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Rabbi Yosef Qafih's Modern Medieval Translation of the *Guide*

Y. TZVI LANGERMANN

Early Biography in Yemen: A Medieval Philosopher of the Twentieth Century

The various translators of Maimonides' *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, medieval and modern, all had an excellent command of Arabic. However, only two of them can be considered native speakers: Yehudah al-Ḥarizi and Yosef Qafih.[1] While Samuel Ibn Tibbon may well have spoken Arabic at home, he did not grow up in an Arabic-speaking environment. The ability of native speakers goes far beyond the ability to communicate freely in the language; they are familiar with the entire culture of expression for which the language is the main medium. Native speakers possess sensitivity to nuance and innuendo that is nearly impossible to teach, or even for emigrants to pass on within their households.

1. The family name in Arabic was al-Qāfiḥ. The rabbi had little interest in the proper spelling of his name in English, a language that he did not read; Mossad ha-Rav Kook, which published the rabbi's editions and translations of Maimonides, prefers Kafih. Here, I will simply use Qafih, without diacritics.

Rabbi Yosef Qafih had yet another advantage: he was born and spent his formative years in the Yemen, a country in which medieval traditions of philosophy and astronomy, close to those in which Maimonides himself was involved, were very much alive.[2] But the Yemen was not closed to the outside world. To the contrary, "modern" ideas and books were received there by way of the Turkish authorities as well as Jewish visitors. Rabbi Yihya Qafih (1850–1931), Yosef's grandfather, was very open to these new resources, which he viewed to be fully compatible with Maimonidean philosophy. His library included books on modern science in Hebrew, products of the European Haskalah, and in Arabic, reflecting a parallel development in the Middle East.[3] Rabbi Yihya instituted a major revival based on the two pillars of Saʿadya Gaon and Maimonides, and Rabbi Yosef's life work was mostly devoted to the writings of those two figures.[4]

The influence of his grandfather on Rabbi Yosef cannot be overstated. An orphan almost from birth (his father died after being brutally struck by a Yemeni soldier, and his mother died soon after he was born), Yosef was raised by his grandparents. Though Yosef was only a young boy when Rabbi Yihya passed away, the precocious youngster absorbed a tremendous amount of learning from his grandfather.

Among Rabbi Yihya's many activities, two in particular are directly relevant to Rabbi Yosef's translation: his regular study sessions on the *Guide* and his efforts to preserve the Yemeni literary heritage. Rabbi Yihya taught Maimonides (and Saʿadya) to a select group of students; Arabic, of course, was the language both of the texts and of instruction. Though still only a child, Rabbi Yosef sat in on those sessions, and would even follow up later privately on some question that had been raised. Decades later he recalled specific remarks of his grandfather.

An interesting example of this is found in the introduction to his edition and translation of Maimonides' *Book of Commandments*. Rabbi Yosef recalls that often there were not enough manuscripts of the text for all the participants, and some had to use, instead, a printing of Moshe Ibn Tibbon's translation. This led to many questions concerning differences and

2. To date, the only published biography is that written by his granddaughter Avivit Levi (2003), which contains liberal citations from the rabbi's handwritten autobiography. There are scattered references in Rabbi Qafih's writings to his discussions with Muslim astronomers and philosophers. David King mentions meeting, during a visit in 1974, several elderly Yemenis who had studied computational astronomy from medieval texts; see King 1983, 10.

3. Langermann 1987, 10–11.

4. Rabbi Yihya's reform is discussed in Ahroni 1986, 154–56.

omissions from the original (as taught by Rabbi Yihya) and the medieval Hebrew version.[5] In a note, Rabbi Yosef recalls a specific case: Ibn Tibbon apparently did not recognize in one place that an initial *alif* serves as the interrogative particle, and so misread *a-wa-lā* (and is it not?) as *awwalan* (at first).[6]

As European collectors scoured the Yemen for manuscripts, Rabbi Yihya initiated a desperate attempt to preserve the written heritage of Yemenite Jewry. He could not outbid the foreigners, but he was able to reach an agreement with some agents to deposit manuscripts with him overnight so that they could be copied (by hand, of course) before they were shipped out. Over the course of the night, the manuscript would be divided among a team of copyists, and Yosef, although he was only six years old, took part in the effort. His edition of the *Dalāla*, from which he prepared his translation, is based on the Munk-Joel edition checked against three Yemeni copies, all of which were recommended by Rabbi Yihya to his grandson.[7]

Entry into the World of Translation and the Academic Periphery

The social relations that obtained within Jewish society toward the end of the British Mandate and the early years of the State of Israel, the period when Rabbi Yosef began his literary activity, seem today like a romantic fantasy. The young Yemenite rabbi was befriended by some of the most eminent scholars of his generation, such as Shlomo Dov Goitein, one of the first non-Yemenites whom Rabbi Yosef met upon arrival in Jerusalem. Goitein recognized that the Judeo-Arabic culture that he had studied in university was still very much alive in people like Rabbi Yosef. Still, he did not look upon Rabbi Yosef as a talking artifact to be exploited for his own academic publications. Instead, the two developed a true friendship based, as all such relationships must be, on mutual respect.[8] Moreover, the dividing lines be-

5. Qafih 1971, 9–10.

6. Qafih 1971, 52–53n35. The divergence was noticed in the specific manuscript used by Rabbi Yihya. The *Book of Commandments* has never been critically edited, and most of the manuscripts have yet to be taken into consideration.

7. See the introduction to his edition and translation (Qafih 1:14–15). Many more Yemeni copies are extant; see Sirat 1991; Langermann 2000b.

