Amalek and the War Against War
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Mark Twain said that history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes. If this is so, then history has been quite the poet as of late. Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, inevitably calls to mind the horrors of the past and forces the entire world to confront whether this time will be different. Jews, however, are called to do something else. Rather than turn to the past to predict the future, they must look to the Torah to understand the present. Where historians attempt to discover the immutable rules of history, a Jew looks to the Torah and sees the eternal word of God.

Few rabbis have done a more brilliant job of understanding their time through the lens of the Torah than Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel (1882-1945), an important rabbinic figure and brilliant darshan in early twentieth century European Jewry who later moved to Israel and become a leader of Religious Zionism. In watching the news these past weeks, my thoughts turned to a derashah he wrote for Parshat Zakhor about a century ago either during or in the aftermath of World War I. For most of Jewish history, Amalek has remained a figure the Jewish people cannot seem to escape. Anti-semitism in its various forms has kept alive the specter of a nation that strikes the Jewish people without reason or mercy. For many rabbis, Amalek was not a historical relic but a contemporary reality. But where most exuberantly identified Amalek with those who oppressed the Jews, Rav Amiel perceived Amalek as a threat to the world at large. It was not to be identified with a particular person or nation but with an ethos.

“Militarism,” he explains, is “the symbol of Amalek.” Living through the horrors of World War I, as he did, it’s not hard to understand why. Militarism is a worldview that espouses the belief that a people or state should maintain a strong military and use it aggressively to pursue its national interests. It often goes hand in hand with chauvinistic nationalism, and together they often serve as the driving force for why one country invades another. Throughout much of the 19th century, there was a delicate balance of power between countries like Germany, England, France, and Russia, but as each sought to increase its influence and its military might, tensions heightened. When war finally broke out, the great powers relished the opportunity to expand their empires all for the sake of power, no matter the cost in human life. To those not caught up in nationalistic fervor, the needlessness of the bloody war was readily apparent. For Rav Amiel, militarism captures the essence of Amalek, a worldview that sees war as an end unto itself.

Even with a superficial examination we can feel in Amalek the symbol of militarism,

that the sword is not only a means to an end, but the very purpose of life... Those that go out to war do so not because they have to or because they have no choice... only in war can they find a way to distinguish themselves and their ego.\textsuperscript{2}

What distinguishes Amalek from other nations is that it raises its sword not because it must but because it can. Because it is an opportunity to demonstrate its power, its ability to dominate the other. This can be seen, Rav Amiel explains, in the way that Amalek attacked the Jewish people after leaving Egypt. Rather than striking the able-bodied men, Amalek “cut down the stragglers in the back” (Deuteronomy 25:18). They did this not to achieve a military objective but because the stragglers represented those too physically weak to keep up. Their very existence was an affront to Amalek because, “Amalek hates the weak... and desires to be amongst those who oppress others.”\textsuperscript{3} According to Rav Amiel, Amalek represents a will to power that sees war and violence as an ultimate good, because it separates the strong from the weak.

A century later, it’s not hard to see Russia’s actions in the picture that Rav Amiel paints. Putin’s propaganda is built around the image of a strong and mighty Russia with him as the powerful leader at its helm. Dictatorial in rule, his authority is legitimated by his toughness and a willingness to use violence against all who oppose him both inside his borders and beyond. Ukraine’s existence is a threat not because of its military but because of its democracy, a fact that makes it weak in Putin’s eyes and an affront to Russia’s honor. War presents the opportunity for Putin to demonstrate Russia’s greatness and make clear to the entire world that those who are weak must bend to those who are strong. No one knows where this war will take the world, but we all know the profound devastation it can leave in its wake.

What then is the proper response to Amalek? How does one defeat those who would violently oppress the weak just to glorify themselves? For Rav Amiel, the answer is clear. When Amalek strikes, one must of course defend oneself and all those in harm’s way, just as the Jewish people did in the desert. When Amalek comes with the sword, one must pick up one’s own, for there is no morality in going like sheep to the slaughter. So too it would seem the same is true in our current moment. Ukraine’s fight against the Russian invasion is a deeply just cause and one should do all that one can to support them. Their attempts to defend themselves after being needlessly attacked reflects a sincere and profound moral effort in the face of the kind of evil that only Amalek can bring to the world.

