

The Guide of the Perplexed as a Jewish Book

The exposition of one who wishes to teach without recourse to parables and riddles is so obscure and brief as to make obscurity and brevity serve in place of parables and riddles.

—Maimonides, Introduction to *Guide of the Perplexed*

This chapter analyzes “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*” and explores the Jewish dimension of Strauss’s essay. My intention here is to read “How To Begin To Study” in light of the *Guide*, only briefly touching on the general political-philosophical issues that serve as context for Strauss’s comments.

“How To Begin To Study” was first published as part of the 1963 University of Chicago English-language edition of the *Guide*. A truncated version of “How To Begin To Study” appeared a second time in the 1965 *Harry Austryn Wolfson Jubilee Volume*, titled, “On the Plan of *The Guide of the Perplexed*.” It was then published a third time under its original name in 1968, in full, in LAM.¹

It might seem strange, if not redundant, to treat the Jewish dimension of “How To Begin To Study.” After all, in the essay Strauss writes: “One begins to understand the *Guide* once one sees that it is not a philosophic book—a book written by a philosopher for Jews—but a Jewish book: a book written by a Jew for Jews.”²

However, Strauss opened his 1967 essay “Notes on Maimonides’ *Book of Knowledge*” on a slightly different note: “If it is true that *The Guide of the Perplexed* is not a philosophic book but a Jewish book, then it surely is not a Jewish book in the same manner in which the *Mishneh Torah* is a Jewish book.”³

The question of whether the *Guide* is a Jewish or philosophic book—and if it is a Jewish book, what kind of Jewish book—is further complicated by Strauss's preface to LAM. There, he explains that LAM extends previous efforts, "to lay bare the fundamental difference between classical and modern political philosophy."⁴ In order to reveal that difference, Strauss illustrates, "the liberalism of premodern thinkers by elucidating some examples of their art of writing."⁵ One of the examples that Strauss brings is Maimonides's *Guide*. In other words, Strauss includes the *Guide* among the works of classical political philosophy. Based on Strauss's different statements, it seems that the *Guide* is somehow both a Jewish book *and* a book of political philosophy. What this means will become clearer as we progress in our understanding of "How To Begin To Study."

This chapter is made up of fifteen parts. The different parts shadow the progression of "How To Begin To Study," an essay made up of fourteen parts, and they treat the major themes and claims that emerge in Strauss's treatment of *The Guide of the Perplexed*. The different parts of Strauss's "How To Begin To Study" are implicitly held together by the theme of "progress," both in its "historical" sense as well as in the sense of "progress in understanding," and these two senses of progress merge at the essay's peak where Strauss treats "the true perplexity," intellectual perplexity as opposed to perplexity that is produced by the imagination. Strauss uses "progress" as an ambiguous term in "How To Begin To Study" in a way that parallels Maimonides's use of "providence" as an ambiguous term in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, but the significance of this parallel will become clear only after we very carefully delineate the Jewish and philosophical dimensions of Strauss's essay in this and the following chapter. Although Maimonides's intended addressee is a potential philosopher, Strauss shows his readers that the *Guide* also addresses the vulgar and the actual philosophers. The different kinds of readers are all in their own way perplexed, and the *Guide* addresses the different kinds of perplexities, including the kinds of contradictions, that bedevil each group.

One note is in order before we begin our analysis of "How To Begin To Study." In 1944 Strauss delivered the lecture, "How to Study Medieval Philosophy."⁶ Strauss began his lecture by stating, "we have to study Medieval Philosophy as exactly and intelligently as possible."⁷ Exact and intelligent study means paying close attention to the smallest details, while never losing sight of the work as a whole, "We must never, for a moment, overlook the wood for the trees."⁸ This advice is pertinent, in turn, for an investigation of Strauss's Maimonidean writings. One must pay attention to the smallest details of Strauss's texts while also stepping back to view those texts in their

contexts and as wholes. In “How To Begin To Study” Strauss seems to remain at the level of the trees for the entire text. Although he treats major themes such as providence, God’s will, God’s wisdom, and so forth, these treatments remain within the horizon line of the *Guide*. However, Strauss’s essay is also a whole, and its significance as a whole extends beyond Maimonidean studies. This chapter follows the progression of Strauss’s argument, and therefore the analysis focuses on many small details. Although occasionally stepping back to view the essay as a whole, by and large it follows Strauss and remain at the level of the trees. The following chapter focuses much more on Strauss’s essay as a whole, and in context. In a sense, this order merely reflects the different contexts within which Strauss published “How To Begin To Study.” In the first chapter, “How To Begin To Study” is read as an introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed*. In the second chapter, “How To Begin To Study” is read within the context of LAM and as an exploration of a work of classical political philosophy.

On the Plan of “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*”

“How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*” is a notoriously difficult text. Strauss doesn’t state a clear thesis; his essay is “rich in obscure passages.”⁹ If one reads “How To Begin To Study” the way one reads a conventional essay or article on medieval philosophy, the text simply resists the reader’s probing. But the obscurity of Strauss’s speech is not accidental. In “Literary Character of *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” Strauss, following Maimonides’s lead, informed his readers that “if someone wishes to teach the secrets without using parables and enigmas, he cannot help substituting for them obscurity and briefness of speech.”¹⁰

Strauss’s obscurity in teaching the secrets of the *Guide* is calculated, artful—which is to say that “How To Begin To Study,” like the text it introduces, needs to be studied, not simply read. Here we again are at a loss: how should we begin to study “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*”?

