separates the wise person from the fool is that the former realizes that only God can comprehend God.

In some respects, Maimonides' view of language resembles the one expressed by Wittgenstein at the end of the *Tractatus*:³⁶

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.

Obviously Maimonides would not say that every claim we make about God is nonsensical. But he would say that the claims we make about God are best understood as steps on the way to something higher: a perspective from which we see that strictly speaking nothing we say about God can be true. After reflecting on the deficiencies of religious language, Maimonides (*GP* 1.59, p. 139) also encourages the reader to pass over the subject in silence, quoting Psalm 65:2: "Silence is praise to thee."³⁷

We can understand silence as the price we pay for uniqueness. If God is truly unique, any attempt to praise or characterize God can only end in failure. Maimonides sums up his position by proclaiming (*GP* 1.59, p. 137): "Glory . . . to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity; and when they contemplate the proceeding of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns into ignorance; and when the

tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity." To be sure, silence runs the risk of atheism; to say nothing is to encourage some people to think there is no point in taking up the subject in the first place. But atheism, as Levinas remarks, is a risk that has to be run, because only through the process of denying inadequate conceptions of God can we reach the idea of true transcendence.³⁸

Having emphasized the limits of human knowledge, Maimonides could make it easy on himself by claiming that what reason cannot comprehend, revelation can. In other words, he could argue that there are extrarational modes of access to God that have provided him or others with a special kind of enlightenment. But it is important to see that he does not pursue this option and is willing to live with the consequences of his position. Twice in the *Guide* (3. Introduction, p. 416; 3.51, p. 624) he tells the reader that he has not had a prophetic experience of his own. In keeping with his skepticism, he begins the *Guide* on a hesitant note, apologizing for what he intends to do (*GP* 1. Introduction, p. 16): "God . . . knows that I have never ceased to be exceedingly apprehensive about setting down those things that I wish to set down in this Treatise." His apprehension does not apply to the existence and unity of God, topics so central to Judaism that even general audiences must accept them (*GP* 1.35, pp. 79–80). But God's existence and unity must still be interpreted negatively or else we will again put God on the same level as creatures.³⁹

We saw that once we get beyond existence and unity to "obscure matters," Maimonides' teaching is full of reservations. The issues he discusses are not completely known to anyone, which means that the reader cannot expect full coverage and must settle for scattered insights that will "appear, flash, and then be hidden again." The reason we can have only scattered insights is that matter acts as a dark veil over the human mind, preventing it from apprehending the true nature of immaterial reality (*GP* 3.9, pp. 436–37).⁴⁰ All we can hope for, then, are a few insights from which we can try to put together a provisional theory. Like the prisoner in Plato's cave who sees the sun and returns to tell his fellow prisoners about it, those who are fortunate enough to receive these insights have trouble communicating them to others (*GP* 1. Introduction, p. 8): "Know that whenever one of the perfect wishes to mention, either orally or in writing, something that he understands of these *secrets*, according to the degree of his perfection, he is unable to explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended."

Monotheism and Religion

We come to what may be the greatest problem of all: the possibility that monotheism in the strict sense may not be the essence of Judaism but a separate doctrine to which Judaism is only partly related. Can Judaism accommodate a timeless, changeless, unitary being whose greatness is best appreciated in silent devotion? In some ways this is the Jerusalem versus Athens question all over again. Critics charge that Maimonides has done away with the personal side of God, found philosophic messages in texts that are completely innocent of philosophy, undermined the institution of prayer, and put too much faith in the power of reason. Defenders answer that if Judaism is to be more than a series of rituals, if it is really committed to a worldview that everyone ought to consider, then the foundations of that worldview have to be articulated in a philosophically acceptable way, which is to say a way that plays down superstition, cultural or ethnic chauvinism, and claims of privileged access to God.

There is no need to review the history of this debate, because it breaks out in every age. We saw that Rita Gross argued that it is impossible to pray to or receive commandments from a nonpersonal ultimate. Essentially the same point is made by more traditional theologians who do not share Strauss's view of Jerusalem and Athens. According to David Burrell:⁴¹

The clean alternative is simply to assert God to be *other than* the world, holding on quite firmly to the reality of the world in which we live. This can be considered Maimonides' position . . . but one always feels in such cases that one's religious self holds one's mind captive. For it takes but a little reflection to realize that God cannot be *that* neatly other if we are to use the name *creator*, or if divinity is to be in any way accessible to our discourse.

And Steven Katz:⁴²

If we take these claims for apophantic theology seriously, two problems, one philosophical, the other theological, arise: Philosophically the issue is how can the "x of x's" retain any meaning given the embargo on content for all predications about the ultimate. Theologically the concern is how can God, conceived so radically apophantically, be the object, or subject, of covenantal relationship, the revealer of Torah and mitzvot, the Judge or Redeemer of souls, the One to whom we address prayers and supplications?

To these questions I add one of my own: Can we seek God in ever widening spheres of negation, or does worship inevitably lead to a "god" with one foot in heaven and one foot on earth?

