Now to be faithful to our text, we must note that Maimonides does not necessarily present as integrated a human ideal as we might prefer – an ideal in which one is not only devoted to God but is also fully connected to those around us. It is true that in the final chapter of the *Guide* (3.54), he emphasized returning to the community to embody God’s attributes of loving kindness, justice, and righteousness in the world. However, in the passages on prayer we have been examining in Guide 3.51, he seems to prefer contemplative solitude and isolation from community. He does hold up the importance of attentive awareness in our spiritual lives. Thus he bids that when we are engaged in prayer or practice of the commandments we do so with full concentration and focus; this is not the time to think about baseball scores, one’s to-do list, or our scheduling challenges for the coming week. However, Maimonides does not tell us that we should bring the same mindful attention to our human relationships and the affairs of daily life; he betrays a manifestly intellectualist sensibility that puts prime value on matters of study, worship, and religious expression over connection to others in human community.

In portraying his ideal of the special worshiper, Maimonides seems to posit a day divided into three isolated time periods, with corresponding separate activities. He suggests that a person who pursues the training he suggests should focus on God while engaging in prayer or practice of the commandments, think about everyday matters when engaged in the everyday, and engage in the deepest contemplation during moments of solitude, such as lying in one’s bed at night, in those precious moments of engaging in intellectual worship and appearing before God.¹

The ultimate ideal, however, is that of the prophets and founders of the Israelite community, who through such an apprehension of the truths and joy in what they apprehended were able to engage fully with others while at the same time directing their hearts and minds toward God, as it says in *Song of Songs* 5:2, “I sleep, but my heart wakes; it is the voice of my beloved that knocks.” Maimonides does not
assert that all the prophets reached this level, but that Moses and the patriarchs did, and that it was because of the union (ittiḥād) of their intellects with the God that he made a lasting covenant with each of them:

For in these four (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses) union (ittiḥād) with God—that is, the apprehension and love of him—became manifest, as the texts testify. Further, the providence watching over them and their descendants must have been great, for at the same time that they were devoted in heart and mind to the service and contemplation of God they were also occupied with managing other people, increasing their fortunes, and managing their property. This is a clear proof that they were attending to these pursuits with their limbs alone, while their intellects were constantly in the presence of God.

There are several important points to notice in this description. A likely historical source for the image is the Regime of the Solitary (Tadbīr al-mutawāhid) by the Islamic philosopher Ibn Bājja (d. 1139), who argued that the true philosopher is an alien in society, a contemplative whose thoughts are in the spiritual world and not the world in which he or she lives:

These individuals are the ones meant by the Sufis when they speak of the “strangers;” for although they are in their homelands and among their companions and neighbors, the Sufis say they are strangers in their opinions, having travelled in their minds to other levels that are like homelands to them, and so forth.

This is in contrast to the political ideal of the ninth century Islamic thinker Alfarabi, who like Plato upheld the duty of the philosopher to govern and perfect society. Maimonides here seems to be following Ibn Bājja’s portrait of the philosopher as a solitary contemplative, in contrast to Alfarabi’s model of the philosopher as an engaged leader of the human community.

Another point of note is that Maimonides uses the term ittiḥād for union with God. This is a radical term that was avoided even by most Sufis. Perhaps he feels the latitude to use it because he has been so careful in the chapter to give an intellectual flavor to the kind of devotion he is talking about. He has made it clear that his devotion is not an act of the imagination, but the intellect, and that the intellect should direct itself to the First Intelligence—the Separate Intellect that can be apprehended, whereas the
Necessary Existent itself would be beyond our intellectual apprehension. And yet he does assert here that the apprehension (idrāk) and love (maḥabba) of God became manifest in the Biblical ancestors. Thus, although we will see that he does not explicitly attribute ultimate happiness (saʿāda) to Moses, Miriam, Aaron, and the patriarchs, he does attribute to them states of love and joy, including passionate love (ʿishq) and even union (ittiḥād) with God.

Does Maimonides’ depiction of the Biblical ancestors then suggest an ideal disengagement from the world for the purpose of devotion to God, or does it include engagement with the community and the world around us? On one reading, the patriarchs are managing their affairs “with their limbs alone,” while their intellects are before God. In his instruction on prayer and the practice of commandments, Maimonides admonished us precisely not to engage in these actions with our limbs alone, but with full awareness. We might be troubled by the notion that Maimonides’ ideal is that one should be on “automatic pilot,” engaging in one’s everyday pursuits with one’s limbs alone, while one is actually off contemplating God. This suggests the image of the absent partner or absent-minded professor—one who is thinking about advanced physics or contemplating God, oblivious to the person before them. Aristotle notes that humans are social-political by nature; as communal animals, we presumably prefer to know that others are present with us in spirit as well as body. In some fascinating research, Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer has shown across a spectrum that children, music audiences, and even animals can discern when we are mindfully present or mindless, and we are drawn to those who are mindfully aware.

