Introduction to Monotheism

Avraham is said to have brought many individuals under the wings of the shekhinah of the "souls that Avraham made" by imparting a belief and understanding, as far as the limits of human understanding can grasp of the oneness and uniqueness of G-d. This guide traces how philosophers after Avraham including Rav Saadia Gaon in Sefer Emunot Ve-Deot, Rav Bachya ibn Pakudah in Hovoot LeVavot, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevy in the Kuzari, Maimonides in the Moreh Nevukhim, and others, gave rational proofs for the existence and uniqueness of Hashem. The guide explores the concept of monotheism, and how this belief and position leads one to naturally conclude that G-d created the world, yesh mi-ayin (creation ex nihilo) rather than other positions in philosophy that the world is eternal (Aristotle's position), or creation de novo (Plato's position).

While the attempts to prove G-d's existence are many in the course of Philosophy a number of those proofs from medieval Jewish philosophers are classified under the following rubrics:

(1) proof from motion: In that we witness the heavenly bodies in motion, there must be a first cause, Siva Rishonah, that put these heavenly bodies in motion as when we read in Iyov, " at creation all the stars shouted for joy".

(2) proof from intelligent design: Although this is a later term (intelligent design) medieval Jewish philosophers long before the modern period noted that G-d encoded or encrypted order and purposeful design in the universe. Science seeks out these laws in the order of nature. Scientists have reduced to numerical mathematic formulas such natural laws as: (1) the laws of gravity (Newton), (2) the laws of entropy, (3) the laws of thermodynamics, (4) the laws of Einsteinian Relativity, etc. Medieval Jewish philosophers recognized that the world was not created and governed by chaos and random "chance", although chance and coincidence play a role in the plot structure of Megillat Esther (what if the King had not been sleepness that night? What is Mordechai had not overheard the plot to destroy the Jews? etc.) but rather G-d governs the Universe and His laws are enscribed in its workings which make us understand that there is a 1st Creator who determined these natural scientific laws, which the scientists seek out. The intricate design and order of existent things and natural processes imply that a Great Designer exists. Long before William Paley who spoke of the existence of a clock suggests a clockmaker, so too the existence of created word suggests a Creator, medieval Jewish philosophers interested in science recognized and articulated this proof.
(3) Ontological proof: G-d is the thought beyond which thought cannot proceed etc. This proof takes a mystical position that there are limits to language which makes possible thought. At the limits of language the philosopher is forced to as Wittgenstein says, "kick the ladder of logic out from beneath his feet and ascend the mountain alone" in silent contemplation of the attributes of Hashem.

(4) Efficient Cause. Maimonides notes that although G-d is incorporeal with corporeal things we can note 4 causes, (1) Efficient cause, maker of kiddush cup, (2) formal cause, shape of kiddush cup, (3) material cause, silver in which kiddush cup made, (4) teleological cause, purpose of kiddush cup to sanctify G-d in blessing over the wine etc. The sequenc of causes which determine the universe suggest that there must be an Efficient Cause, i.e. G-d who created the Universe.

(5) Credo Absurdum ist. Long before this formulation in Latin by Christian philosophers, Medieval Jewish philosophers considered that this understanding of the limits of the human intellect that cannot possibly bridge the gap between the divine infinitte understanding of G-d, leads one to the conclusion that man with his human intellect cannot prove the existence of G-d, and therefore one believes because the absurdity of such an attempt is apparent. That is still to acknowledge with Maimonides that the link (kesher) between G-d and man is the active intellect (sekel hapoel) which determines what it is to be "BiTzelem Elokim" yet this human intellect must engage in the method of "negative theology" positing that G-d is not finite (i.e. ayn sof), not ignorant, and not a body (ain lo demut ha-guf ve-eino guf) because there is an infinite gap between Divine omniscience and the humble creature man endowed in the image of G-d through the Descartian cogito ergo sum. Yet Maimonides recognizes that we can imitate G-d in positive attributes which we recognize are elements of the divine spark in the inter-human realm (das zwischen mentschlich) such as being kind, compassionate, slow to anger, gracious, etc.

(6) Argument for Necessary Being. Since all existent things depend upon other things for their existence, there must exist at least one thing that is not dependent and so is a Necessary Being. For Maimonides G-d is self sufficient and unique as noted in the Yom Kippur liturgy that Hashem is leilah, leilah, beyond all praises. How can a self-sufficient Being who is perfect, who thinks Himself in the perfection of what it is to think i.e. sui generis need praises when his Glory is a priori? This necessary Being for Maimonides is definitional based on self-sufficiency and not conceived in terms of a Boethian "consolation to philshophy"

(7) Argument from Gradation and spectrum of goodness and evil in the world etc. Since all existent things can be compared to such qualities as degrees of goodness, there must exist something that is an Absolutely Good Being. This ties in with Maimonides understanding of positive attributes of Hashem
that we should strive to perform and imitate intrinsically as a part of good character development (see Shemoneh Perakhim)

(8) other ontological proofs exist see this article

Through attempting to comprehend the existence of G-d, the principle of Rambam’s yod gimel ikararim (hu Kayam) we are led through philosophical demonstration to better grasp of G-d’s uniqueness. Sefer Iyov gives us an incling to this uniqueness when in chapter 38 G-d shows up out of the whirlwind since Iyov has demanded a court case (riv) with G-d as we read:

1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:

2 Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?

3 Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto Me.

4 Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast the understanding.

5 Who determined the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who stretched the line upon it?

6 Whereupon were the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the corner-stone thereof,

7 When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

8 Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth, and issued out of the womb;

9 When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it,

10 And prescribed for it My decree, and set bars and doors,

11 And said: 'Thus far shalt thou come, but no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed'?
12 Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days began, and caused the dayspring to know its place;

13 That it might take hold of the ends of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it?

14 It is changed as clay under the seal; and they stand as a garment.

15 But from the wicked their light is withholden, and the high arm is broken.

16 Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? Or hast thou walked in the recesses of the deep?

17 Have the gates of death been revealed unto thee? Or hast thou seen the gates of the shadow of death?

18 Hast thou surveyed unto the breadths of the earth? Declare, if thou knowest it all.

19 Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and as for darkness, where is the place thereof;

20 That thou shouldest take it to the bound thereof, and that thou shouldest know the paths to the house thereof?

21 Thou knowest it, for thou wast then born, and the number of thy days is great!

22 Hast thou entered the treasuries of the snow, or hast thou seen the treasuries of the hail,

23 Which I have reserved against the time of trouble, against the day of battle and war?

24 By what way is the light parted, or the east wind scattered upon the earth?

25 Who hath cleft a channel for the waterflood, or a way for the lightning of the thunder;

26 To cause it to rain on a land where no man is, on the wilderness, wherein there is no man;

27 To satisfy the desolate and waste ground, and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth?
Hath the rain a father? Or who hath begotten the drops of dew?

Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoar-frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?

The waters are congealed like stone, and the face of the deep is frozen.

Canst thou bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?

Canst thou lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season? Or canst thou guide the Bear with her sons?

Knowest thou the ordinances of the heavens? Canst thou establish the dominion thereof in the earth?

Canst thou lift up thy voice to the clouds, that abundance of waters may cover thee?

Canst thou send forth lightnings, that they may go, and say unto thee: 'Here we are'?

Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? Or who hath given understanding to the mind?

Who can number the clouds by wisdom? Or who can pour out the bottles of heaven, when the dust runneth into a mass, and the clods cleave fast together?

Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lioness? Or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they couch in their dens, and abide in the covert to lie in wait?

Who provideth for the raven his prey, when his young ones cry unto God, and wander for lack of food?