INTRODUCTION: Our father Jacob taught all of his children, and he designated Levi and appointed him as head of the academy to teach the ways of God and to observe the commandments of Abraham.¹ And he commanded his children to not take leave from the Levites, so that their learning would not be forgotten. This concept [of monotheism] continued to grow strong among the children of Jacob and their followers, so in the world there was a nation who knew God. When the Jews prolonged their time in Egypt, they regressed to learn from their [the Egyptians’] ways and practiced idolatry and the like,² except for the tribe of Levi, who stood firm to the commandments of the patriarchs. And the tribe of Levi never practiced idolatry (Hagigah 6b, based on Exod. 32:26). Soon the principle which Abraham had implanted would have been uprooted, and the descendants of Jacob would have returned to the folly of the nations and their crookedness. However because of God’s love for us (cf. Deut. 7:8), and because He vouchsafed the oath to our father Abraham, He appointed Moses, our teacher and greatest of all our prophets, and sent him [to redeem Israel]. When Moses our teacher prophesied, and God chose Israel as an inheritance, He crowned them with commandments and made known to them the way of His service, and the punishment for idolatry and for those who follow after it in error (Avodah Zarah 1:3).

Exodus 1

1:10. Come, let us deal shrewdly [nитḥакקэма] with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land. — The term ḥokhmah (“wisdom”) in Hebrew is used of four different things:

(1) It denotes the knowledge of those truths which lead to the knowledge of God: e.g., “But where shall wisdom be found?” (Job 28:12), “If thou seest her like silver” (Prov. 2:4). The word occurs frequently in this sense.

(2) The expression ḥokhmah denotes also knowledge of any workmanship, e.g., “Whoever is wisehearted of you shall come and make everything that the Lord has commanded.” (Exod. 35:10), “And all the women that were wise-hearted did spin” (Exod. 35:25).

(3) It is also used of the acquisition of moral principles, e.g. “And teach his princes wisdom” (Ps. 105:22), “With the ancient is wisdom” (Job 12:12), for it is chiefly the disposition for acquiring moral principles that is developed by old age alone.

(4) It implies, lastly, the notion of cunning and subtlety, e.g., “Come, let us deal wisely with them” (Exod. 1:10)….³

It is possible that the Hebrew ḥokhmah expresses the idea of cunning and planning, which may serve in one case as a means of acquiring intellectual perfection, or good moral principles; but may in another case produce skill in workmanship, or even be employed in establishing bad opinions and principles. The

¹ “In all the days of our ancestors, the academy never departed from them” (Yoma 28b). Jacob gave the Levites as a tithe (Genesis Rabbah 70:7, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 37).
² “When Israel was in Egypt they were practicing idolatry and would not let it go” (Exodus Rabbah 16:2).
³ Rashi explains the word mirmah, commonly translated “deceit,” to mean ḥokhmah (Gen. 27:35).
attribute *ḥakham* [“wise”] is therefore given to a person that possesses great intellectual faculties, or good moral principles, or skill in art, but also to persons cunning in evil deeds and principles. According to this explanation, a person that has a true knowledge of the whole Law is called “wise” in a double sense: he is wise because the Law instructs him in the highest truths, and second, because it teaches him good morals (*Guide* 3:54).

Maimonides does not offer an explanation of how Pharaoh would deal shrewdly with them. Nahmanides writes, “Pharaoh and his wise counsellors did not see fit to slay them by the sword. For it would have been a gross treachery to smite without reason a people that had come into the land by command of a former king.... Rather, Pharaoh said he would do it wisely so that the Israelites would not feel that it was done in enmity against them. It is for this reason that he placed a levy upon them, as it was customary that strangers in a country contribute a levy to the king.... Afterwards he secretly commanded the midwives to kill the male children upon the birthstool so that even the mothers should not know it. Following that, ‘he charged all his people: Every son that is born, you, yourselves, shall cast into the river’ (Exod. 1:22).”

For how this verse relates to Maimonides’ opinion of Pharaoh’s loss of free will, see at Exod. 4:21.

1:14. And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of labor in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigor. — [From the Haggadah:] This bitter herb that we eat—what is its reason (cf. Exod. 12:8)? Because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our forefathers in Egypt, as it says, “And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of labor in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigor” (Exod. 1:14) (*Nusah ha-Haggadah*; quoted also at Exod. 12:8; see also *Hametz u-Matzah* 7:5, based on m. *Pesaḥim* 10:5s).

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4 Aristotle writes, “There is a faculty which we call cleverness—the power of carrying out the means to any proposed end, and so achieving it. If then the end be noble, the power merits praise; but if the end be base, the power is the power of the villain. So we apply the term ‘clever’ both to the prudent man and the villain” (*Ethics* 1144a).
Exodus 2

2:4. His sister stood [va-tetatzav] at a distance, to see what would happen to him. — Although the two roots nitzav and yatza'v are distinct, yet their meaning is, as you know, identical in all their various forms. The verb has several meanings: in some instances it signifies “to stand” or “to place oneself,” as “And his sister stood [va-tetatzav] afar off” (Exod. 2:4), “The kings of the earth set themselves [yitatzevu]” (Ps. 2:2), “They came out and stood [nitzavim]” (Num. 16: 27). In other instances it denotes continuance and permanence, as, “Your word is established [nitzav] in Heaven” (Ps. 119: 89), i.e., it remains forever (Guide 1:15).

Ibn Ezra, against Maimonides, says והַתִּצָב is a foreign word (short commentary). The Bekhor Shor says that this word looks like a hif'il (causative), “others set her there.” The word והַתִּצָב is also understood as a reflexive, “she set herself” (Ha’amek Davar).

2:10. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water [meshitihu].” — [The Hebrew root מ-ש-ח means “pulling” [meshikhah] and “dragging” [gereirah] (PhM Shabbat 22:6).

The Mishnah is discussing what activities are permitted and forbidden on the Sabbath because it could be considered a type of forbidden medical treatment. Maimonides is commenting on the word מתמשי, and he uses the present verse as an example. However the printed Talmud has מתמשין, touch" (Shabbat 147a). Rashbam, like Maimonides, says מ-ש-ח means meshikhah.

2:10-12. One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. — A gentile who strikes an Israelite incurs capital punishment, as it says, “And he looked this way and that […] and killed the Egyptian” (Hovel u-Mazzik 5:3).

2:13. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the wicked man [la-rasha], “Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?” — It is even forbidden to raise one’s hand against one’s colleague, and whoever raises his hand against his fellow, even if he does not strike him, is wicked [rasha] (Hovel u-Mazzik 5:2).

