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# Maimonides on Courage

ALEXANDER GREEN

One of the great scholarly debates that has animated scholars of Maimonides is how to reconcile the divergent positions he takes in his various works, written at different points in his life. Do the differences between statements in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* (written 1161–1168), *Mishneh Torah* (written 1168–1177) and *Guide of the Perplexed* (written 1185–1191), on topics such as dogmas, miracles and metaphysics, represent a significant evolution in Maimonides' philosophic position or merely a particular way of communicating the same truth to a different audience?<sup>1</sup>

One area in which one can see such a discrepancy is how Maimonides articulates his views on the nature of ethics.<sup>2</sup> It is often argued that in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides employs a form of Aristotelian ethics (as adapted through Al-Farabi) which highlights the cultivation of moral virtue in the mean, while in the *Guide* Maimonides focuses on a neo-Platonic ethos advocating the ascetic pursuit of wisdom alone.<sup>3</sup> As Herbert Davidson succinctly frames

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004) 7; Charles Manekin, "Divine Will in Maimonides' Later Writings," in *Maimonidean Studies*, vol. 5, ed. Arthur Hyman and Alfred Ivry (New Jersey: Ktav, 2008) 189–222; and Gad Freudenthal, "Maimonides on the Scope of Metaphysics *alias* Ma'aseh Merkavah: The Evolution of His Views," in *Maimónides y su época*, ed. Carlos del Valle et al. (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2007) 221–230.

<sup>2</sup> The various discrepancies between Maimonides' views on ethics across his different writings have been clearly summarized by David Shatz, "Maimonides' Moral Theory," in *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 167–192.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Davidson, "The Middle Way in Maimonides' Ethics," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 54 (1987) 31–72. One must note that there is a significant difference between the neo-Platonic and Platonic position. The neo-Platonic position is much more ascetic and less practical, while Plato recognizes the practical implications of his ethics even though his main character Socrates is famous for extolling that virtue is wisdom.

it, “the *Guide* has, in a word, repudiated the ideal of the middle way.”<sup>4</sup> In questioning this thesis, it is possible to demonstrate that there may be a greater compatibility between Maimonides’ so-called “Aristotelian” and “neo-Platonic” ethics than some scholars assert.<sup>5</sup> While the ideal of the *Guide* may be the ascetic pursuit of wisdom, as exemplified in the metaphor of the Sultan’s Palace,<sup>6</sup> this metaphor is followed by an exegesis of Jer 9:22–23 discussing the practical implications of that wisdom.<sup>7</sup> One of the forms of this “consequent morality,” as opposed to “propadeutic morality,” is the cultivation of moral virtues that are guided by wisdom.<sup>8</sup> The human construction of a political society with the different moral virtues is an imitation of the divine governance of nature and is a result of studying it.

This paper will specifically disclose how Maimonides crafts the specific virtue of courage and examine how he attempts to revive it as a central Jewish virtue. Maimonides describes three forms of courage: courage in its physical form, as an overcoming of the fear of physical death; in its moral form, as a challenge to unjust laws and leadership within society; and in its intellectual form, as a reevaluation of one’s conventional opinions to strive to know the truth. In each case, too much fear or too much rashness can be detrimental to its success. As a result, I will also argue that his teaching on courage throughout his writings is less dichotomous than is often conceived.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Davidson, “Middle Way,” 50.

<sup>5</sup> This thesis has already been developed by Raymond Weiss, *Maimonides’ Ethics: The Encounter of Philosophic and Religious Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 3–4; Joshua Parens, “Maimonidean Ethics Revisited: Development and Asceticism in Maimonides?” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (2003) 33–62; and Aviram Ravitzky, “The Doctrine of the Mean and Asceticism: On the Uniformity of Maimonides’ Ethics” *Tarbiz* 79 (2010–2011) 439–469. This paper will approach it specifically through the angle of the virtue of courage.

<sup>6</sup> Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 618–628 (3.51). References to the *Guide* throughout this article refer to the Pines edition.

<sup>7</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 3.54. Daniel Frank, “The End of the *Guide*: Maimonides on the Best Life for Man,” *Judaism* 34 (1985) 485–495. It is true that at multiple points in the *Guide* Maimonides advocates the Socratic position that virtue is knowledge (e. g. 1.1–2, 3.13, 51). At the same time, there are also multiple places in the *Guide* where he suggests the necessity of moral virtues, whether they are a propadeutic morality or a consequent morality (e. g. 1.54; 2.40; 3.27, 54). I suggest that for Maimonides we need both and should not assume we can make a choice for one over the other.

<sup>8</sup> I thank David Shatz for these two terms. See Shatz, “Maimonides’ Moral Theory,” 187–188.

<sup>9</sup> This article is a continuation of my analysis of courage as a virtue in the Jewish tradition, as first articulated in Alexander Green, “Spinoza on the Ethics of Courage and the Jewish Tradition,” *Modern Judaism* 33 (2013) 199–225.

### *Courage as Moderation in Rabbinic Judaism*

The human attribute of courage and the Jewish tradition appear to many to be antithetical.<sup>10</sup> Jewish tradition is generally known for cultivating virtues such as humility, wisdom, holiness or obedience. For most casual observers, courage would not rank high on the list of Jewish values. Some scholars have even argued that it is absent from the Jewish tradition as a whole. Literary critic Lionel Trilling, for example, claims that

not all cultures develop the idea of the heroic. I once had occasion to observe in connection with Wordsworth that in the rabbinical literature there is no touch of the heroic idea. The rabbis, in speaking of virtue, never mention the virtue of courage, which Aristotle regarded as basic to the heroic character. The indifference of the rabbis to the idea of courage is the more remarkable in that they knew that many of their number would die for their faith .... And if, in the Jewish tradition, we go back of the Rabbis to the Bible, we do not find the heroic there either. David, as a person, is of consummate interest to us, but the interest is not of the sort that attaches to heroes. Milton, in the Greek manner, does his best for Samson, but not even in Milton's poem, much less in Judges, is Samson really a hero.<sup>11</sup>

However, Trilling is incorrect in stating that the rabbis do not mention the virtue of courage – though admittedly it is presented as a form of moderation or self-restraint from desire.<sup>12</sup> This is most famously declared in *Pirkei Avot* 4:1: “Who is strong (*gibor*)? He who controls his passions, as it is said, *Better is the long-suffering than the mighty, and one that rules his spirit than one who takes a city* (Prov 16:32).”

