

THE EPISTLE TO YEMEN

I
To the honored, great, and holy master and teacher, Jacob,¹ wise and genial, dear and revered sage, son of the honored, great, and holy master and teacher, Nathanel Fayyumi, distinguished prince of Yemen, president of its congregations, leader of its communities, may the spirit of God rest upon him, and to all his associates and to all the scholars of the communities of Yemen, may the Lord keep and protect them. From a loving friend who never saw him but knows him only by reputation, Moses ben Maimon ben Joseph ben Isaac ben Obadiah² of blessed memory.

Just as plants bear testimony to the existence of roots, and waters are evidence of the excellence of the springs, so has the firm shoot developed from the roots of truth and righteousness, and a huge river has gushed forth from the spring of mercy in the land of Yemen, to water therewith all gardens and to make flowers blossom.³ It flows gently on to satisfy the needs of the weary and thirsty in the arid places; wayfarers and folks from the isles of the sea satisfy their needs with it. Consequently, it has been proclaimed from Spain to Babylonia, from one end of heaven to the other: *Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water* [Isa. 55:1].⁴ Men of business and traffic unanimously declare to all inquirers that they have found in the land of Yemen a beautiful and delightful plantation and a rich pasture with faithful shepherds wherein every lean one shall wax fat. They strengthen the indigent with bread and greet the opulent with hospitality and generosity; even the Sabeian caravans look forward to their benevolence.⁵ Their hands are stretched out to every passerby, and their homes are wide open to every traveler. With them all find tranquility; sorrow and sighing flee. They continually study the Law of Moses, walk in the way of R. Ashi,⁶ pursue justice, repair the breach, uphold the principles of Torah, bring back the stray people of God with encouraging words, observe the religious ceremonies punctiliously in their communities. *There is no breaching and no sortie, and no waiting in our streets* [Ps. 144:14].

Not long after his arrival in Egypt in 1167 C.E., Maimonides was appointed physician to the ruler of the country and his entourage. Maimonides was sought out by the Jewish community not only for medical treatment, but also for guidance and help in its private and communal affairs. Such was his reputation that a request for advice soon came to him from Jacob ben Nathanel al-Fayyumi on behalf of the Jews of Yemen. There too a fanatical Muslim movement was threatening the existence of the Jewish community. The movement had been started in 1150 by the Shi'ite Ali ibn Mahdi and was now attempting to force the conversion of all non-Moslems under his son 'Abd al-Nabi' ibn Mahdi.

Jacob raised several issues in his request for advice. What was the significance of the community's suffering? How should they respond to a convert who had become a missionary for Islam and claimed that the Torah itself confirmed the prophethood of Muhammad? What should they make of the claim of another individual to be the Messiah, come to rescue them from their persecutors? Could the date of the Messiah's coming be predicted by astrology?

Maimonides gave his ruling on all these questions in his *Epistle to Yemen* of 1172, so phrasing his answers that the community might be encouraged to avoid succumbing either to the oppressor or to messianic delusions.

Blessed be the Lord, that He has suffered Jews to remain who observe the Torah and obey its injunctions in the most distant peninsulas, as we were graciously assured through Isaiah, His servant, for it is to you people of Yemen he was alluding when he prophesied: *From the end of the earth we hear singing* [Isa. 24:16].⁷

When we departed from the West to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to frequent His temple [Ps. 27:4],⁸ I learned that he⁹ passed away. May God bestow His justice and goodness upon him. May he enter unto peace and rest upon his bed. May He send him angels of mercy. May he rest and rise up for his reward at the end of days. This, my dearly beloved friend, is proof that God was pleased with his deeds, and that He will compensate him doubly and grant him peace, that you are his son, and have risen in his place to promote religion and observance, to further justice and righteousness, to obey His precepts and laws, and to abide by His covenant. May the Lord your God be with you as He was with your fathers. May He not forsake nor abandon you. May He give you deep understanding to judge His people. *May His words never depart from your mouth, nor the mouth of your children* [Isa. 59:21], as He declared. May you follow your father as leader of His people, and may God grant that your fame be greater than his.

