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THE USE OF MIDRASH IN MAIMONIDES' *GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED:* DECODING THE DUALITY OF THE TEXT

by

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Introduction

In the introduction to his philosophical magnum opus, the *Guide of the Perplexed,* Maimonides provides us with a rationale for the composition of this work as well as instructions for the targeted reader on how to decipher its elusive and enigmatic style. Such devices as contradiction, diffuse and seemingly discordant treatment of subject matter, and deliberate ruses are employed to accommodate both halakhic legal constraints on the overt teaching of physics and metaphysics and the wide intellectual disparity of his potential readers. The sensitive nature of the topics to be explored demands an unorthodox pedagogy that both illuminates and conceals, allowing entrance to the qualified few while excluding those who cannot cope with the intellectual rigors involved. Rabbinic stricture prohibits revealing anything more of the Account of the Chariot (metaphysics) than chapter headings, and therefore Maimonides cautions, "my purpose is that the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed so as not to oppose that divine purpose which has concealed from the vulgar among the people those truths requisite for His apprehension."[1]

Maimonides' treatise is addressed to readers who find themselves in an existential quandary whose only resolution appears to be an either/or

1. *Dalālat al-hā'irīn,* trans. by Shlomo Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago, 1963), introduction, p. 7. All references to this work will be cited hereafter as *Guide*.

choice between religion and intellect. Those who have achieved philosophical sophistication "must have felt distressed by the externals of the Law" plunging them into a "state of perplexity and confusion as to whether [one] should follow his intellect, renounce what he knew concerning the terms in question and consequently consider that he has renounced the foundations of the Law or he should hold fast to his understanding of those terms and not let himself be drawn on together with his intellect . . . perceiving that he had brought loss to himself and harm to his religion."[2] Maimonides' remedy, offered in the *Guide,* is to expose the heterogeneous nature of Scripture, whose external layer is but a veil for deeper truths which, when discovered, will allow the faithful rationalist to remain true to both his intellect and religious tradition.

Maimonides relates that he had once tried to compose a commentary that would "explain all the difficult passages in the midrashim where the external sense manifestly contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible,"[3] but had aborted this undertaking because he had concluded that if "we should adhere to parables and to concealment of what ought to be concealed we would not be deviating from the primary purpose. We would, as it were, have replaced one individual by another of the same species."[4] Realizing that his endeavor would promote further confusion rather than the clarity he had hoped for, Maimonides abandoned the project, later to be replaced by the style and content of the present treatise, the *Guide.*

In this paper I shall confine myself to Maimonides' use of midrash in the *Guide* and demonstrate that his expositions of many topics and issues in the *Guide* are implicitly rooted in complex, multilayered readings of midrash. Upon the failure of his earlier attempt at a straightforward commentary on midrash, Maimonides opted for an approach that would leave the simple understanding of the masses undisturbed, while accommodating the sensibilities of the philosophically inclined. It will be seen that midrash is subtly woven into the text of the *Guide* by way of direct quotation and indirect reference so as to perform this deliberate balancing act.

2. Ibid., pp. 5–6.

3. Ibid., p. 9.

4. Ibid., see also Maimonides' introduction to the tenth chapter of Tractate Sanhedrin (*Perek Ḥeleq*) in his Commentary to the Mishnah, where he announces his intention to embark upon such a work, *Mishnah im Perush Moshe ben Maimon,* trans. Heb. J. Kafih (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1964), vol. 4, p. 109.

In his list of the seven causes of contradiction found in literary compositions,[5] Maimonides designates contradictions in haggadah and midrash as sixth and seventh. The sixth results when an author fails to detect a contradiction between two basic propositions which, after many premises, may lead to "contradictory or contrary" conclusions. More relevant to our study, however, is the seventh, which is not due to confused and sloppy writing but rather is a consciously planned literary device of concealment designed to exclude unsophisticated readers and prevent them from discovering its use in the text.

> The seventh cause. In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others. Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means.

Midrash is the only genre that shares the seventh cause with the *Guide*. The only other works that might contain contradictions of the same type are the books of the prophets, but this possibility is left as a "matter for speculative study and investigation."[6] Maimonides therefore considers several midrashic sources to be esoteric texts whose meaning suggests itself to the few but remains obscure to most. Since he adopts the same ploy in his own work, it would be reasonable to assume that those midrashim which are similarily crafted are of a more sophisticated type and address only the most attentive of readers. In addition, as the declared subject matter of the *Guide* is *Ma'aseh Bre'shit* and *Merkavah*—domains which stretch the Jewish tradition's outermost limits of obscurity and mystery—midrashim quoted in the context of such discussions should themselves be intentionally obscure in the sense that they deal with or are related to the same sublime material.

Those parts of the *Guide* which utilize midrash to further an argument or strengthen a proposition can only be understood when several layers of camouflage are stripped away so as to reveal the ultimate core of meaning. The combination of the text, deliberately adopting a method of contradiction, with a midrash, also texturized by contradiction, compels members of the

5. *Guide*, pp. 17–20.
6. Ibid., pp. 18–19.

intelligentsia to devise a reading which provides access to the book's true meaning. At the same time, this complex strategy impedes access to the book by the masses.

