# The Cultures of Maimonideanism

# Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy

*edited by*

Leora Batnitzky (Princeton University)
Christian Wiese (University of Sussex)
Elliot Wolfson (New York University)

VOLUME 9

# The Cultures of Maimonideanism

## New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought

*edited by*

James T. Robinson


BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2009

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The cultures of Maimonideanism / [edited] by James T. Robinson.
p. cm. — (Supplements to the Journal of Jewish thought and philosophy ; v. 1)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-90-04-17450-4 (hardback : alk. paper) 1. Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204—Teachings. 2. Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204—Influence. 3. Philosophy, Jewish. I. Robinson, James T., 1965- II. Title. III. Series.

B759.M34C85 2009
296.1'81–dc22

2009007856

ISSN 1873-9008
ISBN 978 90 04 17450 4



PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

CONTENTS

# PREFACE

The papers included in this volume were, with one exception, presented at the Eighth EAJS Summer Colloquium entitled "The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought," which convened July 16–19, 2007 at Wolfson College, Oxford. The Colloquium, organized by Gad Freudenthal of CNRS and myself, was sponsored by the European Association of Jewish Studies. I wish to thank the EAJS, along with its administrator Garth Gilmour, for assistance before and during the colloquium. I also wish to thank Michiel Klein Swormink, the Jewish Studies Editor at Brill, for accepting this volume for publication. I add a special note of gratitude to my co-organizer Gad Freudenthal—the organizer of conferences par excellence—and to the colloquium participants, who effectively transformed our inchoate ideas and aspirations into something far richer and more diverse than we could have expected. I think this is clear testimony to the richness and complexity of Maimonideanism.

* * *

In this brief preface, I would like to provide a few preliminary reflections on some of the main themes, concerns, problems, and also opportunities, that emerged during the colloquium and which are developed in the papers that follow. I will try to identify and highlight common features I find in many of the chapters, certain patterns emerging in the history of Maimonideanism. Although the chapters are organized more or less chronologically, these brief remarks will be presented synthetically, organized around four main areas: reception; accommodation; cultural mentalities—that is, the way Maimonides emerged in various contexts as cultural hero or emblematic figure; and application: the way the *Guide* was read, adapted, revived, and recreated throughout history in light of contemporary debates and ideologies, providing a "cure" for the illnesses of the time, a treatment for symptoms of intellectual malaise, a bulwark against superstition and the irrational, and—to focus on its most common use—a remedy for the perplexities of faith and reason.

*Reception*

It is one of many paradoxes or ironies in Jewish history that Maimonides, the elitist and pedagogical pessimist (if we accept Frank Griffel's characterization of him in Chapter 1), became the Teacher par excellence, ha-Rav ha-Moreh and Moreh Tsedeq, the inspiration of countless popular movements extending from the thirteenth century to the twentieth, from Western Europe to the Yemen, from Spain to the New World.

As described by Howard Kreisel (in Chapter 2), in some ways the emergence of a Maimonidean tradition was quite simple and straightforward, and followed naturally from the work of Maimonides himself. This, at least, was the case in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when Maimonidean enthusiasts in Spain, Provence, and Italy devoted themselves to the translating, explaining, imitating, defending, expanding, and extending of the work of the Master, creating the material foundation for an intellectual tradition. Often this meant completing a project begun by Maimonides, such as the philosophical explication of the "work of the beginning" and "work of the chariot." It moved in more general directions as well: writing a detailed Maimonidean commentary on the Bible, a full Maimonidean explication of Rabbinic midrash and aggadah, and completing the theological system only partially constructed by the Master. It is for the latter reason that even Gersonides might be considered a true Maimonidean—following some of the suggestions by Roberto Gatti (in Chapter 5)—even though Gersonides developed a new method, worked within a different philosophical framework, and arrived at very different conclusions than his predecessor.

There were other ways to follow Maimonides, less straightforward, but no less significant; for example the rewriting of his ideas within a more traditional context, the use of his methods to achieve seemingly non-Maimonidean goals, or the defending of his positions by appealing to authorities with disparate intellectual affinities—from Saadia Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra to Immanuel Kant. Nor was the simple straightforward translating and publishing of Maimonides' writings distinct from contemporary philosophical and ideological debates. This is certainly the case with the seventeenth-century Latin translations of Maimonides' writings mentioned by Yaacov Dweck (in Chapter 9), or the eighteenth-century editions of the *Guide* discussed by Abraham Socher (in Chapter 10). To what extent the republication of the *Guide*,

together with commentaries by Moses Narboni and Solomon Maimon, determined the course of *Guide* scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a fascinating subject; it highlights, among other things, the cultural power exerted by a publisher.

### *Accommodation*

The examples discussed thus far I would consider first-order Maimonideanism, that is, the conscious and intentional creation of a tradition of philosophy and exegesis by countless and often anonymous translators, philosophers, theologians, exegetes, preachers, popular educators, propagators of wisdom and defenders of the faith. As discussed in many of the papers in this volume, there was also a second-order Maimonideanism. I refer to the way that Maimonides, through both his *Mishneh Torah* and *Guide*, forced or encouraged a completely new understanding of the canon. After Maimonides, Bible and rabbinic literature could no longer be read the same way. Earlier medieval authors, moreover, were brought into conversation with the Master, transformed into his allies and initiates.

This is certainly the case with Ibn Ezra who, as explained by Tamás Visi (in Chapter 4), was transformed into a Maimonidean commentator on the Bible. It was also the case with Judah Halevi—a more unlikely Maimonidean. As discussed by Maud Kozodoy (in Chapter 6), in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the *Kuzari* experienced something of a revival in Provence and Spain, but seems not to have offered a real living alternative to Maimonides. Unlike the nationalistic Halevi of religious Zionism (as discussed briefly by Dov Schwartz in Chapter 16) or the romantic Halevi of Rosenzweig (as mentioned by Hanoch Ben-Pazi in Chapter 14), Halevi's medieval commentators tended to transform his anti-philosophical work into a Maimonidean text: they explained it in light of the *Guide* and the works of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Jacob Anatoli, Levi b. Abraham and others. Even Halevi's polemic against Aristotle in Book 5 was transformed into an introductory textbook on Aristotelian philosophy!

Still more complex are examples of syncretism—the mixing of Maimonides with intellectual traditions seemingly opposed, often contrary, to the spirit of the Master. Well-known is the example of Maimonides' own descendents who, by focusing on the mystical terminology of *Guide* 3:51, created a Sufi Maimonideanism, which

would become the preferred tradition of Bet ha-Rambam into the fourteenth century. The example of Kabbalah is even more interesting. Mor Altshuler's identification (in Chapter 8) of Maimonidean patterns and ideals playing out in practice with Joseph Karo is quite remarkable, and should be followed up more generally in the history of later Kabbalah and Messianism. If Jonathan Dauber is correct (see Chapter 3), we have something more than syncretism: the organic development of Kabbalah out of Mamonides, at least concerning ideas about the unity of God and divine attributes. The same might be suggested of Meister Eckhert's negative theology and other mystical developments, Jewish and Christian alike.

## *Mentalities*

Yet to be a Maimonidean does not require that one write a commentary on the *Guide*, a philosophical explication of Bible and Midrash, or even a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra. In fact, as shown by the papers in this volume, one can join the ranks of the Maimonideans without really understanding Maimonides—or even reading him. This was already true early in the thirteenth century when Aaron b. Meshullam defended the Master as if he were no different than Saadia Gaon. It continued into the later medieval, early modern and modern periods as well, as exemplified by the popular liturgical dogmatics of Yigdal and Ani ma'amin (as discussed by Abraham Melamed in Chapter 7), the purely symbolic Maimonides of the eighteenth century, and the thoroughly "yeshivish" Maimonides of the twentieth.

I think the importance of the "cultural" or "rhetorical" Maimonides is clearly supported indirectly by the work of George Kohler and Görge Hasselhoff (Chapters 12–13). That the *Guide* was studied seriously and philosophically beginning only in the nineteenth century I think is cogently argued. But one could add that Maimonides' work could be read philosophically in the nineteenth century only because of the cultural work done in the eighteenth and the debate and discussion surrounding the *Guide* in the nineteenth (as discussed by Michah Gottlieb in Chapter 11). The philosophical reading of the *Guide* in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth (with the work of Strauss and Levinas, as discussed by Benjamin Wurgaft in Chapter 15) emerges after more than one hundred years of debate and discus-

sion over the contested space that was Maimonides. In other words, one might hypothesize that cultural image—as much as philosophical content—played a key role in the development of reading practices and philosophical doctrines.

## *Medicine for the Soul*

This brings us to the fourth category: the *Guide* as cure, as a remedy of sorts, a form of therapy, which Maimonides prescribed for the illnesses of his age, the deep anxieties—as Gad Freudenthal described it in his opening remarks at the colloquium—caused by the inconsistency between religion and philosophy.

In light of the papers in this volume, I think we can say that the *Guide* is not a single cure but many different cures, a pharmacy of sorts, a pharmacopeia; it is many medicines which, when mixed properly by the skilled physician, can cure a large assortment of diseases. Maimonides himself addresses the many different ailments in his own time, including unreflective conventional practice; biblical and rabbinic literalism; the "sickness" that is Kalām; idolatry and superstition (as represented by Sabianism); anthropocentricism and materialism. In later generation the list grew longer. The Christians considered the *Guide* a cure of Jewish literalism, Leone Modena thought it a remedy for Kabbalah, while Reformers in the nineteenth century focused their attention on a pilpulistic orthodoxy that seemed a mere shell of the Bible's authentic ethical monotheism, as already pointed to—so they claimed—by Maimonides in the *Guide* and elsewhere.

In light of the chapters in this volume one might also identify a history of reading the *Guide* that corresponds closely with various and diverse movements of renewal and reform—with small case "r." To say it differently: everyone had their favorite chapter in the *Guide* which supported their own ideas and aspirations. To give a few examples: The Sufi descendents of Maimonides preferred *Guide* 3:51, as did Ibn Tibbon, who termed it the "noblest chapter in the noble treatise." Ibn Tibbon's son-in-law Jacob Anatoli was attracted mainly to *Guide* 1:31–34 and its complex discussion of education and the limitations of knowledge. The Kabbalists, as well as the modern reformers, were drawn to the chapters on divine attributes, while in the seventeenth century, among Jews and Christians alike, it was Maimonides' historicizing account of

biblical law that was considered most important. A history of reading the *Guide*, I think, would go a long way toward mapping—or rather, indexing—a historical topography of Jewish thought.

These are just a few general categories and concerns. There are many others that will emerge in the following chapters, such as the problems of elite vs. popular culture, the close relation between tradition and censorship (on many levels), the various processes of canonization, and the complex relation between master and disciple, charismatic figure and social-religious movement. But what I hope these remarks can do, simple and schematic as they are, is provide some orienting framework for the discussion that follows—in this book, and hopefully in many future studies of and conferences devoted to this very fruitful subject of Maimonideanism.

CHAPTER NINE

# MAIMONIDEANISM IN LEON MODENA'S *ARI NOHEM*

Yaacob Dweck

> About six months earlier I had completed a treatise against the Kabbalah. I entitled it *Ari Nohem* [*The Roaring Lion*] because of my great anger at one of those [kabbalists] who had spoken wrongly in his books against the great luminaries of Israel, especially 'the eagle,' Maimonides, of blessed memory. But it was never printed.[1]

This study takes Modena's short statement in his autobiography, written in the spring of 1640, as its point of departure and explores the role of Maimonides in the treatise. Another theme alluded to in this phrase, the circulation of *Ari Nohem* in manuscript between its 1639 composition and its first publication in print by Julius Fürst in Leipzig in 1840, is discussed elsewhere.[2] The first part of this study identifies the numerous critics of Maimonides who appear throughout the pages of *Ari Nohem* and examines the various strategies that Modena uses to defend "the great eagle." Modena was only half-correct in his description of *Ari Nohem* in his autobiography. While his anger certainly was great, he directed it at more than one of Maimonides' critics. The second part explores Modena's study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* that repeatedly appears in *Ari Nohem*, and it offers a profile of the passages in the *Guide* that Modena advises his prize student, Joseph Hamiz, to reflect upon.[3] The third part connects Modena's discussion of two issues to his reading of Maimonides: the history of esoteric secrets and the distinction between Kabbalah and philosophic knowledge.