When your letter, my dearly beloved friend, arrived in Egypt, all were pleased to hear of it and delighted to look at it. It bore witness that you are one of the ministers of the Lord who dwell in His domain and are pitched at His standard, that you pursue the study of the Torah, love its laws, and watch at its gates. May the Lord divulge its secrets unto you, and stock you abundantly with the knowledge of its treasures, make its crown your chief crown, place its necklace upon your neck. May its words be a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path, and may you become celebrated through them. *And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Lord's name is proclaimed over you, and they shall stand in fear of you* [Deut. 28:10].¹⁰

As for the information in your letter, my dear friend, that you heard some of our coreligionists in the Diaspora—may the Lord keep and protect them—praise and extol me very highly and compare me with the illustrious *geonim*, they have spoken thus about me out of mere tenderness for me, and written about me out of pure goodness.¹¹ However, listen to a word fully spoken by me, and give no heed to the

sayings of others. I am one of the humblest scholars of Spain whose prestige is low in exile. I am always dedicated to my duties, but have not attained to the learning of my forebears, for evil days and hard times have overtaken us and we have not lived in tranquility; we have labored without finding rest. How can the Law become lucid to a fugitive from city to city, from country to country? I have everywhere pursued the reapers and gathered ears of grain, both the solid and the full, as well as the shriveled and the thin. Only recently have I found a home.¹² Were it not for the help of God, as we are told by our ancestors, I would not have gathered the little I have, from which I continually draw.¹³

Now, the princely priest R. Shelomo, my friend and disciple,¹⁴ who, as you write, indulges in hyperboles in praise of me and speaks extravagantly in appreciation of me, exaggerates unreasonably because he wants to, and waxes enthusiastic because he loves and cherishes me. May the Lord guard him, so that he is like a blooming vineyard, and may he return to us hale and hearty.

The other matters in your letter that you wish me to speak of, I deem it best to write in the Arabic tongue and idiom,¹⁵ so that all men, women, and children can read it with ease,¹⁶ for it is right that your membership be enabled to understand the contents of the reply.

You write of the affair of the rebel leader in Yemen¹⁷ who decreed forced apostasy of the Jews, and compelled all the Jewish inhabitants in all the places he had subdued to desert their religion, just as the Berbers had obliged them to do in the Maghreb.¹⁸ This report has broken our backs and astounded and dumbfounded the whole of our community, and rightly so. For these are evil tidings, and *both ears of everyone who hears about it will tingle* [1 Sam. 3:11 and 2 Kings 21:12]. Indeed, our hearts are weakened, our minds are confused, and our strength wanes because of the dire misfortunes that have come upon us in the form of the religious persecution in the two ends of the world, the East and West, *so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on the other side* [Josh. 8:22].¹⁹ It is of the like of this dreadful occasion the prophet prayed and interceded in our behalf: *I said, "Oh, Lord God, refrain! How will Jacob survive? He is so small"* [Amos 7:5].²⁰ Indeed, this is a subject that no religious person dare

take lightly,²¹ nor anyone put aside who believes faithfully in Moses. There is no doubt that these are the messianic travails²² concerning which the sages invoked God that they be spared seeing and experiencing them. The prophets trembled when they envisioned them, as Isaiah reacted: *My heart pants, fearfulness affrights me; the twilight I longed for has been turned into trembling* [Isa. 21:4].²³ And the divine exclamation in the Torah expresses sympathy with those who will experience them, by saying: *Alas, who shall live when God does this!* [Num. 24:23].²⁴

When you write that the hearts of some people have turned, uncertainty befalls them, and their beliefs are weakened, while others have not lost faith and not become quieted, we have a divine premonition of it through Daniel. For he predicted that the long stay of Israel in exile and the continuous persecution would cause many to drift away from our faith, to have misgivings, or go astray, because they were to witness our feebleness and note the triumph of our adversaries and their dominion over us, while still others would neither oscillate in their belief, nor be shaken in their convictions. He states: *Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand* [Dan. 12:10].²⁵ Further, he explains that even men of understanding and intelligence, who would have brooked milder misfortunes and remained firm in their belief in God and in His servant Moses, will yield to distrust and will err when they are visited by sterner and harsher afflictions. Only a few will remain pure in faith, for he adds: *And some of them that are wise shall stumble* [Dan. 11:35].²⁶

And now, brethren, it is essential that all of you give attention and consideration to what I am going to point out to you.²⁷ Teach it to your women and children, so that their faith, to the extent that it has become enfeebled and impaired, may be strengthened, and that enduring certainty may be reestablished in their hearts. It is—may the Lord deliver you and me—that ours is the true and divine religion, revealed to us through Moses, chief of the former as well as of the later prophets.²⁸ By means of it God has distinguished us from the rest of mankind, as He declares: *Yet it was to your fathers that the Lord was drawn in His love for them, so that He chose you, their lineal descendants, from among all the peoples* [Deut. 10:15]. This choice was not made thanks

to our merits, but was rather an act of grace, on account of our ancestors who were cognizant of God and obedient to Him, as He states: *It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set His heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples* [Deut. 7:7].²⁹

