"Therefore I Have Removed the Veil": Disclosure of Secrets in Eleventh-Century Islam and the Literary Character of Maimonides's *Guide*

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■ Abstract

This article investigates Maimonides's ethos of disclosing "secrets" and explores its Islamic origins, focusing on sources neglected by earlier scholarship concerning the *Guide of the Perplexed*. I turn from the prevalent method by which the *Guide* has been studied for decades, namely, as a work at the core of which lie strategies and an ethos of concealment. In lieu of the conventional method, I go in a very different direction by inquiring into the modes that Maimonides used in fashioning his *Guide* as a work that involves a self-proclaimed exceptional act of revelation of secrets and a breach of the boundaries of concealment. The resulting textual investigation demonstrates that clusters of motifs presented in these sources, as well as structures of arguments, were retained in their cultural migration. This exploration allows me to illuminate new aspects of the question of the genre of Maimonides' *Guide*, its sources, and its author's intertextual art of writing.

■ Keywords

■ Introduction

This article will shed light on Maimonides's ethos of revelation of secrets—which is attested to most clearly in two specific loci in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-ḥāʾirīn*): the opening unit of the work, and the introduction to the *Guide*'s third part—and will explore its Islamic sources. This mode of research demands a turn away from the prevalent method through which the *Guide* has been studied for decades, namely, as a work whose core consists in strategies and an ethos of concealment, and which therefore calls for an inquiry into the methods of withholding knowledge and a careful reconstruction of the knowledge that lies hidden beneath its external layer. Instead, I seek to turn attention to an almost polar theme in the work and investigate the ways in which Maimonides fashioned his *Guide* as a work that involves an exceptional act—so he himself attests—of revelation of secrets, and a breach of the boundaries of concealment as dictated by tradition.

In the decades that have passed since the appearance of Leo Strauss's "Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*" in 1941,[1] Strauss's first attempt at providing an extensive account of Maimonides's "art of revealing by not revealing,"[2]

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[1] See Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Essays on Maimonides: An Octocentennial Volume* (ed. Salo W. Baron; New York: Columbia University Press, 1941) 37–91; Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: Free Press, 1952) 38–94. A recent reprint of the article also includes Strauss's notes; see *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings* (ed. Kenneth H. Green; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) 341–98. The changes in Strauss's attitude toward Maimonides were addressed in Remi Brague, "Leo Strauss et Maimonide," in *Maimonides and Philosophy: Papers Presented at the Sixth Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter, May, 1985* (ed. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel; Dordrecht and Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1986) 246–68; cf. Alfred Ivry, "Leo Strauss on Maimonides," in *Leo Strauss's Thought: Towards a Critical Engagement* (ed. Alan Udoff; Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991) 75–91. Strauss's thesis had already been suggested, though in a far less elaborated form, by Alexander Altmann, "Das Verhältnis Maimunis zur jüdischen Mystik," *MGWJ* 80 (1936) 305−6 (in English: Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides' Attitude Toward Jewish Mysticism," *Studies in Jewish Thought* [ed. A. Jospe; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981] 200–201); Altmann explicitly mentions brief remarks Strauss made about Maimonides's esotericism in Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz: Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935 [the chapter "The Philosophic Foundation of the Law: Maimonides' Doctrine of Prophecy and Its Sources" was originally written as an article in 1931 and was first printed in 1934; see n. 2 below]) 88–89 (in English: Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995] 102–3).

[2] Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," 51. Strauss briefly addressed Maimonides's esotericism in some of his earlier articles and lectures: Leo Strauss, "Cohen und Maimuni" (lecture, Academy for the Science of Judaism in Berlin, 1931; first printed in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften* [ed. Heinrich Meier; Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler; 1997] 393–436, esp. 427); idem, "Maimunis Lehre von der Prophetie und

Maimonidean esotericism has become the most researched topic, as well as one of the most celebrated features, of Maimonides's writing. Strauss's article—which was later included in his book *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and which came to be framed by the book's overall thesis—was an important axis around which Maimonides scholarship was conducted for decades.[3]

According to Strauss's thesis, esoteric writing was employed for two main reasons. The first was the protection of communal cohesion. According to this line of argument, the purpose of "writing between the lines" was to secure social unity and coherency in view of the destructive power of the revelation of truth. Following a Nietzschean view, Strauss argued that the social structure would not endure under conditions of complete transparency.[4] The second reason was protection of the philosopher from the persecution and condemnation that might result from his undermining of the principles of faith held by his social milieu. The community, according to Strauss, would not tolerate an author who threatens its fundamental principles of faith—those that secure its cohesion—and would persecute him mercilessly.[5] In his scholarly work, Strauss attempted not only to understand the reason that lay behind esoteric writing but also to trace its ascent, its heyday, and its historical decline. In his view, the literary corpus of Plato marked the rise of esoteric writing, most significantly his Πολιτεία (*The Republic*) and

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ihre Quellen," first printed in *Le Monde Oriental* (Uppsala) 28 (1934) 99–139, reprinted Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, 87–123, at 89–90; Leo Strauss, "Quelques Remarques sur la Science politique de Maïmonide et de Farabi," *REJ* 100 (1936) 1–37, reprinted in idem, *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, 125–58, at 137–38, 152–53; idem, "Der Ort der Vorsehungslehre nach der Ansicht Maimunis," *MGWJ* 81 (1937) 93–105, reprinted in *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, 179–190, at 186; idem, review of *The Mishneh Torah*, book 1, by Moses Maimonides, ed. Moses Hyamson, *RR* 3 (1937) 448–56, reprinted in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides* (ed. Green), 329–40, at 338; For an overview on Strauss's early approach to Maimonides, see Ivry, "Leo Strauss on Maimonides," 77–79.

[3] Strauss's overall approach is based on the presuppositions that the religious milieu of philosophically inclined authors has posed a danger to them and that both Jewish and Islamic thought of this period is centered on the tension between philosophy and religion. See Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 17–19; cf. Warren Zev Harvey, "How Strauss Paralyzed the Study of the 'Guide of the Perplexed' in the Twentieth Century," *Iyyun* 50 (2001) 387–96, at 388 (Hebrew). A fierce methodological critique of Strauss's approach to the field of Islamic studies was leveled by Massimo Campanini, *An Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) 68; cf. Dimitri Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (2002) 19–25. For a bibliographic list of scholars who addressed Maimonides's esotericism with diverging levels of explicit or implicit acceptance of Strauss's thesis, see Omer Michaelis, "It Is Time to Act for the Lord: [They] Violate[d] your Torah": Crisis Discourse and the Dynamics of Tradition in Medieval Judaism (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2019) 236 n. 807.

[4] See Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 17; cf. Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Implications* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 162–63.

[5] See, for instance, Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 21.

Νόμοι (*The Laws*).[6] The practice was appropriated, most notably, by abu-Nasr al-Fārābī,[7] and transmitted through his writing, according to Strauss, to Maimonides and his oeuvre,[8] specifically to the *Guide of the Perplexed*.[9] Strauss claimed that the most significant stylistic contribution of writings in the Islamicate world to the art of writing the *Guide of the Perplexed* was the lesson on the acute need to withhold knowledge from the multitude, as well as the different strategies of covert double-writing that allowed the text simultaneously to reveal (to the few) and conceal (from the many).

Scholars have accepted this genealogy of the sources of Maimonidean esotericism throughout the past 75 years, even though important additions to it have been proposed. Sara Klein-Braslavy suggested the first, arguing that this genealogy should be augmented by another mode of esotericism, one that involved the careful cultivation of special areas of knowledge,[10] which are to be revealed only to the adept. The second addition, which various scholars suggested, is esotericism drawn from rabbinic sources.[11] These scholars presented Maimonides as an author who coalesced two currents of esotericism: on the one hand, the Tannaitic-Amoraic mode of concealment, and on the other hand, the philosophical esotericism fostered by Greek authors, transmitted to the Islamicate world by the great translation movement and much elaborated by al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja, and Ibn Sīnā.[12] Still, most of the scholarship written during these past decades remained within the confines of the Straussian paradigm, which called for an inquiry into the reasons and modes

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[6] See Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935) 63–65; idem, *Persecution and the Art of Writing,* 9–10.

[7] See Leo Strauss, "Farabi's Plato," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume: On the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Saul Lieberman, Shalom Spiegel, Solomon Zeitlin and Alexander Marx; New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945) 357–93; and, more concisely with some modifications, in idem, *Persecution and the Art of Writing,* 7–22.

[8] Strauss offers a maximalist and in my opinion unconvincing reading of a line from Maimonides's epistle to Samuel ibn Tibbon: "The books of Ibn Sina, although it is appropriate to take issue with them [*lehaqšot ʿaleyhem*] and [although] they are not like al-Farabi's utterances—there is usefulness in his books and one should study his utterances and probe into their ideas"; See Leo Strauss, "Eine vermißte Schrift Farabis" [1936], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2 (ed. Meier), 176, cf. n. 18 below.

[9] See Strauss, "Farabi's Plato," 9.

[10] See Sara Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Metaphysical Esotericism according to Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996) 15–30 (Hebrew).

[11] Ibid, 31–105.

[12] On the influence of Ibn Bājja's esotericism on Maimonides, see Lawrence V. Berman "Ibn Bajja and Maimonides, a Chapter in the History of Political Philosophy" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1959) 144–49 (Hebrew). With regard to Ibn Sīnā, see Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 23–26. On al-Fārābī see ibid., 19–22, 83. The juxtaposition of these authors with the Greek philosophical tradition overlooks the possible influence of Shīʿīte and Ismāʿīlī trends on authors such as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, and in any case leaves unexamined the relations between the *Guide* and Ismāʿīlī esotericism. On the relation and tension between Maimonides and the Ismāʿīliyya, see Alfred Ivry, "Ismaʿili Theology and Maimonides' Philosophy," in *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society, and Identity; Proceedings of an International Conference Held by the Institute of Jewish Studies, University College, London, 1992* (ed. Daniel Frank; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 271–99.

of concealment that Maimonides and his predecessors employed. A rare exception is to be found in the scholarship of Moshe Halbertal, who sought to answer the question of why Maimonides employed the language of secrecy and revelation in the first place. According to Halbertal, employing the discourse of secrecy allowed Maimonides an "extraordinary flexibility,"[13] and through it he forged a powerful vehicle for a "revolutionary integration between apparently contradictory cultural traditions."[14] The important point that Halbertal indicated is that Maimonides not only protected the boundaries of concealment in his work but, at the same time, decisively declared that he would be breaching the limits of the esoteric and providing the rationale for this very act.