In his ShM, Maimonides applies the same teaching in a peculiar way. He starts by saying that when lashes are administered, there is an injunction to inflict more lashes than the criminal can tolerate (based on Makkot 22a). He continues, “And from this prohibition comes a [separate] prohibition of striking any Jew. If we are warned not to strike a sinner [more than his punishment], how much more so anybody else. And the Sages even prohibited threatening to strike someone else, even without striking

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5 The Soncino edition translates this as “massage.” Danby translates it “rub.”
6 Based on Sanhedrin 58b. Rashi quotes the same talmudic teaching. However see Melakhim 10:6 and Kese Mishnah there.
7 Based on Resh Lakish reading, which assumes that Moses spoke to the person before he struck his adversary, because the Hebrew uses takkeh rather than hikita (see Sanhedrin 58b).
him. They said, 'He who lifts his hand against his neighbor to strike him is called wicked, as it says, “And he said to the wicked man: Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew”’ (ShM, Neg. 300).

2:14. He answered, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you desire [omer] to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid and thought [va-yomer]... — [Maimonides addresses the multiple meanings of amar] ... the words “speaking” [dibbur] and “saying” [amirah] are synonymous terms, denoting:

1. “Speech,” e.g., “Moses shall speak [yedabber]” (Exod. 19:19), “And Pharaoh said [va-yomer]” (Exod. 5:5);
2. “Thought” as formed in the mind without being expressed in words; e.g., “And I thought [ve-amarti] in my heart” (Eccl. 2:15), “And I thought [ve-dibbarti] in my heart” (ibid.), “And your heart will imagine [yedabber]” (Prov. 23:33), “Concerning You my heart thought [amar]” (Ps. 27:8), “And Esau thought [va-yomer] in his heart” (Gen. 27:41); examples of this kind are numerous;
3. “Will,” e.g., “And he said [va-yomer] to slay David” (2 Sam. 21:16), that is to say, he wished or he intended to slay him; “Do you desire [omer] to kill me” (Exod. 2:14)....

I need not explain that in Hebrew amar and dibber have the same meaning, as is proved by the passage, “For it has heard all the words [imrei] of the Lord which He spoke [dibber] to us” (Josh. 24:27) (Guide 1:65).

Maimonides argues that amirah and dibbur are synonyms, and that they both have multiple meanings: speech, thought, and will. On the current verse, he says ha-lehargeni attah omer, means, “Do you desire to kill me?” Rashi, based on a Midrash, assumes a hyperliteral understanding of ha-lehargeni attah omer, meaning that Moses killed him by uttering the Tetragrammaton, i.e., by “speech.” Nahmanides in different places in his commentary quotes different understandings of amar, though he entertains the meaning “thought” on the current verse.

2:17. And the shepherd came and drove them away, but Moses arose and came to their defense and watered their flock. — Included in the phrase “men of valor” (Exod. 18:21) means that they should have a courageous heart to save a victim from his oppressor, as it says on the matter, “but Moses arose and came to their defense” (Exod. 2:17) (see further Hil. Sanhedrin 2:7, quoted at Exod. 18:21).

FURTHER: [This passage comes from a longer discussion of prophecy. Maimonides states that there are different levels of prophecy. The first level inspires someone to do something “good and grand.” The second level is when one feels “as if something came upon him.” People in these two categories are not actually prophets, but are called so because they are “almost prophets.” Maimonides argues that even from a young age, Moses had this first level of prophecy.] — The first degree of prophecy consists in the Divine assistance which is given to a person, and induces and encourages him to do something good and grand, e.g., to deliver a congregation of good men from the hands of evildoers; to save one noble person,

8 Rashi says that dibbur is language of rebuke (lashon kasheh), while amar is the language of comfort (lashon tahamunim) (see, e.g., Rashi on Num. 12:1). Maimonides does not appear to accept this distinction.
9 See also Nahmanides on the current verse, as well as on Gen. 1:3 and 18:17.
or to bring happiness to a large number of people; he finds in himself the cause that moves and urges him to this deed. This degree of divine influence is called “the spirit of the Lord,” and of the person who is under that influence we say that the spirit of the Lord came upon him, clothed him, or rested upon him, or the Lord was with him, and the like. All the judges of Israel possessed this degree, for the following general statement is made concerning them, “The Lord raised up judges for them; and the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them” (Judg. 2:18). Also all the noble chiefs of Israel belonged to this class. The same is distinctly stated concerning some of the judges and the kings: “The spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah” (Judg. 11: 29); of Samson it is said, “The spirit of the Lord came upon him” (Judg. 14: 19); “And the spirit of the Lord came upon Saul when he heard those words” (1 Sam. 11:6). When Amasa was moved by the Holy Spirit to assist David, “A spirit clothed Amasa, who was chief of the captains, and he said, ‘We are yours, David…’” (1 Chron. 12:18).

This faculty was always possessed by Moses from the time he had attained the age of manhood: it moved him to slay the Egyptian, and to prevent evil from the two men that quarreled. It was so strong that, after he had fled from Egypt out of fear, and arrived in Midian, a trembling stranger, he could not restrain himself from interfering when he saw wrong being done; he could not bear it: “And Moses arose and came to their defense” (Exod. 2:17) (Guide 2:45).

2:21. Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. — see at Exod. 4:19.

2:24. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. — For Maimonides’ understanding of the phrase “God heard,” see at Exod. 22:21-23.

2:25. God looked upon [va-yar] the Israelites, and God took notice of them. — [Maimonides is commenting on the fact that Onkelos translates va-yar in this verse as u-glei kadam, “it was revealed” before God] … as regards the verb “to see” [ra’ah], his [Onkelos’s] renderings vary in a remarkable manner, and I was unable to discern his principle or method. In some instances he translates literally, “and God saw.” In others he paraphrases “it was revealed before the Lord.”

The use of the phrase “and God saw” [haza] by Onkelos is sufficient evidence that the term haza in Aramaic is homonymous, and that it denotes mental perception as well as the sensation of sight. This being the case, I am surprised that, in some instances avoiding the literal rendering, he substituted for it: “And it was revealed before the Lord.” When I, however, examined the various readings in the version of Onkelos, which I either saw myself or heard from others during the time of my studies, I found that the term “to see” when connected with wrong, injury, or violence, was paraphrased, “It was manifest before the Lord.”

