MAIMONIDES' INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED

THE WELL, THE PEARL AND THE GOLDEN APPLE

> "The first purpose of this Treatise is to explain the meanings of certain terms in books of prophecy." Guide p. 5, Pines translation.
>
> "This treatise also has a second purpose: namely, the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets...." p. 6.

OVERVIEW

The Introduction is the most important chapter of the Guide of the Perplexed, since that is where Maimonides explains his purposes and methods. The core of the Introduction is his examination of parables found in biblical prophecies.

The Guide of the Perplexed is many things, but Maimonides' several purposes converge on one goal: to train prophets to lead Israel toward messianic redemption. He had made prophecy a required belief in his Thirteen Principles of Faith. There had once been schools or guilds of prophets. The Guide is his college for the training of prophets.

However, just as Maimonides had various purposes for writing his Guide, the Guide also acquired various audiences. It looks as though he wanted these audiences to select themselves, and some few among them he meant to pursue prophetic training. Those few, who might not at first have known who they were, he meant to attend closely to his words so that they could reach his intended end, the revival of prophecy.

But there could be no prophecy without understanding the multilevel writing of the prophets. Scriptural language is the prism through which we view prophecy. Maimonides wrote that the first purpose of the Guide was to explain certain terms in the prophetic books. All those terms possess corporeal meanings, and most are anthropomorphic. Their usual corporeal definitions mask their incorporeal intent. They conceal the mystery of God's creation and provident guidance of this world.

He located the key to prophecy in the articulation and interpretation of parables. They are the archetypical *mythoi* by which the prophets channel their unutterable inspirations to the minds of men. That is why Maimonides says that the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of prophets constitutes the second purpose of the Guide, while the explanation of their words was its first purpose. He achieves both purposes, first considering the parables here in the Introduction to the Guide, while analyzing the words of the prophets in his Lexicon (Guide 1:1 – 1:45).

Why parables? Parables voice hidden truths through their capacity to simultaneously reveal and conceal. Maimonides' Introduction demonstrates for us the correct technique for reading between the lines of those prophetic parables.

The three parables that he treats in his Introduction are the Parable of the Well, the Parable of the Pearl, and the Parable of the Golden Apple. These three parables teach, respectively, the secret method, means, and content of prophecy.

There have not been many scholarly treatments of this material, despite its evident importance, and its few commentators mostly fail to recognize its concealed level.

Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508, sometimes spelled Abarbanel) wrote on those three parables at length. He had been a statesman, commentator, and financier during the period of the Spanish expulsion. His commentary is indispensable to this study. My conclusion, however, is that Rabbi Abravanel did not comprehend Maimonides' understanding of parables. We must try to understand why he did not penetrate their concealed core.

(I use the Shlomo Pines translation in this chapter, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, University of Chicago, 1960. In the rest of this book I use Michael Friedlander's translation, first edition, undated, The Hebrew Publishing Company of New York. Hebrew translations are from R. Yosef Kafiḥ, Mossad Ha-Rav Kook Publishing, 1977. *Appendix A* attached to this chapter is my translation of Abravanel's commentary on the three parables of the Introduction to the Guide. *Appendix B* treats certain grammatical issues. I refer to various commentators and translators, who I identify fully in the Preface to this volume. On schools of prophets: 1 Samuel 19:18–24; 1 Kings 18:4; 2 Kings 2, and 2 Kings 4:38–4:40. Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Belief: Commentary on the Mishnah, *Helek*. On prophecy: Mishneh Torah, *Yesodai HaTorah* chapter 7.)

I. THE WELL

THE SYSTEM OF PROPHECY

Maimonides' discussed his system of prophecy near the end of his Introduction to the Guide, pages 10-14.

The key to his system is the understanding of the biblical prophets' multilevel writing. Their devices uncover the truths hidden in Torah. In Pines' translation, these truths are "very obscure" (*ha-stomot meod*, "very closed from understanding," like a stopped up well).

This was not a discussion of philosophy. Prophecy differs from philosophy. Prophecy reaches toward the essence of God, while philosophy stops at divine existence (David Bakan, *Maimonides on Prophecy*, Jason Aronson Publ. 1991, p. 5-6, Principles 6, 7, and 8). Philosophy, however, provides intellectual preparation that the prophet needs to make sense of revelation. According to Maimonides, while all prophets are trained as philosophers, prophecy is a stage beyond philosophy and different from philosophy.

It is important to understand that the meaning of the word "prophecy" in English is only a small part of what it means for Maimonides. The ability to foretell events is a part of some prophecies, but is neither necessary nor sufficient for a definition. In Hebrew, the word for prophecy is *navua*, closely related to *beea*, sexual intercourse, indicating a sense of penetration in which the prophet receives divine influx.

> "...The true reality and quiddity of prophecy consists in its being an overflow overflowing (Heb.: *shefa ha-shofa*) from God...through the intermediation of the *Active Intellect* (*ha-sekhel ha-poel*), toward the rational faculty (*koakh ha-divri*) in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty (*koakh ha-dameh*). This is the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species..." (Page 369, Guide 2:36)

The "active intellect" is the conceptualization of that moment when the mind, which can know, does know. It is the "image of God" in which man is made (Guide 1:1). In the cabalist system it is the lowest sefirotic channel, the one that connects God to man.

Maimonides believed it necessary to prepare the rational and imaginative faculties to receive prophecy. Abravanel and the majority of non-cabalist rabbis disputed this. They also rejected the need for intermediaries in the prophetic process, like the active intellect. These critics held that prophecy is entirely miraculous: no human act can either aid or prevent it. Maimonides finds support for his contrary view in various rabbinic and scriptural accounts, and some mainstream and many cabalist rabbis agreed.

He quotes a series of texts of increasing depth, three of which are themselves parables, briefly commenting on them: the Parable of the Well, the Parable of the Pearl, and the Parable of the Golden Apple.

Several of these passages come from the beginning of the *Midrash to Song of Songs*, a work well known to Maimonides. The first parable to be treated, The Parable of the Well, explains why Solomon, author of Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, created parables:

> "And it said in the Midrash: 'To what were the words of the Torah to be compared before the advent of Solomon? To a well the waters of which are at a great depth and cool, yet no man could drink of them. Now what did one clever man do? He joined cord with cord and rope with rope and drew them up and drank. Thus did Solomon say one parable after another and speak one word after another until he understood the meaning of the words of Torah.'" (*Midrash to Song Of Songs* 1:8, p. 11 of the Guide, p. 9 in Soncino translation of the Midrash.)

The passage compares Torah to a well of great depth, whose hidden and cooling waters were closed off and unavailable to mankind. By linking words, concepts, and parables together, as one would link ropes to reach the depths of a well, Solomon drew forth the hidden teaching.

The Hebrew word for "well," *be'er*, vocalized slightly differently, can also mean "clarity of understanding" or "clarification of understanding." The concept of the well is important in the book of Genesis. The patriarch Isaac spent a large part of his career opening wells dug by Abraham but stopped up by the Philistines (*va'ystemum*, Genesis 26:18). Maimonides' understanding of these passages is that the wells contain the secrets of the Torah. In cabala, the wells are the *sefirot* (*Zohar* II: 151b-152a).

The "words of Torah" mentioned in the Midrash are not the surface meaning of the biblical text, the *pshat*. In the Guide, Maimonides is not interested in *pshat*, and his explanations defy it. These "words of Torah" requiring descent in deep wells conceal the Torah's esoteric level.

R. ABRAVANEL'S COMMENTARY ON THE PARABLE OF THE WELL

R. Abravanel analyzed the Parable of the Well in the context of the few lines in the Guide preceding and succeeding the passage. (For my translation of his commentary, see *Appendix A*.) Maimonides wrote:

> "As I have mentioned parables, we shall make the following introductory remarks: *know* that the key to the understanding of all that the prophets, peace be on them, have said, and to the knowledge of its truth, is an *understanding* of the parables, of their *import*, and the meaning of the *words* occurring in them." (Guide, p. 10, my emphasis.)

Abravanel learns from Maimonides that there are three essential aspects of all prophetic parables, a) the simple or apparent *understanding* of the external meaning of the parable (*pshat*); b) the *import* of the parable, that is, its moral, including that which was intended by its moral; and c) the explanation of the *words* of the parable. That is, we must understand how the equivocal or homonymous terms in the parable teach its moral.

Abravanel explains that this three-part approach is the key to understanding prophecies. For you could not comprehend the parable without knowing whether you should take it literally or on its deepest level. Maimonides continues:

> "*You know* what God, may He be exalted, has said: 'And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes.'" (Hosea 12:11, Guide page 11, Bible trans. as in Pines' text)

Abravanel comments: "Consider the words of Maimonides who brings four quotations from the Bible and two from the Midrashic literature." The four biblical quotes are:

A: "And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes," (Hosea 12:11);

B: "Put forth a riddle and speak a parable," (Ezekiel 17:2);

C: "They say of me, is he not a maker of parables," (Ezekiel 21:5);

D: "To understand a word and a figure, the words of the wise and their dark sayings," (Proverbs 1:6).

The two passages from the Midrash are the Parable of the Well and the Parable of the Pearl (*Midrash on Song of Songs* 1:8).

Abravanel asks why it was necessary to bring all of these supporting texts. He answers that the first proof text shows that prophecy comes from God to the prophets in the form of parables. They are in the form of parables because of the special quality of the recipient, his power of imagination, which can materialize (*sh'yagshim*) the divine emanation. The prophet Hosea related what God told him about the mechanism of prophecy: "I have spoken unto the prophets, and I myself have multiplied visions, and by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes." This means that God's message or emanation (influx) is clear and pure but its reception by the prophetic recipient can only be through his faculty of imagination, and he can only comprehend the influx through imaginative "similitudes." These similitudes and parables then become the prophet's educational devices.

