*Derrida: From Athens to Jerusalem*

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In this essay, I would like to bring Jacques Derrida, a philosopher associated with Athens, to Jerusalem. I will argue that a central concept in Derrida’s philosophy, *différance,* is analogous to Maimonides’s homonyms will show this using the parable of Jacob’s ladder. I will demonstrate that Derrida is a Greek-Jewish philosopher. Gideon Ofrat wrote that is impossible to deeply understand of Derrida’s without the illumination of the Jewish dimension in his thought. Ofrat claims that beneath the surface, beneath the veil, beneath the text, Judaism is concealed. Judaism is hidden, almost compelled. Does the revelation of Jewish identity, emerging from darkness to light, not lie at the roots of the Derridean endeavor? Is it not the “source,” the “ultimate” (essence, eidos, logos) for Derridean writing? Derrida’s closer engagement with Emmanuel Levinas in recent decades has brought to the forefront a kind of Judaism that was concealed in his earlier writings.[[1]](#footnote-1) I will explore this through a conversation and correspondence with Maimonides. I refer to this as “correspondence” because Derrida’s deconstruction is done using the hermeneutical method.

Both Derrida and Maimonides, in their interpretation of the biblical text, are hermeneuticians. Both philosophers were interpreters of texts and hence Derrida engages with Maimonides, despite the time gap between the two Jewish philosophers – Maimonides, a 12th century philosopher and Derrida, a philosopher of the 20th century. I will argue that this gap can be bridged, and I will do so through the deconstructive method, interpreting the text of Maimonides’s *The Guide for the Perplexed* which offers interpretations of the biblical text. In other words, I will describe the hermeneutics of deconstruction and then apply it to Maimonides through a case study of the parable of “Jacob’s ladder” from *The Guide for the Perplexed,* highlighting the similarities between Maimonides’ hermeneutics of biblical interpretation and Derrida’s.

But first, we must establish what hermeneutics is. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation that deals with the translation, explanation, and interpretation of texts to clarify a complex or difficult statement. When an interpretation includes additional explanations by the interpreter, it becomes hermeneutics. In Greek mythology, Hermes was the messenger of the gods whose role was to translate, explain, and interpret divine words into human language. Hermeneutics, derived from Hermes, refers to interpretation and for deconstruction, particularly the interpretation of texts. The function of hermeneutics is to convey and translate something beyond human understanding into something that a reader can grasp and comprehend. Hermes’s role was to transmit and translate something beyond human understanding into something humans could understand. The Greeks attributed to Hermes the revelation of language and writing, with which people could understand meaning and convey it to others. This mythological tradition that relates to Hermes corresponds to the statement of the Jewish Sages: “The Torah speaks in the language of men.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

There is no single discipline of hermeneutics, but rather various methodological, theoretical, and hermeneutical trends.[[3]](#footnote-3) The root of the word ‘hermeneutics’ comes from the Greek verb *hermẻneuein*, which means “to interpret.” The noun form, *hermẻneia,* means “interpretation.” The various forms of the word *hermẻneuein* suggest a process of turning the non-understandable into the understandable. How does the process of interpretation work? As mentioned above, hermeneutics is an elucidation that contains additional explanations by the interpreter. Interpretation goes beyond mere elucidation. It expands the text to ultimately arrive at something actually more succinct, the meaningful core of the text. It leads to a transformation because it introduces elements absent from simple elucidation. Interpretation mediates between the text and the reader; it alters or adds something that was not initially in the text to make it easier for the reader to understand the text without it. Is interpretation a necessary condition for a “good reading” of literary, religious, philosophical, legal, and other texts? Or, perhaps the interpretation limits the text in that each interpreter believes that theirs is the one correct and true reading? Perhaps there could be several “good readings?” From this perspective, not just hermeneutics, but also interpretation, goes beyond mere elucidation.

According to Hanoch Ben-Pazi, the act of interpretation appears, on the surface, to be almost innate. Each one of us uses interpretive actions in our daily lives, in every step and action of our lives. For example, someone may approach us on the street, and we interpret and understand what they said to us. Or we read a newspaper; pass by an advertisement, and immediately interpret what we read or what we saw. We encounter another person’s physical gestures, and we immediately engage in an interpretive action to rationalize the gesture. Our lives are filled with innumerable acts of interpretation to the point where one can say that we are “interpreter-humans.” As Hans-Georg Gadamer,[[4]](#footnote-4) one of the great hermeneuticians of the 20th century, says: “every act of understanding is an act of interpretation.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Unlike Schleiermacher’s[[6]](#footnote-6) modernist hermeneutics, which sees the need for reconciling the gap between the text and the author to understand it, and unlike Ricoeur’s[[7]](#footnote-7) structuralist hermeneutics, which disregards the author, postmodern hermeneutics claims that what exists is solely the text, and this text is what must be interpreted. When speaking of a text, one speaks of writing. For Derrida, the word closest to describing deconstruction is *différance*, a term which he coined.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is derived from the verb *differer*, which can be defined in two ways: to be different and separate (différ), or to defer or delay (defer). Thus, the full meaning of *différance* includes different meanings that can replace and defer one another. Derrida’s choice to spell this word with an “a” rather than an “e”, which is neither a term nor a concept, reveals his idea in coining this term. In the French language, the difference in pronunciation between ‘difference’ and ‘différance’ is not heard. Through this, Derrida was able to unite all the characteristics of *différance*. The difference between the two spellings is only visual, only read and written but not heard. It is impossible to understand this nuance through speech. Thus, the ‘a’ of ‘différance’ remains silent, mysterious, and concealed; it is written but not pronounced. The difference and deferral between ‘e’ and ‘a’ in the word ‘différance’ go beyond the sensory order of hearing and lead us to a place that is not subject to the senses and is possibly incomprehensible. The order that goes on beyond the opposition between the senses and understanding is the movement of *différance* between the two distinct letters, a *différance* that goes beyond both voice and writing in their usual sense, as well as beyond speech and writing. [[9]](#footnote-9) Given this information, how does one discuss *différance*?