There is a charitable way to read Maimonides. A person acting with “the limbs alone” might suggest that it is the Active Intellect that is guiding a person’s activities. This is what seems to be the case in the final paragraphs of the Guide, in which Maimonides describes the person who has assimilated God’s attributes of action. When one has achieved knowledge of God through reflecting upon God’s presence in nature and the wisdom of the commandments, all one’s actions come to reflect the divine attributes; the way of life of such an individual will always reflect God’s loving kindness, justice, and righteousness. One thus becomes like a mirror reflecting God’s qualities in all one does.
Given this description at the end of the *Guide*, we might charitably read Maimonides’ depiction of the patriarchs and Moses in the same way. It is true that Maimonides uses the quotation from *Song of Songs*, “I sleep, but my heart wakes; it is the voice of my beloved that knocks” to describe worldly life as sleep and being with God as wakefulness. Nevertheless, we might take up the suggestion that the human ideal Maimonides portrays is one in which the Active Intellect rather than the human being’s own limited intellect guides the person’s actions and affairs.\(^{\text{xii}}\) One is both with the people around one and immersed in contemplation of God. And the reason God’s providence could guide the Biblical ancestors’ affairs is that they were wholly dedicated to creating a people that would know and serve God.

Maimonides’ model bears similarity to the ideal of *karma yoga* presented in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Both texts struggle with the question of whether one must leave the world of communal engagement, whether God can only be known in solitary contemplation. Given his hectic life, Maimonides himself seems to have longed for seclusion, and rued the active life of communal service in which he was engaged.\(^{\text{xii}}\) But he may have realized that the resolution of this tension could lie in precisely this—not only in finding moments during his work day to study in the Sultan’s library, but also in striving to practice contemplation even while immersed in the affairs of everyday life.\(^{\text{xiii}}\) If Maimonides did regard these two states as a split—that contemplation of God and metaphysics represent alertness, while being with people is a state of sleep—this suggests that perhaps he had not come to value the integration many of us seek to achieve. Perhaps if he had found within his community the kind of intellectual fellowship he longed for in his student Joseph, he would have put more value upon an integrated ideal of friendship and community with human beings, and not only the divine. Indeed, there is evidence that Maimonides was gravely disappointed in Joseph; it seems that the beloved student in whom he had invested so much hope did not live up to his early promise. This must have increased Maimonides’ sense of isolation from human community, and perhaps gave fuel to his belief that it is only in solitary study and in the divine that one can find unwavering solace, a joy that will never disappoint us.\(^{\text{xiv}}\)
Maimonides thus divides time into three. There are times when we are engaged in everyday activities, during which we can think of worldly affairs. Then there are times when we are engaged in liturgical prayer or the practice of commandments, during which we can practice focused attention. The deepest knowledge of God takes place during the precious moments of solitude at night, when we can devote ourselves completely and uninterruptedly to contemplation of the divine.

Guide 3.51 I have here modified the translations of Pines and Rabin to make the Arabic of this complex sentence comprehensible. Pines, 624; Rabin, 191-2.


Raphael Jospe, Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages, 514-515, 519-520, 536-537; Sarah Stroumsa, “Philosopher-King or Philosopher-Courtier: Theory and Reality of the Falasifa’s Place in Society,” in Identidades marginales 2003: 433-459, especially 442-447, 450-452; Steven Harvey, “The Place of the Philosopher in the City According to Ibn Bājja,” in The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy—Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi, ed. Charles Butterworth, 199-233, especially 207-208, 222. While Ibn Bājja might agree with Alfarabi’s ideal in theory, he did not see it as feasible in society as we know it. I thank Steven Harvey for this qualification. See Harvey, “Maimonides in the Sultan’s Palace,” in Joel Kraemer, ed., Perspectives on Maimonides, 47-75 at 48-49.

However, as we saw above, Maimonides does return to Alfarabi’s engaged model in the final chapter of the Guide.

It is true that in other passages in the Guide, Maimonides at times seems to evince a sense that the great truths of metaphysics, celestial physics, and perhaps even terrestrial physics may be inscrutable. And in those texts, he seems to advise his students to engage in skeptical epoche, to suspend judgment and not exhaust the mind trying to find answers for those things that are beyond our minds to fathom. However, Tzvi Langermann points out that even in the famous passage in 2.24 where Maimonides expresses his perplexity about astronomical matters, he suggests that perhaps someone more gifted in such matters may be able to resolve problems he has henceforth been unable to resolve, whether through prophetic gifts or scientific acumen. See Langermann, 305-17.

