

Fear and Awe in Maimonides' Thought¹

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Fear is a basic human emotion common to all people. Yet, despite the distressing aspects of fear, Dietrich Bonhoeffer takes a remarkably hopeful approach to it. In his sermon, 'Overcoming Fear,' he states that what differentiates human beings from all other creatures is the ability to overcome fear, and he emphasizes that faith is 'a great battle cry' against it. But how do we understand fear? And is it something we can truly control and overcome? If one looks back to the ancient sources, one discovers that Aristotle and the Bible present different answers to the question of how to best overcome human fear. According to Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, fear is 'a sort of pain or agitation derived from the imagination of a future destructive or painful evil'.² He implies that there is no universal list of fears that we all share, but that fear derives from a subjective perception of danger. It varies depending on when and how we perceive that this danger will bring harm to us. Aristotle also asserts in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that fear is a vice and not a virtue. The proper moral virtue is courage, which is the balance between the extremes of fear and confidence, or knowing when to be fearful and when to be confident.³ However, in contrast to Aristotle, the Biblical and Rabbinic traditions seem to regard a certain type of fear—the fear of God—as the highest model for human conduct. As such, one finds statements in Biblical wisdom literature,

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1. This article is a further development of my earlier article, Alexander Green, "Maimonides on Courage," *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 22/2 (2015): 162–183.
 2. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 139 (2.5.1).
 3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Robert C Bartlett and Susan D Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 54–56 (3.6-7).

such as ‘The fear of the LORD (*yirat Hashem*) is the beginning of wisdom’ (Prov 9:10) and likewise many characters in the Bible are extolled for fearing God.⁴ For example, Abraham does not reveal to Abimelech that Sarah is his wife since ‘surely there is no fear of God in this place’ (Gen 20:11), implying that fear of God is a virtue that is lacking in Abimelech’s kingdom. Similarly, the fear of God is a positive trait in the story of Joseph who promises his brothers a fair treatment because ‘I fear God’ (Gen 42:18); it is also the fear of God that compelled the Egyptian midwives to refrain from following orders to kill the Israelite male children because they ‘feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them’ (Ex 1:17). Rabbinic literature later develops this concept, referring to it as the ‘fear of heaven’ (*yirat shamayim*), and treats it as the highest religious virtue. Indeed, the rabbis state that ‘Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven (*yirat shamayim*)’ and ‘Anyone who has learning [Torah] but not the fear of Heaven (*yirat shamayim*) is like a treasurer who is given the inner keys but not the outer keys. How will he enter?’⁵ Hence, it seems that the wisdom of the Torah can only be fully realized through the fear of God. In fact, the rabbis suggest that one cannot entirely gain entry to the Torah’s depths without possessing the appropriate awe, which in their view, is a crucial aspect of this type of fear.

Aristotle and the Bible (and later Rabbinic texts) clearly offer divergent positions on the question of fear, especially regarding the question of whether fear should be overcome through courage or whether fear is a desirable element of human striving. One of the most cogent attempts to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory approaches to fear is undertaken by the great medieval Jewish

4. Similar permutations of the statement that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom can be at Prov 1:7, 8:12–13, 15:33 and Ps 111:10. For an overview of the meaning of this concept in biblical literature, see: Job Jindo, ‘On the Biblical Notion of the “Fear of God” as a Condition for Human Existence’, in *Biblical Interpretation* 19, no. 4–5 (2011): 433–453.

5. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 33b and Shabbat 31b. The full plethora of rabbinic sources and interpretations regarding *yirat shamayim* have been explored in depth in Byron Sherwin, ‘Fear of God’, in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, edited by Arthur A Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 245–254 and Warren Zev Harvey, ‘*Yirat Shamayim* in Jewish Thought’, in *Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence and Fear of God*, edited by Marc D Stern (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2008), 1–26.

philosopher, Moses Maimonides, who attempts to synthesize the Arabic-Aristotelian tradition with the Biblical-Rabbinic tradition in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, the *Mishneh Torah*, and the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Maimonides articulates the position that the Torah advocates two distinct approaches to fear: (i) cultivating an ethics of moral and intellectual courage, overcoming fear by bravely advancing the pursuit of knowledge, and using that knowledge to improve the world, and (ii) fostering an ethics of awe, by recognizing the human limitations on comprehending the highest levels of nature, leading to acts of loving-kindness and compassion towards all.