Even so, Rav Amiel makes clear that no permanent victory against Amalek can be achieved with the sword. If militarism, the turning of strength into an idol, is the essence of Amalek, then the battle against Amalek can never be limited to a specific enemy. In truth, he contends, the battle against Amalek is a war against the very idea of war itself and it cannot be won through violence and military might. He writes:

> The approach of Judaism is that the prosecutor cannot be made a defense attorney. Evil cannot be uprooted from the world with evil. Terror cannot be
eliminated from the world by responding with terror.\textsuperscript{4}

For Rav Amiel, this assertion is not just philosophical but one rooted in a close reading of the Torah. Joshua’s military victory over Amalek was only temporary as Amalek fled to fight another day. The secret to Amalek’s final defeat was not to be found on the battlefield but in God’s instructions to Moses afterwards: “write this in a book as a reminder” (Exodus 17:14). One defends against Amalek with the sword but Amalek can only truly be defeated with the book, i.e. the Torah. The book is mightier than the sword not because it can be used as a weapon but because it invokes a power not rooted in physical force, yet a power that compels all the same. If Amalek brings violence and death to the world, its defeat is contingent on humanity’s internalization of the Torah’s fundamental message: all human life is created in the image of God and attacking those who have done nothing wrong is an affront to all that is holy in this world.

The Jewish people, Rav Amiel explains, were chosen by God to be an alternative to Amalek. If Amalek hates the weak, Jews are meant to love them. If Amalek identifies with the oppressor, Jews are meant to identify with the oppressed. God’s chosen people are meant to stand in opposition to Amalek for God’s very name is peace and the Jewish people have been tasked in helping bring it to the world. For Rav Amiel, this idea is at the heart of the Jewish people’s victory over Amalek celebrated on Purim. When targeted by Haman without justification, violence was not the Jewish people’s first choice of action, but as it became clear that Achashverosh’s decree could not be undone, the Jews had no choice but to defend themselves. Though the story of Purim is often viewed as a cautionary tale about the dangers of Jewish weakness and the importance of Jewish strength, seeing it this way misses a fundamental point. The megillah goes to great lengths to make clear that the holiday is to be celebrated not on the day of the military victory, as is the case for all other nations, but on the day afterwards. The Jews successfully defended themselves, but they do not celebrate the war but rather the peace. In fact, celebrating the peace is so important that the holiday becomes split into different days depending on where Jews live, a deeply strange fact considering the deeply held Jewish awareness that a shared calendar is what serves to unify the Jewish people. Nevertheless, affirming peace, rather than war is simply too great a value. Rav Amiel makes clear that “the Jewish people hate war and even a war of self-defense” and to be among “the children of Jacob” is to feel as Jacob did when forced to confront his brother Esau. It is to “be afraid of killing more than being fearful of being killed.”\textsuperscript{5}

One might think that humanity has achieved some level of progress in its war on Amalek since Rav Amiel’s time. After the horrors of World War II, international law greatly expanded to regulate and limit war, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was accepted as the basis for how political systems were to be judged. Rav Amiel would no doubt see these as significant achievements, but already in his time, he recognized that people often talk about peace while still pursuing war. In this, he discerns a fundamental hypocrisy all too common to the modern international order that makes

\textsuperscript{4} 134.

\textsuperscript{5} 138-139.
moral claims but rarely, if ever, lives up to them. It is all too often the case, he explains, that nations will condemn the violence of others while ceaselessly using it to pursue their own needs. He writes, “It is like the thief that runs together with the community and screams in a loud voice, ‘search for the thief!’” Countries quickly learn that it is more effective to take up the rhetoric of morality rather than its practice, a fact proven easily by perusing the list of countries currently sitting on the UN Human Rights Council. As Rav Amiel notes, what is often found today is that “The voice is the voice of Jacob but the hands are the hands of Esau” (Genesis 27:22). Under such conditions, morality is determined not by what is right, but by what the powerful can get away with.