In what follows I shall demonstrate this thesis by analyzing three extracts from the *Guide,* each of which is constructed around a midrashic axis. All of these passages, when subjected to a detailed examination, will appear slightly skewed as a result of some incongruence which arises from the manner in which the midrash is incorporated into the text. This unorthodox use of midrash is meant only for the philosophically trained eye, obliquely guiding it to reexamine the midrash both in its own context and in the context of the *Guide* as a whole. The outcome is an increasingly profound reading which Maimonides deems, for one reason or another, would be detrimental to the simple piety of the masses. The thematic link between these passages is that each midrash is taken from *Midrash Rabbah* and forms the crux of a self-reflexive discourse about the nature and purpose of midrash itself.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:8 and the Parabolic Method

Maimonides informs us at the start that the Jewish religion is practiced on various levels of the realm of intellect and thought in response to the equivocality of Scripture, "so that the multitude might comprehend them in accord with the capacity of their understanding and the weakness of their representation whereas the perfect man . . . will comprehend them otherwise."[7] The impossibility of an unequivocal narrative when discussing such obscure topics as the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot is illustrated by Solomon's maxim "That which was is far off and exceeding deep; who can find it out?" (Eccles. 7:24). Further on in the introduction, Maimonides quotes a midrash from *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* (1:8)[8] that can be regarded as a direct response to the query in this verse, "who can find it out?" Solomon is portrayed as the inventor of the parabolic method, wherein the use of parables for the understanding of Scripture is likened to the joining of cords and ropes in order to draw up water from an exceedingly cold and deep well. Thus Solomon is credited with pioneering a method by which "the meaning of the words of the Torah would be understood." The image of

7. Ibid., p. 9.

8. *Midrash Rabbah Shir Hashirim,* ed. S. Dunsk (Jerusalem, 1980).

drawing water (= knowledge) from a deep well soothes the Solomonic cry of despair at the prospect of unfathomable depths expressed in Ecclesiastes.[9]

Maimonides elaborates on this idea by citing another midrash in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* which compares understanding Torah by means of parable to using light provided by worthless material to find a valuable lost article in a dark house. Just as the material that provides the light is worthless, "so the parable in itself is worth nothing but by means of it you can understand the words of the Torah."

At first glance both midrashim seem to convey the basic proposition that a true understanding of Torah can only be achieved upon the realization that its structure is composed of an external layer of parable which conceals an internal essential truth. On closer scrutiny a number of "divergences"[10] arise between the two which present us with the *Guide*'s first instance of midrashic duality. A parallel deconstruction of the two midrashic texts reveals a study in contrasts rather than harmony.

Well Parable	Pearl Parable
1. *Discovery* of meaning and attaining what was once unattainable (stringing cord together = Solomon's *mashal* methodology).	1. *Recovery* of what was once within grasp and lost (loss of pearl in house).
2. *Construction* of method to decipher biblical text.	2. *Deconstruction* (lighting of material = dissipation of *mashal* to arrive at meaning)
3. Extolling virtue of *mashal*.	3. Worthlessness of *mashal*.
4. *Water* metaphor signifies message of biblical text.	4. *Fire* eliminates outer layer, unveiling inner meaning of Scripture.
5. Understanding conveyed by act of drinking.	5. Lighting of lamp is act of comprehension.

While the well parable vindicates the *mashal* as a vehicle ultimately leading to a comprehensive assimilation of meaning ("drinking water"), the

9. See the further interpretation of Eccles. 7:24 in *Guide* I:34.

10. For a most insightful theory that what many scholars have viewed as contradictions in the *Guide* are really "divergences" and not logical contradictions, see Marvin Fox, "A New View of Maimonides' Method of Contradictions," *Annual of Bar-Ilan University* 22–23, *Moshe Schwarcz Memorial Volume* (1987).

pearl parable denigrates it as an aid that must be dispensed with in order to gain clarity. That clarity, signified by distinguishing a pearl at a distance from amongst household objects, would seem to indicate an apprehension inferior to the one symbolized by the actual ingesting of fluid.

The juxtaposition of these two midrashim reflects a variegated readership demarcated by different approaches to Scripture. The first midrash is directed at those who are philosophically adept enough to realize that a literal reading of Scripture can only lead to such absurdities as anthropomorphic images of the deity, and therefore need a justification of the parable as a necessary instrument of truth. The nature of the subject matter—an ultimately unknowable deity—mandates that Scripture take literary license of this kind in order to convey its meaning.

On the other hand, the simple fundamentalist belief of the masses values the literal above all else, and thus the anthropomorphic God is exactly the one prescribed by Scripture. For Maimonides, of course, this is tantamount to idolatry,[11] and widely held beliefs of this kind can only be dispelled by way of extreme corrective measures. The antidote is provided by the second midrash, with its radical call to discard the parable/literal altogether and regard the *mashal* as so much dross to be sifted out so that the true meaning can emerge.

Although parables are a valuable medium of truth, as is made clear by the first midrash, they have, in fact, led the multitude into gross error, which the second midrash attempts to reverse with its derisive tone. Just as the golden mean, in the realm of ethics, can sometimes only be achieved by resorting to the habituation of an extreme trait,[12] so the acquisition of correct opinions, in the realm of thought, demands parallel remedial action.

