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James A. Diamond
University of Waterloo

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THE INEXHAUSTIBLE METAPHOR OF LIGHT: ILLUMINATING THE FAULT LINES BETWEEN CRESCAS AND MAIMONIDES

JAMES A. DIAMOND

University of Waterloo

Introduction:

What Is Sight for Maimonides Is Blindness for Crescas

Moses Maimonides's (1138-1205) *Guide of the Perplexed*, and his later philosophical and theological arch-nemesis Hasdai Crescas's (circa 1340-1412) *Light of the Lord*, are works of philosophical theology intended in a core sense as primers on how to properly understand God's revealed word. It comes as no surprise, then, that much of both treatises are concerned with exegesis of that word as expressed in the Hebrew Bible and as later filtered through the lens of the rabbinic midrashic tradition. Maimonides explicitly informs his audience of this aim, which is primarily to "explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in the books of prophecy," and secondarily, to explicate "very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets but not explicitly identified as such."¹ In fact

¹ *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 5-6, hereinafter GP.

this exegetical aim is so overarching that Maimonides instructs his readers to examine those chapters devoid of any biblical references either as ancillary to those that do contain them, or as obliquely hinting at some biblical term intentionally suppressed in the interim.²

Correspondingly, Crescas aims at undermining the Aristotelian philosophical framework within which Maimonides conducts his exegesis, seeking to liberate Judaism's scriptures from the strictly rationalist constraints with which Maimonides shackled them. As a result, as will be seen, Crescas recalibrates scripture more in line with traditional rabbinic interpretations on fundamental issues such as the nature of God, providence, prophecy, and Israel's chosenness.

Eliezer Schweid encapsulates their opposition in a paradoxical contrast which pits Crescas's "innovative and revolutionary stance in philosophy stemm[ing] from his extreme conservatism in religious thought" against Maimonides's "conservatism in philosophy and extraordinary radicalism in religious thought."³ For both thinkers it is God that is the ultimate unknowable object, but for Maimonides he is primarily an object of knowledge which considers love conditional and proportionate to knowledge. For Crescas, on the other hand, God is an object and subject of love where the measure of that love encompasses far more than knowledge.⁴

² Ibid., 10.

³ See his chapter on Crescas in *Our Great Philosophers: Jewish Philosophy in the Middle-Ages*, (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 1999), 362 [Hebrew]; English trans. Leonard Levin, *The Classic Jewish Philosophers: From Saadia Through the Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁴ As with everything in Maimonides's oeuvre there is a not unexpected debate whether Maimonides considered love of God to be wholly identical with knowledge or proportional to it. Suffice it to state for the purposes of this study that I am in complete agreement with Howard Kreisel's finding of an "overall consistency" between the *Guide* and the *Mishneh Torah* on this subject. See his "Love and Fear of God in Maimonides's Thought," *Daat* 37 (1996): 127-151 [Hebrew], reprinted in English in his *Maimonides's Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 225-266, at 264. See also my own detailed analysis in "Maimonides on Maimonides: Loving God Rabbinically and Philosophically," in *Maimonides and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 26-68. For critical sources regarding love in Maimonides's thought, see *Laws of Repentance 10:6 in Mishneh Torah*, ed. Shabse Frankel, 7 vols. (Jerusalem: Ohel

Probing the depths of Maimonides's and Crescas's symbolic discourse is not a matter of mere literary flourish but of substantive meaning itself. Metaphor and allegory are the primary instruments both for aligning scriptural language with philosophy and for articulating subject matter that transcends the limits of human capacity.⁵ What James Notopoulos argued regarding symbolism in Plato, especially the symbolism of light, is equally apt for these two seminal Jewish medieval thinkers:

When direct knowledge is not possible, the philosopher proceeds with the aid of symbolism...Symbolism is inherent in the very nature of thought... Symbolism in Plato is not merely the expression of a poet who gets the better of the philosopher but the result of the limitations of the human mind and its compromise with probability. As Plato puts it, if unable to see the sun directly, it is wise for one to see it first through its reflections in the world of nature.⁶

Thus, in what follows, I focus on light as a root metaphor which illuminates a broad array of the challenges Crescas mounts against Maimonides.

Their different uses of light imagery capture the core issues informing the opposition between Maimonides and Crescas across the entire theological spectrum. Light for Maimonides conveys intellectual *enlightenment*, but the metaphor doesn't resonate if it is isolated from its exegetical biblical anchor. A prime example is the teasing of a

Yosef, 1975-2001); GP I:39, III:28, III:51. For the term *chesheq*, that Maimonides designates for a degree of love reached that is of passionate intensity see Steven Harvey, "The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judaeo-Arabic: Thought and Some Remarks on the Judaeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides," in *Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, ed. Norman Golb (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publications, 1997), 175-196.

⁵ See Mordecai Cohen's excellent study, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor: From Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides to David Kimhi*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 4, where he explores in great detail his assessment that "Maimonides made metaphor the exegetical focus of his Guide of the Perplexed."

⁶ See "The Symbolism of the Sun and Light in the Republic of Plato. I," *Classical Philology* 39, no. 3 (1944): 163-172, at 163-164. For a good overview of current theories regarding the use of metaphor in religious language, see Victoria S. Harrison, "Metaphor, Religious Language, and Religious Experience," *Sophia* 46, (2007): 127-145.

philosophical axiom out of a verse from the Psalms: “In Thy light do we see light, (Ps. 36:10) that through the overflow of the intellect that has overflowed from Thee, we intellectually cognize, and consequently we receive correct guidance, we draw inferences, and we apprehend the intellect.”⁷ Light as intellect locates the nexus between God and man in the various exercises of the mind (cognition, guidance, inference, apprehension) identified with reason and philosophical demonstration.⁸

Maimonides sets out to resolve a “perplexity”—perceived as an either/or choice between the apparently conflicting truths of the Torah and those of philosophical demonstration—by reconciling the two. Crescas, on the other hand plays on the Hebrew root for “perplexed” to push back against Maimonides’s use of light to indicate degrees of perplexity, refracting its rays in an entirely different direction. Crescas’s *Light of the Lord* targets this Maimonidean bond between man and God in order to restore the Torah’s primacy over philosophy. Crescas transforms that intersecting light to “show all the nations that that which removes perplexity (*mevuchah*) in matters of faith, and which lights up all the darkness, is the Torah alone.”⁹ For Maimonides, then, reason is the ultimate arbiter of truth and, ipso facto, of the Torah’s meaning; for Crescas, reason is subordinate to the supra-rational truth of the Torah,

⁷ GP II:12, 280.

⁸ For the centrality of light as a metaphor in medieval Christianity and Aquinas, see David Whidden, “Light and Language,” in *Christ the Light: The Theology of Light and Illumination in Thomas Aquinas* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2014).