*Différance* is neither about existence nor essence. It is not derived from any category of being, whether present or absent. It transcends the finite categories of essence and existence. *Différance* cannot be reduced to any theological or ontological understanding.[[10]](#footnote-10) Even though *différance* is not a word or concept, Derrida still attempts to approach and analyze it semantically. We already know that the verb “differer” (*diferre* in Latin) has two distinct meanings; it participates in two different statements, claims, or assertions. In this sense, “diferre” in Latin does not correspond to the Greek translation “diapherein,” and this is important for connecting our discourse to a specific language, which may be understood as less philosophical. The Greek word “diapheria” does not include the postponement inherent in the Latin “differre.” The concept of postponing an action or thinking about time and forces of action such as a deferral, delay, suspension, representation are all summarized by Derrida in one word: temporality. None of these are present in the Greek word *diapheria*.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The other meaning of *differer* is more intrinsic: to be other, not identical, distinct and separated. There must be some distance, space, or gap that forms between two dissimilar elements and persists with continuity. “Difference” with an “e” cannot express both meanings: temporality and differentiation or spatiality. *Différance* with an “a” can compensate for the loss of meaning because it can simultaneously signify both meanings.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is inherently polysemous.

*Différance* is also not in a passive or simple state; it is like a source of variations and differences. Derrida wants to remain in the semiotic problem to see the unity of *différance* as both temporal and spatial. Most contemporary semiotic or linguistic studies, which dominate contemporary thought, attribute this influence to Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure was firstly the theorist who imposed the arbitrary character of the sign and the character of differentiation based on a contingent social agreement.[[13]](#footnote-13) According to Saussure these two characteristics – arbitrariness and differentiation – cannot be separated. Arbitrariness is only possible because the sign system is built on differences and distinctions. *Différance* is the play of differences that makes possible both the distinction and differentiation within the sign system.[[14]](#footnote-14) From this perspective, the concept, the signified, is secondary and derives its importance from the signs that surround it.[[15]](#footnote-15) No word, according to Derrida, can function as a sign unless it itself refers to another possible sign, an absence, a negation, which exists as a trace within it. The trace is the absence, the negation, both in space and time. Derrida calls this state “archi-writing” or “archi-trace” or simply *différance*. It represents space and time simultaneously.[[16]](#footnote-16) Variations, distinctions, and differences are all “formed” by *différance*. While *différance* arises from the binary opposition, it gives birth to an infinite play of signifiers, reflecting the absence, the negation, in both space and time. *Différance* is the transition between one concept and its opposite. Thus, we can consider the binary pairs of philosophy and our discourse not as opposites that cancel each other but with the awareness that every concept must appear as the *différance* of the other, recalling that the other is different from defers what it is not identical to. To summarize, *différance* aims to disrupt the ontology of presence and existence while challenging and destabilizing the notion of “being.” *Différance* does not rule over anything, and it does not apply any authority. There is no kingdom of *différance;* on the contrary, it undermines kingdoms, even the kingdom of presence.

*Différance* is the most distinct expression of deconstruction. Deconstruction is one of the ways that expresses post-modernity. During the Enlightenment, also known as “the Age of Reason” which captured Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, the belief was that truth could be reached, and in the context of interpretation, that the true meaning of text could be discovered. However, in the postmodern era, there remains no such recognition, only the recognition that one cannot reach the truth of the text because the postmodern interpreters grapple with the fact that there are no longer definitive determinations about the interpretation that aim at modernity. In other words, post-modernity acknowledges the problems of modernity and attempts to cope with its failures. It can be said that modernity speaks in the single-voiced tone of logos, whereas post-modernity selects multiplicity and ambiguity. The idea of multiple truths and interpretations, or as Derrida calls it, “the writing.” Derrida, according to Professor Ze’ev Levy, searched for a long time for a term that would adequately describe his philosophical work. He initially thought of “dissemination” in the sense of spreading ideas (i.e. seeds) that the farmer scatters not to destroy but to grow. What initially appears as an act of dispersion and destruction is, in fact, an act of growth. Therefore, Derrida himself was inclined to call his theory “Dissemination.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The term expresses the idea that every text diverges from its author’s clear intent. The core content of the text breaks through the intended semantic horizons, spreading without order and in all directions. Derrida uses this term to express the idea that every text is “sown to the winds” and breaks out in all directions. In terms of its meaning, it is indeterminate. Furthermore, the text’s creative potential lies in its resistance to fixed concepts, meaning that one word or concept does not signify a specific meaning explicitly. Ultimately, Derrida chose the term “deconstruction,” a term that is not about construction or reconstruction but the negation of construction, or construction through negation.