The foundation of these two positions is laid out by Maimonides at the beginning of the *Mishneh Torah* in the *Book of Knowledge*, *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 2.2:

And what is the way of loving Him and fearing Him? When a man reflects upon His wondrous great works and creatures and perceives from them His inestimable and infinite wisdom, he at once loves, praises, glorifies, and yearns greatly to know the Great Name—as David said: *My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God* [Ps 42:3]. And when he meditates on these things themselves, he at once recoils (*nirta'*) in a start, and will fear (*ve-yira'*) and tremble (*ve-yifhad*) and know that he is a small (*qetannah*), lowly (*shfalah*), dark (*a'felah*) creature standing with slight insignificant understanding (*da'at qalah me'utah*) before [Him who is] perfect in understanding.⁶

Maimonides then continues to expand upon this theme at *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 4.12:

When a man reflects on these things and acknowledges all the created things, from angel and sphere [to] man and the like, and sees the wisdom of the Holy one (blessed be He) in all the formed and created things, he increases the love for God. His soul thirsts, his flesh longs to love God (blessed be He). He will fear (*ve-yira'*) and tremble (*ve-yifhad*) on account of his lowliness (*me-shifluto*), wretchedness (*ve-daluto*), and

6. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: The Code of Maimonides*, ed. Yohai Makbili (Israel: Or Vishua, 2009), 35 (*Laws of the Foundations of the Torah*, 2:2). English translation from Ralph Lerner, *Maimonides' Empire of Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 144.

insignificance (*ve-kaluto*) when he compares himself to one of the great holy bodies. All the more [when he compares himself with] one of the pure forms that are separate from matter and have never at all been combined with matter. It will dawn upon him that he is like a vessel full of shame and disgrace, worthless and defective.⁷

As outlined by Maimonides, the love of God is the courageous quest to comprehend the teleological structure of nature, such that everything is purposefully ordered. Hence, the more one is aware of the *telos*, the more one feels closer to God. The fear of God, however, is the humble realization that the conclusions reached are limited and perhaps incorrect due to the physical nature of the human condition in contrast to God. The courageous quest for knowledge leads down the path to create a more just society, while the impulse to recoil in awe reached from one's limited comprehension leads to acts of love and compassion based on the shared position of human weakness. The human being needs both self-assurance and self-criticism. These two emotions are complementary.

The Psychological Origin of Fear

Maimonides follows Aristotle in presenting fear as an extreme that is situated far from the mean of the moral virtue of courage.⁸ In fact, an extreme such as fear is considered by Maimonides to be a deficiency, or a symptom of a sick soul. Yet in his religious writings, Maimonides does not diagnose the specific reason why individuals fall prey to these extremes. He does however diagnose the psychological basis of fear as a mental and physical debility in his late medical work, *On The Regimen of Health*.⁹ There he explains that fear originates from two sources: either the inability to escape the trauma of past loss, such as the death of a loved one or the loss of wealth; or the dread of a poten-

7. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 39 (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 4:12). English translation from Ralph Lerner, *Maimonides' Empire of Light*, 152.

8. Maimonides, 'Eight Chapters,' in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, edited by Raymond L Weiss and CE Butterworth (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 67.