⁹ *Light of the Lord*, trans. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24, hereinafter LL. Unless otherwise noted, this is the English translation I cite, and the Hebrew edition *Or Hashem*, ed. Rabbin Shlomo Fisher (Jerusalem, 1990), 9, hereinafter OH. Here I replaced “confusion” with “perplexity” in the English since I believe Crescas consciously chose that term (*mevucha*) to subvert Maimonides’s use of it as translated by Samuel ibn Tibbon’s translation (*navuch*). As Michael Schwartz notes in his survey of the *Guide’s* Hebrew translations, Tibbon “crafted a Hebrew philosophical terminology that served Hebrew writers in the subsequent generations such as Crescas in his *Light of the Lord*.” See his Hebrew translation of the *Guide*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), 744-745. On the influence of Tibbon’s translation see Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of the Dalalat al Ha’ irin into the Moreh ha-Neukhim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007) [Hebrew].

which alone resolves a faith that is “perplexed.” Maimonides condescends literal understandings of rabbinic traditions that fly in the face of science, since they belie Deuteronomy’s description of Israel in the opinion of other nations as a “wise and discerning people.”¹⁰ Crescas thus intends on proving that it is precisely the Torah alone that shows “all the nations” where the ultimate resolution of perplexity resides.

Crescas’s and Maimonides’s symbolic choices of light are not haphazard. Light as a metaphor for truth is one of the images that most strikingly captures the impassable divide between them. Hans Blumenberg, in his brilliant study of light’s adaptations over the course of the history of philosophy, notes its profound versatility: “light is the absolute power of Being which reveals the paltriness of the dark, which can no longer exist once light has come into existence. Light is intrusive; in its abundance it creates the overwhelming conspicuous clarity with which the true ‘comes forth.’”¹¹ The questions are what is the source of that light, or from where does truth ultimately “come forth,” and how does one emerge from the darkness of ignorance into the light of truth.

Maimonides incorporates into his philosophical exegesis Greek notions of intellect and knowledge as light, while Crescas seeks to repatriate light to its origins in God and his revelation.¹² Crescas proclaims himself a pioneer in refuting “the proofs of the Greek [Aristotle] who

¹⁰ See Maimonides’s introduction to *Pereq Heleq* in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, in *Haqdamot HaRambam laMishnah*, ed. Y. Shilat, (Jerusalem: Hotza’at Shilat, 1992), 133 [Hebrew].

¹¹ “Light as a Metaphor for Truth at the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Levin (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1993), 30-62, at 31.

¹² Maimonides draws on the Greek penchant for this symbol. According to James McEvoy, “As a symbol for human knowledge, the interplay of light and sight is omnipresent in Greek intellectual culture and all its heirs” (“The Metaphysics of Light in the Middle Ages,” *Philosophical Studies* 26 [1978]: 126-145, at 126). For Crescas on the other hand, “no matter how much [he] might have been driven in his investigations by a love for science, it was this larger project of freeing rabbinic Judaism from Aristotle that motivated this work” (James T. Robinson, “Hasdai Crescas and Anti-Aristotelianism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 391-414, at 408.

darkened the eyes of Israel in our times.”¹³ This image specifically targets Maimonides’s philosophical project of the *Guide*, which is bracketed by precisely the image of light that “opens the eyes of the blind.” Adam’s primal sin, an allegory for intellectual decline, consisted of a distraction from the proper subject of philosophy as universal truths, shifting instead to the subjective fluctuating knowledge of “generally accepted things.”¹⁴ Thus, the biblical description of the primal couple’s cognitive decline as visual enhancement (“and their eyes were opened” [Gen. 3:7]) ironically signifies an intellectual blindness that diverted their minds away from reasoned truth. Strategically, Maimonides cites an Isaianic proof-text (“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened” [35:5]) to support the metaphorical meaning of “opening eyes” as “uncovering mental vision,” since that verse alludes precisely to the antidote to Adam’s fall. That very verse crowns the end of the *Guide*, which Maimonides deems will be the result of “grasp[ing] all the intentions I have included therein.” The entire *Guide*, then, charts a journey from Adam’s compromised vision to regaining visual acuity, signposted largely by Aristotelian science and logic.¹⁵ In sum, what is sight for Maimonides is blindness for Crescas.

¹³ LL, 14; OH, 8. It is important to note that light imagery also has its roots in ancient Greek science. As Hava Tirosh-Samuelson observes, “The visual understanding of knowledge which can be traced to the Greek philosophers, is based on a scientific theory of light and vision.” (“Kabbalah and Science in the Middle Ages: Preliminary Remarks,” in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 476-510, at 507. See also Eyal Meiron, “Mathematical and Physical Optics in Medieval Jewish Scientific Thought,” *Idem*, 172-181.

¹⁴ The literature on this is voluminous, but for one insightful classic study see Lawrence V. Berman, “Maimonides on the Fall of Man,” *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 1-15.

¹⁵ Though at times Maimonides distinguishes between an Aristotelian position and that of the Mosaic Law, there are those who argue that while he might explicitly reject the former and favor the latter, closer attentive reading reveals an esoteric position that in fact ends up endorsing the Aristotelian position. This has been hotly debated, most notably on the issue of creation and which opinion Maimonides does actually endorse as he formulates them in GP II:13. Again, there are numerous treatments of this subject, but for the purposes of my argument here I concur with Warren Zev Harvey that Maimonides basically identifies with the Aristotelian position in his “A Third Approach to Maimonides’s Cosmology Prophology Puzzle,” *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 287-301.

The Case of Image (Tzelem) of God: The Light of Mitzvot vs the Light of Reason

Much turns on the assorted roles intellect, revelation, and divine commandments play in their theological frameworks, all of which are, as will be seen, also symbolized by light. Thus, a brief discussion of their initial lexicographic dispute regarding the term *tzelem* (image) lays the exegetical groundwork for Crescas's lightning assault on Maimonides. Maimonides dedicates his very first lexicographical chapter to that biblical term, defining it as "the true reality" of a human being, "that from which human apprehension derives." Therefore, the phrase "in His image and likeness" (Gen 1:27) denotes "the divine intellect conjoined in man."¹⁶ Crescas thus also launches his treatise attacking Maimonidean rationalism by redefining the term "image" (*tzelem*). What is essential for Crescas is the strange pagan sounding plural in the phrasing "Let us make man in our image," a peculiarity Maimonides ignores in his inaugural definition of *tzelem*:

He made for them [angels] a *seal of the sum* (Ezek 28:12). The Lord God fashioned the human being in the likeness of all His creatures- and the Lord Himself at their head- as God said, "Let us...". God was joined in this effort by the totality of existent beings, in order that the human being bear the imprint of all parts of existence; and just as all parts of existence are under the governance of the Lord, so is the human being under the governance of his intellect. It is for this reason that our predecessors, peace be upon them, called him a 'microcosm' (*olam qatan*) because God made him a miniature imprint and seal on which all His creatures are engraved.¹⁷

¹⁶ GP I:1, 22-23. See also consistently Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*, Yesodei HaTorah 4:8.

¹⁷ LL,16-17; OH, 1-2. Here I believe the phrase "seal of the sum" as Warren Zev Harvey translates is more appropriate than LL's "seal of perfection." See his dissertation, *Hasdai Crescas's Critique of the Theory of the Acquired Intellect* (Columbia University, 1973). Seth (Avi) Kadish similarly poses this passage in contradistinction to Maimonides but in a different context. See "Jewish Dogma after Maimonides: Semantics or Substance?" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 86 (2015): 195-263, at 243-245. For "man as a microcosm" (*olam qatan*), see *Tanhuma*, Piqudei 3. Abraham ibn Ezra is wont to cite this phrase numerous times in his biblical commentary. See especially his comment on Zechariah 12:1.

