# From “God of the World” to “God of the Heavens”

# From the *Mishneh Torah* to *The Guide of the Perplexed*[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

Maimonides opened “almost all of his books” with the verse “In the name of the Lord, the God of the world” (Gen. 21:33).[[2]](#footnote-2) This verse describes the nature of Abraham’s calling, which Maimonides interprets, both in the *Mishneh Torah* and in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, as an effort to persuade others to abandon their idolatrous perceptions and affirm the uniqueness of God. Maimonides’ use of this epigraph seems to indicate that he envisioned his books as a continuation of Abraham’s original calling.[[3]](#footnote-3) There is, however, a difference between the way Maimonides’ describes Abraham and his calling in the *Mishneh Torah* and their portrayal in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the former, Abraham is presented as an Aristotelian philosopher, in the latter, as a biblical prophet. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides’ description of Abraham revolves around a verse that describes the “God of the World” (*’El ‘olam*), in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides adds verses in which Abraham mentions the “heaven.” In this article, I shall examine these differences and suggest that they represent developments and shifts in Maimonides’ own philosophical position.[[4]](#footnote-4)

## Abraham in the Mishneh Torah

Maimonides’ famous account of humanity’s deterioration – from monotheism to idolatry – appears at the beginning of the laws of idolatry. Following this description, Maimonides explains how Abraham realized the errors of his contemporaries and felt compelled to correct their misguided positions. A careful analysis of Maimonides’ words yields a distinction between Abraham’s own comprehension and the teachings he relayed to others. This is how Maimonides describes the course of Abraham’s intellectual development, from his weaning until the age of forty:

After Abraham was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering: “How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere should continuously be guiding the world have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself.” He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in aught. He was submerged in Ur of the Chaldees, among silly idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshiped idols, and he worshiped with them. But his mind was busily working and reflecting until he has attained the way of truth, apprehended the correct line of thought,

1. and knew that there is **One** God,
2. that He **guides** the celestial sphere,
3. and **created** everything,
4. and that among all that exist, there is no god besides Him.

He realized that men everywhere were in error, and that what had occasioned their error was that they worshiped the stars and the images, so that the truth perished from their minds. Abraham was **forty years old** when he recognized his **Creator** (Maimonides, *Hilkhot ‘Avodat Kokhavim*, 1:3).[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to Maimonides’ account, it seems that Abraham’s apprehension went through several stages. In his youth, he is described as an Aristotelian philosopher who questioned the pagan world-view, relying on the Aristotelian demonstration of God’s existence from the perpetual rotation of the spheres. Underlying this proof is the assumption that the world is eternal.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, it seems that the sentence that concludes this passage (“Abraham was *forty years old* when he recognized his *Creator*”) refers to another, deeper form of attainment achieved later in Abraham’s life. Between the first and final stage are four perceptions of God and one conclusion regarding the reason for the errors of Abraham’s contemporaries. The third perception (“and created everything”) goes beyond the Aristotelian perception and presupposes the creation of the world *ex nihilo*, or, at the very least, creation from preexistent matter.[[7]](#footnote-7) Maimonides dubs this recognition “the way of truth” and “the correct line of thought.”

Abraham’s attempts to reform the views of his contemporaries are also described as unfolding in two stages. In the first stage, Maimonides describes Abraham’s quarrel with the inhabitants of Ur of Chaldees, and in the second stage his teachings during his journey from Haran to the land of Canaan. In Ur of Chaldees, Abraham is presented as a Jewish Socrates, undermining a king’s sovereignty by raising philosophical arguments and calling for the destruction of pagan icons:[[8]](#footnote-8)

Having attained this knowledge, he began to refute the inhabitants of Ur of the Chaldees, arguing with them and saying to them, “The course you are following is not the way of truth. he broke the images, and commenced preaching to instruct the people

1. that it is not right to serve any one but **the God of the world**, to whom alone it was proper to bow down, offer up sacrifices, and make libations, **so that all human creatures might, in the future know Him**;
2. and that it was proper to destroy and shatter all the images, **so that the whole people might not err like these who thought that there was no god but these images**.

When he had prevailed over them with his arguments, the king (of the country) sought to slay him. He was miraculously saved and emigrated to Haran (Ibid.).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Abraham recognized the connection between human practice and beliefs.[[10]](#footnote-10) Therefore, he did not limit himself to a purely philosophical discourse, but rather called upon his contemporaries to modify their customs as well – to direct their sacrificial rites to the “God of the world.” This would instill recognition of God among the people. At the same time, Abraham called for the destruction of idols lest they lead the people astray.

The second stage described is Abraham’s journey from Haran to Canaan. This culminates with the creation of “the house of Abraham”:

He then began to proclaim to the whole world with great power and instruct the people

1. that the entire universe [world] had but One God
2. and Him it was right to worship.

