

## Rabbi Moses Nahmanides on the Two Glories Dan Merkur

Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (1194-1270) is frequently called by his acronym RaMBaN. He has also been known as Rabbi Moshe Nahmani, Rabbi Moshe Gerondi, and in European languages by his Latin designation Nahmanides. Born in Geronda, Catalonia, he was educated in several traditions of Jewish scholarship, including the teachings of Rashi's descendants, the tosafists of northern France. Nahmanides became a rabbi, the head of a yeshiva (rabbinical school), an expert talmudist, philosopher, kabbalist, biblical commentator, and poet. In addition, he earned his livelihood as a physician. In the 1230s, when a controversy surrounded Maimonides' philosophy, Nahmanides developed a compromise position between the two camps. In 1263, King James of Catalonia required him to respond to the accusations of the apostate Pablo Christiani against Judaism in a public disputation in front of the king and the leaders of the Dominicans and Franciscans. Nahmanides won the disputation, securing the Jews' continued permission to observe their religion in Catalonia, and James awarded him 300 dinars to mark the event. In 1267 Nahmanides visited Acre and Jerusalem, and in 1268 he made Acre his home.<sup>1</sup>

Although most of Nahmanides' writings pertain to talmudic law, he wrote a *Commentary on the Torah* late in his life, which included occasional passages that were informed by his perspective as a kabbalist. Both in the thirteenth century and since, many Jews received their first exposure to the kabbalah through Nahmanides' occasional comments. His discussion of Exodus 16, the biblical chapter on manna, primarily addressed the *pshat* or "simple" meaning of the text, but also included several notable remarks that expressed esoteric concerns.

Commenting on the biblical reference to manna as a trial, Nahmanides rejected the interpretations of Rashi and Maimonides, and instead asserted that the manna:

was a trial to them, since they had no food in the wilderness and were without recourse to any sustenance except the manna, which they knew not from before and had never heard of from their fathers. Each day's quantity came down on its day, and they were eagerly desirous for it. Yet with all this, they hearkened to walk after God to a place of no food.<sup>2</sup>

Nahmanides here ignored the biblical text, which states that the Israelites fled into the desert, only to find themselves without food. He instead alleged that the Israelites went knowingly into the desert because they had faith that God would provide manna. This deliberate misreading of the biblical text provided a means for Nahmanides to express an esoteric teaching. His claim that the Israelites engaged in an act of faith when they relied on God to provide manna, implied that Jews in all subsequent generations have similarly engaged in acts of faith when they have relied on the contents of their experiences of manna.

Nahmanides developed his esoteric argument more fully when he took exception to conventional readings of manna's relation to the vision of the *kabod*, "glory."

"And in the morning, then you shall see the Glory of the Eternal." This does not refer to God's Glory that appeared in the cloud, for that occurred [later] in the day when Aaron spoke to them, "and they looked toward the wilderness and, behold, the Glory of the Eternal appeared in the cloud."<sup>3</sup>

Nahmanides claimed that the Glory that appeared in the morning differed from the glory that was visible in the cloud later in the day.

After reviewing and rejecting the views of Rashi, the Mekhilta, and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, Nahmanides presented his own interpretation of the glory that appeared in the morning.

The correct interpretation appears to me to be that the wonder inherent in the manna was extremely great....The manna..was created for them now; [it was] a new creation in heaven, similar to the process of [the original] Creation. This is the intent of what the Rabbis have said with respect to the manna, i.e., that it was created on the sixth day of creation between sundown and nightfall [Mishnah, Aboth 5:6]. This is why Scripture said...by the great wonder He will do for you in the morning, you will see the Glory of His kingdom, *for what god is there in heaven or on earth that can do according to His works and according to His mighty acts* [Deut 3:24]. By the great and marvellous things that God does, He shows His Glory, similar to that which is written, *I will gather all nations, and all tongues, and they shall come, and shall see My Glory* [Isa 66:18].<sup>4</sup>

Nahmanides asserted that manna was created *ex nihilo* for the Israelites in the wilderness, and that its very existence manifested the glory by its wondrousness. There were then two kinds of divine glory: a kind that could be seen, either with the eyes or in a vision, as for example located in a cloud in the wilderness; and another kind that could be appreciated intellectually, through an experience of wonderment. Nahmanides' categories took for granted the customary distinction in medieval psychology, among things that could be sense perceived, imaged mentally, and conceptualized. He claimed that in addition to the glory that could be sense perceived or imaged mentally, there was also an intelligible kind of glory that could be apprehended only with rational faculty.