Strauss begins with his account of the plan of the *Guide*. We follow Strauss’s lead and begin with an account of the plan of “How To Begin To Study.” Strauss divided the *Guide* into seven sections; we will also divide his Introductory essay into its various sections. In the following scheme, the numbers on the far left indicate the sections of Strauss’s essay. The numbers that follow refer to the pagination from the version of “How To Begin To

Study” that appeared in LAM, and the roman numerals that follow thereafter refer to the pagination of “How To Begin To Study” that appeared in the 1963 English-language translation of the *Guide*:

1. The plan of the *Guide*. 140–142/xi–xiv.
2. An attempt to give an account of the *Guide* in light of the question: to what subject is the *Guide* devoted? 142–145/xiv–xvii.
3. The importance of the question: to whom is the *Guide* addressed? 145–154/xvii–xxvi.
4. An account, according to Strauss’s division of the *Guide* into sections and subsections, of the first subsection of the *Guide*’s first section. 154–157/xxvi–xxix.
5. An account of the second subsection of the *Guide*’s first section, that is, 1:2. 157–172/xxix–xliv.
6. An account of 1:3. 172–174/xliv–xlvi.
7. An account of 1:4. 174–175/xlvi–xlvii.
8. An account of 1:5. 175–177/xlvii–xlix.
9. An account of 1:6. 177/xlix–l.
10. An account of 1:7. 177–178/l.
11. An account of 2:1. 178–179/l–li.
12. An account of 2:2. 179–181/li–liii.
13. An account of 2: 3–7. 181–183/liii–lvi.
14. Conclusion. 183–184/lvi.

From the above scheme we see that Strauss examines the first two sections of the *Guide*, or according to Maimonides’s explicit division, all of book one and roughly the first thirty-one chapters of book two.¹¹ Strauss does not treat what he listed as the other five parts of the *Guide* or in other words, the rest of book 2 and all of book 3. Strauss’s essay, after shifting the focus from the *Guide*’s subject matter to the question of its addressee, follows the development of the *Guide* subsection by subsection. The last reference in “How To Begin To Study” to a chapter from the *Guide* is to

book 2, chapter 24, the chapter in which Maimonides introduces “the true perplexity.”

A quick glance at the above scheme is also sufficient to see that Strauss’s essay is divided into fourteen sections. It is not unreasonable to assume that this division into fourteen sections is purposeful, for in “How To Begin To Study” Strauss emphasizes the centrality of the number seven: “The *Guide* consists of seven sections. . . . Wherever feasible, each section is divided into seven subsections; the only section that does not permit of being divided into subsections is divided into seven chapters.¹²

Seven is the magic number, and fourteen is, of course, seven plus seven. Maimonides divided his *Treatise on the Art of Logic* into fourteen chapters, laid down fourteen legal principles in his introduction to *Sefer HaMitzvot*, divided the *Mishneh Torah* into fourteen books, and parallel to those books included fourteen chapters on reasons for the commandments in the *Guide*. In addition, in the *Guide* Maimonides treats the equivocality of the term “man” in 1:14.¹³ The notion that “man” is an equivocal term was central to Strauss’s claim that there is an inevitable and permanent tension between philosophy and society. It is thus not surprising that Strauss divided his essay into fourteen parts. Finally, Strauss himself only treats the first fourteen subsections of the *Guide*; he thus treats the first fourteen subsections of the *Guide* in an essay with fourteen parts.

This division, however, might appear to be forced. While it can be plainly demonstrated that Strauss’s essay follows the *Guide* subsection by subsection through the end of what he designates as the *Guide*’s second section, according to the scheme I sketched above, Strauss’s thirteenth section treats five of Maimonides’s subsections, whereas in all of the other sections from “How To Begin To Study” that analyze subsections, only one subsection is examined. This difficulty can be explained as follows.

In sections 4 through 10 of “How To Begin To Study,” Strauss analyzes the first section of the *Guide*, “Biblical terms applied to God (I 70).”¹⁴ According to Strauss’s division, that section of the *Guide* is further divided into seven subsections. In his treatment of those subsections, Strauss indicates to the reader which subsection he is analyzing.¹⁵ Clearly, then, each of these sections of “How To Begin To Study” stands alone.

In the remainder of his essay, however, Strauss no longer tells the reader which subsection he is analyzing. Accordingly, it is more difficult to differentiate the different sections of “How To Begin To Study.” Nevertheless, Strauss continues to shadow the progression of the *Guide*, and by reading Strauss’s essay closely one can bring the implicit logic of Strauss’s division to the surface. In order to see that “How To Begin To Study” continues to

shadow the movement of the *Guide's* second section, which Strauss calls, "Demonstrations of the existence, unity, and corporeality of God,"¹⁶ it is helpful to bear in mind that Strauss divided the first section of the *Guide* into two uneven parts, "Terms suggesting the corporeality of God (and the angels) (I 1–49)," and "Terms suggesting multiplicity in God (I 50–70)."¹⁷ When he begins his treatment of the second section of the *Guide*, Strauss states that his discussion of the last part of the first section has come to a close, "This must suffice toward making clear the perplexing and upsetting character of Maimonides' teaching regarding unity."¹⁸ This sentence is the first sentence of the paragraph within which it stands, and it serves as a segue into the section 11 of "How To Begin To Study," Strauss's analysis of what he identifies as the first subsection of the second section of the *Guide*, "Introductory (1:71–73)."¹⁹ The key term here is "demonstration," as Strauss emphasizes: "The destruction of the old foundations forces [the addressee of the *Guide*] to seek for a new foundation: he is now compelled to be passionately concerned with *demonstration*, with the *demonstration* not only of God's unity but of His very being in a sense of "being" that cannot be entirely homonymous. For now he knows that the being of God is doubtful as long as it is not established by *demonstration* (1:71)."²⁰