There is no doubt that the term haza in Aramaic denotes complete apprehension and reception of the object in the state in which it has been perceived. When Onkelos, therefore, found the verb “to see” connected with the object “wrong,” he did not render it literally, but paraphrased it, “It was revealed before the Lord.” Now, I noticed that in all instances of the Torah where “seeing” is ascribed to God, he translated it literally, except those instances which I will mention to you: “For my affliction was revealed before the Lord” (Gen. 29:32); “For all that Laban does to you is revealed before Me” (Gen. 31:12). Although the first person in the sentence refers to the angel [and not to God], Onkelos does not ascribe to him that perception which implies complete comprehension of the object, because the object is “iniquity”: “The oppression of the children of Israel was known to the Lord” (Exod. 2:25); “The oppression of My
people was surely known to me” (Exod. 3:7), “The affliction is known to Me” (Exod. 3:9), “Their oppression is known to Me” (Exod. 4:31) (Guide 1:48).
Exodus 3

3:2. And an angel of the LORD appeared to him… — Even Moses our teacher received his first prophecy through an angel: “And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in the flame of fire.” It is therefore clear that the belief in the existence of angels precedes the belief in prophecy, and the latter precedes belief in the Law (Guide 3:45).10

… in a flame of fire [be-labbat eish] out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. — The Hebrew lev [heart] is a homonymous noun, signifying that organ which is the source of life to all beings possessing a heart, e.g., “And thrust them through the heart of Absalom” (1 Sam. 18:14). This organ being in the middle of the body, the word has been figuratively applied to express “the middle part of a thing,” e.g., “unto the midst [lev] of heaven” (Deut. 4:11); “the midst [labbat] of fire” (Exod. 3:2) (Guide 1:39).

Maimonides says that in addition to the two meanings above, lev can mean “thought” (e.g., 2 Kings 5:26), “counsel” (e.g., 1 Chron. 12:38), “will” (e.g., Jer. 3:15), and “understanding” (Eccl. 10:2). He concludes, “It must, in each passage, be explained in accordance with the context.”

Ibn Ezra, like Maimonides, understands lev as emotza, “center” (long comm. to Exod. 15:8). However Rashi, on the phrase “heart of the sea” (Exod. 15:8) assumes the word “heart” refers to the sea’s attribute of strength, rather than its center.

3:6. He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon [me-habbit] God. — This verb [hibbit], when applied to God [as the object], is employed in this figurative sense; e.g., “to look [me-habbit] upon God” (Guide 1:4).

FURTHER: … we must understand the words, “And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God,” though retaining also the literal meaning of the passage, that Moses was afraid to gaze at the light which appeared to his eye; but it must on no account be assumed that the Being which is exalted far above every imperfection can be perceived by the eye. This act of Moses was highly commended by God, who bestowed on him a well deserved portion of His goodness, as it is said, “And the similitude of the LORD shall he behold” (Num. 12:8). This, say our Sages,11 was the reward for having previously hidden his face, lest he should gaze at the Eternal (Guide 1:5).

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10 Earlier, Maimonides writes, “Some prophets see angels in the form of man, e.g., “And behold three men stood by him” (Gen. 18:2); others perceive an angel as a fearful and terrible being, e.g., “And his countenance wasas the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible” (Judg. 13:6); others see them as fire, e.g., “And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire” See Maimonides Between Philosophy and Halakhah: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchiks’ Lectures on the Guide of the Perplexed by Lawrence J. Kaplan, pp. 162-163, where Rabbi Soloveitchik is critical of Maimonides’ view of angels.

11 Rabbi Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: As a reward for three [pious acts in Exod. 3:6] Moses was privileged to obtain three favors: In reward of “And Moses hid his face,” he obtained the brightness of his face (Exod. 34:29-30). In reward of “for he was afraid,” he obtained the privilege that “They were afraid to come near him” (Exod. 5:30). In reward of “to look upon God,” he obtained “the similitude of the LORD does he behold” (Num. 12:8) (Berakhot 7a).
Maimonides’ understanding of “looking at God” remains unclear to me. “Looking at God” cannot be literal, because God has no body and therefore cannot be seen. And the figurative sense of verbs for “to see” (i.e., *ra’ah*, *ḥazah*, and *hibbit*) means “to understand,” but God is too great to be understood. (See also at Exod. 6:18.)

3:7. And God said, “I have surely seen the affliction My people that are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their oppressors for I have known their sorrows.” — See at Exod. 2:25. Furthermore, Joseph Albo writes, “... though Israel had sinned and were not deserving at that time of such great deliverance, nevertheless God saved them of His own accord as if He was affected by their trouble and misery, as we read, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of My people that are in Egypt...’” (*Ikkarim* 2:14). This is an example of Maimonides-style “as-if theology” being applied to a biblical passage.

3:9. The cry of the Israelites has now come to Me... — See at Exod. 2:25.

... I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress [laḥatz] them. — [Maimonides is explaining the meaning of *mi-doḥak* (M. *Ma’aser Sheni* 2:6)] And they said *mi-doḥak* (*Maaser Sheni* 2:6), meaning “great need” [*tzorekh gadol*]. The translation [of Onkelos] for *laḥatz* is “distress” [*duḥka*] (*PhM Maaser Sheni* 2:6).12

3:12. And he said, “Surely I will be with you... — The prophets must have had these two forces, courage and intuition, highly developed, and these were still more strengthened when they were under the influence of the Active Intellect. Their courage was so great that, e.g., Moses, with only a staff in his hand, dared to address a great king in his desire to deliver a nation from his service. He was not frightened or terrified, because he had been told, “I will be with you” (*Guide* 2:38).

... and this shall be a sign to you... — Consider how the action of Divine Providence is described in reference to every incident in the lives of the Patriarchs, to their occupations, and even to their passions, and how God promised to direct His attention to them. Thus God said to Abraham, “I am your shield” (Gen. 15:1); to Isaac, “I will be with you, and I will bless you” (Gen. 26:3); to Jacob, “I am with you, and will keep you” (Gen. 28:15); to [Moses] the chief of the prophets, “Surely I will be with you, and this shall be a sign to you” (Exod. 3:12); to Joshua, “As I was with Moses, so I shall be with you” (Josh. 1:5). It is clear that in all these cases the action of Providence has been proportional to man’s perfection (*Guide* 3:18).

... and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you; when you have brought the people out of Egypt... — ... all Israel were witnesses to [the appointment of] Moses, our teacher, at the [revelation] at Mount Sinai, and it was unnecessary for him to perform any further wonders for them. This concept [is alluded to in the interchange between God and Moses at the revelation of the burning bush]. At the beginning of his prophecy, the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him the signs [and wonders] to perform in Egypt and told him, “And they will listen to your voice” (Exod. 3:18).

12 Menahem translates *laḥatz* as *matzok*, “distress.”
Moses, our teacher, knew that one who believes [in another person] because of signs has apprehension in his heart; he has doubts and suspicions. Therefore, he sought to be released from the mission, saying, “They will not believe me” (Exod. 4:1), until the Holy One, blessed be He, informed him that these wonders [were intended only as a temporary measure] until they left Egypt. After they would leave, they would stand on this mountain [i.e., the mountain referenced at Exod. 19:9] and all doubts which they had about him would be removed. [God told him:] Here, I will give you a sign so that they will know that I truly sent you from the outset, and thus, no doubts will remain in their hearts. This is what is meant by “This will be your sign that I sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain” (Yesodei ha-Torah 8:1-2; see further at Exod. 19:9).