9. Maimonides, *On the Regimen of Health: A New Parallel Arabic-English Translation*, edited and translated by Gerrit Bos (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 108–110 (3.16).

tial misfortune that could occur to one in the future. Maimonides sees fear as originating in a false deterministic view of nature and thus, he counsels the fearful individual to oppose this type of thinking by taking the opposite approach: being hopeful for the future:

Everything that someone anticipates belongs to the category of something possible that may happen or may not happen. And just as someone may be sad and distressed lest something he dreads might occur, in the same way one should dilate one's soul with lasting expectation and hope that perhaps the opposite of what he anticipates might occur, since both what he anticipates and its opposite are possible.¹⁰

Maimonides' practical lesson is that there is no benefit in living a life of distress due to being paralyzed by fear. The future is filled with multiple possibilities and it is as likely that a good and positive outcome will occur to you in the future as the negative outcome that you dread. As a result, Maimonides advocates that it is more productive in life to be hopeful and work towards one's goals, than to be paralyzed by fear of a deleterious outcome that is no more likely than the beneficial one.

Problematic Fear I: Fear of Divine Punishment

The fear of divine punishment as the motivation behind religious practice is difficult to gauge in Maimonides' writings, as at times it seems to be an approach that is endorsed by Maimonides, and at other times, condemned. In Maimonides' earlier *Book of Commandments*, he seems to look favorably upon this position, listing the fear of God as the fourth positive commandment and explaining that it is one that requires awareness of divine punishment. He writes that we should 'not be at ease and self-confident, but to expect His punishment at all times.'¹¹ Yet in Maimonides' later *Mishneh Torah*, he expresses a negative view of this earlier position. In the first book, the *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah*, Maimonides presents love and fear as equal, so that fear essentially means awe. However, in the final

10. Maimonides, *On the Regimen of Health*, 110.

11. Maimonides, *The Commandments (Sefer ha-Mitzvot)*, translated by Charles B Chavel (London: The Soncino Press, 1976), 5.

book, the *Laws of Repentance*, he presents love as superior to fear, since here he suggests that fear motivates people to act for the sake of reward and punishment.¹² He identifies this approach in the *Laws of Repentance* with that of those who do not know better because of ignorance; for such people, the commandments are merely a means to their own success, with the implication that one who follows them because of reward or punishment does not really care about God, but is using God to benefit oneself. However, Maimonides does admit that this form of worship has a pedagogical advantage: it trains people in the right method to worship God, even if it is for the wrong reason—that is, until they have acquired the appropriate knowledge, when they would act for the right reason.¹³ He writes that

When instructing the young, women or the illiterate generally, we teach them to serve God out of fear or for the sake of reward till their knowledge increases and they have attained a large measure of wisdom. Then we reveal to them this secret, little by little, and train them by easy stages till they have grasped and comprehended it, and serve God out of love.¹⁴

Indeed, utilising the fear of punishment for educational purposes is described by Maimonides as being akin to parenting: you reward and punish children for good and bad behavior with the hope that as they grow older and mature they will come to see the value of such behavior as good; they will no longer need the threat of reward and punishment and will eventually understand the reason why the action is valuable in itself. While it is not clear that everyone graduates from

12. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 35, 39 (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 2:2, 4:12) and 88 (Laws of Repentance 10:1–2). This contradiction has been noted in David Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), 265 n61; Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law and the Human Ideal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 258–259. Cf. Joseph Kafih's comments in his edition of the *Mishneh Torah* on Maimonides, *Sefer Mishneh Torah*, ed. Joseph Kafih, volume 1, on Foundations 2:2 and Repentance 10:2 (Jerusalem: Machon Mishnat ha-Rambam, 1984), pp. and Eliyahu Nagar, 'Fear of God in Maimonides' Teaching (A Reexamination)'; in *Da'at*, 39 (1997), 89–99.

13. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 85 (Laws of Repentance 10:1).

14. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 85 (Laws of Repentance 10:5). English translation with slight modifications from Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: The Book of Knowledge*, trans. Moses Hyamson (New York: Feldheim, 1974), 93a.

this childhood stage, it is the ideal toward which to strive. Thus, the fear to which Maimonides refers as an ideal equivalent to love in the *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah*, (to be discussed further below), is not the same as the fear of punishment that ends the *Laws of Repentance* as the latter is the basic form of fear, while the former is a mode of fear that functions on a more advanced and higher level.