In this article, I argue that Maimonides had his Islamic sources not only regarding concealment but also with respect to the breaching of its boundaries.[15] In other words, by carefully attending to Islamic writings, Maimonides implemented in his *Guide* not only his method of withholding knowledge but also the ethos of revealing secrets. A study of these sources reveals that the coupling of Maimonides and al-Fārābī, so prevalent in scholarship, does not exhaust the picture at all, and even distorts it.[16]

What were the sources of Maimonides's idea of the exceptional revelation of secrets? I will consider two sources that earlier scholarship on the *Guide* has neglected: the closing unit of Ibn Sīnā's[17] *Risāla fī aḥwāl al-nafs* (Epistle on the States of the Soul),[18] the so-called epilogue of the "Lesser" *Destination*; and the

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[13] Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 52.

[14] Ibid, 53.

[15] On the necessity of studying Maimonides in light of the cultural milieu in which he thought and wrote, see Sarah Stroumsa, preface to *Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) xiii–xiv.

[16] Gutas criticizes Strauss's overall approach, and specifically his understanding of al-Fārābī's notion of esotericism and his insistence on al-Fārābī's centrality to the dissemination of knowledge in the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, he does not challenge Strauss's conception of Maimonidean esotericism as being the heir of al-Fārābī; see Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy," 19–20.

[17] On Maimonides's reception of Ibn Sīnā, see Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, "Maimonides' Reticence toward Ibn Sīnā," in *Avicenna and His Heritage: Acts of the International Colloquium, Leuven, September 8–11, 1999* (ed. Jules Janssens and D. de Smet; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002) 281–96; Steven Harvey, "Avicenna's Influence on Jewish Thought: Some Reflections," in *Avicenna and His Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy* (ed. Y. Tzvi Langermann; Turnhout: Brepols, 2009) 327–40; W. Z. Harvey, "Maimonides' Avicennianism," in *Maimonidean Studies*, vol. 5 (ed. Arthur Hyman and Alfred Ivry; New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2008) 107–19; Mauro Zonta, "Maimonides' Knowledge of Avicenna: Some Tentative Conclusions about a Debated Question," in *Die Trias des Maimonides. Jüdische, arabische und antike Wissenskultur* (ed. Georges Tamer; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005) 211–22.

[18] See Aḥmad Fuʾād Al-Ahwānī, *Les états de l'âme par Avicenne* (Cairo: Issa el Babi el-Halabi, 1952) 141–42. On the treatise and the different attributions scholars have suggested, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (2nd rev. ed.; Brill: Leiden, 2014) 102–3, 477–79. Gutas indicates that the epilogue was copied in many cases as part of both the *Kitāb al-Shifā* and the *Kitāb al-Najāt*, in ibid., 22.

introduction to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's[19] *Mishkāt al-anwār* (Niche of Lights).[20] And I will argue that Maimonides was very much attuned to these texts when fashioning the two narratives that are included in his rhetoric of revelation: the narrative of the crisis of the body of knowledge, and that of the redemption of an elect disciple. Moreover, I will argue that the introduction to al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* also provided the general framework or genre—namely, the writing of an epistolary treatise in which secrets of scriptures are to be revealed—that Maimonides appropriated for the *Guide*. In contrast to Shlomo Pines's argument that "the *Guide* belongs to a very peculiar literary genre, of which it is the unique specimen,"[21] I argue that, while the *Guide* indeed had no precedents in Jewish literature, it partakes of a genre that developed in the Islamicate world and was mediated to Maimonides through the writings of al-Ghazālī, which enjoyed wide dissemination in al-Andalus after its occupation by the Muwaḥḥidūn.

[19] Maimonides does not mention al-Ghazālī as one of the authors of works commendable for study in his epistle to Samuel ibn Tibbon, which survived only partially in the Arabic original. It is possible that Maimonides did not see al-Ghazālī as a philosopher in the fullest sense of the word but as standing between the *falāsifa* and the *mutakallimūn*. For a comparison between the different surviving versions of the Hebrew translation of the epistle, see Doron Forte, "Back to the Sources: Alternative Versions of Maimonides' Letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon and Their Neglected Significance," *JSQ* 23 (2016) 47–90, at 83–90. See also Sarah Stroumsa's suggestion that Maimonides's epistle is not a reading list but a response to a list Ibn Tibbon sent to him for evaluation. If this is indeed the case, we cannot infer anything about the absence of authors from the list; Sarah Stroumsa, "Note on Maimonides' Attitude to Joseph ibn Ṣaddiq," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1990) 33–38 (in Hebrew). For a detailed picture of scholarship on Maimonides's reception of al-Ghazālī, see Samuel Harvey, "The Changing Image of al-Ghazālī in Medieval Jewish Thought," in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī; Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary* (ed. Georges Tamer; Leiden: Brill, 2015) 288–302, esp. 292–96.

[20] For a succinct survey of the scholarship on *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, see Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī's Cosmology in the Veil Section of his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*," in *Avicenna and his Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy* (ed. Y. Tzvi Langermann; Turnhout: Brepols, 2009) 27–50, at 28–29. On the attribution of the work to al-Ghazālī, see the detailed bibliography in Scott M. Girdner, "Reasoning with Revelation: The Significance of the Qurʾānic Contextualization of Philosophy in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-Anwār* (The Niche of Lights)" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2010) 34 nn. 44–45. On the two medieval Hebrew translations of the treatise, see Erez Tsabary, "The Hebrew Translations of *Mishkāt al-Anwār* by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī" (MA thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2013); Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Niche for Lights: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary (Old and Modern Hebrew Translation)* (ed. Avi Elqayam; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2018) 150–73. On the treatise reception among medieval Jewish authors, see ibid., 173–204. For a thematic comparative study of the treatise and Maimonides's eight chapters, see Scott M. Girdner, "Ghazālī's Hermeneutics and Their Reception in Jewish Tradition: *Mishkāt al-Anwār (The Niche of Lights)* and Maimonides' *Shemonah Peraqim (Eight Chapters)*," in idem, *Islam and Rationality* (ed. Tamer)*,* 253–74. Cf. Griffel, "Al-Ghazālī's Cosmology," 38–39; even though Griffel's remarks on Maimonides are brief, his article can serve as a fruitful model for a comparative study between *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

[21] Shlomo Pines, "Translator's Introduction: The Philosophical Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) lxxix. Pines's assertion appears in a section in which he examines the influence of al-Fārābī on Maimonides. Indeed, as it will be argued, with respect to genre, Maimonides was not influenced by al-Fārābī at all but by other Islamic authors, most notably al-Ghazālī.

Admittedly, we cannot in this case point to the two essays mentioned above as definite Arabic sources of Maimonides. As in many other cases, Maimonides himself does not indicate his familiarity with these works, and we have no other explicit proof that he read them.[22] Nonetheless, this does not exempt us from the task of exploring the *possible* sources of the *Guide*. Between certainty, which we rarely attain, and the sources that could not possibly have influenced Maimonides lies a broad spectrum that ranges from the more likely to the less likely. In what follows, I will try to make the case—by pointing out affinities related to a cluster of themes and arguments—that the two works cited above were possibly on Maimonides's mind and that he appropriated them when he wrote the *Guide*.[23]

Maimonides's appropriation was, of course, subject to a process of cultural negotiation. As is the case with most of his intertextual gestures, he almost never directly quoted in full or left his Islamic sources untouched.[24] He molded and fashioned them by paying close attention to the possibilities afforded him by the canonical sources of the Jewish tradition, in many cases shrewdly reinterpreting these precedents. In any case, as Sarah Stroumsa recently emphasized, when ideas and discourses migrate between cultures—in this case Islam and Judaism—they do not simply penetrate a new culture but are transformed during their migration.[25] That said, the textual investigation I propose will demonstrate that clusters of motifs, as well as structures of arguments, were retained in the course of their cultural migration from Islam to Judaism. This exploration will first allow me to shed new light on the question of the sources of Maimonides's *Guide* and on his intertextual art of writing. Moreover, in the conclusion to the article, I will argue that through Maimonides's mediation we can trace the influence of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā,

[22] On Maimonides's frequent omission of citations, see Sarah Stroumsa, "Citation Traditions: On Explicit and Hidden Citations in Judaeo-Arabic Philosophical Literature," in *Heritage and Innovation in Medieval Judaeo-Arabic Culture* (ed. Joshua Blau and David Doron; Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2000) 167–78 (Hebrew); cf. Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World*, 24–25. On patterns of citations and omissions of citations in medieval Islamic writing, see Franz Rosenthal, *The Technique and Approach of Muslim Scholarship* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1947) 41.

[23] I follow Stroumsa's claim that a cluster composed of an argument, a prooftext, and technical terms that appears in two contexts strongly suggests direct influence; see Sarah Stroumsa, "Comparison as Multifocal Approach: The Case of Arabic Philosophical Thought," in *Comparative Studies in the Humanities* (ed. Guy G. Stroumsa; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2018) 133–52; eadem, "The Impact of Syriac Tradition on Early Judaeo-Arabic Bible Exegesis," *ARAM* 3.1–2 (1991) 83–96.

[24] See Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World,* xii.