… you shall worship God on this mountain.” — see at Exod. 14:3.

3:13-14. And Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM THAT I AM.”” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.'” — ... Moses [said], “And they shall ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say unto them” (Exod. 3:13). How far was this question, anticipated by Moses, appropriate, and how far was he justified in seeking to be prepared with the answer? …

When God appeared to our teacher Moses, and commanded him to address the people and to bring them the message, Moses replied that he might first be asked to prove the existence of God in the Universe, and that only after doing so he would be able to announce to them that God had sent him. For all men, with few exceptions, were ignorant of the existence of God; their highest thoughts did not extend beyond the heavenly sphere, its forms or its influences. They could not yet emancipate themselves from sensation, and had not yet attained to any intellectual perfection. Then God taught Moses how to teach them, and how to establish among them the belief in the existence of Himself, namely, by saying Ehyeh asher Ehyeh (Exod. 3:14), a name derived from the verb hayah in the sense of “existing,” for the verb hayah denotes “to be,” and in Hebrew no difference is made between the verbs “to be” and “to exist.”

The principal point in this phrase is that the same word which denotes “existence” is repeated as an attribute. The word asher [“that”] corresponds to the Arabic illadi and illati, and is an incomplete noun that must be completed by another noun: it may be considered as the subject of the predicate which follows. The first noun which is to be described is ehyeh: the second, by which the first is described, is likewise ehyeh, the identical word, as if to show that the object which is to be described and the attribute by which it is described are in this case necessarily identical. This is, therefore, the expression of the idea that God exists, but not in the ordinary sense of the term: or, in other words, He is “the existing Being which is the existing Being,” that is to say, the Being whose existence is absolute. The proof which he was to give consisted in demonstrating that there is a Being of absolute existence, that has never been and never will be without existence. This I will clearly prove.

13 Text from ellipsis is placed at Exod. 4:1.
14 Nahmanides objects to this interpretation, writing, “In my opinion, the elders of Israel never doubted the existence of the Creator, as the Rabbi [Maimonides] said.” Rather, according to Nahmanides, the question is what attribute of God Moses should refer to when saying he was sent by God.
15 Maimonides says that Ehyeh is one of the seven names of God that cannot be erased (Yesodei ha-Torah 6:2). The Talmud says the full name Ehyeh asher Ehyeh cannot be erased (Shevuot 35a, based on Deut. 12:3), but says nothing about the name Ehyeh. The Kesef Mishnah surmises the inconsistency is because Maimonides had a variant text of the Talmud.
God thus showed Moses the proofs by which His existence would be firmly established among the wise men of His people. Therefore the explanation of the name is followed by the words, “Go, gather the elders of Israel” (Exod. 3:16), and by the assurance that the elders would understand what God had shown to him, and would accept it, as is stated in the words, “And they will hearken to your voice.” Then Moses replied as follows: They will accept the doctrine that God exists convinced by these intelligible proofs. “But,” said Moses, “by what means shall I be able to show that this existing God has sent me?” Thereupon God gave him the sign. We have thus shown that the question, “What is His name” means “Who is that Being, which according to your belief has sent you?”

The sentence, “What is His name?” (instead of “Who is He?”) has here been used as a tribute of praise and homage, as though it had been said: Nobody can be ignorant of Your essence and of Your real existence; if, nevertheless, “I ask what is Your name?” I mean, “What idea is to be expressed by the name?” (Moses considered it inappropriate to say to God that any person was ignorant of God’s existence, and therefore described the Israelites as ignorant of God’s name, not as ignorant of Him who was called by that name.) (Guide 1:63).

There are two main strands of interpreting the phrase I AM THAT I AM. For Philo (Moses 1.74ff), Maimonides (Guide 1:63), Joseph Albo (Ikkarim 2:27), and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik,16 this is a statement of God’s absoluteness, either about His essence or His eternity.

However, according to the Talmud (Berakhot 9b), Rashi, and Nahmanides, the phrase I AM THAT I AM is a relational phrase; in effect, God is saying, “I am the One that will be with you and the Jewish people always.” For them, the phrase does not teach anything about God’s essence (as Maimonides and others claim), and in a time of distress it seems the Jewish people did not need a lesson in philosophy, but emotional assurance and inspiration that God would be receptive to their cries, act for their sake, and bring about their redemption.

Yet it might be possible to resolve the two sides. The Kuzari writes, “The name Ehyeh... is to prevent the human mind from pondering over the incomprehensible but real entity. When Moses asked: ‘And they shall say to me, What is His name?’ the answer was: Why should they ask concerning things they are unable to grasp? ... ‘Say to them Ehyeh,’ which means ‘I am that I am,’ the existing one, existing for you whenever you seek Me” (Kuzari 4:3). The Kuzari concedes it is a statement about God’s essence, though he posits that God’s essence is not something to be examined too closely; hence the name is almost a diversion. In a similar vein, Seferno writes, “I am an independent existence, not subject to influences by other phenomena or even caused by them. Seeing that this is so, it follows that I love existing, and beings that exist. As a corollary to this love of Mine for existence, it follows that I deeply resent anything or anyone who tries to terminate such an existing being from continuing to do so.” Seferno’s commentary seems to contain both sides of the debate—that of Maimonides and that of Rashi—and argues that one argument flows naturally from the other.

3:15. God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations. The Patriarchs... attained this degree of perfection; they approached God in such a manner that with them the name of God became known in the

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16 “Confrontation,” p. 10.
world. Thus we read in Scripture: “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.... This is My name forever” (Exod. 3:15). Their mind was so identified with the knowledge of God, that He made a lasting covenant with each of them (Guide 3:51).

One must ask: what is the difference in revelation between the Patriarchs and Moses? Of course, for Maimonides, the prophecy of Moses was categorically different than any other prophecy. But is there also a difference in function? That too is answered in the affirmative. The Patriarchs were able to establish the name of God in the world, but Moses was tasked with something even harder: he was sent not just to pave the path for monotheism, but to actually introduce and impose belief to the Israelites, who would question everything about Moses’ mission, from his initial dispatch onwards, and trouble him for most of his prophetic career (see Guide 1:63, quoted at Exod. 4:1).

3:16. Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have surely taken notice [pakod pakadti] of you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. — [Maimonides is discussing the fact that on Rosh Hashanah, we recite blessings in the themes of Malkhiyyot (Kingship), Zikhronot (Remembrance), and Shofarot (Trumpets). He discusses which verses can be included in the blessing of Zikhronot:] Verses using p-k-d cannot be used for Zikhronot, such as “I have surely taken notice [pakod pakadti] of you” (Shofar 3:9). 17

FURTHER: God… showed Moses the proofs by which His existence would be firmly established among the wise men of His people (Guide 1:63, quoted at length on Exod. 3:13-14).

