

Secrets of the Law and Truth: An Introduction to Maimonides' Philosophical Reconstruction of Rabbinic Judaism *

Yasa'nın Sırları ve Hakikat: İbn Meymûn'un Rabbânî Yabudiliği Felsefi Açıdan Yeniden Yapılandırmasına Bir Giriş

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Abstract: This article examines Maimonides' attempt to integrate philosophy (particularly Aristotelian physics and metaphysics) into the legal-hermeneutical core of rabbinic Judaism by reconstructing the lost esoteric teachings of the Oral Torah, especially those concerning the Account of the Beginning (Ma'aseh Bereshit) and the Account of the Chariot (Ma'aseh Merkavah). Focusing on Maimonides' philosophical and halakhic writings, it explores how he redefines the "secrets of the Torah" not as mystical doctrines, but as philosophical truths grounded in reason and embedded within the Jewish sacred literature. The article also highlights Maimonides' pedagogical model, based on gradual revelation and esoteric interpretation, aimed at addressing the existential and intellectual crisis of the "perplexed" Torah scholar. It argues that although Maimonides presents his project as a restoration of a lost rabbinic wisdom, it in fact entails a radical reconfiguration of the epistemological and doctrinal foundations of Judaism on both legal and theological levels.

Keywords: Maimonides, Rabbinic Judaism, oral law, esoteric interpretation, philosophy.

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Introduction

The literature on Maimonides is intimidatingly vast, so much so, in fact, that one might wonder whether anything remains to be said about his work on Jewish law or philosophy. Writing on Maimonides is therefore exceedingly difficult; yet for anyone seeking to understand the (re)foundation of Jewish thought, it is equally difficult to avoid engaging with the “Eagle of the Synagogue.” Moreover, it is quite rare for a reader or researcher to encounter a text that speaks directly to them across the centuries. For anyone exploring the relationship between philosophy and Judaism, encountering Maimonides is precisely such an experience.

One of the major classical questions that continues to stimulate research on Maimonides is the relationship between philosophy and Judaism or, more precisely, the status of “philosophy” within rabbinic Judaism. This question, often framed in terms of “Athens and Jerusalem,” has taken many forms and has been interpreted in various ways by scholars. More broadly, it may be understood as the uneasy coexistence of Revelation and Reason or, more specifically, of revealed truth and rational truth, which are nevertheless assumed to be ultimately identical. One might even prefer to speak of two distinct forms of “rationality,” each grounded in a different source: biblical wisdom, revealed by God to a particular people, and Greek wisdom, the product of purely human reason (cf. Strauss, 1989a, pp. 149–150; Wolfson, 1962b, p. 71).

To be sure, interpreting the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh/ Scripture/ “Old Testament”) through the lens of philosophical concepts entails not only a reinterpretation of Scripture but also a thorough reformulation of philosophy’s task and a redefinition of its epistemological status. It is, in fact, within this context that Philo Judaeus — through a move of far-reaching consequence — subordinates philosophy to Scripture. Philosophy thus becomes a kind of exegetical tool, intended to decipher the hidden meanings of the revealed Word, which is often conveyed through obscure allegories intrinsic to biblical language. In this light, it has been famously observed that philosophy is conceived here as the “handmaid of Scripture” or “handmaid of theology” (Wolfson, 1962a, pp. 87–138).

It is undoubtedly possible to situate Maimonides within this lineage, particularly through the hermeneutical method he develops in the *Guide of*



the Perplexed. Indeed, his great modern adversary, Baruch Spinoza, sees him as a philosophical allegorist who is “only concerned to derive Aristotelian trifles and some fragments of their own from Scripture” (Spinoza, 2007, p. 18 [I, 14]). However, if we turn specifically to Judaism and to the relationship between Sinaitic Revelation and philosophy in order to approach Maimonides' thought, we must also take into account another layer of legal, hermeneutical, moral, and sapiential thought: namely, Talmudic or rabbinic literature, traditionally understood as the “Oral Law,” which comprises the accumulated discussions and decisions of generations of sages spanning roughly from 200 BCE to 500 CE.

Within this rabbinic-Hellenistic context, the encounter with philosophy appears all the more problematic, given the underlying cultural and ideological tensions. Philosophy is rightly regarded here as a foreign — and indeed pagan — idea. As Julius Guttman famously remarked, “the history of Jewish philosophy is a history of the successive absorptions of foreign ideas which were then transformed and adapted according to specific Jewish points of view” (Guttman, 1966, p. 3). True to its nature, the Talmud contains opposing views on the study of philosophy alongside the Torah (understood here as the Pentateuch together with its rabbinic commentaries and legal interpretations). Yet overall, there is undeniably a strong sense of caution and often explicit disapproval, toward such ideas. For instance, concerning the archetype of the “apostate” or “heretic,” Elisha ben Avuya (derogatorily called *Aher*), it is said that “Greek tunes [*zemer yevoni*] never ceased from his mouth,” and that “many heretical books [*arbe sifrei minim*] would fall from his lap” — books that ultimately led him astray from the right path (*Chagigah* 15b; see also, e.g., Mishnah, *Pirkei Avot* 5:22; Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot* 99b; *Megillah* 9b; cf. Halbertal, 1997, pp. 100–101).¹