[25] Stroumsa argues that intercultural dynamics do not resemble the activity of the marketplace, where ideas are transferred without changing their form. Instead, in the medieval intellectual scene, ideas migrated in a circular fashion, "modifying the system into which they were adopted, and, in the process, undergoing some transformation themselves" (Sarah Stroumsa, "Whirlpool Effects and Religious Studies: A Response to Guy G. Stroumsa," in *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe: Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives* [ed. Volkhard Krech and Marion Steinicke; Leiden: Brill, 2012] 159–62, at 159).

even if indirect,[26] on the acceleration of the process of writing *sitrey torah* (secrets of the Torah) in medieval Judaism.

■ The Crisis of Esotericism in Ibn Sīnā's *Risāla fī aḥwāl al-nafs*

In the concluding chapter of the *Ilāhiyyāt,* which seals his *Kitāb al-Shifā*, Ibn Sīnā subtly refers to the mode by which metaphysical knowledge is concealed, by symbols and allegories that withhold it from the unworthy: [27]

> [The Prophet] ought not to involve them [the masses] with anything [metaphysical] pertaining to the knowledge of God. . . . Beyond the knowledge that He is One, the Truth, and has nothing similar to Him. To go beyond this and obligate them to believe in His existence as being not referred to in place, as being not subject to verbal classifications, as being neither inside nor outside the world, nor anything of this kind [is to ask too much]. He will [simply] render their task too great [and] confuse the religion they have. . . . [The rest] would come to deny the truth of such existence, fall into dissensions, and indulge in disputations and analogical arguments that stand in the way of their performing their civil [duties]. This might even lead them to adopt views contrary to the welfare of the city [*al-madīna*], opposed to the imperatives of truth. . . . For it is not for everyone that [the acquisition] of divine wisdom is facilitated. Nor is it proper for any human to reveal that he possesses knowledge he is hiding from the commonality. . . . Rather, he should let them know of God's majesty and greatness through symbols [*rumūz*] and similitudes [*amṯila*] derived from things that, for them, are majestic and great. . . . There is no harm if his [the Prophet's] address contain symbols [*rumūz*] and pointers [*ishārāt*] that might call forth those naturally disposed toward the theoretical reflection [*al-baḥṯ al-ḥikmī*] to pursue philosophic investigations.[28]

According to Ibn Sīnā, uncontrolled dissemination of metaphysical knowledge can inflict damage on its author, for such dissemination may expose him to the perils of incomprehension and of holding views that are in discrepancy with widely held opinions. Furthermore, harm can also be caused to the recipients of metaphysical knowledge and to society as a whole because of the threat of dissensus, the erosion

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[26] On the patterns of indirect intercultural and interreligious influence, see Stroumsa, "Whirlpool Effects," 160; eadem, *Maimonides and His World,* 98.

[27] In his comprehensive study of Ibn Sīnā, Dimitri Gutas compiled and analyzed numerous texts by Avicenna that address the issue of withholding knowledge and presented a typology of Avicenna's methods of communicating knowledge; see Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 256–66, 335–58. Gutas opposes the idea, endorsed by numerous scholars, of an "esoteric," mystical Avicenna that is hidden from most of his work, and especially from *al-Shifā* , referring to it as an error that he traces back to Ibn Ṭufayl; see Dimitri Gutas, "Avicenna's Eastern ('Oriental') Philosophy: Nature, Contents, Transmission," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 10.2 (2000) 159–80, at 160–66.

[28] Translated by Michael E. Marmura in Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing: A Parallel English-Arabic Text* (ed. M.E. Marmura; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005) 365–66, here with minor modifications. See the alternative translation by Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 338–39.

of social bonds, and the destabilization of the political community.[29] There is thus a need to withhold knowledge from the masses and, moreover, a need to withhold from this high-risk group the very fact of concealment, that is, the idea that there is knowledge that, while not revealed to them, is held by the author. The way to achieve this is by structuring a multilayered discourse that is composed first and foremost of a symbolic or allegorical stratum that reflects the general beliefs of the masses, or, in the language of Ibn Sīnā, those "things that for them are majestic and great."[30] This stratum will harness the power of language as it is generally used in order to infuse an idea with a regulating power without fully exposing its contents. The symbol and allegory, if properly introduced, will be effective without alerting most of the recipients. But the symbol must contain another element, which is a hint to its reader that its superficial level does not exhaust its content and that another layer awaits those who can acquire metaphysical knowledge. Methods of concealment should not only withhold knowledge but also be "inviting," in the language of Ibn Sīnā, and summon the elect few to remove them.[31] Thus, Ibn Sīnā argued that the writing of esoteric knowledge must be done in a constant tension between shadow and light and be fully exposed only by those who are entrusted with the necessary capabilities, in a process that entails education and training.

Another case, albeit with different characteristics, of the dialectics between disclosure and concealment in the oeuvre of Ibn Sīnā is his *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*. Ibn Sīnā begins this work with a dominant chord of disclosure, stating that in the work he intends to reveal knowledge that has not yet been disclosed: "Your persistence in the demand that I set forth the story of Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān for you has overcome my stubborn determination and has untied the bonds of my firm resolve to defer and delay this, and I have consented to come to your aid."[32] Yet, despite this explicit statement, the work itself, as Alfred Ivry noted, is a deeply coded dramatic narrative with allegorical dimensions. In such a coded narrative, the decoded message is not self-evident and is not set forth in the superficial level of the text.[33] Thus, the gesture of exposure and disclosure with which the work opens is accompanied by a gesture of withdrawal and concealment that is inherent in the allegorical mode of writing. The very writing of the treatise is an act of disclosure, but the content

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[29] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 338–341; cf. Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World,* 154–155; Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 23–27.

[30] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 339; Arabic original in Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* (ed. Marmura), 365.

[31] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 339; Avicenna, The *Metaphysics of the Healing* (ed. Marmura), 366.

[32] See *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān li-Ibn Sīnā wa-Ibn Ṭufayl wa-s-Suhrawardī* (ed. A. Amīn; Cairo, 1952) 43.

[33] See Alfred L. Ivry, "The Utilization of Allegory in Islamic Philosophy," in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (ed. Jon Whitman; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 153–80, at 158–64, esp. 160. For a discussion of the dramatic quality of the work, see Sarah Stroumsa, "Avicenna's Philosophical Stories: Aristotle's *Poetics* Reinterpreted," *Arabica* 39 (1992) 198–204.

of the narrative reflects a reversal in the movement of disclosure and introduces elements of concealment into the very texture of this work.[34]

However, in one of his other works, Ibn Sīnā also claimed that he explicitly decided to expose and discuss—now in a clear and detailed manner and not in the allegorical mode—layers of knowledge that the Peripatetic tradition (at least according to his own account) kept hidden. Ibn Sīnā accounted for this through his argument that there is also a danger in the act of withholding knowledge, namely, the threat to knowledge itself. What is the harm that may be caused to knowledge during eras in which traditions of concealment, accompanied by subtle revelation of and education in the proper methods of extricating knowledge, are ill-treated? This issue is the crucial link that ties Ibn Sīnā to the rhetoric Maimonides uses in his *Guide*. According to Ibn Sīnā, in such times one should turn from concealment to revelation and disclose what was bound to remain hidden in other circumstances. He explicitly stated this in the final paragraph of his *Risāla fī aḥwāl al-nafs,* which frames the treatise as a whole, and which was copied in some cases into manuscripts of both the *Kitāb al-Shifā* and the *Kitāb al-Najāt*:[35]

> In this essay I have left out a discussion of the external aspects of the theory of the soul, except for what was absolutely necessary, and have instead "removed the cover" [Qurʾān 50:22], lifted the veil, and revealed the secrets [*asrār*] stored in the depths of books and withheld from explicit mention. [I did this] in an effort to return favor to my companions and also because I know that in our times there is no one who would either inherit these secrets through instruction or be able to gain a comprehensive knowledge of them through discovery, and [also], I have relinquished the hope that the person who seeks to perpetuate the knowledge and bequeath it to posterity has any means or device at his disposal other than to put it down in writing and include it in books, without relying on the learners' will to ascertain them in the proper manner, uphold them, and bequeath them to posterity, or on the solicitude of our contemporaries and their like-minded successors to inquire into the topics of the symbols and their interpretations if it was expressed in symbol, and to elaborate the succinct passages if it was written succinctly. I forbid all my friends who would read [this treatise] to squander it on an evil or obdurate person, or to show it to him, or to deposit it where it does not belong, and bind them to God as their adversary in my behalf [in case they violate the prohibition].[36]

[34] In Ibn Ṭufayl's retelling of Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, the author indeed argues that he aims to disclose the secrets that were left hidden in Ibn Sīnā's narrative. Ibn Ṭufayl also provides an elaborate account of his decision to act in such a manner; see Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* (trans. Lenn E. Goodman; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 3–5, 155–56. However, Ibn Ṭufayl's discourse on the disclosure of esoteric knowledge introduces elements and arguments that are incongruent with Maimonides's discourse in the *Guide* and therefore will not be analyzed here.

[35] See n. 18 above.

[36] Translated by Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 22–23, modified; see the Arabic original in Aḥmad Fuʾād Al-Ahwānī, *Les états de l'âme par Avicenne* (Cairo: Issa el Babi el-Halabi, 1952) 141–142.

A remarkable feature of this passage is its emphasis that esotericism must be regarded not only from the perspective of an ahistorical distinction between types of knowledge that are to be disclosed or concealed, but also from the perspective of the given historical era, which may demand shifts from the register of concealment to that of disclosure. Historical changes may necessitate an aberration, a departure from customary patterns of knowledge transmission and a breaching of the limitations that are generally imposed on its circulation. The acute crisis that, according to Ibn Sīnā, was taking place at the time he was writing his treatise renders the utilization of the techniques of esoteric transmission counterproductive. The method that allows for withholding knowledge by encoding it in symbols and allegories and a second method, which is only alluded to in this passage in the words "elaborate their succinct passages" and which entails condensed writing with omission of necessary elements, are presented here as inadequate.[37] In order to function properly, both methods depend on transmission to recipients who are equipped with the necessary skill of converting knowledge and transforming concealment into revelation through the act of careful reading and inference. During times of a decline in the culture of esotericism, the necessary conditions for successive esoteric transmission are not met. Ibn Sīnā's argument, with its historical edge, exposes a new mode in discussing esotericism, for now it is not only knowledge that has to be retained between generations, in view of the threat that it will be lost; the very acknowledgment of esotericism, with its methods of concealment and modes of disclosure, is also on the verge of disappearing.