The second biblical text, "Put forth a riddle and speak a parable," clarified that when the prophet speaks to the people he speaks in parables. This is a different matter. The teaching that he personally received in the form of parables, he now relates to the mass of the people in parables.

Maimonides introduces the third biblical passage above by saying:

> "And you know too that because of the frequent use prophets make of parables, the prophet has said: 'They say of me, Behold, he speaketh but in parables!'" (Ezekiel 21:5, Leeser trans.).

According to Abravanel, this passage shows that prophets characteristically and usually speak in parables.

He says that the fourth passage clarified a distinction between the public teaching of the prophets and their parabolic writing. In public speech they are like the wise man who uses parables and then explains them so that his hearers can comprehend him. But in his *written* parable the prophet does not explain its meaning, leaving only the apparent meaning (*pshat*) of the surface of the text. Thus, Solomon writes, "To understand a word (*mashal*, i.e., proverb,) and a figure," to teach that men should strive for the deeper meaning of written Proverbs and parables beyond the *pshat*, just as they are also commanded to labor in the study of Torah.

Having made this case, Abravanel thought that Maimonides still doubted whether he had appropriately clarified the prophetic parables. Up until this point, he had only been speaking of prophecy in the five books of the Torah and in the books of the prophets, but had not considered the Proverbs of Solomon, which are, by contrast, matters of wisdom and investigation (*hokrim*). That is why Solomon does not mention Torah here, but rather says, "to [those who] understand a word (proverb), and a figure; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings." Maimonides needed to relate the *Proverbs* of Solomon to the inner secrets of the Torah, i.e., by means of the Parable of the Well. Mankind needed that method, from the Solomonic books of wisdom, linking parable to parable, to draw from the well of Torah its subterranean level of meaning.

If Solomon wrote the Proverbs to help us understand the Torah, we might think that he meant them to clarify the commands (*mitzvot*) of the Torah. To the contrary, "To the one who understands a proverb and a figure," refers to the fundamental secrets of the Torah, not its laws. Therefore, Maimonides says that:

> "I do not think that anyone possessing an unimpaired capacity imagines that the *words of Torah* referred to here (in the Midrash of the Well), that one contrives to understand through the understanding of parables, are *ordinances* concerning the building of tabernacles, the *lulav* and the law of the four trustees."

Abravanel, therefore, supplied the emphasis, "To a well the waters of which were at a great *depth* and cool." Solomon was obviously not writing about legal or ethical matters whose meaning is revealed and straightforward, but rather to the Torah's deepest foundations. When Maimonides said, "Rather what this text has in view here is without a doubt, the understanding of obscure [deep] matters," he derived the term "deep, obscure (*amuk*)," from the phrase: "...The waters were at great depth and cool."

The secrets of the Torah are not its "ordinances." Maimonides had emphasized that the prophets did not introduce their parables to clarify our understanding of ritual law or civil law, those requirements necessary for the constitution of Jewish society.

But what were these "ordinances" that were not secrets of the Torah, those "tabernacles, the *lulav* and the law of the four trustees"? The tabernacle was the place ordained for divine communion with the Jewish people. It was essentially an architectural plan, but, as Sampson Raphael Hirsch shows in his Torah Commentary, it embodied a vast symbolic structure. The *lulav* is a palm frond waved on the Feast of Tabernacles, *Sukkot*. On another level, the shape of the frond represents man, and symbolically perfects him. The "law of the four trustees" (four different types of bailees) is the foundation of property, contract and tort law.

Now, though Maimonides seems to deprecate these three things in relation to the secrets of parables, they are not "small things" (see Mishneh Torah, *Book of Knowledge*, 4:13). He devotes most of Mishneh Torah to these things, and he assumed that his Guide readers were already familiar with them. They establish the Jewish commonwealth. Nonetheless, all this is extraneous to the discussion. They are irrelevant to the obscure secrets, except that such a polity is the assumed precondition for the preparation of the prophetic mind. In other words, there is no possibility of prophetic man without at least a halachic man.

Even Gentile prophets, like Balaam, are in some sense halachic men, as Noahide law adherents, since Noahide law is a halachic category. Maimonides calls Noahides *hasidei umot ha-olam*, "righteous gentiles." But note that Maimonides calls Balaam "almost a prophet," and only "when he was good" (Guide 2:45; and see Friedlander's trans., note 1, p. 209, sifting what Maimonides meant in saying that Balaam "… was good.").

THE PROPHET MUST TEACH

While Abravanel was correct in his interpretation of the Well Parable, as far as he went, to get the whole story we need the full Midrashic substratum of Maimonides' text.

The Midrash, both those parts quoted and those not quoted by Maimonides, argues that the parable is the framework of a public teaching, which becomes the precondition for the attainment of higher levels of prophecy.

This concept of the public articulation of prophecy links to Maimonides' concept of human imagination. The perfected imagination and the perfected intellect are the two necessary parts of the prophetic mind (page 369; 2:36). Under the influence of the divine influx, the prophet's imagination produces archetypal images.

He articulates them through parables and other devices. Through this public profession the prophet achieves a *tikkun*, perfecting the community. This endows him with the blessing of further divine engagement.

The Midrash twice brings, close by the previous passages, this doctrine of the meaning of the public teaching. It uses the term the *ruakh hakodesh* ("spirit of holiness," "inspiration"), which is the lowest degree of prophecy, but which is, nonetheless, the basic included level of all prophecies (Guide 2:45). The twin passages use the following identical language:

> "Rabbi Yudan states: this is to show that whoever teaches the Torah publicly merits that *ruakh ha-kodesh* should rest upon him, for so did Solomon; he taught, and the *ruakh ha-kodesh* rested on him, and he composed three books: Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes." (*Midrash to Song of Songs* 1:8-9, pp. 9, 11)

This remarkable statement comes in two different contexts.

The first time, it is the conclusion following the Parable of the Well and the Parable of the Pearl in the Midrash. To restate it, the Torah and its truths were closed off and unavailable to mankind, like a stopped up well. Solomon created the parabolic method to uncover these doctrines and taught them in public. This act of teaching prepared Solomon for a higher level of prophecy and revelation. According to Rabbi Yudan, Solomon's reward was the revelation that resulted in his sacred writings. After climbing Jacob's ladder, the prophet brings the teaching back down in order to merit another ascent. This is a continuous three-step process: the rise to prophetic insight, teaching what has been learned, and the reward of a more profound mystical experience.

The context of the second iteration of Rabbi Yudan's statement (1:9) was that Solomon had a single prophetic dream in which he suddenly knew the entire Torah and its secrets. Dreams are important in prophecy. According to Maimonides, prophecy comes in dreams to all prophets except Moses. The dream is the mediating channel through which truth penetrates the prophet's imagination. But the account of Solomon's wonderful dream was only the first step.

The Midrash then takes a second step. Solomon performed a public act to celebrate the prophetic dream, a *Simkhat Torah* (celebration of the Torah). Because this act was like a public teaching, the Midrash repeats Rabbi Yudan's doctrine that Solomon merited the inspiration for his famous writings. Solomon could have kept the dream to himself or conducted some sort of private celebration. In this case, his teaching took the form of a public ritual celebration of his dream, a kind of public parable, which guaranteed his further prophetic ascent.

Maimonides' system of prophecy begins to emerge. Solomon created the parabolic method, which enabled the public teaching of what was originally an obscure revelation. The sage's reward was prophetic access to the entire Torah and its secrets. He got its meaning immediately. It was engraved upon his mind (Mishneh Torah, *Yesodai ha-Torah* 7:3).

His imagination conceived the parable, which conveyed the public teaching, including the public parable of ritual, understood at different levels by different members of the public. This double perfection of Solomon's imaginative faculty, allowing him to both understand and to teach, made him an excellent creator of parables, who was then inspired to write the biblical books of wisdom.

* * *

We will see that R. Abravanel, interpreting the next parable of The Pearl, created a distinction between the written parables of the prophets and their oral teachings. But Abravanel's distinction between oral and written deflects the point. The public writings are, as a practical matter, all that are available to us. The prophet constructs his parable in his public writing. Maimonides, in Mishneh Torah, *Yesodai Ha-Torah* 7:3, says that occasionally the

prophets themselves write the solution of their parables, but his emphasis is on unsolved written parables and their esoteric content.

Maimonides does not believe that everyone can learn the Torah at once (Introduction, pp. 17-20; 2:33). We need to employ various educational methods. The parabolic method is the means of acquiring the truths that are deep and closed from understanding. Only one Torah exists: Solomon's project, and Maimonides' as well, was to *teach* one entire revelation, the one hidden in the parable, and the one exposed in its textual surface. The Parable form conceals and reveals. Because it has different levels, different people absorb what they can. The student must integrate the teachings, linking those ropes to draw fresh water from the depths of the well.

II. THE PEARL

> "*Our Rabbis say: A man who loses a sela or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an issar. In the same way this parable in itself is worth nothing but by means of it you can understand the words of Torah*. (*Midrash to Song of Songs* 1:8). This too is literally what they say. Now consider the explicit affirmation of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, that the internal meaning of the words of Torah is a pearl whereas *the external meaning of all parables is worth nothing* (*pshat shel kol mashal aino kloom*), and their comparison of a subject by its parable's external meaning to a man who let drop a pearl in his house which was dark and full of furniture. Now this pearl is there [*b'bayit*, in the house], but he does not see it, and does not know where it is. It is as though it were no longer in his possession, as it is impossible for him to derive any benefit from it until, as has been mentioned, he lights a lamp—an act to which an understanding of the meaning of the parable corresponds." (Guide p. 11)

Maimonides is concerned in these passages to "understand all that the prophets...have said," and the understanding of "*obscure* matters."

His procedure is peculiar, and seems out of character. He has told us that he does not want to speak parabolically. By explaining parables with other parables, he would have "replaced one individual by another of the same species" (page 9). Yet this is precisely what he does. A further difficulty: what "parables" usually mean for us is not what they meant for Maimonides. If he had wanted us to read each difficult Torah passage as though it contained some general moral truism, like a fable from Aesop, he could have done so, and others had. But he does not.