While the rabbis did not openly admit to Hellenistic influence, their notion of courage can be seen to be both influenced by and a response to models prevalent in their surrounding society.<sup>13</sup> The discussion in

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, “Heroism (*gevurah*),” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: Free Press, 1987) 363–370.

<sup>11</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) 85–86.

<sup>12</sup> Hava Tirosh-Samuels, *Happiness in Premodern Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2003) 120–121. This approach of the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud is revived by Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who gives it a new Kantian reading; see Leibowitz, “Heroism,” 363–370. Before its Kantian revival, this approach was kept alive in the 16th century by Joseph Karo, who began his *Shulchan Aruch* with the obligation to “rise up (*yitgaber*) in the morning ferociously like a lion to worship God.” Literally, *yitgaber* is to “overcome oneself,” from the same root as *gevurah*, “courage” (root *g-b-r*).

<sup>13</sup> For the different views of the amount the rabbis were influenced by Hellenistic philosophy, see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1950); Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York, origi-

*Pirkei Avot* 4:1 is attributed to Shimon ben Zoma, who was negatively acclaimed for studying cosmogony (*ma'aseh bereshit*), which perhaps betrays a hint about the rabbis' awareness of "Greek wisdom."<sup>14</sup> It is therefore not surprising that this expression of Ben Zoma's is very similar to a Stoic *paradoxa*, seen in the works of Horace and Cicero.<sup>15</sup> For example, Horace argues "Who then is free? The sage who masters himself"; and Cicero recommends that he "curb his lusts," in the fifth paradox ("only the wise man is free"), where he also discusses master-ship and commandship.<sup>16</sup> The crucial difference between these similar analyses is that the courageous Stoic self-mastery in Horace and Cicero is for the sake of freedom (*autarkia*), while rabbinic courage is commended for the sake of the fear or awe of God (*yir'at shamayim*).<sup>17</sup>

Hence Rabbi Akiva is portrayed as a rabbinic hero when he resists the Roman enemy, which signified the greatest threat of physical destruction to the Jewish people. In *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (a commentary on *Pirkei Avot*), Rome is personified as a seductive female. In this presentation Rabbi Akiva's life is endangered by a Roman general. In such cases, the usual way a war hero's courage is portrayed is showing him risking his life to escape or resist. Akiva, however, courageously fights the Romans by resisting the sexual temptation they place before him of two women – the saving grace is that the smell of non-kosher meat on their breath was abhorrent to him, indicating that his fear of God

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1942, *JTS* 1965); Lieberman, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?" in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); and Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> Mishnah Hagiga 14b and Tosefta Hagiga 2.5–6. Fischel argues that the Pardes story is intended as a criticism of Jewish Epicureanism; see Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature*, 1–34.

<sup>15</sup> Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature*, 70.

<sup>16</sup> Horace, *Satires*, trans. William Matthews (New York: Ausable Press, 2002) 84 (2.7); Marcus Tullius Cicero, "Stoic Paradoxes" in *De Oratore, De Fato, Paradoxa Stoicorum, Partitiones Oratoriae*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942) 284–293 (Paradox V); and Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature*, 71–72.

<sup>17</sup> Warren Zev Harvey, "Yirat Shamayim in Jewish Thought," in *Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence and Fear of God*, ed. Marc D. Stern (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2008) 2. Harvey shows how in BT Berakhot 33b, where Rabbi Haninya states that "everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven (*yirat shamayim*)," is a rabbinic response to Stoic determinism, which held that all is determinism except freeing oneself from fear of gods. Rabbi Haninya's implicit response is that determinism is not overcome by the rejecting the fear of heaven, but by embracing it.

overcame the sexual temptation.<sup>18</sup> As Jonathan Wyn Schofer points out, “the sages resist both the threat and the seduction, asserting power through rejecting women even though the ultimate sources of peril are actually other, powerful Romans.”<sup>19</sup> Of course, without wishing to historicize, it is also not unreasonable to suggest that the rabbis’ decision to emphatically spiritualize courage was their response to the tendency toward “excessive” military or physical courage that manifested itself among the Jews in the two great and heroic, but nevertheless historically disastrous, Jewish revolts against Rome.

### *Courage as Moral Virtue in Eight Chapters and Laws of Character Traits*

I argue that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Maimonides’ larger philosophic project attempts to bring courage to the forefront of Jewish virtues. As Joel Kraemer points out, “he also praised the virtue of courage, which is rarely esteemed by Jewish ethicists. In classical rabbinic sources courage is equated with self-control.”<sup>20</sup> Maimonides goes much beyond this minimalist definition. In doing so, he attempts to show the necessity of a type of courage that competes in physical, moral and intellectual realms, while at the same time showing the inherent tension between them.

Maimonides begins by re-defining courage as a moral virtue, with the assistance of the ethical structures and dialectical arguments of Aristotle and Al-Farabi. He first adopts the ethical framework of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially as interpreted in Al-Farabi’s *Aphorisms of a Statesman (Fusul al-Madani)*.<sup>21</sup> He does so in his two large works on ethics: *Eight Chapters (Shmoneh Perakim)*, an introduction to his commentary on the tractate *Avot* in the Mishnah, and *Laws of Character Traits (Hilkhot De’ot)*, a summary and reinterpretation

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<sup>18</sup> *Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, trans. Judah Goldin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955) 84–85 (Ch. 16). Similarly, the great example of the physical courage of the Maccabees is missing in the Mishnah, due to Rabbi’s Judah’s disapproval of the Hasmonean dynasty; see Gerald Blidstein, “Hanukkah in Hazal: The Missing Players,” *Tradition* 35, no. 3 (2001) 20.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan W. Schofer, *The Making of a Sage: A Study in Rabbinic Ethics* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005) 110.

<sup>20</sup> Joel Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds* (New York: Doubleday, 2008) 334.