According to Ben-Pazi, Derrida did not seek a term of destruction but rather a term of complex and creative construction, in which negation is part of it. Derrida, the philosopher, seems to many to be a strange philologist, who nurtures an eccentric writing genre that contradicts all conventions and realism. Others see him as a key figure heralding a new era in philosophy, with a revolutionary theory on reading and interpreting texts.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus, following Derrida is one of the critical literary trends known as “deconstruction.” This trend subjects all philosophical perceptions of knowledge, language, and understanding, which characterized modern hermeneutics to uncompromising criticism. The intention of deconstruction, as implied by its name, is to deconstruct all structural or critical systematicity. Derrida began to cast doubt on science and its position, i.e., the objectivity of language description and analysis, as well as the assumptions of the Saussurian model that served as an analytical foundation for structuralists.[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, he is considered a post-structuralist. Derrida criticizes all the concepts that characterize Western modern philosophy: language, entity, and the like.

John R. Searle argues that Derrida criticizes and is wary of all binary concepts in Western philosophical thought: speech/writing, male/female, truth/similarity, literal/metaphorical, reality/appearance, and more. Deconstruction believes that the right binary concepts are above and precede the left ones, which are negative, complex, and disruptive to the right ones. These hierarchical oppositions seem to be at the heart of logocentrism, which is obsessed with rationality, logic, and the search for truth. Deconstruction aims to reverse this hierarchy and undermine logocentrism by inverting the hierarchy of opposites, where the second term is, in fact, the primary, and the first term is a particular case of the second. The second term is the possibility condition of the first. The results are surprising. It appears that speech is a form of writing, and what seems to be meaningful language is a free play of signs or an infinite process of composing text upon text. However, there is another stage in this process of deconstruction, the dislocation of classical ethical binary concepts. Later on, I will demonstrate that speech and writing are, in fact, forms of “archi-writing” that turn into a new concept that includes speech and writing. [[20]](#footnote-20)

But is deconstruction, as David Couzens Hoy asks, a theory or a method? Hoy suggests that deconstruction is an interpretive strategy or maneuver that can encompass any “theory.” The analysis of deconstruction places mirrors on the theory discussed by the application of the very same theory through questioning and investigation.[[21]](#footnote-21) Deconstruction is, therefore, “philosophical;” and if so, deconstruction is a post-structuralist philosophical trend that rebels against the systematic and rational methods. Out of this grew Derrida’s influence on the field of criticism, particularly in the reading of literary and philosophical texts. Geoffrey H. Hartman argues that the house Derrida built, which is not a “house of cards,” challenges those who think that books are constructed rigidly and uniformly in an intellectual space defined by clear and sharp boundaries.[[22]](#footnote-22)

There are several ways to read a text, and the text’s own writing stands at the center of deconstruction’s hermeneutics. I will also show that this at the center of Maimonides’ hermeneutics in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, which reveals the “Seventy Faces to the Torah.” In his important book “On Grammatology,” Derrida analyzes both the meaning of writing and the theory of writing. At first glance, the technical issues he presents deal with the development of various writing methods; for example, how the phonetic method that dominates the Western world developed, the various possibilities of how humanity’s cultures that engaged in writing could have developed, leading to different forms of expression. Derrida’s analysis is very challenging, especially in his reference to the question of writing as a fundamental question of culture, of “book” culture, and by ways of reading and interpretation. (I will fill in myself)[[23]](#footnote-23) *Différance* is the writing. Therefore, I want to engage in reading and the interpretation of texts as it is here where the interpretation of the written text enters hermeneutics.

“Plato’s Pharmacy”[[24]](#footnote-24) is perhaps the right work to begin to explain Derrida’s general philosophy and the issues with interpretation because it contains his rereading of the myth recounted by Socrates at the end of *Phaedrus* concerning the ostensible inferiority of writing to speech. It is important to emphasize that before Derrida’s reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, oral speech was considered primary and writing was viewed as inferior, sometimes referred to as “the dead letter.” Derrida is a revolutionary in his elevation of writing. Ronny Klein, in his book *Sign, Body, Community*, calls this event “the textual turn.”[[25]](#footnote-25) More specifically, he states that where there is writing, i.e., text, there is room for interpretation. Written letters are a living entity. Therefore, our starting point is Plato’s *Phaedrus*.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato deals with the origins of writing and its value. Is it proper or improper to compose things in writing? When does it have a defect, and when does it not? Plato compares writing to “Pharmakeia,” which is a general term that means the giving of any potion, whether as a remedy or as a poison. *Pharmakon* is considered a substance, but Derrida adds that it is actually an anti-substance since it stands in the way of any philosophical analysis – going beyond any formulation. *Pharmakon* is a non-identity, non-substance, and quasi-essence. It is destined to be revealed as an ambiguous, controlled meaning that allows for either indefinity or over-determination, which can be translated as a remedy, poison, drug, or potion. The true nature of writing as *pharmakon* is given over from the outset to the myth of Theuth (I will fill in myself). [[27]](#footnote-27)

We can see that the relationship between writing to myth becomes clearer, and so does its opposition to knowledge that a person draws from within himself, as well as the possibility to detach from the source. *Pharmakon*, the text, is presented before the king, who decides and decrees its value. He is presented as a present that Theuth gives to King Thamus. Creativity, art, this present of writing, have value in their use. The value of the *Pharmakon*, of writing, is given as a present but it is the king who gives it its value. King Thamus, or Amon, king of the gods is the source of value. Writing is valuable only if the god-king sees it as important. He is illiterate and that ignorance testifies to his independence and power. The god-king does not need to write because he is the speaker, and for the one who writes, his speech is sufficient.[[28]](#footnote-28) (I will fill in myself)