Since God has singled us out by His laws and precepts, and our preeminence over the others was manifested in His rules and statutes, as Scripture says in narrating God's mercies to us: *What great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?* [Deut. 4:8],³⁰ all the nations, instigated by envy and impiety, rose up against us in anger, and all the kings of the earth, motivated by injustice and enmity, applied themselves to persecute us. They wanted to thwart God, but He will not be thwarted. Ever since the time of revelation³¹ every despot or rebel ruler, be he violent or ignoble, has made it his first aim and his final purpose to destroy our Law, and to vitiate our religion by means of the sword, by violence, or by brute force. Such were Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian,³² and others like them.

The second class consists of the most intelligent and educated among the nations, like the Syrians, Persians, and Greeks.³³ They also endeavor to demolish our Law and to abrogate it by means of arguments that they invent and controversies that they institute. They seek to render the Law ineffectual and to wipe out every trace of it with their compositions, just as the despots try to do with their swords. But neither the one nor the other shall succeed. For a long time ago the assurance was given us through Isaiah that every tyrant who seeks to triumph over our Law and annihilate it by weapons of war will be demolished by the Lord so that they will have no effect. This is a metaphorical way of saying that his efforts will be of no avail. Likewise every disputant who will attempt to demonstrate the falsity of our Law, the Lord will shatter his arguments and prove them absurd, untenable, and ineffective. This is the divine promise: *No weapon formed against you shall succeed, and every tongue that contends with you at law you shall defeat* [Isa. 54:17].³⁴ Although both of these persuade themselves that this is a structure that can be demolished and lay plans to undermine its firmly established foundations, they only increase their pain and toil. The structure remains as firm as ever, while the Constant³⁵

mocks and derides them because they endeavor with their feeble intelligence to achieve something no human being can undertake. The prophet,³⁶ describing their efforts and God's scorn of them, says: *Let us break the cords of their yoke, shake off their ropes from us! He who is enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord mocks at them* [Ps. 2:3-4].³⁷ We have been incessantly distressed and harassed by these two parties all through the epoch of our political independence, and in part during the period of our dispersion.³⁸

After that a new class arose that combined the two methods, namely, conquest, controversy, and dispute³⁹ into one, because it believed that this procedure would be more effective in wiping out every trace of the community. It therefore resolved to lay claim to prophecy and to found a new Law, contrary to our divine religion, and to contend that it also came from God, like the true claim. Thus doubts will be generated and confusion will be created, since one is opposed to the other and both supposedly emanated from one god, and it will lead to the destruction of both religions. This is a remarkable plan contrived by a person who is envious and malicious, who will strive to kill his enemy and remain alive, and if he cannot achieve this, he will devise a scheme whereby they both will be slain.⁴⁰

The first to institute this plan was Jesus the Nazarene,⁴¹ may his bones be ground to dust. He was Jewish because his mother was a Jewess although his father was a gentile, and our principle is that a child born of a Jewess and a gentile or a slave, is legitimate.⁴² Only figuratively do we call him an illegitimate child.⁴³ He impelled people to believe that he was sent by God to clarify perplexities in the Torah, and that he was the Messiah predicted by each and every prophet. His purpose was to interpret the Torah in a fashion that would lead to its total annulment, to the abolition of its commandments, and to the violation of all its prohibitions. The sages of blessed memory, aware of his objective before his reputation spread among our people, meted out a fitting punishment.⁴⁴ Daniel had already alluded to him when he presaged the downfall of a wicked and heretical Jew who would endeavor to destroy the Law, claim prophecy for himself, make pretense to miracles, and allege that he was the Messiah, as is written: *The children of the impudent among your people shall make bold to claim prophecy, but they shall fall* [Dan. 11:14].⁴⁵

Quite some time later, a religion, which is traced to him by the descendants of Esau, gained popularity.⁴⁶ Although this was the aim he hoped to realize, he had no impact on Israel, as neither groups nor individuals became unsettled in their beliefs. His inconsistencies were transparent to everyone, as was also his failure and disappointment when he fell into our hands with the well-known end.⁴⁷ After him the Madman⁴⁸ arose, who emulated the precursor who had paved the way for him. But he added the further objective of procuring rule and obedience,⁴⁹ and he invented his notorious religion.