What, then, is Maimonides' position on philosophy and the study of philosophical texts? We know that Maimonides primarily identified with the tradition of the Talmudic Sages. He was raised to be — and indeed was — first and foremost a *Rav*: a rabbi, a legal scholar, and an authority in matters of Jewish law (*halakha*). Not only was he widely respected across

¹ All references to the Babylonian Talmud are taken from *The William Davidson Edition* (Koren – Steinsaltz), translated by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, via Sefaria.org.



virtually all Jewish communities of his time, but he also served as *Ra'īs al-Yabūd* (Head of the Jews) for the Jewish communities of Egypt and Syria under Ayyubid rule. Yet, as a communal leader, a jurist (*faqīh*), and jurisconsult (*muftī*), his authority rested not on institutional power, but rather on his extraordinary erudition, his profound mastery of *halakha*, and his reputation as a steadfast defender of Judaism and of Jewish communities throughout the diaspora (see Maimonides, 1985, p. 131; Maimonides, 1995, pp. 167–168; Kraemer, 2008, pp. 228–229).

He never appears to have envisioned departing from a tradition that assigns primacy to the elucidation and interpretation of the Law. And yet, his view of the value and significance of philosophy is significantly different from that of the early rabbinic sages. In fact, he ultimately maintains that the study of philosophy is indispensable for the accomplished Torah scholar in the pursuit of intellectual and spiritual perfection. Philosophy thus comes to represent a kind of culmination of the study of law, marking the transition from the “legalistic study of the Law” (*‘ilm al-sharī‘a*, i.e., *fiqḥabā*) to the “science of the Law in its true sense” (*‘ilm al-sharī‘a ‘alā al-ḥaqīqa*), the latter referring to a deeper, more philosophical understanding of the Law’s source and ultimate purpose (*Guide* I: Introduction, p. 5).² It is at this point that the famously elusive “secrets of the Law” come into play.

As one of the most prominent — if not *the* most prominent — figures in the history of *halakha*, Maimonides is also rightly regarded as one of the major philosophers of the Middle Ages, particularly within the tradition of Arabo-Islamic thought, which itself drew deeply from ancient Greek sources. Often scornful of his rabbinic contemporaries, he is strikingly generous in his praise of the philosophers who influenced him.³ Is this a

² From now on, references to *The Guide of the Perplexed* are given by part and chapter, followed by page numbers from Shlomo Pines’ English translation: (Maimonides, 1963a, 1963b). The Judeo-Arabic original used throughout is that of Munk’s edition: (Maimonides, 1930).

³ This is what he writes to his translator, Samuel Ibn Tibbon: “Aristotle’s intellect [represents] the extreme of human intellect, if we except those who have received divine inspiration. [...] I tell you: as for works on logic, one should only study the writings of Abu Nasr al-Fārābī. All his writings are faultlessly excellent” (Pines, 1963, pp. lix–lx). Cf. “A Letter to Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Concerning the Dispute with the Head of the Yeshiva,” in Maimonides, 1995, pp. 300–314).



contradiction, a dilemma? Situated at the crossroads of these sapiential traditions, can he be considered a “Jewish philosopher” or a “philosopher of Judaism”? We cannot know for certain how he would have responded to such labels; nevertheless, the name Maimonides has become nearly synonymous with what is today called Jewish philosophy. As Warren Zev Harvey notes: “Not only did the *Guide* render all previous Jewish philosophy almost obsolete, but it is barely an exaggeration to call all subsequent medieval Jewish philosophy ‘Maimonidean’” (Harvey, 1980, p. 249).

In a sense, it is Maimonides’ thought that defines the status and function of philosophy within rabbinic Judaism. It is precisely in this context that one must examine the relationship between the “science of the Law in its true sense” and philosophy or theology, as well as their connection to the perplexity experienced by certain disciples of the Sages (*talmidei hakhamim*). What is certain is that, through Maimonides, the study of philosophy — despite ongoing and seemingly endless debates — not only gains a measure of legitimacy, but is also recognized as a means, if not the only remaining path (given the decline in knowledge of the esoteric meanings rooted in Tanakhic and Midrashic passages), to grasp the “foundations of the Torah.” It thereby becomes a way to overcome perplexity in the face of the discrepancy between the surface meaning of the revealed word and the conclusions of rational inquiry, and serves as a basis for the rational reorganization of the entire corpus of the Oral Law.

In any case, this placement of philosophy at the heart of the legal-hermeneutical tradition of rabbinic Judaism calls for explanation and clarification from both philosophical and Judaic perspectives. This article can thus be read, on one level, as an attempt at self-clarification by a perplexed reader. Yet in doing so, it also seeks to shed light on the way Maimonides introduces philosophy into rabbinic Judaism — by addressing the perplexity of a half-enlightened Torah scholar — and to show how philosophy comes to play a central role in the reshaping of rabbinic Judaism. What follows is also intended as an introduction to a vast and complex topic, laying the groundwork for further exploration in future publications.