<sup>21</sup> Muhammad Shahjahan, “The Concept of Courage in the Philosophy of Al-Farabi,” *Islamic Quarterly* 29 (1985) 234–239.

of the ethics of the Jewish tradition in his restatement of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*. When writing *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides did not have access to Aristotle's text directly and relied heavily on Al-Farabi's *Aphorisms*.<sup>22</sup> However, it is highly possible that when writing the *Mishneh Torah* in Egypt he had seen a copy of the Arabic translation of *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>23</sup>

Maimonides and Al-Farabi both adopt the Aristotelian model of the soul which has five parts: nutritive, sentient, imaginative, appetitive and rational.<sup>24</sup> The basis of the virtues is the appetitive part of the soul, which deals with emotions or temperaments, but can be influenced by reason. This appears to be the explanation for why Maimonides refers to the emotions or temperaments as *de'ot* in the *Mishneh Torah*, since it has the dual meaning of "character trait" (Mishnah Avot 4:10) and "knowledge" (e. g., Pss 73:11 and Jer 3:15).<sup>25</sup> The different emotions of the soul mimic the larger structure of nature in that they can be seen as a spectrum with two extremes, and the perfected way is the mean.<sup>26</sup> Though Maimonides addresses the extreme emotions of fear and rashness in both *Eight Chapters* and *Laws of Character Traits*, he affirms courage as the proper mean in *Eight Chapters*, but not in *Laws of Character Traits*.<sup>27</sup> The absence of courage in *Laws of Character Traits*, along with

<sup>22</sup> Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides' *Shemonah Peraqim* and Alfarabi's *Fusūl al-Madani*," *Proceedings of American Academy for Jewish Research* 31 (1963) 33–50.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Harvey, "The Sources of the Quotations from Aristotle's *Ethics* in the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Guide to the Guide*" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 14 (1998) 100–101.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus, 2002) 19–21 (1102a–1103a) (all references to Aristotle, *Ethics* in this article refer to this edition); Abu-Nasr Al-Farabi, "Selected Aphorisms of a Statesman," in *Alfarabi, The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 14–15 (no. 7); and Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, ed. Raymond L. Weiss and C. E. Butterworth (New York: New York University Press, 1975) 62–63. .

<sup>25</sup> Weiss, *Maimonides' Ethics*, 89. Maimonides uses the first definition of *de'ah* in his own *Laws of Foundation of Torah* 4:8–9 to describe "intellect" or "separate intelligence"; see Bernard Septimus, "What Did Maimonides Mean by 'Madda'?" in *Meah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life, in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Gerald Blidstein et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001) 96–102.

<sup>26</sup> Marvin Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 101: "Aristotle's answer is that the mean is the way in which nature and art normally achieve their goals of proper excellence" because "nature does not itself give us specific norms or standards of behavior, nor tell us what virtuous character is, apart from its general principle that the middle way is the best...nature gives us only the form and not the content of moral life" (p. 114).

<sup>27</sup> Maimonides' list of the virtues in *Eight Chapters* is almost identical to Al-Farabi's list in *Aphorisms*; see Davidson, "Maimonides and Alfarabi," 39 n. 17.

compassion, is mysterious at first,<sup>28</sup> since Maimonides presents other virtues of the middle way, such as moderation and generosity.<sup>29</sup> This may, however, reflect the different intentions of the two works. *Eight Chapters* is not merely an introduction to ethics, but also to intellectual virtue and prophecy.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, due to the political nature of courage, it assumes an important role in *Eight Chapters*. By contrast, *Laws of Character Traits* attempts to create an independent theory of ethics. Although courage is related to political and prophetic matters, it is not exclusively discussed in this section, and hence one needs to search for statements on courage in other sections of the *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>31</sup>

Another relevant issue for understanding Maimonides' treatment of the virtue of courage is his pedagogical method and its limits. As he points out, the body with its balance of humors disposes people more toward fear or rashness. For example, an individual whose heart has a warmer temperament will become more courageous, and one whose heart has a colder temperament will become more fearful.<sup>32</sup> This is not deterministic and does not mean that they will automatically be rash, courageous or doomed to a fearful existence; but the biological factor is a predisposition that can be cultivated or overcome with the correct or incorrect training. Secondly, an individual can be educated in a courageous disposition through repeated action that solidifies firm habits, so that "they become easy for him and need no effort."<sup>33</sup> Thirdly, all men naturally tend towards one extreme, and thus, in order to correct this tendency, one should incline towards the opposite extreme.<sup>34</sup> According to *Eight Chapters*, in the case of courage it is fear and cowardice to

<sup>28</sup> Maimonides, "Laws of Character Traits," in Weiss and Butterworth, *Ethical Writings*, 28 (1:1)

<sup>29</sup> Maimonides, "Character Traits," 29 (1:4) and Weiss, *Maimonides' Ethics*, 121.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the political nature of *Eight Chapters*, see Jeffrey Macy "The Theological-Political Teaching of *Shemonah Peraqim*: A Reappraisal of the Text and of its Arabic Sources," in *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 8 (1982) 31–40, and for a reading of it as a prolegomena to prophecy, see Eliezer Schweid, *Studies in Maimonides' "Eight Chapters"* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Academ, 1989) 95–110. Cf. Weiss, *Maimonides' Ethics*, 121, for a different explanation.

<sup>31</sup> For example: Maimonides, "Laws Concerning the Basic Principles of the Torah" in *Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge*, trans. Moses Hyamson (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1974) 40a–41b (Ch. 5); "Laws of Sanhedrin" in *Mishneh Torah: Book of Judges*, trans. Abraham M. Herhman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949) 8–9 (2:7); and "Laws of Kings and their Wars" in *Mishneh Torah: Book of Judges*, 227 (7:15).

<sup>32</sup> Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," 83 and "Character Traits," 28–29 (1:2).

<sup>33</sup> Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," 68 and "Character Traits," 30 (1:7).

<sup>34</sup> Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," 69 and "Character Traits," 29 (1:5). He curiously refers to this opposite extreme by the rabbinic term "beyond the line of the law"; see



which man is naturally disposed, and therefore, so as to correct this, a coward should practice rashness more than a rash man should practice cowardice. In fact, even the virtuous man who has a courageous disposition should incline slightly towards rashness.<sup>35</sup>

### *Physical, Moral and Intellectual Courage in the Guide*

In Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, he interprets the Bible as a manual for cultivating physical, moral and intellectual courage, though he makes the case for intellectual courage less obviously. Physical courage, as described by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.6, is finding the proper mean between fear and rashness for causes that endanger one's physical being, the paradigmatic example being that of risking one's life on the battlefield for a noble cause.<sup>36</sup> Maimonides adopts this form of physical courage from Al-Farabi's interpretation of Aristotle, arguing that this is the intention of the regime of the Israelites in the Bible. Hence, in his reading of the Bible, Egypt represents a non-virtuous regime, described both as representing "prosperity"<sup>37</sup> and causing "slavish service,"<sup>38</sup> "where we did not work according to our free choice."<sup>39</sup> Maimonides portrays the biblical Egypt as shifting from an oligarchy under Joseph to a tyranny under the pharaoh who "did not know Joseph" (Exod 1:8). These two Egyptian regimes are equally defective in their teaching of true virtue, since each breeds an abundance of fear of death and thus the inability to risk their lives to fight back. For example, he says the oligarchy under Joseph introduces lavish mores and not enough hard work to train its citizens to be courageous to fight in war,<sup>40</sup> and the tyranny under the later pharaoh allows no freedom, also making it difficult, if not next to impossible, to act courageously.<sup>41</sup> While the other enemies of the Israelites, the

