For Penelope and Adeline,
two bright sparks of divine light and love.

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Introduction

Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) was born in Cordoba, Spain, and considered himself an heir to the Andalusian philosophical tradition, developed by his generational contemporaries Ibn Bājja (d. 1138), and Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 1126–1198). In a letter to his translator Samuel Ibn Tibbon evaluating readings in philosophy, he recommends no Jewish philosophical sources.[1] Likewise, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he cites no Jewish sources. He cites Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Plato, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Bājja; he is also clearly indebted to Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 1037) and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). While it is evident that he has read Saadya Gaon (882–942), Judah Halevi (c. 1075–1141), Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), and Abraham Ibn Daud (1110–1180), he never openly acknowledges them by name.[2]

In contrast, his son Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237) writes a commentary to the Torah in which he grapples explicitly with the commentaries of earlier Jewish exegetes, including Saadya Gaon, Samuel ben Ḥofni (d. 1034), and Abraham Ibn Ezra, commentators who represent the Gaonic-Andalusian rationalist tradition of Biblical exegesis. Yet Abraham Maimonides grew up in Egypt, and while he defends Maimonides' philosophical positions, he shows little interest in the Andalusian tradition of Arabic Aristotelians, and even makes critical remarks about the dangers of the philosophical path.[3]

Maimonides was clearly proud of his Andalusian origin; throughout his life, he signed his name in Hebrew as "Moshe ben Maimon *ha-Sefaradi*" ("the Spaniard," *al-Andalusī*).[4] Maimonides regarded himself, along with Averroes, as a final heir of this Andalusian school, which was actually quite small. The Spanish Aristotelian tradition traced its roots in the East to the tenth-century Islamic philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 951),

rather than to Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), whose works came to prevail in the East.[5] The figure who sparked the Aristotelian revival in Spain was Ibn Bājja, who was followed by Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185) and Averroes.[6] As Joel Kraemer points out, this was not a school in a formal, institutional sense, but rather a group of thinkers who shared a framework of ideas, arguments, source material, and terminology, pursuing common questions through a shared methodology.[7] Sarah Stroumsa adds that Maimonides' identification with this school was not typical for medieval Jewish thinkers. Whereas modern scholars group Jewish thinkers into schools such as "*kalām*," "Neoplatonism," and "Aristotelianism," medieval Jewish thinkers did not generally identify explicitly with one school, and were not identified as members of a school by others.[8] It is thus especially noteworthy that Maimonides, commenting to his translator Samuel Ibn Tibbon on a philosophical curriculum, demonstrates identification with an Aristotelian tradition; he recommends Aristotle over Plato, and gives stern instructions to read Aristotle with authoritative commentators Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and the contemporary Andalusian Averroes.[9] In the *Guide*, he again indicates his Andalusian intellectual affiliation, noting that he himself has studied under a student of the contemporary Andalusian philosopher Ibn Bājja, and that he has met a son of the Andalusian astronomer Jābir Ibn Aflaḥ (d. ca. 1150).[10]

Because of religious persecution, Maimonides was forced to flee al-Andalus with his family and eventually settled in Egypt. Abraham Maimonides thus grew up in an entirely different intellectual milieu than did his father. There is no evidence that philosophical and scientific works had reached Egypt; scholars in Egypt might have known them only through Maimonides' citations and summary of their ideas.[11] His father, an Aristotelian who had actually studied primary source texts from the Andalusian philosophical tradition, was a rare exception in this intellectual environment.[12]

In addition to his father, among Abraham Maimonides' close associates were R. Abraham ibn Abī'l-Rabīʿ he-Ḥasid (d. ca. 1223), who seems to have held an official post, and his father-in-law, R. Ḥananel ben Samuel, who served in Abraham Maimonides' rabbinic court (*bet din*), perhaps as its head.[13] Both R. Ḥananel and R. Abraham he-Ḥasid were members of a circle of Egyptian pietists; Abraham Maimonides refers to R. Abraham ibn Abī'l-Rabīʿ he-Ḥasid as "our master in the path of

the Lord."[14] Abraham Maimonides is thus the heir of two traditions—the Aristotelian Andalusian philosophical tradition, exemplified by al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja, and Averroes, of which his father was a proud exemplar, and the Sufi-influenced pietism of his Egyptian milieu.[15]

Abraham Maimonides is well-versed in this complex of intellectual trends, and selectively integrates these trends according to his own distinctive sensibility.[16] It is clear that he has read and come into contact with a wide variety of Jewish and Islamic texts and traditions, and creates his own unique synthesis. He understands his father's interpretations well and tries to harmonize them with other streams of thought. But in the end he is his own person and disagrees with his father. For example, while Moses Maimonides asserts that a thinker who upholds the theory of God's glory as created light is one of insufficient intellectual capacity, Abraham Maimonides does not hide that he himself finds this view plausible. Moreover, he omits explicit language of the Active Intellect, prominent in the thought of his father. Abraham Maimonides is well aware of his father's abstract metaphysical concept of Necessary Existence, but draws less precise philosophical boundaries between metaphysical necessity and temporal eternity than does his father. Abraham Maimonides accepts Saadya's conception of the created light and the created word of God, which are dismissed by his father as secondary interpretations. Nevertheless, he is well aware of the great intellectual stature of his father, and seeks to defend his father's interpretations and harmonize them with his own.