Obviously these issues are too broad to be addressed in a single chapter. We should keep in mind, however, that Maimonides would begin by emphasizing one point: Tradition supports him. Granted that the sacred books do not support him if we understand them at a surface level. There is no doubt that the Bible seems to present a God whose emotions change from one moment to the next and whose promises and threats establish the boundaries of moral discourse. But Maimonides would reply that Judaism is heir to a body of learning that rejects surface meaning and looks for insights that can withstand the give and take of dialectical scrutiny. In other words, he would reply that there is no reason why we have to take this conception of God as primary and measure everything else against it.

One hardly needs to point out that many of Maimonides' interpretations of the Bible would not hold up if judged by the standards of modern historical scholarship; but the same could be said for the interpretations of the rabbis, the mystics, and many of Maimonides' fiercest opponents. For all its virtues, modern historical analysis makes no claim to be sacred. But that is exactly what Maimonides does claim. At the beginning of the *Guide* he says that he is going to discuss the secrets of the Torah, or what he calls the science of the Law, in its true sense (*GP* 1. Introduction, pp. 5-9). When all is said and done, the science converges on one point: that the primary intention of the Law consists in people apprehending God and not worshipping anything but God (*GP* 3.28, p. 512; 3.32, p. 530).⁴³ That is why Maimonides refuses to compromise on the question of God's transcendence. In Judaism, as in most religions, there is a duty to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5). Once the otherness of God is surrendered, once our image of God is measured in human terms, love of God would become a form of self-love, and everything sacred in the religion would be lost.

To the person who objects that Maimonides' view provides little in the way of comfort or consolation, the gist of Maimonides' answer is that comfort and consolation, though desirable, are not the be-all and end-all of religious life. As a rabbi and a physician, he was certainly in a position to see suffering and pain on a regular basis. And no student of Jewish law could doubt that caring for the sick and comforting mourners are divine commandments. But a religion whose primary function is making people feel comfortable would soon become a travesty.

Beyond the issue of comfort is that of truth. If Maimonides is right, the highest obligation we have is to pursue truth even if what we discover threatens our self-image and causes anxiety. As he is fond of pointing out, Judaism does not ask people to starve themselves, beat themselves, or jeopardize their health. But it does require them to achieve a certain amount of theoretical sophistication, at least enough to recognize that we are only a small part of a vast universe. Viewing God as a friend, love partner, or protection agency may provide comfort in the short run, but in the long run it is to take solace in a life of fantasy.

Reduced to simplest terms, monotheism tries to purge us of the need to see our own image reflected everywhere in the universe. Rather than bringing God and humans closer together, its purpose is to emphasize the infinite distance that separates them. To return to Akiva and the parable of the rabbis who entered *pardes*, monotheism asks us to confront the wholly other *as* other without losing our sanity or composure. Recall that after hearing the voice of the Almighty, Job repented in silence. Without achieving union with God or looking for kinship between God and himself, he sought and found a higher form of holiness than what he had known before. In Maimonides' opinion, this form of holiness is the goal to which all the holidays, rituals, and sacred books point even if it does not look that way to the average worshipper. In sum, monotheism is justified by the truth of its vision rather than by the number of its adherents.

Monotheism as Enslavement: Hegel's Critique of Judaism

Despite Maimonides' sincerity in trying to prevent spurious worship, his view of religion remains controversial. As long as the gap between God and humans is infinite and unmediated, then some people will object, as Hegel did, that we cannot help but feel a profound sense of estrangement when we reach out for a God we can never embrace.⁴⁴ Faced with an opposition we cannot surmount or even comprehend, we have no choice but to stand in awe of God and, like Job, submit to the dictates of an alien will. Not surprisingly, estrangement soon manifests itself as enslavement. The point of worship is to glorify God and stress that next to God we are nothing. For Hegel, this idea of God is not only mysterious but severely, even oppressively, abstract. Lacking any sensuous manifestation, God is never present and never really revealed. In the end, all we have is an empty conception of divinity and a people who believe they have been cho-

seen as its servants. Because God is always other and never understood, God's commandments will always be arbitrary and unyielding. In this scheme, the human attempt to please God will always fall short of its goal, with the consequence that Judaism is a religion that culminates in sorrow and regret.

From Hegel's standpoint, the only way to avoid this plight is to abandon the idea of God as an undifferentiated "other" and overcome the opposition on which it is based. The goal, then, is to spell out the historical process by which the implicit unity between God and human becomes actual and definite. In considering Hegel's criticism, it is important to remember that by *God* he does not mean an all-powerful being existing separate from the world but rather absolute spirit or *Geist*. The characteristic feature of spirit is to become conscious of itself through history, which in Hegel's system means that humans become ever more conscious of or articulate about the idea of divinity.⁴⁵ "God is God," Hegel tells us, "insofar as he knows himself; his knowing himself is, furthermore, a self-consciousness in man and man's knowledge of God that goes on to man's knowing himself in God."⁴⁸ Or more succinctly (*LPR* 3, pp. 303–4): "The Spirit of Man, whereby he knows God, is simply the Spirit of God himself."

