



MAIMONIDES

AND THE

SHAPING OF THE JEWISH CANON

JAMES A. DIAMOND

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Jewish thought since the Middle Ages can be regarded as a sustained dialogue with Moses Maimonides, regardless of the different social, cultural, and intellectual environments in which it has been conducted. Much of Jewish intellectual history consists of a series of engagements with him, fueled by the kind of “Jewish” rabbinic and esoteric writing Maimonides practiced. This book examines a wide range of theologians, philosophers, and exegetes who share a passionate engagement with Maimonides – assaulting, adopting, subverting, or adapting his philosophical and jurisprudential thought. This ongoing enterprise is critical to any appreciation of the broader scope of Jewish law, philosophy, biblical interpretation, and Kabbalah. Maimonides’ legal, philosophical, and exegetical corpus became canonical in the sense that many subsequent Jewish thinkers were compelled to struggle with it in order to advance their own thought. As such, Maimonides joins the fundamental Jewish canon alongside the Bible, the Talmud, and the Zohar.

James A. Diamond holds the Joseph & Wolf Lebovic Chair in Jewish Studies at the University of Waterloo. He is a leading authority on medieval Jewish thought and philosophy, and his studies have been published widely in all the prominent journals in the fields of Jewish studies, religious studies, and philosophy. His previous two books each garnered the Canadian Jewish Book Award for best scholarly book in the field of Jewish studies, and his last book, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers: Maimonides and the Outsider*, was chosen in 2008 as a Notable Selection by the Jordan Schnitzer Book Awards in the category of Philosophy and Jewish Thought for best book in the previous four years.

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JAMES A. DIAMOND

University of Waterloo, Ontario



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Acknowledgments

Over the course of time researching and writing this book, I have come to appreciate far more profoundly how critical Jewish thought and philosophy have been for my life, from both a scholarly and an existential perspective. My formative years were spent in a setting where grandparents were conspicuously absent for those raised by parents who immigrated to North America after surviving the very darkest periods in Jewish history. As a result, when raising my own family, I considered myself a bridge between that unfathomable devastation experienced in the past by both my parents and the parents of my wife Florence, and the unlimited opportunities afforded by our welcoming liberal democracy to our children in the future. The sturdiness of the bridge hinges on the depth of the connection to the Jewish tradition that could never be superficial or uninformed.

After years of reflection on the various struggles to somehow come to grips with that which will forever remain beyond comprehension, I realized I could not cloud the next generation's future with the dismal theological and philosophical conclusions I had entertained. The prospects of the deaths of both God and civilization do not offer the best of ideational frameworks within which life could thrive. But more than that was the lived challenge of our parents whose own resistance to radical evil was to fulfill that 614th *mitzvah* of surviving as Jews. That meant ensuring their children's continuing commitment to Judaism and the Jewish nation. The possibility of frustrating their *qiyum hamitzvah* was never a viable alternative. This book could not have been written without their sacrifices and is in some small way a fruit of that *mitzvah*. It could also not have been completed without my wife Florence's inspiration, encouragement, and critical eye. My love for her is best captured as the *חולי האהבה* described by Maimonides in the concluding chapter of Sefer HaMada.

In my capacity as a bridge between my parents' generation and the future, I dedicate this book to my children Shimon, Yonah, and Nina, who are themselves

the ultimate living testaments to their grandparents' devotion, will, and refusal to surrender to the forces that would have annihilated them, their heritage, and their people. Without them, and others like them, the Jewish canon I unfold in this book would become a relic consigned to some museum dedicated to an extinct culture that the murderers had so perversely conspired to erect. The rabbinic tradition attributes the childlessness of the biblical matriarchs and patriarchs to God's longing for their prayers in order to realize their aspirations. Children are thus a synthesis of a mutually invigorating relationship that sustains both humanity and the Transcendent. Their lives reflect both their parents' longing and the dependency of the Transcendent on the human voice and address.

I would like to thank the Social Sciences Humanities and Research Council of Canada for its gracious support of the research invested in this project. In addition, I extend my profound appreciation to Moshe Halbertal, Joseph Weiler, and the Tikvah Center for Law and Jewish Civilization at New York University for providing me the opportunity, the camaraderie, and the ideal environment within which to complete this book. The collegiality, encouragement, and constructive criticism I enjoyed during my year as a Tikvah Fellow immeasurably enhanced the quality of my work and the very experience of working it through to the printed page. Finally thanks to Miriam-Simma Walfish for her keen editorial skills and Lew Bateman and Shaun Vigil at Cambridge University Press for their gracious efforts in welcoming my work to the prestigious Cambridge catalog of Jewish scholarship.

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Chapter 5 from "Abarbanel's Exegetical Subversion of Maimonides' Akedah: Transforming a Knight of Intellectual Virtue into a Knight of Existential Faith," in *The Hebrew Bible in Fifteenth Century Spain: Exegesis, Philosophy, Literature, and the Arts*, eds. Jonathan Decter and Arturo Prats Olivan (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 75–100.

Chapter 7 from "Maimonides, Spinoza, and Buber Read the Hebrew Bible: The Hermeneutical Keys of Divine 'Fire' and 'Spirit' (Ruach)," *Journal of Religion* 91, no. 3 (2011): 320–43.

Chapter 8 from "Exegetical Idealization: Hermann Cohen's Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Maimonides," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2010): 49–73.

Chapter 10 from "A Kabbalistic Reinvention of Maimonides' Legal Code: R. Abraham Isaac Kook's Commentary on Sefer HaMada," *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 11 (2012): 345–84.

Introduction

“In the post-Maimonidean age all philosophical thinking is in the nature of a commentary on Maimonides whether avowedly or not.”

Isaac Husik, *A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy*,
(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1941) p. 312.

MOSES MAIMONIDES: ANCHORING JEWISH INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

The eleventh to fourteenth centuries mark a watershed in the evolution of Jewish thought. The period was anything but a dark age for Judaism, with a strong intellectual tradition in every sphere of thought and practice, including the nascent Jewish mystical movement, kabbalah, and new directions in biblical exegesis, jurisprudence, and Talmudic novellae that proliferated throughout the Jewish world. And yet, despite there having been no shortage of important thinkers and personalities in this era, about whom modern scholars have produced a fertile body of literature, unquestionably the dominant figure of the age was Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, also known by his acronym, Rambam (1138–1204).

Maimonides was, on a parochial level, the most eminent authority of rabbinic law in the Jewish world, proficient in all its canonical sources, from the Hebrew Bible through the Talmud, and on to the Geonic sources. In a broader sense, he was also a master of the scientific/philosophical corpus of his day, as evidenced not only by his writings but also by his having risen to a position of official physician in the royal court in Egypt. As a result, the positions he took on matters crucial to Jewish existence and the practice of Judaism seminally influenced the evolution of Jewish thought, worship, and observance ever afterward. Without this potent combination of rabbinic expertise and philosophical acumen, Maimonides could easily have been ignored by devotees of either school and thus would not loom as large over the evolution of Jewish thought or, indeed,

even be the subject of the present study.¹ Maimonides was the quintessential *talmid hakham* (Jewish sage), proficient in all disciplines pertinent to rabbinically stipulated Jewish practice and belief.² Even his most fervent opponents could not shunt him aside.³

He augmented (or, some might say, encumbered)⁴ Judaism with a new fundamental credo, which quickly became sacrosanct,⁵ and he compiled the first comprehensive code of Jewish law. Though its practical authority was superseded in the sixteenth century by Joseph Karo's *Shulhan Arukh*,⁶ Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*⁷ nevertheless became the third prong of the Jewish academic canon, alongside the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Whether examined in critical academic or devotional rabbinic settings, it is arguably the most microscopically studied text in all the halls of Jewish learning to this day.⁸ His philosophical magnum

¹ This rare combination of rabbinic erudition and philosophical mastery, as David Hartman and Elliott Yagod point out, is what "made him a threat in philosophy. You had to confront Maimonides' philosophic views because you could not ignore his halakhic views." See their "God, Philosophy, and Halakha in Maimonides' Approach to Judaism," in *Multiple Paths to God: Nostre Aetate Forty Years Later*, ed. J. Hogan and G. McLean (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005), 307–44, at 308.

² See *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:13.

³ Again, the raging debate over Maimonidean thought that ensued for centuries, and in somewhat milder form until the present day, would never have transpired had Maimonides only authored the *Guide*. As Daniel Jeremy Silver notes in his account of the controversy, "It was not Maimonides' theological ingenuity, but his rabbinic omnicompetence and genius which made his philosophic work a *cause célèbre*." Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy*: 1180–1240 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 20.

⁴ As Menachem Kellner has argued in *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2010).

⁵ Although, as Marc Shapiro has demonstrated, the majority of these "principles" have been subjected to critical debate by prominent halakhists ever since their inception. See his *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2004). However, despite this long history of scepticism toward their authoritativeness, it is still safe to characterize them as having achieved a canonical status in Judaism. See, for example, the spirited resistance to Shapiro's thesis by R. Yehuda Parnes in "Torah U-Madda and Freedom of Inquiry," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 1 (1989): 65–71.

⁶ Joseph Karo himself considered Maimonides the most central and authoritative figure in halakhah and "aspired to become Maimonides' successor and the mediator between the medieval *Mishneh Torah* and his own times." See Mort Altshuler, "Rabbi Joseph Karo and Sixteenth Century Maimonidean Messianism," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 191–210, esp. 193–97. Karo's code is also more codelike, in its lack of nonhalakhic material, than the MT, which is replete with philosophical and ideological asides, making it "as much commentary as it is code." See Isadore Twersky, "The *Shulhan 'Aruk*: Enduring Code of Jewish Law," *Judaism* 16 (1967): 141–58, at 153.

⁷ All references to the *Mishneh Torah* throughout the book are to the Shabse Frankel edition (Jerusalem: Ohel Yosef, 1977–2001).

⁸ One strong testament to the centrality of Maimonides' work in the world of the yeshivah is the moving reminiscence of R. Joseph Soloveitchik, a scion of the most prominent rabbinic dynasty in the modern period, regarding his father's near obsession with the *Mishneh Torah* with regard to Talmudic studies; see his "U-Bikkashtem mi-Sham," in *Ish ha-Halakhah: Galui ve-Nistar* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979), 230. Precisely because of its having been superseded practically, it became a focus of theoretical study. As R. Moshe Lichtenstein explains its

opus, *The Guide of the Perplexed*,⁹ remains the most important and influential synthesis of science and the Jewish tradition. No serious attempt to broach this issue can do so without dialogue with that work, even today when both sides of the science-faith equation have been radically revamped or, worse, debunked.¹⁰ Thus, every path in Jewish thought and law from the twelfth century on bears some of Maimonides' imprint. So formidable was his intellectual legacy that even the particular crystallization of kabbalah, so inimical to the general thrust of his rationalism,¹¹ would have been unimaginable without his work.¹² A quick glance through the index of virtually any current scholarly or rabbinic study, be it on a modern, renaissance, or medieval topic in Jewish studies, is certain to reveal multiple entries under his name.¹³ His thought evoked adoption, opposition, revision, or reinvention, but never indifference.

attraction, "Suddenly, the work is perceived to be an invaluable asset to the endeavor of the beit midrash, rather than as a work of practical halakhah with occasional bearing on the purely intellectual or theoretical pursuit." See his "What Hath Brisk Wrought: The Brisker Derekh Revisited," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 9 (2000): 1–18, at 2.

⁹ All references to *The Guide of the Perplexed* are to the Shlomo Pines edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), and cited throughout this book as GP or the *Guide*.

¹⁰ For one such attempt that models itself on the Maimonidean project, see Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 2011), which, in the twenty-first century, can still acknowledge the strong influence of the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition. It is difficult to find such "serious" attempts in current times, considering the abysmal deterioration in the level of discussion. If vigorous debates can persist in modern times over whether the age of the universe is short of six thousand years old, then I suspect Maimonides would be quite happy to have his name omitted from the conversation. See, for example, the pages of a blog that deals with this issue as well as others in the conflict between what is often thought to be Jewish dogma and science in <http://www.rationalistjudaism.com>. I base my speculative observation on a solid footing of Maimonides' own explicit assertion that the Torah must bow to scientific demonstration and not the other way around on the issue of creation. See GP, II:25, pp. 327–28. On this, Shem Tov, a major medieval commentator on the *Guide*, admits unreservedly in his understanding of Maimonides' disclosure: "And even if it destroyed the law entirely, should eternity be demonstrated, we would have interpreted the verses in accord with eternity" (MN, 51).

¹¹ For a full-length study of this opposition, see Menachem Kellner's *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2006).

¹² See, for example, Elliot Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) – His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts*, ed. G. K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), 209–37. Wolfson states categorically that the entire spiritual/intellectual landscape of the "masters of Jewish esoteric lore were incubated in the shadows of the great eagle" (210).

¹³ Although Maimonides occupies the very apex of what has become the canon of medieval Jewish thought, the modern engagement with him and that canon is based on a modern "construction" of it, as Aaron W. Hughes astutely argues involved translating an amorphous "past" into a detailed and scientifically constructed "history." See "'Medieval' and the Politics of Nostalgia: Ideology, Scholarship, and the Creation of the Rational Jew," in *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 17–40.

MAIMONIDES: FULCRUM OF JEWISH INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Because Maimonides set the agenda in one way or another for virtually all of Jewish thought since the Middle Ages, a study of the explicit and implicit Maimonidean threads that course their way through various historical periods and thinkers serves to illuminate certain aspects of the different strands of that thought which might otherwise go undetected. This study focuses on an ongoing, uniquely Jewish hermeneutic of writing, engaged with the intellectual and textual legacy of the Jewish tradition that extends well beyond Moses Maimonides and his twelfth–thirteenth-century world. There is one dimension of this legacy that can be regarded as a sustained dialogue with Maimonides, regardless of the social, cultural, and intellectual transformations inevitably wrought by time. In fact, much of Jewish intellectual history can be viewed as a series of engagements, disengagements, and reengagements with him, fueled by the kind of writing Maimonides himself practiced, thereby establishing the very lines of discourse that target or conjure up his thought.

In the text-centered culture of Judaism and Jewish thought, interpretation is, as Moshe Halbertal concludes, “the dominant mode of intellectual creativity.”¹⁴ As such, the numerous examples of Maimonidean engagements in this book collectively amount to an argument in favor of elevating the Maimonidean oeuvre to canonical status alongside the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and subsequently the Zohar. The distinction Halbertal draws between *central* texts that are influential in shaping thought and *formative* texts “in which progress in the field is made through interpretation of the text itself”¹⁵ is also instructive in how precisely to classify the Maimonidean textual legacy in terms of Judaism’s curricular canon. In light of the extent to which this book places post-Maimonidean thought in dialogue with that legacy, Maimonides’ Guide and Code can safely be subsumed within the formative category.

This study gives voice to that dialogue in a panoply of intellectual languages and across historically delineated periods. The dialogue may stretch between people as varied as a rabbinic rationalist such as Maimonides, living in Islamic-dominated Egypt; an adversarial rabbinic mystical exegete such as Nahmanides (thirteenth century) in Christian-dominated Spain; the fiercely antagonistic fifteenth-century kabbalistic encyclopedist Meir ibn Gabbai; and an admiring twentieth-century Eastern European mystic, Zionist, and political activist such as Abraham Isaac Kook, who reinvented Maimonides; but all are firmly entrenched within a well-established rabbinic tradition. Even Spinoza, Judaism’s arch-heretic and free-thinking iconoclast, who broke with the Jewish tradition altogether in seventeenth-century Holland, could not sever his ties to his inherited religion without refuting the Maimonidean biblical hermeneutic.

¹⁴ *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

I will argue that in his very rejection of Maimonides, he actually resorts to this hermeneutic, if only to overcome his primary Jewish intellectual predecessor and foil. All these theologians, philosophers, and exegetes share a strategic obsession to weave that tradition, be it biblical, Talmudic, or midrashic, into their own textual presentations, which cut across different cultural and intellectual milieus. The other compulsion they share is a passionate, never staid, engagement with Maimonides, either assaulting, adopting, or adapting his philosophical and jurisprudential thought. This ongoing enterprise is critical to any appreciation of the broader scope of Jewish law, philosophy, and their unique hermeneutic. In a sense, Maimonides emerges as a fulcrum for Jewish law and civilization in all its genres – legal, rabbinic, philosophical, and mystical. Often, even when Maimonides is not explicitly mentioned, it is clear from a cited verse or rabbinic adage that a later thinker has contemplated Maimonides’ interpretation, whether as endorsement and incorporation of its Maimonidean sense, or to carve out new space for an opposing idea.

In this way, Jewish jurisprudential and intellectual history can be traced in terms of its engagements and reengagements with Maimonides’ thought in all its manifestations. Along the way, the boundaries between what are often regarded in Jewish studies as rigid disciplines of law, rabbinics, philosophy, and mysticism become increasingly blurred. Whether halakhist/lawyers, philosophers, biblical exegetes, or mystics, the canonical thinkers examined here share a common discourse consisting of what I would characterize as midrashic thinking – a mode unique to their rabbinic antecedents. I discuss the term “midrash” in [Chapter 1](#) and what that means in a Maimonidean context, but let it suffice here to adopt James Kugel’s general definition of the term, which is equally applicable to post-Maimonides struggles with the Maimonidean corpus. Kugel brings out the nuance of the meaning of the term as follows: “The Hebrew word *midrash* might best be translated as ‘research,’ a translation that incorporates the word’s root meaning of ‘search out, inquire,’ and perhaps as well suggests that the results of that research are almost by definition *recherché*, that is, not obvious, out of the way, sometimes far-fetched.”¹⁶ Much of Jewish thought can then, from a certain angle, be said to engage Maimonidean thought in this double entendre sense of the word – inquiring into Maimonides and then refining it in order to break away from it or to break it away from its medieval context to adapt to a new age or theology.

Much as the Hebrew Bible provided the staple for rabbinic creativity, Maimonides’ reappropriation of a biblical verse or rabbinic adage leaves a new textual legacy for the ongoing development of Jewish thought. Although critical of Maimonides’ theory of midrash, it is no wonder that the most eminent modern scholar of midrash, Isaak Heinemann, launches his pioneering study, *The Ways of*

¹⁶ “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 77–103, at 91.

the Aggadah (*Darkhe HaAggadah*),¹⁷ with it. A prominent critic of Heinemann's own theory of midrash opens his study as well with a discussion of Maimonides, boldly claiming, "It would be no exaggeration to say that Maimonides occupies a place in a specific Jewish literary history and theory analogous to that of Aristotle in the discourse of European literature."¹⁸ Perhaps the strength of Maimonides' musings *about* midrash reflects his expertise as a practitioner *of* midrash himself, thereby informing the way in which subsequent critics and admirers engaged his own work. As such, my study here subscribes to the characterization of the last quote, subject to a slight amendment, replacing Maimonides' theoretical importance with that of his posing a midrashic point to the counterpoint of Jewish thought that succeeded him.

Never again, for instance, can the biblical apothegm *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in silver filigree* (Prov. 25:11) be cited without Maimonides' hermeneutical use of it as a metaphor for the multilayered messaging of biblical writing hovering somewhere in the background, if not the foreground. Its connotations of the external silver, the internal gold, the size of the filigree's apertures that allow the internal meaning to peek through the external filter, and the intellectual distance between the reader and the text, all continue to inhere in any post-Maimonidean referencing of it. A particular deference or nod to tradition might in fact consist of a discourse with a verse's Maimonidean overlay. As such, it could be examined in its role as a new intertext for later thinkers in the sense that a text is "ultimately dialogical in that it cannot but record the traces of its contentions and doubling of earlier discourses."¹⁹ I revisit this verse and its imagery in the conclusion of this book, but for now I turn to a brief example of this discourse centering on this image as a sampling of what lies ahead.

JEWISH THOUGHT AS CREATIVE CORRECTION: AN INTERTEXTUAL EXAMPLE

There is also a form of anxiety that both links and propels the various strands of Jewish thought presented in this book and that helps account for a critical dimension of its creativity in advancing Jewish thought. For the purposes of my study, I note Harold Bloom, whose seminal insights into the vitality of poetry and prose are also applicable to Jewish thought. What Bloom originally proposed regarding the writing of poetry and the poet's relationship to his or her precursors is, I propose, similarly apt with regard to the thinkers discussed in this book and their relationship with Maimonides' thought. Here is how Bloom understands the creative force of much of Western poetry composed over the last few centuries:

¹⁷ Isaak Heinemann, *The Ways of the Aggadah* (*Darkhe HaAggadah*) (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1970).

¹⁸ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

Poetic Influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main traditions of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.²⁰

As one proceeds along this study of various Jewish thinkers – rationalist or kabbalist, medieval or modern – this “central principle” of Bloom’s sweeping consolidation of all good poetry under one primary rubric of “misreading,” “correction,” “misinterpretation,” and “revisionism” begins to crystallize as a formative principle of post-Maimonidean Jewish thought as well. By transposing some of the terms in Bloom’s assertion, the following can be stated with equal force:

Jewish philosophical, jurisprudential, and theological influence – when it involves a strong, authentic thinker – often proceeds by a misreading of Maimonides, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. A good part of the history of fruitful Jewish philosophical and theological influence, since the Middle Ages, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism of Maimonidean thought, without which modern Jewish thought as such could not exist.

As an illustration of a post-Maimonidean adaptation, intertextuality, and creative correction, the Zohar, the canonical “bible” of kabbalah (a work that deserves individual treatment within the theme of this book, but that merits a book-length study of its own), offers what I believe are many instances of this Maimonidean intertextuality. The following is but one adaptation of this same biblical adage – apples of gold in silver filigree – that bears these “traces,” thereby entering into dialogue with its Maimonidean precursor. As the Zohar enriches the list of precious metals, stones, and materials out of which the desert Tabernacle is to be constructed with theosophic symbolism, it hierarchizes the gold, silver, and copper inaugurating that list in terms of divine components:

For surely gold is ascension beyond all – yet, gold in a concealed manner, and this is supernal gold, seventh of all those kinds of gold. This is gold shining, dazzling the eyes . . . Silver – below, mystery of the right arm, for the supernal head is gold . . . When silver is perfected, it is included in gold, and this is the mystery of apples of gold in settings of silver. Thus silver turns into gold, and then its place is perfected. So there are seven kinds of gold.²¹

²⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 30.

²¹ Zohar, 2:148a, as translated by Daniel C. Matt in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 5 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 344–45.

אבל זהב בחדוה איהו ובסליקו דדחילו דחודו קיימא ובאתערותא דחודו, וכסף לתתא רזא דרועא ימינא דהא רישא עלאה זהב איהו דכתיב (דניאל ב) אתה הוא רישא דדובא, (שם) חדוהי ודרעוהי די כסף לתתא, (נ"א ואימתי אשתלים כסף כד אתכליל וכו') וכד אשתלים כסף כדן אתכליל בזהב ורזא דא (משלי כה) תפוחי זהב במשכיות כסף אשתכח דכסף, אתהדר לזהב וכדן אשתלים אתרתי (נ"א אלים אריה), ועל דא ז' זיני, זהב אינון

Briefly, much of the kabbalistic tradition conceives of the Torah itself as, in Gershom Scholem's graphic description, a "living organism" that is "animated by a secret life which streams and pulsates below the crust of its literal meaning."²² As well as narrating human events and promulgating law, the Torah is in some sense an autobiography of its divine author. Though an intricate web of kabbalistic ciphers, suffice it for our purposes to state that rather than interpretive layers of meaning, the "secret" of this particular verse's imagery is how the gold and silver and spectrum of colors associated with them relate to the complex inner mechanics of the divine godhead. They capture not only an anatomical hierarchy but also the notion of the perfecting of the lower silver by its envelopment in the higher gold of God's sefirotic alignment and composition. I believe that no complete understanding of the Zoharic sense of this verse can be gleaned without appreciating its role as a Maimonidean intertext. The Zohar's incorporation of it then becomes a conscious usurpation of its Maimonidean traces of a hierarchical hermeneutical model, while raising the stakes of what in all likelihood it views as a trivialization of the biblical message by replacing mere interpretation with ontology. At the same time, it does not vacate its Maimonidean connotations entirely, but retrofits the verse with a new application of them, such as Maimonides' assertion that a biblical passage's "external meaning ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning" (GP, 12). Although the external meaning bears some allusion to the internal, Maimonides clearly distinguishes between knowledge that is useful for "the welfare of human societies" in the former and that "concerned with the truth as it is" in the latter – in other words, between practical and theoretical wisdom. In its transformation of the bible from a text to be read and interpreted to an architectural drawing of God, the Zohar amalgamates what Maimonides has bifurcated. Whereas people graduate from lower to higher knowledge in the self-perfecting process that includes mining a text for meaning, the kabbalistic transition from silver to gold entails a perfection of God, which is ultimately realized in a paradoxical unity of composite parts that are really one part, and a silver that is really gold. The Zohar's appropriation of the apples-of-gold metaphor consciously dismantles its Maimonidean construction and rebuilds on its skeletal remains.

This Zoharic passage displays all the elements Harold Bloom noted of "misreading" and "creative correction" necessary to boldly move Jewish thought forward while at the same time looking backward apprehensively. Though espousing entirely different theologies, both Maimonides and the authors of the Zohar are "strong and authentic" Jewish thinkers, thus fulfilling the first of Bloom's prerequisites. In this instance, Maimonides' exegetical appropriation of the biblical phrase "apples of gold in silver filigree" overwhelms its meaning to the point of displacing any other approach to the Jewish canon that is not philosophical. The Zohar is unwilling to enslave itself to the past, but yet is unable to liberate

²² Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 14.

itself from the hold of the Jewish canon, which now includes Maimonides. In order to chart its new direction, the Zohar creatively corrects all the facets of Maimonides' exegesis that impede its own daring movement in an entirely different direction. It replaces a calibrated hermeneutic preciousness with a holistic one that ensures the preservation of both a higher and lower, rather than leaving it far more prone to discarding the lower in favor of the higher. But what it also does is transform what Maimonides understood as a proverb clearly delineating two layers of meaning in biblical parables into a "mystery" (*raza*). In other words, for Maimonides the biblical maxim simply instructs one in how to read the Bible, and points to the fact that there is an esoteric level to its meaning, but the maxim itself is not esoteric. The Zohar "corrects" instruction to "mystery"; that is, the maxim provides a window into the deepest ontological truth of all Being. The Zohar goes much further, however, and "misinterprets its parent," in the words of Bloom,²³ by turning a Maimonidean analogy between two levels of understanding corresponding to silver and gold in terms of their value into a description of Being where, in its perfected state, there are no distinctions and "there are seven kinds of gold." While Maimonides maintains an internal and external layer of meaning corresponding to the two precious metals, the Zohar fuses the two into a restorative state signified by the silver, or lower dimensions of God, being enveloped in the gold, or upper aspect of God, achieving divine harmony.

Maimonides' hermeneutical "apples of gold" strategy of reading both the Bible and the rabbis raised the specter of their redundancy once their philosophical kernel was retrieved. Thus, what empowered the text and the reader with the interpretive latitude to survive the challenges posed by historical evolution, as well as philosophical and scientific progress, also endangered its authority and integrity. At the heart of the appropriations and engagements with Maimonides is this danger, which can be viewed as an interpretive irritant inspiring the recasting and reconfiguring of new apples of gold. Once catalyzed by this irritant, the creative potential of these engagements was further enhanced by Maimonides' adaptation of the gold/silver methodology into his own work. Maimonides modeled his own esotericism, which intentionally concealed the true meaning of his writing, "speculatively" on the prophetic books and categorically on the midrashic tradition.²⁴ In this sense Maimonides crafted his own treatise as another work of apples of gold in silver filigree that divulges one meaning to the "vulgar," while conveying a more profound one to those who are religious, halakhically committed, philosophically astute, intellectually honest, and, most importantly, existentially troubled by the tension between all these

²³ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 96.

²⁴ See his definition of the seventh type of contradiction on p. 18 of the GP, whose appearance in "the books of the prophets is a matter for speculative study and investigation," while its use in the midrashim and haggadah is explicitly acknowledged on pp. 19–20.

different dimensions of their spiritual and rational constitution.²⁵ The hermeneutical proverb that might better capture many of those who succeeded Maimonides and wished to preserve the integrity of all the Torah's layers of meaning would be a combination of Proverbs 25:11 and Haggai 2:8, "Silver is Mine and gold is Mine, says the Lord of Hosts" (לִי הַכֶּסֶף וְלִי הַזָּהָב נֹאמֵר ה'). All levels of meaning can legitimately lay claim to divine provenance and none can be dispensed with.²⁶

This same dialogical relationship with Maimonides pertains to those thinkers previously mentioned, as well as to the modern-period neo-Kantian Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen, the medieval R. Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, ensconced within the Nahmanidean camp, and the cosmopolitan Portuguese/Spanish/Italian exegete Isaac Abarbanel toward the close of the Middle Ages. Each of them warrants, and is granted, a separate chapter in this study. Clearly, however, there could have been many others deserving of attention. My choice of thinkers examined in this volume was dictated by a combination of factors. Among them is, first, a lacuna in the scholarship with respect to their work altogether, as in the case of R. Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, Meir ibn Gabbai, and R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin. The second factor is the dearth of studies on their engagements with Maimonidean thought in general, which pertains to those just mentioned as well as R. Kook and Isaac Abarbanel. Third, they present particularly good illustrations of engagements with Maimonides in the particular "Jewish" way that I develop as primary. Fourth is their variegated representation of Jewish thought, both historically and ideologically, spanning from the medieval to the modern periods and including kabbalists, talmudists, philosophers, and those who might be ordinarily characterized as secular thinkers, as in the case of Spinoza.

This book also focuses on modes of writing and literary presentation which respond to a crucial question that lies at the core of this study: What precisely is the "Jewishness" that unites all these thinkers despite the wide, often radical, disparity between their theologies and philosophies? Some might point to halakha and normative practice as that dimension which Jewishly unites such adversarial thinkers as kabbalists and rationalists, who maintain profoundly irreconcilable conceptions of a deity. My study locates the Jewishness of their writing in its midrashic contours. Significantly, this study does not just contemplate a theoretical stance but presents many concrete examples of this reading put into

²⁵ See the description of Joseph, the addressee of the *Guide* on pp. 3–4, and the intended audience on p. 5.

²⁶ See, for example, Abarbanel's comments on Genesis 2, discussed in [Chapter 5](#), which explicitly claims to adopt Maimonides' sense of the apples-of-gold analogy, but in order to assert precisely the point of the external meaning representing the truth and reality:

וזהו היתרון הנפלא הנמצא לתורת האלהים על כל חבורי החכמות והנמוס' כי יש בהם שיכונו לנגלה ואין בהם רמז למדע אחר ומהם שיכונו אל האמת הפנימי והיה הפשט החצוני דבר רק ואין בו ממש. וזאת התורה אשר שם משה אינה כן אבל החיצוני ממנה הוא האמתי וכמו שהיה והנרמז היא חכמה עליונה וכבר זכר הרב המורה זה בהקדמת ספרו והביא על זה מאמר שלמה תפוזי זהב במשכיות כסף דבר דבור על אפניו.

practice. There is also another concern that emerges from the close readings I offer here of the various Jewish thinkers I have chosen to demonstrate my thesis. Given that this midrashic discourse is also a strategy of esotericism, it raises an intriguing distinction between the public and the private realms in thought and the act of writing. Indeed, the works of Maimonides and his intellectual successors reflect the anxiety of writing for a private audience, all the while conscious of its inevitable appearance in the public forum. It would not be speculative to assert that all of them were moved by the same Maimonidean sentiment of leaving a legacy of “truth” for the future no matter the personal cost. If the only means of ensuring that legacy was to afford “satisfaction to a single virtuous man while displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses” (GP, 16), then so be it. Personal honor, respect, reputation, and historical eminence all gave way to the supreme mandate of teaching the truth, as Maimonides and those who followed him perceived it, even if that truth reached only a solitary individual.

LAW AND NARRATIVE

Another dimension of Maimonides’ philosophical and legal corpus that also is critical for understanding how it set the agenda for the future of Jewish thought is the inextricable link between philosophy, law, and narrative. Of particular relevance to this is Robert Cover’s penetrating essay “Nomos and Narrative,” where he elegantly argues for the mutual integration of law and narrative using the biblical canon as his paradigm. His assertion that “every prescription is insistent in its demand to be located in discourse . . . and every narrative is insistent in its demand for its prescriptive point, its moral,”²⁷ is key for grasping the full purpose and intent of both the *Guide* and the Mishneh Torah as well as the hermeneutical relationship between them. The Mishneh Torah commences with the “foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all sciences,” which is to know that there is a Prime Existent. Embedded within those first four Hebrew words that launch the Code’s substantive law, by applying the rabbinic wordplay strategy of “notarikon,” is the Tetragrammaton, YHVH, a divine epithet that captures the divine essence “clearly and unequivocally.” The Mishneh Torah concludes with a utopian vision when the entire world will participate in this foundational activity to know God, a uniquely Maimonidean construct of the messianic period. Thus the Mishneh Torah, and all its legal minutiae, is bracketed by a noetic ideal that anchors its presentation of law in a narrative that maps the course of human history all the way to its definitive unfolding. All law looks back at its origins in knowledge, is grounded in it, and promotes it, while at the same time looking forward to a future when, as a carrier of this knowledge, a global community of knowers will crystallize, where the ultimate object of that knowing is whatever the divine cognomen YHVH signifies. The entire prescriptive project of the Mishneh

²⁷ Robert Cover, “Nomos and Narrative,” *Harvard Law Review* 97, no. 4 (1983–84): 4–68.

Torah “demands to be located in the discourse” of knowledge, and where knowledge finally leads.

Correspondingly, the philosophical discourse of the *Guide* begins with Adam’s disobedience to a commandment, consisting of an intellectual decline and distraction away from that ultimate object of knowledge, and concludes with a way of life that is informed by the attainment of all that can be known of that object, by “assimilation to His actions.” The result is a thoroughly pious and moral life that “always has in view loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment,” the last three terms appearing conspicuously in the Hebrew rather than the normal Judeo-Arabic of the text, thereby conjuring up the Jewish life of law and mitzvot, or divine commandments. Thus the narrative of the *Guide* “demands its prescriptive point,” bracketed as it is at the start by violating a law, and at the end by conformity to the moral spirit of the law. Indeed, the very relationship of the Mishneh Torah to the *Guide* as a whole must be regarded as that of a nomos to a narrative. The Mishneh Torah’s prescriptive enterprise demands location in the philosophical discourse of the *Guide*, while the *Guide*’s discourse demands its rootedness in the prescription of the Mishneh Torah. This book could be described as the charting of a narrative of Jewish thought that is rooted in and launched by the prescriptive language of Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah and the philosophical language of his *Guide*.

Setting the Stage for the Future of Jewish Thought

What Constitutes the “Jewishness” of Maimonides’ Thought?

In this first chapter, I wish to ground some of the claims I have presented cursorily thus far. Since those claims involve “Jewishness,” “midrashic” writing, and Maimonides as the “fulcrum of Jewish thought” that succeeded him, my use of this terminology requires some further explication. The question posed by this chapter’s subtitle is not difficult to ascertain as far as Maimonides’ legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, is concerned because the *Mishneh Torah* deals largely with a corpus of law unique to Judaism and its practice. The question becomes thornier, however, with respect to his philosophical work. According to renowned contemporary political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973), whose scholarship on Maimonides elicits much passionate debate,¹ the *Guide of the Perplexed* “is not a philosophic book – a book written by a philosopher for philosophers – but a Jewish book: a book written by a Jew for Jews.”² When I first began my studies on Maimonides, I thought it a trite observation. Over the years, however, I have come to increasingly appreciate its full import, and I return to this quote because I believe, at a very elemental level, it best describes the motivation for my intended project. If we strip away the *Guide*’s undercurrent of Aristotelian philosophy, medieval cosmology, and logic, what kind of a composition are we left with, and how can it continue to be relevant?³

¹ Most recently, see the critiques by Kenneth Seeskin in the appendix dedicated to it in *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177–88, and Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 393–402.

² Leo Strauss, “How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” xiv, in GP.

³ For a comprehensive overview of Maimonides’ views of various strands of science, see Gad Freudenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophy of Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 134–66, esp. 145–50. Particularly pertinent is the ambivalence Freudenthal notes between the importance, indeed the religious obligation, of science for true knowledge of God on the one hand, and the notion that science “is only ancillary to metaphysics and that some questions cannot be subjected

The *Guide* has six primary features that constitute its “Jewishness” and thus account in part for fueling a substantial dimension of the Jewish thought which followed. These features establish points of intersection between the *Guide* and the Mishneh Torah, opening up a kind of intertextual dialogue that enables them to be read symbiotically at critical junctures. They also account for the intertextuality that seeps into the subsequent Jewish texts that are the focus of this book.

1 Referencing

There is the relentless citation of biblical and rabbinic material that, like a connective sinew, weaves itself throughout the work. The biblical and rabbinic traditions’ nonphilosophical mode of discourse – indeed, often absurd, fantastic, or nonsensical, from a philosophically cogent perspective – whose patent sense perplexes and misleads rather than enlightens and guides, was the perplexity that Maimonides considered a chief malaise among his intellectually sophisticated coreligionists. That, coupled with the absence of his committed disciple Joseph, who still yearned for guidance even after departing Maimonides’ direct tutelage, initiated the private correspondence that ultimately would constitute the *Guide*. As such, the foundational Jewish canon is confronted in the work at every turn, if only to be overturned.

For example, although the *Guide* begins its very first chapter with the universal question of what it means to be human, it does so Jewishly by examining the meaning of a biblical term, *tzelem* (image), which Genesis purports to be constitutive in the creation of the human being. It is what distinguishes the human from all other species of life in the world. Ironically, but significantly, the term on its own, based on Maimonidean philology, can also denote what is constitutive about idols, or those objects which pose the greatest of threats to human integrity and consciousness. In this short chapter, no fewer than fifteen different verses lifted not just from Genesis but from across the wider spectrum of biblical books, coalesce to form a cogent thesis as to the *biblical* meaning of “image” and, consequently, on the very essence of the human.⁴ Just as Midrash rummages through the entire Hebrew Bible as its creative playing field,⁵ so Maimonides glides with ease across the same field in the development and fortification of his thought. This philological examination leads to the

to scientific inquiry” on the other. Science, then, is not totally determinative of religious faith; therefore, scientific advances do not necessarily abnegate Maimonides’ philosophical theology.

⁴ For but one extended, detailed study of the first two chapters of the *Guide*, and especially the term *tzelem*, see Marvin Fox, “The Nature of Man and the Foundation of Ethics: A Reading of *Guide* I:1–2,” in his *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), chap. 3, and his observation that is critical to this book that Maimonides is “keenly aware that we cannot read the biblical text responsibly unless we have full control of its language” (158).

⁵ As James Kugel notes, “The basic unit of the Bible, for the midrashist, is the verse; this is what he seeks to expound, and it might be said that there simply is no boundary encountered beyond that of the verse until one comes to the border of the canon itself.” Kugel, “Two Introductions to

conclusion that what distinguishes the human “image” from all other images is its divine nature and, very importantly, its cultivation, without which the divine component of human beings simply remains dormant.⁶ Thus, it meticulously excavates the biblical definition of the human and, in doing so, locates the space in which religious life can play itself out – in the intersection between the human and the divine. It instructs human beings as to how one performs *imitatio dei*, or the very noblest activity of the religious life.⁷

2 Substance

Rather than simply reconcile the apparently contradictory worlds of what has been commonly polarized as *Athens versus Jerusalem*, the treatise is primarily, if not exclusively, of uniquely Jewish concern. First, it is “to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in the books of prophecy” (5), and secondarily to offer “the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets but not explicitly identified there as such” (6). His project, therefore, *in its entirety*, relates to biblical exegesis, both on a microlevel of individual words and a macrolevel of passages or units called “parables,” which, by definition, demand interpretive keys to render their discursive meaning transparent. The reader is advised that any chapter that does not patently deal with biblical terms implicitly does so as ancillary to others that do, or by obliquely hinting to a term intentionally suppressed for the time being. Such chapters, seemingly devoid of biblical reference, might also either “explain one of the parables” or merely “hint at the fact that a certain story is a parable” (10). There is no authorial intention expressed whatsoever to compile a traditional philosophical treatise, but rather to engage in that classical Jewish enterprise of biblical exegesis or, better, of rereading Judaism’s sacred texts.

Again, as a brief illustration, the first such chapter lacking any mention of an equivocal term is I:17, which consists of a short digression on the dangers of publicly teaching not only metaphysics (“divine science”) but physics (“natural science”) as well. This approach is substantiated by the particular illustration of

Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 77–103, at 93.

⁶ Critical to my study here and the integrative relationship between the Mishneh Torah and the *Guide* is that philosophical positions such as this on the human image are not simply academic but practically influence legal formulations. Maimonides’ notion of *tzelem* seriously deviated from its Talmudic antecedents and, as Yair Lorberbaum notes, his “radical departure from the Tannaïtic theosophy enabled (and in some cases even caused) him to deviate from their halakhic applications.” Lorberbaum, “Imago Dei in Judaism: Early Rabbinic Literature, Philosophy, and Kabbalah,” in *The Concept of God, the Origin of the World, and the Image of the Human in the World Religions*, ed. Peter Koslowski (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 57–74, at 71.

⁷ Although Maimonides’ views on the “image” of God highlight the irresolvable tensions inherent in the unbridgeable chasm between the divine and the human, as Howard Kreisel concludes, “he leaves no doubt in this passage that the intellect is in some significant sense ‘divine.’” Kreisel, “Imitatio Dei in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *AJS Review* 19 (1994): 169–212, at 180.

the gendered metaphors of man and woman that Plato and his predecessors resorted to when discussing the subject of form and matter, respectively. If the reader abides by Maimonides' instructions, then this chapter in all likelihood both indicates the parabolic nature of the Garden of Eden narrative and is a key to deciphering it as a kind of intellectual anthropology of the human condition. This chapter, therefore, prompts the reader retrospectively to return and reread the very first chapters charting the fall of man along a course of intellectual decline, as well as [chapter 6](#) dealing specifically with the terms "man" (*ish*) and "woman" (*ishah*), and their figurative senses. The chapter also operates prospectively toward chapter 30 of the second section, with another cryptic discussion of the terms "man," "woman," and "serpent," the central actors of the Eden narrative, weaving together rabbinic legends and verses to allude to a "certain notion" or a "certain signification" rather than their literal senses. It resonates again in the third section when Solomon's proverb about the "married harlot" is interpreted as a parable regarding the relationship between the human components of matter and form (III:8). Thus, it is not only the subject of God and His nature that requires allusion, parable, and metaphor in its teaching, but that of human nature as well. A chapter, then, seemingly lacking in any biblical engagement, radiates out to link up with others that do, bearing directly on how to read a prominent biblical narrative. Maimonides' work emulates the kind of structure that rabbinic midrash conceives of the Bible, whose corpus consists of a concatenation of disparate sources and subjects, yet is treated as a monolithic work to be read holistically. Just as a verse from Isaiah can midrashically elucidate a meaning of a verse in Genesis,⁸ so hermeneutically do the different parts of Maimonides' various works, both inter- and intra-textually, relate to each other.

3 Structure and pedagogy

There is the text's self-declared interconnectedness, demanding a type of reading that I would characterize as quintessentially Jewish. What is at stake with this aspect of the text, Maimonides cautions, is no less than a grasp "of the totality of this Treatise so that nothing will escape" the reader. In order to avoid misconstruing the treatise's overarching message, the reader is admonished to "connect its chapters one with another; and when reading a given chapter, your intention must be not only to understand the totality of that chapter, but also to grasp each word that occurs in it in the course of the speech, even if that word

⁸ See, for example, Benjamin Sommer's example of the mechanics of this hermeneutic and especially his contrast of it to modern biblical criticism where "the context in which a midrashist puts a given verse is that of the entire bible, not the more local context that literary critics privilege and certainly not the context of the biblical book so loved by canon critics." Sommer, "The Scroll of Isaiah as Jewish Scripture or, Why Jews Don't Read Books," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press), 225–42, at 230.

does not belong to the intention of that chapter.” The text cannot be read properly in a progressively linear way and is bound to be partial and misread unless every segmented reading remains tentative and continuously reread in light of each successive reading.

For example, the chapter dealing with the equivocal term “to stand erect” veers off into a short but concentrated excursus on the meaning of Jacob’s ladder – a self-acknowledged detour whose intrusion is noted by “I shall now return to our purpose” (I:15). Although the ladder’s meaning must remain tentative until all its respective terms are fully dealt with, its appearance in this particular chapter itself generates meaning. I have dealt with this parable in minute detail elsewhere,⁹ but suffice it to say here that its insertion in this chapter might highlight the term “stand erect” as its semantic pivot. All movement directed toward or away from the ladder’s summit stands in stark contrast to the summit’s occupant, which is static or “stable and constant.” Proximity to God, prophecy, and the Law, which the prophet “ascends” to and “descends” with, all seem to be acquired independently by human beings without any divine participation since God remains unmoved, unchangeable, and impassive, as the key term “to stand erect” signifies whenever it refers to God. Gerald Bruns’s characterization of the Bible as viewed by the midrashist is equally apt, therefore, for Maimonidean texts, which “can be read as a self-glossing book. One learns to study it by following the ways in which one portion of the text illumines another. . . . The parts are made to relate to one another reflexively with later texts, for example, throwing light on the earlier, even as they themselves stand in light of what precedes and follows them.”¹⁰ The only difference would be between the intentionality of a single authored text in the case of Maimonides, as opposed to the authorial heterogeneity of the Bible.

4 Experience

The *Guide* purports to resolve a uniquely Jewish angst on how to maintain psychological, intellectual, and practical equilibrium along with devotion to the Law, the moral life, and – perhaps most importantly within the Maimonidean value system – philosophical honesty. Maimonides intends to alleviate a Jewish existential crisis. He purports to steer a middle course between a widely perceived stark alternative faced by religious intellectuals that would leave either their faith or their intellect permanently damaged. That middle course

⁹ See my “Jacob vs. The Married Harlot: Intertextual Foils in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2000): 1–25, and “The Seven Units of Jacob’s Ladder and Their Message,” in *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in The Guide of the Perplexed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 85–130.

¹⁰ Gerald Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Frank Kermode and Robert Alter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 626–27.

consists of affording the Bible and the rabbinic tradition a more expansive semantic range that could comfortably accommodate those dimensions formerly considered to be irreconcilable. Were biblical language to be narrowly construed in its literal sense, then, for but one illustration, narratives involving a process of seeing – human beings seeing God, God seeing human beings, or indeed human beings seeing each other – would simply amount to no more than fantastic children’s fables. Once Maimonides enriches the terms ordinarily used for the visual by internalizing them to refer to the mind’s eye,¹¹ those narratives graduate from childish fairy tales to sophisticated epistemology.

Correspondingly, Maimonides considered this linguistic point important enough to take up almost the entire first chapter of his *Mishneh Torah*. A lengthy excursus on the issue appears immediately subsequent to positing the first two fundamental commandments to know God and not to conceive of any other god than the One God. If the structure of the *Mishneh Torah* follows any jurisprudential logic, the implication is that any misconception as to the linguistic range of biblical language could undermine the very foundations of Judaism and its primary monotheistic mandate. The main “proof” provided by this first chapter of the *Mishneh Torah* for the pliability of language when God is the subject is in fact the visual. God is “seen” in different guises, by one prophet clothed in material *white as snow* (Dan. 7:9), and by another dressed entirely differently *in crimsoned garments* (Isa. 63:1). He manifests himself variously even to the same prophet, disclosing Himself on one occasion as a warrior and on another as a designated ritual worship leader cloaked in a prayer shawl.¹² The latter two are rabbinic interpretations of divine revelations, thus drawing on both traditions that constitute the sacred Jewish canon – written and oral, or scriptural and rabbinic. To read these as visual sightings is tantamount therefore to violating the cardinal prohibition against idolatry avowed at the outset, for it would admit of numerous deities. It would also amount to a failure to fulfill its complementary cardinal positive directive to know God, since any conception of a deity possessed of different facets, attributes, or dimensions, is false and constitutes a belief in an imaginary being. On its own, the *Mishneh Torah* saves the common person from idolatry by offering these as mental images, products of the particular prophetic mind that constructs them rather than empirical observation. The troubled religious intellectual in whom Maimonides’ *Guide* is interested must combine the *Mishneh Torah* and the sophisticated notions of divine unity, prophecy, and negative theology presented in the *Guide*. Otherwise there will be no escape from the uncompromising alternatives of religious betrayal or intellectual dishonesty he thought he was confronted with before.

¹¹ See, for example, GP, I:4–5, pp. 27–31.

¹² MT, Foundations of Torah 1:9 citing b. Rosh HaShanah 17b.

5 Readership

Three of the criteria that qualify the type of reader Maimonides wishes as his audience are more universal and all-embracing, including perfection of religion, perfection of character, and a mastery of philosophy. However, the fourth narrows that audience down to Jews who bear these other qualities, requiring a deep commitment to the Torah, or, in his words, one for whom “the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and become actual in his belief” (5).

6 Juristic Legitimacy

There is its legalistic grounding in the extraordinary remedy of *It is time to act for the Lord* (Ps. 119:126), which allows for its very publication in the face of a strict halakhic prohibition against the public teaching of physics and metaphysics, its esoteric subject matter. The whole treatise is stamped with a halakhic imprimatur that positions its undertaking on a Jewish continuum along with R. Judah the Prince’s editing of the Mishnah, which violated the long-standing injunction against transcribing the oral law. According to Maimonides’ own account, the combined urgency of declining rabbinic expertise, increasing oppression and political subjugation, and demographic fragmentation of the Jewish community justified R. Judah’s radical break with tradition.¹³ A halakhic dispensation turned into a guarantee of canonization, for the very act of breaching the law paves the way for its reinvigoration and survival, becoming a vital ground for the future rather than an ossified relic of the past.

Psalms 119:126 originally provided the classical rabbis with the authority that allowed God’s name to become part of a social greeting, a simple hello.¹⁴ Maimonides’ resort to the verse as justification for his own composition resonates with its rabbinic connotations in that the various divine epithets, as interpreted by him, capture the central subject matter of his treatise – the nature of God and His governance. While the articulated Name, the Tetragrammaton, signifies “a clear unequivocal indication of His essence,” all the “other great names give their indication in an equivocal way being derived from terms

¹³ Introduction to MT:

לפי שראה שתלמידים מתמעטין והולכין והצרות מתחדשות ובאות ומלכות רומי פושטת בעולם ומתגברת. וישראל מתגלגלין והולכין לקצוות. חיבר חיבור אחד להיות ביד כולם כדי שילמדוהו במהרה ולא ישכח.

See also his introduction to the PM where he details R. Judah’s outstanding personal stature legitimizing his project of transcription:

והיה בתכלית החכמה ורור המעלה, כמו שאמרו מימי משה ועד רבי לא ראינו תורה וגדולה במקום אחד. והיה בתכלית הענוה ושפלות הרוח והרחקת התאות כמו שאמרו משמת רבי בטלה ענוה ויראת חטא. והיה צח לשון ובקי בשפה העברית יותר מכל אדם, עד שהיו החכמים ע”ה לומדין ביאור מלים שנסתפקו להם בלשון המקרא מפי עבדיו ומשרתיו, וזה מן המפורסמות בתלמוד. והיה לו מהעושר וההון.

For but one rabbinic source which cites Psalms 119:126 to rationalize the writing of that which has been restricted to oral transmission, see b. Temurah 14b, where the following principle emerges: “Better to uproot the Torah rather than have the Torah forgotten.”

¹⁴ M. Berakhot 9:7.

signifying actions” (GP, I:61, p. 147). Considering that the existence of God and His unity are his primary concerns, one could characterize the *Guide*, as well as the Mishneh Torah,¹⁵ as a treatise on divine names whose understanding is essential to preserve the ideas of existence and unity.

MIDRASHIC MAIMONIDES

Maimonides mandates an intertextual hermeneutic for comprehending his composition, one that has heretofore been customarily applied largely, if not solely, to the reading of the Bible and rabbinic midrash. The *Guide*’s continuously intermittent and sporadic dialogue with its own take on the “fractured and unsystematic surfaces” of the Bible and midrash, its textual precursors, attenuates the thread of intertextuality that scholars have traced from the Bible to midrash into a medieval philosophical text and beyond.¹⁶ The particular feature the *Guide* shares with midrash is the pervasive use of scriptural citation which, as in its rabbinic precedent, does not act merely as proof-text but generates new meaning out of the tension orchestrated between its setting within the *Guide* and its original contexts. A citation that would appeal merely by virtue of an authoritativeness accepted by both the reader and the writer simply amounts to a kind of intellectual languor and mindless enslavement to tradition, of which Maimonides cannot stand accused. Maimonides’ engagement with his textual traditions presents a sustained philosophical hermeneutic that innovates while remaining anchored in tradition. The complexity of this hermeneutic is compounded by the adoption of a midrashic like structure, noted previously, in which all its parts operate reflexively, the earlier contemplating the later and the later elucidating the earlier. This kind of hermeneutic is, I believe, essential to any reading of Maimonides’ misreadings of the foundational texts that preceded him. My study commences with an examination of this phenomenon in the legal code as well as an issue critical to forming a proper relationship with God, and thus of the utmost import to those thinkers who followed him. Many of the verses cited mirror those embedded in various contexts of the philosophical *Guide of the Perplexed*; as such, the full import of his presentation in the Mishneh Torah can only be grasped once the two are read via an interlocking hermeneutic that produces a coherent integration of jurisprudence and philosophy.¹⁷

¹⁵ See the beginning of the MT and, for example, MT, Forbidden Intercourse 14:2, where Maimonides directs that the prospective convert be introduced to Judaism first and foremost with the principles of divine unity and prohibition against idolatry. Only these philosophical teachings are conveyed to him “at length.” Everything else, including familiarizing him with the details of the *mitzvot*, are really the framework for inculcating and preserving these two beliefs.

¹⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 16.

¹⁷ A major proponent of this approach is Isadore Twersky, who has argued that Maimonides’ law code “reveals a vigorous intellectualistic posture usually associated with the *Guide*,” and his

Maimonides' intended audience is Jewish, his core subject matter consists exclusively of philosophical issues filtered through Jewish texts, the very writing of it is grounded in a halakhic dispensation, and the existential angst he aims at relieving – the conflict between the Torah and philosophy – is a Jewish one. What better genre is there to employ when it comes to communicating this exquisitely Jewish undertaking than one that is itself uniquely Jewish? Though Maimonides is a thoroughgoing rationalist, the language he adopts to convey the universalistic thought of philosophy is shared with other Jewish movements, even the mystical that he so virulently opposed in its nascent stages. They all exploit the particularistic dialect of the midrashic. In this sense, despite an aversion to various mystical conceptions of God that offend His philosophical unity, there is a certain literary and dialogical continuity between the mystical, rabbinic, and rationalist traditions. One of the staples of midrashic discourse is biblical recitation, whose function is to preserve tradition while transforming it to meet new challenges. What has been posited of midrash, whose “simultaneous rejection and preservation of tradition . . . is shown in the all-pervasive quotation which forms its very warp and woof,”¹⁸ is also true of both of Maimonides' hermeneutical magna opera, the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah*, and the successive texts of those who have engaged them over the past near millennium. Once this hermeneutic is discerned and applied, what initially has the veneer of chaos and disorder ultimately gives way to what Strauss considered the highest form of edification – an “enchanting understanding.”¹⁹

Though Maimonides' hermeneutical stance *toward* midrash has been a subject of scholarly interest,²⁰ how Maimonides and his antagonists, disciples, and successor exegetes and thinkers themselves may have engaged in their own variation of midrashic discourse demands further exploration. On the one hand, according to Maimonides, the rabbis resorted to midrash as a “poetical

image “as a philosopher insisting upon the superiority of the theoretical life . . . is, in fact, fully developed in the pre-*Guide* writings.” See Twersky, “Some Non-Halakhic Aspects of the *Mishneh Torah*,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 95–118, at 95. For a more recent example of the interdependence between the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah*, see Josef Stern's novel and convincing treatment of the seemingly contradictory positions on the commandment of “chasing the mother bird from the nest” (*shiluah ha-ken*) in “Al Setirah KiBe-Yakhol ben Moreh Nevukhim Le-Mishneh Torah” [On an alleged contradiction between Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and *Mishneh Torah*], *Shenaton Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri* 14–15 (1989): 283–98. Reprinted in English as *Problems and Parables of Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), chap. 3.

¹⁸ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 22.

¹⁹ Strauss, “How to Begin to Study,” xiv.

²⁰ See, for example, Eliezer Segal, “Midrash and Literature: Some Medieval Views,” *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 57–65, at 57–60; W. G. Braude, “Maimonides' Attitude to Midrash,” *Studies in Jewish Biography, History and Literature in Honor of I. Edward Kiev*, ed. C. Berlin (New York: Ktav, 1971), 75–82; Joshua Levinson, “Literary Approaches to Midrash,” *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 189–226, at 196–99.

conceit,” a playful literary tool that imaginatively contorts a verse out of its plain contextual sense into something else entirely, often a moral teaching or legal rule, but whose meaning cannot escape “someone endowed with understanding” (GP III:43, p. 573).²¹ For example, the Mishnah accounts moralistically for the biblical prohibition against building an altar with iron hewn stones since it is not appropriate to use “that which shortens life for that which prolongs it.”²² Referring to his own understanding of midrash as “poetical conceit,” Maimonides evaluates this rationale as “excellent in the manner of the Midrashim, as we have mentioned.” However, once subjected to a historical/critical/theological method, the “real” sense of it is to avoid adopting what was idolatrous custom for the purpose of monotheistic worship (GP, III:45, p. 578).²³

On the other hand, rabbinic midrash was also adopted by Maimonides as an esoteric mode of communicating metaphysical notions so profound and radical as to require concealment from all but the philosophically seasoned elite. Most importantly, of all the genres of literature noted by Maimonides to illustrate the various contradictions that suffuse written works, only midrash categorically shares the most profoundly esoteric seventh type with the *Guide* (19–20). This type of contradiction is used to intentionally conceal authorial meaning from that segment of the audience, the “vulgar,” that the book is not interested in addressing, though fully cognizant of the fact that the text itself will fall into their hands. While its use “in the books of the prophets is a matter for speculative study and investigation,” in the midrash and haggadah “there are also to be found therein contradictions due to the seventh cause.” By drawing attention to this common feature, Maimonides is claiming much more than merely a shared esoteric strategy to convey philosophical truths. Rather, he is preparing the reader for a midrashic encounter with his own text – a text that consciously eschews a formal philosophical style in favor of one endemic to Jewish writing and one to whose inflections only the highly trained rabbinic ear would be

²¹ See also his caution regarding the fanciful rabbinic understandings of various aspects of the Garden of Eden narrative, such as the serpent having *Sammael* as a rider, or the original bigendered back-to-back state of the human being, whose “allegorical interpretation was clear to those to whom they were addressed, and they are unambiguous” (GP, II:30, p. 355).

²² M. Middot 3:4.

²³ This example is particularly interesting in that the context of the prohibition may very well indicate the validity of the rabbinic interpretation in its plain sense: “Do not build it of hewn stones for by wielding your sword on them you have profaned them” (Exod. 20:22). See, for example, Nahmanides’ philological analysis of the term “sword,” which is etymologically linked to the same term for “destroy” (*hrb*) in *Commentary*, 1:409. He thus provides a sound critical footing for the rabbinic rationale Maimonides classifies as midrash. See, however, his “midrashic” resolution of contradictory verses (Exod. 20:21, mandating an “altar of earth” vs. 20:22, allowing for stones) for halakhic purposes regarding the construction of the altar in MT, National Sanctuary 1:13. This is also an example of contradictory halakhic positions between the *Guide*, which allows for an earthen altar, and the MT, which prohibits it altogether. See Jacob Levinger, *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1989), 179, who lists this, among others, as an illustration of halakhic incongruity between the two works.

attuned. Its meaning will escape all others. After all, when reading the *Guide* one must always be cognizant of its epistolary nature and its addressee, conducting, as it does, a private correspondence with his most beloved and missed student R. Joseph, a disciple possessed of just such an ear. It is a text intended to fill the vacuum caused by both geographic and temporal separation in his own time and posthumously, as Maimonides painfully discloses to Joseph: “Your absence moved me to compose this Treatise, which I have composed for you and for those like you, however few there are” (GP, 4).

Already in his epistle dedicatory to Joseph, Maimonides signals this hermeneutic by his desire to satisfy Joseph’s quest to “*find out acceptable words*” (Eccles. 12:10). In its original biblical setting, those “words” are supplemented by the recording of “*genuinely truthful sayings*.” The citation, therefore, on one level, accounts for the preservation in writing of what, up until that point, had been a series of oral tutorials. On another level, it also hints at the core of his project, which is to rework those words that have been “accepted,” or tradition and Torah, into “truths.” On a further plane it establishes a line of discourse with its rabbinic overlay, accepting and subverting at the same time. One such source Maimonides targets is the midrashic identification of those “acceptable words” that Solomon sought to discover with a rationale for the law of the “red heifer,” one paradigmatic of all reasonless laws traditionally classified as *hukim*. The second half of the verse is considered a negative divine response to Solomon’s quest, cutting it short with a remonstrance that this law is to be performed devotionally but blindly, and resists any such scholarly project, for “you have no right to delve into it.”²⁴ Once one has completed the *Guide* and become acquainted with precisely its project to break down any such traditional distinction between reason-based law and nonrational law, one understands that this citation is both an affirmation and subversion of tradition in order to chart a new direction for it – a revival of the original Solomonic venture. The citation then expands even further to import its original surrounding context of the very next verse, which draws an analogy between the *words of the wise* and *goads* and *nails well planted*. Its rabbinic drafting of this verse to describe its own midrashic project, which both expands the Torah like a plant that grows yet never uproots it like the nails that statically fix them, accompanies the sense of the *acceptable words* Maimonides is about to impart to his students. Thus the citation also plants Maimonides’ own work firmly within the tradition in which he is rooted, while signaling its daring creativity. The *Guide* intends to model itself on the Torah, which, during the course of its reading, will evoke dialectical tensions graduating from text and verses as exhaustively determinate to ever-increasing meaning that elevates

²⁴ *Midrash Tehilim* 9:2.

intertextuality to “the level of a virtual exegetical principle” – a phrase David Stern has employed to typify midrash, but which is equally apt with reference to the *Guide*.²⁵

Often, Maimonides cites a verse or rabbinic maxim, which initially seems to indicate a certain view, but such a view remains tentative as one works through the rest of the treatise. Links with key terms or phrases of that citation which reappear at critical junctures in the text compel the reader to return to the earlier verse, increasingly nuancing it with each new associative infusion of meaning. A midrashic interplay is generated between verse and text that is characteristic of many of the biblical and rabbinic citations interspersed throughout the *Guide*. Verse and text form a dynamically integrated whole, which in sum produces a Jewish book. Alongside its erudition, its ingenuity, and the eminence of its author, it is this facet of the *Guide*, more than any other, that made it immeasurably more influential than other Jewish medieval texts whose mode of discourse may have been more faithful to the philosophical literary tradition. Maimonides’ project follows the contours of a long-standing Jewish tradition. Medieval Jewish philosophical texts, as well as texts of other genres and later periods, must be added, or explicitly acknowledged, to the long list that James Kugel compiled of genres throughout Jewish history in which the midrashic “way of reading” has found expression.²⁶

There is a striking observation attributed to R. Hanina bar Papa, a fourth-century rabbinic sage, which demarcates the four primary texts of the classical Jewish canon according to their hermeneutical effects. Midrashically stimulated by the direct form of mass revelation to the Israelites at Mount Horeb described as “face to face” (Deut. 5:4), the divine word is said to manifest itself in four different ways, associated with each of these constituents of the canon: “The Bible possesses the face of dread (אימה), the Mishnah a neutral face (בינוניות), the Talmud a playful face (שחוקות), and the Aggadah an explicatory face (מסבירות).”²⁷ In whatever sense the term “dread” or “awesome” is understood, the notion is that the Bible undergoes an interpretive process through the various stages and approaches represented by these different rabbinic genres that slowly moderates that initial terror, transforming it into understanding and clarity. I would venture to attribute the dread emanating from the Bible to its inability to communicate sensibly with a later audience that might no longer share its theological tenets and is uncomfortable with its moral and juristic sensibility. Inconsistency and anachronism, as well as large parts of it being rendered irrelevant by the historical demise of the sacrificial cult, obscures its communicative “face” even further. What initially

²⁵ “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1988), 132–61.

²⁶ See Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash.”

²⁷ *Masekhet Soferim*, ed. Michael Higger (New York: Hotza’at Debei Rabanan, 1937), 16:3, 283–84. There is another version in Pesikta deRav Kahana, ed. Mandelbaum, 25:12, and Tanhuma, ed. Buber, Yitro 17, which switches the roles of Talmud and Aggadah with the latter being playful. It also interprets the “face” here as indicating the manner in which these different subjects should be taught.

overwhelms, startles, or shocks is illuminated by the conciliating, liberal, and explanatory strategies of rabbinic exegesis. This book adds a fifth face of Maimonides to that exegetical process which filters out further biblical unintelligibility for an even later audience who can no longer tolerate its philosophical incoherence. Just as the biblical Moses intervenes to mediate the divine *face-to-face* communication that people cannot tolerate further, so the medieval Moses intervenes with a new midrashic face that philosophizes.

Maimonides on Maimonides

Loving God Rabbinically and Philosophically

A JURIDICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SYMBIOSIS ON LOVE

Before embarking on a discussion of the long and continuing history of exegetical engagements with Maimonidean thought, it is fitting to examine the dynamics of Maimonides' own concept of the love of God, a core theological, philosophical, juridical, and Jewish notion. There are three reasons to do so. First, in order to appreciate subsequent engagements with Maimonides' view of the subject, it is necessary to secure a basic grasp of what precisely attracted, inspired, or repulsed later thinkers about Maimonides' thought in the first place. The issue of love bears heavily on many of the positions that would have challenged those who struggled with his thought and were either offended by or attracted to it. Love is also paradigmatic of what I believe is the extreme intellectualist posture that lies at the core of Maimonides' thought, and it evoked such controversy as to cause a virtual schism within Judaism, heatedly drawn along the lines between its advocates and its assailants.¹ Second, love illustrates Maimonides' own exegetical strategies vis-à-vis the canonical Jewish textual tradition that exercised subsequent exegetical encounters to either contend with, subvert, endorse, or recalibrate it, in the process of advancing their own models of Jewish theology. Third, love is the premiere example of what I consider here to be an essential feature of Jewish intellectual history since Maimonides. It illustrates well the ongoing process of reworking and refining, unfolding internally within his own thought and producing works of different

¹ For just the beginnings of this battle, see Daniel Jeremy Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy 1180–1240* (Leiden: Brill, 1965). For one dimension of this continuing struggle in the fourteenth century that demonstrates how fierce the Maimonidean war became, see Moshe Halbertal, "R. Menachem ha-Meiri and the Debate Over the Study of Philosophy," in his *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menachem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 152–80.

genres that look dialogically to each other – in other words, Maimonides engaging Maimonides.

Though Maimonides did not compose a running commentary on any of the books of the Hebrew Bible, he did cite a myriad of verses throughout his works no matter the genre, be it law, philosophy, commentary on classical rabbinic texts such as the Mishnah, or letters and responsa. As mentioned in the introduction, in good rabbinic form such citation inundates the landscape of his vast literary corpus and at times forms the connective thread between what is often bifurcated as philosophy on the one hand and law on the other.² When one lays these different works side by side, inconsistencies or, worse, outright contradictions result that may be variously explained by different aims or disparate audiences,³ or they may be attributed to the inescapable cost of esoteric writing that intentionally obfuscates what it is claiming to explicate.

As Maimonides himself admits quite explicitly, this is the style he adopts in composing the *Guide of the Perplexed*, which necessitates contradictory and disjointed treatments of its obscure subject matter.⁴ Such an apparently evasive style is undertaken on one level, in the interests of good pedagogy (GP, Introduction, pp. 17–18, fifth contradiction). On an entirely different level, the halakhic constraints and inherent demands of secrecy in the transmission of esoterica require conscious subterfuge “to conceal some parts and to disclose others,” while at the same time it must be subtle enough to escape the attention of “the vulgar who must in no way be aware of the contradiction” (GP, 18, seventh contradiction).⁵ However, the appearance of a common verse intersecting different works, or repeated within the same work, might offer a clue

² The *Guide*, with its emphasis on devising new ways of reading biblical parables, cannot easily be described as “philosophical.” Likewise, as is the case with the subject matter of this paper, the Mishneh Torah, with its periodic nonlegal digressions, escapes a simple classification as a legal code. See Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), esp. chap. 6, who notes “that the ongoing reciprocity and complementarity of law and philosophy is a key feature of the Code” (357).

³ For one sophisticated example of this, see Marvin Fox, “Prayer in Maimonides’ Thought,” in *Prayer in Judaism*, ed. M. Bernard (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 119–41.

⁴ A good proponent of this view is again Marvin Fox, “A New View of Maimonides’ Method of Contradictions,” *Annual of Bar Ilan University* (1987): 19–43, who argues that Maimonides’ “contradictions,” or rather what he terms “divergences,” are much like Kant’s antinomies, for when discussing God, “we no longer have the controls which are necessary for philosophic clarity and reliability” (21–22).

⁵ On this seventh contradiction, see Yair Lorberbaum, “‘The Seventh Cause’: On the Contradictions in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*: A Reappraisal” (*Heb.*), *Tarbiz* 69 (1999–2000): 213–37, and “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics, and Esotericism in Maimonides’s ‘*Guide of the Perplexed*,’” *Review of Metaphysics* 55, no. 4 (June 2002): 711–50, who, contra Strauss and Pines, argues that the seventh contradiction necessitates concealment for sociopolitical reasons rather than to hide heterodox Aristotelian philosophical positions. For a stinging critique of Strauss’s view, see Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 393–402, where he accuses Strauss of turning the *Guide* into “one of the most grotesque books ever written” (401). He also argues that the search for contradictions

to generating a symbiosis of meaning rather than what appears immediately as a dissonance of one.⁶ As I have demonstrated in previous studies (for example, with the subject of leprosy, to whose complex regulatory scheme an entire section in Maimonides' legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*, is dedicated), many of the verses cited in a lengthy non-halakhic, or homiletic, segment mirror those embedded in various contexts of the philosophical *Guide of the Perplexed*.⁷ As such, the full import of his presentation in the code can only be grasped once the two are read via an interlocking hermeneutic that produces a coherent integration of jurisprudence and philosophy.

Although Maimonides' esoteric style has led to endless debate regarding his true positions, in some sense subsequent Jewish intellectual history would have been all the more impoverished without it.⁸ His style fueled a rich series of Maimonidean interpretations and appropriations, as well as defenses and assaults. That roiling history shaped the contours of Jewish thought from the medieval to the modern periods, and crossed the boundaries of all learned environments, each worthy of study on their own. These different "houses of study" (*batei midrash*) include traditional rabbinic inquiry (as the chapter on R. Kook demonstrates), scholarly critical debate (as I would categorize the chapter on Spinoza), or philosophically constructive investigation (the chapter on Hermann Cohen). Indeed, this very book could not have been written without Maimonides' enigmatic and provocative style.⁹

may be futile considering that Maimonides wrote his introduction before writing the *Guide* and the contradictions he planned never actually materialized (391). See also Kenneth Seeskin's appendix to his book *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177–88, which is also dedicated to a sustained critique of Strauss.

⁶ For a good example of the interdependence between the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah*, see Josef Stern's novel and convincing treatment of the seemingly contradictory positions on the commandment of "chasing the mother bird from the nest" (*shiluah ha-ken*). See his "On an Alleged Contradiction between Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and *Mishneh Torah*" (Heb.), *Shenaton HaMishpat HaLvri* 14–15, (1989): 283–98, reprinted in English in *Problems and Parables of the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), chap. 3. For some others who have also advocated this homogeneity between Maimonides' legal and philosophical works, see David Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), and Yeschayahu Leibowitz, *Emunato shel HaRambam* (Heb.) (Tel Aviv: Misrad HaBitahon, 1980).

⁷ See "Maimonides on Leprosy: Illness as Contemplative Metaphor," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96, no. 1 (2006): 95–122.

⁸ For such a history, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 159–207, who considers it "the most fascinating story in the history of Jewish philosophy" (207).

⁹ Maimonides himself considered controversy over his work inevitable since he admits that his treatise is addressed to a "single virtuous man" at the cost of "displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses" (GP, Introduction, p. 16). Even the strictly legal formulations in the *Mishneh Torah* were shaped often by philosophical considerations. See Jacob Levinger, *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989), chap. 4, and Marc Shapiro's detailed review of Maimonides' philosophically driven agenda to cleanse Jewish law of its superstitious tendencies in "Maimonidean Halakhah and Superstition," *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 27–53, revised

On the issue of love of God, I am in complete agreement with Howard Kreisel's finding of an "overall consistency" between the *Guide* and the Mishneh Torah. Indeed, the different, though not all that neatly separated, audiences which the two works contemplate, generally divided between a mass readership and the philosophically astute elite, "did not lead him to formulate his views differently on this issue."¹⁰ I likewise argue that such is the case with a primary commandment in Jewish law to love God, but by a different route: I focus in particular on his philosophical transformations of biblical material¹¹ and exegetical manipulation of the Song of Songs as the biblical epitome of such love, as well as other verses ancillary to the message of the Song. In addition, I trace a rationale for his methodical alternation at crucial junctures between divine appellations. This internal dialogical aspect of his writing reveals Maimonides' ongoing engagement with his own thought throughout his life in the form of revision and refinement rather than outright retraction. Consonant with this maturation process is an ongoing interpretive project, where later refinements often disclose the inherent logic of previous biblical exegetical maneuvers that were consciously left initially opaque or were somehow sensed as appropriate but only fully worked out when his thought matured further.

As is the case with the rest of the Hebrew biblical canon, though no comprehensive commentary on the Song is undertaken, key verses from it arise at critical junctures throughout his various works, including the *Guide of the Perplexed*, the Mishneh Torah, the commentary to the Mishnah, and his letters cum responsa.¹² Aside from the anomalous absence of God from an entire biblical book, one might think that a rigorous medieval rationalist such as Maimonides would avoid the thoroughgoing eroticism and sensuality that suffuses the Song altogether, let alone celebrate its narrative as exemplary of the very highest of religio/intellectual mandates.¹³ However, ever since the second-century rabbinic

and expanded in his *Studies in Maimonides and His Interpreters* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 95–150.

¹⁰ Howard Kreisel, "Love and Fear of God in Maimonides' Thought" (Heb.), *Daat* 37 (1996): 127–51, reprinted in English in his *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999) 225–66, at 264.

¹¹ See the short bibliography on this by Robert Eisen, "The Hermeneutics of Order in Medieval Jewish Philosophical Exegesis," in *Philosophers and the Jewish Bible*, ed. Charles Harry Manekin and Robert Eisen (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2008), 61–77, at 61n1.

¹² See Joseph Kafih's tally of all citations in Maimonides' corpus in his concordance *The Bible in Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1971), 129. Maimonides reports of a commentary he began titled the Book of Prophecy that would include an "elucidation of the parables occurring in the prophetic books," but which he abandoned in favor of presumably the preferable treatment in the *Guide*, which adopted "another manner of explanation" (GP, pp. 10–11). Thus a systematic commentary was replaced by a disjointed erratic treatment that better suited his esoteric project. Further, the Song's parable, as with many other biblical parables, can only be deciphered by combing through Maimonides' corpus for cited verses and excerpted passages and piecing them together.

¹³ The literature on the Song is vast, but for one contemporary assessment of its thoroughgoing eroticism, see J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge

master R. Akiva classified the work as the “holy of holies,”¹⁴ possessed of even greater sacredness than the rest of the prophetic corpus, its patent profanity has been co-opted into the service of the religio/spiritual sphere.¹⁵ Its literary pulsating eros was taken to reflect the intensity of a spousal-like relationship between the nation of Israel, or the Jews, and God, best captured by analogy to the romance between a man and a woman. Though the Song’s sensual passion had been channeled into spiritual impulse and yearning, setting the pace for much of the history of the Song’s exegesis, one would still have expected the obsessive Maimonidean anti-anthropomorphism crusade to eschew any positive deference to the Song’s boldly carnal imagery. How could the man who expressed such an aversion to the “bestial” pleasures of sexual relations,¹⁶ or for that matter, the sense of touch altogether, endorsing Aristotle’s view of it as a “disgrace” (GP, II:36, p. 371),¹⁷ find anything instructive for man’s posture vis-à-vis God in the Song’s microscopically adoring gaze over the human anatomy?

Yet Maimonides, in his legal code, promotes the compulsive lover of the Song as the archetype for the lover of knowledge, and of God as the ultimate object of

University Press, 1998), who asserts that “its sublimity most fully realizes itself within the comic rhythms of a cosmos exuberantly alive with the pulsating power of eros” (277).

¹⁴ M. *Yadayim* 3:5. On what the precise meaning of this is in various rabbinic sources, see Shaul Lieberman, “Mishnat Shir HaShirim,” in Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965), 118–26.

¹⁵ For an excellent modern scholarly biblical commentary on the Song, which also engages the prolific history of Jewish and Christian exegesis, see Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), and the extensive bibliography provided at 233–88. As Maimonides’ descendants, beginning with his own son Abraham, turned toward a Sufi-influenced mysticism, it is not surprising to find a commentary on the Song penned by one of them. See Paul Fenton, “A Mystical Commentary on the Song of Songs in the Hand of David Maimonides II,” in *Esoteric and Exoteric Aspects in Judeo-Arabic Culture*, ed. Benjamin Hary and Haggai Ben-Shammai (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 19–53. As we shall see, Maimonides’ adoption of the Song as an allegory for the love of God lent itself to mystical interpretations. See also S. D. Goitein, “Abraham Maimonides and His Pietist Circle,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 145–64; Shalom Rosenberg, “Philosophical Hermeneutics on the Song of Songs: Introductory Remarks,” (Heb.) *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 133–51; Barry D. Walfish. “Annotated Bibliography of Medieval Jewish Commentaries on Song of Songs” (Heb.), in Sarah Yafet, ed. *Ha-Mikra be-re’i Mefarshav: Sefer Zikkaron leSarah Kamin* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1974), 517–81.

¹⁶ Though it deserves an independent treatment, I believe it is fair to place Maimonides squarely within the history of what Lawrence Osborne termed “sexual pessimism,” which views sexual relations, outside of what is necessary for health and propagation, as a cause of estrangement from God. See his *The Poisoned Embrace: A Brief History of Sexual Pessimism* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

¹⁷ See also MT, Ethical Traits, 3:2, 4:19, and 5:4, which treat sexual relations from clinical medical perspectives, and Warren Zev Harvey’s analysis in “Sex and Health in Maimonides,” in *Moses Maimonides: Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher*, ed. S. Kottke and F. Rosner, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), 33–39.

that knowledge. Correspondingly, in the *Guide*, he appropriates the Song's images to capture his supreme ideal of the purely contemplative life. Maimonides thus shifts the traditional interpretation of the Song's love from community to the individual resulting in an allegory of noetic eros between the religious intellectual and God, rather than the covenantal bond between nation and its divine lawgiver.¹⁸ Ironically, it will become clear that the intellectual intensity of Maimonides' archetypal lover supplants the profound offensiveness of its signifiers in the Song. In addition, these philosophically obnoxious sexual metaphors and others drawn from the Song reflect a symbiotically interlocking hermeneutic between his "esoteric" philosophical works and his "popular" legal works.¹⁹ Though the *Guide's* composition postdated the Mishneh Torah, it is crafted in a way that engages the Mishneh Torah both by building onto it and allowing readers a glimpse into the Mishneh Torah's original intentionality. Thus love's legal parameters are shaped both juridically and philosophically in a tight weave whose warp and woof consist of classical rabbinic exegetical strategies.²⁰

LOVE'S MANY FACES IN MAIMONIDES

Maimonides' initial tabulation of all the commandments compiled in the *Book of the Commandments* (*Sefer HaMitzvot*) first posits the love of God as the third of 613 formal commandments, subsequent to those of knowing

¹⁸ A. S. Halkin asserts that Maimonides was "the spiritual father of the group of commentators who substituted the individual for the nation as the theme of the allegory" of the Song. Halkin, "Ibn Aknin's Commentary on Song of Songs," in *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, English section (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 389–424, at 396. According to Menachem Kellner, Maimonides is the first to veer from the rabbinic paradigm of an Israel/God relationship, which avoided the individual slant for fear of its vulnerability to misinterpretation and extolling the physical/erotic dimensions over the spiritual/communal one. See Kellner, *Commentary on Song of Songs by Rabbi Levi ben Gershom* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2001), 31.

¹⁹ As Isadore Twersky has argued, Maimonides' code "reveals a vigorous intellectualistic posture usually associated with the *Guide*," and his image "as a philosopher insisting upon the superiority of the theoretical life . . . is, in fact, fully developed in the pre-*Guide* writings." See "Some Non-Halakhic Aspects of the *Mishneh Torah*," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 95–118 at 95.

²⁰ In an important but underappreciated essay on Maimonides' incorporation of biblical prooftexts in the *Sefer HaMadda*, Moshe Greenberg identifies fifteen different hermeneutical procedures at play that must be recognized to fully appreciate Maimonides' use of biblical references, which is rarely for mere embellishment. His conclusion is critical for any proper understanding of these prooftexts in the Mishneh Torah, since they "establish the authority of the hermeneutical procedures that the Code's readers must employ in order to reason from the plain sense of scripture to its use in the Code." See "The Use of Scripture in Classical Medieval Judaism: Prooftexts in Maimonides' Code," in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation*, ed. Peter Ochs (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 197–232, at 198.

God's existence and unity.²¹ Included under the normative rubric of loving God is an additional mandate to proselytize and propagate monotheistic belief and worship among others – that is, one's private love is so impassioned as to spur the urge to form a community of lovers united by the same object of desire. It is important to note here that this is not a call for conversion to the religion of Judaism but an obligation to foster a global subscription to the universal truth of God's existence. Following its numerical order established in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, he then elaborates on it within the Mishneh Torah toward the beginning of the Book of Knowledge in the section entitled the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah. A lengthy interregnum ensues dealing with laws governing, among others, such things as martyrdom, ethical traits, *imitatio dei*, the teaching and studying of Torah, idolatry, and finally repentance. The subject of love is sufficiently crucial to warrant revisiting at the very end of the last section in the Laws of Repentance, where it is biblically tethered to the Song, and also acts as the denouement of the entire Book of Knowledge.

In all its contexts, love of God is so tightly bound to knowledge of Him as to virtually collapse any distinction between the two. Its intellectual parameters are established already in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, which mandates contemplation of God's "commandments" and "works" as the sole means of "attaining a conception of God and reach that stage of joy in which love of Him will follow of necessity."²² When the subject is first taken up in the Mishneh Torah, its intellectual tenor, with some subtle changes, is essentially preserved. Love's observance as a commandment is fulfilled by "contemplating (שיתבונן) His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtain a glimpse of His wisdom (הכמות) which is incomparable and infinite." The immediate consequence of this purely noetic activity is "love, praise, and glorification of Him and long with an exceeding longing to know (לירד) His great Name."²³ Since love is conditioned by an understanding of God's creation, Maimonides then logically follows up with a detailed description of the structure of the world, both physically and metaphysically, briefly summarizing the subject matter of those esoteric disciplines rabbinically classified as the Account of the Creation and the Account of the Chariot, equated by Maimonides with the philosophical curriculum of physics and metaphysics.²⁴ That presentation then concludes with a reiteration of its knowledge as an essential prerequisite to the cultivation of love – "when a man reflects (מתבונן) on all these things. . . and discerns God's wisdom (הכמות) in all these creatures and creations, his love for God (המקום) will increase and his soul (נפש) will thirst and his flesh (בשר) will

²¹ *The Commandments of Maimonides*, trans. Charles Chavel (London, New York: Soncino Press, 1967).

²² *Sefer HaMitzvot* (hereafter SM), 3–4.

²³ MT, Foundations of Torah, 2:2

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:11; 4:10.

yearn to love God (המקום ברוך הוא).²⁵ Thus, the injunctive formulation of loving God brackets a detailed cosmological exposition of the world's hierarchical composition. In other words, a sophisticated philosophical appreciation of whatever is knowable of the cosmos is the performative staple of the formal command (*mitzvah*) to love God. It is both what Maimonides considers initially in the Mishneh Torah as the “way” (דרך) toward loving God and finally as “augmenting” (מוסיף) it, and supplementing it with a further dimension of some deep existential pursuit of it that involves all the abstract and concrete human faculties (“soul [נפש] will thirst and his flesh [בשר] will yearn”).

Maimonides returns to the subject of love and devotes the entire [last chapter](#) of the Laws of Repentance to it, seeming to merge knowledge and love even further into an inextricably intertwined unity that renders one virtually synonymous with the other. Such an identity reaches its apex in the ultimate paragraph, where he espouses the “self evident” (דבר ידוע וברור) nature of the proposition that

love does not become closely knit in a man's heart until he is thoroughly and continuously possessed by it and gives up everything else in the world for it; as God commanded us *with all thy heart and all thy soul* (Deut. 6:5). One only loves God with the knowledge that one knows Him. According to the knowledge will be the love. If the former be little or much so will the latter be little or much.²⁶

The uncharacteristic redundancy of a thrice-repeated, one-to-one correspondence between love and knowledge seems to categorically accentuate their coalescence into an indistinguishable unity.

A number of features of Maimonides' juridic structuring of love are enigmatic, including, among others, its interrupted treatment and different expositions and formulations between the *Sefer HaMitzvot* and two sections of the Mishneh Torah regarding love. In addition, the question arises as to whether love and knowledge are so entwined as to render the latter the sole expression of the former. It is my contention that the Song's adoption, in its entirety, as an allegory of the only love that Maimonides considers deserving of its name, the only such “fitting love” (האהבה הראויה),²⁷ is critical for determining the precise rationale underlying these features and resolving these questions. In particular, those verses shared between disparate works form intertexts that draw them into conversation with each other and generate new meaning. Such meaning can only be deciphered by complicating the common view of Maimonides the philosopher, who rationalizes Judaism's foundational biblical and rabbinic texts, rendering them philosophically palatable, with Maimonides the rabbi, who himself

²⁵ MT, Foundations of Torah, 4:12.

²⁶ MT, Repentance, 10:6

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10:3, “And all of *Song of Songs* is an allegory to this matter” (וכל שיר השירים משל הוא לענין זה).

engages in his own variation of midrashic discourse. As such, both the *Guide* and the Mishneh Torah intersect in their primary concern with the Hebrew Bible.

The *Guide* fits the classification of biblical exegesis far better than philosophical treatise, especially considering its targeted audience consists of “a religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief” (Introduction, p. 5),²⁸ and the overarching obsession of the entire *Guide* with equivocal terms or biblical language (Introduction, p. 10).²⁹ His methodical and ubiquitous citation from the traditional Jewish biblical and rabbinic canon transforms his philosophical and legal compositions into midrashic ones as well, which draw on the biblical cache of verses precisely the way Daniel Boyarin described the manner which midrash drew on them, as a “repertoire of semiotic elements that can be recombined into new discourse, just as words are recombined constantly into new discourse.”³⁰ In this particular context, the midrashic intertextual incorporation of excerpts from the Song as well as other biblical sources embedded in Maimonides’ disparate explications of love is the hermeneutical key to disclosing the full import of the love of God within his thought.

DIVINE NAMES AS OBJETS D’AMOUR

There are a number of what I would identify as midrashic markers that distinguish the various treatments of love in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, the Mishneh Torah, and the *Guide* and to which this chapter will confine itself. First is the biblical personality presented in each instance as the exemplar of love, Abraham being the choice of the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, then turning to a Davidic expression of passionate longing for it excerpted from Psalms in the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, and reverting back to Abraham in Laws of Repentance. Though Abraham appears twice, the biblical exemplars in each of the three cases represent entirely different facets of love. The *Sefer HaMitzvot* presents Abraham as the model for the missionary activity that Maimonides considers a second component of the normative realization of love, for “just as Abraham, on account of his loving God, as attested by the verse *Abraham my lover* (Isa. 41:8), and the

²⁸ As Leo Strauss observed, “It is not a philosophic book – a book written by a philosopher for philosophers – but a Jewish book: a book written by a Jew for Jews.” See his introduction “How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” GP, p. xiv.

²⁹ For a recent subscription to this view, see Arthur Hyman, “Maimonides as Biblical Exegete,” in *Maimonides and His Heritage*, ed. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Lenn Goodman, and James Grady (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 1–12, who finds that the *Guide* and the Mishneh Torah and the *Sefer HaMitzvot* are all in some sense Bible commentaries. Even the Mishneh Torah he considers to be “essentially based on the Bible rather than on the biblical literature” (2).

³⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 28. See his extended discussion of the role of biblical citation in rabbinic texts in the “creation of new strings of language out of the pearls of old” (26) at 26–38. I have attenuated the thread of intertextuality that Boyarin traces from the Bible to classical rabbinic texts further to medieval philosophical texts.

strength of his apprehension of God, rallied people to believe as a result of the intensity of his love, so you must love Him to the extent of rallying people to Him.” However, in sharp contradistinction, Abraham reappears at the end of the Laws of Repentance as a paragon of love who “worships out of love, occupies himself with the Law and the commandments, and walks in the path of wisdom moved neither by the fear of the bad (רעה) nor to merit the good (טובה), but does what is true simply because it is true (אמת) and ultimately benefit ensues.” Rather than the public, socially responsible Abraham of the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, whose love translates outwardly into the conscription of others into his belief system, Abraham’s love in the Laws of Repentance is private and self-contained, with no evident communal application. Both Abrahams’ distinct sentiments of love are corroborated by the same Isaianic prooftext that singularly characterizes him as God’s “lover.”³¹

Each term of the cited Davidic prooftext that first illustrates the stirrings of love, *My soul* (נפש *nefesh*) *thirsts for God* (אלהים *elohim*), *for the living God* (אל *el*) (Ps. 42:3), must be cross-referenced with their lexical denotations as developed in the *Guide* in order to appreciate what precisely it captures and the appropriateness of its citation at this juncture of the Mishneh Torah’s normative presentation of love. The verse is cited in the *Guide* as further linguistic support for the use of terms related to eating and drinking as metaphors for the acquisition of knowledge. The propriety of the image is rooted in an analogy of sustenance since, through intellectual apprehension, “the human form endures in the most perfect of states, just as the body endures through food in the finest of its states” (GP, I:30, p. 63). Consistently, therefore, thirst and hunger are “employed to designate lack of knowledge and of apprehension” (64). Thus, the verse as a whole addresses the question posed by the Mishneh Torah that inquires as to the “way toward loving Him,” since that “way” always begins in ignorance. At this stage, it is not comprehension that generates love, but rather the simple acknowledgment of one’s own ignorance by an awareness, without any probative inquiry, of what immediately presents itself – the boundless expanse of existence which radiates a wisdom that “is incomparable and infinite.” The equivocal meaning the *Guide* assigns to “soul” (*nefesh*) that denotes “the rational soul, I mean the form of man” (GP, I:41), is surely the one intended by the verse in the Mishneh Torah. That “rational” form is provoked by its own

³¹ Just as the figure of Abraham plays different roles within a treatment of one subject of love, he assumes many other guises in the Maimonidean corpus – as a prophet exemplifying the highest levels of prophecy short of Moses (GP, II:45, pp. 401–02); as a philosopher arriving independently at universal truths and teaching them universally (MT, Idolatry 1:3; GP, II:38; Iggeret Teman, 147); as an ethical model of the golden mean (MT, Ethical Traits, 1:7); of supererogatory nature (MT, Mourning 14:2); and the “father of all nations” and therefore of all converts (MT, First Fruits, 4:3). See Masha Turner’s survey of all these Maimonidean variations of Abraham, “The Patriarch Abraham in Maimonidean Thought” (Heb.), in *The Faith of Abraham in Light of Interpretation throughout the Ages*, ed. Moshe Hallamish, Hannnah Kasher, and Yohanan Silman (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2003), 143–54.

“thirst,” or ignorance, to aspire toward understanding and the love it automatically inspires. Maimonides’ David echoes none other than Plato’s Socrates, who famously declares that “philosophy begins in wonder.”³² Thus, the Mishneh Torah’s formulation here translates into the proposition that the catalyst for acquiring knowledge is for the intellect to be overwhelmed by its own ignorance.