Instead, he confounds the perplexed by introducing two difficult and perhaps contradictory parables, the Pearl and the Golden Apple, and then somehow uses them to explicate two other parables, Jacob's Ladder and the Married Prostitute (Proverbs 7:6-21). We must follow his words closely to catch his meaning.

The Pearl, like the Parable of the Well, is from the *Midrash on Song of Songs*. The text is difficult for Maimonides and his commentators because of the statement that the parable is "worth nothing." Since the parables are biblical, they could not be worth nothing.

R. ABRAVANEL'S COMMENTARY ON THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL

Struggling with this, Rabbi Abravanel first tries to persuade us that Maimonides thought that the penny candle does not stand for the worthless language of the parable, but, surprisingly, that the house is the parable text. The pearl of the Torah secret is lost in the *pshat* verbiage of the parable in which it is *housed*. The penny candle's light disperses the darkness of the house, that is, the obscurity of the parable. The light, which is the light of the mind, discovers the pearl, which is the truth of Torah. (See *Appendix A* for a full translation of Abravanel's commentary.)

Abravanel argued that when the text employed the otherwise surplus phrase "his house," it could just as well have been outside the house or in the city street. By picking out the house, the Midrashic author meant to emphasize that the house stands for the parable text. We glimpse the truth concealed in the words of the Torah parable just as we can find the pearl lost in the midst of the house.

The pearl was lost in a "house, dark and full of furniture." The darkness of the house is the darkness of human understanding, "full of furniture," all the many things and the many words that confuse the understanding (i.e., the *pshat*, the surface meaning). "Now the pearl is there (in the house)," meaning, the moral is contained in the parable, "but he does not see it," meaning, that the hearer of the parable does not comprehend it because of this darkness. On this account, the light or taper mentioned by the Midrash does not represent the parable or its moral, but rather represents the insightful mind, since by means of it the pearl in the house can be found. Thus, the pearl is the moral, the house is the parable, and the taper is insight. The light of the taper is the mind, as "The soul of man is the candle of the Lord (*ner hashem nishmat adam*) searching all his inward parts" (Proverbs 20:27).

Abravanel was still uncomfortable with this interpretation. Even if the house is the parable it is Torah, and we should not say that "this parable is worth nothing." On reconsideration, he doubled back to say that the worthless candle was indeed the parable, but that it was only the oral form of the parable employed as a teaching device, not the written biblical parable itself. The candle is an external matter (*davar m'hutz*) which we use to find the pearl. Similarly, the parable would be a verbal aid (external to the text) for studying, in order to understand the words of the text, but otherwise "worthless." To put it another way, the Pearl taught that a prophet's verbal parable is "worthless" *other than as* a device used for teaching Torah. By contrast, in the Well Parable, the parable was itself sacred.

Even this second gloss leaves him cold. The prophet's verbal parable may just be an external teaching device. But it still contains its wise moral, so how could it be "worth nothing"? Abravanel ends up trying to prove, through an unconvincing though intricate analysis, that Maimonides must have considered the Parable of the Pearl to be superfluous. He argued that Maimonides included the Parable of the Pearl only because of its close juxtaposition on the Midrash page to the Parable of the Well (*Midrash To Song Of Songs* 1:8).

Abravanel, however, knew that Maimonides would not have agreed with him. Maimonides thought that the Well parable and the Pearl parable are about the same thing: i.e., that the written words of Torah conceal secrets of scripture. Abravanel disagreed, arguing that the Pearl parable was merely an oral explanation external to the text (*davar m'hutz*).

Abravanel concludes:

> "This is what Maimonides understands the Midrash to be teaching. I do not agree. I consider the parable the [verbal] public teaching (*sh'osei ha'melamed*), and that this is what they compared to the candlelight.... Though Maimonides pursues his explanation, the truth should find its own way."

Thus, we have Abravanel's battle with the Pearl Midrash. By reducing parables to public oral teaching, he fails to do justice to Maimonides' concept. In addition, his answer does not avoid the problem of the parable being worthless.

REJECTED MIDRASHIC SOLUTIONS

Another solution to the problem of the worthless taper would be to say that it was merely inexpensive, not worthless. The most important things to us, air and water, are the cheapest; the least important, gold, is the dearest. *Midrash to Song of Songs* brought this solution in a couple of parables not mentioned by Maimonides or Abravanel, but which are obviously close conceptually and linguistically, and which may be the Midrash's amendment to its prior statements. The first of these parables reads:

> "'As an apple tree among the trees of the wood' (Song of Songs, 2:3). Rabbi Judah Ben Rabbi Simon made two comparisons. Just as an *apple* costs an *issar* and you can smell it ever so many times, so Moses said to Israel, 'If you desire to be redeemed, you can obtain your redemption with a very little thing.' They were like a man who suffered with his feet and who went around to all the doctors and could not find a cure, till at last one came and said to him, 'if you want to be cured, there is a very easy way of doing it; plaster your feet with the excrement of cattle.' So Moses said to Israel: 'If you want to be redeemed you can obtain your redemption with a very simple thing; viz., 'And he shall take a bunch of hissop and dip (Exodus 12:22).' They said to him: 'Our master Moses, how much is this bundle of hissop worth, four farthings or five!' He replied to them: 'were it only worth one, it will enable you to acquire the spoil of Egypt and the spoil of the Red Sea and the spoil of Sihon and Og and the spoils of the thirty-one kings [of Canaan].'" (Soncino translation, Maurice Simon, 2:11, pp. 98-99)

The hyssop was the herbal brush the Israelites used to daub blood on their doorposts so that the angel of destruction would not "come into your houses to smite" on Passover night. Daubing sheep blood was a symbolic destruction of the Egyptian god (Guide 3:46, Pines 582). Thus, the "worthless" hyssop saved Israel.

A slightly different version of the worthless taper appears on the same *Midrash* page following its original (*ibid.*, 1:9, pp. 9-10):

> "Rabbi Phineas Ben Yair opened his exposition of the text, 'If thou seek her as silver, etc.' (Proverbs 11:4) if you seek after words of Torah as after hidden treasures, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will not withhold your reward. If a man loses a *sela* or an *obol* (very small coin) in his house, he lights lamp after lamp, wick after wick, till he finds it. Now does it not stand to reason: if for these things which are only ephemeral and of this world a man will light so many lamps and lights till he finds where they are hidden, for the words of Torah which are life both of this world and of the next world, ought you not to search as for hidden treasures?"

Thus, if you would burn a multitude of candles altogether costing more than the mislaid "*sela* or an *obol*," so consider how much more would you spend to acquire real value, the Torah. This is a different approach to the problem. The time and trouble taken to compose and link parables, like the linking of different ropes and the lighting of different candles, is necessary to obtain the great prize. A further passage on the next page compares the efforts of farmers rising early to procure manure and straw, asking if they would go to that much trouble for these inexpensive but obviously not worthless items, should you not go to infinitely more trouble to acquire Torah, the true value.

MAIMONIDES' SOLUTION

But these are not the answers that Maimonides wants us to hear right now, even though he was undoubtedly familiar with them, and agreed with them.

Where Pines translates, "the external meaning of all parables is worth nothing," Schwarz translates "external meaning" as "*pshat*" (others: *pashuto*). The *pshat*, therefore, would be worth nothing. Maimonides compares the *pshat* to the house furnishings in which the light of the understanding finds the concealed pearl.

The word *pshat* immediately suggests the Hebrew acronym *PaRDeS* (*pardes*=paradise/Eden) spelled from the first letters of *Pshat Remez Derash Sod*, which are the four levels of meaning: surface/apparent, symbolic, homiletic and esoteric. It is a historically open question whether Maimonides knew of this acronym before its mention in the published *Zohar*. Be that as it may, he had used the Hebrew term *pshat* in his Mishneh Torah, conscious of this contrast. As he will soon demonstrate, he is not concerned with the symbolic (*remez*) or homiletic (*derash*) interpretation of prophetic texts, but rather with the esoteric level of the text (*sod*), the

"obscure" matters. (Mishneh Torah, Ysodai HaTorah 4:13; *pshat*, in its Judeo-Arabic original was ظاهر, see Efros' discussion in *Philosophic Terms in the Moreh Nebukim*, 20, 101 and 141)

This has not entirely solved the issue of the worthlessness of the parable, but it shows how Maimonides chose this particular Midrash to suggest the classic *pshat-sod* distinction. He has clearly made a selection from various Midrashic possibilities. The selection itself shows that this distinction between exoteric and esoteric is what occupies his mind in the Midrash of the Pearl. The parallel Midrashim do not help him since the issue of worthlessness was not his primary concern, as it was with Abravanel. In other words, in his phrase *pshat shel kol mashal aino kloom* ("the external meaning of the parable is worth nothing"), Maimonides' emphasis was on *pshat* and its distinction from *sod*, not on the *aino kloom* (worthlessness). He emphasizes this very distinction between *pshat* and *sod* again eleven lines down in the Judeo-Arabic original, in his portrayal of the Parable of the Golden Apple (ظاهر وباطن).

But the language is still there: he called the parable's *pshat* worthless, not inexpensive, though the parable is in the text of prophetic revelation, which is clearly not worthless. Maimonides meant that the parable text is valuable as linguistic camouflage of the *sod*. Sometimes we must conceal the *sod*, as the following parable makes clear. It follows that *pshat* may mislead, even purposefully. He tends to interpret *against pshat.* Why?

Pshat is human language, but the ultimate truths of Torah transcend language. *Pshat shel kol mashal aino kloom* means that in comparison with divine truth, human language is insignificant. It is just so much furniture. This is the core lesson of the first volume of the Guide of the Perplexed.

* * *

What we have so far is that we must link parable with parable to find the truth concealed in the esoteric level of the text. The next step is to discover what that esoteric truth is, and why it must be concealed.