It follows that for Hegel, the medieval position that says we can know *that* God is but not *what* God is cannot be right. As long as we are in the dark about what God is, spirit would remain undeveloped and God less than absolute. In short, an unknowable God is conceptually impossible. Like Plotinus, Hegel believes in a reunion of the finite with the infinite; but unlike Plotinus, he does not believe that the infinite is indifferent to the process by which reunion occurs. Until the process is complete, there is a sense in which God is not yet God, not fully self-aware. Revelation is the process by which God is no longer (*LPR* 2, p. 328) "a Being above and beyond this world" but a being that attains consciousness of itself in our consciousness of ourselves.

In concert with many thinkers in the romantic age, Hegel also accepted the idea of a fundamental dichotomy between Athens and Jerusalem and disparaged the latter.⁴⁷ Judaism, on this account, is a religion of slaves who took no delight in the visual arts and remained in fear of a tyrannical God. Since tyranny is the result of separation, it must be corrected by reconciliation. The first step in the process of reconciliation is for humans to take confidence in themselves by coming to see themselves in God. Instead of worshipping a distant God, they worship a god who shares their needs, habits, emotions, and political relations. According to Hegel (*LPR* 2, pp. 257–58):

In this religion there is nothing incomprehensible, nothing which cannot be understood; there is no kind of content in the god which is not known to man, or which he does not find or know in himself. The confidence of man in the gods is at the same time confidence in himself.

Despite its anthropomorphism, Greek religion therefore represents a more advanced stage in the development of spirit than Jewish monotheism does. From Hebrew and Greek religion, we move to a "synthesis" in Roman religion, but the real synthesis or reconciliation between God and humans does not occur until we get to "absolute" religion, which means Christianity.

If the characteristic feature of Greek religion is that humans see themselves in God, the characteristic feature of Christianity is, in Hegel's eyes, the reverse: God becomes human, and in the process each side of the original opposition (*LPR* 2, p. 347) "recognizes itself, finds itself and its essential nature in the other." As Hegel puts it a bit later (*LPR* 3, p. 73), "Man appears as God and God as Man." It is here that the unity of divine and human natures becomes actual and the estrangement or unhappiness caused by their separation vanishes.⁴⁸ Overall the drama can be seen as one in which God creates humans, humans sin against God and fall away, humans and God are reunited in the person of Christ, Christ dies but his body lives on in the form of the Church. In this way religion is a sensuous representation of the movement of thought toward self-consciousness and culminates in the establishment of an institution that universalizes the incarnation by freeing it from dependence on one person. It is not that Hegel's God has one foot in heaven and one foot on earth but that the categories of heaven and earth have been overcome and replaced by that of Spirit.

There are essentially two ways for a Jew to respond to this analysis. The first is to follow Fackenheim in saying that while Judaism insists on the radical otherness of God, it also insists on the nearness and intimacy of God and must hold the two sides of this contradiction in some sort of dialectical tension.⁴⁹ According to Fackenheim, God, though other than the world, "enters into the world" and "descends to meet man."⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, he puts a great deal of weight on the midrashim that deal with God's *Shekhinah*.⁵¹

The second alternative is to follow Schwarzschild in saying that the separation between God and the world cannot be overcome and that any attempt to compromise God's transcendence or explain God's entry into the world is misguided.⁵² Again Judaism contains a variety of currents, so the question is what aspect of the religion one wants to follow. While Hegel's view of Judaism is obviously simplistic, he certainly put his finger on the right question: Is the distinctive

feature of the religion that the gap between God and the world cannot be overcome or that it can? Should prayer, repentance, love, and other ways of bringing us "near" to God be understood as closing the gap or as reinforcing it?

It is clear that in this debate, Maimonides is on the side of Schwarzschild, for what Hegel sees as the great weakness of Judaism, Maimonides sees as its underlying strength: clean lines of demarcation and no attempt to overcome opposition. What Hegel regards as a state of estrangement and unhappiness, Maimonides would regard as an honest assessment of the human condition—or at least one unfettered by romantic assumptions about "man's confidence in himself." For Maimonides, the need to see ourselves in God is a denial of religion rather than an attempt to bring it to a new level of understanding. Maimonides would be unmoved by the claim that since God's otherness is grasped by humans, the activity of grasping it is something more than human.⁵³ For Maimonides, otherness means the denial of essence and ultimately the acceptance of silence. There is, then, no possibility of seeing ourselves in the other.

Reduced to simplest terms, the debate between Maimonides and Hegel is a debate between a logic of either/or and a logic of both/and. The issue is whether a religion based on either/or is viable—whether, as Levinas put it, we should exit Hegel's system by moving backward through the very door by which Hegel thinks we enter it.⁵⁴ Clearly separation creates problems from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. How can God create the world and not have something in common with it? What sense can we give to the claim that holiness consists in becoming like God? More pointedly, can we still talk about prayer, repentance, and love of God in a meaningful way? This is another way of asking whether my account of monotheism is compatible with a religion that can accommodate classical doctrines and meaningful rituals, a religion that people can practice. And if it can, what sort of religion will it be? Does it hold out an ideal that some of Maimonides' staunchest defenders regard as unattainable? Will it avoid the estrangement that Hegel thinks is practically synonymous with Judaism? These questions will be the focal point of the remaining chapters.