3:18. They will listen to your voice; and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, “The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.” — See Guide 1:63, quoted at 4:1.

17 Based on BT Rosh Hashanah 32a; however that source quotes Gen. 21:1, not Exod. 3:16. In many instances, the verbs z-k-r and p-k-d can be used interchangeably; however Nahmanides points out at least one difference between these words; see his commentary to Exod. 20:5.
Exodus 4

4:1. Then Moses answered, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’ — Moses, our teacher, knew that one who believes [in another person] because of signs has apprehension in his heart; he has doubts and suspicions. Therefore, he sought to be released from the mission, saying, “They will not believe me” (Exod. 4:1), until the Holy One, blessed be He, informed him that these wonders [were intended only as a temporary measure] until they left Egypt (Yesodei ha-Torah 8:2; see further at Exod. 19:9).

FURTHER: Any prophet who arises and tells us that God has sent him does not have to [prove himself by] performing wonders like those performed by Moses, our teacher [referenced in Exodus 4], or like the wonders of Elijah or Elisha, which altered the natural order. Rather, the sign of [the truth of his prophecy] will be the fulfillment of his prediction of future events, as, “How shall we recognize that a prophecy was not spoken by God?” (Deut. 18:21).

Therefore, if a person whose [progress] in the service of God makes him worthy of prophecy arises [and claims to be a prophet]—if he does not intend to add to or diminish [the Torah], but to serve God through the commandments of the Torah, we do not tell him, “Split the sea for us, revive the dead, or the like, and then we will believe in you.” Instead, we tell him, “If you are a prophet, tell us what will happen in the future.” He makes his statements, and we wait to see whether [his “prophecy”] comes to fruition or not. Should even a minute particular of his “prophecy” not materialize, he is surely a false prophet. If his entire prophecy materializes, we should consider him a true [prophet] (Yesodei ha-Torah 10:1).

There is a question that must be asked about Maimonides’ perspective on signs. In Yesodei ha-Torah 8:2, he writes, “Moses, our teacher, knew that one who believes [in another person] because of signs has apprehension in his heart; he has doubts and suspicions,” and he reiterates in Yesodei ha-Torah 10:1 that we do not require a prophet to perform signs and miracles in order to be believed. However Maimonides elsewhere writes, “But, said Moses, by what means shall I be able to show that this existing God has sent me? Thereupon God gave him the sign” (Guide 1:63; quoted next). This problem can be resolved by saying that according to Maimonides, a sign is sufficient for preliminary reliance (“belief”) but does not impart certainty (“knowledge”).

FURTHER: Moses was correct in declaring, “But, behold, they will not believe me, for they will say, ‘The Lord has not appeared unto you’” (Exod. 4:1), for any man claiming the authority of a prophet must expect to meet with such an objection so long as he has not given a proof of his mission.

Again, if the question, as appears at first sight, referred only to the name, as a mere utterance of the lips, the following dilemma would present itself: either the Israelites knew the name [of God], or they had never heard it. If the name was known to them, they would perceive in it no argument in favor of the mission of Moses, his knowledge and their knowledge of the divine name being the same. If, on the other hand, they had never heard it mentioned, and if the knowledge of it was to prove the mission of Moses, what evidence would they have that this was really the name of God? Moreover, after God had made known that name to Moses, and had told him, “Go and gather the elders of Israel” (Exod. 3:16), “and they shall hearken to your voice” (Exod. 3:18), he replied, “Behold, they will not believe me nor hearken unto
my voice” (Exod. 4:1), although God had told him, “And they will hearken to your voice.” Whereupon God answered, “What is that in your hand?” and he said, “A rod” (Exod. 4:2).

In order to obviate this dilemma, you must understand what I am about to tell you. You know how widespread the opinions of the Sabeans were in those days. All men, except a few individuals, were idolaters, that is to say, they believed in spirits, in man’s power to direct the influences of the heavenly bodies, and in the effect of talismans. Anyone who in those days laid claim to authority, based it either, like Abraham, on the fact that, by reasoning and by proof, he had been convinced of the existence of a Being who rules the whole Universe, or that some spiritual power was conferred upon him by a star, by an angel, or by a similar agency; but no one could establish his claim on prophecy, that is to say, on the fact that God had spoken to him, or had entrusted a mission to him. Before the days of Moses, no such assertion had ever been made.

You must not be misled by the statements that God spoke to the Patriarchs, or that He had appeared to them. For you do not find any mention of a prophecy which appealed to others, or which directed them. Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, or any other person before them did not tell the people, “God said unto me, you shall do this thing, or you shall not do that thing” or “God has sent me to you.” Far from it! For God spoke to them on nothing but of what especially concerned them, i.e., He communicated to them things relating to their perfection, directed them in what they should do, and foretold them what the condition of their descendants would be: nothing beyond this. They guided their fellow men by means of argument and instruction, as is implied, according to the interpretation generally received among us, in the words “and the souls that they had gotten in Haran” (Gen. 12:5) (Guide 1:63).

Nehama Leibowitz points out a seeming contradiction between God saying “They will listen to your voice” (Exod. 3:18) and Moses saying “perhaps they will not believe me or listen to me” (Exod. 4:1). Rashi and some midrashim believe that Moses acted improperly. Other commentaries, including Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Nahmanides “try to show there is no contradiction between the Almighty’s statement and Moses’ reply.” She continues that Maimonides “makes a distinction between the authenticity of God and that of His emissary. The people would believe in God, in the message of ehyeh asher ehyeh, but not in Moses.”

FURTHER: … although they were corrupt as all this [i.e., they neglected circumcision and committed incest (see at Exod. 12:48)], God rebuked Moses for saying, “What if they do not believe me?” (Exod. 4:1). And He retorted: They are believers, children of believers (cf. Amos 7:14); believers as Scripture reports, “and the people… believed” (Exod. 14:31); sons of believers, “because he believed, He reckoned it to his merit” (Gen. 15:6). But you will end up not believing; it is told in Scripture, “Because you did not believe Me enough to affirm My sanctity” (Num. 20:12). In fact, he [Moses] was punished at once, as the Rabbis understood, “He who suspects the innocent suffers physically. What is the proof? Moses” (Epistle on Martyrdom, ch. 2).

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19 Abraham Halkin writes, “This is another illustration of the method of taking an apt phrase out of its context” (Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides, p. 36). See at Exod. 3:13-14. Obviously, Maimonides purpose in writing an encouraging letter might differ from his general analysis in a more dispassionate context.