Since the potential lover at this point is mired in ignorance, Maimonides was very precise in his choice of a proof-text that designates, by its naming, particular conceptions of God which might first present themselves to an uninformed “soul” or intellect. One is signified by the name *elohim*, whose semantic sense the *Guide* extends to both angels and the deity (GP, I:2). Since much of what needs to be studied in the rest of the Mishneh Torah is a comprehensive cosmological schema of the world whose various components are signified by the term “angels,”³³ the divine name *elohim* on one level captures precisely the subjects that form the core curriculum for achieving love. In fact, the *Guide* broadens the semantic range of the term “angels” to such an extent as to encompass every single facet of creation and virtually every causal force or act, whether animate or inanimate, within the world. He appeals to the expansive range of the biblical term *angel* as a metaphor for such disparate items as the separate intellects, animal movements, the elements, human beings, prophets, and psychological impulses, to conclude that all “individual, natural and psychic forces are called *angels*” (GP, II:6, pp. 262–64).³⁴ As such, on another level, their study will also lead to that God who is designated as the *elohim* of the *elohim* in Deuteronomy 10:17, which, taking it in the sense of judging or governing, means “the deity of the angels” (261).

The other name of God that is the object of the soul’s thirst in Psalms is *el*, one that the *Guide* pairs with *elohim* in representing a similar relationship between God and the creation, and “used with respect to His perfection, may He be exalted, and theirs . . . with respect to His rank in being and in relation to theirs. For He is the deity and not they” (GP, II:30, pp. 358–59). This is also a most apt term as the ultimate goal that will quench the thirst of ignorance in the quest for loving God, since in its connotation of contradistinction between the creator and the creation, it safeguards against a confusion of the two. As Maimonides’ historical account of the evolution of idolatry demonstrates, observation of the creation’s realia can all too easily become a progressive fixation with them as

³² See *Theaetetus* 155d.

³³ See, for example, MT, Foundations of the Torah, 2:7.

³⁴ Moshe Idel details how this identification between the name *elohim* and nature was absorbed into kabbalistic terminology and ultimately led to Spinoza’s notion of *deus sive natura*. In fact, the prominent thirteenth-century kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, noted the numerical equivalence between *elohim* and the Hebrew word for “the natural” (*hateva*). See his “Deus sive Natura: The Metamorphosis of a Dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza,” in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), 87–110. See also Warren Z. Harvey’s analysis of Idel’s argument in “Idel on Spinoza,” *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6, no. 18 (Winter 2007): 88–94, at 88–89.

objects of worship rather than of scientific investigation. Such in fact was the case in Maimonides' historical reconstruction of the world's gradual lapse into an idolatrous theology. The pristine monotheism espoused by Adam and his grandson Enosh, at the beginning of time, deteriorated incrementally over the subsequent years to the point of deification of created entities such as the heavenly bodies. This spiritual and intellectual decline mapped itself along a corresponding loss of cognition of the one authentic deity whose name "was forgotten by mankind, vanished from their lips and hearts, and was no longer known to them."³⁵

Once the survey of all the subjects subsumed under the disciplines of physics and metaphysics in [chapters 2, 3, and 4](#) is complete, Maimonides describes an entirely new state of love inspired by "understanding these things and cognizing all the created things from the angel, the sphere, and the human being, and the like, and perceiving God's wisdom in all the formations and creations." At that stage, one would have expected the yearning for love induced by ignorance in the face of the vast expanse of the universe that launched the extensive survey to be satiated, for the "thirst" to have been quenched. Yet in perfect literary and conceptual symmetry, the new informed awareness engenders further "thirst," even more intense than the original catalyst that prompted the painstaking quest for a scientific proficiency in the workings of the cosmos. At the same time that proficiency "increases love for God" (*makom* = the Place), it also ignites an impassioned craving where "his soul (*nefesh*) thirsts and his flesh (*basar*) yearns for the love of God (*makom*) blessed be He." That longing for an object of knowledge motivates the acquisition of knowledge, which, in turn, incites further longing, is no surprise when that object is "incomparable and infinite." Knowledge for Maimonides does not consist of simply a feeling, a sense, or an unreasoned belief but rather "what has been represented in the soul when it has been averred of it that it is in fact just as it has been represented" (GP, I:50, p. 111). An appreciable, scientifically enhanced understanding of the world serves to immeasurably refine that initial crude sense of singularity and infinitude to the point of truly appreciating its nature, transforming mere impression to apprehension. The desire ignited by the initial intuitional sense of infinity, without the systematic follow up, accords perfectly with that desire described in the *Guide* which remains simply unfulfilled, for there is nothing "to allay that desire; he has only an abundance of longing and nothing else" (GP, I:34, p. 76). The goal, then, is not to satisfy longing but, through progressive study, to prod its evolution from brute emotion to an integrated facet of a reasoned life.

What is pertinent to this study is Maimonides' strategic bracketing of his discussion of love with biblical references that are integral to charting the evolution from the rudimentary love/desire to the philosophically sophisticated one. Here, too, the different epithet for God, once knowledge is gained, signals not only a philosophically revitalized longing, but an entirely different

³⁵ MT, Idolatry, 1:2.

conception of God, the object of that longing. What was a “thirst of the soul” that commenced love’s philosophical journey matures to that same soul’s thirst, now intensified by a “yearning of the flesh.” Knowledge gained by methodical and arduous study becomes assimilated into one’s being. As a result, the attraction to God as the ultimate source and object of all knowledge is animated by the entire human constitution, consisting of flesh and soul, or, in the Maimonidean lexicon, the matter of the body and the form of the intellect.³⁶ The change in divine cognomen from the *el* and *elohim* that are intuited in a precognitive state to the “place” (*makom*) aspired to in a cognitively developed state is surely a conscious one. Both the shift in name and its repetition as an end of both “increased love” and “yearning and longing” suggest something more substantive than merely stylistic.

Here one must resort to the *Guide*’s philosophical layer imposed onto the literal spatial sense of *makom*. When God is its referent, it signifies an ontological singularity and incomparability to anything that is within the human cognitive purview, “there being nothing like or similar to that existence” (GP, I:8, p. 33). More importantly, for our purposes, it is also an allusion to a critical verse within the narrative of Moses’ supreme cognitive moment in Exodus 33 – “Behold there is a place (*makom*) by Me” (v. 21) – where he attains a noetic state “that has not been apprehended by anyone before him, nor will it be apprehended by anything after him” (GP, I:54, p. 123). “Place” there is a metaphor for an advanced level of thought, “in theoretical speculation and the contemplation of the intellect” (GP, I:8, p. 34). Mishneh Torah’s switch to *makom* as the object of love’s desire imports all the other significations associated with Moses’ private revelation at the top of Mount Sinai, including the “goodness” (v. 19) and the “back” (v. 23) disclosed to him, as well as his “standing erect upon the rock.” (v. 21).

Though a detailed analysis of Maimonides’ interpretation of the Mosaic revelation of Exodus 33 is beyond the reach of this chapter, suffice it to focus on one aspect of it that informs the Mishneh Torah’s notion of love. God’s displaying His “goodness” to Moses was meant to intellectually situate Moses at the very origins of creation, allowing him to survey it all from the divine vantage that assessed it as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Rather than a world that often appears fragmented, consisting of forces and elements that vie with each other, Moses discerns a “goodness” where nature’s apparent rivalry and opposition give way to a cooperative whole. He acquires a new perspective of harmony between all existents that appreciates “the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how He governs them in general and in detail” (GP, I:54, p. 124). As a result, Moses achieves both contemplative and political perfection. Since God possesses no attributes, the only possible avenue toward knowing Him is to understand how His actions are manifest within the world, and the sole way of doing that is to investigate all of creation and its working

³⁶ See GP, I:1, on the term “image” (*tzelem*).

parts. Moses accomplishes that and thus earns internal personal perfection. That very theoretical cognition translates into optimum political leadership since Moses can emulate the kind of governance that enables harmony in nature and, in the biblical Moses' Maimonideanized words, "I need to perform actions that I must seek to make similar to Thy actions in governing them" (125). However, these actions only reflect certain character traits that in human terms are associated with those that generate them, such as mercy, kindness, and compassion. Divine actions, on the other hand, do not stem from any such attribute. Correct conduct mirrors those attributes we associate with the manner in which nature operates – that is, "attributes of action" – and not God's essence itself.³⁷ Repetitive conduct that is consonant with such traits as mercy, graciousness, and holiness serves to entrench a correct conception of God within the mind. In the language of Herbert Davidson's seminal analysis, the ultimate performance of *imitatio dei* is not the mere cultivation of intermediate character traits as tentatively proposed in the Mishneh Torah. Rather, it is "by performing acts, as God does, not through intermediate, or any other psychological characteristics, but wholly dispassionately."³⁸

Once the divine object of desire is signified by *makom*, it bears all these connotations and has radical implications for the commandment to love God. If the creation, understood in its deepest sense as Moses did at the summit of the mountain, reflects a notion of an attributeless, dispassionate deity, then any love inspired by it must emulate that deity in kind to establish some common ground for that love. This love affair is not, as is the anthropological norm, driven by passions, but, on the contrary, by what is reasoned as warranted. It flows naturally from an appreciation of a "mutual interconnectedness" of all existence grounded in reasoned governance untainted by passions or affectations. As such, the commandment of love might offer an ideal for all commandments in its striving to transcend its own normative partialness. What begins as a norm of a Jewish parochial framework evolves synchronically with a steadily developing wisdom edging toward a universal ideal of love that encompasses all of creation as a mirror of its creator. The goal of the command to love God is to overcome its particular normative status as one commandment among the remainder of the traditionally enumerated 613 adapted and redesigned by Maimonides in his *Sefer HaMitzvot*, in order to *become* a lover rather than *perform* love.³⁹

³⁷ See the discussion of divine attributes in GP, I:51–52.

³⁸ Herbert Davidson, "The Middle Way in Maimonides' Ethics," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 54 (1987): 31–72.

³⁹ Maimonides' ultimate collapse of the traditional bifurcation between two categories of commandments, between human beings and between human beings and God into just the one consisting of the latter, becomes clear now since God is designated as *makom* in the phrase "between man and God" (בין אדם למקום). GP, III: 35, p. 538. See Hannah Kasher on the significance of the use of *makom* in this classification in her "Commandments between Man and God [*makom*] in the *Guide of the Perplexed*" (Heb.), *Daat* 12 (1984): 23–28, at 23–25, where she explains the

THE GARDEN OF LOVE

This notion of becoming a lover rather than performing love emerges from an unusual summary of the first four chapters of the Mishneh Torah which immediately follows that last formulation on love discussed here. There Maimonides classifies the subject matter of the four positive commandments promoting knowledge, unity, love, and fear of God, and the one negative injunction against polytheism under the rubric of the most esoteric of fields known rabbinically as *pardes*, or the “garden.” Entering the *pardes* must be posterior to familiarizing oneself with all the legal minutiae of the command system of halakhah. Only those who have “filled their bellies with bread and meat which consist of knowing what is permissible and prohibited and the like among all the rest of the commandments” are qualified to graduate to those five that constitute the field of the *pardes*, or the garden of awareness, as opposed to performance. This small subset of *mitzvot* is esteemed as substantively superior (דבר גדול, a major subject) to all others that are subsumed within Talmudic debates generically categorized as “the give and take of Abaye and Rava” which comprise a “minor subject” (דבר קטן).

All of the inferior subject matter have a clear pragmatic rationale, which is “to first settle the mind . . . to placate this world in order to inherit the next world, and it is possible for all to know them including the old, the young, men, women, and those of greater and lesser intellectual capacity.”⁴⁰ Three features distinguish the overall halakhic/juridic apparatus from the elite subset:

1. emotional/psychological, in that they induce calm and mental equilibrium;
2. social/political, in promoting political stability and social welfare;
3. educational in their universal accessibility.

Like the proverbially blindfolded Lady Justice, in order to nurture peace and stability, the laws are effectively blind to intellect, age, and gender. As such, the commandments, oblivious to these distinctions, move outward, governing relations between human beings, thereby fostering a religious community that forms a cohesive political unit at the same time. However, love, rather than establish community and political organization, cultivates an autonomous existential state of being that defies any heteronomic imposition of law. The love that emerges from assimilating those subjects within the *pardes* thrives beyond the realm of law because it is wholly absent of the three features endemic to the rest of the law.⁴¹

meaning of the phrase as “between man and his own perfection by which a relationship is formed between him and God” (25).

⁴⁰ MT, Foundations of Torah 4:13.

⁴¹ As Warren Z. Harvey notes, “Maimonides’ identification of metaphysics with ‘a great thing’ and the 608 non-metaphysical commandments with ‘a small thing’ establish the supremacy of the vita

The “meat” of halakha with which one fills one’s belly stands in stark contrast to the same Hebrew term, *basar*, coupled with “soul,” previously described as being united in their dedicated thirst for love of the “Place.” If one remains at the level of the former *basar*, one operates within the realm of the law, of halakhah, where any love attained can only promote the pragmatic political and psychological goals of normative Judaism that affect the *basar*. In the coupling of *basar* with the soul toward the attainment of love, the *basar* transcends its own physicality, devoting itself wholly to the aims of the soul or the intellect. The human physical dimension, in its all-consuming devotion to the intellect in the quest for love, escapes the pragmatic social realm for an inner-directed, self-perfecting one.

When mandating the severe restrictions on the public and explicit teaching of the esoteric material that is the bedrock of love, a key verse from the Song appears, which conveys this very dimension of love that entails the purely theoretical life. In support of maintaining a kind of gag order on the teaching of metaphysics, a verse from Song of Songs, “Honey and milk are under your tongue” (4:11), is cited, using the image of honey as a metaphor for metaphysics and demanding a covert method of pedagogy. The original context of this verse is most apt in its recurring metaphors for secrecy and inaccessibility. The very next verse (12) repeats the terms for “locked” (*na’ul*) and “sealed” (*hatum*) three times (“A garden *shut up* is my sister, my bride; a spring *shut up*, a fountain *sealed*”), while verse 13 imports the rare term *pardes*, the rabbinic metaphor for these esoteric subjects, into its garden imagery (“Thy shoots are a *pardes* of pomegranates, with precious fruits”). The *pardes* is virtually impenetrable, both because of the formidable barriers the philosophical sophomore must overcome and because of the constraints imposed on dissemination of its material.⁴²

Aside from its degree of obscurity, there is an additional reason why this material almost naturally becomes trapped under one’s tongue. Its attainment is ultimately self-reflexive in purpose. Songs 4:11 is quoted in conjunction with another two verses, mandating the shrouding of these disciplines in strictest confidence. One of them is most revealing for our purposes. Secrecy addresses the esoteric feature of the sciences cultivated in the *pardes*, but it is also a natural consequence of its self-serving function. The verse “They shall be only thine alone, not to be shared with strangers” (Prov 5:17) is cited here with Songs 4:11 to narrowly circumscribe public teachings of these sciences. However, the verse links up with the ultimate chapter of the *Guide*, which expresses its preference for what constitutes the *summum bonum* for humanity. The summit of human perfection is reached intellectually with “the conception of intelligibles.” It is considered so because it is purely self-directed, as opposed to the other three listed types of material, physical, and moral perfections: “If you consider each of the three perfections mentioned before, you will find that they pertain to others

contemplativa over the vita activa.” In “Aggadah in Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah,” *Dine Israel* 24 (2007): 197–207, at 201.

⁴² See also his comments on Song 4:11 in his Introduction to PM, 35.

than you, not you. . . . The ultimate perfection however, pertains to you alone, no one else being associated in it with you in any way: *They shall be only thine alone and so on* [Prov. 5:17]" (GP, III: 54, p. 635).⁴³

The honey imagery of the Song in the Mishneh Torah also directs the reader back to the chapter on eating in the *Guide*, where two of the four prooftexts substantiating the association of eating with acquiring knowledge incorporate the same honey metaphor. Proverbs 25:27 warns against too much of a good thing – "It is not good to eat too much honey" – while Proverbs 24:13 qualifies honey as "good" and recommends its ingestion: "My son eat thou honey for it is good." The verse immediately following is also quoted: "So know thou wisdom to be unto the soul," to perfect the equation between "eating" and "know" and "honey" and "wisdom." As this dietary supplement is absorbed by the soul (*nefesh*), and as "soul" is "a term denoting the rational soul, I mean the form of man," (GP, I:41), the combination of the two verses attests to the assertion that "eating" honey, or the study of the esoteric sciences of physics and metaphysics, contributes to "the permanence of the human form" (GP, I:30, p. 63).

Even the reference to the "discussions of Abaye and Rava" finds its philosophical echo in the *Guide*. In addition to biblical prooftexts, Maimonides also cites rabbinic use of gastronomic terms as metaphors for consuming knowledge, as in the expression "Come eat fat meat at the house of Rava."⁴⁴ The amoraic exchanges between Abaye and Rava are emblematic of the halakhic system as a whole with its legalistic, performative, and pragmatic dimensions. Once layered by its philosophical connotations of the *Guide*, it assumes an entirely different role. The philosopher who has attained the supra-legal degree of love continues to perform the commandments, but not in their inferior capacity promoting psychological and political stability. That functional halakhic "meat" (*basar*) merges with the existential *basar* that has become ancillary to the intellect (*nefesh*) in an all-encompassing love of the *Place*. Once one is equipped with the kind of philosophical love charted in these first four chapters of the Mishneh Torah, one is then prepared for the ultimate sacrifice of "sanctification of the Name" mandating martyrdom that is the subject matter of the very [next chapter](#).⁴⁵

⁴³ See Eliezer Goldman, who sees Maimonides' innovation here not in the downgrading of the three other perfections, which can be found in his predecessors, but in the systematic use of the criterion of *atzmuyut* in "The Worship Peculiar to Those Who Have Apprehended True Reality: Comments on the *Guide* III: 51–54," *Bar Ilan Annual* 6 (1968): 287–315, at 395.

⁴⁴ Baba Bathra 22a.

⁴⁵ Daniel Lasker argues that Maimonides' commandments of knowledge and love of God are formulated in direct opposition to R. Judah Halevi. He cites this immediate turn to the laws of martyrdom as evidence of that opposition, which implies that for Maimonides "only the philosopher can love God and only the philosopher can truly and sincerely give up his life and sanctify the Name." See "Love of God and Sanctification of the Name according to Rabbi Judah Halevi and Maimonides," in *By the Well: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakhic Thought Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein*, ed., Uri Ehrlich, Haim Kreisel and Daniel J. Lasker, The Goldstein-Goren Library of Jewish Thought 8, (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2008), 293–302 (Heb.) at 301.

LOVE TRANSCENDING LAW

This interactive exegesis between the *Guide* and the Mishneh Torah discloses a radical supra-legal conception of the commandment to love God, transcending the law and its avowed social/psychological/political telos. The hermeneutical exercise placing Maimonides in conversation with himself is indispensable in order to ferret out its esoteric message that the ultimate goal of the Law is to overcome itself and to retreat from the public domain into the private contemplative sphere. Planted in the section on the “foundations” of the Law, it informs its entire juridic framework with an Aristotelian formulation on the practical life as “not necessarily directed toward other people, as some think; and it is not the case that practical thoughts are only those which result from action for the sake of what ensues. On the contrary, much more practical are those mental activities [*theoriai*] and reflections which have their goals in themselves and take place for their own sake.”⁴⁶ Love, commonly understood as the very height of a demeanor that expresses itself for the sake of others, transforms itself in its more developed state into its polar extreme: for the sake of oneself.

In its deepening of this existentially solitary dimension of loving God, the organizational logic of Maimonides’ return to the subject of love at the end of the Laws of Repentance becomes more apparent. Because true repentance is instrumental in achieving proximity, or in philosophical terms “conjunction,” with the divine,⁴⁷ Maimonides proceeds to a discussion of what that ultimate conjunction consists of. Conjunction can only be consummated posthumously, once all physical impediments that could inhibit it are removed, leaving only a disembodied intellect, or *nefesh*.⁴⁸ Maimonides then continues with a discussion of the precise nature of that incorporeal intellect that survives death, identifying it with the knowledge gained of all the cosmology detailed in the [first section](#) of the Mishneh Torah. Here he explicitly cross-references his discussion of the soul in [chapter 4](#) of that first section:

Every *nefesh* mentioned associated with this matter does not refer to the “soul” (*neshamah*) that is needed for the body, but rather the form of the *nefesh* which consists of the intellect that apprehends the Creator according to its ability and apprehends incorporeal and other works and it is the form which we explicated in [chapter 4](#) of the *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* which is referred to as the *nefesh* in this matter.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Politics*, VII, 3,8,1325b16–20, in *The Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴⁷ MT, Repentance 7:6.

⁴⁸ Dov Schwartz demonstrates that Maimonides “shaped his doctrine of the intellect’s or soul’s experience in the afterlife in accordance with Avicenna.” In “Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality: A Comparative Study,” in *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. Ronald Nettler (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 185–98, at 188.

⁴⁹ MT, Repentance 8:3.

The sequential pattern of his return to the subject of love at this point becomes evident. Once Maimonides establishes what the ultimate destiny of the *nefesh* is, there is an urgency to reattend love since the *nefesh* is instrumental in its cultivation and is the aspect of the human being that is nurtured and developed in proportion to the intellectualized intensity of that love. But it is love's private aims in the enterprise of self-perfection that, as we have seen, are paramount for him, that accounts for its reappearance in this context. Though Maimonides ostensibly maintains a belief in the individual immortality of souls,⁵⁰ from a philosophical point of view it seems to me indefensible, considering his tacit accession to a theory of one indivisible eternal soul, or Intellect.⁵¹ When discussing the ultimate fate of "souls" he asserts, "What is separate . . . is one thing only" (GP, I:70, p. 174). In addition, he sides with Ibn Bajja, the chief proponent of monopsychism, "and others who were drawn into speaking of these obscure matters" that incorporeal intellects are "one in number" (GP, I:74, p. 221).⁵² Even those scholars like Alexander Altmann, who struggle to reconcile such an extreme view with more traditional ones, only manage to salvage a "modicum of individuality" for the immortal soul.⁵³ Thus love, properly developed along a progressive scale of knowledge, guides the *nefesh* ultimately in the direction of oneness. Its own material journey in the body follows along a parallel scale of interiority and self-perfection that increasingly veers inward and away from the socially interactive realm. The embodied soul strives to achieve a detached oneness, as far as possible given its physical restraints, to enable its transition to the oneness of its disembodied eternal immortality.⁵⁴

Love aims at an internal distancing from community, from which the soul cannot escape temporally, toward the eternal realm where there is no community, which the soul can enjoy. Maimonides' treatment of love, therefore, proceeds from its initial discussion of its performance as one commandment among

⁵⁰ See all the Maimonidean references to immortality of the soul listed in Schwartz's edition of the GP, 183n26.

⁵¹ For an insightful discussion on how the inconsistent "religious" and "philosophical" positions on the soul can live together once Maimonides' subscription to Al Farabi's theory of language is considered, see Oliver Leaman, "Maimonides, and the Soul, and the Classical Tradition," in *The Afterlife of the Platonic Soul: Reflections of Platonic Psychology in the Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth and John M. Dillon (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 163–75. Different ways of speaking, such as religious or theological, help us arrive at the true reality of language that only philosophy can ascertain.

⁵² See Alfred Ivry's discussion of this Averroist tendency in Maimonides, concluding that "in this manner Maimonides as much as makes his own position on this issue clear." In "Moses Maimonides: An Averroist Avant La Lettre?" *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 121–39, at 123–26.

⁵³ *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 85–91, at 90.

⁵⁴ In his PM, vol. 1, Introduction, 22, Maimonides explicitly extends this position to its logical extreme considering it a first principle that "the building of the body entails the destruction of the soul." However, at times Maimonides endorses a balance between the body and soul, as Howard Kreisel argues, that is, for the masses, while "extreme asceticism is the only course for the elite." See his "Asceticism in the Thought of Bahya and Maimonides," *Daat* 21 (1988): v–xxii, at xx.

others within an overall normative framework whose jurisdiction extends to a community. One's obligation to fulfill it arises by virtue of being a member of a particular community. However, its treatment culminates in a discussion of its operation within the parameters of a human being qua human. The *nefesh* perfected by love constitutes the human "form" common to all humanity, and therefore transcends any formal norm, or mitzvah, that situates a Jew within his or her own community. The concluding discussion concerns the type of love that determines the soul's endurance stripped of the body and identity, beyond norms and community, melding eternally with the object of its love. This is the love allegorized by the Song, that hones one's humanity as defined by the intellect rather than one's Jewishness as regulated by halakhah.

Although the [last chapter](#) of the Laws of Repentance raises so many issues as to deserve a monograph of its own, I focus here on one feature that is most pertinent to my thesis so far. In its turn from the public to the private, and from the normative to the transnormative spheres, it conducts a systematic diminishment of a life concerned with the mundane and the commandments. Such a deemphasizing of halakhah is strikingly incongruous with a code that purports to be exclusively concerned with digesting everything related to "forbidden and permitted, impure and pure, along with all the rest of the laws of the Torah . . . to the point where all the laws are accessible, to the old and young, the particulars of every commandment, and of every rabbinic and prophetic decree."⁵⁵ The first two paragraphs subtly set the stage for that agenda, focusing on command performance while undermining its importance in achieving proximity to God. The "performance of *mitzvot* of the Torah and concern with its wisdom" should not be motivated by expectations, either transitory to earn the "blessings" or avoid the curses "written in the Torah," or timeless, to merit "life in the future world" or escape "being cut off" from it. This mode of religious worship is classified as "fear" based, legitimate only as preliminary training needed to evolve from a state of intellectual impoverishment toward a more accomplished intellectual sophistication. It is meant only as a preparatory stage toward inculcating a "love"-based mode.⁵⁶ The initial paragraph thus shifts the focus away from "what is written in the Torah," away from a legalistic mode of obedience reinforced by juridic sanctions, paving the way for a worship that in fact is not anchored in a traditional conception of Torah as divine command.

The next paragraph not only disengages duty from the Torah but divorces it from any possible causal connection to the material world outside the Torah as well by the following remarkable formulation: "The one who worships out of

⁵⁵ Mishneh Torah, Introduction, 4, כל מצוה ומצוה ובדין כל הדברים, עד שיהיו כל הדינים גלויין לקטן ולגדול בדין כל מצוה ומצוה ובדין כל הדברים, שתיקנו חכמים ונביאים.

⁵⁶ אל יאמר אדם הריני עושה מצות התורה ועוסק בחכמתה כדי שאקבל כל הברכות הכתובות בה או כדי שאזכה להי העולם הבא ואפרוש מן העבירות שהזהירה תורה מהן כדי שאנצל מן הקללות הכתובות בתורה או כדי שלא אכרת מחיי העולם הבא אין ראוי לעבוד את ה' על הדרך הזה שהעובד על דרך זה הוא עובד מיראה ואינה מעלת הנביאים ולא מעלת החכמים ואין עובדים ה' על דרך זה אלא עמי הארץ והנשים והקטנים שמחנכין אותן לעבוד מיראה עד שתרבה דעתן ויעבדו מאהבה.

love involves himself in Torah and the commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom not because of anything in the world, neither because of the fear of the bad (*ra'*) or in order to earn the good (*tov*), but rather performs the truth because it is the truth (*emet*) and in the end good will come automatically.”⁵⁷

Once again the *Guide* must be consulted to appreciate the precise degree and nature of love idealized by the Mishneh Torah. The terminology as well as the thematic link to the exposition of *nefesh* as the intellectual form of man in its previous chapters lands the reader at the very beginning of the *Guide*, where the term “image” (*tzelem*) and its implications for the pristine state of Adam in the Garden is explicated. The very [first chapter](#) of the *Guide* establishes the meaning of “image” as the “true reality” of a thing, which, in the case of a human being, is “intellectual apprehension” (GP, I:1, p. 22). In the exercise of intellect, a human being comes closest to *imitatio dei*, and by virtue of which is the “divine intellect conjoined with man” (23). *Nefesh* as human form, which, as we have seen, is the ground of love, is the locus of this conjunction. The [second chapter](#) of the *Guide* traces an intellectual decline of Adam signified by eating of the tree of knowledge, which marks a turn from focusing on what is “true and false” to what is “good and bad.” For Maimonides this signals a deterioration in man’s mental state from things “cognized by the intellect” to those “generally accepted as known” (GP, I:2, pp. 24–25). As an allegory, the commandment not to partake of the tree’s fruit symbolizes the human mandate to cognize only universal truths and not matters that are subjective or particular, fluctuating culturally and nationally (26). Commandments, addressed to a particular people and concerning ritualist or ethical performance, by their very nature concern the realm of “good and bad.” In fact, when describing what transpired at the Sinaitic revelation, Maimonides draws this same distinction between the first two commandments and all others. The former, dealing with divine existence and unity, are “knowable by human speculation alone” and therefore consist of universal truths accessible to all by way of reason. All others, on the other hand, “belong to the class of generally accepted opinions and those adopted in virtue of tradition, not to the class of the intellecta” (GP, II:33, p. 364).⁵⁸

Maimonides subtly imports these same cognitive categories into the Mishneh Torah by distinguishing between performance driven by “good or bad” and that by “truth.” In love’s demand of the latter, Maimonides presents an ideal of worship that, while obviously endorsing the ongoing performance of commandments, at the same time demands their overcoming. How can “truth,” universal and philosophically demonstrable by reason alone, compel

⁵⁷ העובד מאהבה עוסק בתורה ובמצוות והולך בנתיבות החכמה לא מפני דבר בעולם ולא מפני יראת הרעה ולא כדי לירש הטובה אלא עושה האמת מפני שהוא אמת וסוף הטובה לבא בגללה

⁵⁸ Maimonides’ account of this foundational event for Judaism and what precisely transpired is riddled with difficulty and, according to Alfred Ivry, reflects classical neoplatonic thought, exhibiting “multiple layers of meaning, the truth hiding behind various levels of reality.” In “Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides’ Thought,” in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Historical and Philosophical Studies*, ed. Joel Kraemer (Oxford: Littman Library, 1991), 115–40, at 135–37.

the fulfillment of a particularist command such as the observance of the Sabbath? Not only is its observance confined to one community, there can be no philosophical demonstration that arrives at any truth in abstaining from labor. Love envisions a return, as far as humanly possible, to the pre-sin garden state where Adam cognized exclusively the “truth.” Given the evolution of humanity, national identities, Israel, Judaism as a religion, and the exigencies of living in a community whose vast majority are not intellectually qualified to operate in a truth-oriented realm, that can only be accomplished by a partitioning of conduct and cognition.

Here he hints at a kind of commitment to the Law that mirrors its first incarnation at the bitter waters where there occurred a pre-Sinaitic revelation comprising what Maimonides considers solely “first intentions,” which included only the establishment of a judicial system and rule of law, and the Sabbath. Virtually all of the rituals legislated at Sinai assume the form they do because of the Law’s need to take into account its ancient audience’s character and psychology shaped by its pervasively surrounding idolatrous culture. It speaks to that collective mind, by adopting the language and symbols of its host culture, such as sacrifices, and subverts it from within. However, the Law’s primary aim, what Maimonides terms its “first intention,” is to eradicate all traces of idolatry and inculcate the belief that “there is a deity who is the Creator of all this” (GP, III:29, p. 518), and, in the final analysis, “consists only in your apprehending Me and not worshipping someone other than Me” (GP, III:32, p. 530). The Torah’s rituals are largely historically contingent means of achieving that overarching aim.⁵⁹ Rabbinic tradition actually offers a glimpse of what a stripped-down law, whose sole concern is “primary intention” with no need to address historical contingencies, might look like. The Midrash provides Maimonides with just such a law that preceded Sinai at Marah, identifying the “*statute [hok]* and *judgment [mishpat]* revealed there” (Exod. 15:25) as “the Sabbath and civil laws.”⁶⁰ For Maimonides, this is an illustration of a law that concerns itself exclusively with first intentions: “I mean the belief in correct opinions, namely, in the creation of the world in time. For you already know that the foundation of the law addressed to us concerning the Sabbath is its contribution in fortifying this principle.” (GP, III:32, p. 531)⁶¹ Maimonides’ formulation of the ideal

⁵⁹ See generally his preface to the *ta’ame ha-mitzvot* in III:26–33, where this notion of first and second intentions is fully developed.

⁶⁰ The sources are b. Shabbat 87b and b. Sanhedrin 57b, although they add others such as the seven Noahide laws and honoring one’s parents. Rashi cites a tradition that adds the law of the red heifer to the list. See also Menachem Kasher’s survey of variant traditions concerning what was legislated at Marah in *Torah Sheleimah* vol. 14 (Jerusalem, 1949): 168–69n267.

⁶¹ Josef Stern, “The Idea of a Hoq in Maimonides’ Explanation of the Law.” In *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed. S. Pines and Y. Yovel (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1986), 92–130. Stern notes the change in use of first and second intentions from value assessment to chronology (i.e., the first legislation occurred at Marah and the second at Sinai). Maimonides also makes it clear, by conflating *first* and *primary*, that the legislation at Marah is also theoretically superior, since “in the first

love of God in the Mishneh Torah colors the performance of Sinaitic law with its perfect precursor at Marah, which concerns only the truth. Of course, the rule of law ensures the secure environment within which this love affair with the truth can take place. Thus, love dictates that every act conforming to Sinaitic law must overcome its technical origins and strip it of any utilitarian features, and then one must cognitively transport oneself back to its pristine core at Marah.⁶² Remarkably, the Mishneh Torah, a legal code anchored in Sinai and its subsequent rabbinic devolution, deconstructs its own legislative origins to revert to its juridic antecedents. In fact, accepting “the truth because it is the truth” distinguishes one’s obedience and performance from those “incapable of engaging in such speculation” who must “accept the authority of men who inquire into the truth and are engaged in speculation” (GP, I:36, p. 85).⁶³ Those “incapable” are the ones whose obedience and knowledge is anchored in Sinai via a chain of transmission from parents to children and teachers to students, while those who independently acquire truth are, in a sense, breaking that chain by anchoring their obedience in their own minds.⁶⁴ The former are relegated to the lower end of the palace parable hierarchy, ranking different classes of people in terms of proximity to the ruler (God) who inhabits it, who end up wandering around the palace precinct but never gaining entry to it. Although they are well versed in the “law concerning the practices of divine service,” their belief in truth and “the fundamental principles of religion” is based on “traditional authority” (III:51, p. 619). In the language of the thesis developed in this chapter, they are the ones who have mastered the legal code, and the “give and take of Abaye and Rava,” lovers of the law, but not of God.

ABRAHAM: LOVING BEFORE AND BEYOND THE LAW

Abraham then is posed as the embodiment of this ideal love, for “God called him his lover for he worshipped only out of love (והיא מעלת אברהם אבינו שקראו הקב”ה אוהבו)

legislation there was nothing at all concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices, for, as we have mentioned, these belong to the second intention” (GP, III:32, p. 531).

⁶² My interpretation of Maimonides’ [last chapter](#) on love in the Mishneh Torah is an example of what David Novak considers the gist of Maimonides’ jurisprudence, whose “whole approach to the law is teleological which is the transcendent thrust of the law.” See his chapter, “Jurisprudence,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 221–44, at 239.

⁶³ See also GP, I:33, p. 71; I:34, p. 75, for the pragmatic necessity of transmitting knowledge by force of authority.

⁶⁴ This distinction could also explain the different formulations of the Mishneh Torah and the *Sefer HaMitzvot* on love. Only the *Sefer HaMitzvot* includes “comprehension of His *mitzvot*” as a means of inspiring love, while the Mishneh Torah considers only the creation as such. As Norman Lamm argues, the *Sefer HaMitzvot*’s formulation is geared more toward the masses while the Mishneh Torah is for the learned elite. See his “Maimonides on the Love of God,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–3): 131–42.

(לפי שלא עבד אלא מאהבה). That Abraham is chosen as love's exemplar⁶⁵ can now be viewed as eminently appropriate considering that Abraham reasons his way *sui generis* to universal truths by philosophical speculation alone and does not abide by them as a result of law or received tradition. Abraham antedates Sinai, does not relate to God within the parameters of any formal religion, and subjects no one else to any legal imperatives. In fact, this latter detail concerning Abraham's discovery of monotheism and his subsequent mission to attract adherents to its truths is precisely what Maimonides singles out as unique to Abraham's project in contradistinction to the Mosaic one. While Moses incentivizes by way of law, or legal coercion, Abraham's community is galvanized by a common subscription to universal truths sustained by reasoned debate without any norms or sanctions, for "he never said: God has sent me to you and has given me commandments and prohibitions" (GP, II:39, p. 379). Even the one commandment he seems to have undertaken and imposed was, Maimonides asserts, not by way of "a prophetic call to exhort the people to do this" (379)⁶⁶ This defining feature of the Abrahamic calling corresponds precisely to the Mishneh Torah's historical reconstruction of Abraham's nascent monotheistic movement which blossomed into "a nation that knows God." His instruments of persuasion are all pedagogical, and he forms a community dedicated to the "way of truth." Like Socrates, he cajoles by "sowing doubt," "engaging in debate," "informing," "overpowering with demonstration," "accumulating a following," informing each follower "in accordance with his capacity," and ultimately "authoring treatises." Even the one "law" of circumcision, emptied of any legally sanctioned connotations by the *Guide*, is completely ignored in the Mishneh Torah's first account of Abraham's pioneering dissemination of the truths of divine existence and unity. Failure over time to preserve those truths necessitates the Mosaic experience, which introduces law and legal sanction as their new safeguards.⁶⁷

Maimonides then complements Abraham as the human historical exemplar of love with the Mosaic stricture to "love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might" (Deut. 6:5) as its juridic expression. It is noteworthy that previously only the first half of this verse, "And you shall love your God," was cited, while the second half, with its thrice-enhanced phraseology conveying an intensity involving a totality of being, conspicuously enters the scene at this stage. In its normative setting, Maimonides cites only the simple command stripped of the existentially overwhelming level of passion demanded by the second cola of the verse, which is appropriate only in the present context of a

⁶⁵ Abraham's characterization as a lover is rooted in both the biblical address to the "seed of Abraham My lover" (Isa. 41:8) and the rabbinic identification of the distinction in Exodus 20:6 between "those who love me" with Abraham and "those who observe my commandments" with "elders and prophets" (*Mechilta, Bahodesh* 6). It is interesting that the line is drawn between a legalistic relationship with God and one that transcends the *mitzvot* or command structure.

⁶⁶ See MT, Kings, 9, where he says Abraham was commanded to perform circumcision.

⁶⁷ MT, Idolatry, 1:3.

love that extends well beyond the merely prescriptive. The verse's first appearance in the *Guide*, in the chapter dedicated to the term "heart," interprets the enlistment of the heart in loving as a commitment to God "with all the forces of the body" (GP, I:39, p. 89). After self-referencing both the Mishneh Torah and the Commentary on the Mishnah, Maimonides contends that this entails making "His apprehension the end of all your actions." In order to attain this end, any conduct, including that normatively prescribed, must be detached from its immediate consequences or utility to the point that the purely cerebral activity of apprehending usurps any of its social, ethical, or political functionality.

The full verse reappears during Maimonides' preface to his rationale for the commandments, once again as an overarching imperative to examine everything "concerning the whole of being" (GP, III:28, p. 512) – in other words, to be a philosopher. Once more, he self-references his Mishneh Torah as an endorsement of a type of love only realized "through the apprehension of the whole of being as it is and through the consideration of His wisdom as it is manifested in it." Combining this with his previous citation of Deuteronomy 6:5 reinforces the ideal state of love consisting in the dedication of every single "force" of one's existence toward apprehending the world. The activity is pure reason and the object of that activity is the world, bypassing the law altogether. The Law, in effect, calls attention away from itself to the world as its focal center. Finally, it reappears at the *Guide*'s denouement in the context of a stark bifurcation between actions associated with fear and thought associated with love. Most of the chapter is devoted to fear, which repeatedly is the end of the Law – "all the actions prescribed by the Law"; "the end of the actions prescribed by the whole Law"; "the intention of all the words of the Law"; "fear is achieved by means of all actions prescribed by the Law" (GP, III:52, pp. 629–30). Love, however, is achieved through the "opinions taught by the Law, which includes the apprehension of His being as He, may He be exalted, is in truth." The Law cannot teach apprehension; it can only direct one toward it. God's existence, as it is "in truth," can only be arrived at and truly known as far as humanly possible by the methodical and rigorous exercise of reason.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ This highly abstracted conception of love is consistently corroborated by the entire verse and, in addition to the *Guide* and Mishneh Torah, the PM reiterates that same message. Once an account of the different faculties of the soul (*nefesh*) is complete, Maimonides emphasizes that the end to which all these faculties must cumulatively aim is "the knowledge of God alone." What that entails is a single-minded concentration on God which veers every act or speech toward that aim captured by loving God "with all your heart, soul, and might" (Introduction to Avot, chap. 5, p. 189, of R. Kook edition). For a different position, see Menachem Kellner, "Is Maimonides' Ideal Person Austerely Rationalist?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76:1 (2002), 125–43, who, on the basis of this and other key passages cited in this paper, does not see a total identity of love and knowledge but rather that "we achieve love of God through the apprehension of God's being to the greatest extent possible for humans. This does not mean that loving and apprehending God are the same" (143).

This final context of Deuteronomy 6:5 associates another Deuteronomic message that identifies fear as the purpose of “all the words of this Law that are written in this book” (28:58), and thus points the reader back in the direction of an earlier chapter dedicated to the term “trial.” Its premiere biblical illustration is the trial of the binding of Isaac, Abraham’s supreme testament to what Maimonides considers the absolute limits of love, and the subject of our chapter on Abarbanel. For the purposes of this discussion, however, Maimonides’ analysis of the *akedah*’s lesson is confusing on the subject of love since it inserts fear into the equation and fluctuates between the two without any demarcation, seemingly treating them as synonyms. However, as evident from other assertions already dealt with, the two are entirely separate, in terms of their level of worship, the emotional postures they engender, and the features of the Torah from which they emerge. At every point of extracting the moral of love and fear from the *akedah* narrative, Maimonides does in fact mention them as an inseparable pair four times. However, in conclusion, he reverts to fear as the *akedah*’s sole message, attested to by the angelic verdict proclaiming the trial’s success, “For now I know that you fear God” (Gen. 22:12). He then resorts to the same verse cited as a proof-text at the end of the *Guide* for the proposition that fear is “the intention of all the words of the Law”: “If you will not take care to observe all the words of this Law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awful Name” (Deut. 28:58). Within the context of the *akedah*, it is cited to extrapolate from the *akedah* to the command structure in its entirety, establishing that “the end of the whole of the Torah, including its commandments, prohibitions, promises, and narratives is one thing only – namely, fear of Him, may He be exalted” (GP, III:24, pp. 500–01).

Relevant to the issue of love here are two puzzling aspects of Maimonides’ exposition: why the shift from love and fear to fear alone as the *akedah*’s ultimate lesson, and how does the pre-Law, pre-Sinaitic Abraham exemplify the essential telos of legislation that postdates his life and religious career? The key to the kind of fear Maimonides refers to here lies in his original formulation at the beginning of the Mishneh Torah with which we commenced this study. There, fear is a consequence or, better, a reflex, of the love induced by the awareness of the infinite wisdom that inheres in creation. The quest for that wisdom “immediately” inspires a crushing humility, forcing one to “retreat and fear and tremble and acknowledge that one is a tiny, lowly, dark creature, possessed of puny intelligence in the face of Perfected Knowledge.”⁶⁹ Fear is then abandoned altogether as a subject of explication with the detailed cosmological and physical outline of the universe that follows, prefaced by a precis that considers all of it relevant to love alone: “For according to these things I will elucidate major principles of the work of the Master of the Universe, in order for them to form an entryway to the one who comprehends to love the

⁶⁹ MT, Foundations of Torah 2:2.

Name, for the Sages have said concerning love that *as a result you will become familiar with the one who said and the world came to be.*⁷⁰ Since “these things” refer back to the fear and love just defined, and since they will form the “entry-way” or introduction to the means by which love is achieved, the fear noted here is one enveloped by love, or is the intellectual humility that is an integral component of love. Maimonides thus appropriates the fear biblically targeted as the lesson of the *akedah* and transforms it into the love-embodied fear defined at the beginning of the Mishneh Torah and exemplified by Abraham at the end of the Laws of Repentance. Maimonides’ understanding of the *akedah* contrasts conspicuously with its traditional reception as a model of supreme submission to arbitrary divine command. Rather, his interpretation of the three-day hiatus between God’s command and Abraham’s enactment of it transforms it into one of supreme devotion to reason: “For if he had chosen to do this immediately, as soon as the order came to him, it would have been an act of stupefaction and disturbance in the absence of exhaustive reflection. But his doing it days after the command had come to him *shows that the act sprang from thought, correct understanding, consideration of the truth of His command, may he be exalted, love of Him, and fear of Him*” (GP, III:24, p. 501, emphasis mine). Maimonides anchors Abraham’s epochal moment of love and fear in a studious, deliberative, methodical, reasoned exercise that distills truth from the command. Deuteronomy 28:58, then, which at the end of the *Guide* seems to bifurcate fear from love, when integrated with its appropriation in the *akedah* analysis, actually envelops fear back into love whose essential expression is reason rather than law.

THE SONG OF SONG’S SLEEPWALKER AND OBSESSIVE LOVER

Maimonides then moves in the [final chapter](#) of the Laws of Repentance from Abraham as the biblical character who embodies love to the Song as love’s biblical treatise allegorizing the following precise formal definition of love:

He should love God with a great, superlative, intensely powerful love to the point his soul is bound up in the love of God and finds himself constantly focused (*shogeh*, שוגה)⁷¹ on it, as if he were a lovesick person whose attention is not distracted from that woman whom he is focused (*shogeh*) on constantly whether sitting, standing, eating, and drinking. Even more than this should the love of God be in the hearts of His lovers, focusing on him

⁷⁰ לפי הדברים האלו אני מבאר כללים גדולים ממעשה רבון העולמים כדי שיהיו פתח למבין לאהוב את השם כמו שאמרו חכמים בענין אהבה שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם.

⁷¹ Warren Z. Harvey translates this term as “ravished” and concludes on the basis of this and other treatments of sex in the Mishneh Torah that there is a place for erotic love within Maimonidean thought when it is performed for the sake of knowing God. As such the sexual act is elevated from a purely clinical act performed, like daily exercise, as part of a healthy regimen, to part of the “ravishing” love for God. See his “Sex and Health,” 38–39. I do not see any such place for erotic love, but rather the demand for channeling any such eros away from sexual relations and toward the intellectually erotic attachment to God.

constantly as we were commanded *with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might*. That is what Solomon intended by way of metaphor, *For I am sick with love* (Song 2:5). All of the Song of Songs is a metaphor for this matter.⁷²

Here I wish to elaborate on some elements of the Song's allegory as conceived by Maimonides that have not been noted or dealt with adequately in the scholarship to date. However, what others have discussed needs mentioning briefly before proceeding to those elements. The *Guide*, in perfect alignment with the Mishneh Torah, affords a glimpse into how Maimonides might actually read the Song as a parable of spiritual/intellectual love by its allegorization of key verses to the degree of love achieved variously by the Patriarchs, Moses, and his siblings, Aaron and Miriam. They are the biblical exemplars of the Mishneh Torah-formulated hyperintensive love involving a retreat from the world and all things material so extreme as to disengage body from mind. In the Mishneh Torah, the mind of the obsessive lover is exclusively preoccupied with the beloved while carrying on with daily routines of changing physical postures and food consumption. These ordinary, physically sustaining experiences transpire reflexively since the mind, consumed as it is with the beloved, exercises no control over them. The Mishneh Torah indicates that the Song parable doesn't quite capture the extent of the mind's "liberation" from the body, for the love of God is "even more than this." Any vestiges of a mind-body connection that might still remain in the signifier's mundane love-sick psyche are vacated in the signified spiritual realm.

The *Guide* further develops the allegory cursorily alluded to in the Mishneh Torah by its allusions to the very acme of humanly possible spiritual love. In this context, the Mishneh Torah's formulation is drawn out to its logical limit where the mind becomes a virtual disembodied intellect, a state metaphorically captured by the Song's lover, who is so entranced by her beloved that she declares, *I sleep but my heart is awake; the sound of my beloved knocks* (5:2). Within the realm of its spiritual analogue, only Moses and the Patriarchs could echo these sentiments, which reflect a state of being "in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him, may he be exalted, so that in his heart he is always in His presence, may He be exalted, while outwardly he is with people" (GP, III:51, p. 623). The role of the "heart" as a metaphor for both the intellect and "all the forces of the body, for the principle of all of them derives from the heart" (GP, I:39, p. 89), explicitly interpreted in that earlier lexicographic chapter by Maimonides as the meaning of "heart" in the command to love God "with all your heart," now crystallizes. If commandments presuppose performance and ritual, the commandment of love

⁷² הוא שיאהב את ה' אהבה גדולה יתירה עזה מאוד עד שתהא נפשו קשורה באהבת ה' ונמצא שוגה בה. תמיד כאלו חולה חולי האהבה שאין דעתו פנויה מאהבת אותה אשה והוא שוגה בה תמיד בין בשבתו בין בקומו בין בשעה שהוא אוכל ושותה יתר מזה תהיה אהבת ה' בלב אוהביו שוגים בה תמיד כמו שצונו בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך והוא ששלמה אמר דרך משל כי חולת אהבה אני וכל שיר השירים משל הוא לענין זה.

demands mindless performance for the body but “God intoxicated” mindfulness for the intellect. Ironically, only then are “all the forces of the body” dedicated to the love of God – when those forces are no longer vitalized by the intellect. As the intellect is invigorated, physicality is not only detached but minimized to its Mosaic limit at the mountain’s summit where *he neither ate bread nor drank water* (Exod. 34:28), “for his intellect attained such strength that all the gross faculties in the body ceased to function” (GP, III:51, p. 620). In an exquisite extension of food ingestion as a metaphor for acquiring knowledge, there is an inverse relationship between its literal and metaphorical senses – the more one consumes knowledge, the less one consumes food.

Maimonides’ scant allusions such as this verse prod a return to its original biblical context to retrieve their full metaphoric thrust. The verse depicting a lover of somnolent body and wakeful heart also has her attend to a “knock” of her beloved. However, the next few verses describe a reticence to respond to the knock and allow entry to the beloved. Procrastination leads to the loss of opportunity, and when the moment is finally seized, the beloved has disappeared, for *I opened the door for my beloved but my beloved had turned and gone* (5:6). The lover’s vacillation is because she has already disrobed and bathed her feet in preparation for a night’s sleep. The allegory indicates that once achieved, that state of intellectual obsessiveness with God remains tenuous and requires constant nourishment so as not to lapse back into preoccupation with the material world.

The lover’s concern for the preparedness of her body for sleep allegorically signifies the intellectual lover’s turn from the “wakefulness” of the mind to the “sleepfulness” of the body and thus a regressive state of love. The other feature of love’s ideal state conveyed by the Song’s imagery here is its realization in the privacy of the home rather than in a public domain. The metaphor entrenches that dimension developed thus far in this chapter and reinforces a proposition earlier in the chapter of the *Guide* that the intellectually suffused love of God “is achieved in solitude and isolation. Hence, every excellent man stays frequently in solitude and does not meet anyone unless it is necessary” (GP, III:51, p. 621). For all intents and purposes, at this level of love, the end goal of commandments is to render commandments otiose. Only an intricate hermeneutical probe can successfully decode the full import of the Song’s allegory (*mashal*), which epitomizes a lover, a fulfillment of a paramount religious mandate, that is but for a statistically insignificant elite beyond the purview of virtually all Jews. As such, Maimonides’ allegoric construct of the Song is what David Stern classifies as a type of *mashal* that is “secret speech,” or “an interpretive shield guarding a secret meaning,” separating “insiders” from “outsiders” and restricting access to comprehension to a select chosen few.”⁷³

⁷³ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 43.

At the very denouement of the *Guide*, Maimonides returns to this theme of solitude, considering it crucial enough to include in its [final chapter](#). Another verse from the Song appears in the passage discussed previously, signifying the exclusively private nature of “true human perfection” that consists solely of “the conception of intelligibles which teach true opinions regarding divine things” (GP, III:54, p. 635). Verse 1:6, “*My mother’s sons were incensed against me; they made me keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept,*” corroborates metaphorically the proposition that the “ultimate perfection” of pure contemplation flourishes in isolation. Its instrumental preservative ensuring its permanence is to “not weary and trouble yourself for the sake of others” (635). On the level of metaphor, the verse cited signifies the potential lover, whose communal role inhibits her maturity toward becoming the lovesick intellectual lover of God. She is mired in social/political responsibilities indicated by the duty of maintaining others’ vineyards – in this case owned by “brothers,” or, in other words, her own particular faith community of Jews. Her communal role causes self-neglect in the pursuit of the true love of God. Once again, the Song emphasizes the supreme religious impulse as a lonely one necessitating withdrawal from rather than participation in the community.⁷⁴

The image of “brothers,” as a literary allusion to public impediments to intellectual self-perfection, compounds the metaphor with another allegorical layer. In addition to the withdrawal from civic life, it also conveys an internal struggle between the material and formal dimensions of the human. When analyzing the term “woman” (*ishah*) early on, the *Guide* assigns it a figurative sense of “an object apt for, and fashioned with a view to being in conjunction with another object” (GP, I:6, p. 31).⁷⁵ Correspondingly, the terms “brother” and “sister” can also be figurative, as in a verse that relates one to the other in the sense of fastening like objects together: *five curtains should be coupled together, a woman to her sister* (Exod. 26:3). The quarrel with the brothers then signifies the inner struggle of matter caught between its attraction to its like in matter and to its form. Gravitating toward its material counterparts, its “brothers,” veers it away from its fidelity to its form and inhibits its evolution toward spiritual love, where its attraction to its like is grounded in a form of detached attachment.

⁷⁴ See also, for example, how Maimonides pares down any association with others to the barest necessary to sustain physical subsistence: “If the perfect man who lives in solitude thinks of them at all” it is either to prevent harm or gain advantage (GP, II:36, p. 372). For a concise summary of the extensive debate on whether political activity or individual intellectual perfection is the final end of man, between scholars such as L.V. Berman and S. Pines in favor of the former and M. Galston and Warren Z. Harvey supporting the latter, see Steven Harvey, “Maimonides in the Sultan’s Palace,” in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel Kraemer (Oxford: Littman Library, 1991), 70–73.

⁷⁵ See also GP, III:8, pp. 431–34, which draws a lengthy analogy between a spousal relationship between a woman and her husband and that between matter and form.

The other critical Song verse that extends this metaphor of the intellect's progressive disengagement from the body to its uttermost limit depicts the lover's longing for the beloved's kiss: *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth* (1:2). This verse is really the opening clause of the Song, since the very first verse, *Song of Songs by Solomon*, simply provides its title and author. As such, the entire Song is anchored in this sentiment voiced by the lover declaring the ultimate aim of her as-yet-unrequited love. This "kiss" signals a death that consummates a perfected state of love where the intellect/soul has become empowered and, conversely, the body has been weakened. The intellect has become so invigorated as to liberate itself from any physical constraints. Those biblical heroes such as Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, who met their end by a divine "kiss of death," expired "in the pleasure of this apprehension due to the intensity of passionate love" (GP, III:51, p. 628). The Song's lover, therefore, aspires for that acme of love where the intellect perfects itself to such an extent as to overpower and dispense with the body. Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, by its reference to the allegory of the Song, therefore holds out physical mortality and intellectual immortality as the goal of religious life. In its allusion to death, the most individualistic of all human experience, the Mishneh Torah once again addresses itself to the private sphere and fixes a goal where its own regulatory concerns of law will become superfluous. As the soul/intellect strengthens, the need for law diminishes.⁷⁶

In order to appreciate fully Maimonides' use of this "kiss of death" metaphor, as always, his original rabbinic source for its application to the deaths of Moses and his siblings must be examined. Though the three are described uniquely as dying a "kiss of death," that type of death is described as one over which the proverbial "Angel of Death" had no prerogative, shared also by the Patriarchs.⁷⁷ In his analysis of the Book of Job, Satan's authorization to afflict Job is subject to the restriction of "sparing his soul" (Job 2:6), which, subjected to the Maimonidean lexicon, means that Satan had no power over "the thing that remains of man after death" (GP, III:22, p. 488).⁷⁸ This is consistent with the soul (*nefesh*) signifying the intellect, as discussed previously. Maimonides then cites another rabbinic tradition which equates Satan, the

⁷⁶ The "kiss" passage, as well as others cited in this chapter, is key to David Blumenthal's thesis, meticulously developed over the course of numerous studies, that Maimonides' subscribed to a philosophical mysticism that sees philosophical inquiry and contemplation as part of a process leading to a final "post-rational, post-cognitive, post-linguistic" stage. These studies have all been collected now in one volume, *Philosophic Mysticism: Studies in Rational Religion* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2006). Although I cannot here enter into this complex issue, it is clear from my presentation that I don't see room for anything "post-cognitive" in Maimonides' system. Suffice it here to state that I am in basic agreement with Hannah Kasher's critique, most recently in "Mysticism within the Confines of Reason Alone" (Heb.) in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, ed. A. Elkayam and D. Schwartz, Daat 64–66 (2009): 37–44.

⁷⁷ B. Baba Bathra 17a.

⁷⁸ For a comprehensive treatment of Satan in the *Guide*, see A. Nuriel, "The Concept of Satan in the *Guide of the Perplexed*" (Heb.), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 5 (1986): 83–91, who identifies three different Satans, all expressing different traits of matter.

evil inclination, and the angel of death as “one and the same,”⁷⁹ considering it an extraordinary insight in that it “clarifies all that is obscure, reveals all that is concealed, and renders manifest most of the mysteries of the Torah” (488). Thus, this tradition’s philosophical meaning is that the intellect, or the human form, is immune to the exigencies of matter as represented by these various “demonic” powers. The perfected intellects of Moses and others are of course impervious to the angel of death, as a signifier of matter, or that which deteriorates and passes away. Their true selves or their human forms survived their bodies and, therefore, were not subject to the vulnerabilities of matter. In its reference to the kind of death over which the “angel of death” wields no authority, the Song directs the reader to Job and his essential failing of intellectual naiveté. In fact, Maimonides goes as far as to consider Job’s ignorance the hermeneutical key to the entire narrative, for “He is not said to be a wise or a comprehending, or an intelligent man. Only moral virtue and righteousness in action are ascribed to him” (GP, III:22, p. 487).⁸⁰ The lover the Song contemplates is the antithesis of this initial Job, contrasting antipodal models of obsession – the former with thought and the latter with behavior. The Mishneh Torah, then, in its idealization of the Song’s conception of love, demands the transformation of the primitive Jobian worship of God into the spiritually polished lover, to escape the grips of all those “powers” rabbinically associated with matter.⁸¹ In effect, the Jobian fixation with “moral virtue and righteousness in action,” the very core concerns of a

⁷⁹ B. Baba Bathra 16a.

⁸⁰ Maimonides bases this on the fact that among the four characteristics “pure and upright, who feared God, and turned away from evil,” wisdom is missing. What is translated by Pines as “extraordinary” is the same term translated as “strange” in the introductory epistle to Joseph. See A. Nuriel, “The Use of the Term *Garib* in the *Guide of the Perplexed*: A Remark on the Esoteric Method in the *Guide*,” *Sefunot* 5 (1990): 137–43. These are the types of biblical texts that particularly exercised them during their study sessions.

⁸¹ Every mention of the *evil inclination* within a halakhic context in the Mishneh Torah is associated with the sexual urge. See MT, Women, 24:19; Sexual Prohibitions 1:9; Kings 8:4; related to this last law see GP, III:41, p. 567. Since man is born with this tendency, it needs to be reined in from birth. In light of our analysis, two different rationales offered for circumcision are in effect two sides of the same coin. One is that “it weakens the faculty of sexual excitement . . . for if at birth this member has been made to bleed and has had its covering taken away from it, it must indubitably be weakened” (GP, III:49, p. 609). The other is that it is a mark of a covenant that “imposes the obligation to believe in the unity of God” (GP, III:49, p. 610). The strive for the divine “kiss” consists of acquiring as much knowledge as possible of the existence and unity of God. Proportional to the rise of this knowledge is the decline of material urges, the strongest of which is sex. The love of God, therefore, entails the diminishment of sexuality or, in the language of the Song, the divine “kiss” replaces the human kiss. On circumcision, see Josef Stern, “Maimonides on the Covenant of Circumcision,” in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought and History*, ed. M. Fishbane (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 131–54, and his later reformulation on the same issue in *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

Code of Law, is to be superseded by one with pure contemplative thought: The saint must become the philosopher.⁸²

Maimonides' commendation of the "kiss of death" explains the only other Mishneh Torah citation of both cola of the love command verse: *and you shall love your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might*. It is cited as a proof-text endorsing martyrdom in certain limited situations, since the love of God demands the commitment of your soul or your life force.⁸³ Voluntary surrender to death physically mirrors the kiss of death as the supreme expression of love of God. The latter connotes a natural separation of body and intellect, consequent to intellectual perfection, while the former is an embodied expression of the intellect's cardinal preeminence over the soul. Martyrdom is an obligatory choice when confronted with the alternative of death or violation of one of three negative commandments proscribing idolatry, adultery, and murder. Once the verse is quoted as the source for this primary directive, Maimonides continues to provide other rationales for it in the cases of murder and adultery.⁸⁴ As such, the verse in and of itself is primarily supportive of the demand for martyrdom in the case of idolatry, or, in other words, the belief in monotheism demands absolute commitment even at the cost of one's life. The verse poses a Mishneh Torah paradigm of the multi-layered hermeneutic that the *Guide* insists must be applied to the Bible, consisting of exterior/silver and interior/gold meanings (GP, I:12). Its exegetical levels of increasingly precious metals is layered by the silver command and, as we have seen, its highly abstract and esoteric gold directives for the intellectual love of God.⁸⁵ Martyrdom is the normative external expression of the philosophically internal, engendered kiss of death and, therefore, the primal verse commanding love of God conforms to another essential feature of the gold/silver hermeneutic which requires that "its

⁸² Raphael Jospe argues that the Book of Job is a miniature *Guide of the Perplexed* in that its parable mirrors both structurally and conceptually the perplexed and the perplexities addressed by the *Guide*. See "The Book of Job as a Biblical *Guide of the Perplexed*" (Heb.), *Daat* 50 (2003): 83–96. The literature on Job in Maimonides is voluminous, but for an extensive partial bibliography, see Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 247–48n6.

⁸³ MT, Foundations of Torah 5:7. On this law see Isadore Twersky, "Sanctifying the Name and Sanctifying Life: New Perspectives of Holiness in Maimonides' Thought," in *Sanctity of Life and Martyrdom: Studies in Memory of Amir Yekuti'el*, ed. Isaiah Gafni and Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1992), 167–90.

⁸⁴ The rationale is based on b. Pesahim 25a where self-sacrifice in the case of murder is called for on the basis of "logic" while the same in the case of adultery is rationalized by way of biblical textual analogy between it and murder. That leaves the verse alone as the only basis for the same demand in the case of idolatry.

⁸⁵ Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables*, discerns a tripartite structure of parables consisting of vulgar, external, and internal meanings corresponding to meaningless, exoteric, and esoteric levels (72–73). For a more recent study, see Y. Lorberbaum, "'The Men of Knowledge and the Sages Are Drawn, As It Were, Toward This Purpose by the Divine Will': On Maimonides' Conception of Parables," *Tarbiz* 71 (2001/02): 86–132, 107–09, who sees this structure as intrinsically indispensable to the communication of esoteric knowledge.

external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in the internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree work having very small holes" (GP, I:12).⁸⁶

Another verse appears in the *Guide* that is key to piecing together the Maimonidean allegory of the Song. In another prefatory chapter to the sections on the rationale of the commandments, Maimonides dedicates a chapter to one of the purposes of the Law aimed at restraining material impulses and desires. One facet of that restraint is "obedience, acquiescence, and docility." The particular proof-text in support of a corollary of that submissive posture, which is "docility in accepting what ought to be accepted" (GP, III:33, p. 532), is the Israelite expression of it, *And we will hear it and do it* (Deut. 5:24). Cryptically, then, Maimonides links this lesson of acceptance to the Song as integral to its message: "By way of parable, it is said about this *Draw me, we will run after thee*" (Song 1:4). The clue to allegorical significance of this lover's plea is planted, I believe, in the inapposite citation of Deuteronomy 5:24 as an endorsement of unmitigated submission to divine command. First, the rabbinically educated reader would have anticipated another classic rabbinic source for this kind of surrender, which focuses on a verse that echoes these exact two verbs but in reverse order – *We will do and we will hear* (Exod. 24:7) – especially given the copious references to it in the midrashic compilation on the Song, attributing the preciousness of Israel's love to this very declaration of fealty.⁸⁷ Preceding "hearing" with "doing" is taken to express an unconditional obedience (doing) regardless of what may be required (hearing).⁸⁸

Once alerted to Maimonides' odd preference for Deuteronomy 5:24 in this setting, its original biblical context, as well as resort to it in other contexts of the *Guide*, calls for closer scrutiny. After hearing the divine voice directly at Sinai, and frightened for their lives in the face of such an overwhelming epiphany, the verse is part of a plea by the Israelites to have Moses act as their intermediary in the future, whose mediation of divine command will be "done and heard." According to Maimonides, the original unmediated divine call consisted only of the first two commandments regarding the existence and unity of God which, as we have seen, are equally accessible to Moses and the people "by human speculation alone" (GP, II:33, p. 364). The petition for Mosaic mediation of Deuteronomy 5:24 is for conveying the rest of the commandments that are

⁸⁶ Another example of Josef Stern's argument that the gold/silver hermeneutic applies not only to the narratives but to commandments as well is his "Maimonides on the Covenant of Circumcision and the Unity of God," in *The Midrashic Imagination*, ed. M. Fishbane (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 131–54. See his analysis of circumcision, which "exemplifies a mode of allegorical or parabolic interpretation that he employs not only for the narrative portions of Scripture, but also the commandments" (132 and discussion at 146–50).

⁸⁷ *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 7; 8. The last reference captures the notion of submission best.

⁸⁸ See b. Shabbat 88a for the various extolments of this gesture of blind obedience.

classified as “generally accepted opinions.”⁸⁹ Thus, the obedience expressed by it is limited to the political/social/moral commandments as opposed to the ones that are constitutive of loving God.⁹⁰

In light of this analysis, Maimonides’ enigmatic association of Deuteronomy 5:24 with the esoteric message of Song 1:4 facilitates the deciphering of the Song’s allegory. The verse continues with *the king has brought me to his chambers*, a subsequent stage to *draw me*, in advancing a love for God. The two phrases mirror precisely Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah distinction noted previously, between the physics and metaphysics that are cultivated in the *pardes* for attaining true love of God and all the other halakhic study that creates the calm and settling environment in which that love can take root. Maimonides’ identification of the first phrase, *draw me after you*, with the *doing and hearing* of Deuteronomy 5:24, then associates this stage of the lover’s quest for God with the “generally accepted” kind of knowledge the Israelites acquiesced to. This forms the base, the societal framework, from which to launch the theoretical speculation and deep philosophical examination of the world that culminates in the love of God as signified by gaining entry into the privacy of the king’s chambers. The two parts of the verse also parallel the two major groups in the previously mentioned palace parable pictured toward the conclusion of the *Guide*. Those who are merely obedient “adherents of the law” and those engaged in the study of the law “concerning the practices of divine service” never actually enter the ruler’s palace, while those of varying degrees of sophistication who “plunged into speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion” advance progressively along the palace’s inner precincts toward the “inner part” where the ruler resides (GP, III:51, p. 619). *Draw me*, connoting law, knowledge by tradition, and generally accepted things, is the lover’s cry evoked at the very rudimentary level of the first group whose faith is largely defined by law and blind faith, while *the king has brought me to his chambers* is the successful declaration of the mature lover who has progressed beyond the law. That the one who finds himself in the king’s “chambers” of the *Guide*’s palace is one and the same as the lover of the Song contemplated by the Mishneh Torah is assured by the parallel language, the Judaeo-Arabic meshing

⁸⁹ See also GP, I:18, where the verse that pleads for Moses’ “approaching” God from now on does not imply a spatial proximity, but rather “cognitive apprehension” (44).

⁹⁰ Maimonides considers Moses a “king” and so sets the stage for future kings who themselves become the embodiment of various religious ideals for their subjects. Apropos an exemplar of the type of love depicted here, Jacob Blidstein notes a fascinating shift from the public persona to the private in the law that mandates a life of abstinence for the king. Though he must not become inebriated as disruptive of a life dedicated to “Torah and the needs of Israel,” when it comes to sexual abstinence “the verse conjoined his heart to the Torah more than anyone else.” In this public lifestyle which eschews sexual indulgence, the king becomes the living embodiment of the Song’s allegory, which also vacates its external eroticism for that internal love that has nothing to do with community. See Blidstein, *Political Concepts in Maimonidean Halakha* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2001), 188–90, and esp. 153. For the king as the living embodiment of Maimonides’ ethical standards, see my “Maimonides on Kingship: The Ethics of Imperial Humility,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34, no. 1 (2006): 89–114.

with the Hebrew – “after apprehension,⁹¹ total devotion to Him and the employment of intellectual thought in constantly loving Him should be aimed at. *Mostly this is achieved in solitude and does not meet anyone unless it is necessary*” (GP, p. 621 emphasis mine).⁹² The chapter following the one that commences with the palace parable and concludes with the “kiss” of intellectual immortality clearly identifies the “king” of this highly segmented palace, with whom the intellectual lover becomes intimate, as “the intellect that overflows toward us and is the bond between us and Him” (GP, III:52, p. 629). The Mishneh Torah’s designation of the Song as an allegory of intellectualized love of God not only elevates normative love into a metalegal state, but replaces God, as the ultimate object of desire, with the Active Intellect, or the fount of all metaphysics that can possibly be grasped.⁹³

There can be no more fitting post-biblical rabbinic exemplar of the Song 1:4 than R. Akiva, whom Maimonides depicted as the very pinnacle of the systematic “theoretical study of these metaphysical matters” and who “achieved human perfection” (GP, I:32, p. 68). Not only is R. Akiva the advocate of the Song’s supreme “holiness,” he is also the most prominent rabbinic embodiment of verse 1:4, having safely embarked on the engagement with the subject matter that occupies the *pardes*, and ultimately succeeded in securing its knowledge.⁹⁴ The very direction of his biography in fact follows the trajectory of the kind of love envisioned by the allegory of the *Guide* encapsulated in verse 1:4, beginning in ignorance and illiteracy, advancing to an almost obsessive engagement with the “jots and tittles” of the Law, and mastering the metaphysical terrain of the *pardes*. That trajectory doesn’t simply end there, but reaches its crescendo in the closest a post-biblical figure has come to the “kiss,” suffering martyrdom and uttering with his last breath the command to love God *with all your heart, soul, and might*.⁹⁵

⁹¹ David Blumenthal makes much of the term “after” in various places to corroborate his claim of some post-cognitive state in Maimonides. However, the term “after,” as in common English parlance may simply indicate the result of study and not another stage that somehow transcends study – as in “After you study all these rules of physics you will permanently grasp them.” See Blumenthal, *Philosophic Mysticism*, 132–35.

⁹² Steven Harvey also builds a strong case for this identity between the passionate love (*ishk* in Judaeo-Arabic) of the *Guide* and the “fitting love (*ha-abavah ha-reuyah* in Hebrew) of the Mishneh Torah: “Maimonides in the Sultan’s Palace,” in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, ed. Kraemer, 46–75, at 67.

⁹³ When speaking about conjunction Gad Freudenthal discerns shifts in Maimonides’ language between apprehension of God and apprehension of the Active Intellect, and therefore the question arises as to whether Maimonides believes in the possibility of conjunction with God or only with the Active Intellect. Although I do not think the former is possible, Freudenthal’s conclusion is suggestive that in either case, “since the Active Intellect is an emanation of God, closer to Him than anything terrestrial, it remains valid that knowledge (especially of metaphysics), that is, conjunction or unification with Him or with His proximal emanation, the Active Intellect, has religious value.” See “The Philosophical Mysticism of Maimonides and Maimon,” in *Maimonides and His Heritage*, 113–52, at 124.

⁹⁴ b. Hagigah 15b; j. Hagigah 2:1.

⁹⁵ This terse biographical sketch can be culled from such sources as b. Berakhot 27a; b. Pesachim 47b; b. Berakhot 61b; and b. Menachot 29b. The last source actually elevates him above Moses in his exegetical skills.

THE FINAL OBJECT OF DESIRE

Finally, we return to the divine name, and the type of divine beloved that the first four paragraphs of this [last chapter](#) in the Book of Knowledge contemplates as the desired partner of the “soul” as intellect, of Abraham as its pre-Sinaitic incarnation, and of the Song’s allegorical infatuated lover.⁹⁶ Here God is referred to by the Tetragrammaton *YHVH*, the four-letter epithet traditionally acknowledged as God’s most sacred appellation and the object of the Deuteronomic love that commands the *heart, soul, and might*. The *Guide* singles out *YHVH* as the only divine sobriquet that signifies God’s “essence and true reality” (GP, I:64, p. 156). All other names are merely what Maimonides classifies as “derivative,” namely those that don’t relate to God directly but rather to attributes derived from His actions in the world. In other words, those other names, as representing attributes of action, are not descriptive of God, but rather of things related to the world that are then projected onto Him. The name *YHVH* “gives a clear unequivocal indication of His essence, may He be exalted. On the other hand, all the other great names give their indication in an equivocal way being derived from terms signifying actions, the like of which . . . exist as our own actions” (GP, I:61, p. 147).

Thus, the object of desire, as *YHVH*, at this intellectually fixated state of love, mirrors the subject in its interior, isolated, apolitical, asocial, and purely self-referential mode of perfection. All other “derivative” names such as *Judge, Just, the Gracious, the Merciful, or Elohim* – names specifically contrasted by Maimonides to the Tetragrammaton (GP, I:61, p. 147) – are actually the ones associated with those ethical and societal mores the Law aims at cultivating and preserving, either horizontally between human beings or vertically between human beings and God, as acts of *imitatio dei*. The Tetragrammaton, however, connotes no “between,” no “other,” but rather “is indicative of a notion with reference to which there is no association between God, may He be exalted, and what is other than He” (p. 148). Any love that has this being in its sights can only thrive in the kind of environment conjured by such an existence, in some *imitatio dei* that would induce a common ground where there is “no association with what is other,” where law has no jurisdiction. No wonder, then, that Maimonides conspicuously omits the missionary activity in his Mishneh Torah account of love that he considered integral to its performance in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*. As Howard Kreisel explains, since love flows exclusively from intellectual apprehension, “only the internal, intellectual dimension is present. He thereby deters his readers from seeing in any external act, no matter how important it may be,

⁹⁶ In terms of divine names, it is interesting to note that Maimonides adopts a rabbinic ruling that all the mentions of Solomon except for one are “holy” or, in other words, stand for God. This would be vital to take into account for any reconstruction of the Song’s allegory. See MT, Foundations of Torah 6:9.

a fulfillment of the commandment.”⁹⁷ Consistently, an essential component of Abraham’s portrait as a pioneer of monotheism, rather than as a lover of God rendered in the Laws of Idolatry, is his propagation of its ideals because of his role in developing a “nation that knows God.”⁹⁸

That austere intellectual love now presented at the end of the Book of Knowledge, however, is precisely what we have seen is signified by the Song’s obsessive lover and sleepwalker. Their heart (read: intellect) is awake while physically asleep, where actions are totally detached from mind that is preoccupied with a divine being that is itself, as denoted by *YHVH*, one that Maimonides locates prior to the world’s coming into existence, and therefore “divested and stripped of all actions” (p. 149).⁹⁹ Biblical support for the notion that his unique name is the target of Maimonides’ obsessive love, can be found in Psalms 91:14, cited by Maimonides in the chapter on the kiss to correlate that type of love with single-minded concentration on knowing God: “Because he hath set his passionate love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him on high, because he hath known My Name” (GP, III:51, p. 627). The particular term for “passionate love” (חֶשֶׁק) in this verse conveys “an excess of love, so that no thought remains that is directed toward a thing other than the Beloved.”¹⁰⁰ That the

⁹⁷ Kreisel, “The Love and Fear,” 229–30.

⁹⁸ Haym Soloveitchik raises a number of vexing problems regarding Maimonides’ classifications in the Mishneh Torah, one of them being the placement of laws regarding conversion in the laws governing forbidden sexual relations. Considering the convert as one who rejects idolatry, who independently arrives at the truth of monotheism, and who is explicitly identified as a conceptual “descendant of Abraham,” who assumes the Abrahamic mantle of “God’s lover” in a famous response, it would have fit perfectly in a number of places in the Book of Knowledge. The primary one would have been at the conclusion of the Laws of Repentance where Abraham is depicted as this lover. Perhaps a solution to this lies precisely in what I mention here about Maimonides’ omitting any reference to proselytizing as part of performing the command of love. Mentioning the convert at this point would have disturbed the total interiority of the love he presents here. See “Reflections on Principles of Classification in Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah,” *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (2000): 107–15, and his discussion at 110–11.

⁹⁹ Maimonides cites rabbinical support for this distinction in the midrashic tradition that “before the world was created there were only the Holy One, blessed be He, and his name.” *Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer*, chap. 3. Thus *YHVH* captures what David Burrell describes as Maimonides’ “radical agnosticism” regarding God since it connotes the absolute singularity of God’s existence unlike anything within human experience. At the same time, that agnosticism is attenuated by the name’s presentation as a model for *imitatio dei*, which is “the utmost virtue of man” (I:54). See Burrell, “Maimonides, Aquinas and Ghazali on Naming God,” in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 223–55.

¹⁰⁰ On this term, see Steven Harvey, “The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judaeo-Arabic Thought and Some Remarks on the Judaeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides,” in *Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, ed. Norman Golb (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publications, 1997), 175–96. See also Amira Eran, “The Influence of Avicenna and Ghazali on Maimonides’ Notion of Intellectual Passion” (Heb.), in *Maimonides: Conservatism, Originality, Revolution*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2008), 465–80, who concludes that Maimonides’ *cheshek* is thoroughly rooted in Aristotle’s view of the intellect.

Name envisioned here as passionate love's aim is *YHVH* can be determined from one of the most prominent of biblical exegetes and medieval exponents of Maimonidean thought, R. David Kimhi, in his comment to the verse which asserts that "knowledge of the articulated name consisting of four characters constitutes the love of God, blessed be He, and is the absolute limit of human cognition while still confined to a body."¹⁰¹

The ultimate paragraph of the Book of Knowledge borrows the connotations of the name *YHVH* that is isolated from all worldly actions, and superimposes them on the lover whose love can only perfect itself in kind. It is a love "upon which he must constantly be focused properly *to the point of abandoning everything in the world outside of it*, as commanded by 'with all your heart and all your soul.'"¹⁰² Maimonides conspicuously omits the third term of the verse "with all your might" since he has moved to pure thought, disengaged from the world, and both heart and soul, as we have seen, are terms that signify intellect.

Maimonides' ultimate sentence in this abstruse suprallegal excursus on love's ideal incorporates another divine epithet that reflects conscious philosophical design: "Therefore man must dedicate himself to understanding and becoming proficient in the sciences and the wisdom that disclose his Possessor (*kono*, קונו) as far as it is within the human capacity to understand and apprehend as we have explained in the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah." Although what *YHVH* represents must always be borne in mind as the most pristine notion of divine existence, "stripped of all actions," or known by negating all attributes, that actual essence cannot be known, as evidenced by God's rejection of Moses' request for knowledge of it.

Maimonides' turn to the divine name of "possessor," is perfectly symmetrical with the graspable God defined in the very opening sentence of the Book of Knowledge, not as a creator, but as "a First Being who brought every existing thing into being."¹⁰³ The *Guide* rules out the philosophical demonstrability of *creatio ex nihilo* and sets out to prove God's existence based on the assumption

¹⁰¹ וידעת שם המפורש שהוא בן ארבע אותיות היא אהבת האל יתברך והיא ההשגה השלימה שיוכל כל אדם להשיג בעודנו גוף

¹⁰² MT, Repentance, 10:6.

¹⁰³ See Leo Strauss, "Notes on Maimonides' Book of Knowledge," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ephraim E. Urbach, R. J. Zvi Werblowsky, and Ch. Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 269–83. See also Bernard Septimus's observation that this opening formulation and its ensuing philosophical explanation in the *Mishneh Torah*, which is followed by "and knowledge of this matter is a positive commandment," distinguishes it from other instances where he posits the commandment first and then elaborates on it. Septimus concludes that in this type of formulation Maimonides' message is "clear" that we are dealing with "rational principles. The Law requires that we know them, but does not *establish* them – because they have independent epistemological status." See "Literary Structure and Ethical Theory in Maimonides' Book of Knowledge," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 307–26, at 309.

of eternity. That first formulation is not of God as a creator but accords with the Aristotelian position of eternity.¹⁰⁴ Maimonides notes in the *Guide* that designating God as a possessor “tends toward the road of the belief in the eternity of a certain matter,” a corrective to which other terms such as “create” (ברא) or “make” (עשה) provide (GP, II:30, p. 358). The Laws of the Foundations of the Torah avoid referencing God as a creator or maker, and so, since love’s limits are defined by knowledge, Maimonides concludes with a notion of God that lies within those limits, that is inextricably bound with his opening definition of a God of eternity. Remarkably, Maimonides codified a God who is disengaged from a world that He coaxed out of some eternal matter,¹⁰⁵ the love of whom itself can only crystallize out of an empathic disengagement from worldly concerns.

Maimonides’ classification of the Song, along with Ecclesiastes, another Solomonic composition, as “words of wisdom” (*hokhmah*),¹⁰⁶ which at first seems to indicate some kind of textual inferiority, now assumes a different texture. Though I cannot enter the debate here as to the ranking of the philosopher vis-à-vis the prophet, it is essential to precisely define in what way *hokhmah* characterizes the Song. Considering our analysis to this point, there is no question that, out of its four semantic senses, the Song’s *hokhmah* would consist of “the apprehension of true realities which have for their end the apprehension of Him” (GP, III:54, p. 632). Maimonides specifically distinguishes the “science of Torah” from wisdom as two entirely separate species, the former consisting chiefly of knowledge through tradition and the latter “through correct speculation” (634).¹⁰⁷ By classifying the Song as belonging

¹⁰⁴ The proofs for the first two commandments of belief in divine existence and unity offered at the beginning of the MT, 1: 5–6, 7; 2: 5, are skeletal versions of Aristotle’s proofs for the existence of a Prime Mover and its unity and incorporeality in *Metaphysics* I, 2.8.1074a, 33–37. See Herbert Davidson, “The First Two Positive Commandments in Maimonides’ List of the 613 Believed to Have Been Given to Moses at Mt. Sinai,” in *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought*, ed. R. Elier and P. Schaefer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), reprinted in his *Maimonides the Rationalist* (Portland: Littman Library, 2011), 15–52. A serious problem arises with Maimonides’ anchoring of the primary *mitzvot* in science because science has advanced since the Middle Ages and these proofs are no longer held as credible by any reputable philosophical school. As Davidson notes, Maimonides would have to admit this and “concede that the ground on which he anchored love, fear, and worship of God had turned to sand.” (52)

¹⁰⁵ There is a vigorous debate in the scholarship on Maimonides’ true position regarding creation, but suffice it for the purposes here to state that I agree with Warren Z. Harvey’s convincing argument advocating Aristotle’s theory of the eternity of the world. See “A Third Approach to Maimonides’ Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 74 (1981): 287–301. For a thorough book-length treatment of the question, see Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) who argues against Harvey and in favor of the “Torah view,” which sees the world as “the object of a free and benevolent will.” (4)

¹⁰⁶ MT, Other Original Sources of Defilement 9:6, חכמה דברי.

¹⁰⁷ Though I believe this is the sense in which Maimonides meant the Song as “wisdom,” he is not entirely consistent in its connotations of philosophical knowledge and includes ethics within its

to the species of “wisdom,” then, its very genre indicates the essential facet of love developed so far, which isolates true love from its halakhic parameters, inculcates knowledge independent of tradition, and escapes the Law’s parochial orbit into a universal philosophical enterprise.

When Maimonides addressed his constituencies in his capacity as communal leader, politician, halakhic decisor, and consoler, he adopted the traditional rabbinic stance on the Song as an allegory of the profound love between God and His people, the nation of Israel, unlike the very private affair of the Mishneh Torah and the *Guide*. Also, in contradistinction to the one-sided love directed by human beings toward God, when faced with dire existential threats to their spiritual and physical survival, Maimonides portrays Israel as the object of God’s love, the “beautiful woman, having a perfect figure, marred by no defect,” reflecting Song 4:7: “*Every part of you is fair, my darling. There is no blemish in you.*”¹⁰⁸ In response to the superior claims of other religions, in this case Islam, and to thwart any inducements to convert, Song 7:1 declares “*Turn back, turn back O maid of Shulam! Turn back, turn back that we may gaze upon you. Why will you gaze at the Shulamite in the Mahanayim dance.*” In its wordplay on *shulam* as perfection, and the place *mahanayim* as camps, it presents the inimitable national meeting with God at Sinai, a uniquely all-inclusive revelation like no other, as a mutual encounter “in which the camp of Israel faced the camp of the divine presence.”¹⁰⁹ Again, the public communal dimension of Sinai is accentuated by the “camp” dance which expressed “the joy of the revelation at Mt. Sinai that was shared by the camp of Israel.” The verse then is raised one more time, in pointed critique of the private Quranic revelation in which Islam is rooted, to highlight the public nature of Sinai, which was not contingent on one man’s prophecy, but rather “because we, like him [Moses], witnessed the theophany at Mt. Sinai.”¹¹⁰ And, in a climax of its public message, Song 2:7 is invoked as a reminder of an oath taken not to “*waken or rouse love until it pleases,*” to ward off any premature messianic expectations. In the allegory of the Mishneh Torah and *Guide*, this verse would surely translate into a warning against hasty intellectual advancement toward achieving personal love of God

ambit as well. For a detailed analysis of all the different contexts where both the “wise” person (*hakham*) and the conceptual term “wisdom” (*hokhmah*) appears in the Maimonidean corpus, see Hannah Kasher, “Hakham, Hasid, and Tov in Maimonides’ Writings: A Study in Terms and Their Reference,” (Heb.) *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (2000).

¹⁰⁸ *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*, trans. Abraham Halkin, discussion, David Hartman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), “The Epistle to Yemen,” 104. On its historical context and meaning, see Joel Kraemer, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 233–42. However, even this public “letter” bears Maimonides’ signature writing style, which, according to Ralph Lerner, even when we, “expect Maimonides to be at his most lucid, he is indeed that – but not without leaving a trail of ambiguous and mixed signals.” See “Winged Words to Yemen,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, No. 4, *Philosophies Juives Médiévales* (1998): 479–93, at 481.

¹⁰⁹ *Epistle*, 105.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

without the prerequisite philosophical qualifications. However, it now assumes a public admonishment against an untimely prodding of what is to be a historic period of universal knowledge of God.¹¹¹

Thus Maimonides' very different allegorization of the Song in his letters actually substantiates the thesis developed in this chapter. When addressing community as a spiritual practitioner, he communalized Song's eros as a component of his rhetorical appeal in confronting political and spiritual crisis. When promoting his ideal philosophical construct of a lover as a jurisprudential theoretician within his Mishneh Torah, a text detached from concrete existential circumstance, he turned inward and upward toward the mind.¹¹² The letters, the Mishneh Torah, and the *Guide* all reflect the penmanship of a single author possessed of a particular talent for presenting Judaism's foundational texts in a multivocal register.

LOOKING FORWARD

We return to a direct confrontational reading of the Song of Songs when we arrive at the nineteenth century in the chapter dedicated to R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin. In the meantime, as stated at the outset of this chapter, many of Maimonides' positions on various issues dealt with in relation to the Song reappear in the subsequent chapters either to be challenged or attacked, or as theologies to be embraced, or as targets of subversion for reintegration into a new theology distinct from its Maimonidean original. First and foremost among the sources to be encountered in this book along the historical route of seminal Jewish theologians and philosophers is the intricate importation of biblical and rabbinic material into the fabric of Maimonides' thought. The reader must not only be attuned to this facet of Maimonides' own thought but to that of the various thinkers to be discussed. Without being sensitive to this feature, it is not only Maimonides' thought that will be misunderstood but that of all those who engaged it.

Other themes, philosophical issues, and theological stances that have been addressed in this chapter and which resurface in those that follow are:

¹¹¹ The Epistle on Martyrdom (Iggeret HaShemad) appeals to the first half of this same verse as evidence of God's appreciation for martyrdom for His sake. See *Epistles*, 28, and Kraemer, *Maimonides*, supra, 104–13.

¹¹² See the debate between David Hartman and Haym Soloveitchik, and others dealing with inconsistencies between Maimonides' responsa and his code and whether the latter can be considered works of rhetoric rather than strictly halakhic. See H. Soloveitchik, "Maimonides' 'Iggeret ha-Shemad': Law and Rhetoric," in *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume*, ed. L. Landman (New York, 1980), 281–319; D. Hartman, "The Epistle on Martyrdom: Discussion," in *Crisis and Leadership*, supra, 46–90. For an incisive recent reassessment of this debate, see Yair Lorberbaum and Haim Shapira, "Maimonides' Epistle on Martyrdom in Light of Legal Philosophy," *Dine Israel* (2008): 123–69. In this case I believe that Soloveitchik's characterization of the Iggeret HaShemad as a rhetorical work is equally apt for the letter to Yemen.

1. Intellectual perfection as the *summum bonum* of the religious life;
2. the construction, or reconstruction, of biblical personalities such as Abraham and Moses in a Maimonidean mold that often must be deconstructed to fit other molds;
3. the place of history and its value within Jewish thought and philosophy, a subject that features prominently in the [next chapter](#) on Nahmanides;
4. the various names of God, denoting philosophical conceptions of God in Maimonidean thought, and which convey very different notions in both rabbinic thought and within the kabbalistic schema of the divinity;
5. the rationale for the commandments and the resistance to Maimonides' collapse of the distinction between rational (*mishpatim*) and nonrational (*hukim*) *mitzvot*;
6. Maimonides' biblical lexicography, which is instrumental to his exegesis and stabilizes the Maimonidean sense of a biblical verse or phrase;
7. the isolated and highly individualistic religious life of contemplation advocated as ideal by Maimonides versus others that either promote the life of communal responsibility as supreme or one that maintains a balance between the public and private spiritual life;
8. the notion of divine hypostases and in particular of angels, which Maimonides drains of any ontological reality and substitutes for simply nature and natural causation.

Nahmanides (13th Century)

Launching the Kabbalistic Assault

MAIMONIDES VS. NAHMANIDES ON HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SHAPING OF JEWISH IDENTITY

Although deliberation over which personalities to include when dealing with the long history of engagements with Maimonides is difficult, no such difficulty occurs with Moses Nahmanides. Maimonides and his posthumous ideological opponent Nahmanides (ca. 1195–1270), arguably two of the greatest medieval expositors of Jewish thought and law, vehemently disagreed on virtually every substantive issue crucial to Judaism as a belief system. Their positions diverged so drastically on notions such as prophecy, providence, ritual, biblical history, and even the very nature of God – and thus what qualifies as authentic monotheism – that it would be no exaggeration to infer they adhered to two different faiths. Though they practiced more or less the same religion, as embodied in the rabbinic legal tradition known as *halakha*, their theoretical and dogmatic frameworks within which they expressed that practice radically conflicted. As with the other thinkers dealt with in this book, Nahmanides' theology can only be fully appreciated in its counterexegesis, reaction to, and reworking of Maimonides' own theology and philosophical exegesis.

Nahmanides' mystical conception of God is a composite of kabbalistic intra-deical components known as *sefirot*, bearing a multiplicity of attributes, a deity who can be affected and about whom much can be known and positively asserted.¹ Maimonides' God, in contradistinction, is an irreducibly unified

¹ For but one example, see his explanation of the secret behind sacrifices in his Torah commentary to Leviticus 1:9, and Dov Schwartz's explication of the theurgy it expresses in "From Theurgy to Magic: The Evolution of the Magical Talismanic Justification of Sacrifice in the Circle of Nahmanides and His Interpreters," *Aleph* 1 (2001): 165–213, at 167–74. All references to Nahmanides' Torah commentary are to volume and page number of Nahmanides' *Commentary on the Torah* (Heb.), 2 vols., ed. C. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1958–59), herein-after referred to as *Commentary*. Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own.

being, absent of any attribute whatsoever, who can only be described in negative terms,² and who essentially eludes all linguistic attempts to grasp him. Nahmanides' God is a god of history, affected by and interacting with the material world, responding to human conduct, and intervening in temporal matters, while Maimonides' divine Being transcends all time and space so absolutely as to allow for no possible nexus between them. He is absolute perfection and therefore stable, constant, immutable, and invulnerable by definition to any affectation. Miracles are a commonplace of Nahmanides' world; he considers belief in them as the basic fabric of the world and a fundamental principle of faith, going so far as to state that "no one has a portion in the Torah unless he believes that everything about us and all our occurrences consist of miracles and are not nature or order at all."³ Natural causation, however, is the operative rule of Maimonides' universe,⁴ rendering it virtually impenetrable by any divine historical intervention subsequent to creation; his operative principle is captured by the rabbinic maxim "The world goes its customary way" (*olam keminhago noheg*), of which he was particularly fond.⁵

As a result, their disagreement on the nature of Judaism is nothing less than theologically schismatic.⁶ Maimonides would have considered Nahmanides' worship either directed toward a nonexistent deity, at best, or idolatry, at worst. Nahmanides would counter that Maimonides philosophically emasculated God to such an extent as to vacate spirituality and worship of any relational dimensions

² See Harry Wolfson, "Maimonides on the Negative Attributes," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, (New York: AAJR, 1945), 411–46.

