CHAPTER NINE

MAIMONIDEANISM IN LEON MODENA’S *ARI NOHEM*

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About six months earlier I had completed a treatise against the Kabbalah. I entitled it *Ari Nohem* [The Roaring Lion] because of my great anger at one of those [kabbalists] who had spoken wrongly in his books against the great luminaries of Israel, especially ‘the eagle,’ Maimonides, of blessed memory. But it was never printed.¹

This study takes Modena’s short statement in his autobiography, written in the spring of 1640, as its point of departure and explores the role of Maimonides in the treatise. Another theme alluded to in this phrase, the circulation of *Ari Nohem* in manuscript between its 1639 composition and its first publication in print by Julius Fürst in Leipzig in 1840, is discussed elsewhere.² The first part of this study identifies the numerous critics of Maimonides who appear throughout the pages of *Ari Nohem* and examines the various strategies that Modena uses to defend “the great eagle.” Modena was only half-correct in his description of *Ari Nohem* in his autobiography. While his anger certainly was great, he directed it at more than one of Maimonides’ critics. The second part explores Modena’s study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* that repeatedly appears in *Ari Nohem*, and it offers a profile of the passages in the *Guide* that Modena advises his prize student, Joseph Hamiz, to reflect upon.³ The third part connects Modena’s discussion of two issues to his reading of Maimonides: the history of esoteric secrets and the distinction between Kabbalah and philosophic knowledge.


Scholars have long noticed the presence of Maimonides in *Ari Nohem* as well as in Modena’s other writings. Over the past century Nehemiah Libowitz,⁴ Cecil Roth,⁵ Howard Adelman,⁶ Moshe Idel,⁷ David Ruderman,⁸ Talya Fishman,⁹ and Elliot Horowitz,¹⁰ have discussed the role of Maimonides in Modena’s work, and what follows is heavily indebted to their scholarship. This discussion re-opens the question of Maimonides in *Ari Nohem* by placing him at the center of Modena’s polemic rather than at the periphery.¹¹ This study focuses on Maimonides’ impact on Modena as expressed in *Ari Nohem*, one of Modena’s last works where his Maimonideanism attains its clearest and most sustained expression. Other writings relevant to Maimonides and Maimonideanism, notably several of Modena’s letters as well as his mnemonic composition, *Lev ha-Aryeh*, help illuminate his stance in *Ari Nohem*.¹²

Modena begins *Ari Nohem*, an epistolary treatise addressed to Hamiz, with an explicit evocation of Maimonides:

Concerning the cause that impelled the author to compose this treatise for his beloved student [cf. Song 4:3], bold in his speech, who examined those compositions that call themselves kabbalistic and open their

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¹¹ In their historical notes to Modena’s autobiography, Howard Adelman and Benjamin Ravid write: “Modena defended Maimonides in several ways, including reference to the favorable view of him by Nahmanides, himself a kabbalist (*Ari Nohem*, chs. 6 and 21). In context, however, this point was a minor aspect of this important book.” See *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi*, p. 261. On Nahmanides in *Ari Nohem* see below.