Ibn Sīnā's response to his self-proclaimed crisis of esotericism is complex and involves, discursively, breaching a prohibition by shifting registers of written communication and abstaining declaratively from concealment. In order not to be exposed to the abovementioned risks of transmitting esoteric knowledge openly, Ibn Sīnā opts for a new solution. In contrast to works that simultaneously address multiple audiences by employing multilayered writing, his *risāla* addresses one specific circle, which is urged to retain the knowledge within its confines and to refrain from uncritically disseminating it. An attempt to overcome the loss of control that resulted from the decision not to implement any method of concealment is made through a specific mode of address to its readers.

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[37] This method was presented by al-Fārābī in his *Kitāb al-jam' bayna ra'yay al-ḥakīmayn Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa-Arisṭūṭālīs* (The Agreement between Plato and Aristotle), which ascribes it to Aristotle; see Naṣr al-Fārābī, *L'Harmonie entre les opinions de Platon et d'Aristote d'al-Fârâbî* (ed. M. Najjar and D. Mallet; édition bilingue; Paris: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 1999) 71–77. This text was familiar to Ibn Sīnā, who subtly implemented it into several of his works and quoted parts of it verbatim; see Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 23 n. 3.

■ The Epistolary Model of Disclosure in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār*

The major contribution of al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* (Niche of Lights) to the *Guide of the Perplexed* is the specific epistolary format in which it was written,[38] which provided Maimonides with both a literary genre for the revelation of secrets and a line of argumentation to justify the writing of concealed contents. The epistolary genre played a major structural role in revealing secrets not only because it allowed the author to write to his addressee under conditions of physical distance, which is the reason explicitly stated by both al-Ghazālī and Maimonides, but also because of the specific dialectics of proximity and distance that are at play in the genre.[39] This dialectic allows for a transmission of contents while retaining distance, and even, to some extent, for a concurrent act of advance and withdrawal.

Al-Ghazālī's introduction, which begins with words of praise for the Lord and Muhammad, addresses its recipient—beginning from the second passage—in the second person singular and frames the treatise as a response to a question posed by the addressee, requesting the author to disclose the meaning of a specific cluster of scriptural verses in which secrets have been encoded:[40] "You asked me, O noble brother . . . that I unfold for you the mysteries of divine lights, along with an interpretation [*taʾwīl*][41] of the apparent meanings of those recited verses and narrated reports that allude to the divine lights."[42]

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[38] For another appearance of the epistolary model in al-Ghazālī's oeuvre, in conjunction with the genre of autobiography, see the opening passages of *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*; see Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography*, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (ed. Ilse Lichtenstadter, trans. R. J. McCarthy; Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000) 61.

[39] See Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982) 185–216.

[40] On al-Ghazālī's approach to exoteric and esoteric interpretations of the Qurʾān, see Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazali and the Qur'an: One Book, Many Meanings* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 55–62.

[41] An interpretation that gravitates toward the inner core, *bāṭin,* of the apparent meaning, *ẓāhir*. This rendering of *taʾwīl* is prevalent in S̲h̲īʿīte and Ṣūfī modes of interpretation; see Paul E. Walker, "To What Degree Was Classical Ismaili Esotericism Based on Reason as Opposed to Authority?" in *L'Ésotérisme shiʿite, ses racines et ses prolongements: Shiʿi Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments* (ed. M. Amir Moezzi et al.; Turnhout: Brepols, 2016) 493–505; cf. Ehud Krinis, *God's Chosen People: Judah Halevi's Kuzari and the Shīʿī Imām Doctrine* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014) 21–22; Ismail Poonawala, "Ismāʿīlī Taʾwīl of the Qurʾan," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān* (ed. Andrew Rippin; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 199–222, at 214; Meir Bar-Asher, "Outlines of Early Ismāʿīlī-Fāṭimī Qurʾān Exegesis," in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Qurʾan and Bible Exegesis Presented to Haggai ben-Shammai* (ed. Meir M. Bar-Asher, et al.; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007) 303–33, at 305–6, 312–19; Etan Kohlberg, "Trends in Early Imāmī Shīʿī Exegetical Literature and the Contribution of al-Sayyārī," in *A Word Fitly Spoken* (ed. Bar-Asher, et al.) 413–46, at 414–15; Annabel Keeler and Sajjad H. Rizvi, introduction to *The Spirit and the Letter: Approaches to the Esoteric Interpretation of the Qur'an* (ed. Annabel Keeler and Sajjad H. Rizvi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 1–47, at 17–19.

[42] al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār (Niche of Lights): A Parallel English-Arabic Text* (trans. Michael

This request from the addressee, according to al-Ghazālī, is his impetus for writing the work. Moreover, in his work al-Ghazālī never leaves the second person mode of address, which serves as a reminder of the specific, if unknown, addressee for whom the work was originally intended, but it may also be seen as an address to a much more inclusive "you," that is, as an address to whomever reads the work. In the course of the work, al-Ghazālī continuously provokes his addressee and admonishes him. Moreover, as the next passage reveals, al-Ghazālī treats the very question the addressee posed to him as a testament to the latter's merits, putting him in a privileged position that rightfully deserves the author's response:

> With your question you have climbed a difficult slope, one before whose upper regions the eyes of the observers fall back. You have knocked at a locked door that is not to be opened except for the firmly rooted possessors of knowledge.[43] What is more, not every mystery is to be unveiled and divulged, and not every reality is to be presented and disclosed. Indeed, "the breasts of the free are the graves of the mysteries." . . . But I see you as one whose breast has been opened up by God through light and whose innermost consciousness has been kept free of the darknesses of delusion. Hence, in this discipline I will not be niggardly toward you in alluding to sparks and allusions or giving symbols of realities and subtleties, for the fear in holding back knowledge from those worthy of it is not less than that in disseminating it to those not worthy of it. He who bestows knowledge on the ignorant wastes it; and he who withholds knowledge from the worthy has done them wrong.[44]

The virtues of the addressee are present, according to al-Ghazālī, in the very question he posed. In addition to highlighting the worthiness of the disciple, al-Ghazālī also indicates in this short passage the specific character of the sought-after knowledge, which he describes as "secrets" (al-asrār) and as "truth" (ḥaqīqa). These characterizations indicate the esoteric status of the requested knowledge, a status that would normally prevent the author from revealing it in writing. It is in this regard that al-Ghazālī puts forward the reason for breaching the boundaries of secrecy, namely, fear that the disciple will be unjustly treated, a concern that trumps even the requirement not to divulge the esoteric knowledge publicly. Al-Ghazālī also quotes two verses from a poem attributed to Imam al-Shāfiʿī as an authoritative source that supports this line of reasoning: "He who bestows knowledge on the

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E. Marmura; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998) 1.

[43] The reference here is to Qurʾān 3:7, which contrasts "symbolic" (mutashābih) and "determined" (muḥkam) āyāt, and addresses the challenge they pose to interpretation. The specific qurʾānic phrase is "Those rooted in knowledge" (rāsikhūna fī al-ʿilm), who are presented in opposition to those "those whose hearts are given to swerving." In Ṣūfī anthropology, as Sara Sviri noted, the heart is "the organ in which . . . the divine worlds can be seen and in which understanding reside[s]"; Sara Sviri, "The Countless Faces of Understanding: On Istinbāṭ, Mystical Listening and Ṣūfī Exegesis," in A Word Fitly Spoken (ed. Bar-Asher, et al.), 381–411, at 397–98. For a wide survey and a selection of Ṣūfī sources on the rāsikhūna fī al-ʿilm, see Kristin Zahra Sands, Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qurʾān in Classical Islam (New York: Routledge, 2005) 23–28.

[44] al-Ghazālī, Mishkāt al-anwār, 2.

ignorant wastes it; and he who withholds knowledge from the worthy has done them wrong." The words of al-Shāfiʿī are not a traditional ornament decorating the passage but serve as a legal permission—attributed to the founder of the legal school (*maḏhab*) to which al-Ghazālī belonged—for the act of turning from concealment to revelation; in other words, they provide validation of an act that was prohibited, at the very least, in times of cultural decline. Al-Ghazālī further attests to the general requirement to conceal in the next passage, which begins with words from the Ḥadīth:

> "There is a knowledge like the guise of the hidden; none knows it except the knowers of God. When they speak of it, none denies it except those who are arrogantly deluded about God."[45] And when the people of the arrogant become many, it becomes necessary to preserve the coverings upon the face of the mysteries.[46]

The words of the Ḥadīth implore one to avoid concealing knowledge for the sake of gaining spiritual prestige or material benefits. But, argues al-Ghazālī, the turbulent times, the decline of wisdom, and the proliferation of ignorance have brought a change in ethos and demand an altogether different commitment, which involves the concealment of wisdom and a careful regard for it.[47] This is the source of al-Ghazālī's tension, and the meaning of his claim that, in order to reveal the hidden wisdom, he has to transgress a prohibition.

Another aspect of the quoted passage in which al-Ghazālī responds to his addressee's question is its threefold structure of relationality to the truth. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the ignorant, who reject wisdom altogether. Above them stands the disciple, the one who "knocked at the locked door," endowed with talent and deserving of the removal of the veil. And at the top of the hierarchy

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[45] As noted by Buchman, this *ḥādīṯ* does not appear in Wensinck's Concordance, though it appears twice in al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*. See al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār*, 62 n. 4; and see discussion in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition,* 262 and n. 22.

[46] al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār,* 2.