Maimonides had chosen the story of the Pearl from post-biblical rabbinic literature. It would not be on the same level with the story of the Golden Apple, which comes from the Bible itself, from the Proverbs of Solomon, the creator of parables. Maimonides explicitly contrasted the Parable of the Golden Apple, written by "The Sage," Solomon, to the Parable of the Pearl, from "Our Rabbis." By this means, according to Abravanel, Maimonides subtly disparaged the uncomfortable language of the Parable of the Pearl.

III. THE GOLDEN APPLE

> "'The Sage has said: *a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings (maskiyot) of silver*' (Proverbs 25:11). Hear now an elucidation of the thought he has set forth. The term *maskiyot* denotes filigree traceries; I mean to say traceries in which there are apertures and very small eyelets, like the handiwork of silversmiths. They are so called because a glance penetrates through them; for in the [Aramaic] translation of the Bible the Hebrew term *va-yashqef*, meaning, he glanced—is translated *va-istekhe*. The sages accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings (*davar ha-davir al afanav*) is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree work having very small holes (*nekevim*). Now see how marvelously this dictum describes a well-constructed parable. For he says that in a saying that has two meanings – he means an external and an internal one (*pashut v'sod* : ظاهر وباطن) – the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold..."

(Guide pages 11-12. See Pines' implausible footnote 35: *istekhe* is "a verbal form deriving from the same root as the word *maskiyot*, Genesis 26:8, and then my *Appendix B* to this chapter).

The Sage, of course, is Solomon, the creator of parables. It is obvious that for Solomon the parable's language, representing the silver setting, is not worthless, but is an integral part of the secret. It is the means of viewing the secret, as well as being a finely wrought silver jewel. Unlike the implication of the Pearl allegory, in which the parable was worthless, here we recognize it as part of the structure of Torah itself.

R. ABRAVANEL'S COMMENTARY ON THE PARABLE OF THE GOLDEN APPLE

Rabbi Abravanel continues his analysis only briefly to discuss the Golden Apple (see *Appendix A* to this chapter). He fails to address this material with anything like the critical attention he brought to the Parables of the Well and the Pearl. This is peculiar, since Maimonides devoted more space to it, and since it usually impresses readers more than the two previous parables.

Abravanel did not start out on a positive note. He opened his commentary on the Golden Apple section by saying that he had no idea why Maimonides brought this further parable for our consideration.

He surmised, however, that Maimonides brought the Golden Apple parable as counterpoint to the Parable of the Pearl. Where the Pearl held that the external meaning of all parables is worthless, the Golden Apple taught that the relation of the moral to the parable is like the relation of apples of gold in settings of silver. Abravanel explained that the silver setting represents political wisdom (*hokhmah mdinit*) and advantageous practice (*u'maasit muelet*). Nonetheless, with respect to the golden moral, its parable setting is of subsidiary value. (Acolytes of Leo Strauss generally agree, taking the silver to represent political philosophy and the gold to be metaphysics).

Abravanel concluded:

> "Maimonides cites this Proverb to support and establish his explanation of the [Pearl] Midrash, that the candle and its light were comparable to the understanding. He was thus compelled to equate the golden apple to the moral; the silver to the parable. Finally the filigree with its apertures, through which the gold inside could be seen, represents the penetration of the understanding mind, just as the light of the candle was also compared to the understanding."

That is all that Abravanel says about the Golden Apple. Abravanel says nothing of the problem of the word *va-yashqef*, which punctures the center of Maimonides' presentation. This explains why Abravanel missed the point of the account of the parables. I will sort out the issues raised by Maimonides with respect to this term, which is the most important term in his account of the Well, the Pearl and the Golden Apple.

LANGUAGE AS CAMOUFLAGE FOR DANGEROUS CONTENT

Maimonides engages in a curious act of linguistic exegesis, though it is really a type of camouflage. He seems to want to derive "filigree setting" from "seeing." To do this he starts with a Hebrew term (*maskiyot*), proceeds to a completely different Hebrew term (*va-yashqef*), develops its Aramaic equivalent (*va-istekhe*, from Onkelos' ancient Aramaic translation, c.110 C.E.), and reads that back into the original Hebrew term, a four step process. He made it even stranger since in each case the triconsonantal root of the three words is spelled differently. What is going on? (I analyze the grammatical and etymological issues in depth in *Appendix B* to this chapter.)

Maimonides explains that *maskiyot* is a type of setting that is filigreed, and, consequently, seen through. According to Pines and Schwarz, we should understand it by comparison with *yashqef*, which means to glance or observe. But *yashqef* has no linguistic connection with *maskiyot*. *Yashqef*, however, appears at Genesis 26:8 (not

in the Parable of the Golden Apple, Proverbs 25:11), where Onkelos' ancient Aramaic translation made it *istekhe*, which may share a couple of root letters with *maskiyot*, but only by switching the S sounding *sin* (שׂ) with the S sounding *samekh* (ס).

But the whole exercise seems forced and unnecessary.

Its only conceivable purpose was to get us to look at Genesis, rather than Proverbs, the source of the Golden Apple parable.

When we look at Genesis 26:8, we find the Hebrew term *yashqef* coupled with Onkelos' Aramaic translation *istekhe*, but we find much more than that…

Isaac and Rebecca go to live among the Philistines in Gerar. In what is now a family tradition, he tells the natives that she is not his wife but his sister, "Fearing lest the men of the place should kill me for Rebecca, because she is fair to look upon," whatever that means.

After some time Avimelech, king of the Philistines *yashqef*, "looked out" his window and to his surprise, saw, through the window of Isaac's house, that Isaac was having sex with Rebecca. The Hebrew punningly says, "behold *Yitzkhak mtzakhek Rivka*," i.e., Isaac, whose name is a joke (*tzakhek/Yitzkhak*), is "joking" (*mtzakhek*) or sporting with his wife. We know that *tzahek* is a euphemism for sex (Jastrow, p. 1274), but what we might not know is Rashi's explanation of *yashqef*.

Rashi's commentary would be unknown to Maimonides, but expressed traditional exegesis that he would know. The words "And Avimelech *looked out* (*va-yashqef*)" Rashi *defines*: *Ra'ahu m'shamesh mitato*, i.e., "he saw him having sex." It is difficult to reproduce the effect in English but it looks as though Rashi were translating *yashqef* as "to observe sex." His idiom for sex is transitive, as there is none in acceptable English, producing something like "Avimelech observed him fornicating her" (Jastrow p. 1601).

This points to the esoteric truth concealed by parables. To look through the filigree is to observe the sexual subtext of the prophetic parable. Maimonides explains why this should be the case:

> "We have no intellectual cognition of our bringing somebody other than us to existence except through sexual intercourse." (Guide page 99, Pines' footnote 8).

The mystery of all mysteries is the mystery of creation. There is no way our language can comprehend what creation *ex nihilo* could mean other than through the sexual metaphor. But no metaphor does complete justice to what it describes. The student, having recognized the carnal imagery in scripture, must take it as metaphoric of the basic act of creation, that is, the *Maaseh Bereshit.*

David Bakan called this sublimation the "principle of Rabbi Akiva." Prof. Bakan learned this from the Talmud, where Rabbi Akiva first explained the plural "thrones" in Daniel 7:9 to refer to the thrones of God and *his beloved*, but then *re-explained* them as thrones of justice and grace.

> "One passage says: 'His throne was fiery flames'; and another Passage says: 'Till thrones were placed, and One that was ancient of days did sit!' — There is no contradiction: one [throne] for Him, and one for His beloved (*dod*) ; this is the view of R. Akiba. Said R. Jose the Galilean to him: Akiba, how long wilt thou treat the Divine Presence as profane! Rather, [it must mean], one for justice and one for grace. Did he [R. Akiva] accept [this explanation from him, or did he not accept it]? — Come and hear: One for justice and one for grace; this is the view of R. Akiba."

R. Akiva's re-explanation of the prurient meaning of the Daniel passage was an act of sublimation, made necessary by his recognition of the explosive content concealed within the silver filigree of the parable. The meaning of the Parable of the Golden Apple is that the parable's content is reserved for those who know how to sublimate its corporeal language.

(Rabbi Akiva's principle: Bakan, *Maimonides On Prophecy,* p. 6, principle 27; pages 27 through 33; Talmud, *Hagigah* 14a and b. Soncino mistranslates the key term in 14a as "David" instead of *dod*—"beloved," in their own misleading act of sublimation.)

THROUGH THE LATTICE: THE PARABLE OF THE MARRIED HARLOT

In the remainder of the Introduction, from the second paragraph on page 12, until the "Instruction with Respect to This Treatise" on page 15, Maimonides distinguishes two types of parables, by *composition*. In one type, we interpret each term independently, as well as in combination. In the second type of parable, there is one teaching, and the many parable elements merely embellish it, make it more coherent, or further conceal the meaning. For the first type, he cites the parable of Jacob's Ladder (explained: Guide 1:15). For the second type, he recalls the story of the Married Harlot. Maimonides emphasizes this latter type.

The key to the Parable of the Married Harlot is in the opening text:

> "For at the *window* of my house I looked forth through my *lattice* (*eshnabi nishkafti*); and I beheld among the thoughtless ones, I discerned among the youths, a young man void of understanding."
> (Proverbs 7:6-7)

Maimonides called this a "prophetic parable," p. 13, despite that Solomon was only "almost a prophet," "prophet in the more general sense of the term," that is, a second-degree prophet (see Guide 2:45, the twelve degrees of prophecy).

David Bakan has explained this material well in his *Maimonides on Prophecy*. My main point, however, is the connection between the *filigree* in the Golden Apple parable and the *latticed window* in the parable of the Married Harlot (Proverbs 7:6-27).

Maimonides maintains that "the entire book" of Proverbs is based on the ripe sexual analogy between the Married Harlot and *matter*, on the one hand, and *form* standing for either the husband or the "young man void of understanding." Matter embraces form, but will embrace another form at another time.

