

## *Divine Perfection: Definitions of Shleimut*

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The First Principle of Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles of Faith" asserts, among other things, that "the Creator, praised be He...is perfect in all aspects of existence."<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this statement does not appear in the abridged version of the "Thirteen Principles" found in Orthodox prayer books, nor is it found in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah (Code of Jewish Law)*, despite the fact his magnum opus contains many other details of the First Principle of Faith. Nevertheless, Maimonides holds that a Jew is required to believe in G-d's perfection to be included in the community of Israel.<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, of more than casual interest to examine the parameters of Divine perfection, or "*shleimut*," first through the eyes of Maimonides and then through the eyes of other traditional commentators.<sup>3</sup> This paper will examine how traditional commentators, namely Maimonides, Don Isaac Abarbanel, R. Yosef Albo, R. Moses Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal), and R. Judah Loew (Maharal) interpret this idea and will conclude that while there is some common ground between the scholars, many differences abound.

### **Maimonides**

For Maimonides, to describe G-d as "perfect" may be to enter into dangerous theological territory. The verse of *Shema* stating that "the L-rd is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4) proclaims that "there is none comparable to His

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<sup>1</sup> *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah: Tractate Sanhedrin*, ed. and trans. Fred Rosner (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), p. 151. Note that this translation is based on the Hebrew translation of Rabbi Joseph Kapach. The traditional translation as it appears in the standard Vilna Talmud is that the Creator "is perfect in all ways of *perfection*." As this paper deals primarily with the concept of "perfection" per se, the differences in translation, for our purposes, are not substantial.

<sup>2</sup> Rosner, 157.

<sup>3</sup> I have used the term "traditional" to connote those commentators universally accepted by all sects of the Orthodox Jewish community.

Unity of Oneness among other single entities which are found in the universe.”<sup>4</sup> Stated another way, “He is a simple essence without any additional element whatever.”<sup>5</sup>

Maimonides clarifies that no attribute may be admitted in describing the Creator without introducing plurality:<sup>6</sup>

... to hold the conviction that God is One and possesses true unity, without admitting plurality or divisibility in any sense whatever, you must understand that God has no essential attribute in any form or in any sense whatever, and that the rejection of corporeality implies the rejection of essential attributes. Those who believe that God is One, and that He has many attributes, declare the unity with their lips, and assume plurality in their thoughts.

The contradiction to Unity of applying attributes is illustrated by a modern scholar,<sup>7</sup> “Consider ‘God is wise’ ... it seems we are talking about two things: God and wisdom. If God is one thing and wisdom another, predicating wisdom of God would be introducing plurality where we do not want to find it.” Similarly, we may say that to attribute perfection to G-d may be to introduce plurality “where we do not want to find it.”

Maimonides elaborates that G-d’s perfection means that He does not have an idle existence similar to the heavens and the earth, which exist in a non-dynamic sense. Instead, G-d possesses “life, wisdom, power, [and] activity.”<sup>8</sup> G-d’s perfection then connotes a dynamic existence. Maimonides adds a critical point to which we shall return later: G-d’s perfection is absent of any defect.<sup>9</sup>

But how is G-d’s possession of “life, wisdom, power, and activity” not at odds with His Unity?

We must note that Maimonides distinguishes between Divine perfection and human perfection. For human beings, “perfection” is something that is acquired. When we become proficient at a sport, for example, we

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<sup>4</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:7 (translation mine).

<sup>5</sup> Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 1:53. All translations from the *Guide* appearing in this paper are from this translation and are cited according to the Maimonidean arrangement of parts and chapters.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:50.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides: A Guide for Today’s Perplexed* (Behrman House, 1991) p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> *Guide*, 1:46.

<sup>9</sup> *Guide*, 1:58.