---

[1] *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah*, ed. Mark R. Cohen (Princeton, 1988), p. 153. For the original text see *The Life of Judah*, ed. Daniel Carpi (Tel Aviv, 1985), p. 98 [Hebrew].

[2] For the first edition of the work in print see *Ari Nohem*, ed. Julius Fürst (Leipzig, 1840). For the circulation of *Ari Nohem* in manuscript before its appearance in print see the epilogue to Yaacob Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

[3] For evidence that Modena considered Hamiz his prize student, *talmid muvhak*, see Leon Modena, *The Letters of Rabbi Judah Aryeh Modena*, ed. Yacov Boksenboim (Tel-Aviv, 1984), p. 346 [Hebrew].

Scholars have long noticed the presence of Maimonides in *Ari Nohem* as well as in Modena's other writings. Over the past century Nehemiah Libowitz,[4] Cecil Roth,[5] Howard Adelman,[6] Moshe Idel,[7] David Ruderman,[8] Talya Fishman,[9] and Elliot Horowitz,[10] have discussed the role of Maimonides in Modena's work, and what follows is heavily indebted to their scholarship. This discussion re-opens the question of Maimonides in *Ari Nohem* by placing him at the center of Modena's polemic rather than at the periphery.[11] This study focuses on Maimonides' impact on Modena as expressed in *Ari Nohem*, one of Modena's last works where his Maimonideanism attains its clearest and most sustained expression. Other writings relevant to Maimonides and Maimonideanism, notably several of Modena's letters as well as his mnemonic composition, *Lev ha-Aryeh*, help illuminate his stance in *Ari Nohem*.[12]

Modena begins *Ari Nohem*, an epistolary treatise addressed to Hamiz, with an explicit evocation of Maimonides:

> Concerning the cause that impelled the author to compose this treatise for his beloved student [cf. Song 4:3], bold in his speech, who examined those compositions that call themselves kabbalistic and open their

---

[4] Modena, *Ari Nohem*, ed. Nehemiah Libowitz (Jerusalem, 1929), p. 143 [Hebrew].

[5] C. Roth, *History of the Jews in Venice* (New York, 1975), p. 212.

[6] H. Adelman, *Success and Failure in the Seventeenth-Century Ghetto of Venice: The Life and Thought of Leon Modena, 1571–1648* (Ph.D. Diss., Brandeis University, 1985), p. 795.

[7] M. Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early Seventeenth Century," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 154, 174.

[8] D. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, 1995), pp. 119–20.

[9] T. Fishman, *Shaking the Pillars of Exile: 'Voice of a Fool,' an Early Modern Jewish Critique of Rabbinic Culture* (Stanford, 1997), pp. 32–33.

[10] E. Horowitz, "Families and Their Fortunes," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York, 2002), p. 582, n. 36.

[11] In their historical notes to Modena's autobiography, Howard Adelman and Benjamin Ravid write: "Modena defended Maimonides in several ways, including reference to the favorable view of him by Nahmanides, himself a kabbalist (*Ari Nohem*, chs. 6 and 21). In context, however, this point was a minor aspect of this important book." See *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi*, p. 261. On Nahmanides in *Ari Nohem* see below.

[12] On Modena's letters see below. *Lev ha-Aryeh* was printed in Venice in 1612, twenty-seven years before Modena wrote *Ari Nohem*. The volume concludes with a listing of the 613 commandments according to Maimonides compiled by Nathan Ottolenghi. See Modena, *Lev Ha-Aryeh*, 18A. On this work see Gerrit Bos, "Jewish Traditions on Strengthening Memory and Leone Modena's Evaluation," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995), pp. 39–58.

> mouths wide[13] against the great eagle, Maimonides, of blessed memory, and others.[14]

The very first lines of *Ari Nohem* address Hamiz as a reader of kabbalistic books openly critical of Maimonides. Here, as opposed to his autobiography, Modena mentions multiple books critical of Maimonides rather than a single work. Modena quotes, paraphrases, defends, or alludes to Maimonides on nearly every page of *Ari Nohem*. Modena mentions Maimonides explicitly on more than forty occasions in a treatise that covers some forty-five manuscript folios; in addition, he often cites Maimonides without mentioning his name and engages Maimonides' critics at great length.[15] If one peruses the work one finds numerous references to Maimonides' critics. Modena attempts to convince Hamiz to abandon Kabbalah through their collective reading of the *Guide*.

A précis of the different ways late-medieval and early-modern kabbalists read Maimonides and his *Guide* as reflected in *Ari Nohem* can shed light on Modena's own reading of Maimonides. This is neither a synopsis of Maimonidean interpretation in the four and one half centuries that transpired between the writing of the *Guide* and the composition of *Ari Nohem*,[16] nor an exhaustive discussion of Maimonides and

---

[13] See Isa 5:14; Ps 119:131; Job 29:23.

[14] Benjamin Richler has identified a manuscript of *Ari Nohem* in Modena's own hand. See his "Unknown writings of R. Judah Aryeh Modena," *Asufot* 7 (1993), pp. 169–71 [Hebrew]. This is Hebrew MS Moscow, Gunzburg Collection 1681 (F48694). For further discussion of this manuscript and its relationship to other scribal copies of *Ari Nohem* see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter one. Unless otherwise noted, all references to *Ari Nohem* include a reference to the text as it appears in this manuscript, hereafter designated as MS A, and as it appears in the most recent printed edition of the work edited by Nehemiah Libowitz. This citation appears in MS A, 5A, 9–12; ed. Libowitz, 1. I have prepared a new edition of *Ari Nohem* with an accompanying English translation that I hope will appear in the near future.

[15] In chapter six of *Ari Nohem*, in his discussion of Abraham's faith, Modena quotes "The Laws of Idolatry" from Maimonides' "Book of Knowledge." See MS A 14B, 19–22; ed. Libowitz, 17. At the beginning of the second part of *Ari Nohem*, Modena describes the history of the Oral Torah. His account explicitly draws upon the introduction to Maimonides' Code and the introduction to Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah. See MS A 22B 1–3; ed. Libowitz, 35.

[16] For example, the esotericism scholars have identified in the work of Samuel ibn Tibbon, who translated the *Guide of the Perplexed* into Hebrew at the turn of the thirteenth century and wrote his own philosophic works, does not appear in *Ari Nohem*. See Aviezer Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* 6 (1981), pp. 87–123; idem, "The Secrets of the *Guide to the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 159–207; Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of the Dalālat al-Hā'irīn into the Moreh*

Kabbalah.[17] It does, however, describe some of the ways of engaging Maimonides available to a Jewish intellectual in seventeenth-century Venice. Modena demonstrates a keen awareness of three different approaches adopted by kabbalists over the previous several centuries to Maimonides and his *Guide*. Some kabbalists attacked either Maimonides himself or his work; others defended Maimonides and his *Guide*; and still others appropriated Maimonides' thought.

---

*ha-Nevukhim* (Jerusalem, 2007) [Hebrew]; James T. Robinson, *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man* (Tübingen, 2007). Although he does not seem to have been aware of the centrality of esotericism in the work of Samuel ibn Tibbon, Modena was deeply indebted to Maimonides himself on the issue of ancient esoteric secrets. See below.

[17] On this topic see Israel Finkelscherer, *Mose Maimunis Stellung zum Aberglauben und zur Mystik* (Breslau, 1894); Gershom Scholem, "From Scholar to Kabbalist: Kabbalistic Stories about Maimonides," *Tarbiz* 6 (1935), pp. 90–98 [Hebrew]; Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides' Attitude toward Jewish Mysticism," in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit, 1981), pp. 200–219; Moses Cyrus Weiler, "Issues in the Kabbalistic Terminology of Joseph Gikatilla and in His relationship to Maimonides," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966), pp. 13–44 [Hebrew]; Ephraim Gottlieb, "Studies in the Writings of Joseph Gikatilla," in *Studies in the Literature of Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Hacker (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 105–17 [Hebrew]; Alexander Altmann, "*Sefer Or Zarua* by R. Moses de Leon," *Kovez al Yad* 9 (1980), pp. 239, 243 [Hebrew]; Elliot Wolfson, "Introduction," in *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de Leon's Sefer Ha-Rimmon* (Atlanta, 1988), pp. 27–34; Moshe Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 31–81; Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico Della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 84–100; Moshe Idel, *Maïmonide et la mystique juive* (Paris, 1991); Jacob Dienstag, "Maimonides and the Kabbalists: A Bibliography," *Da'at* 25 (1990), pp. 54–94; 26 (1991), pp. 61–96 [Hebrew]; Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison, 2003), pp. 40–71; Elliot Wolfson, "Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *Moses Maimonides (1138–1204): His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophic Wirkungsgeschichte*, eds. Görge K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg, 2004), pp. 209–237; Moshe Idel, "Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah," *Jewish History* 18 (2004), pp. 197–226; Elliot Wolfson, "Via Negativa in Maimonides and its Impact on Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008), pp. 393–442. Modena seems entirely unaware of the kabbalistic commentary of Shem Tov ben Avraham Gaon on the first section of Maimonides' code. On this text see Jacob Dienstag, "Maimonides in the Writings of Kabbalistic Scholars," in *Maimonides: His Teachings and Personality*, ed. Simon Federbush (New York, 1956), pp. 111–12 [Hebrew]; David Shmuel Levinger, "Rabbi Shem Tob Ben Abraham Ben Gaon," *Sefunot* 7 (1963), pp. 7–40 [Hebrew].

## I. *Kabbalistic Criticism of Maimonides*

Modena begins *Ari Nohem* with "authors who call themselves kabbalist and open their mouths wide against the Great Eagle."[18] Two figures in particular, whom Modena subsequently accuses of "mouthing empty words,"[19] appear repeatedly throughout the work: Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov (d. 1429) and Meir ibn Gabbai (ca. 1480–ca. 1540). Although separated in time by over a century, Modena often refers to these two Iberian kabbalists in the same breath.[20] If Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai displayed no compunction in criticizing Maimonides, Modena minces few words in his response. At one point, Modena refers to Ibn Gabbai's reliance on Shem Tov's interpretation to prove the authenticity of the transmission of kabbalistic secrets as "the blind leading the blind;" in another instance, he refers to the two of them as "those foolish ones of the people."[21] In the manuscript of *Ari Nohem* that appears to have been in Modena's possession, the scribe refers to Shem Tov's *Sefer ha-Emunot* (*The Book of Beliefs*) on two separate occasions as *Sefer ha-Dimyonot* (*The Book of Fantasies*) and to Ibn Gabbai as "the one who reproaches and curses."[22]

Although Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai each wrote several books, Modena focuses on Shem Tov's *Sefer ha-Emunot* and on Ibn Gabbai's *Avodat ha-Kodesh* and, to a considerably lesser extent, his *Tola'at Ya'akov*. *Sefer ha-Emunot*, printed for the first time in Ferrara in 1556, was Shem Tov's only work to appear in print before the twentieth century, and it appears among the Hebrew books in the inventory of Modena's possessions drawn up after his death in 1648.[23] Although none of Ibn

---

[18] MS A 5A, 11; ed. Libowitz, 1.

[19] MS A 23B, 11; ed. Libowitz, 37. See Job 35:16.

[20] MS A 23B, 12; 24B, 12; 30A, 24; 42B, 11; ed. Libowitz, 37, 39, 52, 84.

[21] For the first reference see MS A 22A, 18–19; ed. Libowitz, 34. For the second see MS A 24B, 12; ed. Libowitz, 39.

[22] For the references to *Sefer ha-Dimyonot* see MS A 7A, 17; 8A, 4. On this manuscript see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter one. For Ibn Gabbai as one who "reproaches and curses," see MS A 14A, 6–7; ed. Libowitz, 15. The Hebrew phrase *ha-meharef u-megadef* alludes to Ps 44:17. "Reproaches and curses" slightly modifies the King James translation which has "reproaches and blasphemes." The JPS translation reads "taunting revilers."