All of these men wish to liken themselves to the divine religion.⁵⁰ But only a simpleton who lacks knowledge of both establishments will liken the divine institutions to human contrivances. The difference between our religion and the other denominations that liken themselves to us is like the difference between the living, rational individual and the statue skillfully molded out of marble, wood, silver, or gold that looks like a man.⁵¹ A person ignorant of divine wisdom or of God's work, when he sees the statue that superficially resembles a man in its contours, form, features, and color, believes that its structure is like the constitution of a man, because he lacks the knowledge of the inner organization of both. But the informed person who knows the interior of both, knows that the internal composition of the statue betrays no skillful workmanship at all, whereas the inward parts of man are truly marvelously made, a testimony to the wisdom of the Creator. The prolongation of the nerves in the muscles and their ramifications, the branching out of the sinews and their intersections, and the network of their ligaments and their manner of growth, the articulations of the bones and the joints, the pulsating and nonpulsating blood vessels and their ramifications, the setting of the limbs into one another, the uncovered and covered parts, every one of them is in proportion, in form, and in its proper place.

Likewise a person ignorant of the secrets of the revealed books and the inner significance of our Law will be led to believe that our religion has something in common with the established confession if he makes a comparison between the two. For he will find that in the Torah there are prohibitions and commandments, and there are prohibitions and commandments in the others; the Torah contains positive and negative precepts, rewards, and punishments, and the others contain negative

and positive commandments, rewards, and punishments. Yet if he could only fathom the inner meanings, he would realize that the essence of the Torah lies in the deeper meaning of its positive and negative precepts, every one of which will aid man in his striving after perfection and remove every impediment to the attainment of excellence. They will enable the masses and the elite to acquire moral and intellectual qualities, each according to his ability. Thus, the godly community becomes preeminent, reaching a twofold perfection.⁵² By the first I mean man's leading his life in this world under the most agreeable and congenial conditions. The second will constitute the gain of the intelligibles,⁵³ each in accordance with his native powers. The pretentious religions contain matters that have no inner meaning, only imitations, simulations, and copies by which the inventors aimed to glorify themselves and indulge in the fancy that they are similar to so-and-so. However, their shameful action is an open secret to the learned. They became an object of derision and ridicule,⁵⁴ just as one laughs and scoffs at a monkey when it tries to imitate the actions of human beings.

This was predicted by the divinely inspired prophet Daniel, according to whom, in some future time, it would happen.⁵⁵ Sometime later a person will appear with a religion similar to the true one, with a book and oral communications, who will arrogantly pretend that God has vouchsafed him a revelation, and that he held converse with Him, and other extravagant claims. In his description of the rise of the Arab kingdom after the Byzantine Empire, he compared the appearance of the Madman and his victories over the Byzantines, Persians, and Greeks with a horn that grew and became long and strong. This is clearly indicated in a verse that can be understood by the masses as well as by the select few. Since this interpretation is borne out by the facts of history, no other meaning can be given to the following verse: *I considered the horns, and, behold, another little horn came among them before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots; and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a human, and a mouth speaking big things* [Dan. 7:8]. Now consider how remarkably apt the symbolism is. He says that he saw a small horn that was going up. When it became longer, even marvelously longer, it cast three horns down before it, and behold, the horn had two eyes similar to the eyes

of a human, and a mouth speaking big things. This obviously alludes to the person who will found a new religion similar to the divine religion and make claim to a revelation and to prophecy. He will produce much talk and will endeavor to alter this Torah and abolish it, as He states: *And he shall seek to change the seasons and the law* [Dan. 7:25].

But God informed him that He would destroy this person, notwithstanding his greatness and his long endurance, together with the remaining adherents of his predecessors. For the three parties that warred against us will ultimately perish: the one that sought to overpower us with the sword, the second that claimed it had arguments against us, and the third that claims to have a religion similar to ours. Though they shall appear to be triumphant for a while, and be in the ascendancy for a longer or shorter period of time, they shall neither last nor endure. We have a continuous divine assurance that whenever a decree of apostasy is passed against us and wrath breaks out, God will ultimately terminate it. When King David, inspired by the Holy Spirit and speaking in the name of the community, reflected on how many peoples ruled over it in the past, and how many trials and tribulations they had undergone from the beginning of their history, and nevertheless were not exterminated, he exclaimed: *Since my youth they have often assailed me, but they have never overcome me* [Ps. 129:2].

