

Divine Perfection: Definitions of Shleimut

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The First Principle of Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles of Faith" asserts, among other things, that "the Creator, praised be He...is perfect in all aspects of existence."¹ Interestingly, this statement does not appear in the abridged version of the "Thirteen Principles" found in Orthodox prayer books, nor is it found in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah (Code of Jewish Law)*, despite the fact his magnum opus contains many other details of the First Principle of Faith. Nevertheless, Maimonides holds that a Jew is required to believe in G-d's perfection to be included in the community of Israel.² It is, therefore, of more than casual interest to examine the parameters of Divine perfection, or "*shleimut*," first through the eyes of Maimonides and then through the eyes of other traditional commentators.³ This paper will examine how traditional commentators, namely Maimonides, Don Isaac Abarbanel, R. Yosef Albo, R. Moses Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal), and R. Judah Loew (Maharal) interpret this idea and will conclude that while there is some common ground between the scholars, many differences abound.

Maimonides

For Maimonides, to describe G-d as "perfect" may be to enter into dangerous theological territory. The verse of *Shema* stating that "the L-rd is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4) proclaims that "there is none comparable to His

¹ *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah: Tractate Sanhedrin*, ed. and trans. Fred Rosner (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), p. 151. Note that this translation is based on the Hebrew translation of Rabbi Joseph Kapach. The traditional translation as it appears in the standard Vilna Talmud is that the Creator "is perfect in all ways of *perfection*." As this paper deals primarily with the concept of "perfection" per se, the differences in translation, for our purposes, are not substantial.

² Rosner, 157.

³ I have used the term "traditional" to connote those commentators universally accepted by all sects of the Orthodox Jewish community.

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Unity of Oneness among other single entities which are found in the universe.”⁴ Stated another way, “He is a simple essence without any additional element whatever.”⁵

Maimonides clarifies that no attribute may be admitted in describing the Creator without introducing plurality:⁶

... to hold the conviction that God is One and possesses true unity, without admitting plurality or divisibility in any sense whatever, you must understand that God has no essential attribute in any form or in any sense whatever, and that the rejection of corporeality implies the rejection of essential attributes. Those who believe that God is One, and that He has many attributes, declare the unity with their lips, and assume plurality in their thoughts.

The contradiction to Unity of applying attributes is illustrated by a modern scholar,⁷ “Consider ‘God is wise’ ... it seems we are talking about two things: God and wisdom. If God is one thing and wisdom another, predicating wisdom of God would be introducing plurality where we do not want to find it.” Similarly, we may say that to attribute perfection to G-d may be to introduce plurality “where we do not want to find it.”

Maimonides elaborates that G-d’s perfection means that He does not have an idle existence similar to the heavens and the earth, which exist in a non-dynamic sense. Instead, G-d possesses “life, wisdom, power, [and] activity.”⁸ G-d’s perfection then connotes a dynamic existence. Maimonides adds a critical point to which we shall return later: G-d’s perfection is absent of any defect.⁹

But how is G-d’s possession of “life, wisdom, power, and activity” not at odds with His Unity?

We must note that Maimonides distinguishes between Divine perfection and human perfection. For human beings, “perfection” is something that is acquired. When we become proficient at a sport, for example, we

⁴ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:7 (translation mine).

⁵ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 1:53. All translations from the *Guide* appearing in this paper are from this translation and are cited according to the Maimonidean arrangement of parts and chapters.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:50.

⁷ Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides: A Guide for Today’s Perplexed* (Behrman House, 1991) p. 26.

⁸ *Guide*, 1:46.