[23] On Shem Tov see Meir Benayahu, "Sefer ha-Emunot by Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov: Its Concealment and Revelation," *Molad* 5 (1973), pp 658–62. [Hebrew]; Ephraim Gottlieb, "Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov's Path to Kabbalah," in *Studies in the Literature of Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Hacker (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 347–356 [Hebrew]; David Ariel, *Shem Tob ibn Shem Tob's Kabbalistic Critique of Jewish Philosophy in the "Commentary on*

Gabbai's works appear in the same inventory, Modena demonstrates a thorough familiarity with *Avodat ha-Kodesh* and *Tola'at Ya'akov*, both of which appeared in print twice during the sixteenth century.[24] *Tola'at Ya'akov*, the first book of Ibn Gabbai's to be printed, appeared in Istanbul in 1560 and again in Krakow in 1581. *Avodat ha-Kodesh* appeared in Venice under the title *Marot Elohim* in 1567 and a second time at Krakow under the title *Avodat ha-Kodesh* in 1576. Although Modena refers to the book exclusively as *Avodat ha-Kodesh* as the title appears in the Krakow edition, and never once uses the title of the Venetian edition, *Marot Elohim*, his citations seem to indicate that he used the Venetian edition.[25] Modena never quotes from Ibn Gabbai's *Derekh Emunah* printed at Padua in the year 1562.

---

*the Sefirot"* (Ph.D. Diss., Brandeis University, 1981); Roland Goetschel, "Providence et destinées de l'âme dans le Sefer Ha-Emunot de Shem Tob ibn Shem Tob," in *Misgav Jerusalem: Studies in Jewish Literature*, ed. Ephraim Hazan (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. liii–lxxi [Hebrew]; Charles Mopsik, *Les Grands Textes de la Cabale: les rites qui font dieu* (Lagrasse, 1993), pp. 254–65; Erez Peleg, *Between Philosophy and Kabbalah: The Criticism of Jewish Philosophy in the Thought of Rabbi Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov* (Ph.D. Diss., Haifa University, 2002) [Hebrew]. As has recently been demonstrated, Shem Tov was not the only member of his family to write a critique of Maimonides. On the critical attitude of his son, Joseph, toward Maimonides, see Jean-Pierre Rothschild, "Le 'Eyn ha-Qôrê' de Rabbi Joseph b. Shem Tôb ibn Shem Tôb: Critique de Maïmonide et présence implicite de R. Judah Ha-Lévi," in *Torah et science: perspectives historiques et théoriques: études offertes à Charles Touati*, eds. Jean-Pierre Rothschild, Gad Freudenthal, Gilbert Dahan (Paris-Louvain, 2001), p. 177. Modena does not appear to have known Joseph ben Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov's *Eyn ha-Qore*. On this figure see also Shaul Regev, "Sermons on Repentance by Rabbi Yosef ibn Shem Tov," *Asufot* 5 (1990), pp. 183–211 [Hebrew]. On the critical attitude of his son, Shem Tov ben Joseph ben Shem Tov, to the parable of the palace in *Guide* 3:51, see Joel Kraemer, "How (Not) to Read the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (2006), p. 363, n. 42. On Modena and *Guide* 3:51, see below. On Modena's ownership of *Sefer ha-Emunot* see Clemente Ancona, "L'inventario dei beni appartenenti a Leon da Modena," *Bollettino dell'Istituto di Storia della Società e dello Stato Veneziano* 4 (1962), p. 263, n. 40.

[24] On Ibn Gabbai see Meir Benayahu, "On the History of the Jews in Tiria," *Zion* 12 (1948), pp. 37–48 [Hebrew]; Gershom Scholem, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), pp. 298–300; Goetschel, *Meïr ibn Gabbay: le discours de la Kabbale espagnole* (Leuven, 1981); Elliot Ginsburg, *Sod Ha-Shabbat, the Mystery of the Sabbath: From the Tolaat Yaaqov of Meir Ibn Gabbai* (Albany, 1989); Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la Cabale: les rites qui font dieu*, pp. 364–83.

[25] The first time Modena cites Ibn Gabbai, he quotes from the opening chapter of the first section of *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, where Ibn Gabbai writes: "The fulfillment of the soul and its success cannot possibly be imagined in any way if the secrets of the scholars of this knowledge, that is to say the true Kabbalah, are not transmitted to the worshiper." Modena writes "the secrets of the scholars," *me-sodot ha-hakhamim*, following the Venice edition of Ibn Gabbai; by contrast, the Krakow edition has "the traditions of the scholars," *mesorot ha-hakhamim.* The citation from *Ari Nohem* appears

The multiple editions of Ibn Gabbai, five editions printed in three different regions, the Ottoman Empire, the Italian Peninsula, and the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom, over the course of the second half of the sixteenth century, suggest a wide audience and high demand for the work of this recently deceased kabbalist. Similarly numerous writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries read and cited Shem Tov's *Sefer ha-Emunot* in their work.[26] Many of these authors, specifically Moses Cordovero, Menahem Azariah of Fano, Judah Moscato, and Samuel Uceda are mentioned in the pages of *Ari Nohem*.[27] Modena also cites three scholars who have been identified as readers of Ibn Gabbai in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Elijah de Vidas, Aaron Berechya of Modena, and Joseph Solomon Delmedigo. Some of Ibn Gabbai's work was read and cited by Christian kabbalists as well. Jacques Gaffarel, in his preface to the first printed edition of Modena's *Historia de gli riti hebraici*, published in Paris in 1637, a year and a half before Modena wrote *Ari Nohem*, cites a passage from Ibn Gabbai's *Derekh Emunah*, the one work of Ibn Gabbai printed in the sixteenth century that does not appear in *Ari Nohem*.[28]

Shem Tov's *Sefer ha-Emunot* synthesizes a range of arguments leveled by medieval Jewish critics of Maimonides specifically and philosophy more generally. The work is divided into several different gates, which in turn contain subdivisions of smaller chapters. Shem Tov drew upon Kabbalah to offer a set of counter arguments to Maimonidean philosophy, which he viewed as the root cause of philosophically-minded heresy among his contemporaries in early fifteenth-century Spain.

---

in ed. Libowitz, 3. Libowitz has the following text: *Me-sodot ha-hokhmah ha-zot.* In MS A 6B, 9, the text reads: *Me-sodot ha-hakhamim shel ha-da'at ha-zot.* The relevant passage appears in Meir ibn Gabbai, *Marot Elohim* (Venice, 1567), 9A; and idem, *Avodat Ha-Kodesh* (Krakow, 1576), 9A.

[26] Peleg, "Between Philosophy and Kabbalah," pp. 326–27.

[27] For Modena's intense engagement with Menahem Azariah of Fano and Moses Cordovero see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter four. For his discussion of Judah Moscato see MS A 31B, 15, 32A 6; ed. Libowitz, 55, 56. Modena may have owned a copy of Moscato's commentary on the *Kuzari.* See Ancona, "L'inventario dei beni appartenenti a Leon da Modena," p. 262, n. 17. He cites Samuel Uceda in MS A 40A, 22; ed. Libowitz, 79.

[28] Goetschel, *Meïr ibn Gabbay*, pp. 485–99. Evidence that de Vidas read Ibn Gabbai appears on p. 485; Joseph Solomon Delmedigo, p. 491; Aaron Berechya of Modena, p. 492; Jacques Gaffarel's citation in the preface to Modena's *Riti* appears on p. 493, n. 27. Modena cites Elijah de Vidas in MS A 10A, 5–6; ed. Libowitz, 8. He mentions Aaron Berechya of Modena in MS A 5B, 5; ed. Libowitz 1. On Gaffarel's preface to the *Riti* see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter five.

Maimonides' theory of knowledge, according to Shem Tov, denied a role to prophecy as a source of knowledge, and Maimonidean ideas of divine providence led to a hyper-intellectual understanding of the essence of human beings. Of particular importance to Modena in *Ari Nohem* was Shem Tov's critique of Maimonides' concept of tradition as well as his rejection of Maimonidean theories of esotericism. While modern scholars continue to debate the extent of Shem Tov's critique of Maimonides,[29] Modena clearly viewed him as a virulent critic and *Sefer ha-Emunot* as a work worthy of rebuttal.

If Shem Tov takes a largely critical attitude toward the study of philosophy in *Sefer ha-Emunot*, Ibn Gabbai offers a more ambivalent approach in *Avodat ha-Kodesh*. The work fuses philosophy with Kabbalah to a far greater extent than *Sefer ha-Emunot*. In this respect, *Avodat ha-Kodesh* offers an important parallel to another work of sixteenth-century Kabbalah that posed an enormous challenge to Modena in *Ari Nohem*: Moses Cordovero's *Pardes Rimonim*. Both books to a greater or lesser extent synthesize philosophy with Kabbalah in a manner that Modena found deeply threatening. However, Modena's response to *Pardes Rimonim* covered a range of issues, including but not limited to Cordovero's use of Maimonides, while his response to *Avodat ha-Kodesh* focused almost entirely on Ibn Gabbai's criticism of Maimonides. Divided into four different sections, each of which is further subdivided into smaller chapters, *Avodat ha-Kodesh* offers competing views of Maimonides. At times, Ibn Gabbai appears to be as harsh a critic as Shem Tov, if not harsher; at others, he goes to great lengths to draft Maimonides or Maimonidean ideas into the service of his own argument. Ibn Gabbai devotes the entirety of the fourth and final section of the work to a discussion of the "Secrets of the Torah," an issue that lies at the heart of Modena's defense of Maimonides from his kabbalistic critics.

The works of Ibn Gabbai and Shem Tov are the primary anti-Maimonidean writings to have appeared in print prior to the composition of *Ari Nohem*. Except for the polemics surrounding Maimonides in the responsa of Solomon ibn Adret, written in the early fourteenth century and printed several times during the sixteenth century, medieval and early modern anti-Maimonidean writing circulated largely in manu-

[29] Gottlieb and Ariel read Shem Tov as a harsh critic of Maimonides; Peleg argues that the extent of Shem Tov's criticism of Maimonides has been overemphasized among modern scholars. See above for the citations to their respective works.

script.[30] Modena never actually engages with Ibn Adret's criticism of Maimonides; for him Ibn Adret functions only as an opponent of Kabbalah, more specifically as a well-respected medieval authority who denied the belief in the transmigration of souls.[31] The few times that Modena mentions the second Maimonidean controversy in early fourteenth-century Provence and Catalonia he omits any reference to actual criticism of Maimonides by Ibn Adret or his colleagues from the Barcelona community. In short, Modena the polemicist ignores the main controversy and its anti-Maimonidean elements and drafts Ibn Adret into his own argument as a critic of a given kabbalistic doctrine.

Modena engaged both Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai with great intensity, mentioning the former on fourteen occasions and the latter on twenty-four. He focused on Ibn Gabbai to a much greater extent than Shem Tov and his reading of Ibn Gabbai appears to have been far more intensive.[32] Rather than recapitulate the range of criticisms leveled

---

[30] Ibn Adret's responsa appeared at Bologna in 1539 and Venice in 1545–6. See Moritz Steinschneider, *Catalogus Librorum Hebraeorum in Bibliotheca Bodleiana*, Facsimile edition (Berlin, 1931), pp. 2272–74. Modena appears to have been unaware of one of the most virulent anti-Maimonidean texts of the sixteenth century, a polemic against Maimonides and the *Guide* written by Joseph Ashkenazi that circulated in manuscript. Had Modena read Ashkenazi's claim that the printing of the *Guide* was the cause for the burning of the Talmud, he almost certainly would have responded to it. For Ashkenazi's claim see Gershom Scholem, "New information on Joseph Ashkenazi, the Tanna of Safed," *Tarbiz* 28 (1959), p. 71 [Hebrew]. According to Scholem, Joseph Ashkenazi makes this claim at the end of chapter fifty of his polemic, a work composed in the mid 1560s. This section does not appear in the excerpts from the text published by Scholem. See also the response to Joseph Ashkenazi written by an unknown author and published in Ephraim Kupfer, "Strictures of a Scholar on the Writings of R. Joseph Ashkenazi," *Kovez Al Yad* 21 (1985), pp. 213–288 [Hebrew]. This author attempted to refute Joseph Ashkenazi's claims about Maimonides and the *Guide* by arguing that Maimonides could not be blamed for not having had access to kabbalistic knowledge and repeats the legend about Maimonides' conversion to Kabbalah. On Joseph Ashkenazi and the place of Maimonides' *Guide* in Ashkenazi society in the middle of the sixteenth century see Elchanan Reiner, "The Attitude of Ashkenazi Society to the New Science in the Sixteenth Century," *Science in Context* 10 (1997), pp. 589–603. On the legend about Maimonides' conversion to Kabbalah see below.