The logos is the power of speech, and its source lies in the father’s position. In other words, the logos has the aspect of a son, and as such, its fate is doomed without the presence and assistance of his responsible father who speaks for him. Without his father, the logos was only writing. This writing, Derrida says, requires a father to come to its aid because it, itself, cannot cope with the trouble.[[29]](#footnote-29) Therefore, not only is writing an orphan but it is also burdened with the sin of presuming to remove the father, to free itself from him, and to attain a precarious independence. The removal of the father is parricide. In contrast to writing, logos lives when it has a living father, while the orphan is considered dead. The logos’s father is present and stands by his side, supporting him, holding him upright. The logos appreciates the father, and therefore, forbids himself parricide. Only living speech, such as discourse, has a father. The logos always exists, it is a being (*on*). Only the power of speech has a father, and the father is always a father to the living (i.e. to the speaker).

Derrida states that in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, concerning *pharmakon*, Theuth is a secondary and subsidiary figure who has the opportunity to come before King Thamus and present his discovery, writing, so that the king can judge whether the writing is worthy or not. King Thamus responds by rejecting the discovery of writing and this leaves Theuth demeaned.[[30]](#footnote-30) King Thamus confirms the low value of the writing by claiming that it is useful to facilitate memorization, remembrance, and recording (*hypomnēsis*), but not living memory and knowledge (*mnēmē*). *Pharmakon* replaces living speech with a sign that lacks a soul, claiming to manage without its living father, the source of life. Writing itself cannot respond to anything more than a statue or a mute picture could.

The word *pharmakon* is complex in its chain of meanings, a game that appears as part of a system or a textual network. The word may mean a remedy or a benevolent potion because writing will help improve the memory and wisdom of those who use it. The word’s meaning might be a remedy and might erase, on the external level, the functioning of its polysemy, but it is also clear that Theuth, in praising his invention, turned the word on its hidden axis and presents it from only its positive pole. A remedy is beneficial; it produces (wisdom) and rectifies (memory). It enhances knowledge and reduces forgetfulness. However, *pharmakon* has another pole that is erased by its meaning as a remedy. The remedy meaning erases and cancels the advantage of polysemy and renders it difficult to understand the context. However, the king’s response implies that this influence may be reversed: it may worsen the situation rather than heal it. The king states that out of cunning and/or innocence, Theut highlights the opposite of writing’s true result. To praise writing, Theuth (corresponding to Thiot in Egyptian mythology) distorts the meaning of *pharmakon*, presenting it as the opposite of what writing might cause. He presented poison as if it were medicine. All medicines have side effects and the *pharmakon* can never be harmless. Theuth disconnects one meaning, that of poison, from the *pharmakon* and the king renews its connection to its other meaning.

When writing is presented as a *pharmakon*, while it is opposed to life, it transmits the disease, even making it worse. This is the logical structure and the reason the king opposes writing, claiming that it does not assist memory, but rather increases forgetfulness; instead of increasing knowledge, it diminishes it. It does not answer the needs of memory; it misses the target. It does not strengthen memory (mnẻmẻ) but only mention (hypomnẻsis). Derrida argues (I fill in myself).[[31]](#footnote-31)

Now we can perhaps read the king’s response:

(I fill in myself)[[32]](#footnote-32)

Thus, the king, the father of speech, imposes his authority on the father of writing. For writing to have an opposite effect from what is expected, meaning for the *pharmakon* to be revealed as harmful, even poisonous, its actions, its power, must be ambiguous. Plato seeks to overcome this ambiguity with a clear and explicit contrast: good versus evil, inside versus outside, truth versus falsehood, essence versus appearance. Plato is forced to adapt his narrative to the laws of structure including the most general laws in which opposites are formulated and determined: speech/writing, life/death, father/son, master/servant, first/second, legitimate child/illegitimate child, soul/body, inside/outside, good/evil, seriousness/play, day/night, sun/moon, and so on. These opposites show that the *pharmakon* can only revolve in a circle. Only on the surface does writing seem to benefit memory, helping it recognize the truth. But, in reality, writing is harmful in its essence, external to memory. It produces opinion and not knowledge; it is not truth but mere appearance; the *pharmakon* creates a deceptive game and pretends to be true.

If, according to the king, writing produces the opposite result from the one attributed to him, if the *pharmakon* is destructive, it is because it does not come from here. It comes from there; he is external or foreign in relation to life, which is the true presence of the face. In relation to the logos of life that it pretends to assist or replace, writing has no essence or value of its own, neither positive nor negative. Its playground is imitation. It imitates or reproduces the patterns of memory, knowledge, and truth. Therefore, writers are seen in the eyes of the gods, not as wise but only as appearing to be wise or wise in their own eyes. A person who relies on writing, who boasts of the power and knowledge that writing promises him, that imposter is exposed by Thamus and is endowed with all the characteristics of the sophist: imitating the one who knows. The conversion of living memory with a memory aid, the conversion of the organic into the artificial, such as the replacement of an organ with an object. Here the difference between the nominal and the substantial, and the sibylline ambiguity that replaces active spirit with knowledge instead of its current reality. The boundary between inside and outside, between life and non-life, does not simply separate speech from writing, but also memory as a disclosure that recreates presence from recollection as a return to the monument: between truth and its sign, between being and its pattern. Writing is a supplement, an addition to speech.