Perhaps, as Sarah Stroumsa suggests, great philosophers have moments of hope and moments of despair. She writes: “The goal which the philosophers set for themselves—apprehending the highest truth as a precondition to immortality—was an immensely daunting one. The examination of philosophical texts and rational analysis led the philosophers to adhere to this theory, and they usually displayed confidence in their intellectual ability. Nevertheless, it is only natural that they would at times lose heart and lapse into skepticism. Their observation and analysis indicated to them that the attachment of the human intellect to the body was not a mere temporal obstacle, but a constant which defines humanity. Their statements about the possibility of immortality, therefore, vary in intensity, and sometimes even in content. It would be incorrect, in my view, to weigh these statements against each other and look for the single true belief, as opposed to the other, which would be only a camouflage. In such cases as Maimonides’ Guide III 51 or Avicenna’s Isharat where the philosopher abandons technical language to expand on his perception of the hereafter, the emotional language is a clear sign that what the philosopher says reflects precisely what the thinks, regardless of what he may have said before or after. It is a sincere expression of his confidence in the awaiting felicity.” See Stroumsa, ‘True Felicity: Paradise in the
Thought of Avicenna and Maimonides,”” in Medieval Encounters 4:1, 31-77, at 75; idem. Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker, 164-65.


Both Maimonides and Aquinas held that while in most ethical virtues, we should aim for the mean, in the love of God, we need not aim for the mean; as Michael Baris expresses it, while our knowledge may be limited, our love can be unlimited. Michael Baris, “Limited Knowledge: Unlimited Love: A Maimonidean Paradox,” University of Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought 2013; Maimonides, Laws of Repentance (Hilkhot Teshuvah), 10.3; Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I-II, 62, 3. Menachem Kellner pointed out to me that Baris’ suggestion here contradicts the notion that knowledge is proportional to love, which Maimonides expresses in both Guide 3.51 and Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance (Hilkhot Teshuvah) 10.6.

Ellen Langer, On Becoming an Artist: Reinventing Yourself through Mindful Creativity, 35-36, 28-30. See below Chapter 12.

This is indeed the model suggested by Halevi in the philosopher’s speech in the Kuzari 1.1, which is probably modeled on the philosophy of Ibn Bajja. See David Shatz, “Worship, Corporeality, and Human Perfection: A Reading of Guide of the Perplexed III:51-54,” In The Thought of Moses Maimonides, 77-129 at 99; following Altmann, Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” 80.

This is a Sufi motif echoed in the Jewish Sufi-influenced thinker Bahya ibn Paquda (c. 1050-80), whom Maimonides certainly read, and who was an important source for Maimonides’ intellectualist spirituality. See Lobel, A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda’s Duties of the Heart, 47-50. See below, Chapter 10 for the mirror as a central motif in the Persian Sufi poem Conference of the Birds.

See David Shatz, “Worship, Corporeality, and Human Perfection,” in The Thought of Moses Maimonides, ed. Ira Rosenbloom, Lawrence Kaplan, and Julien Bauer, (77-129 at 99; Alexander Altmann has suggested that this is the function of the emanated acquired intellect. See “Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” 80.


See Steven Harvey, “Maimonides in the Sultan’s Palace,” 73-75.

See Sarah Stroumsa, The Beginnings of the Maimonidean Controversy in the East: Yosef ibn Shimon’s Silencing Epistle Concerning the Resurrection of the Dead [Hebrew] xi (English introduction); 15 (Hebrew); idem, Maimonides in his World, 166-76; idem “The Solitude of the Engaged Philosopher: Andalus and Sefarad,” Simon Rawidowicz Memorial Lecture; Steven Harvey, “Maimonides and the Art of Writing Introductions,” in Maimonidean Studies 5, 96-100. I thank Steven Harvey for having strengthened my point here with these sources. For the sense that the eternal will never let us down, because we can never lose it against our will, see Augustine, On the Free Choice of the Will, 1.16, p. 27.
The contemporary philosopher David Hartman has outlined a model that might be useful to resolve the tension refined in Maimonides thought between solitude and engagement. There is an upward ascent in which one observes commandments as practice toward the knowledge of God, the goal of one’s ascent. When one has achieved knowledge of God and practices from a state of knowledge, one is no longer at the level Maimonides terms “the third perfection,” where morality is simply a disposition to be useful to other people, but at the 4+ or fifth perfection, in which actions flow from a deep understanding of God’s attributes of action as manifested in nature as well as in the wisdom of God’s commandments. The model at the end of the Guide seems to be an integrated ideal, in which God’s loving kindness, justice, and compassion flow as a comprehensive expression of one’s understanding. This understanding may include realizing the limits of one’s understanding. As Warren Zev Harvey expresses it, the ethical action that is a means to intellectual perfection is what Maimonides terms the third perfection. The perfection of 4+, a by-product of intellectual perfection (the fourth perfection), is what Maimonides refers to in Guide 3.53 as ḥesed (loving kindness). See David Hartman; Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest, 187-214; and Warren Zev Harvey, "Maimonides on Human Perfection, Awe, and Politics," in The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies, ed. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer, 1-15, at 11-12.