8. Rabbi Qafih thanks Professor Goitein for reading over the manuscript of his *Halikhot Teiman: Jewish Life in San'a and Environs* (Qafih 1963a). In one of the two prefaces to his *The Yemenites: History, Communal Organization, Spiritual Life* (Goitein 1983), Goitein cites from his first publication on the Yemenites, which appeared in 1931, in which he wrote that the Yemenite community is blessed with many scholars and intellectuals who are more capable

tween formal academic (i.e., university) and traditional scholarship were nothing like the trench warfare that now besets Israeli society. Eminent researchers such as Saul Lieberman and Simha Asaf, who both straddled the university-yeshiva divide themselves, also befriended Rabbi Yosef. Asaf's mediation was critical in convincing Rabbi Y. L. Maimon, head of Mossad ha-Rav Kook, to accept, in 1950, Rabbi Yosef's plan to publish the entire Maimonidean corpus (excluding the medical writings): *Commentary on the Mishnah*, *Guide of the Perplexed*, *Book of Commandments*, *Letters*, and *Responsa*.[9]

Translation Procedure for the *Guide*

The encouragement that he received for his earlier translation projects notwithstanding, Rabbi Qafih clearly felt the need to justify a new Hebrew version of the *Guide*. Of all the translations of Maimonidean writings, surely Samuel Ibn Tibbon's *Moreh ha-nevukhim* has had the greatest impact. This was the version studied by generation after generation of Jews who did not read Arabic; and it was the version that enraged some elements in the Jewish communities, leading to the Maimonidean "controversies."[10] Ibn Tibbon's text established the idiom and vocabulary for Hebrew philosophical writing that were maintained well into modern times. Rabbi Qafih quickly disposed of the translation by al-Ḥarizi, Ibn Tibbon's contemporary. Ibn Tibbon's own negative judgment of his rival has held to this day, and al-Ḥarizi's translation has been read by only a few (though some, such as Moses Nahmanides, are very important to the history of Jewish thought).[11] Ibn Tibbon's work required a more serious critique. Rabbi Qafih pointed to two interconnected weaknesses: Ibn Tibbon was not well versed in phi-

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than he of carrying out the study of their language. In the preface to the later anthology, he names Rabbi Yosef Qafih and Professor Yehudah Ratzaby (in that order) as two individuals who made his prophecy into a reality.

9. Rabbi Qafih relates the story in the introduction to his edition and translation of Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishnah* (Qafih 1963b, 8); for undisclosed reasons, Mossad ha-Rav Kook delayed publication for some ten years, which gave Rabbi Yosef the opportunity to critically review the materials that he prepared once more; the volumes mentioned all appeared eventually, except for the responsa, which were published by Joshua Blau. Rabbi Qafih did retranslate many of the responsa in the notes to his edition of the *Mishneh Torah*, his last and most extensive project, which he completed shortly before his demise.

10. Fraenkel 2007.

11. See Raymond Scheindlin's contribution to this volume and the section titled "The Tradition of the *Guide* among Jewish Thinkers . . ." in Caterina Rigo's contribution.

losophy, and his ability to handle the *Guide* properly was hampered by the fact that his study of Arabic was limited to medical texts. On the other hand, Rabbi Qafih conceded that Ibn Tibbon's skills had improved over time.[12]

Rabbi Qafih's translation contains many notes indicating disagreement with Ibn Tibbon, occasionally accompanied by a barb at the Provençal translator. Nonetheless, he does not hesitate to compliment Ibn Tibbon for an elegant translation. A good example of the latter is the passage from III 30 that describes the origins of astrolatry among the ancients, which was instituted at the behest of "their men of knowledge, as well as the ascetics and *ahl al-taqwā* among them."[13] How best ought one to translate *ahl al-taqwā*? Pines translates "men of piety," closely following Munk's "pieux." Rabbi Qafih himself chooses *ḥasid*, the Hebrew word for "pious." *Taqwā* usually means "fear of God," but the context here clearly indicates that Maimonides is speaking of fear of sin, which will bring on disaster. Hence Ibn Tibbon translates *yir'e ḥeṭ'*, "those who fear sin." Rabbi Qafih praises this choice as elegant (*na'eh*).[14]

Rabbi Qafih translated many books, but it was only in connection with the *Guide* that he sensed the need to explain his method at length. It seems clear enough that the reason for this is the extraordinary care that he took in translating this particular text. Maimonides chose his words very carefully, and his translators ought to do no less. Though the *Guide* is indeed especially challenging, the concerns and worries that the rabbi openly confesses certainly apply to all translation. I will quote here extensively from his introduction. However, since he translates from his own edition, I should first say a few words about that.

Rabbi Qafih recognizes two traditions, for lack of a better term, of the original text: that of the Munk-Joel edition (Jerusalem: Junovitch, 1930/31), which presents the version sent to Provence and used by Ibn Tibbon for his translation; and the Yemeni tradition. The differences between the two are for the most part trivial, although not entirely so. An instance of the latter is found in the opening sentence of III 23, concerning Job, where the two provide different groupings of the letters into words: Munk-Joel displays *awwal mā*, the Yemeni manuscripts *aw li-mā*. Thus, only the Yemeni tradition preserves in that chapter the option Maimonides offers (following the rabbis)

12. Qafih 1:16–20.

13. Pines 522.

14. Qafih 3:570n2; notes 1, 8, 12, 13, and 16 to the same chapter are critical, some extremely so.

of reading Job as a parable *or* as a historical occurrence. Pines translates: "If it is supposed that the story of Job happened, the first thing that occurred was . . ."[15] Rabbi Qafih's Hebrew has, instead: "When the episode of Job was supposed, or when it happened, the issue upon which the five agreed upon was . . ."[16] Some of the Yemeni readings that the rabbi consigned to the apparatus open up interesting avenues of interpretation, even when it is quite certain that they are copyists' interventions.[17]

The Yemeni tradition appeared to be essentially uniform, and, though he consulted seven Yemeni copies, Rabbi Qafih settled on three that he used for his edition. Two are twentieth-century copies, one of them prepared by the rabbi himself when he was only twelve years old. It was copied under the supervision of his grandfather from a "very old" manuscript deposited in the Alshaykh synagogue. Not surprisingly, Rabbi Qafih held the Yemeni tradition to be truer to the original. As noted, the rabbi described his method of translation in great detail:

> As for my translation, [I began it only] after I had studied the book several times. Indeed, when still very young I sat before my grandfather. I heard his explanations as he taught the best of his students; they studied it in the Arabic original, and he explained it as need be. When I prepared my own copy [of the Judeo-Arabic original], I asked him more than once about the meaning of one thing or another. Now again I have gone over it more than once. After I established for myself the correct reading of the original, as given above, I translated the whole thing without looking at the earlier translations so as not to be influenced by their understanding, and thus not be able to understand that which I am capable of understanding freely.[18]

It is indeed tempting, when confronted with a difficult passage, for the translator to turn to an earlier translation for help. However, it would then

15. Pines 490.

16. Qafih 3:534. In a note to his Arabic text, Rabbi Qafih records the Munk-Joel version and uncharacteristically adds parenthetically *we-shibush hu'* (it is a mistake).