However, Strauss adds that if the addressee of the *Guide* is going to progress in the way of demonstration, he must first learn to distinguish the way of the Kalām from the demonstrations of the philosophers and Maimonides, "The Kalām . . . attempts to demonstrate that God is, and hence it must start from the given and at the same time it must deny the authoritative character of the given. The philosophers on the other hand start from what is given or manifest to the senses (1:71–73)."²¹ In this manner Strauss closes the paragraph in which he begins his discussion of the second section. The careful reader will note that this paragraph contains three references to 1:71, the first chapter of the section named by Strauss, "Introductory." Although Strauss no longer explicitly tells the reader that his account proceeds parallel to the progression of the *Guide's* subsections, these references, together with the opening sentence of the paragraph, plus Strauss's use of "demonstration" as a leading term, leave little doubt that this paragraph constitutes an independent section of "How To Begin To Study" and is devoted to what Strauss counts as the *Guide*, 2: 1.

Strauss begins section 12 as follows: "Maimonides turns first to the analysis and critique of the Kalām demonstrations."²² Strauss thus indicates to us that he is now treating the *Guide* 2: 2, which he names in his scheme, "Refutation of the Kalām demonstrations."²³

In his account of 2:2, Strauss examines Maimonides's critique of the premises of the Kalām and the demonstrations built on those premises, as

well as Maimonides's method of combining what Strauss characterizes as the "defective ways" of the Kalām and the philosophers: according to what is necessitated by the subject under discussion, Maimonides characterizes God as both Intellect and Will, or alternatively as pure Intellect, alone. Strauss's account of Maimonides's critique of the Kalām also contains a few references to chapters from the second half of the *Guide*, but these chapters are cited in order to help illuminate the character of Maimonides's skillful defense of the Law.

After Strauss's treatment of the Kalām, he continues to follow the progression of the *Guide*, and in section 13 he examines the demonstrations of both the philosophers and Maimonides, 2:3–4 of the *Guide* in his scheme.²⁴ For the first time in his analysis of the *Guide*'s various sections Strauss no longer advances one subsection at a time. By treating the demonstrations of Maimonides and the philosophers together, Strauss implicitly teaches that what unifies all philosophers is greater than what might seem on the surface to separate them. Moreover, Strauss not only treats Maimonides and the philosophers together, he also touches on angels, creation, and the Law. Strauss's procedure is dictated by the subject matter itself: a treatment of philosophic demonstrations (2:3) will touch upon angels (2:5)—if the sphere is eternal, so are the angels or separate intelligences—and a treatment of Maimonides's demonstration (2:4) will necessarily touch on creation and the Law (2:6–7). Strauss therefore treats Maimonides's demonstrations together with the philosophers' demonstrations, and in the course of his discussion he examines the doctrines that are particular to both. This is why section 13 of "How To Begin To Study" is the only section that treats more than one subsection from the *Guide*.

Strauss concludes his section 13 by referring to "the conflict between philosophic cosmology and mathematical astronomy—that conflict which [Maimonides] calls "the true perplexity."²⁵ Strauss's essay as a whole thus leads up to a purely philosophic problem, a problem that appears in part 2, chapter 24, the center of the *Guide*'s second of three sections and thus the center of the *Guide* as a whole. "How To Begin To Study" does not follow the *Guide* through to its conclusion. As we progress in our understanding of Strauss's essay, we will be able to appreciate the importance of the fact that Strauss ends his essay in the middle of the *Guide*, with Maimonides's raising of the "true perplexity." At this point, however, we will return again to the beginning, to Strauss's sketch of the *Guide*'s plan. For we are liable to miss the intention of Strauss's essay if we take a straight line into the *pardes*, the idyllic garden paradise of fundamental questions and philosophic speculation. Education begins with the character of those to be reformed, and while the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land need only take

eleven days, human nature dictates a roundabout forty-year journey through the desert.

Section 1 of “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*”: The *Guide’s* Plan

In his outline of the *Guide’s* plan, Strauss divides the book into two main parts, A and B. A refers to “Views” (1:1–3:24) and B refers to “Actions” (3:25–54). In labeling the two parts “Views” and “Actions,” Strauss is borrowing a Maimonidean dichotomy, for Maimonides distinguishes between opinions and actions—and opinions are synonymous with views—at the end of 3:52 of the *Guide*: “These two ends, namely, *love* and *fear*, are achieved through two things: *love* through the opinions taught by the Law, which include the apprehension of His being as He, may He be exalted, is in truth; while *fear* is achieved by means of all actions prescribed by the Law, as we have explained.”²⁶

When we plug the Maimonidean equation of love with opinions/ views, and fear with actions, back into Strauss’s plan, it appears that according to Strauss’s understanding the *Guide* is intended to bring the reader to love of God through acquiring correct views of God and to fear of God through performance of actions prescribed by the Law. The aptness of this division is further buttressed by the centrality of the love and fear of God in Maimonides’s writings. For instance, Maimonides emphasizes the importance of the love and fear of God at both the beginning and the end of the *Mishneh Torah*. In the *Laws of the Foundation of the Torah*, Maimonides describes how meditating on the wisdom inherent in the world can bring one to the love and fear of God, while at the end of the *Laws of Kings and Their Wars* he states that busying one’s self with the legends regarding the days of the Messiah is a waste of time for they do not contribute to developing either the love or fear of God.

On closer examination of Strauss’s scheme we see that Strauss divides the *Guide* a second time into two parts. While Strauss divides the *Guide* into A and B, he also divides it into A’ and A”, and according to this second division, A’ refers to “Views regarding God and the angels (1:1—3:7),” while A” refers to “Views regarding bodily things that come into being and perish, and in particular man (III 8–54).”²⁷ In other words, according to the second division the *Guide* is exclusively devoted to views, including views about heavenly things and things of the earth.