In his Commentary to the Torah, Abraham Maimonides makes two significant programmatic statements outlining his exegetical agenda.[17] In his comment to Exodus 33:22, R. Abraham states that he seeks to harmonize the interpretation of his father with that of thinkers who interpret God's glory as a sensory created light, the most prominent being Onqelos and Saadya Gaon. In this statement, he writes that "it is not impossible in this and [matters] like it to connect what my father intended with what the scholars who preceded him intended [by noting] that there is some sensory or sensory-like viewing of the created light." Thus Abraham Maimonides indicates his larger exegetical purpose: to harmonize the approach of his father, a strict Aristotelian-Andalusian philosopher, with other exegetical approaches he has inherited, such as those of Saadya. In a second programmatic statement, in his comment to Exodus 3:14, he

makes a conceptual identification between Saadya's interpretation of the divine name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* as eternity, and the assertion of his father that the name signifies Necessary Existence. He writes, "And there is no difference [between this] and what my father mentioned in his explication of this exalted name (*hādhā al-shem ha-nikhbad*), that it points to Necessary Existence." Thus Abraham Maimonides seeks to harmonize Saadya's conception of eternity with his father's conception of metaphysical necessity.

Moses Maimonides is an abstract scientific thinker. Through his study of Avicenna, he is aware of Sufi vocabulary, but gives it a philosophical inflection. In contrast, Abraham Maimonides, while accepting certain metaphysical concepts such as that of Necessary Existence, has a Sufi-influenced pietist sensibility. Elisha Russ-Fishbane has described the writings of Abraham Maimonides and his circle as a form of "intellectual illuminationism" or "philosophical mysticism," and notes the extraordinary impact of the Sufi-influenced language of *Guide* III:51.[18] Our investigation will to some extent confirm this appraisal. Abraham Maimonides does accord the intellect an important role in spiritual ascent. However, we must also recognize a significant distinction between the philosophical sensibilities of Maimonides and his son, as Russ-Fishbane himself acknowledges.[19] While III:51 is the climax of the *Guide*, it is only one strand of discourse in the work.[20] Maimonides grapples with philosophical and scientific questions that perplexed the Andalusians of his time, most significantly the conflict between Aristotelian natural science and Ptolemaic astronomy. Maimonides terms this "the true perplexity."[21] Maimonides is a dialectical thinker, carefully examining and sifting through conflicting philosophical perspectives, searching for philosophical and scientific understanding through relentless dialectical investigation.[22] While Abraham Maimonides may accept some of the outlines, vocabulary, and concepts exemplified in his father's writings on scientific and metaphysical matters, his real interests lie elsewhere—in ethical and spiritual purification as a path to arrival at the divine. He understands his father well, but chooses to pursue the questions and approach that most interest him. Abraham is simply not fascinated in the way his father is with questions of scientific cosmology. While he is as interested as his father in attaining an audience in the inner court of the divine ruler, he is less interested in the study of mathematics, physics, and biology that

Maimonides argues is the path to that inner court.[23] In his desired audience with the divine, Abraham Maimonides would likely pose different questions before his maker than would Maimonides.[24] In one striking difference, Abraham Maimonides omits a key concept central to the thought of his father—that of the Active Intellect—and using visual, sensory language, suggests that one can attain a "glimpse" of the divine essence.

While Abraham Maimonides has great respect for his father's abstract philosophical interpretations of Scripture, he is also more sensitive to a plain-sense contextual reading, bringing in citations from commentaries of Saadya Gaon, Samuel ben Ḥofni, and Abraham Ibn Ezra. In this study, we will analyze the way this difference in philosophical and exegetical sensibility expresses itself in the contrasting and intersecting approaches of Maimonides and his son Abraham to the concepts of created light, created word, and the event at Mount Sinai, and to the divine names *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* and the Tetragrammaton. Our study will reveal the ways Abraham Maimonides mediates between the approach of his father and his own intellectual and spiritual understanding, and the ways that Abraham's interpretations shed new light on the work of Maimonides.