Robert Eisen, "'Lifnim Mi-Shurat Ha-Din' in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 89 (1999) 293 n. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," 69. Like the absence of a discussion of courage as a mean in *Laws of Character Traits*, the absence of extending the inclination towards an extreme for courage appears to be for similar reasons: the non-political character of the *Laws of Character Traits*, as opposed to the eminently political character of *Eight Chapters*.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 38 (1115a) and Al-Farabi, *Aphorisms*, 50 (no. 76–77).

<sup>37</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 500 (3.24).

<sup>38</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 528 (3.32).

<sup>39</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 360 (3.31).

<sup>40</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 499–500 (3.24).

<sup>41</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 527–528 (3.32). For a similar Platonic reading of Muslim history, see Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, trans. Ralph Lerner (Ithaca:



rather than to committing an unrelated sin.<sup>46</sup> Second, courage or not being afraid is not merely physical but also mental, as Maimonides commands the soldier not to be distracted by family or children.<sup>47</sup> Thirdly, like Aristotle, who posits that the soldier's courage is noble, Maimonides adds a philosophic (or should one call it "ideological"?) purpose to the courage of the warrior, arguing that it is "for the oneness of God."<sup>48</sup> Maimonides felt that one reason the Second Temple was destroyed and the Israelites lost their kingdom was that they neglected to study the art of war and the military virtues, which obviously requires such leading virtues as physical courage.<sup>49</sup>

One of the few other times that Maimonides mentions courage in the *Mishneh Torah* is in his discussion of the significance of Hanukkah, which he characterizes as the military victory of the Maccabees and the rebuilding of the Jewish independent kingdom that lasted until the destruction of the Second Temple. He describes the victory as *gavru*, "overcoming," from the word *gevurah*, "courage." Although the Talmud uses this word in the context of the ritual action of the Maccabees, who stopped the Greeks from defiling the Temple (BT Shabbat 21b), Maimonides uses *gavru* twice in the context of military and political victories over their enemies.<sup>50</sup>

Maimonides also presents the Bible as educating its adherents in moral or political courage. This form of courage is described as the confidence to stand up against an unjust authority or law in political society. Aristotle describes this in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.8 as the proper mean between fear and rashness for causes that risk legal penalties or dishonor.<sup>51</sup> According to Maimonides, this type of courage is rooted in the natural force of spiritedness (*iqdam*), especially prevalent in prophets. Spiritedness is compared to the natural impulse of repulsion or self-defense.<sup>52</sup> I surmise that the reason this impulse does not have its own

<sup>46</sup> BT Sotah 44a and Maimonides, "Laws of Kings," 227 (7.15).

<sup>47</sup> Maimonides, "Laws of Kings," 227 (7.15) and Weiss, *Maimonides' Ethics*, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Maimonides, "Laws of Kings," 227 (7.15).

<sup>49</sup> Maimonides, "Letter on Astrology," in *Maimonides Reader*, 465.

<sup>50</sup> Maimonides, "Laws of Hanukah and Megilah" in *Mishneh Torah*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1966) 656 (Engl. *Maimonides Reader*, 118).

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 51 (1116a). It is interesting to note that honor does not appear to play a role in Maimonides' discussion of moral or political courage. This would be consistent with his divergence from Aristotle in disparaging honor as a justified motivation and his preference for the extreme of humility. See Daniel Frank, "Humility as a Virtue: A Maimonidean Critique of Aristotle's *Ethics*," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric Linn Ormsby (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1989) 89–100.

<sup>52</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 376 (2.38), and Weiss, *Maimonides' Ethics*, 163–164.

independent chapter and is classified with divination is that for the force of spiritedness to become a virtue (that virtue being courage), it requires the reasoning of divination, which is a rational process of quick thinking about when, where and on whom to act regarding “warnings concerning great future events.”<sup>53</sup> While Maimonides does not explicitly refer to practical wisdom (*phronesis*, *ta’aqul*) in the *Guide*, concepts such as divination appear to fulfill the same purpose.<sup>54</sup> Thus, if courage is the distinctive virtue par excellence of prophets for Maimonides, this would fit well with the ideal division of power between king, prophet and priest, whereby the kingship follows and politically promotes the religious-moral law,<sup>55</sup> while prophecy serves the larger interests of the state and checks the self-interested motives of the king, by means of the truth of God.<sup>56</sup>

The key problem with Maimonides limiting moral courage to the prophets is that he interprets the “spirit of God” (*ruah elohim*) as the biblical expression for moral or political courage in the first and second degrees of prophecy, which is not necessarily restricted to prophets, but applies to kings, poets and judges as well, in *Guide* 2.45.<sup>57</sup> One apparent difficulty with associating *ruah elohim* with courage in Maimonides is that he makes no explicit mention of *iqdam* 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 *iqdam*.<sup>58</sup> For example, in *Guide* 2.38, he describes *ruah elohim* as a faculty of repulsion to “ward off that which harms him (a

<sup>53</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 376–377 (2.38). Divination in this sense is a rational prediction of the future, not a procedure for consulting oracles and spirits as prohibited in Lev 19:26 and Deut 18:10–12.

<sup>54</sup> Shlomo Pines, “Truth and Falsehood Versus Good and Evil: A Study in Jewish and General Philosophy in Connection with the *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 2,” in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 127; Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) 63; and Weiss, *Maimonides’ Ethics*, 30

<sup>55</sup> Maimonides, “Laws of Kings,” 212 (3.1).

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of the biblical model of balance of power, see Daniel J. Elazar and Stuart A. Cohen, *The Jewish Polity: Jewish Political Organizations from Biblical Times to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 71–91.

<sup>57</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 396–400 (2.45).