The Perplexed Disciple: Starting Point of the Guide

The Guide of the Perplexed opens with the well-known “Epistle Dedicatory” and a lengthy “Introduction,” in which Maimonides presents his



ambitious aims in a tone of humility. These prefatory chapters also sketch the profile of the intended reader. By pairing a description of the treatise's purpose with that of its implied reader, Maimonides effectively outlines the theological-philosophical content of the *Guide*. As the title suggests, the book is primarily intended to help or to *guide* a reader who finds himself in a state of profound *perplexity* (*ṭabayyur* or *ḥayra*).⁴ This perplexity is not merely a rhetorical starting point; it constitutes the programmatic framework of the book and drives its entire argument. Moreover, through the intellectual and emotional portrait of the perplexed reader, Maimonides offers a kind of meta-commentary — a hermeneutical key for interpreting the *Guide* itself. It is therefore fitting to begin by examining the nature of this perplexity, as well as the means by which Maimonides proposes to resolve it.

Who, then, is this perplexed reader? Who does the *Guide* address as an interlocutor? At first glance, far from being an anonymous reader, he is, in fact, a real person: Maimonides' beloved disciple, Rabbi Joseph son of Judah, originally from Ceuta (a city in North Africa) who had distinguished himself in the Maghreb as a Hebrew poet (Munk, 1842, p. 48 ff.; Kraemer, 2008, pp. 359–370). This is precisely how Maimonides came to know him, and it was through his poems that he perceived this exceptional pupil's "powerful longing for speculative matters" (*Guide* I: Epistle, p. 3). After living for a brief period with Maimonides and studying various religious and scientific subjects under his guidance — including astronomy, mathematics, and logic, which may be regarded as a propaedeutic to philosophy — Rabbi Joseph was compelled to depart for Aleppo. Maimonides states that this departure, and the resulting interruption of their private instruction, prompted him to write the *Guide*. Since he addresses his disciple directly in the second person singular, the work may be understood as an extended letter or a written continuation of their previous lessons.

However, Rabbi Joseph son of Judah is not presented as the sole intended reader of the *Guide*. Maimonides adds that he writes his treatise for

⁴ For Maimonides' use of the term *ḥayra*, commonly translated as "perplexity," see (Harvey, 2013). Referring to the works of Alfarabi, the author notes that "the Arabic term *ḥayra* or *ṭabayyur* ("perplexity") was used in medieval philosophical literature as a translation of the Greek *aporia*."



his disciple as well as for his “fellows, however few they may be.” Whether or not one agrees with Leo Strauss’s observation that the *Guide* is not a philosophical book but a Jewish one (Strauss, 1988, pp. 42–43), one thing is certain: the perplexed reader of the *Guide*, despite the work’s later reception in medieval Christian and Muslim intellectual circles, is unmistakably Jewish. He is a Jewish scholar who possesses some degree of philosophical knowledge, is trained in forms of reasoning, and is at least aware of the existence of the “secrets of the prophetic books (*asrār kutub al-anbiyā*).” After all, Maimonides himself states that he already has given him “certain flashes” or “certain indications” on this topic.

It goes without saying that this disciple not only possesses a morally exemplary character but is also well-versed in the religious sciences, particularly those related to *halakha*, in other words, in the “legalistic study of the Law.” Nevertheless, he appears deeply troubled by the *apparent contradiction* between the principles of philosophy (or of reason), insofar as he understands them, and the literal — or rather, the “external” — meaning the Law (*zābir al-sharīʿa*), that is, the plain sense of certain biblical words and verses.

As a result, this man, otherwise “perfect in his religion and character,” finds himself in a deeply painful intellectual and emotional impasse, caught between *irrationality* and *irreligion*:

Hence he would remain in a state of perplexity and confusion [*ḥayra wa-dahsha*] as to whether he should follow his intellect, renounce what he knew concerning the terms in question, and consequently consider that he has renounced the foundations of the Law [*qarwāʿid al-sharʿ*]. Or he should hold fast to his understanding of these terms and not, let himself be drawn on together with his intellect, rather turning his back on it and moving away from it, while at the same time perceiving that he had brought loss to himself and harm to his religion [*fasād fī dīnibi*]. He would be left with those imaginary beliefs [*al-ʾiṭiqādāt al-khayālīyya*] to which he owes his fear and difficulty and would not cease to suffer from heartache and great perplexity [*fī alam al-qalb wa-ḥayra shadīda*] (*Guide* I: Introduction, pp. 5–6).

Maimonides therefore undertakes the difficult task of guiding the perplexed student out of this confusion by showing that the apparent contradiction arises solely from student’s relative ignorance and



misunderstanding of both the Jewish scriptures and the philosophical teachings. In other words, there is no genuine contradiction between the written expressions of prophetic and philosophical truth; and Joseph's perplexity is "connected with his impatient and imprudent desire to learn the secrets of the Torah before he had mastered the prerequisites" (Harvey, 2013, p. 69).

At the same time, Maimonides asserts — in a manner that anticipates Kant in some respects — that the true source of perplexity for any scholar, regardless of their level of knowledge, lies in the zeal to transcend the limits of human cognitive capacity, or in a "defect in one's inborn disposition [*naqṣ fiṭrab*] or some sort of temptation" to "fatigue the minds with notions that cannot be grasped by them." For wisdom also consists in recognizing that "man's intellect indubitably has a limit at which it stops" (*Guide* II:24, p. 327; I:31, p. 65; see also Pines, 1997b; Seeskin, 2000, pp. 18–19; cf. Kant, 1998, pp. 108–110).

