*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 the “homonymous names” of Maimonides and I aim to 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? Isn’t it 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 the 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 interpreter, and Derrida’s.

But first, we must establish what the concept of 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 G-ds whose role was to translate, explain, and interpret divine words into human language and thus, hermeneutics, derived from Hermes, refers to interpretation and deconstruction of texts. The function of hermeneutics is to convey and translate something beyond human understanding into something that a reader can grasp and comprehend. The Greeks granted Hermes the privilege of revealing language and writing, which people applied to understanding the meaning and then conveyed 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 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 there be several “good readings?” From this perspective, not just hermeneutics, but also interpretation, goes beyond mere elucidation.

According to Professor 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 are required to interpret and understand what they said to us. Or we read a newspaper; pass by an advertisement, and immediately we are required to 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 imply that we are “human interpreters.” As Hans-Georg Gadamer,[[4]](#footnote-4) one of the great hermeneuticians of the 20th century, would say: “every act of understanding is an act of interpretation.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Unlike Schleiermacher’s[[6]](#footnote-6) modern 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, post-modern 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 very choice to use this word, which is neither a term nor a concept, which was not conceptualized or written with an “a,” can show the idea that Derrida instilled through coining this term. In the French language, the difference in pronunciation between ‘difference’ and ‘différance’ is not heard because the “a” is silent. Through this, Derrida was able to unite all the characteristics of *différance*. The difference between the two pronunciations of the syllables ‘a’ and ‘e’ remains only visual, since it is 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 this alone may not be possible to comprehend. The order that goes on beyond the opposition between the senses and understanding is the movement of *différance* between two distinct letters, a *différance* that goes beyond both voice and writing in their usual sense, as well as between speech and writing. [[9]](#footnote-9) Given this information, how does one maintain this conversation regarding *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 Latin verb “differer” (*diferre* in Latin) has two distinct meanings: for example, two different statements, claims, or assertions. In this sense, “diferre” in Latin does not correspond to the Greek translation “diapherein.” The Greek word “diapheria” does not include the postponement inherent in the Latin “differre.” The concept of postponing an action until later 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 are “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 opposing ideas of philosophies but realize that every concept must appear as the *différance* of the other, recalling that the other is different from and nullifies everything 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.

*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 post-modern era, there remains no such recognition, only the recognition that one cannot reach the truth of the text because the post-modern 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 of 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 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. However, some 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 is 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 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 stream that rebels against the systematic methods and rationality. Consequently, Derrida’s influence on the field of criticism, particularly in the reading of literary and philosophical texts, expanded. 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 this at the center of Maimonides’ hermeneutics, namely, his theological work, “The Guide for the Perplexed,” which is known as 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. However, Derrida’s analysis challenges thought considerably, 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 in 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 and explain Derrida’s general philosophy and the issues with interpretation because in it, he re-reads the myth recounted by Socrates at the end of *Phaedrus* concerning the coming of writing, ostensibly, in relation to speech. It is important to emphasize and say that before Derrida’s reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, sound and living speech were the preferred method of transmission of the time, while written versions were considered inferior, sometimes referred to as “the dead letter.” Derrida essentially reverses creation so that writing is the elevated and preferred method, and thus, Derrida was a revolutionary and innovator in doing this. Ronny Klein, in his book titled, *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 dialogues of *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 substance, 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 remedy, poison, drug, or potion. The true nature of writing as Pharmakon is handed down from the outset to the embrace the myth of Theuth (I will fill in myself). [[27]](#footnote-27)

We see that the relationship of writing to myth sharpens, 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, and he stands to decide and decree its value. King Thamus, who represents faith, the king of the G-ds, is the source of value. He confers the value of the Pharmakon. The value of writing will not be what it is, namely, valuable, unless the king, the G-d, sees importance in it. The G-d-king does not need to write because he is the speaker, and for the one who writes, his speech is sufficient.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is important to note here that logos is the power of speech, and its source lies in the father’s position. In other words, the logos is in the form of a son, and as such, its fate is doomed unless the presence and assistance of his responsible father who speaks in his name. 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 stubbornness 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 with personal assistance. The logos know the father well, and, therefore, forbids parricide. Only living speech, such as discourse, has a father. The logos always lives 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, the writing, so that the king can judge whether the writing is worthy or not. King Thamus responds by rejecting the discovery of the writing and this leaves Theuth secondary and demeaned.[[30]](#footnote-30) King Thamus confirms the low value of the writing in power 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 ; a textual network so to speak. The word’s meaning may be a remedy or a benevolent potion because the writing will help memory and the wisdom of those who use it. It’s not only that the word’s meaning might have been a remedy and might have erased a specific external level of its function the ambiguity of its dual meaning, but also it is clear that writing that Theuth intended to praise his invention, he turned the word on its axis and presents it from only the positive angle of its poles. A remedy is beneficial; it produces (wisdom) and rectifies (memory) – it enhances knowledge and reduces forgetfulness. However, the king’s response implies that the influence of the pharmakon may be reversed: it may worsen the situation rather than heal it. The king states that in its cunningness and/or its innocence, Theut highlights the opposite of the writing’s true result. To praise the writing, Theuth (corresponding to Thiot in Egyptian mythology) distorts the meaning of the pharmakon, presenting it as the opposite of what writing might cause.

At the time when writing is presented as a pharmakon, while it is opposed to life, it sweetens sickness from their position, even ,at times, sharpening them. This is the logical structure, this is the reason the king opposes writing, claiming that it does not assist memory, that writing increases forgetfulness, instead of increasing knowledge, it diminishes it. It does not answer the needs of memory; it misleads the purpose of it. It does not strengthen memory (mnẻmẻ) but only recollection (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 seize this ambiguity, to weaken it with a clear and explicit opposition: 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 an imitation. It imitates or reproduces the patterns of memory, knowledge, and truth. Therefore, writers are seen in the eyes of G-d, 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 powers 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 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. 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 difference.