It should also be noted that this second layer is slightly hidden from view. A and B are printed in a larger font than A’ and A” and are placed

in the center of the page, whereas A' and A'' are placed in the left margin. Furthermore, the heading of A'', "Views regarding bodily beings that come into being and perish, and in particular man (III 8–54)," is squeezed between "IV. The Account of the Chariot (III 1–7)" and "V. Providence (III 8–24)," with a minimum of space separating the different headings, whereas "B. Actions (III 25–54)" is not only placed in large font in the center of the page, but it is also set off by a large space from the heading above it.²⁸ It is reasonable to conclude that this second division belongs to the class of hidden matters.

That said, Strauss invites the careful reader to read his two divisions in light of each other. When we put these two divisions, or schemes, together, it appears that III 25–54 treats, from one perspective, actions (this being the perspective of B when the *Guide* is divided into A and B), while from another perspective it treats views (this being the perspective of A'' when the *Guide* is divided into A' and A''). How are these two "views" to be reconciled?

For present purposes it is sufficient to point out that A'', "Views regarding bodily beings that come into being and perish, and in particular man (III 8–54)," overlaps with B, "Actions (III 25–54)." The main body of B is devoted to what Strauss identifies as section 6 of the *Guide*, "The actions commanded by God and done by God (III 25–50)."²⁹ Somehow, views regarding man are bound up with actions commanded by God and done by God. What actions are done by God? From Strauss's sketch of section 6, it is clear that he refers to legislative actions; subsections one through five treat the commandments. In addition, the leading term in this section of Strauss's scheme is "rationality." Subsections one through four treat the rationality of God's actions, the rationality of the commandments, and the limit to the commandments' rationality.³⁰ Now, Maimonides's central teaching in this section is that the rationality of the commandments becomes intelligible when the actions commanded by God are viewed in their proper context. In other words, in order to perceive the rationality of the actions commanded by God, the reader needs to have correct views "regarding beings that come into being and perish, and in particular regarding man," that is, the subject of A''. God, we learn, views man in his context. God acts—legislates—within a certain context, and takes into consideration circumstances. In other words, when the *actions* that men are commanded by God to perform are *viewed* contextually, the rationale of the commandments of the Torah becomes evident. If we are led to wonder if Maimonides's contextualizing of God's actions—his contextualizing of the Torah—doesn't come dangerously close to historicism, we will subsequently see that according to Strauss (the great twentieth-century opponent of historicism) critical

and competent readers have always understood the importance of context, including historical context.

As for the centrality of the number seven in Strauss's account of the plan of the *Guide*, this aspect of Strauss's scheme has yet to gain acceptance among scholars. As Alexander Altman wrote in an otherwise favorable review, "few will follow in a credulous mood this kind of Kabbalistic exegesis." Moreover, Altman's view has become representative of the scholarly consensus.³¹

There are, however, exceptions to this consensus. For instance, Steven Harvey in his article "Maimonides in the Sultan's Palace," raised a fascinating idea that would render intelligible Maimonides's use of "seven" as a key for understanding the *Guide*.³² According to Harvey:

A structure of seven parts each in turn devoted to seven parts conjures to mind the seven heavens and seven heavenly palaces of the Hekhalot literature. Might not Maimonides have included some images and terminology of this mystical *merkavah* tradition in his allusions and references to the Account of the Chariot? If so, Strauss' plan of the *Guide* would not be so eccentric, for it would hardly be surprising to find that a treatise whose purpose is the explanation of the Account of the Chariot is structured in accordance with the journey of the Chariot. When one who is worthy ascends and, as Strauss explains, descends through the seven parts of the *Guide*, he will have seen the secrets of the Account of the Chariot, just as the adept who ascends or descends to the seventh palace in the *merkavah* tradition.³³

Harvey writes that his theory regarding the numerological connection between the *Guide* and the *merkavah* tradition lacks unequivocal textual support, but in order to buttress his claim he lists a number of "chariot-related sevens" in the *Guide*. For example, in 3:51, in Maimonides's parable of the palace, there are seven ranks of people. Most importantly, Harvey does find one textual hint that seems to support his thesis:

A hint of Hekhalot influence in 3: 51 may be provided in the problematic statement in the beginning of the chapter that that the chapter is 'only a kind of conclusion.' The term Maimonides uses for conclusion is *al-khatima*. *Khatima* is an equivocal term that can also mean seal, and in the Hekhalot writings seals are what the adept needs to journey safely and successfully through the heavenly palaces. With this sense of *khatima*, Maimonides

would then be saying that 3:51 is the decisive clue to understanding his treatise.³⁴

Harvey's claim that Maimonides is appropriating images and terminology from the Hekhalot tradition is highly intriguing. In light of Strauss's teaching regarding Maimonides's way of education, it is also quite plausible. As we will see as we progress in "How To Begin To Study," Maimonidean education does not proceed by immediately destroying the addressee's problematic beliefs or prejudices. Instead, Maimonides accommodates himself to the habits of his intended addressee and uses them to further a goal that is ultimately inconsistent with the habits that he previously co-opted. In this case, it would be consistent with Maimonides's method if he were to adopt an external form of mystic discourse, thereby appealing to the mystical inclinations among some of his readers in order to further a philosophic goal.