³ *Commentary*, Exod. 13:16. שאין לאדם חלק בתורת משה רבינו עד שנאמין בכל דברינו ומקרינו שכלם נסים אין בהם טבע. ומנהגו של עולם. See also Sermon on Kohelet, in *Writings of R. Moses ben Nahman (Kitvei Ramban)* (Heb.), 2 vols. (hereafter KR), ed. Chaim Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1971), 1:192.

⁴ See his commentary to m. Avot 5:6 and chap. 8 of the *Eight Chapters* regarding ten miraculous events "created" during the twilight hours on the sixth day of creation. According to Maimonides, these are particularized by their specific time of input but are emblematic of all miracles, having been pre-programmed at Creation, only at different intervals of the Genesis account. However, in *Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), II:29, p. 345, he seems to accept the occurrence of miracles but limits their duration. Some scholars have argued that Maimonides shifted his position on miracles from the maximalist one taken in the PM to a more moderate view in the GP. See Hannah Kasher, "Biblical Miracles and the Universality of Natural Laws: Maimonides' Three Methods of Harmonization," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1998): 25–52; Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Maimonides and Miracles: The Growth of a (Dis)belief," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 147–72; and Kenneth Seeskin's discussion of miracles in *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 160–65. Whatever his position is on miracles, though, it cannot entail some change in God.

⁵ See GP, II:19, 25, 29 and Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead, chap. 6. Nahmanides specifically targets this maxim as one subscribed to by Maimonides indicating a disbelief in the uninterrupted divine governance of the world by way of miracles: *Torat HaShem Temimah* (hereafter TT), in KR, vol. 1, p. 153.

⁶ For a good overview of the fundamental differences see Jose Faur, "Two Models of Jewish Spirituality," *Shofar* 10, no. 3 (1992): 5–46, who details how the Andalusian tradition represented by Maimonides was "systematically challenged" by Nahmanides (19).

traditionally associated with them, leaving a lifeless, sterile faith, absent a divine presence in history. Indeed, Nahmanides considers belief in natural causation over an all-encompassing miraculous order tantamount to one of the most egregious theological offenses, which would “exclude one from any portion in the Torah of Moses our Master,”⁷ implicitly disqualifying Maimonidean naturalism as a legitimate Jewish belief. Though David Berger has convincingly argued for a much-tempered understanding of Nahmanides’ apparently extreme dismissal of nature, where “except in the rarest of instances, the natural order governs the lives of non-Jews, both individually and collectively, as well as the overwhelming majority of Jews,”⁸ Nahmanides’ views on nature and miracles are still fundamentally opposed to the Maimonidean model. This is especially so regarding the relationship between intellectual perfection and providence, which Maimonides views as one of direct one-to-one correspondence, while to Nahmanides, as Berger also notes, “[t]his central point of the *Guide* vanishes entirely.”⁹ These alternative theological frameworks within which the two expressed their Judaism in turn shape their accounts of the origins of their religion, shared perhaps in name only, and its biblical founding fathers. As such, they provide alternative memories and historical consciousnesses from which emerge opposing definitions of what constitutes Jewishness.

Any investigation of these alternatives must first focus on their differing views of the purpose served by the historical dimension of the Torah. The opposition between Maimonides’ and Nahmanides’ overarching alternative rationales underlying the benefits of biblical narratives could not be more pronounced. Nahmanides subscribes to a cyclical view of Israelite history as a perpetual reenactment of its biblical antecedents, encapsulated by the rabbinic adage that “everything that happened to the fathers is an indication of what will happen to the children.”¹⁰ Indeed, the biblical annals enfold all of human history as indicated by the verse *This is the book of the generations of Adam*, taken literally to refer to the Torah, “which in its entirety is a record of the history of man.”¹¹ The first couple is named corporately by the generic term Adam, or species, “because all of them [mankind] are contained in them potentially.”¹² The same verse reiterates Adam’s origins on the day he was created *in the image*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 107–28, at 126.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁰ See *Commentary*, Gen. 12:6, where he offers this as a guiding principle of the biblical patriarchal narratives. Amos Funkenstein noted the Christian influence that inspired Nahmanides’ typological exegesis with some essential differences, but in essence all the biblical characters are “historiosophical symbols,” that “foreshadow, prefigure, and even predetermine events in the future of Israel.” See his *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 114–15.

¹¹ *Commentary*, Gen. 5:1, p. 47.

¹² *Ibid.*

of God, “to stipulate that he is the work of God and the image of God.” What follows, then, is that history charts not just mortal events, but divine life as well, since the human species is invested with a divine component. The Garden of Eden story, for example, transpires along parallel lower and upper lines, the human characters and environment mirrored by their metaphysical counterparts within the divine realm.¹³ Mortal history, and singularly Jewish history, discloses mythic history.¹⁴

However, general history is ancillary to Jewish history, and the patriarchal narratives where it all begins map out particularly the nation of Israel’s political and spiritual future. The historical record is crucial for Nahmanides, not for any arcane scholarly appeal, but for elevating Jewish history to a metaphysical plane that expresses the unfolding of divine will and governance. The actual physical enactment of those narratives recorded in the Bible ensures their reenactment in Israel’s future, just as prophets often instantiate their predictions with physical acts to secure their realization.¹⁵ More importantly, the biblical record becomes a crystal ball through which Israel’s immediate destiny can be envisaged, “for when a circumstance of one of the patriarchs occurs one can better understand from it what is decreed to occur to his descendants.”¹⁶ Biblical history is so all-encompassing as to collapse all of Jewish history throughout time, including post-biblical history, into biblical time, as he concludes in his summary of the book of Genesis: it is “a book of the formation (*yetzirah*) regarding the creation (*hidush*) of the world and the formation of all that has been formed, and all the events of the fathers that are like a formation (*yetzirah*) for their descendants

¹³ See Bezalel Safran, “Rabbi Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban)*, 75–106.

¹⁴ Nahmanides comments, for example, on Deuteronomy 21:22 that a midrashic analogy of God and Israel to “twin brothers” “contains a secret.” As Elliot Wolfson astutely comments, “For Nahmanides, Israel below and God above are not brothers only in a figurative sense but they are so in a mystical sense, for the secret he alludes to here involves the symbolic, and hence ontological parallelism between the Jewish soul and the divine paradigm.” In “By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides’ Kabbalistic Hermeneutic,” *AJS Review* 14, no. 2 (1989): 103–78, at 161.

¹⁵ *Commentary*, Gen. 12:6, 1:77.

ודע כי כל גזירת עירין כאשר תצא מכה גזירה אל פועל דמיון, תהיה הגזירה מתקיימת על כל פנים. ולכן יעשו הנביאים מעשה בנבואות . . . ולפיכך החזיק הקדוש ברוך הוא את אברהם בארץ ועשה לו דמיונות בכל העתיד להעשות בורעו, והבן זה. Interestingly, Nahmanides’ perspective here adumbrates modern scholarly interpretations of concrete symbolic prophetic actions accompanying prophecies, referred to by those such as J. Lindblom as a “visible word” paralleling the divine word where “such an action served not only to represent and make evident a particular fact, but also to make this fact a reality.” See *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 172. For Maimonides, these actions are extremely problematic if taken literally, for they would have God “turn his prophets into a laughingstock and a mockery for fools by ordering them to carry out crazy actions.” They are therefore to be taken as visionary rather than historical enactments. See GP, II:46. Once again, this highlights Maimonides’ systematic devaluation of the Bible’s historicity in favor of the reality of the mind.

¹⁶ *Commentary*, *ibid.*

כי כאשר יבוא המקרה לנביא משלש האבות יתבונן ממנו הדבר הנגזר לבא לזרעו

since all their occurrences are *figurae (tziyurei)* of things alluding to and informing about everything that will happen to them in the future.”¹⁷ The entire book is about creation in the clever way Nahmanides manipulates the term “formation,” which is the type of creation that transpires after the initial big bang of *hidush*. All the patriarchal narratives are creation stories as well in the sense that they prefigure and generate all of Jewish destiny.¹⁸ The book of Genesis is entirely about creation – the creation of the world and the creation of history. Maimonides, however, who views the Torah functionally, as an ideal teaching concerned with thought and practice, reads the biblical chronicles in kind as a primer.¹⁹ Their role in the Torah’s uniquely ideal blending of practical and theoretical philosophy is supplemental to the overall teaching in clarifying law and ethics, for “either they give a correct notion of an opinion that is a pillar of the Law, or they rectify some action so that mutual wrongdoing and aggression should not occur between men.” In some sense, Maimonides’ view of narratives prefigures the legal philosopher Robert Cover’s groundbreaking study “Nomos and Narrative,” which argues for the mutual integration of law and narrative using the biblical canon as his paradigm in which “every prescription is insistent in its demand to be located in discourse . . . and every narrative is insistent in its demand for its prescriptive point, its moral.”²⁰ The biblical narratives can be viewed as a kind of legal storytelling, which assume their formal shape in biblical law.

A paradigmatic case in point that highlights the two contrasting models of biblical history is the curiously extraneous account of various internecine military battles between ancient Near Eastern kings in Genesis 14. That passage culminates with Abraham’s defeat of one of them, rescuing his nephew Lot who had been taken captive, and retrieving all his possessions that had been seized. For Nahmanides, those seemingly inconsequential events are in fact of utmost

¹⁷ *Commentary*, 1:279.

שהוא ספר היצירה בחדוש העולם ויצירת כל נוצר ובמקרי האבות שהם כענין יצירה לזרעם מפני שכל מקריהם ציורי דברים לרמוז ולהודיע כל עתיד לבא להם I have adopted Amos Funkenstein’s translation of *tziyurei devarim* as “*figurae*,” which is a conscious approximation of the Christian equivalent of prefiguration. See his *Perceptions*, 112–13.

¹⁸ The reason these biblical narratives achieve this relates to the nature of the text they are embedded in, which, according to Nahmanides, preceded the creation in a different form captured by the phrase “black fire on white fire.” The Torah, therefore, is, as Nina Caputo correctly states, “divorced from temporality or historical circumstance, and according to Nahmanides’ reading, it transcends and defines time.” See “*In the Beginning . . . Typology, History, and the Unfolding Meaning of Creation in Nahmanides’ Exegesis*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 1 (1999): 54–82, at 67.

¹⁹ It should be noted that both these views of biblical history do not treat it as historiography and are no exceptions to Yerushalmi’s determination that “historiography never served as a primary vehicle for Jewish memory in the Middle Ages.” Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 39.

²⁰ *Narrative, Violence and the Law*, ed. M. Minnow et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 95–172, at 96.

consequence in not only presaging the ultimate political redemption of the Jews but in guaranteeing it. The four kings portend the four political empires within whose oppressive orbit Israel will be caught, climaxing in the final overthrow of Edom, the medieval sobriquet for Rome or Christianity, whose repressive hand is the lived experience of Jews contemporaneous with Nahmanides' own time.²¹

There is no historical significance to this narrative either for Israel's past or future for Maimonides, and it is of no interest as history per se.²² First, its miraculous historical facticity is confined to Abraham's experience alone, simply "making known to us" a military victory he achieved against all odds. More importantly, its relevance is in its portrayal of Abraham as a political and moral archetype for human values in general. His actions are a testament to the power of ideas and common beliefs as a socially cohesive force since it "gives us knowledge of his defense of his relative because of the latter's sharing his belief" (GP, III:50, p. 614). In addition, Abraham's refusal of any material gain offered him as tribute for his victory is emblematic of an ethical constitution that is easily contented, eschews material gain, and is "of a striving for moral nobility" (614).²³ What is critical to note here is that Maimonides' view of the utility of this memory coincides with his notion of a national identity that is forged by knowledge rather than ethnicity. Abraham's courageous self-sacrifice specifically for a blood relative is precisely tailored to accentuate this notion. It is decidedly not motivated by tribal attachment or biological ancestry, as one would expect, but because of Lot's "sharing his belief." Abraham does not risk his life for his nephew out of devotion to family but rather out of dedication to opinions mutually held by the two. The lesson is that ideas, not blood, bind a nation together. That is why in Maimonides' writings one is considered to be of the "seed of Abraham" (*zera avraham*), the phrase commonly denoting Abraham's descendants, not by virtue of a common ancestor, but by how one conducts oneself. As Maimonides asserts, "It follows that he alone is a descendant of Abraham (*zera avraham*) who maintains his religion (*dat* or law) and his straight way,"²⁴ the implication being that Jewish heredity is a function of ethics. Consequently, ancestral claims are forged not in genetics, but in conduct that manifests notions of morality "fathered" by Abraham. Thus, while for Nahmanides Jewish history inheres in Abraham's biography both physically and metaphysically, to be played out by his biological descendants, for Maimonides Abraham's life provides a manual on how to qualify as his ideological offspring.

²¹ המעשה הזה אירע לאברהם להורות כי ארבע מלכיות תעמודנה למשול בעולם ובסוף יתגברו בניו עליהם ויפלו כלם בידם, וישבו כל שבותם ורכושם. *Commentary*, Gen. 14:1.

²² For Maimonides' conceptions of history, see David Novak, "Does Maimonides Have a Philosophy of History?" *Proceedings of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy* 4 (1983).

²³ Abraham's selfless sacrifice for Lot's safety is also identified as the trait of the "good eye" associated with Abraham, the imitation of which warrants classification as a "disciple of Abraham." See Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Avot, 5:17, p. 303.

²⁴ MT, Kings 10:7.

It is trite to state that Jews throughout history have traced the roots of their Jewishness back to the first biblical patriarch Abraham, beginning with his initial divine encounter in Genesis 12:1, when Abraham is ordered by God to abandon his own familial roots for a yet to be disclosed destination. On its biblical face, Jewish history is grounded in a naive break with the past for an indeterminate future. However, as with all the Hebrew biblical narratives, this offers only a skeletal account, one that is, as Erich Auerbach famously characterized it, “fraught with background,”²⁵ inviting the embellishment and “gap-filling” that the subsequent rabbinic midrashic tradition so enthusiastically provides. That tradition did not cease with the end of the classical rabbinic period in the first five or so centuries of the common era, but continued with a flurry of medieval exegetical activity in a recurring reconstruction of Abraham’s pioneering challenges to the pagan ideology of his time.

Here is a prime illustration of the way in which Jewish thought advances in the shadow of Maimonides by exegetical subversion. Although apparently adopting Maimonides’ version of Abraham’s beginnings by directly citing the pertinent section in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III:29, pp. 514–15), Nahmanides subtly substitutes its theological tendentiousness with his own. Maimonides depicts Abraham as engaging in persistent debate against pagan belief which, much like Socrates’ indictment for corrupting the youth in Athens, is viewed as politically subversive, causing the king to first imprison him, then confiscate all his property, and finally expel him (515). Abraham’s success, eventually garnering “the consensus of the greater part of the population of the earth,” was due to his formidable powers of persuasion in convincing others as to the truths of monotheism. However, while deferring to Maimonides’ historical rendering,²⁶ Nahmanides at the same time subverts its naturalistic attribution of Abraham’s accomplishments in favor of a supranatural one that singles out its miraculous nature: “Regardless, in that place of Ur Kasdim, *either a miracle or hidden miracle*, was performed on behalf of Abraham our father in that the king was moved to save him and not execute him and release him from prison without constraints, or it was a *renowned miracle* in being rescued from a pit of fire as our Rabbis have said” (emphasis mine).²⁷

Except as an object of Abraham’s own independent intellectual efforts, God’s participation, if any, is minimized in Maimonidean Abrahamic achievements,

²⁵ Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

²⁶ *Commentary*, 1:72–73, and its parallel in Nahmanides’ *Torat Hashem Temimah: Kitvei HaRamban* (Writings), 1:145, which approvingly cited Maimonides’ account of Abraham’s rabble-rousing in Kutha based on the pagan Sabian historical source, *The Nabatean Agriculture*, in GP, III:29, 513–14. See also Maimonides’ parallel account in MT, Idolatry, 1:3. See also b. Bava Batra 91a for differences of opinion on Abraham’s time spent in Kutha and for one that identifies it with Ur Kasdim.

²⁷ Gen. 11:28: והנה על כל פנים במקום ההוא בארץ כשדים נעשה נס לאברהם אבינו, או נס נסתר, שנתן בלב אותו המלך להצילו ושלא ימיתנו והוציא אותו מבית הסוהר שילך לנפשו, או נס מפורסם שהשליכו לכבשן האש וניצל כדברי רבותינו

while Nahmanides charts Abraham's evolving personality along a divinely orchestrated script. Both construct "mythic" origins in their own ideal images of the Jew and the nation of Israel. If the primary mandate of the Jew is to know the existence of God and his unity, not via revelation or tradition, but by human reason, a mandate shared with all of humanity, then the Jewish story must begin in kind. It does so with a human being, having been raised in a culture steeped in pagan theology, who perfects his humanity by philosophical demonstration arriving *sui generis*, not being the beneficiary of any monotheistic tradition, at the truth of one God. He then gains followers by teaching other human beings to follow suit, and uniting them by a "way of truth" into a community that coalesces as a "nation that knows God."²⁸ The political glue of this nation is a shared knowledge of universal truths rather than a common ethnicity, or, as Nahmanides would have it in his own subscription to the rabbinic maxim, "Israel has no *mazel*,"²⁹ the singular focus of divine attention enjoyed by no other nation. While Maimonides does refer to Abraham's escape aided by a "miracle" in his parallel *Mishneh Torah* account, it is conspicuously missing in the relevant passage in the *Guide* to which Nahmanides refers, and plays no ensuing role in gaining adherents to Abraham's ideological camp in either account.³⁰ Nahmanides, though, places the miracle front and center as the cause of Abraham's fame and influence, as conveyed by his comments on the significance of the name *Ur Kasdim*, taking the very name of the city from which Abraham was banished as commemorating the miracle for "the place was called that [taking *Ur* in the sense of flame] because of the miracle."³¹

Nahmanides further reshapes, or rather with this move contorts, Maimonides' account, by drawing an analogy between Abraham's release from *Ur Kasdim* and Israel's later liberation from Egypt, in that both are attributed to the same divine activity of "brought you out" (*hotzetikha*). This term, according to Nahmanides, uniquely denotes a miracle, and

²⁸ MT, *Idolatry*, 1:1.

²⁹ See b. *Sabbath* 156a. According to Nahmanides, the world is governed by a myriad of powers, with each individual nation subjected to the authority of one or the other. Israel is distinct in its direct governance by God. See *Commentary*, Gen. 15:18, 17:1; Exod. 12:3, 20:2; Lev. 18:25; Num. 11:16; Deut. 4:19.

³⁰ In the MT version of Abraham's career, the detail that "a miracle was performed on his behalf" is overshadowed in the larger narrative of Abraham's natural efforts of persuasion. Maimonides may have inserted it there as a minor concession to the more general audience of the MT most familiar with the midrashic tale of Abraham's miraculous escape from a fiery furnace. It can also be read more naturally by its more intellectually sophisticated audience as a euphemism for any escape from imminent disaster, as the same phrase (*na'aseh lo nes*) is used in MT, *Divorce*, 12:5.

³¹ The miracle is maintained consistently as the focal point of Abraham's life, gaining him followers and fame. Later, according to Nahmanides, a miracle is performed on behalf of a foreign king "in honor of Abraham," thus further corroborating the veracity of the miracle that rescued Abraham, for "if a miracle was performed for the king of Sodom in honour of Abraham, how much more probable would it be to believe that a miracle was performed on behalf of Abraham himself to save his life" (*Commentary*, Gen. 14:10).

therefore the verse states I am the God who brought you out (*hotzetikha*) of Ur Kasdim to give you this land as an inheritance (Gen. 15:7), as the term *hotzetikha* connotes a miracle, for it did not state who took you out of (*lokahtikha*) Ur Kasdim but rather *hotzetikha*, indicating that He brought out a captive from prison just like who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exod. 20:2).³²

Nahmanides’ originating myth places Abraham’s historical debut, as a micro-cosmic focus of divine attention, on a continuum macrocosmically with Israel’s, anchoring them both in the miracle. The historical retrieval of Abraham’s biography is a retrojection of the way he conceives of the first of the Ten Commandments, which conditions belief in the existence of God on a miracle and a particular historical experience of it. As he asserts:

It states *who brought you out of Egypt* for bringing them out from there teaches divine existence and will since we went out from there through His knowledge and providence, and it also teaches creation, because nature cannot change if it is eternal, and it teaches His power, which in turn teaches His unity . . . and this is the reason for *who brought you out* (*hotzetikha*) for they know and are witnesses to all these things.³³

Maimonides’ formulation of the first commandment strategically omits the second half of the verse referring to the historical Exodus, and presents only the first half as its biblical source: *I am the Lord your God*. The exodus is neither a reenactment of Abraham’s political travails, nor a presentation of empirical data that substantiates God’s existence. Divine will, miracles, and eyewitness observation play no role in establishing the veracity of God’s being for Maimonides, whereas the independent exertion of human thought does. Abraham is the founder of Israel because he conveyed universal truths through the medium of reasoned instruction. Abraham is constructed as the Socrates of his age who first reasons the existence of God by “thinking and wondering day and night,” until he “attained the way of truth and apprehended the correct line of thought,” and then proselytizes that truth in kind by “sowing doubt,” “engaging in debate,” “informing,” “overpowering with demonstration,” “accumulating a following,” informing each follower “in accordance with his capacity,” and ultimately “authoring treatises.”³⁴ Successive generations, although privileged with seasoned teachers and textual guides, cannot receive their identities by simple

³² Commentary, Gen. 11:28 רמב"ן בראשית פרק יא

וזהו שאמר הכתוב (להלן טו ז) אני ה' אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים לתת לך את הארץ הזאת לרשתה, כי מלת "הוצאתיך" תלמד על נס, כי לא אמר

"אשר לקחתיך מאור כשדים", אבל אמר "הוצאתיך", שהוציא ממסגר אסיר, כמו אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים

³³ Commentary, Exod. 20:2:

אמר אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים, כי הוצאתם משם תורה על המציאות ועל החפץ

כי בידיעה ובהשגחה ממנו יצאנו משם, וגם תורה על החדוש, כי עם קדמות העולם לא ישתנה דבר מטבעו, ותורה על היכולת, והיכולת תורה

על הייחוד, כמו שאמר (לעיל ט יד) בעבור תדע כי אין כמוני בכל הארץ. וזה טעם אשר הוצאתיך, כי הם היודעים ועדים בכל אלה

³⁴ MT Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim, (Laws of Idolatry) 1:3. Similarly, the parallel passage in GP, II:39, portrays Abraham having “assembled the people and called them by way of teaching and

transmission, but must reestablish them anew by approximating Abraham's lead. Jewish identity is perpetuated by self-generated convictions based on philosophical demonstration, guiding others in that same methodology, and leaving written testaments to it for posterity.

Nahmanides' schema, however, of the Jewish historical continuum remains uninterrupted by the intergenerational relay of memory as the instrumental vehicle for preserving the correct God concept. Jewishness is in part passed on and received. Those essential monotheistic principles regarding the existence of God and his nature are perpetuated by recalling the witnessing of those original events that testify to them. Nahmanides imports the same rationale he offered for the first commandment's conditioning of knowing God's existence on the deliverance from Egypt to the parental prescription for transmitting the details of the Exodus to children. The Bible standardizes those historical details as a formulaic response to children's inquiries about the rationale for the commandments. When the child asks about them, a filial inquiry traditionally associated with Passover, the response is prescribed, consisting of God's "bringing us out" of Egypt by way of the miracles He performed "in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his house in front of our eyes" (Deut. 6:21–22). The reason for this specific response, Nahmanides claims, is

precisely the same as why it refers to *who brought you out of Egypt* in the Ten Commandments . . . and that is the reason the verse states *in front of our eyes* because we are the ones who know and are witnesses to the signs and miracles for we saw there that our Lord is the God in heaven and earth and there is none beside Him since all this is known through the Exodus as I explained the first commandment.³⁵

For Maimonides, there is a general functional rationale for all holidays that serves emotional, social, and political needs, since "they are all for rejoicings and pleasurable gatherings which in most cases are indispensable for man; they are also useful in the establishment of friendship, which must exist among people living in political societies" (GP, III:43, p. 570). The particular purpose of Passover is to inculcate a moral as well as an opinion that "consists in the commemoration of the miracles of Egypt and in the perpetuation of their memory throughout the periods of time" (572). Passover observance conjures up a nation conceived out of an experience of miracles whose memory must be perpetuated as a testament to a creator God but not as *proof* of it. Creation out of nothing eludes unequivocal philosophical demonstration, but is accepted on a balance of arguments so that biblical law, miracles, and sanctions for proper conduct are not vitiated since belief in an eternal world "destroys the Law in its

instruction to adhere to the truth that he had grasped . . . attracting them by means of eloquent speeches and by means of the benefits he conferred upon them" (379).

³⁵ *Commentary*, Deut. 6:20: והכונה בזה, הוא הטעם במה שאמר בעשרת הדברות (לעיל ה' 1) אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים, 6:20: כי יתכוון שנודיע לבן השואל כי ה' הוא הבורא והחפץ והיכול כאשר נתבאר לנו ביציאת מצרים. וזה טעם "לענינו", כי אנחנו היודעים ועדים מן האותות והמופתים שראינו שם כי השם אלהינו הוא האלהים בשמים ובארץ ואין עוד מלבדו, כי כל זה יודע ביציאת מצרים כאשר פירשתי בדבור הראשון

principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out" (GP, II:25, p. 328). For Maimonides, memory and history serve to preserve the community, to consolidate the social unit, and to buttress the Torah, its foundational constitution, which provides the framework in which each individual must cultivate independently the fundamentals of religion related to the knowledge of God. In other words, their national Jewishness is expressed through a shared history while their "religious" identity is expressed autonomously. For Nahmanides, on the other hand, memory and history intrinsically promote those fundamentals with the knowledge of and belief in God emerging organically from a retelling of the past.

Maimonides' version of the Sinaitic revelation replicates Abraham's intellectual journey on a national scale for each and every individual present, who, according to a prominent rabbinic tradition, heard the first two commandments, *I and Thou shalt not have*, directly from God (*mipi hagevurah* – *from the mouth of the Force*). He interprets this to mean that the people bypassed Moses in accessing the two truths of divine existence and unity since "they are knowable by human speculation alone . . . with regard to everything that can be known by demonstration, the status of the prophet and that of everyone else who knows it are equal" (GP, II:33, p. 364). The rabbinic understanding of the divine immediacy of the first two commandments is turned on its head by Maimonides to one that displaces God from any involvement in their apprehension, severing Him from the sensual experience, except as the object of human thought. However, the other commandments are Mosaicly mediated since "they belong to the class of generally accepted opinions and those adopted in virtue of tradition, not to the class of the intellecta" (364). Knowledge concerned with politics, ethics, and correct conduct, as opposed to that concerned with universal absolute truths, is subjective and therefore fickle, requiring the ordinances of an expert in governance, a prophet, or a "philosopher king," to maintain an ordered society. The shift from the noetic quality of the first two commandments to the others echoes the intellectual journey of primordial Adam, whose intellectual focus declined from one centered on universal truths (true and false) to one on "generally accepted things . . . judging things to be bad or fine" (GP, I:2, p. 25). This reconstruction of the Sinaitic theophany startlingly imbues the core of what is supremely emblematic of Israel's particularity, chosenness, and uniqueness, with a universal dimension or the state of the human condition. When Jews recollect their historically pristine formative moment, they are at the same time projected back to the embryonic historical moment of all humankind.

While Maimonides traces a history of the Jewish origins from Abraham to Sinai that evolves, and at times devolves, along intellectual patterns, Nahmanides plots one that is animated by miracles – a transcendent history of a people who are witnesses to the transtemporal and transnatural within time and nature. Nahmanides' view of the direct communication of the first two commandments is the mirror image of that of Maimonides, who anchored them in reason. It is the

quality of divine communication that distinguishes the first two commandments from the others, whereby the first two are heard and comprehended while the rest are articulated by an unintelligible sound made intelligible by Moses' elucidation of them. The midrashic intent is so that "*all are prophets* with respect to belief in God and the prohibition against idolatry, for they are the foundation of the entire Torah and the commandments" (emphasis mine). Where Maimonides equalizes all of Israel and Moses in the intersection of intellect, all being engaged in the same philosophical quest, Nahmanides equalizes them in a prophetic experience that uniformly renders them privy to a divine revelation of the same content. Only a miraculous channel can access a being defined by miracles, or one that intervenes supranaturally into nature and history, as opposed to the Maimonidean deity who is defined by the simple ontology of an irrefutable necessary existence.

These opposing notions of what determines the contours of Jewish historical consciousness translate concretely into a halakhic debate concerning normative expressions of memory mandated by the Torah. The positive injunctions for transmitting the memories of both Sinai and the Exodus are reinforced by negative admonitions to inhibit the loss of those memories prescribing the greatest of precautions "*so that you do not forget the things you saw with your own eyes and so they do not fade from your mind as long as you live*" (Deut. 4:9), in the case of the events at Sinai, and "*so you do not forget the Lord who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage*" (6:12), in the case of the liberation from Egyptian servitude. Nahmanides considers these to consist of formal laws and vigorously challenges Maimonides' conspicuous omission of these two legislative prescriptions in his enumeration of the negative commandments. The latter is so paramount as to constitute the negative concomitant of the very first positive commandment to believe in the existence of God, since its intent is to preserve the memory of "what transpired in the exodus from Egypt that was realized by new signs and miracles changing nature indicating a pre-existent God that wills, is powerful, and creates, for this matter of the exodus from Egypt for those who are familiar with it silences any denier in the creation of the world and sustains the belief in God's knowledge, providence, and power over all generalities and particulars."³⁶ Likewise does Nahmanides take Maimonides to task for "forgetting" to enumerate a mandate "not to forget" the Sinaitic theophany that establishes beyond all doubt its historical veracity and which all are obligated "not to be remiss in their transmission to all children and descendants of all future posterity."³⁷

Maimonides' only juridic citation of Deuteronomy 4:9 is of its latter half, "*and you shall make it known to your children and children's children,*" to endorse the extension of the obligation to teach Torah beyond the first generation.³⁸ This halakhic dispute crystallizes conflicting views on the purpose

³⁶ *Sefer HaMitzvot*, ed. Shabse Frankel (New York: Congregation Bnei Yosef, 1995), 406.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ MT, Torah Study, 1:2.

of commemorating national history with far-reaching implications for sustaining national survival, which hinges on parental nurturing. For Nahmanides the fundamental teaching that forges the generational links in the chain of Judaism is the historical narratives of its origins. Recollecting the past constitutes the very essence of the “Jewishness” imparted from parent to child because the past is an intrinsic vehicle for theology. Maimonides’ normative reading of Deuteronomy 4:9 adopts an unequivocal rabbinic application of the verse to the general prescription of teaching Torah to children. Nahmanides acknowledges the problem of the apparent inconsistency between his interpretation of the verse and that of a long-standing rabbinic one but resolves it with a casuistry that sharply distinguishes his view of Jewish survival, and the role of memory in ensuring it, from that of Maimonides. Nahmanides asserts the identity of his reading with the classic rabbinic derivation of simply teaching Torah by equating the “teaching of faith in the Torah” with “the teaching of Torah.”³⁹ The primary goal of teaching Torah is not to impart knowledge and to train one in the art of deduction and independent derivation of it, but to perpetuate the memory of an originating event on which all Jewish faith hinges. Nahmanides reduces the rudimentary mitzvah of transgenerational teaching to the inculcation of a national memory, while Maimonides simply views it as the art of pedagogy and all that is associated with it in cultivating the next generation of autonomously thinking human beings who can proceed in kind with their successors.

Their respective positions on the content of transmission in the perpetuation of Judaism also explains their differing conceptions of the relationship between parent and child. When accounting for the order of the Ten Commandments, Nahmanides relates the first four to the most important principles regarding God – unity, governance, omnipotence, omniscience, providence – and their practical grounding in the concrete action of Sabbath observance. The remainder deals with “corporeal matters and begins with the father for just as you are commanded to honour the first Creator, so I command you to honour the second creator who brought you into existence and they are the father and mother.”⁴⁰ The parallel drawn between the earthly and heavenly creator is critical since all knowledge about the latter is inherently substantiated by the former. Constructed as a creator/creation relationship, every gesture of respect by the child evokes the primary Creator since it is inspired by the parent as a living signifier of the deity. In addition, the truth of the Creation is authenticated by an uninterrupted succession of parents and children that can be traced back to Adam as recorded in the Bible. Moses’ father saw Levi, who in turn saw Jacob, who himself studied with Shem the son of Noah, who personally experienced the Flood which then corroborates creation, “for whoever admits to the Flood, by

³⁹ כי לימוד אמונת התורה הוא הלימוד בתורה

⁴⁰ KR, vol. 1, TT, p. 152.

necessity admits to the creation of the world.”⁴¹ Finally, the evidentiary chain of earthly creators culminates in the heavenly creator since Adam, its primogenitor, “was aware that he himself was alone in the world without a father or mother.” Thus, any warrant of respect by the parent from the child conjures the one who had no parent, transporting the child along finite regress that ends only penultimately in primordial man and ultimately, by inference, in the Creator. For Maimonides the duty to respect parents is purely a function of political and social welfare that “preserves correct relations between human beings,” and whose goals are accomplished in this world since, “if one conducts himself in this way and another does the same, he will benefit from its effect.”⁴² Respect for parents does not generate a historical continuum back to primordial time but instigates benefits contemporaneous with its performance, guaranteeing treatment in kind, for “if you don’t respect your father, your son will not respect you.”⁴³ Identity, as defined by the tenets of Jewish faith, for Nahmanides is transferred by parental pronouncements, and the respect commanded by parents preserves the integrity of its transfer, while for Maimonides it simply maintains an environment within which the independent shaping of identity can flourish.

A striking distinction on the details of Judaism’s origins through Abraham’s own discovery of monotheism (or, more appropriately in Nahmanides’ case, monolatry) crystallizes much of what has been discussed to this point. Abraham’s intellectual journey toward the truths of a single creator deity is initiated *sui generis* within the Maimonidean version. Having been raised in a thoroughly pagan culture, Abraham, Maimonides recounts, independently began to question the regnant ideology while still a minor, emphasizing a consummate intellectual void within which his philosophical doubts germinated – “and he had no teacher, and no one to inform him as to anything, but he was steeped among the ignorant idolaters in Ur Kasdim. And his father, his mother, and the entire nation were idol worshippers, and he worshipped along with them.”⁴⁴ Biblical genealogy, Nahmanides calculates, has Abraham’s and Noah’s lives overlap, and therefore, in opposition to the utter monotheistic vacuum suffused by its absolute idolatrous antithesis in which Maimonides first locates him, Abraham does in fact have a mentor in his quest for theological truths. As he insists, in a passage that actually begins by subscribing to Maimonides’ historical reconstruction, “Abraham, our ancestor, conversed with Noah, the second Adam to the creation, who, with his children, reported to him about the Flood, their stay in the ark, their departure from the ark and how the world was renewed like the day of creation.”⁴⁵ Since, according to

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴² PM, Peah 1:1.

⁴³ GP, III:40.

⁴⁴ MT, Idolatry, 1:3.

⁴⁵ KR, TT, p.145.

Nahmanides, the Flood is proof of creation *ex nihilo*, Abraham was educated in it by those who could provide firsthand testimony as to its historical veracity.

Inasmuch as history provides incontrovertible evidence of the foundational principles of Jewish belief, Nahmanides cannot tolerate any radical breaches in its continuous flow. Abraham must have some historical nexus to the creation via those who witnessed it. A succession of fathers who preserve that memory is crucial for Jewish survival as a faith. Maimonidean history, on the other hand, is punctured by a series of caesuras where ideas have been near irrevocably lost, only to be autonomously retrieved and reintroduced by outstanding individuals such as Abraham. Since it is not history that demonstrates an idea but the intrinsic cogency of philosophical argument, Maimonides cannot only dispense with the carriers of history and historical memory embodied by parents, but actually necessitates it in order to inculcate how truth is preserved – that is, not by history but by independent thought. The lesson of Maimonides' reconstructed history is for its expandability in the ongoing process of generating thought anew each generation.

An instructive model that practically manifests theoretical conceptions of identity, belonging, and the role of memory in a group, is the outsider who somehow gains entry into a group, and how that newly enlisted member is viewed by others already well ensconced within the establishment. In the case of religion, and in our particular discussion of Judaism, that model is of course the convert and what kind of a welcome is extended to the convert by the veteran members of the group. In this model, it is the significance of initiation into the group by way of circumcision, the supreme symbol of entry into the Jewish covenant, and thus of Jewishness, that underscores the difference between Nahmanides and Maimonides on identity. Though the topic is large and has been dealt with extensively and cogently by Josef Stern,⁴⁶ suffice it for our purposes to summarize that circumcision for Maimonides serves utilitarian purposes theologically, socially, and ethically. Socially, it promotes empathy and cohesion among its bearers, while ethically it diminishes that sensual aspect of man that Maimonides most abhors as a distraction from intellectual endeavors. Most importantly, it signifies an incomparably ardent commitment to the theological and philosophical tenets of Judaism as fostered by Abraham, its founding father. One of the most radical halakhic implications of this conception of circumcision is Maimonides' unique and, in defiance of accepted rabbinic law to the contrary, ingenious subsuming of the descendants of Ishmael, in other words Muslims, in the obligation of circumcision.⁴⁷ While this ruling is not

⁴⁶ *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), chap. 5, "Maimonides on the Parable of Circumcision," and Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 146–54.

⁴⁷ MT, Kings, 10:7–8. See Josef Stern's discussion at 95–98. As he concludes, Islam satisfies all of Maimonides' criteria for membership in his category of the "Abrahamic covenant," which is not

surprising given Maimonides' biographical account of Abraham's turn to monotheism, subsequent formation of a monotheistic community bound ideologically, and classification of Islam in his time as pure monotheism, it is nothing less than revolutionary considering rabbinic jurisprudence on the matter.⁴⁸ What is traditionally the quintessential insignia of exclusiveness and parochialism in the construction of Jewish identity is deconstructed into an inclusive gesture that transcends ethnicity and heredity precisely because history and national memory are not the essential ingredients of Abrahamic descent.

Nahmanides, who views the lives of Abraham and the other patriarchs as not just prefiguring Jewish history, but embodying it, cannot tolerate a covenantal inscription that is decoupled from the body. That is why Nahmanides reads Genesis 17:4, "*Behold my covenant is with you and you shall be a father to all the nations,*" in a way that conditions the second half of the divine pronouncement on the first. The covenant is identified as circumcision and "it is only after the covenant that you become a father to all the nations."⁴⁹ What is for Maimonides a physical symbol of Abraham's accomplishments is for Nahmanides an integral stage of their realization, achieving a metamorphosis in his very being. That this is so is confirmed by a further observation on the same verse praising God for his calculated timing of the circumcision command, which "preceded Sarah's conception *in order that his seed be holy*" (emphasis mine).⁵⁰ Circumcision ontologically transforms Abraham and enables a transfer of his genetic makeup, consisting of holiness chromosomes, to his descendants, but to the express exclusion of Ishmael, who was conceived prior to Abraham's circumcision.⁵¹

Maimonides concludes his responsum to the convert Ovadyah,⁵² extending to the convert a wholehearted welcome to participate fully in liturgical expressions of particularist history and ancestral memories with encouraging words

meant to be "coextensive with any other term specifically for the Jews such as the 'people of Israel' or 'the Mosaic covenant.'" (95). See also David Novak, "The Treatment of Islam and Muslims in the Legal Writings of Maimonides," in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions*, ed. W. Brinner and S. Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 233–50.

⁴⁸ See b. Sanhedrin 59b.

⁴⁹ *Commentary*, Gen. 17:4.

⁵⁰ וברוך השם אשר לו לבדו נתכנו עלילות שהקדים וצוה את אברהם לבא בבריתו להמול קודם שתהר שרה, להיות זרעו קדוש. See also his use of the term "holy seed" in *Commentary*, Deut. 23:7, to refer to the origins of the descendants of Edom who stem from Esau, born after the circumcision of Isaac his father. Subsequent kabbalists pick up on this notion of Isaac's conception in "holiness." For but one example see Meir ibn Gabbai, *Avodat HaKodesh*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Yerid HaSeferim, 2004), III:46, vol. 2, p. 424: "For Sarah did not become pregnant before Abraham's circumcision so that the holy soul would be generated through a pure and holy drop from which Isaac was born, so that the nation that would emerge from him would be uniquely suited for the worship of God."

⁵¹ This notion of Israel's ontological uniqueness becomes a staple of the kabbalistic tradition. For a book-length study of this feature of Jewish mysticism, see Elliot Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵² The letter is one of a series of three responses on different issues to Ovadyah and was most probably written in Hebrew. They appear in both *Teshuvot Ha-Rambam*, ed. J. Blau (Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1958), nos. 293, 436, and 448, and vol. 1 of Y. Shailat, *Iggerot Ha-Rambam*

that reverse the preconceived roles of born Jew as insider and convert as outsider.⁵³ Lack of ethnic pedigree is actually superior to biological heredity, for “we [natural-born Jews] can only trace our lineage back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – whereas you [convert] can trace it to *He who spoke and the world came to be*.”⁵⁴ The natural-born Jew’s faith is always suspect since one can never be certain whether adherence to the faith is not somehow motivated by national memory, shared history, and familial allegiances. The convert’s intentions, however, like those of his or her archetypal predecessor, Abraham, are not subject to challenge since the convert arrived at the essential truths of Judaism by reason. Tradition and upbringing played no role in the acquisition of the truth of God’s existence and oneness. Therefore the convert’s relation to God is direct and free of extraneous cultural and social factors. In some sense, authentic membership in Judaism entails an overcoming of history, memory, and heredity, by connecting directly with God who transcends all such mundane dimensions of human experience. Ironically, for Maimonides, the true Jew is one who can claim a universal heritage in the Creator God, the truth of which was arrived at through the universal means of reason available to all human beings.

For Nahmanides, since access to the idea of God as creator is through the historical experience of miracles at Egypt and Sinai, the convert must adopt his or her new host’s national consciousness in terms of history and memory, and therefore can never be completely domesticated. Ontologically, the convert is not a product of a “holy seed” and, biologically, the convert does not share a common ancestry with his or her new compatriots. A subtle halakhic consequence of this condition, I believe, is Nahmanides’ interpretation of the verse regarding an alien’s obligations vis-à-vis the Passover sacrifice, the ultimate symbol of national historical origins since the Egyptian exodus is “the archetypal locus of Jewish historical reference,”⁵⁵ and the original cultic prototype of distinguishing the Israelite from outsiders – *And if a stranger who resides with you would offer a Passover sacrifice to God, he must offer it in accordance with the rules and rites of the Passover sacrifice. There shall be one law for you whether stranger or citizen* (Deut. 9:14). The general consensus among traditional commentators is that, given the context of this passage, it refers to the “second Passover” that is a kind of makeup for those who were ritually disqualified from performing the sacrifice on the regular Passover. Nahmanides,

(Jerusalem: Ma’aliyot Press, 1987). Shailat believes they all form parts of the same correspondence. An English translation is available in Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 475–76. See also Menachem Kellner’s well-developed thesis regarding Maimonides’ nonessentialist view of the Jewish people (as opposed, for example, to Judah Halevi and the *Zohar*) in *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), especially chap. 6.

⁵³ For a detailed examination of this responsum, see my “Maimonides and the Convert: A Juridical and Philosophical Embrace of the Outsider,” *Journal of Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 125–46.

⁵⁴ Maimonides, Iggerot, p. 235, lines 5–6.

⁵⁵ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 43.

however, asserts that this is directed toward converts, charging the newcomer with the same sacrificial obligation as the natural-born Jew. What is problematic with this interpretation is that there already exists precisely this prescription as formulated previously by Exodus 12:48. His resolution to that problem and thus the need for this verse's apparently redundant command is that the previous verse

refers to the specific Passover celebrated in Egypt, for that passage relates to the Passover of Egypt, as I have explained there; the implication of that passage is that the converts, or the mixed multitude, who left Egypt are included since they also experienced the miracle; however, those who converted afterward in the desert or in the land of Israel would not have been obligated in the Passover since neither they nor their fathers were included in *and He took us out of there* (Deut. 6:23); therefore it was necessary here to obligate those generations of the desert and Israel in the Passover.⁵⁶

Two separate commands highlight a distinction rather than a seamless inclusion. The convert's duty to conduct the Passover sacrifice rites results from a formal norm that is secondary to the normative basis for the native Jew, whose rationale is anchored in history and memory. Even the convert who actually experienced the original historical Exodus is contemplated by the primary norm since the convert is addressed just as the native Jew is by its historicity. Thus, for Nahmanides, the convert's celebration of Passover will always be a reminder of his or her difference, since it is a formalistic expression of a divine command, while the indigenous Jew, though also in obeisance to a divine imperative, expresses an identity shaped by historical consciousness.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Commentary*, Num. 9:14. על. הוא על. וְכִי יִגֹּר אֶתְךָ גֵּר וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח, הוא על. וְהָיָה בְּמִשְׁמַע, כִּי הַגֵּרִים הַיּוֹצֵאִים מִמִּצְרַיִם פֶּסַח מִצְרַיִם, כִּי הַפְּרָשָׁה הָיְתָה עַל פֶּסַח מִצְרַיִם נֶאֱמָרָה כְּאִשֶּׁר פִּירְשְׁתִּי שָׁם (בַּפְּסוּק מִג). וְהָיָה בְּמִשְׁמַע, כִּי הַגֵּרִים הַיּוֹצֵאִים מִמִּצְרַיִם עָרַב רֵב יַעֲשׂוּ פֶסַח שֶׁאֵף הֵם הָיוּ בְּאוֹתוֹ הֵנֵס אֲבָל הַמִּתְגִּיירִים אַחֲרָי כֵּן בְּמַדְבָּר אוֹ בָּא "י לֹא יִתְחַיֵּיבוּ בַּפֶּסַח שֶׁלֹּא הָיוּ הֵם אוֹ אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם בְּכָלל וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם (דְּבָרִים ו כג), לִפְיֶכָּה הוֹצֵר בְּכָאן לַחַיִּיבִם בַּפֶּסַח דּוֹרוֹת בְּמַדְבָּר וּבְאַרְץ

⁵⁷ David Novak cites this passage to support the very opposite implication, demonstrating that "one need not have experienced the miracles directly, or even be descended from ancestors who did." However, for the reasons laid out here regarding a norm that is divorced from ancestral experience to cover the convert, I respectfully disagree with Novak's conclusion. See his *Theology*, 117–118.

R. Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili (13th–14th Centuries)

Pushing Back the Assault

ANCHORING THE KABBALISTIC LADDER IN RATIONALISM

While Nahmanides may have set the pace for the long and continuing tradition of critiquing Maimonidean thought since the fourteenth century, Maimonides did attract staunch defenders even from within those camps most antagonistic to him. An important though little discussed such defense came from the *Sefer HaZikkaron* (*Book of Remembrance*), composed by R. Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili (1250–1320), a second-generation Nahmanidean loyalist, who is known by the acronym Ritva.¹ Ritva borrowed a page from Nahmanides’ own notebook, which previously subjected Maimonides’ tabulation of the commandments, the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, to a sustained critique, ostensibly to rehabilitate and defend the honor of Maimonides’ primary critical geonic target, R. Shimon Kayara (ca. 825), known as the Bahag.² Ritva declared his own work to be motivated by the same sentiment – to ameliorate Nahmanides’ withering assault in his biblical commentary on Maimonides’ integrity and thought. I say “ostensibly” because, upon closer examination of this highly nuanced text, the chivalry of coming to preserve an intellectual opponent’s honor proves to be merely a pretence for voicing his own discontent with Nahmanides’ kabbalistic project.

¹ *Sefer HaZikkaron*, ed. Kalman Kahana (Jerusalem, 1959), (hereafter SZ). For a concise overview of Ritva’s rabbinic career and literary output, both extant and lost, see Israel Ta-Shma, *Talmudic Commentary in Europe and North Africa: Literary History*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004), 69–74. There is a paucity, to say the least, of secondary literature on Ritva. I echo Ephraim Kanarfogel’s shock at this glaring lacuna in modern scholarship, which he finds “striking, if not somewhat troubling.” See “Between Ashkenaz and Sefarad: Tosafist Teachings in the Talmudic Commentaries of Ritva,” in *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature, and Exegesis*, ed. E. Kanarfogel and M. Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 237–73, at 250n38.

² See Nahmanides’ introduction *Glosses on the Book of Commandments*, where he states his intent to defend the Bahag from Maimonides’ trenchant critique, which did not do justice to the Bahag’s intent.

Though disagreeing with Maimonides' thoroughgoing rationalism, Ritva's treatise translates into a rigorous argument in favor of its inclusion as a viable option within the Jewish exegetical canon. What Nahmanides set out to dismiss as beyond the pale of acceptable Jewish theology, Ritva sought to rehabilitate for those attracted to the persuasiveness of logic and science rather than the seductive lure of kabbalistic mystery. As such, the *Book of Remembrance* is much more than, as Israel Ta-Shma quite correctly but too narrowly classifies it, a formal adoption of a tradition that "defended earlier sages without necessarily identifying personally with the substance of the defence."³

The argument of this chapter charting the ongoing dialogue with Maimonides' oeuvre is that Ritva's project is an ideological retreat from Nahmanideanism toward Maimonideanism. Defending Maimonides' honor against what he considered excessively harsh and insultingly ad hominem tirades by Nahmanides⁴ was not Ritva's sole or even primary purpose in rising to Maimonides' defense. Neither was it only to "harmonize the teachings of Maimonides and Nahmanides," as a recent scholar characterized it.⁵ It was also to carve out some space in the tradition for a Jewish theology in which kabbalah played little or no role, a kind of "pluralistic" (though I use this term cautiously considering its contemporary connotations) embrace of alternative perspectives consistent with the Torah's multivocality as expressed by its most classical adage: "There are seventy dimensions to the Torah."⁶ In the medieval style of communicating through artful combination of biblical verse and rabbinic dicta, Ritva prefaces his tract with a revealing string of such citations. Despite kabbalah's ancient and firm foundations,⁷ Ritva argues, Maimonides grounded pivotal precepts of Jewish belief such as creation and anti-anthropomorphisms, in "rational demonstrations." But Ritva extends this acknowledgment of Maimonides' contribution to Jewish faith further than he needs to, should he have simply offered an apologia for Maimonides' positions. This he does by considering Maimonides to have entrenched in reason even those esoteric disciplines deemed the very core of kabbalistic science – the Account of the Chariot and the Account of Creation.

³ Ta-Shma, *Talmudic Commentary in Europe and North Africa*, 72.

⁴ SZ, 33: במוסרו לספר עליו בלשון גנאי ואמי' עליו במקומות כי דבריו הכל הבלים ודברי הבאי הביאו לקלקל: [ולא] חס השני על כבוד הרב הראשון

⁵ See James T. Robinson, "Philosophy and Science in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Bible," in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 454–75, at 472.

⁶ SZ, 32. Hananel Mack traces this phrase, indicating a multiplicity of meaning in Torah to its roots in ancient mystical texts such as Enoch and is especially associated in the medieval period with Spanish esotericism represented by, among others, Ritva. See "Shiv'im Panim la-Torah: le-Mehalkho shel Bittui," in *Sefer Yovel li-Khvod R. Mordekhai Breuer*, ed. M. Bar-Asher (Jerusalem, 1992), 2: 452–60.

⁷ SZ, 32: דבריהם כדאי מוצק חזקים והדברים עתיקים

In an allusion to Jacob's ladder, another central image in both the kabbalistic and rationalist chain of being,⁸ Maimonides is said to have "anchored the ladder in the ground," and thus reason undergirds any attempt to gain proximity to God who resides securely at the ladder's summit. By analogy to the tripartite structure of Solomon's temple,⁹ Maimonides provided the underpinnings from which to "ascend to the middle chamber and from the middle to the third story."¹⁰ Jacob's ladder geographically locates "the abode of God and the gateway to heaven" (Gen. 28:17), while the later Temple, itself midrashically identified with the ladder's site, is considered the *axis mundi* where the divine and the mundane intersect.¹¹ Any spiritual ascent can, or perhaps must, be tethered in the Maimonidean philosophical project that fuels the kabbalistic one. Rather than an ethical tempering of an uncivil attack on a theological adversary, Ritva's defense of Maimonides could be viewed as an exercise in bridging the divide between rationalism and mysticism. He widened the path of ascent to God by transforming it into a hybrid experience that can fulfill itself by a mutual reinforcement of both reason and kabbalah.

Ritva's initial deference to the towering reputations of his two predecessors is revealing in that it precisely depicts the opposition between the two and their respective contributions to Jewish life and thought. His references to Maimonides are replete with light imagery, employing a metaphor Maimonides himself often utilizes to construct an intellectual hierarchy in terms of source and brightness.¹² Ritva characterizes Maimonides as "the great light" (הַמְאֹר הַגָּדוֹל), an allusion to the sun as it is identified in Genesis's account of creation (1:15), and thus a direct source of knowledge. Nahmanides, on the other hand, is the "great tamarisk" (הָאֶשֶׁל הַגָּדוֹל), an analogy to a plant that requires light to grow, but, more than that, is likely an allusion to the verse that is pivotal for Maimonides in constituting the Abrahamic credo for monotheism; it was Abraham who *planted a tamarisk at Beer Sheba and invoked there the name of the Lord, the everlasting God* (Gen. 21:33).¹³ This Abrahamic declaration becomes a virtual rallying call

⁸ See, for example, Alexander Altmann, "The Ladder of Ascension," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, ed. E.E. Urbach, R.J.Z. Werblowsky, and C. Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 1–32, and more recently Moshe Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (New York: Central European University Press, 2005), esp. chap. 5.

⁹ This tripartite structure is a common distinguishing feature of Near Eastern temples from the third to first millennium BC. See *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 3:306.

¹⁰ SZ, 33, referencing 1 Kings 6:8.

¹¹ For an incisive analysis of this concept of a "mythic geography" where the only *real* space was *sacred* space, see chap. 1, "Symbolism of the 'Centre'" in Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹² See GP, Introduction, pp. 7–8.

¹³ Nahmanides considers this tamarisk to commemorate the Abrahamic teaching of the "secret of universal governance with the name of God." He also cites, without any evaluative comment, the *Guide's* interpretation of it as referring to the teaching of the pre-eternality of God.

for Maimonides' philosophical monotheism, launching, as it does, every section of the *Guide* and other of his compositions. As such Maimonides lays the groundwork that nourishes Nahmanides' thought and in which it can thrive in advancing Jewish theology. Nahmanides is also credited as one who "seizes the foundations of the Torah and anchors them as a peg in a firm place." Though Nahmanides shores up the foundations by seizing them, it is of course Maimonides who provides that which must be seized to begin with, the "foundations of the Torah" in the form of his Thirteen Principles.

Despite the lack of deference to the "ways of the sages of truth" (דרך חכמי האמת), an epithet for masters of the kabbalah, Maimonides shepherded his coreligionists out of a theological darkness. Thus, in a strategic appropriation of a biblical verse critical to Maimonides' rationalist enterprise, Ritva transforms him into a beacon of light in whose "light they saw light (באורו ראו אור)." ¹⁴ Maimonides cites this verse in the *Guide* as an endorsement of the notion that the intellect poses a two-way medium between human beings and God. It is only in the exercise of the intellect that individuals gain apprehension of God and He in turn exercises some form of governance over them. ¹⁵ In other words, the allusion to this verse imports Maimonides' theory of providence, which is wholly contingent on intellectual perfection, into Ritva's discussion. The verse's imagery of reciprocal illumination captures this mutually reinforcing philosophical signification of providence in "that through the intellect that has overflowed from Thee, we intellectually cognize, and consequently we receive correct guidance." ¹⁶ In Ritva's appropriation of this verse, Maimonides replaces God as the source of the light/intellect – that is, "in Maimonides' light they saw light." Thus, it is only through Maimonides' teaching, or intellectual edifice, at the very least as a launching point, that God can be approached. In contradistinction, the sources of the "sages of truth," or of kabbalistic wisdom, "as strong as a mirror of cast metal," ¹⁷ and ignored by Maimonides, are apparently depicted in biblical terms as firm. Yet the imagery in terms of a mirror, or reflection, may indicate a certain secondary dependency on the way of reason.

According to Ritva, Nahmanides did not adequately plumb the depths of Maimonides' works. He wasn't "willing to examine closely the settings (משכיות) of his words," ¹⁸ alluding to the esoteric structure of prophetic parables famously characterized by Maimonides as "apples of gold in settings of silver." Previously singled out in the Introduction of this book to illustrate the power of Maimonidean exegesis on future readings of the Bible, it reflects the nature of Maimonides' own writing. It mirrors prophetic language requiring intricate investigation to sift out the internal from the external layers of meaning. Since

¹⁴ GP, Introduction, 32, referencing Ps. 36:10.

¹⁵ See GP, III:52, p. 629.

¹⁶ GP, II:12, p. 280.

¹⁷ Citing Job 37:18.

¹⁸ SZ, 33.

Nahmanides did not apply this mode of reading to Maimonides' writing, he failed to "solve its riddle" (לא מצא חידתו). His unwillingness or inability to appreciate Maimonidean texts as esoteric writing fashioned along the lines of biblical texts, taking them instead at face value, tainted his ability to decipher them properly. Ironically, Nahmanides, the greatest of kabbalistic teachers and purveyors of its secrets prior to Ritva, stands accused of not being able to adequately decode Maimonides' meaning.

Another interesting legacy with which Ritva credits Maimonides, warranting more deference than Nahmanides afforded him, is securing Jews some respectable stature within the community of nations. First, Maimonides' scholarship was widely circulated throughout the Jewish world as a "crown of testimony" (כִּוְנָה עֵדוּת), a variant of a phrase lifted from a biblical context concerning a unique coronation, which restores the only remaining legitimate heir to the Judaite kingdom, to the Davidic lineage, after all others had been violently eliminated.¹⁹ Thus, by analogy, Maimonides' own Torah teaching lays claim to its rightful place within the tradition that traces its origins back to its very source in Mosaic revelation. But his reputation extended beyond the parochial confines of his own religious fraternity, acquiring a "great name among the nations," and "in its protection (literally 'shade') we live among the nations" (וּבְצִלּוֹ נֹחִיָּה בְּגוֹיִּים). Maimonides' rationalization of Jewish law and lore, in his own view, earns their distinction and attests to the veracity of their biblical prominence as "wisdom and understanding in the view of all the nations." This renown could not be sustained, Maimonides argues, if biblical narrative and rabbinic lore (*aggadah*) were to be taken literally, in which case, Judaism would be the laughing stock of the other religions and nations. Perhaps this indicates Ritva's repudiation of Nahmanides' insistence on the literalness of every jot and tittle of biblical history and story. In any event, even if not an outright endorsement of Maimonides' position on this issue, it certainly grants it a credible berth within orthodox Jewish theology alongside Nahmanides' more fundamentalist readings. The biblical allusion, however, lends Ritva's defense of Maimonides a heightened urgency since, in its original biblical context, the political protection shielding the Jews vanished with the defeat and capture of Israel's foreign ally. This reflects Ritva's own fear that this particular dimension of Maimonides' thought remains tenuous in the face of stringent critiques such as those mounted by Nahmanides, and in need of reinforcement to prevent its utter collapse.

Finally, the very title of the work chosen by Ritva, *Book of Remembrance*, is revealing for its intent, if not for its lack of any informative indicator regarding the actual substance of the work. It signals that the work will "recite [remember] the language of the Rav [Nahmanides] and respond with words of truth to the one who sent it that are dispersed in the settings of its apples, as it is written, *Apples of gold in settings of silver is a word fitly spoken.*"²⁰ Ritva appropriates

¹⁹ See 2 Kings 11:12; 2 Chron. 23:11.

²⁰ SZ, 34, citing Prov. 25:11.

Maimonides' key hermeneutical metaphor, which demands critical examination of biblical parables that penetrates through their superficial, often practical, external silver meaning, to discern their internal gold, which is more esoteric and theoretical and "useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is."²¹ Thus, the precise recitation of Nahmanides' criticisms will demonstrate their superficial grasp of Maimonides' true meaning. Ritva's treatise is not a medieval exercise in postmodern interpretation. Rather, it is an experiment in the retrieval of authorial intent, whose "words of truth" will neutralize Nahmanides' assault by betraying its failure to credit Maimonides with the profundity he deserves and thus missing its mark. Rehabilitating Maimonides by demonstrating the "truth" of his words places the truth of context, consistency, and logical coherence on a plane of coexistence with Nahmanides' "way of truth," whose measure of legitimacy lies beyond the tools of reason in the received traditions of kabbalah.

The full significance of the title crystallizes once its original biblical context is invoked. Malachi depicts a classic theological crisis confronting those who "fear the Lord." Disappointed with the apparent lack of justice evident in the "endurance of those who do evil" and "happiness of the arrogant," those who are reverent are reduced to despairing pessimism about the futility of devotion to God (3:13–15). God assures them that He will record their conclusions in a Book of Remembrance. Rather than portending some impending retribution for insolence, however, it is meant to evoke a future tenderness and compassion regarding their current understandable malaise and confusion. Ultimately, God guarantees a resolution to this current crisis when they "will come to see the difference between the righteous and the wicked" (v. 18). In other words, the facts, as they patently appear at present, are in fact misleading and prone to misinterpretation requiring some future divine corrective. Ritva's "remembrance" of Nahmanides' words reenacts that very same process. Nahmanides has understandably mischaracterized Maimonides' teachings by affording them a mere surface reading. Ritva's inscriptions of Nahmanides' misconceived interpretations will, like God's, ultimately spur a correct reading that removes any heresy or theological offensiveness Maimonides' words were originally thought to convey. And so, in another replication of Maimonides' biblical allusions, Ritva announces his mission to "find acceptable words" in those of the "first Rav," mimicking Maimonides' own pedagogical motivation for composing the *Guide*. The latter was inspired by the perplexity of Maimonides' beloved disciple Joseph, the single addressee of the *Guide*, in his search for "acceptable words," or to make sense of what appeared to be the scientific nonsense of the Bible. Ritva aims at conducting the very same search to resolve Nahmanides' perplexities regarding not the Bible, but Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.

²¹ GP, Introduction, p. 12.

CHALLENGING NAHMANIDES' PHILOSOPHICAL EXPERTISE

Ritva follows the narrative sequence and chronology of the Bible in presenting Nahmanides' various critiques, and appropriately the very first discussion begins at the beginning with Nahmanides' theory of creation. However, it is exceptional in that, unlike all others, here Ritva focuses exclusively on the weaknesses of Nahmanides' account independently of any opposition to Maimonides. Commencing with a politely understated assessment, considering the extent of his critique, Ritva expresses "an inability to understand [Nahmanides'] words and I have great difficulty with them."²² He then proceeds with a detailed and extensive exposé, "according to what I have learned and seen in their books,"²³ of Nahmanides' incorrect use of Greek philosophical terminology. Though Nahmanides incorporates such terms as *hylc* (היולי), prime matter (החומר הראשון), basic elements (יסוד), matter (חומר), and form (צורה), Ritva demonstrates how his usage of them does not conform to their original senses in the "scientific literature."²⁴ Nahmanides' foray into the discipline of philosophy betrays a lack of familiarity with, or understanding of, the sciences from which he draws. This initial salvo in Ritva's "defense" of Maimonides constitutes a fundamental assault on Nahmanides' philosophical expertise which undermines all his criticisms and raises the suspicion that each might be talking at cross purposes with his opponent.

At the same time, it establishes Ritva's own authority to mediate between them, having immersed himself in that scientific corpus necessary for any meaningful analysis of Maimonides' thought. Finally, its subject matter, the Account of Creation, or physics, lies at the very core of Maimonides' intellectual edifice. Everything hinges on it, including his metaphysics, for "divine science cannot become actual except after a study of natural science . . . since natural science borders on divine science, and its study precedes that of divine science in time."²⁵ Thus, any misconception in physics casts doubt on the integrity of any metaphysical speculations in which they are rooted, rendering any Nahmanidean evaluations of Maimonides' positions in this area suspect and less than credible. What this also establishes is that philosophical acumen thrives in the very heart of the Nahmanidean school, and disqualifies those like Nahmanides from assessing the merits of the Maimonidean school because of their "excessive involvement in Talmud and total commitment to the science of truth *that is known to him*."²⁶ Thus, philosophy is necessary, not just for the proverbial task

²² SZ, 35. לא ירדתי לסוף דבריו ואני.
מתקשה בהם הרבה

²³ ולפי מה שלמדתי וראיתי
בספריהם

²⁴ SZ, 36: ובספרי המחקר

²⁵ GP, Introduction, p. 9.

²⁶ SZ, 39: מרב הפלגתו בתלמוד ושקידת לבו בחכמת האמת הידוע לו לא הורגל
בספר המורה כראוי לו

of responding to one's enemy, but so that one is lucid on issues fundamental to Jewish life such as creation.

The first disagreement dealt with by Ritva concerns the spectacularly lengthy lifespans of the world's nascent period after creation. Life's duration declined over time, especially subsequent to the Deluge of Noah's era. Nahmanides attributes this deterioration to corrosive environmental factors caused by the flood, which somehow increasingly weakened life's sustainability thereafter. Maimonides, on the other hand, considers only those singled out by the Bible to have experienced such longevity, as opposed to the general population. This discrepancy was due to either purely natural causes of superior physical constitution and exceptionally healthy routine, or miraculously – "The anomaly in the individual in question may be due either to numerous causes attaching to his nutrition and his regimen or is due to a miracle and follows the laws thereof."²⁷ What is curious is that Nahmanides, the mystic, whose position on miracles discussed in the [previous chapter](#) might be categorized by some as akin to Islamic occasionalism, which replaces the natural order with the miraculous, ascribes this extraordinary phenomenon to natural causes. Ironically, Maimonides, the supreme rationalist, allows for alternatives of natural or miraculous factors.

However, if Nahmanides' evolutionary account is traced back to its origins, life's contingency on divine will is buttressed rather than weakened in this rationale. Originally, inordinate life spans were attributable to the absolute physical perfection of human creation beginning with Adam. They then precipitously waned along a historical trajectory initiated by the introduction of mortality, onto the Flood and the Babel eras, to the point of the present-day average of seventy to eighty years. It is precisely in such an ordinary environment, though, that divine will is manifest in the exceptional longevity of the righteous God-fearers – a devolutionary theory that informs the evolutionary kabbalistic uniqueness of the nation of Israel.²⁸ Maimonides, on the other hand, attributes such divine intervention neither to his naturalistic explanation nor to his "miraculous" one, since his miraculous "due to a miracle" formulation is vacated of any temporal sense of divine causality by the subsequent phrase, "*and follows the laws thereof.*" The very [next chapter](#) of the *Guide* makes it clear that anything biblically attributed to God must be taken in the sense of the "First Cause of all things," but not as their proximate cause, "whether they are causes

²⁷ GP, II:47, p. 408.

²⁸ *Commentary*, Gen. 5:4:

הסבה באריכות ימיהם כי אדם הראשון מעשה ידיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא נעשה בתכלית השלימות בני
בכח בקומה. וגם אחרי שנקנס עליו שיהיה בן מות היה בטבעו לחיות זמן רב. וכאשר בא המבול על הארץ נתקלקל
עליהם האויר, והלכו ימותם הלך וחסר

...

ונראה כי בדורות אברהם יצחק ויעקב היו הימים בעם שבעים ושנים שנה, כאשר הזכיר משה רבינו בתפלתו
(תהלים צ ז). אבל הצדיקים בדורותם יראת ה' תוסיף בהם ימים

See also his comments to Gen. 17:1, where he depicts Abraham as founding a nation that rises above causality and comes under the direct control of God.

by essence, or by accident, or by free choice, or by volition.”²⁹ Thus the “laws” that miracles “follow” amount to the chain of causality that originates in creation, relegating God’s role from one of immediate agency to the remotest of all senses as a prime cause. Any distinction between the miraculous and the natural evaporates, collapsing into subsets of causation. What distinguishes them is simply the extent of human input toward an effect’s realization. The human contributions of “nutrition and regimen” are therefore considered “natural,” while that which is not subject to human control, such as natural constitution, appears to be God-given and is labeled “miraculous.” However, in reality, the latter can be equally placed along the line of natural causation that begins remotely with a Creator.

Ritva argues against Nahmanides’ theory and in support of Maimonides’, both on scientific and theological grounds. With respect to the naturalistic explanations, Nahmanides’ theory of a permanent universal change in air quality offends the current thinking of “natural scientists” (חכמי הטבע), whereas Maimonides’ theory is consistent with “scientific scholars and experts in medicine” (חכמי המחקר ובעיני חכמי הרפואות). As far as the theological rationale of the miraculous, Maimonides’ position is internally coherent with his own general view of miracles, which, Ritva claims, allows for them to occur purely as a function of inscrutable divine will without any regard for merit. Leaving aside the correctness of Ritva’s presentation of Maimonides’ position, Ritva has both allowed for science to determine biblical interpretation and for competing theologies to stake their claim as viably Jewish. After a short discussion of the feasibility of the miraculous within Maimonides’ own view of miracles, Ritva then claims that Maimonides himself admits the dubiousness of his explanation when he avers that “it is not possible to say of this anything else,” meaning, according to Ritva, there is no other option but one of the two alternatives of miraculous or natural. The question arises as to the extent of Maimonides’ perceived insecurity here – is it directed toward both or one of the alternatives? Considering the sustained argument for the scientific credibility of Maimonides’ natural option, it would seem likely that the miraculous is unconvincing, with Ritva remaining partial, if not wholly committed, to the scientific. In fact, Ritva’s closing remarks, leaving the issue open until the arrival of the “teacher of righteousness” (מורה צדק), apparently depicting the debate between Nahmanides and Maimonides as moot,³⁰ might indicate a preference for the latter over the former. Although he professes its open-endedness pending “the *moreh tzedek* teaching us the way of truth,” the very next sentence refers, as elsewhere, to Maimonides as *haRav haMoreh*. Perhaps Ritva intimates that the *moreh* he

²⁹ GP, II:48, p. 411.

³⁰ For *moreh tzedek* as an allusion to the return of Elijah, thus anticipating a messianic resolution, see, for example, Midrash Lekah Tov, Shir HaShirim 1:2; Otzar Midrashim, ed. Eisenstein, p. 217; Rashi on Zech. 1:1.

avowedly anticipates has already spoken decisively in the person of the author, or *moreh* of the *Guide*.³¹

PROPHECY AND PROPHETIC CONDUCT

Ritva next addresses a critical dispute on the nature of prophecy by focusing on Nahmanides' critique of Maimonides' interpretation of the divine/angelic encounter with Abraham in Genesis 18. That episode is enigmatically prefaced by the "appearance of God," yet is perceived by Abraham in the form of three men/angels (*"The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre . . . and he looked up and saw three men standing near him . . ."*). Once again Ritva attributes Nahmanides' vigorous assault on Maimonides to his "authentic tradition on this and on matters pertaining to prophets and their visions which are in truth *words of the living God*."³² It is important to note that this latter phrase does not connote exclusive truth but rather is an endorsement of the credibility of opposing positions, each deserving of equal respect within the Jewish tradition.³³ Although Nahmanides conducts a multipronged attack on Maimonides' view of prophecy, one of the core issues that divides them is the parabolic nature and the role of the imagination in prophetic visions. This issue is crucial since appreciating the very nature of the Torah, deciphering its content, and determining its authorial design hinge on the channeling effects of the imagination in transmitting the prophetic message. In addition, since the imagination can construct images of beings or objects that do not correspond to any empirical existents, some biblical narratives might simply consist of an imaginative account of what transpired that unfolds entirely within the prophetic psyche. What determines its literalness, according to Maimonides, is the inspiration for the particular prophecy or its communicative source. Any recorded appearance and sound of God or angels signals the internal workings of the prophetic mind coloring the "reality" of any narrative or, for that matter, imperative that follows.

Consistent with his emphasis on historical veracity discussed in the [previous chapter](#), Nahmanides understands Abraham's "encounter" with the angels recounted in Genesis 18 as a historical one, concerning heavenly beings who have assumed a visually accessible human form (*malbush*).³⁴ Maimonides, on

³¹ Maimonides is often referred to by medieval thinkers as the *moreh tzedek*. See, for example, David Kimhi's comments to Jer. 13:1; Ps. 4:5.

³² SZ, 40: כי הקבלה האמתית אשר לרבינו ז"ל כזה ובעניני הנביאים ובמראותיהם, שהם באמת דברי אלהים חיים,

³³ The phrase reflects a kind of halakhic pluralism that, according to Avi Sagi, "implies parity between the conflicting options," in his "Both are the words of the living God": A Typological Analysis of Halakhic Pluralism," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 65 (1994): 105–36, at 106.

³⁴ On this, see Elliot R. Wolfson's important study, "The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides," *Da'at* 24 (1980): xxv–xlix, and Dov Schwartz, "From Theurgy to Magic: The Evolution of the Magical-Talismanic Justification of Sacrifice in the Circle of Nahmanides and His Interpreters,"

the other hand, consistent with his general hermeneutical principle governing all such supernaturally instigated encounters, considers it a mental vision.³⁵ Particularly disturbing to Nahmanides are the apparently superfluous details of the story such as the hospitality extended to the “guests” and Sarah’s laughter, which lack any kind of message meaningful enough to warrant prophecy as its medium. Ritva’s defense consists of the fact that extraneous information poses no problem for the Maimonidean view of prophetic narratives since they are parabolic and by definition often require such for the sake of literary coherence “in accord with the *mashal* but not with the *nimshal*.”³⁶ Since the imagination plays a pivotal role in prophetic reception, one “should not be disturbed about meaningless details that occur in prophecies . . . since all those details stem from the power of the imagination.”³⁷

Although Ritva protests throughout that he doesn’t subscribe to Maimonides’ view, his explicitly intended goal is to demonstrate that Nahmanides’ critique succeeds only on the basis of his own conceptual framework. However, Maimonides remains immune to the critique since his interpretation of biblical narratives is based on a radically different conception of prophecy, which allows for the imaginative use of language. The creative imagination spawns various literary strategies such as metaphor, symbolism, and associative wordplay. The imagination is so powerful, in fact, that it can affect physical reality such as Jacob’s psychosomatically debilitated leg after what was an imaginary battle with an angel that transpired entirely within his mind.³⁸ In Nahmanides’ original attack, he faulted Maimonides for blurring the lines between reality and fantasy to such an extent that it would be impossible to disentangle the two in the prophetic narratives. Not only is the Torah’s hypersignificance stunted by Maimonides’ approach, but the narrative integrity of the Torah is also undermined. Even on this critical disagreement that impacts the overarching nature of the Torah, Ritva opens the door to an alternative to the Nahmanidean school to which he ostensibly subscribes as “accepted and well-trodden” (מקובלת וסלולה), since it has been advanced “for the sake of heaven and with great wisdom” (לשם שמים וחכמה גדולה). There are two prerequisites that qualify Maimonidean theology as legitimately “Jewish,” even if it poses an opposing view to the regnant kabbalistic one – purpose and methodology. According to Ritva, Maimonides passes the test on both grounds, developing his theology for the advancement of Judaism, while utilizing sound and cogent arguments.

Aleph 1 (2000): 165–213, reprinted in *Studies on Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 56–90.

³⁵ See GP, II:41, pp. 385–86.

³⁶ SZ, 41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 42: שאין לאדם
לתמוה על הפרטים באים בנבואות ללא דבר
' כי כל הפרטים
ההם מפעל כח המדמה הם

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 43: כי בהתאבקות וההכאה בירך המרמות ההם' אינו נמנע שי[ש]אר
הלום ומדוכה בגופו' גם לאחר ה[י]קיצה

Ritva hones in on another detailed Nahmanidean critique, this time of a narrative concerning prophetic conduct, rather than an overarching theory or theological schematic of prophecy per se. There is serious disagreement among the various medieval exegetes concerning the narrative of Moses' failure in his handling of the crisis at the *waters of Meribah* (Num. 20:1–13). In particular, there is vigorous debate about the precise nature of Moses' failure or "sin" in striking the rock rather than speaking to it to draw its water. The various positions, especially that of Nahmanides and Maimonides, diverge not simply on making sense of the episode as a coherent story, but they are at odds because of fundamentally different theological perspectives. Maimonides attributes it to loss of emotional control and anger, unbecoming of a leader who poses a model of ethics for his constituency. Nahmanides, on the other hand, after evaluating Maimonides' trivializing interpretation as "compounding nonsense with more nonsense," discerns in Moses' failure a "great secret among the concealed matters of the Torah" (והאמת כי הענין סוד גדול מסתרי התורה). In his usual cryptic fashion when divulging these secrets, he offers a kabbalistic analysis of Moses' failure, which essentially relates to a misconception of the mechanics of God's sefirotic constitution. Moses' action, in physically embodied form, reflected a grave theological corruption that struck at the very heart of the Godhead, the relationship between it and the mundane, and the nature of its governance vis-à-vis human beings and their conduct. It therefore publicly reflects a "falsification" (שיקר) of the nature of God and, most importantly, how He interacts with, or intervenes in, the human realm. A corollary of that distortion of God's nature is also a lack of faith. In other words, while for Maimonides the story of Moses' downfall is one of the usual human foibles and their tragic consequences, essential ingredients of any great worthwhile narrative, Nahmanides raises the stakes of a narrative worthy of a divine "story" such as the Torah from centering on the mundane to one focusing on God.

Ritva's defense is to raise the stakes in kind regarding Moses' behavior and to position Maimonides' account on the same plane of the transcendent as Nahmanides'. In doing so he directs attention to another treatment of Moses' sin elsewhere where he claims that, as a leader, Moses' actions are publically construed as reflecting some like divine posture. Ritva connects Moses' anger with a failure to assimilate what Maimonides considers the very pinnacle of human perfection in the ultimate knowledge gained from God's "revelation" (I use this term loosely when describing the Maimonidean sense of it) of His attributes. Since one of those attributes included the trait of "slow to anger" and patience toward malfeasance, his own anger reflected a lack of conviction in the efficacy of such measured conduct. As such Moses' unbecoming, volatile, and rash behavior does not simply end with Moses, but itself reflects a lack of faith in what he himself has learned about God, directly from God Himself. Rather than emulating divine governance, Moses in his reaction essentially rejects it and therefore constitutes a theological distortion as well as an ethical disappointment because "faith is inextricably bound up with action." Thus, though disagreeing

on the details, Ritva strategically brings Maimonides and Nahmanides into conversation with each other by orchestrating an agreement on essentials. The display of anger was an affront on two counts, according to the Ritva's reading of Maimonides. One is on the flattened level that Nahmanides reads Maimonides, which considers it a failure of character, all the more serious considering Moses' stature. But Ritva argues for an extension of Nahmanides' reading by grounding Moses' conduct in that experience Maimonides considered "a subject of speculation through which he [Moses] can apprehend to the furthest extent possible for man" (GP, I:54, p. 123).

Thus Moses' actions were not perceived simply as autonomous or even as the conduit of divine condemnation, but rather as paradigmatic of *imitatio dei*. Moses' anger was not merely a personal defeat, nor merely a political debacle for leadership that was inconsistent with the divine attributes' lesson in governance, which Maimonides asserts was its "ultimate object," instructing as to the "actions I must seek to make similar to Thy actions in governing them" (125). Just as for Nahmanides, that anger was theologically catastrophic in publically projecting a false conception of God. In fact, anger is so egregious that Maimonides adopts approvingly a rabbinic identification of it with idolatry, the worst philosophical (and by extension religious) offense imaginable. Ritva concludes this particular defense by reiterating two sentiments voiced earlier reinforcing a Jewish interpretive stance that can accommodate both kabbalah and reason in a hybrid biblical hermeneutic. Though he protests that one cannot dispute Nahmanides' "authentic tradition" on the issue, there are still "seventy dimensions to the Torah and all are the words of the living God." Kabbalah cannot monopolize exegesis since the Torah speaks with multivocality expressing various truths layered by both recondite traditions and complex, though cogently demonstrated, reason.

ONKELOS: AN ESOTERIC TRANSLATION

In an important chapter, Ritva defends Maimonides' methodological survey of Onkelos' Aramaic translation of the Bible against Nahmanides' attack on its cogency. It is revealing for his stance on esotericism and the need for prevarication when expounding biblical "secrets." Maimonides views Onkelos as systematically purging the Bible of all its anthropomorphisms by translating them away since he "was very perfect in the Hebrew and Syrian languages and directed his effort toward the abolition of the belief in God's corporeality" (GP, I:27, p. 57).³⁹ Maimonides himself notes inconsistencies in this view of

³⁹ For a detailed challenge to the generally accepted view endorsing Maimonides' anti-anthropomorphic characterizations of the Targum Onkelos, see Michael L. Klein, *Anthropomorphisms and Anthropopathisms in the Targumim of the Pentateuch* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Makor, 1982), and the review thereof by Moshe Bernstein in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 77, no. 1 (1986): 65–70. See also the study by Dov Raffel, "The Theology of Targum Onkelos" (Heb.), *Bet Mikra* 26

Onkelos' project is a precedent for the tenor of Ritva's defense, which is premised on the assumption that there are kabbalistic beliefs which are also nonfoundational.

3. They are not "easily grasped by the multitude." Ritva expands on this third factor, which, according to Maimonides, caused Onkelos to exercise caution limiting the aims of his translation, to combat Nahmanides' critique. Onkelos' inconsistencies are intentionally integrated components of esoteric writing when discussing subjects beyond the ken of the average reader. In fact, these very inconsistencies, rather than challenging Maimonides' thesis, actually reinforce it. They demonstrate that Onkelos preceded Maimonides in adopting the very same esoteric strategies, which "[demand] of every translator to dissemble, to state something one way in a certain place, and another way in another. And it is appropriate to conceal any secret by minimally alluding to it while publically discussing much around it. This is the method of concealing a secret according to the *Guide*."⁴²

Onkelos, according to Ritva, had no choice but to follow this strategy to avoid the double-edged trap Maimonides himself admits succumbing to in a kind of initial experimental attempt at a commentary on biblical parables and rabbinic midrashim preceding the *Guide*. That was abandoned because the two alternative approaches that presented themselves at the time defeated their intended purpose. On the one hand, if the commentary engaged in obfuscation and concealed "what ought to be concealed," it would simply have substituted one incomprehensible text for another. On the other hand, a clear expository style "would have been unsuitable for the vulgar among the people."⁴³ Ritva's rationalization suggests that perhaps the failure of Maimonides' own fledgling exercise prompted him to view Onkelos as narrowly concerned with anthropomorphisms rather than meaning, since Onkelos would not have fared any better had his translation attempted the latter.

Ritva's defense on this topic pointedly raises a flaw in Nahmanides' critique for those familiar with his own self-declared hermeneutic. He also employs esoteric strategies aimed at sifting out intended audiences, albeit for kabbalistic rather than philosophical content. Nahmanides' contemplated readership is forewarned that only those who are privy to kabbalistic traditions will understand "the mystic hints regarding the hidden matters of the Torah," while all others could only look forward to "novel interpretations of the plain meanings of Scripture and midrashim" and "moral instructions."⁴⁴ Onkelos, in his view, contra the way he portrays Maimonides' depiction of him, was proficient in

⁴² SZ, 46: שבמקום הסודות מן הראוי והחובה לכל

מתרגם לשנות בהם' ולאמר במקום אחד דרך אחת' ובמקום אחר דרך

אחרת. וכל אשר יהיה סוד ראוי להסתירו יאות' שירמז בו מעט ולפרסם וזה דרך התחבולה בהסתר הסוד לדעת המורה.

⁴³ GP, Introduction, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Commentary*, Chavel, 1:15–16 and Heb. 1:7–8.

kabbalistic lore and also constructed his translation so that “the one who is adept will understand.”⁴⁵ The subtext of Ritva’s defense is that Nahmanides, himself proficient in the art of esotericism, of all exegetes should have known better than to trivialize Maimonides’ view of Onkelos’ theological tendencies by taking his basic view of it at face value.

That subtext is buttressed by supplementing it with another chapter dealing with the same issue but focusing precisely on another instance of Onkelos’ appearance in the *Guide*. This time it offers a much more nuanced view, and somewhat contradictory to the minimalist portrait voiced earlier in the *Guide*. Maimonides’ analysis of what precisely transpired at the Sinaitic theophany, the formative event of Judaism, includes a radical transformation of a prominent rabbinic midrash that considers all of Israel to have heard the first two commandments directly “from the mouth of the Force.”⁴⁶ What this indicates is, rather than some miraculously endowed mass prophecy, the people achieved some universal philosophical enlightenment regarding the rational propositions of divine existence and unity, which “are knowable by human speculation alone.” As such, and like all propositions that can be known by way of reason, “the status of the prophet and everyone else who knows it are equal; there is no superiority of one over the other.” However, even that initial mass philosophical inspiration concerning the first two commandments resulted in an inferior comprehension to that of Moses on the very same subjects, since “their rank was not equal to the rank of Moses our Master.” Maimonides considers this a “secret” or matter of esoteric wisdom, “transmitted by tradition in the religious community and that is known to its men of knowledge.” What I take this to mean is that this particular secret is preserved in popular form within rabbinic midrash, but is only truly understood by “men of knowledge” or the religiously dedicated philosophers.

Another such medium that guarantees the secret’s survival in Jewish memory is Onkelos’ translation that renders God’s speech with Moses literally, without any corrective dissociating the anthropomorphism of speech from God. Israel’s post-facto report, however, of the experience of God’s speech to them, does in fact incorporate Onkelos’ customary distancing strategy. This Aramaic shift from Moses’ perspective to that of the people captures, according to Maimonides, the central “secret” of the Sinaitic “revelation.” It consists of what he characterizes as “wondrous and sublime notions,” which Onkelos received from the ancient rabbinic sages.⁴⁷ By highlighting this context, Ritva

⁴⁵ והמשכיל יבין *Commentary*, Chavel, 1:551–52; Heb. 1:251.

⁴⁶ B. Makkot 24a, cited in GP, II:33, p. 364.

⁴⁷ That Onkelos is not simply a straightforward translation and incorporates many midrashic traditions accords with the findings of recent scholarly research as well. See, for example, Geza Vermes, “Haggadah in the Onkelos Targum,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 8, no. 2 (1963): 159–69, whose observation as to Onkelos’ motivation at times to depart from the literal Hebrew and adopt a midrashic interpretation instead is similar to Maimonides’ view of Onkelos’ goal: “It renders the biblical text intelligible and theologically acceptable” (169).

suggests that it is precisely Onkelos' own inconsistencies and incongruences within Maimonides' treatise that should have piqued Nahmanides' attention to its esoteric nature, "and the doubts [Nahmanides] raised will return to anyone who does not take note of this."⁴⁸ This is an example, asserts Ritva, of the primary rule governing "secrets," which often involve "contradictions whether in the Bible, or in the words of the Sages; the greater the secret the greater the need to conceal, whereby that which is stated by way of truth is abridged, while everything around it is expanded."⁴⁹ Ritva brilliantly incorporates all the same terms of reference which would have guided Nahmanides' own writing, such as the subject matter of "secrets" (*sodot*) and the means of communication "by way of truth" (*al derekh ha'emet*).⁵⁰ Likewise, the audiences parallel each other as elites who in Maimonides' case are grouped as "men of knowledge" while Nahmanides aims at those who are "the sages of hidden wisdom."

Ritva's singling out of Maimonides' rationalization of Onkelos' translation of the Sinaitic theophany alerts the reader to what Maimonides considers crucial to not only that singular event but to all subsequent Jewish history. That is the discrepant perspectives between Moses' philosophically refined elite notions versus the people's popular understanding of divine existence and unity, the two principles upon which all of Judaism rests. While the former stands at Sinai in the presence of philosophically abstract conception of God and his unified nature, the latter, while attaining some rudimentary semblance of that abstraction in negating anthropomorphisms, cannot operate entirely within a theology devoid of the tangible. An anthropomorphic God is substituted by a "created voice," maintaining a philosophically purer conception of God. At the same time, by transposing the concrete away from God onto a "created voice," an entity removed from God, they can hold onto a somewhat tangible notion of divinity they so crave.

Maimonides identifies the midrashic "voice" that transmitted the first two commandments with this "created voice," but it is a sound which also, continues the midrash, causes their souls to depart and compels them to demand of Moses

⁴⁸ SZ, 49: רבנו ז"ל [הספקות שפסק] יתחדשו לו [הספקות שפסק] ובשום המורה זה מקום סוד יסורו כל הספקות ההם

⁴⁹ SZ, 50: שכלל גדול הוא אצל כל הסודות, שיבואו בהם פעמים: רבות דברים סותרים זה לזה; בין בכתובים; בין בדברי חכמים ז"ל, וכל אשד יגדל הסוד צריך להעלימו ימעטו הדברים בו על דרך האמת וירבו שכנגדם

⁵⁰ For a concise analysis of Nahmanides' method of "hinting" when discussing kabbalistic "secrets," see Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*, trans. J. Feldman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 83–92. Nahmanides is doubly difficult to decipher, not just for the elusiveness and brevity of the "hint," but for the added esoteric barrier that it could only speak to one who is already privy to kabbalistic traditions or well ensconced in what Halbertal calls a "closed system". Otherwise the hint "will remain completely opaque, obviating any deduction whatsoever, even mistaken ones" (90).

that he act as their intermediary from that point on (Exod. 20:16). The reference to a midrash which seemingly transforms Sinai into a wholly supernatural event involving divine discourse and its overwhelming effect is actually incorporated into Maimonides' retelling of it as a thoroughly natural and rational one. In the Maimonidean schema, death or physical deterioration can be a metaphor for the consequences of intellectual alacrity that advances toward knowledge one is not yet prepared to assimilate properly. Maimonides draws the analogy to an eye which strains to see that which is not within its visual range and ends up with impaired vision even for that within its normal range.⁵¹ In another analogy particularly relevant to his view of what transpired at Sinai, beginning one's intellectual curriculum with divine science rather than studiously working one's way toward it is compared to feeding an infant adult food it cannot digest and which "would undoubtedly kill him."⁵² Since the first two commandments address the existence and nature of God, they involve divine science, and, since the people could not possibly all enjoy the philosophical preparation or sophistication to grasp this sublime subject, they metaphorically experience death.

Ritva's reference to this example of Onkelos' methodology of divergent translations when dealing with "secrets" draws attention to a pivotal disagreement between the Maimonidean and Nahmanidean schools on something so crucial to Judaism as its very historical birth at Sinai. As discussed in the [previous chapter](#) on Nahmanides, the centrality of history and miracles in his theology demands that Judaism be grounded in a miraculous historical event that poses a paradigm for the future of Jewish theology. On the two fundamental propositions that ground all of Jewish faith constituted by the first two commandments, there is no distinction between Mosaic knowledge and the nation's. Sinai's legacy is guaranteed by the certainty of its original audience transmitted generationally throughout Jewish history since "they heard and understood the speech of the first two commandments just as Moses understood them."⁵³ The perpetuation of this originating immediate revelation "without any intermediary," via intergenerational teaching, withstands all opposition, regardless of its forcefulness, because of the inviolate integrity of parental care for their children.⁵⁴ They acquired this certitude miraculously through prophecy for "*all are prophets with respect to belief in God and the prohibition against idolatry*, for they are the foundation of the entire Torah and the commandments" (emphasis mine).⁵⁵

⁵¹ GP, I:32, p. 68.

⁵² GP, I:33, p. 71.

⁵³ *Commentary*, Exod. 20:7, I:397.

בשני הדברות הראשונות היו שומעים הדבור ומבינים אותו ממנו כאשר יבין אותם משה

⁵⁴ *Commentary*, Deut. 4:9, 2:362.

כי כשנעתיק גם כן הדבר לבנינו ידעו שהיה הדבר אמת בלא ספק כאלו ראוהו כל הדורות, כי לא נעיד שקר לבנינו ולא ננחיל אותם דבר הבל ואין בם מועיל

⁵⁵ *Commentary*, I:397.

כדי שיהיו כלם נביאים באמונת ה' ובאיסור ע"ז

For Maimonides, tradition, or mesorah, can never inspire certainty while philosophy can, and so every generation can only build on the rudimentary knowledge conveyed by others by way of independent intellectual struggle. If they cannot pursue that route, their access to divine will is, as Maimonides states in the chapter following his excursus on Sinai, through a prophet whose primary mode of communication to a mass audience is law, or “orders and prohibitions.”⁵⁶ History, memory, tradition, and the miraculous are the Nahmanidean guarantors of Jewish faith, while independent de novo acquisition of knowledge for the elite and law for the people are the Maimonidean instruments of its survival. Whatever else Maimonides might mean when he reiterates the absolute singularity and inimitability of Sinai,⁵⁷ the point is that history is not continuous but rather repeatedly ruptured in each generation. Ritva’s concluding remark is revealing for its barbed criticism of Nahmanides on the subject of Onkelos. After citing Maimonides’ attribution of Onkelos’ exegesis to ancient tannaitic sages and his caution as to its esoteric nature and impossibility of any explicit and lucid elaboration of Sinai, he observes that “this indicates that the words of the Sages, and not only Onkelos’ deviations, enter into the matter.” In other words, inconsistencies and linguistic shifts predate Onkelos and are already adopted as esoteric strategies by the classical rabbis. Again, Nahmanides should know that Onkelos follows a well-established tradition in the transmission of “secrets” that defies discursive pedagogy.