Problematic Fear II: Fear of Physical Death and Idolatry

Another type of fear that needs explication in Maimonides' writings is the fear of physical death in a dangerous and potentially life-threatening situation. This is the fear that prevented the Israelites from directly entering Canaan, and which, according to Maimonides, required them to wander in the desert for forty years. The prolonged period in the desert was needed in order to build up their physical courage, which would then prepare them to engage the nations of the land in war. Hence, Maimonides highlights the biblical statement 'God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt"' (Exod 13:17–18). He interprets this verse twice in the *Guide* both at III 24 and III 32, where he writes:

And it is known that but for their misery and weariness in the desert, they would not have been able to conquer the land and to fight . . . For prosperity (*rafāhiya*) does away with courage (*al-shajā'ah*), whereas a hard life and fatigue necessarily produce courage (*al-shajā'ah*).¹⁵

For just as it is not in the nature of man that, after having been brought up in slavish service occupied with clay, bricks, and similar things, he should all of a sudden wash off from his hands the dirt deriving from them and proceed immediately to fight against the *children of Anak* . . . The deity used a gracious ruse in causing them to wander perplexedly in the desert until their souls became courageous (*tashjja'tu*)—it being well known that life in the desert and lack of comforts for

15. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 500 (III 24).

the body necessarily develop courage (*al-shajā'ah*) whereas the opposite circumstances necessarily develop cowardice (*al-jubn*)—and until, moreover, people were born who were not accustomed to humiliation and servitude . . .¹⁶

Maimonides offers two seemingly contradictory explanations for the fearfulness and cowardice resulting from the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt. In the first passage, he attributes it to the culture of prosperity in Egypt, implying that its prevailing ethos was one of comfort and ease, rather than toughness and hard work. In the second passage, he points to the fact that as slaves, the Israelites were compelled by their taskmasters to become meek and submissive. While the explanations at III 24 and III 32 may appear to contradict each other at first glance, presenting the Israelites as both affected by the laxity of their enslaved status as well as by the cruelty of their oppressors, his point here seems to be that as slaves the Hebrews did menial unthinking labor, such that the slave leads an easy and facile but unchallenging life in that all decisions are made by others.

The connection between the two and its outcome as physical fear can perhaps be further explained by examining the political implications of the prevailing idolatry in Egypt at the time. If one looks at how Maimonides views idolatry, it seems that he understands it as a theological representation of materialism. From this perspective, all that exists is the physical world of matter, so that the main goal of life is to increase one's worldly gain.¹⁷ Happiness is therefore found in the amount of worldly goods obtained such as money, food, pleasure, honor, etc. The problem with such a worldview is that physical desires are unlimited and insatiable. The more one has, the more one desires, such that one is never satisfied with what one has.¹⁸ This human weakness leads shrewd manipulators to create false religions and 'idols' for the weak-minded whose 'gods' falsely promise to fulfill all their physical desires. These false prophets then oppress and control the masses for their own personal gain. As Maimonides writes, 'These practices are all false and deceptive, and employed by the ancient idolaters to

16. Maimonides, *Guide*, 528 (III 32).

17. Leo Strauss notes this in describing 'corporealism as the hidden premise of idolatry' (Leo Strauss, 'How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*', in *Guide*, xlii).

18. Maimonides, *Guide*, 445 (III 12).

deceive the peoples of various countries and to derive benefit from them (*kedei she-yinnahu àhareihem*).¹⁹ Egypt is an example of such a culture, whose material prosperity depended on the enslavement of others, and where the majority of people are weak and afraid, other than those in the upper echelons of society. Maimonides describes this type of exploitation in his discussion of the phrase ‘excruciating labor’ (*farekh*), the term used to denote the tormenting work that the Egyptians imposed on the Israelites (Exod 1:13). In the *Laws of Slavery*, he interprets this to mean labor that has no limit and is essentially unnecessary, as it imposes useless tasks onto people to turn them into tools so as to control them.²⁰