In any case, according to the Cordovan thinker, the way out of perplexity at this stage lies in recognizing the profoundly human and allegorical character of the language used in Scripture (the Tanakh) and in the Talmud.⁵ Although the latter differs significantly from the Tanakh in both style and content, Maimonides perceives a fundamental unity in their use of allegory and in the interplay between concealment and revelation that runs through both domains. According to him, not only the "books of prophecy" (*kitāb al-anbiyā'*), but also the "sayings of the sages" (*kalām ahl al-ilm*) are replete with analogies, riddles and allegories, and thus demand also a thoroughly esoteric mode of interpretation (*Guide* I: Introduction, p. 5); (*Helek: Sanhedrin Chapter Ten* [also known as *Introduction to Perek Helek*] in Maimonides, 1972b, p. 409; 1901, p. 10).

In sum, the science that delivers from perplexity is inseparable from a hermeneutical effort (*ta'wīl*) to uncover the hidden, that is, the philosophical and scientific meanings, concerning matters demonstrated intellectually, embedded within the language of the Tanakh and the Talmudic-Midrashic tradition (see *Guide* I:31, p. 66).

⁵ Maimonides' interpretation of the rabbinic dictum "The Torah speaks in the language of men (*dibrah Torah ke-lashon benei adam*)" as the axiomatic basis for the allegorical and polysemic reading of anthropomorphic expressions in sacred literature will be addressed at greater length in a separate study.



Toward a Philosophical Reconstruction of Lost Rabbinic Sciences

At this juncture, many questions arise: How should one proceed with a “perplexed” disciple who, despite lacking intellectual and epistemological preparation, is eager to grasp these highest truths? And most importantly, what, precisely, are these truths? How can one be certain of accessing them through the interpretation of obscure allegories contained in sacred texts? Once again, what “external” source might assist in hermeneutically identifying and systematically articulating these esoteric doctrines, that is, the “secrets of the Torah”?

It is clear that the author of the *Guide* is compelled to grapple with these hermeneutical, pedagogical, and epistemological questions simultaneously. Added to this are the theological-political urgencies of an epoch in which the truth of Judaism (i.e., the truth *tout court* for Maimonides) and the people who bear it are under constant and often vicious threat, both from without and within. As Maimonides' complex *œuvre* demonstrates, the answers to these questions are to be found in one of the most original and profound interaction between the sources of rabbinic Judaism and Greco-Arabic philosophy. Maimonides' fundamental assumption appears to be that these two forms of wisdom — or “rationality” — can engage in genuine dialogue, not in order to dilute either tradition, but to fortify Judaism by uncovering its deepest philosophical foundations (Bensussan, 2003, p. 77 ff.).

Yet we must not forget that for Maimonides, as for many other philosophers, there is only one truth, and truth cannot contradict truth. In other words, there can be no conflict between the wisdom revealed by God and the wisdom attained through human intellect alone. For Maimonides, it seems that none of the philosophical traditions — whether Greek or Arabic — aimed at anything less than a universal and singular truth. This is why, throughout his writings, the sayings of the Talmudic sages and the teachings of the philosophers are placed side by side: for truth, in his view, possesses a universal character that transcends cultural and religious boundaries. As he himself states:

Know that the things about which we shall speak in these chapters and in what will come in the commentary [on the Mishna, *Pirkei Avot*] are not matters invented on my own nor explanations I have originated.



Indeed, they are matters gathered from the discourse the *sages* in the *Midrash*, the *Talmud*, and other compositions of theirs, as well as from the discourse of both the ancient and modern philosophers, and from the compositions of many men. Hear the truth from whoever says it (Maimonides, 1983, p. 60).

On the other hand, we know that, according to the Torah, the revealed wisdom or the universal truth given to the Jewish people is expressed in the form of “laws and statutes [*huqqim* and *mishpatim*].” Thus, Moses says to the Israelites: “Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment [*hokhmatkhem uvinatkhem*] to other peoples” (Deut. 4:6).

However, rabbinic tradition has maintained since its earliest (Pharisaic) origins that the content of the Sinaitic Revelation cannot be reduced strictly to its legal-juridical dimension — even if jurisprudential logic plays a central role — nor can the words of the Torah be confined to their literal meaning (*pesbat*). On the contrary, from this perspective, the Torah is a text whose significance is, by nature, inexhaustible. Most importantly, the Torah (the “Law” or “Teaching”) is not confined to the “Written Torah” (*Torah she-bi-khtav*); it is interpreted, elaborated, and extended through the legal, hermeneutical, and ethical teachings of the “Oral Torah” (*Torah she-be’al peh*), which is likewise believed to have been revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai and, after being transmitted orally for generations, came to be embodied in the Talmud, Midrash, and related texts. (Strack & Stemberger, 1996, p. 15 ff.; Cohen, 2006, p. 205 ff.). As Maimonides affirms: “All the precepts [*mitsvot*: commandments] which Moses received at Sinai were given together with their interpretation [*beferushan nittenu*]” (*Mishneh Torah*, “Introduction to the Transmission of the Oral Law,” 1 in Maimonides, 1972a, p. 35).