HEBREW AND ALTERNATIVE VIEWS OF REVELATION

In another curious chapter, Ritva raises Nahmanides’ objections to Maimonides’ linguistic theory of Hebrew as a “holy” or sacred language due to what he claims is its unique lack of any explicit terms for the sexual act, genitalia, or any secretions associated with the sexual organs.⁵⁸ Hebrew’s sacredness stems from its philological puritanism, avoiding sexuality directly, while signifying it when the need arises by “figurative senses and by allusions.”⁵⁹ Nahmanides dismisses this theory in favor of an ontological notion of “holy” as divine, transcending any mundane view of language as a simple mode of human communication. It is God’s chosen

⁵⁶ GP, II:34, p. 366.

⁵⁷ GP, II:33, p. 366: “The true reality of that apprehension and its modality are quite hidden from us, for nothing like it happened before and will not happen after.” This assertion is repeated but slightly refined in the [next chapter](#) as follows: “This great gathering that you saw – I mean to say the Gathering at Mount Sinai – *will not be a thing subsisting permanently with you*, and in the future there will not be anything like it” (II:34, 366–67). I emphasize the modification that accentuates the fundamental distinction between Nahmanides and Maimonides. While Sinai for the former forever informs Jewish faith, for the latter, it cannot be the ground of such faith.

⁵⁸ See Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides on the Normality of Hebrew,” in *Judaism and Modernity: The Religious Philosophy of David Hartman*, ed. J. Malino (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2001), 435–71.

⁵⁹ GP, III:8, p. 435.

form of speech both as a textual medium in the form of the Torah and as an oral one with prophets. Most importantly for kabbalistic theology, and perhaps its primary driving force, it bears creative potency as the language of creation, antedating humanity and the world, literally constituting the building blocks of the universe. In addition, the multiple facets of the Godhead are designated by the various Hebrew divine appellations in the Bible.⁶⁰ What is curious about this section in *Sefer HaZikaron* is that Ritva offers no defense per se while ostensibly denigrating Maimonides' trivialization of such a sublime notion, peppered with such expressions as "God forbid me from this rationale," "God will forgive him," and "I do not wish to engage this since I vehemently dissociate myself from its principal tenet."⁶¹ However, the very inclusion of this defenseless subject in a tract precisely intended to defend, coupled with disavowals of Maimonides' position that are so vigorously repeated as to hint at harboring some assent to it, draws attention to an anomalous section that betrays intentionality.

The following comment highlights a method behind Maimonides' madness on this issue. It demands considering Maimonides' position from an internal perspective that is consistent with his own prophetic theology and with the strategy of esotericism:

In my opinion, it is on account of a great secret that is not conducive to reveal, according to his method, that he concerned himself so incisively with why our language is called sacred, and that he examined this in detail; though it is forbidden for the *sages of truth* to subscribe to that secret, Maimonides, in line with his own view on the mechanics of prophecy, was obliged to believe in it; the one who is familiar with his great stratagems concerning secrets can discern it.⁶²

Any biblical report of divine communication according to Maimonides is simply a metaphor for something abstract and conceptual, confining all prophecies to the realm of the mind.⁶³ Literal speech would anthropomorphically taint and corrupt beliefs regarding divine nature, and thus Ritva's reference to the

⁶⁰ *Commentary*, Exod. 30:13, 1:492. This is especially crucial for Nahmanides, who views the Torah's kabbalistic subtext embedded in a continuous string of divine names.

שהוא מפני שדברי התורה והנבואות וכל דברי קדושה כולם בלשון ההוא נאמרו. והנה הוא הלשון שהקב"ה יתעלה שמו מדבר בו עם נביאיו ועם עדתו, אנכי ולא יהיה לך ושאר דברות התורה והנבואה, ובו נקרא בשמותיו הקדושים אל, אלהים, צבאות, ושדי, וי"ד ה"א, והשם הגדול המיוחד, ובו ברא עולמו, וקרא שמות שמים וארץ וכל אשר בו, ומלאכיו וכל צבאיו לכולם בשם יקרא מיכאל וגבריאל בלשון ההוא, ובו קרא שמות לקדושים אשר בארץ אברהם יצחק ויעקב ושלמה וזולתם:

⁶¹ והאלהים יכפר לו; וחלילה לי בעיקר טעמו;

איני רוצה

להטפל בזה מרב בריחתי מעקר טעמו בזה

⁶² כי לסוד גדול לפי דרכו שלא נ"ת 1: 52-53, SZ,

לגלותו, חרד את כל החרדה הזאת לדקדק אל קריאת לשונינו לשון הקדש,

וחקר עליו כל החקירה הזאת וחלילה לחכמי האמת להאמין בסוד ההוא ואף כי דבי" המורה ז"ל לפי דרכו בדרכי

הנבואה הוצרך להאמין בו

ימצאנו היודע תחבולותיו הגדולות בסודותיו

⁶³ GP, 1:45, pp. 402-03.

Maimonidean “secret” connects with the previous discussion of the secret of Sinai, an event whose core experience is divine communication. Although wholly different in depth and clarity of perceptions, Moses and the people shared the medium of the communication at Sinai, which consisted of thoughts and not words. Dictation of divine speech did not produce the Torah; rather, it reflects the textual articulation of thought.

The repercussions of this antithetical view of revelation to the Nahmanidean one starkly resonates with the previous discussion of Sinai because the list Nahmanides compiles to demonstrate the sacredness of Hebrew specifically includes the language in which “God spoke with his prophets and community of *I am* and *Thou shalt not have* and the rest of the speakings of the Torah and the prophetic texts.”⁶⁴

Though it is too speculative to conclude with certainty that Ritva has allowed for a Maimonidean view of revelation as an alternative to the Nahmanidean one, the structure, phraseology, and very insertion of this short disquisition on Hebrew raises possibilities that are consistent with our argument so far. The section concludes with an adaptation of a verse from Ecclesiastes, *Like an error committed by a ruler* (10:5), as an assessment of Maimonides’ thesis on Hebrew. When examined closely, it provides another bit of evidence toward a resolution of the issue. The plain sense of this aphorism is that mistakes made by those in authority are particularly pernicious since their effects are widely manifest. The classic rabbinic real-life illustration of this verse, however, points to a different meaning. Unaware of his wife Rachel’s theft of her father’s household idols, Jacob, convinced they are not within his family’s possession, reinforces his misperceived innocence with a curse imposing death on whomever the culprit is (Gen. 31:32).⁶⁵ In this instance, and likewise, in principle, with others cited in rabbinic sources exemplifying the verse, Jacob is deliberate and intends what he says. The content of his statement can be said to be true in a sense. What might have caused him to refrain from uttering it does not substantively undermine what was asserted, but rather is an extraneous factor, which would have injurious consequences for others, in this case one particularly close to him relationally. The “error” Ritva may be alluding to is the very composition of the *Guide* and its publication. It occasioned precisely those damaging consequences Maimonides himself anticipated in his instructions prefacing his treatise that are shot through with the anxiety of becoming a misunderstood author. As he states after repeated warnings regarding the inevitable distortions, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and slander his work is bound to provoke, “God, may He be exalted, knows that I have never ceased to be exceedingly apprehensive

⁶⁴ *Commentary*, Exod. 30:13.

⁶⁵ For example, Bereshit Rabbah 74:9; also Kohelet Rabbah 10:5 for numerous anecdotes that illustrate the meaning of this verse, essentially articulating something one would not wish to realize but does. Thus the moral is to deliberate before speaking. Thought can manifest itself in the real world.

about setting down these things that I wish to set down in this treatise. For they are concealed things; none of them has been set down in any book.”⁶⁶ Ritva’s rabbinically overlaid biblical allusion, then, does not indicate the speciousness of Maimonides’ position but signals a disapproval of his very act of publicly discussing a topic that is prone to engendering adverse consequences among his readers. In some sense it is a disavowal of Maimonides’ default approach to writing, despite the inherent dangers, which prefers teaching “demonstrated truth” and “giving satisfaction to a single virtuous man while displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses.”⁶⁷

REHABILITATING MAIMONIDES’ RATIONALE FOR COMMANDMENTS

On the controversial issue of the rationale for the commandments, Ritva’s main defense of Maimonides’ sociocultural and anthropological account is that it doesn’t rise to the level of a primary rationale. Rather, it is a partial presentation “so that even the general public will know how to respond to the heretic with a modicum of reasoned argument.”⁶⁸ Here also Ritva cleverly and subtly fits Maimonides into acceptable Jewish theology with what was arguably his most radical and threatening idea. Since it temporalized the commandments, there was the danger that their historical contingency eroded their immutability and rendered them vulnerable to change. For Ritva, the subject of reasons for commandments fall within the rubric of esoteric wisdom whose obscurity is captured by Solomon’s proverb “*That which is exceedingly deep, who can find it out*” and whose depth even kabbalah doesn’t begin to plumb.⁶⁹ This verse is cited by Maimonides to describe the profundity of the Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot,⁷⁰ or natural and divine sciences, from whose purview commandments seem to be explicitly excluded in Maimonides’ taxonomy. No one possessing an unimpaired capacity imagines that those obscure subjects which necessitated Solomon’s parabolic method include “ordinances concerning the building of the tabernacles, the lulab, and the law of the four trustees.”⁷¹

In order to subsume commandments within the category of esoteric wisdom, Ritva cites Maimonides’ introduction to the [third section](#) of the *Guide* where he endorses the rabbinic commendation of esotericism in its redirection of Isaiah’s praise in 23:18 toward “him who covers the things revealed by the Ancient of Days, namely, the mysteries of the Torah.”⁷² In so doing, Ritva broadens what is clearly a narrow reference to the subject of the Account of the Chariot, a concern

⁶⁶ GP, 16

⁶⁷ GP, 16.

⁶⁸ SZ, 54.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ GP, 9; I:34, p. 73.

⁷¹ GP, 11.

⁷² GP, 416, citing b. Pesahim 119a, with a slight revision that may reflect Maimonides’ version of the text. Our present manuscripts read “him who covers the things *covered* by the Ancient of Days.”

of the first seven chapters that follow in the *Guide*, to encompass the chapters further on in the [third section](#) on the rationale for the commandments. What allows him to do this is a strictly literal reading of the final words of Maimonides' preface to the [third section](#), "after this introduction has preceded, apply your mind to the chapters that will follow," to encompass the entire section, which includes the commandments, and not just the chapters immediately following. By transforming the commandments into an esoteric topic, it attracts the kind of esoteric discourse that the discussion of Sinai did, and thus what you see is not necessarily what you get. In Ritva's rereading, Maimonides' overt anthropological basis for the commandments discloses a rudimentary truth aimed at a general audience, while concealing some more recondite truth for the philosophically astute.

Ritva actually applies this perspective on the rationale for the commandments to a few that are the subject of a Nahmanidean critique as well. As is his wont, Maimonides rationalizes the biblical prohibition against the eating of blood since blood was a particularly potent medium in ancient pagan cults. Blood was instrumental in cultivating "fraternization" with spirits and conducting séances conjuring demons and spirits who would "come to them in dreams, inform them of secret things, and be useful to them."⁷³ Though Nahmanides finds this rationale logically appealing, he considers it textually specious in that the Bible explicitly offers its own rationale for this injunction on an entirely different ground of identification of the blood as the "soul" or animating life force of the animal.⁷⁴ Ritva's claim is that Nahmanides failed to appreciate the full import of Maimonides' argument. The biblical identification of the blood with the "soul" is precisely what informed the pagan belief in its magical potency. The ancient pagan cult of the Sabians⁷⁵ extrapolated from this biblical truth that blood possessed the same chemical composition as that of the demons and thus provided the ideal agent for establishing contact with them. With this illustration of a commandment's rationale, Ritva brilliantly neutralizes much of the sting of the critique that Maimonides' theory historicizes the *mitzvot*. Rather than a reaction to paganism, Ritva turns the causal connection between divine regulation and common practice on its head. Pagan ritual is in fact an outgrowth, however erroneous it may be, of the various truths reflected in the Torah. Those truths, as in this particular case, of equating the blood with the "soul," are in fact eternal and immutable regardless of idolatrous distortions of

⁷³ GP, III:46, pp. 585–86.

⁷⁴ See Lev. 17:14, Deut. 12:23. See *Commentary*, Lev. 17:11, 2:97.

והאלו דברים מיושבים, אבל הכתובים לא יורו כן. "These words make sense but the verses do not support it."

⁷⁵ Rather than some specific historical culture, Maimonides' depiction of the Sabians was a construct for paganism in general. For an interesting survey of the use of the Sabians in scholarly discourse fueled by Maimonides' appropriation of them for his own purposes, see Jonathan Elukin, "Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians: Explaining Mosaic Laws and the Limits of Scholarship," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002): 619–37.

them. Contrary to the impression that Torah responds to idolatrous myth, Ritva argues that Maimonides' reasoning regarding pagan magic directs one to its own rationalization in the Torah.

On the issue of the significance of Sabbath observance, Ritva resorts to a similar, though slightly varied, tactic in the attempt to configure somewhat of a dialogue between Maimonides and Nahmanides out of what is patently a frontal assault by the latter on the former. Ritva thus transforms antagonists into protagonists, leaving his audience with a choice rather than an either/or decision in the individual shaping of Jewish belief and hermeneutics. The textual problem generating exegetical activity is the divergent commemorative dimensions of the Sabbath offered by the two biblical versions of the Decalogue. Its first chronological version in Exodus conjures up the memory of the creation and God's role as its creator (20:11), while its Deuteronomic parallel memorializes Israel's slavery in Egypt and liberation from it (5:15). Maimonides appreciates the two as representing two entirely different facets of the Sabbath aimed, respectively, at the intellectual and physical betterment of human beings, "both with reference to a true speculative opinion and to the well-being of the state of the body" (GP, II:31, p. 360). The Exodus version is universalist in its scope, explaining why the specific seventh day of the week was "sanctified," or set aside, in tribute to the consummation of the creation of the world, a notion to which all humanity should subscribe. Its Deuteronomic counterpart accounts for its particularistic Jewish observance of it as a day of rest. Nahmanides challenges Maimonides' attribution of the Deuteronomic rationale to perpetuating the memory of the Egyptian exodus, since it has long ago receded into the annals of ancient history and any association between resting and that ancient event would be lost on current onlookers. Thus for him both rationales contemplate the same purpose – to indoctrinate the conception of an omnipotent creator God. The Exodus, having been achieved by divine miraculous intervention, simply reinforces the same notion, through historical experience of that pre-eternal "creative, purposeful, and powerful" God. Each event – the creation of the world and the liberation from Egypt – attest to the truth of each other and the veracity of this divine existence, whose mastery over nature as its creator manifests itself in miracles, the most prominent instance of which occurred at the Israelite exodus.⁷⁶

Ritva's response to Nahmanides' critique is twofold. The first is that Maimonides' rationale in this case is consistent with his general approach to commandments which may have been issued "principally to the generation to whom it was given." However, once it was impressed with its particular associations for that generation, the link between the commandment and whatever historical event may have inspired it remains alive for subsequent generations.

⁷⁶ *Commentary*, 2:367, Deut. 5:15:

על כן אמר בכאן אם יעלה בלבך ספק על השבת המורה על החדוש והחפץ והיכולת תזכור מה שראו עיניך ביציאת מצרים שהיא לך לראיה ולזכר. הנה השבת זכר ליציאת מצרים, ויציאת מצרים זכר לשבת כי יזכרו בו ויאמרו השם הוא מחדש בכל אותות ומופתים ועושה בכל כרצונו.

The commandments in a sense become purveyors of national memory. The Sabbath's connection to the Exodus is simply another example of that operative principle where it would have been obvious to the generation who actually experienced it, but whose association would have been perpetuated throughout posterity. Ritva's defense is tailored to appeal to Nahmanides' own appreciation of history as a guarantor of Jewish belief, the nature of which was examined in the [previous chapter](#). Belief in the fundamentals of faith is inculcated for Nahmanides precisely by the preservation of historical memory via successive intergenerational transmission between parent and child. In contradistinction, for Maimonides, such belief can only form the initial ground in which independent knowledge of such fundamentals must take root.

Thus, in that medieval style of speaking through the canonical texts, Ritva strategically cites Joel 1:3, *Tell your children about it*, ostensibly to simply give biblical expression to the idea to which Maimonides would have subscribed. Although commandments aiming at a belief or at philosophical truths can only be assimilated through arduous independent thought, the historical dimension of a commandment can be sustained by the repeated transmission of it across generations. Such is the case with the Sabbath's ties to the Exodus. However, as the running theme of this book demonstrates, the citation does not merely buttress the credibility of an assertion, but enhances and reorients its very intent. Nahmanides cites this verse within the context of transmitting the historical memory of the Exodus,⁷⁷ thus again pointedly reminding Nahmanides of the emphasis he himself places on the perpetuation of ancient history.

However, the verse alludes to something deeper that addresses the divide between Maimonides and Nahmanides. Nahmanides cites the verse to explain an anomalous preface to the plague of locusts, which begins with a divine command to Moses to “approach Pharaoh” and continues with God’s intention to “harden his heart” for the purpose of demonstrating His power and “to recount to your children.” The verse is curiously silent about the precise content of what Moses must convey to Pharaoh as well as what it is to be transmitted to posterity. Nahmanides cites a midrash which fills in the problematic gap with the unreported background that God divulged to Moses what plague he was about to impose while Moses only hints to what is to be transmitted to future generations, “as is stated, *Tell your children about it*.”⁷⁸ Ritva’s citation of a verse that Nahmanides himself cites to signify a historical event of which God informs Moses, but to which Moses only “alludes”, accentuates the sting of Ritva’s defense. Nahmanides’ entire kabbalistic theology is anchored in biblical allusion, the *remez*, whose only means of preservation is transmission from teacher to student. That same method of continuous

⁷⁷ *Commentary*, Exod. 10:2, 1:318.

⁷⁸ הודיעו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה מה מכה יביא עליהם, וכתב אותה משה ברמז, ולמען תספר באזני בנך ובן בנך, וזו מכת הארבה, כמה דתימר עליה לבניכם ספרו ובניכם לבניהם וגו' (יואל א: ג)

transmission (*mesorah*) makes sense of Maimonides' rationale for the Sabbath. The verse raises the argument that by the same token whereby Nahmanides undermines Maimonides' rationale, his own Jewish *weltanschauung* would be likewise undermined.

Ritva offers a second defense that characterizes the Sabbath as no different than many *mitzvot* "whose rationale is clear, but which are *commandments of men learned by rote*, for most people and no one pays attention to its rationale."⁷⁹ The expression emphasized is an allusion to a rebuke in Isaiah 29:13, of a vapid religiosity where commandments are performed mindlessly, resulting in the words of the same verse in a detached spirituality that severs the "lips" from the "heart." In other words, external acts of obedience do not reflect authentic internal commitment. Midrashically, the phrase assumes the same connotations as the previous allusion, designating that class of people in terms of who are and who are not carriers of the tradition. A midrash places this group of "rote performers" in the latter category with respect to rabbinically generated commandments not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, in contrast to the outstanding sages who are the recipients and conveyors of them in each generation.⁸⁰ Only they preserve the purported continuity of these *mitzvot* with Sinai, ensuring their survival and authoritativeness. Here, too, implicit in this reference, is a pointed critique of Nahmanides' own conception of Scripture and commandments whose internal truths and rationales are perpetuated across history by an elite group of sages who themselves are privy to them via transmission from their masters. If Maimonides' rationale for the Sabbath lacks cogency because people are oblivious to it, then Nahmanides own kabbalistic rationale for commandments becomes vulnerable to the very same critique. And so Ritva concludes, with the conciliatory approach that maintains the integrity of both schools, that there are "many dimensions to the Torah" (וכמה פנים לתורה).

Ritva's defense against Nahmanides concerning the law involving the breaking of a heifer's neck in response to an unsolved murder between towns is another example where the kabbalistic paradigm is subtly critiqued. Rather than fitting it within the general cultic theology of sacrifice, Maimonides assigns the whole process a pragmatic rationale. All the activity leading up to the sacrifice and its memorialization afterward in an uncultivated wadi will generate the kind of publicity needed to assist the criminal investigation and encourage informants to step forward – "because of the matter being universally known, the killer could perhaps be recognized" (GP, III:40, p. 557).

After a detailed refutation whose focal point is a Nahmanidean misreading due to a corrupt variant translation, Ritva concludes with a general, homiletic

⁷⁹ SZ, 64: ואם היום לא יתנו הכל לב לדבר, יש כמה מצות שטעמם מבורא, והם כמצות אנשים מלומדה לרב בני אדם' ואין איש שם על לב הטעם ההוא

⁸⁰ *Lekah Tov*, Leviticus, Emor 66a.

ואין אלו המצות ממצות אנשים מלומדה אלא קבלה ממושה רבינו מפי הגבורה

endorsement of Maimonides' rationale. Rabbinic tradition traces the chain of causation of this murder to an inhospitable society. The desire to avoid such an arduous ritual will promote a more inviting and generous environment that would not be susceptible to such violence. As such, "what greater purpose can there be than to encourage the preservation of life and the commandment of graciousness and hospitality, that is comparable to receiving the divine presence (*shekhina*)."⁸¹ Ritva makes rhetorical use of both a rabbinic and Maimonidean adage that draws a similar analogy between the betterment of human relations and hosting the *shekhina*, albeit in Maimonides' formulation the former ranks even higher than the latter.⁸² That reference also imports the term *shekhina* that is a kabbalistic terminus technicus appearing throughout the Nahmanidean oeuvre. However, Ritva's practical use of it in this context neutralizes its kabbalistic connotations in favor of a more pragmatic nuance. Suffice it to summarize for our purposes that while in the kabbalistic schema, the term *shekhina* signifies an ontic component of Gods' internal constitution – one of the *sefirot* that comprise the complex inner mechanics of the Godhead – for Maimonides it is a metaphor either for some created object distinct from God or for His governance.⁸³ Proximity to God can be realized in the mundane, in compliance with commandments, as Maimonides surely qualifies the law of the broken-necked heifer as contributing to "the welfare of the conditions of the city" (GP, III:28, p. 513).

CONCLUSION

Ritva's defense of Maimonides against the Nahmanidean assault addresses a gamut of issues central to Jewish belief, including prophecy, miracles, rationale for commandments, creation, sin, and the nature of prophetic narratives. Whereas Nahmanides attempted to replace a rationalist theology with a more kabbalistic one, a generation later, Ritva salvages rationalism and reserves a space for it alongside kabbalah within Jewish practice and belief. What I have particularly demonstrated in this chapter is that an important moment in the evolution of Jewish thought can only be fully appreciated via an acute attentiveness to the type of discourse that carries the moment. Ritva concludes his tract with a revealing sentiment that relates to the project as a whole – "And even though the *way of truth* alluded to by our master Ramban is more correct, what are we to do with Rambam if he wasn't aware of that way, or *that he was aware of it but refused to follow it*."⁸⁴ Rather than resort to the myth of a

⁸¹ SZ, 66: ומה תועלת גדולה בעולם יותר מעניין זה, שהוא סבה לשמירת: נפשות ומצות גמילות חסדים ואכסניא שהוא כמקביל פני שכינה. For a Talmudic source, see b. Sabbath 127a.

⁸² MT, Mourning, 14:2.

⁸³ See GP, I:25.

⁸⁴ SZ, 68: ואם דרך דאמת שרמז בזה הענין רבינו הרמב"ן היא: 68: יותר לפי דרכו אבל מה נעשה לרמב"ם ז"ל, אם לא ידע בדוד נכונה ההיא, או שידע ולא רצה ללכת בה

Maimonidean retraction of his life's work because of a last-minute conversion to the truth of kabbalah,⁸⁵ Ritva preserves the option of a conscious rejection of kabbalistic methodology by Maimonides. If that option is viable, then one must give serious consideration to a process of thoughtful deliberation over the merits of kabbalah, leading to its rejection in favor of rationalism by "one of civilization's greatest minds," and *the* greatest in Judaism. The close reading of Ritva's uniquely rabbinic type of midrashic discourse offered here allows us entry into how he understood that mind's deliberative process.

⁸⁵ On Maimonides' alleged conversion to kabbalism, see Gershom Scholem, "Mehoker limekkubal, Sefer Harambam," *Tarbiz* 6, no. 3 (1935): 90–98. There is scholarly evidence that endorses the validity of Ritva's second option in part. For arguments as to the familiarity of medieval philosophers with kabbalistic ideas, see Israel Weinstock, *Bema'agalei Hanigleh Vehanistar* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1969).

Isaac Abarbanel (15th Century)

The Akedah of Faith vs. the Akedah of Reason

ABARBANEL VS. MAIMONIDES: CONTINUUM OR SUBVERSIVE RUPTURE?

This chapter moves ahead to another major Jewish thinker and exegete who struggled with Maimonides' thought throughout his prolific career, which included penning a major commentary on the *Guide*. The fifteenth-century Iberian Jewish political, cultural, and intellectual landscape in which Isaac Abarbanel¹ (1437–1508) lived, taught, and wrote most of his life was vastly different from that of twelfth-century Egypt, which nurtured Moses Maimonides' oeuvre for much of his scholarly career. Not the least of those factors contributing to the changed intellectual environment were centuries of raging controversies in the interim incited by Maimonides' works, in particular the *Guide of the Perplexed*, over whether the rationalist approach to religious belief in its deference to the Greco-Arabic philosophical tradition reinforced or undermined Jewish faith and practice.² Abarbanel's thought resonates negatively with both the aftershocks of these religiously bitter and socially divisive debates and positively with Maimonides' formidable theological, philosophical, and rabbinic legacy from which there was no escape for any Jewish philosopher, exegete, or rabbinic thinker.

The theoretical ideological impact of these near schismatic disputes was compounded by the communal trauma of pogroms, dislocation, and forcible

¹ For the variant spellings of his name, see S. Z. Leiman, "Abarbanel and the Censor," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 19 (1968): 49–61, at 49n1.

² For a good account of the height of the controversies surrounding Maimonides' thought in the thirteenth century, see Daniel J. Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180–1240* (Leiden: Brill, 1965). For the shape of the controversy over Maimonides and the inclusion of philosophy within the Jewish curriculum, see Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Rabbi Menachem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001) (Heb.), esp. chap. 5.

(and in some cases, voluntary) conversions to Christianity, such as those that devastated Jewish Castilian life in 1391–1392. Abarbanel's personal pedigree mirrored such trauma in that his own grandfather, Samuel, along with a number of uncles were baptized. Isaac more than likely would not have recalled Samuel, alias Juan Sanchez de Sevilla, with any great sense of pride. Reverence for Maimonides and horror at the existential consequences of radical rationalist positions vie with each other throughout Abarbanel's thought, which reflects an "intense and ambivalent attitude toward Maimonides."³ Such ambivalence is succinctly captured in his reputed proviso during one of his lectures on the *Guide*, that a theologically noxious passage he had just explicated "is the intention of our master Moses, not the intention of Moses our master." The subversion of the popular adage "from Moses unto Moses none arose such as Moses" within the context of a class dedicated to Maimonides' thought reflects Abarbanel's passionately conflicted engagement with it – it treads a precarious tightrope between a continuum and a rupture with the Sinaitic revelation.⁴

While expounding his arguments and defending Maimonides from attack, Abarbanel also sharply distinguished himself from his predecessor on issues critical for Jewish faith. Once again, theological movement in one's own direction advances along a plane of subversive and adaptive exegetical engagement with Maimonides' own creative theology. What I develop here is that an apparent endorsement of Maimonidean biblical exegesis rendered in the course of his own exegetical discourse may actually amount to a sustained subversive attack once the overall interpretation is considered. This chapter focuses on Abarbanel's extended exegetical treatment of the binding of Isaac (the *Akedah*, Gen. 22), also cross-referenced with his *Guide* commentary, as paradigmatic of this feature in his formal biblical commentary. Though Abarbanel's thought has been richly mined in contemporary scholarship, Eric Lawee pointed out in his 2000 bibliographic work that "studies of Abarbanel's biblical exegesis during the last half-century has been meager

³ Colette Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 395. See also L. Rabinowitz, "Abravanel as Exegete," in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, ed. J. B. Trend and H. Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), 77–92, who observes that although Abarbanel's "reverence for Maimonides is extreme, he does not hesitate vigorously to attack him when his predilection for squaring Divine Revelation with Aristotelian philosophy leads him astray" (80).

⁴ In Isaac Barzilai's book-length study of anti-rationalism in thirteenth- to seventeenth-century Italy, the chapter on Isaac Abarbanel concludes with the sober observation that Abarbanel's "anti-rationalism seems to have been of a mere literary nature, and must least of all be identified with a negative attitude toward secular learning." See *Between Reason and Faith: Anti-Rationalism in Italian Jewish Thought 1250–1650* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 131. See also Eric Lawee's description of a lifelong struggle "to strike a balance between appropriate fidelity to Maimonidean teachings and critical distance from them" in his *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 33.

by comparison.”⁵ In addition to examining another key midrashic style, disengagement from Maimonidean thought, my intent is also to contribute toward diminishing the extent of the scholarly lacuna on Abarbanel’s exegesis. The *Akedah* is a central biblical narrative for him, warranting more scrutiny than other biblical passages since it is “Israel’s principal and merit before their Father in heaven and therefore it is fluent in our mouths, in our prayers all day and because of this it is appropriate to subject it to intense analysis more than other passages.”⁶ On a basic level, while Maimonides addresses its overall message where attention turns to only those details that might corroborate that message, Abarbanel is far more concerned than Maimonides with how each particular detail contributes to a cohesive narrative structure (*peshat*). More importantly, the *Akedah* is uniquely instructive since it cuts across a wide swath of theological issues – from the nature of Adam’s sin, to prophecy, to the significance of circumcision, angels, the precise definition of “fear of God,” and the rationale for commandments – undermining much of Maimonides’ philosophical edifice. His positions on these last two are particularly striking in their divergence from his exegesis, despite a deferential nod to Maimonides. Abarbanel’s cultural/historical milieu, which demanded concrete existential sacrifice for the preservation of one’s faith along with the disappointing failure to withstand a challenge to faith in his own family background and beyond in the general community, may have informed his exegetical divergence in this instance and throughout. Biblical exegesis in fifteenth-century Iberia charts a different path, fueled by a “fear of God” that in the end entails absolute submission rather than reasoned obeisance to divine command. Abarbanel inverts the Maimonidean theological hierarchy, discussed in detail in [Chapter 2](#), which positions this “fear” as a base means toward the optimum intellectualized ideal of love of God, idealizing the limits of the intellect in the worship of God rather than its scope.

⁵ See “Isaac Abarbanel’s Intellectual Achievement and Literary Legacy in Modern Scholarship: A Retrospective and Opportunity,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature III*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 213–47 at 218, and the studies cited on 240n49. Jolene Kellner has updated the bibliography for studies on Abarbanel since Lawee’s in “Academic Studies on and New Editions of Works by Isaac Abravanel: 2000–2008,” *Jewish History* 23, no. 3 (2009): 313–17, but the paucity of studies on Abarbanel’s exegesis remains largely the case. For a good overview of twentieth-century scholarship on Abarbanel, which also notes a serious lacuna on the study of his autobiographical rhetoric in his literary corpus, see Cedric Cohen Skalli, “Discovering Isaac Abravanel’s Humanistic Rhetoric,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 97, no. 1 (2007): 67–99. For the most recent bibliography and survey of Abarbanel’s exegesis, see Eric Lawee, “Isaac Abarbanel: From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, ed. Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 190–214.

⁶ הפרשה הזאת היא כל קרן ישראל וזכותם לפני אביהם שבשמים ולכן היא שגורה בפינו בתפלתנו כל היום ומפני זה ראוי להפליג בה העיון והחקירה יותר מבשאר הפרשיות. All references to Abarbanel’s Pentateuchal commentary are by volume and page number to the Hebrew *Perush Abarbanel al HaTorah*, 5 vols., ed. Yehudah Shaviv (Jerusalem: Chovev Publishing, 2008). All translations are my own. See 1:473.

BOUND VS. UNBOUND REASON

Abarbanel's dichotomous embrace crystallizes in his general introduction to the biblical account of Abraham's life, which constitutes the most important of three foundational moments in the evolution of the Jewish nation after Adam and Noah, providing by analogy the "human intellecting form for the rational being."⁷ The first eight of the ten phases that constitute Abraham's spiritual biography demonstrate the supremacy of theoretical intellect over all other facets of man, commencing with the command to "leave your homeland the place of your birth" which, reading "homeland" (*eret*) literally as "earth," steers the directional course of Abraham's life away from material concerns. Abraham's two wives, Hagar and Sarah, respectively, represent the practical (*maasi*) and theoretical (*iyuni*) components of the intellect that are embodied in the two distinct progeny of Ishmael and Isaac. This realizes itself in the divine guarantee that "only through Isaac will your progeny be considered" (Gen. 21:12),⁸ which, in turn, translates into the proposition that "only the theoretical intellect qualifies for immortality and perpetually gratifying life while the practical intellect, the child of the maidservant, does not qualify for immortality at all but rather disappears with man."⁹ Until this juncture, from a philosophical perspective, one could easily substitute Maimonides for Abarbanel as an advocate of its general philosophical tendenz, which values intellectual virtue above all else.¹⁰ However, the *Akedah*, in its penultimate representation of Abraham's evolving persona, marks an abrupt shift away from that tendenz. As an act of submission to a divine imperative, its sublime moral is "in the event his thoughts and analyses divert him from the way of the Torah and its beliefs, man must bind them on the altar of God and subjugate them in order to accept his Torah and his belief"¹¹. Abarbanel does not characterize the reason at play here as faulty but rather contemplates a conflict

⁷ 1:328: ויהי ערכו אצל האומה בערך הצורה האנושית המשכלת לחי מדבר.

⁸ This verse determines for Maimonides that only the line of descendants stemming from Isaac are obligated to perform circumcision. See MT, Kings, 10:7. Since descendants of Ishmael can no longer be distinguished from those of Abraham's secondary wife Keturah, they are also obligated in circumcision. All references to this work are to the Shabse Frankel edition (Bnei Brak: Hotza'at Shabse Frankel, 1975–2001), 12 vols. Isaac is the one that carries on in the tradition of Abraham's "religion and virtuous ways." See also MT, Oaths, 9:21. In his *Iggeret Teman* 2, Maimonides cites this verse as a response to the fact that Muslims vastly outnumber Jews, but regardless of their numbers it guarantees that only the Jews will be known for carrying on in the virtuous tradition of Abraham.

⁹ 1:329: כי כן השכל העיוני הוא לבד יורש הנצחית והחיים המתמידים המאשרים. אמנם השכל המעשי בן האמה לא יירש נצחיות. כלל כי יפסד בהפסד האיש. For Maimonides, see GP, I:41 on the term "soul" (*nefesh*) as "denoting the rational soul, I mean the form of man . . . the thing that remains of man after death." References to Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation of the *Guide* is to Moreh Nevukhim with commentaries by Efodi, Shem Tov, Crescas, Abravanel (Jerusalem, 1960), reprinted from 1904 edition (MN).

¹⁰ For but one Maimonidean source that would accord with Abarbanel, for example, see his account of the four perfections where the ultimate is "acquisition of the rational virtues" as opposed to material, physical, and moral perfections (GP, III:54, pp. 634–35).

¹¹ 1:329: וכן השכל העיוני כאשר במחשבותיו והקשיו יטה מדרך התורה ואמונות יעקוד אותו אדם על גבי מזבח השם ויכניעוהו לקבל תורתו ואמונתו.

between reason and religion, or what has come to be referred to in modern scholarship as Athens versus Jerusalem. Reason must be reined in when it clashes with the Torah, and the lesson of the *Akedah* follows in that reason must sacrifice itself to the dictates of revelation. For Maimonides, such a clash can only be an apparent one and the Maimonidean Abraham is paradigmatic of a pre-Sinaitic journey toward God fueled solely by reason.¹²

Abraham's reasoned beliefs are synonymous with those that are conveyed in an adulterated form at Sinai ("Torah speaks in the language of human beings"). One of the motivations in penning the *Guide* was to remedy precisely what the *Akedah* for Abarbanel commends when confronted by a conflict between Torah and reason: "Not to let himself be drawn on together with his intellect, rather turning his back on it and moving away from it" (GP, Introduction, p. 6). Abarbanel's virtuous "binding" or restraint of reason would provoke for Maimonides the unceasing "heartache and great perplexity" (6) he suggests would be symptomatic of potential readers who betray their own intellects for the sake of preserving their faith. That restraint carries through into the ultimate stage of arranging Isaac's marriage, which Abraham stipulates is to be conducted only with familial relatives. Taking "family" as a signifier for internal wisdom or Torah and "strangers" as representative of foreign wisdom, Abarbanel interprets this as a metaphor for curbing ultimate confidence in the latter, which is "in truth a *source of bitterness* (מורת רוח) (Gen. 26:35) for the divine Torah like the daughters of the Canaanites."¹³ This approach could not be more strikingly at odds with Maimonides' abiding counsel to "seek wisdom from whatever source it emanates."¹⁴ Abraham's life, for Abarbanel, can be charted along a graph of ever-increasing supremacy of reason, climaxing in an about-face, a sobering curtailment by subduing both reason and its field of inquiry. As its foundational mooring, Israel is anchored in reason constrained by Torah. For Maimonides, rather than a blueprint for Sinai, Abraham represents an idyllic state whose theological and philosophical mandates are pared down to the "primary intentions" of reason uninhibited by anthropomorphic language or extraneous ritual that comprises the "secondary intentions" of Mosaic Torah. The latter, a prime example of which is the command to worship God through the complex sacrificial cult stipulated in the Bible, is designed as ancillary to the primary task of apprehending God's existence and

¹² MT, Idolatry, 1:3.

¹³ 1:3:29: וכן ראוי שהשכל העיוני לא ישים תכלית עיונו בחכמות חיצוניות שהם באמת מורת רוח לתור' האלהית כבנות הכנעני:

¹⁴ What Abarbanel expresses here is consistent with regrets he articulated in a letter later in life over having spent too much time with "the books of the Greeks and *children of strangers*" (Isa. 2:6). See *Sheelot lehabakham Shaul HaKohen shaal me'et Yitzhak Abarbanel* (Venice, 1574), 11v, and Eric Lawee's discussion of it as an admission by Abarbanel that "Maimonides notwithstanding, philosophy's ways are indeed in some fundamental way 'foreign to our Law'" in his "The Good We Accept and the Bad We Do Not: Aspects of Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Towards Maimonides," in *Beerot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 119–60, at 131–33.

unity and is sanctioned “only for the sake of the realization of this fundamental principle” (GP, III:32, p. 530). Maimonides’ Abraham poses a model that far more approximates the midrashically envisioned revelation at the waters of Marah prior to Sinai, which was free of ritualistic “secondary intentions” in that it exclusively addressed “correct beliefs” and “the abolition of mutual wrongdoing among men” (531), or philosophy and ethics.¹⁵ Abraham’s Abarbanelian future, as symbolized by Isaac’s binding and marriage, to the contrary, turns its back on reason and anticipates Torah ritual. The midrashic image of Isaac as a “perfect burnt offering”¹⁶ represents for Abarbanel his “acquisition of perfection through the power of the *akedah*.”¹⁷ Though he symbolizes the “acquired intellect” (*sekhel hanikneh*), it is an intellect shaped by an act of acknowledgment of its own inferiority.

THE AKEDAH: GENETIC REINFORCEMENT VS. BEHAVIORAL INTELLECTUAL MODEL

At the core of Abarbanel’s general introduction to his discussion proper of the *Akedah*, where he identifies its overarching purpose, lie essential ontological notions of Abraham’s progeny, Isaac and the nation of Israel, which immediately steer his analysis in a decidedly non-Maimonidean direction. Leaving aside for the moment what perfection consists of, since the test aims at constructing Israel’s most perfect biological antecedents, its target could not be Abraham: He was genetically tainted by wicked parentage and therefore was “not naturally born into perfection being a saint the son of a sinner.”¹⁸ What Abarbanel considers inherently deficient is precisely Abraham’s prime virtue for Maimonides, since his greatness consists in arriving at the universal truth of a creator God in spite of his upbringing and familial background. Abraham had “no one to teach him and no

¹⁵ Abarbanel rejects the manner in which Maimonides adopts this midrashic rendering of the Marah revelation to explain the apparent difficulty of Jeremiah 7:21 that asserts no commands regarding sacrifices were issued upon the Egyptian exodus. Abarbanel does continue to explain that the sacrifices were a corrective to the sin of the golden calf, whereas initially commands concerned only “matters of belief and praiseworthy deeds.” However, what is pertinent for our study is that he rejects Maimonides’ classification of *mitzvot* into “primary and secondary intentions,” sacrifices being within the second category, for “the sacrifices are divine commandments (*mitzvah elohit*) regardless of whether they were commanded first, second, or third.” See *Commentary on the Latter Prophets* (hereafter CLP) (Jerusalem: Torah VeDaat, 1948), 328, commentary to Jeremiah 7:21. For Maimonides, the sacrifices are a psychologically necessary means to a higher end, while for Abarbanel, although they postdate those commands that Maimonides would classify under “primary intentions,” they are of intrinsic worth in themselves.

¹⁶ Bereshit Rabbah 64:3.

¹⁷ I:330: צחק היה דוגמת השכל הנקנה ולכן היה עולה תמימה ונאמר לו אל תרד מצרימה והוא קנה השלמות בכח העקדה

¹⁸ I:474: אחר שלא היה בעת הלידה מוטבע בשלמות ההוא כי היה צדיק בן רשע

one to instruct him in anything,”¹⁹ and thus he contemplated and laboriously demonstrated his way to the truth *sui generis*, which is the only authentic way according to Maimonides of truly knowing something. In his case, Abraham overcame erroneous knowledge obtained by authority or tradition in favor of true self-gained knowledge. Conversely, Isaac is chosen as the subject of the test for his natural perfections. His father is righteous, his birth is miraculous – “not by natural means but by divine act” – and, just as with Nahmanides, he is engendered “in holiness and purity,” due to the fortuitously timed “godly design that Abraham undergo circumcision prior to Isaac’s birth.”²⁰ (1:474). For Maimonides, circumcision is a purely functional ritual, graphically asserting the strength of one’s commitment to a monotheistic community and pragmatically useful in diminishing the sexual appetite, a cause of distraction from humanity’s true mandate of a reasoned life.²¹

In his account of Isaac’s perfections, Abarbanel alludes to Maimonides, though not by name, with a direct quote that transforms its original intent by its new context. Isaac’s perfection due to his filial connection to Abraham is attributed to the fact that “children draw from the father’s condition, for *the nature of the quarry ought to be present in what is hewn from it*” (emphasis mine).²² Maimonides also uses this to describe Abraham’s descendants, but only as a natural impetus to focus on Abraham as a practical model that will inspire one to “tread therefore in his footsteps, adhere to his religion, and acquire his character.”²³ Abraham is a spiritual/ethical model for posterity, not a contributor to a perfect gene pool. Abarbanel’s combination of it with the other factors of miraculous and holy birth consciously subvert its natural Maimonidean sense into an ontological one, where Isaac physically assimilates his father’s nature to compound his essential perfection, something which of course was not available to Abraham. In an age when many of his religious compatriots faced a dire challenge to their Jewish identities, it

¹⁹ MT, Idolatry, 1:3. For parallel passages regarding Abraham’s auspicious beginnings in the *Guide* see GP II:39, p. 379; III:29, p. 516.

²⁰ 1:474: לכן גזרה החכמה האלהית שימול אברהם קודם לידת יצחק באופן שיולד יצחק בקדושה ובטהרה:

²¹ For Maimonides, as opposed to others, circumcision, unlike baptism, is merely another commandment without which the Jew remains a Jew albeit a transgressor. See Shaye Cohen’s recent discussion of Maimonides’ position in chaps. 6 and 7 of his *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Like Abarbanel, even such a staunch adherent of Maimonidean teachings such as R. David Kimhi was averse to this thoroughly functional view of circumcision and expressed some ambivalence on it. At the start of his comments to Genesis 17:1, he offers the following rationale for the timing of Abraham’s circumcision: “And he was commanded to undergo circumcision prior to conceiving Isaac in order that Isaac should originate from a seed that is more *kasher*.” Abraham Ibn Ezra expresses the same view (Gen. 17:5) and is cited by Abarbanel in support of the “holy birth” of Isaac. On Maimonides’ alternative rationalizations of circumcision, see Josef Stern’s classification of it as a “parabolic commandment” consisting of tripartite levels of vulgar, external, and internal meaning in chap. 5 of *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

²² כי טבע המקור ראוי שיהיה נמצא במה שיחצב ממנו

²³ GP, I:16, p. 42: על כן לכו בדרכיו והאמינו בתורתו והתנהגו במדותיו

is noteworthy that Abarbanel launched his analysis of supreme sacrifice that is the *Akedah* with an excursus on perfect Jewishness in the person of Isaac. That perfection consists of circumcision, the most prominent physical sign of Jewishness permanently etched in one's body, and ancestry or a life that constantly proclaims one's roots. A marrano existence might be compatible with a Maimonidean sense of authenticity that emphasizes internal thought and external ethics, but it would be an affront to Abarbanel's Isaacian model of Jewishness. Although Abarbanel's attitude toward conversos was a complex amalgam of empathy and disdain,²⁴ his distinctly anti-Maimonidean exegesis may have been spurred by what he viewed in part as the conversos' traitorous behavior who "abandoned their religion and chose to become like the gentiles . . . and the name of Israel would no longer be represented by them."²⁵ According to B. Netanyahu, Abarbanel considered the conversos' ultimate goal to have been "a state of complete gentilehood . . . which means also ethnic fusion with the non-Jews to the point of total disappearance."²⁶ In a sense, the willingness of Abraham and Isaac to "disappear," the latter literally and the former in the obliteration of the future, to preserve their Jewishness in their fealty to God offers a formidable antipode to the conversos' exchange of their identities.

The assimilationist trend of the conversos reverses the effects of the *Akedah* in another sense. According to Abarbanel, its paramount goal did not concern God or Abraham but was "for the benefit of our nation as a whole for because of it they would be a holy seed and escape the control of the heavenly powers and come under the direct providence and guidance of God alone."²⁷ The *Akedah* privileges the future corporate body of Israel with divine governance and protection that transcends others who are caught within the ambit of astrological forces.²⁸ Just prior to positing this categorical

²⁴ For the most recent study on this issue, see Ram Ben-Shalom, "The Typology of the Converso in Isaac Abravanel's Exegesis," *Jewish History* 23, no. 3 (2009): 281–92, who detects a more sympathetic attitude that viewed the conversos as remaining part of the Jewish collective with an important role in messianic redemption through their eventual reintegration. For the debate, see the literature cited in footnote 1 therein.

²⁵ CLP, 519, Ezekiel 20:32.

²⁶ *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain* (New York: Random House, 1995), 929.

²⁷ 1:475: תועלת העקדה לצרכה לא בבחינת האל ית' ולא בבחינת אברהם אלא בעבור תועלת כלל אומתנו אשר בעבורה יהיו זרע 1:740, where Abarbanel reiterates the link between the historical transition to direct divine governance and Isaac's circumcision and binding, "for after Isaac was circumcised and bound the transcendent providence bonded with his descendants so that God would be their *elohim* and they would be His nation."

²⁸ Abarbanel's position that Israel uniquely falls under the direct control of the divine umbrella as opposed to other nations that are confined within the astrological ambit of their heavenly hosts is diffused throughout his writings. See, for example, his comments to Deuteronomy 4:15; *Ateret Zekenim*, chaps. 11, 12; *Nahlat Avot*, 3:19. See also Seymour Feldman's discussion of Israel's "special status" among the nations and its companion notion of the special status of the land of Israel in his *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel, Defender of the Faith* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 134–40.

promise of the *Akedah*, Abarbanel argues that Isaac's transformation into a sacrifice is tantamount to sacrificing the material body for the intellect, or that which is eternal and grants "true perfection." Its spiritual legacy is a quintessentially Maimonidean one "that divine providence is proportionate to intellect rather than governance by nature or heavenly forces for the link and conjunction between man and God is conduct in accord with the intellect."²⁹ However, in the same vein that his Maimonidean biography of Abraham sustained itself until the last two phases, where its Maimonidean strain was seriously compromised, so with the legacy of the *Akedah*, which is at once Maimonidean in its promotion of intellect as the sole channel of divine providence and anti-Maimonidean in its inherited quality that becomes nationally ingrained.³⁰ Nowhere does Maimonides distinguish between Jewish providence and gentile providence, treating the human qua human in the link to God via intellect.³¹ Experience dictated this philosophy to Abarbanel as a feeble bulwark against the onslaught of Christian oppression and inquisition, and so a kernel of Maimonidean intellectualism to which he was attracted is preserved along with the kabbalistic essentialism of Israel's, and Israel's alone, unique relationship with God.³²

A FUTURE SACRIFICED IS A FUTURE GAINED VS. REWARD IN ITSELF

As Abarbanel continues to resolve his customary lengthy list of problems posed by the passage, he cites approvingly the two key pedagogical lessons Maimonides considered the *Akedah* narrative to convey in [chapter III:24](#) of his *Guide*.³³ The first is that Abraham's willingness to comply with the command to

²⁹ 1:474: להיות ההשגחה כפי שכלול לא שיהיה מונהג מצד הטבע ומצד כחות הגרמים השמימיים כי הקשר והדבקות אשר באדם עם: השם הוא בהתנהגו כפי שכלול.

³⁰ See GP, III:17 for Maimonides' theory of providence summed up in the assertion that "providence is consequent upon the intellect and attached to it."

³¹ A critical source for Maimonides' universalism outside the *Guide* is in MT, Sabbatical and Jubilee Years, 13:13, which considers all human beings capable of aspiring to a state of "holy of holies." For a book-length argument demonstrating this nonessentialist view of Maimonides, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). Especially pertinent to my argument here is his discussion of Maimonidean providence at 23–26, which he concludes is framed "in terms of human beings ('Adamites'), not in terms of Jews" (25).

³² For an excellent discussion of kabbalah's ontic distinction between Jews and non-Jews see the [first chapter](#) of Elliot Wolfson's *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17–128. Especially pertinent to this study is his observation that kabbalistic ethnocentrism was so pervasive to the point of co-opting the universalistic Maimonidean taxonomy of reason as the essence of humankind to apply specifically to Jews (52).

³³ For detailed studies of Maimonides' understanding of the *Akedah* see H. Kasher, "Sufferings Without Sin: Meaning of Trial in the Moreh" (Heb.), *Daat* 26 (1991): 35–41; Seymour Feldman, "The Binding of Isaac: A Test Case of Divine Foreknowledge," and the response by J. Cohen,

slaughter his son, despite his deep attachment to a child that was born to him late in life, demonstrates “to what point love and fear of God reaches.” Second is the absolute confidence prophets have in the veracity of their revelations, whose “nature to them is identical to things they grasp with their senses.”³⁴ No greater proof of this can be offered than the willingness of Abraham to “slaughter his cherished son whom he loved as his own life.” His commendation of Maimonides’ analysis of the *Akedah*’s objectives is buttressed by applying to it Ecclesiastes’ praise, “A wise man’s talk brings him favour” (10:12), ostensibly accentuating his support for it. However, he then introduces a third teaching that “is appropriate to add to them” which, on close examination, undermines the full thrust of Maimonides’ position – the “belief in the immortality of the soul and its spiritual reward.”³⁵ Abarbanel reasons that Abraham’s decision to slaughter his son, an act tantamount to erasing his future, would be irrational without a firm anticipation on his part “of the reward due his soul posthumously in return for offering his son as a sacrifice, for because of it he would be privileged with the light of eternal life that is a greater good than children.”³⁶ What is apparently presented as a natural extension of Maimonides’ rationale for the *Akedah* is in truth an attenuation of its philosophical implications that Abarbanel considers dangerous.

By pivoting the *Akedah* on the limits of love of God and certitude of prophetic reception, Maimonides thoroughly intellectualized the trial. The latter is clear in its vivid endorsement of the credibility of what is essentially an internal noetic process of filtering information through the intellect and the imagination. A Maimonidean love of God is primarily a function of intellect as it is formulated both halakhically and philosophically. Though the topic is a broad one, suffice it for our purposes to cite but a few of those formulations. For instance, in his listing of the *mitzvot*, the precept of loving God, of which Abraham is the outstanding archetype, is defined in terms of understanding: It consists of “our understanding and apprehending His commandments and actions to the point where we attain supreme pleasure in His apprehension,” and “through intellecting apprehension will be established and pleasure and

“Philosophical Exegesis in Historical Perspective: The Case of the Binding of Isaac” in the volume *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence*, ed. Tamar Rudavsky (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1985), 109–12, 135–42; A. Nuriel, “Maimonides on Parables Not Explicitly Defined as Such” (Heb.), *Daat* 25 (1990): 85–91; James A. Diamond, “Trial as an Esoteric Preface in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*: A Case Study in the Interplay of Text and Proof-text,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1997): 1–30. For a comparative analysis, see A. Van der Heide, “Maimonides and Nahmanides on the Concept of Trial,” in *Sobra la Vida y Obra de Maimonides*, ed. Jesus Palalez del Rosal (Cordoba: Edicion el Almendro, 1991), 305–14.

³⁴ 1:476: היה דינו אצלם כדין הענינים המושגים לחושי

³⁵ 1:477: וראוי להוסיף עליהם עוד למד שלישי יורה עליו ענין עקיד' והוא אמונ' השאור' הנפש ושכרה הרוחני

³⁶ 1:477: אבל הית' תקותו בלבד שכר נפשו שיעצ' אליו אחרי מותו בשכר שיעלה בנו עולה כי בעבורו יזכה באור החיים הנצחיי' שהוא טוב מכנים ומבנות

love will necessarily ensue.”³⁷ His *Mishneh Torah*, as meticulously detailed in [chapter 2](#), defines loving God in terms of knowledge of God’s creation and explicitly draws a direct correlation between love and knowledge: “Love is proportional to knowledge, if a little then little and if a lot then a lot.”³⁸ Finally, these halakhic definitions are wholly congruent with those in the *Guide* and self-referenced as “valid only through the apprehension of the whole of being as it is and through the consideration of His wisdom as it is manifested in it.”³⁹

Wary of a thoroughly intellectualized *Akedah*, Abarbanel introduces the prospect of reward and afterlife to detract from its Maimonidean abstraction and divert attention toward a more concrete aspect of it that would provide enhanced motivation for the performance of commandments rather than promoting a Judaism that could be perfected by an inner contemplative life. Abarbanel rules out exactly the same fear of the wrath of God as Maimonides, of “being killed or impoverished,”⁴⁰ as a possible motivation for Abraham’s compliance, but, where Maimonides’ emphasis is on its absolute altruism, Abarbanel introduces the expectation of a reward, albeit the afterlife. Abarbanel’s supplemental third teaching reinvents Maimonides’ dual pronged teachings, particularly since Maimonides does not only exclude the fear of impoverishment or death as incentives for Abraham’s obedience but also “any hope of a reward” (GP, III:24, p. 501).⁴¹ In fact, the very essence of love is its selfless intellectual devotion to God, and, as Maimonides states in his *Mishneh Torah*, that same essence entails “the pursuit of the truth simply because it is the truth and the good will inevitably ensue.”⁴² Furthermore, Maimonides specifically disqualifies as lovers of God those who act out of the hope of earning “life in the world to come,” or, alternatively, to relieve the angst of being excised from that life.⁴³ Abarbanel subtly preserves the link between simple obedience and eternal life in the guise of augmenting a Maimonidean teaching when in fact it subverts its very advocacy of intellectual perfection as an end in itself and the *sine qua non* of survival in the coming world.

³⁷ *Sefer HaMitzvot*, ed. Chayim Heller (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1995), 35.

³⁸ MT, Foundations of Torah, 2:2; Repentance, 10:6.

³⁹ See GP, III:28, p. 512 and all the references to Maimonides and secondary literature cited by Schwartz in his Hebrew edition of the *Guide*, p. 519n8. For but one thorough review of the place of love in Maimonides’ oeuvre, see chap. 7 of Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), where he demonstrates that both the MT and the *Guide* combine in a seamless continuum on the integral connection between love and intellect.

⁴⁰ מפחד השם שיהרגהו או ירוששהו

⁴¹ כי אברהם אבינו לא מהר לשחוט יצחק לפחדו מהשם שיהרגהו או ירוששהו, אבל כדי שיתפרסם לבני אדם מה ראוי לעשותו בשביל אהבת הש"י ויראתו לא לתקות גמול ולא לפחד עונש

⁴² MT, Repentance, 9:2.

⁴³ MT, Repentance, 9:1, 4.

TRIAL: AN ACCOMPLISHMENT OF REASONED REFLECTION
VS. EMOTIONAL RESTRAINT

Abarbanel rationalizes why the divine fiat of the *Akedah* is alone designated a “trial” out of all the other trials considered by the rabbis to have comprised much of Abraham’s latter years. Each can be dually qualified according to the respective vantage points of the commander and the commanded. Though from Abraham’s perspective a command such as the initial *Leave your country* (Gen. 12:1), which launched his biblical career, is a trial in the sense of the word as “banner” or model of commitment and dedication, its primary goal from the divine perspective was not the demonstration of Abraham’s virtues but rather as preparatory to “entering the holy land and establishing possession of it.”⁴⁴ Only the *Akedah* served no other purpose except to “promote Abraham as a banner and model of *whom the nations shall inquire*.”⁴⁵ On this particular facet of the *Akedah* he surmises that he has honed in on Maimonides’ understanding of it “and I believe this is the opinion of the master the guide (*harav hamoreh*) when understood correctly.”⁴⁶ Although not inconsistent with Maimonides’ dissection of the *Akedah*, its noted distinction from Abraham’s previous trials shifts the focus away from its Maimonidean intellectualist fulcrum to one of simple unadulterated obedience, thus laying the groundwork for a final assault on its Maimonidean trappings. By distinguishing God’s demand to sacrifice Isaac as a pure *nisayon* (trial) divorced from any intrinsic telos of prior divine directives, which are instrumental in accomplishing certain goals, and absolutely free of any pragmatic use, Abarbanel has subtly incorporated the rabbinic categories of rational *mitzvot*, or *mishpatim*,⁴⁷ and those classified as *hukim*, which have no rationale. Maimonides in his *Guide* categorically repudiates this traditional categorization of the commandments.⁴⁸ The trials endured by Abraham leading up to the *Akedah* are distinguished from it in their purposefulness and their instrumentality in achieving some concrete goal, thus mirroring

⁴⁴ 1:478.

⁴⁵ 1:478, based on Isa. 11:8.

⁴⁶ 1:478: זהו דעת הרב המור' בענין העקדה כשיובן על אמתתו.

⁴⁷ See, for example, his comments on Deuteronomy 4:1 and Leviticus 25 (155 at bottom of old edition) where he states, “When one subdues his psyche to perform the *hukim* whose rationale is unknown and therefore difficult intellectually, then without a doubt *they will observe my mishpatim* which are the laws whose rationale human minds can grasp.” For a classic treatment of Abarbanel’s position on the rationale for commandments, see Isaak Heinemann, *The Reasons for the Commandments in Jewish Literature* (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 1949), 1:117–24.

⁴⁸ See GP III:26, pp. 506–10 where this classification of commandments is determined by “those whose utility is clear to the multitude . . . and those whose utility is not clear to the multitude.” If a commandment seems to be purposeless, it is due to “a deficiency [that] resides in your apprehension” (507).

the nature of *mishpatim*. The *Akedah*, however, lacks this intrinsic rationale requiring an absolute submission of all of Abraham's human capacities, be they emotional or intellectual, to the divine will.⁴⁹

This critical fault line between Abarbanel and Maimonides can be detected in the subtly nuanced reformulation of the narrative role Maimonides assigned to the three-day journey to Mount Moriah as a cooling-off period between the actual command and its performance. That temporal hiatus is the crux of Maimonides' conception of the *Akedah* in its near exclusive dedication to reasoned deliberation on Abraham's part. Without this rather lengthy interregnum between divine command and human compliance, Abraham's act, as a model response to God's will, would have appeared impulsive and rash and would have been perceived as "an act of stupefaction and disturbance *in the absence of exhaustive reflection*"⁵⁰ (GP, III:24, p. 501). I stress these last words⁵¹ since they convey what Maimonides considered to have been the *Akedah*'s essential pedagogical message captured by the literary detail of a three-day journey, an otherwise apparently superfluous detail of its account. That "exhaustive reflection" is broken down further into pensive components that are all imbued with cognitive connotations that inform Abraham's act with "thought, correct understanding, consideration of the truth of His command, may He be exalted, love of Him, and fear of Him" (במחשבה ובהשתכלות אמיתי ובהינתן חק מצותו) (Ibn Tibbon, 3:37). Abarbanel's description of Abraham's internal thought processes radically undermines Maimonides' intellectualized account of them by voiding that aspect entirely and replacing reasoned reflection with psychological and emotional accommodation to God's command that belies any hint of shock induced behavior. Abraham conducted himself "with patience and great calm for three days without any second thoughts."⁵²

Calmness and patience do not, however, imply immediate and unflinchingly resolute acceptance of God's will. Otherwise, for Abarbanel, the three-day time frame would indeed be otiose. During that period, Abraham patiently wrestled

⁴⁹ Though I see this position and others as primarily directed against Maimonidean ones, Solomon Gaon has also argued for the direct influence of Christian theologians as well, and in particular Alfonso Tostado. On this issue, for example, of obedience to the Law, Gaon claims that Abarbanel was responding to Tostado's Maimonidean-like position in his commentary to Leviticus 19, arguing that "while the observance of these laws might be prompted by our natural instincts, we must only keep them because of our love for God and our allegiance to Him." See *The Influence of the Catholic Theologian Alfonso Tostado on the Pentateuch Commentary of Isaac Abarbanel* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing, 1993), 64.

⁵⁰ היה פעולת בהלה בבילתי השתכלות

⁵¹ In Abarbanel's Hebrew version of the *Guide*, they would have been השתכלות בבילתי.

⁵² היה פועלת בהלה בבילתי השתכלות במתן ובנחת ג ימים בלי חרטה. This calm premeditated conduct of the *Akedah* carries through even to the climactic moments of the actual binding, where the narrative details of building the altar and arranging the wood (Gen. 22:9) again indicate "that his actions were not done in confusion but rather he built the altar and arranged the wood with equanimity (ישוב דעת) and in a pleasing manner as if he had completely resigned himself to it" (1:484:לבו מיושב עליו). There is a total commitment of the whole person in his combined resignation of *lev* and *daat*.

with the unfathomable emotional turmoil that must have been elicited by a command to obliterate that which he loved and treasured more than anything else in life. Rather than grapple with the command's rational credibility, Abraham required the time to combat and subdue the whirl of emotions, including love, empathy, and compassion that are characteristic of father/child relationships, and so "he suppressed his compassion (כבש רחמיו) during those days by various activities without regret or retreat" (1:480). Abarbanel also offers an illustration of this phenomenon where a rash decision with catastrophic consequences was deferred and averted by allowing compassion to surface and overwhelm anger. In that case the exemplar is God, who twice expresses the desire to obliterate Israel "in an instant" but then thinks better of it.⁵³ As a divine paradigm of emotional control over compulsive reaction, especially anger, that trait which for Maimonides is anathema to a correct notion of divine being, Abarbanel strategically augments his assault on the Maimonidean *Akedah* as corroborative of fealty to the precepts of the Torah anchored in reason. For Maimonides, the one thing that man and God might have in common is intellectual apprehension, and it is "because of the divine intellect conjoined in man that it is said of the latter that he is *in the image of God and in His likeness*" (GP, I:1, p. 23). By introducing this temperamental God as a precedent for Abraham's conduct at such a crucial juncture in Maimonides' intellectualist reconstruction of the narrative, Abarbanel once again undermines the entire intellectual tenor of the *Akedah* by radically shifting the Maimonidean shared ground between man and God to the ethical/emotional realm.

THE AKEDAH AS MITZVAH: A MODEL OF REASON

VS. THE SURRENDER OF REASON

Abarbanel's shaping of the three-day journey sharply veers his exegesis away from that of Maimonides and toward its decidedly antirationalist climax: his definition of the "fear of God" that Abraham demonstrated when finally raising the knife to slaughter his son. Virtually every explication of this "fear" can be viewed as a strategic attack on the fundamental premises of the Maimonidean project to rationalize the commandments. This particular command, which is paradigmatic of the divine command structure as a whole, is thoroughly imbued with the aura of incomprehensibility that reeks with a senselessness regardless of any vantage point from which it is examined, be it commander or commanded. In the case of God, it is a cruel, self-defeating order that offends God's apparent design from both universal and particular perspectives. First, it calls for the

⁵³ שלא יתאפקו רחמיו לעשות בהמשך זמן (Exod. 33:5; Num. 15:21). It is noteworthy that the *Akedah* is a recurrent liturgical theme that develops for the Jewish New Year, where Abraham becomes a model for God who is lobbied to recall how Abraham "overcame his compassion to resolutely carry out your will so should your compassion overcome your anger at us."

eradication of what He previously promoted as an “image of God,” and, second, in this circumstance, for the murder of a human being that He miraculously brought into existence. Paralleling its divine illogic, in the case of Abraham, it enjoins the emotional devastation of murdering a son, the love for whom is compounded by his extraordinary biologically defiant birth. Despite its surreal absurdity, “Abraham agreed to perform the act he was commanded along with all its strangeness and he did not second-guess God’s command to investigate and determine why and for what, for it is the way of an authentic worshipper not to inquire about the reasons for *mitzvot* of his master other than His will that He wills it.”⁵⁴ Abarbanel then defines the ideal “fear” of God precisely in terms of its irrationality, for “this fear would not qualify as its apogee if there were something stronger in the world that could challenge it. Therefore true fear necessarily entails no questioning of God’s character and demands something inimical to the intellect. One should do it out of fear ... and this applies to the *Akedah*, an act that is foreign to the intellect which Abraham agreed to perform without adjudging whether it was appropriate or not.”⁵⁵ Abarbanel first deconstructs the Maimonidean Abraham, whose fear of God is informed by “thought, correct understanding, consideration of the truth of His command.” He then reconstructs him into the consummate obverse of the Maimonidean worshipper, who is willing to commit to an enterprise “very foreign to the intellect,” devoid of any reflection whatsoever as to its inherent truth. Abraham’s meteoric rise as the founding father of Judaism may have been initially stimulated by reason and his rational discovery of a unified deity, but it culminates in reason’s defeat and its surrender to an inscrutable transcendent will. For Maimonides, in contradistinction, Abraham’s career is consistently propelled by intellect, anchored at its inception in reason and propagating its conclusions by teaching and maturing into a physical instantiation of those teachings, for “just as they followed his correct and useful opinions, namely those that were heard from him, so ought one to follow the opinions deriving from his actions and especially from this action” (GP, III:24, p. 502).

Abarbanel presents the *Akedah* as a kind of practical analogue to the Christian *credo quia absurdum* where one submits to God’s will not despite but because of its irrationality. His elevation of it as an archetype for the ultimate service of God, which is “the purpose of the entire Torah and the very apex of human perfection,”⁵⁶ inverts the Maimonidean perfection defined in terms of the intellect, “which consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues” (GP, III:54, p. 635). Here

⁵⁴ 1:488: והנה אברהם הסכים לעשות זה הפועל המצוה אליו עם כל זרותו ולא הררה אחר מצות הש' לחקור ולידע למה זה ועל מה: 1:488: זה לפי שמדר' העובד האמתי שלא יבקש טעם למצות אדוניו וזולת רצונו שהוא רוצה בכך

⁵⁵ לא תהיה אותה היראה בתכלית מה שאפשר אחר שיש דבר בעולם יותר חזק מן היראה מנגד לה ולכן היה מן ההכרח שהיראה אלהים האמיתי לא יהרהר אחר מדותיו כלל ואם יאמר לו הש' לעשות דבר שהוא זר לשכל מאוד יעשהו עכ"פ מצד היראה ... ומזה הצד שהיה פעל העקד' זר אצל השכל שישחוט האב הזקן את הבן היחיד אשר לו הסכים אברהם עכ"פ לשחטו מאין פנות אם הדבר ראוי או בלתי ראוי

⁵⁶ 1:488: הגה להיות מעלת היראה אמיתית תכלית כל התורה ותכלית מה שאפשר לאדם להשיגו מן השלמות כאמרו ועתה ישראל: 1:488: מה ה' אלהיך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה

Abarbanel delivers his fatal salvo to the Maimonidean project by citing a biblical proof-text, a strategy exquisitely endemic to Jewish philosophy and theology, that Maimonides adopted as an anchor text of his enterprise to rationalize the *mitzvot*. What Abraham accomplished with the *Akedah*, according to Abarbanel, was to set the precedent, the existential model, that concretizes for all of Jewish history what God expects of a Jew: *And now Israel, what does God demand of you but fear* (Deut. 10:12). Both citations of this verse in the *Guide* forge an identity between fear inspired worship and that grounded in reason. It first appears within the context of a discussion regarding the equibalance of the *mitzvot* and an allusion to its full explication to come when the *Guide* will fully examine the reasons for the commandments. At this point it suffices for Maimonides' purposes to fault those who consider *mitzvot* as "burdensome" with "an error in considering them" (II:39) (טעות בהבוננות) (Ibn Tibbon 2:83b). The verse regarding the demand of fear is then cited to corroborate the ease of performing the *mitzvot*; that is, God asks of you *nothing more* than fear, an ease and comfort that can only ensue from a correct understanding of their rationale. Its second appearance is in a preface to the section in the *Guide* dealing with the reasons for the commandments, where it conveys the same message following the proposition of the "utility of every commandment" in inculcating proper beliefs leading to love and fear of God. Again, God's demand in Deuteronomy 10:12 is depicted as *all He requires of you is mere fear*; that is, once the commandments' rationale is discerned, compliance is not "fraught with any hardship whatever" (GP, III:29, p. 518). Abarbanel co-opts a verse that underpins Maimonides' normative rationalism to capture the irrational essence of the *Akedah* as a model for all *mitzvot*, thus draining it of its Maimonidean connotations and injecting the vacuum with their exact antithesis. Abarbanel's exegesis displaces the Maimonidean ease of observing purposeful and rational commands for the onerous and angst-ridden intellectual and emotional submission to pure will.

Although Maimonides is far less consistent on his definition of fear as intellectually based than he is on love, fluctuating in his writings between fear as intellectual awe on the one hand and as dread of divine retribution on the other,⁵⁷ as Howard Kreisel has noted, his discussion of its role in the *Akedah* over all others especially lends itself as an endorsement of its intellectual moorings.⁵⁸ Abarbanel, I believe, discerned this and, given the centrality of the

⁵⁷ See Howard Kreisel's comprehensive discussion of this in *Maimonides' Political Thought*, especially 258–66. A striking example of this inconsistency is the divergent formulations he offers of it as a commandment between his *Sefer HaMitzvot*, pos. #4, and the beginning of MT, 2:2.

⁵⁸ "Some passages in the *Guide* may certainly be interpreted as alluding to the notion of fear as intellectual awe, especially Maimonides' discussion of the binding of Isaac." Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 26. Admittedly, however, as is endemic to Maimonides' oeuvre on the whole, even this is not explicit and is subject to interpretation. See also the previous discussion in chapter 2.

Akedah in his thought for Jewish history, identity, chosenness, and command structure, he mounted a sustained assault that sought to reverse the current of fear and love from intellect to submission.⁵⁹ As a component of that assault, Abarbanel, in his lengthy discussion of the proper fear of God in Deuteronomy 10:12, draws a parallel between Abraham's obedience at the *Akedah* and Moses' at the burning bush, the other passage in the *Guide* that advocates most a notion of fear as intellectual awe. For Maimonides, Moses' hiding of his face for fear of gazing at God (Exod. 3:6) is a symbolic gesture of supreme intellectual humility during the arduous process of acquiring knowledge, which at times requires pause and a herculean restraint from prematurely advancing toward its goals. Proper and systematic investigation averts jumping to conclusions, a method that Moses adopts by *hiding his face*, signifying that he did not "strain and impel his thoughts toward the apprehension of the deity," but instead elegantly posed an existential model that one "should rather feel awe and refrain and hold back until he gradually elevates himself" (GP, I:5, p. 29). Fear in this case consists of Moses' subdued approach to intellectual progress and is cast as an essential component of intellectual achievement and understanding God rather than bowing to an inscrutable will. It is therefore by design that Abarbanel cites Moses' physical gesture together with Abraham's enactment of the *Akedah* to illustrate a notion of fear that is motivated by pure loyalty to divine command and terror of estrangement and eliciting divine anger (כדי שלא לעבור על דברי ולהקצין אותי). Moses' reticence in hiding his face is not the assumption of an independent intellectual posture but a compliant response to God's command in the previous verse of *Do not come close* (3:5), "for he feared looking at Him in reaction to the command so that he should not anger Him."⁶⁰ Abarbanel's fear of angering God here is clearly distinguished from fear of punishment, which is an inferior mode of

⁵⁹ It is this theological position regarding the *mitzvot* that underlies Abarbanel's disagreement with Maimonides' essentialization of Judaism to thirteen dogmatic principles. His antiphilosophical stand on the Law prevented him from accepting such a reduction of Jewish faith and practice to these thirteen alone. See Abarbanel's *Rosh Amanah*, trans. Menachem Kellner (Rutherford, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1983), chap. 24. As Menachem Kellner argues, "His fundamentally critical stance toward philosophy led him to elevate every teaching of the Torah to the status of dogma, making philosophical speculation dangerous since mistakes in such speculation might very well cost one his share in the world to come." See his *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 194–95. Leo Strauss considers Abarbanel's erasure of any distinctions between fundamental and nonfundamental precepts to be subversively antiphilosophical in the extreme that "actually undermines the whole structure of the philosophy of the Jewish law which was built up by Maimonides." See his "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, ed. J. B. Trend and H. Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), 95–129, at 104.

⁶⁰ במשה נאמר ויסתר משה פניו כי ירא מהבית אל האלהים כי בעבור שצוהו אל תקרב הלום. ירא מהבית אליו כנגד הצוואה שצוהו לבל יקצוף עליו (in old edition 3:107). Although Abarbanel vehemently rejects Maimonides' view of prophecy as a product of natural perfection (see Ibn Tibbon 2:69), when discussing this passage in his commentary on Exodus he manages to at least trace it to one position of a rabbinic debate on the matter that focuses on the merits of Moses' hiding his face (2:28). See Lawee's discussion of

worship. Rather, it is simply a fear of offending Him without consideration of material repercussions. By combining the *Akedah* and Moses at the burning bush – the two most prominent examples in the *Guide* of fear as intellectual awe – Abarbanel has radically shifted its orientation from reason to simple obedience and opened the door to interpreting the roles of love and fear in Maimonides' *Akedah* in its vein.

AKEDAH'S ANGEL: VISION VS. ENCOUNTER

Understanding Abarbanel's lengthy excursus on the *Akedah* as a systematic subversion of the Maimonidean *Akedah* sheds increasing light on the rationale of offering what he calls a "second approach" (האופן השני) to the problems posed for God's omniscience by the apparently illuminating discovery expressed in the divine declaration *Now I know that you fear God*. Rather than a divine pronouncement, Abarbanel proposes the alternative solution that it is an actual angel addressing Abraham, for "they are the words of the angel who is speaking for himself and not on God's behalf." Given that he holds that angels can acquire new knowledge, the problem raised with respect to deficiency in divine knowledge disappears. Ingeniously, though syntactically awkward, Abarbanel reads the phrase *from me* (מני) in the eureka expressed by *Now I know that you fear God since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from me* (Gen. 22:12) as apposite the first phrase, *Now I know that you fear God*, rendering it as "Now I know that you fear God *more than me*" (1:489). Abarbanel's alternative solution to the statement's theological conundrum is far more than simply an extension of any dispute between Abarbanel and Maimonides on the existence of angels as actual living entities. It forms another prong of attack in the stripping away of the *Akedah*'s Maimonidean intellectual overlay by targeting what Maimonides considers the peak of natural perfection in the prophetic experience. Within the Maimonidean hierarchy of prophetic aptitude, the address of the angel to Abraham in the *Akedah* occupies its very summit as "the highest of the degrees of the prophets whose states are attested by the prophetic books *after the perfection of the rational faculties of the individual considered as necessary by speculation has been established*" (GP, II:45, p. 402; emphasis mine).

Rationally constituted, this angelic revelation is the culmination of an intellectual process arrived at "after the perfection of the rational faculties" and therefore presents an exemplar, paradigmatic as no other, of Maimonidean naturalistic prophetology. This angel, in Maimonides' prophetic topography, reduces to a metaphor for the inevitable result, barring any unnatural divine interference arresting it, of natural cognitive achievement. As such it is supremely antithetical to Abarbanel's critique of and antagonism to Maimonides' theory

this as an example of finding "a 'traditional home' for Maimonidean views that he strongly disputes." *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance*, 121–22.

and his advocacy of prophecy as a supernatural phenomenon that is ultimately contingent on God's will.⁶¹ This second approach, which anthropomorphizes the angel as some ontological entity, both complements his nonintellectual appreciation of Abraham's fear and love of God explicated thus far and directly targets another major component of Maimonides' intellectual construct of the *Akedah*.⁶² It also acts as a buffer against a school of Maimonidean interpreters, whom he vigorously opposes as "heresy" (*apikorsut*) and a "disgusting opinion most distant from his [Maimonides' intent]" (4:485),⁶³ that view the *Akedah* as a vision rather than a historical occurrence precisely because of these angelic intrusions which, for Maimonides, are restricted solely to dreamlike psychic states.⁶⁴

⁶¹ For a concise overview of the debate on this issue between Abarbanel and Maimonides, see Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, chap. 7, pp. 83–99. See also Alvin Reines, *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1970). Reines considers Abarbanel's prophetology to be the "cornerstone" of his entire thought, thereby explaining the passionate tenor of his critique of Maimonides on this issue since he felt that should Maimonides' naturalism gain dominance, "the system of Judaism subscribed to by Abrabanel's fifteenth century community, as well as Abrabanel's personal vision of this system, would stand refuted" (lxviii).

⁶² This is consistent with Abarbanel's endorsement of a far greater role the sensual plays than Maimonides allows within prophecies. See Isaac Barzilai's discussion of Abarbanel's "sensualized" (*nevuah mucheshet*) notion of prophecies in his *Between Reason and Faith: Anti-Rationalism in Italian Jewish Thought 1250–1650*, 103–09 and especially the list of prophetic signs that Abarbanel takes literally as opposed to Maimonides on 108. As he concludes, Abarbanel adopts this position, for "to relegate all such acts to the category of the fictitious is to render meaningless an important characteristic of prophetic behaviour." The *Akedah* would be a prime example of this critical distinction between Abarbanel's and Maimonides' prophetology.

⁶³ MN, 2:88a; 2:93a. See Reines, *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy*, for his translation of Abarbanel's comments pertinent to the *Akedah* at 176–78, 216–17. Abarbanel applies his philological ingenuity to read Maimonides as a proponent of the *Akedah*'s historicity interrupted by prophetic visions signified by the angels since Maimonides illustrates the eleventh degree of prophecy with the address of an angel "as Abraham at the time of the *Akedah*." This is interpreted to mean only at the time of the angel's address as opposed to the other times of the narrative. Similarly Abarbanel sees a commingling of the sensory and the visionary in Abraham's encounter with the three angels in Elonei Mamre (Gen. 18:3). For an analysis of Abarbanel's view of Maimonides on this episode as well as the *Akedah*, see Shaul Regev, "The Level of Abraham's Prophecy According to Maimonides, Abravanel, and R. Eliezer Ashkenazi" (Heb.), in *The Faith of Abraham in the Light of Interpretation Throughout the Ages* (Heb.), ed. M. Hallamish, H. Kasher, and Y. Silman (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002), 177–92, at 182–85.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Nuriel, "Maimonides on Parables Not Explicitly Defined as Such," who convincingly argues that Maimonides viewed the entire *Akedah* as a prophetic experience rather than an actual historical event. In general, for the implications of Maimonides' prophetology on this issue, see Oliver Leaman, "Maimonides, Imagination, and the Objectivity of Prophecy," *Religion* 18 (1988): 69–89, who concludes that with respect to prophecy "we can defuse much of the literalist critique and regard the question 'but did it really happen?' as beside the point" (79). See also Abarbanel's derisive attack on those who deny the historicity of the *Akedah*, in this case specifically Joseph ibn Kaspi, with the stinging rebuke, "I have no idea from what womb this reposterous belief issued," in MN 1:25b.

THE AKEDAH AS FOUNDATION OF THE TEMPLE: BLIND
LOYALTY VS. REASONED OBEDIENCE

Abarbanel consummates his sustained critique of the Maimonidean *Akedah* with his interpretation of the verse traditionally understood to be a dedication by Abraham of the mountain on which the *Akedah* took place as the future site of the Temple: *And Abraham named that site Adonai Yireh whence the present saying "on the mount of the Lord there is vision"* (Gen. 22:14).⁶⁵ As an attractive alternative, Abarbanel partially adopts the Aramaic Targum Onkelos's rendering of the first part of the verse as recording a prayer offered by Abraham *there* (*sham*) rather than a declaration of a name (*shem*), transforming it into *And Abraham petitioned there*. He then abandons Onkelos's translation of the remaining part of the verse, *here future generations will worship*, differing on the precise content of Abraham's supplication. Rather than an allusion to the future Temple, Abarbanel understands the prayer as a plea to God "not to restrain him from sacrificing Isaac even after the ram, otherwise His design for his devotion will not be established."⁶⁶ A syntactically distorted verse emerges that has Abraham appealing to God to take note (*Adonai Yireh*) of what will be seen by others to have transpired on the mountain (*on the mount of the Lord it will be seen*), "that I did not actually bind my son and my original intentions will be perceived as vain and deceptive."⁶⁷ For Abarbanel, Abraham's prayer on the mountain is the vocal expression of the formidable commitment to God's will demonstrated by his resolute conduct toward the physical binding of Isaac, though the liturgical motivation has altered somewhat. His dedication is indefatigable to the point where, even once God has relieved him of this horrific responsibility, his prayer reflects an overwhelmingly obsessive concern for God's honor whose integrity might be compromised by aborting the *Akedah*'s coup de grace.

Abarbanel's deference to Onkelos in its allusion to Maimonides' own endorsement of Onkelos's version of this verse is a final component in the methodical debilitation and rehabilitation of Maimonides' intellectualist reconstruction of the *Akedah*. As a preface to his rationale for that class of commandments concerned with the Temple, Maimonides offers a historical account that traces the origins of the Temple to this liturgical stage of the *Akedah* where Abraham reoriented the direction of prayer toward the West as a graphic rejection of its primary pagan cultic focus of the Sun in the East. Maimonides then cites the same Onkelos in support of originating moment of the Temple location: "For Abraham had recommended to them that that place

⁶⁵ See, for example, b Berakhot 62b; *Sifrei*, Deut. 28; Rashi on the verse and, for Abarbanel himself elsewhere, see *Yeshuot Meshiho* II: iyun 3, chap. 4.

⁶⁶ 1:491: היתה תכלית תפלתו ותחנתו שלא ימנענו מהעלות את יצחק גם אחר האיל כי לולי זה לא תאמן כונתו ורצונו בעבודתו:

⁶⁷ שיאמרו היום הזה מכל בני אדם והוא שלא עקדתי את בני ושכל כוונתי הית' שוא ודבר כזב

should be a house of worship, just as the translator sets forth when he says: *Abraham worshipped and prayed in that place and said before the Lord: Here will worship the generations*" (GP, III:45, p. 575). Underpinning Abraham's establishment of the locus of monotheistic prayer is what informs the entire Judaic sacrificial cult, which is the extirpation of idolatry by a radical subversion of its ritual and ideology. Abraham's pioneering prayer at the *Akedah* imbues all the *mitzvot* relating to sacrifices and Temple with their overarching rationale, since "[t]hose laws concerning sacrifices and repairing to the Temple were given only for the sake of the realization of this fundamental principle [apprehending Me and not worshipping someone other than Me]. It is for the sake of that principle that I transferred these modes of worship to My name so that the trace of idolatry be effaced and the fundamental principle of My unity be established" (GP, III:32, p. 530). In keeping with his methodical displacement of Maimonides' reason-anchored *Akedah* for a reason-subordinated one, Abarbanel radically subverts its final portrait of Abraham as founder of the future Temple shaped by the pragmatic goal of uprooting idolatry and inculcating monotheism in its place. Abarbanel's appropriation of this Aramaic exegesis disengages Abraham's sacrifice from its rationalist foundations in Maimonides in favor of a sacrifice undertaken as a gesture of pure unadulterated fealty and subservience to an inscrutable will.

Abarbanel instantiates Abraham's life in its alternative dimensions of obeisance to God's will as the precursor of the formalized normative theological jurisdiction his posterity will be subject to in its summation, as conditioned by *my charges, my commandments, my laws, and my teaching* (Gen. 26:5). Abarbanel classifies various aspects of Abraham's religious life and compliance with God's dictates under these different headings, synchronizing the Torah to these facets of Abraham's biography.⁶⁸ The theological divide between him and Maimonides expresses itself immediately with the partitioning of *my charges* as encompassing those acts that *declare the name of God and publicize belief in Him throughout the world*. What Maimonides considers the overarching rationale of the entire Torah, and indeed Abraham's *declaring the name of God* is his epigraphic motto for many of his works, Abarbanel relegates to but one facet of Abraham's relationship with God. He then cements further all the theological implications his conception of the *Akedah* has for Jewish observance in the bifurcation of *commandments (mitzvot)* and *laws (hukim)* along the traditional lines of rationality. The former refer to circumcision and the expulsion of Ishmael, each of which are directed toward some utilitarian goal, while the latter refer to "the *Akedah* when he bound first Isaac and then the ram in his place since *for him these were all hukim and royal decrees*." It is noteworthy that Abarbanel relates the plural of *hukim* to both the binding of

⁶⁸ 1:538: וישמור משמרתו ששמר משמר' אמונתו בהיותו קורא בשם י"י ומפרסם אמונתו לעיני העמים. ואמר מצוותי על המילה: 8: ומה שצוה שיגרש את ישמעאל. ואמר חקותי על העקדה שעקד את יצחק ואחר כך עקד את האיל במקומו שהיה אצלו כל זה חקים וגזרת מלך

Isaac and of his animal replacement, for it portends the nonrationality of the entire cultic system to be instituted at Sinai. Abarbanel's ostensive defense of Maimonides' historical rationale for sacrifices elsewhere⁶⁹ must therefore be read in light of this integral link between the *Akedah* and the sacrificial system and tempered somewhat by it. For Abarbanel, the very apogee of religious devotion as represented by the *Akedah* consists of pure obedience stripped of any rationalization while, for Maimonides, the normative ideal is captured by that which preceded Sinai in both Abraham's life and in pre-Sinaitic revelation, for "in the first legislation given to us there was nothing at all concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices" (GP III:32, p. 530). Abarbanel's self-declared interpretative stance vis-à-vis Maimonides of "the good we accept and the bad we do not"⁷⁰ includes also the strategy of accepting good, but a good that is so revamped as to be liberated of all that theologically offends without explicit rejection of the bad.

⁶⁹ See his *Commentary*, Introduction to Leviticus.

⁷⁰ *Letter to Saul HaKohen*, 11v.

Meir ibn Gabbai (16th Century)

The Aimlessness of Philosophy

SACRED VS. RATIONAL WORSHIP

As we move ahead in time, we also move deeper into the world of kabbalah where Maimonides' thought inspires fierce rejection, while ironically at the same time provides a fertile repository of ideas, exegesis, and terminology for the advancement of kabbalistic thought and interpretation. *Avodat HaKodesh*, the comprehensive and popular sixteenth-century compendium penned by Meir ibn Gabbai (1480–ca. 1540) in approximately 1530 in the Greek part of the Ottoman empire, was in the opinion of Gershom Scholem the finest account of kabbalistic speculation before the resurgence of kabbalah in Safed later in the century.¹ Its five editions, printed and distributed in the second half of the sixteenth century across such disparate regions as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire, are a testament to its immense

¹ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 69. Scholem reiterates his appreciation of the work as “an especially impressive summary of the teachings of the earlier Kabbalists,” in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 81. Given Scholem's superlatives, it is surprising that there is such a dearth of secondary literature on ibn Gabbai. Other than the comprehensive study of Roland Goetschel's *Meir ibn Gabbai: Le Discours de la Kabbale Espagnole* (Leuven: Peters, 1981), there are no studies I could find, full-length or articles, dedicated solely to his thought. Though there are copious references to him throughout the literature, none deal with him in any systematic fashion. Jochanan Wijnhoven's review of Goetschel's work, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 2 (1983): 453–54, expressed the same surprise nearly three decades ago. Despite a number of treatments dedicated solely to an aspect of his thought that are sections of larger works on certain kabbalistic themes referred to throughout this study, the scholarly landscape has remained largely the same. There is also Elliot Ginsburg's translation and critical commentary to a section of *Tolaat Yaakov*, another of ibn Gabbai's works, which has little relevance to this study. As Ginsburg points out, “In contrast to the *Avodat HaKodesh*, the influence of philosophical texts is minimal here.” *Sod ha-Shabbat (The Mystery of the Sabbath) from the Tolaat Yaakov of R. Meir ibn Gabbai* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 4.

popularity and influence shortly after ibn Gabbai's death.² Woven into ibn Gabbai's account is a systematic attack on Maimonides' philosophical edifice as constructed both in the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Book of Knowledge, the **first section** of his *Mishneh Torah*.³ Some three centuries after his death, vehement polemics were still being conducted against Maimonides in an ongoing engagement with him as kabbalah's principal ideological antagonist. As such, the *Avodat HaKodesh* is an important work, both for the history of Maimonidean criticism, as well as for appreciating the role Maimonides' intellectual legacy ironically played in actually creatively fueling kabbalistic thought, a system whose underpinnings would have been anathema to his view of God, the world, and humanity.⁴ That a comprehensive kabbalistic digest is inextricably intertwined with a withering critique of Maimonidean rationalism demonstrates how powerful Maimonides was in one sense, according to Moshe Idel, as "a negative catalyzer," for kabbalistic conceptions.⁵ However, the case can be made for even stronger affinities between the two than mere influence, which, as Elliot Wolfson has argued, "portend a genuine intellectual and spiritual kinship."⁶

Instrumental to ibn Gabbai's trenchant critique is his development of a counter-lexicon that methodically displaces the philosophical layer of many of the key

² There is scant biographic information on ibn Gabbai's life. In a book of almost six hundred pages dedicated solely to ibn Gabbai, Roland Goetschel devotes a mere half page to details about his life (33). See also Meir Benayahu, "On the History of the Jews in Tiria" (Heb.), *Tziyon* 12 (1948): 37–48, at 41n21.

³ Ibn Gabbai's critique did not simply express a theoretical opposition but was also motivated by what he considered the ideological bankruptcy of Maimonidean rationalism in its weakening of Spanish Jewry's will to resist conversion, thus inviting divine wrath and expulsion. See Allan Nadler, "The 'Rambam Revival' in Early Modern Jewish Thought: Maskilim, Mitnagdim, and Hasidim on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 231–56, at 233n7.

⁴ For a full-length treatment of this opposition, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2006).

⁵ "Maimonides and Kabbalah," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 31–81, at 54. See also Twersky, "Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18, no. 2–3 (2004): 197–226, where he presents the case of Abraham Abulafia to demonstrate the need for an integrative approach to appreciate the histories of Jewish philosophy and kabbalah. On the intertwining of kabbalah and philosophy in Maimonides' Jewish intellectual history postdating Maimonides, see Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Philosophy and Kabbalah: 1200–1600," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. D. Frank and O. Leaman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 218–57.