He went from city to city and from kingdom to kingdom, calling and gathering together the inhabitants till he arrived in the land of Canaan. There, too, he proclaimed his message, as it is said: “**And he called there on the name of the Lord, God of the world**” (Gen. 21.33). When the people flocked to him and questioned him regarding his assertions, he would instruct each one according to his capacity till he had brought him to the way of truth, and thus thousands and tens of thousands joined him. These were the persons referred to in the phrase, “men of the house of **Abraham.”** Abraham implanted in their hearts this great doctrine, composed books on it, and taught it to Isaac, his son (ibid.).[[11]](#footnote-11)

“The house of Abraham” is comprised of those who “hold his opinion and hold his religion” (*Responsa of Maimonides*, 164). These were individuals who were persuaded by his arguments and accepted his call “in the name of the Lord, the God of the world,” which included the “great principle” that “there is one God for the whole world” and the corollary that “unto Him it is proper to render service.” It is possible that during this second stage, Abraham took a more moderate approach; no longer demanding that idols be destroyed, he instead offered a positive message to worship the “God of the Universe.” The expression *’El ‘olam* according to this paragraph refers only to the fact that a single deity exists in this world. It seems that Maimonides interprets the word *‘olam* here as connoting place, not as it is used in the Bible to connote time (“eternity”).[[12]](#footnote-12)

It is striking that in his description of both stages of Abraham’s mission, Maimonides never claims that Abraham taught others that the world was created or that God is the governor (*manhig*) of the sphere. Abraham deemed it adequate to call for the recognition of a single God who should be treated as the exclusive object of one’s worship. According to this, Maimonides’ Abraham taught others the correct relationship between God and the world, but not the biblical or Aristotelian conceptions of the deity.

## Abraham in the Guide of the Perplexed

As mention, a different depiction of Abraham is offered in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Throughout this book, Maimonides claims that Abraham apprehended the idea that God created the world, and even relayed this knowledge to his contemporaries:

He who received a great overflow, as for instance *Abraham*, assembled the people and called them by the way of teaching and instruction to adhere to the truth that he had grasped. Thus Abraham taught the people and explained to them by means of **speculative proofs**

1. that the world has but one deity,
2. that **He has created all the things** that are other than Himself,
3. and that none of the forms and no created thing in general ought to be worshipped.

This is what he instructed the people in, attracting them by means of eloquent speeches and by means of the benefits he conferred upon them (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 2:39).[[13]](#footnote-13)

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:29, Maimonides presents an account of Abraham’s mission that parallels the one appearing at the beginning of *Hilkhot ‘Avodat Kokhavim*. The story of Abraham’s debate with his contemporaries is described twice: first as presented in the Sabian book *The Nabatean Agriculture* and then according to his own understanding:

… and they say literally what follows: When Ibrahim, who was brought up in Kutha, disagreed with the community and asserted that there was an agent other than the sun, various arguments were brought forward against him. In these arguments they set forth the clear and manifest activities of the sun in what exists. Thereupon he, they mean *Abraham*, told them: You are right; **it is like an axe in the hands of carpenter**. Then they mention a part of his argumentation, peace be on him, against them. At the conclusion of the story they mention that the **king** put *Abraham* our father, may peace be upon him, into prison, and that, being in prison, he persevered for days and days in arguing against them. Thereupon the king became afraid that **he would ruin his polity** and turn the people away from their religions and banished him toward Syria after having confiscated all his property. This is what they relate. You will find this story set forth in this manner in “The Nabatean Agriculture.” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:29).

This account describes only one of Abraham’s arguments against his contemporaries – that the sun is not a god, but rather a vessel in God’s hands, “like an ax in the hand of the carpenter.” As in the *Mishneh Torah*, Abraham is described here as a Socrates of sorts, persecuted by the king for his treasonous claims. However, unlike the account in the *Mishneh Torah*, here Abraham’s departure for Canaan features no miracles.

In Maimonides’ second description, however, Abraham is not described as an Aristotelian philosopher. As in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides draws a distinction here between the content of Abraham’s own attainment and the ideas which he preached to others:

However, when the pillar of the world grew up and it became clear to him

1. that there is a separate deity
2. that is neither a body nor a force in a body
3. and that all the stars and the spheres were made by Him [מצנועאתה, *maṣnūʿātihi*],

and he understood that the fables upon which he was brought up were absurd, he began to refute their doctrine and to show up their opinion as false; he publicly manifested his disagreement with them and called *in the name of the Lord, God of the world* [Gen. 21:23] – both

1. the existence of the deity
2. and the creation of the world in time by that deity

being comprised in that call (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:29).

In this account, Abraham comprehends God’s transcendence and incorporeality. God is not, however, described as the governor (*manhig*) of the spheres, but rather creator of stars and the spheres themselves. I believe that by mentioning the stars, Maimonides is indicating that the basis for Abraham’s comprehension was not the Aristotelian proof, but rather the very evidence offered by Maimonides to demonstrate that God is the creator of the world.