17. For example, according to some Yemeni manuscripts, Maimonides announces that he will make use of the sixth cause of contradiction (and not just causes five and seven, as most versions and all interpreters agree); some medieval Yemeni commentators explore this new possibility. See Langermann 2009, 170–75.

18. Qafih 1:20.

be difficult to produce one's own rendering "freely," and this is a situation that the rabbi wanted to avoid:

> After I completed the translation I went over it again, this time in close comparison to the original, for the purpose of testing and checking. Then I reviewed it once more without the original in order to see if it could be read without obstacles or difficulties in the sentence structure. Sometimes, when the translator reads his translation together with the original, and the sentences of the original are ordered in his mind, he is unable to sense the difficulty in the translation. For this reason I reviewed it again without referring to the original. Wherever I encountered difficulties of any sort that could be readily corrected, I consulted the original and corrected as best as possible. Only after this did I compare my translation with that of my predecessors, R. Shemuel ben R. Yehudah Ibn Tibbon and R. Yehudah al-Ḥarizi. Wherever I found a discrepancy in understanding our author, I examined and checked the original once again, and corrected whatever I saw fit to correct; but wherever both my rendering and that of R. Shemuel seemed equally possible, I cited R. Shemuel's words in my footnotes. Occasionally I did find that R. Shemuel had a better way of expressing it than I did, in which case I rejected my translation and inserted that of R. Shemuel. For my entire purpose was only to present our author's words to the reader in the most correct and precise manner.[19]

A Critical Correction: The Translation of *al-āthār* in *Guide* II 30

As one may expect, most of the corrections of Ibn Tibbon that Rabbi Qafih offers are minor. One correction, however, seems to me laden with meaning for students of the *Guide*, since it shows both proper understanding of a critical passage in the *Guide* and a mature appreciation of the expectations that many readers brought to it. Ibn Tibbon's choice, it seems to me, is not due to a lexical ambiguity or error, but is, rather, the product of a mistaken anticipation—an anticipation based on his idea of what the *Guide* is all about. Ibn Tibbon's (mis)understanding remains solidly entrenched to this day, especially in academic circles. We shall see that the "fatal mistake" detected in the rabbi's alternative by a very senior scholar is a product of

19. Qafih 1:20.

the same prejudice. Finally, Rabbi Qafih's understanding—which I take to be correct—looks to me to be the natural way in which a native speaker would understand the passage. This native speaker is someone who has not merely attained near-native proficiency in the study of the language, but someone who has been brought up in an arabophone culture and its ways of expression. Only one other translator of the *Guide* was as deeply immersed as Rabbi Qafih in Arabic culture and language, experiencing it and participating in it as a living phenomenon, and that was Yehudah al-Ḥarizi. Though his translation of the passage is not entirely clear, he understood the key phrase just as Rabbi Qafih did.

The passage occurs at a climactic moment in Maimonides' discussion of the critical, and highly sensitive, problem of the creation of the world. After offering some thoughts on day two in the Genesis account (the "making of the firmament"), he cites the most loaded passage in Talmudic esoterica, the story of the four who entered paradise (*pardes*, the orchard; Ḥagigah 14b), after which he remarks:

> Reflect, if you are one of those who reflect, to what extent he has made clear and revealed the whole matter in this statement, provided that you consider it well, understand all that has been demonstrated in *al-āthār*, and examine everything that people (*al-nās*) have said about every point mentioned in that work (*fī kulli shay'in minhā*).[20]

I have quoted from Pines's translation, leaving the pivotal word in the original. In parentheses I have placed additional Arabic words, which were almost certainly mishandled as a result of the erroneous translation of *al-āthār*. Ibn Tibbon took *al-āthār* to be shorthand for *al-āthār al-ʿulwiyya* and a reference to Aristotle's *Meteorologica*. It is not hard to see why he did this: preparing a Hebrew version of the *Meteorologica* was his first project in the translation of philosophical or scientific books. Moreover, Ibn Tibbon saw in that Aristotelian book in particular an important key for unlocking the "secrets" of the *Guide*.[21] His translation, however, is mistaken, because by itself *al-āthār* will never refer to the *Meteorologica*. *Athar*, the singular of *āthār*, literally means "trace" or "track," and by extension, "effect," just like

20. Pines 353.

21. On Ibn Tibbon's translation of the *Meteorology*, see Fontaine 1995. Aviezer Ravitzky pressed hard for the critical role of the *Meteorology* in Ibn Tibbon's understanding of the *Guide*; see, e.g., Ravitsky 2008.

"footprint" in contemporary English means "effect," "traces of someone's or something's activity." But tracks or traces of what? Aristotle's book took on the name *al-āthār al-ʿulwiyya* because, in Aristotelian science, the rainbow, halo, rain, snow, and so forth, all of which are discussed in the *Meteorologica*, are the effects or traces produced by the celestial bodies in the earth's atmosphere. Hence *al-āthār al-ʿulwiyya*, "the higher traces," are the traces in the upper reaches of the terrestrial realm of celestial forces.[22]

However, without the adjective *ʿulwiyya*, *al-āthār* will never refer to Aristotle's book. Instead, especially in the context of a reference to an ancient source such as the Talmud, it will mean "tradition," namely, the tracks or traces left for us by an earlier generation. This usage is very widespread in Islamic literature.[23] Accordingly, Rabbi Qafih translates *al-āthār* as *divre ḥakhamim*, "the words of the Sages." Al-Ḥarizi uses here *otot ha-ḥokhma*. Like Ibn Tibbon, he renders *āthār* literally by *otot*. However, the modifying noun that he uses in the formation of the construct refers to wisdom, and tradition does preserve for us the traces of (ancient) wisdom. Ibn Tibbon's modifying noun, *ha-shamayim*, reflects his assumption that this is a reference to Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, to which Ibn Tibbon gave the Hebrew title *Otot ha-shamayim*."