While it would be easy to see this criticism as being directed at the rest of the world, particularly those powerful nations which abuse their might and political influence, Rav Amiel notes that the verse itself is directed not at Esau but Jacob. Though a leader of Religious Zionism, he did not hesitate to criticize what he saw as Zionism’s own tendencies towards militarism, and he recognized that a moral critique of other countries could be used by the Jewish people to deflect their own moral failings. Until they could rectify them, the Jewish people would be unable to help lead the battle against Amalek. As he wrote:

> Regarding that which we desire from of the non-Jewish nations, in truth we must admit that for us as well, the hands are far from the voice. “The voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands are the hands of Esau” was first said about Jacob himself... How is it possible for us to influence others as long as not all is correct regarding us in this matter?²

If we are to take Rav Amiel’s teaching seriously, then Russia’s invasion of the Ukraine places a special weight of responsibility upon the Jewish people and Israel in particular. Not just because hundreds of thousands of Jews live in Ukraine, but because the role of the Jewish people in the battle against Amalek in the world must be like that of Moses who stood above the battlefield in a position where he could be seen by others. As long as Moses’ arms were raised, the Jewish people were victorious, but when his hands fell, the tide turned, and Amalek began winning the battle. So too the Jewish people must do the same if they are to help the world defeat Amalek. According to Rav Amiel, Moses’ upstretched arms represent the true arms of Jacob, arms upon which tefillin can be seen embodying the teachings of the Torah and its message of morality and holiness:

> If we want Israel to overcome the Amaleks of the world, it is upon us to do that which we are commanded in our Torah. “When Moses raised his arms and Israel was victorious.” We must raise our arms in a place visible to the entire world. It will be clear to all “the holiness” of the tefillin on our arms and Israel will be victorious.⁸

Rav Amiel’s clarity of vision about the modern dangers of militarism and war feel not only prescient but grasp dimensions of the current situation in Ukraine that many seem to miss. Self-

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² 141.

7 142.

8 142.
defense is justified and must be supported, yet militarism cannot be defeated with the sword alone. Furthermore, the Jewish people will always have a unique role in such moments if only in the attempt to lead by example while also recognizing that they often fall far short in doing so. Rav Amiel also reminds us that even if Ukraine defends itself and Russia is sent back in retreat, the fight against Amalek remains. It is not a battle against a specific enemy; the hero of today can be the villain of tomorrow. It is a war against the very idea of war itself, and it can only be won with the Book and the moral message it demands us all to listen to.

Revisiting Maimonides’s Merkavah Chapters

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Introduction

Since at least the time of the Mishnah, interpretation of the ma’aseh merkavah (Ezekiel, chapter 1) has represented the most esoteric part of Jewish teaching. The Mishnah on Hagigah 11b prohibits teaching it to non-expert students, and even then, not to more than one at a time. Maimonides states (Guide II:29 and III:Introduction) that a primary aim in writing the Guide of the Perplexed was to explain what could be explained of ma’aseh merkavah (the Biblical Account of the Chariot). In deference to the strictures of the Mishnah in Hagigah, he states that he will address the topic only indirectly and through allusions. Nevertheless, most of his allusions are immediately apparent to anyone familiar with the entirety of the Guide.

Maimonides presents his primary exposition of ma’aseh merkavah (Guide III:1)

Despite his attempt to keep his understanding of ma’aseh merkavah esoteric, the classical commentaries on the Guide uncover each of the references. While they never, to the best of my knowledge, explicitly address how they can do so without violating the Mishnah’s prohibition, I follow their lead in entering into these topics.

Friedlander, in his introduction to his translation of the Guide, concludes his discussion of this section by pointing out the apparent contradiction between Maimonides’s stated desire to keep the section esoteric and the transparency of his allusions:

At the conclusion of this exposition Maimonides declares that he will, in the subsequent chapters, refrain from giving further explanation of the ma’aseh mercabah. The foregoing summary, however, shows

that the opinion of the author on this subject is fully stated, and it is indeed difficult to conceive what additional disclosures he could still have made.  

Indeed, remarkably little has been written on these chapters in the 100+ years since Friedlander wrote this, despite the central place Maimonides gives them in understanding the overall purpose of the Guide. Yet the question remains, if the allusions he makes are so apparent, what is it he was trying to hide with the esoteric nature of these chapters? If we take the classical commentaries at their word, each part of the exposition of ma’aseh merkavah alludes to some philosophical doctrine he dealt with explicitly in some other part of the Guide. Why even attempt to keep the interpretation esoteric if its hidden meaning is an idea he had no problem stating explicitly elsewhere?