The young man meets the Married Harlot.

> "Passing through the street near her corner; and he went the way to her house, In the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night: And, behold, there met him a woman with the attire of an harlot, and subtle of heart. (She is loud and stubborn; her feet abide not in her house: Now is she without, now in the streets, and lieth in wait at every corner.) So she caught him, and kissed him, and with an impudent face said unto him, I have peace offerings with me; this day have I payed my vows. Therefore came I forth to meet thee, diligently to seek thy face, and I have found thee. I have decked my bed with coverings of tapestry, with carved works, with fine linen of Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning: let us solace ourselves with loves. For the goodman is not at home, he is gone a long journey: He hath taken a bag of money with him, and will come home at the day appointed. With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him."

Maimonides is explicit: "The circumstances described in it (the parable) being of the kind typical for adulterers....Also the spoken words and other such details are of a kind typical of words spoken among adulterers."

Compare what Moshe Halbertal termed "visual trespass" in the story of the four who entered *Pardes*, "One peeked and perished, one peeked and was smitten, one peeked and cut down sprouts, one ascended in peace and descended in peace" (page 14, *Concealment and Revelation*, Princeton, 2007, quoting *Tosefta Hagigah* 2:3). Here again we *peek* through a window, through a filigree, through a lattice, to witness a sexual encounter, which, on consideration, we realize is the metaphor for divine formation of matter. But matter can also lead to destruction.

The image also occurs in Song Of Songs 2:9-10, where its meaning is positive: "Behold he stands behind our wall, he looks in through the windows, he peers through the lattice, my beloved spoke and said to me..." Who is peering through the lattice? The *Midrash on Song of Songs* makes the sublimation: God himself is looking through, seeking the Jewish people.

At the other end of Proverbs is the contrasting story of another kind of married woman, a Woman of Valor, (31:10) who is self-reliant, self-conscious, and loyal to her husband, a metaphor of union to one true form. She represents matter, her husband form, and adheres to him as Israel must adhere to God.

The conclusion Maimonides wants us to draw from these parables is that we embody the divine creative principle by loyally embracing the true form, God (See Guide 3:51). By contrast, the empty "joyless search for joy" as Leo Strauss put it, results in destruction, for the proverb concludes: "He goeth after her (the Married Harlot) straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks." The young man "devoid of understanding," is destroyed by his pursuit of materialism: "Her house [is] the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death" (Proverbs 7:22 –27)

THE FLAME OF KNOWLEDGE

Finally, I want to focus on Maimonides' first sentence of the Introduction section beginning "Instructions with Respect To This Treatise," which returns us to the subject of *linking*.

> "If you wish to grasp the totality of what this treatise contains, so that nothing of it will escape you, then you must connect its chapters one with another (*hashav prakav ze al ze*); and when reading a given chapter your intention must not only be to understand the totality of the subjects of that chapter, but also to grasp each word that occurs in the course of the speech, even if that word does not belong to the intention of the chapter."

Compare this with what he said earlier, in the Parable of the Well, about the prophetic method:

> "And it is said in the Midrash: 'to what were the words of the Torah to be compared before the advent of Solomon? To a well the waters of which were at a great depth and cool, yet no man could drink of them. Now what did one clever man do? He joined cord with cord and rope with rope (*sipek hevel b'hevel u'mshicha b'mshikha*) and drew them up and drank. Thus did Solomon say one parable after another and speak one word after another until he understood the words of the Torah.'"

Thus the parabolic linking procedure for learning Torah turns out to be the same way to learn the Guide. Linking is a mystical technique. The following passages from Talmudic and Midrashic literature show that the pursuit of knowledge by linking words of Torah produces a mystical state, receptive to prophetic influx.

These texts analogize the process to fire. Like fire, it can be dangerous, especially when pursued by the immature, who cannot sublimate its prurient content. In *Midrash to Song of Songs* (1:53), a passage known to Maimonides, we read:

> "*Thy Neck With Pearls*: when they were *linking* up the words of the Torah with those of the prophets and the prophets with the Writings, the fire flashed around them and the words rejoiced as on the day when they were delivered from Sinai. For was not their original delivery from Mount Sinai with fire, as it says, 'and the mountain burned with fire unto the heart of Heaven' (Deuteronomy 4:11)? Once as Ben Azzai sat and expounded, the fire played round him. They went and told Rabbi Akiva, saying, 'Sir, as Ben Azzai sits and expounds the fire is flashing around him.' Rabbi Akiva went to him and said to him, 'I hear that as you were expounding the fire flashed around you.' He replied, 'that is so.' He said to him. 'Were you perhaps treating of the secrets of the divine chariot (*Maaseh Merkava*)?' 'No,' he replied. 'I was only linking up the words of the Torah with one another and then with the words of the Prophets, and the Prophets with the Writings, and the words rejoiced as when they were delivered from Sinai, and they were sweet as at their original utterance. And were they not originally delivered from Sinai in fire, as it says, 'and the mountain burned with fire?' Once Rabbi Abbahu sat and expounded, and the fire flashed around him. He said, that 'Am I perhaps not linking together the words of the Torah in the proper way?' For Rabbi Levy said: 'Some are able to link together but not to penetrate [to the secrets in the text], and some are able to penetrate but not to link together. 'But I [R. Abbahu said] am an expert both at linking and penetrating.'"

The prophet is an expert at both linking and penetrating. Ben Azzai, the hero of this Midrash, is mentioned In Talmud, *Hagigah* 14b with Rabbi Akiva, Aher (Elisha Ben Abuya), and Ben Zoma as the four who entered *Pardes/*Paradise. Ben Azzai is sometimes (frequently) the Ben Zoma of the parallel accounts in these Aggadas. Ben Zoma (15a) discovered the secret of the upper and lower waters in the work of creation (*Maaseh Bereshit*). Linking and penetrating the parables and mysteries of the Torah caused Ben Azzai/Zoma to be in flame, inflamed with mystic knowledge.

Connect this with one of the mysteries considered by Maimonides (Guide 3:7), the meaning of "*hashmal*" (Ezekiel 1:27, *KJV*: "lightning," *JPS 1917*: "amber"). Prof. Bakan unpacked the mystical/sexual importance of this essentially untranslatable term (*Maimonides on Prophecy* 137, 176, 225, and esp. 275; Zohar II, *Shemot* 203b). Note the *double entry* of a cautionary tale about the term *hashmal* in Talmud, *Hagigah* 13a. The context is the Mishna that established the law against public instruction in certain sensitive topics. That Mishna reads (Talmud, *Hagigah* 11b):

> "The subject of forbidden sexual relations may not be expounded in the presence of three, nor the work of creation (*Maaseh Bereshit*) in the presence of two, nor the work of the chariot (*Maaseh Merkava*) in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge."

The story involved the spontaneous combustion of a child who recognized the metaphorically creative phallic image in the vision of Ezekiel:

> "May one expound the mysteries of *hashmal*? For behold there was once a child who expounded the mysteries of *hashmal* and a fire went forth and consumed him."

The Talmud restates this admonition in similar terms a couple of lines down.

This passage, in both tellings, proclaims the underlying logic of the law of Jewish esoteric instruction. Why does the Mishna restrict Jewish mysticism and forbidden sexual relations to private instruction? So that their similar processes will not shock the immature. A Ben Azzai can link the parables of the Torah together and have flame flash around him; but another, such as the child suddenly realizing the phallic energy of *hashmal*, could be immolated.

Understanding this, Maimonides will next explain his own esoteric method, including his famous Seven Contradictions (see my next essay, Introduction II). His way to comply with Mishna *Hagiga's* law against publicly teaching these dangerous matters was to lightly conceal them in apparently contradictory formulations. This way Maimonides can reveal this lore to the "single virtuous man" though "displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses."

CONCLUSIONS

This has been a "slow reading" of three pages of the Introduction to Guide of the Perplexed to discover what Maimonides meant by his peculiar presentation of three parables, The Well, The Pearl, and The Golden Apple. His stated purpose was to explain the meaning of parables and the use of the parabolic process.

In this investigation, I made considerable use of the classic commentary of R. Abravanel on the Guide. Abravanel recognized that these parables reveal hidden matters, not the normal matters of Jewish law. However, he concluded that the exoteric text of the parable only provides useful political or moral instruction. Because of this focus, he failed to address or even deal with the most important material in the text, the meaning of *maskiyot*, the silver filigree setting of the Golden Apple, and the way it masks its dangerous content.

My conclusions are:

By teaching the meaning of parables using other parables, Maimonides violated his own ground rule against "replacing one individual by another of the same species" (p. 6). This was an explicit and obvious contradiction. His purpose was to signal that we must read his presentation at a deeper level. It was no conventional account of a mere literary device.

Neither was it a philosophical presentation, as nowhere in the passages we have discussed (10 – 14) had he made any mention, open or concealed, exoteric or esoteric, of philosophy, or of Plato or Aristotle. The only exception is his discussion of matter in his reading of the Married Harlot, where Maimonides said that:

> "All the hindrances keeping man from his ultimate perfection, every deficiency affecting him and every disobedience, come to him from his matter alone. This is the proposition that can be understood from this parable as a whole. I mean that man should not follow his bestial nature; I mean his matter, for the proximate matter of man is identical with the proximate matter of the other animals."

In context, this no longer looks much like a discussion of philosophical hylomorphism, for it has transformed itself into religious admonition. That is, ultimately, because philosophy reaches the existence but not to the essence of the God, and what God wants from us. It cannot explain this essential mystery, why God created man.