I have no doubt that Rabbi Qafih and al-Ḥarizi—the only two translators who had true native proficiency in Arabic—are correct. Ibn Tibbon (and subsequent translators, such as Munk, Pines, and Schwarz, all of whom follow Ibn Tibbon in translating *al-āthār* as the *Meteorologica*) was certainly aware that *al-āthār* means "tradition." At the beginning of III 39—a passage well removed from the discussion of creation—Ibn Tibbon renders it correctly with the Hebrew *qabbalah*.[24] However, he was not deeply enough immersed in Arabic usage to know, as both Rabbi Qafih and al-Ḥarizi knew well, that without a qualifying adjective, *āthār* cannot refer to the *Meteorologica*—even if the topic is the creation of the world. Moreover, his

22. The Arabic versions of Aristotle's treatise are studied in depth by Paul Lettinck (1999).

23. Indeed, Rabbi Qafih's translation is close to the more precise usage of the term listed by Jabre (1970, 1): "tout enseignement positif ayant pour auteur une personalité autre que le Prophète." There is now a whole school of Salafi theologians called al-Athrī, who take their name from their exclusive reliance on tradition; see Halverson 2010. As we shall see, it was the context rather than the lexicography that tripped up Ibn Tibbon and the other translators; when the context has no connection to the creation of the world, the Arabic was handled properly.

24. In a note to the passage in II 30, Rabbi Qafih sarcastically refers to III 39, where, he remarks, Ibn Tibbon's translation is "almost correct."

mistake led to additional, unwarranted interventions in the text. Ibn Tibbon renders *al-nās*, "people," as *anshe ha-ḥokhma*, "people of wisdom," or even "scientists." Pines, who follows Ibn Tibbon's lead, speaks of "that work," though the Arabic makes no mention at all of a book. He has in mind the pronomial suffix, *-hā*, in the last word of the sentence, *minhā*.

Rabbi Qafih's very different translation of *al-āthār* has not drawn much attention. Michael Schwarz does not even mention it in the note to his Hebrew translation, though he refers to it obliquely by citing, at the end of the same note, my contribution to the Pines Festschrift, in which I adduced evidence that some medieval Yemeni thinkers took *al-āthār* to mean something other than the *Meteorologica*.[25] That same paper was cited by Herbert Davidson in his book on Maimonides. Davidson remarks: "The fatal weakness in Kafah's reading is that Maimonides would scarcely have spoken of something's being *demonstrated* in tradition" (Davidson's emphasis).[26] This interesting comment in fact furnishes an additional example of the same expectation that Maimonides is writing exclusively in the technical vocabulary of Aristotelian philosophy, the very same expectation that led to Ibn Tibbon's mistranslation. I will proceed to debunk it by citing one among several passages where *burhān* (or the verb *barhana*, the Arabic term for "demonstrate" that features in the passage under discussion) is definitely not used in the sense of a logical demonstration. This passage will afford another glimpse at Rabbi Qafih's approach to translation.

Let us look, then, at *Guide* III 23. Maimonides is discussing Job's enlightenment, which leads him to admit the errors in his earlier accusations and to withdraw his complaints. The passage reads: "[Job] had given up his opinion, which was most mistaken, and had demonstrated (*barhana ʿalā*) that he had been mistaken therein."[27] It should be clear to all that no demonstration in the Aristotelian sense is to be found in the book of Job. (Indeed, some would question whether there even exists a demonstration for providence as it is understood by Job after his enlightenment.) Rabbi Qafih translates *barhana* as *hokhiaḥ*, which also means "demonstrate," but in a note he explains: "*Barhana*: in the course of the investigative debate, it was proven to him by proofs based on thinking that he erred in his first assumption; but it is possible [to translate] 'publicized.'"[28] The rabbi was

25. Schwarz 1:365–66n43; Langermann 1988.
26. Davidson 2005, 100–101n137.
27. Pines 492.
28. Qafih 3:537n26.

clearly troubled by the passage; many arguments are found in the book of Job, but no demonstration worthy of being called a *burhān* in the strict technical sense. Though he cautiously reproduces the dictionary meaning in his translation, he suggests, in this note, an alternative that suits the context far better. "To publicize" is indeed what Job does.

In fact, as one finds in Louis Gardet's entry in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, *burhān* is used for all sorts of proofs, including those drawn from tradition and scripture.[29] Ibn Tibbon's mistaking *al-āthār* for a reference to a book by Aristotle, and the mistaken remark of Herbert Davidson in defense of Ibn Tibbon's mistranslation, are both due to the same expectation or assumption that the language of the *Guide* is always technical and Aristotelian. Maimonides is committed to the philosophical tradition, but the *Guide* is not by any means written strictly or exclusively in the philosophical idiom.

The Translation of *Shanāʿa* and Other Words Constructed from the Same Root

In this final section, I would like to compare Rabbi Qafih's translation of an important word form with its translation in the four other major translations of the *Guide*. Although it is not considered a "technical term," and hence it has not been given the attention (or what is at times, in my view, almost obsessive consideration) that such terms receive in current research, *shanāʿa* is actually a very important tool in Maimonides' kit. As we shall see, it plays a pivotal role in his arguments against the eternity of the world—perhaps the most delicate and difficult issue treated in the *Guide*.

