

Guide to the Perplexed, the Holy Tongue, and Holy Intimacy

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

In Maimonides' Guide to the Perplexed he expresses a facet of the Hebrew language that it has no vulgar terms:¹

"I have also a reason and cause for calling our language the holy language—do not think it is exaggeration or error on my part, it is perfectly correct—the Hebrew language has no special name for the organ of generation in females or in males, nor for the act of generation itself, nor for semen, nor for secretion. The Hebrew has no original expressions for these things, and only describes them in figurative language and by way of hints, as if to indicate thereby that these things should not be mentioned, and should therefore have no names; we ought to be silent about them, and when we are compelled to mention them, we must manage to employ for that purpose some suitable expressions, although these are generally used in a different sense. Thus the organ of generation in males is called in Hebrew *gid*, which is a figurative term, reminding of the words, "And thy neck is an iron sinew" (*gid*) (Yeshayahu. 38:4). It is also called *shupka*, "pouring out" (Devarim 23:2), on account of its function. The female organ is called *kobah* (Bamidbar 25:8), from *kobah* (Devarim 18:3:3), which denotes "stomach"; *rehem*, "womb," is the inner organ in which the fetus develops; *zoh* (Yeshayahu. 28:8), "refuse," is derived from the verb *yaza*, "he went out"; for "urine" the phrase *meme raglayim*, "the water of the feet" (2 Kings. 18:17), is used; semen is expressed by *shikbat zera'*, "a layer of seed." For the act of generation there is no expression whatever in Hebrew: it is described by the following words only: *ba'al*, "he was master"; *shakab*, "he lay"; *lakah*, "he took"; *gillah 'ervah*, "he uncovered the nakedness."

This thought is consonant with Maimonides' view in that all matters of corporeality are inherently repulsive and should only be done out of the utmost necessity and for the continuity of the human race.

Indeed, Nachmanides (Iggeret HaKodesh) was adamantly opposed to this stance and viewed it as something that was inherently un-Jewish and instead an idea adopted from Greek Philosophy.

"You should know that this joining is holy and innocent when it will be according to what is proper; in the proper time and the proper intention. One should not think that there is any disgrace or ugliness in it—G-d forbid...It is not like the Rav thought in his Guide to the Perplexed—in his praise of Aristotle—that sensuality is a disgrace for us... It is like what the Rabbis (Talmud Sota 17a) said: "When a person joins with his wife in holiness and

¹ This essay is based on Likute Sichot Vol. 3 Pg. 893

purity, the Divine Presence dwells between them...” However, if their intention is not for holy conjoining but rather for the fulfilment of their pleasure...it departs from them.”

Elsewhere (Shemot 30:13), Nachmanides takes issue with Maimonides’ definition of “the holy language.” Instead of defining it—as Maimonides does—that it is in *negation* to unclean words, he explains that it is in *affirmation* of its essential holiness.

“The reason why our rabbis refer to the language of the Torah as the holy language is because the words of the Torah, its prophets and all holy matters are all stated in that language. It is the language that the Holy One, blessed be He speaks to his prophets and his nation. It is the language that His names are in...With it He created the world, gave names to the heaven and earth and all that is in them, refers to his angels...and named the patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov...”

To Nachmanides, debasing Hebrew to a language that is merely missing the word for cohabitation is not only wrong—as he attempts to prove there—but demeaning to the true holiness of the Hebrew language.

On Obscurity and Intent

While the intent of various passages in Maimonides’ have been ferociously argued since they were written, it is clear that the book is wholly obscure. Indeed, Maimonides has often been called the Rorschach Test of Jewish thought, as often readers incorporate their own paradigm of thinking on to Maimonides’ words.

One thing is clear is that the ambiguity of the Guides meaning was intentional. Maimonides himself writes (Guide to the Perplexed, Preface) that he is intentionally vague in his writing, so that someone unworthy should not attain the secrets of the Torah:

“You must, therefore, not expect from me more than such heads. And even these have not been methodically and systematically arranged in this work, but have been, on the contrary, scattered, and are interspersed with other topics which we shall have occasion to explain. My object in adopting this arrangement is that the truths should be at one time apparent, and at another time concealed. Thus we shall not be in opposition to the Divine Will (from which it is wrong to deviate) which has withheld from the multitude the truths required for the knowledge of God, according to the words, ‘The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him’.”