My brethren, you know that in the time of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar the Jews were compelled to worship idols, and none was spared save Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.⁵⁶ Ultimately God destroyed him, and put an end to his laws, and the religion of truth came back into its own. Similarly, during the Second Commonwealth, when the wicked Greek rulers gained control, they instituted severe persecution against Israel in order to abolish the Torah. The Jews were compelled to profane the Sabbath and forbidden to practice circumcision. Every Jew was forced to write on his garment, "I do not have a portion in the Lord God of Israel," and also to engrave these words on the horns of his ox and then to plow with it.⁵⁷ Finally, God simultaneously brought their empire and their laws to an end, after a lapse of fifty-two years.⁵⁸ The sages of blessed memory frequently allude to persecutions in the following manner: "Once the wicked government passed such and such a decree of persecution,"⁵⁹ or "they decreed thus and so."⁶⁰ After a while God would make the decree null and void by

destroying the power that issued it. It was this observation that led the rabbis of blessed memory to affirm that persecutions are of short duration.⁶¹

Indeed God assured our father Jacob that although his children would be humbled and overcome by the nations, they and not the nations would survive and would endure. He declares: *Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth* [Gen. 28:14].⁶² that is to say, although they will be abased like the dust that is trodden under foot, they will ultimately emerge triumphant and victorious. And, as the simile implies, just as the dust settles finally upon him who tramples upon it and remains after him, so will Israel outlive its oppressors.⁶³ The prophet Isaiah predicted that during its exile various peoples will succeed in their endeavor to vanquish Israel and lord over them, but that ultimately God will come to Israel's assistance and put a stop to their woes and afflictions. He says: *A harsh prophecy has been announced to me: "The betrayer is betraying, the ravager ravaging. Advance Elam! Lay siege, Media! I have put an end to all her sighing"* [Isa. 21:2].⁶⁴ The Lord has given us assurance through His prophets that we are indestructible and imperishable, and we will always continue to be a preeminent community. As it is impossible for God to cease to exist, so is our destruction and disappearance from the world unthinkable. He declares: *For I am the Lord—I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob—you have not ceased to be* [Mal. 3:6]. Similarly, He has avowed and assured us that it is unimaginable that He will reject us entirely even if we disobey Him and disregard His behests, as He avers: *If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done—declares the Lord* [Jer. 31:37].⁶⁵ In fact, this very promise was previously given through Moses our Teacher in the Torah. It reads: *Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God* [Lev. 26:44].⁶⁶

Put your trust in these true texts of Scripture, brethren, and be not dismayed by the succession of persecutions or the enemy's ascendancy over us, or the weakness of our people. These trials are designed to test and purify us, so that only the saints and the pious men of the

pure and undefiled lineage of Jacob will adhere to our religion and remain within the fold, as has been stated: *Anyone who invokes the name of Lord shall be among the survivors* [Joel 3:5].⁶⁷ This statement makes it clear that they are not numerous, and that they are the descendants of those who were present at Mount Sinai,⁶⁸ witnessed the divine revelation, entered into the covenant of God, and took upon themselves to do and obey, declaring, *we will do, and obey* [Exod. 24:7].⁶⁹ They obligated themselves and their descendants, by saying: *for us and our children* [for]ever [Deut. 29:28].⁷⁰ God has given assurance—He is an adequate guarantor—and informed them that not only did all the persons who were present at the Sinaitic revelation believe in the prophecy of Moses and in his Law, but that their descendants would likewise do so until the end of time. He declares: *I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after* [Exod. 19:9]. Consequently, let everyone know who spurns the religion that was revealed at that theophany that he is not an offspring of the folk that witnessed it. This is what the sages of Israel of blessed memory said of those who entertain scruples concerning the divine message: They are not the scions of the race that was present at Mount Sinai.⁷¹ May God guard me and you from doubt, and banish from our midst confusion and suspicion that lead to it and ensnare in it.