According to Maimonides, the only way for the Israelites to overcome this fear of physical death and develop courage against life threatening obstacles is to learn how to live in the harsh conditions of the desert. In both Maimonides’ and Al-Farabi’s thought, the desert represents a setting with the least amount of physical comfort, one which would naturally create courageous habits due to its difficult environment.²¹ As the leader of the Israelites, Moses needed to transform a nation of slaves into a nation with a strong military will that could conquer a land and build a state. His knowledge of both God and nature gave him the ability to trick the Israelites into wandering in the desert for forty years, for the purpose of creating a state of misery and lack of comfort which, combined with freedom, was essential for training them to be courageous in battle.²² This means overcoming the fear of physical death since this must be achieved

19. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 76 (Laws of Idolatry 11:16). English translation with slight modifications from *Mishneh Torah* (Hyamson), 80a.

20. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 1083 (Laws of Slaves 1:6).

21. Abu-Nasr Al-Farabi, ‘Selected Aphorisms of a Statesman’, in *Alfarabi, The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, translated by Charles E Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 22 (No 23) and Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 52 (Laws of Character Traits 6:1). Maimonides conceives of the desert in this way also in the ‘Letter to Yemen’, where he counsels those who cannot get away by emigration from an evil regime which persecutes Jews, also to escape to the desert. See Maimonides, ‘Letter to Yemen’, in *Maimonides Reader*, edited by Isadore Twersky (Springfield: Library of Jewish Studies, 1972), 448.

22. Maimonides, *Guide*, 500 (3.24) and 528 (3.32). See Shlomo Pines, ‘Ibn Khaldun and Maimonides: A Comparison between Two Texts’, in *Studia Islamica*, 32 (1970), 170. Maimonides appears to elaborate and develop much farther this idea proposed by Abraham Ibn Ezra on Exod 3:17.

before entering the land of Israel where the Israelites will encounter war and risk their lives in battle to defend themselves against potential enemies.

Solution I: Fear as Incrementalism

Fear also plays a vital role in the way in which prophecy is attained as a necessary restraint on moving too quickly to obtain the proper prophetic knowledge, thus leading to failure. Maimonides considers Moses to be unique and incomparable to both earlier and later biblical prophets, listing four differences between Moses' prophecy and that of other prophets.²³ The third difference to which he makes reference is that all other prophets experienced fear when receiving prophecy, such that they were 'filled with fear (*yere'in*), consternation (*ve-nivhalin*) and became physically weak (*u-mitmogegin*).'²⁴ He contrasts this with Moses whose prophecy he says was without terror and dread, as if he were speaking to a friend.²⁴ The common fear among other prophets reflects the influence of the imagination, while the lack of fear in Moses' prophecy refers to the rational character of his prophecy without influence of the imagination, 'because of the strength of his union with the [Agent] intelligence'²⁵ This differs from the fear that Moses experiences after hearing God's message at the burning bush, where it says 'And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid (*yare*) to look at God' (Exod 3:6). As Maimonides clarifies in *Guide* I 5, the fear described at the burning bush is a reflection of Moses' patience and moderation in taking the incremental steps to master

23. Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna*, volume iv, 212–214; *Mishneh Torah*, 42 (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 7:6); and *Guide*, 367–368 (II 35) and 378–380 (II 39).

24. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 42 (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 7:6). English translation in Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* (Hyamson), 43a. For an earlier version of this statement, see *Mishnah*, 'Im Perush Mosheh ben Maimon [*Commentary on the Mishna*] (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1963–1967), volume iv, 214.

25. Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishna*, volume iv, 214. English translation of Menachem Kellner in Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 14.

the prerequisites before attempting to apprehend God.²⁶ According to this definition of fear,

He should not make categoric affirmations in favor of the first opinion that occurs to him, and should not, from the outset, strain and impel his thoughts toward the apprehension of the deity; he should rather feel awe (*yastahiyyu*) and hold back until he gradually elevates himself.