It is clear in Maimonides’ preface that he views his work as *Ma-ase Merkava*, which he views as metaphysics and is therefore intent on obscuring his intent per the sages (Talmud, Chagiga 11a) that it is forbidden to expound on *Ma-ase Merkava* to even a single student but one rather teaches the student central ideas concisely and the student on his own must extrapolate the larger picture.²

² See Maimonides, Mishna Torah, Principles of the Torah, 2:17

As such, it is clear that Maimonides' words in the guide are not to be taken at face value, as it is plausible that there is a deeper intent in his words.

Indeed, it is partially due to this that in the Chabad School of Chassidism, Maimonides' guide was interpreted with more esoteric meaning than is assumed in a superficial reading.

In fact, it is told (Sefer HaSichot, summer 5700, Pg. 40) that Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi had a study session with his grandson, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch in the Guide to the Perplexed, where they would study it through the paradigm of Chassidic thought. This was possible as it is already clear that Maimonides had a deeper intent in his words—but was often misunderstood.

As such, it is possible to make Kabbalistic inquiries into Maimonides' thought, though seems that he did not write in this style.³

On Creation

It was expressed above—in the quote from Nachmanides—that the world was created using the holy language of Hebrew. This idea is more clearly expressed in Chassidic thought (Shar HaYichud VeHa-emua Ch. 1), that the Hebrew name and letters of an object are actually the building blocks and vitality of that object:

“It is written (Tehillim 119:89): "Forever, O G-d, Your word stands firm in the heavens." The Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory, has explained that "Your word" which you uttered, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters.. .", these very words and letters stand firmly forever within the firmament of heaven and are forever clothed within all the heavens to give them life...

Now, although the name *even* (stone) is not mentioned in the Ten Utterances recorded in the Torah, nevertheless, life-force flows to the stone through combinations and substitutions of the letters which are transposed in the "Two hundred and thirty-one gates," either in direct or reverse order, as is explained in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, until the combination of the name *even* descends from the Ten Utterances, and is derived from them, and this is the life-force of the stone. And so it is with all created things in the world— their names in the Holy Tongue... become invested in that particular created thing to give it life.”

That being the case, an interesting question can be asked. As Maimonides pointed out there are certain words in Hebrew that are euphemisms, but not the actual name for the object. In matters that are deemed vulgar, the holy tongue does not seem to have name for these body parts or acts.

³ See Shar Hagilgulim Sec. 36, Shlomo Alkabetz Shir HaShirim that Maimonides did not study Kabbalah. See however, Sefer HaSichot, summer 5700 Pg. 41 that there was a tradition in the name of the Besht that he did. Additionally see Migdal Oz, Principles of the Torah 1:2, Shalat Utshuvot MaHaram Alashkar Sec. 117 and others that discuss whether or not Rambam had Kabbalistic knowledge.

However, this creates an interesting problem: As Tanya pointed out “with all created things in the world— their names in the Holy Tongue... become invested in that particular created thing to give it life.” If so it is impossible for something to not have a name in Hebrew—for if that were the case it would not exist.

This creates two contradictory questions:

- 1) How then can there be words absent from the Hebrew language merely because of their vulgarity?
- 2) If indeed these words are extant in the *holy* language, how can they be considered vulgar or unclean?

However, what is understood is that to a certain extent the second question sheds light on the first question.

Pre and post sin

The verses in Bereishit expresses a fundamental transformation that ensued in Adam and Chava as a result of their sin.

Before Adam and Chava sinned by eating the tree of knowledge the verse (Bereishit 2:25) states: “Now they were both naked, the man and his wife, but they were not ashamed.”

However, immediately after the sin, the verse (Bereishit 3:7) states: “And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves girdles.”

In Maimonides’ guide (1:2) he asks about the peculiarity that through sin, it seems that man was given the greatest blessing:

“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.”

Maimonides’ there differentiates between true and false vs. good and bad. Before sin they were aware of *objective* truths, but after sin they became aware of good and bad, which are intrinsically *subjective*.

