



FOUNDATIONS OF JUDAISM: THEOLOGY

MAIMONIDES' 13 PRINCIPLES

Gavriel Z. Bellino

THE FIRST FOUNDATION is to believe in the existence of the Creator, blessed be He. This means that there exists a Being that is complete in all ways and He is the cause of all else that exists. He is what sustains their existence and the existence of all that sustains them. It is inconceivable that He would not exist, for if He would not exist then all else would cease to exist as well, nothing would remain. And if we would imagine that everything other than He would cease to exist, this would not cause His, God's, blessed be He, existence to cease or be diminished. Independence and mastery is to Him alone, God, blessed be His Name, for He needs nothing else and is sufficient unto himself. He does not need the existence of anything else. All that exists apart from Him, the angels, the universe and all that is within it, all these things are dependent on Him for their existence. This first foundation is taught to us in the statement, "I am God your God..." (Exodus 20:2, Deuteronomy 5:6).

THE SECOND FOUNDATION is the unity of God, Blessed be His Name. In other words, to believe that this being, which is the cause of all, is one. This does not mean one as in one of a pair nor one like a species [which encompasses many individuals] nor one as in one object that is made up of many elements nor as a single simple object which is infinitely divisible. Rather, He, God Blessed be His Name, is a unity unlike any other possible unity. This second foundation is referred to when [the Torah] says, "Hear Israel! God is our God, God is one". (Deuteronomy 6:4)

THE THIRD FOUNDATION is that He is not physical. This means to believe that the One whom we have mentioned is not a body and His powers are not physical. The concepts of physical bodies such as movement, rest, or existence in a particular place cannot be applied to Him. Such things cannot be part of His nature nor can they happen to Him. Therefore the Sages of blessed memory stated that the concepts of combination and separation do not apply to Him and they said, "Above there is no sitting nor standing, no separation nor combination." The prophet says, "To whom can you compare Me? To what am I equal? Says the Holy One." (Isaiah 40:25) If He would be a physical body He would be comparable to physical bodies. In all places where the Holy Scriptures speak of Him in physical terms, as walking, standing, sitting, speaking and anything similar, it is always metaphorical, as our Sages of blessed memory said, "The Torah speaks in the language of men". Our sages have discussed this issue at length. This third foundation is referred to when [the Torah] says, "For you did not see any form" (Deuteronomy 4:15), in other words, you did not perceive him as being an entity with a form because, as we mentioned, He is not physical and His power is not physical.

THE FOURTH FOUNDATION is that He is first. This means to believe that the One was the absolute first and everything else in existence is not first relative to Him. There are many proofs to this in the Holy Scriptures. This fourth foundation is referred to in the verse, "That is the abode of God the first" (Deuteronomy 33:27).

THE FIFTH FOUNDATION is that it is proper to serve Him, blessed be He, to ascribe to Him greatness, to make known His greatness, and to fulfill His commandments. We may not do this to any lesser being, whether it be one of the angels, the stars, the celestial spheres, the elements, or anything formed from them. For all these things have predetermined natures and have no authority or control over their actions. Rather, such authority and control is God's. Similarly, it is not proper to serve them as intermediaries in order that they should bring us closer to God. Rather, to God Himself we must direct our thoughts, and abandon anything else. This fifth foundation is based in the prohibition against idolatry about which much of the Torah deals.

THE SIXTH FOUNDATION is prophecy. That is, that a person must know that there exists amongst mankind individuals who have very lofty qualities and great perfection; whose souls are prepared until their minds receive perfect intellect. After this, their human intellect can then become attached to the Active Intellect [i.e. the 'mind', so to speak, of God] and have bestowed upon them an exalted state. These are the prophets and this is prophecy. A full explanation of this foundation would be very lengthy and it is not our intent to bring proofs for every foundation or to explain how we know them, for that is the sum of all knowledge. Rather, we are simply mentioning them in an informal manner. There are numerous verses in the Torah which attest to the prophecy of the prophets.

THE SEVENTH FOUNDATION is the prophecy of Moses our Teacher, may he rest in peace. This means to believe that he is the father of all the prophets, both those that preceded him and those who arose after him; all of them were below his level. He was the chosen one from all of Mankind, for he attained a greater knowledge of the Blessed One, more than any other man ever attained or ever will attain. For he, may he rest in peace, rose up from the level of man to the level of the angels and gained the exalted status of an angel. There did not remain any screen that he did not tear and penetrate; nothing physical held him back. He was devoid of any flaw, big or small. His powers of imagination, the senses, and the perceptions were nullified; the power of desire was separated from him leaving him with pure intellect. It is for this reason that it is said on him that he could speak to God, blessed be He, without the intermediary of angels.