Crescas draws on previous interpretations that understand the plural to signify a joint enterprise in the creation of a hybrid creature between God and material existence, or the upper and the lower realms, comprised of both spiritual/abstract and material dimensions.¹⁸ As a result, he widens Maimonides's definition of *tzelem* which restricts it to the intellect, or the human form, to embrace all of existence including the material. In doing so, Crescas also expands the means of cultivating one's form in order to achieve perfection and immortality beyond the intellect, including deeds that are performed with the body. Importantly, in the case of Jews, that expansion of *tzelem's* semantic parameters infuses commandments with some quality beyond practical and theoretical knowledge, since "it was necessary, when the kindness of the blessed and Exalted One determined to perfect us, the congregation of the community of Israel, that He increase our acts."¹⁹ Commandments possess special properties which imbue their performance or transgression. They are in and of themselves beneficial or detrimental, rather than simply functional instruments for attaining benefits such as correct opinions. As Crescas states, "God vested the commandments with special properties, like those of drugs. Just as drugs work because of their quality and in themselves, so too do the commandments of the Torah."²⁰

¹⁸ See for example Nahmanides's commentary on Gen. 1:26.

¹⁹ LL, 18; OH, 2. See also the extended discussion on the true end of the Torah and existence in II.VI.1-3. This is why Crescas planned a competing legal code to Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* called *Lamp of the Lord*, since "God, through the infinite outpouring of divine beneficence, provided the Jews with a path toward human perfection that was to result in communion with God and the obtainment of immortality. The path is composed of multiple commandments that God transmitted to the Jewish people through revelation to Moses and the subsequent interpretive and legislative efforts of the sages. Thus, since immortality and perfection are to be achieved through the practice of commandments, the study of Torah must possess a practical orientation" (Ari Ackerman, "Hasdai Crescas on the Philosophic Foundation of Codification," *AJS Review* 37, no. 2 (2013): 315-331, at 317).

²⁰ See LL, 324; OH, 376. See for example Eliezer Ben Porat who sums up Crescas's philosophy of mitzvot, even those which promote beliefs, as "beliefs are not maintained simply as abstract ideas, but must be expressed in the world of deed...and commandments are the practical expression of those beliefs" ("Notes on Crescas's Discussion of 'Beliefs which are

The most important dimension of the Torah from a qualitative point of view “concerns neither views nor deeds absolutely,” but rather “love of God and true fear of Him.”²¹ The Torah “illuminated” this idea that love “is distinct from intellection.”²² Commandments perfect that love, as prescribed by the verse to love God “with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 10:12). That very same verse conveys for Maimonides the contrary notion that knowledge exhausts the meaning of love of God.²³ Light uniquely captures this as well, but what ignites it for Maimonides is precisely intellection. As he states toward the end of the *Guide*, “he who has no intellectual cognition at all of God is like one who is in darkness and has never seen the light...He who apprehends and advances with his whole being toward the object of his apprehension, is like one who is in the pure light of the sun.”²⁴ Like Plato’s allegory of the cave, as Blumenberg puts it, “the drama of truth is not a cosmic *agon* between light and darkness, but rather only a process of man’s withdrawing himself or handing himself over—a matter thus of *paideia*.”²⁵

Crescas suggestively borrows terms that bear kabbalistic nuances in formulating his definition of *tzelem*. First is “seal of the sum,” adopted from Ezek. 28:12, which Bahya ben Asher also cites, signifying a related sense of man as the apex of creation, “the completion of the creation and the denouement of everything, the seal of the sum.”²⁶ Zev Harvey has demonstrated in detail the kabbalistic adoption of this phrase prior to Crescas, beginning with Isaac the Blind’s commentary to *Sefer Yetzirah*, concluding that “its relation to the term ‘in our image’ is exclusive to

Related to Special Mitzvot,” *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* 63 [2008]: 75-86 [Hebrew], 85).

²¹ LL, 214-215; OH, 238.

²² LL, 220; OH, 244.

²³ See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 10:6. See my comments in footnote 5 regarding the debate whether Maimonides subscribed to an identity between love and knowledge.

²⁴ GP III:51, 625.

²⁵ *Light as a Metaphor for Truth*, supra, 32.

²⁶ Commentary on Gen. 1:3.

kabbalistic literature.²⁷ Related to this notion is man as a microcosm (*olam qatan*), which views humanity as an embodiment of the sefirot and its consequence in the power to exert influence on the upper and lower worlds. As Gershom Scholem notes, it “is a doctrine which found universal acceptance among the kabbalists.”²⁸ Maimonides also references that same view of man as a microcosm (*olam qatan*), but he rests it entirely on human beings’ unique possession of the “rational faculty.”²⁹ In the same way that Maimonides forged the exercise of the intellect as the bridge between man and God in his definition of *tzelem*, so does he forge that same bridge with the microcosm metaphor out of the one to one correspondence between intellect governing man and God governing the universe. Crescas, however, shifts its meaning toward another bridge that, though requiring the exercise of intellect, is not exhausted by it as it is for Maimonides.

By incorporating these kabbalistically reverberating terms in apposition to his analogy between the intellect’s governance of human existence and God’s governance of all existence, Crescas starkly distinguishes himself from Maimonides’s seemingly identical “man as microcosm” analogy while still preserving his commitment to intellectual rigor. Though resorting to kabbalistically nuanced terms may not reflect Crescas’s endorsement of its “mythic framework, [that] see[s] the *mitzvot* as the link which unites the divine and human realms,”³⁰ it does bear its imprint on the notion of relationship with God cultivated through *mitzvot*. Indeed, the very titles of his treatise, *Light of the Lord*, and its uncompleted segment, *Lamp of the Lord*, may very well have been

²⁷ See Harvey’s thorough canvassing of all the kabbalistic sources in “Kabbalistic Elements in Crescas’s *Light of the Lord*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1, no. 2 (1982): 75-109, esp. 97-101.

²⁸ See *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1974), 153. For just two of many illustrations, see Bahya ben Asher on Gen. 1:27 and Menahem Recanati’s commentary on Gen. 1:26. However, as Harvey points out, this phrase appears in both the mystical and philosophical traditions.

²⁹ GP I:72, 190.

³⁰ See Morris M. Fierstein, “God’s ‘Need for the Commandments’ in Medieval Kabbalah,” *Conservative Judaism* 36, vol. 1 (1982): 45-59.

influenced by Jewish mysticism's appropriation of light as a central image, as reflected in two of its major works which Crescas cites: the *Book of Illumination (Bahir)* and the *Book of Radiancy (Zohar)*. As Elliot Wolfson demonstrates, "the ontology of light gives shape to and generates the mystic experience which is essentially a state or process of illumination."³¹ Likewise, for Crescas, light rises from mere metaphor to an ontology of light which gives shape to the performance of commandments and deepens the perceptions of beliefs. That is why in this very same paragraph Crescas veers off from the universal, the creation of human beings, to the particular case of Jews and their special bond with God. Maimonides's equation of *tzelem* with intellect, and his assertion that it is the intellect which individuates man as microcosm—"because of that which is a proprium of man only, namely the rational faculty"³²—bears directly on exercising intellect, that which singles out some men from others as a subject of divine providence.³³ On this basis there can be no distinction between Jews and non-Jews, since all share in that feature common to humankind. Crescas's far more expansive notion of *tzelem*, layered with its kabbalistic associations, opens the door to variegated levels of divine providence that are contingent on God's grace regardless of human achievement. Thus, while "God was provident over all from the realm of His abode," he exercised further His "kindness" and "goodness" "and chose the house of Jacob in whose midst to rest His glory, (Ps. 85:10) that they might love and be in awe of Him, serve Him and cleave unto Him."³⁴

³¹ See *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 270-288, at 270, and "Hermeneutics of Light in Medieval Kabbalah," in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiancy and Religious Experience*, ed., Matthew Kapstein, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 105-118.