The third Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem of Lubavitch, as well addresses this question in his *Sefer HaChakira* (Pg. 66) in a manner that is by his own admission similar to Maimonides’:

From a theoretical perspective there is no difference between the sexual organs and the other limbs, like the face and hands. Adam and his wife did not make clothing to conceal their private parts until they partook of the tree of knowledge and became enveloped in

lusts...Because of the lust they were disgusted in something that they were originally not disgusted by.

This explains an inherent contradiction in Maimonides. In discussing sexual relations and eating Maimonides (3:8) writes: "The sense of touch, which is a *disgrace* to us...and which is the cause of our desire for eating, drinking, and sensuality." However, Maimonides himself points out (1:2) that before man sinned he did not view sexuality as a *disgrace* and was therefore not embarrassed to be naked.

The difference though is clear, as it is dependent on a pre-sin reality or a post-sin reality. In a pre-sin reality that is absent of corporeal lust there is nothing to be ashamed about in sexuality as it is a function like any other. However, in a post sin reality where the individual is keenly aware of his sensuality, there is indeed what to be ashamed about in sexuality.

This explains (See *Sefer HaChakira ibid*) when Yaakov requested that he be given Rachel in marriage he uses a term that we would consider vulgar. The verse (Bereishit 29:21) states: "And Yaakov said to Lavan, "Give me my wife, for my days are completed, that I may come to unto her."

The patriarchs had reached a level where they did not feel their corporeality, and therefore were not ashamed to use a term that seems to express mans lusts.

Answering Maimonides

Accordingly, is as well explained the initial question on Maimonides' definition of the Holy Tongue as a language that is lacking vulgar terms. Predicated on Tanya's explanation that for something to exist it must have a name in the Holy Tongue.

This poses paradoxical dilemma: On one hand as Maimonides points out there are no Hebrew words for these seemingly vulgar terms, and on the other from the fact that there obviously are names for these objects—as they exist—it must mean that these organs and acts are indeed holy?!

However, the answer is imbedded in Maimonides' own explanation of the difference between the pre-sin reality and the post sin reality.

In a pre-sin reality, where the sexual organs are like any other, there is nothing disgraceful in these words and there are surely a way to express these actions and organs in the Holy Tongue. In the post-sin world where these actions cannot be separated from man's lust, we do not know the names for these organs, as their holiness is almost impossible to attain.

It is understood therefore that there is not a pronounced difference between Maimonides and Nachmanides. Maimonides as well believes that there is a level of sexuality that holy and pure, while Nachmanides would agree that cohabitation done purely for lust is antithetical of G-dliness as he states (*Igeret HaKodesh, ibid*): "However, if their intention is not for holy conjoining but rather for the fulfilment of their pleasure...it departs from them."

What is perhaps a point of contention between Maimonides and Nachmanides is whether or not it is possible to attain a reality where cohabitation is completely holy. Whereas Nachmanides implies that it is indeed within our grasp, in Maimonides' explanation it seems to be beyond it.

In Maimonides' post sin reality, he believes it is impossible to completely escape an element of corporeal lust and is therefore something that carries with it disgrace.

This is expressed in King David's words concerning conception. He states (Tehillim, 51:7) "Behold, with iniquity I was formed, and with sin my mother conceived me." His point was that no matter the righteousness of the individual, the sin of the Tree of Knowledge altered man so that he feel corporeal lust.

This is further enunciated in the Medrash (Vayikrah Rabba, 14:5) that states:

Even if he shall be the most righteous, it is impossible that there won't be a degree of iniquity. Dovid exclaimed before the Holy One blessed be He; Master of the universe, did my father have in mind to create me, did he not have his own pleasure in mind?! A proof that this is so: is that after [the couple] do their needs, this one turns their face this direction and this one turns their face the other direction.

While Nachmanides is surely aware as well the effects of sin and what is expressed in the above Midrash, he bases his words on the Talmud (Sota 17a): "When a husband and wife are worthy, G-d resides between them."

This expresses that G-d resides even within the post-sin reality where man cannot escape an element of subjective, selfish, and corporeal lust.

Indeed we should merit to realize the deep intent of the Guide to the Perplexed, where we should be guided by its words and not further confounded! Additionally, we should merit to the reality where the lustfulness that was effectuated by the Sin of Knowledge should eventually depart (See Shabbos 146a) speedily in our time!