Moses is afraid of moving too quickly and thus not taking the right steps to achieve the results. This is similar to the kind of incremental learning recommended by Maimonides in the Dedicatory Letter of the *Guide*, where he says that the proper order of study for his pupil Joseph is to first master the basic sciences before approaching the weightier topic of metaphysics, or discerning the science of God. As he makes clear in the *Guide*, Maimonides is concerned that if a student longs for the answers too much then he will move too quickly and not follow the right order and method to achieve his goal.²⁷

In the same vein, Maimonides posits that Moses' fearful encounter with God through the burning bush at Exodus 3 represents the beginning of his philosophic quest to know God, one that is cautious and methodical. He traces the evolution of this quest back to when an angel appeared to Moses in Exodus 3:2, 'And the angel of the Lord appeared to him' with the angel, in this context, referring to a prophetic vision through the imaginative faculty.²⁸ For Maimonides, a vision can be explained as a manifestation of the imaginative faculty reaching its highest perfection. As he puts it: a vision 'signifies that the imaginative faculty achieves so great a perfection of action that it sees the thing as if it were outside, and that the thing whose origin is due to it appears to have come to it by the way of external sensation.'²⁹ As such, the image of the burning bush is a creation in Moses' imagination derived from the Active Intellect, but one that leads him to knowledge of God. Through his gradual training, he progresses with

26. Warren Zev Harvey, 'Maimonides on Human Perfection, Awe and Politics', in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides*, edited Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan, and Julien Bauer (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 6.

27. Maimonides, *Guide*, 3–4 (Dedicatory Letter).

28. Maimonides, *Guide*, 264–265 (II 6) and 576 (III 45).

29. Maimonides, *Guide*, 370 (II 36).

the proper fear as incrementalism from his initial prophecy through the imaginative faculty to his later perfectly rational prophecy whereby he ‘speaks mouth to mouth’ with God and ‘beholds the likeness of the Lord’ (Numb 12:8).³⁰

Maimonides also interprets the sacrificial service in the Torah as reflecting the same type of incrementalism. According to Maimonides, Moses knew not to radically tear the Israelites away from the pagan worship to which they were accustomed in Egypt; hence he did not introduce them too quickly to the intellectual worship of God. Instead, Moses modified their existing practices so that over time they would come closer to proper worship.³¹ Here he also interprets the citation, discussed above, that ‘God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines’ (Exod 13:17–18) as a metaphor for Moses’ incrementalism in structuring the Torah in such a way so as to gradually teach the Israelites to acquire the proper courage needed for knowing God.³²

Solution II: Moral and Political Courage

Maimonides states that a key quality of prophecy is overcoming the fear to speak out and act in the public sphere with the moral and political courage to challenge the conventional opinions held by political authorities, often telling them directly that they are in the wrong. According to Maimonides, this type of courage is rooted in the natural force of spiritedness or boldness (*iqdām*), especially prevalent in prophets. Indeed, he compares this instinctive spiritedness or boldness to the natural impulse of repulsion or self-defense.³³ He notes that in its raw form, it can be manifested in extremes of fear or rashness as he illustrates by the analogy of how different people respond to confronting an animal: ‘you may find among people some

30. Alvin J Reines, ‘Maimonides’ Concept of Mosaic Prophecy’, in *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 40/41 (1969–1970), 336 and Howard Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 324–325.

31. Maimonides, *Guide*, 525–531 (III 32).

32. Maimonides, *Guide*, 527–528 (III 32).

33. Maimonides, *Guide*, 376–378 (II 38). See: Raymond Weiss, *Maimonides’ Ethics: The Encounter of Philosophic and Religious Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 163–164.

who will advance upon a lion, while others flee from a mouse.' In Maimonides' view, the channeling of the natural force of spiritedness or boldness to overcome fear properly arises as a result of the perfection of the intellect, such that 'when the intellect overflows toward them, these two faculties become very greatly strengthened.' Moreover, the prophet has the reasoning power of divination, which is a rational process of quick thinking about when, where and on whom to act regarding 'warnings concerning great future events.' The certainty the prophet possesses in his message along with his rhetorical ability to convince the audience through the imaginative faculty, gives him the strength to overcome his fear and courageously confront a powerful leader with his vital message.