4:4. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail”—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand. — … miracles in the naturally impossible class will not last at all, nor will they tarry or remain with their features. For, if they persisted, they would open the way to suspicion. If the rod remained a serpent, the uncertainty would be entertained that it had been originally a serpent, so that the miracle is achieved by its return to a rod, “And it became a rod in his hand” (Exod. 4:4). If, in the incident of the followers of Korah, the ground had burst asunder, and stayed open for good, the miracle would be challenged. In fact, the miracle was completed when the ground returned to its former condition: “The earth closed over them” (Num. 16:33); so also “And at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state” (Exod. 14:27). Because of this fact, I refuse to accept the duration of an unnatural situation....

Maimonides is saying that the return to the natural order is an even greater component than the original miraculous transformation. See also Rashi on Exod. 4:7.

4:6. And the Lord said to him furthermore, “Place now your hand in your bosom.” And he put his hand in his bosom; and when he took it out, behold it was white as snow. — [The Sages said:] “Anyone who carries on a dispute transgresses a prohibition, as it is written, ‘Do not be like Korah and his congregation,’” (Sanhedrin 110a, quoting Num. 17:5), [which] is also a type of hermeneutics…. Our Sages explained that God notified that anyone in future generations who disagrees with [the status of] the priests and claims it for himself will not meet the same fate as Korah and will not be punished by being swallowed up (Num. 16:32). His punishment will instead be, “As God said to him through [literally, ‘by the hand of’] Moses,” i.e., tzara’at [which is white], as God, may He be exalted, told Moses, “Place now your hand in your bosom […] and when he took it out, behold it was white as snow],” and as is explained regarding Uzziah (2 Chron 26:16-21; Tanḥuma, “Tzav” 15) (ShM, Neg. 45; similarly at ShM, Shoresh 8).

The Hebrew word tzara’at is generally (and loosely) translated as “leprosy,” based on the divinely imposed skin disease, described at Leviticus 13 and elsewhere. Rashi sees tzara’at as a punishment for Moses maligning the Jewish people by questioning whether they will believe God had sent him.

Does Maimonides, like Rashi, interpret this tzara’at as a form of punishment? Maimonides merely writes Moses’ tzara’at is a sign that when future people agitate against the priesthood, they will be punished. However, there is another Midrash, quoted by Rashi (Exod. 4:14), that Moses was destined for the priesthood but lost it during his hesitations. Perhaps Maimonides would say that Moses’ protestions about his own worthiness for the mission is a form of agitation about the priesthood for

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22 See at Exod. 4:14, where it is explained that according to Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai, Moses lost the priesthood because of his recalcitrance. The Midrash, quoted above, says that the punishment for complaining about priesthood is tzara’at, and it would be worth investigating if Maimonides believes that Moses was punished with tzara’at for the same reason, or if the two interpretations are unrelated.
which he was punished. This might carry more weight when one asks why the lesson about the priesthood needed to be taught at this moment.

More likely, Maimonides does not see any punishment here, since elsewhere he writes, “The word *tzara‘at* is a general word that includes many meanings which are not related, for whitening of the skin is called *tzara‘at*, some hair falling out of the head or beard is called *tzara‘at*, and the change of color in clothing or a house is called *tzara‘at*” (*Tumat Tzara‘at* 16:10). Furthermore, Saadiah on this verse understands *tzara‘at* merely as “white,” without an implication of disease, and R. Abraham (Maimonides’ son) quotes that interpretation approvingly.23

4:11. Then the *LORD* said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the *LORD*?” — [We] condemn lowness of speech, and justly so, for speech is likewise peculiar to man and a boon which God granted to him that he may be distinguished from the rest of living creatures. Thus God says, “Who gave a mouth to man?” (Exod. 4:11); and the prophet declares, “The *LORD* God has given me a learned tongue” (Isa. 1:4). This gift, therefore, which God gave us in order to enable us to perfect ourselves, to learn and to teach, must not be employed in doing that which is for us most degrading and perfectly disgraceful; we must not imitate the songs and tales of ignorant and lascivious people. It may be suitable to them, but is not fit for those who are told, “And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). Those who employ the faculty of thinking and speaking in the service of that sense which is no honor to us, who think more than necessary of drink and love, or even sing of these things: they employ and use the divine gift in acts of rebellion against the Giver, and in the transgression of His commandments. To them the following words may be applied: “And I multiplied her silver and gold, which they prepared for Baal” (Hos. 2:10) (*Guide* 3:8).

FURTHER: [The following is from Maimonides’ *Epistle on Martyrdom*, in which he is criticizing a contemporary of his, and considers quoting him, but is afraid of being too verbose.] — [Speech is] the gift that God, blessed be He, bestowed on mankind… “Who gives speech to mortals? … Is it not I, the *LORD*?” A man should be more sparing with his speech than of his money, and should not speak much yet do little. Indeed the Sage [i.e., King Solomon] has condemned verbosity with little content in his declaration, “Just as dreams come with much brooding, so does foolish utterance come with much speech” (Eccl. 5:2). You know of course what Job’s friends said as he talked on and on: “Is a multitude of words unanswerable? Must a loquacious person be right” (Job 11:2). “Job does not speak with knowledge; his words lack understanding” (Job 34:35) (*Epistle on Martyrdom*).24

There are many ways that “man” has been defined. For example, Rene Descartes defined man as a “thinking thing.” However, Jewish tradition has historically classified created beings into four categories: *domem* (inanimate objects), *tzome‘ah* (plants), *hai* (animals), and *medabber* (humans). The word *medabber* used for “mankind,” is the same root as the word for “speech.” Maimonides is consistent with this classification, since he views the ability to speak as a gift given uniquely to man.

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23 Dr. Isodore Twersky classifies this as a type of “explanatory statement” that “contain[s] a juridical definition or semantic clarification which has clear repercussions for the mechanics and dynamics of classification” (*Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)*, p. 282).

FURTHER: [In this passage, Maimonides has first said that speech is a quality which is created from nothing, a point which he has already made in Guide 3:8 and in the Epistle on Martyrdom. In Guide 3:10, Maimonides starts the section by discussing whether properties and their opposites are both said to exist. For example are lightness and darkness both said to exist, or does only lightness exist and darkness is merely the absence of light. He then quotes this passage:] … here the creation took place from nothing. Only in this sense can non-existence be said to be produced by a certain action of an agent. In the same way we must explain the following passage: “Who has made man’s mouth? or who makes the dumb, or the deaf, or the seeing” (Exod. 4:11). The passage can also be explained as follows: Who has made man able to speak? or can create him without the capacity of speaking, i.e., create a substance that is incapable of acquiring this property? for he who produces a substance that cannot acquire a certain property may be called the producer of that privation (Guide 3:10).