[31] MS A 26B, 6; 27B, 4; ed. Libowitz, 43, 44. In the list of anti-kabbalistic writers that he appended to the end of MS A Modena includes both Ibn Adret and Yedaiah Bedershi. See MSA 48B, 5–6. On the second Maimonidean controversy see Abraham Halkin, "Yedaiah Bedershi's Apology," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 165–184; Gregg Stern, "What Divided the Moderate Maimonidean Scholars of Southern France in 1305?" in *Be'erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), pp. 347–76.

[32] He quotes ten specific passages from Ibn Gabbai's writings, nine from *Avodat ha-Kodesh* and one from *Tola'at Ya'akov*; by contrast, he quotes only two or three specific

by Modena against the claims made by these kabbalists, such as the authenticity of the transmission of Kabbalah, the nature of the *Sefirot*, the transmigration of souls, the theurgic power of prayer, and others, this discussion will explore these themes through the specific defenses of Maimonides offered in *Ari Nohem*.

In his introduction to the second part of *Ari Nohem*, Modena discusses the transmission of kabbalistic secrets, an issue of vital importance to his critique of Kabbalah.[33] Modena cites the opening paragraph of Maimonides' *Guide* 1:71, which describes how the transmission of a corpus of esoteric knowledge known as "Secrets of the Torah" has diminished among the people of Israel over the course of generations. He then turns to the critics of Maimonides, and, in particular, to Shem Tov.

> But please listen to how the stupid ones [*ha-tipshim*] thought to respond to these words spoken by Moses [Maimonides], the Rabbi, of blessed memory. Rabbi Shem Tov, in Gate One, Chapter One, said:[34] "But I ask the rabbi [Maimonides]: either individuals had a tradition in the Secrets of the Torah and beliefs [*kabbalah be-sitrei ha-Torah ve-ha-de'ot*] or they did not have this tradition [*kabbalah*] at all. [If you say they had no tradition at all][35] then you deny that there was any tradition [*kabbalah*] in the Torah, and you deny the entire Oral Torah. For how is it possible that Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, did not receive [*lo kibbel*] the Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot, and did not hand it over to the sages and Joshua son of Nun?"[36]

Shem Tov's question to Maimonides makes a basic assumption that Modena simply will not grant: the identification of the Secrets of the Torah with the Oral Torah. According to rabbinic Judaism, the Oral Torah had been transmitted to Moses at Sinai along with the written Torah and had been passed down from generation to generation. Some kabbalists, particularly those associated with the school of Nahmanides, maintained that the "Secrets of the Torah" had been transmitted along

---

passages in Shem Tov's *Sefer ha-Emunot*. One of the instances where Modena claims to cite from Gate One, Chapter One of *Sefer ha-Emunot*, he is actually citing from Gate Two, Chapter One. See below.

[33] See MS A 21A to 23A; ed. Libowitz, 33–36. In Libowitz's edition this section appears as chapter eleven. The citation from Shem Tov appears on 22A, 5–10.

[34] The citation actually appears in Gate Two, Chapter One. See Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, *Sefer Ha-Emunot* (Ferrara, 1556), 12B.

[35] Modena skips over this phrase in Shem Tov's text.

[36] MS A 22A, 7–10; ed. Libowitz, 34.

with the Oral Torah in an uninterrupted chain that stretched all the way back to antiquity.[37]

A few lines later, Modena offers the following retort that relies implicitly on Maimonides:

> As if we were incapable of distinguishing in terms of continuity between the transmission [*kabbalat*] of the Oral Torah and the Secrets of the Torah, and specifically to respond to his claims, that yes, it is certainly so, it is a truth and belief of all Israel that Moses our teacher, of blessed memory, received from Sinai such and such, and handed it down to Joshua, etc. But the transmission [*kabbalat*] of the Oral Torah was handed down continually to this day through basic principles [*shorashim*]. While certain doubts may have occurred about specific subsections, they were clarified and rectified over the generations to the extent that they are well known…But the Secrets of the Torah were bequeathed [*nimsarim*] exclusively to extraordinary individuals [*yehidei segullah*] of each generation; yet as the number of these individuals declined, and with the rise of the nations' dominion of us, the transmission ceased to be in their hands.

Modena posits a basic distinction between the Oral Torah and the Secrets of the Torah, and he refuses to accept the claim made by kabbalists, notably Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai, that the transmission of the Oral Torah over generations included within it the transmission of the Secrets of the Torah.[38]

---

[37] According to Rivka Shatz this claim was made by the kabbalists associated with Nahmanides and his school in thirteenth-century Catalonia. In contrast, the kabbalists around the circle of Isaac the Blind in thirteenth-century Provence claimed to have received divine revelation rather than an oral tradition dating back to Moses at Sinai. See R. Shatz, "Kabbalah: Tradition or Innovation," in *Massu'ot: Studies in Memory of Ephraim Gottlieb*, eds. Amos Goldreich and Michal Oron (Jerusalem, 1996), p. 448 [Hebrew].

[38] Immediately after citing and refuting Shem Tov, Modena turns to a similar claim made by Ibn Gabbai about the transmission of kabbalistic books and offers a similar refutation. In 1556, the same year that *Sefer ha-Emunot* appeared in print, the Usque press at Ferrara printed Moses Alashkar, *Hasagot she-Hisig R. Mosheh Alashkar 'al mah she-Katav R. Shem Tov be-Sefer ha-Emunot shelo neged ha-Rambam* (Ferarra, 1556). On this work, see M. Steinschneider, *Catalogus Librorum Hebraeorum in Bibliotheca Bodleiana*, p. 1765. As its title indicates, this text includes a set of glosses by Moses Alashkar defending Maimonides against the attacks of Shem Tov. Modena cites this work on one occasion, in what appears to have been no more than an afterthought. "In his glosses against him, Rabbi Alashkar of blessed memory, justifiably said that he was surprised that those who saw his book had not burned it in the synagogue." MS A 8A, marginal note at 11. The note may not be in Modena's own hand; however, even if he did write the note, Modena hardly uses Alashkar's critique of Shem Tov in his treatment of *Sefer ha-Emunot*. Two possible factors might explain this. First, Modena seems to have selected a few passages in *Sefer ha-Emunot* that interested him and focused entirely on them to the

Elsewhere in *Ari Nohem*, Modena expands this claim about the rupture in the transmission of secrets. He rejects the attempt by kabbalists to appropriate the term "Kabbalah" to refer to their teachings. "Kabbalah," he argues, means tradition, and kabbalists, as he sees it, have only inventions. Modena repeatedly uses the Hebrew term *hamtsa'ah*, literally invention, to refer to the emergence of Kabbalah.[39] Medieval kabbalists were attempting to add the patina of antiquity and authenticity to their own esotericism by adopting the Hebrew word for tradition to refer to a set of practices and beliefs that were actually of more recent origin. In recent years scholars have repeatedly and triumphantly exposed traditions thought to have been of ancient origin as more recent inventions.[40] To a more limited extent, Modena attempts to perform a similar type of work in *Ari Nohem* with regard to medieval and early modern kabbalistic views of esotericism and the Secrets of the Torah. Though he does not oppose esotericism on principle, Modena criticizes kabbalists for claiming that their inventions constitute ancient esoteric secrets. Modena suggests that the secrets considered Kabbalah are different from an ancient esoteric tradition.[41]

Modena not only separates the bundling of esoteric secrets identified as Kabbalah with the Oral Torah, he questions the unbroken transmission of Kabbalah from biblical times to the present. In addition to Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai, other early modern kabbalists such as Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) and Abraham Cohen de Herrera (ca. 1570–ca. 1635) had argued that Kabbalah constituted an oral tradition passed from Moses to the sages of antiquity through the Middle Ages.[42] While Modena does not mention these other figures in this context, his

---

exclusion of the remainder of the work. Second, although Alashkar criticized Shem Tov and defended Maimonides, he remained a committed kabbalist.

[39] See the discussion in Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early Seventeenth Century," p. 162, n. 125.

[40] See the collection of essays in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983).

[41] See Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early Seventeenth Century," p. 151, n. 63.

[42] Pico della Mirandola and Abraham Cohen de Herrera went to great lengths to stress the unbroken continuity in the oral character of kabbalistic transmission. See Alexander Altmann, "Lurianic Kabbalah in a Platonic Key: Abraham Cohen Herrera's Puerto del Cielo," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 4–8. Altmann points to the possibility of a polemical anti-Christian stance in Herrera's notion of oral tradition. On Modena's critique of Pico see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter five. Modena may not have been aware of Herrera's work.

argument about the rupture of transmission may have been attempting to refute a similar claim. For Modena, kabbalistic notions of transmission reveal an immunity to history and to historical reasoning. A range of kabbalistic thinkers attacked throughout *Ari Nohem*, including but hardly limited to Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai, posit that Kabbalah has remained an unchanging set of doctrines and practices from antiquity to the present. Throughout his writings, Modena demonstrated an acute sensitivity to change over time and argues that ideas or practices transmitted over a long period of time will necessarily undergo change.[43]

Modena's engagement with Ibn Gabbai can be profitably examined in light of another one of the central themes of the work, one that is related but not identical to his argument about Maimonides and the transmission of kabbalistic secrets. He turns to Ibn Gabbai and his criticism of Maimonides toward the conclusion of a discussion about biblical interpretation. Modena mentions four levels of biblical interpretation known by the acronym *Pardes*, which he defines as "*literal, allegorico, tropologico, enigmatico or mystico*," using the Italian terms written in Hebrew characters.[44] When discussing the fourth level, *sod*, defined as "*enigmatico or mystico*," Modena summarizes the claim made by several kabbalists that only this type of interpretation can yield the meaning of the biblical text.

Kabbalists argued that they have a monopoly upon the interpretation of the Bible and that only their mystical interpretation can offer a correct interpretation of God's word. Responding to this claim, Modena paraphrased Maimonides' introduction to the *Guide*:

> The Rabbi, the Guide, of blessed memory, has already written pure utterances for us about the verse, "apples of gold encased in silver"

[43] On Modena's historicist sense see Fishman, *Shaking the Pillars of Exile*, pp. 3–13. On the importance of this type of argument in his critique of the *Zohar* see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter two.

[44] MS A 13B, 14–15; ed. Libowitz, 15. *Pardes* is an abbreviation for the Hebrew terms *peshat, remez, derash*, and *sod* that refer to the four different levels of interpretation. See Wilhelm Bacher, "Das Merkwort PRDS in der Jüdischen Bibelexegese," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 13 (1893), pp. 294–305; Frank Talmage, "Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York, 1986), pp. 313–355; Moshe Idel, "Pardes: Some Reflections on Kabbalistic Hermeneutics," in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, eds. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (Albany, 1995), pp. 249–268. The notion of four levels of biblical interpretation was hardly unique to the Jews either in antiquity or in the early modern period. See Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, 1998).

> [Prov 25:11]. In the Torah there exists the revealed as well as the concealed, but the revealed is not a mere husk, as those cited above contend. It too is good and precious, even though the concealed is more important than it, just like gold is more valuable than silver.[45]

Modena praises the multiplicity of interpretive modes of the Bible and rejects the attempt by kabbalists to acquire hegemony over biblical hermeneutics:

> And so, thank God, the earlier and later commentaries increase and continue to increase [Zech 10:8], those that explain the Torah to us through the allusive manner, in addition to the rabbis, of blessed memory, who preceded and explicated it in a homiletic manner. Who would [dare] say that you people [kabbalists] know the secret sense [*be-helek ha-sod*] in your wisdom [*be-hokmatkhem*], but we do not know [it]?[46]

Kabbalists denigrate other levels of interpretation such as the plain sense of the text, known as *peshat*, the allusive sense of the text, known as *remez*, and the homiletic sense, known as *derash*. Modena stresses the importance of interpreting the Bible in ways other than the mystical one.