Shlomo Pines famously argued that a defining feature of the Guide of the Perplexed is its relative skepticism with regard to Aristotelian metaphysics in general, and the separate intelligences in particular, when compared with Maimonides’ earlier writings. I submit that it is this rejection of (or at least skepticism towards) Aristotelian metaphysics (as interpreted by the medieval Islamic peripatetics) that lies at the heart of Maimonides’ understanding of ma’aseh merkavah. He keeps it secret because ma’aseh merkavah is not a mere metaphor for the Aristotelian metaphysics he propounded elsewhere. Rather, Maimonides intimates other sections of the Guide in ways that subtly undermine his commitment to those very doctrines expressed there and in his earlier works.

Ma’aseh Merkavah in the Guide vs. Ma’aseh Merkavah in Mishneh Torah

To begin to make this case, I first present Friedlander’s summary of how these chapters in the Guide were interpreted by the classical commentaries (primarily Shem Tov and Efodi):

According to Maimonides three distinct parts are to be noticed, each of which begins with the phrase, "And I saw." These parts correspond to the three parts of the Universe, the sublunary world, the spheres and the intelligences. First of all the prophet is made to behold the material world which consists of the earth and the spheres, and of these the spheres, as the more important, are noticed first. In the Second Part, in which the nature of the spheres is discussed, the author dwells with pride on his discovery that they can be divided into four groups. This discovery he now employs to show that the four "hayot" (animals) represent the four divisions of the spheres. He points out that the terms which the prophet uses in the description of the hayot are identical with terms applied to the properties of the spheres. For the four hayot or "angels," or cherubim, (1) have human form; (2) have human faces; (3) possess characteristics of other animals; (4)

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have human hands; (5) their feet are straight and round (cylindrical); (6) their bodies are closely joined to each other; (7) only their faces and their wings are separate; (8) their substance is transparent and refulgent; (9) they move uniformly; (10) each moves in its own direction; (11) they run; (12) swift as lightning they return towards their starting point; and (13) they move in consequence of an extraneous impulse (ruah). In a similar manner the spheres are described:--(1) they possess the characteristics of man, viz., life and intellect; (2) they consist like man of body and soul; (3) they are strong, mighty and swift, like the ox, the lion, and the eagle, (4) they perform all manner of work as though they had hands; (5) they are round, and are not divided into parts; (6) no vacuum intervenes between one sphere and the other; (7) they may be considered as one being, but in respect to the intellects, which are the causes of their existence and motion, they appear as four different beings; (8) they are transparent and refulgent; (9) each sphere moves uniformly, (10) and according to its special laws; (11) they revolve with great velocity; (12) each point returns again to its previous position; (13) they are self-moving, yet the impulse emanates from an external power.

In the second part of the vision the prophet saw the ofanim. These represent the four elements of the sublunary world. For the ofanim (1) are connected with the hayot and with the earth; (2) they have four faces, and are four separate beings, but interpenetrate each other "as though it were a wheel in the midst of a wheel" (Ez. 1:16); (3) they are covered with eyes; (4) they are not self-moving; (5) they are set in motion by the hayot; (6) their motion is not circular but rectilinear. The same may almost be said of the four elements (1) they are in close contact with the spheres, being encompassed by the sphere of the moon; earth occupies the centre, water surrounds earth, air has its position between water and fire; (2) this order is not invariably maintained; the respective portions change and they become intermixed and combined with each other (3) though they are only four elements they form an infinite number of things; (4) not being animated they do not move of their own accord; (5) they are set in motion by the action of the spheres; (6) when a portion is displaced it returns in a straight line to its original position.

