

The Matrix of the Mystic: The Enclosure of Being in the *Ikhwan as-Safa'* and Saadya Gaon's Commentary on the *Sefer Yezirah*

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This article has a twofold relevance: on the one hand, it attempts to shed light on the continuous effort of the human mind in diverse cultures to find a way out of the labyrinth of ever-changing material existence; on the other hand, I intend it to serve as a sign of homage to Prof. Maria Subtelny, who, in her research and teaching, has assisted numberless colleagues, students, and friends to find this path.

The Texts

The Sincere Brethren and the Loyal Friends (*Ikhwan as-Safa' wa-Khillan al-Wafa'*) was a secret society in the tenth century in Basra and Baghdad. Most of their epistles¹ are written in the first person plural, and the

¹*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa' wa-Khillan al-wafa'*, 4 vols. (Beirut: n.p., 1957).

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society appears to have functioned as a type of anonymous group, that of the “elect.” Their fifty-two epistles are structured around one topic, the vision of God, which is the source of everlasting felicity. They can be characterized as having a gnosticizing nature, but they offer much more than a quick way to salvation via a special type of knowledge. In fact, the Brethren attempt to build a bridge between the philosophical sciences of late Hellenism and the young Islamic culture. Their project is the continuation of the Alexandrian curriculum of late antiquity as they suggest a ladder of cognition starting from logic and mathematics, through physics, biology, astronomy, and astrology, leading to the purest science deprived of all matter: the understanding of holy scriptures and theology, eventually culminating in a direct experience of the Divine.

The other source discussed in this paper dates from 931, when Saadya Gaon, the towering Jewish thinker and Gaon of Sura, commented on the *Sefer Yezirah* (*Book of Creation*),² an enigmatic work attributed to the patriarch Abraham. The dating for the composition of this foundational text of Jewish mysticism varies from as early as the first century AD to as late as the early Muslim period. The short book (approximately 1600 words) in Hebrew describes the act of creation through the twenty-two Hebrew letters and the ten cardinal numbers. Creation is represented as divine speech: the constantly changing combination and permutation of divine letters and sounds constitute the deep structure of reality invisible to physical eyes. In his commentary on the *Sefer Yezirah*, composed in Judeo–Arabic, Saadya makes the following claims.³

The text of the *Sefer Yezirah* attempts to describe creation as a process, focusing on *how* such elements as the world, time, and the soul were created. Saadya in his commentary argues that Abraham had a flash-like (*ka-’l-baraq*) vision⁴ into the happening of creation through transparent

²Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi* (*Commentaire sur le Sefer Yesira ou Livre de la création*), ed. and trans. M. Lambert (Paris: 1891).

³Concerning the differences between the epistemologies of Saadya used in his rational and neo-Pythagorean works, see G. Hegedus, *Saadya Gaon: The Double Path of the Mystic and the Rationalist* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 15–27.

⁴Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 43.

indications (*iyma 'at baziat*) and gleaming allusions (*talwihat lamiat*).⁵ Thus, it is not the physical observation of the visible world that is meant here. This remote wisdom that focuses on a deeper reality than the perception of the senses is called *philosophy (falsafa)*, and as such, “it is similar to the acts of the Creator.”⁶ *Philosophy* here means a contemplative neo-Pythagorean understanding of the universe. The fact that Saadya’s *Commentary on the Sefer Yezirah* is of a philosophical nature has been observed by various scholars.⁷

In his recently published, seminal book on alphanumeric systems, Acevedo considers both the *Sefer Yezirah* and the Brethren’s epistles as elaborations on a pattern of cosmic design that ultimately resulted from a scientific innovation dated to the early Middle Ages.⁸ The alphanumeric scission, the separation between letters and numerals by adopting Indian numerals, had an enormous influence on (hermetic and mystical) philosophy and cosmology by positing a combination of two sets of “elements” (numbers and letters) as the basic constituents of time, space, and all material existents.

While both texts intend to introduce philosophical contemplation into theology, the Brethren make it a step of the ladder of knowledge leading to the most subtle contemplation, and Saadya makes it the human equivalent of divine wisdom.

Both texts claim to originate from ancient and unquestionable authorities: the Brethren identify themselves as Pythagoreans (*faythaguriyyun*)⁹

⁵Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 9.

⁶“*Kanat al-falsafa tashabbuh bima kana min afal al-khaliq.*” Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 4. All translations are mine.

⁷On the philosophical nature of the *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, see R. Jospé, “Early Philosophical Commentaries on the *Sefer Yezirah*: Some Comments,” *Revue des Études Juives* 149 (1990): 369–415; and H. Ben-Shammai, “Saadya’s Goal in His Commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*,” in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture*, ed. R. Link-Salinger (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 1–9.

⁸J. Acevedo, *Alphanumeric Cosmology from Greek into Arabic: The Idea of Stoicheia through the Medieval Mediterranean* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

⁹According to Acevedo, the Brethren can be characterized as “soft Pythagoreans,” since the notion of numbers for them is epistemological: numbers are applied to things, and not considered as independent, immaterial ideas (*Alphanumeric Cosmology*, 245.)

and the author of the *Sefer Yezirah* claims to be no other than Abraham the Patriarch. According to Acevedo, it seems likely that after the death of Proclus (495) and before the publication of Saadya's commentary (931), the Jewish tradition which assigned to the Torah a key role in the creation of the world emerged with insights from Platonic sources, which were included in the earliest form of the *Sefer Yezirah*.¹⁰

Both sources intend to offer an introduction into a *philosophia perennis*, an original and eternal direct insight into the nature of material being, metaphysics, and the Divine.

Numbers and Systems, the Chain, and Wall of Being

Humans can be lost and hopelessly perplexed in two ways: sunk in the ocean of the ultimate oneness and overwhelming presence of the Divine and blinded by vision, or drawn and lost in the chaotic and ever-changing world of individual creatures. In between the ineffable oneness of God and the disturbing multiplicity of material beings, there is a narrow path through which the human mind might build a bridge, that of understanding the different realms of being: time, space, the human body, speech, and Scripture, all of which carry the One through being structured and organized by Him. Creation is ordered and articulated. Systems, be they numbers, letters, divine names, or the structure of the Temple of Solomon, are all proofs for the existence of the One through the many.