## Maimonides’ evidence for the creation of the world

Maimonides presents his evidence against the notion of a preexistent world in two places in the *Guide of the Perplexed:* 2:19 and 2:22. In the first passage, his purpose is to explain “by means of arguments that come close to being demonstration, that what exists indicates to us of necessity that it exists in virtue of the purpose of One who purposed” (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 2:19). This evidence negates Aristotle’s position, but not that of Plato. In 2:22, he begins to offer “**my** proofs and **my** preference in favor of the world’s having been produced in time” – i.e., proofs that negate Plato’s conception as well.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In 2:19, Maimonides adduces as evidence the accidental quality of the heavens. The conception of a created world, which attributes intention to God, offers a more plausible explanation for these random elements than the Aristotelian worldview. After noting the randomness that characterizes the direction and speed of the various spheres, Maimonides adds that the existence of the stars is a “fact that makes even more clear than what has been said” (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 2:19).

Maimonides attributes to Aristotle the claim that the matter that composes the heavens is different than that which composes the earth,[[15]](#footnote-15) establishing this distinction on the basis of the different types of motion that exist in each. The fact that the motions in the heavens are circular while those in the sublunar world are linear indicates the existence of two different types of matter. Later in the same chapter, Maimonides concludes that according to this principle, the matter of the spheres must be distinguished from that of stars as well. While the spheres rotate, the stars are immobile, embedded within the spheres. It follows that the stars are composed of a “very different” type of matter (2:19).[[16]](#footnote-16) Maimonides argues that the conjunction of the star with its sphere, despite the great divergence between the types of matter of which they are composed, supports the claim that they were connected by the One’s intention and not by necessity.

Maimonides points to two further random characteristics of stars and which are difficult to ascribe to sheer necessity. The distribution of stars in the heavens is uneven; while some celestial regions are devoid of stars others are dense with them. Furthermore, it is difficult for an approach predicated on the idea of necessity to explain why the star is connected to a sphere at a specific location, despite the fact that there is no difference between one point in a sphere and another. The notion that God purposely designated places for the stars within their spheres is thus the more coherent explanation for these celestial phenomena; only with great difficulty can they be ascribed to necessity.

As mentioned, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:22, Maimonides, brings evidence to support not only the claim that creation was a purposeful act of God, but also that it was performed *ex nihilo*, i.e., without any preexistent matter. His evidence is based on the weaknesses of the emanation scheme proposed by some philosophers. Because all agree “that anything but a single simple thing should proceed from a simple thing” (ibid.) and “that what first proceeded from God was constituted by a single simple intellect only” (ibid.), the theory of emanation was required to explain how a multifaceted reality could emerge from an undifferentiated God. The main argument was that the first intellect that emanated from God is composite because it intellectualizes both God and itself. That is why two things emanate from it; its intellectualization of God leads to the emanation of another intellect, and its intellectualization of itself, a sphere.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The main fault that Maimonides finds in this conception is the argument that matter can be created by an intellect through an emanatory process: “How can the intellects be a cause for the procession of the spheres from them? And what relation can there be between matter and that which being separate has no matter at all?” (ibid.). Since the spheres are material beings, it is not clear how they could emerge from an intellect separated from matter. Moreover, because a sphere contains two types of matter – that of the sphere itself and that of the fixed stars – their formation is difficult to account for:

Now if this comes about in virtue of a procession, we cannot but require for this compound a composite cause, the procession of the body of the sphere being occasioned by one of its parts and that of the body of the star by the other (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 2:22).

According to Maimonides, it is also possible to distinguish between the matter of the illuminating stars and the matter of the dim stars – a distinction which contrasts with Aristotle’s method. Since according to Plato, God is the cause of matter’s existence (ibid., 2:13), all these questions apply to him as well.

It follows that the randomness that inheres in the heavens demonstrates the “purpose of One who purposed,” while the fact that spheres and stars are comprised of different kinds of matter indicates that the world was created *ex nihilo*. It seems, therefore, that Maimonides has demonstrated the creation of the world from nothing, wherever the **heavens** are mentioned in the verses that describe the relationship of God to the world. Having found the evidence for the concept of the creation of the world from his observation of the heavens, Maimonides saw these verses as sources of evidence.[[18]](#footnote-18)

## God of the heavens

Maimonides attributes this understanding to the prophets of Israel and to Abraham before them:

For this reason you will find that all the prophets used the stars and the spheres as proofs for the deity`s existing necessarily. Thus in the traditional story of Abraham, there occurs the tale, which is generally known, about his contemplation of the stars. Again *Isaiah*, calling attention to the conclusions to be drawn from the stars, says: *Lift up your eyes on high, and see: who hath created these? and so on* [Isa. 40:26]. *Jeremiah* says similarly: *He made the heavens*. *Abraham* says: *The Lord, the God of the heavens* [Gen. 24:7]. And the chief of the prophets says: *Who rideth upon the heaven* [Deut. 33:26], an expression we have explained (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:19).