The knowledge obtained when the parabolic cover (seeing from a distance) is obliterated is inferior to that arising when it is preserved (ingesting) in that the multitude can only aspire to a semblance of the truth. This modicum of truth leaves them with certain indispensable notions of God (incorporeality, nonaffectation) described as "matters that ought to be inculcated, made clear and explained to everyone according to his capacity and ought to be inculcated in virtue of traditional authority upon childen, women, stupid ones and those of defective natural disposition just as they adopt the notion that God is one,

11. See *Guide,* p. 81, where the belief in corporeality is equated with the belief "in the non-existence of the deity, in the association of other gods with Him or in the worship of other than He."

12. See *Mishneh Torah,* Hilkhot De'ot 2:3–5.

that He is eternal and that none but He should be worshipped."[13] Scripture's penchant for anthropomorphisms is the sole means of communicating God's existence to the multitude without revealing anything about His essence or the true reality of His substance. The association of the privileged few with the first midrash is further substantiated by the next passage in which the water/well imagery surfaces, *Guide* I:30. A clever wordplay in the Targum[14] transforms the verse "With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation" (Isa. 12:3) to "With joy shall you receive a new teaching from the chosen of the righteous." Water is equated with knowledge, while the Hebrew term for "wells," *ma'yene,* is transformed to be "the equivalent of *me'eyne ha'edah:* I mean thereby the notables who are the men of knowledge."[15] The pairing of water/knowledge with well/notables in the context of the lexicographical analysis of the term "eating" in I:30 reflects on the metaphoric usage of the very same images in our first midrash as alluding to the process of "notables" acquiring "knowledge."

The final prooftext in this passage, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Prov. 25:11), provides a synthesis for the ideas expressed in the two preceding midrashim by way of an expansive image of Scripture's heterogeneous meaning. "Silver" corresponds to the external meaning, which is "useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies," while "gold," the internal meaning, "contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is."[16]

The external represents the moral and political foundations upon which societal welfare depends, whereas the internal conveys the purely abstract and theoretical groundwork necessary for intellectual welfare. These two meanings are posited in addition to the starkly literal and vulgar reading,[17] and therefore the second midrash can be seen as prodding the masses to

13. *Guide* I:35, p. 81.

14. The Aramaic translation-cum-commentary of Isaiah.

15. *Guide,* p. 64.

16. Ibid., p. 6.

17. For a well-argued thesis calling for the application of this analysis to the commandments as well as the narrative, see Josef Stern, "Maimonides on the Covenant of Circumcision and the Unity of God," in *The Midrashic Imagination,* ed. M. Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 131–154, where Maimonides' explanation of circumcision "exemplifies a mode of allegorical or parabolic interpretation that he employs not only for the narrative portions of Scripture but also the commandments" (p. 132; and see esp. the discussion at pp. 146–150).

bypass the face value altogether in order to arrive at the "silver," the bread and butter of interpersonal and intersocietal relations. The intellectual, on the other hand, is urged to strive for the "gold."

Whereas the masses can only achieve the silver by discarding the vulgar meaning, the external gold layer is attainable solely by assimilating the silver, as "its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning."[18] The tension inherent in the first two midrashim is resolved by Proverbs 25:11, which sets up two observers, one whose view from a distance leaves him with an illusion (although a useful one), and one who can traverse the distance and discern reality (though always obscured by the illusory device of filligree work, indicating that a clear knowledge of God's essence is ultimately unattainable).[19]

When the three introductory verses of this passage (Hos. 12:11; Ezek. 17:2, 21:5) are subjected to closer scrutiny, the choice of prooftexts for the use of parabolic language by the prophets does not appear to be random. It is instead a carefully constructed endorsement of the trivalent nature of Scripture which has emerged thus far. When unraveled, the common thread binding these three verses is that the truths of Scripture radiate out to respective audiences, satiating their diverse intellectual capacities on one of the two levels of meaning beyond the bare literal.

The middle verse (Ezek. 17:2) signifies the paradigm of parabolic exegesis in that it introduces a chapter whose prophecy is marked by a duality throughout. It embodies a poetic fable which is subjected to a dual interpretation, first on an earthly plane and then on a divine one. As Moshe Greenberg has pointed out,

> Duality pervades the prophecy: fable and interpretation, two eagles, two plants, two modes of punishment, two planes of agency (earthly and divine) doom and consolation. With this duality agrees the double command with which the

18. *Guide*, p. 12.

19. For an important and controversial study on what can ultimately be known in the Maimonidean system, see S. Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Baja and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 82–109.

> oracle opens: "pose a riddle (*ḥidah*) and tell a fable (*mashal*)"—an indication that more is here than meets the eye.[20]

The schemata of this chapter in Ezekiel precisely complements Maimonides' exegetical hierarchy as follows:

1. Verses 1–10 = eagle parable = vulgar literal, which in itself has no useful purpose and is pure poetry.[21]
2. Verses 11–18 = first level of interpretation, referring to political events of the day involving earthly entities Babylon and Egypt and consequences of breaching treaties = silver/external meaning, concerning "welfare of human societies."
3. Verses 19–21 = second level of interpretation, sets up first interpretation of earthly events as itself a parable alluding to realm of ultimate truth—the divine, i.e., consequences of violating divine covenant = internal/gold which is wisdom "useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is."

