

Yair Lorberbaum

## **Laws as Parables: Maimonides on Allegorical Interpretation of the Mitzvot**

Within the context of the problems raised by the allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and canons, the allegorical explanation of commandments holds a distinctive place. The point of departure of this article is this question: Why did Maimonides interpret mitzvot allegorically in *Mishneh Torah*, but in *The Guide of the Perplexed* – where allegorical interpretation is a central device for resolving the perplexity caused by the plain meaning of scriptures – he refrained from allegorical interpretation of mitzvot? This question is a useful framework for examining the similarity between allegorical interpretation of prophecies and biblical narratives and allegorical interpretation of mitzvot, as well as the fundamental differences between them.

In section 1 I will set out the components of the question: I will present the brief, unexplained, comment in the introduction to *The Guide*, that every person possessing “an unimpaired (intellectual) capacity” understands that the commandments should not be explained allegorically, on the one hand, and examples of allegorical interpretations of the mitzvot in *Mishneh Torah*, on the other hand. In section 2 I will lay out the conceptual framework for the answers that I will offer to this question in the following sections. I will describe Maimonides’ theory of parables and the different purposes he attributed to parables – pedagogical, philosophical, and political. I will distinguish between allegorical interpretation of commandments and allegorical interpretation of their reasons.

The answer I will offer in section 3 is anchored in the awareness that a main purpose of *The Guide of the Perplexed* is to solve the perplexity of the plain meaning of scriptures, and it does that by claiming that the biblical prophecies and narratives are parables that aim at their inner, philosophical meanings, while their external meanings themselves have no value. When allegorical interpretation uprooting the *peshat* is applied to the mitzvot, even if only to their reasons, it undermines their external-practical meaning. Therefore, Maimonides refrained in *The Guide* from interpreting mitzvot allegorically.

In section 4, I will show that Maimonides’ purpose in *The Guide*’s chapters on the reasons for the commandments is not only to provide reasons for the mitzvot in general, but mainly to point out the reasons of their details. In his view, allegorical interpretation is inappropriate for providing reasons

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for the minutiae of the mitzvot. Maimonides' argument at the end of the introduction to *The Guide*, that the details in most prophetic parables "have not been inserted with a view to interpretation," and that such assumptions would be "extravagant fantasies," is also aimed at allegorical interpretations of mitzvot.