<sup>58</sup> Alvin Reines, *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1970) 186–187. My interpretation draws upon Abrabanel’s connection between *Guide* 2.38 and 2.45, though does take his argument fully in the direction he does.

prophet)” and was used to “save a religious community from the burden of slavery”; and in *Guide* 2.45 it is *ruah elohim* that “moves and activates him (a prophet) to a great, righteous and important action – such as the deliverance of a community of virtuous people from a community of wicked people.” But while both are rooted in spiritedness, in the first case Maimonides appears to be talking about the natural impulse that controls courage, while in the second case it is the same impulse controlled by reason and channeled to noble purpose, thus truly making it a virtue. This form of reason is more a form of prudence or practical reason, and not the full theoretical reason needed for prophecy (which is another example of practical wisdom appearing under a different guise).

If *ruah elohim* is the Bible’s way of symbolically referring to moral courage, then the two lower degrees of prophecy, where the actor has *ruah elohim* attributed to his actions, represent two methods of moral courage: courage to act for the truth in society (first degree) and courage to speak the truth in society (second degree). The biblical characters that are described as acting for the truth are judges such as Jephthah or Samson, kings such as Saul or David, and leaders such as Joseph.<sup>59</sup> One can also add to this group judges of the Sanhedrin, where one of the necessary qualities is having a courageous heart (*lev amitiz*), in order to rule justly and save the oppressed from the oppressor.<sup>60</sup> While a courageous judge is not mentioned in the list in *Guide* 2.45, it is implicit, since the same example of Moses defending the daughters of Midian (Exod 2:17) is present in both “Laws of Sanhedrin” as the ideal role model of courage for a judge and as a courageous action in *Guide* 2.45. The biblical characters that are depicted as having the courage to speak the truth are David, Solomon and all the other scribes in writing Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Daniel, Job, Chronicles and Esther.<sup>61</sup> The problem with all the examples in *Guide* 2.45 (of kings, judges and prophets) is that they are all cases of courageous action or courageous speech, but not both simultaneously. The only two who exhibit both traits at once are the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who are described in *Guide* 2.38 as combining both courageous action and speech. For example, Maimonides posits that Jeremiah needed to “address a call to a people, regardless of whether that call is listened to or not, and even if he as a result thereof is harmed in his body.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 396–397 (2.45).

<sup>60</sup> Maimonides “Laws of Sanhedrin,” 9 (2:7). This has been analyzed by Shlomo Riskin, “The Sword and the Scale,” *Jerusalem Post*, Sep 4, 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 398–400 (2.45).

<sup>62</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 375 (2.37).

Thus he makes him into what Abraham Melamed calls “the prototype of the public prophet, whose task it is to rebuke the rulers and sinful people.”<sup>63</sup> Jeremiah attempts both to speak out against society and to induce people to change their ways. The example Maimonides brings forward is Jeremiah’s chastising and threatening the Israelites with punishment for succumbing to temptations of sexual desire in adulterous and idolatrous ways (Jer 29:22–23).<sup>64</sup> It is this supreme moral courage of the prophet, both in words and deeds, that is needed to uphold truth in society and check the interest of the king and other members of society who are sinning against God. Maimonides goes so far as to suggest that not only is the moral courage of the prophet necessary for the well-being of society, but with regard to idolatry, adultery and killing, everyone must courageously fight back and even sacrifice one’s life if necessary, which amounts to a legal duty to be courageous.<sup>65</sup> He even goes on to argue that the cause of the First Temple’s destruction was a lack of moral courage, inasmuch as the people were too afraid to challenge the idolatrous practices of Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>66</sup>

Maimonides also quietly hints that the Bible educates in intellectual courage through his careful employment of Exod 13:17–18 as a parable deployed at decisive points in the *Guide*. This subtle hint is similar to that employed by Aristotle, who also makes a reference to such a form of courage in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.8, but does not draw out the implications of it. He argues that “experience in each kind of situation also seems to be courage, which is why Socrates believed that courage is knowledge.”<sup>67</sup> Intellectual courage is the ability to challenge and potentially reject one’s accepted opinions and perspective on the world, and consider their falsity in the search for the truth. Like physical and moral courage, it requires a balance between fear and rashness, but in this case it is guided towards the pursuit of truth.

At first glance, it would appear that Maimonides does not adhere to a notion of courage for the mind, but merely conceives of it functioning for physical and moral purposes, through describing *shaja’ah* as physical

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<sup>63</sup> Abraham Melamed, *The Philosopher-King in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 40.

<sup>64</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 384–385 (2.41).

<sup>65</sup> Weiss, *Maimonides’ Ethics*, 150–51.

<sup>66</sup> Maimonides, *Book of Commandments*, trans. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971) 63–64 (Positive Commandment #10). This is in contradistinction to his “Letter on Astrology”; see n. 49, above.

<sup>67</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 51 (1116b).

courage<sup>68</sup> and *iqdam* or *ruah elohim* as moral courage.<sup>69</sup> But while Maimonides may not have a distinct word for intellectual courage, he uses the lesson of physical courage in Exod 13:17–18, as a metaphor or parable for intellectual matters in two crucial chapters, *Guide* 3.24 and 3.32.<sup>70</sup> His selective use of this verse, and his similar explanation that appears in only these two points and not anywhere else in the *Guide*, seems to be too coincidental to be an accident. In fact, it fits in well with his hermeneutical guidelines, where he states that he will explain in a dispersed fashion the true meaning of certain biblical parables, and seems to present mere “chapter headings” and yet even while doing so spreads the true meanings throughout the work.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, one can surmise that the tension between the two references to Exod 13:17–18 reveal the two methods of teaching intellectual courage: the way of Abraham, who represents a non-ritualistic and purely intellectual approach to knowing God for the philosophic few, versus the pedagogy of Moses, who educates through a slower training regimen in intellectual courage by shifting the end goal of the pagan sacrificial ritual for the many. In *Guide* 3.24, Abraham, who courageously and single-handedly rejects all previous idolatrous beliefs of the society around him, is the paradigm for imitation of the love of God, which aims only to teach individuals.<sup>72</sup> Egypt is portrayed as representing prosperity and ease which produces softness, whereas the desert signifies the hard life and fatigue required to produce courage. If carried over as an intellectual metaphor, this expresses the notion that false beliefs represent comfort and rest, while challenging them and reaching the truth require hard work.<sup>73</sup> The Binding of Isaac thus represents, for Maimonides, a paradigm of the courage required to know God, as Abraham did not fear the repercussions of knowledge, nor did he act rashly, but “his doing it after the command had come to him shows that the act sprang from thought, correct understanding ... nor should one opt for the notion that

<sup>68</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 500 (3.24) and 528 (3.32).