The great medieval exegete David Kimḥi's distinction between the terms *ḥidah* and *mashal* is enlightening, in that it accounts for why I think Maimonides chose this particular verse here: "A *ḥidah* is an obscure saying from which something else is to be understood, while a *mashal* is a likening of one matter to another—so the *mashal* in which the king is likened to an eagle is at the same time a *ḥidah,* since none but the discerning (*maskilim*) can understand it."[22] The leap from the vulgar to the first level, where moral and political lessons are derived, can and must be achieved by most. Advancement to the second stage of theoretical speculation regarding the divine sphere is barred to all but the few (*maskilim*).

If Ezekiel 17:2 is emblematic of the structure of parabolic language, then the two other verses relay the difficulty with which that language is rendered comprehensible. Hosea 12:11, "And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes," portrays God, in one sense, as bestowing the allegorical method upon the prophets as a mode of communication. The ambiguity of

20. Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20,* Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), p. 317.

21. For Maimonides' opinion of those who view Scripture as poetry or history, see his scolding of the "learned man" who propounded a challenge to the logic of the Eden story; *Guide* I:2, p. 24.

22. Kimḥi, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 17:2.

the Hebrew term for "have I used similitudes" (*'adameh*) allows for another sense which the midrash[23] and some medieval exegetes take to mean "I have assumed likenesses."[24]

This wordplay and midrashic gloss would most certainly have been familiar to Maimonides and may explain his preference for the Hosea passage in this context. The elasticity of the phrase conjures up an image of two very distinct domains—one, private and self-contained, playing itself out wholly within the confines of the mind ("likenesses") of the prophet (i.e., philosopher/intellectual), and the other, public and accessible, revealed in the prophet's popular pronouncements ("similitudes"). The "similitudes" are the means whereby the theoretical formulations conceived within the prophet's mind ("likenesses") are relayed to the public, albeit in a very distilled fashion.[25]

Hosea 12:11 thus establishes two poles of humanity whose only hope of rapprochement is by way of the parable. Ezekiel 17:2 affords us a typology of this literary device as a model for studying it. The third verse, "They say of me: Is he not a maker of parables?" (Ezek. 21:5), when examined contextually, reveals the failings of the parabolic device in actual practice and how they can be overcome in order to salvage the original intent of the parable.

The sequence of the narrative surrounding the verse commences with a prophetic vision to Ezekiel consisting of a parable in which a fire is ignited, consuming an entire forest; both fresh and dry trees are destroyed, and the fire is inextinguishable. The prophet protests in 21:5 that the people will not acknowledge this as an authentic prophetic vision forewarning an impending historical disaster and will simply accuse him of being a spinner of riddles and fables. God responds by rendering the prophecy as explicit as possible with regard to the imminent destruction of Israel and Jerusalem, whose consequences will be indiscriminately wreaked on both righteous and wicked.

Ezekiel 21:5, therefore, is the instrumental verse within a dramatic development that Maimonides utilized as a metaphor for what had unfortunately

23. See *Pesikta Rabbati,* trans. W. G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 33:11.

24. See the commentaries of Rashi and Rabbi Joseph Kara to this verse.

25. For the precise intellectual machinations involved in the prophetic process, see *Guide* II:36–38, where the "true reality and quiddity of prophecy" is detailed, pp. 369–378.

become the popular attitude toward allegory. The prophet realizes that the people will not see past the poetry—past the vulgar and literal—and this ultimately undermines his authority as a messenger of God. The parable is to be dispensed with altogether and the people must be confronted with the unmediated political and social ramifications, which we have marked as the external/silver meaning of the original parable. Only then will they understand.

This verse, which portrays the people as unable and/or unwilling to transcend the face value of the allegorical symbolism, provides the rationale for what we have demonstrated to be the moral of the second midrash, in which the *mashal* is deemed to be worthless. The devaluation of the *mashal* is a drastic measure to allay the fear expressed in the prophet's frustrated plea that the people will only view him as a "maker of parables" and not as a harbinger of the practical and theoretical truths implicit in his visions.

In summary, our analysis thus far has revealed this passage in the *Guide* to be a carefully crafted argument, constructed by manipulation of scriptural verse and midrash. The argument proposes a hierarchy of scriptural interpretation which parallels a pyramid-shaped model of human intellect. Ultimate meaning lies within the exclusive domain of the superior intellect. Inferior yet necessary truths are aimed at those less capable. For the former all planes of interpretation (poetic, practical-ethical, theoretical) coexist in a complex grid of truth that would collapse if any one component was lacking. For the latter the grid must be disassembled so that only what Maimonides calls the external meaning survives, while the literal is sacrificed altogether and the theoretical remains out of reach.

