In the thirteenth century Maimonideans in Southern France devoted themselves “with religious zeal” to teaching philosophy to the general public.¹ At the same time they were committed to the esoteric character of philosophy, holding that access to it must be restricted to the select few.² In this paper I want to propose a solution to this puzzle.

In his magisterial study on the appropriation and role of the sciences in the medieval Jewish communities of Southern France, Gad Freudenthal documented and explained the radical transformation which these communities underwent, from traditional Talmud-Torah centers into leading centers of philosophy and science. According to Freudenthal, Maimonides’ interpretation of Judaism as a philosophical religion played a key role in this process:

En effet, à partir du début du XIIe siècle, notamment, suite à la pénétration dans les communautés juives du Midi de la France et du Nord de l’Espagne,
Freudenthal persuasively argues that Maimonides’ interpretation of Judaism both structured the corpus of scientific and philosophical texts that was translated from Arabic to Hebrew and provided a religious justification for studying these texts. According to Maimonides the commandment to love God (Deut. 6:5) is a “call” to acquire “all the … correct opinions concerning the whole of being—opinions that constitute the numerous kinds of all the theoretical sciences [al-‘ulûm al-nazariyya].” The “theoretical sciences” are mathematics, physics, and metaphysics, preceded by the study of logic as the tool of philosophy. Maimonides thus legitimizes studying the entire range of the philosophical sciences that prepare for and culminate in the intellectual love of God.

What turns the process described by Freudenthal into a puzzle is Maimonides’ insistence that the philosophical sciences are esoteric sciences—“the secrets of the Law.” Boldly identifying physics with the “Account of the Beginning” and metaphysics with the “Account of the Chariot,” Maimonides refers to the authority of the Talmud to stress their esoteric character: Whereas the “Account of the Beginning ought not to be taught in the presence of two men,” the “Account of the Chariot ought not to be taught even to one man, except if he be wise and able to understand by himself, in which case only the chapter headings may be transmitted

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4 Maimonides, Guide 3.28 (ed. Munk, p. 373; trans. Pines, p. 512). Note that throughout this paper I have often modified existing English translations.

5 Ibid., 1.34 (ed. Munk, p. 50; trans. Pines, p. 75).

6 For a detailed account of Maimonides’ interpretation of Judaism as a philosophical religion, see C. Fraenkel, From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of the Dalālāt al-Ḥāʾirīn into the Moreh ha-Nevukhim (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 2007), in ch. 2.2.