[47] On this motif in Islamic writings from al-Andalus, see Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 264. It is possible that al-Ghazālī's very need for justification is related to the issue of esoteric exegesis being identified in early Islam with shīʿism. Al-Ghazālī was thus in need of defending the implementation of an esoteric approach in Sunnī discourse that had yet to integrate it. Al-Ghazālī wrote a polemical work against the Ismāʿīliyya, using the prevalent derogatory term *bāṭiniyya* in the very title: *Kitāb Faḍāʾiḥ al-Bāṭiniyya wa-faḍāʾil al-Mustaẓhiriyya*. Cf. Farouk Mitha, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ismailis: A Debate on Reason and Authority in Medieval Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001); and Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 8–10; For a recent reassessment of this issue, which holds a far more dialectical relationship, including both rejection and appropriation, between al-Ghazālī and Ismāʿīli thinkers, see Daniel De Smet, "L'attitude ambivalente d'al-Ġazālī envers l'ismaélisme. Éléments ismaéliens dans le Miškāt al-anwār," in *Al-Ġazālī (1058–1111) / La prima stampa armena. Yehūdāh Ha-Lēvī (1075–1141). La ricezione di Isacco di Ninive: secondo Dies Academicus, 7–9 Novembre 2011* (ed. Carmela Baffioni et al.; Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana; Rome: Bulizoni, 2013) 37–52; Khalil Andani, "The Merits of the Bāṭiniyya: Al-Ghazālī's Appropriation of Ismaʿili Cosmology," *JIS* 29 (2018) 181–229.

are those "rooted in knowledge," a highly charged qurʾānic phrase with a long history of medieval interpretation, which describes those who stand, as it were, on the other side of the locked door. It should be emphasized that al-Ghazālī not only differentiates between the multitude (*jumhūr*) and the elite but draws another distinction, which cuts across the elite itself, between the apprentices and the masters of wisdom. Notwithstanding his preparedness to reveal the secrets to his disciple, al-Ghazālī proclaims in the final words of his introduction that he intends to keep some measure of concealment, as this befits both the stature of the disciple, who has the ability to infer knowledge from hints, and the nature of the knowledge, which is to be handled with caution:

> Be satisfied with abridged allusions and brief indications, since the verification of this discussion would call for laying down principles and explaining details which my present moment does not allow, nor do my concern and thought turn toward. The keys of the hearts are in God's hand; He opens hearts when He wills, as He wills, and how He wills. The only thing opening up at this moment is three chapters.[48]

The work, as attested to by its author, is an act of endowment, though it does not make the knowledge completely transparent. Instead, al-Ghazālī presents his treatise as involving a careful interweaving of disclosure and concealment. The rhetorical gesture that runs through the introduction, declaring the transition that is to be taken in the course of the work from concealment to disclosure, ends on a somewhat reserved note. Not everything will be revealed, and even the part that is to be revealed will not be fully disclosed. In other words, in writing *Mishkāt al-anwār*, al-Ghazālī sought not simply to reveal the secrets of the divine light but, in the very movement of disclosure, to retain an opposite movement of retraction and cloaking. That said, and despite the aforementioned element of control and reserve, it should be emphasized that al-Ghazālī's act of writing does involve a removal of barriers and a significant loss of control over the dissemination of knowledge, which pertain to its transmission in the textual medium. Al-Ghazālī briefly notes the specific strategies of reticence, encoded in the terms "indications" (*ishārāt*) and "allusions" (*talwīḥāt*) that signal only partial disclosure. Indeed, the introduction ends with a gesture of withdrawal, but this restraint should be understood neither as the main line of argumentation in the introduction nor as the exclusive interest of al-Ghazālī's treatise. Essentially, *Mishkāt al-anwār* is a work of disclosure, as al-Ghazālī not only declares but also argues for in his introduction.

We have thus seen the thematic cluster that is at play in the introduction and the specific literary genre that serves as the infrastructure for al-Ghazālī's treatise. In sum, we can see that in the introduction, the revelation of secrets is tied to the epistolary genre, and specifically to an epistle addressed to an elect disciple. In addition, al-Ghazālī presents a three-tiered hierarchy—sage/disciple/multitude—that undergirds both the need to disclose the secrets—namely, for the sake of guiding

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[48] al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār,* 2.

the disciple—and the need for a measure of concealment, to prevent the knowledge from falling into the hands of the masses. Furthermore, al-Ghazālī asserts that, in view of the various considerations, the scale tips in favor of disclosure and not concealment, for the obligation toward the disciple trumps the duty to conceal from the multitude. However, al-Ghazālī insists that not *all* knowledge will be revealed in his work, and that only indications and allusions will be provided. We will now turn to see how each and every one of these features returns in Maimonides's *Guide* and serves as the discursive infrastructure for his own introduction.

■ *Mishkāt al-anwār* and the Prefatory Unit of the *Guide of the Perplexed*

Before closely examining Maimonides's introduction and the way in which it was shaped by the epistolary genre, it should be emphasized that even though Maimonides was the first to employ this genre for writing a work in the realm of *sitrey torah*, the epistolary genre itself was a well-established medium already in the days of the geonim.[49] Furthermore, a survey of the geonic *responsa* reveals that already near the end of the tenth century, the epistolary genre exceeded the limits of a halakhic question or even a set of halakhic questions and a direct response to them. Robert Brody has indicated that two of the most celebrated "epistles" from geonic times, the famous epistle of Rav Sherira and that of Seder Rav Amram, were indeed written specifically as *responsa*, though they expanded the boundaries of the genre.[50] In another study, Neil Danzig showed that the genre of *responsa*, even when addressed to a specific addressee, was in many cases intended for and, indeed, reached wider circles.[51] Islamic al-Andalus, where earlier works written in the genre of the *risāla*[52]—most notably the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*—were in circulation, provides us with many examples of the phenomenon of "epistles" pertaining to philosophy and theology.[53] Thus, for instance, we can find epistolary

[49] According to Brody, the medium of *responsa* has been "the characteristic literary genre of the Geonic period," Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 60. On epistolarity in Jewish writings, focusing on halakhah, see Israel Ta-Shma, *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature* (4 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2004) 1:117–25.

[50] Brody remarks that "Sherira's Epistle belongs, formally speaking . . . to the responsum, but it stretches the limits of this genre"; idem, *The Geonim of Babylonia*, 20. On *Seder Rav Amram*, see Ta-Shma, *Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Literature*, 192–93.

[51] See Neil Danzig, "From Oral Talmud to Written Talmud: On Studying and Transmitting the Babylonian Talmud in the Middle Ages," *Bar-Ilan* 30–31 (2006) 49–112, at 81 (Hebrew).

[52] Josef van Ess notes that already in the 7th century theological ideas were "set forth in the discursive form of the epistle"; Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra* (trans. J. O'Kane; 3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2017–2018) 1:62.

[53] See numerous examples in the Sevillan philologist and Ḥadith scholar Ibn Khayr al-Ishbīlī's (d. 1179) catalogue of works (*Fihrist*), published in two vols. by J. Ribera y Tarragó under the title *Index librorum de diversis scientiarum ordinibus quos a magistris didicit* (Saragossa, 1894–1895). On the circulation of *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* in al-Andalus, see Godefroid de Callataÿ, "Magia

works written by Ibn Masarra,[54] al-Baṭalyawsī[55] and Ibn Bājja[56] and the short commentaries of Ibn Rushd to the Aristotelian corpus, which were all referred to in the manuscripts as *Rasāʾil*.[57]

Turning to the *Guide*, we find that both the opening words of the "epistle dedicatory," which form the first part of the opening unit, and the unit in its totality feature an equivocality.[58] The *Guide* opens with an epistle to Rabbi Joseph, son of Rabbi Judah:[59] "When you came to me—my honored pupil Rabbi Joseph, may the Rock guard you, son of Rabbi Judah, may his repose be in Paradise—having conceived the intention of journeying from the country farthest away in order to read texts under my guidance."[60] This dedicatory part is also concluded as an epistle:

> Then when God decreed our separation and you betook yourself elsewhere, these meetings aroused in me a resolution that had slackened. Your absence moved me to compose this Treatise, which I have composed for you and for those like you, however few they are. I have set it down in dispersed chapters. All of them that are written down will reach you where you are, one after the other. Be in good health.[61]

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en al-Andalus: *Rasāʾil ijwān al-Ṣafāʾ, Rutbat al-ḥakīm y Gāyat al-ḥakīm (Picatrix)*," *Al-Qanṭara* 34.2 (2013) 297–344. Other instances of Ismāʿīlī epistolary works that feature a blend of theology, cosmology, and philosophy are the *Risāla al-Mudhhiba*, attributed to al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān and printed in *al-Khams rasāʾil Ismāʿīliyya* (ed. ʿĀrif Tāmir; Salamiyya, 1956) 27–87; al-Kirmānī's *Risālat al-naẓm fī muqābalat al-ʿawālim* (see *Majmūʿat rasāʾil al-Kirmānī* [ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib; Beirut, 1983] 43–60). On the genre of the "philosophical epistle" in medieval Jewish writing, see Charles H. Manekin, "The Philosophical Epistle as a Genre of Medieval Jewish Philosophy," in *Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Its Literary Forms* (ed. A. W. Hughes and J. T. Robinson; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019) 264–87.

[54] See Ibn Massara, *Risālat al-iʿtibār*, printed in Pilar Garrido Clemente, "Edición crítica de la Risālat al-iʿtibār de Ibn Masarra de Córdoba," *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 56 (2007) 81–104. See the discussion in Michael Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Ismāʿīlī Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 219–20.

[55] See al-Baṭalyawsī's three epistles, discussed in Ayala Eliyahu, "From *Kitāb al-ḥadāʾiq* to *Kitāb al-dawāʾir*: Reconsidering Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī's Philosophical Treatise," *Al-Qanṭara* 36.1 (2015) 165–98, at 178–80.

[56] These works were collected in *Rasāʾil Ibn Bājja al-ilāhiyya* (ed. Majid Fakhry; Beirut, 1991).