Modena connects this discussion of biblical interpretation to Ibn Gabbai's critique of Maimonides:

> But [Ibn] Gabbai continues to curse and revile the Rabbi, The Guide, of blessed memory. In [the third section of] his work, *Helek ha-Takhlit*,[47] chapter sixteen, he wrote: "the intellect [*sekhel*] is precluded from grasping the Secrets of the Torah [*sitrei ha-Torah*] and even the intellect of Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, could not grasp it until the Ancient of Days Himself reveals them." As if to say that everything that they [i.e., the kabbalists] utter about these matters, [they say because] the spirit of the Lord speaks to them, as it did to Moses.[48]

Over and above the claims that kabbalists make about the exclusive importance of their mystical interpretation of the Bible, they posit that their interpretation cannot be derived through intellectual inquiry; one

---

[45] Modena, following Ibn Tibbon's translation of Maimonides, uses the terms *nigleh* and *nistar*, which I have translated respectively as "revealed" and "concealed." Pines uses "internal" and "external" for the passage. See Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963), pp. 11–12.

[46] MS 14A, 1–6; ed. Libowitz, 15.

[47] This is the third of four sections of Ibn Gabbai's *Avodat ha-Kodesh*.

[48] MS A 14A, 6; ed. Libowitz, 15. Modena quotes the identical passage a second time without giving the citation. See MS A 17A, 11; ed. Libowitz, 22.

must either have an oral tradition that stretches back to Moses at Sinai or receive divine revelation. Given that Kabbalah has not been transmitted continuously since the divine revelation at Sinai, reasons Modena, the only remaining option is that each and every kabbalist receives divine revelation like Moses. Modena sees this as an expression of incredible hubris and concludes his discussion with a stinging rebuke.

While Ibn Gabbai is portrayed in this quotation and elsewhere in *Ari Nohem* as a harsh critic of Maimonides, the boundaries between different kabbalistic interpretations of Maimonides are by no means hard and fast. In Ibn Gabbai's case, they are explicitly crossed, if not in Modena's reading of him, then certainly in Ibn Gabbai's own work. Modena casts Ibn Gabbai solely as a critic of Maimonides, a curser and reviler, yet he ignores the fact that at various points in *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, Ibn Gabbai softens his polemic against Maimonides and attempts to turn him into a kabbalist.[49] As will be discussed below, Ibn Gabbai was hardly the only kabbalist to treat Maimonides in such a fashion. For Modena's polemical purposes, however, Ibn Gabbai appears only as a Maimonidean critic.

Modena delivers these criticisms of both Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai only after having quoted from Maimonides; in these two instances he quotes from the *Guide*, while elsewhere in *Ari Nohem* he quotes from the introduction to the commentary on the Mishnah and the Code, specifically the introduction and the *Book of Knowledge*. To a certain extent, Maimonides functions as a shield behind which Modena can hide as he delivers his criticism of learned and well-respected kabbalists. Maimonides and the *Guide* serve as an anchor within the Jewish tradition for Modena's polemic and he invokes both the man and his work as part of a rhetorical strategy in his attack on kabbalists. One might question whether Modena is as committed to hero-worship as the kabbalists he criticizes? Kabbalists have impugned the authority of Maimonides, and what is more, their work has been printed in multiple editions. This affront requires a vigilant response on the part of a defender of Maimonides.

[49] For one instance see Scholem, "From Scholar to Kabbalist," p. 198.

## II. *Kabbalists Who Defended Maimonides*

According to Modena, Ibn Gabbai derived his argument that Kabbalah was beyond intellectual inquiry from Nahmanides, the rabbinic polymath who flourished in thirteenth-century Catalonia.[50] In particular, Modena associates this position with a particular phrase whose origin he assigns to Nahmanides: "investigation of it [Kabbalah] is foolishness" [*ve-ha-severah bah ivelet*].[51] Yet Modena does not denounce Nahmanides as he does Ibn Gabbai; his attitude toward Nahmanides is far more nuanced. Although he criticizes Nahmanides' claim that Kabbalah is beyond intellectual inquiry, Modena appeals to Nahmanides as a model particularly regarding his attitude to Maimonides. For Modena, Nahmanides serves as the foremost kabbalist to have defended Maimonides and the *Guide*. A thinker of intellectual and spiritual stature who serves as a counterweight to Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai, Nahmanides defended, at least partially, Maimonides and his philosophical work. If Ibn Gabbai and Shem Tov appear throughout *Ari Nohem*, Nahmanides surfaces considerably fewer times, and when he does, his name most frequently occurs embedded within the citation of another text. However, on two occasions Modena cites Nahmanides' letter in defense of Maimonides addressed to the sages of northern France in the 1230s during the first Maimonidean controversy.[52]

---

[50] For the connection between Ibn Gabbai and Nahmanides on this point see MS A 12A, 19–12B, 8; ed. Libowitz, 12. The scholarly literature on Nahmanides is vast. Three recent studies are Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* (Tel Aviv, 2003) [Hebrew]; Moshe Halbertal, *By Way of Truth: Nahmanides and the Creation of Tradition* (Jerusalem, 2006) [Hebrew]; Nina Caputo, *Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community & Messianism* (Notre Dame, 2007). See also the citations in the notes below.

[51] MS 12A, 20–21; ed. Libowitz, 12. "[But] this type of investigation and speculation is forbidden, from the words of Nahmanides, of blessed memory…The first among them who said: investigation of it is foolishness. Many of them took this from him and said the same." The phrase also appears in *Ari Nohem* at MS A 12B, 1; 14B, 7; 42A, 1; ed. Libowitz, 13, 16, 82. Nahmanides uses this phrase in the final lines of his introduction to his commentary on the Bible, as cited in Halbertal, *By Way of Truth*, p. 311.

[52] On this episode see Daniel J. Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy, 1180–1240* (Leiden, 1965); Joseph Shatzmiller, "Toward a Portrait of the First Controversy over the Writings of Maimonides," *Zion* 34 (1969), pp. 126–144 [Hebrew]; Azriel Shohat, "Clarifications on the episode of the first Maimonidean controversy," *Zion* 36 (1971), pp. 27–60 [Hebrew]; Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982). For Nahmanides' role see David Berger, "How Did Nahmanides Propose to Resolve the Maimonidean Controversy?" in *Me'ah Shearim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, eds. Gerald Blidstein, Ezra Fleischer, Carmi Horowitz, and Bernard Septimus

Although written over four centuries before the composition of Modena's polemic, Nahmanides' letter to the sages of France was of more than casual interest to a Jewish intellectual in Venice in the 1630s. The letter had appeared in print for the first time as part of Joseph Solomon Delmedigo's omnibus *Ta'alumoth Hokmah*, a work that played a fundamental role in Modena's thinking about Kabbalah that was printed at Hanau between 1629 and 1631.[53] Nahmanides' actual defense of Maimonides' *Guide* was quite limited. He only called for the ban by the French sages on the private study of the *Guide* to be revoked but upheld their ban on group study of the text.[54] In describing Nahmanides' letter as "long and blessed, bound and attached, in defense of the book, the *Guide*,"[55] Modena may have been guided by the presentation of Nahmanides' letter in Delmedigo's *Ta'alumoth Hokmah*, where it appears under the title, "Nahmanides' Epistle in defense of the book of the *Guide*."[56]

For Modena, Nahmanides' letter emphasizes two vitally important points: the personal piety of Maimonides himself and the role of the *Guide* in preventing the apostasy of numerous Jews. Quoting Nahmanides about the *Guide*, Modena asks:

---

(Jerusalem, 2001), pp. 135–146. See also the sources in Jacob Dienstag, "The Moreh Nevukhim Controversy: An Annotated Bibliography," in *Abraham Maimonides' Wars of the Lord and the Maimonidean Controversy*, ed. Fred Rosner (Haifa, 2000), pp. 140–200. On Nahmanides' attitude toward Maimonides see Halbertal's study cited above as well as Bernard Septimus, "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 11–34; Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments* (Albany, 1998). See also Jacob Dienstag, "Maimonides and Nahmanides: A Bibliography," *Da'at* 27 (1991), pp. 125–139.

[53] On Delmedigo and his relationship to Modena see the discussion in Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, introduction and chapter two. For the textual history of Nahmanides' letter see Mauro Perani, "Mistica e Filosofia: la mediazone di Namanide della polemica sugli scritti di Maimonide," in *Nahmanide: esegetica e cabbalistica*, eds. Moshe Idel and Mauro Perani (Florence, 1998), p. 115, n. 34; Berger, "How Did Nahmanides Propose to Resolve the Maimonidean Controversy?" p. 139. On the printing of Delmedigo's work in Hanau, and not in Basel as indicated on the title page of the work, see Gershom Scholem, *Abraham Cohen Herrera, Author of Sha'ar Ha-Shamayim* (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 26 [Hebrew].

[54] Berger, "How Did Nahmanides Propose to Resolve the Maimonidean Controversy?" pp. 135–46.

[55] Modena's discussion of Nahmanides' letter appears in MS A 7B, 1–20; 24B, 14; ed. Libowitz, 4, 39.

[56] *Iggeret ha-Ramban le-Hitnatslut Sefer ha-Moreh*, appears at the top of each of the four pages of Nahmanides' letter. See Delmedigo, *Sefer Ta'alumoth Hokhmah* (Hanau, 1629–1631), pp. 85–90.

> How many of those displaced from the faith did he [Maimonides] gather up? To how many epicureans did he respond?... The Rabbi [Maimonides] placed his books as crowns in the face of tribulation, as a shield to the arrows of the bows of the Greeks, those [Isa 10:1] who write out evil writs.[57]

Dismissing Shem Tov's attempt to rebut Nahmanides' letter as "perversion," Modena notes that Nahmanides was never "satiated as he wrote to praise, laud, glorify, and exalt his [Maimonides'] wisdom [*hokhmato*] and piety." At the conclusion of his account of Nahmanides' letter, Modena writes, "how will they [the kabbalists] respond to Nahmanides, of blessed memory, first in this Kabbalah, who praises him [Maimonides] and glorifies him?"

Nahmanides' stature as an eminent kabbalist plays a complicated role in *Ari Nohem*. Although Modena uses Nahmanides' reputation as a kabbalist to criticize others for daring to attack Maimonides, he rejects his attempt to claim Kabbalah as beyond intellectual inquiry. Yet he never denounces Nahmanides in the same manner that he rejects Ibn Gabbai and Shem Tov and only criticizes his engagement with Kabbalah in an indirect manner. Throughout *Ari Nohem*, Modena repeatedly discusses Isaac bar Sheshet's responsum on the study of Kabbalah, and at one point he quotes Bar Sheshet as writing, "Rabbenu Nissim, of blessed memory, told me in private [*be-yihud*] that Nahmanides became far too absorbed in his belief of this Kabbalah."[58] In *Ari Nohem*, Modena rarely shirks from criticizing those figures, whether living or dead, with whom he disagrees; his treatment of Nahmanides as a kabbalist seems doubly significant in this respect. Despite his utility as a defender of Maimonides, Nahmanides and his study of Kabbalah require some

---

[57] MS A 7B, 6–11; ed. Libowitz, 4.

[58] Responsa 157. Two editions of Isaac bar Sheshet's responsa had appeared in print before the composition of *Ari Nohem*. Responsa 157 appears in both but the first edition printed in Istanbul is not paginated. See Isaac bar Sheshet, *Teshuvot Ha-Rav* (Istanbul, 1546); idem, *She'elot U-Teshuvot* (Riva di Trento, 1559), 88A–89A. For the passage in *Ari Nohem* see MS A 27A, 10; ed. Libowitz, 44. Other instances of Bar Sheshet's responsum in *Ari Nohem* include MS A 18A, 13; 26B, 25; 28B, 18; 43B, 13; ed. Libowitz, 25, 43, 47, 87. Bar Sheshet also appears in the list of writers against Kabbalah that appears at the end of MS A 48B, 10. Ibn Gabbai, in *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, part II, chapter 13, cites the identical passage of Bar Sheshet's responsum with Rabbenu Nissim's critique of Nahmanides, and attempts to respond to it. This passage in Ibn Gabbai was cited by Modena in *Ari Nohem* on at least one occasion. See MS A 18A, 12–13; ed. Libowitz, 25. Bar Sheshet's responsum is also quoted in Delmedigo, "Mazref Le-Hokmah," in *Ta'alumoth Hokmah*, 13A. On this responsum see Halbertal, *By way of Truth*, p. 11.

form of rebuttal. Modena offers this critique only through the voices of the past: Isaac bar Sheshet quoting Rabbenu Nissim.