The style and tone adopted by Saadya in his philosophical commentary on the *Sefer Yezirah* is very similar to that of the Brethren. The *Sefer Yezirah* describes the ways that all worldly phenomena can be traced back to their creation out of the ten numbers and the twenty-two letters. Thus, the text lends itself to a neo-Platonizing and neo-Pythagorean commentary. Saadya, however, rejects the Neoplatonists' theory of emanation, probably because its acceptance would cause difficulties for the understanding of God as a free agent. However, he makes extensive use of neo-Pythagorean elements, and the way in which he structures his ontology is basically the same as that of the Brethren.

¹⁰Acevedo, *Alphanumeric Cosmology*, 216.

Both Saadya's commentary and the epistles of the Brethren consider the world to be made up of systems of interconnected elements. In Saadya's commentary, everything is created by the ten numbers and twenty-two letters, and each being contains the same ingredients. All beings are arranged according to systems and hierarchies ('*ala nizam wa-tartib*) which follow that of the numbers and letters.¹¹ The Brethren make use of the same terms in their ontology. They claim that "all the things are connected by one single link, [they all come] from one cause and from one Creator, in the same way as numbers."¹² Beings form hierarchical systems¹³ which are connected to each other, and their outcomes are defined by their beginnings.¹⁴ When Saadya talks about the deep structure of all beings as composed from a permutation of numbers and letters, he alludes to the system used by the Brethren, who establish an analogy between the numeric system and the order and hierarchy of creatures.

In a Neoplatonist and pseudo-Dionysian manner, the Brethren consider the whole of existence as comprising a continuous chain of beings, all interconnected with each other. The body of the world as a whole (*jumla jism al-'alam*) and all of its spheres and parts and constellations are situated one inside the other (*tarkib ba'diha jawfa ba'd*), and they are constructed out of each other (*murakkaba ba'duha min ba'd*). In fact, the body of the world functions like the body of an animal, a human, or a city.¹⁵ The Brethren claim that the different classes of beings form a continuous chain, the highest degrees of plants being connected to the lowest degrees of the animal world, and the highest degrees of the animal world, such as parrots, horses, and monkeys,

¹¹Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 21.

¹²"*al-asya' kulluha marbuta ribatan wahidan 'an 'illa wahida wa-mubdi' wahid mithlu-l- 'adad'* (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E20, 143).

¹³"*al-mawjudat kulluha murattaba ba'duha tahta ba'd*" (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E29, 36).

¹⁴"*al-mawjudat [. . .] 'ala nizam wa-tartib'*" ("The beings [. . .] are arranged into] systems and hierarchies"), and "*'ajza' al-'alam muhita ba'duha bi-ba'd, awakhiruha mutasila bi-awailiha*" ("The parts of the world encapsulate each other, their ends are connected to their beginnings") (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E34, 223–24).

¹⁵"*jumla jism al-'alam yajri majra jism hayawan wahid aw insan wahid wa-madina wahida'*" (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E5, 216).

being linked to the lowest degrees of humans, based on their ability to speak, and their intelligence, outlook, and behavior. The lowest degrees of humans, in their turn, are similar to animals in that they know only what is perceived by their senses (*la ya 'lamun illa- 'l-mahsusat*).¹⁶ The highest degrees of humans, the prophets and the philosophers, on the other hand, reach the lowest degrees of the realm of the angels.¹⁷ In this system, the higher classes function as a paradise (*janna*) for the lower ones. Thus, “the paradise of the vegetative souls is the animal form [. . .] and the paradise of the souls of humans is the angelic form.”¹⁸ In the *Commentary on the Sefer Yezirah*, the gist of the principle of all beings’ continuity is formulated by Saadya in the following short remark: “Each dyad is separated by a third balancing between them.”¹⁹ Thus, separation and difference is considered as a connection and bridge and not division.

Another pattern used by the Brethren to represent the symmetry and interconnectedness of all beings is that of concentric circles, applied originally in astronomy for modeling the position of the spheres. They state: “Creation in its entirety and nature in its wholeness [are like] the spheres and like circles, the one surrounding the other, connected to each other, and the entire world is similar to the body of an animal or to the different faculties of the same soul.”²⁰

The very idea of causality is an expression of this universal interconnectedness. In fact, causality means connectedness in time because an invisible network of causes and effects keeps the world simultaneously dynamic and organized. According to the Brethren,

¹⁶*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E34, 228–29.

¹⁷The continuity and interconnectedness of all beings is one of the favorite and most frequently uttered statements of the Brethren. The two Arabic words used to express this idea are *ittisal* (see *Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E22, 170–71; E34, 224; and E39, 328), and *ta'alluq* (e.g., “*al-mawjudat kulluha suwar muta'allaqa*”: “All existents are interconnected forms” [*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E35, 235]).

¹⁸*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E41, 397.

¹⁹Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 33.

²⁰“*al-khilqa bi-ajma'iha wa-l-fitra bi-usariha aflak ha'ita wa-dawa'ir jami'a muhita ba'duha bi-ba'd marbuta ba'duha bi-ba'd wa-inna-l'alam kulluha ka-jism hayawan wahid wa-jami' al-quwa sariya fithi nafs wahida*” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E49, 236–37; see also E34, 215).