The structure of writing and its history play a decisive role in determining writing as the repetition of the sign, as a sign of a sign. In other words, living speech is a sign of something, and writing is a sign that signifies living speech. Writing signifies the vocal sign. While vocalization must exist in living proximity, in the presence of mnẻmẻ (memory) or psyche (soul), the graphic sign, which doubles or erases it, takes another step further, moves outside of life, draws them out of themselves, and betrays them in their repetition. Hence the two harms of the *pharmakon*: it weakens memory, and if it has any benefit, it is not for mnẻmẻ (memory) but for hypomnẻsis (recollection). Instead of reviving life at its source, it can at most preserve a memory. Poison that weakens memory, a remedy that strengthens its external signs, its symptoms: an ephemeral, contingent, superficial, effaced event that is separated from the thing to which it refers. Derrida argues that in both in its externality and its harmful, penetrating power, the influence of the *pharmakon* reaches the deepest places.

The living logos, the great lord, is also a *pharmakon*, and it can be more violent than writing. The living logos is both good and evil, even though it is not inherently inclined towards either good or evil. Derrida argues that even Socrates, like the sophists, is a *pharmakon*. Consequently, “if the logos is already an intervening additive, is Socrates, ‘he who does not write, ‘the lord of the *pharmakon*?’ And thus, is he not like the sophists, Protagoras, the magician, the sorcerer, and perhaps even those impostors condemned by Georgias? This entanglement of partnerships is almost impossible to resolve.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

The Socratic *pharmakon*, Derrida claims, also acts as poison; penetrating and seizing the most hidden interior of the body and soul. Philosophy places against its other the role of the drug in the remedy, the role of the *pharmakon* against its contrary. Such action could not be possible without the treasure of the pharmaco-logos within it, sharing conflicting values, and only when the *pharmakon* is initially presented as something that lacks identity, that presents itself as both a remedy that can poison and a poison that can heal. The “essence” of *pharmakon* is that it has no stable essence, no character or identity of its own. This medicinal substance is not, in any sense of the word, a substance. It cannot be fully treated because it has no being, and likewise, its effects may be reversed and after drinking it, he declared in writing a medicine, much like an elixir. The king came, and after him, Socrates, and he reversed and denounced this elixir as a harmful substance, a potion of forgetfulness. And on the other hand, the poisoned elixir, a *pharmakon* itself, is presented to Socrates as a substance of death.

Derrida claims that (I will fill myself).[[34]](#footnote-34) Inside the pharmacy it is impossible to distinguish the medicine from the poison, the good from the bad, the truth from the lie, the inside from the outside, the vital from the deadly, etc. When you consider the *pharmakon* in its original transformation, it is precisely the same because it has no identity. And the same is found in the supplement or in difference, in delay. It is nothing but that truth and untruth, like the other differences and contrasts of philosophy, are dependent and relative to each other like writing and speech. They are the same, as in the *différance*.

*Phaedrus* is a good place to start analyzing the nature of the author’s intentions in the text. For example, what was Plato’s intention in *Phaedrus* regarding the inner thoughts of the soul? But there is so much more to say about this text. Thus, one must also consider the reader or interpreter. Derrida casts doubt on this and asks: Is reading external to writing? Are the thoughts found in writing internal, essential, and true that reading needs to interpret? Michel Ness asks:[[35]](#footnote-35) (I’ll fill it in myself).

The philosophical tradition assumes that a good reading is defined as one that repeats the intentions of the text, but neither reading nor writing are independent of each other. To read Plato and assume that reading is an activity where we already know the author’s intention is to know all the answers in advance. But a good reading is a moment of decision, a moment when something unique can happen. Initially, we need to read Plato’s intentions, his inner voice, but then we can avoid the regular meaning and look for a new tradition and a new history, concepts, structures, and ideas.

As mentioned earlier, deconstruction is more associated with *différance*, which is related to writing and inscription. Deconstruction primarily expresses itself not in the conversation in which the speaker and the listener are present, but in a language where the meaning is always a “clue or trace” of something that has already happened. Hence, text and meaning are never identical, and that is why the need for interpretation arises to bridge this gap. Consciousness writes, but it never apprehends presence; it only defers it. Therefore, it is impossible for us to have fixed and clear concepts of reading or understanding. Levi argues that Derrida eliminates the possibility of this because any written work could have multiple textual layers, changing and replacing each other frequently, and preventing the text from being read in one single way. Every reading is, in such a way, a “deconstruction” of the text being read.[[36]](#footnote-36) Derrida proves that no writing can “represent” anything other than itself, but rather, is open to variations in its readings. No word in the text has only one meaning or sense, but each word can be broken down into several different meanings that affect each other and come at the expense of one another. Deconstruction is a method that insists that it is impossible to establish only a single meaning from a text. Yet, the concept of interpretation that Derrida uses does not claim to achieve any deep or fixed certainty. Instead, every meaning changes and defers itself to another; it is simply “interpretation” and nothing else.