The dictionary definitions of *shanāʿa* give no indication of its applications in philosophy, nor of the variety of meanings that it can take on. Wehr's dictionary lists "ugliness," "hideousness," "horridness," and "repulsiveness." In its weightiest appearances in the *Guide*, when it is a criterion for rejecting the arguments in favor of the eternity of the universe, *shanāʿa* means something like "absurdity"—in what sense the thing it describes is "absurd" will be clarified below. It also features in Maimonides' discussion of the rationale of the religious commandments.[30] Other forms constructed

29. Gardet 2012.

30. For example, *Guide* III 26 (Pines 509); see below for its occurrence in connection with levirate marriage. On some other occasion I hope to present a comprehensive study of all of the word's appearances.

from the same root are found in the *Guide* and have caused headaches for the translators. In the following, I will take a close look at some of the most interesting cases and how they were handled by all of the translators.

Prima facie, the translator ought to try to use the same word (or words constructed from the same root) to translate a word from the donor language as consistently as is feasible. Doing so not only transfers the idiom and the lexical units but also alerts the reader that a single word is being used consistently in the donor language. (Such consistency is now one of the demands—again, as far as is possible—of academic translation, especially when dealing with so-called technical terms.) However, the semantic fields and other baggage that words carry with them differ greatly from one language to another, and often one must choose to use more than one word in order to render its meaning in different contexts as precisely as possible in the recipient language.

Shanāʿa is certainly very difficult to translate, and translators of the *Guide* have had to resort to more than one word when they render it into Hebrew, French, or English. Munk, followed by Pines, often chooses "absurd." Schwarz, the author of the most recent translation, usually wavers between the Hebrew *absurd*, a foreign loanword that was not available to earlier Hebrew translators (I doubt that Rabbi Qafih knew of it, or would have considered it if he had known), and *megunneh*, which is used often, but not always, by Ibn Tibbon, and which is reflected in Pines's occasional choice of "disgraceful." Ibn Tibbon will also use *harḥaqah*, literally, "putting something at a distance," or, more loosely, "rejecting." Al-Ḥarizi prefers *dibbah*, a reverse translation of Saʿadya's rendition of the biblical *dibbah* as *shanāʿa* (Num 13:14; Prov 10:18). As Jacob Klatzkin notes, *dibbah* in medieval Hebrew does not mean "slander," but rather a false claim, nonsense, or absurdity.[31]

Rabbi Qafih almost always (rare exceptions are reviewed below) translates the word with forms of the Hebrew *zar*, *zarut*, "strange," "out of place." He will occasionally supply a note explaining exactly what Maimonides is calling strange. Only once does he acknowledge Ibn Tibbon's alternative. In the discussion of levirate marriage in *Guide* III 49, Maimonides twice states that the brother of the deceased may wish to avoid the *shanāʿa* of the ceremony of "the taking off of the shoe" (*haliṣah*; see Deut 25:7–10)

31. Klatzkin 1928–33, 1:124.

and consent to marry his sister-in-law. Pines translates the term as "shame." Here Rabbi Qafih notes that Ibn Tibbon's *gennut* is "possible."[32]

Before proceeding to our examples, the meaning of "absurd" as a stand-in for *shanāʿa* must be clarified. "Absurd" is a philosophical judgment, and it is the translation used often, though by no means consistently, by Munk, Pines, and Schwarz. How appropriate is "absurd" as an expression of the negative judgments Maimonides offers in the *Guide*? Arabic-writing philosophers and scientists, Maimonides among them, certainly recognized the proof known in mathematics, especially Euclidean geometry, as reductio ad absurdum. In that proof, two premises lead to two contradictory statements, an impossible impasse. In Arabic, this situation is expressed not by *shanāʿa*, but rather by the phrase *wa-hādhā muḥāl*, "and that is impossible." However, the "absurdities" rejected by Maimonides in the *Guide* are not logical impossibilities; hence he uses *shanāʿa* rather than *wa-hādhā muḥāl*. The problematic statements are, as a rule, far-fetched options—so far-fetched as to lie beyond the bounds of reason. With this in mind, Rabbi Qafih's *zar*, "foreign" or "out of place," seems to capture more precisely the sense of absurdity that Maimonides has in mind.

Moreover, it seems almost uncanny that in his choice of *zar*, Rabbi Qafih has hit upon an exact translation of the Greek word that is likely to stand behind *shanāʿa* when used in philosophical argumentation: *atopos*, literally, "out of place."[33] According to Liddell and Scott, *atopos* can take on the meanings of "strange, paradoxical," which is the meaning given to *shanāʿa* in Rabbi Qafih's translation, and also "disgusting, foul," conveyed by *megunneh* in the translations of Ibn Tibbon and others. However, when employed in a logical context, the first of these two meanings seems to be more appropriate; it is used in this sense by Aristotle in *Categories* 11a37, and is usually translated as "absurd."

Now on to our examples, the most important of which figure in Maimonides' extensive critique of the philosophers' claims concerning the eternity of the world.

Guide II 14 (Qafih 2:314; Pines 288; table 9.1) contains the penultimate argument of the philosophers against creation, which Maimonides characterizes as *ʿalā jihat al-tashnīʿ*, "by way of bringing about a *shanāʿa*." This is the

32. Pines 603; Qafih 3:657n26.

33. I thank Michael Chase for his help in clarifying this; Chase refers to Hadot 1995, 158.

argument that before creating the world the deity would have been idle in pre-eternity. It seems clear that in this setting, *shanāʿa* must mean something "strange," "unseemly," "hard to fathom," or "absurd," in the sense of "out of place," as explained above. This range of meanings is captured well by the Hebrew *zarut*.

Table 9.1

Rabbi Qafih	Ibn Tibbon	al-Ḥarizi	Schwarz	Pines	Munk
ʿal ṣad ha-zarut	*ʿal ṣad ha-harḥaqah*	*ʿal ṣad tameha we-dibbah*	*kede le-gannot*; and, in a note, "in order to show the *gennut* of the belief or the absurd within it"	to prove that the opposed doctrines are disgraceful	réduire à l'absurde

Guide II 16 (Qafih 2:320; Pines 294; table 9.2), at the very end of the chapter, reads as follows (my translation from the Judeo-Arabic): "I shall make it clear that just as a certain *shanāʿa* is forced upon us in maintaining creation, a more serious *shanāʿa* than that is forced when maintaining [the world's] eternity." Its usage in both this and the preceding passage reinforces the claim that *shanāʿa*, even if it is not usually admitted to the club of "technical terms," is a key tool in Maimonides' argument; it furnishes an important criterion for deciding the delicate issue of creation versus eternity. This is one instance where Rabbi Qafih departs from his usual translation, choosing instead the Talmudic term *qushiyot*, "difficulties" or "objections." Note that both Rabbi Qafih and Ibn Tibbon use a plural form. This is perfectly acceptable, even though *shanāʿa* is singular, because here *shanāʿa* refers collectively to the difficulties caused by a series of objections, which are spelled out in the subsequent discussion.