“divine wisdom and providence arranged the borders of beings in such a way as to be interconnected with each other by a connecting link (*ribat*) and it arranged them into one system. And this means that certain beings are causes (*ilal*), whereas others are effects (*ma'lul*).”²¹

Moreover, the ontology of the Brethren exhibits a type of cyclical quality or a sort of dialectics in the sense that apparently irreconcilable dichotomies tend to transform into each other. Winter and summer, day and night, good and evil, and even the ruling dynasties gradually replace each other in the same way as a turning wheel (*dolab da'ir*) moves.²² Seasons, life cycles, and celestial motions are also in a process of uninterrupted change according to the eternal laws established by the Creator.²³ Saadya's commentary expresses the same idea: “In this way was created everything which was and is created everything which will be,”²⁴ and “the beginning (*fatiha*) and the end (*khatma*) are interconnected.”²⁵ In the ontology of the commentary, everything in some sense contains everything else, as each being is created by the totality of the principles. Thus, the differences between beings are due to differences in the proportion of the “ingredient principles,” and not to essential differences. While we qualify objects according to their dominant features, which are caused by the preponderance of one of the constituents, nothing is entirely “pure.”²⁶

Thus, in the heart of this all-embracing system, each element is alike, but also different from the rest. The arrangement of beings is similar to the structure of a tree, the trunk of which represents more general categories, while its branches are likened to particular beings. It is also described as being similar to a tribe divided into a multiplicity of clans and families,

²¹*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E37, 276–77.

²²*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E48, 187.

²³*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E51, 274–75.

²⁴“*hakadha uhditha jami' ma kana wa-yuhdath jami' ma yakun*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 84).

²⁵Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 45.

²⁶Saadya formulates it as follows: “*na lam an fir-r-riwa' al-harr buruda wa fi-l-barid harara*” (“We know that there is coldness in the warm rain, and hotness in the cold”) (*Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 91).

or as a huge palace consisting of several rooms and storage chambers.²⁷ The concept of specification (*khassiyya*), which is equivalent to that of the *differentia specifica* in Aristotelian logic, is used by both the Brethren and Saadya. All things of a mathematical, physical, or divine nature possess a specification (*khassiyya*) unlike the others.²⁸ In the *Commentary on the Sefer Yezirah*, Saadya claims that the deep structure of all beings is formed by the inversion (*taqlib*) of the thirty-two basic principles (the ten numbers and twenty-two letters), and that things differ from each other given their different “specifications”—that is, due to the “difference in the number of the components.”²⁹

This primordial structure of the universe, the laws of nature constituted by divine wisdom, presents an impenetrable wall, enclosure, and ultimately a constraint for the creatures within. Material being is a prison, and the way out of it starts with the understanding of the structure of the prison and the mind of its builder.

In the epistles, humans are stated to be imprisoned by five unchangeable circumstances: the celestial spheres (*aflak*), nature (*tabi'a*), law (*namus*), political rule (*sultan*), as it is always present, and bodily needs (*haja*), like thirst and hunger.³⁰ In his commentary, Saadya holds that humans are placed in a double enclosure, in the first instance by their createdness, since “there is no way out of this existence,” and in the second by revelation, given the fact that “there is no way out of His [God’s] commandments.”³¹

An understanding based on science reveals the structure of the universe, and first, humans must realize that there is no escape from this structure. Humans are subjected to the changes of time, and the nature of the place and political realities in which they live. On a deeper level, the

²⁷*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E34, 214–15.

²⁸“*la say' min al-mawjudat ar-riyadiyya wa-t-tabi'iyya wa-l-ilahiyya illa wa-lahu khassiyya laysat li-say' akhar*” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E2, 113).

²⁹“*tabdil a'dad al-ajza'*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 58).

³⁰*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E38, 307.

³¹“*la khuruj lahu 'an kawnihi kadhaka [.] la khuruj lahu 'an amrihi*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 30).

neo-Pythagorean thought expressed in both texts shows that the escape (liberation, salvation) lies in the act of profound understanding. The deepening understanding of the structure and the gradual realization of the symmetries of creation make the prison a labyrinth—one that is an enclosure but also hides the way to escape. This gnostic liberation equates to redefining the prison walls as pages and traces of the divine handwriting, or as utterings of the divine speech that expect to be deciphered, a code that needs to be broken.

The Intermediary Ontological Position and the Numeric System as the Soul of the Universe

The surface of the world consists of elements attainable to the senses, like the letters of writing, sounds of speech, or tones of music. These elements are bound together by organizing principles, like symmetry, grammar, causality, or rhythm, that are attainable for us only through individual material manifestations. The deep structure that constitutes the order of the universe is directly unattainable for the senses, but it indwells the whole creation. In both texts, God is stated as the ultimate author of all systems and as thus, the most remote from sensation. The only bridge between Creator and human lies in a special understanding: finding a structure behind the elements and a design behind a random and chaotic material surface.

But where is this immaterial structure? Is it in the human mind, which attempts to make the world meaningful? Does it have an objective, although immaterial, existence? Where is the tablet on which God inscribes His wisdom? Is it the texture of the world, or the texture of the mind?

According to both works, these two (mind and world) are the same in their deeper structures, and both serve as carriers for the divine writing, which functions as an intermediary between the sensible and the ineffable.

This intermediary domain between the unattainable realm of the Creator and that of the sensible beings can be reached through

philosophy, a gradually deepening contemplation that turns into inspiration. The Brethren openly criticize those who state that beings are divided into the two realms of the Creator and of creatures without attributing any significance to spiritual substances (*jawahir ruhaniyya*)—that is, to the pure forms (*suwar mujarrada*). According to the Brethren, real scholars acknowledge the existence of non-corporeal substances, which are God's army (*junud Allah*) and the heart of creation (*lubb al-khaliqa*).³²

According to Saadya, this realm, called the *angelic world* in the language of revelation, or the *world of the pure forms* in the terminology of philosophers, is equivalent to the thirty-two items (the ten numbers and twenty-two letters) of the *Sefer Yezirah*.

The science of this intermediary, immaterial realm is considered philosophy, a therapeutical procedure leading out of the prison of matter to a higher and deeper speculation and to proximity to the Divine. Both the Brethren and Saadya assert that God does not communicate with His creatures directly, but rather expresses Himself in the language of the faculties of nature (*quwa tabi'iyya*), which is equal (in religious terminology) to the language of the angels.³³ This divine language, through which God organizes the universe and communicates with humans, is present at each level of existence and is expressed by numbers and proportions (and also, according to Saadya, by the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.) According to both sources, God creates in different languages depending on the nature of the context. The *angelic world* in the language of revelation, *the world of the pure forms* in the terminology of the philosophers, and *natural laws* for the scientists have the same meaning: the presence and creative work of the Divine articulated in diverse contexts.