⁹ *Guide*, 1:58.

acquire a perfection that did not previously exist. G-d, explains Maimonides,¹⁰ is not “perfect” in this sense; His qualities have not been “acquired.”¹¹ Were we to say that G-d acquired perfection this would mean that such perfection was at one time absent from Him,¹² which would stand at odds with notions of G-d’s unchanging eternity and which would suggest the presence of an external characteristic contradicting G-d’s Unity.¹³ Maimonides therefore explains that G-d’s perfection is part of His very essence.¹⁴

It is not yet clear what is meant by G-d’s perfection “being part of His essence.” Later, Maimonides explains that G-d’s intellect, life, will, and wisdom “are not anything separate from Himself or different from His essence”¹⁵ and therefore not at odds with Divine Unity. It seems that once attributes are part of G-d’s essence, they no longer pose a threat to His Unity. Can the qualities of Divine perfection, namely, life, wisdom, power, and activity, also be part of His essence? How so? The answers may lie in Don Isaac Abarbanel’s explanation of Divine *shleimut*.

Don Isaac Abarbanel

Abarbanel’s work *Rosh Amanah* defends the Maimonidean “Principles of Faith” against its critics. This work also contains a discussion of Divine perfection. It is important to keep in mind, however, that when Don Isaac Abarbanel discusses the idea of Divine perfection in his *Rosh Amanah*, he does so in the context of the Maimonidean view.

In the Maimonidean conception, G-d’s essence is the antithesis of plurality and physicality. It may follow, therefore, that were an attribute to be removed from all elements of plurality and physicality it would fit in well with G-d’s essence.

¹⁰ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004) 1:59. All translations from the *Guide* appearing in this paper are from this translation and are cited according to the Maimonidean arrangement of parts and chapters.

¹¹ See *Shem Tov* commentary to *Guide*, ad loc.

¹² *Guide*, 1:55.

¹³ Rosner, 152.

¹⁴ See *Ephodi* commentary to *Guide* 1:59.

¹⁵ *Guide*, 1:69.

G-d's *shleimut*, or "perfect character,"¹⁶ says Abarbanel, finds expression in Maimonides' Third Principle, G-d's incorporeality. Abarbanel explains, "for spiritual [i.e., not physical] things are more exalted and perfect than physical things."¹⁷ In other words, G-d's perfection stems from His absolute lack of physicality. The first five of Maimonides' "Thirteen Principles," Abarbanel explains, teach of G-d's "perfect character."¹⁸

If G-d's perfection comes from His non-physical nature, one may understand how Maimonides' Second Principle, G-d's Unity, expresses His perfection, as well. Absolute Unity, meaning, not consisting of any component parts whatsoever, is so removed from physicality that it may be seen to personify *shleimut*. Maimonides' Fourth Principle, that G-d is "first and last," speaks to His eternity and absence of physicality. This, in turn, means that G-d does not fall under the category of time and is not limited by it. This lack of physical limitation, says Abarbanel, also speaks to G-d's "infinite perfection."¹⁹ One may also understand another of Abarbanel's assertions, namely, that G-d's perfection precludes Him from changing.²⁰ Since all physical things experience change in one way or another, removing G-d from such an experience is to remove Him from physicality, rendering Him a purely spiritual existence befitting perfection.

Above we stated that Maimonides conceives of G-d's perfection as being "absent from any defect." By removing Divine perfection from any physical constraint, Abarbanel has freed the concept from any defect. As such, even Maimonides may agree that Divine perfection can be part of G-d's essence without compromising His Unity, much like the concepts of intellect, life, will, and wisdom make up His essence. We may then be able to explain how a dynamic expression of Divine perfection, one of "life, wisdom, power, and activity," is part of G-d's essence and is not at odds with His Unity.

Thus far, Abarbanel has defined the characteristics of Divine perfection as devoid of all physical constraints. These characteristics can fit into the theology of Maimonides and others who hold of G-d's absolute Unity. Let us now examine how Abarbanel describes the very *identity* of Divine perfection itself.

¹⁶ Yitzchak Abarbanel, *Principles of Faith (Rosh Amanah)*, trans. Menachem M. Kellner (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), ch. 10. All translations from the *Rosh Amanah* appearing in this paper are from this translation and are cited according to the author's arrangement of chapters.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Principles of Faith (Rosh Amanah)*, ch. 10.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., ch. 13.

Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* (*Book of Commandments*) enumerates the 613 commandments of the Torah. The first commandment is to believe (or know) there is a G-d. Abarbanel claims that included in Maimonides' commandment to believe in G-d is the requirement to believe "that [G-d] is an absolutely perfect Being, existing necessarily with respect to His essence."²¹ Abarbanel posits that "existing necessarily" is part of the definition of "an absolutely perfect Being," to wit, G-d's perfection means He exists necessarily, that "everything but God is dependent, while G-d is dependent upon nothing beyond itself."²² A contemporary scholar explains that such "necessary existence" is referred to in classical philosophy as *a priori* existence, "compared to which the existence of everything else is merely secondary or conditional."^{23,24} Divine perfection, then, does not speak to G-d's dynamic existence but to His ultimate existence; G-d is the only necessary existence and this makes Him perfect. Unlike Maimonides, who held Divine perfection as *defining* G-d's essence, to Abarbanel Divine perfection *is* G-d's essence. Divine perfection is an automatic expression of who (or what) G-d is; as the ultimate Creator, G-d enjoys a necessary existence which is Divine perfection.

In sum, Abarbanel speaks of the nature of Divine perfection as a spiritual perfection devoid of physical constraints. This may explain why "perfection" is not an additional quality of G-d, whereby it would be at odds with His Unity, but is part of His very essence. A trait absent of physicality may not be seen as contradicting Unity. But Abarbanel does not only

²¹ Ibid., ch. 7.

²² Ibid.

²³ Noson Gurary, *The Thirteen Principles of Faith: A Chassidic Viewpoint* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1996), p. 28.

²⁴ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, nineteenth-century leader of the Chabad Lubavitch Chassidic movement and commonly referred to as the Tzemach Tzedek, takes issue with Abarbanel's interpretation of Divine perfection in the Maimonidean context. G-d as the *a priori* existence, argues Tzemach Tzedek (*Derech Mitzvotecha, Ha'amanat Eloket*, ch. 1.), cannot be included in the Maimonidean commandment to believe in G-d. The conviction that the existence of everything depends upon the belief in G-d but the existence of G-d does not depend on anything is a logical, and not faith-based, conclusion. When one comes to the realization, using logical argumentation, that there is a Creator, it is axiomatic that He does not depend on His creations in order to exist. *A priori* existence is thus not a matter of blind faith.

Instead, Tzemach Tzedek describes the commandment to believe in G-d's *shleimut* as the belief in the perfection of G-d's reality (Yoel Kohen, *Machshevet ha-Chassidut*, vol. I, p. 77). Such perfection is a far more elevated concept and even transcends human intellect (see Gurary 43, footnote 5).

identify the characteristics of Divine perfection but also its expression. As the ultimate Creator, G-d does not depend on His creations for His existence. His perfection is that He is the *a priori* existence.²⁵

While Maimonides had to grapple with the contradiction between the attribute of Divine perfection and G-d's Unity, Abarbanel identified perfection with the definition of G-d Himself. R. Joseph Albo, we shall see, identifies perfection in a way that does not connect the trait with the essence of the Creator.

R. Joseph Albo

While according to Maimonides and Abarbanel Divine perfection defines the nature of G-d's essence/existence, to R. Joseph Albo it describes the nature of His attributes. As such, Albo would never have to answer for contradictions between Divine perfection and G-d's Unity; inasmuch as G-d is permitted to express attributes, a fact undisputed even by Maimonides, He would be allowed attributes of a perfect nature. Albo states:²⁶

Now every attribute ascribed to any subject has in it two aspects. One aspect is that of the perfection inherent in the attribute. The other is the defect which supervenes as a result of the attribute. Accordingly, the attribute is, so to speak, composed mentally of two elements, one being a perfection, the other a defect.