[57] See Albert Arazi and Haggai Ben-Shammai, "Risāla," *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 532–39, at 534. As the authors mention, because of the relatively unregulated literary structure of the genre, it became the "format habitually chosen by authors of monographs" in various branches of knowledge in the Islamicate world.

[58] On her study of "The Silencing Epistle," Stroumsa has shown how Maimonides capitalized on the ambiguity between public and personal modes of address; see Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World*, 176–78.

[59] Joseph ben Judah Ibn Shimʿon fled the Muwaḥiddūn to Fusṭāṭ, where he arrived to study with Maimonides. On the identification of the addressee as Ibn Shimʿon, his life and his relations with Maimonides, see Stroumsa, *The Beginnings of the Maimonidean Controversy in the East*, 13–15.

[60] All citations from the *Guide of the Perplexed* are from Shlomo Pines's translation: Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

[61] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 4.

The ambiguity of this opening unit consists in the fact that, on the one hand, it retains the form of an epistle—accentuating the uniqueness of its addressee both by directly addressing him and by employing the second person singular and thereby presenting the *Guide* as a continuous letter—sent, part by part, to its addressee in order to initiate him into the secrets of the Torah,[62] while, on the other hand, the second person singular is directed in this case at more than a single addressee. Indeed, the treatise is written not only for Rabbi Joseph b. Judah but, in the words of Maimonides, for him and "for those like" him. The singular turns plural already in the dedicatory epistle, and all the more so in the rest of the treatise. Furthermore, Maimonides refers to the *Guide* in the introduction as *maqāla*[63]—which Pines translates as "treatise"—and not as *risāla*, which translates as "epistle."[64] Although the two terms are sometimes used as synonyms, in this particular case the difference between them may be significant. Maimonides does not intend the text to be read only by one person in particular but, at the very least, aims at the class of people who resemble this person. Indeed, Maimonides openly refers to the existence of the *Guide* and even quotes from it in his other epistles.[65] Therefore, I argue that Maimonides deliberately chose the epistolary genre as a literary vehicle for his work and that one should not view this work as an epistle that was somehow caught on its way to its addressee and disseminated, contrary to Maimoindes's original expectations. Maimonides's *Guide*, like al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār*, interlaces the epistolary genre with the purpose of the work, namely, the careful revelation of the secrets, which are presented as the hidden meaning that lies behind names and verses from the sacred scriptures.

[62] See, for instance, *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:24: "You know of astronomical matters what you have read under my guidance and understood from the contents of the 'Almagest'. But there was not enough time to begin another speculative study with you," 322.

[63] According to Arazi and Ben-Shammai, in many cases, *maqāla* and *risāla* are equivalent terms; see Arazi and Ben-Shammai, "Risāla," 534. *Maqāla*, however, emphasizes the public element and presupposes wide distribution, which is only implicit in *risāla*. For a list of works employing the terms *maqāla* or *risāla* in their titles, see Moritz Steinschneider, *Die arabische Literatur der Juden. Ein Beitrag zur Literaturgeschichte der Araber, grossenteils aus handschriftlichen Quellen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Kauffmann, 1902), index D, Arabic titles, s.v. *maqāla*, *risāla*. See, further, Ch. Vial, I. Afshar, and P. Dumont, "Maḳāla," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 6:92–96. Strauss indicates the possibility of translating *maqāla* as "a speech" in Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," reprinted in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides* (ed. Green) 352 and n. 38. In Strauss's view, Maimonides sought to highlight the "essentially oral character of its teaching." However, *risāla* also originally denoted an oral transmission of a message, as noted by Arazi and Ben-Shammai, "Risāla," 532.

[64] The treatise length prevents it from being considered as *jawāb*. However, *kitāb*, and even *risāla*, as Arazi and Ben-Shammai noted ("Risāla," 534), also denoted long written documents.

[65] Diesendruck has argued that the *Guide of the Perplexed* was conceived and partly elaborated before the arrival of Joseph ibn Shim'on to Fusṭāṭ; see Zevi Diesendruck, "On the Date of the Completion of the Moreh Nebukim," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 12–13 (1937–1938) 461–97. Strauss noted this, and emphatically asserts "[Maimonides's] evident determination to write the *Guide* even if he had never met Joseph, or if Joseph had never left him"; Strauss, "Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," 354.

This is only the beginning of the similarity between these works. Another correspondence is to be found in the shared fourfold argument, comprised of the following elements: (a) the knowledge that is revealed in the work was meant to be concealed, or at least not disseminated in written form; (b) notwithstanding the prohibition, the author chose to disclose the esoteric knowledge; (c) this act was explained by the obligation toward an elect disciple, which trumps the potential harm that may result from the circulation of the work among the ignorant; (d) the decision to transgress the prohibition is based on a traditional trope and a legal precedence. All these features can be gleaned from the following passage, from the *Guide*'s introduction to the first part:

> God, may He be exalted, knows that I have never ceased to be exceedingly apprehensive about setting down those 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—written in the religious community in these times of *Exile*—the books composed in these times being in our hands. How then can I now innovate and set them down? However, I have relied on two premises, the one being [the Sages'] saying in a similar case, *It is time to act for the Lord, and so on;* the second being their saying, *Let all thy acts be for the sake of Heaven.* Upon these two premises have I relied when setting down what I have composed in some of the chapters of this Treatise. To sum up: I am the man who when the concern pressed him and his way was straitened and he could find no other device by which to teach a demonstrated truth other than by giving satisfaction to a single virtuous man while displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses—I am he who prefers to address the single man by himself, and I do not heed the blame of those many creatures.[66]

The prohibition Maimonides alludes to is the famous interdiction presented in the Mishnah in tractate *Ḥagigah*, forbidding one to expound on the account of creation (*maʿaśeh berešit*) before two people and on the account of the chariot (*maʿaśeh merkabah*) even before one person, unless, in the words of the Mishnah, he is a sage and understands his own knowledge.[67] Yet Maimonides declares that in writing the *Guide* he will not yield to this prohibition, for he sees the fulfilment of the potential of the "virtuous man" as trumping the need to maintain the boundaries

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[66] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 16–17.

[67] On the legal status of the mishnaic interdiction, see Yair Lorberbaum, "Did Naḥmanides Perceive the Kabbalah as 'Closed Knowledge'?" *Zion* 82.2–3 (2017) 309–54, at 319–21 (Hebrew). Lorberbaum argues that the mishnaic clause is not a formal legal prohibition, but rather, a proposition of the reasons that can establish such prohibition. Indeed, in the loci in which Maimonides refers to the predicament of transmitting esoteric knowledge (I:Intro.; I:33; I:71; III:Intro.), he does not use the term *taḥrim*, which is the *terminus technicus* for legal prohibition in the *Guide*. However, Maimonides does relate to legal transgression in both of the "premises" (*muqaddima*) mentioned in his introduction, "Let all thy acts be for the sake of Heaven" (see n. 70), and in the implicit reference to the rabbinic directive: "It is time to act for the Lord, [Violate your Torah]." Cf. Maimonides's claims, twice in III:Intro, that it is prohibited by the *sharīʿa* to teach the account of the chariot except orally to one man having certain stated qualities. In light of this, I reckon that Maimonides did see Mishnah Ḥag. 2:1 as legally binding.

of concealment. This breaching of the limits of secrecy is based, as in the case of al-Ghazālī, on traditional precedence. In this case, the traditional trope appears in two modes, which Maimonides calls "premises": the first is "It is time to act for the Lord—violate your Torah," a command to violate a prohibition, which Maimonides applies to the writing of the *Guide* by authorizing himself to declare that *his* time is indeed such a time that necessitates the transgression. As for the second "premise," here, too, Maimonides alludes to the theme of transgression, as is made clear by reading this source alongside his commentary on the Mishnah, where he binds the verse "*Let all thy acts be for the sake of Heaven*" with a transgressive act.[68] Maimonides is thus willing to transgress the traditional prohibition yet still claim for his work the status of an exception that belongs within tradition itself, and this is because of his commitment to the disciple and his class. That said, Maimonides, like al-Ghazālī, declares that his transition from concealment to revelation will not be complete and that the knowledge will not be fully disclosed.

Maimonides characterizes this mode of regressive disclosure with the mishnaic term "chapter headings" (*ra'šey peraqim*), which is appropriated from the talmudic discussion on the aforementioned Mishnah from tractate *Ḥagigah*. In the words of Maimonides:

> A sensible man thus should not demand of me or hope that when we mention a subject, we shall make a complete exposition of it, or that when we engage in the explanation of the meaning of one of the parables, we shall set forth exhaustively all that is expressed in that parable. An intelligent man would be unable to do so even by speaking directly to an interlocutor. How then could he put it down in 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? . . . Hence you should not ask of me here anything beyond *the chapter headings*. And even these beginnings are not set down in order to be arranged in coherent fashion in this Treatise, but rather are scattered[69] and entangled with other subjects that are to be clarified.[70]

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[68] This becomes clear in light of Maimonides's assertion in the fifth of his "eight chapters": "The prophets, similarly, urge us on in saying, 'In all thy ways know Him,' in commenting upon which the sages said, 'even as regards a transgression' [*va'afillu bidbar 'aberah*], meaning thereby that thou shouldst set for every action a goal, namely, the truth, even though it be, from a certain point of view, a transgression. The sages of blessed memory, too, have summed up this idea in so few words and so concisely, at the same time elucidating the whole matter with such complete thoroughness. . . This saying is found among their precepts and is, 'Let all thy acts be for the sake of Heaven.'" Maimonides, *The Eight Chapters of Maimoindes on Ethics: Shemonah Perakim* (ed. and trans. J. Gorfinkle; New York: Columbia University Press) 73–74, translation modified.

[69] Maimonides refers here to a method of encoding knowledge, prevalent in Ismāʿīlī circles, termed *tabdīd al-ʿilm*, which involves scattering kernels of esoteric knowledge throughout the text. An attentive reader is called to discern them by noticing irregular gestures in either the structure or the sequence of the discussion. See Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Dissimulation," *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 1:541.