In the opinion of both the Brethren and Saadya, the system of numbers serves as the most appropriate analogy for understanding the work of creation. At the outset of the epistles, the Brethren state:

³²*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E35, 238–39.

³³*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E21, 153.

In all the sciences of the beings of the world, in the realm of substances and accidents, in the field of the simple, unique beings and also concerning composite beings, and during the search for their principles and for their genera, species and specific differences, and [in order to model] their systems and structures as they are now, and [to picture] the way in which they were created and originated from one single cause and from one single principle and from one Creator, be Him exalted, the best testimony is given by the example of numbers and by geometrical proofs, in the same way as the Pythagorean sages thought.³⁴

Elsewhere, they assert: “All the things are forms and various entities arranged in a hierarchical way in the likeness of the arrangement of the numbers, which are all connected to one another, starting from the one which precedes the two.”³⁵

According to the Brethren, the idea that “the nature of the beings follows the nature of the numbers”³⁶ was first recognized by Pythagoras. As such, they consider themselves to be Pythagoreans. In light of this idea, it follows that “the knowledge of numbers is equal to the knowledge of the quantity of the genera of creatures,”³⁷ given that each number possesses a certain specificity (*khassiyya*) and the structure of the creature has a similar specificity (i.e., each creature has a characteristic which the rest do not have).³⁸ Moreover, they state that it would not have been compatible with divine wisdom to create everything in the same way from all aspects (*min jami' al-jihat*), or to create beings different from all sides (*min jami' al-wujuh*). The ideal solution proved

³⁴“fi jami' 'ulum al-mawjudat allati fi-l-'alam min al-jawahir wa-l-a'rad wa-l-basa'it wa-l-mujarradat wa-l-mufradat wa-l-murakkabat wa-l-bahth 'an mabadiha wa-'an kammiyyat ajnasiha wa-anwa'iha wa-khawassiha wa-'an tartibiha wa-nizamiha 'ala ma hiya 'alayhi al-an wa-'an kayfiyyat huduthiha wa-nusu'iha 'an 'illa wahida wa-mabda wahid min mubdi' wahid jalla jalaluhu yastashidun 'ala bayanaha bi-mithalat 'adadiyya wa-barahin handasiyya mithlu ma kana yaf' aluhu l-hukama' al-faythaguriyyin” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E1).

³⁵“Inna l-asya' kullaha suwar wa-a'yan gayriyyat murattab ba'duha tahta ba'd ka-tartib al-'adad min al-wahid alladhi qabla l-ithnayn” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E10, 401).

³⁶“tabi'at al-mawjudat bi-hasb tabi'at al-'adad” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E32, 178).

³⁷“ma'rifat al-'adad ma'rifa kammiyyat ajnas al-mawjudat” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E32, 179).

³⁸*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E3, 140.

to be creation from the same matter, but through a multiplicity of forms according to numbers and measures (*maqadir*).³⁹

In Saadya's work, numbers possess three qualities which enable them to represent the work of creation: 1. they are not only discontinuous (*gayr muttasil*) in themselves, but the substances and the parts are also separated by them;⁴⁰ 2. they are infinite for us (as the infinite possibility of the combination of accidents), but finite for the Creator;⁴¹ and 3. they are constitutive of real symmetry (*muqabalat haqiqa*) and of perfect equilibrium (*mu'adalat sahiha*),⁴² which enable them to represent the perfect proportionateness of creation expressed in the symmetry of commandments and prohibitions and of reward and punishment.

Although the Brethren formulate it somewhat differently, they hold that numbers display the same three features:

1. They define *number* as “the multiplicity of the one imagined in man's soul by the repetition of the one in an infinite increase.”⁴³ And just as each number represents a specificity (*khassiyya*), so each creature corresponds to a different number, given that they all are created by the multiplication of the one and from the same matter (*huyula*), but according to different forms (*suwar*). Saadya does not accept the theory of creation through the union of form and matter. However, when he states that God created beings through numbers and letters in the immaterial “first air,” he gets quite close to the theory of matter and form. Thus, according to both Saadya and the Brethren, the numeric system figures as a universal “bar code” system, each number corresponding to a single creature which is different from all the others, but which is constructed out of the same numbers or ingredients.

³⁹*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E32, 179.

⁴⁰“*biha tanfasil al-jawahir wa-l-ajza'*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 12).

⁴¹Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 14.

⁴²Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 30.

⁴³“*al-'adad laysa huwa say'an siwa kuthrat al-ahad yatasawwaruha l-insan fi nafsihi min takrar al-wahid fi tazayud bila nihaya'*” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E42, 432).

2. The infinity of the series of numbers is taken by the Brethren as evidence, without any need for further proof.⁴⁴

3. In several instances, the Brethren state that creation took place according to the laws of the numeric system: “The erudite scholars and the divine sages said that when God, the Exalted, created beings and generated creatures, He arranged them according to the sequence of numbers (*rattabaha maratib al-a‘dad al-mutawaliyat*) and organized them into a unified system where creatures follow each other (*wa-nazzamaha nizaman wahidan yatlu ba‘duha ba‘dan*), parallel to the proportions of numbers.”⁴⁵ And “All the genera of creatures corresponding to specific numbers (*‘ala a‘dad makhsusa*) are arranged together, either on the basis of their quantity or based on their quality in order to serve as a sign for the erudite and as an illustration for the intelligent.”⁴⁶

Elsewhere, they state that “the arrangement and the system (*tartib wa-nizam*) of beings is equal to the arrangement of the numbers starting from the one. Their multiplicity [the multiplicity of the creatures] indicates His unity and their arrangement and system indicates His perfect wisdom in His creation, thus the proportion (*nisba*) of the creatures to the Creator is equal to the proportion of the numbers to the one.”⁴⁷

According to the Brethren and Saadya, numbers are both indwelling and situated between the corporeal and the spiritual world in the same manner as the soul mediates between the pure form and the body.⁴⁸ In a sense, the numeric system is the soul of the universe.