Thus if we attribute wisdom to a subject, the attribute is in itself a mark of perfection in the subject. But on the other hand, from the fact that it is acquired by the subject and accidental in him, there results a defect in the subject, because the attribute is not essential in him, and thus induces plurality.

... When we attribute wisdom to God, therefore, our purpose is to indicate that He has this perfection without any defect, though the only way we can conceive of attaining wisdom is that in which man acquires it. Similarly, we say concerning power, will and the other attributes, that they are ascribed to God with a view to the perfection attaching to the attribute in question and not with a view to the defect.

²⁵ Cf. Abraham Duran's *Magen Avot*, ch. 1: "*G-d's perfection emanates from Himself*"; ch. 2: "it is impossible for the one who necessitates existence to have anything secondary, and no cause is similar to Him. This is complete simplicity *and complete perfection*"; see also ch. 5: "G-d is complete perfection...*and His unity is complete perfection*" (translation mine).

²⁶ Joseph Albo, *Sefer ha-Ikkarim: Book of Principles*. Trans. Isaac Husik (Philadelphia: JPS, 1946), II, 21. All translations from *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* appearing in this paper are from this translation and are cited according to the author's arrangement of parts and chapters.

Hence Divine perfection is a quality inherent in G-d's attributes. In an earlier chapter Albo identifies righteousness, uprightness, faithfulness, kindness, strength, mercy, and grace as perfect attributes and we can take this to mean they are expressed by G-d without any defect.²⁷ Defect here is defined as any limiting or restrictive factor. Hence we speak of a wise G-d but not of one who has acquired wisdom, for that would imply that at one time G-d was lacking.

These perfect qualities, Albo assures us, are also not "accidental" in G-d. As Albo explains, "We say that the attributes ascribed to G-d must be conceived as unified in Him, though in us they are separate and distinct."²⁸ A contemporary scholar²⁹ compares the manifestation of such attributes to the inborn instincts of man. Such instincts are a part of man's essence and were never "acquired." That is to say, there was never a time when these instincts did not exist within the person.

R. Moses Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal)

The difficulty in conceiving of Divine perfection without adding to God's Unity is addressed by R. Moses Chaim Luzzatto. We also see that, like Maimonides, he differentiates between human and Divine perfection.

Ramchal³⁰ echoes Maimonides' assertion that G-d "is perfect in all aspects of existence." We may use Ramchal's own words to preface his understanding of Divine perfection:³¹

The elemental perfection (*shleimut*) of the Blessed One is completely beyond our apprehension. This is the true perfection, which is entirely unknown to us; and it is by its very nature exalted and elevated above all the affairs of His creatures.

²⁷ Ibid., II, 7.

²⁸ Ibid., II, 21.

²⁹ Shlomo Toledano, *Sefer Dibbur u-Machshavah* (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 2013), vol. I, p. 170.

³⁰ Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *The Elucidated Derech Hashem*, trans. Abba Zvi Naiman (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2012), 1:2:1. All translations from *Derech Hashem* appearing in this paper are from this translation and are cited according to the author's arrangement of parts, chapters, and sections.

³¹ Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Daat Tevunot: The Knowing Heart*, trans. Shraga Silverstein (New York: Feldheim, 1982), p. 76. All translations from *Daat Tevunot* appearing in this paper are from this translation.

Even so, Ramchal explains, G-d revealed “a minute facet (*katzeh katan*)” of His perfection to the world.³² Regarding the essence of Divine perfection, Ramchal writes:³³

Note that He alone is true perfection devoid of all shortcomings (*chesronot*) and no other state of perfection is like His whatsoever. As such, any imaginable perfection other than God’s perfection is not true perfection; rather it is referred to as “perfection” relative to something more deficient than it. But absolute perfection is only found within the perfection associated with God.