After presenting his plan of the *Guide*, Strauss simply states, "The book is sealed with many seals."³⁵ This pronouncement recalls another statement of Strauss's from "The Literary Character": "The *Guide* is devoted to the explanation of an esoteric doctrine. But this explanation is itself of an esoteric character. The *Guide* is, then, devoted to the esoteric explanation of an esoteric doctrine. Consequently it is a book with seven seals. How can we unseal it?"³⁶

Strangely, Strauss immediately follows his statement in "How To Begin To Study" that "the book is sealed with many seals" by referring to the conclusion of the Introduction to the first part of the *Guide*. There, so far from calling attention to the book's difficulty, Maimonides refers to the *Guide* as a key for opening up that which was previously locked. Writes Strauss: "Maimonides describes the preceding passage as follows: 'It is a key permitting one to enter the places the gates to which were locked. When those gates are opened and those places entered, the souls will find rest therein, the eyes will be delighted, and the bodies will be eased of their toil and of their labor.'"³⁷

When we put these passages together we conclude that the *Guide* is at one and the same time a key *and* sealed with many seals. The "preceding passage" in the *Guide* to which Strauss refers reads as follows: "And after these introductory remarks, I shall begin to mention the terms whose true meaning, as intended in every passage according to its context, must be indicated. This, then, will be a key. . . ." ³⁸ At first glance, it appears that knowing the true meaning of biblical terms will enable "one to enter the places the gates to which were locked." Efodi, for instance, writes that the gates which were previously locked are, "equivocal terms."³⁹

But it is not only the correct understanding of the equivocal, biblical terms that will open up the gates of understanding. It is the true meaning, “as intended in every passage, *according to its context*.”⁴⁰ As we shall see as we progress in Strauss’s introductory essay, and as we have briefly noted in both of our discussions related to the plan of the *Guide*—that of the two divisions of the *Guide* into two parts (A and B; A’ and A”), and that of the charm of the number “seven”—context is the key.

Strauss, however, immediately covers up what he has implicitly revealed by calling the *Guide* a forest: “The Guide as a whole is not merely a key to a forest but is itself a forest, an enchanted forest, and hence also an enchanting forest: it is a delight to the eyes. For the tree of life is a delight to the eyes.”⁴¹ There are many noteworthy features to this sentence. First, Strauss uses the loaded language of enchantment, a term that in contemporary contexts is usually associated with Max Weber and his melancholy claim that the disenchantment of the world is the stuff of progress. As we will see shortly, this veiled reference to Weber is intentional.

Second, Strauss magically transforms his “enchanted forest” into a single tree, “The *Guide* as a whole is . . . also an enchanting forest: it is a delight to the eyes. For the tree of life is a delight to the eyes.”⁴² The enchanted forest is the tree of life, a delight to the eyes. Before wondering if the tree of life is *really* a delight to the eyes, we need to remember that one particularly famous garden contains a “tree of life”: the Garden of Eden. Strauss seems to be hinting that *The Guide of the Perplexed* is a key to entering the Garden of Eden. Paradise.⁴³

Perhaps. But this doesn’t explain Strauss’s manifest blunder: in Genesis, the tree of life is *not* called a delight to the eyes. Instead, when the serpent describes the tree of knowledge to Eve, the Torah says that the tree of knowledge is a delight to the eyes! Did Strauss confuse the tree of life with the tree of knowledge?

Strauss’s reputation for esoteric writing would be sufficient for thinking twice about attributing to him such a strange mistake and for wondering whether the mistake is not perhaps intentional. That hunch is confirmed by Strauss’s statement in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* that if a highly competent writer “commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional.”⁴⁴ So too in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss writes, “Machiavelli’s work is rich in manifest blunders of various kinds.”⁴⁵ Moreover, these manifest blunders, “indicate his intention.”⁴⁶ They include “blunders of which an intelligent high school boy would be ashamed,” such as, one assumes, confusing the tree of life with the tree of knowledge.⁴⁷

The manifest blunder in “How To Begin To Study” is thus intentional. Strauss is hinting that while the *Guide* presents itself as the tree of life, a

work written in the spirit of the Law, it is, in truth, a work that grants access to the tree of forbidden knowledge, undertaken in the spirit of philosophy.

One might object that according to Maimonides's explicit statement in the *Guide* 1:2, the tree of life represents the *muskalot*, the intellect, while the tree of knowledge represents the *mefursamot*, good and bad. Thus, the tree of life represents philosophy and science, whereas the tree of knowledge represents politics. But this objection holds only as long as one assumes that Maimonides's interpretation of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was intended to reveal the intention of the text. If, however, one reads Maimonides's interpretation as a purposeful misreading of the text, then this objection is no longer relevant. Strauss clearly did not believe that Maimonides's interpretation of Genesis was intended to reveal the Torah's intention.⁴⁸ Notably, Strauss opens his essay "Persecution and the Art of Writing" with the following quotation: "That vice has often proved an emancipator of the mind, is one of the most humiliating, but, at the same time, one of the most unquestionable, facts in history."⁴⁹ And later in his essay, Strauss makes the following remark: "Some great writers might have stated certain important truths quite openly by using as a mouthpiece some disreputable character: they would thus show how much they disapproved of pronouncing the truths in question. There would thus be good reason for finding in the greatest literature of the past so many interesting devils, madmen, beggars, sophists, drunkards, epicureans and buffoons."⁵⁰

Lest we forget, in the *Guide*, 1:2, Maimonides responds to the "learned man" who wondered how man's original disobedience, "procured him as its necessary consequence the great perfection peculiar to man," by attacking this learned man's character: "O you who engage in theoretical speculation using the first notions that may occur to you and come to your mind and who consider withal that you understand a book that is the guide of the first and last men while glancing through it as you would glance through a historical work or a piece of poetry—when in some of your hours of leisure, you leave off drinking and copulating."⁵¹

It is hard to see how such a dissolute and lazy character ever became learned in the first place. According to a Straussian reading of this passage, Maimonides is attacking the objector's disreputable character because dangerous truths need to be hidden. In reality, however, this disreputable character is Maimonides's mouthpiece. After all, according to the Pines translation, Maimonides himself writes that "when these gates are opened and these places are entered into, the souls will find rest therein, *the eyes will be delighted*, and the bodies will be eased of their toil and of their labor."⁵²

Did Maimonides mean to teach that when these gates are opened the souls will find rest therein by contemplating good and evil, the *mefursamot*? Or did Maimonides mean to teach the careful reader that "forbidden"

knowledge awaits him in the garden? At the end of his Introduction, Maimonides, playing with the language of Genesis, tempts his careful readers with the promise of forbidden knowledge.