The parable is the key to biblical prophecy. Parables are a system or process for uncovering hidden truths of Torah, those truths that relate to the divine essence, and to divine creativity. Parables appear as part of prophecy because the divinely inspired prophetic imagination has the unique capacity to articulate those messages in parables. Maimonides defines prophecy as an emanation overflowing from God, through the intermediation of the Active Intellect upon the imaginative faculty. R. Abravanel correctly explained that:

> "They are in the form of parables because of the special quality of the recipient, his power of imagination which can materialize the divine emanation...God's message or emanation is clear and pure but its reception by the prophetic recipient can only be through his faculty of imagination, and comprehension of the influx can only be accomplished by the imagination through parables."

According to Maimonides, but not Abravanel, the rational and imaginative faculties can be prepared to receive prophecy. One preparation required for prophecy is a certain form of meditation, initiated by Solomon, by which we link concepts, passages, and parables together to open channels of meaning concealed by the Torah.

The prophet frequently delivers his prophecy in parabolic form. When the prophet does not explain these parables himself, we must search their meaning. The subject of these prophecies is divine creativity (*Maaseh Bereshit*) and divine providence (*Maaseh Merkava*), not Torah laws.

Maimonides based his understanding of parables on passages carefully selected from Midrashic sources, particularly the *Midrash on Song of Songs*, where we saw that the parable is the framework of a public teaching. The linking of different biblical materials is the *procedure* for the attainment of prophecy, while its public articulation is the prophet's *work*. The teaching is the precondition for the prophet's receipt of further inspiration. It is the prerequisite for further prophecy.

Maimonides explained three thoughtfully chosen parables, in ascending order of importance.

The meaning of the Parable of the Well is that the prophet, in his prophetic state, frames and links parables to reach the Torah's revelation.

In the Parable of the Pearl, we find the hidden truth through the illumination of those parables by the light of the rational faculty. We reviewed three possible interpretations. According to *R. Abravanel*, the light of the "worthless" candle in the Parable of the Pearl was a device for teaching the meaning of the parable, which he identified with the public oral teaching. The *Midrashic* understanding of the "worthless" candle in the Parable of the Pearl, developed in several parallel *Midrashim*, is that the truly valuable things for us are inexpensive and ready to hand, if we would comprehend their real purpose. Maimonides agrees with neither the Midrash nor Abravanel in his interpretation of the worthlessness of the parable. He holds that the *pshat*, the simple meaning of the parable, is not important for prophetic purposes. The emphasis is the *sod*, that is, the esoteric. In other words, the Parable of the Pearl directs us to the concealed level of the text, not its surface.

The Parable of the Golden Apple finally brings Maimonides to the esoteric *content* of the biblical parable. The content of the parable is the exposition of the *Maaseh Bereshit* (divine creation) and the *Maaseh Merkava* (divine providence). The Mishna legislated against the exposition of these Torah secrets in public. The reason for the law against the public teaching of Jewish mystical doctrine is that, like the teaching of forbidden sexual relations, to which it is explicitly connected, we cannot allow the public to ascribe carnal attributes to God in His relation to man and the world. Nonetheless, our language cannot comprehend divine creation or ongoing providence except through sexual metaphor, since "we have no intellectual cognition of our bringing somebody other than us into existence except through sexual intercourse." The prophet must recognize the anthropomorphic imagery of the prophetic parable, and then sublimate it as metaphorical of the basic processes of creation and providence. A similar process illuminates all corporeal terms employed by the prophet's imagery. To spotlight this, Maimonides began his Guide with an entire Lexicon interpreting the terms that prophets use in their corporeal imagery (Guide 1:1-45).

The parable, then, is our window through which we glimpse the essence of divine creativity. The ability to do so depends on the prior preparation of the prophetic adept, but is psychologically and morally dangerous to others, particularly the immature.

APPENDIX A

RABBI ABRAVANEL'S COMMENTARY ON PAGES 7a THROUGH 8a OF MAIMONIDES' INTRODUCTION TO THE IBN TIBBON TRANSLATION OF THE GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED.

R. ABRAVANEL'S COMMENTARY ON THE PARABLE OF THE WELL

[R. Abravanel analyzes the Parable of the Well in the context of the few lines in the Guide preceding and succeeding the passage. My translation of his commentary follows, which should open up much of what Maimonides had written. I include pagination and number the lines as in the standard print of the Ibn Tibon Hebrew translation. I have indented Abravanel's commentary without quotation marks, for easy identification. I have reproduced all quotes from the Guide alluded to by Abravanel in full, with quotation marks, from the Pines translation, unless otherwise indicated. Nonetheless, the reader will find the commentary easier to follow by following the Guide text. Biblical translations are from Pines unless otherwise indicated].

> "As I have mentioned parables, we shall make the following introductory remarks: *know* that the key to the understanding of all that the prophets, peace be on them, have said, and to the knowledge of its truth, is an *understanding* of the parables, of their *import*, and the meaning of the *words* occurring in them." (Guide, p. 10)

Page 7a: line 15

Abravanel: "Know," etc.: Maimonides says that while we find in the books of the prophets admonitions and prognostications, "The key to the understanding of all that the prophets, peace be on them, have said," as well as all that they have intended by their words, is in three things (italicized above): a) the simple or apparent *understanding* of the external meaning of the parable (*pshat*); b) the *import* of the parable, that is, its moral, including that which was intended by its moral; and c) the explanation of the *words* of the parable.

This three part approach is the key to understanding the subjects of all the prophecies. For how could you know the truth of what they had written until you knew whether it was to be understood literally or as a parable? Their admonitions and prognostications could not be truly known without knowing if they were intended parabolically.

> "*You know* what God, May He be exalted, has said: 'And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes.'" (Hosea 12:11, Guide page 11)

Consider the words of Maimonides who brings four quotations from the Bible and two from the Midrashic literature. The four biblical quotes are:

> A: "And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes," (Hosea 12:11);
>
> B: "Put forth a riddle and speak a parable," (Ezekiel 17:2);
>
> C: "They say of me, is he not a maker of parables," (Ezekiel 21:5);
>
> D: "To understand a word and a figure, the words of the wise and their dark sayings," (Proverbs 1:6).

Maimonides also quotes Midrash: "To what were the words of the Torah compared before the advent of Solomon? To a well, the waters of which were at great depth and cool..., etc.," (*Midrash on Song of Songs* 1:8). He brings as well a second text from that same Midrash: "Our Rabbis say: 'A man who loses a *sela* or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an *issar*...etc.,'" (*Midrash on Song of Songs* 1:8).

7b:L.2

It is appropriate that you should consider why Maimonides brings all these proof texts. It would have been sufficient to bring one or two of them since: "Upon the evidence of two witnesses...a case is established," (Deut. 19:15, Leeser translation). It is evident that more than one citation is superfluous to ground the three simple points about parables made above. Furthermore, why is each one of the four biblical texts introduced by the phrase "You know" or "You know too [you already know]," but these phrases are not employed to introduce the two Midrashic messages?

I think that Maimonides brought the first passage, "And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes," to demonstrate that prophecy comes from God to the prophets in the form of parables. They are in the form of parables because of the special quality of the recipient, his power of imagination, which can materialize (*sh'yagshim*) the divine emanation. Hosea says, "I have spoken unto the prophets, and I myself have multiplied visions, and by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes." This means, that God's message or emanation (influx) is clear and pure but its reception by the prophetic recipient can only be through his faculty of imagination, and so he can only comprehend the influx by the imagination through parables.

Maimonides brings the second biblical text, "Put forth a riddle and speak a parable," to clarify that when the prophet speaks to the people he speaks in parables. This is a different matter. The teaching that he has received in the form of parables, he now relates to the multitude of the people in parables.

These passages teach only that the prophets use parabolic form several times, but we cannot derive from this that they *always* speak in parables. For this reason, Maimonides brings the third biblical passage, and introduces it saying:

> "And *you know too* that because of the frequent use prophets make of parables, the prophet has said: 'They say of me, Behold, he speaketh but in parables!'" (Ezekiel 21:5, Leeser).

He brings this passage to clarify that prophets characteristically and usually speak in parables.

Maimonides brings the fourth biblical passage, from Proverbs 1:6, saying: "*You know* how Solomon began his book: 'To understand a proverb and a figure; the words of the wise (*divrei hakhamim*—matters of wisdom) and their dark sayings.'"

This passage is brought to further clarify a distinction between the public teaching of the prophets and their parabolic writing. In speaking publicly they employ the manner of the wise man who organizes parables in his speech so that the hearers comprehend him. But in his written parable the prophet does not draw forth the meaning in what he has written, leaving only the apparent meaning (*pshat*) on the surface of the text. Thus Solomon writes: "To understand a proverb and a figure," and from this Solomon teaches that men are commanded to try to understand [by themselves] the meaning of written prophetic parables, just as they are also commanded to understand Torah knowledge, when he says, [you are commanded] "To know wisdom and understand instruction" (*hokhma u'mussar*, Proverbs 1:2).

L.14

Maimonides has brought four biblical passages to clarify four aspects of prophecy to our "knowledge." He therefore introduces each one with phrases "You *know*," and "You *know* too [already]," and "You *know* that he has said," and, "You *know* too that because of the frequent use prophets made make of parables," and "Already you *know* how Solomon began his book (Pines deletes 'already')."

However, Maimonides is still in doubt. He writes of [biblical] prophecy but he tells us to consider the Proverbs of Solomon, which do not mention matters of the Torah nor of the Prophets. These are matters of wisdom and of books of investigation (*hokrim*), and so he does not mention in his words Torah, but rather says, "to [those who] understand a proverb, and a figure; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings."

Therefore, Maimonides needs to quote the Midrash that relates the *Proverbs* of Solomon to the inner secrets of the Torah.

> "And it said in the Midrash: 'To what were the words of the Torah to be compared before the advent of Solomon? To a well the waters of which are at a great depth and cool, yet no man could drink of them. Now what did one clever man do? He joined cord with cord and rope with rope and drew them up and drank. Thus did Solomon say one parable after another and speak one word after another until he understood the meaning of the words of Torah.'" (Midrash to Song of Songs 1:8).