G-d’s perfection, says Ramchal, is absolute, whereas man’s is relative. The term “perfection” then may be accurate in describing both G-d and man, but man is perfect only compared to one less perfect.³⁴

Not only is G-d’s perfection absolute, it exists within Him in a single integral state.³⁵ The difference between the single state of G-d’s perfection and man’s is well-described by a contemporary scholar: “A person can have strong will, be wise and have the ability to carry out his plans. Through these different traits he can become perfect, as an added factor to his personality. [God] though is perfect by definition in His own right.”³⁶ A quality of Divine perfection then is that G-d’s traits are an indispensable part of Him. Without His qualities, G-d would not be Himself.

Ramchal states unambiguously that the precise nature of *shleimut* is unknowable. Whatever it is, we accept it is absolute and exists in G-d like in no other. Thus, while the essence of G-d’s *shleimut* is impossible to understand, it is absolute within G-d and not in a relative manner and has no shortcoming. G-d’s perfection means that his qualities are an essential part of Him and not an added factor to His being. Ramchal’s conception of Divine perfection therefore does not pose a contradiction to G-d’s Unity.

R. Judah Loew (Maharal)

Maharal, too, adopts the position that G-d is “perfect with absolute perfection.”³⁷ In his work *Netivot Olam*, Maharal reveals a novel definition of *shleimut*:³⁸

³² Ibid., p. 24.

³³ *Derech Hashem*, *ibid.*

³⁴ Anonymous, *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh: Derech Hashem* (Heb.), p. 90.

³⁵ *Derech Hashem*, 2:1:5.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 27, footnote 41.

³⁷ Judah Loew, *Derech Chaim*, ed. Yehoshua David Hartman (Jerusalem: Mechon Yerushalayim, 2007), 3:16 (translation mine). See also, 4:17, 6:10; *Netzach Yisrael*, ch. 12; *Be'er Ha-Golah*, *be'er* 4.

³⁸ Judah Loew, *Netivot Olam* (Israel, 1980), *Netiv ha-Avodah*, ch.1 (trans. mine).

For by means of Divine service (such as prayer) it appears that He, blessed be He, is One and there is no other (as we have said). And this, too, indicates that He, blessed be He, is also perfect in absolute perfection and is removed from all deficiency. For when there is, heaven forbid, another other than Him, one has surely diminished Him [by saying] that there is something other than Him, if so He is lacking, heaven forbid.

And when we serve before Him, certainly everything is His and when everything is His there is no deficiency, for He is all and is not lacking.

Similar to Maimonides, Albo, and Ramchal, Maharal defines Divine perfection, at least in part, as being removed from all deficiency.³⁹ Unlike his predecessors, Maharal views *shleimut* as G-d's proprietorial sufficiency where "everything is His."

Maharal elaborates on G-d's proprietorial sufficiency:

And therefore it is said regarding offerings, "My offering, My bread for My fire offerings, a pleasant aroma for G-d (Numbers 28:2)" for when man has no bread, he is lacking and the bread is his completion until he is not in deficiency, therefore the offerings are called "My offering, My *bread* for My fire offering" on account that the offering informs of G-d's completion, that He is not lacking.⁴⁰

G-d's *shleimut*, translated here as "completion" rather than perfection, is described as proprietorial. As man is not lacking when he has bread, so too is G-d never lacking. As Maharal states later,⁴¹ "for He, blessed be He, is One and everything is His and this informs about His *shleimut*."

Another dimension to G-d's *shleimut* is also described by Maharal:⁴² "G-d, blessed be He, gives bounty to all beings and that in which G-d's *shleimut* goes forth to others is a superior quality and is a greater *shleimut* than the perfections which do not go forth to others."

Here Maharal says that G-d's completion approaches a higher level when G-d bestows to others. In other words, an absolute perfection/completion is always present in G-d but it is *manifest* on a higher level

³⁹ This perfection would be jeopardized with the appearance of another god who would, as it were, diminish G-d's *shleimut*. *Shleimut* is therefore part of G-d's identity as a Unique Being and any competitor is seen as a detraction. We may contrast this view of *shleimut* as pertaining to Divine character traits, perfect as they are in a Divine Being.

