

## APPENDIX A

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

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

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

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

Page 7a: line 15

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### 7b:L.2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7b: L. 19

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

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

Therefore, Maimonides says that:

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

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

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

P.7b:L.23

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

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

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

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

Additionally, Maimonides states:

L.25

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

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

L.28

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

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

L.30

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

L.31

Observe Maimonides' doubts about the allegory of the Pearl (and its identity of meaning with the allegory of the Well) arise in three places. The *first place* is in the second Midrash where its author

says: "... By means of it [the parable], you can understand (literally "see") the words of the Torah," which teaches that the parable is not the words of Torah (*divrei torah*), but rather it is a verbal technique that is employed by the wise to explain the words of Torah without reference to the apparent meaning (*pshat*). Thus, the words of the Midrash: "By means of it you can understand the words of Torah." (In other words, it is "worthless" other than as a device used for teaching Torah; in itself, the parable is not Torah. By contrast, in the Well Parable, the parable was itself sacred.)

### L.33

The *second place* causing Maimonides' doubt is the reflective statement in that Pearl Midrash: "In the same way this parable by itself is worth nothing." If it was the Torah's intent to employ a parable, how can we say that it "is worth nothing"? Observe that within the parable is its moral, so how can we say regarding the parable as a whole, if wisdom is found within it, that the parable "is worth nothing"? This would teach that the oral parable a teacher constructs to teach the text is worth nothing. (He means to contrast this result with the contrary teaching in the Well Parable. The well and the ropes were sacred writ themselves, and not "worth nothing.")

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

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

### L.35

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

### L.37

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

### L.40

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

P.8, L.1

He resolves the *second problem* by saying:

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

That is, [Maimonides holds that] the *apparent* meaning of the parable is worthless, but not the parable itself and its moral message (i.e., Maimonides holds that the *pshat* is what is worthless in relation to prophecy. Abravanel holds that the oral educational technique is worthless in relation to the biblical text it seeks to clarify).

L.3

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

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

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

L.12

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

L.17

The Midrash states, “Our Rabbis say: A man who loses a *sela* or a pearl in [within, *b'toch*] his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an *issar*.” Since it says, “within his house” Maimonides

holds that the house and not the taper represent the parable [so says Abravanel], because the text should not employ the otherwise surplus phrase, “Within his house.” It could just as well be outside the house or in the city street, and so the image would be of losing it in the obscurity of the night.

L.19

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

L.22

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

L.23

“But by means of it [the parable] you can understand the words of the Torah.” That is, the house where the pearl was left protects the pearl, and through the house you can find it; “The internal meaning of the words of Torah is a pearl,” and this meaning is seen in the midst of the words of Torah just as the pearl is seen in the midst of the house.

L.24

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

## **R. ABRAVANEL’S COMMENTARY ON THE PARABLE OF THE GOLDEN APPLE**

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

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

P. 8a:L.26

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

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

disclose the value of the parable itself, which is like silver, and the value of the moral, which is like gold.

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

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

*Copyright © 2019, Scott Michael Alexander, no copying or use permitted without express written permission of the author.*