Although Maimonides ascribes his description of Abraham to “tradition,” he nevertheless adduces as evidence a verse from the Pentateuch uttered by Abraham – not his call “in the name of the Lord, God of the world” as in the *Mishneh Torah*, but rather the words, “the God of the heavens.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This latter verse is not mentioned at all in the *Mishneh Torah* and it is clear that it was selected because it evokes the unique association between God and the heavens – as opposed to the relationship between God and the world as a whole.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Therefore, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, as opposed to the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides uses another verse spoken by Abraham to establish the claim of a created world. He mentions the verse “Maker [*qoneh*] of heaven and earth” (Gen. 14:22), and through it establishes his claim that Abraham believed the world to be created. After stating that the idea of creation is one of the foundations of the “Law of Moses our master,” he remains faithful to the position expressed elsewhere in the *Guide of the Perplexed* that Abraham adopted this view and publicized it:

It was *Abraham our father, peace be on him*, who began to proclaim in public this opinion to which speculation had led him. For this reason, he made his proclamation *in the name of the Lord, God of the world* [Gen. 21:23]; he has also explicitly stated this opinion in saying: *Maker of heaven and earth* [Gen. 14:22] (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:13).

According to Maimonides, the language of some verses is clearer than others when it comes to this issue. The verse “in the name of the Lord, God of the world” reflects the general fact that Abraham disseminated the idea of creation. The verse, “Maker of heaven and earth,” however, points “explicitly” to creation. It seems that the basis for this distinction is whether or not a verse uses the word “heaven.” “Heaven” alludes to the evidence from the random nature of the cosmos that indicates the “purpose of One who purposed.” Maimonides apparently believed that calling “in the name of the Lord, God of the world” includes a reference to the idea of creation, because the verse “Maker of heaven and earth” preceded it. Having realized that the character of the heavens indicated that they had been formed through deliberate intention, Abraham “called *in the name of the Lord, God of the world* [Gen. 21:23] – both the existence of the deity and the creation of the world in time by that deity being comprised in that call” (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 3:29).

Maimonides refers to these verses once again in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:30, in his discussion of the four expressions – *baro’* [to create], *‘assoh* [to make], *qanoh* [to acquire, possess] and *’El* [God] – all of which are used when the Pentateuch associates the heavens with God. The first two expressions are taken from the prophecy of Moses, the last two from Abraham:

Among the things you ought to reflect upon are the four words that occur with reference to the relation between the heaven and God. These words are *baro’* [to create] and *‘assoh* [to make] and *qanoh* [to acquire, possess] and *’El* [God]. It says: *God* [*’Elohim*] *created* [*bara’*] *the* *heaven and the earth* [Gen. 1:1]. And it says: *In the day that the Lord God made* [*‘assoth*] *earth and heaven* [Gen. 2:4]. It says also: *Possessor* [*qoneh*] *of heaven and earth* [Gen. 14:19; 22]. And it says: *God* [*’El*] *of the world* [Gen. 21:33]. And: *The God* [*’Elohei*] *of the heaven, and the God* [*’Elohei*] *of the earth* [Gen. 24:3] (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:30).

It seems that here also Maimonides is alluding to the idea that the proofs for creation referred to in the Pentateuch relate to the unique character of the heavens. Although the first three expressions are demonstrated by the citation of one verse, in his illustration of the expression *’El*,he cites two, both spoken by Abraham: “*God* [*’El*] *of the world* [Gen. 21:33] and *The God* [*’elohei*] *of the heaven, and the God* [*’elohei*] *of the earth* [Gen. 24:3].” It seems that his purpose is to emphasize that the word “world” in this verse reflects the special relationship between God and the heavens. The expression “God of the world” should be understood as an abridged form of the more explicit expression, “the God of heaven and the God of the earth,” and therefore also points to the divine intention evinced by the heavens.

Later in the same chapter, discussing the exact meaning of each expression, Maimonides mentions the two verses again. This time, however, he only quotes part of the second verse – that part which relates to the heavens:

As for the expressions, *the God* [*’Elohei*] *of the heaven* and also *God of the World* [*’El ‘olam*],they are used with respect to His perfection, may He be exalted, and theirs. He is *’Elohim* – that is, He who governs – and they are those governed by Him [חאכם והי מחכומה, *ḥā kim wahiya maḥkūmah*], not in the sense of domination – for that is the meaning of *qoneh* [*possessor*] – but with respect to His rank, may He be exalted, in being and in relation to theirs. For He is the deity and not they – I mean heaven. Know this (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:30).