7b: L. 19

Since the words of the sages of the Midrash were a completion of the demonstration of what was to be learned from Solomon's proverbs, Maimonides does not introduce the Midrashic passage with the phrase "And you know too," as he did in the four biblical passages. He writes only "And it said in the Midrash," since the Midrash is brought to complete the demonstration that he began when he brought the passage, "To [those who] understand a proverb, and a figure." (i.e, we needed the Midrash to show that the explanation of the parabolic method requires the Torah, the Prophets, *and* the Solomonic books of wisdom).

Furthermore, since it is undisputed that the Proverbs of Solomon were created for an understanding of Torah, it might seem that they were meant to clarify the commands (*mitzvot*) of the Torah. The Midrash helps to clarify that when Solomon wrote, "To the one who understands a proverb and a figure," he was actually referring not to the elucidation of Torah laws, but rather to fundamentals of Torah and secrets of the Torah.

Therefore, Maimonides says that:

> "I do not think that anyone possessing an unimpaired capacity imagines that the words of Torah referred to here [in the Midrash of the Well] that one contrives to understand through the understanding of parables are ordinances concerning the building of tabernacles, the *lulav* and the law of the four trustees (bailees)."

Observe that Maimonides is very specific in the way he uses the language of the Midrash, "To a well the waters of which were at a great *depth* and cool." He was obviously not talking about legal or ethical matters whose meaning is revealed and straightforward, but rather to the deepest foundations of the Torah. Therefore, Maimonides says: "Rather what this text has in view here is without a doubt, the understanding of obscure [deep] matters," deriving the term "deep, obscure (*amuk*)," from the phrase: "...The waters were at great depth and cool."

R. ABRAVANEL'S COMMENTARY ON THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL

P.7b:L.23

Abravanel: Maimonides brings the second Midrashic passage, with the specific introduction, "About this it has been said (*v'shem neemar*)":

> "Our Rabbis say: A man who loses a *sela* or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an *issar*. In the same way this parable in itself is worth nothing but by means of it you can understand the words of Torah."

He concludes, "This too is clearly what they say" ("This is what they say *also*," *zeh hu davram gam khen*).

This second Midrash, The Pearl, appears to be unnecessary. He indicates this by introducing it with the phrase "It has been said," and not "You know." Even more significant is the fact that the passage concludes, "This is what they say *also*." We see that at the conclusion of the prior Midrash of the Well Maimonides does not say, "This is what they say *also*," but rather, "That is really what they say" (i.e, "This is what they say," *zehu davram*, without the *gam khen*, that is, without the additional "also" brought after the Pearl Midrash. Abravanel interprets the "also" to mean that Maimonides thought the Pearl parable was unnecessary.)

Additionally, Maimonides states:

L.25

> "Now consider the explicit affirmation of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, that the internal meaning of the words of Torah is a pearl,"

This is not a new subject for him. What I think is that Maimonides found juxtaposed these two texts about the Well and the Pearl, close to each other on the Midrash page. The two juxtaposed statements, the first from Rabbi Hanina and the second from "The Rabbis," were not brought to contradict each other. Both parables agree as far as their subjects are concerned (i.e., that parables teach the deepest foundations of Torah).

L.28

Nonetheless, from subsequent statements of Maimonides problems appear in three places [see at line 31] regarding his conclusion that both Midrashic texts were brought to the same purpose.

Therefore, after quoting the first Midrash about the Well, he then brings the Midrash about the Pearl, and by way of introduction states, "[And] about this it has been said; Our Rabbis say," indicating the Rabbis say something that contradicts Maimonides' understanding. Therefore, Maimonides goes to some lengths to explain what each item in the Midrash of the Pearl represents.

L.30

Indeed, this parable only comes to teach and accustom the listener to understand what are purely oral devices employed by teachers, and not sacred texts. The Pearl Parable was not intended to refer to parables appearing in the prophetic books. (This is Abravanel's view. By reducing the "pearl" parables to verbal statements, he hopes to avoid calling biblical texts worthless).

L.31

Observe Maimonides' doubts about the allegory of the Pearl (and its identity of meaning with the allegory of the Well) arise in three places. The *first place* is in the second Midrash where its author says: "... By means of it [the parable], you can understand (literally "see") the words of the Torah," which teaches that the parable is not the words of Torah (*divrei torah*), but rather it is a verbal technique that is employed by the wise to explain the words of Torah without reference to the apparent meaning (*pshat*). Thus, the words of the Midrash: "By means of it you can understand the words of Torah." (In other words, it is "worthless" other than as a device used for teaching Torah; in itself, the parable is not Torah. By contrast, in the Well Parable, the parable was itself sacred.)

L.33

The *second place* causing Maimonides' doubt is the reflective statement in that Pearl Midrash: "In the same way this parable by itself is worth nothing." If it was the Torah's intent to employ a parable, how can we say that it "is worth nothing"? Observe that within the parable is its moral, so how can we say regarding the parable as a whole, if wisdom is found within it, that the parable "is worth nothing"? This would teach that the oral parable a teacher constructs to teach the text is worth nothing. (He means to contrast this result with

the contrary teaching in the Well Parable. The well and the ropes were sacred writ themselves, and not "worth nothing.")

The *third problem* with the Pearl Midrash emerges in Maimonides' short discussion immediately following that Midrash:

> "'Our Rabbis say: A man who loses a *sela* or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an *issar*. In the same way this parable in itself is worth nothing but by means of it you can understand the words of Torah.' This too is literally what they say. Now consider the explicit affirmation of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, that the internal meaning of the words of Torah is a pearl whereas the external meaning of all parables is worth nothing, and their comparison of a subject by its parable's external meaning to a man who let drop a pearl in his house which was dark and full of furniture. Now this pearl is there, but he does not see it, and does not know where it is. It is as though it were no longer in his possession, as it is impossible for him to derive any benefit from it until, as has been mentioned, he lights a lamp—an act to which an understanding of the meaning of the parable corresponds."

L.35

The *third problem*: the Midrash seems to compare the candle and the pearl, respectively, to the parable and the moral of the parable. It is clear that the moral is within the parable. But the pearl is not within the candle. The candle is an external matter (*davar m'hutz*), and man makes it a means to find the pearl which is there. Therefore, the parable is an aid [external to the text] for studying, to understand the words of the text.

L.37

Maimonides understands this interpretation as contradicting his view (that we are discussing prophetic parables, not oral teaching devices). Therefore, he concludes his reading of that Midrash with the formula, "this too [also] is literally what they say," meaning, these are "also" the words of the Sages who spoke in the first Midrash. Just as he is supported in his understanding by the first Midrash, so it is appropriate for him to feel that the apparent contradiction between the two Midrashic texts is not between the sages themselves, for they brought them one after the other in the same place for the same purpose. Because of this, it was necessary to resolve the problem by saying, "Now consider the explicit affirmation of the sages...that the internal meaning of the words of Torah is a pearl" (i.e., it is not "worthless." To the extant the second Midrash says more than this, Abravanel interprets Maimonides to regard it as superfluous).

L.40

He resolves the *first problem*, where the Midrash reads, "but by means of it [the parable] you can understand [see] the words of Torah," that the "words of Torah" are the Torah secrets. The intent of the text, "you can understand [see] the words of Torah," is you see to know and to comprehend what is within them, comparable to the first Midrash: "Thus did Solomon say one parable after another until he understood the meaning of the words of the Torah." (i.e., Maimonides holds that the Well parables and the Pearl parables contain the same thing, that is, the secrets of the Torah. Abravanel disagrees, holding the Pearl parable is an oral explanation external to the text: *davar m'hutz*).

P.8, L.1

He resolves the *second problem* by saying:

> "Now consider the explicit affirmation of the Sages that the internal meaning of the words of the Torah is a pearl, whereas the external meaning of all parables is worth nothing,"

That is, [Maimonides holds that] the *apparent* meaning of the parable is worthless, but not the parable itself and its moral message (i.e., Maimonides holds that the *pshat* is what is worthless in relation to prophecy.

Abravanel holds that the oral educational technique is worthless in relation to the biblical text it seeks to clarify).

L.3

He resolves the *third problem*, with the subsequent statement:

> "And their comparison of the concealment of a subject by its parable's external meaning to a man who let a pearl drop in his house, which was dark and full of furniture. Now this pearl is there [*b'bayit*, in the house] but he does not see it and does not know where it is. It is as though it were no longer in his possession, as it is impossible for him to derive any benefit from it until, as has been mentioned, he lights a lamp—an act to which an understanding of the meaning of the parable corresponds."

Meaning, that one should not err in considering the light comparable to the parable in the Midrashic text, and the pearl comparable to the moral; it is not so. If it were the Sages' intention that the pearl is the moral, then the house must be the parable since the pearl is within the house. Maimonides indicates that the house represents the parable when he says that it is a "house, dark and full of furniture." The darkness of the house is the darkness of human understanding, "full of furniture," all the many things and the many words that confuse the understanding (like the *pshat*, the surface meaning). "Now the pearl is there [*b'bayit*, in the house]," meaning, the moral is contained in the parable, "but he does not see it," meaning, that he does not comprehend it. On this account, the light or the taper mentioned by the Midrash does not represent the parable or its moral, but rather represents the insightful mind, since by means of it the pearl in the house can be found. Therefore, Maimonides says, "Until, as has been mentioned, he lights a lamp, an act to which an understanding of the meaning of the parable corresponds."

L.12

Observe here that the pearl is the moral, the house is the parable, the taper is insight, the light is the mind, as "The candle of God is the soul of man," (Proverbs 20:27). This is how Maimonides explains the Midrash. However, it remains to be seen how he proves this explanation from the words of the Sages in the Midrash.

L.17

The Midrash states, "Our Rabbis say: A man who loses a *sela* or a pearl in [within, *b'toch*] his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an *issar*." Since it says, "within his house" Maimonides holds that the house and not the taper represent the parable [so says Abravanel], because the text should not employ the otherwise surplus phrase, "Within his house." It could just as well be outside the house or in the city street, and so the image would be of losing it in the obscurity of the night.

