

# The Platonic Source for the Philosophical Riddle and How It Is Used in Ibn Gabirol's Poem 'I Love You'

By Yehuda Liebes

בכל לבו ונפשו ומאודו	אהבתיך כאהבת איש יחידו
להבין סוד פעולת צור ילדו	וששתי על לבבך אשר תר
ומי ידע ומי יבין יסודו	והדבר מאוד עמוק ורחוק
ועליך להתבונן בסודו	אבל אגיד לך דבר שמעתי
למען כל אשר הכל בידו	חכמים אמרו כי סוד היות כל
כמו חושק אשר נכסף לדודו	והוא נכסף לשומו יש כמו יש
באמרם כי בראו על כבודו	ואולי זה ידמו הנביאים
תנה מופת למען העמידו	השיבותי לך דבר ואתה

Translation:<sup>1</sup>

I've loved<sup>2</sup> you as a man who loves his sole one,  
With all his heart and his soul too and his vim,  
And took great joy about your heart which did seek  
To see the secret act of God who bore him.  
Now this idea's very deep and remote,  
And who can know and understand its bedrock;  
Yet I'll relate to you a thing which I heard,  
And you reflect upon its secret that's locked.  
The wise had said the secret of the being of All  
Is for All's sake for whom all is in His hand,  
And He aspires to make it be like that Be  
Just like a lover whose desire's for his friend.  
Perhaps that is what prophets did allude to  
When the said He had made it for His name's sake;  
I've given you reply, and now it's you

---

<sup>1</sup> The translation is by A. Leo Motzkin. Though it occasionally differs from my own interpretation of the poem, I find it superior to the many other translations, and it preserves some of the rhythm of the original.

<sup>2</sup> I prefer to render *ahavtikha* as 'I love', in the present tense, as I have done in the title of this article.

Who must find proof in order that it will stand.

This poem by Solomon ibn Gabirol, with the philosophical riddle at its heart, has fascinated scholars, making it perhaps the most widely interpreted medieval Hebrew text. I, too, devoted a lengthy article to it, to which I refer the reader for my own interpretation of both the poem as a whole (including some critical remarks on the text) and the riddle within it.<sup>3</sup> I now intend to provide the riddle with its literary source, and to demonstrate that my interpretation generally holds for this source as well.

The poet himself tells us that he heard the riddle from some ‘sages.’ Up to now, no scholar, to my knowledge, has succeeded in identifying its exact source, but it is generally assumed to have something to do with Platonic (or Neoplatonic) philosophy, with which it is indeed suffused. In my above-cited article, I adduced a number of literary parallels, some by Gabirol himself – in his poetry and in his philosophical work *Fons Vitae* (which I believe was written after this poem) – and others from what I saw as possible sources. These included passages in the *Sefer yesira* and in the commentary on it by Saadya Gaon, and others drawn from Gnostic and Neoplatonic literature in both Greek and Arabic, and from Plato himself (in the *Timaeus* and elsewhere). But all these possible sources shed light only on the philosophical-theological aspect of the riddle and do not relate to its personal aspect, which, to my mind, is the very essence of both the riddle and the poem. Now I believe I have identified the riddle’s principal source, in the second letter of Plato. Here lies the key to all its elements.

F. Bargebuhr did adduce this text in his magisterial article on the poem’s philosophical meaning. In connection with Gabirol’s concept of the relationship between God and the universe, he remarks: ‘The Hebrew wording has its support in Proverbs 16:4 (similarly Plato, in his second letter,

---

<sup>3</sup> Yehuda Liebes, ‘Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol’s Use of the *Sefer Yesira* and a Commentary on the Poem “I Love Thee,”’ in J. Dan (ed.), *The Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, Jerusalem 1987 (= Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 6/3–4), pp. 73–123 (in Hebrew). The article can be read also in: <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar/gabirol.doc>.

speaks of a king in whose hands everything remains).'<sup>4</sup> But this short, parenthetical comment does not expressly assert the passage from Plato as Gabirol's source; it refers only to a general resemblance between the two with regard to the philosophical element, for which other examples can be adduced as well.<sup>5</sup> Bargebuhr's remark elicited no further scholarly discussion, and I myself noticed it only after preparing the first draft of the present paper.