From Athens to Jerusalem: According to Maimonides, there exist parables and words in the biblical text with more than one meaning. Let us recall here that deconstruction is a method that insists on the notion that it is impossible to establish only a single meaning from a text. When hermeneutics tries to deal with a system of signs, the result is not one interpretation, but rather two opposing interpretations; in other words, there is no identity but difference. Maimonides makes this same fundamental distinction of the Bible contradicting itself between the layers of the scripture. According to Derrida, this is an integral feature of every text. That is, the author of the Bible created it with these contradictions so that inherently, there would be different layers to the text. This implies that the processes of interpretation and its possibilities are seemingly endless and that “the gates of interpretation are never locked before us,” in the words of Maimonides.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Literary critic Hillis J. Miller, who until the 1970s belonged to the school of phenomenological criticism but later became more or less supportive of deconstruction, addressed the claim that deconstruction is a “pure parasite” aimed at killing the host. Parasitical reading is the opposite of self-evident, singular-meaning reading?[[38]](#footnote-38) Miller asks what about the “excerpt” from the reviewed work that appears in a review article? Is there a difference between an introduction in an original text and the same introduction in an interpretive text? For example, in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, there are quotations from the Bible, such as “And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). This verse from Genesis appears in the body of *The Guide for the Perplexed,* which is “nourished” by it. When a quotation is brought into an interpretive text, such as *The Guide for the Perplexed*, maybe the text, in this case, *The Guide for the Perplexed,* is the parasite that surrounds it and is nourished by it. Wouldn’t it be correct to see the biblical citation as a kind of “host” that sustains the parasite, *The Guide for the Perplexed,* which exists because of it? And maybe the hermeneutic text is a danger to the citation because it can smother it from its context? The citation could be destroyed by its parasite, the hermeneutic text. Could the interpreter, namely the hermeneutician, be nothing more than a parasite? Is Maimonides a parasite that “feeds” on the Bible? When the parasite “deconstructs” the original text, isn’t that going to kill the host?

Nevertheless, Miller continues with the allegory, could we not reach a different conclusion? That the host and the parasite can coexist peacefully, nourishing each other, growing, and prospering together? Deconstructive criticism is likened to a virus that penetrates the host, i.e., a pure metaphysical text, with an “inherent and self-evident meaning,” and acts upon it.[[39]](#footnote-39) Perhaps we should reverse the process and see the deconstructive virus in the same metaphysical light, as something that seeks a single and unambiguous meaning, as developed in the Western world. Even in nature, parasites (the deconstructive element), are a natural phenomenon, and therefore, according to this analogy, the “deconstructive virus” of criticism is a “friendly presence,” fulfilling a useful function by preventing uniformity. Without the deconstructive element, i.e., criticism, metaphysics, and language would turn into a kind of prison, preventing any new idea or thought from emerging.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Interpretation is not a “parasite” but rather the true “host” of the work. When the host, i.e., interpretation or criticism, employs a deconstructive interpretative strategy, it is a legitimate action. Just as an “inherent and self-evident reading” of the text is not the text itself, so too, a deconstructive reading does not completely deconstruct the text to the point of its annihilation. Both the “inherent and self-evident reading” and deconstructive reading can coexist side by side. There is no inherent contradiction between them; instead, a triad exists: the host and the parasite, the innkeeper and the guest, and the interpreter and the interpreted. The emphasis is on shared hospitality. The “inherent and self-evident reading” of the text is always accompanied by a “deconstructive reading” as an element within itself. On the other hand, a deconstructive reading cannot completely break free from the metaphysical reading that it seeks to refute. The text itself is neither the host nor guest, but rather the sustenance that both depend on; it serves as a third element in this triad. The two readings are linked by an unlikely relationship of mutual obligations: of giving and receiving nourishment from Athens to Jerusalem.

The internal contradictions in the text of *The Guide for the Perplexed* lead the reader to multiple readings. The advantage of *The Guide for the Perplexed* lies in its multitude of meanings. The text is understood differently by different readers: the esoteric and the exoteric, the advanced disciple versus the masses. An essential part of the existence of a text is rooted in the fact that it is based on signs. There is an essential distance between the sign and the signified. The existence of the sign implies the absence of the signified, and the attempt of the sign to represent, to bring back what is absent to the present time, is impossible and maintains the distance between the signs of the text and what they signify. The sign, according to Ben-Pazi, delays the presence of the signified, and therein lies its power. Therefore, a text does not have a single and fixed meaning; rather, layers alternate, replacing each other for the sake of new understanding. There is no single reader but many, and hence there are multiple readings, all equally valid. The multitude is ready in equal measure. The masses read *The Guide for the Perplexed* in the same way, while the gifted student reads it differently. However, contrary to Derrida, Maimonides has a preference for one reading over the other; he desires to prevent the anthropomorphism of God and therefore reads specific words in a non-literal sense, and this is where Maimonides deviates from Derrida. Deconstruction does not choose, it “refrains” from committing to a preferred meaning or correct reading of the text, while Maimonides actively selects one over the other.