In the third vision Ezekiel saw a human form above the hayot. The figure was divided in the middle; in the upper portion the prophet only noticed that it was hashmal, (mysterious); from the loins downwards there was "the vision of the likeness of the Divine Glory," and "the likeness of the throne." The world of Intelligences was represented by the figure; these can only be perceived in as far as they influence the spheres, but their relation to the Creator is beyond human comprehension. The Creator himself is not represented in this vision.4

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4 Friedlander, lv-lvi.
To bring the aims of Maimonides’s presentation of ma’aseh merkavah in the *Guide* into full relief, it is worth summarizing what Maimonides says about ma’aseh merkavah in *Mishneh Torah* and highlighting how it differs from his presentation in the *Guide*. This will make Maimonides’s shifting approach toward Aristotelianism unmistakeable. While one could no doubt point out small details of difference, his presentation in *Mishneh Torah* is, by and large, consistent with Aristotelian (or Farabian) metaphysics. In his presentation in *Mishneh Torah*, all three of the celestial beings from Ezekiel’s vision (hayot, ofanim, hashmalim), along with seven other words denoting angels that he culled from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (er’elim, seraphim, mal’akhim, elohim, benei elohim, keruvim, ishim), represent separate intelligences (*Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 2:3-8). He thus arrives at the ten intelligences common to the Neoplatonized Aristotelianism of his day, akin to what could be found in Al-Farabi. In contrast, in the *Guide*, he discusses only the three celestial beings explicitly mentioned in Ezekiel’s vision. The first two of these, the *hayot* and *ofanim*, as understood by the classical commentaries on the *Guide* (as summarized by Friedlander above), do not even refer to separate intelligences, but to aspects of the material world, namely the celestial spheres and the material elements. Maimonides hints at this in his digression in *Guide* III:5 into the Talmudic debate (*Hagigah* 13a) about exactly which sections of Ezekiel’s vision fall under the prohibition to expound publicly. He cites approvingly the opinion that only the third vision (the vision of the *Hashmal*) falls into this category. In separating the first two visions (the *hayot* and the *ofanim*), he is hinting to us that the content of these visions really belongs to the realm of ma’aseh bereishit (physics) rather than ma’aseh merkavah (metaphysics). In limiting the separate intelligences to just the *hashmal*, he is already indicating skepticism towards the details of Al-Farabi’s presentation, if not the concept of separate intelligences altogether.

### Disillusionment with Aristotelian Astronomy in the Vision of the *Hayot*

Even in Maimonides’ presentation of the visions of the *hayot* and the *ofanim*, which he associates with celestial and terrestrial physics, respectively, he does so in a way which highlights his disillusionment with Aristotle. In discussing the *hayot* (*Guide* III:1-2), he repeatedly emphasizes the significance of it having four faces. A reader familiar with Aristotelian physics would

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6 It is perhaps worth noting that even the order of the celestial beings is different. In *Mishneh Torah*, the *Hayot* are the highest, while in the *Guide*, the *Hashmal* is on top.

7 In classical Aristotelian thought, God (i.e. the First Intellect or Unmoved Mover) is the cause of motion in the universe, but not of the existence of the universe. Medieval Aristotelians, however, generally adopted a Neoplatonized version of Aristotelianism where God was also thought of as the cause of the existence of the universe through a series of emanations of successively lower intelligences, the last of which gave rise to the material world.


9 See the commentary of Shem Tov on *Guide* III:5.

10 Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides,” points out that Al-Farabi himself, in other works, may have expressed skepticism about the system of separate intelligences he laid out in *On the Perfect State*. 
immediately see in the number four a reference to the four terrestrial elements. It would then be logical to assume that the ofanim, whose name literally refers to circularity, are a reference to the circular spheres of the heavens. Maimonides explicitly excludes this possibility by ascribing it to Jonathan ben Uziel, and indicating his disagreement with it (Guide III:4). This forces the reader to recognize that the number four, which he emphasized with regard to the hayot, is a reference not to the four terrestrial elements, but to the four-sphere conception of the heavens that he endorses in Guide II:9. This is significant because his four-sphere conception of the heavens is a departure from the standard nine-sphere peripatetic cosmology, which he himself had embraced in Mishneh Torah (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 3:1). Thus, the very beginning of his presentation of ma’aseh merkavah alludes to his departure from the very Aristotelian doctrines he had taught in his younger days.11

The Vision of the Hashmal as a Rejection of the Aristotelian Notion of God as Intellect

Though Maimonides hints at his departures from Aristotle in his presentation of the hayot and ofanim, as discussed in the previous section, the secrets that Maimonides believes to be the real point of ma’aseh merkavah come out in his presentation of the hashmal. As stated earlier, the hashmal is the only part of Ezekiel’s vision that he truly regards as ma’aseh merkavah and falling under the restrictions of the Talmud.