Maimonides is driven by a question that is both exegetical and philosophical: how can one say that the verb “place” (simah) can apply to muteness, which is the absence of a quality; how can an absence be created ab initio?25

In the present verse, what does it mean to “create muteness”? Nahmanides quotes Maimonides’ interpretation without qualification. Chavel, in his translation of Nahmanides, writes, “The difficulty presents itself: Since the absence of a property is nothing positive and dumbness is the lack of the property of speech, how can one speak of ‘the making’ of dumbness when it is nonexistent? See Rambam’s Moreh Nebuchim III, 10, where the author discusses this problem. The answer, quoted here by Ramban, that it refers back to ‘the man,’ suggesting, ‘Who can create a man without the capacity of speech?’ is mentioned there by Rambam.”

Rashi, based on the Tanhuma, may have been motivated by a similar concern that “muteness” cannot be “created.” Rashi’s interpretation resolves this philosophical difficulty, taking a different approach: “Who made Pharaoh dumb, that he did not exert any effort [to issue his] command to kill you? And [who made] his servants deaf, so that they did not hear his commandment concerning you? And who made the executioners blind, that they did not see when you fled from the [executioner’s] platform and escaped?” (Rashi based on Tanhuma, “Shemot” 10).26

4:14. Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. — [Maimonides does not quote this verse but the following comment can be applied to the phrase “the anger of the LORD was kindled”:] He [God] performs acts similar to those which, when performed by us, originate in certain psychical dispositions, in jealousy, desire for retaliation, revenge, or anger: they are in accordance with the guilt of those who are to be punished, and not the result of any emotion: for He is above all defect! (Guide 1:54).

25 On the philosophical side, the question of privation goes back at least to Aristotle (Metaphysics, Book Delta, XXII “Privation”).
26 This analysis is based in part of the notes to Nahmanides’ commentary in the Torat Hayyim edition.
Maimonides is addressing the famous question of what it means for God to get angry, if according to the Aristotelian model, God doesn’t have emotions. Maimonides concludes that God behaves in a way that if the same action is performed by a person, it would be performed out of anger.

This is only a partial answer, because it does not directly address the question of what action God took as a result of His “anger” in this case. We will present two possible answers. First, The Talmud states: “R. Joshua b. Korha said: Wherever it says haron af [fierce anger] in the Torah there is an imprint [roshem, a lasting impression] but here (i.e., Exod. 4:14), there is no imprint. R. Simeon b. Yohai said: There is an imprint in this instance too, for it is said, ‘Is there not Aaron your brother the Levite?’ (Exod. 4:14). Now surely he was a priest [kohen]? Rather, this is what He meant: I had said that you would be a priest and he a Levite; now however, he will be a priest and you a Levite” (Zevahim 102a). According to this approach, the result of God’s anger is Moses’ loss of the priesthood.

A second answer is that Moses was punished as being aral sefatayim (Exod. 6:12). R. Abraham suggests that this was Moses’ punishment, which would be in keeping with the theological value of “measure for measure.” In Exod. 4:10, Moses demurs from his mission, saying he is not eloquent (lo ish devarim anokhi… kevd peh u-khav lashon anokhi). In the next two verses God reassures Moses that speech is a divine gift and that God will be with Moses throughout the process. Moses still asks to be excused. At that point, God becomes angry. According to R. Abraham, the anger is manifest in a punishment that Moses’ compromised ability to speak is further impaired, as he becomes aral sefatayim.

Nahmanides sees the anger manifest in God’s not removing the speech impediment: “The correct interpretation appears to me to be that God said to Moses, ‘Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf… ? Is it not I, the Lord’ (Exod. 4:11). ‘Who does all this? I could heal you. But now since you did not want to be healed, nor have you prayed to me about it, go and I will be with your mouth (Exod. 4:12), and I will cause you success in My mission.’ It is also possible that there is a hint in the verse, ‘the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses’ (Exod. 4:14), that He did not want to heal him, and that He sent him against his will” (on Exod. 4:14).

Thus there are two ways to understand God’s anger in this verse: (1) Moses’ loss of the priesthood (R. Simeon b. Yohai), (2) the speech impediment, either being imposed (R. Abraham) or not being removed (Nahmanides).

This approach is taken by Onkelos, Rashi (le-rav u-le-sar, “a master and a minister”), R. Saadiah, and Rashbam (sar ve-shofet, “minister and judge”). See however Ibn Ezra (long) and Seforno.

4:19. The LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt… — One who vows not to benefit from his neighbor can only have the vow absolved in his [neighbor’s] presence. The Sages learned this from what is written, “Go back to Egypt” (Exod. 4:19). He [God] said, “In Midian you made your vow; now go

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27 Rashi in his commentary on this current verse quotes this talmudic passage. In his commentary on the Talmud, Rashi points out that roshem means different forms of punishment or curse.
and annul your vow in Midian,” as is says, “And Moses was content [va-yo’el] to dwell with the man” (Exod. 2:21) (PhM Nedarim 9:4).

4:21. And the LORD said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. — It is possible that a person will commit a great sin or many sins until judgement is is rendered before the true Judge, which will be punishment against this sinner for these sins that he did voluntarily and deliberately., which prevent him from repenting and do not allow him the possibility to repent from his wickedness until he dies and is destroyed in his sin [i.e., he dies in a state of sinfulness without repentance].

This is implied by what the Holy One, blessed is He, said to Isaiah, “Make the heard of this people fat” (Isa. 6:10). And it says, “They mocked the messengers of God, scorned His words, scoffed at His prophets until the anger of God mounted up against His people until there was no remedy” (2 Chron. 36:16). This means that they sinned willingly and continued to err until repentence—the “remedy” [marpei]—was prevented from them.

Therefore, it is written in the Torah, “And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart” (Exod. 14:4). Because he sinned willingly [me-atzmo] and inflicted evil on the Israelites who dwelled in his land, as it says, “Come, let us deal wisely with them” (Exod. 1:10), the judgment was given to withhold repentance from him until punishment was inflicted upon him. Therefore the Holy One, Blessed is He, hardened his heart.

And why was this sent by Moses, saying “send [them] and repent” when the Holy One, Blessed is He, had already stated that he [Pharaoh] would not let them go, as it says, “I know that you and your servants [still do not fear God]” (Exod. 9:30). “For this reason I have established you to inform the inhabitants of the world that when the Holy One, Blessed is He, withholds repentance from a sinner, he cannot repent but rather dies in his state of wickedness as he began….

In sum, God did not decree that Pharaoh act wickedly towards Israel, nor Sihon to sin in his land (Deut. 2:30), nor on the Canaanites to commit abominations (Josh. 11:20), nor on the Israelites to worship idols (2 Kings 18:37). Rather, they all sinned willingly [me-atzman], and they all become liable to have repentance withheld from them (Teshuvah 6:3; Maimonides makes a substantively similar point in Shemonah Perakim, ch. 8).