It should also be noted that Pines's translation is uniquely his own: no other translator has translated the phrase in question, *istaladhdhat al-ʿayūn*, by using the language of Genesis 3:6. Pines could have translated the phrase as, "the eyes will take pleasure." It's true that if Maimonides had wanted to make his hint crystal clear, he could have appropriated Se'adia Gaon's translation of the passage in Genesis, *shahīyat al-manzar*. But the fact that Maimonides didn't use Se'adia's translation doesn't prove that he didn't mean to appropriate the language of Genesis. It only proves that his hint, like all hints, is not crystal clear.

The great importance Strauss attributed to Pines's translation is further demonstrated by the fact that he concluded "How To Begin To Study" by rearranging the concluding passage of Maimonides's Introduction and placing the phrase, "the eyes will be delighted," at the conclusion of the quotation, thus incorrectly citing Maimonides and committing another manifest blunder: "So we may conclude with the words of Maimonides with which we began: 'The *Guide* is "a key permitting one to enter places the gates to which were locked. When those gates are opened and those places are entered, the souls will find rest therein, the bodies will be eased of their toil, and the eyes will be delighted.'" ⁵³ By rearranging the text, Strauss visibly casts the *Guide* as a key to forbidden knowledge: that which is a delight to the eyes—the tree of knowledge—is placed at the end, or, as the end of the service of God.

After claiming that the *Guide* is akin to the tree of life, and thus a delight to the eyes, Strauss adds the following caveat: "The enchanting character of the *Guide* does not appear immediately. At first glance the book appears to be merely strange and in particular to lack order and consistency. But progress in understanding it is a progress in becoming enchanted by it. Enchanting understanding is perhaps the highest form of edification."⁵⁴

Two points should be made at this juncture. First, Strauss in this passage introduces progress as a theme. Now, one can easily imagine that a certain kind of Straussian reader will resist the notion that "progress" might function as a leading term in one of Strauss's writings. After all, Strauss criticized the idea of progress in both its optimistic and historicist forms. Moreover progress, simply, is not the theme here, but instead, "progress in understanding," and progress in understanding is just another way of speaking about philosophy, the love of wisdom. When one loves wisdom, one is always progressing in one's knowledge of wisdom but never possessing wisdom itself. The love of wisdom is philosophy; the claim that one possesses wisdom, simply, is sophistry.

It is important to raise this hypothetical Straussian objection because it explains in part why some readers have failed to discern one of Strauss's fundamental intentions in "How To Begin To Study." For present purposes it is sufficient to acknowledge that while Strauss indeed speaks here of "progress in understanding," later in the essay, especially in his treatment of the second subsection of the *Guide*, he will repeatedly speak of progress in a clearly "historical" sense. In "How To Begin To Study" Strauss points to two kinds of progress: progress in understanding and progress in the "historical" sense of the term. Progress in understanding—or to be more precise, the intended addressee's progress in understanding—is the key to understanding the structure of the first half of the *Guide*, while progress in the "historical" sense is the key to uncovering the esoteric historical dimension that Strauss finds in the *Guide* and brings to the reader's attention. As previously stated, these two types of progress then meet at the end of "How To Begin To Study" with reference to what Strauss considers to be the peak of the *Guide*, 2:24.

The second point is that in this sentence, Strauss turns Weber on his head. According to Weber, the *disenchantment* of the world is progress.⁵⁵ According to Strauss, *enchantment* is progress. In equating enchantment with progress Strauss obviously does not mean that one finds invisible, magical forces in the depths of the *Guide*. Instead, he indicates his intention in the following sentence, "Enchanting understanding is perhaps the highest form of edification."⁵⁶ What this means we will see more clearly when we progress in our understanding of Strauss's essay. For now it is sufficient to note again that "How To Begin To Study" ends by leading the reader to "the conflict between philosophic cosmology and mathematical astronomy—that conflict which [Maimonides] calls 'the true perplexity.'"⁵⁷ Strauss's essay as a whole thus leads up to a purely philosophic problem, to a peak that is surrounded by mist and lies in deep darkness. Here, one's only support is the love of truth.

In this case one can again imagine a certain kind of Straussian resistance to the idea that Strauss is doing subterranean battle with Max Weber, for we know that Strauss didn't think very highly of Weber. In "A Giving of Accounts," Strauss, recalling his response to one of Heidegger's lectures, belittles Weber: "I had never heard nor seen such a thing—such a thorough and intensive interpretation of a philosophic text. On my way home I visited Rosenzweig and said to him that compared to Heidegger, Max Weber, till then regarded by me as the incarnation of the spirit of science and scholarship, was an orphan child."⁵⁸

But just because Strauss didn't consider Weber to be a first-rate thinker doesn't mean that he wouldn't devote efforts to criticizing him. Although

Strauss didn't consider Weber to be philosophically important, he understood that Weber's ideas were very influential, especially in light of the ascendance of the social sciences in American universities after World War II. In *Natural Right and History*, for instance, Strauss devotes a chapter to critiquing Weber's thought.⁵⁹ Likewise in the *Guide*, Maimonides explicitly attacks the Kalām, not because he respected them philosophically, but because he considered their influence to be harmful.⁶⁰