⁶ Elliot Wolfson, "Via Negativa in Maimonides and Its Impact on Thirteenth Century Kabbalah," *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 393–442, at 393. Wolfson has demonstrated that, notwithstanding Maimonides' "rationalism," his thought looms large in Jewish mystics' formulations regarding their own esoteric enterprise. For another example, see his "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth Century Kabbalah," in *Moses Maimonides: His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts*, ed. George Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), 209–37.

terms such as “sitting,” “standing,” “foot,” or “spirit,” dealt with in Maimonides’ lexicography of biblical terms in the first part of the *Guide*, replacing them with his own parallel, but inverse, lexicon. While Maimonides’ overarching concern was to drain these terms of their anthropomorphic connotations when referring to God, ibn Gabbai’s was to reverse Maimonides’ anti-anthropomorphism crusade, and reanthropomorphize biblical language in aid of what he was convinced was its kabbalistic message.⁷ Terms such as “sitting,” for example, are drained by Maimonides of any active or reactive connotations when referring to God in favor of consummate inaction resulting in a signification of a deity “who undergoes no manner of change, neither a change in His essence . . . nor a change in His relation to what is other than Himself” (GP, I:11, pp. 37–38). Maimonides therefore inverts a verse that appears to depict divine sitting as some kind of response to an event in human history – *The Lord sits at the flood* (Ps. 29:10) – into its philosophical converse, such “that when the state of the earth is changed and corrupted there is no change in the relation of God to things; this relation remains the same – stable and permanent – whether the thing undergoes generation or corruption” (GP, I:11, pp. 37–38). A changeless, unaffected, nonrelational deity is anathema to ibn Gabbai’s kabbalistic God, so he reinvents the term “sitting” to signify precisely an affected relational God who undergoes internal change as a result of human action. Ibn Gabbai, in a counterpoint hermeneutic characteristic of his work, restores the very same flood verse to its mythic origins, and preserves a relational God that responds to human conduct, with the “sitting” God now signifying that “He became unified with His glory to preserve the world lest it be destroyed by the flood.”⁸

By substituting the rational for the mystical, ibn Gabbai, writing on the cusp of the Lurianic revolution in Jewish mystical theology, was a seminal figure in laying the groundwork for the project of reading the Torah kabbalistically rather than philosophically. In addition, his exegesis of biblical verses and midrashic traditions during the course of discussions of core kabbalistic concepts, which also appear in Maimonides’ corpus, are intended as hermeneutical counterpoints to it, radically transforming the philosophically esoteric exegeses of those common references into a kabbalistic mode.⁹ This chapter will examine these strategies in much closer detail than has been conducted to date to determine the precise nature of this subversive hermeneutic, which has an impact on

⁷ For a general overview of ibn Gabbai’s critique of Maimonides, see Goetschel, *Meir ibn Gabbai*, 59–65.

⁸ All references are to *Avodat HaKodesh* (Jerusalem: Shivlei Orchot Hachaim, 1992) 2 vols. (hereafter AK), by section and chapter. All translations are my own. See here 3:42 – נתייחד בכבודו לקיים – העולם שלא יפסד במבול

⁹ The importance of the AK for kabbalah’s ongoing polemic with Maimonidean rationalism cannot be understated. Isaiah Tishby treated ibn Gabbai’s critique of Maimonides as a paradigm depicting the central notion of anthropocentrism endemic to the kabbalistic school as a whole. See his *The Wisdom of the Zohar: Texts From the Book of the Zohar* (Heb.), vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1957), 4–5.

the entire spectrum of Judaism's foundational beliefs such as Sinaitic revelation, Mosaic prophecy, the *sumum bonum* of human life, the nature of God, angels, and the very nature of humanity itself. Along the way, ibn Gabbai dismantles Maimonides' theological rationalism, such as his prophetic classification, both quantitatively and qualitatively by an ingenious reappropriation of Maimonides' own appropriation of biblical and rabbinic texts relevant to the subject.

Some key examples that will be highlighted are rabbinic adages such as that regarding biblical exegesis, *the Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man*, a mainstay premise of Maimonides' lexicography; *It is time to do something for the Lord, they have infringed Thy Law* (Ps. 119:126), authorizing unorthodox legal measures in times of crisis and, according to Maimonides, the very writing of his own book, the *Guide of the Perplexed*; and of extolling the power of the prophets in their capacity to *liken a form to its creator*, a maxim Maimonides takes to endorse the audaciously crude nature of prophetic language regarding God. In the latter, for instance, what is for Maimonides grounded in a consummate evisceration of any relationship between God and human beings, rendering absurd the literality of anthropomorphisms, is inverted by ibn Gabbai to intimate an ontological reciprocity. Ibn Gabbai thus supplants what he considers an austere philosophical view of religion that alienates a person from God in favor of his own dynamic theosophy and theurgy that unites a person with God. In kabbalah's combative response to the Maimonidean project, what will also become evident is how critical Maimonides was in providing kabbalists with the very language they required for their own mystical discourse, and whose writings "contributed to the structuring modes of religious thought he did his best to combat."¹⁰

The tenor of ibn Gabbai's assault can be gauged from the way he engages the epigraphic biblical verses that set the agenda for Maimonides' *Guide* as a whole. The *Guide* inaugurates itself with a series of verses that end with the Proverbial entreaty to *Incline thine ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply thy heart to my knowledge* (22:17) (GP, p. 5). During the course of examining the term "wisdom" (*hokhma*), although he acknowledges the distinction drawn by the Jewish tradition between general "wisdom" and Torah "wisdom," Maimonides makes it absolutely clear that while both fall within the human capacity for reason, the latter is classified separately because it "is received through tradition and is not demonstrated by the methods of speculation" (GP, III:54, p. 633). However, it is only the presentation, not the content, which solely offers conclusions unsupported by reasoned argument, that distinguishes Torah from general wisdom or philosophy. They are separated by style, not substance. Since received knowledge is an inferior form of knowing, it is the task of human beings to subject the received wisdom of Torah to the rigors of reasoned examination so that they may truly be known, for "the science of the Torah is one species and wisdom is a

¹⁰ Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," supra p.79.

different species, being the verification of the opinions of the Torah through correct speculation" (634). Thus, a dedicatory verse reflects the nature of the entire project. What he is setting out to do is to reconcile the "words of the wise" or the received wisdom, with "my knowledge," or philosophically demonstrated wisdom resulting in "the verification of the opinions of the Torah." Ibn Gabbai's appropriation of this verse vacates the term "wisdom" of its rational sense and targets the very heart of the Maimonidean project, which attempts to identify the contents of the Torah with philosophically verifiable knowledge. Ibn Gabbai equates the wisdom of the verse to suprarational knowledge that can only be obtained through the received tradition uninterruptedly rooted in Sinai, as he states: "For when it says *Incline thine ear and hear the words of the wise*, it sanctions the received wisdom that is the divine wisdom which requires receiving from those who know, who are the authentic sages, therefore incline your ear to receive it from their mouths; for without that it is impossible in any way to apprehend it for it transcends the human intellect."¹¹ While the "wisdom" of reason animates the *Guide* and is its proposed measure of the Torah's worth, ibn Gabbai appropriates the very same verse to mandate a turn toward a "wisdom" that surpasses the human mind's limits and that cannot be attained or evaluated by reason. True wisdom for ibn Gabbai amounts to the secrets of the kabbalistic tradition to which one can only be privy through a master who is situated in an unbroken chain of its transmission.

The following caustic tirade against negative theology is emblematic of ibn Gabbai's near revulsion at Maimonides' conceptions of God and man, and is worth citing in full since it resonates with the gamut of positions ibn Gabbai challenges throughout his work:

The unification that the master [Maimonides] thought to gain with the negation of attributes is not that which the Torah commanded us for, the Torah, whose method is to light a path for us so that we shouldn't stumble in the pit of corrupt opinions, and destructive beliefs, and which leads us toward accomplishment, is replete with positive attributes . . . for who better than the master in wisdom and understanding should know these things, and yet he invented a *new song and commanded us regarding attributes and forbid us positive ones and permitted us negations and negated from us all good should we not negate*, and not a word of this can be found among the Sages, for it is evident that describing something in relation to another is not only permitted in regard to God, but obligatory, all the more so for us, the community that has received the Torah, for the Torah's wisdom and commandments have been etched out of the supernal wisdom (*bokhma*) and emanated out of His true will, and from their aspect they have a special relationship and affinity with us.¹²

¹¹ AK, 1:12: כי באמרו הט אונק ושמע דברי חכמים יזהיר על החכמה המקובלת שהיא חכמת האלהות וצריך שמיעה מפי יודעיה שהם: החכמים האמיתיים ולכן יטה אונק לקבלה מפיהם. כי בזולת זה אי אפשר להשיגה בשום פנים כי היא למעלה משכל האדם.

¹² AK, 3:68: כי הייחוד שחשב הרב להרויח בשלילת התארים אין זה הייחוד שנצטוונו עליו בתורה: מלאה מתארים חיוביים . . . כי מי חכם ויבן אלה כרב ז"ל בהמציאו שירה חדשה וציונו על התארים ואסר לנו את החיובים והתיר לנו את השוללים ושללנו מכל טוב אם לא נשלול גם לא נמצא לחכמים ע"ה דבר מזה יש להוכיח שהתבאר שיתואר הדבר ביחסו לזולתו

This invective raises virtually every dimension of Maimonides' philosophical approach to God and Torah, which ibn Gabbai finds not only objectionable, but intolerable and inimical to the basic tenets of the Jewish tradition. The following list can be generated by this terse polemic:

1. Unity of God: for Maimonides this belief entails attaining a philosophically sophisticated knowledge of God's oneness while, as will be demonstrated, for ibn Gabbai, the Jew's mandate is to actually unify a fragmented God.
2. Divine attributes: Maimonides demands their negation; ibn Gabbai demands their assertion.
3. Biblical language: Maimonides denies its patent sense; ibn Gabbai endorses it.
4. Relation between God and man: Maimonides minimizes, if not completely vitiates, while ibn Gabbai posits it.
5. Torah wisdom: for Maimonides, a practical guide for the perfection of morality and thought; for ibn Gabbai, some materialization of a divine efflux from the internal dynamic of the Godhead.
6. Jews: for Maimonides, uniqueness lies only in being privy to the instruction of the Torah, which teaches universal knowledge accessible to all humanity; for ibn Gabbai, the Jew is ontologically privileged with the Torah's wisdom over all other human beings.¹³

What I have emphasized in the extract is an ironic parody on a rabbinic tradition that is as revealing about ibn Gabbai's kabbalistic agenda as it is artfully cunning in its barb against Maimonides. Ibn Gabbai appropriates the rabbinic betrothal benediction, which originally reads, "*who has commanded us regarding forbidden relations and has prohibited us the betrothed and allowed us the wedded*,"¹⁴ to describe what Maimonides has done with his theory of negative attributes. By drawing a parallel between the command concerning "forbidden relationships" and Maimonides' advocacy of negative attributes, he implies that the adoption of negative theology is anathema to cultivating proper relationships with God. Since a primary symbol of an idyllic relationship, both internal to the Godhead between all its components and between God and the Jew, is a spousal one,¹⁵ ibn Gabbai's ironic use of the blessing insinuates that Maimonides' theology undermines not only the relationship between man and

אינו נמנע בחק השם אבל מחייב וכל שכן לנו עדת מקבלי התורה כי להיות חכמת התורה ומצותיה נחקקים מן החכמה העליונה ונאצלים מן הרצון האמיתי הנה מצדם יש לו יחס והצטרפות עמנו

¹³ See, for example, AK 1:47, where gentile souls are said to originate in the "impure."

¹⁴ B. Ketubot 7b.

¹⁵ See, for example, AK 1:27, where the union between different aspects of the Godhead is described as the love between each other that is realized in a bride/groom (*kalah/hatan*) relationship. Correspondingly, the souls of Jews emanate from this place of spousal unity and therefore long to return to it, consolidating that unity in turn. See also 3:64, where the climactic erotic scene on the threshing floor between Ruth and Boaz is taken as a symbol of the spousal union within the Godhead that is contingent on the actions of human beings. Sexual intercourse itself, conducted

God, but God Himself, in preventing the intradivine union that human beings effect.¹⁶ The “sacred worship” ibn Gabbai calls for, as the title of his compendium suggests, which guides people toward consummating this intradivine marriage, contests the rational worship Maimonides calls for in resolving intellectual perplexities on the road toward self-perfection, as the title of *his* work indicates.

DOING SOMETHING FOR THE LORD: HALAKHIC DISPENSATION VS. THEURGIC MANDATE

It is appropriate to address in this chapter Maimonides’ rabbinic rationalization of his philosophical enterprise at the start of his own magnum opus and ibn Gabbai’s subversive adoption of it for his alternative kabbalistic purposes. Maimonides’ *Guide* concerns itself with the philosophical disciplines of physics and metaphysics, identified by him with the classic esoteric Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot. These were the two areas of knowledge the rabbis cordoned off as out of bounds to a general audience, and, accordingly, whose dissemination they subjected to severe halakhic curtailment, essentially prohibiting their public teaching. Thus, despite its literary ruse as a private letter to a beloved disciple, the *Guide*’s format as a treatise, which Maimonides predicted would lend itself to wider publication in violation of rabbinic law, required some sort of halakhic dispensation. He describes considerable anxiety over the recording in writing of what are “concealed things; none of them has been set down in any book – written in the religious community in these times of exile – the books composed in these times being in our hands” (GP, Introduction, p. 16).¹⁷ He then defers to a verse, *It is time to do something for the Lord, they have infringed Thy Law*. (Ps. 119:126), adopted by the rabbinic tradition as authority for transgressing the Law in times that required extraordinary measures in order to preserve the Law. In good rabbinic form, this, combined with the private format as well as his intended use of contradictions to obfuscate his true

properly, effects a union within the Godhead, with the Sabbath being a particularly opportune time when the kabbalist’s carnal acts, as Elliot Wolfson states, “theurgically assists in the sacred union of the masculine and feminine gradations in the sefirotic realm.” See his “Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynization,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997): 301–44, at 310. See also Charles Mopsik’s discussion of passages from the *Tikkunei haZohar*, in *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah* (Los Angeles, Cherub Press, 2005), 122–26, where the physically unobstructed sexual act is a model for divine union in later kabbalistic literature.

¹⁶ This theurgical power of man to effect union within the Godhead is also crucial to ibn Gabbai’s notion of ultimate redemption in which, as Moshe Idel points out in a recent study, it “is not only the spiritual and material redemptions of the humans as individuals or as a group that matter but preeminently the redemption of a divine feminine hypostasis, the Shekhinah.” See his extended discussion of ibn Gabbai’s notion of redemption in “Multiple Forms of Redemption in Kabbalah and Hasidism,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 1 (2011): 27–70 at 51–57 (quote at 57).

¹⁷ These sentiments are reiterated in the preface to the third section of the *Guide* where he delivers his exposition of the Account of the Chariot.

meaning, was his responsum, his *pesak din*, granting himself the authority to divulge secrets that the rabbis ruled must remain secret.

Ibn Gabbai's incorporation of the same rabbinic principle is, I argue, as with others, a conscious subversion of Maimonides' use of it, wresting it of its rationalist inclinations and pointedly reinvesting it with his own kabbalistic agenda. Rather than a pragmatic sanction of unorthodox measures to address a crisis that threatens society's legal integrity, it mandates the theurgic mission Jews have been entrusted with "to do something for Lord," in the literal sense of addressing God's needs, rather than people's, in their service of God. God, the Torah, and humans are all perfectly aligned with the 613 commandments, mirroring the anatomical structure of both lower man and upper man.¹⁸ The performance of each commandment then effects a unification on high, "for the commandments are the path and way to unification and the fulfillment of one of them below fulfills above, that is to say its analogue, and this is the secret of *it is time to do something for the Lord*."¹⁹ What acts as a halakhic authorization for Maimonides to contravene the law, ibn Gabbai adopts as a cardinal dictate promoting the very purpose and effect of the law itself and posing the substantive theme of his work as a whole. For ibn Gabbai, Maimonides' entire rationalization of the commandments actually emasculates them, for he limits them to their practical self-reflexive human benefits. Succinctly put, for Maimonides, "every commandment from among these six hundred and thirteen exists either with a view to communicating a correct opinion, or to putting an end to an unhealthy opinion, or to communicating a rule of justice, or to warding off an injustice, or to endowing men with a noble moral quality" (GP, III:31, p. 524). Ibn Gabbai reverses the verse's Maimonidean thrust, and with it presents a critique of Maimonides' reduction of it to what only benefits man, elevating it to what he perceives as its explicit promotion of benefitting God.²⁰ Maimonides' project itself has alienated God from man to such an extent as to endanger the future

¹⁸ AK, 2:16: "הנה תרי"ג איברים בעליון וכנגדן תרי"ג מצות אלו נגד אלו, ובבנין האדם התחתון העשוי בצלם ודמות לתקן הכבוד: 2:16: AK, 2:16: רמ"ה איברים ושם"ה גידין נמצאו הבנינים מכוונים. See Moshe Idel's discussion of the theurgical potency of the Torah due to its "double affinity – with its divine source and with the persons who perform the commandments – it is able to function as a bridge between the two realms." Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 175–78, at 177.

¹⁹ AK, 2:16: כי המצות מסלול ודרך אל הייחוד והמקיים אחת מהם למטה מקיימה למעלה, כלומר דוגמתה וזה סוד עת: 2:16: AK, 2:16: לעשות ליי

²⁰ For this notion generally in medieval kabbalah, see Morris M. Faierstein, "God's Need for the Commandments in Medieval Kabbalah," *Conservative Judaism* 36, no. 1 (1982): 45–59, and his discussion of ibn Gabbai in particular as a prominent exponent of "God's need" for the commandments. Although he traces this idea back to the Gerona and Zoharic schools, he notes that ibn Gabbai's contribution minimizes the reciprocal relationship between man and God and focuses on man's impact on the sefirotic world to the point that "worship with the proper *kavvanah*" means worship which has as its only purpose the unification of the sefirotic world." Ibn Gabbai, however, does not ignore completely the reciprocity between the divine and the human. See, for example, AK 1:54 and the formulation "they [Jews] are for the needs on high, and the on high is for their need" (הם צורך גבוה וגבוה צרכם).

viability of Judaism and inviting a reaction that must be done “for the sake of the Lord.” Ibn Gabbai complies by restoring the reciprocity between humans and God that is implicit in the phrase *to do something for the sake of the Lord*, a meaning that Maimonides has vitiated from it.

Ibn Gabbai also attacks Maimonides’ claim of the paucity of Jewish literature on the subject as a reason to resort to the extraordinary measure of *it is time to do something for the Lord*, to prevent its irretrievable loss. The very principle ibn Gabbai considers it to stand for – that of *tzorekh gavoah*,²¹ or catering to the needs of God – militates against such a textual lacuna in Jewish history.²² That “true received wisdom,” as opposed to philosophy, “never wandered off from the nation exclusive to it, to another,” as opposed to the Jews losing it to the Greeks, and “it was never absent from the Jews by necessity but can be discovered from scribes and books of the sages of Israel,” contrary to Maimonides’ account of the exilic loss of that corpus.²³ The very dictum that calls for the remedying of Israel’s loss of “wisdom,” for Maimonides, is the one that dictates its uninterrupted preservation in the annals of world history.²⁴ First, to benefit God and unify Him is the unique mandate of the Jews, and the Torah is the exclusive means of fulfilling that mandate. In support of this anti-Maimonidean view of Israel’s textual transmission history, ibn Gabbai cites a Zoharic passage that interprets the second colon of the verse *It is time to do something for the Lord, they have infringed Thy Law*, as a consequence of the absence of the activity called for by the first colon – should God’s needs not be attended to, then

²¹ See Goetschel, *Meir ibn Gabbai*, 276–84. The notion of God having needs that human beings could accommodate is already adumbrated by Nahmanides in his Torah commentary to Exodus 29:46, where he asserts that the “great secret” of the Tabernacle as a “residence” for God is contrary to the “plain sense” that the reason for providing a dwelling amidst Israel for the Divine glory was “to fulfill a want below.” On the contrary, “it fulfilled a want above.” See the Chavel edition and translation of the volume on Exodus (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1973), 506.

²² In tracing the evolution of the concept of *tzorekh gavoah* from its beginnings in classical rabbinic literature, Joseph Avivi demonstrates that it even developed, through its premiere exponent, Moses Haim Luzatto, into the notion that history itself plays out to the benefit of God, and that “it is not only human worship that is *tzorekh gavoah* . . . but all of history is *tzorekh gavoah*.” See “History as a Divine Prescription” (Heb.), in *Rabbi Mordechai Breuer Festschrift*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher (Jerusalem: Academon Press, 1992), 709–72, at 713.

²³ AK, 4:1: לזה חייב שלא . . . לא עברה מן האומה אשר היא מיוחדת אליה אל אומה אחרת. . . לזה חייב שלא תעדר מן האומה, אבל תמצא בה מפי סופרים ומפי ספרים הנמצאים לחכמי ישראל

²⁴ Gershom Scholem finds this claim of kabbalistic secrets originating in God’s revelation to Adam, and continuously transmitted since to be “highly characteristic of Jewish mysticism,” and he cites ibn Gabbai as emblematic of it. See *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 21. This notion in particular is also attacked by Leon Modena in his seventeenth-century defense of Maimonides against ibn Gabbai’s critique. See Yaacob Dweck’s account in “Maimonideanism in Leon Modena’s Ari Nohem,” in the *Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. James Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 211–44, at 221–23, showing that ibn Gabbai’s claims that kabbalah was an integral part of the Oral Torah stretching back to biblical times offended Modena’s sensitivity to history as change and “reveal[ed] an immunity to history and to historical reasoning.”

the supernal Torah would be extinguished.²⁵ Since what is at stake with the loss of kabbalistic wisdom is the potential disintegration of God, the world could never have tolerated it.²⁶ Ibn Gabbai's manipulation of this verse constitutes a frontal assault on its Maimonidean purport including the uniqueness of Israel, the rationale of the commandments, history, and divine and human ontology.

FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN: KNOWING GOD VS. BENEFITTING GOD

The second rabbinic principle Maimonides cites – alongside *it is time to do*, rationalizing the entire enterprise that results in the composition of the *Guide*, a work he prudently anticipates is likely to incite controversy – is an admonitory stricture from a Mishnaic ethical tract of *Let all thy acts be for the sake of Heaven* (וכל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים).²⁷ At first glance the two principles seem to complement each other in that the first justifies an act of teaching esoteric subjects that is technically proscribed, while the second attests to the altruistic intent of the teacher in doing so, free of any ulterior motivation other than the advancement of religion. Both principles ostensibly operate in tandem to vindicate the intent and act of the author in the production of a text that fits within the “tradition.” However, Maimonides' extended discussion of the full import of this maxim in his introduction to that Mishnaic tract where it originally appears reveals another intent. Chapter 5 of his *Eight Chapters* develops his central thesis that every human action, whether it be physical or cognitive, should be aimed at one single all-consuming goal of knowing God. No activity should be considered as effecting any other end such as health, aesthetic pleasure, material well-being, intelligence, or worldly knowledge, except insofar as it facilitates the primal goal of apprehending God through the mind.²⁸ What Maimonides intends, then, by

²⁵ AK, 4:1: מאי הפרו תורתך תורה דלעילא דאיהי מתבטלא אי לא אתעביד בתיקוני שמא דא – “What is *They infringe your torah?* It refers to the supernal Torah that is nullified if there is no involvement in repairing the Name here.”

²⁶ Scholem also cites ibn Gabbai at length as the most extensive discussion of the revelatory “voice” at Sinai, also the bearer of the wisdom that emanates out of the “hidden Eden,” as a constant medium of Jewish tradition, that is expressed in every utterance of every exponent of the Oral Law, including the statement that “were it to be interrupted even for a moment all creatures would sink back into their non-being” (citing AK, 3:23). See Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 298–300.

²⁷ Avot 2:17, cited in Introduction to GP, p. 16.

²⁸ *The Eight Chapters: The Introduction to Maimonides' Commentary on Tractate Avot*, trans. Michael Schwarz (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi, Institute, 2011), 27–31. For the same idea repeated elsewhere in Maimonides' corpus, see MT, Ethical Traits, 3:3. The biblical proof-text fueling this idea is Proverbs 3:6: *In all your ways acknowledge Him*. Maimonides' interpretation of this verse dominates much of the tradition thereafter and is adopted in various forms by numerous rabbinic thinkers subsequently. For a discussion and partial listing of those influenced by it, see Tsippi Kauffman, *In All Your Ways Know Him: The Concept of God and Avodah BeGashmiyut in the Early Stages of Hasidism* (Heb.) (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2009), 192–96 and 194n57.

citing this maxim is that since the *Guide* instructs on how to read the Torah philosophically, it demonstrates how the Torah in its entirety promotes the rational cognition of God. Maimonides' *Guide*, written as a private communication to his beloved disciple Joseph, commences with a prefatory letter to this single addressee of the *Guide*, in which he longingly reminisces discussions that can no longer take place face to face. He recalls those sessions he conducted in person with Joseph during which "a [biblical] verse or some text of the Sages was mentioned in which there was a pointer to some strange notion" (GP, p. 4). Philosophical argument, or knowledge per se, is of no interest to Maimonides' *Guide* except as a component of demonstrating how "the Law as a whole aims at two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body" (III:27, p. 510), in the realization of the ultimate end which it explicitly designates as "the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things" (III:54, p. 635). Since all "welfares," as he asserts in his exposition of the phrase *all thy acts be for the sake of Heaven*, must have knowledge exclusively as their end, Maimonides' written legacy for Joseph, and all other qualified readers of his work, is a guide on how to read the Torah "for the sake of heaven," or, in other words, to achieve noetic perfection.

Ibn Gabbai's conception of Torah as mirroring a supernal Torah, where the performance of any of its precepts triggers some affectation in the divine realm, is diametrically opposed to Maimonides' intellectualized abstraction of the Torah's aims. As such, the Maimonidean understanding of *all thy acts be for the sake of Heaven* militates against that conception, and so ibn Gabbai must incisively invert its meaning, thereby obviating its Maimonidean sense in favor of its converse. For ibn Gabbai, worship or service *for the sake of heaven* involves the "unification of the great name in thought and in deed,"²⁹ rabbinically typified by the figure of a renowned sage such as Hillel the Elder, whom the Talmud credits with conduct exclusively carried out *for the sake of heaven*. All of Hillel's actions, ibn Gabbai therefore concludes, were done "for the need of on high and not for his own needs."³⁰ The two precepts which initially enable Maimonides' composition of the *Guide* to teach both restricted philosophical disciplines (Account of Creation as physics; Account of the Chariot as metaphysics), as well as how to read the Torah as philosophy in achieving the ultimate intellectual end of man, are steered by ibn Gabbai away from their intellectual objectification of God in the direction of their theurgical impact on God as man's ultimate telos. Maimonides' contravention of rabbinic law is "for" God as an object, in the sense of diverting a person's contemplative attention toward a perfect God, while Gabbai's "for" God renders God the beneficial recipient of man's actions and thought in the process of being perfected himself.³¹

²⁹ AK, I:28: כוונתו של אדם בעבודתו תהיה לשם שמים, שהוא ייחוד השם הגדול במחשבה ובמעשה:

³⁰ *Ibid.*, וכל מעשיו היה מכין בהם צורך גבוה לא צרכו בלבד

³¹ As Jonathan Garb, in *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism: From Rabbinic Literature to Safedian Kabbalah* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004), 235, points out, ibn Gabbai

BIBLICAL LANGUAGE: MODE OF COMMUNICATION VS. MODE OF BEING

Since biblical language lies at the very core of both their enterprises, it is critical to focus next on the rabbinic axiom that guides their respective views on the linguistic strategies one must resort to when speaking of the divine and the metaphysical realm God inhabits. Here the rabbinic maxim they both subscribe to, *the Torah speaks in the language of men*, captures their respectively distinct rationales underlying biblical symbolism in communicating the ineffable to an audience that craves the effable.³² For Maimonides, the Torah could have communicated its subject matter in a far more ideal manner but needed, out of expediency, to resort to its present form for mass consumption. In essence, the true content of the Torah cannot penetrate the common human mind without a filtering process, which dilutes the ideal for some semblance of comprehension. Conceptual purity is sacrificed for accessibility and, ironically, the medium of anthropomorphisms, the most extreme dilution of that purity, is the cost. Verses attributing emotions, movement, or anatomical features to God are false and, if taken literally, describe something that doesn't exist. Such language must be divested of all its semantic sense in order to arrive at a truth it cannot articulate.

Each term discussed strives toward its self-elimination from any lexicon of divine terminology on the way to the goal of a substantive philosophical silence that inspires only contemplation rather than speech consistent with the Psalter's advice that *for you silence is praise* (65:2). As Maimonides reads the verse, its message is "silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellect are more appropriate" (GP I:59, p. 140), advocating a laconic rather than loquacious religious parlance. Once subjected to Maimonides' anti-anthropomorphic scrutiny, a term is not only purged from any vocabulary regarding God, but, at the same time, increases the distance between God and human beings by eradicating any common ground on which they can intersect. Paradoxically, for a religious thinker, the wider this gap becomes, the more human one becomes in progressively perfecting the intellect or what for Maimonides constitutes the human form.

emphasizes that "the dependence of divine power on man is not automatic and necessary but is contingent on the will of God." This conclusion is drawn from a passage in AK 2:4, which asserts that this human power to perfect God originates in "the Will from the beginning" (כן היה) (ההפך מתחילה).

³² The maxim is ubiquitous throughout the *Talmud*, but for one example, see b. Sanhedrin 64b. Typically the two sides of the debate on whether the Torah speaks humanly are identified with the tannaitic schools of R. Akiva and R. Ishmael. For Maimonides' use of this expression, which runs completely contrary to its original rabbinic sense, see Abraham Nuriel, "The Torah Speaks According to the Language of the Sons of Man" (Heb.), in *Religion and Language: General and Jewish Philosophical Essays*, ed. M. Hallamish and A. Kasher (Tel Aviv: University Publishing Projects, 1981), 97–103. See also Jay Harris's discussion of this exegetical principle in chap. 2 of his *How Do We Know This: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

That is why he commences the *Guide* with a definition of the term “image” (*tzelem*) as form, identifying it with the intellect in whose exercise there is a shared experience with God in that “no sense, no part of the body, none of the extremities are used.” Yet even this analogy does not conform to reality, but is only apparent “to the first stirrings of opinion” (GP, I:1, p. 23). Proximity to God entails a progressive silencing of all modes of depiction or characterization, whether oral, written, or contemplative. Indeed, even pure intellectual contemplation must be “silenced,” vacating the mind of any pictorial images to the extent of eliminating imaginal representations of statements or propositions about God.³³

As opposed to a concession to the inadequacy of the human intellect that must be overcome, ibn Gabbai understands the maxim *The Torah speaks in the language of men* to posit a relationship between God and human beings that biblical language exploits in a direct one-to-one correspondence between human and divine features. A core notion that undergirds his entire mystical theology is that the human being is a microcosm of the divine, whose physical structure mirrors that of God. Though he reiterates this repeatedly, suffice it for our purposes here to cite his interpretation of “image” and “likeness,” which precisely captures this operative principle of ibn Gabbai’s kabbalah. Ibn Gabbai reinfuses these terms with the very literality Maimonides vacated from them, asserting that the “secret” (*sod*) of the divine intention *let us make man in our image, in our likeness*, discloses that “man is structured according to the design of the supernal edifice, is made in the likeness of the glory, and his structure corresponds to the structure of the supernal chariot and all its parts.”³⁴ All the anthropomorphisms, then, of “the language of the sons of man” correlate the human physique to its divine counterparts and must be preserved rather than dispensed with as functional guides in religious worship.³⁵ In his very engagement with philosophy, ibn Gabbai’s systemization of kabbalistic ideas “actually elaborated the mythical dimensions of the received tradition.”³⁶

³³ Elliot Wolfson articulates well the distinction between Maimonides and the kabbalists on the type of silence called for by Psalm 65:2. Whereas for Maimonides it consists of epistemological ignorance, for kabbalists it consists of a gnosis “expressed uniquely in the silence of unsaying as opposed to the muteness of not-speaking, an unsaying that reveals the hidden in the hiddenness of its revelation.” See Wolfson, “Via Negativa,” 442.

³⁴ AK, 2:16, p. 125: ובנינו מכון מול בנין המרכבה העליונה האדם בנוי לתלפיות הבנין העליון עשוי בדמות הכבוד, ובנינו מכון מול בנין המרכבה העליונה ופרקיה

³⁵ In this correlation between human physiology and divine constituents, ibn Gabbai follows a well-worn kabbalistic path, and may even be truer to original biblical mythology. For one example of how a specific divine limb was conceived from the Bible, through the classical rabbinic tradition, to Zoharic literature, see Elliot Wolfson, “Images of God’s Feet: Some Observations on the Divine Body in Judaism,” in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 143–81. See especially his observation that the Zoharic association of feet with God’s attribute of judgment actually “recovers an ancient symbol of Israelite myth” (164).

³⁶ See Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, “Philosophy and Kabbalah: 1200–1600,” 249.

In a direct attack on Maimonides' identification of *tzelem* with intellectual apprehension, ibn Gabbai discloses the fundamental factors that drive his biblical hermeneutic. The first principle is that the Torah need not inform us of things we can determine ourselves. In the case of *tzelem*, even "one who hasn't aspired to divine secrets, nor received the light of the Torah, nor aware of the secret of creation,"³⁷ knows such a rudimentary fact that intellect distinguishes human beings from all other creatures. Maimonides' antithetical hermeneutic rests on precisely the converse assumption, that is the Torah must conform with what has been rationally demonstrated. Indeed, the entire *Guide* aims at resolving the "perplexities" that are generated by the contradictions between Scripture's patent sense on the one hand and philosophically definitive truths on the other (GP, Introduction, pp. 5–6). The second principle is the plain sense of the verse, which again, on the meaning of *tzelem*, militates against Maimonides, since "the language of the verse does not tolerate the master's intent, for the phrase *let us make man in our image* denotes the arranging and making of something modeled on the structure of another thing."³⁸ The third is that the "secrets of the divinity" (סתרי האלהות) is what constitutes the Torah's suprarational teachings, and in this instance, rather than the Greeks, he turns to the canon of the kabbalistic tradition, the "Midrash of R. Shimon bar Yohai," better known as the Zohar, for its content.³⁹ The fourth is a countervailing view of Jewish intellectual history to that of Maimonides, discussed earlier, which bolsters the truth, authenticity, and Jewishness of the kabbalistic tradition. In place of what Maimonides reconstructs as a philosophical tradition that begins with the Jews and then migrates temporarily to the Greeks (I:71), ibn Gabbai traces an uninterrupted kabbalistic tradition originating in Sinai that has always been the exclusive preserve of the Jews.⁴⁰ What then emerges is a new *tzelem* designed as a rebuttal to every facet of the Maimonidean *tzelem*, empowering man and forging an integral bond between man and God that Maimonides has ruptured. The entire *Guide* is grounded in this lexical point, for if the essence of human beings is the intellect, then that will inform all their endeavors including biblical exegesis, and so every single term dealt with bears its stamp. For ibn Gabbai, "Everything is in the supernal image and model and things materialize below which reflect and testify to their causes above, that were made and structured according to the design of the chariot of the supernal lights which are contained within each other and it is analogous to a shell and covering of the

³⁷ AK, 3:25, pp. 354–55: ואף מי שלא עמד עליו בהשגתו, ואף מי שלא עמד בסוד יי' ולא קבל אור התורה ולא ידע סוד הבריאה

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ואין לשון הכתוב סובל כוונת הרב, כי לשון נעשה אדם בצלמנו וגו', יורה על תקון ועשיית דבר בדוגמת תבנית דבר

³⁹ Among the host of influences on ibn Gabbai, according to Jonathan Garb, the Zohar is the most important. See his discussion of ibn Gabbai in his *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism*, 232–46, at 233.

⁴⁰ AK, 4:1, p. 473: החכמה האמיתית המקובלת באומה שהיא נשמת התורה להיותה תנאי בידיעת האל יתברך ובייחודו לא עברה מן האומה אשר היא מיוחדת אליה אל אומה אחרת בשום זמן

other.”⁴¹ The “godliness” of man is for Maimonides a metaphor while, for ibn Gabbai, it is descriptive of a phenomenal reality, of a human being that is near God incarnate and, correspondingly, of a deity that is carnal in some sense.

Gabbai translates this divine/human correlation into his counterlexicon, and so, for instance, the term “man” (*ish*), in the chapter dealing with the terms “man” and “woman,” can refer to God in the Bible, as it does with *God is a man of war* (Exod. 15:3), because man mirrors the divine architecture.⁴² Maimonides’ parallel chapter dealing with the same terms “man” and “woman” traces its philological development from its original connotation of a human male, subsequently evolving to mean “any male or female among other species of living beings” (GP, I:6, p. 31), encompassing animals as well. By widening the term’s mundane scope to embrace other species, the term “man” travels in a philological direction away from God and establishes an affinity with animals. Ibn Gabbai perceives this as another example of the distancing between man and God that is endemic to Maimonides’ entire philosophical project. He thus systematically reverses the theological direction that much of Maimonides’ lexicon charts toward the other extreme, ontologically approximating the human to the divine to the point where the kabbalistic messianic vision of the unification of God is reflected in the verse that contemplates man and woman becoming “one flesh.”⁴³

This fundamental dispute over the meaning of *tzelem* then translates into that disagreement between them regarding biblical language and the maxim of *The Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man*. What ibn Gabbai means by his citation of it is that the earthly received Torah translates the divine heavenly Torah into human speech based on a one-to-one correspondence between material referents and their purely spiritual analogues. For example, the relationship between man’s hand and his soul is analogous to that between God and the intradeical emanations of the *sefirot*. Each mirrors the other in that no divine act can be realized except through the medium of the *sefirot* in the case of God, nor, commensurately, can any physical act occur without the hand in the case of a human being. However, one must always be cognizant of the analogy’s limitations since, in the case of God, the *sefirot* are not distinct entities, but form a unified whole with Him, while, in that of man, the soul and the body comprise a duality. The limbs and the soul

⁴¹ AK, 3:25; והכל בצלם ובדוגמא עליונה והדברים מוחשים למטה מראים ומעידים על סבותיהם למעלה אשר נעשו ונתקנו: 3:25. As Goetschel puts it when discussing ibn Gabbai’s notion of the symbolism of *tzelem*, it must be understood “from below toward on high and not the reverse” (Meir ibn Gabbai, 114).

⁴² AK, 3:38.

⁴³ Gen. 2:24, cited by AK 3:34, along with the quintessential messianic prophecy of Zechariah 14:4: “On that day He shall set His feet on the Mount of Olives,” as both portending the same utopian vision of a unified deity that culminates in verse 9, when “*God will be one and His name will be one.*”

are distinct components of man's being, the former embodied and the latter incorporeal.⁴⁴

In an early discussion of the maxim, there is the impression that ibn Gabbai's understanding of it is consistent with Maimonides', as he explains that these metaphors are "to approximate it to the intellect since it is impossible for a corporeal body to apprehend or understand it without this."⁴⁵ Much later in the work, though, he attacks Maimonides on the issue of the precise referent of human language when alluding to God. According to ibn Gabbai, Maimonides argues that the choice of language is determined by what the common mind can relate to. Since it cannot conceive of existence that is incorporeal nor of life without motion, corresponding language is formulated simply to convey God's existence, thus "the minds of the multitude were accordingly guided to the belief that He exists by imagining that He is corporeal, and to the belief that He is living by imagining that He is capable of motion" (GP, I:46, p. 98). Ibn Gabbai considers this rationalization of biblical mythology a trivialization since God's existence is elementary to the entire Torah, from the creation narrative, through the Exodus miracles, and finally to its entire normative apparatus anchored in the very first commandment declaring God's existence. Alternatively, a corollary of ibn Gabbai's basic premise that lower man is modeled on a supernal anthropos is that there are components of that anthropos which animate their material counterparts, since "the light and emanation extends from them to sustain that existence made in its likeness and they are called hands, feet, eyes, ears."⁴⁶ The first prong of ibn Gabbai's attack is against Maimonides' effective eradication of any divine referent altogether, except for some general notion of existence. Human language directs one in fact to ontologically substantive divine referents. The second, and more devastating assault on the Maimonidean notion of a divine perfection that is immune to any affectation, is the reciprocity between the lower and upper "men." In perfecting his own body, largely through the *mitzvot*, man in turn perfects those parallel incorporeal "limbs" of the divine anatomy out of which he was molded and actually provides support and grounding for the upper realm captured by the kabbalistic adage that "limb strengthens limb."⁴⁷ As with many other subscriptions to rabbinic maxims, ibn Gabbai's can only be fully appreciated in contradistinction to Maimonides' conscription of them.

⁴⁴ AK, I:8: ידוע כי הידים כלי הפעולה וזולתם לא תצויר וכן לא יצויר ולא יתכן שום פועל כי אם בספירה ולפיכך היה: 1:8: ונברא הכל באמצעותם לפי שהם לאדון יחיד כמו הידים לנשמה לפעול בהם ולהראות כחה

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:65: אלא כדי לקרב הדבר אל השכל ימשילו כן כי אי אפשר לגשם להשיג ולהבין בזולת זה,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:65: אשר מהם מתפשט האור והשפע לקיום הנמצא הזה העושה בדמותו, והם נקראים ידים רגלים עינים אזנים

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, אבר מחזיק אבר. On the mystical tradition of this adage, see Daniel Matt, "The Mystic and the Mizvot," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: SCM Press, 1985), 367–404, at 392, and his references to ibn Gabbai at 393–94, as well as 402n56, where he claims that the expression originates with ibn Ezra's *Yesod Mora*, chap. 5. See also Yehuda Avida, *Sinai* 29 (1957): 401–02.

LIKENING A FORM TO ITS CREATOR: METAPHOR VS. ISOMORPHISM

According to Maimonides, those originally entrusted with prophetic abilities to speak about God were never in doubt as to the nature of their exercise. They appreciated the need for anthropomorphic language and with precision, method, and restraint, constructed a semantic framework for that purpose which, although permissible, was evidently metaphorical. The rabbinic dictum forcefully emphasizing the original prophetic design never to be taken literally in corporeal references to God and stating that the “doctrine of the corporeality of God did not ever occur even for a single day to the Sages” (GP, I:46, p. 102) is the midrashic declaration, “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 a likeness as the appearance of a man*” (Ezek. 1:26).⁴⁸ This extraordinary “power” attributed to the prophets does not convey their unique ability to anthropomorphize God, but rather their proficiency in the use of an outrageous idiom, “for they always speak this way when they express their appreciation of the greatness of something said or done, but whose appearance is shocking.” Corporealizing God is so patently scandalous that they felt “safe and sure in that there would not be confusion and difficulty with regard to this point” (GP, I:46, p. 103).⁴⁹ The proof-text cited from Ezekiel is the most vivid illustration of this prophetic power where Ezekiel, the original visionary of the Account of the Chariot, envisions a semblance of a “man” seated on a heavenly throne, drawing a comparison between God and man as a whole, an all-comprehensive image encompassing every possible anthropomorphism. Ezekiel’s example is all the more striking for Maimonides’ purposes in that it is excerpted from the very apex of the Account of the Chariot, a prophetic account that conveys the most sublime details of metaphysics, the profoundest of all philosophical subjects.

This intriguing midrashic reference raises a number of central issues that lie at the very core of the divide between Maimonides and ibn Gabbai and so provides fertile ground for reappropriation by ibn Gabbai in constructing his own counter-rational mystical theology. Once broken down into its various components, it yields various stances on fundamental notions separating them including prophecy, prophetic language, the nature of metaphor or analogy, relationship between creator and creation, the definition of “form,” and the Account of the Chariot. Because of its multifaceted nature, ibn Gabbai seizes on it as an opportune

⁴⁸ Genesis Rabbah, 27:1. See Goetschel, *Meir ibn Gabbai*, 391 where he cites this midrash as ibn Gabbai’s endorsement for “human beings modeled on the structure of the supernal man which enables him to perfect that structure.”

⁴⁹ Warren Harvey discusses the ambiguity of the phrase “Great is the power” as either laudatory or ironic and sarcastic without reaching a definitive conclusion in his “‘Great Is the Power of the Prophets’: An Investigation of the *Guide* of the Perplexed I:46” (Heb.), *Daat* 37 (1996): 53–61, at 57–60.

adage that endorses his own theurgy based on a literal reading of the “likeness” between creator and creation. At the same time it radically subverts Maimonides’ rationalism which precludes any “likeness” between God and human beings as an obvious offense against the tenets of reason, a “likening” so self-evidently absurd as to rule out any reading of prophetic language except the metaphorical.

It is worth interjecting here with another parallel biblical reading that vividly distinguishes their alternative conceptions of Torah, as well as illustrating ibn Gabbai’s subversive exegetical technique vis-à-vis Maimonides. Maimonides eviscerates any traditional angelology with a reduction of the term “angels” to any causal force within nature, as its primary sense of “intermediary” suggests – that is, anything that is an agent of divine will at the origin of all creation qualifies as an “angel.” The term can signify judges, prophets, separate intelligences, human messengers, animal movements, or any bodily functions such as the physiological stimulative forces that cause a penile erection (GP, II:6, p. 262). In other words, it is a term so all-encompassing, subsuming the entire chain of natural causation, as to become meaningless, which is surely Maimonides’ very intention in his battle against commonly held beliefs in supernatural beings that carry out divine orders. Another example explicitly identified as angels are the elements, which in medieval science would consist of earth, air, fire, and water or, in modern scientific terms, every element in the periodic table. The biblical proof-text cited in support of this proposition describes God *who makes winds His angels, the flaming fire His minister* (Ps. 104:4): the implication being that air and fire, two of the basic physical elements are equated with “angels.” Ibn Gabbai cites this verse a number of times in the context of angels, citing it as proof of their chameleon-like nature, which periodically transmutes from an incorporeal form to corporeal as it descends from the upper to lower worlds, “for when they descend below they are clothed in the clothing of this world and if they would not be clothed in the manner of this world they would not be able to exist in this world.”⁵⁰ An analogy is then drawn between angels and the Torah, which operates in precisely the same way when metamorphosing from its supernal state to its present form in the physical world, since “the Torah also requires the assumption of clothing . . . the external being the narratives, the internal the “bodies of the Torah” [the commandments] and the soul that is the actual Torah interior to all of them.”⁵¹ Angelic encounters consist of meetings with substantive beings, whose purely incorporeal nature is somewhat diluted or filtered for a physical environment both for its own tolerance of a foreign domain and to cater to the sensual perception of human beings.⁵²

⁵⁰ AK, 2:26: בשעתא דנחתין לתתא מתלבשי בלבושא דהאי עלמא ואי לאו מתלבשי בלבושא כגונא דהאי עלמא לא יכלין למיקם: See also AK, 4:28. בהאי עלמא ולא סביל לון עלמא

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, וגם התורה כשירדה מן העליונים נתלבשה בכמה מלבושים מהם חיצוניים ומהם פנימיים החצוניים הם ספורי התורה נקראים והפנימיים גופי תורה נקראים והנשמה שהיא התורה ממש לפני מכלם

⁵² Goetschel’s discussion of ibn Gabbai’s position on angels focuses largely on his polemic with Maimonides, and more extensively with Abraham ibn Ezra, on the issue of man’s rank vis-à-vis

Not only does this rehabilitate the ontic substance of angels that Maimonides sought to eradicate from Jewish belief, but, in its analogy to Torah, it dictates a radically different engagement with it. For Maimonides it is one with a text that calls for a certain hermeneutical strategy to determine its meaning, while for ibn Gabbai it is a meeting with a vital entity. For the latter, it is not a text to decipher, nor a representation of ideas, concepts, or morals, as it is for Maimonides, but rather a thing in itself, albeit adulterated for human consumption. Its normative and narrative dimensions are instruments of contact and control rather than education and guidance. The analogy ibn Gabbai draws between angels and the Torah reinforces this notion of the Torah as a medium of control and influence since those like Jacob actually struggled with angels and managed to subdue them. Thus, just as one is able to dominate an angel in its corporeally attired form, so is one who is adept at approaching a Torah structured along the same angelic model able to affect and impact on its parallel ontic existence in the supernal realm. The primary example corroborating the “clothing” of the angels is Jacob’s struggle since, of course, without it how could Jacob have restrained a wholly incorporeal, and thus intangible, entity?⁵³ Critical for appreciating ibn Gabbai’s subversive adaptation of the prophetic power to “liken a form,” though, is that Jacob’s angelic confrontation is also presented as eminent proof of the superiority of the righteous over angels.⁵⁴ The analogy between engaging prophetic language in the Torah and encountering angels is thereby reinforced, not to convey prophetic innovation in the use of daring, near heretical, metaphoric language but rather to assert the prophets’ efficacious ability to existentially correlate the human to the divine in a theurgic enterprise.

In ibn Gabbai’s hands, prophetic power lies in its ability to reverse the very process of materialization undergone by the Torah and angels. Just as the supernal Torah and angels, both purely incorporeal, clothed themselves in material form, the former in narrative and law and the latter in physical body, so man, a composite of the physical and spiritual, the body and soul, in order to ascend toward God can shed his own materiality and “clothe” himself in his supernal analogue. This is the “likening” the prophet effects, achieving union with supernal anthropos, or his “form,” thereby prophesying, not *in the name of* God, but, for all intents and purposes, *as* God. What is truly daring about this prophetic metamorphosis is that, unlike the self-perfection that Maimonides requires as a prerequisite to prophecy, ibn Gabbai’s prophecy results from a perfecting of God. In one of his most explicit expositions of the mechanics of this process, he states:

The prophets restore and perfect their edifice to that of the Great Man, and establish the secret of the likeness in its proper place, and that is the secret of likening their own form to

them, arguing contra Maimonides that human beings are superior to the angels. See Goetschel, Meir ibn Gabbai, 345–60.

⁵³ AK, 4:28.

⁵⁴ AK, 3:4.

its creator through the perfection of their deeds, and through this they achieve a level of prophecy which flows *from that form they have perfected*, and thus they apprehend what resembles their own form which is the form of man, to inform that this parallel to that is restored and complete, and because the likening of a form to its creator is an extremely powerful thing, for who is able to overwhelm matter by intellect, it was said “Great is the power.”⁵⁵

Ibn Gabbai hijacks every aspect of the adage “great is the power” and wrenches it out of its Maimonidean context, importing it into his own kabbalistic one. The prophetic “likening” is an existential transformation rather than a literary strategy; the “form” Maimonides identifies with intellect is replaced by a physical reflection of the Godhead; the union aimed at to instigate prophecy is not some intellectual conjunction between the human intellect and a separate intellect, but a union of the human form and its divine mirror image;⁵⁶ and the prophet does not simply perfect himself but perfects God Himself.

A critical ramification of ibn Gabbai’s subversion of the Maimonidean overlay on this rabbinic adage is that, in its reinvention of the proof-text cited in the original, it undermines one of the pillars of Maimonidean biblical exegesis concerning the Account of the Chariot. The startling power of the prophet to liken the human to the divine is captured by the very climax of Ezekiel’s vision: *And upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man* (Ezek. 1:26). Whatever the particular metaphysical allusions are within Maimonides’ cryptic schematic of Ezekiel’s prophecy, it is clear that the term “likeness” (*demut*) is used “in respect of a notion and not with respect to a shape and a configuration” (GP, I:1, p. 23) and thus does not connote any structural, physical, or design resemblance. Since for ibn Gabbai, man is precisely configured in accord with a divine model, the “man” Ezekiel sees is indeed a reflection of his own perfection which has in turn perfected God. Rather than an anthropomorphic *account* of metaphysics which imparts knowledge of that discipline, it records the anthropomorphic *restoration* of a metaphysical substance. There is an isomorphic relationship between man and the Godhead which, when realized through purity of thought and deed, produces a “likeness” that “mimics the very thing it repairs and is of a kind with it.”⁵⁷ The “likening of a form to its creator”

⁵⁵ AK, 3:65: הנביאים מתקנים ומשלימים בנים לבנין האדם הגדול ומעמידים סוד הדמות על מכונו והוא סוד שמדמים הצורה: שלהם ליוצרה בשלמות מעשיהם ולזה יזכו למעלת הנבואה הנשפעת מן הצורה ההיא אשר השלימו ולזה ישיגו כדמות צורתם שהיא צורת אדם להודיע שזו לעומת זו מתוקנת ושלמה ולפי שדמוי הצורה ליוצרה דבר גדול וגבורה רבה להגביר השכל על החומר מי ומי אשר יוכל על זה לזה אמר גדול כחן

⁵⁶ For a parallel notion in a previous kabbalist, see Elliot Wolfson, “Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in the Prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, ed. A. Ivry, E. Arkush and E. Wolfson (Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 311–60, where he states “for Abulafia the Torah is identified as the Active Intellect and the soul of every Jew is rooted ontologically in the Active Intellect. . . . [I]t follows that the fulfillment of the commandments can serve as a means to attain conjunction with the God through the Active Intellect” (350).

⁵⁷ AK, 4:21: הנה הוא בדמותו הוא עצמו שתקן והוא מין במינו

is for ibn Gabbai a process, the culmination of which arrives at the end of an arduous combination of “correctness of deeds, right intent, purity of ideas, holiness of soul and its cleaving beyond to all the potencies included in the Great Name, and his thought concentrates ceaselessly here to unify it with its glory.”⁵⁸ Even according to those scholars who would ascribe a certain mystical tendency in Maimonides’ thought,⁵⁹ the two modes of mysticism could not be more incompatible. Maimonides advocates an ultimate goal of union with a separate intelligence, while ibn Gabbai’s *raison d’être* of human existence is not unification *with* God, or any aspect of God, but unification *of* God. Ibn Gabbai transforms what Maimonides considered a literary ruse to accommodate a largely intellectually impoverished population into the very purpose of existence.

JACOB’S LADDER

It is only once the profound theologically driven exegetical divide between Maimonides and ibn Gabbai is appreciated that the depth of subversion in ibn Gabbai’s counterlexicon can be fully understood. Here I present one example that best illustrates ibn Gabbai’s anti-Maimonidean semanticity, for in his antipodal construct of the term “to stand erect” (*natzov*), hinging as it does on Jacob’s ladder, an image central to both thinkers, all the principal issues of contention between them crystallize. Maimonides showcases Jacob’s ladder (Gen. 28:12–13) as a prime example of a hypersignificant prophetic parable where every single word contributes additional meaning to its overall message (GP, p.12) and one of the terms critical to deciphering its intent is “to stand erect.” Two forms of the verbal root appear in the parable, one describing God at the summit of the ladder, and the other at its base where it is anchored in the ground. Though highly complex,⁶⁰ essentially the ladder symbolizes varying degrees of knowledge along which the angels, symbolizing prophets, progress on their way to apprehending that being which is located at its summit. The content of that apprehension is captured by the term “stand erect,” which signifies “God’s being stable, permanent, and constant” (GP, I:15, p. 41). The ascent of man has no impact whatsoever on God.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, כפי התורה ויושר כוונתו וטוהר רעיוניו וקדושת נפשו ודבקוהו למעלה בכחות הנכללים בשם, הגדול ותמיד מחשבתו משוטטת שם ליחדו בכבודו

⁵⁹ David Blumenthal has argued forcefully in a series of studies over the last few decades for this as authentically characteristic of Maimonides himself. He detects a stage reached after strictly rationalist pursuit where the intellectual contemplation of God is so intense and continuous as to properly be considered mystical. For the most recent formulation, see “Maimonides’ Philosophical Mysticism,” in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, ed. A. Elkayam and D. Schwartz, *Daat* 64–66 (2009), v–xxv, and the comprehensive bibliography compiled at xxii–xxv.

⁶⁰ I have subjected this parable to a close Maimonidean reading that attempts to identify the precise meaning of each word in it in chap. 5 of my *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 85–130.

What ibn Gabbai cannot tolerate about this interpretation is that these very connotations of the term “stand erect” as changeless, unaffected, and perpetual sameness deny any relational dimensions between those ascending the ladder and God at its apex. The prophets *ascend* in perfecting themselves by gaining knowledge precisely of a remote God that cannot be affected and who bears no relationship whatsoever to them and, as a result, descend, with whatever knowledge they have acquired, as increasingly mature politicians and pedagogues ministering to the populace. The object of the verb “stand,” a midrashic subject of dispute, is a crucial factor that ibn Gabbai seizes on in his assault on Maimonides: Does God stand on the ladder or on Jacob? Maimonides clearly addresses the ambiguity of the verse *and behold the Lord stood erect on it (him?)* (Gen. 28:13) when he clarifies his exegetical intent, asserting “that is, was stably and constantly upon it, I mean upon the ladder.” Ibn Gabbai turns Maimonides’ exegesis on its head by his preference for the alternative of situating God’s standing on Jacob, conveying the notion of an imperfect being who is supported by those below for “the God of the righteous is maintained by them for they are the cause of preserving the Name and unifying it.”⁶¹ In ibn Gabbai’s counter-lexical sense, the term “to stand erect,” when referring to God, signifies unification of Him. Thus, ibn Gabbai renders the same verse that for Maimonides meant God resides virtually inert at the top of the ladder, oblivious to the prophetic movement up and down the ladder, to depict a more dynamic being, a work in progress, whose accomplished state is contingent on the activity on the ladder. The ladder parable is not about acquiring knowledge of independent truths along a trajectory of escalating truths toward the ultimate truth of the nature of God, but about actualizing God from a potential imperfect state into an ultimate unified ontological truth. For Maimonides, God simply is and man is becoming, whereas for ibn Gabbai, man is becoming and God is becoming consequent to man’s becoming.

Perhaps more important than the direct rebuttal of Maimonides’ semantic claims for the nature of God and biblical language here is ibn Gabbai’s thorough attack on the entire Maimonidean lexical exercise, extending to even those mundane senses that cause no anthropomorphic problems. Such philosophically innocuous verses can, of course, according to Maimonides, be taken literally, and, in the case of “standing erect,” convey its primary sense of physical posture. An example of the latter is *And his sister stood erect at a distance* (Exod. 2:4), a reference to Miriam, Moses’ elder sister, literally standing stoically on the river bank as her baby sibling floats away. Ibn Gabbai, however, elevates “sister” to the sefirotic realm where Miriam’s mundane act of standing is mirrored in an act of unification within the Godhead. Ibn Gabbai seizes on Maimonides’ literal example of a term and directs it toward its supernal referent highlighting his radically different conception of Torah as an embodied form of a divine master copy rather than a practical and theoretical handbook. Maimonides’ Torah

⁶¹ AK, 3:45: הצדיקים אלהיהם מתקיים עליהם כי הם סבת קיום השם וייחודו בעבודתם:

caters to the lowest common denominator of its human audience, whereas ibn Gabbai's engenders theurgic activity in its noblest addressees.

ABRAHAMIC FOUNDATIONS

It is instructive to end this chapter with ibn Gabbai's view of Abraham, Judaism's founding father, for not only does it inform his overarching kabbalistic view of Judaism, as with Nahmanides in chapter 3, it also provides a paradigm in which all the parallel lines drawn between ibn Gabbai and Maimonides converge. Essentially Maimonides constructs an Abraham who was raised in a theological and philosophical vacuum, absent any accurate notions regarding monotheism, as a result of a historical deterioration in the true knowledge of one God to the point of its near disappearance. Despite the false idolatrous culture in which he was raised, he arrived at the truth of one God independently through his own reasoned investigation. Modeled as a kind of biblical Socrates, he then conveyed those truths in turn by reasoned instruction, who missionizes by "sowing doubt," "engaging in debate," "informing," "overpowering with demonstration," "accumulating a following," informing each follower "in accordance with his capacity," and ultimately "authoring treatises."⁶² Those who imitate Abraham in this reason-infused lifestyle qualify as his "children" in the sense of how the *Guide* defines a pedagogical fathering process as "whoever instructs an individual in some matter and teaches him an opinion, has, as far as his being provided with this opinion is concerned, as it were engendered that individual" (GP, I:7, p. 32).⁶³ The *Guide* offers another parallel image of the relationship between Abraham and his followers as one of a rock and the stone quarry from which it is extracted based on the verses which draw this analogy, *Look to the rock from which you were hewn; look to Abraham your father* (Isa. 51:1–2). The metaphor accordingly demands allegiance to Abraham's modes of thought and behavior, enjoining one to "tread therefore in his footsteps, adhere to his religion, and acquire his character, inasmuch as the nature of the quarry ought to be present in what is hewn from it" (GP, I:16, p. 42).

Ibn Gabbai charts a parallel regressive history that deteriorates not in philosophical wisdom and correct notions of God, but in the endeavor to meet the "needs of on high" (*tzorekh gavoah*). The crisis Abraham faced was not the loss of the *idea* of a unified God but rather the imminent loss of a unified God. Abraham bursts on this theurgically impoverished landscape and salvages a broken fragmented God by unifying Him once again. The forces that propel

⁶² MT, Idolatry, 1:3. For a parallel passage in the *Guide*, see GP, II:39, p. 379, where Abraham is described as having "assembled the people and called them by way of teaching and instruction to adhere to the truth that he had grasped . . . attracting them by means of eloquent speeches and by means of the benefits he conferred upon them."

⁶³ Maimonides himself, in his own correspondence with his students, assumed this paternal role and addressed them as his sons.

ibn Gabbai's history replaces Maimonides' intellectual forces that animate his, with human conduct and the resultant displacement and fracturing of the divinity, for "the generations preceding Abraham, by their bad conduct, dislocated the *shekbinah* from its place among the lower beings causing separation and uprooting, and when it is dislocated from the lower it also becomes dislocated among the upper and there is disintegration."⁶⁴ Abraham's rehabilitation of a theologically decadent world is not by means of an intellectual retrieval of an idea, but rather a substantive rescue of the Godhead from its deterioration because no one had been working *letzorekh gavoah*. Gabbai appropriates Maimonides' historical regression of mankind, propitiously reversed by Abraham, and transforms it into a historical regression of God whom Abraham rescues from further degeneration.

Ibn Gabbai also turns to the rock/quarry model and transforms Abraham from a philosophical prodigy that demands emulation by his descendants, or those wishing to convert, to a theurgical/theosophical one that ontologically animates his biological descendants. Ibn Gabbai's counterlexical treatment of the term "rock" (*tzur*) repatriates a divinity Maimonides has alienated from man and the world by his definition of the term, when referring to God, as the "principle and efficient cause of all things other than himself" (GP, I:16, p. 42). Maimonides' adoption of Aristotelian terminology here was understood by ibn Gabbai to distinctly bifurcate the cause and the object of causation, or the world and God, a theological perversion compounded by Maimonides' somewhat problematic stance that there is absolutely no likeness or relation between God and human beings (GP, I:56, p. 130). Although the particular problems relating to Maimonides' account of creation are well beyond the scope of this study, suffice it for our purposes to state that ibn Gabbai seeks to reverse what he perceives as Maimonides' philosophical distancing between God and the world. First, his alternative identification of "rock" as a referent for God is "the mother of all the children known as the supernal 'rock,'"⁶⁵ the upper mother being a cipher for "*binah*."⁶⁶ He then kabbalistically hijacks Maimonides' pivotal "rock" verse, focusing on two aspects signified by Isaiah 51:1–2 in its demand for a bidirectional gaze at both the *rock from which you were hewn* and *Abraham*. The first urges Jews to be attentive to the source of their souls, "hewn" out of the *sefirah* of *binah*, which apprises them that the "holiness of

⁶⁴ AK, 2:2: כי הדורות שקדמו לאברהם אבינו סלקו השכינה ממקומה שהיה בתחתונים במעשיהם הרעים וגרמו הפרוד והקצוץ וכשנסתלקה מן התחתונים נסתלקה גם כן מן העליונים ונתפרדה חבילה

⁶⁵ AK, 3:46: והכוונה על אם הבנים הנקראת צור עליון

⁶⁶ See I. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:282, who discusses *binah* as the "cosmic mother" from whose womb emerge the lower seven sefirot. See also Gershom Scholem's discussion of its identification in the Bahir as the "Mother of the Universe" who "raises" the seven children or sefirot below her in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*. See also Elliot Wolfson's discussion of its phallic role as the archetype of the mother in *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 99ff.

their souls qualifies them for perfection.”⁶⁷ The second direction toward Abraham indicates that their holy souls are complemented by holy bodies, “for it was due to remarkable providence that Sarah was not impregnated until Abraham was circumcised so that the holy soul should be animated by a holy and pure drop from which Isaac was born, so that the nation that emerged from him would be particularly suited for worshipping God, thus the nation became qualified, both from the aspect of the soul and the body, for perfection.”⁶⁸ Ibn Gabbai reroutes Maimonides’ exegesis, which dissociates God from the world and portrays an Abraham whose allure is accessible to all, to one that draws God into an inextricable nexus with the world and an Abraham we have encountered previously with Nahmanides and Abarbanel that informs biological descendants with a unique genetic pedigree. Jews are ontologically bound singularly to both God and Abraham, as is no other nation.

In his pragmatic and philosophical treatment of the Bible, midrash, and *halakhah*, Maimonides bequeathed an extremely potent repository of quintessentially Jewish sources from which ibn Gabbai, and other Jewish mystics, could draw on as intertexts in the advancement of their kabbalistic projects. Maimonides’ own rational engagement with Judaism’s foundational texts spurred a veritable explosion of kabbalistic exegesis in its subsequent antagonism to Maimonides’ philosophically driven this-worldliness which it perceived as distancing man from God and devaluing the *mitzvot*. Gabbai and other critical exponents of Jewish mysticism developed a contrapuntal hermeneutic composed of Maimonides’ rationalist point and their own kabbalistic counterpoint, one that was shaped substantively and exegetically in the shadow of Maimonides’ own philosophical hermeneutic.

Unlike Ritva, Ibn Gabbai subscribed to a legend, popular with kabbalists in particular, according to which Maimonides, faced late in life with newly acquired knowledge of kabbalah, was reported to have admitted that had he the opportunity, he would have retracted much of his rationalist agenda accordingly and recalled many of his writings.⁶⁹ So convinced were kabbalists like

⁶⁷ See also AK, 3:39, pp. 411–12, where ibn Gabbai discusses the term “son” (*ben*) in the context of biblical references to Israel as God’s children, which he interprets consistently with his discussion of “rock” as connoting the supernal origins of Jewish souls in the sefirah *binah* which is assonant with the term *ben*.

⁶⁸ AK, 3:46: שהרי היתה ההשגחה הנפלאה שלא תתעבר שרה עד שנמול אברהם למען תחול הקדושה בטפה טהורה וקדושה אשר אל מונה נולד יצחק למען תהיה האומה אשר תצא ממנו מיוחדת לעבודת המקום ב' ה' והרי היתה האומה מוכנת מצד הנפש ומצד הגוף אל השלמות

⁶⁹ AK, 2:13, p. 117. On the history of this false legend, see Gershom Scholem, “From Scholar to Kabbalist: The Legend of the Kabbalists on Maimonides” (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 6 (1934/35): 331–42, and Michael Shmidman, “On Maimonides’ Conversion to Kabbalah,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 375–86. See also the comprehensive list of those who repeated the legend throughout history compiled by Eli Gurfinkel, “An Annotated Bibliography on the Linkage between Maimonides, the Kabbalists, and the Kabbalah” (Heb.), in “Maimonides and Mysticism: Presented to Moshe Hallamish on the Occasion of His Retirement,” special edition of *Daat* 64–66 (2009): 417–85, items 239–88.

ibn Gabbai of the cogency of their beliefs in contradistinction to Maimonides that, as a last resort, they could always claim Maimonides himself would have conceded to them. Maimonides' thought loomed so threateningly large over the kabbalistic enterprise, and his stature and authority were so overwhelming that, failing all else, kabbalists like ibn Gabbai could depict a Maimonides who repudiated his life's work in a humiliating surrender to kabbalistic theology. Kabbalah would thus carry the imprimatur of Maimonides' endorsement at the cost of the image of the Great Eagle having lived a lie as a philosopher who, ironically, claimed to have lived by the guiding principle to "accept the truth from whoever says it."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Introduction to his Commentary on Avot. See the translation of R. L. Weiss and C. Butterworth in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York: Dover, 1983), 60.

Spinoza (17th Century)

Reorienting Maimonides' Scriptural Hermeneutic

MAIMONIDES VS. SPINOZA ON SCRIPTURAL HERMENEUTICS

Considering the personalities chosen to be treated in this book, the one central to this chapter would at first glance seem to be an anomalous choice. In what follows, I focus on three seminal thinkers within the philosophical tradition generally and, more particularly, within Jewish thought, who are not regularly mentioned together owing to the profound temporal and intellectual distances among them. However, Moses Maimonides, Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677), and Martin Buber (1878–1965), aside from their common roots in Judaism, share an abiding interest in the Hebrew Bible, especially in developing hermeneutical approaches that would best meet the challenges posed to it by their respective intellectual and historical contexts. Each was exquisitely attuned to the nuances of biblical Hebrew, and each had an overarching concern for establishing a hermeneutic dedicated to communicating the truest sense of the biblical text. Their respective biblical lexicographic projects come into sharper focus when placed in dialogue with each other, especially since Spinoza's primary critical target in his hermeneutical enterprise is Maimonides, with whom he shared more in common than the distance of nearly half a millennium would suggest.¹ Buber engages both, explicitly and implicitly, in formulating what he would term "encounter," rather than a simple reading, with the text. The latter is best articulated in a series of studies explicating his approach to the monumental German translation of the Hebrew Bible he jointly undertook with Franz Rosenzweig.

¹ As Harry Wolfson concludes, Spinoza's daring in "overthrowing old Philonic principles which by his time had dominated the thought of European religious philosophy for some sixteen centuries" is tempered by a "reinstat[ement of], with some modification, the old principles of classical Greek philosophy." In *From Philo to Spinoza: Two Studies in Religious Philosophy* (New York: Behrman House, 1977), 64.

Here I focus on two illustrations of Spinoza's biblical lexicography – God portrayed as a “consuming fire” and the recurring biblical term *ruah* (air, wind, spirit, *geist*, *pneuma*?) – and the manner in which they constitute a counterbiblical hermeneutic to the Maimonidean one, which have not to date been subjected to the detailed examination they deserve. It will be seen that Spinoza's treatment of the biblical God as a “consuming fire” directly challenges its Maimonidean philosophical, juridical, and political constructions. Once that has been demonstrated, it will become clear why Spinoza devoted so much attention to the term *ruah*, one that was subjected to his lexicographic microscope far more than any other. Spinoza's initial exhaustive survey of the biblical term *ruah* can be better appreciated as an opening salvo in the attack on Maimonides' lexicographical edifice. Consistent with Spinoza's assault on this critical dimension of the *Guide*, his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (TPT) launches almost immediately into an extended philological analysis of the term *ruah*, also specifically dealt with in the *Guide*, which I argue implicitly targets virtually every facet of Maimonides' hermeneutic of the Bible. As such the term and all the biblical allusions associated with it become Maimonidean intertexts as the term weaves its way across the spectrum of subjects encompassed by the *Guide*, such as creation, the nature of God, human nature, the imagination, and the intersection between humanity and God in prophecy. This exercise with *ruah* serves as an essential hermeneutical tool for appreciating the debate between the TPT and the *Guide* in all its dimensions. Spinoza himself, the quintessential rebel against his own tradition, and certainly against the dogmatic principles of faith laid down by Maimonides, utilizes the midrashic discourse of his tradition to undermine it. Spinoza presents a rabbinic subversion of all things rabbinic. He thus fits perfectly within the running theme of this book for ironically, while rejecting everything Jewish, he engages in that quintessential form of Jewish discourse to do so. Finally, as a kind of postscript to their debate, we move to Martin Buber's dialogical hermeneutic of twentieth-century Germany where, I argue, his method of Bible translation (jointly with Franz Rosenzweig) and what constitutes the true voice of the Hebrew Bible contemplates some form of epilogue to this debate. One of the primary examples of his approach to translation also focuses on *ruah*, which demonstrates that biblical teaching “does not so much *present* its highest truths as it lets them be *opened up*.” Buber's Bible – “a voice to be heard rather than a book that is read”² – can serve as an alternative for contemporary readers that surmounts the tension between the Maimonidean and the Spinozistic hermeneutic.

² For a good discussion of what Buber perceives as the “spokenness” (*Gesprochenheit*) of the Bible, which also refers to all the primary sources in Buber's writings regarding voice and hearing rather than reading as paramount for biblical sensibility, see Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), chap. 3, esp. pp. 43–58.

Here it is useful to elaborate on some of the arguments framed in this chapter's introduction regarding the Maimonidean hermeneutic toward which Spinoza directs his animus. Maimonides dedicated the largest part of the [first section](#) of his philosophical magnum opus, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, explicitly and the entire treatise implicitly to compiling a lexicography of biblical terms in aid of correctly reading the Hebrew Bible. "Correctly," for him, meant an understanding of scripture that was both philosophical and therapeutic in resolving an existential angst which seemed to pose an either/or choice between an intellectual honesty toward the truths demonstrated by science and logic on the one hand, and a religious commitment to the "foundations of the Law" (GP, 5), which seemed to contradict those truths, on the other. That resolution was accomplished by a rationalization of biblical language which perceived its crude antiphilosophical literal external sense as one that invited decoding to determine its true internal sense consistent with philosophically demonstrated truths. In so doing the Bible's pervasive reason-offensive vocabulary would be transposed for an entirely new one in keeping with what reason had patently demonstrated to be true. In other words, the *Guide* does not promote an allegorical interpretation of biblical passages as much as it offers a translation of biblical text from its Hebrew as commonly understood to a more nuanced language dictated by the versatile semantic range of its vocabulary.³ It is a project of excavating its original intent from beneath the layers of idiomatic accretions imposed on it by readers, misled by what the classical Rabbis described as the popular language in which it was couched, or the "language of the sons of man."⁴ The Hebrew Bible was revealed in a language devised to communicate with as large an audience as possible, while at the same time conveying eternal truths to those who could discern the various layers of its language. Maimonides transformed what was originally a Talmudic maxim intended to curtail excessive exegesis and limit normative (*halakbic*) invention into a license for translating what appears as primitive prophetic language into a philosophically sophisticated one.⁵

As we advance in time from twelfth-century Egypt, and the medieval Aristotelian physics and metaphysics with which Maimonides operated, to the seventeenth-century Amsterdam of Benedict de Spinoza, we arrive at a very different

³ In a recent study of Maimonides' lexicographic undertaking, Jose Martinez Delgado locates the *Guide* as "a watershed in the history of Andalusian Hebrew lexicography" that "enriched and modernized the art of composing dictionaries of biblical Hebrew." Delgado, "Maimonides in the Context of Andalusian Hebrew Lexicography," *Aleph* (2008): 15–40, at 29.

⁴ GP, I:26, p. 56. The term "man" (*adam*) should be translated by the sense Maimonides affords it in GP I:14, p. 40, of the "multitude . . . as distinguished from the elite." For Talmudic sources and evolving use of this maxim by some of Maimonides' medieval precursors, see Michael Schwartz's Hebrew translation of the *Guide* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), 1:62n2.

⁵ See Abraham Nuriel, "The Torah Speaks in the Language of the Sons of Man in the *Guide of the Perplexed*" (Heb.), *Religion and Language* (Tel Aviv: University Publishing Projects, 1981), 97–103, and Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: HaHevra LeHeker Mikra, 1978), 24–27, on Maimonides' appropriation of this phrase.

philosophical and scientific milieu. For Spinoza, scripture can only be understood from within by way of an internal analysis of its terms that establishes their meaning through the manner in which it alone uses them. Thereby knowledge “of almost all matters that are contained in Scripture has to be sought from Scripture itself alone, just as knowledge of nature does from nature itself”⁶ (TPT, 7.1.12, p. 84). The meaning of scripture cannot be determined by any yardstick of external standards of truth, including that of human reason, so as not to “confuse the true sense with the truth of things” (TPT, 7.3.4, p. 86). Any attempts to do so constitute an imposition of foreign criteria on scripture, which it naturally resists and inevitably ends in distortion rather than clarity. Approaching scripture in light of demonstrated tenets of reason amounts to skewing “the mind of Scripture to the dictates of our own reason and to our preconceived opinions” (TPT, 7.3.13, p. 87) and must be precluded from any scholarly or honest investigation of its teachings.⁷ In other words, Spinoza considers his methodology one that takes scripture far more seriously than his medieval predecessors, chief among them Maimonides, who he accused of a single-minded obsession with “twisting Aristotelian trifles and their very own fantasies out of Scripture” (TPT, 1.10.3, p. 5).

Spinoza sought to undermine the Maimonidean project by exposing its biblical hermeneutic as wholly foreign to its textual origins, and offering in its place an authentic reading that would be exclusively “established from the Bible itself.” In order to restore the Bible to “itself,” Spinoza’s strategy included a thorough subversion of Maimonides’ lexicography, striking a fatal blow at the very core of the Maimonidean enterprise. Spinoza understood well what is often overlooked, that Maimonides’ *Guide* is, as Maimonides himself explicitly apprised his readers, entirely concerned with the meaning of biblical language on the microlevel of individual words and on a broader level with that of a narrative or parable. Any chapter that does not manifestly deal with linguistic issues does so tacitly either as “preparatory for another or it will hint at one of the meanings of an equivocal term that I might not wish to mention explicitly in that place, or it will explain one of the parables or hint at the fact that a certain story is a parable” (GP, p. 10). Spinoza’s philological scrutiny of the Bible, then, targets the very nub of Maimonides’ project in order to restore the Bible to its original language and liberate it from its superimposed philosophical overlay in which philosophical theologians like Maimonides encased it.⁸

⁶ All references to Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* are to Martin Yaffee’s recent translation (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004), hereafter TPT. All references are to this translation’s numbering of chapters, paragraphs, and sentences.

⁷ As Leo Strauss explains Spinoza’s “unprejudiced” study of the Bible, “Scripture is not being understood if the interpreter is introducing his own insights or convictions into the text, if he is not taking Scripture as it presents itself.” Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 262.

⁸ Liberation from the blind authority of revelation and the dogmatic shackles of the past is an overarching mission of the TPT. Steven Smith captures this liberationist goal by describing

A FLAMINGLY JEALOUS GOD: TRUE OR NECESSARY?

It is no coincidence, then, that a prime illustration of Spinoza's scriptural hermeneutic is the biblical identification of God with fire – *For God is a consuming fire, a jealous God* (Deut. 4:24) (כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת הוּא אֵל קַנָּא) – in its original context a Mosaic depiction intended to discourage Israelite betrayal of its commitment to their God, Yahweh. Spinoza's citation here, as with others throughout the TPT where the intellectual antagonist remains unnamed, strikes corrosively at the very heart of the Maimonidean hermeneutic both normatively and philosophically. Like Maimonides, Spinoza too rejects its literal sense but critically, unlike Maimonides, bases that rejection on the limits of analogy fixed internally by scripture itself rather than the dictates of reason. The "God is fire" case exemplifies a strategy of Spinoza's, whereby Maimonides' own presuppositions such as figurative language about God are adapted in a subversive manner orchestrated in a way that Shlomo Pines has described thus: "Maimonides might have considered as a damaging parody of his own views."⁹ Moses' own teachings rule out any likeness between God and "visible" physical phenomena and so demand, out of literary consistency, a metaphorical understanding of God as "fire" – "since Moses also clearly teaches in many passages that God has no likeness to visible things that are in the heavens, on the earth, or in the water, hence it is to be concluded that this tenet – or all the former ones – *is to be explained metaphorically*" (TPT, 7.3.7) (emphasis mine). Spinoza's allusion to the very same verses cited by Maimonides excluding any likeness between God and the world (e.g., Isa. 40:18, 25; Jer. 10:6; GP, I:55, pp.128–29) is far less restrictive in its scope since its semantic range is unfettered by the restraints of reason. For Spinoza, scriptural proscriptions of likeness are narrowly construed, allowing for the possibility of nonvisual characteristics or emotions,¹⁰ whereas for Maimonides, their reason-enhanced meaning vastly broadens their range barring any attribution whatsoever, be they corporeal, affectationous, or implying potentiality, in accord with "the useful teachings of natural science with regard to the knowledge of the deity" (GP, I:55, pp.128–29).

Spinoza's interest in the Bible, not for "examples of timeless truths but as a propaedeutic to our liberation from false ideas and bondage to superstition. History is intended to fulfill an emancipatory function." See his *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*, ed. Ora Segal (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 63.

⁹ Shlomo Pines, "Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant," in *Further Studies in Philosophy: Scripta Hierosolymitana* 20 (1968): 4–54, at 4.

¹⁰ Spinoza's hermeneutical move is not as smooth as he would like us to believe. The very same verses cited to exclude corporeality from God can equally be read to exclude any likeness whatsoever between the physical world and God, which would include emotions as well as physicality. Edwin Curley quite rightly questions Spinoza's cogency here since the verses "whose general theme is that there is no one like God seem as inconsistent with God's possession of passions as they do with his corporeality." In "Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece: Spinoza and the Science of Hermeneutics," *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions*, ed., Graeme Hunter (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 64–99, at 96n53.

Howsoever “fire” is denied its literality, Spinoza is free to comb through scripture for its metaphorical sense which, by means of an analogous Jobian proof-text, is discovered to be “jealous.” Scripture categorically and repeatedly posits a jealous God, appearing in a passage no more authoritative than the Decalogue itself, which resists reason’s attempt to philosophically sanitize it by metaphor. In fact, Spinoza insists, in a reverse Maimonidean hermeneutic, that any passages elsewhere in scripture which intimates a God who is not jealous is “necessarily to be explained metaphorically so as to be seen to suppose no such thing” (TPT, 15.1.24).¹¹ This example is methodically chosen as paradigmatic of Spinoza’s scriptural hermeneutic, I believe, not only to allow for divine attributes but precisely those of “jealousy and anger,” the ones most anathema to Maimonides’ conception of the deity. Although all emotions are ontologically false descriptions of God, there is none more egregiously misleading than anger. It is one of only two traits for which Maimonides demands total banishment from the human psyche,¹² and is explicitly ruled out in his legal code as a divine emotion (along with every other).¹³ In fact, considering Maimonides’ approval of the rabbinic dictum equating anger with idolatry,¹⁴ if God were to vent anger, He Himself would be guilty of idolatry. For Maimonides, if fire is a metaphor for anger or jealousy, then it is a metaphor for another metaphor, whereas for Spinoza, it is a metaphor for a passionate biblical God that Moses constructed, “however much we believe that this tenet conflicts with reason” (TPT, 7.3.12). Spinoza consciously chose the term that most graphically bifurcates the revealed God of Moses the prophet from the reasoned one of Maimonides the philosopher.

Spinoza’s assault on Maimonides with this particular exemplar of scriptural interpretation is even more trenchant in its critique. For Maimonides, the biblical portrayal of disobedience evoking divine anger is singled out as a *necessary belief* “for the sake of political welfare.”¹⁵ It serves as a practical deterrent against social instability, and so is pragmatically essential “for the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing or for the acquisition of a noble moral trait” (GP, III:28, p. 514), yet it is philosophically false. Scripture, then, is divided between correct beliefs on the one hand, such as the existence and unity of God, and false beliefs on the other, necessary for a viable polity such as a God who can be “violently angry with those

¹¹ Amos Funkenstein nicely sums up Spinoza’s interpretation of God as a consuming fire and notes that the biblical God who is composed of psychological attributes but not of physical ones is a God without a body but with a soul. The possibility of a soul without a corresponding body is philosophically ruled out in the *Ethics* and therefore this Mosaic image of a jealous God without a body stresses the wholly unphilosophical nature of the Bible. See his *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 97.

¹² MT, Ethical Traits, 2:3. See D. Frank, “Anger as a Vice: A Maimonidean Critique of Aristotle’s *Ethics*,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1990): 269–81.

¹³ MT, Foundations of Torah, 1:11.

¹⁴ MT, Ethical Traits, 2:3. See b. Shabbat 105b.

¹⁵ GP, III:28, p. 512.

who disobey Him" (GP, III:28, p. 512).¹⁶ Spinoza, in contradistinction, reduces the entire Torah to obedience, and specifically obedience that cultivates one single overarching prescription of love for the neighbor. As he asserts, "Scripture's intent has not been to teach the sciences" but rather "requires nothing from human beings besides obedience, and condemns only stubbornness, not ignorance" (TPT, 13.1.9). In other words, Spinoza considers the entire Torah to consist of necessary beliefs formulated to inculcate ethical conduct in stark opposition to Maimonides, who views the Torah as a perfect amalgam of philosophical and ethical teachings.¹⁷ The choice of a jealous and angry God as paradigmatic of Spinoza's approach to scripture challenges not only Maimonides' philosophical construct of the biblical deity, but also subverts Maimonides' assessment of the Torah as the most perfect Law. The Torah, for Spinoza, resorts to whatever is necessary, including dogmatizing a philosophically false deity, to achieve the most cohesive polity and does "not expressly require true dogmas, but such as are necessary for obedience – as confirm the spirit in love toward one's neighbor" (TPT, 14.1.35).¹⁸

In addition to its assault on Maimonides' intellectualized Torah, its subversive reach extends to Maimonides' normative project as well. The verse identifying God as a *consuming fire* plays a critical role in the formulation of the primary commandment of keeping the company of sages (read philosophers?) assuming its position as sixth after God's existence, unity, love, fear, and worship of him. Deuteronomy 10:20 mandates a *cleaving* to God (וְיָרָא), or the *divine indwelling* (*shekhina*), whose literal sense Maimonides dismisses on

¹⁶ For an incisive analysis of the doctrine of necessary beliefs, see Hannah Kasher's "Myth of the Angry God in the *Guide of the Perplexed*" (Heb.), in *Eshel Beer Sheva* 4 (1995): 95–111, which probes the precise meaning of God's anger as a necessary belief. See especially her conclusion about anger, which is equally applicable to jealousy that "the assertion *God is angry with someone*, does not describe a divine reaction but rather the epistemological state of that individual. Therefore, even though 'God' is the textual subject of the sentence, the conceptual subject is the individual who persists in his ignorance" (105).

¹⁷ Though the first four of Spinoza's seven dogmas of universal faith, God's existence, unity, and power, parallel the "true opinions" Maimonides himself tabulated as opposed to "necessary beliefs," since they are not of divine origin and are designed to inspire obedience, they all, as Arthur Hyman astutely argued, "in their purpose and in the manner of their formulation possess the same characteristics as Maimonides' necessary beliefs." See "Spinoza's Dogmas of Universal Faith in Light of Their Medieval Jewish Background," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 183–95, at 191. Pines concurs that Spinoza's dogmas are informed by the political motivations of necessary beliefs in "Spinoza's Tractatus."

¹⁸ Although even this reduction of the entire Torah to this essential moral principle can be directly traced to its rabbinic roots in R. Akiva's statement, Spinoza considers this to be a product of Christianity's superior teaching over Judaism's. As Norman Brown put it, "Christ reduced the prophetic religion to its essence, and in formulating the Golden Rule – to love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself – transcended the prophetic principle of obedience to the law and prefigured the philosophic religion of love." Brown, "Philosophy and Prophecy: Spinoza's Hermeneutics," *Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (1986): 195–213, at 199.

the basis of God's depiction elsewhere as a *consuming fire*.¹⁹ Since it is not physically possible to attach to fire, this *cleaving* must bear some other metaphorical sense that allows for its normative performance. In this case, that sense dictates the maintaining of close relationships with sages "in order to imitate their conduct and to acquire correct beliefs from their discourse."²⁰

First, the focus on this fire analogy draws attention to an inconsistency in the Maimonidean approach since the logic of the argument advocating a metaphorical sense of *cleaving* operates on a literal understanding of God as fire! One must dismiss a literal attachment to God as an impossibility only if the literal sense of fire is maintained, and so the literal God of fire informs a metaphorical cleaving.²¹ More importantly, the fire analogy is instrumental in both advocating the primacy of correct beliefs or philosophy for scripture and promoting philosophers as the ultimate arbiters or priests of religion. For Maimonides, it demands a consummate subjugation to the sage in every facet of life to the point of near submersion of one's identity in that of the sage, urging that "one marries the daughter of sages, marries off his daughter to sages, eats and drinks with sages, conducts business with sages, and associates with them in every manner of contact."²² Maimonides' juridic exploitation of God's biblical identification with fire actually affords a normative injunction that demands religious dependence on philosophers, the kind of fealty Spinoza fears most as a consequence of submitting scripture to the dictates of reason. Maimonides' formulation of the "cleaving" norm as derived from the "God is fire" image leaves the masses at the total mercy of the philosophers who "would be a new Church authority and a new kind of priests or Pontiffs, which the vulgar would ridicule rather than venerate" (TPT, 7.11.27).²³ Spinoza's "God is fire" analysis

¹⁹ As Menachem Kellner has ably demonstrated, Maimonides' conception of the *shekhina* is not an ontological or hypostatic one, but he consistently uses it "to hint at his intellectualist conception of religion," and not any sensual one. See *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Portland, OR: Littman Library, 2006), 213.

²⁰ See SM, Heb. trans., ed. Hayim Heller (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1946), pos. command #6, pp. 36–37. "By this injunction [cleave to God] we are commanded to mix and associate with wise men, to be always in their company, and to join them in every possible manner of fellowship . . . The Sages also use the words *To Him thou shalt cleave* (Deut. 10:20) as proof that it is one's duty to marry a wise man's daughter . . . 'Is it possible,' they say 'for a man to cleave to the Divine Presence, seeing that it is written *For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire*? Hence we must conclude that whoever marries a wise man's daughter . . . is to be regarded in the light of this verse as cleaving to the Divine Presence." In *The Commandments*, trans. C. Chavel (New York: Soncino Press, 1967), 1:9.

²¹ For a discussion of Maimonides' esoteric strategy behind this anomalous use of two verses, neither of which can be taken literally, see James A. Diamond, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers: Maimonides and the Outsider* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 122–24.

²² MT, Ethical Traits, 6:2.

²³ Spinoza himself may fall into the same trap by endowing the political with supreme authority. As Yirmiyahu Yovel puts it, "By making the political authorities the sole interpreters of what is considered the word of God, Spinoza grants the secular government a monopoly over the

is orchestrated to preempt the replacement of clerical authority as the supreme arbiter of meaning with a new authoritative class of philosophers.²⁴

SPINOZA VS. MAIMONIDES ON RUAH

Although Shlomo Pines identifies Spinoza's importation of Maimonidean presuppositions for the purpose of parodying them, when it comes to his comprehensive philological analysis of the biblical term *ruah* (spirit), Pines accuses him of conveniently applying a method that is "in its operation and as far as its results are concerned, practically indistinguishable from Maimonides' allegorical method, which Spinoza rejects."²⁵ However, on close examination of the particular prooftexts cited, their precise juxtaposition, and their meanings assigned, what emerges is in fact another illustration of turning back Maimonides' own methodology against him and producing results that are not only distinguishable from Maimonides' but also fatally compromising to their integrity.²⁶ That Spinoza's sustained treatment of "spirit" is much more than just one illustration of his philological method is already evidenced by its prominent display in the epigraph to the TPT, which cites 1 John 4:13, *Through this we know that we remain in God and God remains in us: that he has given us of his Spirit*.²⁷ Spinoza's extensive dissection of the biblical sense of *ruah*²⁸ is not intended merely to stabilize its meaning but rather is itself a minitreatise contra Maimonides. Although the imagination is pivotal in Maimonidean prophetology, it is as an ancillary filter for "an overflow from God . . . through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place" (GP, II:36, p. 369). A primary prooftext cited by Maimonides to

normative domain as a whole." Spinoza's lack of attention to the precise limits of this authority renders his political vision vulnerable to what Yovel calls "the danger of a despotism of reason." See *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 134–35.

²⁴ See Jay Harris's discussion in his *How Do We Know This: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Judaism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 121–31. What he posits about ecclesiastical exegesis applies equally to that of philosophers: "The future harmony of human society depends on once and for all eliminating the rabbinic and papal approaches to Scripture: this would allow the appropriate axiological significance of the Bible to be manifest to all" (129).

²⁵ Pines, "Spinoza's Tractatus," 8.

²⁶ Harry Wolfson already discerned this strategy, in his example with respect to miracles and creation, where Spinoza "with subtle irony . . . turns the tables on Maimonides." Wolfson, "The Veracity of Scripture in Philo, Halevi, Maimonides, and Spinoza," *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, ed. Saul Lieberman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1950), 603–30, at 628.

²⁷ See George Gross's discussion of this, whose significance "is not immediately evident," in "Reading the Bible with Spinoza," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 7, nos. 1–2 (1995): 21–38, at 22–26.

²⁸ For a similar examination of the term by Hobbes on whom Spinoza may have patterned his own, see *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 269–73; 56–57; 294–95. For Hobbes's Leviathan as a prototype for the TPT, see Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring the 'Will of God'* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2003), 8–10.

exemplify the sense of *ruah* as this very “overflow” is *And I will take of the ruah which is upon thee and I will put it upon them* (ואצלי מן הרוח אשר עליך ושמתי עליהם) (Num. 11:17), which, in its biblical context, is God’s response to Moses’ exhaustion at bearing the burden of governance alone. According to Maimonides, what *ruah* denotes is the natural enablement of prophecy or “the divine intellectual overflow that overflows to the prophets and in virtue of which they prophesy” (GP, I:40, p. 90). Spinoza, however, strips the term *ruah* of any intellectual sense with which Maimonides imbued it, particularly of any such connotations in prophetic communication since, as Spinoza posits, “Prophets perceived the things revealed of God only by the work of the imagination” (TPT, 1.22.1).²⁹

Having established that all scriptural instances of prophecy are products of a “vivid imagination” rather than a “perfect mind” – “as far as prophesying goes, it is not the work of a more perfect mind but of a more vivid imagination” (TPT, 1.16.1) – Spinoza caps his lengthy excursus on *ruah* with a directive to apply his conclusions to the narratives initiated by Numbers 11:17 and 1 Kings 22:2. This he does to alleviate any shock at their “improper and obscure” depictions of God’s spirit or mind (TPT, 1.24.2). By combining Numbers 11:17 with 1 Kings 22:2 to illustrate the wildly imaginative nature of prophecy utterly devoid of intellect, Spinoza also aimed at toppling a scriptural pillar of Maimonides’ intellectualized notion of prophecy.³⁰ In order to fully appreciate Spinoza’s allusion to these narratives it is important to cite them in full.