The biblical way of expressing this phenomenon of overcoming fear in the moral and political realm is for Maimonides the expression the 'spirit of God' (*ruah elohim*), referring to the first and second degrees of prophecy in *Guide* II 45. One apparent difficulty with associating *ruah elohim* with courage is that Maimonides makes no explicit mention of *iqdām* in that chapter. However, as noted by Abrabanel in his *Commentary on the Guide*, Maimonides hints that these first two grades of prophecy are in fact forms of courage; this can be seen in his use of similar language that directly alludes to other references he makes to virtue, even though he does not specifically mention *iqdām*.³⁴ But while both are rooted in spiritedness, in II 38 Maimonides appears to be talking about the natural impulse that controls courage, while in II 45 it is the same impulse controlled by reason and channeled toward a noble purpose, thus truly making it a virtue. These two lower degrees of prophecy, in which the actor has *ruah elohim* attributed to his actions, represent two modes of moral courage: courage to act for the truth in society (first degree) and courage to speak the truth in society (second degree). The first type of courage is exemplified in the actions of biblical judges and kings and the second type of courage is exemplified in the authorship of biblical wisdom literature.³⁵ It is this supreme moral and political courage of the prophet, both in words and deeds, which Maimonides suggests

34. Alvin Reines, *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1970), 186–187. My interpretation draws upon Abrabanel's connection between *Guide* II 38 and II 45, though does not take his argument fully in the direction he does.

35. Maimonides, *Guide*, 396–398 (II 45).

is needed to uphold truth in society and to check the interest of the king and other powerful leaders of that society. Thus, the prophets do not fear the king, the royal authorities, or the masses, since they are motivated by the ‘spirit of God,’ which is the faculty of courage. The spirit of God is an alternative to fear, enabling one to overcome fear.

Solution III: Fear as Awe

According to Maimonides, fear becomes infused with awe when man becomes aware of the limitations of human knowledge and the fundamentally weak physical condition of humanity. In fact, Maimonides views this as an essential lesson of the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). The story ends with the words of the angel stating, ‘for now I know that you fear (*yere*) God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from me’ (Gen 22:12). In fact, Maimonides regards this story as ‘the highest of the degrees of the prophets . . . after the perfection of the rational faculties’ while simultaneously demonstrating the limits of love and fear of God, ‘up to what limit they must reach.’³⁶ Maimonides suggests that this story not only has a deep philosophic meaning but also that it occurred in a prophetic vision, thus making it a parable whose meaning must be pondered and discerned.³⁷ In other words, the events concerning the binding of Isaac, according to this interpretation, were not historical, but took place in a prophetic vision.

Furthermore, Maimonides seems to intentionally link the story of the binding of Isaac at Genesis 22 with the story of the Garden of Eden at Genesis 2–3 through the character of Samael, the wicked angel that is equivalent to the character Satan, who confronts both Eve (through the Serpent) and Abraham in various midrashim.³⁸ Thus, Maimonides appears to be suggesting that one should inter-

36. Maimonides, *Guide*, 402 (II 45) and 500 (III 24).

37. Maimonides, *Guide*, 386 (II 41) and 501–502 (III 24). See: Abraham Nuriel, ‘Maimonides on parables not explicitly identified as such’, in *Da’at* 25 (1990): 88–89.

38. Maimonides, *Guide*, 356 (II 30). Samael appears in *Genesis Rabbah* 56.4 with regards to the binding of Isaac and *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* 13 with regards to the Garden of Eden. For an overview of Maimonides’ intertextual citations in *Guide* III 24, see: James Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 131–150.

pret the story of the binding of Isaac allegorically in the same way he interpreted the tale of the Garden of Eden in *Guide* I 2. If, in the Garden of Eden, Adam, Eve and the Serpent represent form, matter and the imagination, then one can similarly read Abraham, Isaac and the midrashic addition of Samael to respectively represent form, matter and the imagination.³⁹ As such, the two stories impart a similar message, but in different ways: the Garden of Eden represents the impossibility of being a pure intellect without the imagination and physical desires, while the binding of Isaac represents the attempt of the human intellect to transcend the body and the imagination, but reaches the conclusion that this is not possible or desirable. Hence, God's command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to Him can be interpreted as the allegorical expression of Abraham's attempt to intellectually know God such that he would liberate himself from his corporeal existence (metaphorically 'kill') in order to focus on pure intellectual conjunction.