The expression “God” (*’El)* points to a certain aspect that is evident from the world regarding God. Maimonides calls this the “relationship between governor and governed,” but immediately qualifies this statement by explaining that this relationship should not be understood in its ordinary sense, “but with respect to His rank, may He be exalted, in being and in relation to theirs.” In other words, the expression indicates the absolute dependence of the contingent existence of the world on the necessary existence of God. However, at the same time, this expression also precludes a direct relationship between God and the world because of the unbridgeable gap that divides them. God’s attribute of existence is not “an accident attaching to what exists” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1:57), but rather “something” identical to His essence. Maimonides rejects the use of attributes that indicate a direct relationship between God and the world; even existence itself cannot be used as a common denominator to define such a relationship.[[21]](#footnote-21) The expression *’El ‘olam* therefore reflects the continued and perpetual “relationship” between God and the world even after creation. It expresses the absolute transcendence of God from the world on the one hand, and the absolute dependence of the world on God on the other.

If so, this attribute (*’El)* is completely neutral regarding the question of whether the world was created or preexistent. Nevertheless, the this does not negate the conception of creation that Maimonides reads into these verses; even after creation, God is transcendent and the world dependent upon Him. Maimonides explicitly states in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:25 that the verses of the Pentateuch allow for different interpretations and the interpretative decisions regarding their meaning are not solely predicated on Scripture itself. Nevertheless, the combination of the verse “the God of heaven” with Maimonides’ view that God has not only wisdom but also will, leads to the conception of creation as the basis of Abraham’s approach.

In my opinion, we can use a similar approach to explain Maimonides’ understanding of another biblical term that describes God’s relationship to the world – “possessor” [*qoneh*]:

With reference to them, it says *qanoh* [*acquire, possess*], because He, may he be exalted, has dominion over them just as a master has over his slaves. For this reason He is also called *the Lord* [*’adon*] *of all the earth* [Josh. 3:11 and 13] and *the Lord* [*ha-’adon*]. However, as there is no *Lord* [*’adon*] without there being something *possessed* [*qinyan*] by Him, and this tends toward the road of belief in the eternity of a certain matter, the term *baro’* [*create*] and *‘assoh* [*make*] are used with reference to them (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 2:30)

Here, too, the expression *qoneh* points to a certain characteristic of the world that demonstrates its relationship with God. This relationship is neutral regarding the question of creation or eternity; it refers to God’s enduring relationship to the world even after its creation. This expression seems to reflect the idea that God is the governor (*manhig*) of the world, i.e., the first efficient cause for the motion of the spheres. The term *qoneh* in its primary sense “tends toward the road of belief in the eternity of a certain matter,” since it presumes the existence of the heavens, describing God as their governor but not their creator.

Because it is possible to err and ascribe to the verb *qanoh* the connotation of an eternal world, the Torah added the terms “create” and “make” in reference to the heavens to emphasize that the world was indeed created *ex nihilo*. Here too, the use of the verbs “create” and “make” does not contradict the verb “possess” but rather serve to illuminate its meaning. Indeed, the verse in its entirety “*Possessor* [*qoneh*] *of heaven and earth*” (Gen. 14:19; 22) also alludes to the unique character of the heavens – their materiality and their display of intention. Both of these indicate a created world. This interpretive assertion is already made earlier in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:13 and it does not contradict the statement made in 2:30. At most, it can be seen as a contradiction of the fifth cause (ibid., introduction), that one must first offer a general statement and only after a more detailed explanation.

## The thirteen principles of faith

Thus the differences between the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide of the Perplexed* reflect Maimonides own intellectual process vis-à-vis the proofs for God’s existence. When he wrote the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides did not find the philosophical proof for the creation of the world convincing. The Aristotelian proof was a solid evidentiary foundation for God’s unity and incorporeality, but it was predicated on the notion of a preexistent world. Therefore, Maimonides described Abraham as an Aristotelian philosopher who taught others to recognize the One God, but who did not demand that they recognize the creation of the world. Apparently, because the creation of the world was a philosophically problematic position, Maimonides did not include it within the principles of the *Torah* as described in the *Mishneh Torah*.[[22]](#footnote-22)

When he wrote the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides had formulated a philosophical proof predicated on the random character of the heavens, thus strengthening the claim that the world was indeed created by God. Having found this evidence, he offered a new portrayal of Abraham: Now he is a prophet who has discovered the concept of creation and has taught it to mankind. Maimonides found a basis for this in those verses where Abraham explicitly mentions the relationship between God and heaven. Therefore, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides added that the creation of the world is one of the main principles of the Pentateuch. Furthermore, after writing the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he returned to his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and added the principle of creation *ex nihilo* in the form of a marginal note appended the fourth principle.[[23]](#footnote-23)