<sup>69</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 376 (2.38) and 396–400 (2.45).

<sup>70</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 499–500 (3.24) and 527–528 (3.32).

<sup>71</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 12 and 15 (Introduction). See also Avraham Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2000) 151.

<sup>72</sup> Maimonides, “Laws Concerning Idolatry and the Ordinances of the Heathens” in *Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge*, 66b–67a (1.3). See also James Diamond, “Chapter III:24 of the Guide: ‘Trial’ – the Bridge between Metaphysics and Law,” in *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002) 131–150. Diamond, like Nuriel, argues that for Maimonides the Akedah is a paradigm for intellectual virtue, and not action.

<sup>73</sup> See also “toil” and “labor” at Maimonides, *Guide*, 20 (Introduction).



he was in a state of passion.”<sup>74</sup> The significance of Abraham’s intellectual courage can be gleaned through its distinctive location in the work, since *Guide* 3.24 appears to be the last chapter analyzing philosophic ideas, before Maimonides launches his discussion of the meaning of the commandments.

In contrast, in *Guide* 3.32, Moses’ innovation is instituting the sacrificial ritual in order to present a slow and gradual training in intellectual courage for the masses, i. e., for educating the collective entity of a nation in that virtue. In Maimonides’ view, this was necessary because the Israelites were already habituated to sacrifices as a religious ritual, so Moses merely kept the outer form, but changed the focus and intention to that of worshiping one God. He suggests that, just as their bodies were slavish and weak due to Egyptian slavery and therefore did not have the courage to fight their enemies, so their minds were weak from the idolatry of the Egyptian religion, and thus they did not have the courage to confront the truth. Maimonides, therefore, sees prayer not as a downgraded form of worship, but as a more advanced service to God which educates the people in correct opinions about Him.<sup>75</sup> He also viewed it as a form of worship that had already been practiced informally since the time of Moses, though only instituted as a formal structure by Ezra and later elaborated by the rabbis.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, Maimonides did not see Moses’ ultimate and highest purpose in prayer itself, which is after all only another (though higher) means to an end. The true end is knowledge of God through contemplation,<sup>77</sup> which brings the people closer to the Abrahamic ideal. But by asserting that sacrificial laws are a fundamental part of his entire code of law, Moses may also be hinting at the limits of spreading intellectual courage to everyone and for all time. It may be that the temptation to succumb to idolatry again in similar historical situations is part of human nature. Therefore, as long as human nature remains the same, the need for the many apparently temporal laws also remains constant, as well as the need for the study of these laws, to prevent the Israelites from succumbing to corrupt sacrifices, or their equivalent, in the future.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 501 (3.24).

<sup>75</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 621 (3.51).

<sup>76</sup> Maimonides, “Laws of Prayer” (1:1–1:6) in *Mishneh Torah*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1966) 29–32 (Engl., *Maimonides Reader*, 88–89).

<sup>77</sup> Maimonides, “Basic Principles,” 34a (1:1).

<sup>78</sup> Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides*, 341, and Warren Zev Harvey, “Les sacrifices, la prière, et l’étude chez Maïmonide,” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 154 (1995) 97–103.



Furthermore, Maimonides posits that the Second Temple was destroyed and sovereignty lost not only because of a lack of physical and moral courage. He suggests that a lack of intellectual courage is at the root of the Israelites' inability to act with physical courage and to promote the "art of war." In this regard, he sees their reliance on astrology as a form of idolatry, which is not based on an attempt to understand the world rationally, but to rely on forces of the stars and constellations.<sup>79</sup> Astrology is also dangerous because it destroys the belief in free choice. While the latter belief promotes acting for one's own good and cultivating virtues such as courage, the former belief promotes fatalism<sup>80</sup> or the attempt to control the heavens and their influence on man through magical worship.<sup>81</sup>

*Pinnacles of Courage:  
Moses' Legislation and Solomon's Hermeneutics*

Although according to Maimonides, many post-Mosaic prophets and writers reached new heights in understanding deep philosophic concepts – such as Isaiah's and Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot, Job on providence and evil, and Daniel on resurrection – he describes only Moses and Solomon as pinnacles of courage. To Maimonides, Moses is the most courageous in intellectual and moral-political matters and is described by him as having both "strength of mind" (*koah beda'ato*)<sup>82</sup> and as the man who "went boldly to a great king in order to save a religious community from burden of slavery and had no fear or dread."<sup>83</sup>

Yet what is it specifically that distinguishes Moses in his intellectual and moral courage? According to Maimonides, this intellectual courage stems from his ability to realize the limits of possible human understanding of metaphysics. Moses' intellectual courage is seen by Maimonides to be a result of a program of study that is gradual and not rash. His courage is also characterized by mental daring limited by

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<sup>79</sup> Tzvi Langermann, "Maimonides' Repudiation of Astrology," in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. Robert Cohen and Hillel Levine (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000) 131.

<sup>80</sup> Maimonides, "Letter on Astrology," 465 and "Laws of Repentance," in *Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge*, 87a–87b (5.4).

<sup>81</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 542 (3.37): "the operations performed by the magicians are various species of worship offered to a certain star, which, being pleased with that operation or speech or fumigation, does for us what we wish."

<sup>82</sup> Maimonides, "Basic Principles," 43a (7:6). The translation here is my own, not that of Hyamson.

<sup>83</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 376 (2.38).

appropriate caution. Both rashness and fear negatively affect contemplation, since they are guided by the vacillating passions of the imaginative faculty rather than reason. The imaginative faculty leads men to pursue concerns that are not fulfilling to their higher nature, such as desire for honor or wealth, or in Moses' case fear due to imagining possible harms happening to oneself or rashly jumping too far ahead in knowledge without proper preparation and caution.<sup>84</sup> Moses' contemplation of God can be referred to as courageous because it is purely intellectual, with no influence or aid by the imaginative faculty.<sup>85</sup> And his lack of rashness can be gleaned from the verse "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God" (Exod 3:6). In Maimonides' view, this would require following an ordered plan of study, from logic to mathematics to natural science to divine science. Later, the absence of fear in Moses' contemplation is evident in the verse, "And God spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exod 33:11), with the implication that there is no fear when true friends speak to one another.