When the subtle interplay of midrash and verse is noted, a passage in the *Guide* which at first sight advances the simple proposition that Scripture relies heavily on parables as its parlance is rendered a more complex argument about such things as the nature of parabolic parlance, authorial intent and motivation, and composite readership. The stimulus for this reading is the incongruity of the two midrashim regarding the role of parable in recovery/discovery of the scriptural message, which then recasts the preceding and subsequent verses from simple prooftexts into a "generic pattern (causing) the verses to speak with each other and a kind of axiological code by which we can read the

juxtaposition."[26] The reader to whom Maimonides is reaching out will discern the pattern leading to a true understanding of Scripture—"hermeneutic keys to the unlocking of the hermetic Torah"[27]—while others will be oblivious to it, gaining only very restricted access to Scripture's truths.

Genesis Rabbah 9 and Flash Technique

Another reason that compels Maimonides to adopt this writing style, particularly related to his use of midrash, is implicit in the nature of the subject matter (*Ma'aseh Bre'shit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*), which obliges all who have gained any knowledge of it to transmit it to others by way of "flashes": "every man endowed with knowledge who has come to possess an understanding of something pertaining to those secrets, either through his own speculation or through being conducted toward this by a guide must indubitably say something. It is, however, forbidden to be explicit about it. He must accordingly make the secret appear in flashes."[28]

Maimonides' preference for the types of midrash which he employs in the composition of his treatise is expressed in terms of flashes: "Many such flashes, indications, and pointers occur in the sayings of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, but these sayings are mixed up with the sayings of others and with sayings of another kind. For this reason you will find that with regard to these *mysteries,* I always mention the single saying on which the matter is based, while I leave the rest to those whom it befits that these should be left to them."[29]

Only midrashim which conform with the strictures against disclosing such sensitive material by their usage of "flashes, indications and pointers" in place of clear exposition will be incorporated into Maimonides' treatise on these matters. Therefore, as we have already seen, a reference to a midrash in the *Guide* should almost always pique our attention to a cautious reading of a text that is purposefully restrained and ambiguous regarding its message.

26. See David Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 32, and especially the chapter on Song of Songs, pp. 105–116, where he discusses *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 1:8.

27. Ibid., p. 107.

28. *Guide* II:29, p. 347.

29. Ibid.

Indeed, the very midrash which provoked the discussion in II:29 is itself a case study in flash pedagogy. *Genesis Rabbah* 9 is adduced as support for the prohibition against these esoteric matters: "As from the beginning of the book up to here, the glory of God requires to conceal the thing."[30] Here the midrash relates a verse from Proverbs 25:2 calling for concealment to the scriptural account of the first days of creation. At first glance, this is simply a rabbinic endorsement of the confidential nature of esoteric topics. However, if we import meanings that Maimonides specifically assigned elsewhere to the term "glory of God" (*kavod*), the midrash then flashes signals that have a different connotation.

Kavod can equivocally signify either God's "essence and true reality" or "the honouring of Him by all men."[31] Honoring God, Maimonides continues, is directly proportional to the extent to which one apprehends Him, and "Man in particular honours Him by speeches so that he indicates thereby that which he has apprehended by his intellect and communicates it to others."[32] Beings incapable of apprehension honor God only indirectly, simply by inspiring passively "him who considers them to honour God either by means of articulate utterance or without it if speech is not permitted."[33] There appears to be an inconsistency in this line of thought. Honoring God is synonymous with apprehending His essence and communicating it to others. Surely such apprehension falls under the rubric of metaphysics, which is prohibited from being revealed. Ultimately apprehension must lead to silence, which fails to qualify for the "honor" as defined here of "communication." Honor cannot materialize out of muteness.

The resolution of this inconsistency may very well lie in the dual-voicedness of *Genesis Rabbah* 9. Proverbs 25:2 is not only a directive regulating future attempts to convey this material but is also descriptive of the Genesis creation narrative. The narrative in Genesis is itself a "concealment" in consonance with the glory of God, i.e., there is a type of language which conforms with the prohibition against direct instruction, and that is the language of parable.

Maimonides may have had two reasons for not being overly explicit on this issue. First, by posing Scripture as a model for all future communications

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid. I:64, pp. 156–157.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.

regarding physics and metaphysics, the implication follows that the Torah intentionally conceals truths from the masses (which was left moot in the introduction).[34] Second, the definition of *kavod,* when combined with this midrash, allows for very little hope that the vast majority of people can ever aspire to honor God. They cannot apprehend God; they cannot be taught by scholars; and the book to which they turn for guidance on all aspects of their lives intentionally withholds the truth from them.

This extremely cynical and pessimistic stance is somewhat modified by the use of a midrash that can be viewed univocally as simply instructive for the future or, upon deeper reflection and familiarity with the *Guide* as a whole, as a self-glossing discourse on the nature of Scripture itself. Only the few who have the prerequisite rigorous training[35] should be privy to Scripture's hidden agenda.

Another of Maimonides' evasive techniques is the art of omission. As with the passage in II:29, ambiguity or inconsistency should alarm the reader to crosscheck any midrashic or scriptural quotation with its original source. The omission of part of the relevant reference or its context often provides a key to Maimonides' true intent. In II:29, only the first half of Proverbs 25:2 is quoted, whereas the entire verse is reproduced in *Genesis Rabbah* and reads thus: "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing, *but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.*" In the original midrash, each half of the verse becomes a referent for different portions of the Genesis creation account.