After emphasizing the strange and seemingly chaotic character of the *Guide*, Strauss writes that we begin to understand the book if we view the book through the lens of fidelity, or what we today call identity: "One begins to understand the *Guide* once one sees that it is not a philosophic book—a book written by philosophers for philosophers—but a Jewish book: a book written by a Jew for Jews. Its first premise is the old Jewish premise that being a Jew and being a philosopher are two incompatible things."⁶¹

While it is of course true that the age of a premise does not make it true, in this case Strauss believes that there is genuine wisdom in the age-old, Jewish belief. One of the main themes of Strauss's work is that "being a Jew and being a philosopher are two incompatible things." Nevertheless, this formulation raises certain difficulties in the context of an interpretation of the *Guide*, for Strauss considered Maimonides to be a philosopher. How, then, does Strauss understand the relationship between Judaism and philosophy in the *Guide*? We are only at the beginning of Strauss's essay, and we will have to progress further in the text before we will be able to give a satisfactory account of the relationship between these two cloud-covered mountaintops.⁶² For now Strauss limits himself to clarifying what he means by asserting that the *Guide* is a Jewish book: "Philosophers are men who try to give an account of the whole by starting from what is always accessible to man as man; Maimonides starts from the acceptance of the Torah. A Jew may make use of philosophy and Maimonides makes ample use of it; but as a Jew he gives assent where as a philosopher he would suspend his assent (cf. 2:16)."⁶³

In the passage in 2:16 to which Strauss refers, Maimonides writes that although it is an open question whether the world was created or is eternal, one should ground belief in creation in prophecy: "[Belief in creation] should in my opinion be accepted without proof because of prophecy, which explains things to which it is not in the power of speculation to accede."⁶⁴ Of course, in the eyes of philosophers the prophets are not authorities, and no claim can be reasonably accepted without rational proof. If one were to restrict oneself to reading these passages alone, it would seem reasonable to conclude that according to Strauss, Maimonides belongs to the Kalām.⁶⁵

Two points need to be made in response. First, Strauss writes, "Maimonides starts from the acceptance of the Torah." In other words, while

Maimonides begins with the acceptance of the Torah, we will have to wait and see where he will lead his reader in the end.

Second, we also know that, according to Maimonides, the Torah itself commands Jews to philosophize, for Jews are commanded to love God and there is no loving God without examining creation; there is no loving God without trying to understand the whole, and to understand the whole one must begin not with the Torah but with what is always accessible to man as man.⁶⁶

Strauss's claim that the *Guide* is a Jewish book appears to be a provisional claim, or at least a claim that is not as straightforward as might appear at first glance.

Section 2 of "How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*"

After ending section 1 of his essay by noting that Maimonides starts with the acceptance of the Torah, Strauss is naturally led to begin the second section by addressing the question of the *Guide's* subject matter: "The *Guide* is devoted to the Torah or more precisely to the true science of the Torah, of the Law."⁶⁷

Being devoted to the Torah, the *Guide* explains biblical terms and similes. However, because certain biblical terms have an outer meaning and an inner meaning, "the *Guide* is . . . devoted above all to biblical exegesis."⁶⁸ The question of the inner meaning of certain biblical terms leads to an explanation of the deepest secrets of the Law, which raises an additional problem: "The Law whose secrets Maimonides intends to explain forbids that they be explained in public, or to the public. . . . Since every explanation given in writing . . . is a public explanation, Maimonides seems to be compelled by his intention to transgress the Law."⁶⁹

Strauss claims that Maimonides does not in fact transgress the Law because his explanations of the Law are secret; Maimonides's apparent transgression of the Law thus leads us away, rather quickly, from the question of the *Guide's* subject matter and back to the matter of Maimonides's art of writing.⁷⁰

According to Strauss, Maimonides achieved secrecy in three ways: choosing every word of the *Guide* with exceeding care, deliberately contradicting himself, and scattering the "chapter headings" of the secret teaching throughout the book.⁷¹ This last fact, according to Strauss, "permits us to understand why the plan of the *Guide* is so obscure."⁷² The plan is obscure because the chapter headings are a secret teaching, and being secret, they

must be carefully hidden away. Writes Strauss: “Maimonides succeeds immediately in obscuring the plan by failing to divide the book explicitly into sections and subsections or by dividing it explicitly only into three Parts and each Part into chapters without supplying the Parts and the chapters with headings indicating the subject matter of the Parts or of the chapters.”⁷³

Strauss addresses the question of the subject matter of the parts of the *Guide* later in his essay. Although Maimonides does not supply “chapters with headings indicating the subject matter of the Parts,” the subject matter of the Parts will become clearer when the plan of the *Guide* is examined in light of the character of the intended addressee.

Strauss continues by noting that the plan of the *Guide* is not entirely obscure: “The plan is most obscure at the beginning and it becomes clearer as one proceeds; generally speaking, it is clearer in the second half (II 13–end) than in the first half.”⁷⁴ Strauss’s claim that the plan of the *Guide* is clearer in the second half than in the first half helps us to better understand why “How To Begin To Study” is devoted in large part to analyzing only the first half of the *Guide*: Strauss wished to clarify what was more obscure—the plan of the first half of the *Guide*.⁷⁵

Insofar as the plan of the *Guide* is partly obscure, the book is only partly secret. This fact leads Strauss into a discussion of the secret and public aspects of the true science of the Law. He identifies the public teaching of the Law with the thirteen roots that “Maimonides had put together in his Commentary on the Mishnah.”⁷⁶ The true science of the Law, which is devoted to the public teaching, is charged with the task of “establishing the roots by means of speculation.”⁷⁷ Strauss then observes: “It is not very difficult to see that the *Guide* as devoted to speculation of the roots of the Law or to the public teaching consists of sections II–III and V–VI, . . . and that the sequence of these sections is rational.”⁷⁸