## III. *Kabbalistic Appropriation of Maimonides*

While some kabbalists criticized Maimonides and others defended him, still other late medieval and early modern kabbalists appropriated his thought in one of two distinct forms. One line of thinking is found in a legend about Maimonides' embrace of Kabbalah at the end of his life. According to this "conversion" story, Maimonides himself embraced the study of Kabbalah right before his death, recanting his rationalism and expressing regret for his philosophical writings, and particularly for the *Guide*.[59] The second kabbalistic mode of appropriating Maimonides is to interpret the *Guide* itself in kabbalistic terms.

In discussing Maimonides' alleged conversion to Kabbalah, Modena poses a rhetorical question: if Kabbalah were a tradition from Moses and the prophets, how is it possible that Maimonides did not study it with his teachers, among whom Modena includes Isaac Alfasi (ca. 1013–ca. 1103).[60] Rather, argues Modena, Maimonides did know of certain kabbalistic practices, including traditions about theurgic usage of the divine names (*pe'ullot ha-shemot*) and the composition of amulets, and he condemned them. A sentence later, Modena alludes to the legend about Maimonides' conversion to Kabbalah before his death:

> But when those unhappy people saw this . . . they sought for themselves this refuge of falsehood [Isa 28:17], saying that it has been found written in

---

[59] Scholem, "From Scholar to Kabbalist"; Michael Schmidman, "On Maimonides' Conversion to Kabbalah," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 375–88; Louis Jacobs, "Attitudes of the Kabbalists and Hasidim towards Maimonides," *The Solomon Goldman Lectures* 5 (1990), pp. 45–55. Traditions about a philosopher's deathbed repentance circulated about numerous figures in the Middle Ages. Modena himself quotes a similar tradition that Aristotle recanted his philosophy and believed in the true God at the end of his life. See MS A 25B; ed. Libowitz, 40–41. This tradition had been translated into Hebrew and printed as part of *Sefer Ha-Tapuah* (Riva di Trento, 1562). On the demonization of Aristotle among medieval Jews see Moshe Idel, "Issues in the doctrine of the author of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," *Sefunot* 17 (1983), p. 235 [Hebrew].

[60] MS A 24B, 9–16; ed. Libowitz, 39. Alfasi, an important legal scholar from North Africa often referred to with the acronym Rif, was not actually a teacher of Maimonides. On Maimonides' education see Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (New York, 2005), pp. 75–121. On Alfasi see Ta-Shma, *Talmudic Commentary in Europe and North Africa* (Jerusalem, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 145–54 [Hebrew].

> the name of the Rabbi. These are the words of R. Elijah son of Hayim from Genazzano . . . in *Iggeret ha-Hamudot* which I shall certainly mention [Jer 31:20] for opprobrium in the chapter after this one. This was brought in his name in *Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah* of [Gedalya ibn] Yahya, of blessed memory. In addition, Gabbai in his *Avodah*,[61] Gate ____ Chapter___ expanded and insisted upon saying all of the above in the name of several writers[62] after all the tables of his chapters were filled with vomit and filth [Isa 28:8] against the Rabbi, of blessed memory, and his pure teachings.[63]

In this passage Modena merely alludes to the conversion story noting its popularity and its transmission in writing by three different figures, Elijah Genazzano (ca. 1490), Meir ibn Gabbai, and Gedalya ibn Yahya (1515–ca. 1587).[64]

A page later, Modena cites the story in full and connects it to his critique of the antiquity of Kabbalah:

> They invented in his [Maimonides'] name these words: Upon hearing the words of Kabbalah at the end of his life, he retracted and regretted what he had written. But who would believe this rumor, who would believe this, who is it that testifies that these words ever originated from the Rabbi, of blessed memory, and not from them, and the masses? Moreover, the lie is self-evident and entirely unfounded. If it [i.e., Kabbalah] had been a tradition from the prophets like the Oral Torah, the Rabbi, of blessed memory, would already have known about it from his youth. And his teachers who had taught him the one would have taught him the other, as I said earlier. Certainly they would have considered him a student worthy of receiving the Secrets of the Torah and he would never have dared write against it, heaven forefend.[65]

For Modena, the story about Maimonides, much like Kabbalah in general, is an invention lacking any factual basis. Once the kabbalists

---

[61] There is a gap in the manuscript as to the location of the citation in Ibn Gabbai's *Avodat ha-Kodesh*. In his edition of *Ari Nohem*, Libowitz lists the citation as *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, part 2, chapter 13 as well as part 3, chapter 18. See below for the reference.

[62] Presumably Isaac Abravanel in *Nahalat Avot* cited by Ibn Gabbai in *Avodat ha-Kodesh* 2:13.

[63] MS 25A, 10–16; ed. Libowitz, 40.

[64] See Eliyyah Hayim ben Binyamin Genazzano, *La Lettera preziosa*, ed. Fabrizio Lelli (Florence, 2002), pp. 129–30. Ibn Gabbai, *Marot Elohim*, 33A. In the same chapter that Ibn Gabbai quotes the legend about Maimonides, he also cites the responsum of Isaac bar Sheshet quoted numerous times in *Ari Nohem*. Ibn Yahya, *Shalshelet Ha-Kabbalah* (Venice, 1587), 44A–44B. Ibn Yahya quotes Genzanno's *Iggeret Hamudot* about the legend. Although Modena does not mention it, the legend also appears in Joseph Solomon Delmedigo's *Ta'alumoth Hokmah*. See Delmedigo, *Sefer Ta'alumoth Hokhmah* 15B–16A.

[65] MS A 25B 13–20; ed. Libowitz, 41.

realized that the *Guide* condemned many of the beliefs and practices central to their worldview, such as the combinations of letters, numerology, and theurgic use of the names of God, they needed to appropriate Maimonides but abandon his *Guide*. Modena explodes in anger about this legend; for him the kabbalization of Maimonides is worse than Kabbalah itself.

Appropriating the historical figure through legend but abandoning his philosophical work was not the only strategy that kabbalists used to neutralize Maimonides. Describing another method used by kabbalists to domesticate Maimonides, Modena writes: "There are some of them who strove to explain with all their might his [Maimonides'] words, and one of these commentaries on his book the *Guide of the Perplexed* [explains] it in accord with their Kabbalah."[66] Only a page later, Modena returns to this approach and writes:

> Among them, there was also one who chose a different path to defend this [legend of Maimonides the kabbalist], and he explicated his esteemed book, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, in terms of their Kabbalah. And it is in your possession.[67]

The addressee of this passage, and owner of a kabbalistic commentary on the *Guide*, is clearly Joseph Hamiz, the addressee of *Ari Nohem*. While several kabbalistic commentaries on the *Guide* were composed in the Middle Ages, earlier scholarship suggests that the one in Hamiz's possession was a work by Abraham Abulafia.[68] Moshe Idel has identified a corpus of Abulafia's writings that were collected by Hamiz over the course of his life and has demonstrated that Hamiz had access to writings by Abulafia that have not survived.[69] Given that Modena does not seek to avoid criticizing his opponents by name, his unflattering

---

[66] MS A 24B, 22–23; ed. Libowitz, 39.

[67] MS A 25A, 16–18; ed. Libowitz, 40.

[68] On medieval kabbalistic commentaries to the *Guide* see Idel, "The *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah." For the identification of the book in Hamiz's possession as having been written by Abraham Abulafia see Isaac Reggio's unpublished notes to the manuscript copy he made of *Ari Nohem*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Reggio 34, 41B.

[69] See Moshe Idel, "Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret and Abraham Abulafia: History of a Submerged Controversy about Kabbalah," in *Atarah le-Hayyim*, eds. Daniel Boyarin, Shamma Friedman, Marc Hirshman, Menahem Schmelzer, and Israel M. Ta-Shma (Jerusalem, 2000), p. 249, n. 89. Idel identified JNUL manuscript 3009/8 as Hamiz's autograph. In his introduction to this text, Hamiz uses the phrase *Ari Nohem* in the opening lines of his polemic against Solomon ibn Adret in defense of Abraham Abulafia. See JNUL MS 3009/8, 1A.

reference to an unnamed kabbalistic commentator on the *Guide* may indicate that he did not know the author's identity. The only works of Abulafia to have appeared in print before the composition of *Ari Nohem* appeared anonymously and Abulafia's name does not appear anywhere in *Ari Nohem*.[70]

Modena poses a rhetorical question that offers a revealing insight into the different approaches taken by kabbalists to Maimonides and the *Guide*.

> Who shall explain to me how to reconcile the insult and spittle [Isa 50:6] that they scattered on every place of his aforementioned book—Gabbai and Shem Tov—with the commentary of this man?[71]

Modena juxtaposes the kabbalistic critics of Maimonides, Shem Tov and Ibn Gabbai, with the kabbalistic commentator to the *Guide*, most probably Abraham Abulafia, and points to the fundamental discrepancy between their approaches. The former criticize Maimonides; the latter appropriates him by writing a kabbalistic commentary to the *Guide*. He remains keenly aware of the incompatibility between the criticism leveled at Maimonides by Ibn Gabbai and Shem Tov and the appropriation of Maimonides by the *Guide*'s kabbalistic commentator.[72] In either case, however, Modena posits that kabbalists misunderstand and misread Maimonides.

## IV. *The Study of the* Guide *in Seventeenth-Century Venice*

As opposed to kabbalists who had misread Maimonides, Modena sought to instruct Hamiz in the correct reading of the *Guide*. Modena and

---

[70] Excerpts from Abulafia's works appeared in Avraham ben Yehudah Almalikh, *Likute Shikhehah u-Fe'ah* (Ferrara, 1556). However, Abulafia is mentioned by name in a work known to Modena. See Delmedigo, *Ta'alumoth Hokhmah*, 13B.

[71] MS 25A, 18–19; ed. Libowitz, 40.

[72] The notion of turning Maimonides' *Guide* into a kabbalistic text also found an echo in the writings of Christian kabbalists such as Johannes Reuchlin. See Moshe Idel, "Introduction to the Bison Book Edition," in *Johannes Reuchlin: On the Art of the Kabbalah: De Arte Cabalistica* (Lincoln and London, 1993), xvi, n. 43; Elliot Wolfson, "Language, Secrecy and the Mysteries of the Law: Theurgy and the Christian Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin," *Kabbalah* 13 (2005), p. 25, n. 49. Modena, however, does not connect his critique of Christian Kabbalah to the kabbalistic appropriation of Maimonides or the *Guide*. See Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter five.

Hamiz studied Maimonides' *Guide* together and this joint undertaking provided them with the opportunity to debate central theological issues. By reading over their shoulders, it is possible to isolate both the specific passages they examined and the primary concerns of their study. In *Ari Nohem* Modena explicitly draws on the *Guide* to make points about prayer, the nature of heresy, the biblical figure of Abraham, the reasons for the commandments, and the transmission of the Oral Torah. On at least one occasion, Modena juxtaposes rabbinic dicta in ways very similar to Maimonides without explicitly mentioning the *Guide* as his source.[73] Modena certainly used Samuel ibn Tibbon's translation of the *Guide* that had appeared in print twice during the sixteenth century.[74]

Modena refers to his joint reading of the *Guide* with Hamiz on several occasions, and two of these passages that appear towards the end of the treatise merit close attention. Modena outlines what he expects his student to derive from his reading of Maimonides. In chapter twenty-seven, Modena discusses the requirements, both personal and intellectual, that must be fulfilled before a person can engage in the study of divine wisdom, or metaphysics. Citing the parable of the palace in chapter fifty-one of the third section of the *Guide*, Modena compares kabbalists to "those who have turned their backs upon the ruler's habitation, their faces being turned another away. The more these people walk, thinking they are coming close, the greater is their distance, because their paths lack a solid foundation and a trustworthy place."[75]

The *Guide* functions as an authoritative source, in some sense the authoritative source, for the requirements that must be fulfilled before engaging in the study of metaphysics. Shortly thereafter Modena addresses Hamiz directly:

---

[73] MS A 17A, 15; ed. Libowitz, 22.

[74] Ibn Tibbon's translation appeared in Venice in 1551 and in Sabbionetta in 1553. Modena's citations of the *Guide* consistently match Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew, and the only other medieval Hebrew translation of the *Guide*, by Judah al-Harizi, did not appear in print until the twentieth century. On Ibn Tibbon see the literature cited above. On early modern editions of the *Guide* see Jacob I. Dienstag, "Maimonides' 'Guide for the Perplexed': A Bibliography of Editions and Translations," in *Occident and Orient: A Tribute to the Memory of Alexander Scheiber*, ed. Robert Dan (Budapest and Leiden, 1988), pp. 95–128.