Now, all my fellow countrymen in the Diaspora, it behooves you to hearten one another, the elders to guide the youth, and the leaders to direct the masses. Gain the assent of your community⁷² to the Truth that is immutable and unchangeable, and to the following postulates of the true faith that shall never fail.⁷³ God is one in a unique sense of the term.⁷⁴ And Moses, His prophet and spokesman,⁷⁵ is the greatest and most perfect of all the seers. To him was vouchsafed the knowledge of God, what has never been vouchsafed to any prophet before him, nor will it be in the future. The entire Torah from beginning to end⁷⁶ was spoken by God to Moses, of whom it is said: *With him I speak mouth to mouth* [Num. 12:8].⁷⁷ It will never be abrogated or superseded, neither supplemented nor abridged. Never shall it be supplanted by another divine law containing positive or negative duties. Keep the revelation at Mount Sinai well in mind in accordance with the divine precept to perpetuate the memory and not to forget this

occasion. He enjoined us to teach it to our children so that they grow up knowing it, as He—exalted be the Speaker—says: *But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind so long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children: The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb [Deut. 4:9-10].*⁷⁸

It is imperative, my fellow Jews, that you make this great spectacle of the revelation appeal to the imagination of your children. Proclaim at public gatherings its nobility and its momentousness. For it is the pivot of our religion and the proof that demonstrates its veracity. Evaluate this phenomenon in its true importance, as God pointed out its significance in the verse: *You have but to inquire about bygone ages that came before you, ever since God created man on earth, from one end of heaven to the other: has anything as grand as this ever happened, or has its like ever been known? Has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire?* [Deut. 4:32-33]. Remember, brethren, that this great, incomparable, and unique covenant and faith is attested by the best of evidence. For never before or since has a whole nation heard the speech of God or beheld His splendor. This was done only to confirm us in the faith, so that nothing can change it, and to reach a degree of certainty that will sustain us in these trying times of fierce persecution and absolute tyranny, as He says: *For God has come only in order to test you* [Exod. 20:17].⁷⁹ It means that God has revealed Himself thus to give you strength to withstand all future trials. Now, brethren, do not slip or err, be steadfast in your religion and persevere in your faith and its duties.

Long ago Solomon⁸⁰ compared our community with a beautiful woman having a perfect figure, marred by no defect, in the verse: *Every part of you is fair, my darlings; there is no blemish in you* [Song of Songs 4:7].⁸¹ He further depicted the adherents of other religions and faiths, who strive to entice us and win us over to their convictions as beguiling seducers who lure virtuous women for their lewd purposes. Similarly they seek devices to trap us into embracing their religions, and subscribing to their doctrines. To those who endeavor to decoy her into avowing the superiority of their creed, he in his wisdom answered in

the name of the community: "Why do you take hold of me, can you confer upon me something like the felicity of the two companies?" She challenges them, saying: "If you can furnish me with something like the theophany at Sinai, in which the camp of Israel faced the camp of the divine presence, then I shall espouse your doctrine."⁸² This is metaphorically expressed in the verse: *Turn back, turn back, O maid of Shulem! Turn back, turn back, that we may gaze upon you. "Why will you gaze at the Shulammitte in the Mahanaim dance?"* [Song of Songs 7:1]⁸³ *Shulammitte* signifies the perfect one; the *Mahanaim dance* the joy of the revelation at Mt. Sinai that was shared by the camp⁸⁴ of Israel, as He states: *Moses led the people out of the camp toward God* [Exod. 19:17],⁸⁵ and the camp of God, as He explained saying: *God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands* [Ps. 68:18].⁸⁶

Note well the wisdom and the deep significance of the verse. The fourfold occurrence of the word *return* is an allusion to the four empires, each of which has endeavored to coerce us to abandon our faith and to join it. Now we are living under the last of them.⁸⁷ God has warned us in the Torah that they would draw us to accept their faith, for He says: *There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone* [Deut. 4:28].⁸⁸ However, even then it will not be general throughout the world,⁸⁹ and God will never deprive us of His Law, as He assured us: *Since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring* [Deut. 31:21].⁹⁰ Indeed, Isaiah, the herald of national redemption, has explained that the sign between us and Him, and the token that proves that we are indestructible lies in the perpetuation of God's Torah and His words among us: *And this shall be My covenant with them, said the Lord: My spirit which is upon you, and the words which I have placed in your mouth shall not be absent from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children's children—said the Lord—from now on, for all time* [Isa. 59:21]. Our nation speaks with pride of the persecutions it has suffered, and the sore tribulations it has endured, as he states: *It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered* [Ps. 44:23].⁹¹ The rabbis remark in Midrash Hazita⁹² that the expression *it is for Your sake* alludes to the generations that undergo

persecution. Let these persons exult who suffer dire misfortunes, are deprived of their riches, are forced into exile, and lose their belongings. For the bearing of these hardships is a source of glory and a great achievement in the sight of God. Whoever is visited by these calamities is like a burnt offering upon the altar.⁹³ It is said to them: *Dedicate yourselves to the Lord this day . . . that He may bestow a blessing upon you today* [Exod. 32:29].⁹⁴