³² GP I:72, 190.

³³ See GP I:17.

³⁴ LL, 17; OH, 2. This anticipates Crescas's discussion in II.II of Israel the nation and Israel the land being the subjects of special divine providence. See also LL, 229, OH 256, which cites Deut. 32:9 that resonates with Ps. 85:10 cited in the Introduction: "For the portion of the Lord is His people, Jacob the lot of His inheritance." See also Bleich, J. D., "Providence in the Philosophy of Hasdai Crescas and Josef Albo," in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law*,

Contrapuntal Epigraphs: Lighting the Path

The exegetical duel between the two thinkers emerges even before the substantive disagreement in their choice of epigraphs to inaugurate their respective treatises, which cast each as a guide along a ‘path’ or a ‘way’ that heretofore has been obstructed or concealed. Maimonides opens with a weave of biblical allusions, paraphrasing biblical terminology rather than direct verbatim citations into a new poem. It begins, “My knowledge goes forth to point out the way,” and ends with a designation of that “way” as the “Way of Holiness.” As Michael Schwartz presciently notes, the rare grammatical form of “my knowledge” (*d’y*) occurs only four times in the Bible, all in the book of Job and all expressed by the speaker Elihu. In his chapters dedicated to Job, Maimonides singles Elihu out from the other speakers as the bearer of an esoteric teaching regarding divine providence, that is, the book of Job’s hidden intent.³⁵ Only the rare discerning eye can penetrate it. This epigraph thus sets the tone for his own treatise: a creative esoteric reinvention of scripture divulging its hidden philosophical subtext only to those Maimonides identifies as philosophically equipped. It is all inspired by “my knowledge,” that is, Maimonides’s own prodigious mastery of both Judaism’s religious corpus and what was then current philosophy and science.

Maimonides christens the resulting new path he plans for his *Guide* to pave as “Holiness” which, in the *Guide*’s lexicography, signifies the opposite of “impure” (*tum’ah*). Since impurity connotes disobedience, holiness is a function of obedience and fulfillment of “commandments concerning action or opinion.”³⁶ Isaiah’s vision of this way (35:8), from which Maimonides excerpts, forecasts some utopian highway completely

Thought, and History. Presented to Dr Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday, eds. Y. Elman and J. S. Gurok (New York: Michael Sharf Publication Trust of the Yeshiva University Press, 1997), 311–358. However, Ari Ackerman has complicated this position by demonstrating transformations over the course of editorial revisions in “The Composition of the Section on Divine Providence in Hasdai Crescas’s *Or HaShem*,” *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* 32/33 (1993): xxxvii–xlv.

³⁵ GP III:23, 495. See Schwartz, 767.

³⁶ GP III:47, 595–596; III:33, 533.

insulated from the dangers posed both by the human and animal kingdoms: “No one unclean shall pass over it...no lion shall be there, no ferocious beast shall set foot on it” (Isa. 35:8-9). Analogously, once the *Guide’s* readers assimilate its teachings, they will enjoy a life dedicated to Judaism’s “foundations of the Law,” protected from the pervasive literal understandings of biblical narratives and commandments borne by Jewish compatriots who adhere only to the “externals of the Law.” The *Guide’s* intended audience will never cross paths with those who mine only the “silver,” “the externals of the Law” since the *Guide* maps out its own private philosophical walkway overlaid with the “gold” of scriptural commandments and narratives. The latter “contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is,”³⁷ while “the externals of the law” “contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies.”³⁸

Crescas, correspondingly, opens his *Light of the Lord* with five verses, four of which focus on a path or a way (*netiv, derekh, orach*) which consciously reroutes and repaves the path Maimonides set for his *Guide*. Rather than Maimonides’s own “knowledge” as the path’s guide, it is God’s word addressed as a “light unto my path” (Ps. 119:105). “Torah” and its “commandments” are the “light and lamp,” and the “reproaches of ethics (*musar*) are the path of life” (Prov 6:22). Maimonides demands of his disciples “Know,” because he categorically asserts toward the end of the *Guide* that a biblical exhortation “to know” (*deah*) “always refers to intellectual apprehension,”³⁹ and the “bond between you and Him [God]—is the intellect.”⁴⁰ Crescas, on the other hand, shifts the orientation from intellect to God, commandments, and Torah. Rather than directed toward his disciples, Crescas’s epigraph takes the form of a number of

³⁷ GP, Introduction, 12.

³⁸ See this dichotomy that plagues Maimonides’s authentically perplexed audience in GP, Introduction, 4-5.

³⁹ GP III:51, 621.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 620.

pleas to God: “teach me, oh Lord, Your way” (Ps. 86:11), and “You will make known to me the path of life” (Ps 16:11).⁴¹

This contrapuntal epigraph critically distinguishes Crescas immediately from Maimonides’s position that natural intellectual perfection is the means to acquire the highest forms of knowledge of the ultimate truths in the world, including prophetic knowledge. For the purposes of this discussion it is sufficient to note that Maimonides considers it an impossibility to attain prophecy without all the methodical intellectual preparation required of a philosopher. Though it is debatable whether the prophet can gain some kind of intellection unattainable by the philosopher, for all intents and purposes any successful prophet is tantamount at the very least to an accomplished philosopher who *apprehends* rather than is *endowed* with knowledge.⁴² Crescas, on the other hand, in agreement with Judah Halevi, asserts that God can trigger prophetic cognition in matters of which a person was previously ignorant, “even without the premises that entail them.”⁴³ Crescas reorients the source of Maimonides’s self-acquired prophetic rank of supreme intellectual cognition to Divine endowment and religious performance, “for the true worship and love through which this rank [prophecy] is attained is perfected essentially through the Torah and the commandments.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ In the body of his treatise, when refuting Maimonides’s negative theology which vacates God of attributes, Crescas seems to also take aim at what Maimonides describes as his “way of Holiness.” He justifies his harsh opposition as a re-sanctification of God’s name which Maimonides had in fact desecrated, citing a rabbinic obligation to forego deference for a rabbi when desecration of the name (*chilul hashem*) is at stake. See LL, 110; OH, 110, citing b. Berakhot 19b.

⁴² I acknowledge that this issue is hotly debated in the secondary literature. The engagements with and studies on Maimonides’s view of prophecy are vast. For example, see Jacob Dienstag’s “Maimonides and Prophecy—Bibliography,” *Daat* 37 (1996):193–228, which tabulates 290 entries for the literature up until 25 years ago.