L.19

And where the Midrash says that the man "can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an *issar*," we see that the taper is a source of light, a means of distinguishing the pearl amidst the clutter of the house, and is therefore comparable to the discerning mind.

L.22

However, after the Rabbis in the Midrash present the Parable of the Pearl they state, "In the same way this parable in itself is worth nothing but by means of it you can understand the words of Torah." They are, in this statement, no longer concerned about the matter of the candle, but only with the moral and the parable, which have been compared, respectively, to the pearl and to the house. Therefore, when they say, "That this parable in itself is worth nothing," the parable is that which has been compared to the house.

L.23

"But by means of it [the parable] you can understand the words of the Torah." That is, the house where the pearl was left protects the pearl, and through the house you can find it; "The internal meaning of the words of

Torah is a pearl," and this meaning is seen in the midst of the words of Torah just as the pearl is seen in the midst of the house.

L.24

This is what Maimonides understands the Midrash to be teaching. I do not agree. I consider the parable the public teaching (*sh'osei ha'melamed*), and that this is what they compared to the candlelight, in the same way Rabbi Hanina compared the ropes and cords which had to be joined together, by means of which the water is drawn from the well. According to this analysis, the approach of Rabbi Hanina and the approach of the Rabbis in the two parts of the Midrash are the same approach. Though Maimonides pursues his explanation, the truth should find its own way.

R. ABRAVANEL'S COMMENTARY ON THE PARABLE OF THE GOLDEN APPLE

[Abravanel continues his analysis only briefly to discuss the Golden Apple. He fails to address this material with anything like the critical attention he brings to the Parables of the Well and the Pearl. This is peculiar, since Maimonides devotes more space to it, and most readers are more impressed by this text than by the two previous texts. His commentary, in full, follows:]

"The Sage has said: a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver," (Proverbs 5:11).

P. 8a:L.26

Abravanel: I do not know why Maimonides brought this further passage for our consideration. He could have bought any of the proverbial statements regarding parables made anywhere in the Bible instead.

Perhaps Maimonides needs it because the rabbis [*sic*] in the Pearl Midrash said, "The external meaning of all parables is worth nothing," but that they really did not think that the parable is in itself worthless. He wants us to observe that the parable always contains political wisdom (*hokhmah mdinit*) and advantageous practice (*u'maasit muelet*), even though with respect to the moral itself the parable is worthless. Therefore, he brings the Proverb of the Apple and its subsequent explanation to disclose the value of the parable itself, which is like silver, and the value of the moral, which is like gold.

Further, Maimonides cites this Proverb to support and establish his explanation of the [Pearl] Midrash. He held that the candle and its light were comparable to the understanding. He is thus compelled to equate the golden apple to the moral; the silver to the parable. Finally the filigree with its apertures, through which the gold inside could be seen, represents the penetration of the understanding mind (Just as the light of the candle was also compared to the understanding).

[That is all that Abravanel says about the Golden Apple. But Abravanel says nothing of the problem of the word *va-yashqef*, which punctures the center of Maimonides' presentation. In the essay, and in Appendix B, I sort out the issues raised by Maimonides with respect to this term, which is the most important term in his account of the Well, the Pearl and the Golden Apple.]

APPENDIX B

THE GOLDEN APPLE: GRAMMATIC AND ETYMOLOGICAL ISSUES

LANGUAGE AS CAMOUFLAGE FOR DANGEROUS CONTENT

Maimonides engages in a curious act of linguistic exegesis, though it is really a type of camouflage. He seems to want to derive "seeing" from "setting." To do this he starts with a Hebrew term (*maskiyot*, משכיות) proceeds to a completely different Hebrew term (*yashkef*, ישקף) develops its Aramaic equivalent (*istekhe*, אסתכי) from Onkelos' ancient Aramaic translation (c.110 C.E.), and reads that back into the original Hebrew term, a four step process. He made it even stranger since in each case the consonantal roots [radicals] of the three words are spelled differently. What is going on?

Maskiyot משׂכיות: "filigree setting." In Hebrew grammar, all words are supposedly built on a three consonant root structure (but see Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar*, Oxford 1974, pp. 100-102, 30:2). It is unclear what the three root letters of *maskiyot* would be. Normally, despite the tradition of tri-literals, we would now regard every letter here beside "S*K" שׂכּ as prefix or suffix (i.e., the "*ma*" and the "*iyot*" of *maskiyot* are prefix and suffix), which leaves only those two root letters. We now accept biliteral roots in Hebrew grammar. Biliterally, "S" and "K(h)," *sekh* שׂכ means either thorn/prick, or booth/enclosure, like a *sukkah*. These meanings combined would probably do nicely for a filigree setting. But but they don't seem to do anything for Maimonides.

Maskiya משׂכיה: the singular of *maskiyot*, is a locket in modern Hebrew, but that probably just comes from this use here in Proverbs 25:11. *Meshekh*, משׁך, "skin," changing the "S" to "Sh" (שׂ > שׁ), yields a term, *meshekh orlah*, Maimonides would know from either his medical or Talmudic studies, denoting the stretching of the skin of the penis to disguise circumcision, but the usage still seems distant. What Maimonides needs is for *maskiyot* to mean some kind of jewelry setting that is minimally transparent, in order that the Golden Apple of the interior can be glimpsed, but only close up.

He turns to the *Targum*, the ancient Aramaic translation of the Bible, which Maimonides sometimes treats as a good source. But the *Targum* on Proverbs 25:11 gives the Aramaic for *maskiyot* as *n'goda* נגודא. According to Jastrow (*Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, 873, which actually cites this passage), *n'goda* is a vessel of beaten metal. Rashi says that *maskiyot* means "covered with silver," and compares it to Exodus 33:22, "… while My Glory passeth by, I will put thee (Moses) in the cleft of the rock, and I (God) will *cover* (*sakoti* שַׂכּתִי) thee with my hand until I have passed by." Maimonides' predecessor Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), also understood *maskiyot* to mean "covered with silver, i.e., that they were hidden with what was suitable for them (*ganuzim im ha-raui lehem*), such that *the word fitly spoken* was an appropriate saying that did *not* reveal some other secret."

Succeeding commentators, like Gersonides (1288-1344), divert from this path, but only because they are following Maimonides' interpretation, rather than Rashi. This includes the 18th century R. David Altschuler, in *Metzudat David*; however, his companion commentary, *Metzudat Zion*, still follows Rashi's interpretation that *maskiyot* is a beaten metal covering, rather than a filigree covering.

So it seems that Maimonides had to go further afield if he felt he needed an etymological basis to define *maskiyot* as a filigree that is minimally transparent at close viewing. So he turns to the word *yashkef*. In fact, he really did not need to do that, since his authority was so great that, as we see, successor commentators followed his interpretation, even as they ignored his etymological and grammatical wanderings. Which is why I suggest that

this exercise was not really about this ostensible purpose, but was rather meant for the purpose of drawing us into the story of Isaac, Rebecca, and Avimelekh.

Yashqef יִשְׁקֹף: this is a good Hebrew word for glance/observe. Maimonides says, "*va-yashqef* …is translated [in Aramaic] *va-istekhe*" (p. 12). *Yashqef* has no orthographic or etymological connection with *maskiyot* מִשְׂכִּיוֹת (or *istekhe*). The "S" in *maskiyot* would have to become "SH" and the "K" (*kaf*) become "Q" (*kuf*), while the "Y" would be either a suffix or a placeholder for a suppressed radical. But the "F" is completely new. By etymological transfer, the root *shaqaf* is a doorway/window, *that which* we look through. Thus, the root not only implies seeing, but also that through which we see, approaching the notion of a filigreed aperture. Maimonides got this far, but why does this continue to interest him? And why does he next bring its Aramaic equivalent *istekhe* (from Genesis rather than Proverbs) ?

Istekhe אסתכי: this is the reflexive form of the Aramaic *sekha* or *sekhi* (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 989), meaning: to look out. Except for the change from the Hebrew letter *sin* to the letter *samekh* (שׂ > ס , two different letters that sound "S"), it is similar to the Hebrew root of *maskiyot*, filigree, S*K (In the Aramaic *istekhe*, the "T" coming between the "S" and the "Kh" is part of the reflexive prefix, and ignored in radical diagramming). Pines and Schwarz read Maimonides as taking the similarity of the radicals to derive the Aramaic *va-istekhe* from the Hebrew *maskiyot*. But the apparent similarity of the roots of (Heb.) *maskiyot* and (Aram.) *istekhe* is a long way to go for the payoff of reading *maskiyot* to mean a filigreed setting that can be seen through. After all, you are supposed to be able to see through the thatched roof of (Heb.) *sukkah* (which does share the root S*K with *maskiyot*). Maimonides could have just asserted that this was the *pshat* literal meaning of *maskiyot*, and left it at that. The passage "apples of gold in settings of silver" is broad enough to support such a reading, which was exactly the way that Gersonides read it, and without the grammatical sideshow. But that is precisely *not* what Maimonides intended. What is critical for him is the *location* of Onkelos' linkage of *va-istekhe* to *va-yashqef*, not the linkage itself. Maimonides was not preparing an etymology of *maskiyot*, but, rather, a pointer to a concealed meaning. Precisely like Ibn Ezra, *a word fitly spoken* is a suitable/appropriate (*raui*) locution designed to conceal a secret, a light camouflage.

Maimonides provides no citations for the location of his many biblical references, but his commentators do (including Pines, Schwartz, Kafiḥ), pointing us to Genesis 26:8, where we find *yashqef* coupled with Onkelos' Aramaic translation *istekhe* belabored by Maimonides. The real interest in that passage is its sexual content, which stands in for the incomprehensible processes of divine creativity. His purpose, as I explained in the essay, is to cause us to look for the explosive content concealed (and sublimated) by the prophetic parable.