The first half characterizes the creation narrative up to Genesis 1:31, concluding with the creation of man, an account which must be shrouded in obscurity. The second half informs the narrative that follows, calling for study and clarity. This omission affords a liberal reading of the verse as colored by the midrash but outside the strict confines of its original exegesis.

For Maimonides, the opposing parts of the verse reflect the dichotomy of scriptural language and human intellect. Both parts refer to the same creation account, requiring concealment and revelation at the same time. The essence ("glory") and true reality of God are ultimately concealed, but it is the duty of those who are capable ("kings")[36] to investigate this matter insofar as it is

34. Ibid., p. 19—"whether contradictions due to the seventh cause are to be found in the books of the prophets is a matter for speculative study and investigation."

35. For a description of a worthy disciple, see ibid., p. 3—the Epistle Dedicatory to Joseph.

36. See Gersonides' comment on this verse, which symbolizes the intellectual faculty as "king," and also Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah,* Laws of Repentance 8:4, where "crowns on heads" are equated with "knowledge" in the imagery of the "world to come."

intellectually possible. Scripture's parabolic Account of the Creation deters most from its mysteries but encourages the few to search on for its inner truth.

Genesis 1:31, the lead verse of *Genesis Rabbah* 9:1, is instrumental in the sifting out of Maimonides' message. For Maimonides, the words "And God saw everything that He made, and behold, it was very *good*" define the goodness that was revealed to Moses in response to his plea for knowledge of God's ways and glory. Moses' request to be shown God's glory was rebuffed as unattainable by any human being. Instead God's goodness was revealed as the apex of human intellectual capacity, which "alludes to the display to him of all existing things of which it is said, 'And God saw everything . . . it was very good.' By their display, I mean that he will apprehend their nature and the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how He governs them in general and in detail."[37]

The terms "glory" and "goodness" in this context are contrasting intellectual goals, the former unachieveable, the latter to be striven for. This juxtaposition must be imported into an analysis of *Genesis Rabbah* 9 as quoted in II:29, and perfects its reading for the few as formulated by Maimonides.[38] Following our analysis, the mechanism for decoding the meaning of this passage can be traced as follows:

1. Contextually dissonant use of midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 9:1) motivates the search for hidden meaning.
2. Discovery of partial omission of operative verse quoted by midrash (Prov. 25:2) and variant formulation of midrash by Maimonides.
3. Lead verse (Gen. 1:31) assumes significations assigned to it in other chapters of *Guide*.
4. Derivation of meaning by intended audience regarding possible and impossible forms of knowledge ("goodness" and "glory"); language of Scripture (concealment); medium of instruction (concealment/parable).
5. Intermeshing of midrash with discourse on nature of midrash ("flashes") results in intratextual illustration of "flash" technique.

37. *Guide* I:54, p. 124; see also p. 453.

38. See also ibid. II:30, pp. 353–354, where the expression "it was *good*" pronounced by God in the creation narrative has an association with external utilitarian meaning and inner hidden meaning.

Genesis Rabbah 27 and Prophetic Radicalism

Another instance of the interplay between midrash and textual dissertation regarding some aspect of the nature of midrash itself occurs in *Guide* I:46, where the midrash's preference for anthropomorphisms is rationalized. This is attributed to its mimicking of prophetic terminology, "For this reason you will find that in the whole of the Talmud and in all the Midrashim they keep to the external sense of the dicta of the prophets."[39] The sages felt secure that their adoption of this style could not possibly lead to error, since it is so obviously self-evident that it is not be taken literally, "because of their knowledge that the matter is safe from confusion and with regard to it no error is to be feared in any respect: all the dicta have to be considered as parables and as a guidance conducting the mind toward one being." [40] A midrash is quoted in support of this thesis: "Great is the power of the prophets; for they liken a form to its creator; for it is said: 'And upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of man' (Ezek. 1:26)."[41] The sheer audacity involved in describing God corporeally is sufficient proof "that they were innocent of the belief in the corporeality of God; and furthermore that all the shapes and figures that are seen in the vision of prophecy are created things."

To corroborate Maimonides' understanding of the phrase "great is the power" (*gadol koḥan*), a passage from the Talmud is quoted wherein a similar figure of speech constitutes a comment on the seemingly shocking action of a rabbi who performed the act of *ḥaliṣah* (taking off a shoe to avoid levirate marriage) with a slipper and at night.[42] "Another rabbi said thereupon: How great is his strength to have done it alone." *"How great is his strength* means *how great is his power.*"

Upon closer examination of the original talmudic source, a startling discrepancy emerges between the phrase's contextual meaning and the meaning which Maimonides is purportedly substantiating. Regardless of any textual variants or emendations,[43] the logical progression of this talmudic pericope can only lead to the conclusion that the phrase is sarcastically meant to be

39. Ibid., p. 102.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 103.
42. T.B., Yebamot 104a.
43. See Pines's note 50 on this point.

a declaration of disapproval of the actions at hand.[44] An expression which Maimonides argues is one of praise and appreciation is curiously verified by one conveying denigration and mockery. Once again the cautious reader is alerted to an alternative approach to the midrash by an incongruity which could not have escaped Maimonides' attention.