In the introduction of *The Guide for the Perplexed,* Maimonides discloses the primary purpose of his writing of the book and highlights the central issues of the terms used in the biblical scripture: “My primary object in this work is to explain certain words occurring in the prophetic books. Of these some are homonyms, and of their several meanings the ignorant choose the wrong ones; other terms which are employed in a figurative sense are erroneously taken by such persons in their primary signification. There are also hybrid terms, denoting things which are of the same class from one point of view and of a different class from another.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

According to Maimonides, this role of homonyms is to completely displace the anthropomorphic interpretation of the terms used in the prophetic books, which describe God in corporeal terms. These terms appear dozens of times in the first part of the Bible. Maimonides employs them as interpretative tools to create an alternative meaning for expressions found in the Bible. But before delving into the discussion at hand, it should be noted that according to Maimonides, homonyms have two distinct and separate meanings; one comes in place of the other, meaning it supersedes the other. The expression in the primary sense signifies a physical attribute of God, while the secondary sense denotes a non-physical meaning. The homonyms in *The Guide for the Perplexed* break down into different meanings and interpretations that refute one another and come at the expense of one another. “Image” in “Let us make man in our image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26) and can refer to a physical likeness as well as an entity’s essence. In this case is not a one-dimensional description but rather a two-dimensional one. Another example is “sight,” which can mean perceiving God’s physical appearance or non-physical, intellectual perception.

Homonyms serve as an interpretative means for Maimonides to convey a desired meaning over an undesirable one.. For instance, to prefer “image” as an essence over its corporeal portrayal. Homonyms have two or more distinct and separate meanings, with one coming in place of the other, thereby superseding it. Maimonides presents the two distinct and separate meanings and instructs us to establish a preference for one meaning over the other. In other words, the preferred meaning defers the other, different meaning. According to Maimonides, homonyms are multi-meaningful and dual-valued. This is also the meaning of *différance*. In other words, *différance* is also dual-valued in essence and conveys multiple meanings. As I discussed earlier, it appears that *différance* is identical to Maimonides’ “homonyms.”

Once more from Athens to Jerusalem: For the interpretative dimension of deconstruction, I see Maimonides as a postmodern interpreter. Allow me to explain: Postmodern deconstructionist interpretation is a pluralism of interpretations. It contains multiple meanings and a multitude of possibilities for reading a text against a single “true” reading. Maimonides also holds this position: when he reads, for example, allegories and parables in the Bible, there are multiple interpretations in his reading—external and revealed interpretations versus internal and esoteric interpretations. Yet in that same story, there is a simple meaning and a midrashic one; or a single word that is dual-valued as *différance* or “homonyms.”

Before I refer to *The Guide for the Perplexed* to provide an example of *différance* and homonyms as they relate to the biblical allegory of Jacob’s ladder, we must briefly discuss the meaning of Jacob’s ladder as a Maimonidean symbol. “And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28:12). According to Maimonides, the “ladder” symbolizes the path of spiritual ascent, and the “angels” ascending it are chosen individuals who ascend the ranks of wisdom and prophecy to attain divine knowledge. The philosopher-prophet ascends the ladder in the sense that he connects with the lowest divine intellect, the active intellect, from which he receives wisdom, i.e., revelations, and then descends the ladder to the people of Israel to convey the divine message. The prophet-philosopher’s ascent and descent on the ladder represent his journey between the intellectual world and the physical world. Anyone who reaches the pinnacle (the top of the ladder) is expected to stay there, actualizing their potential without interruption, and isolating themselves in the world of intellectual and metaphysical truths. However, precisely then, once they have achieved this, they are expected to respond to a higher calling or a spontaneous urge to return to their roots and descend to the public, to teach and guide them: “And what is the significance of the words, ‘they ascended and descended upon it’? The ascent precedes the descent; for after ascending to the first parts of the ladder and after obtaining the knowledge that exists there, they descend, as a matter of course, to take care of those who require their instruction.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

Aviezer Ravitzky points out that the allegory of the ladder resonates with Plato’s allegory of the cave. The philosopher who emerges from the cave and sees the light, i.e., the universal truth, is expected to return to the cave and bring the light inside, to the community and the concrete reality. All the more so must Moses, master of the prophets, bring God’s word to his people.[[43]](#footnote-43) Just as God created His world and maintains it according to cosmic laws, so does the human leader organize his society and maintain it according to political and legal laws. Just as God is not only an intellectual (Aristotelian) intellect that knows itself but also a God from the beginning, who creates and projects beyond Himself to sustain and govern the world, so the prophet or philosopher is not only distinguished by his internal spiritual perfection but also by his practical activity, leadership in the community, and legal guidance. Maimonides introduced a political translation of the idea of likeness to God. Maimonides imposed on the philosopher a social duty and a political mission. He is both a high intellect who connects with the lowest divine intellect and receives wisdom, i.e., revelations, and a leader in the community, guiding them with legal and moral guidance.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Maimonides characterized the consciousness of the patriarchs and Moses as possessing two levels of consciousness simultaneously. According to him, they indeed had full social involvement, guided, and led their communities, but at the same time, they also maintained a separate, inner, philosophical contemplation and concentration on the divine and cosmic issues. Maimonides drew the idea from the biblical metaphor (Song of Songs 5:2): “I sleep, but my heart is awake.” That is, social involvement is like “sleep,” and intellectual activity like “wakefulness,” which is contemplative and centripetal. Maimonides presented the complete person as an integrative, two-dimensional, personality.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Although the two roots naẓab and yaẓab are distinct, yet their meaning is, as you know, identical in all their various forms. The verb has several meanings: in some instances it signifies “to stand” or “to place oneself,” … In other instances it denotes continuance and permanence, …i.e., it remains forever. Whenever this term is applied to God it must be understood in the latter sense, as, “And, behold, the Lord stood (niẓẓab) upon it” (Gen. 28:13), i.e., appeared as eternal and everlasting “upon it,” namely, upon the ladder, the upper end of which reached to heaven, while the lower end touched the earth. This ladder all may climb up who wish to do so, and they must ultimately attain to a knowledge of Him who is above the summit of the ladder, because He remains upon it permanently. It must be well understood that the term “upon it” is employed by me in harmony with this metaphor. [[46]](#footnote-46)