²⁹ *Ruah* is a strategically critical term in Spinoza’s critique of the biblical word that is anchored in prophecy. As Nancy Levene astutely notes, the word itself instantiates the essence of the prophet since the “imaginative dimension belongs not only to the person of the prophet but to the very words of the Bible,” and then points to *ruah* as a prime exemplar of this. See *Spinoza’s Revelation: Religion, Democracy, and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 122. There are numerous scholarly treatments of Spinoza’s account of the imagination, but for the purpose of this study, Heidi Ravven’s distinction between imaginative and philosophical knowledge suffices to accentuate the kind of text scripture is, being rooted in the imagination: “Imagination is essentially a historical kind of thinking, in contrast with the timeless truths of philosophy and science . . . Since it perceives via one’s arbitrary and contingent, yet, contextually driven, associations it is accurate and yet, at the same time, highly biased.” See “Spinoza’s Rupture with Tradition: His Hints of a Jewish Modernity,” in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy*, ed. Heidi Ravven and Lenn Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 187–223, at 192, and see the extensive bibliography cited at 213n5.

³⁰ Though, as Warren Zev Harvey has ably demonstrated in his “A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (1981): 151–72, Spinoza’s ethics, psychology, metaphysics, and epistemology all reflect Maimonidean positions, those very same similarities serve to accentuate the incompatibility between the two when it comes to biblical interpretation and translation. For example, while their philosophical positions on the nature of the imagination and intellect accord, their view of their roles in prophecy could not be farther apart. See Harvey’s discussion at 155–61. For a concrete example of a Spinozist doctrine that is simply a logical conclusion to medieval Jewish accounts of the same doctrine demonstrating “how medieval Jewish rationalism bears within itself the seeds of its own Spinozistic *reductio*,” see Steven Nadler, “Spinoza as a Jewish Philosopher,” *Studia Spinozana* 13 (1997): 64–80, at 78. For

I. NUMBERS 11:16–33

“16: And the LORD said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them; and bring them unto the tabernacle of the congregation, that they may stand there with thee. 17: And I will come down and talk with thee there: and I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone. 18: And say thou unto the people, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow, and ye shall eat flesh: for ye have wept in the ears of the LORD, saying, Who shall give us flesh to eat? for it was well with us in Egypt: therefore the LORD will give you flesh, and ye shall eat. 19: Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days; 20: But even a whole month, until it come out at your nostrils, and it be loathsome unto you: because that ye have despised the LORD which is among you, and have wept before him, saying, Why came we forth out of Egypt? 21: And Moses said, The people, among whom I am, are six hundred thousand footmen; and thou hast said, I will give them flesh, that they may eat a whole month. 22: Shall the flocks and the herds be slain for them, to suffice them? or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to suffice them? 23: And the LORD said unto Moses, Is the LORD’s hand waxed short? thou shalt see now whether my word shall come to pass unto thee or not. 24: And Moses went out, and told the people the words of the LORD, and gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them round about the tabernacle. 25: And the LORD came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that, when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, and did not cease. 26: But there remained two of the men in the camp, the name of the one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad: and the spirit rested upon them; and they were of them that were written, but went not out unto the tabernacle: and they prophesied in the camp. 27: And there ran a young man, and told Moses, and said, Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp. 28: And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses, one of his young men, answered and said, My lord Moses, forbid them. 29: And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them! 30: And Moses gat him into the camp, he and the elders of Israel. 31: And there went forth a wind from the LORD, and brought quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, as it were a day’s journey on this side, and as it were a day’s journey on the other side, round about the camp, and as it were two cubits high upon the face of the earth. 32: And the people stood up all that day, and all that night, and all the next day, and they gathered the quails: he that gathered least gathered ten homers:

a recent opposing view to Harvey, see Joshua Parens, *Maimonides and Spinoza: Their Conflicting Views of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

and they spread them all abroad for themselves round about the camp. 33: And while the flesh was yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD smote the people with a very great plague.”

2. 1 KINGS 22:11–24

“11: And Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah made him horns of iron: and he said, Thus saith the LORD, With these shalt thou push the Syrians, until thou have consumed them. 12: And all the prophets prophesied so, saying, Go up to Ramoth-gilead, and prosper: for the LORD shall deliver it into the king’s hand. 13: And the messenger that was gone to call Micaiah spake unto him, saying, Behold now, the words of the prophets declare good unto the king with one mouth: let thy word, I pray thee, be like the word of one of them, and speak that which is good. 14: And Micaiah said, As the LORD liveth, what the LORD saith unto me, that will I speak. 15: So he came to the king. And the king said unto him, Micaiah, shall we go against Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we forbear? And he answered him, Go, and prosper: for the LORD shall deliver it into the hand of the king. 16: And the king said unto him, How many times shall I adjure thee that thou tell me nothing but that which is true in the name of the LORD? 17: And he said, I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd: and the LORD said, These have no master: let them return every man to his house in peace. 18: And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, Did I not tell thee that he would prophesy no good concerning me, but evil? 19: And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. 20: And the LORD said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. 21: And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. 22: And the LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. 23: Now therefore, behold, the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the LORD hath spoken evil concerning thee. 24: But Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah went near, and smote Micaiah on the cheek, and said, Which way went the Spirit of the LORD from me to speak unto thee?”

The two narratives share a perverse depiction of the term *ruah* from two different perspectives: in Numbers 11 an erratic *ruah* lands on individuals whose prophetic qualifications seem to be subject to some doubt (11:26), while in 1 Kings 22, it is a kind of rogue *ruah* that intends to deceive and imbue its recipients with false knowledge. Although Spinoza cites the latter in [chapter 1](#) of TPT as an example of false prophecy and thus as further evidence of

prophecy's tenuousness, "That God sometimes deceives human beings by false revelations" (TPT, 2.3.9), its role in his detailed exposition of *ruah* strikes at the core of Maimonides' proof-textual methodology from within. Why does Maimonides select a primary textual endorsement of *ruah* as a "divine intellectual overflow" which firstly does not originate with God but with Moses and secondly is perceived as somehow awry?³¹ In addition, if a *ruah* of God can be deceptive as in 1 Kings 22, its dubiousness as philosophical knowledge has been raised in all other cases. What legitimately determines its veracity in any of its scriptural occurrences?

For Spinoza, since prophecy is a function of piety and obedience rather than intellectual perfection, it only conveys moral truths, "for this prophetic certainty was not mathematical, only moral" (TPT, 2.3.9). Prophets are authoritative solely for "charity and the conduct of life" while unreliable and no more credible than any other on strictly theoretical matters, "for the Prophets could have been, and really were, ignorant of matters that have to do with theory alone" (TPT, 2.10.1). Once again a prime illustration of a prophecy whose imagery and details must be sifted through to filter out its theoretical inanities from its sensible behavioral guidance at its core is the narrative of 1 Kings 22. Other than its political acuity, in this case predicting the outcome of a military campaign, the rest of its revelatory details, such as "God's true and false Spirit, army of heaven standing on either side of God, and the rest . . ." (TPT, 2.10.4), can be discarded as the fruits of a hyperactive imagination, for "revelation itself varied with each Prophet with respect to the disposition of the temperament of the body, with respect to that of the imagination" (see TPT, 2.5.2). On this issue of what truths can be extracted from the graphics of prophetic revelation, Spinoza's choice of 1 Kings 22 is singularly incisive in its critique of Maimonides in that Maimonides himself exploits this narrative, and particularly the role of *ruah* within it, for its moral value. Maimonides, in emphasizing the egregious nature of murder over any other crime, cites a midrashic identification of the "seductive *ruah*" of 1 Kings 22, with Nabot, an innocent victim of Ahab's oppressive regime:

When all of Ahab's sins and merits were reviewed by the *God of the spirits* there wasn't any sin that deserved annihilation or that was more onerous than the blood of Nabot for it says *And the ruah went out and stood before the Lord* (22:21) – this is the *ruah* of Nabot, and it was told *Seduce him and you will succeed* (22:22). Now if that wicked Ahab did not kill directly but only caused a death, how much more [heinous] is it to kill with one's own hands.³²

Spinoza's scriptural reference here piques the reader's attention to its hortatory use by Maimonides where a prophetic *ruah* emanating from God is

³¹ That someone unqualified could become a prophet is, for Maimonides, as ludicrous as that God "should turn an ass or a frog into a prophet" (GP, II:32, p. 362).

³² MT, Murder and Preservation of Life 4:9. This is cited by Isadore Twersky as a prime example of propping up halakhic norms with aggadic flourish so that his language is "more hortatory and emotional, frequently communicating personal feelings as well." See *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 177, 340, and 444.

explicitly characterized as a “false *ruah*” (רוח שקר) (22:22). Maimonides’ use of *ruah* in this instance is an implicit endorsement of Spinoza’s view of prophecy since *ruah*, the communicative vehicle of prophecy, conveys a false prediction and yet is, at the same time, a powerful political message against unjust governance³³ and general deterrence of a most morally reprehensible act.

Another crucial proof-text cited by Spinoza against the casting of the prophet as a philosopher is Isaiah 40:13, *Who can decipher the ruah of God* (מי תכן את רוח ה’). He considers this verse an assertion regarding the absolute opaqueness of the mind of God, “that is, who besides God himself has determined God’s mind to will anything” (TPT, 1.20.14). Spinoza’s skeptical use of this verse denying the prophet natural knowledge militates against Maimonides’ adoption of it as allowing for the comprehension of some facet of God that can be transmitted by those who have gained it, for “he who knows the ordering of His will or apprehends His governance of that which exists as it really is, should teach us about it” (GP, 1:40, p. 90). Maimonides’ reference here is to prophetic knowledge that reaches its apex in the Mosaic grasp of all existing things: “their nature and the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how He governs them in general and in detail” (GP, 1:54, p. 124).³⁴ Again Spinoza sabotages the Maimonidean *ruah* conceived as an access route to scientific knowledge and intelligibility of nature by drafting an instrumental verse in that Maimonidean construct into an endorsement of its total obverse, of intellectual impenetrability.³⁵ *Ruah* again in Spinoza’s biblical lexicography signifies the rational stuntedness of prophetic knowledge rather than its philosophical maturity.

Since Spinoza views Maimonides as imposing a foreign Aristotelian overlay onto scripture,³⁶ contorting its language, laws, and narratives to fit the contours

³³ For Spinoza, Mosaic law was geared toward establishing institutions of governance where the regulators “did not become tyrants” and the regulated “did not become rebellious.” See all of chap. 17 and 17.6.7.

³⁴ Rather than the abstract theoretical knowledge of God’s attributes of action acquired by Moses in Exodus 33:20, the very summit of human knowledge for Maimonides, Spinoza considers Moses’ grasp of God as crassly anthropomorphic. God’s response to Moses’ quest for His essence that *man cannot see me and live* (Exod. 33:20) is consistent with this conception of God as a “visible” entity (2.9.19).

³⁵ As Michael Rosenthal states, “Moses used prophetic language for its effect, which was to strengthen the very institutions for which the Hebrews had been chosen in the first place, not because it taught anything about the workings of nature.” The Spinozistic *ruah* of Isaiah 40:13 discloses this while, for Maimonides, that same *ruah* precisely signifies the prophetic appreciation of the workings of nature. See his “Why Spinoza Chose the Hebrews: The Exemplary Function of Prophecy in the Theological-Political Treatise,” in *Jewish Themes in Spinoza’s Philosophy*, ed. Heidi Ravven and Lenn Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 225–60, at 237.

³⁶ It should be noted here that some scholars argue that, rather than a radical break with the Aristotelian notion of God, Spinoza’s notion of thought and extension might more appropriately be viewed as a modification of its predecessor – one in fact that Maimonides may very well have embraced as a solution to his metaphysics rather than as an assault on it. See, for example, Carlos Fraenkel, “Maimonides’ God and Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura*,” *Journal of the History of*

of established philosophy, his programmatic deconstruction of the term *ruah* strikes at its Maimonidean nerve center: intellect as form and the enduring aspect of man. One of the seven senses within the semantic range of *ruah* according to Spinoza is in fact “the mind or spirit itself” (TPT, 1.17.18). Two Ecclesiastic prooftexts illustrate this sense – *And there is the same ruah for all* (Eccles. 3:19)³⁷ *For the fate of man and the fate of the beast are one and the same fate, one dies like the other and there is the same ruah for all; man has no advantage over the beast for all is vanity; And the ruah will return to God* (Eccles. 12:7).³⁸ In their precise combination, the two verses comprise a hermeneutical assault on the Maimonidean lexical appropriation of *ruah* as intellect. Maimonides cites the latter verse as an endorsement of *ruah* signifying that ethereal dimension which “remains of man after his death and that does not undergo passing-away” (GP, 1:40, p. 90). Another colon of the former verse, *So that man has no preeminence over the beast*, is cited some twenty-five chapters earlier to express the other concrete material facet of man, which he shares with all other species, whose common fate on an individual basis is degeneration and passing away.

Maimonides buttresses this sense of man as species with another scriptural use of *ruah* excerpted from the same passage in Ecclesiastes that reiterates this intersection between man and animal, *Who knows the ruah of the sons of man* (3:21) *Who knows if the ruah of the sons of man ascends above and if a beast's ruah descends to the earth below*.³⁹ The term *sons of man* is Maimonides' euphemism for the masses, or those who have not or cannot aspire to the kind of intellectualized *ruah* that would ensure them some form of postmortem existence. Maimonides' *ruah*, then, is a variegated one that can represent two antithetical aspects of the human condition – the tangible that eventually ceases to be and the abstract which transcends its restrictive *ruah* in perpetuity. Its proper sense is disclosed variously by its context. Spinoza's juxtaposition of the same two verses Maimonides originally employed to bifurcate *ruah* into a temporal and eternal feature of the human effects a consolidation of the two into an integral unit that expires with death. Spinoza's calculated convergence of the two verses that Maimonides diverges expresses a rejection of intellectual immortality *as a biblical teaching*. His textual coalescence of a *ruah shared* by animal and man with a *ruah* that reverts back to God strongly indicates as well a rejection of any biblical endorsement of personal immortality. Just as nothing remains of that shared species' *ruah*, so nothing discernible survives in its reversion to God or the All.⁴⁰

Philosophy 44, no. 2 (2006): 169–215, who concludes that Spinoza's “transition from a God into whose intellectual essence the form of all existents is inscribed to a God whose active essence comprises both thought and extension is the result of the solution of a problem, not of a radical transformation” (209).

³⁷ The full verse reads *כי מוקרה בני האדם ומוקרה הבהמה אחד להם כמות זה כן מות זה ורוח אחד לכל ומותר האדם מן הבהמה אין כי הכל הבל*

³⁸ והרוח תשוב אל האלהים

³⁹ מי יודע רוח בני האדם העלה היא למעלה ורוח הבהמה הירדת היא למטה לארץ

⁴⁰ What Spinoza's position is on this is subject to dispute, but for the purposes of this study I adopt Steven Nadler's book-length treatment of it, which argues vigorously against any notion of

Another biblical proof-text cited by Spinoza to corroborate the sense of *ruah* as mind severs even deeper the link between scripture and philosophy in its tactical repudiation of its Maimonidean overlay and reclamation of its pristine sense. Spinoza translates Genesis 6:3, *And My ruah will not reason in a human being since he is flesh*⁴¹ – as “a human being afterward will act on the basis of the decrees of the flesh and not of the mind I have given him to discern the good” (TPT, 1.20.10). Again, contemplating Maimonides, Spinoza’s citation disengages the human mind from its philosophical anchoring to God by displacing God, the possessive subject of *ruah*, in favor of man rendering it man’s *ruah* rather than God’s. The verse is not a statement regarding any kind of relationship with God, or God’s governance, but is rather a strictly anthropological assertion about the human constitution.⁴² For Maimonides, however, whenever *ruah* is apposite God it must intimate either a “divine intellectual overflow” to prophets or “purpose, will, and governance.” In this instance, where human being is a signifier for the multitude, whether it indicates the overflow’s inaccessibility or exclusion from divine governance, the verse conditions some connection to the divine on intellect. In order to distance himself from this kind of reading, Spinoza himself resorts, here and throughout his analysis of *ruah*, to the same offensive hermeneutic he accuses Maimonides of: metaphor un-compelled by the internal logic of scripture.

A THIRD WAY: BUBER’S BIBLICAL STRANGENESS

While Maimonides and Spinoza both view scripture through the prism of the “human language” in which it is couched, they radically differ on the mode of its communication. Since Maimonides reconciles the meaning of scripture with truth, the language of “the sons of men,” as he adopts and formulates it, is an esoteric one that contemplates different audiences graded by ascending levels of perception. Spinoza, on the other hand, who claims to probe scripture for meaning alone without regard to truth, that very same language (*scriptura humane loquitur*) addresses one audience alone bound together by the lowest

personal immortality in Spinoza. It is also important to note that my study deals with Spinoza’s quarrel with Maimonides on scriptural hermeneutics but does not necessarily rule out their possible consensus on purely philosophical grounds irrespective of any scriptural grounding. For example, on the issue of immortality, I agree with Nadler’s assessment that Spinoza may be pushing Maimonides’ position to its logical conclusion in that if the acquisition of eternal truths “is all that remains after we are dead, then the traditional claims about the personal immortality of the soul are nothing but fictions.” See Nadler, *Spinoza’s Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 131.

⁴¹ לא ידון רוחי באדם לעלם בשגם בשר

⁴² Spinoza’s analysis of the term *ruah* is crucial for Spinoza’s argument severing the direct channel between God and the prophet since, as Steven Smith asserts, the use of the term *ruah* “to ascribe prophetic insight to the power of God is merely a way of expressing one’s ignorance about the psychological mechanisms that control the mind.” See “How Jewish Was Spinoza?” in *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize*, ed. Paul Bagley (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 191–208, at 197.

common denominator in interpretive skills common to all.⁴³ Scripture is therefore attuned to “the natural and common mental cast and capacity of human beings” (TPT, 7.11.49),⁴⁴ whom it “is not eager to render learned but obedient” (TPT, 13.1.34). In the twentieth century, the “human language” of the Bible evolves into the “justified stammering” of its voice heard and propounded by Martin Buber.⁴⁵ Unlike Maimonides and Spinoza, one needs to open oneself up to “biblical strangeness” rather than harmonize it with physics, as the former does, or simply relegate it to the status of a primitive relic of ancient politics that must in a sense be overcome, as the latter does. It is no coincidence, then, that Buber offers a treatment of the term *ruah* as paradigmatic of his effort to expose “the massive reality of this biblical strangeness” by which one is shown “the way in”⁴⁶ to the Bible. The looming *ruah of elohim* that hovers and overshadows primordial earth needs to be resuscitated after it has been drained of its ability to speak to contemporary man by Maimonides and Spinoza, who both confine it to the natural realm, either as an elemental air of Aristotelian physics (GP, II:30, pp.350–51), or as simply a powerful air/wind (TPT, 1.20.3) whose force is metaphorically conveyed by attributing it to God.⁴⁷

The very trajectory of history for Buber from creation to revelation to redemption would be scuttled if not anchored in the totality of that primordial *ruah* which realigns the spirit and nature that Maimonides and Spinoza have ruptured. That originating *ruah* must be translated as “a spiritual divine act and a natural divine act” at one and the same time so that the historical human being is not simply reduced to some biological amalgam of elements, Aristotelian or otherwise. It is the maternal *ruah* that “shelters the totality of the things that are to be,” which also infuses the human being “destined for existence in history, to be present for his decision and to share his fate.”⁴⁸ Buber’s *ruah* enhances that of Maimonides and Spinoza, enriching it from what he views as a static, stilted, one-dimensional datum of nature to a dynamic ingredient integrating spirit and nature in humanity, thus enabling the possibility of revelation and ultimately redemption.⁴⁹

⁴³ Tamar Rudavsky notes that the principle of *scriptura humane loquitur* in the TPT functions as “the leitmotif of the entire work” in her “Galileo and Spinoza: Heroes, Heretics, and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, no. 4 (2001): 611–31, at 623.

⁴⁴ See also TPT 4.4.30; 2.9.34; 6.1.45.

⁴⁵ Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 12 (hereafter referred to as ST).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁷ The Buber/Rosenzweig Bible translation often gazes back at its exegetical past in order to steer it in new theological directions. For two incisively analyzed illustrations of this, where “a complicated passage and its exegetical history have been decisively reconfigured,” see Michael Fishbane, “Justification through Living: Martin Buber’s Third Alternative,” in *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Jerusalem and Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 120–32, at 124–26.

⁴⁸ ST, 17.

⁴⁹ Buber and Rosenzweig’s translation, as Leora Batnitzky observes, “itself is the act of revelation leading to redemption.” In “Translation as Transcendence: A Glimpse into the Workshop of the

Virtually all of the verses cited by Buber illustrative of this revelatory *ruah* that enters the person forging the link between creation and history and revelation history (Judg. 6:34; 14:6, 19; 1 Sam 10:6; 11:6; 16:13) are those that Maimonides classifies under the lowest degree of the eleven degrees of prophecy he enumerates in ascending order of quality. Maimonides considers this category to be a “steppingstone toward prophecy,” but not prophecy proper (GP, II:45, p. 396). It is also a class particularly dominated by the catalytic force of *ruah* where this pseudo-prophecy is commonly inspired in the Bible by the phrase “*ruah* of the Lord.” I believe that Buber was uniquely drawn to this prophetic class when formulating his conception of *ruah* because, in its Maimonidean setting, it is distinguished from all others in its lack of theoretical or juridic content. Rather, it consists wholly in conduct and performance, where the “individual in question finds in himself something that moves and incites him to the action” (GP, II:45, p. 396).⁵⁰ All the other Maimonidean degrees of prophecy involve speeches and addresses in either words, parables, or images, while the first involves the moral spirit where the “*ruah* of the lord by no means caused one of these to speak anything; rather its object was to move one strengthened by it to a certain action; not to any action but to an action that succors a wronged one” (397). By eliciting the prooftexts that constitute Maimonides’ first prophetic degree, Buber discards the *ruah* of metaphysics in exchange for a “something” that is transformative, which naturally and spiritually translates into a *ruah* injected into the prophet that is “present for his decision and to share his fate.”⁵¹

The *ruah* of Numbers 11, which courses its way from Moses onto the seventy elders, and then possibly awry onto two other recipients, examined previously in Spinoza and Maimonides, is also cited by Buber as paradigmatic of the *ruah* that informed the creation and humanity at their inception.⁵² For Maimonides,

Buber-Rosenzweig Bible Translation,” *New German Critique* 70, no. 1 (Special Issue on Germans and Jews) (1997): 87–116, at 96.

⁵⁰ Buber distinguishes between the *ruah* and *davar* of revelation where the former is the stimulus and the latter the content. See *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 63–64.

⁵¹ ST, 17. I do not wish to enter the debate as to whether Buber’s encounters are so contentless as to be devoid of ethics altogether and lead to ethical anarchy, but I am in agreement with those who reject such an interpretation. This I find clearly in such assertions as “Love is responsibility of an I for a Thou” (*I and Thou*, 15). If “all revelation is summons and sending” (115), then that summons and sending must concern ethical responsibility. See, for example, Paul Mendes-Flohr, who describes the I-Thou encounter not as antinomian but as a “metanomian ground of all ethical and religious acts,” in “Buber’s Reception among the Jews,” *Modern Judaism* 6, no. 2 (1986): 111–26, at 115. See also Stuart Charne, “The Two I-Thou Relations in Martin Buber’s Philosophy,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 1/2 (1977): 161–73, who argues that the I-Thou relation is “an ethical ideal for authentic life with others in the world” (171); and Richard Freund, “Martin Buber’s Biblical and Jewish Ethics,” in *Martin Buber and the Human Sciences*, ed. Maurice Friedman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 77–92, who concludes that Buber’s divine encounter “will ultimately determine how one reacts through informed human will” (88).

⁵² It is noteworthy, considering our discussion, that Buber cites the *ruah* of Numbers 11 as one that is devoid of the content of *davar* because it inspires a company of prophets rather than an individual, which demonstrates that prophetic *ruah* alone is emblematic of a “collective condition which from

as noted, a partial view of the initial stage of *ruah*'s journey rendered it a metaphysical construct of a divine intellectual overflow, of the bridge between human beings and God. Spinoza turns it against Maimonides and replaces metaphysics with politics, a narrative about the distribution and sharing of power between Moses and the elders, and popular consent to his governmental regime.⁵³ For Buber, though, that same *ruah* does not end its journey with its stray prophetic empowerment but continues with the punitive consequences of the people's impatient gastronomic craving that is also propelled by a *ruah that traveled from God* (Num. 11:31), showering the camp with an abundant supply of quail and ultimately inflicting a decimating plague. Any translation of *ruah* in this episode must capture its hybrid nature indicated by the narrative juxtaposition of a *ruah* that grants prophecy and a retributive one that gusts from the sea. It must convey the "latent theological principle" of that primordial *ruah* which expresses "that God is to be assigned neither to the realm of nature nor to the realm of spirit, that God is not nature and is not spirit either, but that both have their origin in him."⁵⁴ Buber reiterates his interpretation of the double sense of *ruah* in his discussion proper of the passage in Numbers in his book *Moses*. There is also the interweaving of the two events, the descent of the spirit upon the elders and the spirit's carriage of the quails, which "make the reader feel that both, the working in Nature and the working in the soul of human beings, are the one work from on high."⁵⁵

Buber glosses this translative moment with a note that is crucial for this study in that he co-opts Spinoza's postulate that thought and extension are the only two of God's infinite attributes accessible to humanity as faithful to this "Old Testament vision: in contrast to the Pauline and Johannine pneumatization of God which in effect amounts to spiritualizing him."⁵⁶ Although Buber's stance

time to time seizes the men exposed to the *ruah*, gathering them and driving them over the land." See Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, 64.

⁵³ See 17.5.5 and Annotation 36, 250–51.

⁵⁴ ST, 15. In his Heideggerian analysis of what is at stake in Buber's art of translating the Bible, Peter Gordon explains that translation aims not just at understanding but is a metaphysical event as well. A mistranslation "warps the very texture of Being." He cites the experiment with *ruah* as paradigmatic of this task, which amounts to "a metaphysical retrieval—an act of anamnesis." See Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 268.

⁵⁵ Buber, *Moses* (Oxford: East & West Library, 1958), 163–65.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, n13. Though Spinoza's attribution of extension to God may have been a radical break with Jewish philosophy, as Myer Waxman noted long ago, "With the positing of extension as an attribute of God, Spinoza parted company with Judaism and Jewish philosophy." Buber's gloss here tempers the break somewhat. Since it might be more in accord with the biblical conception of God, one would have to omit Judaism from Waxman's assertion and restrict the break to Jewish philosophy that preceded Spinoza. See "Baruch Spinoza's Relation to Jewish Philosophical Thought and to Judaism," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, new series, 19, no. 4 (1929): 411–30 at 429. Buber retrojects Spinoza back into the biblical notion of God but adds the mode of personality to that of thought and extension. See Michael Zank, "Buber and *Religionwissenschaft*: The Case of His Studies on Biblical Faith," in *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, ed. Michael Zank (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 61–84, at 69–70.

toward Spinoza is complicated by its evolving nature over the course of his life,⁵⁷ in the end Spinoza's God does not go far enough for Buber, in the sense that the two knowable attributes Spinoza limits it to must be supplemented by a third, which is critical to Buber's own conception of God as a Person – "the attribute of personal being."⁵⁸ However, by considering Spinoza truer to the original spirit of the Old Testament God than Christianity's "spiritualizing" of Him, Buber has reversed the evolutionary direction Spinoza charted from the primitive Mosaic imagination-based communing with God to the more sublime unmediated intellectual mode of Christ (TPT, 1.14.3–5). Spinoza's God in Buber's hands, although still lacking personhood, is a return to the Old Testament God whose worldly presence infiltrates both humanity and nature with the *ruah* of thought and extension.⁵⁹ Perhaps Buber repatriates Spinoza to the Jewish native tradition he truly felt most contributed to the ethical progress of humanity but had displaced for Christianity out of political expedience.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ In his early addresses on Judaism delivered between 1909 and 1918, for example, Buber considers Spinoza pivotal in what he terms the "spiritual process" that constitutes Judaism in a striving toward unity. See "Judaism and Mankind," 29, and "Renewal of Judaism," 43, where he credits Spinoza with introducing "the unity of the world permeating, world animating, world being God: *deus sive natura*." in *On Judaism*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).

⁵⁸ See, for example, the afterword to *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 135, where he concludes that "only this third attribute of personal being would be given to us to be known direct in its quality as an attribute." See also Buber, "Spinoza, Sabbatai Zvi, and the Baal Shem," where he also faults Spinoza for negating personality entirely from God, although he was well intentioned in that "he opposed it as a diminution of divinity." Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), 92. See also in the same collection, the essay "God and the Soul," where he contrasts Spinoza's "withhold[ing] all personality from God" with the kabbalistic conception of God (191). My thanks to the anonymous reader for pointing to these sources and for helping me reformulate this section of my chapter.

⁵⁹ Buber's reading of Spinoza back into the Old Testament affords an opportunity to reconsider another of Spinoza's oppositional constructs between Moses the legislator on the one hand and Paul and Jesus the philosophers on the other. His total bifurcation of reason and revelation with respect to the Old Testament inconsistently (disingenuously?) reunites in the New. As Steven Frankel convincingly argues, Paul addresses different audiences, commingling a moral teaching for the masses with a philosophic teaching for the elite which he mutes so that the former hears the moral while allowing "the careful readers with philosophic potential to pursue Paul's philosophic wisdom." This is precisely the way Maimonides reads the Old Testament. What Spinoza denies Moses he grants to Paul and Jesus. See Frankel's "Spinoza's Dual Teachings of Scripture: His Solution to the Quarrel between Reason and Revelation," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 84 (2002): 273–96, at 286.

⁶⁰ As with every other issue there is much debate on Spinoza's true position vis-à-vis Christianity, but an argument that would be consistent with what I propose here is advanced by Robert Misrahi: "In Christ Spinoza admires a Jewish Rabbi extending to the whole of mankind that part of the teaching of the Torah which is purely ethical." Misrahi, "Spinoza and Christian Thought: A Challenge," *Speculum Spinozanum*, ed. S. Hessing (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1977), 387–417, at 414. On the other hand, Leo Strauss sees Spinoza's appeal to Christianity's supremacy over Judaism as a Machiavellian strategy that "in a book addressed to Christians cannot but

CONCLUSION: MORE THAN INK AND PARCHMENT

When drawing the correspondence between the terms *earth*, *water*, *ruah*, and *darkness* in the first two verses of Genesis and the four basic elements of earth, water, air, and fire, Maimonides raises the question as to why *ruah* is uniquely captioned as the *ruah of God*. Since it alone is described as being in motion (*merahefet*) as opposed to the inertness of the others and “the motion of the wind is always ascribed to God,” this elemental *ruah* is therefore attributed to God. The quail carrying wind in Numbers 11 is one of the three prooftexts cited in support of the assertion that moving winds are biblically associated with God. Although, for Maimonides, God may be the impetus for these winds in the remotest sense of natural causality, every biblical occasion of a wind that moves history in some direction conjures up the pristine creative moment at the world’s inception. Of the two exclusive alternative meanings allowed *ruah* when associated with God, either divine intellectual overflow or purpose and will (GP, I:40, p. 90), its sense in Numbers 11:31 can only be the latter. The physical and the metaphysical merge in the rushing wind and, just as Buber sought desperately to preserve the two in translation (e.g., *Geistbraus; windsurge*), Buber’s caution with respect to the natural and supernatural connotations of *ruah* would have equally concerned Maimonides: “it is not for us to split unbridgeable the two . . . the spiritual meaning is falsified when it loses its connection with concrete physicality.”⁶¹ And so every natural phenomenon for Maimonides, the wind perhaps the one that most startles us, must evoke God’s purpose and will exercised at the originating surge of creation to effect with contemplation what Buber attempted by translation, “the divine origin of the wind inwardly felt.”⁶²

Maimonides, Spinoza, and Buber all subjected scripture to an intense lexical scrutiny that would, in Maimonides’ words, act as “a key permitting one to enter places the gates to which were locked” (GP, Introduction, p. 20). Taken as simple history or poetry, the Bible cannot achieve in its readers that utopian state of bliss described by Maimonides at the end of his introduction to the *Guide* in which “souls will find rest,” “eyes will be delighted,” and “bodies will be eased of their toil and labor.” The effort they all exerted to determine the precise meaning or range of meanings of biblical terms and phrases indicates the seriousness with which they all approached the text and thus their engagement in that most quintessential of all Jewish activity: biblical exegesis.⁶³ With this study of

appeal to the Christian prejudices which include anti-Jewish prejudices,” and dismisses any genuine reverence for Christianity, as Hermann Cohen argued. See Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 20. For one excellent example of Spinoza’s attack on Maimonides as a veil for entering current Christian debates about scripture with Maimonides deployed as mask for a contemporary disputant, see Samuel Preus, “A Hidden Opponent in Spinoza’s *Tractatus*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 3 (1995): 361–88.

⁶¹ ST, 87.

⁶² *Ibid.* See also 96, 153–54.

⁶³ Even Spinoza’s devastating critique of the Bible’s authority and philosophical utility is, according to Buber, a serious encounter with the Bible in the sense that “even where people have said ‘no’ to

core examples of that exegesis and especially of the way each of them translated the term *ruah* (spirit/wind), Spinoza looks back at Maimonides, and Buber contemplates both his predecessors extending a hermeneutical process that subverts while demanding a new hermeneutical encounter with the text.⁶⁴ Though distinguished by conceptions of scripture that generate divergent modes of reading, all would unite in the goal of salvaging the scripture from simply being reduced to what Spinoza feared: “nothing besides ink and parchment” (TPT, 12.2.10).⁶⁵ By focusing on a lone biblical term, I have abided by Buber’s own rationale for doing so with respect to “fire” and *ruah*, which is to demonstrate “what guiding power can lie in a single biblical word if we only pursue it earnestly and commit ourselves to it.”⁶⁶

it, that ‘no’ has only validated the book’s claim upon them they have bore witness to it even in refusing themselves to it” (ST, 4–5).

⁶⁴ In this looking back with a view to a revitalized reading, Buber’s translation is the product of an act of reading that “calls out to the polyphony of voices who have read the text in the past and the present, and even to those who will read the text in the future.” Batnitzky, “Translation as Transcendence,” 96.

⁶⁵ The fact that Spinoza divorces scripture from philosophy, leaving a theological political text, does not necessarily mean it is not a serious book. As Nancy Levene argues, the text conveys prophetic teachings concerning matters that “transcend the bounds of natural knowledge . . . conveyed in words or writing and it concerns things – experiences, languages, histories, politics – that, while sources of knowledge for and about human beings, cannot be deduced from human nature alone.” See Levene, *Spinoza’s Revelation: Religion, Democracy, and Reason*, 120.

⁶⁶ ST, 17.

Hermann Cohen (19th Century)

A New Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Maimonides

THE RANGE OF COHEN'S AND MAIMONIDES' EXEGETICAL PROJECTS

This chapter progresses quickly in time to the modern post-Kantian period where Maimonides still looms large in the ongoing development of Jewish thought and philosophy. Though we have encountered Maimonides' battle against anthropomorphism previously, it is worth stressing for the purposes of this chapter how anathematic biblical language was for him. Taken at face value, such language profoundly offended medieval philosophical notions of divine essence and unity, projecting a pagan rather than monotheistic image of God and thereby provoking a radical rereading of both the Bible and its rabbinic reception. Maimonides dedicated much of his efforts to developing a new lexicon of biblical terminology that would safeguard the Bible's credibility as Judaism's foundational text among the new readers who found themselves caught between the certain truths of demonstrable thought and the patent falsehoods of biblical idiom.¹ Theirs was not simply an intellectual challenge but an existential quandary that threatened to undermine their commitment to the very tradition in which they were reared. "Being distressed by the externals of the Law" posed an either/or choice "as to whether he should follow his intellect . . . and consequently consider that he has renounced the foundations of the Law," or "not let himself be drawn on together with his intellect,"² while remaining steadfastly loyal to the apparent nonsense of the Bible. The latter would condemn him to a life of dishonesty and inner turmoil to the detriment of his commitment to both Judaism and reason – a life that, in Sartreian terms,

¹ See Mordecai Cohen's discussion of the structural framework for the lexicography in *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 201–10.

² GP, Introduction, pp. 5–6.

would be conducted in bad faith and inauthenticity. Psychologically unhinged and intellectually defeated he “would not cease to suffer from heartache and great perplexity.”³ To stave off such heartache and resolve that perplexity, Maimonides offers his *Guide of the Perplexed*, a handbook designed to preserve one’s dedication to both philosophy and the sources of Judaism in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic midrash.

Close to seven centuries after Maimonides’ death, Hermann Cohen would embark on his own project which, though not motivated by the same challenges facing Maimonides, overlapped in his determinedness to read Jewish literary sources *reasonably*, only this time in the shadow of Kant rather than Aristotle. As such, ethics becomes the overriding concern and, as George Kohler points out, “Cohen does not read Maimonides’ treatise as a medieval textbook of Aristotelianism, but as a medieval rabbi’s contribution to the religious ethics of Judaism.”⁴ In contrast to his medieval intellectual predecessor, Cohen could avail himself of much expanded and richer material in that the sources available to him included, among others, Maimonides’ own textual legacy.⁵ In addition, the medieval obsession with both philosophy and exegesis tended to weave philosophy into religious literature, whereby “the whole wide sphere of Bible exegetics becomes a source of Judaism.”⁶ While Maimonides reread his sources to reconcile biblical and rabbinic texts with the demands of reason, Cohen, in his construction of a “religion of reason,” rereads Maimonides’ rereadings of those very same texts. Maimonides’ Judaism often bridges the sources toward Cohen’s religion of reason by providing a philological anchor that nudges a term or verse now viewed through a more modern historical and evolutionary lens toward its ultimate reason-infused meaning. Once again we are confronted by a major Jewish philosopher and theologian who engages Judaism’s foundational canon as filtered through Maimonides’ own canonical exegesis.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴ *Reading Maimonides’ Philosophy in 19th Century Germany: The Guide to Religious Reform* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 287.

⁵ As Almut Bruckstein notes, “Cohen’s detailed textual interpretations of the “classics” among the medieval Jewish thinkers such as Saadya, ibn Daud, Maimonides, Crescas, and Albo are, in fact, all directed toward demonstrating their respective share in the construction of Judaism as the classical expression of ethical rationalism. Bruckstein, “On Jewish Hermeneutics: Maimonides and Bachya as Vectors in Cohen’s Philosophy of Religion,” *Hermann Cohen’s Philosophy of Religion*, ed. S. Moses and H. Wiedebach (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997) (hereafter HCPR), 35–50, at 42. My argument here is in agreement, but I nuance this assertion in that Cohen’s nod to these “classics” often involves a subversive hermeneutic in support of his construction.

⁶ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 29. As this chapter addresses issues that are pertinent to Maimonides, medieval Jewish philosophy, and philosophical biblical exegesis, it would be of interest to a much wider audience than Hermann Cohen specialists. I therefore use this English translation for reasons of accessibility to all these “fields” of study, which I attempt to bridge in this chapter. All references to *Religion of Reason* are to this edition and are cited hereafter as RR.

In this chapter, I explore a hitherto neglected feature of their oeuvre that unites Maimonides and Cohen as much as distinguishes them. Both their works are Jewish in that they are unrelentingly engaged with Judaism's foundational texts to vindicate in Maimonides' case their consistency with reason, while in Cohen's to excavate their contribution to the crystallization of a religious universalism whose overarching concern is ethics.⁷ However, despite their shared enterprise of exegesis, Leo Strauss in his respective introductions to the *Guide* and the *Religion of Reason* excludes the former work from the genre of "philosophical books" while the latter qualifies as "a philosophic book and at the same time a Jewish book." Strauss classifies the *Guide* as solely a Jewish book: "a book written by a Jew for Jews," because his enterprise is premised on the nonphilosophic "acceptance of the Torah," in contradistinction to Cohen's, which does not consider revelation as a historical progenitor of certain laws and truths but as a "creation of reason."⁸ This chapter examines the "Jewishness" shared by both Cohen and Maimonides, and by all the thinkers in this book, as evident in the most Jewish of all exercises that suffuses both their works: biblical and midrashic exegesis.⁹ Their exegetical nets are systematically cast widely throughout the breadth of the Hebrew Bible but more often than not offering highly discrepant readings of the same passage or proof-text.¹⁰ Cohen's referencing of many of the same sources appeals to their Maimonidean rationalist refurbishment but at the same time often places them in combative discourse in order to subvert and reorient Maimonides' exegesis. The aim of citation in Maimonides' own work is subscribed to by Cohen as well in his referencing of his predecessor's, which "plays a double role; it both continues and breaches the tradition, that is uncovers angles of inquiry which were unknown or

⁷ Eliezer Schweid distinguishes Cohen's engagement from medieval Jewish engagement with the classical sources in that his demand of them "was not that they fit in with some existing system but that they provide materials for the construction of the philosophical system itself." Schweid, "Hermann Cohen's Biblical Exegesis," in *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism: Tradition and the Concept of Origin in Hermann Cohen's Later Work*, ed. H. Holzhey, G. Motzkin, and H. Widebach (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2000) (cited hereafter as *Tradition and the Concept*), 353–79, at 354.

⁸ GP, "How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*," p. xiv, and RR, "Introductory Essay," p. xxiii.

⁹ Strauss's characterization of the RR in the previous citation must also be modified by Steven Kepnes's observation that Cohen's openness to texts and deep commitment to Jewish scriptures reveals a recognition of them "as alternative 'sources' of philosophical thought and ethics." Kepnes, *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pt. 2, chap. 2.

¹⁰ In his customarily lucid and elegant way, Kenneth Seeskin addresses the question of how God, a supranatural being that cannot be disclosed to human beings in any sensual way, can be known to us: "Rather than being present as a concrete fact, God is known to us through the process of construction, a process that looks to the Bible, its commentaries, the philosophic tradition, and everything else which informs our religious experience." This is particularly apt of the Jewish tradition and explains the all-consuming engagement with the "sources of Judaism" by Jewish thinkers such as Cohen and Maimonides. See *Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 115.

forgotten.”¹¹ Here my focus is on the notion of divine names, *image* (*tzelem*) of God, “nearness” to God, and divine *glory* (*kavod*), to bear out this intertextual relationship between two seminal Jewish thinkers, which might be instructive toward resolving a complex question posed by Arthur Hyman as to the precise characterization of their relationship: “To what extent is Cohen a genuine interpreter of Maimonides’ thought and to what extent does Maimonides provide a kind of ‘prooftext’ for Cohen’s own philosophy?”¹² Although by “prooftext” Hyman meant Maimonides’ entire thought, the use of the term is insightful for the aim of this discussion to demonstrate that the answer lies in Cohen’s engagement with Maimonides’ prooftexts in their literal sense.

THE DIVINE NAME YHVH: DIVERGENCE AND RECONVERGENCE IN THE ETHICS OF HUMILITY

Pertinent to my discussion regarding “nearness” to God, Maimonides considers the divine epithet *Shaddai* in contradistinction to *YHVH*. The former he considers an inferior patriarchal apprehension of God and the latter a superior Mosaic one, based on the verse *And I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai but my name YHVH I did not disclose to them* (Exod. 6:3).¹³ Cohen, on the other hand, examining these names in the shadow of modern critical biblical scholarship, sees an evolution from a mythological appreciation of God etymologically connected to *shedim* or demons to a more philosophically acceptable notion of God associated with Being.¹⁴ However, evolution is possible because of Maimonides’ philological groundwork that relates *shaddai* to the term *day* or “sufficiency” to indicate “that He does not need other than Himself with reference to the existence of that which He has brought into existence or with reference to prolonging the latter’s existence, but that His existence, may He be exalted, suffices for that.”¹⁵ Cohen locates the link between the two names in this proposition, which roots *shaddai* in God as Creator and thus the more primitive name bears within itself the seed that reflects a later philosophically mature notion that “God’s relation to the world is of primary origin and based on the essence of God.”¹⁶ For Cohen the name *YHVH* overcame its mythological predecessor at the same time that it preserved its monotheistic hub, while for Maimonides, though *Shaddai* is perfectly legitimate in its full connotation, of all

¹¹ Stefan Morawski, “The Basic Functions of Quotation,” in *Sign, Language, Culture*, ed. Algirdas J. Greimas et al. (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 690–705, at 694.

¹² “Maimonidean Elements in Hermann Cohen’s Philosophy of Religion,” in *Hermann Cohen’s Critical Idealism*, ed. Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 357–70, at 359.

¹³ GP, II:35, p. 367.

¹⁴ RR, 39.

¹⁵ GP, I:63, p. 155. This is also what is meant when God is described as “not powerless” in I:58, p. 136.

¹⁶ RR, 39.

the divine names only YHVH captures a pristine essence “which is not derivative.”¹⁷

Here, in their respective exegeses of Exodus 6:3 – *And I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai but my name YHVH I did not disclose to them* – we begin to discern the divergent natures of the Cohenian and Maimonidean projects as formulated by the former’s *Religion of Reason* and the latter’s *Guide of the Perplexed*. As the deliberate omission of the definite article in the beginning of his title discloses and as Cohen himself admits, “I do not assert that Judaism alone is the religion of reason.”¹⁸ Cohen’s Judaism is not *the* religion of reason but an ideal model out of which it, as Steven Schwarzschild has argued, “could and should be crystallized,” while other religions “are compelled to work harder at shedding the mythological, immoral, pagan, irrational, and other barnacles that they accumulated on their voyage through history.”¹⁹ In this instance the Hebrew Bible already internally sheds its own mythological baggage by refining the pagan dross in the conceptual evolution of God from *Shaddai* to YHVH.²⁰ The verse’s juxtaposition of the two reflects for Cohen “a later stage of interpretation [which] turned the Shaddai into the Almighty.”²¹ For Maimonides, rather than tracing a development from the mythic to the rational, the two names are positioned contrapuntally to authenticate Moses’ supreme unimpeachable authority as the giver of the Law: “Thus it informs us that his apprehension was not like that of the Patriarchs, but greater: nor, all the more, like that of others who came before.”²² The superiority of Mosaic prophecy bolsters the Torah’s unequalled stature and immutability since “the call to the Law followed necessarily from that [Moses’] apprehension alone.”²³ Thus, for Maimonides the verse is instrumental in establishing

¹⁷ GP, I:61, p. 149.

¹⁸ RR, 34.

¹⁹ RR, introductory essay, “The Title of Hermann Cohen’s *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*,” 7–20 at 8, 11. In Alexander Altmann’s appraisal of Cohen’s favoring of Cohen’s bias toward Judaism as a “religion of reason”: “Judaism has not a monopoly but the primacy in this respect.” Altmann, “Theology in Twentieth Century German Jewry” (London: Leo Baeck Institute, 1956), reprinted in *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1981), 266–92, at 272.

²⁰ Eliezer Schweid points to Cohen’s view of the biblical names of God as a prime illustration of Cohen’s hybrid approach to the biblical text that does not consider biblical criticism’s view of it as a collection of discrete sources inconsistent with its basic unity in the sense that “its overall meaning [is] determined by the later literary context into which the earlier strata had been set.” See Schweid, “Hermann Cohen’s Biblical Exegesis,” in *Tradition and the Concept*, 353–79 and discussion at 361–63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39. Cohen’s analysis here already prefigures recent biblical scholarship, which detects an exegetical process that predates rabbinic exegesis within the Hebrew biblical canon, itself termed inner biblical interpretation. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and especially pertinent to the issue of divine names of God, the discussion of scribal “corrections” (70).

²² GP, II:35, p. 367.

²³ GP, II:39, p. 379.

Judaism as *the* religion of reason, which legitimizes the principle that “there never has been a Law and there never will be a Law except the one that is the Law of Moses our Master.”²⁴

Though they exegetically diverge on passages such as the one discussed, often Cohen’s and Maimonides’ respective readings reconverge in their ultimate implications. Cohen understands the divine name *YHWH*, etymologically derived from “being” (*hayah*), to establish God’s exclusive claim to being “in comparison with which all other being vanishes and becomes nothing.”²⁵ God’s self-disclosure of “I will be what I will be” (Exod. 3:14) to Moses at the burning bush “expressed the thought that no other being may affirm about itself this connection with being.”²⁶ Though profoundly suggestive for its philosophical distinction between God and natural existence, here we need only focus on one ethical dimension of this revelatory encounter: humility. In its absolute uniqueness and supreme transcendence the Being revealed at the bush instills a sense of insignificance without which the acquisition of morality would be impossible. For Cohen, human “becoming” must originate in the acknowledgment “that nature, that man himself has no original worth, no worth of its own. If nature and man should be able to attain any worth at all, it could only be derived from the unique worth of God’s being.”²⁷ For Maimonides, God’s revelation of His identity as *YHWH* is prefaced by Moses’ supreme act of humility in the gesture of “hiding his face” (Exod. 3:6), a graphic admission of his self-limitations in the noetic process. Moses restrained himself from unprepared advancement to more sophisticated stages of cognition, for which he was rewarded with the very acme of human cognition and relationship with the divine as alluded to in *and the figure of the Lord shall he look upon* (Num. 12:8). Both Cohen and Maimonides locate humility at the very core of the burning bush narrative, albeit at different junctures: Maimonides in anticipation of enlightenment as to divine nature and Cohen as a consequence of that enlightenment. Mosaic modesty is then sharply contrasted by Maimonides with the arrogance of *the nobles of the children of Israel* whose lack of self-control led to an intellectually impoverished apprehension of the deity (Exod. 24:10) diluted by anthropomorphic misconception. Though they deserved annihilation in retribution for their egregious behavior, “Moses, peace be on him, interceded for them; and they were granted a reprieve.”²⁸ As Cohen reads Maimonides on divine humility, in light of his negative theology that banishes any divine attributes, it “can

²⁴ *Ibid.* The supremacy of Mosaic prophecy along with its immaculate transmission and invulnerability to supersession are enshrined as principles number seven, eight, and nine in Maimonides’ thirteen fundamental principles of faith. *Commentary to the Mishnah (Mishnah im Perush Rabbeinu Mosheh ben Maimon)*, 3 vols., trans. Joseph Kafih (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1976), vol. 2, Sanhedrin, Perek Helek, 142–44.

²⁵ RR, 41.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁷ RR, 48.

²⁸ GP, I:5, p. 30.

only be understood as an ethical paradigm . . . The case of humility proves beyond doubt that the divine attribute as such does not refer to divine substance, but rather to a correlational concept of ethics.”²⁹ Here Maimonides’ Moses conforms to a Cohenian Moses that does not simply inhabit the plane of the purely contemplative. Rather, knowledge of God as true being invites an ethical posture that compels him to intercede on behalf of those who are vulnerable, who face impending disaster. In this case those he assists are counterposed to him by Maimonides in their intellectual endeavor and destination, negative mirror images to that achieved by Moses at the burning bush. Rather than choose the comfort of a superior cognitive state and abandon them to their fate as deserving of it, Moses assimilates the divine ethical paradigm of humility revealed to him and seeks their protection.

LOWER THAN ELOHIM: PERFECTION OR WANTING FOR THE FACE OF THE OTHER?

Early on in his work, Maimonides confronts the term *elohim*, another common divine name which, if taken as such, disturbs the logic of the Garden of Eden narrative. If the disobedient eating of the tree of good and evil renders the primal human couple as “*elohim*,” as gods, then it would seem that deviant behavior is inappropriately rewarded. However, Maimonides suggests, the term can also connote a class of human being, in this case politicians and judges whose noetic concerns concentrate on the subjective truths of *good and evil* rather than the universal ones of truth and falsehood.³⁰ Thus human transgression was punished by an intellectual deterioration from the realm of the immaculately philosophical to the far inferior one of contingency. The verse that captures that pristine intellectual condition is *Thou hast made him but little lower than Elohim* (Ps. 8:6),³¹ thus rendered emblematic of the ideal human state toward which all must aspire. Immersion in *elohim*-like deliberations distracts people from their true calling and fractures the common ground between human beings and God. Cohen considers this verse wanting and surely must have had Maimonides in mind when he found it lacking the insight that man’s humanity is cultivated in “compassion” (*mitleid*) for the suffering of the other rather than in philosophical contemplation, for “at this

²⁹ Cohen, *Ethics of Maimonides*, trans. with commentary by Almut Bruckstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 142 (cited hereafter as EM). In his chapter on “The Virtues” in the RR, Cohen emphasizes that the road toward the messianic era would collapse without humility for “humility becomes the foundation of messianic mankind. The vocation of man, the future of mankind, cannot be fulfilled unless every man for himself and every people for itself strives for humility” (427). All of human history, individual or corporate, hinges on the cultivation of this virtue without which its cardinal goals would be frustrated.

³⁰ GP, I:2, pp. 23–25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

crossroad all ethics clearly and sharply separates itself from metaphysics in all its varieties.”³²

There is, however, a kernel of truth in this verse (Ps. 8:6) on which he and Maimonides would concur, which is, as Cohen discerns, that “the highest good is secured in the ‘nearness to God.’” Though the two intersect on the general virtue of “nearness,” Cohen’s exegesis contemplates Maimonides’ in its destabilization of it. For Cohen the verse on its own provides a woefully inadequate paradigm for ‘nearness’ but must realize itself in the prophetic compassion that compels a yearning for an era when God *shall blot out the tear from every face* (Isa. 25:8). Isaiah drags the prophet from the Psalter’s remote pedestal where his gaze is directed upward so that he “does not look down from this height to humankind with indifference.”³³ In this reorientation from theoretical to practical knowledge, what Maimonides views as a decline in human nature Cohen considers its elevation by a radical exegetical inversion of the role assigned to *face* (*panim*) in Maimonides’ account of the primal sin.³⁴ For Maimonides the verse *Adam, He changes his face and Thou sendest him forth* (Job 14:20) encapsulates the nature of the crime and the logic of the ensuing sanction, indicating “when the direction toward which man tended changed he was driven forth.”³⁵ The operative term here is *face*, signifying a perverse turning away from man’s original objective, which was the unadulterated contemplation of “truth and falsehood,” the realm of divine thought. Such an alteration of the *face* warranted retribution in kind, which was expulsion or a distancing from God. In other words, the *face* from this Jobian verse provokes the dislocation of Adam’s ideal nearness expressed by *a little lower than elohim*. For Cohen that very nearness to God anchored in reason is not an end but a catalyst toward the ethical life that entails the mode in which one approaches the suffering face of the other.³⁶ It is empathy and compassion rather than the contemplative indifference associated with the heights achieved in Adamic pre-sin thought that will, for Cohen, pave the way ultimately to the

³² RR, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Cohen’s use of this verse captures in exegetical form what Michael Zank considers Cohen’s boldest insight in his *Ethics*, which renders the obligation to act in accordance with the moral law contingent on the freedom of the other rather than autonomous freedom: “*Ethics* proceeds not from supererogatory morality but from the fellow human being who is the necessary condition of all contractual, and legal relations.” See “The Ethics in Hermann Cohen’s Philosophical System,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 13 (2006): 1–15, at 14.

³⁵ GP, I:2, p. 26.

³⁶ Though the “face” of the other evokes Levinas, what Cohen intends by it is to be distinguished from the Levinasian face. For Cohen, openness to it is a function of a correlation between man and God through ethical reason, whereas for Levinas, access to the other via the face “can never be derived from more fundamental premises such as the correlation between man and God but must be the object of a phenomenological intuition.” Unlike Levinas, for Cohen the “face” is not a phenomenological category and neither is the “Other” a philosophical category. See Edith Wyschogrod, “The Moral Self: Immanuel Levinas and Hermann Cohen,” *Daat* 4 (1980): 35–58, at 49.

abolishment of suffering or the messianic period when there will no longer be any tearful faces, when “God will efface the tears from every countenance. God will bring true consolation for every suffering.”³⁷

COHEN’S PROGRESSION FROM MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGE TO THE CORRELATION OF ONE FLESH

For Cohen, who subsequently appropriates Maimonides as endorsing the notion that God is the ground of ethics, it is crucial to undermine Maimonides’ exegesis of the Garden of Eden story offered at the very opening of the *Guide* since it informs the precise relation between human beings and God throughout Maimonides’ corpus. Of the two creation stories offered by the first two chapters in Genesis, Cohen favors the second because of his disdain for the first account’s misleading representation of man as an “image” and “likeness” of God, which offends God’s uniqueness. The second account is far more appealing for its opposing depiction of man originating in dust (Gen. 2:7), as well as its appreciation for the social and ethical dynamics in human relationships played out in the “constructing” (*boneh*, as opposed to creation’s verb, *bara*) (2:22) of woman and the graduation of man and woman into “one flesh” (2:24). Cohen admiringly follows the second account’s nuanced trajectory from a being of pure dust to a composite of soul and dust to the emergence of woman to the *becoming* that flourishes into a marital union, which sagaciously “places the creation entirely in the center of culture,” thus overshadowing the first, which “with its image of God and the likeness of man, very naively intends to give myth a monotheistic coloring, which then asserts itself in the thought of man as God’s image.”³⁸ Though unmentioned by name, this constitutes a frontal assault on the Maimonidean identification of *image* of God as intellectual apprehension and *likeness* with the nonsensual exercise of it, the propriety of the terms determined “because of the divine intellect conjoined with man.”³⁹ In addition, in contradistinction to the positive role Cohen sees assigned to woman, Maimonides subscribes to the classic symbolization of Aristotelian form and matter by man and woman (male/female), where the latter is the root cause of man’s decline.⁴⁰ Cohen’s reversal of Maimonides’ ideal creative states of man as depicted in the two genesis narratives also reverses Maimonides’ intellectual gradation from a regressive turn to inferior knowledge to a progressive realization that “the essence of man

³⁷ RR, 274.

³⁸ RR, 86.

³⁹ GP, I:1, p. 23.

⁴⁰ See GP, I:6; I:17, p. 43; and II:30, p. 356, where he states that “it was through the intermediation of Eve that Adam was harmed and that the serpent destroyed him.” See also S. Klein-Braslavy’s discussion in her *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis: A Study in Maimonides’ Anthropology* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1986), 198–201.

is dependent on the knowledge of morality. Reason is not only theoretical, but also practical, ethical.”⁴¹ Here Cohen implicitly rejects Maimonides’ claim that distinctions between good and bad “belong to the things generally accepted as known and not to those cognized by the intellect,” in favor of ones that are absolute and indeed emblematic of monotheism as opposed to the fickleness of polytheism. For the latter, what constitutes the moral is a function of whatever divinity happens on the scene, whereas “Monotheism creates with the one divinity also the one morality as well.”⁴²

But how, then, does Cohen enlist Maimonides’ unmitigated support for Kantianizing Judaism as ethical monotheism,⁴³ where morality trumps pure understanding when it so blatantly offends Maimonides’ very opening, an exegetical unraveling of the Garden of Eden episode that also drives much of Maimonides’ arguments through the rest of the work?⁴⁴ Maimonides’ explicit endorsement of the primacy of rational virtues – “in true reality the ultimate end . . . through it man is man,” at the end of the *Guide*,⁴⁵ the section Cohen considers to be its very epitome – renders Cohen’s interpretive hurdle almost insurmountable. As I argue, Cohen accomplishes his task by the periodic incorporation in *Religion of Reason* of key biblical prooftexts cited by Maimonides as well, which in one sense are consonant with its Maimonidean construct while in its

⁴¹ RR, 86.

⁴² RR, 130.

⁴³ For example, Cohen adopts the famous rabbinic rationale for the “strange” order of Israel’s acceptance of the Torah, placing “we will do” prior to “we will listen” in Exodus 24:7 to endorse the assertion that “duty has precedence over knowledge” (RR, 323–24).

⁴⁴ The debate as to what Maimonides considered the *summum bonum* rages on. One extreme is represented by the early S. Pines, who claims the view, as held by those like Cohen, that “Maimonides at the end adopted the quasi Kantian idea that the ordinary moral virtues and moral actions are of greater importance and value than intellectual virtues . . . is completely false” (Introduction to GP, p. cxxii). The other polar extreme is espoused by the later Pines himself, who performed a startling about-face in endorsing a Maimonidean esoteric position that rejected the possibility of any knowledge beyond empirical and therefore denying the human intellect any genuine metaphysical knowledge of God. See Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Alfarabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides,” *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82–109. For a sustained critique of this position, see Herbert Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–93): 49–103. See also Steven Schwarzschild, who confidently asserts that “Maimonides’ exegesis is clear; man’s purpose is to know God, but the God who is to be known is knowable only insofar as He practices grace . . . and to know Him is synonymous with imitating these practices of Him in the world.” See “Moral Radicalism and Middlingness in the Ethics of Maimonides,” *Studies in Medieval Culture* 11 (1978): 65–94. Reprinted in *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, ed. M. Kellner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 37–160 at p. 70. Though I cannot enter into the minutiae of this debate for the purposes of this chapter, I subscribe to the middle course steered by A. Altman, where “[i]mitatio dei is, therefore, but the practical consequence of the intellectual love of God and is part and parcel of human perfection,” in “Maimonides’ Four Perfections,” in *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History*, 65–76, at 73.

⁴⁵ GP, III:54, p. 635.

contextual setting are also dissonant with that very same construction. In this instance, it is Cohen's referencing of Isaiah 40:18, *What likeness will ye compare to Him*, that operates in this way. In its categorical renunciation of any possible divine analogy, its citation supports his negative assessment of the first creation account's depiction of man as the "image of God" as mythological: "There can be no image of God. Therefore man cannot be an image of God."⁴⁶ For Maimonides this verse is critical but decidedly not within the context of the creation stories. Rather, it signifies God's absolute incomparability and acts as biblical bulwark against any divine attribution that entails corporeality, affection, or change.⁴⁷ All verses to the contrary – and the Hebrew Bible is suffused by them – must be conditioned by this verse to be consistent with Maimonides' negative theology, translating any such offending passages as attributes of action rather than essential divine attributes. As is well known, Cohen passionately embraces this theory but as a fundamental building block in advocating a Judaism whose essence is ethical rationalism. To put it succinctly, if the very pinnacle of human cognition is attributes of action that provide the fodder of *imitatio dei* as expressed by a midrash Maimonides is particularly attracted to – "As he is gracious so be you also gracious, He is merciful, be you also merciful"⁴⁸ – then the cognitive journey toward God culminates in ethics. Cohen forges a solid trajectory from this to the grand finale of the *Guide*, whose concluding chapters he deems "form the gravitational center of the entire exposition"⁴⁹ where, read on its own, Maimonides is certainly open to being interpreted as endorsing such a view.⁵⁰ Cohen's Maimonidean God is "not the God of metaphysics, nor the God of cosmic substance, but the God of ethics . . . as the paradigm for human emulation,"⁵¹ who is revealed "solely and exclusively as an ethical being."⁵²

Cohen therefore strategically displaced a key proof-text that undergirds Maimonides' negative theology and transplanted it within the context of the

⁴⁶ RR, 86.

⁴⁷ GP, I:55, p. 128.

⁴⁸ Sifre on Deut. 10:12 cited in GP, I:55, p. 128. Also see MT, Ethical Traits, and the various rabbinic sources beside the Sifre that could form the basis of this maxim noted by M. Schwartz in his Hebrew edition of the *Guide* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), vol. 1, p. 135n35.

⁴⁹ EM, 24.

⁵⁰ For but one concise and lucid summary of Cohen's reading of Maimonides' attributes of action, see Bruckstein, *On Jewish Hermeneutics*, 40–46.

⁵¹ EM, 192.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69. See also 114. How Martin Yaffee characterizes Cohen's systematic appeal to authoritative Jewish texts in support of whatever position he advocates pertains to his appeal to Maimonidean sources that are the subject of this chapter: "Characteristically, Cohen 'idealizes' his sources. That is, he interprets them in light of what he regards as their highest ethical (and economic) possibilities." In evaluating the final chapters of the *Guide* as the "gravitational center of the entire exposition," Cohen "idealizes" Maimonides' text. See Yaffee, "Autonomy, Community, Authority: Hermann Cohen, Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss," in *Autonomy and Community*, ed. Daniel Frank (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 143–60, at 145.

creation story so as to link up the *Guide's* "climactic conclusion"⁵³ with its seemingly contradictory opening. The story is transformed from one that relates a precipitous decline in the ideal human condition into one whose moral is that reason does not simply strive toward the theoretical but also toward the practical ethical, and thus humanity expresses itself in a process of "becoming," of perpetual self-perfection. The tree of knowledge for Cohen supplements mere creation by introducing knowledge into the human sphere and distinguishing humans from all other animal species as a focal point of all becoming "insofar as the tree of knowledge blooms for him."⁵⁴ For Maimonides the decline of man signified by the consumption of the fruit whose ingestion symbolizes the turn toward inferior knowledge lies in the very nature of the act and not merely in its transgression of a divine command. The command was a reflection of the superior cognitive state in which Adam operated, "for commandments are not given to beasts and beings devoid of intellect,"⁵⁵ and its breach inflicted a devastating blow to man's own humanity tarnishing the *image* he was endowed with, that realm where God and man intersect "because of the divine intellect conjoined with man."⁵⁶ For Cohen it is precisely within the domain of distinctions between bad and good, where God and man meet or, as Cohen phrases it, where there is "correlation" between man and God.⁵⁷ The very universality Maimonides ascribed to the pre-sin cognitive distinctions between truth and falsehood is that which Cohen ascribes to those between bad and good as a dictate of monotheism's conception of a unique God. As opposed to polytheism and its fluctuating moral norms contingent on whatever divinity may be in control at the moment, monotheism "is based on a uniform comprehension of the distinction of good and bad, and thus on a uniform attitude of God to man, as well as of man to God."⁵⁸

COGNITIVE VS. ETHICAL NEARNESS

In consequence of the human intellectual deterioration charted by Maimonides, humanity is alienated from God as signified by the original

⁵³ EM, 61. See also p. 25, where Cohen contests Manuel Joel's view of the final chapters of the *Guide* as a mere "appendix" (*anhang*) and elevates it to a "deductive conclusion" (*Konsequenz*) to which everything else that precedes it is a "preparatory exposition."

⁵⁴ RR, 86.

⁵⁵ GP, I:2, p. 24.

⁵⁶ GP, I:1, p. 23.

⁵⁷ Ken Seeskin, in a paper presented at an Association for Jewish Studies conference, whose text he kindly shared with me, argues that Maimonides could not possibly subscribe to Cohen's "correlation" between humanity and God since "two things that have nothing in common, whose descriptions are completely homonymous, cannot stand in relation to one another." See Andrea Poma's discussion of correlation in chaps. 9 and 10 of his *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), where he explicates the need for this term because of Cohen's concept of God's uniqueness which "posits a drastic difference between God and every entity" (172).

⁵⁸ RR, 130.

couple's expulsion from the Garden. At that juncture, the human and the animal become virtually indistinguishable, for "God reduced him, with respect to his food and most of his circumstances, to the level of the beast."⁵⁹ Proximity to God is a function of cognition, and any interruption of pure metaphysical speculation sets up a barrier between man and God. That man is condemned to eke out the basest of agricultural produce after intensive toil (Gen. 3:18–19) indicates for Maimonides man's demotion to the level of the beast, in a balanced retributive measure for redirecting his intellectual focus from that which is unique to the human to that which he shares with the animals. Here a verse to which Cohen is very partial conveys that which sets him and Maimonides apart at the same time that Cohen enlists Maimonidean support for the preeminence of the ethical over the contemplative as the goal of all human aspirations: *The nearness (kirvat) of God is my good* (Ps. 73:28). In his relentless assault on biblical anthropomorphisms, Maimonides deals with the term *karov* (near; approach) among those that are problematic in their attribution of spatial coordinates to God. Every instance where this term would literally indicate a philosophically offensive spatial relationship between God and a material being must metaphorically connote cognitive proximity, a "drawing near through apprehension, not in space."⁶⁰ Thus the anthropomorphically offensive "nearness" to God of Psalm 73:28 is neutralized by replacing the spatial with the cognitive, where "cognitive apprehension is intended, not nearness in space." Though the term *karov* does not appear in the Garden narrative, the expulsion from God's garden is metaphorically apt in its signification of Adam's cognitive estrangement from God.

For Cohen, the nearness evoked by Psalm 73:28 is instigated by a love and yearning for God that inspires action, a perpetual endeavor that never consummates and which is captured by the grammatical form of the verb *korav* purposefully chosen to convey "self-nearing" (*hitkarvut*). The first major implication of this self-reflexive conjugation is that the movement originates in man, "the whole center of gravity [being] placed in man's own action,"⁶¹ a notion with which Maimonides would absolutely be in accord. However, it is the second implication that Cohen derives from the verse's contextual setting following intense pangs of yearning and desire (*Beside Thee I desire none upon the earth. My flesh and my heart faileth but God is the Rock of my heart and my portion forever*) which Maimonides would find contentious – the impetus for nearness is love and the "love for morality is the love of God."⁶² God for Cohen is an "archetype of moral action"⁶³ and, as such, the ultimate destination of

⁵⁹ GP, I:2, p. 26.

⁶⁰ GP, I:18, p. 44.

⁶¹ RR, 164.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 163. See Poma, *The Critical Philosophy*, who states that for Cohen, "love of God is resolved in an inclination towards the realization of the idea in moral action" (210).

approaching, loving, and knowing the divine is ethics.⁶⁴ However, Maimonides concludes his analysis of the term “near” with the general proposition that “nearness to Him, may He be exalted, consists in apprehending Him; and remoteness from Him is the lot of him who does not know Him.”⁶⁵ Action and morality are absent from Maimonides’ formulation grounded in a biblical proof-text which, inherited by Cohen, demands a rereading. Once again Cohen selected a verse which in its Maimonidean setting conditioned nearness on pure apprehension and exegetically overlaid it to link with his interpretation of Maimonides’ attributes of action as rendering God a moral paradigm for human emulation. The textual journey toward Cohen’s ethical interpretation of Maimonides is fueled by an exegetical revision of such crucial verses.

In support of this identity between loving God and loving morality, Cohen cites Maimonides’ normative intertwining of love and knowledge. This, Cohen claims, demonstrates Maimonides’ abandonment of pure Aristotelian intellectualism in favor of one that is informed by “monotheistic love.” Maimonides’ correlation of knowledge and love implies for Cohen that “He does not recognize a knowledge without love either on the part of God or on the part of man . . . His rationalism, in its unity with the theoretical, is always ethical rationalism.”⁶⁶ Cohen here refers to Maimonides’ halakhic formulations in his legal code, which defines the commandment *to love God* in terms of understanding the wisdom inherent in God’s creation⁶⁷ and draws a direct proportionality between love and knowledge that can only materialize as a result of exclusive dedication “to the understanding and comprehension of those sciences and studies which will inform him concerning his Master.”⁶⁸ Cohen thus bifurcates what is likely a mere terminological simile between love and knowledge into the philosophical assertion that love is prerequisite to knowledge. Once love’s relationship to knowledge is conceived in terms of the former enabling the latter, then ethics enters the equation as a ground of love.⁶⁹ But this misreading of Maimonides necessitates further radical exegetical revision of vital biblical verses that Cohen

⁶⁴ This is not to be confused with yearning or longing for God, which are not themselves ethical terms. For this and its role in how the Jewish prayer congregation “constitutes itself as a unification of institution and individual,” see Hartwig Wiedebach’s insightful “Aesthetics in Religion: Remarks on Hermann Cohen’s Theory of Jewish Existence,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2002): 63–73, especially 72, where he discusses this as a “lyrical” form of expression which, “Cohen teaches in his *Aesthetics of the Pure Feeling*, is identical with the confession of longing, finding its answer in the lyrical idea of the beloved Thou, no matter whether or not it exists in social reality.”

⁶⁵ GP, I:18, p. 45.

⁶⁶ RR, 162.

⁶⁷ MT, Foundations of the Torah, 2:2.

⁶⁸ MT, Repentance, 10:6.

⁶⁹ As Gabriel Motzkin hypothesizes, “It could be that the love of knowledge is necessary in order to secure knowledge, and it could also be that this love for knowledge must have its origins in religious love,” which in turn “is awakened through compassion for the poor.” Motzkin, “Love and Knowledge in Cohen’s ‘Religion of Reason,’” in *Tradition and the Concept*, 89–104, at 100.

favors along with Maimonides, and in what follows I focus on one that is central to the notion of nearness to God.

FILLING THE EARTH WITH THE GLORY OF ETHICAL CONDUCT OR PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEMPLATION

Another term whose anthropomorphic sense of spatiality draws Maimonides' lexicographical attention is *fill* (*malle*) appearing in a number of verses relating to God, and in particular Isaiah 6:3, *The whole earth is full of His glory/honor* (*kavod*). Out of a series of verses incorporating this offending term, Maimonides singles out Isaiah 6:3 for instruction in deciphering its meaning, "being that the whole earth bears witness to His perfection, that is, indicates it."⁷⁰ What permeates the world for Maimonides is evidentiary material substantiating God's existence and reflective of his nature. God's presence is a function of man's investigations of nature, leading to philosophical demonstrations regarding the divine nature. In other words, God does not inhere in nature but rather in the human discovery of Him upon examining nature and the world. Cohen joins rank with Maimonides on the anti-anthropomorphic thrust of this verse that, in its ubiquitous location of God, conveys His transcendence of space, which, as opposed to its nature, "cannot be a limitation of God's being."⁷¹ However, at the same time that they intersect in the battle against anthropomorphism – for Cohen, against pantheism – and its most egregious corollary, Cohen purposefully appropriates this same verse to reorient its original Maimonidean exegetical path from the contemplative to the ethical. For Maimonides, once the verse is liberated of any geographical spatiality, it conveys the more sublime truth that the world *attests* to divine existence and perfection. This remains a datum of nature regardless of human activity or failure to exploit all the connotations of that datum. For Cohen, who pursues his argument to its logical end of identifying God with morality, what "fills" the world with God's "glory" (*kavod/honor*) is ethical behavior, thereby conditioning perfection on its mortal introduction into the world.

Though Cohen can posit, in complete accord with Maimonides, that "the limitations of space have now fallen before the monotheistic view," he radically departs from him on the implications of this verse in that the same cannot be said of the limitations of ethics and human conduct. While God and nature must stand in clear ontological distinction from each other, Cohen boldly declares that "God cannot remain without the world, without the human world."⁷² No sharper antithetical position could be formulated than Maimonides' enshrinement in his legal code of a postulate that is fundamental to the very first commandment "to know there is a primary existence." That knowledge entails

⁷⁰ GP, I:19, p. 46.

⁷¹ RR, 45.

⁷² *Ibid.*

the proposition that the hypothetical nonexistence of the world would not affect God's existence, "for all beings are in need of Him; but He, blessed be He, is not in need of them, nor any of them."⁷³ The critical proof-text cited by Maimonides in support of this is *But the eternal God is truth (emet)* (Jer. 10:10), meaning that "He alone is truth (*emet*) and nothing else is true like His truth."⁷⁴ God is ontologically singular in his essentiality as opposed to the contingency of all other existents. The *truth* of this verse must be reinterpreted by Cohen to widen its semantic range beyond this narrow ontological distinction to include its moral valence where it becomes apparent why God "cannot remain without the human world." Truth is for Cohen "nothing other than God's being," but because it only has any meaning "within the correlation to man [it] therefore cannot be explicitly named as an attribute of God alone."⁷⁵ Truth connotes solely "the connection of theoretical and ethical knowledge"⁷⁶ and so has no meaning if the human is absent, if the world where ethics is practically manifest is severed from its purely theoretical dimension. Ethics must be inextricably tethered to the theoretical for the phrase *God is truth* to bear any philosophical meaning. Cohen effectively reversed Maimonides' induction of Jeremiah 10:10, which originally served to decouple God from the world, to imagine a God without a world in order to reengage God as its moral ground and to render a God bereft of the world unimaginable.

Cohen elucidates further the full significance of Jeremiah 10:10 by cross-referencing it to Rashi's explication of Psalm 119:160, *The beginning of Thy word is truth*, another *truth*-bearing verse, but in this instance attributing truth to commandment rather than to God's essence. Rashi ingeniously reads the verse as tracing the gradual realization of the truth of the first three commandments (*beginning of Thy word*), which crystallizes only once the moral commandments mandating the honoring of parents and prohibiting adultery and murder are revealed. As God pronounces the first three, there is suspicion among the gentile nations that God concerns Himself solely with His own honor. However, as He proceeds to those commandments that concern respect and civil relations between human beings, "they acknowledged from this closing of Thy word also the beginning that it is truth." Cohen views this exegesis as a profound characterization of revelation "by truth, the truth of reason, the ethical truth, which is based upon logical knowledge."⁷⁷ God's truth is anchored in ethical truth and can only be conceived as true in this way by the human consciousness. Acknowledgment of God's existence, unity, and a warrant of respect demanded by the first three commandments gain their credibility by the God who sanctions the ethical mandate of the later commandments – they are a logical consequence of God as

⁷³ MT, Foundations of the Torah, 1:3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:4.

⁷⁵ RR, 414.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

moral exemplar.⁷⁸ Maimonides originally resorts to Jeremiah 10:10 for scriptural corroboration of God's truth as a noetic component of what he considers a "fundamental principle of all fundamental principles and pillar of all sciences" (*yesod hayesodot veamud habokhmot*). It appears prior to his Laws of Ethical Traits (*deot*) and stands on its own as the theoretical underpinning of all the laws that follow. What Cohen has done in his citation of the same verse is to recontextualize it by linkage to the verse in Psalms, *The beginning of Thy word is truth*, thereby normatively informing God's *truth* in Jeremiah with ethical truth. Cohen undertakes an exegetical displacement of a Maimonidean proof-text to produce an identity between a conception of God and a conception of ethics.

Cohen perfects his exegetical reconstruction of Maimonidean scriptural proof-texts on the notion of God's "honor" (*kavod*) by revisiting Isaiah 6:3, *The whole earth is full of His glory/honor (kavod)*, and stripping it not only of its spatial connotations, but also the mystical ones with which the kabbalistic tradition has infused it.⁷⁹ "Honor" is a far preferable translation of the term *kavod* than "glory," which lends itself to misleading anthropomorphic and mystical conceptions of the divine. "Honor" is much better suited to represent a God that is "the archetype of morality, of which alone God's being consists."⁸⁰ Isaiah 6:3, by its portrait of a God that permeates the world, subverts any mystical appropriations of the term as obfuscating and shrouding God in mystery. On the contrary, honor, Cohen asserts, "becomes the proper connecting link in the correlation of God and man. God's honor cannot mean God's glory in the mystical sense, because it passes over to human honor." Cohen's manipulation of this verse forms a common exegetical front with Maimonides, both in its assault on anthropomorphism and in its measuring of divine honor in terms of human activity, but their alliance fragments irreparably on the critical issue of what precise activity qualifies as such. God as an archetype of morality for Cohen would remain otiose without the moral conduct He exemplifies. What value is there in an archetype after which nothing is modeled?⁸¹ Every virtuous act mimicking a divine

⁷⁸ While Israel accepted the Torah and the Ten Commandments at Sinai, Rashi's portrait of the other nations eavesdropping on the private revelation between God and Israel and then acknowledging to themselves God's truth lends itself to Cohen's view of Israel as a symbol for piety wherever it may be manifest. In his concise overview of Cohen's various positions in the RR, William Kluback tersely summarizes this thought as "God is truth, and it is in the knowledge of this truth that piety and humility find their source." A logical consequence then of this proposition is his next sentence: "Israel was for Cohen the collective name for the pious of the world." See Kluback, *Hermann Cohen: The Challenge of a Religion of Reason* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 79.

⁷⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of Maimonides' mystical defanging of the term *kavod* as part of a "campaign against what we might call the re-mythologization of Judaism which is so prominent a feature of the world of Heikhalot texts," see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2006) chap. 6, pp. 179–215.

⁸⁰ RR, 404.

⁸¹ As Cohen states, "Archetypes have no worth of their own unless they are models for the actions of reasonable beings" (RR, 160).

attribute of action injects the divine into the world, thereby increasing God's honor.⁸² Maimonides confines that honor to the realm of understanding, "for the true way of honoring Him consists in apprehending His greatness."⁸³ The sole concrete human activity that manifests God's honor is the oral articulation of that abstract apprehension: "Man in particular honors Him by speeches so that he indicates thereby that which he has apprehended by his intellect and communicates it to others."⁸⁴ As previously noted, Isaiah 6:3, *The whole earth is full of His glory/honor (kavod)*, scripturally conveys the notion that all facets of nature outside the human, as products of divine creativity, also honor God strictly by virtue of inspiring "him who considers them to honor God, either by means of articulate utterance or without it if speech is not permitted to him."⁸⁵

Isaiah 6:3 is a vital prooftextual linchpin for Cohen's programmatic rereading of Maimonides' sources of Judaism because its appearances in the *Guide* strategically reinforce his orientation of the entire treatise toward its denouement in the final chapters. Though integrally linked to intellectually speculative activity in the first part, as we have seen, its final citation occurs in section III:52, where it does seem to operate within an ethical context. A God-suffused world described by Isaiah 6:3 motivates "such humility, such awe and fear of God, such reverence and shame before Him," as to exact proper conduct regardless of whether it is intimately private or publicly transparent.⁸⁶ However, the context of that chapter leading up to the verse's citation fixes it within the exegetical orbit drawn for it previously in the *Guide*. The only authentic existence that inhabits the world described by Isaiah 6:3 is a world that is overwhelmed by the divine presence, one that has earned it, that has achieved a level of intellectual perfection that gains him admission into it. The intellect is the bridge between God and man, for "the king who cleaves to him and accompanies him is the intellect that overflows toward us and is the bond between us and Him, may He be exalted." The verse is only operative for those who cultivate the intellect, for "just as we apprehend Him by means of that light which He caused to overflow toward us . . . so does He by this selfsame light examine us; *and because of it, He, may He be exalted, is constantly with us*, examining from on high"⁸⁷ (emphasis mine). What triggers this existential state of optimal ethical behavior is the intellectual

⁸² This notion of God's "honor" is a corollary of God as an archetype who, as Ken Seeskin puts it, "stands at the limits of human experience. We can encounter Him only to the degree that we have clarified our duties as moral agents." Seeskin, *Jewish Philosophy*, 116.

⁸³ GP, I:64, p. 157.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ GP, III:52, p. 629.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* The prophet and the philosopher would seem to intersect this point. See, for example, H. Kreisel, "The Sage and the Prophet in the Thought of the Rambam and His School," *Eshel Be'er-Sheva* 3 (1986): 149–69, who concludes that the paramount characteristic of the prophet is "the ultimate perfection of the intellect" (158).

exploitation of all facets of nature that reflect God's "honor," as noted previously. Isaiah 6:3 is not cited independently but as part of a Talmudic source to which Maimonides draws attention, where it acts as a proof-text for a rabbinic rubric demanding impeccable conduct of any behavior no matter how trivial, including physical posture: "You know already that they forbade walking about with erect stature because [of the biblical dictum] *The whole earth is full of His honor*."⁸⁸

What is crucial to note is that this rabbinic source prescribes such conduct unbecoming of "scholars" (*talmid hakham*) whose behavior bears closer scrutiny than the general public because they, and they alone, have transformed their domain through the study of metaphysics into one that is *full of His honor*. Cohen submerged this intellectualization of Isaiah 6:3 in his ethicization of it, revising Maimonides' notion of *kavod* while allying himself with him in cleansing it from any traces of mysticism and pantheism.

Finally, Cohen perfects his subversion of the second colon of Isaiah 6:3 by grounding it in its first colon, the interangelic declaration *Holy, holy, holy, the Lord of Hosts*. For Cohen this sets the stage for the ethical reading of God's honor since holiness reinforces God's uniqueness as both its complement and foundation. God's "uniqueness rests in holiness, which is the religious expression of morality."⁸⁹ Maimonides severs *the whole world is full of his honor* from its angelic source, thereby disengaging *honor* from *holiness* which does in fact connote for him conduct and behavior, in particular the performance of the *mitzvot*.⁹⁰ Holiness is merely a qualifying trait that enables the proper pursuit of intellectual perfection via metaphysical speculation. As Howard Kreisel notes, Maimonides "shows little interest in the notion of 'holiness' in reference to God," and that even the end of holiness, which consists largely of behavior that suppresses one's corporeality, is directed toward the ultimate goal of becoming pure intellect.⁹¹ Cohen pursues a programmatic exegetical idealization of Maimonidean proof-texts to reconstruct a new Kantianized God whose "uniqueness rests in holiness," where both are expressions of ethics. In doing so Cohen exegetically expanded the scope of God's mind from thinking only Himself, one that Maimonides adopted from Aristotle, to render a more Jewish God who "when thinking of Himself, must relate to mankind."⁹²

In light of the methodical and sustained exegetical jousting with Maimonides in which I have demonstrated Cohen engaged, it is important to revisit Strauss's distinction, which initiated the present discussion, between the Jewish nature of Maimonides' *Guide* and the philosophical-Jewish hybrid of Cohen's *Religion of*

⁸⁸ GP, III:52, p. 629, citing b. Berakhot 43b; b. Kiddushin 31a.

⁸⁹ RR, 395.

⁹⁰ GP, I:54; III:33, 47, p. 595.

⁹¹ See Kreisel's discussion of holiness in Maimonides in his *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law and the Human Ideal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 154–56.

⁹² EM, 95.

Reason. Strauss also cautions that what he considers a correct “impression” is far from self-evident and “not as clear as it appears at first sight.”⁹³ The second part of the title itself (*Out of the Sources of Judaism*), Strauss observes, suggests “that the *Religion of Reason* transcends the boundaries of the *System of Philosophy*, or of any system of philosophy.”⁹⁴ Cohen’s anchoring of philosophy in and drawing it out of those sources is the hallmark of that “transcendence,” which both he and Maimonides share, and forms the common ground for a discourse that traverses seven centuries of a quintessential Jewish enterprise. Both subscribe to the rabbinic maxim that *the Torah speaks in the language of men* and for both that *language* is philosophy. However, in their passionate existential and intellectual commitment to the Torah (biblical and postbiblical), a new Jewish language is born.

⁹³ RR, introductory essay, xxiii.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, xxv.

R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (19th Century)

Loving God Strictly Rabbinically

The temporal and geographical distances between nineteenth-century Imperial Russia and twelfth-century Egypt make it difficult to draw comparisons or contrasts between any intellectual discourses conducted in two such diverse domains. However, considering the theme of this book, within the development of Jewish intellectual history the figure of Moses Maimonides tends to bridge temporal and spatial gaps or even, in cases such as this, chasms. Though the two environments could not be more dissimilar politically, culturally, spiritually, juridically, or philosophically, modern Jewish theologians, exegetes, halakhists, and philosophers continue to engage their medieval precursor Maimonides at every turn. While Maimonidean thought is not immune to the evolutionary currents inevitably propelled by historical change and scientific progress, it does hover over their Jewish dimensions waiting to be supportively enlisted, frontally challenged, or adapted into new modes and directions of thought.

Such is once again the case with one of the most prominent rabbinic figures of the nineteenth century, R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, known by his acronym Netziv (1816–1893). Inducted at the age of thirty-six as the dean of the renowned Etz Hayim yeshivah in the Lithuanian town of Volozhin, the Harvard equivalent of all Eastern European rabbinic academies, he remained at its helm for forty years until its final closing in 1892, a year before his death. The list of many of those enrolled in his yeshivah during his tenure includes many of the most central Jewish figures in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, both within the narrow confines of the rabbinic world and the broader secular sphere of politics, literature, and thought.¹ For just a brief glimpse of its illustrious alumni, consider that at the former end of the spectrum reside the revered deans of two other “Ivy League” rabbinic academies in Slobodka and

¹ For fascinating accounts reminiscing their stay in the Volozhin yeshivah, see *Memoirs of the Lithuanian Yeshiva* (Heb.), ed. Immanuel Etkes and Shlomo Tikochinski (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2004), 218–59.

Telz, Moshe Mordekhai Epstein (d. 1933) and Shimon Shkop (d. 1939), while at the latter end are Mikhah Yosef Berdyczewski (d. 1921) and Hayyim Nahman Bialik (d. 1934), two of the most celebrated secular Hebrew poets and pioneers of the renaissance of modern Hebrew letters.² Though there are a host of factors that would account for this diverse student body during a vibrantly complex and revolutionary period in Jewish thought and politics, among them would certainly count Netziv's relatively welcoming personality and ideology.³

Caution dictates reticence when applying such terms as "tolerance" and "pluralism," which are pregnant with many modern connotations falling under the colloquial umbrella of "live and let live." Such semantic inferences would certainly not pertain to the unswerving orthodoxy of Netziv. However, in a limited sense, Netziv advocated a certain tolerance, perhaps pragmatic, yet still uncharacteristic of his rabbinic confines, best expressed by an observation concerning secular Jews in his commentary on the Song of Songs.⁴ In an excursus on verse 4:13, *Your limbs are an orchard of pomegranates*, Netziv acknowledges that category of Jews ("empty")⁵ who have abandoned orthodoxy, "who do not accept the yoke of Torah and *mitzvot*," but yet are still naturally good, kind, and charitable human beings, "saturated with charity (*tzedakah*) and generosity (*gemilut hesed*) like a pomegranate."⁶ They are empty of divine commands but replete with natural humanistic ethics. As such their associations, even with

² For an actual list of students enrolled in the yeshivah, and short descriptions of the more prominent ones during Netziv's tenure, see Genrich Agranovsky and Sid Leiman, "Three Lists of Students Studying at the Volozhin Yeshivah in 1879," in *Turim: Studies in Jewish History and Literature Presented to Bernard Lander*, ed. Michael Shmidman (New York: Touro College Press, 2008), 1–24.

³ See Jacob Schacter's discussion of Haskalah influences and Netziv's *relative* and limited openness to it in "Haskalah, Secular Studies, and the Close of the Yeshiva in Volozhin in 1892," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990): 76–133, esp. 91–103.

⁴ Most famously emblematic of this tolerance are his comments on the Tower of Babel story in his commentary *Ha'amek Davar* (hereafter HD) to Genesis 11 (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Volozhin, 1999), which considers, not the content of the sameness of thought (*devarim ahadim*), as evil, but the very homogeneity of thought and ideology to be intrinsically bad. On the issue of Netziv's tolerance, see Howard Joseph, "As Swords Thrust through the Body: The Netziv's Rejection of Separatism," *Edah Journal* 1, no. 1 (2000): 1–26; Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Question of Tolerance in the Jewish Religious Tradition," in *Hazon Nahum*, ed. Y. Elman and J. Gurock (New York: Ktav, 1997) 378–85. Netziv's "tolerance" of secular Jews does not in any way imply condoning what he was convinced was errant behavior but rather stemmed from what Gil Perl characterizes as his "deep-seated aversion to communal strife." See his more sobering analysis in "No Two Minds Are Alike: Tolerance and Pluralism in the Work of Netziv," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 12 (2004): 74–98, at 81.

⁵ Netziv plays on the word here translated as "limbs," which contains the Hebrew root for the word "send." Those who are here likened to pomegranates are those who have been sent away from the community of believers but still remain ethically virtuous.

⁶ Metiv Shir, in *Rinah shel Torah* (Jerusalem: Hotza'at Yeshivat Volozhin, 2002), 57, citing b. Berakhot 57 as his rabbinic source. See also b. Sanhedrin 37a. The original source links this idea to Song 4:3 and 6:7. All citations from Netziv's commentary on the Song are from this edition, which includes short and longer versions and an essay on antisemitism entitled *She'er Yisrael*. The

reprobates (*letzim*), will benefit the world, “since their joining together will lead to acts of kindness if circumstances that call for compassion and mercy arise, resulting in mutual assistance.”⁷ This sentiment, Netziv’s relative tolerance, and its consequent emphasis on embracing community in all its diversity are not simply tangential curiosities about Netziv.⁸ They return us to the issue of love of God with which we began this study, and express one of a number of critical theological departures from medieval individualistic approaches strongly advocated and influenced by Maimonides.