A brief overview of the book's chapters will orient the reader to our study. Part one explores the themes of created light, created word, and the revelation at Mount Sinai, with a particular focus on the question of experiential illumination. In Chapter 1, we analyze Abraham Maimonides' interpretation of the image of God's glory that Moses perceives in the cleft of the rock. In both his Torah Commentary and his pietist Compendium (the *Kifāya*), Abraham speaks of attaining "a glimpse of God's exalted essence [or existence]." Abraham's language of illumination suggests a background in spiritual practices known from the writings of his Pietist circle.

In contrast, Maimonides suggests that the concept of God's "created light" arises from an inferior interpretation for those who cannot achieve an abstract conception of illumination as purely intellectual. In chapter 2, we see that detailed exegesis reveals that Maimonides also hints at an esoteric interpretation, according to which "created light" signifies the Active Intellect or the separate intellects. Thus the "vision" of the glory at Mount Sinai was not a collective vision of sensory light, but rather signifies openness to inspiration from the Active Intellect.

Chapter 3 explores the Israelites' experience of created light in the desert. Abraham Maimonides emphasizes the inner dimension of spiritual life, even in the group religious experience of the Israelites in the wilderness. Although the nation shared a common experience of witnessing the light of God's glory, each individual experienced this as an event of individual spiritual illumination. Here, as at Mount Sinai, Abraham Maimonides alludes to the Sufi practice of emptying or inner solitude (*khalwa*), even in the historical experience of the nation as a whole.

Chapter 4 turns to the theme of created light in preparation for the revelation at Mount Sinai. Both Maimonides and his son interpret Exodus 19:22 as warning that one must engage in a slow, internal process of preparation to achieve vision of the Lord. However, the two diverge in what such vision means. Maimonides insists in *Guide* I:5 that all language of vision with respect to God is metaphorical; "seeing God" is a metaphor for intellectual understanding. The two will thus also disagree on what preparation for this "seeing" entails. While Maimonides describes an intellectual process including studying the rules of logic and inference, Abraham emphasizes a spiritual, pietistic process of purification of the heart and mind, without the goal of scientific study of creation. For Abraham Maimonides, study of the sciences is at most preparatory; for Maimonides, understanding of the scientific order of the universe is central and intrinsic to contemplation of God.

Chapter 5 turns to the revelation at Mount Sinai itself. We discover that Maimonides borrows the phrase "the great event of witness" (*al-mashhad al-ʿaẓīm*) from Judah Halevi. However, Maimonides divests the phrase of its anti-al-Fārābīan polemic, co-opting it to describe the Sinai event in accord with his own philosophical theory of prophecy. He suggests that the event at Sinai was a *sui generis* vision of prophecy; like the glory, the "voice" heard at Mount Sinai is a metaphor for information received from the Active Intellect. "Created light" and "created voice" are two sensory metaphors for intellectual apprehension. Both signify that we come to understand the truth of the Necessary Existent and the way divine intelligence is expressed in nature.

Chapter 6 turns to the created word experienced at Mount Sinai. We find that Abraham Maimonides draws upon the experiential dimension of the Sinai event expressed by R. Abraham he-Ḥasid. However, whereas Abraham he-Ḥasid insists that the voice that the people heard on

Mount Sinai was an undifferentiated, unintelligible sound, for Abraham Maimonides, the people heard the Ten Words. Like Abraham he-Ḥasid, Abraham Maimonides holds that the event at Mount Sinai made the people of Israel suitable vehicles for reception of the prophetic experience for generations to come.

Chapter 7 turns to the vision of the created light by the nobles of Israel in Exodus 24:9–11. However, Abraham describes the vision as a singular apprehension, likened to clarity, brightness, and purity. By contrast, in *Guide* I:5, Maimonides criticizes the nobles and the material nature of their vision. Whereas Maimonides suggests that the nobles deserved to die because of their rushing forward, Abraham suggests that no harm befell the elders because they prepared themselves spiritually.

Part One demonstrates that Abraham Maimonides sought to harmonize the approach of his father with that of Saadya on the topics of created light, created word, and the event at Mount Sinai. In Part Two, we see this harmonizing impulse again with respect to the divine names. In chapter 8, we find that there are two approaches to the divine name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* in rabbinic and medieval Jewish philosophical literature. One is historical, experiential, and existential; "I will be" means "I will be with you; I will be present." A second is metaphysical, and connects the name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* to the Tetragrammaton.