According to Maimonides, the teachings revealed at Mount Sinai and transmitted across generations (*Mishnah*, *Pirkei Avot* 1:1) included not only laws and commandments but also profound metaphysical truths concerning the nature of God, the universe, prophecy, and more. But the crucial point is this: Maimonides contends that these philosophical teachings were *largely lost* — both due to the inherently fragile and cautious manner in which the sages transmitted them, and because of the historical



calamities that befell the Jewish people. He offers an account of this *tragic loss* of esoteric knowledge in several of his works. (Kellner, 1996, pp. 37–54):

In our days, severe vicissitudes prevail, and all feel the pressure of hard times. The wisdom of our wise men has disappeared [*ve'avdab hokhmat hakbhamenu*]; the understanding of our prudent men is hidden [*u'vinat nevonenu nistaterab*]. [...] Needless to add that such is the case in regard to the Talmud itself [very few people properly comprehend it]—the Babylonian as well as the Palestinian—the *Sifra*, the *Sifri* and the *Tosefta*, all of which works require, for their comprehension, a broad mind, a wise soul and considerable study, and then one can learn from them the correct practice as to what is forbidden or permitted, and the other rules of the Torah (*Mishneh Torah*, “Introduction to the Transmission of the Oral Law,” 40: Maimonides, 1972a, p. 39).

It is therefore important to take note of this loss and of the current degradation of the rabbinic sciences. Maimonides is not, in fact, the first sage to lament such a decline; on the contrary, the “decline of the generations” is a well-known theme in Talmudic Judaism. Several rabbis frequently express their sense of diminished stature, often contrasting themselves unfavorably with their predecessors in matters of Torah learning, typically through their characteristic use of figurative language. For example, Rabbi Yoḥanan compares the wisdom [literally “hearts”: *libban*] of the earlier generations to the majestic “doorways” of the “Temple” and the “Sanctuary,” while that of his own generation, he says, can be compared only to “the eye of a fine needle” (B. T. *Eruvin* 53a).

What is new in Maimonides, however, is that he links the lost wisdom or science of the Sages — which reflects the esoteric dimension of the Oral Torah — to philosophical truths, under the expression “secrets of the Torah.”

Thus, he conceives of (or presents) the biblical prophets and the sages of the Talmud not merely as righteous and saintly figures whose task is to teach divine laws and decrees to the people — so that they may “do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with their God” (Micah 6:8) — but also as philosophers: individuals possessing knowledge of the nature of the Creator and the workings of His creation. This is precisely the knowledge that, according to Maimonides, is in danger of being *completely lost*.



Know that the many sciences devoted to establishing the truth regarding these matters that have existed in our religious community have perished because of the length of the time that has passed, because of our being dominated by the pagan nations [*al-milal al-jāhiliyya*], and because [...] it is not permitted to divulge these matters to all people (*Guide* I:71, p. 175).

By “these matters,” Maimonides refers to the philosophical topics discussed in the preceding chapters of the *Guide*, such as God’s various causal relationships to the universe (e.g., as first, efficient, formal, or final cause), His governance of the heavenly spheres and their functions, and the status of souls before and after death (I:69–70, pp. 166–175; cf. Aristotle, 1998, p. 115 [Δ-II]; Aristotle, 2008, pp. 48–50 [II:7]). Despite the abundance of biblical, Talmudic, and Midrashic references, the subject matter of these chapters is unmistakably rooted in Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. In a remarkable *tour de force*, Maimonides identifies these truths as integral to the Jewish-rabbinic tradition originating at Sinai, corresponding to what the rabbis referred to as the esoteric doctrines of the “Account of the Beginning (*Ma’aseh Bereshit*)” and the “Account of the Chariot (*Ma’aseh Merkavah*).” This, then, is what he refers to — at least in part — as the “secrets of the Torah” or the “secrets of the Law.”

According to Leo Strauss, however, Maimonides’ principal aim is not to teach these philosophical sciences (i.e., physics and metaphysics) directly, but rather to demonstrate their essential identity “with the secret teaching of the Bible” (Strauss, 1989b, pp. 45–46). This demonstration, perhaps deliberately, is far from clear.

Esotericism Without Mysticism

Indeed, in this context, Maimonides not only asserts that the *Account of the Beginning* corresponds to Aristotelian physics and the *Account of the Chariot* to Aristotelian metaphysics or theology, but also addresses these very subjects in the opening book of the *Mishneh Torah*, entitled *Sefer ha-Madda* (“The Book of Knowledge”). There, he audaciously incorporates the metaphysical and physical teachings associated with the *Account of the Chariot* and the *Account of the Beginning* — drawn from Greco-Arabic philosophy — into the halakhic framework itself (Pines, 1997a, p. 458).



This amounts to introducing an entirely different mode of rationality into rabbinic thought regarding “what is above the firmament and what is below the earth, what was before Creation, and what will be after” (B.T., *Chagigah* 11b). For insofar as Greek philosophy exerted an influence on rabbinic thought in the Hellenistic period, nothing in the Talmud explicitly supports the idea that these narratives — *Ma'aseh Bereshit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, referring respectively to the biblical narratives in Genesis and Ezekiel — are to be understood as Aristotelian physical and metaphysical sciences. Not only that, the very idea of a systematic and conceptual inquiry into the nature of God, Creation, the heavenly beings (*hayyōt*), etc., is largely foreign to the Talmudic sages, who tend to approach such matters in a thoroughly biblical — that is, figural and non-conceptual — manner.