In this chapter, therefore, I focus on Netziv’s commentary to the Song of Songs, that quintessential biblical book of love, through which he voices many of his theological positions, expressed elsewhere in his corpus. In particular, the Song presents an exegetical opportunity to stress the bond between community and God as the subjects of its romantic ode to love, in marked distinction from what he might have considered the intellectual narcissism of his medieval rationalist predecessors. Siding with Abraham ibn Ezra, Netziv cites approvingly his disparagement of that trend among the “critical scholars” (*anshei mehkar*), which treats the Song as an allegory of “attachment between the supernal soul and the body,” rather than one revolving around the “assembly of Israel” (*Knesset yisrael*).⁹ The tenor of Netziv’s commentary thus mirrors the empathetic character of his life. R. Abraham Isaac Kook, the subject of our next chapter, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of twentieth-century Palestine and another of Netziv’s illustrious graduates, adopted similar kabbalistically tinged terminology and attested to the same when he recalled how Netziv “exerted great effort to inculcate in the hearts of his students love of the nation and devotion to the assembly of Israel (*Knesset*

commentary was first published in 1886; a second posthumous edition appeared in 1894. For a bibliographic survey of Netziv’s corpus, see A. R. Malachi, “The Literary Work of Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin” (Heb.), *Jewish Book Annual* 25 (1967–68): 233–39, esp. 238. According to Meir Bar-Ilan, it was originally published long after it was actually written. See his *Rabban shel Yisrael* (New York: Mizrahi Organization of America, 1943), 24. All translations of *Metiv Shir* are my own and are cited as MS hereafter. There is a nonacademic and highly problematic English translation, *The Commentary of Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin to Shir Hashirim* by David Landesman (Kefar Hasidim: Jewish Educational Workshop, 1993).

⁷ MS, 57. Netziv’s sentiment here is in direct contradistinction from Maimonides’ view of any gathering of *letzim*, which can only lead to a mockery of the Jewish foundational canon, its revered sages, and ultimately heresy. See the dangers of a “gathering of reprobates” (*yeshivat letzim*) articulated at the very end of MT, Leprosy Defilement, and my analysis of this non-halakhic passage in chap. 2 of my book, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 33–53. This group’s intellectual and moral fiber inevitably deteriorates to the point of undermining the fundamental tenets of monotheism.

⁸ Netziv’s advocacy of communal leadership in theory might be somewhat at odds with the often tense relationship between the yeshiva and the community in Volozhin. See Immanuel Etkes, “A Shtetl with a Yeshiva: The Case of Volozhin,” in *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 39–52, esp. 46, where Netziv’s sensitivity on this issue is evident in his defense of the community’s less than enthusiastic attitude toward the yeshiva.

⁹ MS., p. 2. See Chapter 2 of this book, note 18.

yisrael).¹⁰ Consistent with his concern for the corporate integrity of his coreligionists, Netziv methodically restores the Song's allegory from the private sphere to its original rabbinic construct in the public realm between the nation and God.¹¹ This chapter concentrates on this factor, more than any other, as the one that shapes Netziv's position on love in sharp relief to Maimonides. I must stress also that I use the term "allegory" as one that best captures, for a modern critical audience, Netziv's exegetical methodology.¹² However, Netziv, perpetuating an age-old tradition of commentary vis-à-vis the Song, would have considered the allegory the "plain sense" of the book. As R. Kook in his memoir of Netziv described it, the commentary is "in the manner of the plain sense" (*baderekh hapeshat*), ruling out the possibility of reading the Song according to its plain sense of romantic love between two human lovers.¹³

Though Maimonides surely lived a life practically dedicated to community, his theoretical orientation, especially on the issue of love, was far more individualistic and internalized, expressed best by his radically intellectualized interpretation of

¹⁰ *Ma'amarei HaRe'iyah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1984), 123–126, at 126: התאמץ להשריש בלב תלמידיו אהבת האומה וכנסת ישראל

¹¹ See Chapter 2, note 18.

¹² There are a number of full-length works in Hebrew on Netziv's exegetical methodology. See Nissim Elyakim, *Ha'amek davar le-N.Ts.Y.B.: midot ve-khelim be-farshanut ha-peshaṭ* (Rehovot; Moreshet Yaakov, 2003); Hanah Kats, *Mishnat Ha-Netziv: shiṭato ha-ra'ayonit v'ha-hinukhit shel ha-Netziv mi-Voloz'in le-or ketavav v'e-darkhe hanhagato* (Jerusalem, 1990); Z. A. Neugroschel, *Torat ha-Netziv: Birurei Sugyot be-mishnato shel R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin* (Jerusalem, 2002). For a concise survey of his methodology, see Temima Davidowitz, "Kavim Meafayanim beParshanuto shel ha-Netziv miVolozhin," in *Igud: miuḥar ma'amaram be-mad'e ha-Yahadut*, ed. Ron'elah Merdler (Jerusalem: World Congress of Jewish Studies, 2005), 85–102.

¹³ *Ma'amarei HaRe'iyah*, 126: פירושו על שיר השירים בדרך הפשט וכתוב במליצת ישרון בסגנון נעים ונחמד. Netziv's great, great-grandson, R. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, the guiding rabbinic authority of twentieth-century Modern Orthodoxy, in his own engagement with the Song, still adheres religiously to this approach. See his "UBikashtem MiSham," *Hadarom* 47 (1978): 1–83. For an English translation, see *And From There Shall You Seek*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2008). See also the modern ArtScroll paternalistic translation of the Song, which offers the allegory as the "literal" translation. A non-Hebrew speaker is simply deceived into thinking that the allegorical layer is what the Hebrew actually reflects. For example, that reader would be misled into believing that verse 1:13, "My beloved is to me a pouch of myrrh which lies all night between my breasts," appears in its original as "But my Beloved responded with a bundle of myrrh – the fragrant atonement of erecting a Tabernacle where His Presence would dwell amid the Holy Ark's staves." I assume that only non-Hebrew speakers need protection from the Song's patent eroticism, while the Hebrew-speaking audience to whom it is addressed can be trusted with the text. ArtScroll claims that "a literal translation would be misleading – even false – because it would not convey the meaning intended by King Solomon the composer." See *Siddur Eitz Chaim: The Complete ArtScroll Siddur* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1985), 328. Apparently Solomon, credited traditionally with the Song's authorship, should have known better than to write a misleading and false book in the native language of his readership. Landesman follows suit in his tendentiously Orthodox translation of Netziv's commentary when he claims in his preface that Netziv's commentary is not allegory but rather the plain sense.

a central Song verse: *I sleep but my heart awakes; it is the voice of my beloved that knocks* (5:2). This is the tenor of the entire last chapter of his Book of Knowledge in the Mishneh Torah, discussed in [Chapter 2](#) where the Song was the biblical vehicle of Maimonides' philosophical conception of love of God. This verse captures the very apex of human perfection, which borders on a functional solipsism where the "intellect is wholly turned toward Him, may He be exalted, so that in his heart he is always in His presence, while outwardly he is with people" (GP, III:51, p. 623). It is no coincidence that Maimonides brackets the book entitled "Knowledge" (*mada*) with knowledge at its opening that grounds the first commandment "to know that there is a prime existence," and knowledge at its closing that constitutes the second commandment to love God, "with the knowledge that one knows of Him." It is no less of a coincidence then that Netziv prefaces his commentary on this verse with a long excursus on the responsibility to the community borne by the leader/sage since its Maimonidean overlay threatens an excessive emphasis on contemplative individual perfection at the expense of community involvement. There is a spiritual pessimism which inspires the Song's poetry that replaces intellectual shortcomings by a failure of leadership as love's most menacing enemy. What follows, beginning with this verse, is rooted in the anguish over an anticipated time "when the great ones are not attuned to the needs of the community, and the divine indwelling (*shekhina*) suffers over this, as it were, for her love for the assembly of Israel."¹⁴ Thus, Netziv shifts the metaphor outward in a kabbalistic register, from its Maimonidean privileging of the inner world of the mind wholly detached from its external façade where it robotically manifests civic-mindedness, almost as an afterthought. Even the term "thought" would exaggerate the intentionality of Maimonides' perfected intellect with respect to social commitment.

For Netziv, "sleep" signifies a pervasive spiritual malaise that can only be remedied by an "awake heart," or the leader, the "heart" of the people, who is alert to their desperate condition and provokes the "sound of the beloved," or God, "to focus and attend to correcting what is flawed."¹⁵ At the heart of

¹⁴ MS, 60. One halakhic expression of Netziv's concern for the cohesion of the community is his discouragement of litigation by strict law in favor of compromise. See *Meshiv Davar* 3:10 where he states, "Whenever my eyes observe a dispute among the Jewish communities a fire burns within me; accordingly I cannot be silent until I have spoken on the subject." See Menachem Elon's discussion of this responsum as an ideal ruling for a turbulent and divisive time which requires a "synthesis of law and justice." Elon, "The Values of a Jewish and Democratic State: The Task of Reaching a Synthesis," *Israel among the Nations*, ed. A. Kellerman, K. Siehr, and T. Einhorn (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1998), 177–226, at 224–26.

¹⁵ MS, 62–63. Netziv's own political/religious involvement in the Zionist Hibbat Tzion movement is one manifestation of his commitment to communal leadership. In a letter Netziv paraphrases this very expression from the Song to indicate his commitment to both the Zionist enterprise and his own local community, "for though my heart is awake, I am not asleep." In that same letter he adopts another of the Song's locutions to express his passion for settlement of Israel, "for the voice of our beloved God knocks on our hearts to see to the good of our Holy Land." See Bezalel Landau, "Ha-Netziv mi-Volozhin bi-Ma'arakhah le-Maan Yishuv erez Yisrael

Netziv's theoretical concern for community is what his own son, Meir Bar Ilan, described lovingly as a magnanimous spirit whose interests went far beyond the walls of the rabbinic academy to which he dedicated his entire life: "There was so it appears an internal need to be close to whatever transpired in the broader world. His nature was not alien to the world, to everything that occurs, as long as it was not antithetical to the love of Torah."¹⁶ The operative component of Netziv's broadness is this last proviso which also implies that, subject to certain constraints, public life cannot only complement the religious moment of love, but is integral to it.

Netziv immediately charts a course for the Song that steers its direction along an entirely different route than was set for it by Maimonides. First, as Netziv characterizes, its appeal versus other books in the biblical Writings is its particularistic character addressed to Jews as opposed to the more universalistic message of Ecclesiastes, which, as he understands it, was communicated to an integrated audience of Jews and gentiles. Since the latter reached out to a multiethnic assembly, Solomon resorted to the universal language of "ethical inquiry." Second is the Song's devaluation of philosophy in favor of Torah study and practice as the instruments of love and fear of God, "for one who has accessed the reasoning of the Torah no longer needs philosophical investigation to achieve fear of God."¹⁷ Third is that the Song is not simply an allegory of love but itself inspires that love, "for Solomon conveyed the Song of Songs to arouse the love of God in the heart of Israel." Finally, and most pointedly aimed at the Maimonidean conception of love, which, as [Chapter 2](#) argues, conditions its ultimate realization on a transnormative intellectual experience, the Song actually *limits* it to specifically the practice and study of Torah and its normative content.

Netziv charts the evolution of Jewish spirituality that, in a very limited sense, parallels Maimonides' view of the gradual restriction of the options available for religious worship. Once the unbounded manifestations of love for God such as private altars were outlawed, Solomon institutes another spiritual outlet in its place by composing the Song which channels the desperate need to voice that love through the power of Torah: "for Solomon was particularly motivated to

biKedushatah," *Niv HaMidrashiyah* 11b (1974): 251–77, at 276. For an extensive bibliography of Netziv's active participation in the early Zionist enterprise, see Jacob J. Schacter, "Haskalah, Secular Studies and the Close of the Yeshiva in Volozhin in 1892," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990): 76–133, at 128n121.

¹⁶ Meir Bar-Ilán, *Mi-Volozhin ad Yerushalayim* (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University, 1971), 1:138. Though this was written in regard to Netziv's reading of newspapers, it reflects his overall *weltanschauung*. Once again, one needs to temper any modern notions of worldliness when it comes to Netziv with the operative condition here being "as long as it was not antithetical to the love of Torah." As Shaul Stampfer puts it, Netziv "was not opposed to the Haskalah per se but to *bittul torah*, the waste of time that could be used for Torah study." Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning*, trans. Lindsay Taylor-Guthartz (Portland, OR: Littman Library, 2012), 163.

¹⁷ MS, 1.

this at the time of constructing the Temple which entailed banning private altars through which the righteous ones of the generation were accustomed to acquiring and expressing love of God.”¹⁸ Netziv, already in his preface, sharply distinguishes himself from the Maimonidean approach, which views the sacrificial cult as a concession to ancient habitual polytheistic behavior that can only be modified gradually. While for Maimonides sacrifice is a pagan ritual from which the monotheist must be incrementally weaned,¹⁹ for Netziv it is a sign of spiritual virtue that is regulated, but perpetuated all the same, by the normative cultic framework of the Torah. The Song’s message for Netziv substitutes but, at the same time, reinforces the spirit of sacrifice, a “fundamental” (*ikar*) means of love along with Torah study,²⁰ while for Maimonides, it teaches a method of love that is driven by thought which usurps and abolishes sacrifice and the religious proclivity for it. Here again Netziv resorts to cultic terminology to transform the role of the most accomplished individuals from philosopher to communal activist. While the qualification of a particular tribe as priests in the Maimonidean scheme is but one component of the overall strategy of limiting the sacrificial impulse on the road to its total abrogation, Netziv resurrects the priestly class in the sage who becomes the modern day intercessor by way of prayer instead of animal sacrifice, “and just as the priests and the Levites were obligated to bring the Israelite sacrifices to draw down the aura (*hashpa’ah*) . . . so the sages of our time are obligated to pray on behalf of Israel.”²¹

Netziv’s view of Jewish law and national identity as transcending, respectively, reason and nature and somehow not entirely explicable in human terms permeates his view on love and the Song, its biblical expositor, forcefully militating against Maimonidean theology. At this point in our study there is no need to further demonstrate Maimonides’ position on the rationality of divine law except to reiterate that he appreciates every single commandment teleologically, regardless of their ritualistic or civil character, aimed toward inculcating anyone of “opinions, moral qualities, and political civic actions” (GP, III:31, p. 524). He diagnoses those who tend to ennoble divine law precisely because of its mysteriousness considering “it a grievous thing that causes should be given for any law,” and who are most satisfied if “the intellect would not find a meaning for the commandments and prohibitions,” as having succumbed to “a

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Netziv returns to this theme later in the commentary where he expounds on the dangers of obsessive love to the detriment of religious observance. Solomon’s passionate love for God, which private altars expressed, caused him to procrastinate from constructing the Temple, “for this was the shame of Solomon that he was so steeped in love to the point of neglecting building the Temple so that he could continue with the worship of private altars” (MS, 85).

¹⁹ GP III:32.

²⁰ MS, 2.

²¹ MS, 15. Netziv does classify two types of leaders, one religious who is charged with “halakhic guidance and expanding Torah and fear of God,” and the other political who “deals with the needs of the community” (MS, 15). But the role of the learned sage is still communal in the sense of catering to the spiritual needs of the community.

sickness that they find in their souls" (523).²² One would have thought some eight centuries, after these words were written, would have been more than enough time for this sickness to have been cured, eradicated, or at the very least quarantined. Yet, in a blatant challenge to Maimonidean rationality, Netziv conditions love of God on exposing oneself to this very "sickness." He subverts Maimonides' collapse of any distinction between nonrational (*hukim*) and rational (*mishpatim*) into one overarching rational classification, with his own collapse of them into a uniform scheme of nonrationality. Thus he infuses even that dimension of the law reason would dictate necessary for the normal functioning of any civil society with metalegal mystery, for "even those commandments which apparently even human reason would engender, were not decreed by the Torah from the aspect of human reason, but rather from the aspect of the non-rational (*hukei*) dimension of the Torah."²³

The implications of this transcendent view of Jewishness and Jewish law fundamentally challenges the Maimonidean program for becoming a God-lover. As stated previously, Maimonides' normative formulation of the command to love God is purely in terms of the natural: "the point at which one *contemplates* (שיחבון) His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtain a glimpse of His *wisdom* (חכמתו) which is incomparable and infinite, he immediately loves, praises, and glorifies Him and longs with an exceeding longing to *know* (לידע) His great Name"²⁴ (emphasis is mine to highlight the rational tenor of this activity). Though divine wisdom is ultimately unattainable, whatever it is we can know of it is available only through God's creation or nature. Nature is the sole object of contemplation for acquiring knowledge of God, and, since love directly corresponds to knowledge, love can only emerge precisely from a constant engagement with nature. For Netziv, since there is a transcendent dimension to everything Jewish, the establishment of the ultimate spiritual relationship with God must perforce be anchored itself in transcendence. Nature and the world surrounding us are simply insufficient to consummate the Jewish bond to God. But Netziv goes even further in repelling any kind

²² Maimonides' rationale for the commandments is a much discussed topic, but simply for the sake of clarifying his diagnosis of a subscription to reasonless commandments as a disease Kenneth Seeskin's pedagogical analogy is sufficient. If the Torah teaches something and God is a teacher, then "the proper way to pay homage to God's superiority is not to set aside one's intellectual faculties but to recognize that as a perfect being, God must also be a perfect educator." In Seeskin, *Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed* (New York: Behrman House, 1991), 94.

²³ MS, 6. For a discussion of this and a list of sources in Netziv's writings advocating this "non-rational" perspective on law, see Gil Perl, *The Pillar of Volozhin: Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin and the World of Nineteenth Century Lithuanian Torah Scholarship* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 232–33. The boldest such assertion is articulated in his comment to Lev. 19:37 in HD. His aversion to historical rationalization of commandments, though, does not prevent him from at times providing his own historicization of biblical law. See Nissim Elyakim, "Netziv's Autonomy in Netziv's Interpretation of Legal Verses in the Torah" (Heb.), *Shma'tin* 150 (2002): 94–113, esp. 103–13.

²⁴ MT, Foundations of Torah, 2:2.

of naturalism within this spiritual realm, not only protesting its inadequacy, but actually considering it an impediment to any Jewish realization of a passion for God. The Song's lover's shame at being "blackened" (1:6) by the sun, which Netziv takes as representing nature, highlights Israel's supranatural existence, since "Israel is beyond nature, and their world is maintained by divine providence which is contingent on Torah, worship, and good deeds; consequently when Israel pursues nature, and turns away from divine governance, they are not as successful as non-Jews."²⁵ Every component of this position is anathema to the entire Maimonidean oeuvre – the ontological distinction between Jews and gentiles,²⁶ the devaluing of nature and its study, and the linking of divine providence to ethics and ritual rather than intellect. If loving God constitutes a mitzvah, or commandment, which is anchored in a transcendent realm, then, by Netziv's logic, it can only be properly fulfilled by abandoning science, by diverting attention away from nature, and by distancing oneself from that body of human knowledge that has developed independently of the Torah.

Consequently, in a near mirror image of Maimonides' formulation for attaining a love of God, Netziv states the following:

The love of nature that rages within me prevents me from diverting attention away from worldly necessities toward taking pleasure in solitude and the realization of love of God, even though I am fully aware that it comprises the supreme pleasure for the soul that overwhelms all material ones, Thus it is our obligation and is appropriate for us to immerse our minds in the love of God.²⁷

Netziv here demands a suppression of that very passionate obsession with the creation Maimonides considers the operative ingredient of love for God, since it mires one in the here and now, barring access to the transcendent realm where the ontological bond between God and Israel can be forged. Paradoxically, though consistently, Netziv senses a danger to any obsession per se, whether it is with the here and now or with the transcendent. His powerful sense of communal responsibility and rabbinic law forces him to also challenge the intensity of Maimonides' isolated God-lover, whose mind, as we have seen in [Chapter 2](#), is fixated abstractly on God, that obscurest of all objects of desire.²⁸ In a cautious retreat from unbounded passion divorced from practicality, Netziv reminds the reader of ancient Israel's inability to tolerate unmediated contact with the divine for fear of physical demise.²⁹ According to Netziv they demanded

²⁵ MS, 11.

²⁶ See Menachem Kellner's book-length study on Maimonides' universalism, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

²⁷ MS, 22.

²⁸ As Alan Brill notes, "Netziv, unlike Maimonides, finds fault in an isolationist spirituality that lacks social involvement." Brill, "Dwelling with Kabbalah: Meditation, Ritual, and Study," in *Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law*, ed. Adam Mintz and Lawrence Schiffman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2005), 127–62, at 137.

²⁹ Deut. 5:22: *If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer we shall die.*

a cessation of such immediacy in favor of “a love of God by way of the light of the Torah – they requested the light of the Oral Torah (*torah sheba'al peh*) so that they could tolerate it.”³⁰ For Netziv the more proximate love gained through the written Torah needs to be filtered through the oral law, a necessary dilution for a sustainable relationship. This is consistent with Netziv’s general approach in all his writings of reading rabbinic law back into Sinai,³¹ but, for our purposes, it reflects another blow to the Maimonidean construct of spiritual romance. Whereas Maimonides’ lover travels further away from the practical intellect to the theoretical intellect, and in the process, ascends in his Jewish hierarchy from the “small thing” of halakha and oral law to the “great thing” of physics and metaphysics, Netziv reverses the direction. Solomon’s bed, described by the Song, is *surrounded by sixty warriors of the warriors of Israel* (3:7) which is taken by Netziv, according to the “plain sense” (*peshat*), as the place Solomon reserved for loving God “through the power of the Torah by surrounding himself with sixty Torah experts.” On the metaphorical plane (*derash*), Solomon signifies God Himself, who “designates a place to cohabit with Israel in love, that is the four cubits of halakha.”³²

The true lover for Netziv, on both levels of exoteric and esoteric meaning, inhabits the realm of law, both as scholar and practitioner, while Maimonides’ lover transports himself beyond that realm to that of pure thought. No other

³⁰ MS, 5.

³¹ Two extreme exegetical illustrations of this that pervade his entire rabbinic project are the following:

1. The simple biblical verb for “command” (*tzav*), refers to the oral law that overlays the written law. See *Emek HaNetziv* (Jerusalem: Va’ad leHotza’at Kitve HaNetziv, 1959–61), 2:233.
2. The simple biblical term for laws or statutes, *hukim*, refers throughout the Bible to the principles of rabbinic hermeneutics. See, for example, HD on Genesis 26:5, which strikingly captures Netziv’s approach in its attribution of the knowledge and study of all of rabbinic law and its derivational logic to the not only pre-rabbinic but pre-Sinaitic patriarch Abraham. See also his comment on Genesis 12:17, where he notes Abraham as the pioneer of Torah study dedicating himself tirelessly to it. For a discussion and copious references that appear ubiquitously throughout Netziv’s corpus, see Perl, *The Pillar of Volozhin*, 180–82, 190–91. However, it would be wrong to characterize Netziv as ruling out any independent human contributions to the development of rabbinic law. See Jay Harris’s discussion of this in *How Do We Know This: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 239–44, where he maintains that, although the “exegetical means to create halakha” are Moses’ legacy to the Jews, “the hermeneutical principles that expanded the range of halakha were the product of deep and rational reflection on the oral traditions entrusted to Moses and their connection to Scripture” (242).

³² MS, 41. Though the figure of Solomon is at times associated with ethics, by and large Solomon’s name is associated with intellectual apprehension, the proper way to achieve it, and the limits on teaching subjects that lead to its ultimate attainment. For a very different construct of Solomon than Netziv’s, see Sara Klein-Braslavy’s chapter on “Solomon and Metaphysical Esotericism According to Maimonides,” in her *Maimonides as Biblical Interpreter* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 163–94.

image evokes the extent of this abstraction as a religious ideal than that of the bed. When speaking of prayer, Maimonides envisions a time when it will be surpassed by a far more advanced form of silent meditation “limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects” (GP, I:59, p. 140). The biblical proof-text for this assertion presents the bed as a metaphor for the most private space conducive to such meditation: *Commune with your heart upon your bed and be still* (Ps. 4:5). Prayer is the most pervasive and dominant feature of the Jewish ritual system of commandments (*mitzvot*). The Jew’s entire daily cycle is measured in terms of prayer intervals and blessing opportunities. The observant Jew’s calendar is governed by prayer frequency and appointed times. The classical rabbis considered prayer a “worship of the heart,” which replaced the most prominent feature of ancient Judaism, the Temple sacrificial cult.³³ Praise, supplication, entreaty, appreciation, contemplation – virtually every facet of one’s relationship with God – are articulated through prayer.³⁴ In its demand for a quorum (*minyan*) as its ideal forum, it is also essentially a communal ritual that continuously draws the individual into the group to commune with God. For Maimonides, then, the privacy of one’s bed is an image which best captures that ideal of love wholly divorced from *halakhah* and society.³⁵

Netziv’s exegesis of the bed imagery inducts the image that is most representative of privacy divorced from social contact and an interval free of behavioral activity, into the public sphere of *halakhah* and Torah study. As such, it is a total subversion of Maimonides’ appropriation of the image to signify consummate spiritual internalization where the only human faculty exercised is thought. It is precisely during the central prayers of the Jewish liturgy when it is “most conducive to receiving the holy Spirit in accordance with the desire of God and those who yearn for it.”³⁶ At one point, Netsiv resorts to an extreme formulation inverting the means and ends of study and love by explaining the rationale behind the commencement of a standardized prayer seeking the comprehension of Torah with a declaration of the love between God and Israel. Netsiv considers only a beloved of God privy to the secrets of Torah, and that is why love prefaces the supplication for understanding “since the purpose of prayer is to enlighten us with understanding His holy Torah.”³⁷ Netsiv again reverses the route of human perfection mapped out by Maimonides. Maimonides’ philosophical

³³ See b. Taanit 2a; b. Berakhot 26b; MT, Prayer 2:5; Sifre Deut, Ekev 41.

³⁴ MT, Prayer 1:2.

³⁵ For a valiant attempt to integrate Maimonides’ philosophical and halakhic notions of prayer and its efficacy, see Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart: A Study in Maimonides’ Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), who considers Maimonides’ conception of “prayer to be an attempt to attain an awareness of being before the presence of God.” This notion has both a cognitive and emotive structure that caters to both the contemplative intellectual and the common man (129).

³⁶ MS, 101.

³⁷ MS, 81.

perfection evolves from *halakhah*/Torah's content (external conduct such as prayer) to thought (internalization of prayer to meditation) and ultimately to love (philosophical investigation), whereas Netziv's Torah scholar evolves from love as a ground in which to finally develop a grasp of Torah.

Netziv's antinatural stance on love directs one back to the role of the Temple and the sacrificial cult within Judaism. A corollary of the project of transcending the creation in order to arrive at love is that God provides for a space that is most conducive to the activity which brings about love – a spatial retreat from the natural world. That space is the Temple, which, according to a rabbinic tradition, was suffused by perpetually occurring miracles in all its facets of worship,³⁸ and thus, for Netziv, provides the optimum environment for aspiring to a nonnatural state, “for there is nothing better than to stand in a place where nature and the sun are not that dominant.”³⁹ It is an environment defined by the miraculous and wholly insulated from the natural. For Maimonides, however, just like the priests and sacrifices, the Temple is a spatial restriction on pagan modes of worship. Maimonides' interpretation of Jeremiah's problematic assertion that there were no commandments regarding sacrifices at the time of the exodus from Egypt (7:22–23), clearly belying the Pentateuchal accounts, substantiates this view: “For he says that the first intention consists only in your apprehending Me and not worshipping someone other than Me. . . . Those laws concerning sacrifices and repairing to the Temple were given only for the sake of the realization of this fundamental principle. It is for the sake of that principle that I transferred these modes of worship to My name so that the trace of idolatry be effaced and the fundamental principle of My unity be established. You, however, came and abolished this end, while holding fast to what has been done for its sake” (GP, III:32, p. 530).

In addition, the very mishnaic source Netziv refers to that historically corroborates the Temple having been populated with miracles is embedded in other miraculous lists which Maimonides explains away as ultimately natural themselves. “Miracles” like the splitting of the Red Sea can all ultimately be considered “natural” in the sense that they were preprogrammed into nature at creation.⁴⁰ His explanation of some of those “miracles” endemic to the Temple sanctum reflects their naturalism as well. For example, the smoke from the sacrifices was never swept away “because the air was calm,” and no one ever complained about being cramped and leaving the Temple precinct for more spacious quarters since “during the prostration there was no pushing and shoving out of the abundance of awe there was for this place.” Netziv therefore dismantles the entire Maimonidean edifice of natural spirituality grounded in the creation and a profound understanding of it, replacing it with another realm beyond nature which only the nation of Israel inhabits.

³⁸ M. Avot 5:8.

³⁹ MS, 24.

⁴⁰ See GP, II:29, pp. 345–46; PM, Avot 5:5.

Verses 3:1–2, *Upon my couch at night, I sought the one I love – I sought but found him not. I must rise and roam the town through the streets and square. I must seek the one I love. I sought but found him not*, provide Netziv the exegetical ground for openly challenging Maimonides' formulation of the commandment to love God in [chapter 2](#) of the first section of his *Mishneh Torah*. He finds the Song's pessimistic sentiment expressing the frustrated quest for and elusiveness of love especially apt for a direct attack on Maimonides' rationalist means for attaining love. His argument is that the exasperated lover of this verse is precisely the one who complies with Maimonides' recipe for spiritual love, which inevitably leads to failure. Netziv takes issue with what he considers Maimonides' "misquote" of a halakhic midrash that conditions love of God on a scientific understanding of nature and the creation, since "out of this you will come to recognize 'He who spoke and the world came to be.'"⁴¹ For Netziv, the referent of "out of this" is the phrase of the verse following the commandment to love God, *Take to heart these instructions which I command you this day* (Deut. 6:6), which forms an inextricable link between the "heart," which dedicates itself to *mitzvot* of this verse, and the "heart" of the previous verse, which is committed to the love of God.⁴² Netziv's "heart" is a very different metaphor than its Maimonidean construct, which views its referent as "denoting the intellect."⁴³ Thus the inference of this halakhic midrash according to Netziv is in fact opposed to Maimonides' program for love, "since scientific knowledge is not assimilated into the heart of the scientist needed to love God since he remains distant from it, that is from things that are holy. However, when he immerses his heart and soul in divine laws which lead to holiness, then *he will recognize 'He who spoke and the world came to be.'*"⁴⁴ Torah and its normative content become the instruments of love rather than what

⁴¹ Sifrei, Deuteronomy, Vaetchanan 33:6:

והיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוץ היום על לבבך, רבי אומר למה נאמר, לפי שנאמר ואהבת את ה' אלהיך בכל לבבך אני יודע כיצד אוהבים את המקום תלמוד לומר והיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוץ היום על לבבך, תן הדברים האלה על לבך שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם ומדבק בדרכיו.

⁴² Others, of course, sensed this glaring omission in Maimonides' MT formulation of the love commandment, which conditions it solely on knowledge without reference to the Torah and its contents. For one prominent forerunner to Netziv's opposition on this point, which also acknowledges science as a means to love but only as a preliminary that must be supplemented by the Torah and *mitzvot*, see Joseph Elkouby's discussion of Maharal in his "The Love of God and the Fear of God in the Thought of Maharal of Prague," in *Rabbinic Theology and Jewish Intellectual History: The Great Rabbi Loew of Prague*, ed. Meir Seidler (New York: Routledge, 2013), 44–53 at 47–49. Netziv sides with his rabbinic predecessor and many others in rejecting "Maimonides' essential intellectualism."

⁴³ See GP, I:39, 89, which also appropriately ends with the role of "heart" in Deuteronomy 6:5, as "all the forces of the body, for the principle of all of them derives from the heart." This deepens the role of the intellect since it subordinates all of human activity to intellectual endeavor reading Deuteronomy 6:5 as an obligation to "make His apprehension the end of all your actions."

⁴⁴ MS, 38.

Maimonides considers simply the pragmatic framework within which one can best cultivate science and philosophy, the only true instruments of love.⁴⁵ Netziv promotes a “heart” of subordination rather than a “heart” of intellect.

But Netziv extends his opposition to Maimonidean rationalism as an essential conduit of love even further in a total subversion of Maimonides’ overarching view of Torah, science, and love of God. For Maimonides there is a direct correlation between knowledge and love, best expressed in his halakhic work by the assertion that “it is evident that love of God cannot be ingrained . . . except by way of the knowledge one knows of Him; as the knowledge so the love – if little then little and if much then much.”⁴⁶ There is corresponding clarity on this issue in his philosophical work that cross-references itself to his formulation in the Mishneh Torah that the all-consuming love demanded by Deuteronomy 6:5 “becomes valid only through the apprehension of the whole of being as it is and through the consideration of His wisdom as it is manifested in it.”⁴⁷ Netziv, however, inserts a further ingredient, in addition to performance of the *mitzvot*, for the attainment of love, which is a corollary of the Torah’s transcendence. Since love is not anchored in the natural, the Jew can fulfill all its prerequisites and yet still be frustrated in his quest for love, “for the love of God requires heavenly assistance that is only extended to those who merit it, and this does not mean to one involved in scientific investigation that concerns nature and human reason.”⁴⁸ For its ultimate achievement, love requires divine grace. Netziv correctly understood the danger of Maimonides’ elimination of any active divine involvement in the elemental religious impulse and goal, consistent with the overall thrust of his religious philosophy. Supplementing human endeavor with divine grace further undermines Maimonidean intellectualism.

Thus, in direct challenges to Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah formulations, Netziv begins his commentary with this very notion that “it is not wholly dependent on us, rather it requires heavenly assistance.”⁴⁹ But here he introduces another evaluation of Maimonides’ rationalist account of love that undermines the very core of Maimonides’ role for both God and divine law within the process of human perfection. After acknowledging the utility and necessity of Maimonides’ intellectual route toward love, he also points out its limitations as merely a preliminary in the continuing journey that lays the groundwork for entering the realm of the transcendent – “for all this advice [Maimonides’ requirement that man must dedicate himself to understanding and becoming proficient in the sciences at the end of Laws of Repentance in his

⁴⁵ See, for example, MT, Foundations of Torah 4:13, for one of his clearest statements on the purely utilitarian function of *mitzvot* as merely preliminary to pursuing the higher purpose of science and philosophy. There is no intrinsic value to *mitzvot* other than their functionality.

⁴⁶ MT, Repentance 10:6.

⁴⁷ GP, III:28, pp. 512–13. See also GP, III:52, p. 630.

⁴⁸ MS, 38.

⁴⁹ MS, 4.

Mishneh Torah] only serves to bring man toward love of God, but do[es] not bring closer the supernal Mind to reach man and pour on him the holy spirit . . . for love is consummated only when the beloved becomes intimate enough to pour out the spirit of its love to the one who yearns for its proximity.”⁵⁰ Netziv strategically dismantles the Maimonidean hierarchy where intellect reigns supreme, the only conduit through which a passive supreme Intellect can be accessed, and demotes intellect to a preparatory role that qualifies man as a *recipient* of divine grace. Maimonides’ one-sided acquisition of love with a passive divine beloved is replaced by one that more closely approximates the mutually embracing feelings of a human love affair.⁵¹

Here Netziv draws us away from the secluded intimacy of Maimonidean love back into the public sphere and the role of the sage, whose prayers, we have seen, are needed to assist in attracting divine grace. For Maimonides, while love is directly proportional to the grasp one has of the workings of nature, or all those disciplines falling within the rubric of science, it is also accompanied by an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and self-acknowledged limitations, “standing with meager and deficient knowledge before absolute proficiency in all knowledge.”⁵² Thus, paradoxically, the success of mastering the mechanics of creation, is, at the same time, measured by the realization of the limits of human intellection and its ultimate failure in the presence of that infinite knowledge possessed only by God.

Netziv’s idea of dependence on divine grace, therefore, hones in on another verse that is central to Maimonides’ Song hermeneutic; *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth* (1:2). For Maimonides this verse signifies the very apex of human perfection achieved with any certainty, by only three people in Israel’s prophetic history, all members of Judaism’s founding family – Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. They share in a unique type of death described as a divine “kiss,” indicating a life that ends saturated, as far as humanly possible, in knowledge of universal truths. It is a state where the intellect is empowered to such an extent that the physical body can no longer tolerate it, where “the intellect rejoices in what it apprehends . . . , this apprehension increases very powerfully, joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension become

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Netziv’s addition of divine intervention as an essential component of the human-divine relationship supplies a sorely needed ingredient to what Jerome Gellman describes as Maimonides’ theology of “radical human responsibility,” which places spiritual fulfillment solely in the hands of the human actor. As he states with respect to the achievement of love, “Armed with a sense of self-responsibility, the reader is freed from the motive of seeking self-aid, in order to pursue the goal of love of God – a relationship based on disinterested worship. . . . A sense of radical freedom and competence in cognition makes possible a relationship to God not grounded in one’s needs for oneself.” In Gellman, “Radical Responsibility in Maimonides’ Thought,” in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides*, ed. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan, and Julien Bauer (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 249–65 at 263.

⁵² MT, Foundations of Torah, 2:2.

stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of apprehension” (GP, III:51, p. 627). Maimonides identifies this intellectualized kiss of death with verse 1:2 of the Song, the logical culmination of a life of romancing God with the pursuit of knowledge. In other words, every effort in life must be exerted toward reaching a goal where there is a fusion of the knower through all the knowing he has accumulated and the known, or whatever it is of the divine that can be known. Everything about this process and goal is shrouded in autonomy, to use a vivid image Maimonides favors, in ascending the ladder of knowledge to apprehend “He who is stably and permanently at the top of the ladder” (GP, I:15, p.41). The only movement on the ladder between God at the summit and the earth in which it is anchored is by the seeker, but what is sought is simply forever there, immutably anticipating the seeker’s arrival. Netziv cannot tolerate a love of God that is absent the mutuality that in fact informs all true human love and thus transforms this verse into a petition that limits the reach of human love for God by God’s own response. Thus Netziv explicitly inveighs against this Maimonidean one-sidedness here on this verse, for “this first song is a prayer for achieving the love of God, a pleasure which supersedes all others for a Jewish soul.” He then forcefully attacks in full exposition of the quote just mentioned on this subject, “despite the fact that this is dependent on human will, and it consists of a formal positive commandment to love God as stated in the Shema, and as we clarify further on regarding Maimonides’ law in Foundations of Torah, still the matter is not wholly dependent on us but we require heavenly assistance to grace the passion of one who aspires to it if it is merited.”⁵³

Netziv, on the other hand, because of his emphasis on the active dimension rather than the contemplative, resists this supremely humbling moment Maimonides’ love aspires to since it is prone to encourage a quietist existence. He therefore adopts a more empowering model of humans in partnership with God, a notion we have seen with deep kabbalistic roots. Netziv distinguishes between what are really two synonyms for “lover” in verse 5:16, the “beloved” (*dod*) and the “darling” (*rea*), posing a contrast between an inferior and superior kind of love – “the *dod* is the term for a lover who cleaves through thought while the *rea* combines thought (or counsel) with action. The Torah sages are classified as *re'im* because they participate in the creation (*ma'aseh bereshit*) . . . and by virtue of the fact that they transform the words of the Torah into the truth of the Torah, they become partners with God in the creation (*ma'aseh bereshit*).”⁵⁴ Netziv completes the Maimonidean subversion. Netziv transforms the term for creation, *ma'aseh bereshit*, which, for Maimonides, is a subject of intellectual examination grounding love into an object that the lover constructs. The former entails a subservience of the knower/lover to the wisdom inherent in creation,

⁵³ MS, 4.

⁵⁴ MS, 79.

while in the latter, the lover imposes his knowledge on the creation effecting change in it. Maimonides' lover of God is changed by the creation; Netziv's lover changes the creation.

Just as with Meir ibn Gabbai, much of what drives Netziv's antipathy, to use perhaps a mild term of opposition to Maimonides' theology of love, is his rejection of Maimonides' antiteleological view of the cosmos. According to Maimonides, one cannot determine a causal hierarchy in creation in the sense of ascribing one part of existence as ancillary to another. All that one can conclude is that every part of creation "conformed to His intention and purpose" (GP, III:13, p. 453), and nothing more. God created everything "for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else." Any investigation into the final aim of any component of existence is doomed to failure and the "quest for the final end of all the species of beings collapses" (452).⁵⁵ The corollary of this teleological skepticism that irked many of Maimonides' theological antagonists is the devaluation of man in the scheme of the universe, for "it should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man" (452). Netziv counts himself among those whose religious sensibility does not allow for both anti-teleology and anti-anthropocentrism. In a pointed attack on the latter, Netziv asserts that, despite what appears to be the material world's lowliness, "all of existence was created for the sake of the saint (*tzadik*) and his actions in this world."⁵⁶ In biblical support of this anthropocentrism, Netziv cites a phrase that for Maimonides signifies its very opposite: "*Nevertheless as I live and as the Lord's Glory fills the earth.* (Num. 14:21), that is the purpose of the creation and its maintenance in order that the earth shall be filled with God's glory, thus He⁵⁷ is the foundation and pillar of the world."⁵⁸ Netziv adopts this consciously to invert what is a near motto for Maimonides that shifts the focus from human beings to God, from anthropocentrism to theocentrism. Virtually the identical phrase cited from Isaiah, *The whole earth is full of His glory* (6:3), signifies for Maimonides "that the whole earth bears witness to His perfection" (GP, I:19, p. 46), diverting attention away from the world as the pinnacle of creation and toward its role as evidence of divine existence.

⁵⁵ Warren Zev Harvey considers Maimonides' position quite radical in that "its strong anti-anthropocentric and anti-teleological views had (as far as I am aware) no parallel in medieval philosophical literature." See his "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," *Journal of History of Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (1981): 164. Recently, Joshua Parens has challenged this view, claiming that Maimonides did in fact endorse a limited Aristotelian-like teleology which could account for some things existing "for the sake of others" in his *Maimonides & Spinoza: Their Conflicting Views of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 153–61.

⁵⁶ MS, 78.

⁵⁷ Since Netziv begins this thought with the idea that all of creation exists on account of the saint in this world, it seems probable that this pronoun completes that principle in that since the saint is instrumental in manifesting the divine presence, the saint is thus the sustainer of the world.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Netziv's anthropocentrism shores up the value of human action in the world, intended as another direct challenge to Maimonides' minimization of action in favor of thought. Maimonides' analysis of the term "glory" categorically substantiates this by measuring "glory" solely in terms of thought. The earth is filled with God's glory in the sense that either human beings contemplate Him, or that the material world provides the basis for human meditation on His existence. Here it is important to cite Maimonides' perspective on precisely how the earth is filled with His glory for its striking antithesis to Netziv's appropriation of the very same phrase:

For the true way of honoring Him consists in *apprehending* His greatness. Thus everybody who *apprehends* His greatness and perfection, honors Him according to the extent of his *apprehension*. Man in particular honors him by speeches so that he indicates thereby that which he has *apprehended by his intellect and communicates it to others*. Those beings that have no apprehension, as for instance the minerals, also as it were honor God through the fact that by their very nature they are indicative of the power and wisdom of him who brought them into existence. For this induces him who considers them to honor God either by means of articulate utterance or without it if speech is not permitted to him . . . Accordingly it is said of that which is devoid of apprehension that it praises God . . . It is in view of this notion being named glory that it is said *The whole earth is full of His glory*" (GP, I:64, p. 157).⁵⁹

No more unambiguous a statement could be formulated to convey the thoroughly contemplative and philosophically oriented theocentrism to which Maimonides subscribed. The only human activity outside the mind that the verse allows for is the teaching to others what has been apprehended by the mind. All this is captured by the very same biblical idiom that Netziv adopts to endorse human beings and the material world as the telos of all creation.

A corollary of Netziv's anthropocentric view is that the earth itself is the telos of all creation, a proposition vindicated by another biblical proof-text that can only be fully appreciated in its role as a Maimonidean intertext. By way of imperial imagery, Isaiah extols a divine expansiveness expressed by God's proclamation that *the heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool* (66:1). Netziv explains the analogy to a king who sits on his throne not for the sake of the throne but for the purpose of governing his kingdom outside the palace, "so are the heavens God's throne, but the earth is His footstool, that is the aim of all His thoughts and the goal is the earth."⁶⁰ Again, on the crucial issue of teleology Netziv subverts Maimonides' exegesis to render its converse. After consulting Maimonides' lexicography, first the term "heavens" conveys

⁵⁹ Isaiah 6:3 appears once again in GP, III:52, in a context that is also bracketed by intellect, establishing it at the beginning as "the bond between us and Him," and concluding with the notion that love of God is purely a function of intellect for love achieved "through the opinions taught by the Law, which include the apprehension of His being as He, may He be exalted, is in truth" (630).

⁶⁰ MS, 78.

superiority or “My existence, grandeur, and power,” while the term “throne” signifies “the greatness of the individual who is considered worthy of it” (GP, I:9, p. 35). Rather than the minimizing effect of the throne metaphor and its prodding of attention elsewhere than the location of the throne that Netziv proposes, Maimonides sees it as honing the focus on it, as an accentuation of the grandeur of its occupant, and emphasizing the separateness of its locale. Another chapter in the *Guide* elaborates further on the terms “throne” and “feet” as they are biblically attributable to God, viewing them as constituting a hierarchy of being with the throne at the summit and the earth situated below the feet. The conclusion toward which this exegesis of throne and feet develops is a hierarchy of creation composed of two distinct realms of a superior heaven that consists of a “sublimity of that matter and its nearness to Him,” and an inferior “defectiveness” of earth (GP II:26, pp. 331–32).

When the term “feet” absorbs its philosophical nuance from the Maimonidean lexicon, Netziv’s own appropriation of it as elevating the status of the earth vis-à-vis the creation in its entirety comes into even sharper distinction. A Sinaitic hierophany envisions a *work of the whiteness of sapphire stone under His feet* (Exod. 24:10), presenting a grossly anthropomorphic depiction demanding a sense that alleviates its philosophical distortion of the nature of God. The last phrase, *under His feet*, indicates a notion of causality, in this case the sense of “He being the cause and because of Him” (GP, I:28, p. 61). Once the term “feet” is understood as a metaphor for causality, one is directed to Maimonides’ conception of where God exactly fits in the chain of causation that ends in the earth. Here, the clearest and perhaps most radical in terms of traditional notions of God’s relationship to the world and human history, is Maimonides’ instruction on how to read every biblical ascription of some event to divine will. Each one is simply a metaphor for natural causation that God originally initiated at creation, “who has made the natural things pursue their course” (GP, II:48, p. 410). Thus every time there occurs some narrative that literally conveys direct divine intervention, it really refers to any one of those natural proximate causes behind which “God, considered as efficient cause, is then the remotest one” (GP, I:69, p. 168). For Maimonides, while the image of the earth as a footstool philosophically captures the remoteness of God, since it is a correct understanding of nature and God, it paradoxically brings one closer to God since the intensity of love is directly proportional to that understanding. Netziv thus appropriates that very same proof-text to draw God back into the kind of relational immediacy with the world that can only properly ground love.

No other theological belief offends Maimonides’ view of natural causation more than that in the existence of angels which proliferate in the primitive religious consciousness. Thus Maimonides appropriates that very same belief in the service of his own worldview, transforming angels from divine delegates incessantly realizing God’s will in the world, into the quintessential metaphor for natural causation. The term “angels” signifies every single causal force in the world, “for all forces are angels,” thus, in its all comprehensiveness, draining the

term of any of its traditional ontological connotations, and rendering it virtually meaningless. It thoroughly overhauls a superstition into an emblem of science.⁶¹ Netziv, therefore, repatriates the angelic role to its mythical origins to complete the reversal of Maimonidean naturalism and restore a divine presence extant in every aspect of the world. The capacity for love is possible only with such a Being who is ever-present and cognizable, one who is “manifest in every agent of his entourage, for there is nothing that is done without His knowledge and will and that is the meaning of *He is preeminent among ten thousands* (Song 5:10), He is evident in the thousands of forces in the world.”⁶² Populated by a myriad of supernatural beings carrying out divine orders at every turn, the world becomes a far more opportune place to achieve love of God.

The discussion now leads us to the central verse Maimonides adopts as endemic to his entire allegorical message of the Song, *for I am sick with love* (Song 2:5), analogizing an infatuated single-minded lover to the kind of love warranted by God: “constantly focused on God, as if he were a lovesick person whose attention is not distracted from that woman whom he is focused (*shogeh*) on constantly whether sitting, standing, eating, and drinking . . . All of the Song of Songs is a metaphor for this matter.”⁶³ For Maimonides the ideal spiritual love is wholly identified with what the Song symbolizes as a “sickness,” in the sense of defying the norm signified by a healthy life. The daily routine of a “healthy” existence involves engagement with everything associated with a civic, familial, ritual, and commercial life. It thus entails a mind occupied by many different things; therefore, the norm is also on the whole a life of distractions. If sickness connotes the irregular, then in this case it indicates obsessiveness free of any distractions. It is the “healthiness” of a mundane existence that needs to be cured by the “sickness” of a knowledge-suffused life that transcends the mundane. Because this is the central peg in Maimonides’ construction of the Song’s message, Netziv directly challenges Maimonides’ reading of this verse, transforming it from a description of love’s ideal state to a plea for its attainment.

Netziv understands “sickness” in its regular colloquial sense as a deficiency or abnormality, and therefore it means that “I lack love of God . . . thus the Song reverts to prayer and supplication to attain love of God by way of Torah.”⁶⁴ This reading is a corollary of his antinaturalist stance since it insists on human dependency on God in all one’s endeavors. No activity can be conducted or goal achieved independent of divine will, even love of God. No matter how much the lover exerts himself, the relationship is only fully realized by the grace of the divine beloved. In a final blow to the Maimonidean edifice of religious love, Netziv not only rules out the study of the creation as a means to love but

⁶¹ See GP, II:6, pp. 261–65.

⁶² MS, 73.

⁶³ See [Chapter 2, note 71](#).

⁶⁴ MS, 28.

considers it an obstacle, “for the primary difficulty in attaining love of God, even when the soul aspires passionately for it, is the love of nature . . . and this love displaces love of God.”⁶⁵ Netziv then offers a coup de grace to the independently acquired Maimonidean model of autonomous achievement by making angels, the traditional belief in which is anathema to Maimonidean naturalism, an intrinsic element of the love process, for one must “prostrate oneself in song to the angels for assistance to attain this pleasure.”⁶⁶ Once again I believe it is the danger Maimonides’ strong current of independence and solitude poses for the role of the Jew as an integral part of a community or nation that motivates much of his antagonism to it. Here the teaching that ultimately one cannot rely wholly on one’s own efforts in the metaphysical realm poses a model for *imitatio dei* promoting the positive and religious value of interdependence in the physical realm.

Unlike Maimonides’ sickness as ideal, Netziv understands “sickness” in its patent sense, and, rather than emblematic of a perfected state that must be attained, it represents a malaise that must be remedied. Netziv challenges both the Maimonidean sense of illness and the intense heterosexual relationship Maimonides diagnoses as its etiology, as appropriate metaphors for the love of God. Another consequence of Netziv’s rejection of Maimonides’ allegory, therefore, is his repudiation of the spousal relationship altogether as the ideal model for spiritual love. Verse 8:1 provides the textual opportunity for advancing an alternative human model for spiritual love, when the lover laments the need to be modest with her love: *If only it could be as with a brother, as if you had nursed at my mother’s breast: then I could kiss you when I met you on the street and no one would despise me.* Netziv finds the yearning for a free, public expression of love from which the lover is presently barred particularly appealing. Prophets, he says, are appropriately compared to women in their relationship with God, since “it is not customary for a woman to offer her love to her husband except when it is favorable for him.”⁶⁷ Netziv characterizes any rabbinic advocacy of solitude and privacy as the appropriate forum for cultivating spiritual love as an inferior mode, which correlates to the analogous spousal mode where intimacy is restricted by “modesty and shame.” However, in a startlingly explicit formulation, he endorses the sibling model of love as an ideal because it is not limited by sexual mores that confine sexuality to the bedroom and can be publicly flaunted, unrestricted temporally or spatially. The sense of the lover’s plea here, therefore, according to Netziv, is to free her love from the restraints normally associated with lovers and elevate it to a sibling-like love where “a sister kisses her brother and there is no disgrace to shower on him the full strength of her love, to embrace him, and to kiss him whenever the love for

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ MS, 103.

him overwhelms her, even in the marketplace.”⁶⁸ Netziv here articulates his boldest challenge to the Maimonidean model of spiritual love, whose earthly model best captured its austere internal, isolated, and near-ascetic quality. Maimonides was willing to set aside his disdain for the erotic and the sexual for the sake of communicating the ultimate fulfillment of a supreme religious mandate. Netziv, likewise, was willing to resort to an incestuously charged image precisely pictorialized to dispel the Maimonidean ideal of love, replacing it with a publicly oriented one that repatriates the God-lover back to the community and the public sphere where he belongs.

Netziv tempers the Maimonidean notion of the obsessive lovesick lover of God further by introducing the peculiar idea of God’s “hiding His face” (*hastarat panim*) into the conversation. The infatuated lover does not pose the correct model because the intense singular focus it connotes is detrimental to the pursuit of the active life and the performance of *mitzvot*. The analogy of human love appropriately captures not the ideal but the danger of obsessive love “since it is evident that it is impossible to attend to many worldly matters while steeped in love and intimacy.”⁶⁹ As a corrective to such blinding love that displaces attending to the beloved’s practical needs, the beloved ignores the lover to the point where the lover craves the resumption of the beloved’s attention. At that point the beloved advises the lover of his reliance on her for household upkeep, which is neglected by her obsessive love. Therefore, “it is better not to focus your love for me constantly.”⁷⁰ Jewish history mirrors the course of this unhealthy relationship where spirituality overwhelmed the normative dimension of Judaism and required a “hiding of the Face” to recalibrate the relationship combining a balance of spirituality and performance. Accordingly, Netziv reads the poet’s words *Turn your eyes away from me* (6:5) as a warning “not to immerse your minds in me more than necessary,” *for they overwhelm me*, since they believe that “I am satisfied simply with love; but this is not true since fulfillment of the *mitzvot* are a ‘need on high,’ therefore I will hide my Face from you.”⁷¹

With this exegesis Netziv disavows the Maimonidean model of the obsessed lover by turning it on its head. What leads to God’s concealment from the people is precisely the kind of all-absorbing love Maimonides advocates as the ideal. Its consequence is not spiritual bliss and proximity to God but its opposite: a total

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* אחות הנזשקת לאחיה אין גנאי לשפוך עליו עוז אהבה לחבוק ולנשקו בכל עת שבוער אהבתו בלבב ואפילו בשוק וזהו דבר הבקשה

That the explicit language used by Netziv here is particularly jarring to the religiously orthodox ear is evidenced by the tempered translation of Landesman as follows: “If the relationship is like that of brother and sister, then a public display of affection would not be considered brazen or improper” (258). The replacement of “kissing,” “embracing,” and “overwhelming love” (or literally “when her love for him burns in her heart”) with “affection” is telling.

⁶⁹ MS, 87.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

rupture in the human divine relationship. For Maimonides, *hastarat panim* is precisely the consequence of an interregnum in the God-lover's obsessiveness, since worldly affairs detract from that intellectual focus which keeps him within God's protective gaze if his thought "is free from distraction, if he apprehends Him, and rejoices in what he apprehends" (GP, III:51, p. 625). It is only the instant the lover lapses from his engulfing desire that the alienation from God, which the Bible depicts as *hastarat panim*, occurs. Such is what the Bible means when it has God threaten *And I will hide my face from them and they will be devoured* (Deut. 31:17). But even here the debate between medieval Jewish rationalism and nineteenth-century Lithuanian Orthodoxy runs deeper. For Netziv, it is a human condition that causes *hastarat panim* only in the sense of inviting a divine response which consciously acts to correct that condition. Netziv's stance has Maimonides clearly in its sights here as well since God is immutable and immune to affectation. Maimonides thus emphasizes this in his short excursus on the *hastarat panim* phenomenon: "It is clear that we are the cause of this *hiding of the face*, and we are the agents who produce this separation" (GP, III:51 p. 626). There are two very distinct components to this proposition. Had Maimonides ended it after the first half, Netziv and he could have had a meeting of minds. But the second adds the human element as not simply the cause but as the "agent who produces"; that is, there is no divine agency here, only human agency. Any encounter with God, if one can legitimately use this distinctly modern term that smacks of the relational with Maimonides, involves an active lover who moves toward his beloved, while the latter remains firmly and immovably ensconced in its own space waiting for the lover's approach through knowledge. Any negative or positive impact on this relationship stems from the lover below who either fails in his venture, and thus attracts the metaphor of a hiding God, or succeeds in his intellectual endeavors, and metaphorically "sees" God. Any visual sighting of God, surely a necessary element of proximity between two human lovers, on the metaphysical plane always connotes "the mind's turning and directing itself to the contemplation of a thing" (GP, I:4, p. 28).

It is instructive to conclude this chapter on a nineteenth-century model of Judaism constructed in opposition to its twelfth-century antecedent with the way they sharply collide on two pivotal biblical moments perceived as optimum exemplars of love of God. The first is the brief life of pre-sin Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the second is the national assembly at Sinai, which Maimonides conceives in some sense as a momentary return to the intellectual footing of utopian Eden. Much like the sleepwalking state achieved by Moses on the way to the final "kiss of death" described previously in the Song's imagery, Adam, prior to the sin, also found himself in a disembodied state where mind focused in a manner as far as humanly possible divorced from body. At that point he operated at the very highest human level of intellection when "he had no faculty that was engaged in any way in the consideration of generally accepted things, and he did not apprehend them" (GP, I:2, p. 25). All matters that would

be classified within the realm of morality and politics, that are judged as bad or good, rather than universal objective truths of science, were simply not within Adam's purview. As such, Adam was impervious to the "badness" of his nakedness since he had no operational capacity for evaluating it in that term.

I believe Netziv formulated his analysis of Adam's obliviousness to his nakedness in direct contradistinction to Maimonides' philosophical psychoanalysis. Netziv's preference expressed for sibling over spousal love in the Song is explicitly cross-referenced to his analysis of Adam's shamelessness in his commentary on Genesis and vice versa, importing the same concerns over the highly abstruse and civically disengaged love presented as ideal by Maimonides. "Nakedness" conveys a metaphorical sense of a prophetic state which requires the stripping away of one's physical overlay so that there can be a total union with the divine. However, in contrast, Adam's lack of shame over his carnal exposure represents precisely the ability to maintain one's humanity and involvement with human affairs at the same time as carrying on a love affair with God.⁷² In his commentary on Genesis, Netziv echoes the perspective he voices in the Song, which advocates the sibling romance as an ideal model for transcendent love since that can be conducted in public. As Netziv states it, "That is what the poet longs for, that love of God should be so commonplace to the extent that there is no shame in conjoining with the supernal mind *while in the marketplace*."⁷³ I lay emphasis on the final words because it so strikingly stakes out its position in contradistinction to Maimonides' thoroughly detached portrait of Adam, whose love for God is a function of an extreme intellectual asceticism entirely oblivious to worldly affairs.

The "opening" of Adam's and Eve's eyes as a result of the sin (Gen. 3:7) is for Maimonides not a cessation of blindness, but a metaphor for a transition in consciousness, for "there had been no membrane over the eye that was now removed, but rather he entered upon another state in which he considered as bad things he had not seen in that light before" (GP, I:2, p. 25). Netziv, on the other hand, first reads the phrase literally as a sensual enhancement of vision.⁷⁴ He then attends to the resultant cognition of nakedness, which signals a lapse into a state where human wisdom, both practical and theoretical, becomes disengaged from cleaving to God. Thus Adam "deteriorated from the level of wisdom by way of the holy spirit and remained with wisdom of science and human cognition."⁷⁵ Scientific wisdom is precisely what constitutes loving God and is what exclusively consumed Adam's mind. Netziv therefore reverses the direction of the Maimonidean decline of the human condition. Netziv's Adam begins with a

⁷² HD comment to Gen. 3:1, p. 24. "For this [the prophetic detachment from worldly affairs] was not the case with pre-sin Adam who was naked but without a separation from humanly concerns. מה שאין כן אדם לפני החטא היה ערום מבלי הציצה מדעות אנושי."

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2: עד שלא יבחו לו אם יתדבק בדעת עליון בשוק: 2.

⁷⁴ HD, Gen. 3:7, p. 27. ראייה חושית חזקה.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* הוא ירד ממעלת חכמת רוח הקדש ועמד על חכמת הטבע בדעת אנושי.

coupling of spiritual intimacy together with reasoned involvement in human affairs to which all the intellectual faculties are dedicated. Human degeneration amounts to a decoupling of the two. Maimonides' pristine Adam begins his earthly existence with an intellectual focus that is constitutive itself of spiritual love and subsequently becomes distracted from what Maimonides considered the only legitimate subject of philosophy to an inferior subject that lies outside philosophy's purview.

The second biblical moment over which Netziv distinguishes himself from a Maimonidean conceptualization is the Sinaitic revelation, the foundational event at which both Judaism and the Jewish nation was forged. Here the discussion moves from the universalist circumstance of the Adam narrative dealing with the human qua human to the particularistic situation of a specific people and its unique encounter on a national scale with the divine. As discussed previously in the chapter dealing with Ritva, Maimonides' version of the Sinaitic is complex and requires an intricate unraveling, but suffice it for our purpose here to stress its highly intellectualized grounding. The two cardinal principles of monotheism, the existence of God and His unity, are normatively articulated by the first two "commandments" of *I am the Lord your God* and *Thou shall have no other gods*. Maimonides then distinguishes between these first two commandments and the remaining eight along precisely the same lines his description of pre-sin and post-sin Adam's contemplative focus. The first two beliefs are philosophically available to all thinking human beings and can be established by rigorous logical argument since they comprise universal truths that "are knowable by human speculation alone." The latter eight commandments "belong to the class of generally accepted opinions and those adopted in virtue of tradition, not to the class of the intellect" (GP, II:33, p. 364). In other words, the Sinaitic epiphany replicates the intellectual transition of pre- to post-sin Adam in its shift between the subject matter of the first two commandments, or that belonging to the world of truth and falsehood, to that of the next eight, which pertain to subjective judgments of good and bad. Maimonides grounds Sinai, and ipso facto Judaism as a religion, in a mass experience of philosophical enlightenment.

Netziv, consistent with his concern for human relationships and communal interests as themselves integral aspects of spiritual love, vacates Sinai of its Maimonidean intellectualism. Rather than anchor Judaism in a thoroughly intellectual experience, Netziv roots it in community and ethics. First Moses, the Maimonidean beacon of intellectual perfection, is privileged to govern Israel because of his impeccable moral constitution, "for what inspired God to endow Moses with the holy spirit was his good deeds." Netziv then directs his attention to that quality of the nation which warranted the holy spirit at Sinai and similarly accounts for it by ethics, but in particular an ethic that is expressed nationally as opposed to the personal ethics of Moses evident in his "good deeds." That national ethic Netziv identifies is the communal spirit, the togetherness, and the unity with which Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai: "and similarly when all of Israel approached Sinai it was privy to the holy

spirit even before possessed of any Torah *because they were encamped in peace*" (emphasis mine).⁷⁶ Thus, if Sinai is Judaism's foundational event, then the religion and the people decidedly emerge from an exquisitely public instant of a relationally integrated collective as opposed to Maimonides' individually thinking minds.

After this overview of Netziv's engagement with and opposition to Maimonides, one better understands the sentiments expressed by two of Netziv's most prominent disciples who ultimately turned their back on the yeshivah world in general and the kind of theology typified by Netziv in particular. Mikhah Yosef Berdyczewski penned a brief review of Netziv's commentary on the Song which was published together with Netziv's essay on antisemitism where he praised the latter work as a model for the rabbinic world, "leaving the Talmudic focus to attend to issues relevant to the nation as well."⁷⁷ However, Netziv's commentary did not receive as favorable a review, to say the least, since one "who is encumbered by a mountain of laws and regulations is bound to often distort its plain sense."⁷⁸ Berdyczewski's critique is better appreciated in contrast to Maimonides' explication of the Song. Although Maimonides may have also not followed the plain sense methodology in his exegesis, he could not be accused of reading the world of *halakhah* into the Song. On the contrary, the Song for him endorses the life of thought over action, the pursuit of philosophy and science over observance. At the same time, a line of poetry composed by Hayim Nahman Bialik, another of Netziv's wayward students, is far more nuanced once read in light of Netziv's opposition to Maimonides. One of his reminiscences about the yeshivah in Volozhin concerns those who were expelled for various malfeasances. In the company of those ejected from the yeshivah for such religious violations as smoking on the Sabbath, socializing with girls, and gambling is also "the one who hid himself with the *Guide* of the Perplexed."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ MS, 106.

⁷⁷ "Megilat Shir HaShirim shel HaNetziv," *HaZefirah* 25 (Tevet 5648 [1988]), 2. בצאתו מן הנקודה.

⁷⁸ שכל מי שהר של חקים וגדרים כפוי עליו כגיגית הוא מוכרח לעוות לפעמים את הפשט

⁷⁹ "The Yeshiva Student (HaMatmid)," in *Shirot Bialik: A New and Annotated Translation of Chaim Nachman Bialik's Epic Poems*, ed. Steven Jacobs (Columbus, OH: Alpha Publishing, 1987), 31–32. עם מורה נבוכים הסתתר.

R. Abraham Isaac Kook (20th Century)

A Kabbalistic Reinvention of Maimonides' Legal Code

RETRIEVING MAIMONIDES' INTELLECTUAL MYSTICISM

Virtually all ideological strains and genres of Jewish thought that preceded him converge in the voluminous corpus of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's (d. 1935) literary legacy. As such, his thought poses a fitting conclusion to this book as a kind of modern culmination of the Jewish thought continuum as a long series of engagements, disengagements, and appropriations of Maimonides. The elaborate complexity of his thought reflects the dizzying biographical, and often tormented, drama of his life, originating as a Talmudic prodigy (*ilui*) in Volozhin, the most prestigious of Eastern European rabbinic academies, through his passionate spiritual and political advocacy of Zionism, as a local rabbinic leader of the pre-State of Israel city Yafo, a stint as a pulpit rabbi in England, founder of his own independent political movement, and, ultimately, as the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Palestine. Throughout this frenetic communally activist career, his writing in various forms rarely ceased, leaving a prodigious record of his thought driven by an irrepressible urge to disclose his most intimate reflections no matter the consequences: "I must deliberate without any restraint, to pour onto paper without restraint all my heart's thought."¹

¹ *Shemona Kevatzim*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 2004), 1:295, hereinafter referred to as SK and cited by section (collection) and paragraph. This collection introduced for the first time many of R. Kook's writings as originally conceived and arranged, rather than what was previously available as collections edited by his students and son, Tzvi Yehudah Kook. For a close examination of its importance in understanding R. Kook and offering a new window into his thought, particularly in terms of chronological development, see Avinoam Rosenak, "Who's Afraid of Rav Kook's Hidden Treatises" (Heb.), *Tarbiz* 69, no. 2 (2000): 257–91, and Jonathan Garb, "Prophecy, *Halakhah*, and Antinomianism in the 'Shemonah Kevatzim' by Rabbi Kook," in *Shefa Tal: Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture Presented to Bracha Sack*, ed. Z. Gries et al. (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2004), 267–77. Unless otherwise noted, all Hebrew translations are my own.

Throughout his prolific career, R. Kook, unexceptionally for any scholar steeped in rabbinic thought, engaged the thought of Maimonides,² whose own corpus, in its thoroughly systematic nature, whether halakhic or philosophic, could not be more antithetical to R. Kook's.³ Writing for Maimonides was anything but unrestrained, often couched in language of "great exactness and exceeding precision," devised to exclude all but "the remnant whom the Lord calls."⁴ It is this engagement, more properly termed an appropriation, which forms the focus of this chapter, and in particular an early methodical, though fragmentary, commentary on the Book of Knowledge (*Sefer HaMada*), the [first section](#) of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah.⁵ It is also the most philosophically informed section of the entire work.⁶ More of an esiegetical reinforcement of his own thought than an objective commentary, R. Kook composed a philosophical exegesis that creatively reinvents Maimonidean *halakhah* and philosophy in an existentially kabbalistic register.⁷ In a sense,

² For a thorough and comprehensive overview of this engagement with Maimonides and the centrality of his thought for R. Kook, particularly with respect to the *Guide*, as well as secondary literature on the subject, see Uriel Barak, "The Formative Influence of the Description of the First Degree of Prophecy in the *Guide* on the Perception of 'The Beginning of Redemption' by Rabbi A. I. Kook's Circle" (Heb.), in *Maimonides and Mysticism: Presented to Moshe Hallamish on the Occasion of His Retirement*, ed. A. Elkayam and D. Schwartz, *Daat* 64–66 (2009): 361–415, at 364–70. Most relevant to the topic herein is his note on 365–66n14, regarding R. Kook's relationship to Maimonides' halakhic oeuvre including the Mishneh Torah.

³ See R. Kook's own self-appraisal as in "no sense a systematic writer," in *Iggerot HaReiyah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1943), 2:243, as well as the testimony of his most dedicated disciple David Cohen (the "Nazir") in his introduction to the first volume of *Orot HaKodesh*. See also Marvin Fox's rationale for this apparent "disorder" since "the lack of system is inherent in his subject matter and in his method" in "Rav Kook: Neither Philosopher Nor Kabbalist," in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, ed. Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 78–87, at 80.

⁴ GP, I:34, p. 75, citing Joel 3:5. Although, as Pines notes, "systematic expositions of the Aristotelian philosophers are often dislocated and broken up . . . in a word, order is turned into disorder" (lvii), it is intentional and he is systematic in his disorder.

⁵ In this enterprise R. Kook is an integral part of a vibrant engagement with Maimonides' thought by major exponents of the Hasidic movement throughout its history. Israel Dienstag offers a survey of this engagement, whose rationale he notes could also be apropos of R. Kook's, for "despite the consensus that Maimonides is a proponent of the 'mastery of the intellect' while hasidut reflects the emotional and poetic current of Judaism, there persists a spiritual proximity between them." See "The *Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Book of Knowledge* in Hasidic Literature" (Heb.), *Abraham Weiss Jubilee Volume* (New York: Hotza'at Va'ad Sefer ha-Yovel, 1964).

⁶ Indeed, Shlomo Pines has argued that Maimonides' halakhic works, including the Book of Knowledge, are even more radical in their Aristotelian formulations than his philosophical work, the *Guide*, in "The Philosophical Purport of Maimonides' Halachic Works and the Purport of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed. S. Pines and Y. Yovel (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 1–14.

⁷ R. Kook's thought reflects virtually the entire spectrum of Jewish mysticism that preceded him. For a panoramic listing of those influences see Lawrence Fine, "R. Abraham Isaac Kook and the Jewish Mystical Tradition," in Kaplan and Shatz, *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, 23–40 at 25. Gershom Scholem celebrated his oeuvre as "a veritable *theologia mystica* of Judaism

R. Kook applied the methodology he ascribed to Maimonides' appropriation of Aristotelian philosophy to his very own appropriation of Maimonidean philosophy, for "he did not follow Aristotle and his Arabic philosophical commentators blindly, but rather investigated, distinguished, and refined the matters . . . and after it became clear that there was no contradiction to the fundamentals of the Torah and he was convinced by them, he did not hide the truth declaring that they were his opinions, and determined it proper to explain the written and the oral laws in light of them."⁸ R. Kook himself, as evidenced in his commentary on the Book of Knowledge, adopts this very same stance of intense scrutiny to reconcile Maimonides' thought with his own.⁹ Though much of the commentary relates to technical halakhic issues, what follows attends primarily to its nonhalakhic, philosophical/kabbalistic engagement.

As opposed to ibn Gabbai's approach, which turned Maimonides' own terminology and philosophical structure against him in a systematic attack on Maimonides' in order to develop his own divergent kabbalistic theology, R. Kook systematically appropriates Maimonidean positions only to have them transcend their own rationalist limits to a kind of meta-metaphysics.¹⁰ This chapter, like the others in this study, focuses on how he achieves this appropriation in his sporadic commentary on the Mishneh Torah's Book of Knowledge.¹¹ Though unmentioned, the *Guide of the Perplexed* looms large in R. Kook's concerted subversion of Maimonides' rationalist grounding of the

equally distinguished by its originality and the richness of the author's mind." Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 354n17.

⁸ Kook, "Le'Ahduto shel HaRambam: Maamar Meyuhad," printed in Zev Yavetz, *Toledot Yisrael* 12:211–19; reprinted in *Ma'amarei HaReiyah*, ed. Elisha Aviner [Langauer] and David Landau (Jerusalem, 1984), 105–12.

⁹ Although the near obsession in the rabbinic world with the study of the Mishneh Torah has never abated since Maimonides' time, as Allan Nadler has shown, it has never shown the same love for the *Guide*. There was a revival of its study after a lengthy period of neglect and suppression in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. See Nadler, "The Rambam Revival in Early Modern Jewish Thought: Maskilim, Mitnagdim, and Hasidim on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 231–56. Although my study here focuses on what is another example of the long-standing exegetical tradition vis-à-vis the Mishneh Torah, as will become clear, the *Guide* looms prominently in the background.

¹⁰ In this exegesis of the Mishneh Torah, R. Kook bears a special affinity with that of Habad's engagement with it. See Jacob Gottlieb's full-length study *Rationalism in Hasidic Attire: Habad's Harmonistic Approach to Maimonides* (Heb.) (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2009). The last leader of Habad, R. Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, who related to the Mishneh Torah "on two levels, a rationalist and a kabbalistic one" (40), echoes R. Kook's approach.

¹¹ All citations will be to the edition "Orot HaRambam" in *Le-Oro: 'Iyunim be-mishnat Rabenu Avraham Yitsḥak ha-Kohen Kūk*, ed. Jacob Filber (Jerusalem: Ha-Makhon le-Heker Mishnat ha-Re'iyah, 1995), 161–233, hereafter referred to as OR. It was also reprinted in *Otzrot HaReiyah*, ed. Moshe Zuriel, 5 vols., 2nd ed. (Rishon Le-Zion: Yeshivat Ha-Hesder Rishon Le-Zion, 2001), 9–68. Yehuda Mirsky dates this composition to a time shortly after 1903 and R. Kook's first arrival in Palestine. See his "Rav Kook and Maimonides: A New Look" (Heb.), in *Iggud: Selected Essays in Jewish Studies*, ed. B. Schwartz, A. Melamed, and A. Shemesh (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2008), 1:397–405 at 399n9.

commandment to know, love, and fear God, the very first commandments enumerated by Maimonides in his tabulation of the *mitzvot*, and the first to be halakhically explicated in the Mishneh Torah.¹² In particular, comments on *halakhah* that share a metaphorical image or proof-text with the *Guide*, when examined closely, target both the Mishneh Torah and the *Guide* to construct a new intellectualist halakhic mysticism.¹³ My use of the term “subversion” is not meant to imply that R. Kook intentionally distorted a text into conveying a meaning he knew it in fact did not convey, contrary to the author’s intention. He believed that the *patent* sense of many Maimonidean texts offends their *real*, authorially intended, sense and therefore required conscious subversion so that the genuine sense would emerge seamlessly for his readers. One of R. Kook’s exegetical assumptions in reading Maimonides is that which was fundamental to rabbinic exegesis of scripture, what James Kugel has described as the “omni-significance” of the text. R. Kook adopted that same hyperliteral approach attributed to rabbinic midrash, which considers “that the slightest details of the biblical text have a meaning that is both comprehensible and significant . . . put there to reach something new and important, and it is capable of being discovered by careful analysis.”¹⁴

THE FINITE TORAH OF THE MISHNEH TORAH: A CONFIDENCE IN ACHIEVEMENT

R. Kook initiates his commentary with the epigraphic verse Maimonides cites to launch his introduction to the Mishneh Torah: *then I will not be ashamed when I look at all Your commandments* (Ps. 119:6). In Maimonides’ work, this served to immediately provide the rationale for the purported comprehensiveness of the Mishneh Torah, as its very title suggests, which would later provoke so much criticism.¹⁵ R. Kook postulates a finite and an infinite dimension to the Torah: The student must avoid stultifying shame and

¹² R. Kook considered the Mishneh Torah and *Guide* to be cut from the same cloth and aggressively criticized those who distinguish between the two in an essay on Maimonides, written shortly before his death, entitled “HaMaor HaEhad,” in *Maamarei HaReiyah* (Jerusalem: Hakeren al shem Golda Katz, 1984), 115–17. As Dov Schwartz concludes in his close analysis of R. Kook’s defense of Maimonides against his contemporary detractors, “Kook drew no distinction between Maimonides in the *Mishneh Torah* and Maimonides in the *Guide*.” Schwartz, “Maimonides in Religious-Zionist Philosophy: Unity vs. Duality,” in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 395.

¹³ If David Blumenthal is correct in his interpretation of Maimonides’ thought as leading to an intellectual mysticism, then R. Kook’s commentary may in fact be more properly classified as such than a “reinvention.” For his most recent formulation of this position, see “Maimonides’ Philosophical Mysticism,” in *Maimonides and Mysticism*, ed. A. Elkayam and D. Schwartz, *Daat* 64–66 (2009): v–xxv, and the comprehensive bibliography, xxii–xxv.

¹⁴ Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 103–04.

¹⁵ For the history of the charge against Maimonides that he intended his MT to do away with the need for the *Talmud*, see Isadore Twersky, “R. Joseph Ashkenazi and Maimonides’ *Mishneh*

humility in approaching the former, while the latter demands their adoption to an extreme degree. Though limitless in its scope, “there is a manner in which we can complete the entire Torah, and that is the definitive laws (*piskei bahalakhhot*) on which conduct depends.”¹⁶ Excessive humility holds the student back when he or she seeks to attain what is achievable in Torah,¹⁷ whereas its ethical posture is appropriate with respect to its limitless speculative and metahalakhic facets, which ultimately elude the human intellect.¹⁸ Thus Psalm 119:6 denies that shame is appropriate in seeking proficiency in *all Your commandments*, or the attainable normative/halakhic aspect of Torah.¹⁹ What is pertinent to this study is that R. Kook accepts Nahmanides’ explication of Exodus 24:11 – *and they saw God and they ate and they drank*, a reference to the prophetic vision of the *nobles of Israel* at the foot of Mount Sinai – to corroborate the notion of a finite Torah that can be mastered in its entirety. For Nahmanides the verse indicates a celebration of the Torah’s reception, akin to the rabbinic advice that whenever one completes a unit of Torah study, that accomplishment merits a banquet in its celebration.²⁰ The inference, of course, is that there is something in Torah that can be completed. However, its striking contrast with Maimonides’ own extremely negative view of this biblical passage, a view that could not have escaped R. Kook’s attention, invites further consideration of R. Kook’s methodology in explicating Maimonides’ project.

Maimonides considers the nobles’ vision to be a corrupt, anthropomorphic apprehension of God, as indicated both by its strongly physical description and by the festive gastronomic celebration following it, which, consistent with their

Torah” (Heb.), in *Salo Baron Jubilee Volume*, ed. S. Lieberman (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1975), 183–94.

¹⁶ OR, 161.

¹⁷ See, for example, SK 1:894: “There is more to fear from lowliness than from exaltedness.” See also 2:322; 6:242, where extreme humility prevents the righteous from fulfilling their mission and improving the world.

¹⁸ Lack of humility and acknowledgment of intellectual inadequacy when engaged with this dimension of Torah is tantamount to idolatry. See SK, 1:636, 886. As Daniel Frank has argued, Maimonides’ extreme position on humility is a reaction to Aristotle’s positive view of pride. On this issue, R. Kook would be closer to the Aristotelian position. See Daniel H. Frank, “Humility as a Virtue: A Maimonidean Critique of Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 89–99.

¹⁹ R. Kook’s valuation of *halakhah* cannot be overestimated, and this “pride” encouraged in the pursuit of the finite Torah motivated R. Kook to exert much of his effort during his later tenure in Jerusalem to pursuit of a halakhic project titled *Halakhah Berurah* that parallels Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, but for precisely opposing ends. His goal was to annotate the *Talmud* with all its pertinent references in post-*Talmudic* halakhic literature. Rather than divorcing practical *halakhah* from its *Talmudic* origins as Maimonides intended, R. Kook hoped to reverse that trend and remarry *halakhah* to *Talmud*, “creating a more profound identification between the [halakhic] investigator and the *Talmudic* corpus that must be mastered.” See Avinoam Rosenak’s discussion in *The Prophetic Halakhah: R. A.I.H. Kook’s Philosophy of Halakhah* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007), 404–05.

²⁰ *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:9; *Kohelet Rabbah* 1:1

corporeal apprehension, “inclined toward things of the body.”²¹ What led to the nobles’ deficient vision, according to Maimonides, was precisely that sense of confidence which R. Kook encourages in the pursuit of that which is attainable in Torah. In stark contrast to Moses’ act of supreme humility in covering his face at the burning bush, a gesture of intellectual restraint for the sake of gradual progress toward levels of knowledge for which he was not yet prepared, the nobles “were overhasty, rushing forward before they reached perfection.”²² R. Kook’s reference to this very same event as a successful religious enterprise, combined with Nahmanides’ reading of it as such, functions as a critique of Maimonides’ philosophical project at the same time as it commends his halakhic one. In Maimonides’ account, while the goal of both Moses and the nobles is attainable, reaching it or failing to do so depends upon the propriety of their efforts. For R. Kook, since the knowledge being sought consists of physics and metaphysics – or what are termed in the rabbinic tradition the Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot, the stated concerns of the *Guide* – the very assumption that this knowledge can be attained determines the ultimate failure to do so, regardless of method. For Maimonides, philosophical knowledge of God is distinct from jurisprudential knowledge of His norms because of their respective truth-values and difficulty of apprehension. R. Kook’s displacement of the nobles’ vision onto *halakhah* both locates its proper domain in law rather than philosophical speculation, and registers approval of Maimonides’ self-declared exhaustive codification of Jewish law.²³

Since the notion of humility lies at the core of Maimonides’ contrast between Moses’ apprehension and that of the nobles, it is also radically transformed by R. Kook’s explication here. R. Kook draws a distinction between negative and positive humility in the pursuit of knowledge.²⁴ The aspect of the Torah that can be mastered cultivates a constructive self-confidence that encourages learning

²¹ GP, I:5, p. 30. On this see S. Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and the Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 142–45, and Shaul Regev, “The Vision of the Nobles of Israel in Jewish Philosophy of the Middle Ages” (Heb.), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1984/85): 281–302.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ R. Kook’s favorable view of the “nobles” has its medieval precedents especially in Isaac Abarbanel’s extended defense of their vision. In fact, they may have shared the very same motivation. As Eric Lawee has argued, Abarbanel’s defense is intended as an endorsement of the superiority of prophecy over philosophy, and the nobles, as prophets, imperfect as they were, “must be viewed as superior to their post-biblical, non-prophetic critics.” See *Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 62–76, at 73.

²⁴ See also R. Kook’s discussion of the need for self-confidence in *Musar Avikha* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1971), 61–67, and Yehuda Mirsky’s analysis of its place in perfecting oneself, which “requires a complex balancing act between recognition of one’s ontological emptiness and a commitment to develop oneself. It can only proceed via careful introspection and the exercise of the mind,” in his “An Intellectual and Spiritual Biography of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Ha-Cohen Kook from 1865 to 1904” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2007), 201–05, at 204.

and study because it contemplates an attainable goal, for “since there is a way to attain some aspect of completion within the perfection of the Torah, although partial and minute in relation to its vastness, this principle fortifies human nature so that it can resist excessive shame.”²⁵ Conscious of Maimonides’ onerous intellectual demands, which restricts its Torah curriculum of physics and metaphysics to only the most trained and sophisticated of minds, R. Kook carves out a space for those who cannot possibly meet these requirements. That space, R. Kook claims, is created by the Mishneh Torah, whose goal is to convey one dimension of the Torah in its entirety. What Maimonides conceives as a pragmatic concession to human psychology and emotions in that it “settles the human psyche,” R. Kook transforms into a pedagogical stimulus that invites rather than excludes participants in the venture of studying Torah. R. Kook then channels that inclusiveness back into the fear of God, which, as strictly construed by Maimonides, also restricts its fulfillment to only the very few, since it reflects mastery of philosophic and scientific knowledge of the world. As he concludes, “Only when man is not ashamed can he aspire to acquire the type of shame that constitutes true fear of God.”²⁶ The fear of God, which Maimonides posited as a consequence of systematic philosophical contemplation, becomes, in R. Kook’s hands, confidence in the ability to master the halakhic dimension of Torah.

This multifaceted conception of a finite and infinite Torah manifests itself in Maimonides’ pedagogical program for children outlined in the *Laws Concerning the Study of Torah*, which advises “instructing little by little, a few verses at a time, until the age of six or seven.”²⁷ R. Kook contrasts this sporadic nature of early childhood pedagogy, unwed to any textual sequence, with a more orderly curriculum for mature students tied to the final version of the masoretic canon. Thus he points to a parallel between the two sides of the Talmudic debate concerning the mode of the original transmission of the Torah: The early childhood method corresponds to the view that the Torah was transmitted gradually, “scroll by scroll,” over a long time, and the adult one to the view that it was transmitted in its entirety all at once.²⁸ Counterintuitively, though consistently, R. Kook considers the disorder of the former more sublime than the order of the latter. Thus, “for infants at the beginning one ascends with what supersedes order . . . and inculcates in them the transcendent aspect, and afterwards one proceeds to teach them in an orderly fashion.”²⁹ Here R. Kook dislodges the

²⁵ OR, 162. R. Kook elsewhere also tempers Maimonides’ extreme position on humility and pride by narrowing the kind of pride Maimonides absolutely abhors to one “that has no ingredient of humility at all.” However, when that pride is informed by humility, it is a positive trait. See *Otzerot HaReiyah*, ed. Moshe Zuriel (Rishon Le-Zion: Yeshivat Ha-Hesder Rishon Le-Zion, 2001), 2:824.

²⁶ OR, 162.

²⁷ MT, Torah Study, 1:6.

²⁸ OR, 174, referring to b. Gittin, 60a.

²⁹ This is consistent with R. Kook’s general appreciation for the purity of childhood thought that must be preserved throughout life as one matures (SK, 2:358, 359); the innocence of children

scientifically programmatic development toward the highest truths of the Torah usually associated with Maimonides³⁰ by reversing its direction.

In R. Kook's writings, logic, order, and linear thinking, however necessary, might actually be an obstacle and distance one from the Torah's essence. Elsewhere he privileges a more naive mode of thought as the key to that essence, a kind of reasoning that is dominant in the pristine, untainted, and innocent soul of children, for "in truth it is not science and broad knowledge that perfects us, but rather the purity of childhood."³¹ While Maimonides' rigorous pedagogical curriculum is structured to evolve from the crude and elementary grasp associated with children to the advanced sophistication of adulthood, R. Kook envisions movement that ultimately retraces its steps to recapture the "disorder" of childhood and leads to a more transcendent Torah. With this comment R. Kook praises, as he does in numerous passages throughout his corpus, a virtue of childhood, in whose soul alone pulsates the "strongest and clearest essence of the ideal of existence."³² In contrast, Maimonides would normally dismiss the intellectual qualities of childhood as vulgar and infantile. R. Kook's distinction between childhood and adult Torah informs his conception of the ultimate educational goal (anticipated by Maimonides) of an exclusive focus on *pardes*, or natural and divine science. That pristine disordered Torah, inculcated at a young age, must be restored in order to extract "the good and the light that inhabit [Torah] in purity and strength," transcending the written and oral Torah. The basic, simplistic thoughts that Maimonides seeks to supplant are revitalized by R. Kook as "illuminating our way more than those thoughts we imagine are lofty and sublime."³³

MASTER COPY AND TRIBAL EDITIONS: THE MULTIPLE TRUTHS OF TORAH

In tracing the line of transmission from Sinai onward, Maimonides naturally begins with the written Torah, which was transcribed entirely by Moses, after

reflects an essence that can guide one's life "more than any thought we imagine to be sublime" (1:351); only that Torah digested in infancy has the purity to defeat evil (3:265).

³⁰ See, for example, Maimonides' description of the qualities of his student Joseph, the addressee of the *Guide*, who had mastered astronomy and mathematics prior to being taught "divine matters," and Maimonides' persistent appeal to "approach matters in an orderly manner" (4). See also GP, I:34, p. 75, for the necessary prerequisites to "achieve human perfection," which consist of logic, mathematics, natural science, and ultimately divine science reserved for "a few solitary individuals" and to be "hidden from the beginner" (79). The reason for this rigorous curriculum is, as Alfred Ivry points out, the need "of all the Josephs of this world . . . to realize that the bible is a sophisticated philosophical text." Ivry, "Strategies of Interpretation in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Jewish History* 6, no. 1/2, *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume* (1992): 113–30, at 122.

³¹ SK, 7:205.

³² SK, 6:284. See also 2:358, 359; 3:265; 7:15.

³³ SK, 1:351.

which “each tribe was given a copy and one copy was placed in the Ark as a witness.” For Maimonides the scroll in the Ark serves as a “witness” in the sense of a master copy to which all others can be compared for their accuracy and veracity. A witness testifies to an objective truth that is empirically verifiable and irrefutable.³⁴ R. Kook, in his commentary on the Mishneh Torah, views the copy in the Ark and the individual scrolls distributed to each tribe as paradigmatic of a plurality of individuated expressions of a single truth that underlies all existence. There are a multiplicity of approaches in Torah, which vary “according to the logic of each sage, dependent on temperament, and nature, and other factors,” reflected in the copies each tribe possessed. However, the image of the one copy in the Ark captures the converse notion of uniformity where, “*these and these are the words of the living God* and all is encompassed by the Torah of Moses.”³⁵

Once again R. Kook transforms what is at the very core of the Maimonidean project, both in philosophy and jurisprudence, into one closer to his own modern notion of Torah and, synonymously, of truth. Rather than each Torah being an exact replica of the master copy residing in the Ark, conforming to Maimonides’ notion of one absolute truth, R. Kook perceives truth in subjectivity, as the copies tailored to accommodate the respective spirits of each tribe indicate.³⁶ For Maimonides, although the language of the Torah is drafted to communicate different messages, those differences are marked by hierarchical levels that direct one toward an ultimate truth but are not full expressions of it. The primitive form of the Torah, considered by Maimonides as the meaning of the Talmudic dictum, *the Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man*, is a concession to the unsophisticated intellects of a mass audience, and not a valid articulation of the subjective nature of truth. R. Kook injects harmony, and therefore greater accessibility, into the origins of Judaism, whereas Maimonides probably would have conceived them in the opposite way as the master copy’s or universal truth’s highly restricted accessibility, enclosed in the Ark, available to Moses alone, and subsequently in its permanent place in the Temple, known solely to the High Priest. R. Kook brings the Mishneh Torah in line with his unified *weltanschauung*, which favors opposition and diversity over uniformity.

³⁴ Cf. for example the reason Mosaic prophecy is unimpeachable: not because of the miracles he performed, “but because our eyes saw and our ears heard just as he heard” (MT, Foundations of Torah, 8:3).

³⁵ OR, 163.

³⁶ R. Kook’s “pluralism” has been the subject of much discussion, but it is clear that his tolerance and pluralism did not stem from what we usually associate with liberal democratic principles. It was a result of his metaphysical worldview that perceived difference only from a human perspective but a “monolithic undefined unity, with no distinction between disparate entities,” from God’s perspective. See Tamar Ross, “Between Metaphysical and Liberal Pluralism: A Reappraisal of R. A.I. Kook’s Espousal of Tradition,” *AJS Review* 21, no. 1 (1996): 61–110, at 89, and Benjamin Ish-Shalom, “Tolerance and Its Theoretical Basis in the Teachings of Rabbi Kook,” *Daat* 20 (1988): 151–68.

As he asserts elsewhere, godliness inheres “within divisions and disagreements, not essential opposites and disharmonies, but rather *these and these are the words of the living God*” where even subjectivity “can apprehend the essence that unites and perfects all.”³⁷

DRAWING DOWN GOD’S HESED: REATTRIBUTING MAIMONIDES’ ATTRIBUTELESS GOD

R. Kook continues his reinvention of Maimonides, immediately after the introduction to his *Mishneh Torah* commentary, with the epigraphic verse that opens the Book of Knowledge: *Draw down your hesed on those who know you and your tzedakah on the upright of heart* (Ps. 36:11).³⁸ For R. Kook, the pairing of *hesed* with knowledge and *tzedakah* with the heart suggests divine reciprocity between two different facets of a human being: the intellectual and the emotional/psychological. Crucial to note here is what I believe to be R. Kook’s subversion of Maimonides’ own definitions of divine “grace” and “righteousness,” infusing them with a relational dimension conspicuously lacking in their original formulation. When descriptive of God, who possesses no attributes, these are attributes of action or of those aspects of His creation that would elicit such characterizations, were they examples of human behavior. If *hesed*, according to Maimonides, is the conferring of an unwarranted benefit on a beneficiary who has no claim to it, then divine *hesed* is to be taken in that sense “because He has brought the all into being.”³⁹ Concomitantly, *tzedakah* is the fulfillment of a moral duty such as “remedying the injuries of all those who are injured” rather than discharging a formal legal duty such as paying wages owed to an employee. Divine *tzedakah*, then, is a description in human terms of what we see operative in the world, “because of His mercy toward the weak – I refer to the

³⁷ SK, 1:498. Though R. Kook endorses the maxim that “[t]he Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man,” his understanding of it and the anthropomorphic images of the Bible is, as Lawrence Kaplan argues, critically different. Rather than a pragmatic pedagogical tool which must be overcome to attain the truths that crude corporealism points to, R. Kook considers it an essential “symbol” that “constitutes an ineluctable, inescapable, and permanent necessity when speaking of God.” See Kaplan, “Rav Kook and the Philosophical Tradition,” in Kaplan and Shatz, *R. Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, 41–77, at 48.