It is significant, also as mentioned above, that there is only one hashmal in Ezekiel’s vision. What is more telling, though, is what Maimonides tells us about the hashmal. The hashmal has human form. This is no doubt a reference to human intellect.12 Maimonides clearly states (Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 2:3) that angels/Intelligences have intelligence without a body, so he surely does not believe they possess a human physical form. Next, Maimonides wants to make sure we know that the hashmal is “a created thing” (Guide III:713). “The likeness of a man that was on the throne and that was divided, is not a parable referring to Him, who is exalted above all composition.” It is the hashmal who possesses the likeness of man. God does not possess the likeness of man. This stands in stark contradiction with the very first chapter of the Guide, where Maimonides discusses what it means for man to be created in the image of God. He asserts that it was “because of the divine intellect conjoined with man, that it is said of the latter that he is in the image of God and in His likeness.”14 This would seem to indicate a fundamental similarity between the human intellect and the Divine intellect. Were this the case though, Maimonides would have no problem portraying God with the likeness of man in a prophetic vision. By making it clear that the man in Ezekiel’s vision is the hashmal and not God, he makes it clear that only the hashmal’s intellect shares any similarity with the human intellect, but

11 See Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides,” for further discussion of Maimonides’ skepticism with regard to Aristotelian astronomy. See also Charles Manekin, “Possible Sources of Maimonides’ Theological Conservatism in His Later Writings,” in Jay Harris, ed., Maimonides After 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2007), 220.


13 430 in Pines.

14 23 in Pines.
God is beyond any human form. Many have noted\textsuperscript{15} that Maimonides’ negative theology (\textit{Guide I}:58-60), essentially Neoplatonist in nature,\textsuperscript{16} is incompatible with his Aristotelian description of God as eternally self-cognizing intellect (\textit{Guide I}:68 and \textit{Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah} 2:10). In denying to God even the intellectual form of man, Maimonides is using the \textit{ma’aseh merkavah} to convey to us his ultimate rejection of the Aristotelian notion of God as intellect.

**Further Skepticism Regarding Aristotelian Metaphysics and the Actual Symbolism of the Hashmal**

Rejecting the notion of God as intellect does not necessarily indicate Maimonides’ skepticism regarding the existence of separate intelligences as a creation of God. It is thus necessary to look further at how Maimonides describes the \textit{hashmal}. At the beginning of \textit{Guide III}:7, Maimonides highlights that the prophet uses the word “likeness” when describing the \textit{hayot} and the \textit{hashmal}, but not when describing the \textit{ofanim}. Shem Tov and Efodi (ad loc.) both assert that this is because we can have certain knowledge of the \textit{ofanim}, as they represent the terrestrial elements. The \textit{hayot} and \textit{hashmal}, however, represent celestial physics and the separate intelligences, respectively, so certain knowledge of them is not achievable except through prophetic vision. That Maimonides would put this into his discussion of \textit{ma’aseh merkavah} already buttresses Pines’ claim that his skepticism with regard to Aristotelian metaphysics and celestial physics should be seen as a major theme of the \textit{Guide}.

Regarding the \textit{hashmal} itself, Maimonides highlights that the prophet refers to it as having “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord,” and not, as stated above, the likeness of God Himself. The phrase “glory of the Lord” clearly references the reader back to \textit{Guide I}:64, where he discussed three possibilities for what this phrase can mean: 1) “the created light that God causes to descend in a particular place in order to confer honor upon it in a miraculous way,”\textsuperscript{17} 2) God’s “essence and true reality,” 3) “the honoring of Him, may He be exalted.”\textsuperscript{18} The first one is relevant only to a few specific narratives in the Torah and would not provide any meaningful insight in this context. The second one Maimonides already explicitly excluded by emphasizing that the \textit{hashmal} has only the likeness of the glory of the Lord, and not the likeness of God, as I stated above. This leaves open only the third possibility, namely that the \textit{hashmal} represents that which conveys honor to God. Thus, examining what he said about this third understanding of the “glory of God” in I:64 will provide the clues to understand what Maimonides means in III:7 when he says the \textit{hashmal} has the likeness of the glory of God. It is this comparison


\textsuperscript{16} Unlike in Aristotelian metaphysics, where the highest ontological reality is mind/intellect, in Neoplatonist metaphysics, intellect is the first emanation of the One, which is beyond being. Maimonides’ description of a God nothing can be accurately said about is reminiscent of the Neoplatonist One.