⁴³ LL, 169; OH, 183. See also Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2001), 443–467. For a concise summary of the differences between Crescas and Maimonides on prophecy, see Warren Zev Harvey, *Rabbi Hisdai Crescas* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2010), 68–75 [Hebrew].

⁴⁴ LL, 188; OH, 205.

An Enlightened Abraham: The Light of Prophecy vs. the Light of Reason

The combination of 'light' and 'paths' or 'ways' imagery as metaphors for their radically divergent views on the acquisition of knowledge find their way into the two thinkers' opposing constructs of the patriarch Abraham. For Crescas, he is the founder of Judaism and the nation of Israel, and for Maimonides, he is the founder, or rediscoverer, of monotheism. Both seize on the following midrashic parable which depicts Abraham "walking along a way" and, through observing an "illuminated castle," discovering the existence of one God that governs the world:

The Lord said to Abram: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee" [Genesis 12:1] This may be compared by way of parable to someone who was walking on the way from place to place, and saw a *birah doleqet* [a castle "illuminated" or "afire"]. He said, "Could you say this castle has no governor [*manhig*]?" The master of the castle looked down upon him, and said to him, "I am the master of the castle!" So Abraham our father would say, "Could you say this world has no Governor?!" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked down upon him, and said to him, "I am the Master of the world!"⁴⁵

Suffice it for the purposes of this paper to state that Maimonides adapts its imagery to reconstruct the biblical Abraham as a philosopher whose "walking along the way" translates into a decades long, deep intellectual reflection of "wandering about in his mind...day and night." As a result, he arrives at the existence of a governor (*manhig*) of the world by observing the "illuminated castle." This analogy translates into a proof for God's existence by observing the stars and the "perpetual motion of the celestial bodies."⁴⁶ Crescas subverts Maimonides's Abrahamic

⁴⁵ See Warren Zev Harvey's short study dedicated to their respective interpretations of this midrashic parable, "Maimonides, Crescas, and the Parable of the Castle," in *Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought*, ed. Rachel Haliva (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 167-76.

⁴⁶ See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1:3 and its parallel in GP II:19, 310. Though Harvey contends that Maimonides remained esoterically skeptical about the validity of this

construct by reimagining its symbolic referents. He transforms Abraham from a philosopher who strives toward the truth, which he acquires solely by his own initiatives, into a prophet who similarly strives but is ultimately dependent on divine enlightenment for that truth: "By this they meant that, even though Abraham was inclined to the truth (*netiyah el ha'emet*), he was not free of all doubt (*safeq*) until God caused His light to flow (*hishpiah oro*) onto him. This is prophecy."⁴⁷ Crescas's Abraham must in the end rely on a supra-rational knowledge provided by God via divine will, revelation, and prophecy. The stars illumine Maimonides's "way" by provoking analytic reasoning that stops at the limits of the human intellect, while Crescas's "way" is ultimately illuminated by divine will as source of all light that transcends human intellectual capacity.

Israel's Election: Subverting Maimonides's Hierarchy of Light

What anticipates Crescas's entire critique of Maimonides's thoroughgoing rationalism is his early overturning of Maimonides's hierarchy of light. This hierarchy of light grades people in terms of its length and intensity, ascending from a darkness that does not even qualify as a level of existence to its peak of "unceasing light." By dint of its biblical proof-text, the latter alludes to Moses, having achieved the very limits of human intellectual capacity. The former represents the nameless masses who wander aimlessly with no awareness of their bearings, whom the Psalmist identifies as those who "do not know nor do they understand, they walk in darkness" (82:5). Those at the very bottom are "the vulgar among the people," the vast majority of them, who cannot discern the truth "in spite of the strength of its manifestation." Crescas immediately undermines Maimonides's one-to-one ratio between proximity to God and intellectual perfection by citing the very same verse in Psalms, but to corroborate its converse. In Maimonides's hands the verse excludes most, while Crescas cites it to posit a special relationship between God and Israel

argument from design, his Abrahamic construct remains that of a philosopher, though perhaps a skeptical one.

⁴⁷ LL, 119; OH, 122.

distinct from the rest of humanity: “in the magnitude of His kindness and the abundance of His goodness, God was provident over all from the realm of His abode, and chose the house of Jacob in whose midst to rest His glory.” Since intellect as the measure of providence would be a common denominator across humankind, Crescas is compelled to undermine Maimonides’s gradation of humanity in order to maintain a traditional faith in Israel’s chosenness that replaces intellect with divine attributes (kindness, goodness) as the source of providence.⁴⁸

This is one of the reasons it is crucial for Crescas to preserve divine attributes such as goodness or kindness in response to Maimonides’s extreme apophatic theology, which demands the negation of all positive attributes from God’s essence.⁴⁹ The issue of divine attributes is a large topic, but what is pertinent here is Crescas’s resort to light imagery in support of his contention.⁵⁰ For Crescas, the belief that God possesses essential attributes does not imply multiplicity or a violation of divine unity, for it is analogous to “inferring light necessarily from a light source...For light is not an essence separate from the light source.”⁵¹ Particularly important for understanding the centrality of light imagery is his reference to the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a kabbalistic work analogizing this unity between essence and essential attributes to “a flame connected to a live coal,” a phenomenon that “attests to an unbreakable unity.”⁵² Light is pregnant with metaphysical meaning, and in this case, the overt citation

⁴⁸ See especially Crescas’s extended discussion in LL, 226-235; OH, 251-264.

⁴⁹ See especially GPI:59-60. For a brief but concise and nuanced view of Maimonides’s theory of negative attributes, see Kenneth Seeskin, “Metaphysics and its Transcendence,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 82-104, at 88-91. As he states, “negative predicates are a device for getting us to the point where we realize that all linguistic formulations contain a measure of distortion” (89).

⁵⁰ For one major pioneering study, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, “Crescas on the Problem of Divine Attributes, Chapter I,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 7, no. 1 (1916); “Crescas on the Problem of Divine Attributes, Chapter II,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 7, no. 2 (1916): 175-221.

⁵¹ LL, 110; OH, 109.

⁵² LL, 112; OH, 113.

of a canonical kabbalistic text explicitly turns to kabbalah as authoritative on this issue. What is striking is that *Sefer Yetzirah* presents its image as a corroboration of an unbreakable unity in the sefirotic conception of the Godhead.⁵³ As Blumenberg described the philosophically inexhaustible metaphor of light, “Light remains what it is while letting the infinite participate in it; it is consumption without loss.”⁵⁴ Maimonides’s paradigm of intellect as light would leave most in the dark regardless of their national/religious affiliations or origins—Jew and non-Jew alike.⁵⁵ Crescas therefore subverts Maimonides’s hierarchy of light with one grounded in divine grace, free to choose who will be its recipient.⁵⁶

Crescas translates the light imagery he uses for theoretical knowledge and beliefs into the practical world of action and, specifically, the performance of *mitzvot*. In the section discussing the various aspects of the Torah that exceptionally benefit the nation of Israel in perfecting itself, he enumerates various features of the Torah which promote Israel’s uniqueness. The first is that, through the exodus, Sinaitic revelation, and other miracles, “we were singled out for extraordinary renown”; the second includes “giving us His Torah, in which the punctiliousness of His providence with respect to us is made clear”; and the third “concerns His bequeathing unto us true views and the apprehension of as much as can be apprehended of God.”⁵⁷ Both narratives and commandments in the

⁵³ See Eliezer Ben-Porat’s discussion of this citation in “Notes on Crescas’ Discussion of the Divine Attributes,” (Heb.) *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah* 70 (2011): 35-47, at 36-39 [Hebrew]. He states that Crescas’s intention “is to teach us that the belief in positive attributes is true because the kabbalah advocates it, except that it references them as sefirot” (39).