³⁸ Marvin Fox’s cautionary advice to all readers of the *Guide* never to ignore those verses that lead off the various sections of the *Guide* applies equally to the *Mishneh Torah*. He demands that they “should not be thought of as mere adornments with no substantive significance, but should be studied with care to see what message the author is conveying to his readers. One might say that this is the first test of the competence of the readers. Readers who ignore these verses or fail to investigate the implications fully have already shown insufficient sensitivity to the text.” See Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 154. In his explication of this verse and the verse that leads off the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, R. Kook abides by this same advice.

³⁹ GP, III:53, p. 632.

governance of the living beings by means of its forces.”⁴⁰ In relation to divine omnipotence, all living beings are considered “weak.” God’s creation of all living things includes endowing them with all those natural biological mechanisms (“forces”) necessary to sustain themselves. From a divine perspective, the two ethical terms of generosity simply refer to the establishment of nature – in the case of *hesed*, its inception, and in that of *tzedakah*, its perpetuation. *Imitatio dei* charges human beings with the duty of assimilating the traits they perceive to be inherent in nature in their ethics.⁴¹ Knowledge, as codified in the first two sections of the Mishneh Torah, undergirds ethics, as the title *Deot* of the section, usually rendered as “Ethical Traits,” would suggest.⁴² Thus the verse that launches these sections is transformed from supplication for divine beneficence, which is unaffected by human behavior, to a petition for success in the juridical effort to inculcate these ethics in Maimonides’ audience.

R. Kook understood that Maimonides, by refusing to attribute human qualities to God, shifted the onus to mankind, in a sense replacing God by man with respect to the ethical aspects of the world. In contrast to Maimonides, he imbues the world with *hesed* and *tzedakah*, thus restoring them to the province of God as their endower. *Hesed*, for him, is not unwarranted but unneeded. In the enigmatic terms of kabbalah, as opposed to the rigorous terms of philosophy, it perfects the already perfect, taking it to even greater heights of perfection, while *tzedakah* redresses the deficient, succors the needy. The first half of the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* For an extended discussion of the meaning of *tzedek*, which demonstrates its thorough intellectualization in the thought of Maimonides, see my “Forging a New Righteous Nation: Maimonides’ Midrashic Interweave of Verse and Text,” in *New Directions in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Elliot Wolfson and Aaron Hughes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 286–325, at 293–300, where I conclude that *tzedek* “is no longer a legal or ethical mode of conduct, but it is a posture vis-à-vis one’s own intellect.” This highlights its contrast with R. Kook’s view that follows herein.

⁴¹ What this means for Maimonides is that while people normally exhibit moral behavior emotively, God’s actions strictly accord with what reason dictates is appropriate. Genuine *imitatio dei*, then, is, as Herbert Davidson has so ably argued, to act morally but dispassionately. See his “The Middle Way in Maimonides’ Ethics,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 54 (1987): 31–72.

⁴² On the use of the term *deot* by Maimonides for ethical traits (rather than a more likely term such as *middot*), see R. Weiss, who attributes the choice to that which distinguishes man from brute: his intellectual form. Maimonides thereby “intellectualizes the character traits by calling them *deot*. He also stresses the effect of moral conduct upon the mind by treating character traits as *deot*” [“Language and Ethics: Reflections on Maimonides’ Ethics,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9 (1917): 425–33, at 430]. Leo Strauss translates *deot* as “ethics” [“Notes on Maimonides’ Book of Knowledge,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. Scholem*, ed. E. E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and Ch. Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 269–83, at 270], while S. Schwarzschild prefers “morals” [“Moral Radicalism and Middlingness in the Ethics of Maimonides,” in *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, ed. M. Kellner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 37–160, at 143]. For the most detailed and comprehensive examination of the term *deot* as an ethical disposition, see Bernard Septimus, “What Did Maimonides Mean by *Madda*?” in *Me’ah She’arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Ezra Fleischer et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 83–110, at 96–102.

verse involves such a *hesed* “without which there is also perfection, however the light of *hesed* elevates the one who knows God to a higher and more sublime level.” The second half invokes a *tzedakah* that “compensates for deficiency . . . for those upright of heart to incorporate through knowledge the practical and ethical within it.”⁴³ Once man naturally perfects his knowledge of God, another realm of existence is unleashed from which the “light of *hesed*” shines, illuminating a route toward an even more extended perfection. R. Kook’s interpretation of this verse introduces another reality at the point where Maimonides’ human one would normally end. The borders of the world pertinent to man within Maimonides’ framework are configured by the intellectual capacity of the mind, while for R. Kook that limit marks the entryway to a further God-suffused reality depicted figuratively as an emanative light that envelops all. R. Kook’s exegesis raises the stakes of the Mishneh Torah project from its purported exclusive concern with law and practice, generally, and the natural science and metaphysics of Foundations of Torah, particularly, to one of kabbalistic metaphysics. It views the “drawing down of *hesed*” as far more than a mere incorporation of an ethical trait extrapolated from the workings of nature, but as one which draws down another reality that supersedes mundane perfection. In that drawing down there is a reflexive ascent to the purest origins of the world of emanation (*atzilut*) where all is good.⁴⁴ As R. Kook states elsewhere in explicating this same verse, “The *hesed* which we aspire to draw down by way of knowledge is knowledge of the name of God that transcends the supernal value of the *hesed* of *elohim*, which glimmers from the shade of the supernal wings, and the drawing down of the *hesed* is the elemental *hesed*, that is drawn to those who know God.”⁴⁵

REVERSING THE PRIORITIES OF LOVE AND FEAR OF GOD

For Maimonides, knowledge achieves intellectual enlightenment and thereby enhances knowledge of God, while for R. Kook it transcends its own rational limits to tap into a divine realm from which it “draws.”⁴⁶ Thus, it channels a *hesed* whose essence is that it is unwarranted, and it also transforms another

⁴³ OR, 170.

⁴⁴ In the kabbalistic tradition R. Kook was working with, this world (*atzilut*) is the highest of all worlds “conceived as being substantially identical with the divinity and the En Sof.” See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 272. R. Kook follows suit, viewing it as the location where the “uppermost emanation is purely good” (SK 1:547).

⁴⁵ *Olat Reiyah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1963), 2:21. According to R. Kook this is a return of the material world to its pure origins, a reversal of the progressive devolution from light to matter along a route from nature back to *atzilut*. See, for example, SK 1:547.

⁴⁶ R. Kook is another exemplar in a long line of kabbalists who consider philosophical thought limited in the ultimate truths it can access. See, for example, the studies of Aviezer Ravitzky, “Samuel ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87–123, and Moshe Idel, “*Sitrei Arayot* in Maimonides’ Thought,” in Pines and Yovel, *Maimonides and Philosophy*, 79–91. As Elliot Wolfson has demonstrated, one of the pioneers of

facet of the noetically developed relationship with God that Maimonides posits. For him, whatever aspect of the divine is gained by knowledge is a natural consequence of it and therefore warranted by it, “for providence is consequent upon intellect and attached to it.”⁴⁷ Setting aside the possibility of divine intervention that might interrupt the prophetic process, Maimonides concurs with the philosophical position that once his rational, imaginative, and moral qualities are perfected, a person “will necessarily become a prophet, inasmuch as this is a perfection that belongs to us by nature.”⁴⁸ Since R. Kook’s notion of knowledge allows for transcending the boundaries of reason, its objectives are not subject to any rules or mechanisms that automatically dictate their realization once certain levels of knowledge have been achieved, as they are in Maimonides’ thought. That is why R. Kook reverses the priorities that Maimonides had set for love and fear of God when defining them halakhically. Love results from “comprehending [God’s] actions and magnificent creations and perceiving from them an inestimable and infinite wisdom.” Fear then follows this understanding when one “immediately retreats and is frightened and aware of one’s minute, lowly, and dark creatureliness that persists in weak and superficial knowledge compared to the Perfection of all knowledge.”⁴⁹ R. Kook transforms what appears to be a reflex of the ultimate goal of love⁵⁰ into a higher state of consciousness for which love sets the stage: “from the words of our master it appears that fear of the Exaltedness is a superior level that is consequent to a perfected love.”⁵¹ Maimonides continues, stating that, in

this school who also engaged Maimonides, was Abraham Abulafia, whose own mode of transmitting mystical gnosis derives from “a complex synthesis of the Maimonidean perspective and the acceptance of an oral tradition that transcends philosophical orientation.” See *Abraham Abulafia: Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000), 77–78. R. Kook’s own hermeneutical engagement with Maimonides has medieval roots. For a different Hasidic hermeneutic which views the *Guide* and the Zohar as sharing a common esoteric tradition, see Shaul Magid’s detailed treatment of the Izbica and Radzin tradition of appropriating Maimonides’ *Guide* in *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica and Radzin Hasidism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

⁴⁷ GP, III:17, p. 474.

⁴⁸ GP, II:32, p. 361.

⁴⁹ MT, Foundations of Torah 2:2. Lawrence Kaplan has already ably argued for R. Kook’s reversal of Maimonides’ directional movement of love itself, which he claims progresses from a cold intellectual love to a passionate desirous one in Maimonides, while R. Kook follows the reverse route from passionate, intuitive love to a refined love. Though that may be the case with love, what I argue here is that ultimately the path toward perfection does not end there. Rather, it is preliminary to “fear” as described here. See his “The Love of God in Maimonides and Rav Kook,” *Judaism* 43, no. 3 (1994): 227–39.

⁵⁰ Maimonides does abandon this intellectually based fear formulated at the beginning of the Mishneh Torah for a more popular-based one afterward, which Howard Kreisel hypothesizes is attributed to the fact that “inferior forms of fear play an important role for the masses’ observance of the Law.” Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law and the Human Ideal* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 259.

⁵¹ OR, 173.

consonance with his definitions of love and fear, he will proceed to “explain important principles of the works of the Master of the universe that will serve as an entryway (*petah*) for the intellectual to love God.”⁵² R. Kook ingeniously reinforces his reversal of Maimonidean priorities by midrashically reading *petah* as referring to love. In other words, love is merely the *preliminary*, the “entry-way,” for further degrees of perfection.

The significance of Psalm 36:11, as it resonates in R. Kook’s inversion of fear and love, is accentuated by his distinction, presented in the same comment, between lower and higher forms of fear corresponding to pre-love and post-love manifestations of it. The former is simple fear (*yirah peshutah*) motivated by the literal fear of punishment or reprisal, while the latter is a more direct fear of God (*yirat hakavod veharomemut*) uncompromised by ulterior concerns for one’s own welfare. This stratification of fear, repeatedly endorsed elsewhere in R. Kook’s corpus,⁵³ is particularly pertinent to his exegetical engagement with the Mishneh Torah. Since the professed intention of that work is to provide a comprehensive guide to all of *halakhah*, or mandated Jewish practice, it runs the risk of cultivating an inferior form of fear caught up in the myriad of details Jewish law involves. This fear is best expressed by R. Kook in another context, unrelated to the Mishneh Torah, which itself climaxes in the utopian state envisioned by Psalm 36:11. Concern with the minutiae of the *mitzvot* stems from two sources, the lower one of fear of punishment and a much enhanced one, from “the current of the light of life within the source of apprehension.”⁵⁴ That apprehension consists of consciousness of the sanctity of the *mitzvot* along with “the unity of the soulful nature of Israel with all the *mitzvot*, their different classifications, and branches of their branches.” The ascent from that elementary fear is propelled by an overarching appreciation of the entire command structure and its intrinsic relationship with the whole community of Israel. Simple fear is fragmentary, manifested by a religiosity that is itself fragmentary in its obsession with details. Practice obsessed with concern for *mitzvot* lacking a deeply felt, integrated conceptual grasp of them amounts to a “sham frumkeit” containing an “alienating and foreign kernel.”⁵⁵ What must be read into R. Kook’s

⁵² Here I agree with Menachem Kellner’s interpretation [also citing Lawrence Berman’s “Ibn Bajjah viHaRambam” (Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1959), 37] that Maimonides’ notion of human perfection entails two tiers of *imitatio dei*, one “before intellectual perfection and an imitation of God after such perfection. In other words, we obey God before intellectual perfection out of fear and after intellectual perfection out of love.” See Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 39.

⁵³ His development of this hierarchy of fear runs throughout his writing. For a few examples, see SK, 2:264, for the power of the superior fear possessed by the righteous; 2:304 for the evolution from “simple fear” to the superior form advanced by the progressive removal of doubts about reality and God; 1:274; 2:332, 333 for the detriment of excessive simple fear; 6:25 for fear that cultivates despondency and retards spirituality; 6:272 for how to elevate an overwhelming crude fear to the higher form of *yirat romemut*.

⁵⁴ SK, 6:125.

⁵⁵ SK, 5:241.

interpretation of Maimonides' epigraphic verse is the assurance he sees expressed by it in one of his meditations that the petty legalistic attitude fueled by "the lower spring of fear of punishment" inevitably ascends to "the upper spring of the light of life."⁵⁶ In R. Kook's hands, then, the verse spiritually reinforces what is purported to be a comprehensive legal code to inspire a love-grounded holistic fear over the legalistic religiosity it is most prone to induce.⁵⁷

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: TO NOT KNOW GOD

At the commencement of each section of the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides tallies all the positive and negative commandments contained therein, and so R. Kook's first substantive comment on the body of the *Mishneh Torah* appears on the very first positive command "to know that there is a God." Its argument revolves around a hyperliteral reading, which renders it as "to know *there* is a God," taking the term "there" (שם), an innocent Maimonidean locution for simply "there is,"⁵⁸ as a locational referent to another realm of knowing. Parallel to the two dimensions of the Torah postulated by R. Kook in the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah* and discussed previously are two epistemological ones with respect to God. They consist first in the proposition "that knowledge acquired through things that are possible to know, that is recognition of Him through His actions," and second "that aspect of knowledge which is impossible to know."⁵⁹ The term "there" refers to this latter, superior form of knowledge which is "hidden" (נעלם), and comprised of a rigorous and methodical not-knowing that grasps its inaccessibility by establishing "its parameters, and the reasons preventing complete knowledge of the divinity." For Maimonides there is no other human knowledge than that first type, identified by R. Kook as being gained "through His actions," an unequivocal reference to Maimonides' theory of attributes of action.⁶⁰ The latter are solely what we can affirm of God while direct attributes must be negated "undoubtedly com[ing] nearer to Him by one

⁵⁶ SK, 6:126.

⁵⁷ For the distinctions between a primitive fear and an advanced one that only appears outwardly to be opposed to human autonomy in its subordination to a supreme power, but in reality "is the motive power of life," see Benjamin Ish-Shalom, *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism*, trans. O. Wiskind Elper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 114–15, 140–41.

⁵⁸ *Sham* is in all probability simply the Hebrew equivalent of the Arabic *fi*, meaning "there is," and has no metaphysical implications whatsoever. I thank the anonymous reader of this chapter for this observation.

⁵⁹ OR, 171.

⁶⁰ See, for example, GP, 1:58–59. For a recent and typically concise exposition of Maimonides' theory of attributes of action, see Kenneth Seeskin, "Metaphysics and Its Transcendence," in the *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 83–91. As he states, "They are not descriptions of God, but descriptions of what God has made or done" (87).

degree.”⁶¹ In another context, independent of the Mishneh Torah, R. Kook draws an analogy between Maimonides’ negation of attributes and his “negation of a purpose to the universe and the negation of reasons for the details of *mitzvot*.”⁶² R. Kook argues that they all share in an ineffability that exceeds our limited intellects. However, he concludes, all three are treated as one class by Maimonides, “who did not negate them intrinsically from the essence of their reality, but only from the capacity of our expression.”⁶³ Maimonides, though, argues at great length that to affirm attributes of God is tantamount to inventing an imaginary being “an invention that is false; for he has, as it were, applied this term to a notion lacking existence as nothing in existence is like that notion.”⁶⁴ Refraining from positive attributes is not merely a matter of human incapacity. It is a truth claim. R. Kook’s creative reading of “there” reserves a space for what Maimonides would consider a distortion of reality or, worse, idolatry, for a meta-reality where God resides in the fullness of attributes.⁶⁵

Although Maimonides’ negative theology itself may culminate in a philosophically informed ignorance, that is what ultimately lies within the purview of the human intellect. R. Kook’s telling “there” broadens the narrow intellectual straits to which Maimonides has confined the essential religious enterprise and the mandate to pursue knowledge of God in order to allow for faith.⁶⁶ This is an extraordinarily crucial exegetical move for it anchors the entire Mishneh Torah in a Kookian model of *homo religiosus*, for whom an exclusively intellectual mold is limiting and even stifles the religious spirit in its quest for proximity to God. Purely rational thought cannot adequately accommodate the fullness of the

⁶¹ GP, I:60, p. 144.

⁶² SK, 6:78. See Tamar Ross’s discussion of R. Kook’s view of divine attributes, which considers the theistic conception of absolute incomparability or likeness between God and the world as not “the absolute truth but a deficient perception.” Hence, R. Kook’s understanding of God is diametrically opposed to Maimonides’ for, as Ross states, “[I]t is only when we associate attributes with God himself . . . that [divinity] is disclosed in a form superior to that accessible to intellectual understanding.” Ross, “The Concept of God in the Thought of HaRav Kook” (Heb.), *Daat 9* (1983): pt. 2, pp. 39–70, at 46.

⁶³ *Ibid.* שלא שללם הרמב"ם בעצמות המציאות, אלא מיכולת ביטוינו.

⁶⁴ GP, I:60, p. 146.

⁶⁵ This notion of divine attributes is another formulation in a long history of kabbalistic struggles with the nature of the divine *sefirot* and Maimonides’ theory of negative attributes. As Moshe Idel has demonstrated, “Maimonides’ theory of negative attributes was not accepted at all by the mystics . . . they negate the attributes from the *ein sof* (the hidden God) only to attribute them to the *sefirot*.” What I have argued here regarding R. Kook is another example of a long line of mystics who, Idel claims, “view the negative attributes as an expression of the philosopher’s inability to appreciate any positive ingredients.” See “Divine Attributes and Sefirot in Jewish Theology,” in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed. S. Heller Wilensky and M. Idel (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989), 87–112, at 112.

⁶⁶ For a lucid analysis of faith in R. Kook’s thought, see chap. 1 of Dov Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads: A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism*, trans. Batya Stein (Leiden: Brill, 2002), esp. 27–30, where he concludes that faith for R. Kook must transcend “human epistemological or intellectual capabilities,” since those only render an “epistemological illusion.”

holy within the Torah and the world according to R. Kook. This is consistent with R. Kook's views expressed elsewhere in his body of work on the spiritual inadequacy of reason on its own. One needs therefore to boost reason, to "inject the components of reason which operate on the basis of their order and nature into the highest emanation of the holy spirit to extract them from their confined and constricted existence in which they find themselves, to their expanses, to the world of supernal freedom."⁶⁷ R. Kook's microscopic reading of Maimonides' inaugural formulation of the first mitzvah in the Mishneh Torah thus "injects" his own existential/kabbalistic thought into what is patently an Aristotelian formulation of God as a "primary existent" (מצוי ראשון) that lies within the scope of human knowing.⁶⁸ In supplementing the Maimonidean rational endeavor with a hidden realm, R. Kook also resolves a long-standing "contradiction" perceived by rabbinic thought between the Mishneh Torah's formulation to "know" (לדע) God and that of the Book of Commandments' (*Sefer HaMitzvot*) to "believe" (להאמין) in God. Regardless of its chimeric attempt to harmonize the original Hebrew expression in the Mishneh Torah with a Hebrew translation of a Judeo-Arabic expression in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*, what is essential to what we have argued is R. Kook's systematic derationalization of the Mishneh Torah.⁶⁹ The duplicitous language, claims R. Kook, precisely captures the totality of the mitzvah to know God, which is fulfilled by

⁶⁷ SK, 5:88, p. 233. להכניס את מערכי הלב ההגיוניים העושים את דרכם על פי סדרם וטבעם אל. האצילות העליונה של רוח הקודש להוציאם מתוך החיים הצרים והמצומצמים שהם נתונים בהם למרחביה לעולם החרות

העליון. As Hugo Bergman notes, for R. Kook, rational reflection only presents a fragmentary and disconnected view of reality, while only the "non-rational faculty of his inner vision and the power of his imagination" can "push beyond the fragmentariness of conceptual knowledge and discover the underlying principle." Bergman, "Rav Kook: All Reality Is in God," *Faith and Reason: Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 125.

⁶⁸ What can and cannot be known according to Maimonides' epistemology is an issue of considerable debate. For a particularly lucid overview of the various schools of thought on the extent of Maimonidean skepticism and the limits of the human intellect, see Josef Stern, "Maimonides' Epistemology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, 105–33, and especially his eminently sensible suggestions regarding a Maimonidean endorsement of the theoretical life that can at the same time "take into account his skepticism about metaphysical knowledge" at 127–29. For a list of all the major scholars involved in the debate, see 130–31n16. See also his "The Knot That Never Was," *Aleph* 8 (2008): 319–39, and all the other articles in the forum discussion of that issue relating to "Maimonides on the Knowability of the Heavens and Their Mover," 151–317, as well as Stern's extended discussion in "Maimonides on the Growth of Knowledge and the Limitations of the Intellect," in *Maimonide: Philosophe et Savant*, ed. T. Levy and R. Rashed (Louvain: Peeters, 2004), 143–91.

⁶⁹ Much ink has been spilled in the rabbinic academy on the perceived contradiction between the first commandment as listed in the *Sefer HaMitzvot* in the ibn Tibbon translation as "to believe" (להאמין) in the existence of God and that of the Mishneh Torah which begins with the mitzvah "to know" (לדע) that Being. What ibn Tibbon translated as "to believe" is *itikad*; therefore, the Mishneh Torah is perfectly consistent with the *Sefer HaMitzvot*. See Abraham Nuriel's discussion in "The Concept of Belief in Maimonides" (Heb.), *Daat* 2–3 (1978–79): 43–47, at 43, and R. Haim Heller's first note to the first commandment of his edition of the *Sefer HaMitzvot* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1946), 35.

“revealed knowledge and hidden knowledge,” the “*there*” being real knowledge. “There” directs you to the realm in which “belief” is operative and is captured by the *Sefer HaMitzvot* formulation, “for that aspect of knowledge defined as not knowing is perfected afterward clearly in the form of faith.”⁷⁰ R. Kook identifies that hidden realm which invokes faith, in another passage unrelated to the Mishneh Torah, as a point at which “all knowledge is vitiated, and all classifications and strict logic is absolutely nullified as it ascends conceptually, there resides the hidden *shekhina*, and there the divine revelation flickers. Like light that appears through the cracks *running and returning as the appearance of a flash of lightning* (Ezek. 1:14).”⁷¹ It is no coincidence that R. Kook cites a key verse from Ezekiel’s Account of the Chariot in order to remystify Maimonides’ naturalistic exegesis of it,⁷² thus elevating it from its scientific, logical, empirical framework to the realm where all such criteria break down.⁷³

Maimonides uses two phrases at the substantive beginning of the Mishneh Torah to express the crucial nature of the mitzvah to know God, calling it the foundation of foundations and the pillar of wisdoms (יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות). R. Kook assigns these phrases to the two realms of knowledge, respectively. Since the not-known, inaccessible by science or philosophy, is more sublime than

⁷⁰ OR, 171.

⁷¹ SK, 6:278. שכל דעה מתבטלת, וכל הגדרה וכל הגיון מוגבל מתבטל בביטול אפסי בכל עת עלותו ברעיון, שם השראת השכינה. חבייה, ושם ההתגלות האלהית מתנוצצת, כאור הנראה מבין החרסים, רצוא ושוב כמראה הבזק

This closely parallels the affinity of R. Nahman of Braslav, a major Hasidic antagonist of Maimonidean rationalism, for the maxim “the ultimate knowledge is that we do not know.” See, for example, *Likutei Moharan* I, 24:8, and Ada Rapoport-Albert, “Self-Deprecation (*katnuth*, ‘*pesbituth*’) and Disavowal of Knowledge (*‘eyni yodea’*) in Nahman of Braslav,” in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. S. Stein and R. Loewe (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 7–33. For the most recent examination of this tenet of Bratslav thought, see chap. 7 of Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav* (New York: Continuum, 2009), where his description is equally applicable to R. Kook’s formulation here of “This knowing, yet not knowing, this attaining yet not attaining, is the ultimate knowledge” (230).

⁷² See Herbert Davidson’s decoding of Maimonides’ account, which reads “Ezekiel’s vision as a figurative depiction of the universe outside of God.” *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 348–49.

⁷³ One of the most striking implications of this meta-rational realm in R. Kook’s thought is his approval of the medieval Islamic Mutakallimun’s notion that everything that can be imagined as possible “in truth exists” (SK, 2:9), in stark contrast to Maimonides’ rejection of it. While Maimonides disparages their blurring of imagination and reality, R. Kook approves of their position that whatever can be imagined as possible in the sense that “the epistemological function of the imagination should be asserted joyfully.” See Shalom Carmy, “Rav Kook’s Theory of Knowledge,” *Tradition* 15 (1975): 193–203, at 195. See also Benjamin Ish-Shalom’s discussion, which presents R. Kook’s qualified endorsement of the Kalam as knitting together Kalam’s necessary possibility with Maimonides’ necessary existence to render a hybrid formulation in *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook: Between Rationalism and Mysticism*, 41–42.

its rational counterpart, it corresponds to the “foundation,” while the known corresponds to “wisdom” or sciences. That pairing, foundation knowing of the not-known and wisdom = knowing of the known, in turn corresponds to what follows in the next four chapters of the *Mishneh Torah* as the Account of the Chariot and the Account of Creation.⁷⁴ The latter correlates to “the known by way of the actions, that part of knowledge possible to know, while the *Account of the Chariot* images the knowledge impossible to know, the recognition of the hiddenness of the hidden.”⁷⁵ By drawing these equations, the entire section on the two most important disciplines in the Maimonidean curriculum, which comprise the content of knowledge of God, are informed by R. Kook’s kabbalistic epistemology. In so doing, R. Kook has also tempered Maimonides’ elitism, the onerous intellectual demands of which would exclude all but a very minuscule number of individuals from ever fulfilling the primary mitzvah of Judaism to know God. R. Kook endorses scientific progress as a means of increasing worldwide familiarity with the Account of Creation. Scientific advancement incrementally removes the Account of Creation’s esoteric cover since it is knowledge, he claims, “which becomes progressively an exoteric science that is investigated publicly.”⁷⁶ Such inroads into the Account of Creation, he argues in a discussion of it outside the context of the *Mishneh Torah*, “themselves are essential forces to opening the gates of the *Account of the Chariot*, that is the supernal channel that vitalizes the senses and the desires, the cognitions and the emotions, to grasp the depth of a formidable spirituality into the origin of eternal and perfect life.”⁷⁷

This core bidimensional epistemology carries through consistently further on in the section of laws governing the names of God where, at its outset, Maimonides describes those names as “the holy, the pure” (הטהורים הקדושים).⁷⁸ R. Kook first defines “holy” (*kadosh*) as “something separated and set apart beyond comprehension,” while “pure” (*tahor*) means “a clear comprehension untainted by false imaginings.”⁷⁹ Thus those epithets, as objects of human contemplation somehow

⁷⁴ MT, Foundations of Torah, 2:11, describes the subject matter of the first two chapters as the Account of the Chariot, and 4:10 dedicates chaps. 3 and 4 to the subject matter of the Account of Creation.

⁷⁵ OR, 171–72.

⁷⁶ SK, 1:597. R. Kook was a staunch advocate of the public dissemination of esoterica to “all hearts,” even to those “who have not reached that measure of expansive knowledge for the acquisition of broad and deep knowledge” (שלא באו למדה של דעה רחבה לקנין מדע רחב ועמוק). *Orot Hatorah* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat HaMerkazit HaOlamit, 1950), 56. See Jonathan Garb’s discussion in *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth Century Kabbalah* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 23–29. Indeed, the very title of this book is taken from a poem by R. Kook which expresses the hope that his kabbalistic thought, “which had hitherto been espoused by elitist circles (‘the Chosen’) only would turn into a mass movement of sorts (‘the herds’)” (27).

⁷⁷ SK, 1:597.

⁷⁸ MT, Foundations of Torah, 6:1.

⁷⁹ OR, 182.

capturing God's being, comprise both those realms.⁸⁰ R. Kook then hones in on the seemingly innocuous omission of the conjunctive "and" between the two adjectives "holy" and "pure" to corroborate his theory that knowledge of God is constituted by a knowing and a not-knowing. That grammatical quirk indicates that the two terms are inseparable, representing "one single notion to be pronounced in one breath, 'holy pure.'"⁸¹ R. Kook's attempt here to have the divine epithets subsume both realms of knowledge refers us to his concept of Names in which all the Names bridge the distance between existence and the *ein sof*, precisely that uppermost aspect of God within the kabbalistic sefirotic realm that is beyond all knowing, as "they sustain everything and call all to being."⁸² R. Kook's exegetical manipulation of the Mishneh Torah's normally unproblematic syntax elides Maimonides' philosophical taxonomy of divine names, as developed in the *Guide*. There he offers a noetic distinction between the Tetragrammaton and the other divine epithets where the former signifies God's *essence* stripped of any association with material existence, since, according to the Midrash, it preceded the creation of the world and therefore conveys an ontology absolutely distinct from it.⁸³ It also "is not indicative of an attribute but of simple *existence* and nothing else" (emphasis mine),⁸⁴ whereas all other divine names "derive from actions."⁸⁵ R. Kook infuses all the Names with the hidden dimension of not-knowing that transcends the essential/derivative classification, to incorporate the *ein sof*, or the "hidden realm," that indiscriminately inhabits every *expression* or utterance of God's name.⁸⁶ Thus, in his spiritual diaries, R. Kook

⁸⁰ R. Kook's use of these two terms, "holy" and "pure," here parallels the different senses in which he uses "intellect" throughout his corpus as delineated by Ish-Shalom. At times it designates a "secular intellect" based on reason, and at others a "holy intellect" which signifies mystical perception. See Ish-Shalom, *Between Rationalism*, 185.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² See SK, 1:756, p. 241. וְהָם הֵם הַמְקִימִים אֶת הַכֹּל, וְקוֹרְאִים אֶת הַכֹּל לַהֲרִיָּה. 241.

⁸³ GP, I:61, p. 149, adopting *Pirke deRabbi Eliezer*, 3.

⁸⁴ GP, I:64, p. 156.

⁸⁵ GP, I:61, p. 147.

⁸⁶ Due to the unsystematic nature of R. Kook's literary corpus, which consists of spiritual diaries rather than treatises, in a stream of consciousness-like presentation, his thought on this issue as well as others is often inconsistent and paradoxical. As Ben Zion Bokser describes it, the entries in these diaries "read like poems, or prose-poems, and they are independent meditations, each born in the newness of the experience that continued to unfold day by day." See his *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems* (NY: Paulist Press, 1978), 3. Sometimes R. Kook also makes distinctions between names. See, for example, SK, 2:5, p. 294. On the distinction drawn in this passage between *elohim* and *YHVH*, Shalom Rosenberg draws an analogy between it and Kant's phenomenon and noumenon. *Elohim* is the phenomenon, or nature, "veiled in the essence of being" (הַנִּמְסָךְ בְּעֶצְמוּתוֹהָ שֶׁל הַהֲרִיָּה), whereas *YHVH* is the noumenon which "subsumes past, present, and future, transcending temporal categories" (כּוֹלְלוֹת אֶת הָעֵבֶר הַהוּוֹה וְהַעֲתִיד לְמַעַל מִסֵּדֶר זְמַנִּים וְצוּרָתָם). Rosenberg, "HaReiy'a VeHaTanin HaIver," in *BeOro: Studies in the Thought of Reiyah Kook*, ed., Chaim Hamiel, (Jerusalem: Hotzaat HaTziyonit HaOlamit, 1986) 317–52, at 328. However, the general thrust of his thought is to avoid pigeonholing God with the various names.

poetically expresses a passionate paean to God, “the limitless (*ein sof*) light inhabits the expression of the name, the expression of *elohim*, and all the names and epithets that the human heart conceives and contemplates as the soul ascends higher and higher.”⁸⁷ R. Kook’s exegetical overlay would have Maimonides now in accord with this theological passion.

REUNITING GOD WITH THE WORLD: FROM THEISM TO PANENTHEISM

When defining the God that is to be known in fulfillment of the first commandment, Maimonides distinguishes between the essential being of God and the contingent being of all other existents, “for all existents are dependent on Him, but He, blessed be He, is not dependent on them and not any one of them, therefore His true essence is unlike the essence of any one of them.”⁸⁸ Here R. Kook transforms what is a purely Aristotelian formulation, which differentiates necessary from contingent existence,⁸⁹ into a kabbalistic distinction that lies at the very core of his panentheistic conception of reality. Maimonides’ rigid bifurcation of the material world versus God and the divine realm rules out the possibility of any kind of inherent presence of the divine in the world.⁹⁰ Indeed, one can characterize Maimonides’ entire philosophical enterprise as an attempt to maintain a strict separation between God and the world as captured by the *via negativa*, where there is nothing in common between God and the world and “the relationship between us and Him, may He be exalted, is considered as non-existent – I mean the relation between Him and what is other than He.”⁹¹ Conversely, R. Kook perceives a divine source of all life to be discernible in all things so that all distinctions evaporate and meld in the common universal

⁸⁷ SK, I:164, p. 66. שוכן הוא אור אין סוף בהביטוי של השם, בביטוי של האלהים, ובכל השמות. הכינויים שלבב האדם הורה והוזה, בהנשא נשמחו למעלה למעלה. For a complete translation of this as a poem, see *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, ed. and trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 373. R. Kook’s theory of names described here coincides with that of a mystical predecessor, Joseph Gikatilla, as Scholem describes it, where “[t]he Torah as published is completely founded and built on the tetragram; it is woven from the tetragram and its qualifying names, that is from the divine epithets which are derivable from it and emerge in it at any given moment.” See his “The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala,” *Diogenes* 80 (1972): 164–94, at 179.

⁸⁸ MT, Foundations of Torah, 1:3.

⁸⁹ See GP, I:57, p. 132, for his Avicennian formulation of this notion expressed in the MT that only “His existence is necessary . . . [it] is identical with His essence and His true reality, and His essence is His existence . . . Consequently He exists but not through an existence other than His essence.”

⁹⁰ It should be noted here that, as scholars such as Alfred Ivry have pointed out, there are many Neoplatonic dimensions to the *Guide*, with which Maimonides struggled, though readers of the *Guide* have been oblivious to them because of the *Guide*’s avowed admiration of Aristotle. See his “Maimonides and Neoplatonism: Challenge and Response,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 137–56.

⁹¹ GP, I:56, p. 130.

ground of all being.⁹² He confronted all appearances of opposition in order to uncover the reality of convergence between all things, which replaces distinction with the sameness of the divine underpinning of all existence. As he expresses time and again in his spiritual diaries, R. Kook's spiritual quest was fueled by an acosmism that sought to "demonstrate that in the place of fragmentation dwells unity, in the place of oppositions there resides identity, in the place of conflict there is the residence of peace. And what emerges from this is that in the place of the profane there is the dwelling of the holy and the light of the living God."⁹³

Employing a hyperliteral midrashic maneuver, R. Kook converts Maimonides' formulation from its strict separation between God and the world to a monistic one that transforms the object of the first commandment into one consistent with his mysticism. The catalyst for this reading is, first, superfluous language in the definition of God's utter noncontingent being as "not dependent on them and not any one of them." Why the need for "not any one of them" when the general proposition "not dependent on them" would have been sufficient to convey the notion of noncontingency? Second, the implication of the second half of the formulation – "His true essence is unlike the essence of any one of them" – would seem to be that it *is* like *all* of them. The key to deciphering this formulation, states R. Kook, is Maimonides' initial assertion regarding the nature of all existents outside of God as existing "only through His true existence," which means that "all existence is only in Him and from that perspective they all form a unity precisely like His unity . . . However from the perspective of all the existents it is possible to speak of division and fragmentation and individual existences."⁹⁴ This provides the solution to the first question: Contingency is ruled out from both the perspective of universal being and from that of particular existence. However, since, from the point of view of all of existence together, "nothing exists at all

⁹² Tamar Ross discovers a striking parallel on this between R. Kook and the neo-Hegelian English philosopher F. H. Bradley (d. 1924) who, "like R. Kook, was a metaphysical monist, believing, in line with the Parmenidean, Neoplatonic tradition, that only the One was real, leaving no room for the existence of separate entities, not even individual selves." Ross, "Between Metaphysical and Liberal Pluralism," 89.

⁹³ *Hadarav: Perakim Ishiim*, ed. R. Sarid, 3rd ed., (Dabri Shir: Ramat Gan, Israel, 2002), 130–31. See Nathan Rotenstreich's discussion of the holy and profane in R. Kook's thought, which is again informed by an ultimate harmony where the two coalesce in an ultimate unity at which point one views "the profane also in light of the holy, to know in truth that there is no absolute profane." Rotenstreich, "Harmony and Return," in *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times: From Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), 228–31, at 227. There is a large body of scholarship on acosmism and its doctrinaire appearance in Habad thought, but for one succinct overview, see chap. 11 of Rachel Elior's *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jeffrey Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), and the literature cited in 238n1, and most recently Elliot Wolfson's intensive study of it in *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁹⁴ See, for example, SK, 8:154, 292: "Everything that appears to us as a particular is not really in truth but one manifestation of a unified whole." כל מה שנראה לנו פרטי, איננו באמת כי אם הופעה אחת מהכלל. המאוחד.

apart from God, since everything exists through His true existence, and from that truth of His existence, nothing else exists at all.”⁹⁵ Therefore, R. Kook reasons, in the second half of Maimonides’ formulation, it is not possible to state that one thing is unlike another within the indivisible totality of existence, since that totality is identical with God. Unlikeness could only apply to “the existents when they are individuated.”⁹⁶ R. Kook radically subverts the strict separation Maimonides posits between God and the world, transfiguring him from an Aristotelian theist to a Hasidic panentheist.

This of course has far-reaching implications, especially for the way R. Kook reinvents Maimonides’ intellectualism, according to which whatever can be known of God the creator must be derived from a thorough knowledge of the creation. Reason and empirical observation, whose primary functions are to discriminate and classify, are the instruments of that knowledge. The very apex of human knowledge is reached by Moses, who achieves ultimate apprehension of God’s “goodness” in Exodus 33:19, which “alludes to the display of all existing things.” That “goodness” apprehended by Moses is the very *good* that God perceived after surveying the totality of creation on the sixth primordial day, when He viewed *all* that He made in Genesis 1:31.⁹⁷ If this Mosaic enlightenment is the pinnacle of human knowledge, then the outermost limit of the human intellect is a comprehensive grasp of all of nature, upon which one can ground contemplation of God. The two are utterly distinct.

For R. Kook that outermost limit is the point where all existence becomes one indistinguishable unity, where the all is in God and God is in the all. The most esoteric of all thought lies in a domain of knowledge that supersedes the highest allowed by Maimonides in his version of the Account of the Chariot. As a restricted area, off-limits to all but the most advanced of philosophers, Maimonides codifies the strict rabbinic restraints on its public teaching, since its subject matters “are extremely profound which most minds cannot tolerate . . . and with respect to them it is said *honey and milk under your*

⁹⁵ There are many formulations by R. Kook that express this panentheistic view of the world, but for just one that clearly demarcates two different views of reality and ranks the one that views God as creator and the world as His creation far inferior to the one that realizes that God “encompasses everything in a supernal and wondrous unity,” see SK, 2:92, p. 322.

⁹⁶ All the citations in this paragraph are to OR, 172.

⁹⁷ GP, I:54, pp. 124–25. Interestingly, R. Kook blends Maimonides on this episode of supreme intellectual achievement with modern and kabbalistic strains. He interprets the Talmudic tradition that what is meant by God revealing his “back” to Moses (Exod. 33:17–23) is the knot of His tefillin, in *Hevesh Pe’er*, a collection of early sermons on the significance of phylacteries, as the controlling power of the intellect. For a discussion, pertinent to our theme, of R. Kook’s engagement in these sermons with the philosophical tradition, and Maimonides in particular, to establish the primacy of the mind, see Yehuda Mirsky, “An Intellectual and Spiritual Biography,” 128–36, who concludes, “He was trying to navigate his way between the several spiritual traditions that he saw as his inheritance – Lithuanian Talmudism, medieval philosophy, and Kabbalah – granting primacy to the mind while linking it to a more dynamic cosmos than the one imagined by the philosophers” (136).

tongue (Song of Songs 4:11); the early Sages have explained this to mean that things that are like honey and milk should be kept under your tongue.”⁹⁸ A verse that for Maimonides forbids dissemination of esoteric knowledge and shrouds it in impenetrable secrecy becomes an endorsement of his panentheism for R. Kook and turns Maimonides’ medieval metaphysics into the kabbalistic meta-metaphysics of the unity of opposites. R. Kook identifies the inferior intellects that cannot sustain the depth of this metaphysics, as “narrow-minded,” trapped in the world of distinctions.⁹⁹ The broader one becomes in thought the more evident it appears “that even what is considered pure evil to the eyes is not absolute evil and is also necessary for the good, and the good emerges from it.”¹⁰⁰

R. Kook then draws on the honey/milk metaphor to transform what Maimonides considered a practical restriction on the public dissemination of esoteric disciplines into an endorsement of the identity of opposites. Milk and honey both violate the general halakhic rule that “all that is a product of something impure is itself impure,”¹⁰¹ for they are permissible despite their impure sources, thus analogously “all great things are compared to honey and milk, through which the impure becomes pure.” R. Kook’s theory of transubstantiation captured by the milk/honey metaphor closely resembles Habad’s appropriation of a medieval motif that the pig, the ultimate symbol of impurity in Judaism, will become pure in messianic times. Elliot Wolfson’s characterization of this utopian expectation in Habad thought as one that “culminates in an ontological transubstantiation and an axiological transvaluation”¹⁰² applies with equal force to R. Kook’s conception of a realm where the rigid distinctions between good and evil collapse in an overarching harmony of opposites.

⁹⁸ MT, Foundations of Torah, 2:12. A more fitting context would be difficult to find, since the next verse (12) repeats the terms for “locked” (*na’ul*) and “sealed” (*hatum*) three times, while verse 13 imports the rare term *pardes* into its garden imagery. The *pardes* is virtually impenetrable, both because of the formidable barriers the philosophical novice must overcome and because of the constraints imposed on dissemination of its material. See also Maimonides’ comments on Song 4:11 in his introduction to his *Mishnah im Perush Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon: Seder Nezikin*, ed. Joseph Kafih (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1965), 35.

⁹⁹ One needs to escape this “narrow-mindedness” to appreciate the ultimate harmony of all. See, for example, SK, 2:154: “for all contradictions appear only to the constrained intellect that has no value at all in contrast with the ultimate truth”; 2:270: “everything that appears distinct and opposite is only because of the smallness of their intellect and the narrowness of their perspective.” כי כל הנראה רבים כדברים חלוקים והפוכים. הוא רק מפני קטנות שכלם וצמצום השקפתם.

¹⁰⁰ OR, 173–74.

¹⁰¹ B. Bekhorot 7b.

¹⁰² Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 167. One of the core implications of Habad thought brilliantly elucidated by Wolfson in this study of “*coincidentia oppositorum*, a state where evil will be changed to good, impure to pure, and guilt into innocence,” is shared to a great extent by R. Kook, who himself was highly influenced by Habad theology.

R. Kook in a sense “transubstantiates” Maimonides’ own work here in two crucial ways. First, paradoxically, he grounds what is intended as a comprehensive legal code in a hypernomian foundation. *Halakhah*, or the normative, that which involves details and particulars, which invites dispute, which is historically and socially conditioned, anticipates its own utopian supersession. This is consistent with R. Kook’s own anguished self-reflective sentiments of the stifling effects of *halakhah* on those unique individuals who have transcended the pettiness of the individuated world where it normally operates. These extraordinary individuals, as he daringly posits elsewhere, altruistically fulfill their communal responsibilities as halakhic practitioners, while at the same time personally suffering “great internal conflicts,” since they “inhabit a plane so exalted that, should everyone exist on their level, the commandments would be dispensable, as they will be in the future.”¹⁰³ Second, it subverts the distinctions that Maimonides’ incorporation of the milk/honey image was meant to reinforce. For Maimonides it maintains an elite that holds a monopoly over profound knowledge that they are prohibited from sharing. For R. Kook it bears the message of the collapse of all distinctions, albeit one that is borne by an elite.

R. Kook strategically chooses the passage in the Mishneh Torah that defines the prophet in order to instantiate this theology of the identity of opposites. One of the essential prerequisites for prophecy, according to Maimonides, is the mastery of “an exceedingly broad and correct knowledge” (בעל דעה רחבה ונכונה עד מאד).¹⁰⁴ This, consistent with previous appearances of the phrase “broad knowledge” in the Mishneh Torah,¹⁰⁵ suggests intellectual depth and acuity that can attain perfection in the progressive acquisition of a definitive truth. R. Kook, though, takes it in the literal sense as the ability to accommodate a multiplicity of ideas. In keeping with the hyperliteral manner of reading, with which we are now familiar, R. Kook interprets “broad” and “correct” as two different psychological traits rarely possessed by the same human being. There is “the one of broad knowledge who can assimilate all opposing ideas but is not strong in the unique method appropriate to strong practice, while there is the one who is strong in practice because his mind is constrained by one idea in accordance with his character.”¹⁰⁶ The prophet, however, must combine the two qualities “that oppose each other, so that his mind is *broad* and encompasses the thoughts and ideas of many people, while at the same time it is *correct* and vigorous in the practice of the good.” The prophet singularly fuses normative inflexibility

¹⁰³ SK, 1:410: העולם היה במעמד, היו המצות, שגם אנשים גדולים כאלה, שמהלך רוחם הוא כ”כ נשא, עד שמצדם אם כל העולם היה במעמד, SK, 1:212, 400, 412. As Smadar Cherlow demonstrates in her examination of R. Kook’s SK, the diaries are not simply those of a mystic but of one who considered himself possessed of all the powers, duties, and goals of a hasidic rebbe, or a *tzadik*, in line with all the connotations of the phrase *tzadik yesod olam*. See Cherlow, “Rav Kook’s Mystical Mission” (Heb.), *Daat* 49 (2002): 99–135.

¹⁰⁴ MT, Foundations of Torah, 7:1.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:11; introduction.

¹⁰⁶ OR, 185.

with a meta-normative malleability that can harmonize diversity, accomplishing a unification that spans the entire spectrum of human thought.¹⁰⁷ According to Maimonides, the prophet is adept at popularizing a single truth by crafting norms that best direct most people toward the truth. R. Kook transforms that model into a human paradigm of the acosmism that constitutes existence in its totality. The prophet can govern practically by a rigid adherence to one unalterable set of norms, while at the same time he theoretically accommodates a myriad of conceptions and ideas subjectively held by many different individuals in a paradoxically unified whole. The prophet's capacity to combine qualities that "oppose each other" reflects the nature of reality. For Maimonides the prophet must adopt the language of the many to *teach* the truth of the One,¹⁰⁸ while for R. Kook the language of the many *is* in fact the truth of the One.

PROPHECY: ATTUNED TO NATURE OR IN CONTROL OF IT

Support for our contention that R. Kook's conception of the prophet endows Maimonides' model of the prophet with a suprarational dimension that aspires to achieve the unity of all opposites is R. Kook's interpretation of Maimonides' situating of human beings on the lowest rung of his cosmological intellectual hierarchy. The stars and the spheres occupy the intermediate rung of that hierarchy between the "angels" above and man below. His precise formulation, crucial for R. Kook's hyperliteral exegesis, is that "the knowledge of the stars and spheres is inferior to that of the angels but superior to that of men" (מעוטה מדעת המלאכים וגדולה מדעת בני האדם).¹⁰⁹ Apparent inconsistencies, contradictions, and lexical variations between similar contexts have always been the bedrock of rabbinic creativity and so, in good rabbinic form, R. Kook seizes on one here as an opportunity to promote his own theology through Maimonides. He discerns a contradiction between placing man on an intellectual level below the stars here and a statement in the [previous chapter](#) in the Mishneh Torah, where man is placed on a plane nearly equal to that of the angelic realm, which is situated beyond the stars. There, the *ishim*, the lowest category of angels, are those that communicate with prophets "because their level approximates to that of the level of human

¹⁰⁷ On this see Avinoam Rosenak's book-length treatment of *The Prophetic Halakhah*, especially 114–50 on the terms "sage" (*hakham*) and "prophet." What I have delineated here by the terms "broad" and "correct" precisely parallel those qualities of prophetic *halakhah* identified by Rosenak, which allow for "the balancing, in a dialectical manner, between the various impulses of prophecy and aggadah on the one hand and particularized *halakhah* on the other" (149).

¹⁰⁸ For the philosophical background to Maimonides' critique of emanationists and his solution to the problem of how multiplicity can emerge from simple unity, see Arthur Hyman, "From What Is One and Simple Only What Is One and Simple Can Come to Be," in Goodman, *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, 111–35.

¹⁰⁹ MT, *Yesodei HaTorah*, 3:9

intelligence” (שמעלתם קרובה ממעלת דעת האדם).¹¹⁰ Playing on the term “level,” which bears the sense of “above” or “beyond,” R. Kook resolves the apparent discrepancy by distinguishing between the phrase “level of intelligence,” indicating superior or extraordinary intelligence, and simple “intelligence,” referring to the average mind. The human intelligence close to that of the lowest angels is still “beyond the intelligence of common men,” for “ordinary men cannot achieve this level, only outstanding individuals,”¹¹¹ while most people function at a level below the stars. Prophetic intelligence borders upon the angelic realm, a level to which the mundane intellect can never aspire.

R. Kook’s concern with an inconsistency in this instance, unlike others previously encountered, is in fact legitimate. Indeed, his resolution of the inconsistency by drawing a distinction between average and singular intellects is remarkably astute, in that it draws attention to a preferable textual variant to which he was not exposed and which may very well vindicate his distinction. In the best manuscripts, we find the reading, the *knowledge of man* (דעת האדם), referring to knowledge on par with the lower angels, as opposed to *knowledge of the sons of man* (דעת בני האדם), referring to knowledge inferior to the stars and spheres.¹¹² Had R. Kook been working with this version, he probably would not have had to resort to a forced distinction between the two passages but could have more reasonably supported his idea on the basis of the subtle distinction between *man* and *sons of man*. When juxtaposed, the two precisely capture R. Kook’s distinction between the extraordinary individual in the former case and the common one in the latter. The anthropomorphic language of the Torah, for example, appeals to the *sons of man*, “I mean the imagination of the multitude,” which caters to the crude conceptions of God and the world held by the majority of humankind.¹¹³ They constitute the mass audience to whose intelligence the external, easily digestible, anthropomorphic language of the Torah caters, as suggested by the rabbinic maxim that Maimonides endorses: “The Torah speaks in the language of the *sons of man*.”¹¹⁴ The verse that Maimonides

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:7. See also GP, 2:6, p. 262, identifying all Jewish traditional references to angels with Aristotle’s separate intellects. In that chapter, Maimonides drains the term “angels” entirely of its mythological, ontological, and pagan connotations by equating them with any causal force in nature. Menachem Kellner considers this the most radical of Maimonidean subversions of tradition in chap. 8 on angels in his *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2006), 272–85.

¹¹¹ OR, 175.

¹¹² The MT editions of Moses Hyamson (New York, 1937), Shabse Frankel, and Joseph Kafih all concur in this text.

¹¹³ See GP, 1:26, pp. 56–57.

¹¹⁴ See Abraham Nuriel, “The Torah Speaks in the Language of the Sons of Man in the *Guide of the Perplexed*” (Heb.), in *Dat VeSafah*, ed. M. Hallamish and A. Kasher (Tel Aviv: Mifalim Universituyim leHotza’ah LeOr. 1981), 97–103, who notes that Maimonides transformed this rabbinic maxim, which originally limited halakhic creativity into an Aristotelian formulation that views biblical language as mythological. For its original connotations, as a distinguishing feature between the schools of R. Akiva and R. Ishmael, see Jay Harris, *How Do We Know This:*

chose for an epigraph for the *Guide* conveys this very distinction. The citation of Proverbs 8:4, “Unto you O men (*ishim*) I call and my voice is to the sons of men (*benei adam*),” envisages two very different types of readers, as the main classical medieval commentators on the *Guide* such as Efodi and Abarbanel, already point out.¹¹⁵ These two audiences precisely parallel the two intellectual hierarchies of the Mishneh Torah, with the former, the *ishim*, representing the elite whose intellects approximate that of the angel with which they are in contact, and the former, the *benei adam*, intellectually plebeian men who are inferior to the spheres and stars.¹¹⁶ The prooftext Maimonides cites to support his understanding of the term “man” (*adam*) is the following: “Both the sons of man (*bnei adam*) and the sons of an individual (*ish*)” (Ps. 49:3). In this verse, the phrase *sons of man* contrasts with the term “designating the multitude, I mean the generality as distinguished from the elite.”¹¹⁷ Maimonides’ use of this prooftext corroborates the distinction drawn by R. Kook between the two hierarchies of intelligence found in the thought of Maimonides.

While in one respect, R. Kook echoed the original intent of Maimonides, he transforms another idea found in Maimonides from its naturalistic sense into his own preferred meta-natural one. He argues that individuals of superior intelligence can attain supernatural powers, for “they arrive at a prophetic state that is in truth beyond the intellect of the stars and therefore controls them. Therefore the prophets performed miracles even with the heavenly bodies such as *stand still sun at Gibeon* (Josh. 10:12) and making the shade recede ten steps (Is. 38:8).”¹¹⁸ R. Kook transforms Maimonides’ prophet into a miracle worker; by perfecting his intellect, he attains knowledge of the natural world that affords him mastery over it. For Maimonides, the prophet approximates the intelligence of the *ishim* because that angelic realm represents the Active Intellect¹¹⁹ whose emanative intelligence the prophet has naturally accessed by virtue of his intellectual acuity. What is popularly considered a miracle is simply a substantiation of the prophet’s

The Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 33–43. See SK, 1:567, for the anguish of the great man who cannot communicate clearly with the masses, not out of fear of them, but because of his great love and concern for them, lest they be adversely affected in their misunderstanding of him.

¹¹⁵ *Sefer Moreh Nevukhim* (Jerusalem, 1960), 3b. See also Michael Schwarz’s Hebrew edition of the *Guide* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002) 1:8n3. See my own close analysis of this epigraphic verse in *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in the Guide of the Perplexed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 7–9.

¹¹⁶ See b. Yoma 71a where the term *ishim* alludes to the learned class or the sages (*talmidei chakhamim*). See also *Midrash on Proverbs*, trans. Burton Visotzky (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 45, which draws this distinction and identifies the virtuous men with the *ishim*: “If you have [earned the] merit of upholding the words of the Torah you will be called *ishim*, as are the ministering angels. If not you are to be called *benei adam*.” Maimonides may have had this very midrash in mind.

¹¹⁷ GP, I:14, p. 40.

¹¹⁸ OR, 175.

¹¹⁹ See GP II:36, p. 369; II:41, p. 386.

insight into the workings of the natural order. According to Maimonides, miracles are historical contingencies, inherent in the natural order from the time of creation, which are forecast by the prophet, not performed by him. “The sign of a prophet consists in God’s making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation, and thereupon a certain thing is effected according to what was put in its nature when first it received its particular impress.”¹²⁰ Even “miracles” like the splitting of the sea can all ultimately be considered as “natural” in the sense that they were preprogrammed into nature at creation.¹²¹ The prophet does not manipulate nature; rather, his apprehension of the workings of nature is so profound that he could predict these “miraculously” natural events just as a scientist’s comprehension of nature allows him or her to safely do so with the daily rising and setting of the sun.¹²²

It is no coincidence that R. Kook cites Joshua’s arresting of the sun in Joshua 10:12–13 as an example of the prophet’s miraculous power over the natural order. That incident is the one chosen by Maimonides as paradigmatic of his naturalist view of miracles as opposed to supernaturalist in both his earlier commentary on the Mishnah and his later *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the former it appears as an illustration of his position that miracles are really extraordinary natural occurrences woven into the fabric of nature at its inception, for “on the fourth day at the time the sun was created, it was endowed with the future of standing still at a certain time as when Joshua addressed it.”¹²³ The *Guide*, though from a different perspective, also naturalizes it, perhaps even more

¹²⁰ See GP, II:29.

¹²¹ See PM, Avot 5:5. What precisely Maimonides’ position was with respect to miracles is not easy to determine. According to some scholars, Maimonides’ statements that seem to endorse a traditional divine interventionist view of miracles are for popular consumption while his naturalistic view is the esoteric one intended for a philosophic audience. Others have argued that various positions can live together in a dialectic of religion and philosophy. See, e.g., M. Z. Nehorai, “Maimonides on Miracles” (Heb.), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9:2 (1990): 1–18, and A. Reines, “Maimonides’ Concept of Miracles,” *HUCA* 45 (1975): 243–85.

¹²² There is a lively scholarly debate concerning the nature of Maimonidean prophecy, but suffice it for our purposes to endorse both Lawrence Kaplan’s and Warren Zev Harvey’s naturalistic views of it. The only miraculous element of prophecy is the “possibility” that God might withhold prophecy from someone who has naturally developed to the point where he must, of natural necessity, become a prophet. See Kaplan’s “Maimonides on the Miraculous Element in Prophecy,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 3/4 (1977): 233–56, and Harvey, “A Third Approach to Maimonides’ Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle,” *Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 3 (1981): 287–301, esp. 299n52. For a recent comprehensive summary of the various positions on the issue, see Tamar Rudavsky, *Maimonides* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 116–24. For a recent critique of Harvey’s and Kaplan’s arguments, see Roslyn Weiss, “Natural Order or Divine Will: Maimonides on Cosmogony and Prophecy,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 15:1 (2007): 1–25, which argues for the most extremely naturalistic view on both creation and prophecy and identifies Maimonides’ true position with the Aristotelian philosophical refusal to admit anything outside the natural order. This view would simply have exercised R. Kook even further and would render his interpretation even more subversive.

¹²³ PM, Avot 5:5.

examining the texture of medieval Jewish mysticism”¹²⁶ is equally applicable to R. Kook’s engagement with Maimonides.

R. Kook’s approach to the Mishneh Torah, as has been examined in this chapter, can be encapsulated in the contrast between his exegesis of a verse that brackets the entire *Guide*, appearing, as it does, at its beginning and at its conclusion. Maimonides’ analysis of the nature of Adam and Eve’s awareness of their nakedness after their sin draws a philological comparison between the “opening” of their eyes in Genesis 3:7 denoting that awareness and other biblical appearances of that term, including the messianic expectation of *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened* in Isaiah 35:5. The “opening” they both share is a metaphor for “uncovering mental vision”; that is, it represents a cognitive rather than a visual development, whereby some new mental consciousness is attained. In Eden it is an epistemological transition from contemplating the universal objective categories of “true and false” to the subjective fluctuating ones of “good and bad.”¹²⁷ If the opening of the eyes in Eden signifies an intellectual deterioration at the beginning of the *Guide* (and the world!), then the opening of the eyes in Isaiah, in its cited context at the very end of the *Guide*, anticipates a progressive reversal of that intellectual decline. It acts as a supplication for the realization of its promise: perfection of the intellect to the point where the human being’s original “mental vision” of philosophical truths is restored.¹²⁸ For R. Kook, however, this verse envisions an all-encompassing appreciation of the world that transcends the narrow and skewed views that individual perspectives produce, be they emotional or intellectual. Each of these, cultivated in isolation, tends to occlude the others and therefore renders a distorted grasp of reality that isolates the physical from the spiritual.¹²⁹ R. Kook, therefore, cites Isaiah 35:5 in the course of spiritual musings as an aspiration for the kind of “opening” where “the scientific sea and the emotional depths will imbue every single scientific perspective and every single emotion as reality is truly

¹²⁶ Wolfson, “Jewish Mysticism: A Philosophical Overview,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1997), 450–98, at 453.

¹²⁷ GP, I:2, p. 25.

¹²⁸ As Aviezer Ravitzky notes, the key to understanding the messianic vision at the end of the MT where all the world will be preoccupied with the knowledge of God “is to be found precisely in Maimonides’ allegorical interpretation of the story of the Garden of Eden in the opening chapters of the *Guide*.” The true meaning of the messianic era is when “the opening of human history is united with its final perfection . . . the universal redemption of the human race . . . refers in fact to man’s return to his original stature represented by the human archetype.” See Ravitzky, “‘To the Utmost of Human Capacity’: Maimonides on the Days of the Messiah,” In *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel Kraemer (Oxford: Littman Library, 1991), 221–56, at 230–33.

¹²⁹ Tamar Ross understands Adam’s sin as the rupture between spirit and nature and thus utopia is the restoration of the pre-sin consciousness of a “continuum between the spiritual and the physical.” Ross, “Immortality, Natural Law, and the Role of Human Perception in the Writings of Rav Kook,” *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, 237–53, at 245–46.

constituted for it is impossible for any spiritual creation to exist independently, it must be permeated by everything.”¹³⁰

There can be no better example of the way R. Kook transforms Maimonides' thought than their radically different conceptions of the utopian future destined for humanity. For Maimonides the “opening” of primal man's eyes entailed a broadening of his mental scope that signaled a deterioration in thought. The ideal future therefore envisions a narrowing of that “opening” in order to revert back to the single-minded paradisiacal state, which sifts out all but the purest of philosophical thought. R. Kook, however, appropriates that very same image for the purpose of reversing its direction, as we have shown, in his commentary to the Book of Knowledge. Rather than constriction, R. Kook's “opening” offers a widening that embraces all that is human, beyond the mere intellectual, “where all opinions, emotions, and images exist in one single, organic and perfected whole,”¹³¹ so that all reality, in the holistic fullness of its divinity, can materialize.

¹³⁰ SK, 3:69. כמו שהענין. שכל מדע, ומכל רגש, יהיה נשקף כל הים המדעי, וכל התהום ההרגשי. זהו הדין שיהיה עומדת בפני עצמה, אלא זהו הדין שיהיה עומדת בפני עצמה, שיהיה עומדת בפני עצמה, שיהיה עומדת בפני עצמה. Like Maimonides, R. Kook envisions the messianic era as a universal transformation in human consciousness, but the nation of Israel has a special role in its achievement. Israel is elected in that sense to remedy the current historical “tragedy of the world which inhabits only the edge of truth, alienated from itself and all of existence.” See Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, “Utopia and Messianism in the Thought of R. Kook” (Heb.), *Kivunim* 1 (1979): 15–27, at 21.

¹³¹ SK 6:104: עד שכל הידיעות ההרגשות והציורים עומדים בצורה אורגנית וחיבה משוכללת

Conclusion

THE MAIMONIDEAN FILIGREE OF JEWISH THOUGHT: KAFKA, SCHOLEM, AND BEYOND

My book has traveled across a wide spectrum of Jewish thought, from Maimonides writing in Egypt under Islamic rule in the Middle Ages, through Spinoza pioneering critical biblical scholarship in the relatively tolerant Christian environment of the Netherlands at the dawn of the modern period, and onto R. Abraham Isaac Kook, a politically active and mystical diarist on the cusp of the establishment of the modern Jewish state. Along the way there were exegetical encounters with other prominent rabbis, kabbalists, exegetes, and rationalists such as Nahmanides, R. Yom Tov b. Abraham Ishbili, Isaac Abarbanel, Meir ibn Gabbai, Hermann Cohen, and R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin. However, while covering the disparate intellectual and sociocultural milieus that such a broad swath of history surely encompasses, the study has demonstrated a recurring point of convergence between them that traces its origins back to the Middle Ages and Maimonides. At virtually every critical turn in Jewish thought, one confronts Maimonidean formulations in one way or another. My study has focused in particular on Maimonides' thought as it is conveyed by his original exegesis, which was then imported by those who succeeded him, adapted to new currents of thought, subverted, or negated by them, as the case may be, and transported further, elongating the chain of Jewish philosophy, theology, and law.

Maimonides' readings of biblical verses and rabbinic dicta or midrash transformed them into carriers of profound ideas about revelation, God and humanity, and the relationship between them. Many subsequent Jewish thinkers were compelled, due to the power of Maimonides' reputation as a halakhist, philosopher, and communal leader, as well as the allure of his rationalist arguments, to forge their own direction through some type of engagement with him. Such engagements could be endorsing in the form of serious misreading, as was the case with R. Kook and Cohen; respectfully challenging as systematically mounted by Nahmanides; rationalized as acceptable as Ritva defended; openly antagonistic in the counterbiblical lexicon offered by Meir ibn Gabbai; covertly

subversive in the exegesis of Abarbanel; or undermining by turning his own mode of biblical interpretation against him as Spinoza forcefully rebutted. But Maimonides could never be simply shunted aside, ignored, or discounted. To borrow a formulation from Harold Bloom's theory of poetry, one of the indicators of the greatness of the thinkers dealt with here lies not necessarily in their "originality" but rather in their "persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to death. Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves."¹ That "precursor" with whom the subjects of this study wrestled and from whom they appropriated is Moses Maimonides.

I return to a verse with which I began this study, which is critical for the whole enterprise of Jewish hermeneutics since the advent of Maimonides. Once Maimonides adopted Proverbs 25:11, *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver* (תְּפִיחֵי זָהָב בַּמְשְׁכִּיּוֹת כֶּסֶף דְּבַר דְּבַר עַל אֶפְנֵי) as his hermeneutical motto for biblical exegesis, it could never be read again without its Maimonidean resonance. Its connotations of the external silver, the internal gold, the size of the filigree's apertures that allow the internal meaning to peek through the external filter, and the intellectual distance between the reader and the text, all continue to inhere in any post-Maimonidean referencing of it. A particular deference or nod to tradition might in fact consist of a discourse with a verse's Maimonidean overlay. As such it could be examined in its role as a new "intertext" for later thinkers in the sense that a text is "ultimately dialogical in that it cannot but record the traces of its contentions and doubling of earlier discourses."² But what is evoked is not just this local exegesis whenever that particular verse is subsequently cited. In the same way that the midrashic tradition opened up Scripture to a myriad of readings, captured by its own hermeneutical rallying call of "there are seventy faces to the Torah," each of the terms of this biblical proverb interpretively liberated the text from its literal and contextual moorings.

Historical and scientific developments posed formidable challenges for understanding ancient biblical language ever since its perceived revelation. These pertained regardless of the types of readers encountering it within the Jewish intellectual tradition, be they kabbalists, rationalists, or halakhists. Like its midrashic precursor, the Maimonidean hermeneutic provided a tool for resolving those challenges. Prophetic parables are finely crafted to address different audiences and to reveal different messages that accord both with the intellectual capacity and attentiveness of the reader. The near imperceptible gold of the text can be mined through the "very small" apertures of the silver encasing that patently appear on the page of the text. But it is the reader who creates these apertures with his or her own mind in order to pierce through to the core: "When

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

² Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 14.

looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold" (GP, 12). Though Maimonides released Scripture from its literal restraints, he also shackled it in turn with his own overpowering rationalist interpretations, which called for an unleashing to make way for new exegetical, and thereby theological, directions subsequent Jewish thinkers wished to chart. Thus the imagery of the metaphor remains intact but the size of the apertures, the distance between the reader and the text, the kind of attentiveness required of the reader, what kinds of meaning the gold and the silver represent, how much of the silver layer of meaning is enveloped by the gold, and ultimately whether one can dispense with the silver altogether once the gold has been assimilated, are all for the particular thinker who postdates Maimonides to determine.

Though Maimonides acknowledged some value in the surface meaning of prophetic parables which "contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies" (GP, 12), there is a lingering sense of his absolute devaluation of this level in favor of the philosophically esoteric level. Consider Maimonides' citation of a midrash, which compares the interpretive exercise of understanding Torah to the search for a precious stone in the darkness by lighting a worthless candle. The midrash then deciphers its own metaphor, equating the prophetic parable with that candle by whose means the inner meaning is extracted. Maimonides invites further reflection on this analogy and decodes its imagery and its intent even more explicitly: "That the internal meaning of the words of the Torah is a pearl whereas the external meaning of all parables is worth nothing" (11). In other words, once the pearl/internal is discovered, the parable/candle, or the tool of discovery, disappears/burns down. The implication is that the internal, or in Maimonides' case the meta-physical, meaning supplants the external moral political teaching. Maimonides expresses a similar approach when dealing with rabbinic traditions or midrash, "where the external sense manifestly contradicts the truth and departs from the intelligible" (9). In such cases, there are only two options for any judicious reader. If they remain at the external level, then all they present is gibberish, and their author cannot escape being discredited as an "ignoramus." But if there is an acknowledged inner meaning that reveals philosophically coherent lessons, then the author's credibility is salvaged (10).

Indeed, the apples of gold metaphor itself can, or must, be subjected to the same hermeneutic. By subjecting the second cola of the verse, *a word fitly spoken* (*davar davur al afnav*), to wordplay, the verse can read that *a word spoken about its wheels* (*al ofanav*) must be articulated in the apples of gold form.³ No other aspect of Ezekiel's vision, the Account of the Chariot, or, in philosophical terms,

³ See *Bereshit Rabbah* 93:3, which applies this wordplay to the verse as a description of Judah's diplomatic language in his address to Joseph (Gen. 44:18–34), which was carefully crafted to convey multiple messages.

the core teachings of metaphysics, attracts as much Maimonidean attention as the wheels (*ofanim*), or the supportive base for the “creatures” above them.⁴ Without delving into its precise signification, what is relevant to our discussion is its position and its multiple facets in that it “was joined to the earth and also formed four bodies and likewise had four faces” (GP, III:2, p. 420). If anything else, it is the bridge between the upper and lower worlds, between physics and metaphysics, and, because of its esoteric nature, can only be taught most likely cryptically or by transmitting only chapter headings (GP, III:5). If the apples of gold interpretive strategy is applied to unfold its meaning, as the verse now instructs, the silver and all its anthropomorphic imagery must be discarded in the end as gross pictorializing in favor of the golden philosophical truth it conceals.

While reminiscing over his intellectual career, Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, stated that in Israel, following his departure from Germany, there were only three books – the Hebrew Bible, the Zohar, and the collected works of Kafka – which he “read and reread with true attentiveness, with an open heart, and with spiritual tension.” He considered these three “books” to be “collections on which over the course of three thousand years were impressed that spirit customarily referred to as the spirit of Judaism.”⁵ Though Kafka is an intriguing inclusion in Scholem’s concise list of quintessentially Jewish works, a list that betrays a certain bias against the classical rabbinic tradition, Maimonides, and rationalism, I would express the same sentiment with respect to the collected works of Maimonides. Alongside the Bible, the Talmud, and the Zohar, they comprise the core spiritual and intellectual canon of Judaism. It would be difficult to characterize anything postdating the Middle Ages as authentically Jewish absent some engagement with all or some of the components of this canon. Indeed, Scholem’s own canon of Jewish thought, and lifelong interest in kabbalah, can be thought to have been constructed in one sense as a reaction to Maimonides. When reminiscing about what motivated his study of kabbalah, he admitted an antipathy to the Maimonidean (along with Saadya Gaon and Hermann Cohen) project, whose “primary function,” he claims, was “setting up antitheses to myth and pantheism and disproving them. It would have been more beneficial had they attempted to raise them to

⁴ GP, III:2, p. 420; III:5, p. 426.

⁵ See the chapter “My Way to Kabbalah,” in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 23. It is interesting to note that there are those who argue that even Kafka did not escape the Maimonidean grip on Jewish thought and that some of Kafka’s darkest themes were influenced in some way by his reception of Maimonides’ thought. See David Suchoff, *Kafka’s Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). See, for example, his assertion in this regard that relates well to the general thesis of this book with respect to Kafka: “Kafka’s tradition was therefore not a construct of the past whose ‘invention’ forecloses the multiple voices in human culture, but rather a boundary construction where the meaning of difference in its multiple forms comes to the fore. Maimonides was a crucial figure for Kafka in this regard” (10–11).

a higher level within which they would be negated.”⁶ Even this statement echoes the traces of Maimonides’ *apples of gold* hermeneutic, which Scholem attempts to turn back on itself. In its Maimonidean version the observer who views the object “from a distance” or “with imperfect attention” (GP, 12) (Schwarz – בלי התבוננות מפלגת) or without proper understanding *mistakes* it for a silver apple – something that in fact it is not. Rather than the silver masking the gold, and consequently dismissing myth as a distortion or, worse, a false corruption of the truth, Scholem, on one level, laments Maimonides’ not affording it its proper due, even if only to oppose it. Yet on a deeper level, note Scholem’s precise language, which itself calls for a reversion to what we have seen in the introduction: the Zoharic appropriation of the *apples of gold* metaphor where the silver is enveloped in the gold once it is perfected and “turns into gold.” Scholem’s call, then, for “raising myth to a higher realm within which it would be negated” should not be taken as a defeat of myth, but rather its negation in its very perfection. Scholem’s entire kabbalistic project can be viewed as a redemption of what Maimonides had denigrated.

But I would question Scholem’s canon even further, not simply for what it includes and glaringly omits, but for its very consideration of its last component as consisting of Kafka and his deep connection as a hermeneutical key to the Zohar, whose membership in the canon precedes his.⁷ Scholem perceives an inextricable link between Kafka and kabbalah in the themes of obsessive questioning of the Law, truth’s inaccessibility, religious nihilism, and absence of God to the point where he advised his students that “in order to understand the Kabbalah nowadays, one had to read Franz Kafka’s writings, particularly, *The Trial*.”⁸ Though there may be much truth in Scholem’s appreciation of Kafka as a modern secular gnostic version of the kabbalistic tradition, both that tradition

⁶ “A Candid Letter about My True Intentions in Studying Kabbalah,” in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 3–5, at 4. My discussion of Scholem here is inspired by a conversation I had with Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor for the *New Republic*, about the present book that I was then in the process of writing. I am grateful to him for his most suggestive advice to consider including Scholem in the long history of Maimonidean encounters.

⁷ Scholem stresses the profound depth of Kafka’s kabbalistic dimension in another letter explaining his own obsession with kabbalah. In Kafka he found “the most perfect and unsurpassed expression” of the fine line between religion and nihilism. He then poetically repeats his appreciation of Kafka’s canonicity by considering Kafka’s oeuvre “a secular statement of the kabbalistic world feeling in modern spirit, [which] seemed to me to wrap Kafka’s writings in the halo of the canonical.” See letter to Zalman Schocken in David Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 75.

⁸ See Scholem’s *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 125, and insightful analysis of Scholem’s understanding of Kafka by Stephane Moses in chap. 8 of his book, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Cultural Memory in the Present), trans. Barbara Harshav (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), where he concludes that for Scholem, “The fact that the search for truth is a hopeless enterprise is the primary intuition underlying the affinity between Kafka’s world and that of Jewish mysticism.”

and Kafka are ultimately made possible in some sense by Maimonides' radical negative theology. There does not seem to me to be a very great distance between believing in what God is not and believing or, better, experiencing, that God is not. Though the issue of negative theology is far too complex to deal with in this study, suffice it to refer to some pivotal statements that capture just how radically alienating Maimonides' conception of any relationship with God can be. God can only be known by negating from Him that which He is not because He is "an existent whom none of the existent things that He has brought into existence resembles, and who has nothing in common with them in any respect" (GP I:59, p. 137). As a result, "in every case in which the demonstration that a certain thing should be negated with reference to Him becomes clear to you, you become more perfect," and "when you make an affirmation ascribing another thing to Him you become more remote from Him" (139). In the end, even this systematic process of negating "does not give knowledge in any respect of the true reality of the thing with regard to which the particular matter in question has been negated" (139). Thus self-perfection consists in affirming through negation that there is absolutely no affinity or relation between us and our world and God. Likewise, a relationship with God is established through denying the possibility of any such relationship. Affirming anything positive about the God to whom we attempt to relate serves only to distance us further from Him. Finally, even the logic of negation produces an illusion of knowledge, which, if considered an attainment of some real substantive knowledge of God, places one back in the remote camp of those who posit things about God. Negative theology amounts to a systematic alienation of us from God and of God from the world, to the extent that language itself, the ability to communicate, totally breaks down into utter silence, captured by the Psalter's *Silence is praise to Thee* (65:2) (139). A theology of negation ends in the breakdown of both intellect and language, the two primary instruments of philosophy. Although the argument can be made that Maimonides' negative theology leads directly to a positive metaphysics of ethics and politics,⁹ Maimonides' path toward God, as just described, can all too easily lead to a theology of brokenness and alienation, and to the parables of Kafka.

Once again, though Kafka presents a subject for further study beyond the scope of this book, I merely seize on one aphorism that illustrates what I see as another link in the Maimonidean continuum which underlies this book. The following is a cryptic note in Kafka's diaries concerning what he refers to as the "Negative":

⁹ See Michael Fagenblat's original and exciting thesis regarding Levinas's appropriation of Maimonides' negative theology in this way where "it surpasses metaphysical knowledge of God by going beyond the limits of the intellect in moral and political action." "Levinas and Maimonides: From Metaphysics to Ethical Negative Theology," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2008): 95–147, at 122. This is also another good illustration of the crux of my study. Fagenblat argues persuasively for a deep engagement with and appropriation of Maimonides in a work that never mentions or refers to him.

The Negative alone, however strong it may be, cannot suffice, as in my unhappiest moments I believe it can. For if I have gone the tiniest step upward, won any, be it the most dubious kind of security for myself, I then stretch out on my step and wait for the Negative, not to climb up to me, indeed, but to drag me down from it. Hence it is a defensive instinct in me that won't tolerate my having the slightest degree of lasting ease and smashes the marriage bed, for example, even before it has been set up.¹⁰

Though Bloom, like Scholem, traces this sentiment to the specific manifestation of negative theology "from that most negative of ancient theologies, Gnosticism,"¹¹ I sense a Maimonidean tinge to this as much as they would a kabbalistic one. If the Negative is the God reached and understood by negation, then Kafka expresses the dialectical tension of working toward the "Negative." Not only does it never satisfy, but every advance toward it entails its own retreat away from it. Kafka takes the ultimately unknowable, unreachable, yet kind and gracious medieval God a step further to the destructive God, which frustrates in its very elusiveness and absence that negation deepens. Yet, even Maimonides' notion of a benevolent deity is a misnomer, since the benevolence and kindness refer only to the creation and not to the Creator (GP, I:55, pp. 127–28). The God of the negative cannot offer the solace, comfort, or protection that those who turn to religion in their "unhappiest moments," often a catalyst for the religious impulse, seek. Any perceived advance is simply infinitesimal, illusory, and deceptively easing. Since "apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the ultimate term in apprehending Him" (GP, I:59, p. 139), any step forward toward apprehension must anticipate the certainty that no such ascension has been achieved for negating collapses into an "inability" to attain the goal to which it aspires.

But the collapse conjured for me a theme that has emerged over the course of this book on the love of God. Kafka's vulnerability and sense of futility are captured by the image of a "marriage bed" that is "smashed" by the negative "before it has been set up." Maimonides analogizes his ideal of love, as we have seen, to the obsessive lovesick lover of the Song of Songs, whose mind is focused relentlessly and uninterruptedly on the beloved. Kafka's diary notation, however, sharpens the danger inherent in Maimonides' metaphor. If proximity to and relationship with God is a function of the single-minded intensity with which one is absorbed with Him, and if that concentrated focus can only lead to a Negative and an "inability to attain the ultimate term in apprehending Him," then the love can only end frustrated and unrequited with an equally ferocious intensity, which could leave the relationship in irreparable tatters. Kafka undermines the possibility of relationship with the transcendent before it even begins. Maimonides captures the state of intellectual perfection achieved at the very apex of a fully developed negative theology where only silence and

¹⁰ Franz Kafka: *Diaries 1910–1923*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 410.

¹¹ Bloom, *The Strong Light of the Canonical: Kafka, Freud and Scholem as Revisionists of Jewish Culture and Thought* (New York: City College Papers 20, 1987), 19.

intellectual limitation remain,¹² by the image of a bed on which the Psalter instructs *Commune with your own heart, upon your bed, and be still* (4:5) (GP, 1:59, p. 140). This bed, in which language and intellect are stilled, is the culmination of Maimonides' love ideal and thus the marriage bed. What Maimonides initiated as a love that can never be consummated, Kafka refuses to even consider a possibility, let alone undertake. The Negative holds out no prospect of an object of desire that could share the marriage bed and so, for Kafka, there is no welcoming bedroom to even anticipate. Kafka's Judaism is, presciently and prophetically, certainly a theologically bleak prospect,¹³ but one far more apt for an age Kafka himself did not physically witness, but which his sisters and millions of his European coreligionists did. No longer can Jewish theology speak, as the Song of Songs does, of a spiritual love that longs to be consummated when the lovers of God have been literally consumed.

Once the issue of love enters the discussion of Kafka and Maimonides, it is pertinent to examine one other of Kafka's parables concerning Abraham, the biblical personality who embodies Maimonides' ideal lover of God. Kafka offers a number of alternative Abrahams to consider within the context of the *Akedah*, or the binding of Isaac trial, a problematic biblical narrative discussed previously in [Chapter 5](#), but it is the one he ends with that I believe problematizes Maimonides' depiction of him. The following is the Abraham that Kafka leaves us with:

But take another Abraham. One who wanted to perform the sacrifice altogether in the right way and had a correct sense in general of the whole affair, but could not believe that he was the one meant, he, an ugly old man, and the dirty youngster that was his child. True faith is not lacking to him, he has this faith; he would make the sacrifice in the right spirit if only he could believe he was the one meant. He is afraid that after starting out as Abraham with his son he would change on the way into Don Quixote. The world would have been enraged at Abraham could it have beheld him at the time, but this one is afraid that the world would laugh itself to death at the sight of him. However, it is not the ridiculousness as such that he is afraid of – though he is, of course, afraid of that too and, above all, of his joining in the laughter – but in the main he is afraid that this ridiculousness will make him even older and uglier, his son even dirtier, even more unworthy of being really called. An Abraham who should come unsummoned! It is as if, at the end of

¹² Susan Sontag draws an interesting parallel between the *via negativa* of mysticism that culminates in silence and absence in art: "As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativ*, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the 'subject' (the 'object,' the 'image'), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence." See Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Vintage Press, 1994), 3–34, at 4–5. As I have with Scholem, I would replace the mystic with Maimonides.

¹³ There are, however, two very distinct readings of Kafka. One is Scholem's pessimistic one, for which I have particular sympathy, but the other is Martin Buber's, who "saw in the suffering of the world – even through Kafka's eyes – a redemptive meaning and not an absurdity." See Rivka Horowitz, "Kafka and the Crisis of Jewish Religious Thought," *Modern Judaism* 15, no. 1 (1995): 21–33, at 29.

the year, when the best student was solemnly about to receive a prize, the worst student rose in the expectant stillness and came forward from his dirty desk in the last row because he had made a mistake of hearing, and the whole class burst out laughing. And perhaps he had made no mistake at all, his name really was called, it having been the teacher's intention to make the rewarding of the best student at the same time a punishment for the worst one.¹⁴

As noted in [Chapter 5](#), Maimonides pivots the *Akedah* on “two great notions that are the fundamental principles of the Law” (GP III:24, p. 500), and therefore of his own intellectualized conception of religion – what the limits of love of God are and the absolute certitude of prophetic revelation. There are a host of difficulties with Maimonides' account of the *Akedah* that I have dealt with elsewhere,¹⁵ but a central one that is never quite resolved is the paradox of a parable that teaches prophetic reliability through a prophetic command that defies any moral rationale, that constitutes a cardinal sin, and that violates Maimonides' own rule of prophecy, which cannot, by definition, turn prophets “into a laughing-stock and a mockery for fools by ordering them to carry out crazy actions” (GP, II:46, p. 405). Even if the three-day hiatus between the command and the act of sacrifice signify that “the act sprang from thought, correct understanding, consideration of the truth of His command, may He be exalted, love of Him, and fear of Him” (501), what possible “truth” could Abraham have deciphered in a divine command to commit murder? Since the imagination plays a central role as a prophetic medium, how can Abraham be certain that this perverse “command,” even if only intended to be parabolic and never meant for actualization, is not a corrupted product of his own fancy? The “exhaustive reflection” Maimonides claims is an essential component of the *Akedah* parable should have compelled Abraham, at the very least, to suspect its underlying authenticity, and dismiss it as an unreflective daydream actually unworthy of any further reflection.

I understand Kafka here in the same vein as Scholem's Kafka with respect to kabbalah, who is instrumental to an appreciation of Maimonides without necessarily having read or being familiar with him – by reading him “against the grain” of Maimonides. Kafka's Abraham is a subversive midrash on Maimonides' Abraham, which knits together all these difficulties into a new Abraham composite, replacing the confident, deliberate, self-assured, celebrated Abraham, with a doubting, insecure, pathetic, and humiliated one. If extreme humility to the point of self-abnegation is a mandatory posture, as Maimonides

¹⁴ *The Basic Kafka*, introd. by Erich Heller (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), 173–74. See Beth Hawkins, “Reluctant Theologians: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabes,” (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 6, who notes that what *The Basic Kafka* presents as one unified parable is really a composite of two separate sources.

¹⁵ See my “‘Trial’ as Esoteric Preface in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*: A Case Study in the Interplay of Text and Proof-text,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1997): 1–30.

stipulates in his *Mishneh Torah*,¹⁶ there is a prophetic paradox that would deny prophecy to the very ones most qualified to receive it. How could Abraham ever consider himself worthy of being addressed by God if he, virtuously by Maimonidean ethics, considered himself “an ugly old man”? But the paradox deepens as he fears public derision and more, that his “ridiculous” behavior “will make him even older and uglier, his son even dirtier, even more unworthy of being really called.” This betrays a sense of self-worth that is preserved even in his “ugly” state that could worsen, and so what appears as humility is really a self-obsession with image and reputation. The murder of an innocent never seemed to enter into the Maimonidean equation, and neither does it in the Kafkean one. Kafka strikes the mortal blow to the *Akedah* by raising the specter of an Abraham who assumes the task but is “unsummoned.” Kafka extends the internal problematic of the *Akedah* from both a philosophical and moral perspective, which for Maimonides resulted in a successful, inspiring Abraham as love paragon, to a failed, anxiety-ridden, inferior subject of mockery.

All the self-doubt that might have been stimulated by the problems and paradoxes inherent in Maimonides’ depiction lead in the end to what is an absolute rupture with Maimonides. Kafka’s dénouement to the *Akedah* is the nightmarish alternative to Abraham’s anxiety that Maimonides could never have contemplated: Abraham in fact is summoned by a God who intentionally orchestrates it as a punishing humiliation. Perhaps, taking Scholem’s perspective, this is another instance of Kafka’s gnostic turn to an evil Demiurge signified by the teacher, who intentionally disgraces Abraham and maneuvers him into an act of buffoonery. Abraham is transformed from the knight of faith, or the “best student,” to the “worst student” who has been duped into actually committing, or attempting to commit, the most heinous violation possible of the true Divine will. However, if there is no gnostic turn, but rather a direct assault on the worshipped God of the Jewish tradition, Kafka’s turn is far more subversive. Maimonides’ negative theology now evolves in Kafka’s hands from human negating of God to both divine self-negation and human self-negation. One of the most heinous ethical and psychological crimes known to the rabbinic tradition, later codified by Maimonides, is shaming and embarrassing. Its grievousness can never be ameliorated or atoned for,¹⁷ and its turpitude rises to the magnitude of murder and warrants the loss of any share in the world to come (*olam ha’ba*), or the ultimate reward of eternal life.¹⁸ If Abraham heard correctly, God Himself, in Kafka’s parable, humiliates and therefore loses His own share in the future world, and so, ipso facto, everyone has lost his or her share,

¹⁶ MT, Ethical Traits, 2:3.

¹⁷ See Maimonides’ commentary on m. Avot 3:11 on this implication of singling out shaming, along with a few other offences, as attracting this punishment.

¹⁸ See m. Avot 3:11; MT considers it offensive enough to warrant repeating it in three different sections: Ethical Traits 6:8; Repentance 3:14; Injuries and Damages 3:7.

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innocent and guilty alike, because the very Maimonidean essence of the World to Come is to sit at the feet of God and “draw pleasure from His radiance.”¹⁹ But there is a doubly amplified loss and catastrophic consequence of this divine embarrassment. The worst student’s humiliation constitutes the “best student’s” reward, and thus God has trapped the best of human beings into the prospect of absolute loss of future. Maimonides codifies, that, along with the one who shames, the one who benefits, or is honored at the expense of another’s embarrassment, also loses his stake in any future reward.²⁰ Kafka’s parable takes negative theology to what he considers its logical nihilistic conclusion, which fails to distinguish between the fates of the good, the bad, and indeed the divine itself. The future is obliterated for all, and all are accomplices in their own demise. The *Akedah*, the Maimonidean paradigm of love and prophetic conviction, collapses into irrevocable loss, meaninglessness, and infinite transcendent absence.²¹ Reading Kafka’s parable of the *Akedah* now, after the murder of a million children alongside millions more during that darkest of periods in Jewish history when humanity and God both died, we understand how the prophetic certitude Maimonides discerned in Abraham is better transposed to Kafka’s visionary tale.

When discussing the inclusion of Kafka in the Jewish canon, Scholem goes on to excoriate those critics who deny the Jewishness of a Kafka composition on the basis of an absence of any overt allusions to Jews or Judaism. Singling out as an illustration Kafka’s last work prior to his death, he dismisses the arrogance of those who do not “hesitate at any means so as to avoid the Jewish significance of Kafka’s last story, *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse People*, with the ludicrous argument that the word ‘Jew’ does not appear at all in that work.”²² As this study has shown, a similar assertion can be made regarding a substantial segment of Jewish thought that postdates Maimonides: The fact that he might remain unmentioned in a particular work does not mean that he isn’t contemplated somewhere in the background, or even in the foreground, for that matter.

Scholem’s allusion to Kafka’s *Josephine* evokes an observation regarding the relationship between her artistry and her audience that might equally reveal

¹⁹ MT, Repentance 8:2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:14:

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²¹ If I am even remotely attuned to the sense of this parable, then I echo David Biale’s sentiment: “No wonder, then, that Kafka ended up in an abyss of despair and regarded his writings as failures deserving only to be burnt.” On the other hand, Biale’s description of the relationship of a heretical kabbalist, Kafka, and Scholem to the Jewish canon is a perfectly apt one regarding Maimonides as well: “For the secular Jew, as for the radical kabbalist, the truth is now alien and hidden; the texts handed down by tradition do not reveal this truth if read literally. Only by reading the texts against their literal intent can the reader reveal what is hidden.” See Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah: Text and Commentary,” in *Gershom Scholem*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 99–123, at 122.

²² Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism*, 23.

Maimonides' own thoughts concerning the legacy of his thought and how he might have considered the fate of its future reception:

She believes anyhow that she is singing to deaf ears; there is no lack of enthusiasm and applause, but she has long learned not to expect real understanding, as she conceives it. So all disturbance is very welcome to her; whatever intervenes from outside to hinder the purity of her song, to be overcome with a slight effort, even with no effort at all, merely by confronting it, can help to awaken the masses, to teach them not perhaps understanding but awed respect.²³

Maimonides knew very well he was writing for an extremely elite minority consisting of “a single virtuous man,” and that for the most part his thought would either “sing to deaf ears” or be misunderstood. Yet he still believed that, despite his pessimistic view of the popular intelligence, his thought could somehow benefit those who could never hope to understand it. So he predicts at the very beginning of the *Guide*, “I know that, among men generally, every beginner will derive benefit from some of the chapters of this Treatise, though he lacks even an inkling of what is involved in speculation” (16). Maimonides might have considered much of the thought, or what I term “variations,” presented in this book as “disturbances” and dilutions of the “purity of his song.” However, considering his concern for the general public, he might also have been pleased over the very fact of the persistent “confrontations” with his intellectual legacy that serve to keep the community alive with an “awed respect” for not only his thought, but for Jewish thought in all its manifestations. If we apply Maimonides' lexicographical analysis of biblical terms to the word “rise” (*kom*) in the old adage *מִמֹּשֶׁה עַד מֹשֶׁה לֹא קָם כָּמוֹהוּ* (“from Moses to Moses there never arose a man like Moses”), it transforms itself to capture the central theme of my study. One sense of the term signifies stability and constancy, that is, it characterizes something as unchanging and enduring. A second sense is as a metaphor for reacting against something or somebody, or “whoever has revolted over some matter” (GP I:12, p. 39). In the latter sense, Maimonides certainly mounted a powerful challenge to virtually every aspect of Jewish philosophy, theology, and law then current in his time. Because of its power and proficiency, it also certainly endured in the former sense as a constant inspiration or irritant, as the case may be, throughout the course of Jewish intellectual history ever since.

²³ Kafka, *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

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