The solution to this conundrum lies in the multipronged strategy of the *Guide* demonstrated thus far. Success in addressing the multitude is measured in terms of the extent to which they can be jolted out of their traditional acceptance of prophetic and rabbinic teachings at face value, thereby rejecting corporealisms and gaining closer proximity to a monotheistic belief. This is accomplished by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument implicit in the "great is the power" midrash.

The perfect man, however, realizes that any particular section of the *Guide* can only be grasped in terms of the totality of the treatise, "connecting its chapters one with another . . . and also to grasp each word that occurs in it in the course of the speech even if that word does not belong to the intention of the chapter. For the diction of this Treatise has not been chosen at haphazard but with great exactness and exceeding precision."[45] For him, each word of the quoted midrash and its talmudic counterpart gains a significance beyond its specific context and attracts a network of allusions, definitions, and expositions that are scattered throughout the treatise.

Those who have "philosophized and have knowledge of the true sciences"[46] are aware that it is philosophically unacceptable to describe God in positive terms, as the prophets and rabbis have done. On the other hand, the alternative of utter silence and muteness regarding divine science would leave both the masses and the elite in a void bereft of the guidance and instruction required in regard to such fundamental matters. The intellectually sophisticated reader, therefore, will be prompted to another level of understanding the "great is the power" midrash via the hidden message of its talmudic prooftext. The reference to levirate marriage and *ḥaliṣah* conjures up Maimonides' theoretical formulations elsewhere in the *Guide,* suggesting that the form of the Torah's narrative and legal components is, in a sense, the lesser of two evils necessitated by the unpalatable alternative of silence.

44. See Rashi's commentary on this expression, n. 40.
45. *Guide,* p. 15.
46. Ibid., p. 10.

I:26 is the operative chapter deliberating on the anthropomorphically charged narrative segments of the Torah, which are governed by the maxim, "The Torah speaketh in the language of men." Corporeal attributes convey the basic notions of existence and perfection to a general public whose only frame of reference is the physical world, "as the multitude cannot at first conceive of any existence save that of a body alone," and "everything that the multitude consider a perfection is predicated of Him even if it is only a perfection of relation to ourselves."[47]

III:32 is the complementary analogue to the I:26 argument with regard to the Torah's legislative component. The rationale it offers for much of the legislative content is divine recognition of human nature's weakness and general resistance to sudden and radical change. The law is motivated by primary and secondary intentions, the latter aimed at mutual abolition of wrongdoing and correctness of beliefs, and the former at intellectual apprehension of God. Thus we are presented with a tripartite structure of scriptural law which exactly parallels what we have seen of scriptural narrative.

1. Literal/superficial = formal aspect of law.
2. External = correct beliefs and moral-ethical guidance.
3. Internal = true apprehension of the deity.

The external formal aspect of the law, at its most stark and obvious level, means nothing. It is simply a concession to human frailty, "for a sudden transition from one opposite to another is impossible. . . . therefore, He may be exalted, suffered the above mentioned kinds of worship to remain [animal sacrifice] but transferred them from created or imaginary and unreal things to His own name."[48] Maimonides describes the outer form of the law as a "divine ruse" designed to establish God's oneness and existence, "while at the same time the souls had no feeling of repugnance and were not repelled because of the abolition of modes of worship to which they were accustomed and than which no other mode of worship was known at that time."[49]

Just as there was no other language with which God could be discussed, as pointed out in I:26, so there was no other legal modality whose praxis

47. Ibid., p. 56.
48. Ibid., p. 526.
49. Ibid., p. 527.

could lead to the same refined notions of God. "In anticipation of what the soul is naturally incapable of receiving, [God] prescribe[d] the laws that we have mentioned so that the first intention should be achieved, namely the apprehension of Him."[50] Though much of this discussion centers on animal sacrifice, it can be read as an overall preface to the section dealing with the rationale for the commandments and informs that entire discussion. Its thesis is applicable to the category of ritual law in general.

Critical for our purposes is the concluding paragraph of III:32, where Maimonides fortifies his previous discussion with a midrash reporting that at the waters of Marah, just after the exodus from Egypt, there was a revelation of a "first legislation,"[51] i.e., "The Sabbath and the civil laws were prescribed at Marah."[52]

Maimonides classifies this revelation as one of "first intention concerned solely with correct opinions as witnessed by the Sabbath (creation of world in time) and the civil laws (abolition of mutual wrongdoing)"; "Accordingly it is already clear to you that in the first legislation there was nothing at all concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices for as we have mentioned, these belong to second intentions."[53] Obviously, the perfect law is one which confines itself to first intentions and is not diluted by inferior secondary ones. For Maimonides, then, the legislation promulgated at Marah is paradigmatic of this superlative law untainted by formal ritual conforming to a defective human characteristic.