We are indeed dealing with, from the very first page of the Talmud, a strictly monotheistic faith and a communal life governed by commandments derived from a divine Law, the word of a God whose revelation is studied with unceasing fervor. Yet the belief in an absolutely unique God — worthy of exclusive worship by virtue of His essential attributes — is not introduced through rational, conceptual, dogmatic, or even overtly normative statements (cf. Brague, 2009, p. 2). In fact, it would not be inaccurate to say that, at least until the medieval period, rabbinic Judaism did not undertake a sustained effort to conceptualize itself or its teachings in theological or philosophical terms. Instead, rabbinic texts speak in an elliptical, imaginative, narrative, and casuistic language, one that is rich in metaphor, ambiguity, and contradiction.

Nevertheless, traditions of mystical interpretation of certain biblical narratives appear to have emerged as early as the first century BCE. As Gershom Scholem writes:

We know that in the period of the Second Temple an esoteric doctrine was already taught in Pharisaic circles. The first chapter of Genesis, the story of Creation (*Maaseh Bereshith*), and the first chapter of Ezekiel, the vision of God's throne-chariot (the “Merkabah”), were the favorite subjects of discussion and interpretation which it was apparently considered inadvisable to make public. Originally these discussions were restricted to the elucidation and exposition of the respective Biblical passages. [...] It seems probable, however, that speculation did not remain restricted to



commentaries on the Biblical text. The *hayoth*, the “living creatures”, and other objects of Ezekiel’s vision were conceived as angels who form an angelologic hierarchy at the Celestial Court (Scholem, 1995, p. 42).

Maimonides was surely aware of these mystical interpretations — often influenced by Gnostic and Neoplatonic thoughts — particularly those concerning the *Account of the Chariot*. Not only does he largely ignore or at times marginalize these proto-Kabbalistic readings, but he also seeks to radically redefine the status and meaning of the “secrets of the Torah.” What he does, in effect, is to reclaim the term “secrets of the Torah” and reinterpret it, not as mystical doctrines advanced by certain Pharisaic sages and later developed in the *hekhalot* literature of the early medieval period, but as universal truths accessible through Aristotelian philosophy (Scholem, 1995, p. 45 ff.). These truths, he suggests, are already subtly — yet eminently — embedded in the biblical and Talmudic texts themselves, awaiting deeper understanding and careful exegesis. In this way, esotericism is stripped of its mystical and magical aura and reconfigured as a rigorously intellectual and elitist endeavor, grounded in rational, theological, and philosophical knowledge.

This is one of the main reasons why Maimonides’ project may rightly be considered “revolutionary.” Yet, as is often the case with influential religious or ideological reformers, he presents his reinterpretation and reconfiguration of the very foundations of Judaism not as a revolution or innovation, but rather as a restoration (Kellner, 1996, pp. 43–44). This restorative approach is evident not only in Maimonides’ effort to integrate philosophy into the logic of *halakha*, but also in his attempt to reorganize the halakhic tradition by replacing the vast and often difficult-to-access corpus of the Talmud with a systematic legal code, and thereby transforming the very mode of transmission of the Oral Law (Halbertal, 2014, p. 171 ff.). Redefining the content of the Jewish esoteric tradition must likewise be seen as an integral part of this restoration.

The crucial point, however, is that Maimonides’ conception of the “secrets of the Torah” is also presented as halakhic precepts — norms that prescribe how one must think and what one is required to believe. Within this system, the laws are not only formulated through a mode of argumentation distinct from that of the Talmud, but certain philosophical



principles are also elevated to the status of binding precepts, supported by both rational demonstration and scriptural citation. In other words, the philosophical truths implied by the “secrets of the Torah” become, within this framework, normative beliefs or articles of faith. As a result, by incorporating his interpretation into his legal code, “Maimonides [implicitly] obliged even non-philosophical readers to accept his perception of *Sitre Torah* [secrets of the Torah]” (Idel, 1990, pp. 34–35; see also Halbertal, 2014, pp. 165–166; Kellner, 2006, pp. 61–62).

Did these ideas truly become an integral part of *halakha*? Were they ever unanimously accepted and studied as Maimonides once hoped? That is an entirely different question. There is no doubt about the widespread authority of the thirteen principles of faith formulated by Maimonides — all of which made even their way into Jewish liturgy, most notably in the poem *Yigdal* (see *Introduction to Perek Helek* in Maimonides, 1972b, pp. 417–423). It is difficult, however, to say the same about Aristotelian metaphysics as part of *halakha*.⁶

We have thus already addressed some of the questions mentioned above. We now understand what Maimonides means by the “secrets of the Torah” and which “external” source he employs in order to recover those truths concerning God and the universe. But we have yet to inquire into the appropriate response to the perplexity experienced by a small group among the Torah scholars and its implications for Judaism and the Jewish people during a time of theological and political crisis.