It therefore behooves the victims of this persecution to escape and flee to the desert and wilderness, and not to consider separation from family or loss of wealth.⁹⁵ For they are a slight sacrifice and a paltry offering due to God, King of kings, possessor of all things, *this honored and awesome Name, the Lord your God* [Deut. 28:58].⁹⁶ God may be trusted to compensate you well in this world and in the world-to-come. Thus we have found that the godly and pious folk who are animated by a desire to get acquainted with the truth and those who are engaged in its pursuit, rush to the divine religion, and wend their way from the most distant parts to the homes of scholars.⁹⁷ They seek to gain increased insight into the Law, that they may gain reward from God. How much more is it one's duty to run for the entire Torah! We know that when a man finds it arduous to gain a livelihood in one country, he emigrates to another. It is all the more incumbent upon one who is restricted in the practice of the divine religion to depart for another place. If he finds it impossible to leave that locality for the time being, he must not become careless and indulge in the desecration of the Sabbath and the dietary laws on the assumption that he is exempt from all religious obligations.⁹⁸ It is the eternally inescapable duty of everyone belonging to the stock of Jacob to abide by the Law. Nay, he exposes himself to punishment for the violation of each and every positive or negative precept. Let no one conclude that he may freely disregard the less important ceremonies without liability to penalty because he has under duress committed some major sins.⁹⁹ For Jeroboam son of Nebat, may his bones be ground to dust,¹⁰⁰ was chastised not only for the sin of worshipping the calves and inciting the Israelites to do the same, but also for his failure to construct a booth on the Feast of Tabernacles.¹⁰¹ This is one of the fundamentals of our religion. Understand it aright, teach it, and apply the principle widely.

II

You mention that the apostate¹⁰² has misled people to believe that *bm'd m'd* is the Madman,¹⁰³ or that in the same way *He appeared from Mount Paran* [Deut. 33:2]¹⁰⁴ alludes to him, or similarly, that *a prophet from among your own people* [Deut. 18:15]¹⁰⁵ refers to him, or likewise his promise to Ishmael: *I will make of him a great nation* [Gen. 17:20].¹⁰⁶ These arguments have been rehearsed so often that they have become nauseating. It is not enough to declare that they are altogether feeble; nay, to cite them as proofs is ridiculous and absurd in the extreme. Neither the untutored multitudes, nor the apostates themselves who delude others with them, believe in them or entertain any illusions about them. Their sole purpose in citing these verses is to win favor in the eyes of the gentiles by demonstrating that they believe the statement of the Koran that Muhammad was mentioned in the Torah. But the Muslims themselves do not accept these arguments; they do not admit them nor cite them, because they are manifestly fallacious. Inasmuch as the Muslims could not find a single proof in the entire Bible, nor a reference, or possible allusion to their prophet that they could utilize, they are compelled to accuse us, saying: "You have altered the text of the Torah, and expunged every trace of the name of Muhammad therefrom."¹⁰⁷ They could find nothing stronger than this ignominious argument, the falsity of which is easily demonstrated to one and all by the fact that the Torah had been translated into Syriac, Greek, Persian, and Latin hundreds of years before the appearance of the "prepostle,"¹⁰⁸ and by the fact that it is an unbroken tradition¹⁰⁹ in the East and the West, with the result that no differences in the text exist at all, not even in the vocalization, for they are all correct. Nor do any differences affecting the meaning exist.¹¹⁰ Only the absence of any allusion to him in the Torah compelled them to rely on these weak proofs.

The phrase *a great nation* implies neither prophecy nor a Law, but merely large numbers and no more,¹¹¹ just as He says of the idolaters *nations greater and more numerous than you* [Deut. 11:23].¹¹² Similarly, the phrase *bm'd m'd* simply signifies *exceedingly*. If the allusion in the phrase were intended to *that one*, it would read *and I shall bless him bm'd m'd*,¹¹³ so that whoever likes to hang on a spider's web might