Nahmanides might have located his claim that there were two kinds of glory in commentary on a great many passages in the Bible. For example, he discussed the concept of "trial" in commentary on a passage in Genesis, rather than in commentary on the manna episode. His positioning of his teaching about glory in connection with manna had a further and esoteric significance that he signalled by his statement, "The manna..was created for them now; [it was] a new creation." Nahmanides immediately contradicted this statement when he cited the mishnaic teaching that manna was created on the sixth day of creation, and was therefore *not* a new creation in Moses' era. The apparent contradiction was an esoteric signal regarding the secret presence of an unstated meaning. Nahmanides' intention cannot be deduced from his text but would have been self-evident to anyone who had correctly understood Maimonides' discussion of prophecy in *Guide of the Perplexed*. Maimonides asserted that his book discussed the prophecy of prophets other than Moses, and that he had not a word to say regarding the prophecy of Moses, which was in a category of its own. The prophecy of prophets other than Moses consisted, in Maimonides' view, of a psychological process, by which the rational faculty presented materials to the imaginative faculty, resulting in either a dream or a vision of prophecy.<sup>5</sup> The prophecy of Moses, by contrast, was a new creation, a creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>6</sup> When Nahmanides called manna a new creation, he alluded to Maimonides' teaching about the prophecy of Moses.

By the allusion to Maimonides' typology of prophecy, Nahmanides was secretly asserting that glory, in the sense seen in the desert, was consistent with Maimonides' account of the prophecy of prophets other than Moses. It was a natural, psychological phenomenon, a matter of human imagination and mental imagery. At the same time, glory, in the sense of the wondrousness of a new creation, was genuinely divine revelation; and it was not restricted, as Maimonides had claimed, to the prophecy of Moses. Manna or, more precisely, faith in manna made the intelligible glory of a new creation available to whomever might partake. Through manna, anyone might achieve prophecy of the genuinely revelatory type that Maimonides had claimed unique to the experience of Moses.

Following this esoteric defense of the legitimacy of kabbalists' claims to prophecy, Nahmanides went on to present a theosophical account of manna. Indebted to medieval Jewish Neoplatonism, the kabbalah imagined a series of stages by which a supersensible, intellectual light emanates from God and coalesces to become perceptible substances.

Now the manna was a product of that Higher Light which became tangible by the will of its Creator, blessed be He, and thus [according to Rabbi Akiba], both the people who ate the manna and the ministering angels were sustained by the same substance. But Rabbi Yishmael criticized him, since the existence of the ministering angels is not dependent upon something tangible evolving from the Light. Their existence is by means of the Higher Light itself.

It was for this reason [i.e., the heavenly origin of the manna], that the Israelites found in the manna every flavor they desired. The rational power of the soul causes it to cleave to the higher worlds, thus finding restful life and obtaining His favor.<sup>7</sup>

In the last sentence of this quotation, Nahmanides asserted that when the Israelites consumed manna, their souls' rational faculties were able to "cleave," which is to say, unite mystically, with the higher worlds.

Nahmanides also referred explicitly to the psychoactivity of manna in a later passage that reverting to the topic of the creation of manna at the beginning of the world.

The [Higher] Light was made tangible [and assumed the form of the manna], for it is of the Higher Light that Scripture speaks in this language, [such as]: *the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God* [Ezek 1:1]. It may be that the manna was already existing in the heavens [in the form in which it came down], just as the Rabbis have said that it was created on the sixth day of creation between sundown and nightfall.<sup>8</sup>

Here Nahmanides asserted that the coalescence of the higher light to become an edible, material substance had already occurred in heaven before the heavens opened. Nahmanides implied that the biblical prophet Ezekiel saw manna but called it visions of God.

#### Notes

1. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 12 MIN-O (Jerusalem: Keter, & New York: Macmillan Company, 1971), pp. 774-75.
2. Ramban Nachmanides, *Commentary on the Torah: Exodus*, trans. C. Chavel (Brooklyn, NY: Shilo Publishing House, 1973), pp. 221-22.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 225-26.
5. David Bakan, Dan Merkur, and David S. Weiss, *Maimonides' Cure of Souls: Medieval Precursor of Psychoanalysis* (Albany: State University of New York, 2009).
6. Dan Merkur, "Three Types of Theology in Maimonides" (2008), online: [www.danmerkur.com](http://www.danmerkur.com).
7. Ramban Nachmanides, p. 227.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 229.