The contrast of first and second legislations is indeed radical when one considers that Marah preceded the Sinaitic theophany. The truly utopian law, it indicates, is not the one emerging from Sinai and presently extant but rather a pre-Sinaitic ideal which never fully materialized due to the reasons outlined above. If not for the exigencies of human nature, the final draft, as it were, of the Torah, as presented at Sinai, would have been superfluous. I:26 and III:32 form a sustained argument that the legacy of Sinai is, in effect, a compromise. As a result, the religious intellectual is faced with an ongoing challenge to recover its original pristine intentions aimed at the apprehension of the deity.

In the passage under consideration, the inconsistency of the talmudic prooftext on levirate marriage precipitates a revised reading of the "great is

50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., pp. 530–531.
52. B.T., Shabbath 87b.
53. See above, n. 49.

the power" midrash in which the aggregate of these ideas planted throughout the treatise converge. The authentic student of Maimonides is directed to the rationale for levirate marriage found in III:49,[54] which is unique among the various reasons for other commandments in that it validates a custom which antedates Sinai; "As for the reason for the levirate it is literally stated [in Scripture] that this was an ancient custom that obtained before the giving of the Torah and that was perpetuated by the Law."

The escape route for avoiding levirate marriage is *ḥalişah;* according to Maimonides, this is a demeaning process providing an incentive to perform the levirate. The reason provided for this commandment disrupts the pattern of the section dealing with the rationalization of the commandments. No actual reason is offered for its utility as either promoting a moral quality or right opinion or combating an idolatrous practice.[55] Instead, there is simply an appeal to some long-standing tradition of the Torah which is considered sufficient for its being adopted by and enshrined in the Law. A comprehensive analysis of this commandment would require a separate study, but what is important for our purposes is the signification it would bring to the mind of an attentive reader searching for a key to a difficult passage within which a seemingly inappropriate reference is made.

For Maimonides' true disciples, armed with the hints and clues interspersed throughout the *Guide,* the midrash at hand would emerge in a subtly nuanced form. In one sense, the expression "great is the power" truly praises the prophets for their ability to create a language where language is sorely inadequate. In quite another sense, the very same expression is critical of the prophetic choice of language when cast in light of the comments elsewhere about levirate marriage. The latter referent provides the intersecting point for the conclusion which must be drawn from such disparate chapters as I:26 and III:32 melding together in our passage in I:46.

This critique is bolstered by what we have seen to be the connotations raised by the levirate as emblematic of the law looking back to and embracing its antecedents. The "likening of a form to its creator" is not the ideal and is really a utilitarian submission to the weakness of the human intellect. The intellectual will be compelled to aspire to some pristine level of understanding beyond the language of the prophets. That level is one which prophetic speech, as embodied in the corpus of Scripture, cannot capture (possibly the realm

54. *Guide,* p. 603.
55. Ibid. III:35.

of pure abstract speculation). The demands of religious observance for most and of philosophical truth for the few dictate that prophetic discourse will attract both praise and criticism. The astute reader can detect both notions in this midrash, while those not philosophically inclined will remain with the former. The notion that the Torah is not the ideal in the sense demonstrated would be too radical for the masses to absorb and yet continue to remain faithful to its content.

Marvin Fox's solution to the "contradiction" of maintaining both the duty to pray and the denial of divine attributes within the same Maimonidean system is most apropos our problem as it deals with identical opposing demands. The doctrine of divine attributes is at odds with the traditional notion of prayer. Maimonides did not wish to explicitly reject the latter in favor of the former, for fear that unphilosophical but pious readers would not be able to cope. Instead, he synthesized the alternatives into a system which

> enunciates the ideal of a form of worship that makes no use of language, but he also recognizes that this presents an impossible demand not only for common people, but even for philosophers. His solution is to retain both the language of worship and the truth about divine attributes within a single system. These elements of the system live in dialectical tension, and it is a great art to keep them in balance.[56]

The same "balancing act" must be performed by the religious philosopher who appreciates both the skillfulness of prophetic imagery and the nature of its sublime subtext.

Conclusion

We have seen that Maimonides adopts a creative strategy with respect to the use of midrash and the manner in which he incorporates it into his work. The question as to how Maimonides could feel comfortable about treating revered and esteemed rabbinic utterances with so much interpretive latitude can be answered by reflecting on what type of literature he considered midrash to be. In response to those who hold that midrash captures the true meaning of biblical texts or is equal in status to traditional legal decisions, Maimonides

56. Fox, "New View of Maimonides' Method of Contradictions," p. 76.

declares that it has "the character of poetical conceits whose meaning is not obscure for someone endowed with understanding. At that time this method was generally known and used by everybody just as the poets use poetical expression."[57] Midrash is poetry, a genre that by definition stretches the bounds of conventional language to embrace the poet's personal thoughts. According to Maimonides, this art was at one time generally recognized for what it was, and he is simply reintroducing its authentic roots to his readers. The rabbis themselves set the stage for Maimonides' methodology with their "poetical conceits," which were never intended to be static authoritative texts that manifested the correct meaning of scriptural texts. Midrash, as "witty" poetry, has a malleability not available with doctrinaire teachings like halakhah. For this reason it is a suitable candidate for the kind of liberal and ambiguous usage Maimonides employs in the labyrinthine undertaking that constitutes the *Guide of the Perplexed.*

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57. *Guide,* p. 573.