Here, “*naẓab*” serves as a homonymous name with two distinct meanings, one referring to “standing upright” and the other to “stability and permanence.” Both interpretations contribute to the comprehension of God’s unwavering presence and uninterrupted guidance over Jacob’s ladder, emphasizing His continuous involvement and steadfast nature. Consequently, “*naẓab*” and “*yaẓab*” exemplify the concept of *différance* and homonyms in the Maimonidean philosophy, as they possess dual meanings, with one taking precedence over the other depending on the context.

1. Ofrat, Gideon. The Jewish Derrida. *Preface.* Syracuse University Press, 1 June 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This statement is associated with R. Eliezer ben Azaria, but is mainly cited in the name of R. Ishmael. It is quoted in many places, among others: *Sifrei* Bemidbar 112, Sanhedrin 64b, and Berakhot 32b. In the last, a list of parallel texts appears. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some hermeneutical approaches include those of Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher from the 19th century (theoretical hermeneutics), Wilhelm Dilthey, his biographer, Paul Ricoeur (phenomenological hermeneutics) and Hans-Georg Gadamer. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, (revised translation by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall), New York: Seabury Press 1975. Gadamer offers a historical analysis of the development of hermeneutics from Friedrich Schleiermacher, through Dilthey, to Heidegger. He then offered to hermeneutics from an aesthetic and historical philosophical angle. His thought process was expressed in Heideggerian and Gallian terms of "historically active consciousness" in dialectic with the tradition that appears in the text. According to him, hermeneutics is an encounter through language and through this encounter he believed that we could understand history, existence and reality. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ben-Pazi, Hanoch, 'In the orchard of post-modern interpretation with Derrida and Levinas', (Hebrew) Mikhlol-Pardes, 1, 2016, p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Schleiermacher, D.E. Friedrich, *Hermaneitik: Nach den Handschriften neu herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Heinz Kimmerle*, Heidelberg, 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ricoeur, Paul, Quest-ce qu'un texte?Expliquer et comprendre, in *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*,II, Tuebingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Derrida, Jacques, *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass (trans.), Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris: Minuit, 1972) Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy, p.5* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., page 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., page 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., page 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. De Saussure*,* Ferdinand, *Course in General Linguistic*, Wade Baskin (trans.), New York: Philosophical Library, 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. De Saussure*,* Ferdinand, *Course in General Linguistic*, pp. 117-118, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Derrida, Jacques, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., page 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Levy, Ze’ev, *Hermeneutics in Modern Jewish Thought*, Magnes Press, 2006, p. 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ben-Pazi, Hanoch, 'In the orchard of post-modern interpretation with Derrida and Levinas' (Hebrew), Mikhlol-Pardes, 1, 2016, p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. De Saussure, Ferdinand, *course in general linguistics,* Wade Baskin (trans.), New York: Philosophical Library 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Working through Derrida, p. 171 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Hartman, Geoffrey H., *Saving the Text,* The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1981. p.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Derrida, Jacques*, Of Grammatology*, Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1976. pp.8-9*. (De la grammatologie*, Paris: Minuit, 1967.) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Derrida, Jacques, Dissemination, Translated by Barbara Johanson, Continuum, NY 1981, (Derrida Jacques*, La Dissemination*, Paris: Seuil, 1972) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Klein, Roni, Ot, Goff, Community, Tel Aviv: Resling 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. # [Plato](https://www.amazon.com/Plato/e/B0105T5Z32/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1), *Phaedrus* (Hackett Classics) UK ed. Edition, [Alexander Nehamas](https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_2?ie=UTF8&field-author=Alexander+Nehamas&text=Alexander+Nehamas&sort=relevancerank&search-alias=books) (Translator), [Paul Woodruff](https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_3?ie=UTF8&field-author=Paul+Woodruff&text=Paul+Woodruff&sort=relevancerank&search-alias=books) (Translator) 1995, p274..

    [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Derrida, Jacques, *Dissemination*, pp.80-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., p. 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., p. 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., pp. 104-105 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., p. 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., p. 130 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Naas, Michael, *Taking on the Tradition*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press 2003, p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Levy, Ze’ev, *Hermaneutics in Modern Jewish Thought*, Magnes Press, 2006, p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204. *The Guide for the Perplexed*. London :Routledge & K. Paul, 1956 (2:25) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Hillis, J. Miller, *The Critic as Host*, Deconstruction and Criticism, op. cit., pp. 217 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., p. 222 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Levy, Ze’ev, *Hermeneutics in Modern Jewish Thought*, Magnes Press, 2006, p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204. *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Friedlander translation (1903). Prefatory Remarks. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Teacher of the Perplexed* 1:15 And see: Klein-Breslby, Sarah, "The Rambam's interpretations of Jacob's ladder dream". In M. Schwartz (ed.), Bar Ilan University Yearbook, 22-23 (5588) pp. 348-337. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Aviezer Ravitzky, *Financial Studies*, Jerusalem Tel Aviv: Shoken 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., page 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., page 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Guide of the Perplexed, I:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)