Table 9.2

Munk	Pines	Schwarz	al-Ḥarizi	Ibn Tibbon	Rabbi Qafih
absurdité	disgrace	absurd (the loanword, written out in Hebrew)	*dibbah*	*harḥaqot*	*qushiyot*

Schwarz again signals his discomfort in a note; he refers to Dozy's dictionary, adding that the primary meaning is "something disgraceful" (using the Tibbonian *megunneh*).

In *Guide* II 21 (Qafih 2:342; Pines 315; table 9.3), Maimonides opens the chapter by remarking that "the latter-day philosophers," even though they subscribe to eternalism, nonetheless refer to God as "agent," "chooser," "He Who purposed," and "particularizer." These words reflect no change at all in their accepting the necessity (*luzūm*) of the world being as it is; they have simply reworded their exposition for the purpose of a nicer expression (*taḥsīn ʿibāra*) or to remove a *shanāʿa*.

Table 9.3

Rabbi Qafih	Ibn Tibbon	al-Ḥarizi	Schwarz	Pines	Munk
zarut	*harḥaqot*	*ha-dibbah*	*gennut*; in a note, *absurd*	shocking	quelque chose de malsonnant

In this context, *shanāʿa* should relate somehow to *ʿibāra*, and thus the fault should lie in the articulation of the argument rather than in its logic. For this reason, both Munk and Pines choose a translation that is different from their usual preferences. As usual, Rabbi Qafih sticks with *zarut*, and that makes sense too: something can be "foreign" or "out of place" for literary or aesthetic reasons as well as for logical ones.

The culmination of this argument offers an interesting instance in which both Pines and Munk appear to agree on the same (seemingly incorrect) understanding. Maimonides is, as we have seen, arguing here that the philosophers think there is no real difference between saying that the world exists of "necessity" as the effect of divine cause and saying that it is an act or intentional particularization of the deity, unless we accept that it has come to be at a particular instant, etc. There are certain criteria that must be met with regard to the proper understanding of "intent" (*qaṣd*) in order to make the verbal distinction meaningful. So the final sentence of this section, beginning *fa-idhā fahimta al-maʿnā hākadhā* (Qafih 343; Pines 315: "Now if you understand the meaning of the term in this way . . ."), should be making this very point, namely, that, by itself, the verbiage changes nothing. This point is missed by both Munk and Pines, who understand the last part of this sentence (that the world has come to be through an act or an intentional particularization) to be the correct view that Maimonides wants

his reader to accept. That is not untrue, but it's not what Maimonides wants to get across here; rather, he wants to get across that the later philosophers hold two incompatible views.

By contrast, Rabbi Qafih's translation of *maʿnā* is *ʿinyan*, "issue," rather than "meaning of the term." A note explains that the issue is the contradiction between something being both a particularized act of the deity and one necessarily issued from him.[34] Schwarz registers his disagreement with Pines in a note, but takes notice of neither Rabbi Qafih nor Munk.

In *Guide* II 30 (Qafih 2:380; Pines 349; table 9.4), the term appears twice in the same argument presented at the beginning of the chapter. I cite here Pines's translation, inserting forms of *shanāʿa* in place of his translations: "On the other hand the statement, which you find formulated by some of the Sages, that affirms that time existed before the creation of the world is very difficult. For that is the opinion of Aristotle . . . : he holds that time cannot be conceived to have a beginning, which is *shanīʿ*. . . . They express their opinion in the following text [from Genesis Rabbah III] . . . *that there existed before that an order of time . . . that the Holy One, may His name be blessed, used to create worlds and destroy them.* . . . This second opinion is *ashnaʿ* than the first." This citation further illustrates the critical role played by *shanāʿa* and its derivatives in deciding the all-important question of creation; it also serves to exemplify the difficulty translators had in finding its proper equivalent, especially here, where we encounter the adjective in normal and comparative forms. Here, Rabbi Qafih uses *muzar*, "strange"; Ibn Tibbon sticks to *megunneh* and is followed here by Schwarz. Pines chooses "incongruous," a word he will use occasionally—though not consistently—later on. All of the above produce the comparative by means of an additional qualifier in Hebrew or English. Munk uses two entirely different words, perhaps because "plus absurde" does not sound right. Al-Ḥarizi, too, has two different words—indeed, two different parts of speech.

Table 9.4

Munk	Pines	Schwarz	al-Ḥarizi	Ibn Tibbon	Rabbi Qafih
absurde	incongruous	*megunneh*	*dibbah*	*megunneh*	*muzar*
plus blamable	more incongruous	*yoter megunneh*	*yoter raʿ*	*yoter megunneh*	*yoter muzar*

34. Recall that the mathematical usage of *shanāʿa* is "absurd" in the sense of two incompatible conclusions.

The next set of examples comes from the discussion of the intertwined issues of divine providence and knowledge in *Guide* III 16 (Qafih 3:502; Pines 461; table 9.5). Here, too, *shanāʿa* functions as an important criterion. Notable here is Maimonides' severe characterization of the "philosophers'" opinions concerning God's knowledge as "evil (*sayyiʾa*) and *shanīʿa*." *Shanīʿa* is an intensive adjectival form built from the same root as *shanāʿa*.