Between Law and Philosophy: Transmission of Esoteric Knowledge

It is precisely at this point that Maimonides must confront the rabbinic prohibition against teaching such doctrines, as well as the question of the appropriate mode of their transmission. Whether through a legal code intended to instruct casuistic students of the Talmud, or a philosophical-exegetical treatise aimed at addressing the doubts of a philosophically

⁶ According to Gershom Scholem, no “philosophy of Judaism” — including that of Maimonides — could achieve a “true synthesis” between *halakha* and philosophy: “Maimonides, for instance, begins the *Mishneh Torah*, his great codification of the Halakhah, with a philosophical chapter which has no relation whatever to the Halakhah itself. The synthesis of the spheres remains sterile, and the genius of the man whose spirit moulded them into a semblance of union cannot obscure their intrinsic disparity.” (Scholem, 1995: 28–29)



inclined disciple, the transmission of this knowledge must take into account not only the intellectual aptitude and moral disposition of the audience, but also the dialectic of concealment and revelation that characterizes the rabbinic tradition on this matter. We find the following passage in the first book of the *Mishneh Torah*:

What distinction is there between the *Maaseh Mercabab* [Account of the Chariot] (Ezek. I) and the *Maaseh Bereshith* [Account of the Beginning]? The subject matter of *Maaseh Mercabab* [metaphysical subjects including divine unity and incorporeality, the structure of creation and the divisions within the universe, the nature of angels, and similar themes] is not expounded even to an individual unless he is wise and able to draw conclusions independently [*ellā im kēn hāyā hākhām u-mevīn mi-da 'tō*]; and then, only the heads of the subjects [*rashei ha-perakim*] are communicated to him. But the topics of the *Maaseh Bereshith* [the physical sciences, including discussions of the celestial spheres, the four elements, the composition of the human soul] are taught to an individual; and even if he is unable to form independent conclusions we nevertheless teach him as much as he is capable of learning on these matters. (*The Book of Knowledge*, “Foundations of the Torah,” IV:II in Maimonides, 1972a, pp. 47–48).

It is worth recalling that Maimonides identifies three reasons for the gradual disappearance of the “sciences” that were once part of the inheritance of the Talmudic sages: the passage of time, the domination by foreign civilizations, and the rabbinic prohibition against disclosing or teaching these metaphysical foundations of the Torah. Of these, the only cause over which the rabbis seem to have direct control is this prohibition of transmission, though any relaxation of that rule entails its own dangers and inherent risks. Conscious of that fact, Maimonides fully agrees with the Talmudic sages on the necessity of limiting or even prohibiting the transmission of certain truths. In keeping with rabbinic tradition, he repeatedly emphasizes that these subjects demand great caution and, if transmitted at all, must be conveyed only obliquely and in summary form. This is what he writes when he returns to the issue in the *Guide*:

We have already explained in our legal compilations some general propositions concerning this subject and have drawn attention to many themes. Thus we have mentioned there that the *Account of the Beginning* is



identical with natural science [*al-‘ilm al-ṭabī‘ī*], and the *Account of the Chariot* with divine science [*al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*]; and have explained the rabbinic saying *The Account of the Chariot ought not to be taught even to one man, except if he be wise and able to understand by himself, in which case only the chapter headings may be transmitted to him*. Hence you should not ask of me here anything beyond *the chapter headings* (*Guide I: Introduction*, p. 6).

If the *Mishneh Torah* contains only “some general propositions,” it is only natural to expect the *Guide* to offer more substantial knowledge on the subject. But how can this be achieved through the use of mere chapter headings? Thus, at the heart of the project of the *Guide of the Perplexed* lies a pedagogical and methodological problem. Its message resides as much in its form as in its content: the aim is not merely to transmit a fixed, ready-made truth — whether derived from prophetic, scriptural, or philosophical sources — but of ensuring that “truth (*al-ḥaqq*) should be established in [the reader’s] mind according to the proper methods, and that certainty (*al-yaqīn*) should not come to [the reader] by accident” (*Guide I: “Epistle Dedicatory”*, p. 4). This requires “approach[ing] matters in an orderly manner (*tartīb*),” gradually activating the intellect and deepening one’s understanding of physics and metaphysics in order to access the more profound, concealed meanings of the Law. To achieve this, Maimonides must develop a style of writing adapted both to his intended readership and to the biblical, Talmudic, and philosophical nature of his subject matter (Chalier, 2006, pp. 19–21).

From the very first pages, it becomes clear that the *Guide* adopts a literary and pedagogical style composed of multiple layers of meaning, each directed toward a different level of understanding. It appears that Maimonides adapts here the Talmudic principle that “the left hand should reject and the right hand should welcome” (B.T. *Sotah* 47a) for his own philosophical purposes. The *Guide* is constructed to distance — or even to confuse — its potential detractors (such as the Jewish *mutakallimūn*, or the vulgar among the people), who are, in any case, incapable of benefiting from it due to their ignorance or entrenched prejudices, while drawing the perplexed disciples (already distinguished by their moral and intellectual virtues) ever closer to the goal of their quest.



It is this dialectic of revealing and concealing that, according to Strauss, makes Maimonides “a master of the art of revealing by not revealing and of not revealing by revealing” (Strauss, 1988, p. 52). Indeed, Maimonides himself states that his aim “is that the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed [*al-ḥaqā’iq tulmaḥ minbā thumma tukbfā*]” (*Guide* I: Introduction, pp. 6-7).