## Appendix: The verbs baro’ [to create] and ‘assoh [to make]

Sarah Klein-Breslevi has analyzed Maimonides’ interpretations of the verbs “create” and “make” and concluded that they are ambiguous. In her opinion, Maimonides believed that the verb *baro’* [to create] could imply any one of the three approaches presented in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:13 (creation of the world from nothing, the eternity of matter as maintained by Plato, and the eternity of the world as maintained by Aristotle). This does not mean that the use of the verb *baro’* in the specific context of the creation account of Genesis 1 is ambiguous. Nevertheless, in her opinion Maimonides hints at this ambiguousness in his commentary to the first verse of the creation account, and therefore did not reach a final decision on this issue.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:13, Maimonides is careful to define the opinion of “the Law *Moses our Master*” of creation as bringing into existence “**after** having been [**the**] **purely** and **absolutely** nonexistent” [בעד **אל**עדם אלמחץ' אלמטלק, *baʿda al-ʿadam al-maḥḍ al-muṭlaq*]. In contrast, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:30, which refers to the verse of creation in Genesis, he defines the verb as “bringing into existence **out of** nonexistence” [איג'אד מן עדם, *ijād min ʿadam*] (not “after” but “out of,” not “**the** nonexistent” but “nonexistent,” and without the adverbs “**purely** and **absolutely**”). These changes indicate, in her opinion, that Maimonides intentionally chose a polysemous expression in order to imply that the verb “created” in this verse is ambiguous and to indicate that he is uncertain whether the world is created or preexistent.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Klein-Breslevi, however, does not account for the fact that Maimonides concludes 2:13 by clarifying the opinion of “the Law of *Moses and Abraham our Father*,” using the exact same words:

For the purpose of every follower of the Law of *Moses and Abraham our Father* or those who go the way of these two is to believe that there is nothing eternal in any way at all existing simultaneously with God; to believe also that the bringing into existence of a being out of nonexistence [איג'אד אלמוג'וד מן עדם, *ijād al-mawjūd min ʿadam*] is for the deity not an impossibility [מן קביל אלממתנע, *min qabīla al-mumtanaʿ*].[[26]](#footnote-26)

It is clear from context that the expression “out of nonexistence” (without “after,” “the,” or “**purely** and **absolutely**”) does not refer to preexistent matter but rather to creation *ex nihilo* because “there is nothing eternal in any way at all existing simultaneously with God” and because he needed to determine that it is not “an impossibility.” Therefore, it seems that Maimonides did not distinguish between the phrase “**after** having been [**the**] **purely** and **absolutely** nonexistent” and its shortened variations “after nonexistence,” “**out of** the nonexistence” and “**out of** nonexistence.” All express the same idea: creation *ex nihilo*.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Klein-Braslavy offers a similar argument to explain Maimonides’ understanding of the verb ‘*assoh* [to make].[[28]](#footnote-28) Maimonides explained that the verb refers to “the specific forms that were given to them [to heaven and earth] – I mean their natures” (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 2:30). In Klein-Braslavy’s opinion, Maimonides understands that the verb *‘assoh* does indeed indicate the giving of natural forms, but because all of creation was performed through a single action, all verbs in the creation account must be interpreted as belonging to this one action. Therefore, just as *’amor* (to say) and ‘*assoh* (to make) denote a single action (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 1:12) of giving matter its form, so too *baro’* and *‘assoh* represent the same action. In her opinion, this identification reinforces the claim that *baro’* does not denote creation from nothing but merely the act of giving forms to matter.[[29]](#footnote-29)

I believe that this argument is begging the question; it denies in advance the attribution of more than one outcome to God’s single act. Maimonides’ approach to creation acknowledges different expressions of wisdom and will in the world, although both are clearly identical with God’s unity. Therefore, the argument that the entire world is created in one action does not negate the possibility of divergent effects. In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:52, Maimonides explains that divine actions should be understood not as descriptions of God Himself but rather descriptions of His effects upon the world. His words indicate that despite the multitude of divine actions that are evident from the world, all of them must be understood as results of the same cause, since the essence of God is one and has no multifariousness. That which is manifest in the world as various actions is hidden in the simple unity of God. Therefore, the verbs “create” and “make,” while based on the same “relationship” between God and the world, express different aspects of this relationship. *Baro’* refers to creation *ex nihilo*, *‘assoh*, to the giving of forms.

Moreover, Maimonides maintains that *’ammor* and *‘assoh* in the creation account are also to be understood as identical. At the same time, he interprets the words “saying” [*’ammira*] in the creation account as a way to denote “will or volition” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1:65; 67). If “said” and “made” are the same, then it follows that “made” denotes divine will as just as much as “saying.” The more precise identification between the verse “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made” (Psalms 33:6) and “the work of Thy fingers” (Psalms 8:4) (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:66) relating to the heaven and the stars leads to the chapter discussed above that pertains to this verse:

Regarding the dicta: [*When I consider thy* ***heavens****,* *the work of Thy fingers, the* ***moon*** *and the* ***stars***] *which Thou hast established* [*konanta*] [Ps. 8:4]; *hath spread out* [*tipphah*] *the* ***heavens*** [Isa. 48:13]; *who stretchest out the* ***heavens*** [Ps. 104:2], the terms used therein are included in the verb to make [‘*assoh*] (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:30).

The formation of the moon and the stars, which is more compelling evidence of divine intention, is therefore alluded to in the description of the making of the heavens, and is an expression of God’s will as expressed in the verse “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made” (Psalms 33:6).