[70] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 6 (emphasis in original).

The chapter headings are referred to in this passage as "beginnings," a term that joins a variety of other terms Maimonides uses when reflecting in the *Guide* on his own art of writing, and specifically on the meaning of the phrase *ra'šey peraqim*; these terms include *alghāz* (riddles), *marmūz* (allegories or symbols), *ishārāt* (indications), *talwīḥāt* (allusions), and *tanbīhāt* (remarks).[71] It is important to emphasize that Maimonides employs only two of these terms in the dedicatory epistle. When referring to the mode in which he chose to disclose the secrets of the prophetic books to his disciple, he writes: "I saw that you are one worthy to have the secrets of the prophetic books revealed to you so that you would consider in them that which perfect men ought to consider. Thereupon I began to let you see certain allusions [*talwīḥat*] and to give you certain indications [*ishārat*]."[72] These are the very same terms al-Ghazālī utilized, and in the very same context—namely, when the author implores his disciple to be satisfied with the measure of disclosure he has decided upon. The rest of the aforementioned terms do not appear in the epistle, or in the introduction, but only in later chapters of the treatise.[73]

Thus, reading the introductory unit of the *Guide* side by side with al-Ghazālī's introduction has revealed the strong emphasis placed in both works, not on esotericism and protection of knowledge, but on the acute need to reveal knowledge, in the textual medium, even though this involves a transgression of the prohibition of disclosure. Furthermore, the analysis exposed both the shared literary infrastructure—namely, the epistolary genre—and the identity of the terms pertaining to the mode of revelation in the two works.

■ The Crisis of Esotericism in the *Guide* and Its Relation to the *Risāla fī aḥwāl al-nafs*

Maimonides's assertion that *sitrey torah* must be disclosed in written form—in a careful manner that treads between revelation and concealment—in order to salvage an elect disciple is augmented in the *Guide* by another type of argument, which first appears in I:71 but is elaborated in the introduction to the *Guide*'s third part. According to this argumentative line, *sitrey torah* were forgotten through the ages and then rediscovered by Maimonides through the sheer power of his intellect, creating a situation that called for their revelation as their only mode of preservation. The claim about the crisis of esotericism, which Ibn Sīnā made in the epilogue to his *Risāla fī aḥwāl al-nafs*, is located in one of the *Guide*'s juncture-chapters—chapters in which thematic units are joined and which feature some of

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[71] See Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 66–76.

[72] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3 (translation modified).

[73] The correspondence between the mishnaic terms *ḥakam umeḇin midda'to* (wise and understanding through his own knowledge) and *ra'šey peraqim* (chapter headers) and the Arabic term *talwīḥ* is further made in *Guide* I:33. Cf. Maimonides, "Maqāla fi teḥiyyat ha-metim," ed. Joshua Finkel, *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 9 (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1939) 37.

Maimonides's programmatic assertions.[74] Maimonides begins chapter I:71 with these words:

> *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, and because, as we have made clear, it is not permitted to divulge these matters to all people. For the only thing it is permitted to divulge to all people are the texts of the books. You already know that even the legalistic science of law was not put down in writing in the olden times because of the precept, which is widely known in the nation: "Words that I have communicated to you orally, you are not allowed to put down in writing."[75]

In these opening words to this chapter, Maimonides does not refer to the realm of esoteric lore explicitly, nor does he employ the term *sitrey torah* or plainly proclaim their loss. Instead, he opts to use a term that has specific gravity in the *Guide* but which is less culturally charged: *al-ʿulūm*, plural of *al-ʿilm*, which can be translated as "science" or "wisdom." The interchangeability of the Arabic term *ʿulūm* with a term that designates esoteric knowledge (*sitrey torah* in the *Guide*)[76] was characteristic also of Ibn Sīnā's epilogue, which tied together the terms *al-ʿilm* and *al-asrār*. Furthermore, before turning to an explicit discussion of *sitrey torah*, Maimonides refers to another corpus of knowledge that was transmitted only orally in "olden times," which is the Jewish halakhah. This reference serves a dual aim: first, it strengthens the sense of threat to knowledge that is exclusively orally transmitted; second, it signals that this knowledge is to be redeemed only by shifting from oral to written discourse, a topos that is widely repeated in narratives of the history of Jewish law.

The transition to a specific discussion of esoteric knowledge takes place immediately after the reference to the Oral Torah, in the following passage:

> Now if there was insistence that the legalistic science of law should not, in view of the harm that would be caused by such a procedure, be perpetuated in a written compilation accessible to all the people, all the more could none of *sitrey torah* have been set down in writing and be made accessible to the people. On the contrary they were transmitted [orally] by a few men belonging to the elite to a few of the same kind, just as I made clear to you from their saying: *sitrey torah* may only be transmitted to a counsellor, wise

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[74] This specific chapter binds the large unit dedicated to the divine names and attributes and the unit addressing the proofs of existence, unity, and the incorporeality of God.

[75] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 175–176 (emphasis added).

[76] *Sitrey torah* is only one of the terms denoting esoteric knowledge in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Other terms include *asrār al-ʿilm al-ilāhī* (secrets of the divine wisdom; *Guide* I:Intro); *asrār ilāhiyya* (divine secrets; *Guide* III:51); *asrār al-wujūd* (secrets of existence; *Guide* II:26; II:36); *al-kutub al-nubuwwa* (secrets of the prophetic books; *Guide* I:Intro); *asrār al-nubuwwa* (secrets of the prophets, *Guide* II:29); and the widely used *al-sodot*.

in crafts, and so on. *This was the cause that necessitated the disappearance of these great roots of knowledge from the nation.*[77]

Maimonides frames the two passages with an assertion of loss, which appears in the opening sentence of the first passage and in the closing sentence of the second. In between, he shifts from discussing the Oral Torah in its halakhic manifestation, whose survival depended on its being written, to relating to the orality of *sitrey torah*. In contrast to the legal corpus, the esoteric knowledge was not transmitted in written form, a circumstance that brought about its loss.[78] Furthermore, the reference to the halakhic body of knowledge that appears prior to his focus on *sitrey torah* allowed Maimonides to tie his narrative of the esoteric knowledge to the well-rooted anxiety of forgetfulness, which hovers over the Torah and which was a prominent topos in late-antique and early medieval rabbinic discussions.[79] In light of the deep-rooted anxiety of forgetfulness in late-antique and medieval Judaism, Maimonides's audacious narrative becomes not only plausible but almost inevitable, even though his claim regarding the complete loss and subsequent oblivion of a body of knowledge that was previously held by the nation (or even a small circle of its sages) is unprecedented in earlier Jewish sources. Maimonides cloaks the audacity of his claim in another veil, namely his assertion that "This was the *cause that necessitated* [my emphasis] the disappearance of these great roots of knowledge from the nation," which treats the loss of the esoteric knowledge as unavoidable because of its oral transmission. The notion of the Oral Torah's destiny of oblivion is articulated here in a naturalistic manner that relates the forgetting to the oral medium of transmission.[80] Here, we can also discern an important difference between Maimonides's argument and that of Ibn Sīnā: Ibn Sīnā does not refer to a corpus of lost knowledge but to an esoteric knowledge that faces the threat of being forgotten but that is still, at least apparently, existent.

Although the esoteric lore has been lost, Maimonides argues that its restoration is possible, through a venture that can be undertaken by an individual who will restore the lost tradition and revive the knowledge through the power of his intellect. To his twofold argument regarding the loss of the esoteric knowledge and the powers of an outstanding individual to redeem the immense body of knowledge from oblivion, Maimonides adds a conclusion according to which the individual to whom these teachings are revealed must put them in writing, though in a careful and limited

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[77] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 176 (emphasis added).

[78] Maimonides elaborates on this in his introduction to *Mishneh Torah*, using it as a legitimizing precedent for his halakhic codification enterprise.

[79] See, specifically, b. Šabb. 128b, MS Oxford 366. Discussions and remarks on forgetfulness in late-antique rabbinic literature are manifold, with inner tensions and controversies on the possibility of forgetting both oral and written Torah. See Shlomo Naeh, "The Art of Memory: Constructions of Memory and Patterns of Text in Rabbinic Literature," *Meḥqarei Talmud* 3 (2005): 543–90, at 582–86 (Hebrew); Yaakov Sussman, "Oral Torah in Its Literal Sense," *Meḥqarei Talmud* 3 (2005) 209–384, at 245–46, 249–50, 252 n. 30, 255–58, 359–61 (Hebrew).

[80] Cf. *Guide* III:Introduction.

manner. Given that the loss of the esoteric lore has already happened once, and in light of its sudden resurgence, thanks to the efforts of the individual, this individual (namely, Maimonides himself) must prevent the subsequent loss of the secrets by committing them to a written treatise of his own making. Herein lies Maimonides's final emphasis: binding the crisis of esotericism with a change in the mode-of-being of the esoteric knowledge, a change that entails a shift from orality to textuality, as well as an act of self-exemption from the traditional prohibition on writing.