According to this scheme, section 2 of the *Guide*, which is devoted to “Demonstrations of the existence, unity, and incorporeality of God,” incorporates roots 1–5, which treat God. Section 3 of the *Guide*, which is devoted to “prophecy,” incorporates the roots that treat prophecy, 5–7. Section 5, which is devoted to “providence,” incorporates the roots devoted to providence, 10–13. And section 6, which is devoted to “the actions commanded by God and done by God,” incorporates the roots that treat the Torah, 8–9.⁷⁹ This sequence departs from the order of the roots as they appear in Maimonides’s *Commentary on the Mishnah*, but they are rational insofar as they follow an orderly descent: from God, to the prophets (who travel, in their minds, along the spheres), down to providential care for this world, and ultimately issuing in the Torah, to the Law that orders this world and creates the conditions for beginning the ascent back to God.

While these parallels shed a bit of light on the structure of the *Guide*, Strauss also remarks that “one cannot understand in this manner why the book is divided into three Parts, or what sections 1, 4, and 7 and most, not to say all, subsections mean. The teaching of the *Guide* is then neither entirely public or speculative nor is it entirely secret and exegetic.”⁸⁰

The plan of the *Guide* is partly obscure and partly clear; it is partly secret and partly public. But the book is nevertheless still one whole. The fact that the book is still one whole enables Strauss to raise the question of nature of the bond between the book’s “exegetic and . . . speculative ingredients.”⁸¹

He first tries to account for the connection between the speculative and exegetic parts of the *Guide* by considering the possibility that exegesis uncovers what speculation demonstrates: “While speculation demonstrates the roots of the Law, exegesis proves that those roots as demonstrated by speculation are in fact taught by the Law. But in that case the *Guide* would open with chapters devoted to speculation, yet the opposite is manifestly true.”⁸² If exegesis merely proves the identity of speculation and the Law, one would expect the *Guide* to begin with speculation. However, instead of beginning with chapters devoted to speculation, the *Guide* opens with chapters devoted to exegesis.

Strauss tries to open a different route by noting that Maimonides identifies the Account of the Beginning with natural science and the Account of the Chariot with divine science. Accordingly, “this might lead one to think that the public teaching is identical with what the philosophers teach, while the secret teaching makes one understand the identity of the teaching of the philosophers with the secret teaching of the Law.”⁸³

Strauss, however, rejects this possibility: “One can safely say that this thought proves to be untenable on almost every level of one’s comprehending the *Guide*. The nonidentity of the teaching of the philosophers as a whole and the thirteen roots of the Law as a whole is the first and last word of Maimonides.”⁸⁴

Strauss seems to completely reject the possibility that the teaching of the Law and the philosophers are identical. However, Strauss also seems to contradict himself in the very next sentence: “What he means by identifying the core of philosophy [natural science and divine science] with the highest secrets of the Law [the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot] and therewith by somehow identifying the subject matter of speculation with the subject matter of exegesis may be said to be the secret par excellence of the *Guide*.”⁸⁵

In truth there is no contradiction between these two statements, but in order to understand Strauss’s intention it’s necessary to read him very

closely. When we read Strauss very closely, we see that that while on the surface he seems to completely reject the idea that the teaching of the philosophers and the teaching of the Law are identical, his language leaves room for maneuvering. Let us return to the text.

Writes Strauss, “One can safely say that this thought,” that is, that the teaching of the philosophers and the teaching of the Law are identical, “proves to be untenable on *almost* every level of one’s comprehending the *Guide*.”⁸⁶ The identity of the teaching of the philosophers and the Law is untenable on *almost* every level. That means that it remains tenable on a certain level. What is that level? “The nonidentity of the teaching of the philosophers *as a whole* and the thirteen roots of the Law *as a whole* is the first and last word of Maimonides.” When taken as wholes, from vulgar politics to that which crowns our understanding, the teaching of the philosophers cannot be identified with the teaching of the Law. However, according to Strauss, Maimonides *does* identify “The *core* of philosophy” with the “*Highest* secrets of the Law.” The level on which it is tenable to identify the teaching of the philosophers with the teaching of the Law lies at the *peak* of the Law, the end to which the Law directs its practitioners. Even more significantly, Strauss writes, “The nonidentity of the teaching of the philosophers as a whole and the thirteen roots of the Law as a whole is the *first and last word* of Maimonides.” If the nonidentity of the teaching of the philosophers as a whole and thirteen roots of the Law as a whole is the first and last word of Maimonides, we are still left with the word that falls in the middle. And as Strauss wrote in “How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*,” the middle of a text is the place “least exposed to the curiosity of superficial readers.”⁸⁷ Because superficial readers tend to look only into a book—and often just the beginning and the end—as opposed to reading the whole book, not to mention studying it, careful writers hide their true views in the place where superficial readers are most likely not to look, namely, the middle. Strauss, however, wants to teach his reader “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*.” In this context we recall that Strauss ends his essay with a reference to Part 2, chapter 24 of the *Guide*, that is, in the middle of Maimonides’s book, that is, the place where superficial readers are least likely to look. As we have seen, the middle of the *Guide* is where Maimonides speaks of “the conflict between philosophic cosmology and mathematical astronomy—that conflict which [Maimonides] calls ‘the true perplexity.’” It appears then that Strauss’s introductory essay only gives an explicit account of half of the *Guide* not only because the first half of the *Guide* is more opaque than the second half, but also because Strauss is leading the careful reader to the heart of