⁴⁴“*tada‘uf al-‘adad ila ma la nihaya lahu*”: “Numbers can be multiplied ad infinitum” (*Rasa‘il Ikhwan as-Safa‘*, E15, 13).

⁴⁵*Rasa‘il Ikhwan as-Safa‘*, E40, 377.

⁴⁶*Rasa‘il Ikhwan as-Safa‘*, E40, 377.

⁴⁷*Rasa‘il Ikhwan as-Safa‘*, E33, 201.

⁴⁸In the view of the Brethren, all discussions can be divided into three realms: 1. corporeal (*jismaniyya*), physical/natural (*tabi‘iyya*), and sensible (*mahsusa*); 2. spiritual (*ruhaniyya*) and intelligible (*ma‘qula*); or 3. mathematical (*riyadiyya*), which mediates between the corporeal and the spiritual (*mutawassita bayna l-jismaniyya wa r-ruhaniyya*) (*Rasa‘il Ikhwan as-Safa‘*, E42, 509).

After this discussion of the remarkable similarities between the two works in terms of the treatment of the concept of numbers and the role it plays in the arrangement of creation, both in the realm of terminology and in terms of philosophical attitude, two basic differences must be mentioned.

1. The Brethren establish a univocal relation between the Neoplatonist theory of emanation and the numeric system, according to which the Creator corresponds to the number one, the universal intellect to number two, the universal soul to three, the primary matter to four, nature to five, the absolute body to six, the spheres to seven, the four elements to eight, and finally, the creatures of a composite nature to nine.⁴⁹ In this system, numbers become increasingly complex as their representations become increasingly corporeal; thus, whereas materialized creatures as originating from the universal soul correspond to number one, the soul of the genus (*an-nafs al-jinsiyya*) corresponds to ten, the soul of the species (*an-nafs an-naw'iyya*) corresponds to one hundred, and the particular individual soul (*an-nafs al-juz'iyya as-sakhsiyya*) corresponds to one thousand.⁵⁰ Needless to say, because Saadya rejects the theory of emanation, he does not delineate the parallels between the different levels of emanation and the sequence of numbers.

The text of the *Sefer Yezirah* states that God created the world in thirty-two mysterious ways (i.e., by the twenty-two letters and the ten numbers). Thus, in the commentary, Saadya thoroughly elaborates on the forms, pronunciation, and alphabetic order of the Hebrew letters, whereas the Brethren concentrate almost all their attention on the examination of the numeric system. One passage in the epistles compares creation to writing, but even there, the Qur'anic and the Neoplatonic influences are much more dominant than in Saadya, who appears to have created his own system.⁵¹

⁴⁹*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E32, 181; and E26, 461–62.

⁵⁰*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E34, 216.

⁵¹“The divine sphere and the exalted intellectual forms (*as-suwar al-'aqliyya*) are like a book written by the pen of the [divine] will, the lines of which are shining (*taluh suturuhu*)” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E49, 203).

2. Regarding the role played by the numeric system in the act of creation, one key question is answered in a somewhat different way by Saadya and by the Brethren: Is the order and symmetry of numbers only the most appropriate manner of picturing the otherwise unfathomable way in which creation happened, or did God really create the world with numbers?

For Saadya, the numeric system and the sequence of letters are used only as an analogue to represent an unwitnessed, unfathomable, and timeless event. Saadya constantly reminds his reader that each statement concerning the method of creation must be understood as “rapprochement (to the intellect)” (*taqrib*), or as “allusion” (*tadhkir*). Just as God is not representable in His real nature by language, as the idea of God is so sublime that it surpasses description,⁵² so the act of creation, given its unique and unwitnessed nature, requires figurative depiction. The terms Saadya most frequently uses are *ta'bir* (allegorical expression), *taqrib* (rapprochement to the understanding), *talkhis* (hint, epitome), or phrases such as these: “The author only paves the way for us and raises us from one notion to the next in order to facilitate our understanding,”⁵³ and “we can arrive at this only through our thoughts, but we cannot see its reality.”⁵⁴

According to the more arithmetic model of the Brethren, on the other hand, “the Creator [. . .] made all the corporeal and sensible things examples and evidences for the spiritual and intelligible matters and made the way of the senses as a step or a ladder to ascend by it to the knowledge of the intelligible issues.”⁵⁵ The Brethren appear to attribute more importance to the notion of proportionality (*nisba*)

⁵²Indeed, according to Saadya, God cannot be represented by human understanding other than by “hints” (*talwih*) and “epitomes” (*talkhis*) of His great acts (*Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 23).

⁵³“*sahib al-kitab innama tarraqa lana bi-dhalika li-yushil lana wa-yuraqqina min say' ila say'*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 89).

⁵⁴“*wa-innama nasil min dhalika ila iqamatih fi fikrina faqat wa-laysa nasil ila fi 'lihi haqiqan'*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 99).

⁵⁵“*al-bari' [. . .] ja'ala al-umur al-jismaniyya al-mahsusa kullaha mithalat wa-dalalat 'ala-r-ruhaniyyat al-'aqliyya wa-ja'ala turuq al-hawass darajan wa-maraqi yartaqi biha ila ma'rifat al-umur al-'aq-liyya'*” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E35, 246).

than does Saadya. They claim that in the work of creation, the same measures are expressed as in the numeric system, and it is through this proportionality that we may reach the real knowledge of God.

Analogies and Correspondences: Between Identity and Difference

The nature of analogy is similar to the veil: it hides and exhibits at the same time; it forms an intermediary between clear visibility and complete hiddenness. In both texts, this “between” figures as the focus and center. Analogy is situated in a middle position: more sublime than observation but far from the direct vision of God, which is a rare event occurring exclusively to prophets of the highest rank and is ineffable. To establish analogies means capturing a common basis between phenomena that appear different on the surface, thereby deciphering the divine language, which creates infinite multiplicity through order and interconnected systems.