⁵⁴ *Light as a Metaphor for Truth*, supra, 31.

⁵⁵ On Maimonides’s universalism, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ For Crescas, divine providence can discriminate between peoples, times, and places. See LL, 160-166; OH, 171-179; and Zev Harvey, “The Uniqueness of the Land of Israel in the Thought of Hasdai Crescas,” in *The Land of Israel In Medieval Jewish Thought*, ed. Moshe Hallamish and Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1991), 151-165 [Hebrew].

⁵⁷ LL, 227-228.

Torah attest to and reinforce these notions that all accentuate Israel's particularity.

In the same vein, the fourth consists of numerous biblical declarations that concern "God's punctiliousness in His providence and guidance with respect to us...and especially with respect to the chosen nation." The Temple's light apparatus is among a number of commandments that indicate this notion. The candelabrum's (*menorah*) spiritual teaching is "that the bounteous light comes from God. It has seven branches to teach that there are seven servants that overflow from Him. For this reason, the candelabrum is lit from the altar of God."⁵⁸ Crescas's intriguing reference to the Temple's source of light is one of a number of commandments that are exemplary of the fourth principle, which reflects a special providence with respect to Israel's election as "the chosen nation." For the *menorah* to fit within this class, Crescas's reference must be understood in light of his distinction between God's governance of Israel and of other nations. Israel's endowment with special providence runs throughout Crescas's thought. Typical is the following assertion: "the community of our nation is the people that God chose as His inheritance, they received guidance from him...But God's guidance of the other nations was through the mediation of the celestial bodies."⁵⁹ Thus, the *menorah* as depicted by Crescas joins the list in its signification of this very distinction between Israel and the other nations. The "seven servants" symbolize the seven planets that govern the world and allude to popular belief in astrology — a belief endorsed by the classical rabbinic tradition, which, although repudiated by Maimonides, was also championed by prominent medieval Jewish thinkers such as Gersonides and Abraham ibn Ezra.⁶⁰ Though all the planets are subordinate to God, Crescas's specific mention of the

⁵⁸ LL, 230; OH, 257.

⁵⁹ See LL, 145.

⁶⁰ See for example b. Shabbat 156a. See also Tzvi Langermann, "Some Astrological Themes in the Thought of Abraham Ibn Ezra," in *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath* (Harvard, 1993); and Tzvi Langermann, "Maimonides Repudiation of Astrology," in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press, 2000), 131–157.

requirement that the *menorah* be lit “from the altar of God” indicates a uniquely unmediated relationship between Israel and God. As indicated by other *mitzvot* in the list, while other nations come under the astrological jurisdiction of the planets, Israel enjoys God’s direct governance.⁶¹

In contradistinction, Maimonides subsumes his rationale for the *menorah* under his general rubric that all *mitzvot* related to the Temple, its utensils, and its sacrifices aim at subverting pagan beliefs. They adapted pagan forms of worship in a way that would best subvert them, legislated solely for promoting an intellectual endeavor, “of apprehending Me and not worshipping someone other than Me,” and that “the fundamental principle of My unity be established.”⁶² The chapter in the *Guide* which mentions the *menorah* as a member of all those classes of *mitzvot* related to the Temple, begins with Abraham’s founding of its location in the west as a prayer coordinate militating against the direction of pagan worship toward the sun as its deity in the east. The ark contains the first two of the Ten Commandments, which Maimonides takes as demanding a philosophically demonstrated knowledge of God’s existence and unity. Maimonides’s rationale for the *menorah* is that it “was placed in front of [the ark] in order to glorify and honor the Temple. For the Temple which was always illumined by lamps and separated by means of a veil [from the Holy of Holies] made a great impression upon the soul.”⁶³ In other words, the *menorah* diverts attention away from the sun, the natural source of light, and casts its light metaphorically on those truths of divine existence and unity that must ultimately be assimilated into the soul or the intellect. Crescas’s *menorah* spotlights everything that would extinguish Maimonides’s *menorah*: divine attributes, special providence, and

⁶¹ This idea also draws on a rabbinic opinion that “there is no mazal for Israel, only for the nations” (b. Shabbat 156a). The two expiation goats sacrificed on the Day of Atonement is another example of a commandment included in this section which is emblematic of this unique quality, for this makes a strong impression in terms of removing us from the guidance of others- that is why one of the goats is sent to the wilderness- and consigning our guidance solely to God” (LL, 230-231; OH, 257-258).

⁶² GP III:32, 530.

⁶³ GP III:45, 577.

astrology. Light does not only play itself out conceptually in the theological duel between Crescas and Maimonides but in the arena of performance and *mitzvot* as well.

The Soul's Emergence from Darkness Toward the Radiance of the Shekhina

Finally, we arrive at how Maimonides's and Crescas's contrasting notions of the soul refract light in such different directions as to end in irreconcilable conceptions of the ultimate end of all human existence, that which survives the demise of the physical body. Maimonides's clearest statement on the soul's immortality appears in his halakhic work, *Mishneh Torah*, where he categorically identifies knowledge acquired during life as what remains of a person posthumously:

Thus did the ancient sages say: "In the World to Come there is no eating, no drinking, and no family life, save that the righteous are sitting, graced with crowns upon their heads, and enjoy the radiance of the Shekinah" ... the crown spoken of by the sages refers to knowledge and for the sake of which they have attained life in the world to come...The term soul employed on this subject refers not to the breath of life necessary for the body, but the form of the soul which is the intelligence by which it attained knowledge of the Creator's Being according to its intellectual power, and apprehends other abstract concepts and other things.⁶⁴

Maimonides forms this absolute identity between the immortality of the soul and intellect in his legal code. Though the implications are far-reaching, as has already been discussed, perhaps the one Crescas's theology finds most offensive is that it rules out any individuated immortality. This position is known as monopsychism, to which Maimonides himself may very well subscribe in his *Guide* when he states that, for intellects, "there can be no thought of multiplicity of any mode whatever...consequently all are one in number."⁶⁵ For Maimonides, light

⁶⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, Repentance, 8:2-3.

⁶⁵ See GP I:74, 221; I:70, 173. For a long list of other primary and secondary references, see Michael Schwartz's Hebrew edition of the *Guide*, supra, vol.1, 183 n26. For a concise overview, see Alfred Ivry, "Moses Maimonides: An Averroist Avant La Lettre?"

“enjoying the radiance of the Shekhina,” signifies the intellect and all things cumulatively cognized by it—signifying the same thing during eternal incorporeal existence as it signifies during a lifetime.