[75] MS A 44B, 12–14; ed. Libowitz, 89. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, p. 619.

> But you know how much the Rabbi, the Guide, of blessed memory, in his esteemed book, doubled and tripled his warning that any person who enters into metaphysics [*hokhmat ha-elohut*] to which he alludes in that treatise, if he did not first acquire [the prerequisites] of knowledge of wisdom, a purification of his attributes, and [if] the days of his temptation have not preceded him… He speaks about this in the fifth chapter of the first part, and in the thirty-first of it, as well as in the thirty-second, and thirty-third, as well as in other places. Examine them.[76]

Here Modena stipulates knowledge of wisdom, a purification of moral attributes, and the overcoming of temptation. In the continuation of this passage, he adds two other prerequisites: humility and twenty years of age. These last two are drawn not from the *Guide*, but from writings by the kabbalists themselves, notably Moses Cordovero and the work of his own son-in-law Jacob Levi.[77] While this may simply be part of Modena's polemical strategy—he will use whatever source works to make his point as effectively as possible—he appears to use the comments about the requirements of age in Cordovero and Levi as a means of expanding upon a concept mentioned in the *Guide*. Maimonides had described the importance of "overcoming temptation" before beginning the study of metaphysics. Cordovero and Levi offer a specific age and add the importance of humility. Modena not only cites the relevant passages from the *Guide*, but also directs Hamiz to examine these same passages on his own in greater detail.

At the very outset of the third section of *Ari Nohem*, Modena addresses Hamiz and refers to a choice passage in the *Guide* which they had studied. "I am certain that you have not forgotten what we read together in his book, there is no limit to its praise, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, part I, chapter sixty-one."[78] Modena cites this passage more than any other passage in the *Guide*. In this chapter as well as the several chapters preceding it, Maimonides develops his notion of the negative attributes of God. Human beings, according to Maimonides, cannot obtain positive knowledge of God's essential attributes. Attributes ascribed to God in the Bible such as merciful or wrathful must be interpreted as attributes

---

[76] MS A 44B 16–19; ed. Libowitz, 89.

[77] MS A 44B 20–26, 45A, 1–4; ed. Libowitz, 89–90. On the importance of Jacob Levi in the composition of *Ari Nohem* see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter one. On Cordovero and the prohibition of studying Kabbalah see Moshe Idel, "On the History of the Prohibition to Study Kabbalah before Age Forty," *AJS Review* 5 (1980), p. 13 [Hebrew].

[78] MS A 39A, 5–7; ed. Libowitz, 76.

of action, meaning God acts in a merciful or wrathful manner. In chapter sixty-one, Maimonides writes that the different names of God that appear in the Bible derive from God's actions. He proceeds with an exposition of the tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God uttered by the high priest in the Temple. For Maimonides, the prohibition on the pronunciation of this name derives from the fact that this name alone is indicative of God's essence. Other names of God that appear in the Hebrew Scriptures do not indicate God's essence; they refer only to actions that can be attributed to God. At the conclusion of the chapter, Maimonides includes a short rebuttal of "the writers of charms," who claim that one can manipulate the different names of God to perform miracles.

Modena emphasizes this chapter of the *Guide*, along with those that immediately precede and succeed it, in order to reinforce his critique of the kabbalistic notions of the names of God and the kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sefirot*. As in other cases, Modena invokes Maimonides in order to anchor his own claims.

> However, if you envisage His essence as it is when divested and stripped of all actions, He no longer has a derived name in any respect… but which they call names and of which they think that they necessitate holiness and purity and work miracles. All these are stories that it is not seemly for a perfect man to listen to, much less to believe. Until here, his [Maimonides'] words. From this it appears that in the time of the great rabbi, of blessed memory, this nonsense also existed, and he knew about it and distances himself from it as the pursuit of wind [see Eccl 1:14] and contrary words, as I wrote earlier in chapter eleven.[79]

Elsewhere in *Ari Nohem* Modena rejects the notion that the kabbalists know the names of God and that they can use them to affect change in heaven and on earth, and he attributes a similar stance to Maimonides.[80] According to Modena, contemporaries of Maimonides claimed to have secrets and traditions about the divine name, something Modena simply calls "this nonsense," and Maimonides rejected these ideas in no uncertain terms. In short, Modena sees his own rejection of contemporary kabbalists who claim to be able to perform miracles using divine names as entirely within this Maimonidean tradition and,

[79] MS A 39A, 8–14; ed. Libowitz, 75–76.
[80] MS A 24B, 18–25A, 7; ed. Libowitz, 39–40.

in fact, as a continuation of Maimonides' own program.[81] Furthermore, he rejects the attempts by kabbalists to interpret this passage of the *Guide* as evidence that Maimonides himself knew of these same traditions about the divine name.[82]

Modena also rejects the kabbalistic notion of the *Sefirot*, criticizing this doctrine as one that opens the door to a concept of divinity that is plural in nature. In order to emphasize the essential unity of God, Modena invokes the same passage in *Guide* 1:61. Modena poses the following question about the *Sefirot*:

> Which is simpler to visualize in the human mind and [which is] the greater expression of God's unity, a greater safeguard against erring: thinking that He is one, singular and unique, by denying that there could be plurality in Him or imagining in one's thoughts the proliferation of *Sefirot*, channels, and lights?[83]

Railing against the belief in *Sefirot*, Modena asserts that the primary method of combating such a belief is to adopt the Maimonidean notion of the negative attributes of God. Modena's rejection of the kabbalistic notion of *Sefirot* is hardly new in the history of Jewish thought and he himself demonstrates keen awareness that numerous figures before him refused to accept the validity of this doctrine. To take only one example: On at least four occasions in *Ari Nohem* Modena cites with approval a comment quoted in Isaac bar Sheshet's responsum about belief in the ten *Sefirot*: "The Christians believe in the trinity and they [the kabbalists] believe in the decad."[84] Like the unnamed philosopher quoted by Isaac bar Sheshet, Modena sees belief in the *Sefirot* as akin to belief in the multiplicity of God.

Throughout *Ari Nohem*, Modena's rejection of the kabbalistic notion of *Sefirot* goes hand-in-hand with his criticism of Moses Cordovero and his treatise *Pardes Rimonim*. While much of Modena's rebuttal of Cordovero has to do with his importance as one of the leading kabbalistic

---

[81] For a recent study that argues that Maimonides rejected the proto-kabbalistic practices of his contemporaries see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford, 2006).

[82] MS A 25A, 3–4; ed. Libowitz, 40.

[83] MS A 16A, 18–20; ed. Libowitz, 20.

[84] MS A 27A, 7–9, 27A, 20–21 [not in the Libowitz edition], 43B, 13–14, 46A, 24; ed. Libowitz, 44, 87, 94. See Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early Seventeenth Century," p. 175, n. 81: "This is the classical argument used by Jewish authors against Kabbalah. Its origin and history deserve a separate study." For Bar Sheshet's responsum see the references above.

theologians of sixteenth-century Safed,[85] it also relates to Cordovero's attempt to appropriate Maimonides.[86] More than any of the other kabbalists mentioned in *Ari Nohem* with the possible exception of Ibn Gabbai, Cordovero attempted to synthesize medieval Kabbalah with the philosophical teachings of Maimonides. His *Pardes Rimonim* offers a digest of prior kabbalistic theories of the *Sefirot*. Cordovero repeatedly drew on Maimonides' *Guide* and his theory of the divine attributes to explicate the kabbalistic notion of the *Sefirot*. While Maimonides explained the multiple terms used to describe God in the Hebrew Scriptures as indicative of different actions performed by God, Cordovero used the terminology of the *Sefirot* to describe God himself. Modena will have none of this. Throughout *Ari Nohem*, he repeatedly attempts to posit a basic disjuncture between the *Sefirot* as explained by Cordovero and Maimonides' notion of the negative attributes of God.

The sense of urgency that one detects in Modena's polemic against the *Sefirot* overlaps with his appeal to Hamiz regarding their joint study of the *Guide*. Hamiz, by contrast, reads Maimonides with kabbalistic commentaries and discovers an interpretation of Maimonides that validates the kabbalistic traditions about the divine names as well as a justification of the *Sefirot*. Just as Maimonides prescribed the *Guide* as a type of therapeutic cure for the spiritual ailments of his own student, Joseph ibn Shimon, whom he described as a confused reader of philosophical and theological works, Modena prescribed the *Guide* as a cure for Hamiz's kabbalistic tendencies.[87]

---

[85] On Modena's critique of Cordovero's *Pardes Rimonim* within the context of his larger criticism of the Kabbalah of Safed see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter four.

[86] On Cordovero's relationship to Maimonides see Joseph Ben-Shlomo, *The Mystical Theology of Moses Cordovero* (Jerusalem, 1965), pp. 23–25, 297–299 [Hebrew].

[87] "As I [Maimonides] also saw, you [Joseph ibn Shimon] had already acquired some smattering of this subject from people other than myself; you were perplexed, as stupefaction had come over you… Your absence moved me to compose this Treatise [the *Guide*], which I have composed for you and those like you, however few they are" (*Guide*, p. 4). On Ibn Shimon see Sarah Stroumsa, *Beginnings of the Maimonidean Controversy in the East: Yosef ibn Shim'on's Silencing Epistle concerning the Resurrection of the Dead* (Jerusalem, 1999) [Hebrew]. Nearly half a century earlier, in a series of letters to Gershon Cohen written in the winter of 1593, Modena had advised his correspondent to examine Maimonides' *Guide* and his treatment of the account of creation and the account of the chariot. See *Letters of Rabbi Judah Aryeh Modena*, pp. 60–67.

## V. *Modena's Maimonideanism*

Modena's notions about writing and esotericism were heavily influenced by Maimonides. According to some kabbalists, particular individuals had been compelled to record esoteric secrets in writing at periodic moments of crisis in order to prevent their disappearance. This explanation accounted for the inscription of the *Zohar* in writing in late medieval Spain and for its publication in print in sixteenth-century Italy. Only by the public revelation of esoteric doctrine had they managed to avert a complete rupture in transmission. Modena's response to this theory drew heavily upon the ideas of Maimonides, both the history of the Oral Torah presented in the introduction to Maimonides' code of law and the notion of ancient esoteric secrets outlined in the *Guide of the Perplexed.* The kabbalistic narrative itself echoes Maimonides' history of the Oral Torah sketched in the introduction to his code of law. In Maimonides' rendering, Judah the Prince recorded the Mishnah in writing as a response to a crisis in the transmission of tradition.[88] While the Mishnah had succeeded in preventing the loss of the Oral Torah, Maimonides argued elsewhere that ancient esoteric secrets had actually been lost. In the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides emphasizes that a set of esoteric secrets given to Moses had not survived the vagaries of history. Only through the power of his own intellect had Maimonides himself been able to recover these secrets.[89]

Like a good Maimonidean, Modena posits that ancient esoteric secrets had been lost. An extensive marginal note addressed to Hamiz in the second person indicates that Maimonides' claim about the loss of esoteric secrets was central to Modena's polemic:

> Not only did I know, but all my life I taught to the multitudes that Moses our teacher, of blessed memory, and the prophets had in their dominion secrets and mysteries [*sod ve-seter*] about every stroke in our Torah; but as

[88] On Maimonides' introduction to the Code see most recently Moshe Halbertal, "What Is the Mishneh Torah? On Codification and Ambivalence," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), pp. 81–111. As Halbertal indicates, Maimonides recounted this history of the Oral Torah in the introduction to his code of law as justification for his own work. He saw his own time period as a similar moment of crisis and his own efforts to codify the Oral Torah in writing as a similar gesture to the Mishnah of Judah the Prince.

[89] *Guide* 1:71, pp. 175–84.

> a result of the persecutions and exiles of Israel, these pathways ceased, as Maimonides, of blessed memory, wrote.[90]

Modena violently opposes the attempt by late medieval and contemporary kabbalists to associate the set of ideas and practices referred to as Kabbalah with the ancient esoteric secrets possessed by Moses. After an explicit invocation of Maimonides and his theory of esoteric secrets, Modena posits a basic disjuncture between what his contemporaries refer to as Kabbalah and the ancient esoteric secrets given to Moses at Sinai.