Maimonides frequently affirms the wisdom and soundness of the rabbinic decision to conceal certain truths from the multitude. Yet he also draws this commitment to esotericism and the primacy of oral transmission from philosophical sources: It is well known that the original rabbinic prohibition pertained to the writing down of the Oral Law. While the Talmud devotes significant attention to this issue, it offers no explicit justification for it (see, e.g., B.T. *Temurah* 14b; *Gittin* 60b). At the same time, the discussions make clear that the prohibition was a subject of debate from the outset, and that exceptions to the rule have always existed.

However, as Maimonides repeatedly emphasizes, the absolute prohibition against the written transmission of the *Account of the Chariot* — that is, the ban on teaching the “secrets of the Torah” in writing — is both unequivocal and of particular importance. At the same time, he proposes a rational explanation for this cautious stance: Interestingly, the very form of knowledge or discourse that he introduces into Jewish-rabbinic thought — rational philosophical inquiry — also includes a tradition of warning against committing such knowledge to writing. Plato, for instance, famously laments the fixed and impersonal nature of written texts, which renders them incapable of defending their intended meaning. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates observes that writing, “exactly like painting,” “maintain[s] an aloof silence” in the face of any question. He further remarks: “Once any account has been written down, you find it all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and shouldn’t talk to” (Plato, 2002, p. 70 [275 d-e]).

Maimonides echoes this concern about the limits of textual transmission. In the introduction to the *Guide*, he asks how “the explanation of the meaning of one of the parables [of the Torah],” which “one is unable to do even by speaking directly to an interlocutor,” could ever be committed to



writing “without becoming a butt for every ignoramus who, thinking that he has the necessary knowledge, would let fly at him the shafts of his ignorance” (*Guide* I: Introduction, p. 6). He adds in another chapter:

This [concealment of the truth] is not only the case with regard to people adhering to Law [*‘abl al-sharī‘a*], but also with regard to the philosophers and learned men of the various communities [*al-falāsifa wa-hukamā’ al-umam*] in ancient times. For they concealed what they said about the first principles and presented it in riddles (*Guide* I:17, pp. 42-43).

Once again, we see Maimonides explicitly linking — on the question of the dangers of written transmission — two traditions or two sources of truth with which he identifies. In doing so, he provides a rational account of certain halakhic prohibitions, especially those concerning the transmission of the “secrets of the Law.” In this context, caution regarding writing reemerges not as a mystery in its own right, but as a theological-political response to the necessity of concealing the principles and conclusions of certain sciences from the multitude; those who, in their ignorance, are inevitably scandalized by truth and prone to distort it in order to accuse and condemn philosophers and legal scholars, or those who unite both vocations, such as Maimonides, Averroes, and many other medieval thinkers.

This passage also contains an *a fortiori* argument that summarizes Maimonides’ own ambivalent and esoteric style: after noting that philosophers adopt the method of concealment even though their subject matter does not directly concern the faith and conduct of the multitude, he asserts that this principle applies even more forcefully to the sages of the Law, who are entrusted with far weightier matters: teaching how to live according to divine commandments. In other words, theologians and religious-legal scholars must exercise even greater caution when addressing such topics as divine governance, providence, creation, revelation, and redemption, lest they mislead the multitude or destabilize the very order of the city governed by divine law.

Although Maimonides adopts the rationale for concealment from the philosophers, he is careful not to present himself as belonging to their camp. Rather, he explicitly identifies with “the community of those who adhere to the Law.”



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Öz: Bu makalede, İbn Meymûn'un felsefeyi (Aristoteleci fizik ve metafiziği) Rabbânî Yahudiliğin hukuki ve yorumbilgisel öğretisiyle bütünleştirme girişimi; bu çerçevede de Sözlü Tevrat'ın parçası olan kayıp bâtını bilgileri — özellikle de Yaratılış Kısası (Maase Bereşit) ve Binek Kısası'na (Maase Merkava) ilişkin gelenekleri — yeniden yapılandırma tasarısı ele alınmaktadır. İbn Meymûn'un hem fıkhi hem de felsefi eserlerine odaklanan makalede, "Tevrat'ın sırları"nın mistik öğretiler olarak değil, Yahudiliğin kutsal metinlerinde saklı bulunan akla dayalı, felsefi hakikatler olarak yeniden tanımlanması da konu edilmektedir. Çalışmada, ayrıca, İbn Meymûn'un "yolunu şaşırmış" Tevrat âliminin varoluşsal ve entelektüel krizine müdahale etmek üzere geliştirdiği ve bâtını tefsir ve tevilin kademeli olarak öğretilmesini içeren pedagojik yöntemine de eğilinmektedir. İbn Meymûn, tasarısını her ne kadar kayıp bir Rabbânî bilgeliğin restorasyonu olarak sunsa da, makalede, onun bu bağlamda Yahudiliğin temellerini hem hukuki hem de teolojik düzeyde köklü bir şekilde yeniden yapılandığı ileri sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İbn Meymûn, Rabbânî Yahudilik, sözlü yasa, bâtını tefsir, felsefe.