It is my desire to clarify this wondrous topic, and to open the sealed verses of the Torah; to explain the idea of the verse "mouth to mouth" ([Numbers 12:8] and similar verses. However, as I see it, this subject would require many proofs and great length, involving numerous presentations, introductions and illustrative examples. We would first have to clarify the existence of the angels and the distinction between their greatness and the Creator, God, blessed be He. We would also have to clarify the subject of the soul and its powers. The discussion would then have to be widened to speak of the forms which the prophets see representing the Creator and the angels, and this would bring us into the subject of the Divine Stature. Even this would not suffice, even if the discussion would be kept as short as possible it would still be an essay of a hundred pages. Therefore I will leave this discussion for another place, either in a book of discourses which I plan to write, or for a book on prophecy which I am working on, or for a book in which I will explain these foundations.

So, I now return to the subject of the seventh foundation. The prophecy of Moses our Teacher is distinguished from the prophecies of all other prophets in four regards:

First, every other prophet received the word of God through an intermediary, Moses did not have an intermediary, as it says, "Mouth to mouth I speak to him." (Numbers 12:8)

Second, all other prophets only receive their prophecy either when they are sleeping, as we find in numerous places "in a dream at night" (Genesis 20:3) and "in a vision at night" (Job 33:15) and many other examples. Or by day when a trance has fallen over them which removes all their senses and leaves their mind open as in a dream. Such a state [of prophecy] is called a vision or seeing and is referred to as "Divine visions" (Ezekiel 8:3). Moses received his prophecy by day as he stood before the cherubim, as is testified to by God, blessed be He, "and I will commune with you there" (Exodus 25:22). And as God, blessed be He, states, "If prophets are among you then I, God, make myself known to them through a vision, in a dream I speak to him. It is not so with my servant Moses, he is trusted in all my house. I speak to him mouth to mouth, in a vision without puzzlement. He gazes at the image of God." (Numbers 12:6-8)

Third, when a prophet receives prophecy, even though it was only a vision and by means of an angel, he would nevertheless be weakened by it and his body would shudder. He would be stricken with a very great fear almost to the point that his spirit would leave his body, as Daniel said when [the angel] Gabriel spoke to him, "No strength remained in me; my robustness changed to pallor, and I could retain no strength... and I was in a deep sleep upon my face, and my face was to the ground". And as he says later, "during the vision my joints shuddered and I could retain no strength". (Daniel 10:8-9, 16). But Moses, may he rest in peace, was not so, rather, the word came to him and he did not experience trembling and shivering in any way, as it says, "And God spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). In other words, just as a man does not experience trembling from the speech of his fellow, Moses did not tremble from the word even though it was face to face. This was due to his total attachment to the intellect, as we said earlier.

Fourth, all the [other] prophets were unable to receive prophecy when they willed it but only when God, blessed be He, wished it. The prophet could wait days or years and prophecy would not come. He could beseech God, blessed be He, to make known to him a matter through prophecy and then he could wait for days or months for the prophecy, sometimes it would never come at all. There were groups which would prepare themselves and purify their thoughts, as Elisha did, as it is written, "Now bring me a musician", and prophecy came upon him. But it was not certain that prophecy would come at the time a person prepared himself. Moses, may he rest in peace, [could prophesize] at any time he wished. As he said, "Wait and I will hear what God has commanded you" (Numbers 9:8) and as it says, "Speak to Aaron your brother, he shall not come at all times in the holy place" on which our Sages of blessed memory said, "Aaron could not enter, but this did not apply to Moses".

THE EIGHTH FOUNDATION is that the Torah is from Heaven. This means that we must believe that this entire Torah, which was given to us from Moses Our Teacher, may he rest in peace, is entirely from the mouth of the Almighty. In other words, that it all was conveyed to him from God, blessed Be He, in the manner which is called, for lack of a better term, “dibur” - “speech”. It is not known how it was conveyed to him, except to Moses, may he rest in peace, to whom it was given, and he was like a scribe writing from dictation, and he wrote all the incidents, the stories, and the commandments. Therefore [Moses] is called “mechokek” - “scribe” (Numbers 21:18).

There is no difference between [verses such as] “And the children of Cham were Kush and Mitzrayim” (Genesis 10:6), “And the name of his wife was Meheitaveil” (ibid. 36:39), and “And Simnah was a concubine” (ibid. 36:12) and [verses such as] “I am God your God” (Exodus 20:2) and “Hear O Israel” (Deuteronomy 6:4), for all of the Torah is from the mouth of the Almighty and it is all the Teaching of God, perfect, pure, holy, and true.

One who says that verses and stories like these [in the first group] were written by Moses out of his own mind, behold! He is considered by our Sages and Prophets as a heretic and a perverter of the Torah more than all other heretics, for he believes that the Torah has a “heart” and a “shell” [i.e. an meaningful part and a meaningless part] and that these historical accounts and stories have no benefit and are from Moses our Teacher, may he rest in peace. This is the meaning of [the category of heretic who believes that] “The Torah is not from Heaven” [which is listed in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:1) as one who has no share in the World to Come]. Our Sages, may their memory be a blessing, explain that this is [even] someone who says that the entire Torah is from the Almighty except for a particular verse which was written by Moses alone. And on this [person, the Torah writes], “For he has scorned the word of God... [his soul shall be absolutely cut off, his sin is upon him]” (Numbers [Numbers] 15:31). May God, blessed be He, forgive the statements of the heretics.