\textsuperscript{17} 156 in Pines.

\textsuperscript{18} 157 in Pines.
that will fully demonstrate his departure from the
doctrine of separate Intelligences.

The first thing Maimonides tells us in I:64 about
that third understanding of the “glory of God” is,
“In fact, all that is other than God, may He be
exalted, honors him.” This corresponds with what
Maimonides wrote in III:7, that “[E]verything to
which the parables contained in these
apprehensions refer is only the glory of the Lord.”
In both passages, he tells us everything may be seen
as part of the glory of the Lord, even if it is more
apparent in some parts than others. Furthermore,
the parallel between the vision of the chariot and
“All that is other than God” indicates that the vision
of the chariot is supposed to convey all that
Maimonides believes exists in reality other than
God. While the entire vision refers to the glory of
God, the hashmal is nevertheless specifically singled
out as being in the likeness of the glory of God. I:64
gives us the clue to understand this as well.

For the true way of honoring God consists
in apprehending His greatness. Thus
everybody who apprehends His greatness
and His perfection, honors him according
to the extent of his apprehension. Man in
particular honors Him by speeches so that
he indicates thereby that which he has
apprehended by his intellect and
communicates it to others.

According to Maimonides, the part of creation that
is uniquely singled out to honor God is man. It

19 Maimonides already expresses the idea that the “Glory of
God” is a reference to the human intellect in his commentary
on Mishnah Hagigah 2:1

ultimately man himself, and not some separate
intelligence, that sits atop the chariot bringing the
honor of God to the world.

A further parallel between III:7 and I:64 supports
this contention. There, Maimonides notes a
possible explanation of the meaning of the word
hashmal as possessing the two contradictory
notions of “speech and silence.” This parallels
Maimonides’ statement in I:64 that man “honor[s]
God, either by means of articulate utterance, or
without it if speech is not permitted him.”
Furthermore, these dual modes of honoring God,
through speech and silence, echoes what
Maimonides wrote in I:59, that “Whatever we say
intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand
we find that it can have some application to Him,
may He be exalted, and on the other we perceive in
it some deficiency. Accordingly, silence and
limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the
intellects are more appropriate.”

20 Additionally, as
stated above, Maimonides emphasized the
composite nature of the hashmal (in distinction
with God, who is beyond all composition). The
vision is divided in two, with only the upper half
having human form. This composite image of the
hashmal corresponds with the composite nature of
the human soul into its various faculties, with
only the highest, the rational faculty, being truly
the “human form.”

21 See Maimonides’ Eight Chapters, chapter 1.

22 See Guide I:1, where Maimonides refers to the intellect as
the form of man.
representative of humanity, and not some separate Intelligence. Thus, separate Intelligences have no place in Maimonides's ultimate understanding of physical and metaphysical reality, as portrayed in his exposition of *ma'aseh merkavah*.

**The Real Angel Who Speaks with Prophets**

The fact that the primary vehicle for bringing God's honor to the world is man would not necessarily preclude the existence of separate intellects who also honor and perceive the greatness of God. One cannot say definitively whether Maimonides outright rejects this aspect of Aristotelian metaphysics, or is merely skeptical about it. Even Pines only goes as far as claiming Maimonides is agnostic on this point. The point here is that their existence is not in any way key to Maimonides' understanding of the operation of the universe. In other words, separate intelligences may or may not exist; we ultimately have no way of knowing, and either way it is not particularly religiously or philosophically relevant. However, this conceptualization might be challenged by what Maimonides writes in III:45, where he argues that:

> It is known that the fundamental principle of belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law. For it there is no prophet, there can be no Law. The prophet receives prophetic revelation only through the intermediary of an angel...Consequently, it has been made clear that the belief in the existence of angels precedes the belief in prophecy, and the belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law.\(^{23}\)