> But those who nowadays refer to the Secrets of the Torah [*sitrei Torah*] and the wisdom of truth [*hokhmat ha-emet*], it is all an invention of the last three hundred and fifty years, and was not received [*mekubbelet*] from the prophets. And of all that is opposed to Kabbalah in this treatise of mine, my intention is not against those Secrets of the Torah [*sitrei Torah*], heaven forefend, but against that which they refer to in our time as Kabbalah. As for the true secrets [*ha-sodot amitiyim*], the blessed Lord shall return and reveal them during the redemption of Israel; about this it is said, for the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord [Isa 11:9], and all your children shall be disciples of the Lord [Isa 54:13], and the like.[91]

Only with the redemption of Israel would knowledge of these secrets be revealed.

Modena also rejects the argument that Kabbalah is *Hokhmah*, a medieval Hebrew philosophical term used to denote knowledge, science, or wisdom. Modena's position on this issue appears to have been influenced by the discussion of the term *Hokhmah* in the very last chapter of Maimonides' *Guide*.[92] Although Modena never explicitly cites this chapter, his rejection of the identification of Kabbalah with *Hokhmah* has a distinctly Maimonidean character. In the final chapter of the *Guide*, Maimonides outlines four different senses of the word *Hokhmah*. His distinction between knowledge derived from tradition versus knowledge derived from philosophical speculation seems especially relevant to Modena's discussion of Kabbalah and *Hokhmah*.[93]

---

[90] MS A 8B, between lines 15 and 16.
[91] MS A 8B, between lines 15 and 16.
[92] *Guide* 3:54, pp. 632–38.
[93] In this passage, the term that Pines translates from Maimonides' Judeo-Arabic text as "wisdom" appears in Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation known to Modena as *Hokhmah*. See Maimonides, *Moreh Nevukhim* (Venice, 1551), 184A–184B.

> One who knows the Law in its true reality is called *wise* in two respects: in respect of the rational virtues comprised in the Law and in respect of the moral virtues included in it. But since the rational matter in the Law is received through tradition and is not demonstrated by methods of speculation, the knowledge of the Law came to be set up in the books of the prophets and the sayings of the *Sages* as one separate species, and wisdom, in an unrestricted sense, as another species. It is through this wisdom, in an unrestricted sense, that the rational matter that we receive from the Law through tradition is demonstrated.[94]

Adopting this understanding of *Hokhmah*, Modena rejects both Nahmanides and Ibn Gabbai who had declared that Kabbalah was beyond rational inquiry and speculation. For them, Kabbalah is a closed set of doctrines and not an area where one can advance through speculation and inquiry. This being the case, Kabbalah cannot possibly be defined as *Hokhmah*, because philosophical knowledge is necessarily the product of speculation and inquiry.

The distinction between Kabbalah and *Hokhmah* functions as a leitmotif throughout *Ari Nohem*. The clearest formulation appears in chapter four:

> It [Kabbalah] is not knowledge [*Hokhmah*]. Because knowledge [*Hokhmah*] entails understanding a thing in its causes, and the derivation of secondary principles from primary principles by means of inquiry and analysis as we have said. But in this instance [i.e., Kabbalah], inquiry and analysis are forbidden, as in the words of Nahmanides, of blessed memory . . . who said investigation of it is foolishness.[95]

Modena proceeds to cite two passages from Ibn Gabbai about Kabbalah as beyond intellectual inquiry.

Modena explicitly invokes Maimonides' discussion of esoteric secrets in the *Guide* and appears to have drawn on the work in his distinction between Kabbalah and *Hokhmah*. He does not, however, use Maimonides' writings to construct an independent or coherent theological or philosophical system; rather the *Guide* serves as a source of authority, an integral part of a rhetorical strategy, a polemical resource, and a common point of reference in Modena's discussions with Hamiz. Modena's defense of Maimonides against his kabbalistic critics involved the adoption of particular Maimonidean positions on a host of issues ranging from the nature of God, the intellectual requirements that must

---

[94] *Guide* 3:54, p. 633.
[95] MS A 12, 17–20; ed. Libowitz, 12. On Nahmanides' position see above.

be fulfilled before studying metaphysics, the transmission of the Oral Torah, and the relationship between writing and esotericism.[96]

In the early seventeenth century, numerous other readers, Christian as well as Jewish, turned to the writings of Maimonides in order to make a range of philosophical and theological points. While Modena may have read the *Guide* in Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation, contemporary readers of Latin had access to the *Guide* in Johannes Buxtorf's translation, printed in Basel in 1629. Modena's use of the *Guide* and the *Code* against his Jewish kabbalistic foes, coincides with the interest in Maimonides by the Dutch translators of Maimonides' *Code* in Amsterdam and the English students of the *Guide* such as John Spencer and John Selden.[97] In spite of the parallels between Modena's interest in Maimonides and the interests of contemporary Christian intellectuals, Modena appears to have been somewhat of an isolated voice among

---

[96] "Modena was primarily a polemicist…but though defending Judaism against what he considered to be its adversaries, he never systematically explained his own answer to the question of what indeed Judaism is. Modena seems to accept—more in his later than in his earlier books—the philosophical version of Judaism given by Maimonides." Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early Seventeenth Century," p. 174.

[97] On the Dutch translators of the Code see Aaron L. Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis: Seventeenth Century Apologetics and the Study of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 178–234. On John Spencer, see Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), pp. 55–90; Guy Stroumsa, "John Spencer and the Roots of Idolatry," *History of Religions* 41 (2001), p. 14. On John Selden see Jason Rosenblatt, *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden* (Oxford, 2006). See also Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, 1986), p. 241: "The finest hour of Maimonides' theory [of accommodation] came not in the Middle Ages, but in the seventeenth century: the humanists recognized the affinity between their outlook and his." For an earlier instance see the treatment of Master Ciruelo (ca. 1476–1548) by Joan-Pau Rubies, "Theology, Ethnography, and the Historicization of Idolatry," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (2006), pp. 588–89. See also Jonathan Sheehan, "Sacred and Profane: Idolatry, Antiquarianism and the Polemics of Distinction in the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present* 192 (2006), p. 54. Sheehan refers to Maimonides as the "darling of seventeenth-century Christian Hebraism." For reference to discussions about Maimonides between Robert Boyle and Menasseh ben Israel in Amsterdam see Martin Mulsow, "Idolatry and Science: Against Nature and Worship from Boyle to Rüdiger, 1680–1720," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 (2006), p. 702, n. 13. Boyle refers to Maimonides as "the ablest of the Jewish rabbis." See also the remark of Richard Popkin: "Although one finds it [the *Guide* in Buxtorf's Latin translation] cited all over the place, and although one finds editions of it in many, many private libraries of Christian scholars, there is as yet no study of the impact of Maimonides on seventeenth-century European thought." Richard Popkin, "Some Further Comments on Newton and Maimonides," in *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology*, eds. James E. Force and Richard Popkin (Dordrecht, 1990), p. 2.

Venetian Jews in his adoption of a Maimonidean program. Unlike Modena who turned to Maimonides, contemporary Venetian Jews such as Hamiz, Jacob Levi, and others had turned to Kabbalah, both its medieval forms and the new doctrines emerging from sixteenth-century Safed, to define their religious outlook.[98]

## *Conclusion*

*Ari Nohem*, an epistolary treatise written by Modena to Hamiz, concludes with a postscript in which Modena addresses Hamiz directly and personally. In a similar fashion to the opening lines of the treatise, Modena invites Hamiz to respond should he disagree with him.[99]

> But if you would like to labor to deliver a response to my words, respond to those anxious of heart [Isa 35:4], lovers of simplicity [Prov 1:22], to strengthen them in it, lest they hear the justice of these words of mine and return from this folly; but in order to have me renounce my belief in this, at the end of my days, in order that they may say about me what they imagined and invented about Maimonides, of blessed memory, do not belabor yourself, have the sense to desist [Prov 23:4] because . . . you shall not move me from my opinion.[100]

No record of Hamiz's reaction to *Ari Nohem*, if he indeed received the work, has been found. In any case, he remained a committed kabbalist long after his teacher's death in 1648. Upon leaving Venice for the island of Zante, where he worked as a doctor in the 1660s, Hamiz became a supporter of Sabbatai Zevi.[101]

Not only was *Ari Nohem* unsuccessful in its attempt to convince its primary addressee of the folly of Kabbalah, later readers, despite Modena's best intentions, made what they would of the text and its author. Readers of *Ari Nohem* at the turn of the nineteenth century

---

[98] For the impact of Safed spirituality on Venetian Jewish life see Dweck, *The Critique of Kabbalah in Leon Modena's* Ari Nohem, chapter four.

[99] For the passage at the outset of *Ari Nohem* see MS A 8B, 8–10; ed. Libowitz, 6.

[100] MS 48A, 5–8; ed. Libowitz, 98.

[101] Ephraim Kupfer, "R. Joseph Hamiz in Zante and His Work," *Sefunot* 2 (1971–1978), pp. 199–216 [Hebrew]; Isaiah Tishby, "Documents about Nathan of Gaza in the Writings of Joseph Hamiz," in idem, *Paths of Faith and Heresy* (Jerusalem, 1984) [Hebrew].

offer an ironic postscript about Modena and Maimonides. One of the later manuscripts of *Ari Nohem* contains a little asterisk next to the passage where Modena tells Hamiz that he has written *Ari Nohem* in his old age in order to ensure that no one would invent stories about him akin to the stories invented about Maimonides. A short note in the margin of the line with the asterisk reads: "Examine what I have cited at the end of the treatise."[102] If one turns the page, the colophon of the manuscript reads:

> Solomon said: "Many designs are in a man's mind, but it is the Lord's plan that is accomplished" [Prov 19:21]. That which happened to Maimonides happened to him [Modena]. For at the end of his life, in his book *The Life of Judah*, extant in manuscript, he wrote that he saw a six-month old baby boy who was about to die open its eyes and recite "Hear O Israel etc." And from that day on he believed in the transmigration of souls. Examine *Shem ha-Gedolim* part II, section *Yod*, paragraph 79, page 43, column four.[103]

Which manuscript of *The Life of Judah* the copyist of this manuscript refers to in his colophon remains obscure. This much is clear: the manuscript was copied at some point in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, as established by the reference to the second volume of Hayim Yosef David Azulai's *Shem ha-Gedolim*, first printed in Livorno in 1786. A version of this story dates from at least eight years earlier. In his travel diaries, *Ma'agal Tov*, Azulai mentions in an entry recorded in the winter of 1778 that Modena recanted his denial of the transmigration of souls when he saw a dying baby recite the *Shema*. Azulai, however, does not mention Modena's *Life of Judah* nor does he refer to the account of Maimonides in *Ari Nohem*.[104] The story of the

---

[102] Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Mich. 314, 40A.

[103] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Mich. 314, 40B.

[104] Hayim Yosef David Azulai, *Ma'agal Tov Ha-Shalem*, ed. Aaron Freimann (Jerusalem, 1934), p. 113. Azulai mentions *Ari Nohem* earlier in *Ma'agal Tov* (9) on an account of his journey in the 1750s. However, he does not mention the story of the dying baby and *gilgul*. Neither Azulai nor the scribe of the Bodleian MS Mich. 314 mention the fact that Modena composed a short treatise against the belief in the transmigration of souls, *Ben David*. It is entirely possible that neither of them knew of this text, which, like *Ari Nohem*, circulated in manuscript until the middle of the nineteenth century. For Isaac Reggio's reaction to this story about Modena see Oxford MS Reggio 34 (Neubauer 2186), 48B through 50A. On 49B Reggio argues that even if Modena were to have recanted of his denial of *gilgul*, this would not have necessitated a recantation of his other criticisms of Kabbalah. For a discussion of Reggio's reaction to this story

philosopher's deathbed repentance, so prevalent in the Middle Ages, resurfaces in northern Italy about a Venetian rabbi intent on defending the legacy of Maimonides.

---

see Howard Adelman, "New Light on the Life and Writings of Leon Modena," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, ed. David R. Blumenthal (Chico, Ca., 1984), pp. 109–122.