Moreover, the way that the story ends—with Abraham not killing Isaac, followed by the message about the fear of God—is highly significant for Maimonides. According to his reading, when the angel stopped Abraham from killing Isaac, this is a metaphor for Abraham reaching a specific level of knowledge: the realization that he cannot have apodictic demonstrative knowledge of God and thus must live and act through his corporeal existence, symbolized by his son Isaac. Furthermore, the fear of God that the angel reveals to Abraham is his recognition of intellectual humility. Maimonides makes this very point about the fear of God following from the intellectual knowledge and love of God in *Guide* III 52:

Know that when perfect men understand this, they achieve such humility, such awe and fear of God, such reverence and shame before Him, may He be exalted—and this in ways that pertain to true reality, not to imagination—that their secret conduct with their wives and in latrines is like their public conduct with other people.⁴⁰

39. Maimonides, *Guide*, 24–26 (I 2). The nature of Satan is explored further at *Guide*, 488–490 (III 22). See: Warren Zev Harvey, 'Three Theories of the Imagination in 12th Century Jewish Philosophy', in *Intellect and Imagination in Medieval Philosophy*, volume 1, edited by Maria Candida Pacheco and Jose F Meirinhos (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 300–301.

40. Maimonides, *Guide*, 629 (III 52).

The humility that arises from the fear of God is the recognition of a common human fragility and smallness in the larger expanse of existence. For Maimonides, this inspires the great rabbis to act with humility and modesty, as is evident in the Talmudic examples he cites, such as, 'It is prohibited for a person to walk even four cubits with an upright posture' implying arrogance.⁴¹ In fact, Abraham's discovery of humility and awe through the Akedah story leads him to become the exemplar of kindness and compassion for all people. Maimonides writes that the descendants of Abraham are merciful to all, that charity is an identifying mark among them, and that Abraham instituted the ways of loving-kindness by selflessly welcoming guests to his home.⁴² Although Abraham came to the rational knowledge of God, which enabled him to teach others and help them increase their wisdom, he also realized the limitations of metaphysical knowledge. This led him to the conclusion that human beings are also weak and fragile creatures requiring mercy and compassion in order to improve their human condition.

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer's sermon, 'Overcoming Fear', not only echoes Maimonides' analysis of the multiple sources of human fear but it also emphasises the religious calling to triumph over fear which both thinkers derive from the Bible. As we have seen, Maimonides incorporates multiple definitions and types of fear in his writings, some positive and others negative. Drawing on his reading of biblical stories, he shows that living with fear of divine punishment by an authoritarian God or living in fear of physical death in an oppressive idolatrous culture are both forms of weakness that attempt to minimize human initiative and striving. Instead of submitting to fear, Maimonides advocates for both an ideal of courage and an ideal of awe. The proper knowledge of God must be acquired by avoiding the extremes of fear and rashness, not advancing too quickly, but with the courage to know more. This leads to morally and politically courageous actions to fight against injustices and improve society. However, the limitations of how much knowledge can be achieved with certainty leads to awe. It incorporates the recognition that human beings are generally weak, and this

41. BT Kiddushin 31a.

42. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 1092 (Laws of Slaves 9:8), 562 (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10.1), and 1232 (Laws of Mourning 14:2)

knowledge serves as a stimulus for people to act with compassion towards each other. As a result, one may say that Maimonides' unique integration of Aristotelian and biblical ideas points to how to achieve a proper balance of courage and awe, by bringing out the best of both, thereby showing how it might be possible to live a life that is both heroic and humble.



Fear and Faith
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Evolutionary Perspectives

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