At first glance, one might be tempted to assume that the angel Maimonides refers to here as the intermediary between God and the prophets, whose existence is necessary to belief in prophecy, and ultimately, belief in the Law, is a reference to the Active Intellect. Indeed, in II:36, Maimonides describes prophecy as coming through the intermediary of the Active Intellect. This is contradicted, however, by II:45:

> You have counted among the degrees of prophecy the degree in which the prophet hears speech coming from God who addresses him as in the cases of Isaiah and Micaiah. How can this be in view of the fact that our principle states that all prophets hear speech only through the intermediary of an angel, the sole exception being Moses our Master...Know then that this is in fact so, and that in these cases the intermediary is the imaginative faculty.\(^{24}\)

Here Maimonides makes clear that the only angelic intermediary necessary to belief in prophecy is not a separate Active Intellect, but a part of the human soul. This confirms, once again, the interpretation that *hashmal* of the *merkavah* vision refers not to some separate intellect. Rather, it refers to the various faculties of the human soul, presumably the lower part to the imaginative faculty and the upper part, as I stated earlier, to the rational faculty. Once a separate Intelligence is no longer necessary to Maimonides's understanding of prophecy, there are no further barriers to the claim that he sees the question of their existence as religiously irrelevant.

**Conclusion**

I have demonstrated here how Maimonides's entire presentation of *ma'aseh merkavah* is laden with allusions that point to his skepticism or denial of

\(^{23}\) 576 in Pines.

\(^{24}\) 403 in Pines.
Aristotelian metaphysics. He begins by challenging the accepted number of spheres in the standard cosmology of his day. From there, he contests the number of angelic beings, before finally indicating that the only angelic being necessary to his religious scheme is the human soul. In doing so, Maimonides makes clear to the astute reader that he no longer subscribes to the philosophy he once wholeheartedly endorsed in *Mishneh Torah*. This, in turn, enables the reader to properly understand other contradictions in the *Guide* not as pointing towards Aristotelian ideas, but as pointing away from them.

Why did Maimonides want to keep his move away from Aristotelianism secret? It is hard to say with certainty. Perhaps he was afraid of losing his credibility with the philosophical community. Perhaps he thought Aristotelian metaphysics was a perfectly good belief system for the masses and there was no need to challenge its foundations unnecessarily. Or perhaps Maimonides simply wanted to guide the reader along the same philosophical journey he took. Regardless of his ultimate reason, revealing his departure from Aristotle is as crucial today as concealing it was in the medieval period. Nowadays, Aristotelian metaphysics is no longer in vogue. Few believe in separate intelligences unless they got it on Maimonides's authority, and no one’s faith is going to be undermined if there’s no Active Intellect. Kabbalistic Judaism has managed to shed its medieval philosophical garb to present an authentic spiritual vision to the modern Jew, and Maimonidean Judaism, if it is to remain relevant, must do the same. Nothing will help Maimonideanism shed the image of being just outdated Greek philosophy in a Hebrew garb more than the realization that Maimonides himself, through his own spiritual journey, ultimately left Aristotelianism behind.²⁵

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²⁵ Maimonides’s deep skepticism regarding Aristotelian metaphysics should not force us to Pines’s conclusion in “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides” that Maimonides was a radical agnostic with regard to the existence of God as well. Radical negative theology, taken to its logical extreme, ultimately must result either in radical agnosticism, or in radical apophatic mysticism. If one cannot know God rationally, one can either not know God at all (agnosticism) or can know God only through direct experience (mysticism). Pines’s apparent unwillingness, in “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides,” to consider the latter, led him to conclude the former. For further discussion of the possibility of seeing Maimonides as a mystic see David Blumenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophic Mysticism,” in David Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006), 128-151. Available at: [http://davidblumenthal.org/Maimonides%20Philosophic%20Mysticism.htm](http://davidblumenthal.org/Maimonides%20Philosophic%20Mysticism.htm) and my previous piece at the Lehrhaus on Maimonides and mysticism: [https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/mysticism-and-its-alternatives-rethinking-maimonides/](https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/mysticism-and-its-alternatives-rethinking-maimonides/).