Table 9.5

Munk	Pines	Schwarz	al-Ḥarizi	Ibn Tibbon	Rabbi Qafih
absurdes	incongruent	*ha-megunnot*	*ha-reḥoqot*	*ha-megunnot*	*ha-muzarot*

The pairing of the two adjectives may indicate that in this case, Maimonides is passing a moral judgment. Such an understanding is reflected in the translations of Munk ("mauvaises et absurdes") and Schwarz (*ha-raʿot we-ha-megunnot*). But Rabbi Qafih translates *sayyiʾa* as *geruʿot*, "bad" in the sense of "faulty" rather than "evil" (Munk's "mauvaise" may perhaps be taken in this sense), and maintains his consistent translation of *shanīʿa* with *muzarot*. The rabbi senses here the need for an explanatory note, in order to explain that the *zarut*, "strangeness," consists in this: in order to avoid ascribing to the deity a lack of care for creation—an ethical defect—they ascribe to him ignorance, an essential defect in the correct conception of the deity. In his reading, Maimonides is not ascribing any evil intent to the philosophers. Instead, they have tried (once again, as it seems Maimonides' opponents have the tendency to do) to avoid one difficulty only to fall into a more serious one. In other words, it is a case of what we would call poor judgment.

In the chapter that follows (*Guide* III 17; Qafih 3:508; Pines 466), Maimonides asserts that the Ashʿariyya stance on the question of divine providence brings along with it "tremendous *shanāʿāt*," which they willingly bear and take upon themselves. *Shanāʿa* is rendered by each of the translators exactly as it was in the previous example. But just what are these *shanāʿāt*, strange or absurd notions, that the Ashʿariyya school knowingly accepts? I have not seen any of the translators—including Rabbi Qafih—address this in their notes. However, in one of his classes on the *Guide* that I attended, the rabbi explained that the "strange things" incumbent upon them are their religious commandments, imperatives accompanied by threats, which are hard to reconcile with the notion that everything is governed by pre-eternal divine will.

In *Guide* III 17 (Qafih 3:513; Pines 471; table 9.6), Maimonides sums up his opinion concerning *ʿināya*, usually translated "providence," and called here a *qāʿida*, which literally means a "pillar" (of Judaism).[35] Pines translates: "I am not relying upon the conclusion to which demonstration has led me, but upon what has clearly appeared as the intention of the book of God and of the books of the prophets. This opinion, which I believe,[36] is less disgraceful (*aqallu shanāʿatan*) than the preceding opinions and nearer than they to intellectual reasoning (*al-qiyās al-ʿaqlī*)."

Table 9.6

Munk	Pines	Schwarz	al-Ḥarizi	Ibn Tibbon	Rabbi Qafih
moins d'invraisemblance	less disgraceful	*paḥot megunneh*; in a note, *absurdit* (?)	*safeqoteha we-dibboteha paḥot*	*yoter meʿaṭat ha-harḥaqot*	*meʿaṭat ha-zaruyot*

This is one of the most important passages for the study of the term *shanāʿa* and, I think, an important and overlooked passage in Maimonides' epistemology. Maimonides admits that he has no "demonstration" (*burhān*) for his position on providence—or at least he will not reveal it if he has one.[37] His view has been formed by an inspection of Scripture; its superiority over all the other views lies in its (1) possessing less *shanāʿa* than any other position and (2) being the closest of all to *al-qiyās al-ʿaqlī*. There are then two criteria, which play out against each other in this way: in the absence of *burhān*, we must settle for the view that is weighed down with the least *shanāʿa* and is closest to *al-qiyās al-ʿaqlī*. In other words, in the absence of a full proof, we choose the most reasonable and least troublesome alternative.

All three Arabic terms denote criteria employed in logical reasoning. Hence Pines's choice here of "disgraceful" for *shanāʿa* looks to be out of place. Schwarz's doubts are revealing: though he chooses *megunneh*, "dis-

35. So also does he dub his famous thirteen "articles of faith," articulated in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and now part of the daily prayer of many Jews. There are some interesting differences between the *qawāʿid* that are mentioned in the *Guide* and those in the "canonical" thirteen; I hope to address them on some other occasion.

36. I think it would be clearer to translate here, "which I hold to be true."

37. I have shown above that *burhān* need not always mean "demonstration" in the sense of a proof constructed with all the rigor of formal logic. However, that is the usual meaning of the term. Maimonides could also be referring to a demonstration drawn from oral tradition, as he is in II 30.

graceful," he questions in a note whether *absurdit* is not the better translation. Elsewhere Schwarz offers alternative translations for *shanāʿa* in a note, but this is the only place I have found where he punctuates his note with a question mark. Munk offers, here, a new translation for *shanāʿa*, one that he has not yet offered; to my mind it suits the context perfectly. Munk's translation means something like "less unreasonable"; it indicates that we are choosing here the least troublesome of alternatives, none of which has been satisfactorily demonstrated.

Al-Ḥarizi's version is interesting: either his copy of the original added *shakk*, "doubt," or he, as translator, saw a need for clarification and added a synonym. Rabbi Qafih sticks with *zarut*, though, like Ibn Tibbon and al-Ḥarizi, he displays a plural form. This indicates that he takes *aqall* to mean "less in quantity." One could also take it to mean "less in severity," in line with Maimonides' own statement that it is the severity of doubts, rather than their quantity, that ultimately rules an opinion out of court.

One could justify, on purely lexical grounds, rendering *al-qiyās al-ʿaqlī* as "intellectual proof" or even "rational syllogism." However, Maimonides emphasizes here that he has no "demonstration," so a good translation must therefore make it clear that *al-qiyās al-ʿaqlī* is something less than a demonstration. Ibn Tibbon's literal rendering, *he-heqesh ha-śikhli*, glosses over the difference. Munk's translation, "le raisonnement de l'Intelligence," followed closely by Pines, is again an excellent fit within the context. Rabbi Qafih translates *ha-shiqqul ha-śikhli*, literally, "weighing by the intellect." This phrase conveys the act of sizing up the different views by means of reason, in a manner that falls short of proof; like Munk's translation, which the rabbi could not read, it is a fine contextual solution.