Thus, when Crescas treats the nature of the soul and its immortal dimension, he insists on recalibrating the light achieved during one’s life and the light that persists posthumously as a result. Since, as we have seen, the soul is more than simply intellect and knowledge, more than what can be cognized by reason, one gains perfection of the soul not by philosophical demonstration and observance of nature, but “by means of what it apprehends of the Torah and of God’s miracles,”⁶⁶—that is, through revelation, or God’s word, and through what interrupts nature, or God’s intrusion in nature. The result is persistence “in the strong bond [with God] and in the light’s unceasing streaming thanks to the removal of the barrier that darkens its way— namely, matter.” Maimonides and Crescas share the opinion that matter poses an obstacle to the ultimate truth, yet even here light streams in as an image that divides them. For Maimonides, the crux of Sinai is a mass philosophical enlightenment apprehending naturally the truths of divine existence and unity “by human speculation alone,” while for Crescas all those present at that gathering acquired those truths miraculously.⁶⁷

In a chapter that focuses on the proposition that matter is a barrier to knowledge, Maimonides turns to Sinai as the foundational event whose biblical description captures it best, thereby anchoring all of Judaism in its

Maimonidean Studies 5 (2008): 121-139, at 124-126. Once again, Maimonides equivocates on this issue. Though it cannot be definitively stated that Maimonides subscribed to monopsychism, what is important for this study is the way Crescas understood the implications and dangers of Maimonides’s position, which views only intellect as that which survives posthumously.

⁶⁶ LL, 281. For a concise description of Crescas’s non-naturalistic view of miracles, see Howard Kreisel, “Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 75, no. 2 (October 1984): 99-133, at 130-131. Kreisel summarizes, “For Crescas miracles are purposeful acts performed directly by God out of knowledge of each of the recipients. They are the product of His infinite eternal power, not bound in any way by the operations of nature” (131).

⁶⁷ GP II:33 vs. LL, 312.

sobering message. A central image of the Sinaitic revelation is not its clarity but rather its hiddenness, represented by God's manifestation in a "thick cloud" (Exod. 19:9) and in "darkness, cloud, and thick darkness," (Deut. 4:11). According to Maimonides, "it draws attention to the fact that the apprehension of His true reality is impossible for us because of the dark matter that encompasses us and not Him."⁶⁸ Sinai, then, is the paradigm for what is both open and concealed, but the measure of openness and concealment is human reason. What is open is acquired by reason, and what is concealed is beyond reason's limits. The chapter reaches its crescendo with the light that is beyond the darkness, but that also traverses it: "for near Him there is no darkness but perpetual dazzling light the overflow of which illumines all that is dark." This light imagery brilliantly charts Maimonides's journey of the soul. In its first stage as an embodied intellect living within the darkness, or the material world, it apprehends everything it can by exerting its faculty of reason, incrementally tapping into the constant "overflow" that filters into the corporeal world via the Active Intellect. That apprehension survives into its post-embodied stage where it basks in the dazzling light, or the materially inaccessible pure intellect that is "near" God. In other words apprehension "enjoys the radiance of the Shekhina" posited in his legal code.

Crescas's most vigorous deflection of Maimonidean light—from reflecting intellect to reflecting the content of the Torah and its commandments—arrives at a critical point of his discussion on the nature of the soul:

We maintain that the soul has an essence beyond its intellection, even though its quiddity remains obscure to us. Indeed, our Rabbis called it in several places light, as Scripture says "the soul of man is the lamp of the Lord" (Prov 20:27). It is worthy of this name inasmuch as it illumines the eyes of the blind and the benighted. For this very reason they attributed light to the Divine Presence (*Shekhina*), and said "enjoying the radiance

⁶⁸ See GP II.33, 437. See also GP I:47 where female represents matter and male represents form; and my "Jacob vs. The Married Harlot: Intertextual Foils in the Guide of the Perplexed," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2000): 1-25.

of the *Shekhina*." Scripture says too "The light dwells with Him" (Dan 2:22).⁶⁹

Light is decidedly not the intellectual dimension of the soul, but instead is what Maimonides might describe as darkness, since it represents something "obscure to us." The soul, which Proverbs identifies as the "lamp of the Lord" contains an allusion to the general comprehensive project Crescas envisioned but never completed dedicated to the commandments, which was to be called *Lamp of the Lord*. What I only wish to point out here is that Crescas replaces intellect, or what Maimonides held was the intersecting ground between God and human beings, with something that can only be channeled through the commandments and the Torah. Matter naturally occludes the capacity of reason, but if the divine aspect of the human soul defies definition, then it could also defy matter in the same sense prophecy and miracles overcome nature for Crescas.⁷⁰ Thus, the "radiance of the *Shekhina*," whose enjoyment is reserved by Maimonides for surviving intellects to experience in the "world to come," for Crescas intrudes into the physical world as well, since his definition of the soul also encompasses that light.

The prooftext cited by Crescas from Daniel is set in a context permeated by God's initiative rather than human initiative, who "gives the wise their wisdom and knowledge to those who know" (Daniel 2:21). In other words, the knowledgeable and the wise, who have achieved a certain intellectual perfection, still require divine grace for true wisdom that only the Torah offers. Prefacing "the light that dwells with Him," is also that God "knows what is in the darkness." If darkness signifies materiality, then here again Crescas's position starkly opposes Maimonides's. The notion that God directly involves Himself in the

⁶⁹ LL, 282.

⁷⁰ For a concise overview of Crescas's notion of the soul, see Harvey, *Rabbi Hisdai Crescas*, supra, 76-81, where he concludes that "Crescas asserts with certainty that the soul is not pure intellect, he doesn't presume to know what it is. Its essence is 'obscure' and it is shrouded in mystery" (81).

material world means that the soul would be enjoying His radiance while still embodied.⁷¹

We return to Crescas's introduction where he also mentions "enjoying the radiance of the *Shekhina*." Its context and its targeting of Maimonides comes into sharper focus in the shadow of our examination of light imagery. He states:

And He made shine for us, in the light of His Law, the two great lights, the *lamp of God* and the *light of the Lord*, which are the commandments and the beliefs, to prepare the way for us, the way of life, which without them would be very distant, who could find it, unless there shined upon his countenance the true light, which is called the radiance of the [*Shekhina*] Indwelling?⁷²

For Maimonides, all light imagery, which traverses both mortal and immortal existence, consists of metaphors whose common referent is intellect distinguished by various degrees of intensity. By transforming that metaphor's referents to the supra-rational realm, Crescas expresses at the outset his essential antagonism to Maimonides's rationalism. There are two ways of cultivating that realm which intellect on its own cannot attain, and both are signified by light. One is mediated by the content of the Torah ("light of His Law"). The content of the Torah is itself subdivided between the theoretical, or that which promotes beliefs ("light of the Lord"), and

⁷¹ This is most evident in Crescas's adaptation of the rabbinic notion of God as the place (*maqom*) of the world, which supports his interpretation of God's glory "filling all the earth" (Isa. 6:3) to mean that God emanates even "into the most turbid of the elements" (LL, 77). Though there is some textual issue as to whether the latter phrase reads "alludes to the secret of impregnation" (see LL, 77 n124), it still sharply distinguishes Crescas's God from Maimonides's God, who can have no relation to matter whatsoever. There is much discussion on Crescas's kabbalistic understanding of "glory" and of it being a precursor to Spinoza's notion of God. See for example Harvey, "Kabbalistic Elements," *supra*, 91-96 and more recently, Carlos Fraenkel, "Ḥasdai Crescas on God as the Place of the World and Spinoza's Notion of God as 'Res Extensa'" *Aleph* 9, no. 1 (2009):77-111. For Maimonides, "The earth is filled with His glory" translates into apprehension of the world and attests to God's perfection. See GP I:19 and I:64. For Crescas, it signifies precisely God's immanence. See Harvey, *Rabbi Ḥasdai Crescas*, *supra*, 61-62.