1. \* I would like to thank Prof. W. Zev Harvey, Dr. Esti Eisenman, Dr. Hanoch Gamliel, and Dr. Shalom Tzadik for their comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Laws of the Yerushalmi of the Rambam* [Hebrew], ed. Shaul Lieberman (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1947), 5, note 7. Zev Harvey also notes the opening to *Maimonides’ Arabic Treatise on Logic*, which according to one manuscript begins with the Arabic expression “*Bismillah rab al-ʿālamīn*.” See W. Zev Harvey, “Liebes’ Sefer Yetzira: Between Parmenides, Nietzsche, and Maimonides” [Hebrew], in *And This for Yehuda*, ed. Maren R. Niehoff, Ronit Meroz, and Jonathan Garb (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2012), 24, note 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* [Hebrew], trans. Yosef Kafih (Jerusalem: Rav Kook Institute, 1987), 3, note 1; Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Masha Turner devoted two articles to the description of Abraham in the writings of Maimonides. In her opinion, Maimonides presents him as a philosopher who evolved from Aristotelianism to Platonism. In doing so, he laid the foundations for Moses’ prophecy, which renewed the belief in the creation of the world. See Masha Turner, “The Portrayal of Abraham the Patriarch in the *Guide of the Perplexed*” [Hebrew], *Daat* 57 (1996): 181–92; idem, “Abraham Our Father in the Thought of Maimonides” [Hebrew], in *The Faith of Abraham: In the Light of Interpretation throughout the Ages*, ed. Moshe Halamish, Hanna Kasher, and John Silman (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University), 143–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 73. All translations from the *Mishneh Torah* were taken from this book with minor changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See W. Z. Harvey, “The Mishneh Torah as a Key to the Secrets of the Guide” in *Me’ah She’arim - Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Ezra Fleischer, Gerald Blidstein, Carmi Horowitz, and Bernard Septimus (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 18–19. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Warren Zev Harvey believes that this stage in Abraham’s development reflects the metaphysical proof of Ibn Sina, as it is explained by Maimonides in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:4. See Warren Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1998), 47–48, 60–65; idem, “Maimonides, Crescas, and the Parable of the Castle,” in *Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought*, ed. Racheli Haliva (Hamburg: De Gruyter, 2018), 167–72. Sara Klein-Braslavy believes that the verb *bara*’ can imply any one of the three opinions cited in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:13. I find her claim unconvincing. See the appendix at the end of this article. See Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1988), 89–90; eadem, “Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Verb ‘Bara’ and the Creation of the World” [Hebrew], *Daat* 16 (1986): 40–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The story of Abraham parallels that of Socrates. Abraham raises doubts about the fundamental beliefs of his society undermining the authority of the regime and resulting in his persecution. However, unlike Socrates, he escaped with his life. See Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” *Social Research* 8, no. 4 (1941): 488–504. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Eliezer Hadad, “Act as a Designer of Consciousness: Wittgensteinian Comments on Maimonides’ Philosophy” [Hebrew], in *The Halakhah as an Event*, ed. Avinoam Rosenak (Jerusalem: Magnes; Van Leer, 2016), 256–294. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, 73–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Joel Kraemer and Josef Stern, “Shlomo Pines on the Translation of Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1998): 13–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. All translations from *the Guide of the Perplexed* are taken from the Pines edition. Moses Maimonides, *The* Guide of the Perplexed, trans. Shlomo Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). The Arabic source which served as the basis of this edition was that of Shelomo Munk with the additions of Isaskhar Joel (Jerusalem 1930-1931). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Herbert Davidson, “Maimonides’ Secret Position on Creation,” *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* 1 (1979): 27–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Aristotle, *De Caelo* 1, 2–3, 268a–270b; 3, 270b, 20-24. For a description of Aristotle’s few comments on the subject and the divergent possibilities encountered by his commentators, see Ruth Glasner, “The Question of Celestial Matter in the Hebrew Encyclopedias,” *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy: Proceedings of the Bar-Ilan University Conference* (*Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought* 7), ed. Steven Harvey (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 313–15. Al-Farabi used two different terms to indicate the matter of the earth (مادة, *māddah*) and the matter of heaven (موضوع, *mawdū*ʿ), because latter is never in a state of potentiality. As opposed to Aristotle, Al-Farabi maintained that the spheres were composed of both matter and form. In some of his writings, however, he notes that each sphere can have only one form, its spirit, in contrast to matter in the sublunar world that can change forms. See J. Damien, *Method, Structure, and Development in Al-Farabi’s Cosmology: Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science, Texts and Studies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 206–210. Following in the wake of Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, Maimonides maintained that despite the essential difference between the matter of heavens and the matter of the earth, the spheres nevertheless contain matter and form. In his opinion, the different directions of the various spheres’ movements reflect their different forms. Maimonides further believed that the circular motion of the spheres indicates that they are living beings with a soul, in contrast to the straight movement of the elements, which indicates that the source of their movement is nature, not a soul (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2:4). Again, this does not, according to him, negate the existence of forms in the spheres. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Maimonides rejects Al-Farabi’s claim that the difference between the matter of the spheres and that of the stars matter is a minor one: the former transparent the latter not. He criticizes him for referring only to the difference in transparency between the stars and the spheres and not to the difference in motion. Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera noted a contradiction between Maimonides’ assertion that one must distinguish between the matter of the spheres and that of the stars, and his discussion in the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:26. In this latter chapter, Maimonides seems to accept of the position of the *tanna* R. Eliezer that the matter of heavens and what is within them (=the stars) is one matter. See Shem Tov ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera, *Moreh ha-Moreh* [Hebrew], ed. Yair Shiffman (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2001), 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Arthur Hyman, “From What is One and Simple only What is One and Simple Can Come to Be,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn E. Goodman (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 111–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Charles H. Manekin, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Maimonides: Earlier vs. Later Writings” [Hebrew], in *Maimonides: Conservatism, Originality, Revolution*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzki (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2008), 297–316; idem, “Divine Will in Maimonides’ Later Writings,” *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 189–222. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This expression is used twice by Abraham; Gen. 24:3 and Gen. 24:7. It seems that Maimonides quotes the second verse that mentions only the heavens without the earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Similarly, he chooses the verse spoken by Moses “Who rideth upon the **heaven**” as a support for his proof of creation predicated on the structure of the heavens. In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:70, Maimonides interprets this verse as pointing mainly to God’s transcendence, but he also incorporates the idea that the spheres rotate by virtue of *will*. This interpretation may refer mainly to differences in the direction of the spheres’ rotations and velocities, rather than the location of the stars within the spheres. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:52; 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:1–7; *Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:7; Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 54–61. He rejects various explanations to account for the omission of creation from the thirteen principles. He concludes that Maimonides wanted to include only those principles that do not require a complete understanding of God and that are absolutely necessary. Creation is included in the secrets of Torah and is not necessary for the observance of commandments, and therefore, was not included as a principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “Know that a foundation of the great Torah of Moses is that the world is created: God formed it and created it after its absolute non-existence. That you see me circling around the idea of the eternity of the world is [only] so that the proof of His existence will be absolute as I explained and made clear in the Guide” (*Maimonides’ Commentary on* *Mishna*, *Perek* *Helek*. Translation from Kellner, *Dogma*, 54). This note appears in the margins of Maimonides’ autograph copy (Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. Ms. Poc. 295:

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/inquire/Discover/Search/#/?p=c+0,t+,rsrs+0,rsps+10,fa+,so+ox%3Asort%5Easc,scids+,pid+b7e0b998-0a85-4a30-851f-58d67be5247d,vi+a77b5292-7188-46bb-84c5-f4ebb43b26fd>). See Kellner, *Dogma*, 240, note 211, regarding the identification of the manuscript that contains the note. It is interesting that Maimonides did not see fit to add a similar note in his *Mishneh Torah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Klein-Braslavy, *The Story of Creation*, 86–90. I find her proof from Maimonides’ interpretation of the verse “who forms the light and creates darkness, who makes peace and creates evil” (Isa. 45: 7), convincing. However, the way she learns the meaning of the Hebrew verb *baro*’ from Maimonides’ use of the Arabic verb “כ’לק” [*ḫalaka*] seems to me to be forced. In my opinion, Maimonides did indeed think that the verb create carried only two meanings, not three. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Klein-Braslavy, *The Story of Creation*, 81–84. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This conclusion, I believe, also stems from other sources. The contrast between “generated from some being” and “created *from* nothing” [אלמבתדע מן עדם, *al-mubtada*ʿ *min* ʿ*adam*] (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 2:17, Pines 297) proves that it is creation *ex nihilo* being referred to here. The same holds true for the expressions: “according to our opinion and our doctrine of the production in time of the world as whole *after [the]* nonexistence” [בעד **אל**עדם, *ba*ʿ*da al-*ʿ*adam*] (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:13, Pines 450–51) and “according to our opinion – produces all the things that are other than itself *after* they have been nonexistent” [בעד **אל**עדם, *ba*ʿ*da al-*ʿ*adam*] (*Guide* *of the Perplexed* 3:20, Pines, 428). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I found no place in the *Guide of the Perplexed* where the term “nonexistence” (עדם, ʿ*adam*) is used to refer to matter, although of course it is a quality associated with matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Klein-Braslavy, *The Story of Creation*, 96–99. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. She mentions the *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:30, in order to prove that *baro*’ [to create] and ‘*assoh* [to make] are identical verbs. Maimonides argues that since “the Lord [’*adon*] of all the earth” (Josh. 3:11; 13) connotes creation from eternal matter, the Pentateuch added the verbs “create” and “make” to negate such a view. In other words, they share a single meaning. It should, however, be noted that this shared meaning relates to the shared negation of eternal matter and not complete synonymity. See Klein-Braslavy, *The Story of Creation*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)