According to the Brethren’s epistles, the world, physical or spiritual, consists of several interconnected structures. Although each system represents a different level of existence, they are formed by the same proportionalities, and consequently, each system stands in an analogous relation to all the other systems. Representing systems as being analogous to one another is so constant in the epistles that in this article, I will present only some of the most frequently used analogies, rather than offer an exhaustive list.

The systems of celestial bodies, the human body, the faculties of the soul, human society, the animal world, cities, royal courts, colors, and the angelic world are all organized by the same proportionality, and therefore are analogous to each other. Thus, the system of the human body displays analogies with the system of the celestial bodies;⁵⁶ the human body is also likened to a city, where, for example, the liver is the house of the vegetative soul and the heart is the home for the animal soul.⁵⁷ The human body is also likened to the earth⁵⁸ and to the system

⁵⁶For example, the twenty-eight phases of the moon are analogous to the twenty-eight members of the vertebral system. (*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E22, 197.)

⁵⁷*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E23, 386.

⁵⁸Bones are analogous to mountains, the brain to minerals, etc. (*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E26, 466).

of the planets.⁵⁹ The soul is likened to a royal court or to a country,⁶⁰ the planetary system to the faculties of the universal soul,⁶¹ and the secret society of the Brethren to the faculties of the human soul.⁶²

The two basic and most constantly recurring analogies, however, are the correspondence of the micro- and the macrocosm and the analogy between this world and the hereafter. Humans occupy a central position in the whole work of creation: the extent of their bodies is situated halfway between big and small, their faculties of sensation are medium, and in the chain of beings, they are situated between animals and angels. Concerning their intellectual capacities, they also take a middle position: the notion of God is unfathomable to them, given both its clearness and evidence (*siddat zuhurihi*) but also its hiddenness (*siddat kitmanihi*).⁶³ Moreover, humans appear to be a receptacle for all specifications (*khassiyya*). Each specificity of the animal world, as well as those of the mineral, plant, and elemental, can be found in humans.⁶⁴ Thus, humans function as a book wherein all the phenomena of the universe are recorded.⁶⁵ In the view of the Brethren, then, the whole world can be considered as one “big man” (*insan kabir*) and as one body (*jism wahid*).⁶⁶ The form of humans is stated to be “the greatest proof of God for His creation [. . .] and the measure which He put amongst His creatures, containing all the forms of the two worlds and the abridgment of all the knowledge which is on the preserved

⁵⁹The heart is analogous to the sun, the lung to the moon, the gall bladder to Mars, etc. (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E26, 478–79).

⁶⁰*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E26, 471.

⁶¹*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E26, 477.

⁶²*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E48, 172.

⁶³*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E28, 21–22.

⁶⁴“Each [species of] animals has a specificity it possesses by nature (*matbu'a 'alayha*) and all of these specificities can be found in man. For example, he can be as courageous as a lion, etc. And there is no mineral, plant, element, sphere (*falak*), constellation (*kawkab*), or sign of the zodiac (*burj*), and no specificity belonging to any being whatsoever, which is not to be found in man” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E26, 474–75).

⁶⁵“*surat al-insan li-nafsih* kitab mubin wa-sirat mustaqim fi l-'alam al-kabir”: “The form of man is an ‘evident book’ and a ‘straight path’ for [the knowledge of] the macrocosm” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E49, 213).

⁶⁶*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E16, 25.

tablet.”⁶⁷ The earth is situated in the middle of the universe, and the sanctuary in Mecca is posited as the center of the earth.⁶⁸

In a similar way, the ontological system in Saadya’s *Commentary on the Sefer Yezirah* appears to be based on the idea of the essential interconnectedness of things and on the analogy afforded by the common originating principles (represented by numbers and letters). The interconnectedness of things is clearly stated in the text of the *Sefer Yezirah* as follows: “Everything is attached.”⁶⁹ In his Judeo–Arabic commentary, Saadya translates this idea of mutual attachment in an even stronger sense, in a statement expressing homology: “Everything is alike.”⁷⁰ Like the Brethren, Saadya establishes a system of analogies (*muqabalat*) according to which the macrocosm (*al-‘alam al-kabir*), the “middle-world” (*al-‘alam al-awsat*), and the microcosm (*al-‘alam as-sagir*) are analogous.⁷¹

The Brethren vehemently criticize those groups (*tawa’if*) which attempt to describe all of creation by giving preference to a particular number. For example, the dualists (*ath-thuna’iyya*) prefer the number two and divide all beings into two components: matter and form, or substance and accident. In the group giving preeminence to the number three are the Christians, while the proponents of the number four are those who believe in the overwhelming importance of the four elements, and the proponents of the six are the Indians (*ahl al-hind*).⁷² Based on the notion of the five duties of the believer, the Brethren assume that Muslims (*banu-‘l-islam*) prefer the number five.⁷³

⁶⁷“*surat al-insan akbar hujjat allah ‘ala khalqih* [. . .] *al-mizan alladhi wada’ahu bayna khalqih* *al-majmu‘a fiha suwar al-‘alamayn jami’an, al mukhtasar min al-‘ulum allati fi l-lawh al-mahfuz”* (*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E43, 12).

⁶⁸*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E20, 138.

⁶⁹“*we-qolan aduqin*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 89).

⁷⁰“*wa-inna-l-asya’ kullaha mithlu wahid*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 89).

⁷¹In this representation of creation, the *macrocosm* refers to the realm of the celestial bodies; the *middle-world* refers to the Sanctuary (that lies within the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem); and the *microcosm* refers to the human body (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 70).

⁷²*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E32, 179–80.

⁷³*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E33, 208.

According to the epistles, the true Pythagorean view is that creation required all the numbers. Different phenomena are, of course, arranged according to different numbers. For example, time and space are of a threefold nature. They can both be divided into three dimensions: past, present, and future, or length, width, and depth. But on the whole, each number has its role in the work of creation.

In his commentary, Saadya states that the underlying structure of all beings is to be understood as a temporary mixture of the thirty-two basic principles expressing themselves in ever-changing accidents. He also asserts that each being is created by the totality of the thirty-two principles.⁷⁴ As with the Brethren, he appears to oppose any view which gives exclusive importance to particular numbers or letters in the work of creation.