In Maimonides' view, Moses made the slow ascent to perfection and did not rashly jump ahead, allowing him to reach the limits of human knowledge regarding the nature of the divine, one of the highest questions of metaphysics (the study of first principles of existence). This can be seen in Maimonides' interpretation of Exodus 33 where Moses, in seeking forgiveness from God for the Israelites' sin of creating the golden calf, also attempts to understand the essence of the divine, which is referred to as God's "glory" (Exod 33:17) or "face" (Exod 33:12).<sup>86</sup> The answer he receives, however, is ambiguous: "You cannot see my face, for man cannot see me and live" (Exod 33:20–21). This is a metaphor for Moses' inability to achieve demonstrative knowledge regarding God: One can come up with certain conceptions of God and the universe, based on likely inferences from evident knowledge of the sublunar sphere, but cannot achieve absolute certainty that they are

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<sup>84</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 29 (1.5) and 372 (2.36).

<sup>85</sup> Here Maimonides surely was influenced by Al-Farabi, who argued that "the supreme ruler without qualification is he who does not need anyone to rule in anything whatever, but has actually acquired the sciences and every kind of knowledge, and has no need of man to guide him in anything"; see Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, "The Political Regime," trans. Fauzi M. Najjar, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963) 36–37, and Jeffrey Macy, "'True Knowledge' in Medieval Islam and Judaism," in *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, vol. 7 (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1988) 100.

<sup>86</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 123–128 (1.54).

correct.<sup>87</sup> This is confirmed by the parable of the Sultan's Palace, where it seems to be hinted that Moses reached the seventh and highest level.<sup>88</sup> Even with the king in the innermost antechamber, there is no absolute certainty:

He, however, who has achieved demonstration, to the extent that it is possible, of everything that may be demonstrated; and who has ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that that is possible, everything that may be ascertained; and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it – has come to be with the ruler in the inner part of the habituation.<sup>89</sup>

Maimonides makes a similar point in *Eight Chapters*, where in regard to God's essence he argues that "human perception cannot reach this level of perception, but [Moses] ... perceived a little below it."<sup>90</sup>

In fact, the *Guide* has two positions on the notion of the divine, and they both exist in the work, with no easy and clear solution to the contradiction.<sup>91</sup> Shlomo Pines argues that "physics and metaphysics which is concerned with the higher being ..., the conceptions and propositions which make up this system cannot be cognized by the human intellect. They are in the best case merely probable."<sup>92</sup> It is this dichotomy of knowledge with skepticism, or "love" and "fear," that represents the highest understanding of metaphysics achieved by Moses, and it is this

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<sup>87</sup> Kalman P. Bland, "Moses and the Law According to Maimonides," in *Mystics, Philosophers and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann*, ed. J. Reinharz and D. Swetschinski (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982) 52–53.

<sup>88</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 620–624 (3.51). By placing Moses at the seventh level, I disagree with Menachem Kellner, who argues that Moses is on an eighth level above the other seven; see M. Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 20. This would make Moses almost super-human or godly, which I do not think is Maimonides' intention. For example, in *Eight Chapters* he stresses how there was still one veil that even Moses could not pass because of his being human and having a body.

<sup>89</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 619 (3.51). The emphasis is my own.

<sup>90</sup> Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," 83. The emphasis is my own.

<sup>91</sup> See Maimonides, *Guide*, xcvi–xcviii, and Hannah Kasher, "Self-Cognizing Intellect and Negative Attributes in Maimonides' Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994) 461.

<sup>92</sup> Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph A. Buijs (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 104. However, Pines seems to have changed his view from the Translator's Introduction to the *Guide* where he treats Maimonides as if metaphysics was more a matter of knowledge for him.

ideal model that serves for Maimonides as a paradigm to be striven for by future thinkers and enlightened rulers.<sup>93</sup>

Moral or political courage appears to be an outcome of the intellectual courage needed to realize the uncertainty about the highest metaphysical issues and instead focus on God's "actions" or the structure of nature, and imitate that in forms of legislation and leadership. After Moses realized the limitations of certainty about metaphysics, comprising the "upper world" of God and the angels, he attempted to comprehend the structure and laws of the sublunar world visible to humans – that is, the realm of terrestrial physics, also known as God's "ways" (*derachecha*) or "back" (*acher*).<sup>94</sup> One of these forms of laws are those regarding politics, which are especially based on the premise that man is by nature a political animal. Maimonides suggests that man needs political association for his own happiness, both to create stability (political perfection) and to allow for moral and intellectual perfection.<sup>95</sup> Hence, when he discusses Moses' challenge to Pharaoh and his freeing of an enslaved people from a tyrannical regime in *Guide* 2.38, it is Moses' courage that is praised, which Maimonides bases on Moses' knowledge of God's actions. Since Pharaoh's regime is not one that allows people to strive for perfection and happiness, Moses found the moral courage to challenge Pharaoh and liberate the Israelites to build a new regime conducive to such perfection and happiness. As Maimonides phrases it,

the lone individual, having only his staff, went boldly to the great king in order to save a religious community from the burden of slavery, and had no fear or dread because it was said to him, *I will be with thee* (Exod 3:12).<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Maimonides, "Basic Principles," 35b (2:1). Warren Zev Harvey, "Maimonides' First Commandment, Physics and Doubt," in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm*, ed. Y. Elman and J. S. Gurock (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997). If one compares Maimonides' discussion of "love" and "fear" in the *Mishneh Torah* to the above on contemplation and its limits, it does not appear that in this regard the *Mishneh Torah* is exoteric and the *Guide* is esoteric; in fact it appears that here the *Mishneh Torah* can help one uncover the meaning of the *Guide*. See Warren Zev Harvey, "The *Mishneh Torah* as a Key to the Secrets of the *Guide*," in *Me'ah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. E. Fleischer et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001).

<sup>94</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 123–128 (1.54) and 87 (1.38). Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 64–65; Lawrence Kaplan, "'I Sleep, but My Heart Waketh': Maimonides' Conception of Human Perfection," in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies*, ed. I. Robinson et al. (Wales: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990) 137–138, and Pines, "Limitations," 103–104.

<sup>95</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 383 (2.40).

<sup>96</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 376 (2.38).