*Phaedrus* is a good place to start dissecting 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 whether reading is external to writing? Are the thoughts found in this 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 assumed 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 when we already know his 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 difference, 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’s 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. And 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. Which, according to Derrida, was made to be 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, was asked to argue that deconstruction is a “pure parasite” aimed at killing the host. Does deconstruction not stand in contradiction to a meaningful and single meaning reading?[[38]](#footnote-38) Miller asks what about the “excerpt” from the reviewed work that appears in the 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 G-d 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. But when the same quotation is brought into an interpretive text, such as “The Guide for the Perplexed,” maybe the text is the parasite that surrounds it and is nourished by it. Wouldn’t it be correct to see the hermeneutic text 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 original parasite because it can eliminate it from its context? 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, if Miller continues with the allegory, could we not reach a different conclusion? That the host and the parasite could coexist peacefully, nourishing each other, growing, and prospering together? Deconstructive criticism is likened to a virus that penetrates the surrogate, 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 a different metaphysical light, one that seeks a single and unambiguous meaning, as developed in the Western world. Even in the nature of the parasite (the deconstructive element), there is a natural phenomenon, and therefore, according to this analogy, the “deconstructive virus” of criticism is like a “friendly presence,” fulfilling a useful function by preventing uniformity and blatancy. 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 “surrogate” 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 innkeeper nor the 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 nourishments 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 anthropomorphism of G-d 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: “The first aim of this book is to explain the meanings of the terms used in the prophetic books. Some of these terms are used metaphorically, and the ignorant, therefore, have taken them in their wrong meanings. Some of them are homonymous, and the uneducated have been in doubt as to whether they are used in their homonymous or in their primary signification.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

According to Maimonides, this role of “homonymous names” is to completely reject the anthropomorphic interpretation of the names used in the prophetic books, which describe G-d in physical terms as corporeal. These names appear in dozens of chapters 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, “homonymous names” 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 in relation to G-d, while the secondary sense denotes a non-physical meaning. Examples of “homonymous names” in “The Guide for the Perplexed” include “*tzelem”*  or “image,” breaks down into several different meanings and interpretations that refute one another and come at the expense of one another. *“Tzelem”* is outlined as “Let us make man in our image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), and can refer to a physical likeness as well as a deeper essence. *“Tzelem”* in this case is not a one-dimensional description but rather a two dimensional one. Another example of “sight,” which can mean perceiving G-d’s physical appearance or a non-physical, intellectual perception.

“Homonymous names” serve as an interpretative means for Maimonides to convey a desired meaning over an undesirable one. “Homonymous names” 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. For instance, to prefer “image” as an essence over its corporeal portrayal. According to Maimonides, “homonymous names” 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’ “homonymous names.”

Once more from Athens to Jerusalem for the interpretative dimension of deconstruction, I see Maimonides as a post-modern interpreter. Allow me to explain: Post-modern 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 “homonymous names.”

But before I refer to “The Guide for the Perplexed” to provide an example of *différance* and “homonymous names” as they relate to the Biblical allegory of Jacob’s Ladder, first, 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 G-d 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 what they have, 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)

The allegory of the ladder resonates with Plato’s allegory of the cave, says Professor Aviezer Ravitzky. 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. Additionally, for Moses, master of the prophets, when he brings G-d’s word to his people.[[43]](#footnote-43) Just as G-d 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 G-d is not only an intellectual (Aristotelian) intellect that knows itself but also a G-d 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 G-d. 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 active on 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,” intellectual activity like “wakefulness,” which is contemplative and centripetal. Maimonides presented the complete person as an integrative, two-dimensional, personality.[[45]](#footnote-45)

‘Natzav’ or ‘yatzav,’ although these two roots differ, their meanings are the same in all their inflections. The name is identical, and a single meaning applies. One term signifies ‘standing upright,’ while the other denotes ‘stability and permanence’—in other words, constancy and continuity. All references to this name regarding the Creator adhere to this sense. For instance, in the phrase ‘And behold the Lord was standing over him’ (Genesis 28:13), the term conveys His constancy and continuous presence over him. In this case, ‘over him’ is used metaphorically, in the context of the ladder extending from earth to heaven. Everyone who ascends and rises on this ladder inevitably comprehends Him, who is above, as He maintains His constant and continuous position at the ladder’s summit. It’s evident that when I say ‘over him,’ it’s within the framework of this metaphor.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Here, “natzav” 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 G-d’s unwavering presence and uninterrupted guidance over Jacob’s ladder, emphasizing His continuous involvement and steadfast nature. Consequently, “natzav” and “yatzav” exemplify the concept of *différance* and “homonymous names” 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 made a historical analysis of the development of hermeneutics from Fredrich Schleiermacher, through Dilthey to Heidegger. However, he was not satisfied and dedicated himself 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 Pardes the post-modern interpretation with Derrida and Levinas', Makshul-Pardes, Issue 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. (Derida, Jacques, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris: Minuit, 1972) Derrida, Jacques, *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-Fazi, Hanoch, 'In Pardes, the post-modern interpretation with Derrida and Levinas', Makshul-Pardes, Issue 1, 1966, p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. De Saussure, Ferdinand, *course in general linguistic,* 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 for the Perplexed*. London :Routledge & K. Paul, 1956 (1:9-10) [↑](#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. Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204. *The Guide for the Perplexed*. London :Routledge & K. Paul, 1956 (1:15) [↑](#footnote-ref-46)