⁴⁰ *Netivot Olam*, *ibid*.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

⁴² Judah Loew, *Gevurot Hashem* (Israel, 1980), ch. 44 (translation mine).

when expressing itself in a generous form. G-d's *shleimut* then never changes in an existential sense but rather in a perceptive one.

Conclusion

G-d's condition of being "perfect in all aspects of existence" is discussed by a variety of traditional commentators. While the explanations of Divine perfection may vary, we also observe some common ground.

All commentators seem sensitive to establishing a concept of Divine perfection that does not threaten G-d's absolute Unity. Maimonides formulates a type of perfection, one of "life, wisdom, power, [and] activity," that is part of G-d's very essence. With the help of Abarbanel, we may explain Maimonides' intention. The aforementioned attributes are devoid of any physical makeup; they do not change, are not acquired the way traits of perfection are acquired by human beings, and do not consist of any component parts. So divorced are these attributes from physicality that they are part of G-d's essence and do not impinge on His Unity.

Abarbanel describes G-d's perfection as being His *a priori* existence. In turn, Divine perfection is part and parcel of G-d's identity as the Creator par excellence and does not disturb His Unity.

R. Joseph Albo says Divine perfection speaks to the nature of Divine attributes; they are free from defect. Any quality that G-d possesses is present in its most perfect sense without containing any drawbacks. Albo here defends against any offense to Divine Unity; if an attribute possesses a hint of plurality, then that hint does not exist in the Divine manifestation of that attribute.


R. Moses Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal) describes Divine perfection as being "completely beyond our apprehension," but still containing "a minute facet" of understandability by mere mortals. Like Maimonides and Albo, Ramchal describes a *shleimut* as "devoid of all shortcomings" and like Maimonides, as "existing in an integral state," which can be taken to mean that it would not stand at odds with a strong concept of Divine Unity. If one does not understand how this can be so, Ramchal can always fall back on his statement that, ultimately, Divine perfection is completely beyond human apprehension.

Similar to Abarbanel, R. Judah Loew (Maharal) sees Divine perfection as pertaining to a truth about G-d Himself. While Abarbanel sees *shleimut* as identical with the fact that G-d is the necessary existence, Maharal sees Divine perfection as the reality that G-d is proprietarily sufficient, that "everything is His."

At the beginning of this article we mentioned the centrality of the idea of Divine perfection to the first of the “Thirteen Principles of Faith.” Why, it may be asked, is it so crucial to believe in what may be seen as a fine point of Jewish theology?

R. Yaakov Weinberg, late *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshiva Ner Israel, asks this question.⁴³ His answer speaks to a moral vision that only monotheism can convey and to a standard of ethics that only Judaism dares preach.

Taking the Maimonidean/Ramchal model that Divine perfection is part of G-d’s very essence and therefore absolute, the *rosh yeshivah* explains that only with an absolute deity can there exist an absolute truth. If one is not aware of G-d’s absoluteness, then a Torah with absolute values cannot exist for him and cannot bind him. Concepts of good and evil can only be absolute when derived from an absolute source.⁴⁴

In a generation where moral relativism is taken as fact and yoke-less atheism is boldly promoted in all areas of media, it behooves us to re-examine the underlying principle that necessitates absolute truth and objective morality. Recognizing a G-d whose existence is not contingent on any of His creations, who is absolute unlike anything else in the universe, is at the core of identifying a Torah of absolute value and which has the final say in all moral matters by virtue of its Author’s nature. The concept of Divine perfection is therefore prerequisite for the existence of morality itself. 

⁴³ Yaakov Weinberg, *Fundamentals and Faith: Insights into the Rambam’s 13 Principles*, ed. Mordechai Blumenfeld (Israel: Targum Press, 1991), pp. 27–28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.