How could God deny Pharaoh the possibility of repentance, when freedom of the will is one of the cornerstones of religious theology? Maimonides writes that Pharaoh’s heart was hardened only after Pharaoh himself began to sin earlier, when he said, “Come, let us deal shrewdly with them” (Exod. 1:10). When Pharaoh and his advisors exercised his own free will to oppress the Jews, he inculcated evil behavior in himself, which inhibited his own ability to repent. Maimonides writes, “they willingly sinned, multiplying their iniquity until it was obliged to hold back their repentance, [which is referred to as] the ‘remedy.’” A few other opinions worthy of comparison:

• **Rashi:** “Pharaoh acted wickedly and defied Me, and it was revealed before Me that there is no goodwill among the heathens to repent with a full heart. It is better that his heart should be

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28 Based on Nedarim 65a, understanding shevuah and allah as synonyms. Maimonides codifies this law in Shevuot 6:7 and Nedarim 4:5, but without quoting the verse. Shadal sees a difference between allah and shevu’ah (see his comments at Gen. 24:41).
hardened so that I may multiply My signs against him, so that you will recognize My strength. And this is the trait of the Holy One, Blessed be He: He brings punishments on the nations of the world so that Israel should hear and be awed, as it says, ‘I have cut off nations, their towers are desolate… I have said: You shall surely fear revere Me and receive correction’ (Zeph. 3:6-7). Nonetheless, regarding the first five plagues, it does not say ‘God hardened Pharaoh’s heart,’ but ‘Pharaoh’s heart was hardened’” (on Exod. 7:3).

- **Saadiah:** “Pharaoh needed a bolstering of the spirit in order not to die from the plagues [that befell the Egyptians], but remain alive until the rest of the punishment had been completely visited upon him” (*Emunot ve-De’ot* 4:6).

- **Seforno:** “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart” so that “Pharaoh was strengthened to endure the plagues and not, out of fear of the plagues, send out the Israelites” so that God should make His strength manifest (Seforno on 7:3; see also on the present verse).

Nahmanides appears to quote both Rashi and Maimonides and claim they are both correct: “there are two explanations, and both of them are true. One [i.e., Maimonides] is that Pharaoh in his wickedness had unjustifiably perpetrated such great evils against Israel that justice required that the ways of repentance be withheld from him…. The second explanation [Rashi] is that half of the plagues came upon him because of his transgressions, for in connection with them it is only said, ‘And Pharaoh’s heart was hardened’ (Exod. 7:13, 22, 8:15), ‘And Pharaoh hardened his heart’ (Exod. 8:23, 9:7). Thus Pharaoh refused to let the children of Israel go for the glory of God. But when the plagues began bearing down upon him and he because weary to suffer them, his heart softened and be considered sending them out on account of the onslaught of the plagues, not in order to do the will of his Creator.” (on Exod. 7:3).

According to Maimonides, God begins to harden Pharaoh’s heart here (at Exod. 4:21), as it says, “I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go,” based on Pharaoh’s sin of “dealing shrewdly” at Exod. 1:10. According to Rashi, God does not harden Pharaoh’s heart until the sixth plague. However, according to Rashi (as read by Nahmanides), who says that Pharaoh voluntarily hardened his own heart during the first five plagues, the current verse presents a difficulty. Nahmanides offers the resolution that the current verse is a prophecy about what will happen after the first five plagues. Thus Maimonides’ reading is smoother on the current verse. However, the merit to Rashi’s reading is that God did not harden Pharaoh’s heart until the sixth plague. Furthermore, it appears that Nahmanides understands Rashi as saying the opposite of Maimonides: God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he would be strong enough to withstand the plagues so that God could “multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 7:3), which is also the opinion of Saadiah, Ibn Ezra (short commentary; cf, long commentary), Seforno and Shadal. Thus Maimonides appears to be a minority opinion in arguing that God hardening Pharaoh’s heart is a punishment to remove Pharaoh’s ability to repent.

4:24. On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. —

Come and see how strict is the obligation of circumcision, since our teacher Moses was not granted a temporary reprieve even though they were travelling (*Milah* 3:9).²⁹

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²⁹ Based on the opinion of Rabbi Joshua b. Korhah in *Nedarim* 3:10.
4:25. ... and she cast it at his feet. — [Maimonides understands the word *naga* as having both literal and metaphorical meanings. He uses the word *va-tigga*, “and she cast,” as a literal usage of the root *naga*; see *Guide* 1:18, quoted in part at Exod. 14:10 and Exod. 24:1-2.]

4:31. And the people believed and heard that God had remembered the children of Israel for He had seen their affliction... — For Maimonides’ understanding of the phrase “God heard,” see at Exod. 22:21-23.

... and they bowed down and prostrated [*va-yikdu va-yishtaḥavu*]. — [Maimonides does not quote this verse, but he draws a distinction between *kidah*, “bowing down,” and *hishtaḥavayah*, “prostration”:] What is meant by *hishtaḥavayah* [prostration]? ... [He] sits on the ground and falls on his face towards the ground and he entreats with all sorts of supplications that he desires. “Kneeling” [*keri’ah*] wherever it is mentioned means [falling on ones’ knees]. *Hishtaḥavayah* [prostration] is extending his arms and legs until he is flat with his face on the ground (*Tefillah* 5:13).30

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30 Based on BT *Megillah* 22b. See *Tur, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 131.
Exodus 5

5:2. And Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should listen to His voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.” — See at Exod. 9:27.

5:4. And the king of Egypt said to them, “Why do you, Moses and Aaron, take the people away [tafri’u] from their works? Return to your work. — Maimonides does not quote this verse, but see his comments quoted at Exod. 32:25 on the meaning of para (פָּרָה).

5:12. So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw. — This verse ends with the words le-koshesh kash la-teven, which Onkelos translates as le-gavava gillei le-tivna. The Mishnah uses the phrase ve-ha-megabbev be-yavash, “and one who collects dry herbs” (Shevi’it 9:6), where megabbev is the same root as le-gavava. Maimonides writes that in this Mishnah, megabbev means “gather” (PhM Shevi’it 9:6). The Kapach translation uses the word osef (ף'וס), which means “gather.” Hence the Hebrew le-koshesh corresponds to Targumic Aramaic/Mishnaic Hebrew in the root g-b-b, which in turn corresponds to osef.32

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31 Jastrow suggests that megabbev is used for collecting dry plants, while melakket is used for green plants (p. 203).

32 Elsewhere in his Commentary, Maimonides says gevavah is straw mixed with manure (PhM Kelim 17:1), or just manure (PhM Shabbat 3:1).