In truth, however, every word of the Torah has within it wisdom and wonders for one who can understand them, and the full depth of their wisdom can never be attained. “Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea” (Iyov [Job] 11:9). A man has option but to follow in the footsteps of King David, the anointed of the god of Yakov (Jacob), who prayed, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things in your Torah” (Tehillim [Psalms] 119:18).

All this is also true for the explanation of the Torah, which was also received from the mouth of the Almighty [the Oral Torah]. The manner in which we today make the Sukkah, Lulav, Shofar, Tzitzis, Tefillin, and other items is precisely the manner that God, blessed be He, instructed Moses, who then instructed us and Moses was reliable in relating [God's word].

The verse which teaches this foundation is “And Moses said, 'Through this you shall know that God has sent me to do all these things, for they are not from my heart.’” (Numbers [Numbers] 16:28)

THE NINTH FOUNDATION is the transcription, meaning that this Torah, and no other, was transcribed from the Creator and we may not add to it or remove from it, not in the Written Torah or in the Oral Torah, as it says, "...you shall not add to it, nor diminish from it" (Deuteronomy 13:1). We have already fully clarified this foundation in the introduction to this work [the Commentary on the Mishnah].

THE TENTH FOUNDATION is that God, blessed be He, knows the actions of mankind and does not turn His eyes from them. Not like the opinion of those who say, "...[The Lord does not see us;] the Lord has forsaken the land" (Yechezkel [Ezekiel] 8:12). But rather like it says, "Great in counsel, and mighty in work; for your eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men; to give to every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (Yirmiyah (Jeremiah) 32:19), "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth..." (B'Reishis (Genesis) 6:5), and "And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great..." (ibid. 18:20). These verses teach us this tenth foundation.

THE ELEVENTH FOUNDATION is that God, blessed be He, gives reward to one who obeys the commandments of the Torah and punishes one who violates its prohibitions. The greatest reward is the World to Come, and the greatest punishment is kareis (spiritual excision, "cutting off"). We have already said enough on this topic [earlier in the Commentary]. The verse which teaches this foundation is [when Moses says to God], "And now, if you will forgive their sin; and if not, please remove me [from your book which you have written]" to which God responds, "...Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot from my book" (Shemos (Exodus) 32:32-33). This indicates that He knows the servant and the sinner, to give reward to this one and punishment to the other.

THE TWELFTH FOUNDATION is the time of the Messiah (literally, the anointed). This means to believe and be certain that he will come, and not to think that he is late in coming, "if it seems slow, wait for it; [because it will surely come, it will not come late]" (Habakuk 2:3). You should not set a time for him, and you should not make calculations in Scripture to determine the time of his coming. The Sages say, "Let despair come upon those who calculate end times." [This foundation further includes] to believe that he (Messiah) will possess advantages, superiority, and honor to a greater degree than all the kings that have ever existed, as was prophesied regarding him by all the prophets, from Moses, peace be upon him, till Malachi, peace be upon him. One who doubts this or who minimizes his greatness denies the Torah that testifies explicitly to this in the account of Balaam (Numbers 24) and in the portion of Netzavim (Deuteronomy 30:3-5). Included in this principle is that there is no king to the Jewish people except from the House of David and the seed of Solomon alone. Anyone who disagrees with [the status of] this family denies God and His prophets.

THE THIRTEENTH FOUNDATION is the resurrection of the dead. This has already been explained [earlier in the Commentary]. [The following is a translation of what Maimonides writes on this subject: The resurrection of the dead is a foundation from the foundations of Moses our Teacher, may peace be upon him. There is no faith and no connection to the Jewish religion for one who does not believe this. But the resurrection is only for the righteous. And so we find the Sages teach, "The rains are for the righteous and the wicked, and the

resurrection of the dead is for the righteous alone.” How could the wicked be brought back to life when they are dead even during their lifetime? And so the Sages teach us, “The wicked, even during their lifetimes they are called dead; the righteous, even during their deaths they are called living.”]

When a man believes all of these foundations and his belief in them is clear, then he enters into the community of Israel, and it is commanded to love him, to have mercy upon him, and to behave towards him with all the manners of love and brotherhood which have been commanded upon a man towards his fellow by God, blessed be He. And even if he sins greatly because of his desires and the strength of his baser nature, he is punished according to his sins but he still has a share in the World to Come and he is considered a sinning Jew.

[However,] if a man does not accept [even] one of these foundations, then he has left the community and denied the fundamental. He is called a min and apikorus (two technical terms for a heretic). He is one who “cuts the plantings”.