Chapter 9 explores rabbinic interpretations of the name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, both metaphysical and historical. We observe that one manuscript variant of Onqelos translates the term as *ehe ʿal ma de-ehe* ("I will be what I will be" or "I will be according to what I will be"). This could be a metaphysical assertion of God's eternal existence or a historical assertion that God will act according to circumstances. Rabbinic midrashim include both historical and eternal interpretations. In one interpretation included in the *Tanḥuma*, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is not a name in itself but a stand in for the names that God will be called according to the qualities God expresses in different historical circumstances. A purely historical twist found in the medieval midrashic collection *Exodus Rabbah* and in the Babylonian Talmud suggests that *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* signifies one who will be with the nation in present and future tribulations.

Chapter 10 turns to Saadya Gaon's interpretation of *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. Saadya parallels both sides of rabbinic interpretation, the metaphysical and the historical. In his stand-alone Arabic translation of the

Torah (the *Tafsīr*), he translates *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* as "the eternal (beginningless) that will not cease to be (*al-azalī alladhī lā yazūl*)." Other comments of Saadya reflect a historical reading, in which *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* is not in itself a name, but a stand-in for names that will be appropriate according to the circumstances, an approach that parallels Midrash *Tanḥuma*.

Chapter 11 demonstrates that the two approaches—the metaphysical and the historical—are integrated and explicated at length in Saadya's long commentary to Exodus 3:13–15. Abraham Maimonides, in his commentary to the Torah, cites Saadya's translation and a very short fragment—or perhaps a quotation from a paraphrase—from Saadya's long commentary. Saadya suggests that *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14a indicates eternity in the past and the future, as we see in his *Tafsīr*. Thus the one term *Ehyeh* in Exodus 3:14b can be translated by the one term "the eternal" (*al-azalī*), which includes both past and future. Saadya has not yet arrived at Maimonides' notion of metaphysical necessity. His concept of eternity is concerned with the infinitude of God—stretching from the past to the future—in contrast to the finitude of creatures who come to be and pass away.

Chapter 12 investigates Abraham Maimonides' interpretation of Saadya's position. Abraham Maimonides agrees with Saadya that the concept of eternity (*azaliyya*) includes not only eternity in the past but eternity in the future. Abraham shows interest in harmonizing the interpretations of Saadya and his father; he identifies Saadya's conception of eternity with his father's conception of Necessary Existence. Abraham pushes Saadya's conception of eternity in the direction of necessity and non-contingency.

Chapter 13 turns to Maimonides' interpretation of the divine names. Like Halevi and Ibn Ezra, Maimonides associates the name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* with the Tetragrammaton. Maimonides suggests that there may be an etymological and semantic derivation of the Tetragrammaton of which we are not aware. The Tetragrammaton does not derive from God's actions, but represents God's essential nature, which is simple, necessary being. Through deliberate use of ambiguous language, Maimonides provokes the reader to ponder the relationship between the Tetragrammaton and the name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. Maimonides suggests, in accordance

with the interpretation of his son, that *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* offers an explanation of the Tetragrammaton.

Chapter 14 explores Abraham Maimonides' explication of conceptions of eternity and relationship in the name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. Abraham asserts that the first pronouncement of *Ehyeh* (*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, Exodus 3:14a) relates to God's exalted essence, which it is difficult for language to express, while the second *Ehyeh* ("Thus say to the children of Israel, *Ehyeh* sent me to you," Exodus 3:14b) signifies God's relationship to humanity; "*Ehyeh* has sent me to you" suggests that God sent Moses to Israel as an act of divine providence. Abraham suggests that the name *El Shaddai* also expresses Necessary Existence; this position softens the philosophical precision of his father, who reserves the concept of Necessary Existence for the Tetragrammaton, yet adds an experiential dimension to apprehension of the divine names.

In our conclusion, we investigate the three contexts in which Abraham Maimonides alludes to catching a glimpse of the divine essence, and contrast his approach to the intellectualist mysticism of his father. In investigating the concept of intellectualist mysticism, we note the ways Abraham Maimonides integrates the intellectual approach of his father with his own focus upon illuminative, experiential awareness.

A final introductory word will be of aid to the reader. The following chapters offer an exploration of texts and concepts in the history of Jewish thought that are not immediately transparent. This study is as much a journey through these texts and ideas as it is about the thinkers who investigate them. Medieval Arabic thinkers argue that to accept the authoritative pronouncement of an author—a stance they term *taqlīd*—does not do justice to the spirit of independent inquiry and engagement expressed by these thinkers and the texts they love. Approaches to illumination and the divine Name invite careful reflection, a savoring of ideas with the intuitive as well as the discursive mind, much as we savor poetry. The words of these texts guide the reader to experiential insight that lies behind and beyond the words themselves. Readers are invited to journey deeply into these texts, to ponder the ideas they express, and hence to enter into the intellectual and spiritual worlds of Moses and Abraham Maimonides.

Part One

Moses and Abraham Maimonides on Created Light, Created Word, and the Event at Mount Sinai