PART TWO

PESHUTO SHEL MIQRA
In contrast to his use of the term \( \text{zāhir al-naṣṣ} \), which adheres to the parameters of earlier Judeo-Arabic exegesis, Maimonides’ construal of the talmudic rule of \( \text{peshat} \) and even his use of the term \( \text{peshuto shel miqra} \) itself is innovative and unique. To begin with, he casts this rule exclusively as a legal principle that effectively links \( \text{halakhah} \) to biblical exegesis integrally, whereas the term \( \text{zāhir al-naṣṣ} \) was used by him in all realms of interpretation, both halakhic and non-halakhic. An appreciation of Maimonides’ innovation in this respect is possible only in the context of the Geonic-Andalusian tradition of jurisprudence that he inherited. Therefore, in order to understand the nexus of issues that his rule of \( \text{peshat} \) was intended to address, we must examine the earlier Rabbanite tradition of legal hermeneutics, beginning for our purposes with Saadia, while also taking into account the Karaite and Muslim legal conceptions to which Rabbanite authors responded, and which at times necessarily shaped their own legal thought.

1. **The Geonic-Karaite Debate**

The widely held Geonic-Andalusian position—guided by Saadia’s model—that halakhic traditions can override \( \text{zāhir al-naṣṣ} \) faced a formidable challenge from the robust scripturalism of the Karaites. Judah ha-Levi acknowledges as much in his apologia for Rabbanite Judaism, known as the book of the *Kuzari*, where he places the following question in the mouth of the inquisitive Khazar King:

> Explain to me now your arguments against the Karaites, for I see that they exert effort (\( \text{ijtihād} \)) in the worship of God more than the Rabbanites, and their arguments seem superior and more often in keeping with the texts (\( \text{nuṣūṣ} \)) of the Torah.\(^1\)

\(^1\) *Kuzari* III:22, Baneth and Ben-Shammai ed., 112. Ha-Levi here articulates a common Rabbanite perception. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that despite the