Whereas Saadya uses the word *muqabala* to express the notion of analogy, the Brethren make use of the words *qiyas* and *mizan*.⁷⁵ The last word, meaning “balance, weight, or measure,” represents the measure and the symmetry of creation. The Creator while creating the world established “measures” (*mawazin*) so that His creatures could judge (*yatahakam*) when they sought justice, impartiality, the real nature of things (*haqa’iq*), and harmony (*istiwa*).⁷⁶ In fact, people of various vocations make use of measures while expressing different types of proportionalities: poets, astronomers, lawyers, and scholars equally apply them while mapping or expressing the work of creation. In the field of logic, this “measure” is called *syllogism* (*burhan*),⁷⁷ as opposed to the *qiyas* (logical inference) of the *mutakallimun* (rational theologians in medieval Islam and Judaism). According to the Brethren, each single proportion which exists in creation, in mathematics, and in the human

⁷⁴Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 89.

⁷⁵On the notion of the *mizan* in Isma’ilite thought, see D. De Smet, “*Mizān ad-Diyāna* ou l’équilibre entre science et religion dans la pensée ismaélienne,” *Acta Orientalia Belgica* VIII (1993–94): 247–54.

⁷⁶*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E42, 447–48.

⁷⁷The Brethren refer to *syllogisms* as the “measure of the intellect” (*mizan al-‘aql*) (*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E42, 403).

mind itself functions as an indication of the harmony of the divine realm and as a path to its knowledge.

The Divine as Ultimate Unity, Center, and Immanence

In the last section of this paper, I would like to argue that in the view of both the Brethren and Saadya, the Divine cannot but constitute the ultimate center of creation, and be the author of all analogical systems, present and manifest in all systems through structure and order.

The Brethren identify themselves as followers of Pythagoras, who held that a fundamental proof for the existence of God resides in our thinking: the fact that the series of numbers starts from one indicates that the multiplicity of creatures starts from the Creator.⁷⁸ The statement—according to which the relationship of the creatures to their Creator is the same as that of the number series to the number one—is one of the most fundamental and often repeated assertions of the Brethren.⁷⁹

In the *Commentary on the Sefer Yezirah*, Saadya makes the same assertion when he argues that the uniqueness of the Creator is inscribed in the hierarchy of numbers. In glorifying the number (*tasrif al-‘adad*), Saadya states that “the beginning of all existing things is wherever we put it, except in the case of the number, the beginning of which must be the one. It cannot begin with any other [number].”⁸⁰

The Brethren describe the uniqueness of the Creator as “the pure unity (*al-wahda al-mahda*), free from all attributes attached to it in logical statements (*alfaz al-mantiqiyya*), and free from the imaginations of

⁷⁸“In the knowledge of numbers and of the way in which they are derived from the one which precedes the two is the knowledge of the oneness (*wahdaniyya*) of the Creator [. . .] and in the knowledge of the specificity (*khawass*) of numbers and of the way in which they are arranged and organized is the knowledge of the creatures of the Exalted Creator” (*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E33, 200).

⁷⁹For example, “The Creator precedes the existence (*wujud*) of creatures in the same manner as the one precedes all numbers” (*Rasa’il Ikhwan as-Safa’*, E40, 353); and “The hierarchy of all beings leads to God in the same way as the arrangement of all numbers leads to the one” (E35, 234).

⁸⁰“*kull mawjud mid al-asya’ innama yakun awwaluhu min haythu yada’ al-wadi’ ma khalal-‘adad fa-in awwaluhu huwa-l-wahid la mahalata la yajuz an yabda’ min gayrihi*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 60).

the soul (*takhayyulat nafsanīyya*), and dissimilar to all material representations (*tamthilat huyulaniyya*). Moreover, this Oneness cannot be multiplied like the one of the numbers (*la tatakaththar ka-takaththur wahid al- a 'dad*).⁸¹

Elsewhere, they state that “the unity which exists in the [notion of] oneness in the mind (*al-wahid al-mawhum*) is the basis (*asl*) and the origin (*mansa'*) of all numbers without being one of them. And the numbers figure as the multiplicity of the ‘one’ (*kuthrat al-ahad*).⁸² Thus, the Brethren distinguish between oneness in an apparent sense (*zahir*)—that is, oneness attainable to sense perception as that existing in matter—and hidden (*batin*) oneness, meaning the immaterial idea of uniqueness existing in the human mind that has emptied itself of all materiality.⁸³ God is absolute Oneness, the foundation of all analogies, the basis of all systems. The trace and fingerprint of the Creator exists all over creation; in fact, without it the universe would collapse.

Similarly, in his commentary, Saadya distinguishes between external unity, which manifests itself to the senses in reference to each thing,⁸⁴ and absolute unity (*al-wahda as-sahiha*), which “underlies and precedes the appearance to the senses.”⁸⁵ The “one” is not only the foundational point for the numbers, since all numbers are derived from it, but also stands as the ultimate basis for the work of the intellect, preceding the act of sense perception. External unity, based primarily on the perception of the senses and subsequently on abstraction by the intellect, belongs to the superficial layer of creation which is attainable to sense perception. Absolute unity, on the other hand, is “beyond all things which can be thought.”⁸⁶ “It comes [spontaneously] to the mind in

⁸¹*Rasa 'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E49, 199.

⁸²*Rasa 'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E41, 394.

⁸³*Rasa 'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E1, 49.

⁸⁴Each being which is perceived or intuited can be characterized as one (e.g., one man or one hundred).

⁸⁵Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 71.

⁸⁶“*wa-huwa [al-wahid] fawqa kull say' alladhi yaqa' lahu fi-l-fikr*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 71).

connection with each origin without appearing to the senses.”⁸⁷ This intuited absolute unity is that which characterizes the Creator.