The three claims—also put forth by Ibn Sīnā in his epilogue—which involve the crisis of esotericism, the individual who uncovered the secrets by his sheer intellectual power, and the obligation to transmit them in writing for the sake of their continuity, are clustered together in the introduction to the third part of the *Guide*:

> It has been made clear that even that portion of it that becomes clear to him who has been given access to the understanding of it [namely, the account of the chariot], is subject to a legal prohibition against its being taught and explained except orally to one man having certain stated qualities, and even to that one only the chapter headings may be mentioned. This is the reason why the knowledge of this matter has ceased to exist in the entire religious community, so that nothing great or small remains of it. And it had to happen like this, for this knowledge was only transmitted from one chief to another and has never been set down in writing. If this is so, what stratagem can I use to draw attention toward that which may have appeared to me as indu- bitably clear, manifest, and evident in my opinion, according to what I have understood in these matters? On the other hand, if I had omitted setting down something of that which has appeared to me as clear, so that that knowledge would perish when I perish, as is inevitable, I should have considered that conduct as extremely cowardly with regard to you and everyone who is perplexed. It would have been, as it were, robbing one who deserves the truth of the truth, or begrudging an heir his inheritance. And both those traits are blameworthy. . . . If that interpretation is examined with a perfect care by him for whom this Treatise is composed and who has understood all its chapters—every chapter in its turn—the whole matter, which has become clear and manifest to me, will become clear to him so that nothing in it will remain hidden from him. This is the ultimate term that it is possible to attain in combining utility for everyone with abstention from explicit statements in teaching anything about this subject—as is obligatory.[81]

Like Ibn Sīnā in his *Risāla*, Maimonides portrays his time as a unique window of opportunity in which—in contradistinction to eras of decline and loss—the redemption of the esoteric lore is possible, but only at the price of transmitting knowledge in a way that deviates from the traditional modes of transmission. Maimonides asserts that, in writing the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he indeed breaches a prohibition, but he presents his *Guide* as a project that will rectify this infraction and will ease the tension that is involved in his radical act. His assertion of the acute need for revelation is depicted as a temporary phase in the vast process he

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[81] Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 416.

sought to generate in the *Guide of the Perplexed,* which was to lead to overcoming the crisis of esoteric knowledge and its restoration through the writing of a treatise that will bestow the secrets to those worthy of receiving them and will prevent the esoteric lore from relapsing into a state of crisis. But Maimonides, like Ibn Sīnā before him, was aware of the perils involved in the transition between modes of transmission, and of the uncontrollable nature of the dissemination of written materials. This may be the reason for Maimonides's adjuration—which resembles Ibn Sīnā's—to his reader to treat the treatise in an appropriately cautious manner:

> I adjure—by God, may He be exalted!—every reader of this Treatise of mine not to comment upon a single word of it and not to explain to another anything in it save that which has been explained and commented upon in the words of the famous Sages of our Law who preceded me. But whatever he understands from this Treatise of those things that have not been said by any of our famous Sages other than myself should not be explained to another; nor should he hasten to refute me, for that which he understood me to say might be contrary to my intention. He thus would harm me in return for my having wanted to benefit him and would *repay evil for good.*[82]

This adjuration reveals the audacity involved in the writing of the treatise and, at the same time, an anxiety that attests to an astute awareness of the inability to control the destiny of the written text and the ways in which it will be interpreted as it begins to circulate.

◼ Conclusion

In light of the textual evidence presented in this article, we can see that Maimonides fashioned the literary framework of his *Guide* in close correspondence to al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* and Ibn Sīnā's epilogue to the *Risāla fī aḥwāl al-nafs*. These works provided him with both the genre and the lines of argumentation that underlie his treatise's address to its recipients and through which he sought to pave the way to the hearts of the elite intellectual Jewish milieu of his age and to reshape the realm of secret knowledge in the Jewish tradition.

The investigation of the *Guide*'s opening unit, in comparison with the introduction to the third part of the treatise, has revealed a hitherto unnoticed bifurcation of the reasons for the writing of two distinct narratives. While these narratives do partly overlap—for instance, insofar as both address a crisis and overcoming it—they are nonetheless independent and distinct. One narrative is focused on the education of an individual and revolves around the disciple's desire for knowledge and his perplexity—an issue addressed mainly in the "epistle dedicatory" and the general introduction—whereas the other narrative, in marked difference, focuses—both in its first appearance in I:71 and in the introduction to the third part—on the cultural heritage, which Maimonides terms "inheritance." Here, Maimonides's emphasis is on redeeming a body of knowledge (*sitrey torah*), which is highly esteemed in

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[82] Ibid., 15 (emphasis in original).

terms of its place in the hierarchy of knowledge, from the state of oblivion that has erased it from the cultural memory of the elite circles responsible for preserving it. In the scholarship to date, this bifurcation has not been explained or discerned. By tracing the different intellectual sources for these two narratives, the analysis I have offered here sheds light on the very existence of this divergence and also suggests a possible reason for it.

In conclusion, I wish to mention briefly a remarkable phenomenon that followed the Maimonidean implementation and integration of the Islamic discourse of disclosing secrets. The two motifs that were integrated in the *Guide*—the declarations on the crisis of forgetting of *sitrey torah*, and the urgent necessity to commit them to writing—had an enormous impact on the proliferation of writings in the field of *sitrey torah* in the post-Maimonidean age. In contrast to Maimonides's hope that the writing of his own *Guide* would be accepted as a resolution of the crisis of lost knowledge, or at the very least would provide the basic framework, content-wise, for the discourse in the realm of *sitrey torah*,[83] his account in fact instigated an ongoing process of multifarious writings in the genre of *sitrey torah*.

As soon as the notion of forgetfulness took root—through the wide circulation of the *Guide* on the Iberian Peninsula, in Provence, and in the East—a process unforeseen by Maimonides took place. Instead of convincing his readers that the crisis of forgetfulness had been resolved by writing the *Guide*, the *Guide* promulgated an acute sense of crisis, as well as an ethos of breaching the limits of secrecy and the possibility of individual creation in the field of *sitrey torah*. Authors such as Samuel ibn Tibbon,[84] Joseph ibn Aknin,[85] Isaac Ibn Laṭif,[86] and Abraham Abulafia,[87] and possibly later authors also, wrote their works by

[83] See, for instance, *Guide* I:Intro: "I do not say that this Treatise will remove all difficulties for those who understand it. I do, however, say that it will remove most of the difficulties, and those of the greatest moment"; *Guide of the Perplexed*, 6.

[84] See Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Maʾamar Yiqqavu Hammayim* (ed. Rivka Kneller-Rowe [dissertation]; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2011) 652; cf. Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*, 111–13.

[85] See Joseph ibn Aknin's argument in the introduction to his *Inkishāf al-aʾsrār waṭuhūr al-anwār* (The Divulgence of Mysteries and the Appearance of Lights) that no one but him has gathered the secrets which he aims to reveal in his treatise; Joseph ibn Aknin, *Inkishāf al-aʾsrār waṭuhūr al-anwār* (ed. Abraham S. Halkin; Jerusalem, 1964) 37–38; cf. 140–43; and, on Ibn Aknin's acquaintance with *The Guide of the Perplexed*, see 398.

[86] See, for instance, Isaac ibn Laṭif's introduction to his *Šaʿar Haššamayim* (Gate of Heaven), MS Moscow-Ginzburg 89. See also Ibn Laṭif's mode of address to an elect disciple in his *Ṣurat ʿOlam* (Form of the World) and his declaration of the exceptional revelation of secrets in his work; Yossi Esudri, "Studies on the Philosophy of R. Isaac Ibn Latif: Profile, Knowledge and Prophecy and a Critical Edition of *Zurat ʿOlam*" (PhD diss.; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008) 2:67, 2:11.

[87] In the case of Abulafia, this holds true both for his three commentaries on the *Guide of the Perplexed* and for his independent treatises. See, for instance, Abulafia's assertion of the forgetfulness of divine names, which for him form the uppermost region of *sitrey torah*, in Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Hammeliṣ* (ed. Amnon Gross; Jerusalem, 2001) 55. Abulafia's revelation of secrets is very much affected, as Idel has claimed, by his strong messianic consciousness: see, for instance, Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrey Torah* (ed. Amnon Gross; Jerusalem, 2002) 16; and cf. Moshe Idel, "Abraham

reproducing, partly or in full, the argument put forth by Maimonides in his *Guide*, even though the contents of their works differ dramatically from each other and from the *Guide*. Despite these many differences, these authors all appropriated a set of presuppositions from Maimonides that shaped their own ethos and modus operandi. These presuppositions were: (a) that the esoteric tradition was lost (in part or fully) to Israel, creating an immense vacuum at the heart of Jewish culture; (b) that it is in the powers of an outstanding *individual* to restore the immense body of knowledge of these lost esoteric teachings; and (c) that the individual to whom these teachings are revealed must publicly disseminate them, in writing, as part of their revival. The *Guide* shaped these authors' self-understanding, informed their conception of what happened to the esoteric teachings over the course of Jewish diasporic history, and provided them with a particular method and genre to counteract the crisis of the esoteric tradition, creatively and, indeed, subversively. Why subversively? Because while all did heed the Maimonidean view of the history of the esoteric tradition and its loss, and while they acquired from the *Guide* the range of possibilities available to them in their present—specifically, the necessity to reveal the secrets in writing as a fitting measure in a time of crisis—they did not subscribe to Maimonides's claim that the *Guide* itself sufficed to fill the vacuum and complete the restoration of the lost tradition. This predicament left them with a discursive field highly esteemed in terms of its place in the hierarchy of knowledge but rather undefined and nebulous in terms of its contents, a field that summoned the select few to step up and fill the vacuum. This is the backdrop against which the aforementioned authors emerged and from which they embarked on their respective grand intellectual and cultural enterprises.[88] That said, it is important to stress that even when the authors diverged from the *Guide* in terms of both content and method, the book still left its imprint on the genre in which they wrote their works. Put otherwise, the contents of their works were poured into a cultural vessel cast by Maimonides in his *Guide*; and this vessel, in turn, was previously forged in the furnace of Islamic culture.

Abulafia's Works and Doctrine" (PhD diss., 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976) 395–418. On Abulafia's commentaries on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, see Moshe Idel, "On *Sitrey Torah* in Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," *Religion and Politics in Jewish Thought: Essays in Honor of Aviezer Ravitzky* (ed. Benjamin Brown et al.; Jerusalem: Zalman-Shazar Institute and Israel Democracy Institute, 2012) 371–458 (Hebrew); and for a list of earlier studies on this issue, see ibid., 377 n. 19.

    [88] In an exploration of the phenomenon of the secret, Michael Taussig argues that it is common that the dynamics of revelation and concealment not only involve inauguration and transmission of knowledge, but continuously generate *more* secrets; Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 269.