There is at least one place where Maimonides uses *shanāʿa* to convey a moral judgment: Rabbi Qafih certainly thinks so, but most other translators do not agree. The passage is found in *Guide* III 37 (Qafih 3:597; Pines 546), where Maimonides describes how the ancient fire-worshippers would intimidate people into passing their children through the fire, asserting that this ritual would protect them. He observes further—citing Pines's translation—that "there is no doubt that because of this absurd belief (*al-shanāʿa*) everybody hastened to perform this action." Pines's translation of the sentence is as literal as one can get and still maintain clear English. Munk (3:288) has slightly rearranged the sentence structure, in effect highlighting the role of *shanāʿa* by making it the subject: "Cette croyance absurde eut indubitalement pour effet que chacun s'empresserait d'accomplier l'acte en question." "Absurd,"

for Munk and Pines, and *harḥaqa*, for Ibn Tibbon, are common translations for *shanāʿa*. They convey, however, the rational judgment that the pagan practice makes no sense. Rabbi Qafih, who, as noted, is the most consistent of all translators with regard to *shanāʿa*, here uses a different word, *mifgaʿ*, meaning "nuisance" or "obstacle" in modern Hebrew. Knowing the rabbi's predilection for biblical phrases as they are interpreted by Saʿadya, I suggest that he had in mind Job 7:20, where Saʿadya takes *mifgaʿ* to mean "opponent and rival" (Saʿadya 1972, 64). In context, then, the pagan practice dubbed *shanāʿa* is an act of hostility or opposition to God. Schwarz uses an even stronger term, *toʿevah*, "abomination," to indicate that the judgment is here a moral one. Interestingly enough, in this case, it is the two most recent translators who depart from their usual policy regarding alternatives. Rabbi Qafih, who generally ignores alternatives in the rendering of *shanāʿa*, footnotes both the Arabic term and Ibn Tibbon's translation. Schwarz, as we have seen, almost always wavers between *absurd* and *megunneh*; but the very different meaning taken on by *shanāʿa* in this particular instance seems so clear that he sees no need for a note.

Finally, let us look at some instances where *shanāʿa* appears as a verb. In *Guide* III 40 (Qafih 3:607; Pines 556; table 9.7), Maimonides employs *shannaʿa* as a verb in the second form, meaning "to make something a *shanāʿa*." The context is the ridicule heaped on the Torah by the *khawārij* (heretics, literally, "those who have stepped outside," that is, out of the bounds of the religious norms) in connection with the law that an ox that has fatally gored a human is to be put to death. This, asserts Maimonides, is not a punishment for the ox, *ka-mā yushanniʿu ʿalaynā al-khawārij*; Pines translates: "an absurd opinion that the heretics impute to us." Only Ibn Tibbon has available to him a verbal form of one of his preferred translations. Both Rabbi Qafih and Schwarz find Hebrew verbs that convey the meaning accurately enough; Munk uses a verb that, in my opinion, misses the slanderous sting of the heretics' claim. Pines and al-Ḥarizi employ one of their usual translations but must add a verb to convey the transitive sense.

Table 9.7

Munk	Pines	Schwarz	al-Ḥarizi	Ibn Tibbon	Rabbi Qafih
comme nous le reprochent	impute an absurd opinion to us	*malʿizim*	*dibbah*	*yarḥiqu ʿalaynu*	*loʿagim*

Finally, a passage in *Guide* III 46 (Qafih 3:635; Pines 582; table 9.8) speaks of the rationale behind slaughtering the paschal lamb and sprinkling its blood on the doorposts; there *shanāʿa* features as a verb in the tenth form. Perhaps it was this unusual form, along with the context, that raised difficulties for all of the translators. I offer here my own English version, which is as literal as possible. Citing Exodus 12:23, where Moses tells the Israelites that, as a result of the ritual, God will spare the Israelites the destruction that will befall the Egyptians, Maimonides explains that this is "a reward for publicizing their obedience and eliminating that which the idolaters held to be a *shanāʿa* (*yastashniʿuhu*)."

Table 9.8

Rabbi Qafih	Ibn Tibbon	al-Ḥarizi	Schwarz	Pines	Munk
she-haya ḥamur be-ʿene . . .	*she-hayu marḥiqim oto*	*she-hayu nizharim bo*	*harḥaqat (maʿaśehem we-deʿotehem) he-megunnim*	absurd things	les absurdités

Rabbi Qafih's Hebrew follows the Arabic precisely in sentence structure and syntax, until *yastashniʿuhu*. There is no Hebrew equivalent of *shanāʿa* in this form, so he renders it "was severe (*ḥamur*) in the eyes of the idol worshippers." I believe that he means here that this was held to be a severe violation of their religious code. Both Ibn Tibbon and al-Ḥarizi applied similar translation strategies; in fact, both manage to find an appropriate verb and keep idol worshippers as the subject, as it is in the Arabic. Ibn Tibbon once again maintains consistency with many of his other translations, in which *shanāʿa* is rendered by *harḥaqah*.

Munk has considerable difficulty with the passage. He translates (3:363): "les absurdités professées par des[38] idolâtres." Pines follows Munk closely, writing: "This is in recompense of their manifestation of obedience and their having put an end to the absurd things done by the idolaters." The same sense is conveyed by Schwarz, though he wisely chooses *megunneh* here over *absurd*, and adds a rare parenthetical clarification (610): "and their keeping afar the (acts and beliefs) of the idolaters that are *megunim*."

Munk, however, is clearly not satisfied with his translation. In a note to

38. This is certainly a typographical error; it should be "les," as it is in the alternatives given in the note to the passage.

the passage, he suggests some alternatives based on his understanding of *istashnaʿa*, which, in his opinion, must mean "faire ou croire des absurdités" here. He adds that this is not the usual meaning, which is "réputer absurd." Finally, he cites both Ibn Tibbon and al-Ḥarizi, chiding the latter (but, for some reason, not the former) for not giving a good account of *istashnaʿa*. In my view, "absurd" is not at all fitting in this passage. The point is not the absurdity of Egyptian belief, but rather the brazen effrontery in slaughtering the animal held by them to be sacred. Rabbi Qafih, Ibn Tibbon, and al-Ḥarizi all agree on the proper sense, which is that the Israelites were rewarded for committing an act that the idolaters held to be utterly forbidden.