The Brethren make a similar statement, saying “the one is analogous to the Creator, [as] it has no associate (*sarik*), no analogue (*sabah*) and no equivalent (*mithl*). It is the basis (*asl*) and the origin (*mansa'*) of the number and it exists in all numbers by surrounding them (*muhit biha*). It is the cause of numbers (*'illat al-'adad*) in the same sense as the Creator is the cause of all beings.”⁸⁸

In fact, at the beginning of the epistles, the Brethren draw a parallel between the ultimate unity of the Creator and the “theoretical” one, the source of all numbers:

The one is the basis (*asl*) of the number and its origin (*mansa'*), its beginning (*awwal*), and its end (*akhir*). In the same way, God [. . .] is the cause (*'illa*) of things and their Creator, their beginning, and their end. And in the same manner as the one is indivisible (*la juz' lahu*) and has no equivalent (*mithl*) among the numbers, so God [. . .] has no equivalent and nothing comparable (*sabah*) to Him in His creation. And in the same manner as the one encompasses all the numbers and reckons them, so God [. . .] knows the things and their qualities (*mahiyya*), and He is much more exalted than the sinners assume.⁸⁹

In his commentary, Saadya basically presents the same view when he asserts that “the fact that the one appears beyond all the multiplied numbers is a proof for [the existence of] the Holy One.”⁹⁰

The view according to which God exists in and together with everything is the result of a basic analogy between counting and creation, the most

⁸⁷“*wa-innama al-wahda as-sahiha huwa ma yakhtur 'ala-l-bal li-kull ibtida' min gayr zuhur li-l-hass*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 71).

⁸⁸*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E32, 181.

⁸⁹*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E1, 54.

⁹⁰“*fa-qad tabayyana zuhur al-wahid fawqa kull madrub wa-dhalika 'allama li-l-wahid al-qaddis*” (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 83).

basic act of the human mind and the foundational divine act that called the universe into being.

The Brethren assert that

the Creator is inside everything and together with everything without being mixed or intermingled with it, in the same way as the one is inside each number and in each counted being. And if the number one disappeared from all creatures we assume that all the numbers would disappear [as well], but even if the numbers as such disappeared the one would not disappear. In the same way, if the Creator did not exist, nothing would exist at all. But if the things were destroyed it does not imply that He would be destroyed together with them.⁹¹

Saadya's commentary asserts that "the Creator is in the center of His creation by sustaining it,"⁹² and God is said to indwell in things⁹³ in the same manner as "the notion in the center (*al-ma'na al-mutawassit*) holds/sustains all of its peripheries (*hamilan li-kull al-hawasi*)."⁹⁴

Conclusion

Mystical traditions in each religion are focused on a deep transformation of the human mind by gaining a direct insight into the ultimate reality underlying and inherent in all matter. During these special times of the pandemic, we have had to become more conscious than ever of the fact that our physical freedom is illusory, and we are enclosed and encapsulated into a network of unchangeable necessities.

The two sources investigated above claim to offer the most archaic and original (Abrahamic and Pythagorean) of all remedies against this

⁹¹"*al-bari' fi kull say' wa-ma' kull say' min gayr mukhalata laha wa-la mumazaja ma'aha kama an al-wahid fi kull 'adad wa-ma'dud fa-idha irtafa'a al-wahid min kull al-mawjud tawahhamna irtifa' al-'adad kullihi wa-idha irtafa'a-l-'adad fa-lam yartafi' al-wahid kadhalika law lam yakun al-bari' lam yakun say' mawjudan aslan. Wa-idha batalat al-asya' la yabtul huwa bi-butlan al-asya'*" (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E40, 349).

⁹²"*al-khaliq mutawassit khalqih bi-ma'na al-qiyam bihi'*" (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 52).

⁹³"*al-khaliq dakhil fi-l-asya'*" (Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 52).

⁹⁴Saadya Gaon, *Tafsir Kitab al-Mabadi*, 69.

claustrophobia and inertia which result from our subordination to natural law. The three stages of this ancient therapeutic journey are

1. *establishing* natural laws from which there is no escape;
2. *recognizing* that laws occur as organized systems, we are subjected to those rules, but we might understand their nature; and
3. *realizing* that the Divine is within the system, immanent through its very being, as its origin and indelible foundation.

This transformation of the mind might occur spontaneously, as in the case of Abraham's vision (in Saadya's commentary), or as the result of lifelong philosophical education.

The Brethren state that “as a necessary outcome of His wisdom, God created the knowledge of His essence in the natural disposition of the soul”⁹⁵—such a natural disposition being one without learning (*ta'allum*) or acquisition (*iktisab*). However, humans are invited to a long philosophical journey that refines the mind and leads it from a “simple material understanding of the Divine to the conception that God is the essence of all beings.”⁹⁶

In his commentary, Saadya employs the same *philosophia* in a different context: he makes this *philosophia* a key to decode the vision of Abraham described in an ancient mystical text. The lengthy series of “proto-Shi'ite” epistles, the voice of the Fatimid Empire, and a philosophical commentary composed by the most illustrious Jewish rationalist of the Abbasid Empire on an enigmatic Abrahamic vision

⁹⁵“*allah ta'ala ja'ala bi-wajib hikmatih fi jiblat an-nufus ma'rifa huwwiyatih tab'an*” (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E45, 516).

⁹⁶Believers are divided into five levels according to the degree of their convictions (i.e., the way they picture God): 1. according to the view of the unlearned, He sits on a throne and hears everything; 2. in the opinion of the common people and of some of the elect, He is a unique person (*sakhs munfarid*) who can be described by attributes; 3. for some, He is a spiritual form indwelling in all the beings without existing in a specific place and time; 4. some say that He is a simple light (*nur basit*) of a spiritual nature; and 5. for others, God is a unique essence out of which the being of the beings emanates (*wa-huwa fa'id minhu wujud al-mawjudat*). The last and least corporeal conviction is the most appropriate view of the Divine. (*Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa'*, E45, 515.)

bear witness to the same view: the ultimate unity of the Creator immanent in all creatures. This view is far from being a static vision, since while God is the ultimate center and reference point of the universe, humans are situated in the ultimate “between.”

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