⁷² LL, 27; OH, 2. I cite Harvey's translation because I believe it conveys the sense more accurately.

the practical through commandments (“lamp of God”). The other is through direct access to that divine emanation to which prophets aspire, the “radiance of the *Shekhina*,” of which Abraham’s “discovery” of God discussed previously is exemplary. *Experience* is the critical dimension of light in its conveyance of relationship with and gaining proximity to Crescas’s imminent God, either through God’s word and norms, or, like Abraham, through personal “superlative eminence.”⁷³ For access to Maimonides’s transcendent God, wholly obstructed by the corporeality of human existence, it is light’s revelatory translucence which simulates the abstract process of intellectual apprehension. Its exercise most closely resembles God’s apprehension, since “no sense, no part of the body, none of the extremities are used.”⁷⁴ For Crescas, then, light is more than mere metaphor because it mirrors a dimension of spiritual experience both sensually and perceptually—that, is through commandments and beliefs.

The Case of Moses’ Blinding Face: Light of Shekhinah vs. Light of Reason

Since, as we stated at the outset, Maimonides’s *Guide* and Crescas’s *Light of the Lord* are both works of philosophical/theological exegesis, it is fitting to conclude by plunging back into the biblical text with a narrative that strikingly depicts the polarity between their respective metaphysics of light. Crescas’s ontology of light is most evident in the biblical narrative regarding Moses’s face “beaming with light” (Exod. 34:10), which treats light as a hypostasis of the divine presence (*Shekhina*). When discussing the features that distinguished Mosaic miracles from those performed by

⁷³ LL, 17; OH, 2. As Eliezer Schweid puts it, Crescas’s thought “crosses over from the realm of speculation whose subject is apprehension of God to the realm of religious experience in which man confronts God in the fullness of his created being and not merely in his reasoned thinking” (“Substantial Attributes in Crescas’ Philosophy,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*: 449-467, at 464).

⁷⁴ GP I:1, 23. However, Peter Eli Gordon argues for an experiential dimension to Maimonides’s thought, “a theory of human finitude that opens out onto a theory of religious experience” (“The Erotics of Negative Theology: Maimonides on Apprehension,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1995):1-38, at 37).

other prophets, Crescas includes Moses's illumined face as a prominent exemplary of endurance: "for this is the most marvelous miracle without bounds, since it is the attachment of the *Shekhina* to Israel, especially to Moses, steadily over time. And this alone would establish Moses's superiority to other prophets."⁷⁵ In other words, Moses's facial projection of light is a visual instantiation of the *Shekhina*, a miraculously palpable display of both Moses's proximity to God and of the *Shekhina*'s ontic association with the nation of Israel. It is also a metaphysical vindication of Moses's prophetic credentials.⁷⁶ Considering the scholastic influence on Crescas's thought, it is not surprising, apropos our argument, to note a trace of this in the writings belonging to the scholastic metaphysicians of light which subordinated cognition to love. Crescas's understanding of Moses's shining face conjures a description of light's role in in one of those scholastic thinker's thought: "Light is also the measure of nobility in that the divine being is communicated to the lower beings in the form of light so that the more luminous a thing appears the nobler it is."⁷⁷ As we noted previously, love of God—not knowledge of God—is the driving force toward the final ends of human existence,⁷⁸ which "the Torah illumined for us."⁷⁹ Moses's face literally illumines that very same message as a

⁷⁵ LL, 309-310; OH, 358. Crescas draws on a widespread interpretation among commentators (Rashbam, Abraham ibn Ezra, Joseph Bekhor Shor, and even Maimonides's son Abraham) which understands Exod. 34:10, "and all the people who are with you shall see how awesome are the LORD's deeds which I will perform for you," to allude to Moses's face beaming with light.

⁷⁶ This is also a contentious opposition to Maimonides's position that miracles are not persuasive for establishing truths and were decidedly not performed by Moses to prove his prophetic authenticity. See *Mishneh Torah*, Yesodei HaTorah, 8:1. See also Howard Kreisler, "The Verification of Prophecy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," (Heb.) *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* (1984) 4:1-2, pp.1-18.

⁷⁷ Joseph Anthony Mazzeo describing a theme in *De Intelligentiis*, an early 13th century work variously ascribed to Grosseteste, Adam Pulchra Mulier, or Adam Mulier Pulcherrima ("Light Metaphysics, Dante's 'Convivio,' And The Letter To Can Grande Della Scala," *Traditio* 14 (1958): 191-229, at 203.

⁷⁸ LL, 220.

⁷⁹ LL, 225.

corporeal manifestation of Moses's incomparably intense love for God. Thus, another description of the scholastic work just cited vividly captures how light operates in this love: "love was released by the perception of light on both the sensible and intellectual levels, light as beauty and knowledge calling forth the love which, with the help of cognition, orders us and leads us to God."⁸⁰

Maimonides, however, cites this very phenomenon for Moses having reached the absolute peak of intellectual perfection, occupying the summit of the hierarchy of light mentioned previously: "Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus, night appears to him as day. That is the degree of the great one among the prophets, to whom it was said: *But as for thee, stand thou here by Me*, and of whom it was said: *that the skin of his face sent forth beams, and so on* [Exod. 34:28-29]." These verses metaphorically convey Moses's attainment of single-minded intellectual concentration on God where "his intellect is wholly turned toward Him...while outwardly he is with the people."⁸¹ Externally the people see nothing but Moses's external involvement in political and philosophical leadership and guidance, while the light represents his internal state of mind.

No other metaphor than light and the image of Moses's blinding countenance more vividly contrasts what is without exaggeration a schismatic theological rift between Crescas and Maimonides. Moses's incarnation of the Divine Presence, the very apex of closeness to God for Crescas, would surely constitute an idolatrous image for Maimonides, whose distorted theological implications are indulged by those at the very bottom of the hierarchy of light who wander aimlessly in the dark. Crescas calls on his readers to be attuned to Moses's perceptibly illuminated face and all the associations between light and divine radiance with divine governance, Torah, and Israel's election. Maimonides calls on his readers to emerge from the darkness to which they would be condemned by a

⁸⁰ LL, 214.

⁸¹ GP III:51, 623.

literal reading of light, into the true metaphorical light Moses's intellectual perfection projects for them. In the end, though light shines in radically different directions for Maimonides and Crescas, they might both agree on Blumenberg's description of its metaphorical richness:

Light can be a directed beam, a guiding beacon in the dark, an advancing dethronement of darkness...but also a dazzling super-abundance, as well as indefinite, omnipresent brightness containing all: the 'letting-appear' that does not itself appear, the inaccessibility of things.⁸²

⁸² *Light as a Metaphor for Truth*, supra, 33.