In Maimonides' view, God's commitment to Moses to "be with thee" refers to God's providence in nature.<sup>97</sup> He is thus suggesting that there is a direct link between providence and prophecy. This implies that God's rule and ordering of the cosmos serve as a model of imitation for how the prophet should structure society through his legislation and rebuke. By "I will be with thee," God did not mean that He would simply change the structure of nature to save the Israelites, but that He would provide to Moses the model of his own rule of the universe as a guide, allowing Moses to differentiate between a regime conducive to perfection and one not conducive to perfection. It was only then that the Israelites would be able to perfect their moral virtues such as courage and increase their physical strength so that Pharaoh's tyranny could be challenged. Moses' moral courage was thus superior to all other prophets, in that he did not merely challenge authority on behalf of God and truth, but had the courage to liberate the Israelites from a bad regime and educate the nation under a new law. While Maimonides still holds intellectual courage as the highest form, he also recognizes its limits, and in this regard admits that there are occasions when moral or political courage play an equally important role.

In a similar way, Solomon represents the model of courageous writing about secret matters that Maimonides himself imitates in his own works.<sup>98</sup> Maimonides suggests that there are two extreme approaches to handling secret matters, both of which are deficient: the cowardly and the rash approaches to writing.<sup>99</sup> The fearful or cowardly approach does not attempt to divulge anything of the secret matters for anyone. The problem with this is that if the matter is too hidden, then it will be lost and no longer passed on.<sup>100</sup> He describes this approach as "extremely cowardly (*jabnan azy'man*) with regard to you and everyone who is perplexed. It would have been, as it were, robbing someone of the truth who deserves to know it, or begrudging an heir his inheritance."<sup>101</sup> The other way is to be too open about secret matters, leading people who are not suited to know such things, either because of natural incapacity

<sup>97</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 475 (3.18), where Exod 3:12 is quoted a second time.

<sup>98</sup> Sara Klein-Braslavy, "King Solomon and Metaphysical Esotericism according to Maimonides," in *Maimonidean Studies*, ed. Arthur Hyman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990) 57–86, and Sara Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996).

<sup>99</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 9 (Introduction).

<sup>100</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 175–176 (1.71).

<sup>101</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 415–416 (3.Intro) and Maimonides, *Dalalat al-Ha'irin*, 297.

or improper preparation, or causing them to rashly delve into them or hasten to know too much too fast.<sup>102</sup> This would lead “the vulgar among the people” for whom “it would be unsuitable”<sup>103</sup> to imitate heretics such as Elisha ben Avuya in “aspiring to apprehend things that are beyond your apprehension; or, if you hasten to pronounce false, assertions the contradictories of which have not been demonstrated or that are possible, though very remotely.”<sup>104</sup> In opposition to both these approaches, Maimonides advocates that the correct approach is a form of courageous writing, just as courage is the proper mean between cowardice and rashness. This is writing through parables and hints that have a meaning both for the ordinary reader, which will not lead him astray, and a separate meaning for the philosophic reader, who can read between the lines and learn the secrets from these parables and hints. The strategy of writing on two levels, with one message for the casual reader and one hidden and deeper message for the philosopher, is evident to Maimonides in the phrases: “that which is far off, and exceedingly deep – who can find it out?” (Eccl 7:24)<sup>105</sup> and “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Prov 25:11).<sup>106</sup>

While Maimonides likely learned about this style of writing from Al-Farabi and his reading of Plato, he attributes courageous writing to Solomon in his composition of the biblical books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.<sup>107</sup> As Sara Klein-Braslavy notes, “Maimonides says that his own words of instruction are no more than an interpretation of the words of instruction of a wise man who preceded him, Solomon.”<sup>108</sup> According to him, the importance of writing in parables is evident from Solomon’s utterance at the beginning of Proverbs: “to understand a proverb and a figure; the words of the wise and their dark saying” (Prov 1:6).<sup>109</sup> And the obligation not to reveal secrets openly is put forward in verses such as Song 4:11 and Prov 27:26. For example, “honey and milk under thy tongue” (Song 4:11) refers to

<sup>102</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 77 (1.34).

<sup>103</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 9 (Introduction).

<sup>104</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 68–69 (1.32).

<sup>105</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, Intro., 9

<sup>106</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, Intro., 11.

<sup>107</sup> Whether these were actually written by King Solomon is doubted by modern scholars, but Maimonides follows the traditional rabbinic opinion that attributes them to him. Plato discussed the problems of writing in *Phaedrus* 276c and *Seventh Letter* 341c and 344c, where he recognized the need to write, though not literally. For Al-Farabi’s similar reading of Plato, see Abu-Nasr Al-Farabi, “Summary of Plato’s *Laws*,” in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 84–85.

<sup>108</sup> Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 75.

<sup>109</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, Intro, 11.

esoteric matters that should not be taught publicly, with “honey and milk” representing the secret matters themselves and “under thy tongue” as a metaphor for not speaking or teaching. Similarly, “the lambs will be for thy clothing” (Prov 27:26) teaches the need to not spread secret knowledge, with “lambs” (*kevasim*) being a pun on “secrets” (*kevashim*) and “thy clothing” indicating the need to hide.<sup>110</sup> Hence, Maimonides suggests that it was the need to pass on these secrets to the few who are able to grasp their meaning, without revealing too much to the masses, that led Solomon to courageously write in parables with hints for the careful reader.<sup>111</sup>

### Conclusion

Maimonides’ writings demonstrate a greater consistency in his ethics than may appear at first, as demonstrated through the example of the virtue of courage. Courage appears in different forms and guises throughout his writings, but is part of the larger matrix of the physical, moral and intellectual. Each of these three strives to find a mean between fear and rashness, but in three different realms: one’s physical life, political justice versus injustice, and the pursuit of truth. There are times when two or three overlap, such as when one risks one’s life to stop injustice or to obtain truth, but there are also times when the three may not be conjoined.

Furthermore, one might even suggest that Maimonides held the two courageous figures of Moses and Solomon as ideals that he himself strove to imitate. He seemed to regard Moses as the perfect lawgiver, who was intellectually courageous enough to understand both metaphysical perplexity and the more certain laws of politics, while morally courageous enough to free a nation from slavery and reveal a law to them, based on these principles. Solomon is a model of the courageous writer who, after achieving intellectual perfection (the level Moses achieved), realized the need not only for law, but also to reveal the secret wisdom to the wise who are able to achieve such understanding through judiciously constructed parables and hints. Maimonides clearly understood the three types of courage in all of his major works, which suggests that he maintained a fairly consistent teaching about courage from the beginning to the end of his career as a thinker.

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<sup>110</sup> Maimonides, “Basic Principles,” 36b (2:12). See also Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 60

<sup>111</sup> Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 158 and 160.