The comparison I suggest is much wider and takes into account the parallels in the wording and style of both texts, which are both phrased as riddles and expressly so defined by their authors. At their center lies the word All, reiterated several times. Both texts are written in response to the respective disciple's wish to solve the mystery of creation, which is deemed by the writer to be beyond the disciple's ability at the present point in the course of his education. In both cases, this seems to be the rationale for phrasing the mystery's solution as a riddle.

But the main ground for comparison lies in the human or social contexts of the two texts. I interpret Gabirol's poem as a love poem rather than a philosophical one, with the philosophical riddle serving as an instructive and pedagogical means toward an erotic end. The cosmogonical relationship between creator and universe is used to elucidate the desired relationship between the poet and his beloved disciple, which will be actualized once the disciple has become educated enough (by means of instructional exercises like this riddle) to make him fit to receive the teacher's love.

Plato's letter, too, was designated for a particular student, who had to be educated towards a specific personal end. Its addressee was Dionysius II,

---

<sup>4</sup> Frederick P. Bargebuhr, 'Gabirol's Poem Beginning "Ahavtikha..."', *Review of Religion*, 15 (1950), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> In my article 'Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Use of the *Sefer Yesira*' (above, note 3), I adduced several ancient passages in which the word 'All' recurs in more than one significance, along with some other medieval 'All' riddles; see *ibid.*, pp. 117-123. Other ancient examples may be found in Yair Lorberbaum, *Image of God*, Tel-Aviv 2004, pp. 299, 314-316, and note 126 (in Hebrew).

tyrant of Syracuse, son of Dionysius I and nephew of Plato's friend Dion, who deposed Dionysius II but was murdered before he could complete Plato's politico-philosophical plan. When Plato wrote his letter, however, he was still hoping to educate Dionysius II and through him to implement his political ideas;<sup>6</sup> the whole letter is dedicated to a rather desperate attempt to heal the initial breach in their relationship. Plato's goal thus was admittedly different from Gabirol's, in that it was political rather than erotic. This difference, which diminishes when we take into account the philosophical dimension of both goals, may account for the major variance between Gabirol's version of the riddle and its Platonic source: Plato speaks of the first being as of a 'king,' whereas Gabirol only alludes to kingship<sup>7</sup> and invokes erotic terms. That is because Plato wished to make a good king out of Dionysius, while Gabirol desired but a loving friend; both, apparently, were eventually disappointed. However, while the love relation between God and world is not expressed in this second Platonic letter, it is nevertheless a central idea in the Platonic world and appears in many places in Plato's writings and those of the Neoplatonists.<sup>8</sup>

I reproduce here not only Plato's version of the riddle, but also some of its context, in which Plato indicates the internal difficulty of the philosophical subject, the manner of approaching it, and how Dionysius's understanding of it ought to affect their relationship. This passage should thus be seen as the source not only of the philosophical riddle in Gabirol's poem, but also of its context and pedagogical meaning. When the passage as a whole is juxtaposed to the poem, I believe the similarity speaks for itself.

---

<sup>6</sup> My late father Joseph Gerhard Liebes wrote about Plato's relationship with Dionysius and his dynasty and the part it plays in Platonic philosophy in his book *Plato: His Life and Work*, Jerusalem 1969 (in Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> 'Has all in his hand.' According to my colleague Ze'ev Harvey, the poem contains further kingly allusions to the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, both ascribed to King Solomon, with whom Gabirol, whose first name was Solomon, somehow identifies. Harvey also sees an allusion to Is. 43:15, where the Creator is called King (personal communication).

<sup>8</sup> See Bargebuhr, 'Gabirol's Poem' (above, note 4), pp. 12–15, and my article, 'Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol's Use of the *Sefer Yesira*' (above, note 3), pp. 117–120.

Φῆς γὰρ δὴ κατὰ τὸν ἐκείνου λόγον, οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἀποδεδείχθαι σοι περὶ τῆς τοῦ πρώτου φύσεως. Φραστέον δὴ σοι δι' αἰνιγμῶν, ἴν' ἂν τι ἢ δέλτος ἢ πόντου ἢ γῆς ἐν πτυχαῖς πάθῃ, ὁ ἀναγνοὺς μὴ γνῶ.

Ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἔχει. Περὶ τὸν πάντων βασιλέα πάντ' ἐστὶ καὶ ἐκείνου ἔνεκα πάντα, καὶ ἐκεῖνο αἴτιον ἀπάντων τῶν καλῶν· δεύτερον δὲ πέρι τὰ δεύτερα, καὶ τρίτον πέρι τὰ τρίτα. ἢ οὖν ἀνθρωπίνη ψυχὴ περὶ αὐτὰ ὀρέγεται μαθεῖν ποῖ' ἄττα ἐστίν, βλέπουσα εἰς τὰ αὐτῆς συγγενῆ, ὧν οὐδὲν ἱκανῶς ἔχει.

Τοῦ δὴ βασιλέως πέρι καὶ ὧν εἶπον, οὐδὲν ἐστὶν τοιοῦτον — τὸ δὴ μετὰ τοῦτο ἢ ψυχὴ φησιν — ἀλλὰ ποῖόν τι μῆν; τοῦτ' ἐστίν, ὃ παῖ Διονυσίου καὶ Δωρίδος, τὸ ἐρώτημα ὃ πάντων αἴτιόν ἐστιν κακῶν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἢ περὶ τούτου ὠδὶς ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἐγγιγνομένη, ἣν εἰ μὴ τις ἐξαιρεθήσεται, τῆς ἀληθείας ὄντως οὐ μὴ ποτε τύχη.

Σὺ δὲ τοῦτο πρὸς ἐμέ ἐν τῷ κήπῳ ὑπὸ ταῖς δάφναις αὐτὸς ἔφησθα ἐννενοηκένας καὶ εἶναι σὸν εὖρημα· καὶ ἐγὼ εἶπον ὅτι τοῦτο εἰ φαίνοιτό σοι οὕτως ἔχειν, πολλῶν ἂν εἴης λόγων ἐμέ ἀπολελυκῶς. οὐ μὲν ἄλλω γέ ποτ' ἔφην ἐντετυχηκένας τοῦθ' ἠύρηκότι, ἀλλὰ ἢ πολλή μοι πραγματεία περὶ τοῦτ' εἶη· σὺ δὲ ἴσως μὲν ἀκούσας του, τάχα δ' ἂν θεία μοίρα κατὰ τοῦθ' ὀρμήσας, ἔπειτα αὐτοῦ τὰς ἀποδείξεις ὡς ἔχων βεβαίως οὐ κατέδησας, ἀλλ' ἄττει σοι τοτὲ μὲν οὕτως, τοτὲ δὲ ἄλλως περὶ τὸ φανταζόμενον, τὸ δὲ οὐδὲν ἐστὶν τοιοῦτον. καὶ τοῦτο οὐ σοὶ μόνω γέγονεν, ἀλλ' εὖ ἴσθι μηδένα πώποτε μου τὸ πρῶτον ἀκούσαντα ἔχειν ἄλλως

πως ἢ οὕτως κατ' ἀρχάς, καὶ ὁ μὲν πλείω ἔχων  
πράγματα, ὁ δὲ ἐλάττω, μόγις ἀπαλλάττονται, σχεδὸν  
δὲ οὐδεὶς ὀλίγα.

τούτων δὴ γεγονότων καὶ ἐχόντων οὕτω, σχεδὸν κατὰ  
τὴν ἐμὴν δόξαν ηὐρήκαμεν ὃ σὺ ἐπέστειλας, ὅπως δεῖ  
πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἡμᾶς ἔχειν. ) Ἐπεὶ γὰρ βασανίζεις αὐτὰ  
συγγιγνόμενός τε ἄλλοις καὶ παραθεώμενος παρὰ τὰ τῶν  
ἄλλων καὶ αὐτὰ καθ' αὐτά, νῦν σοι ταῦτά τε, εἰ  
ἀληθῆς ἢ βάσανος, προσφύσεται, καὶ οἰκεῖος τούτοις τε  
καὶ ἡμῖν ἔση.<sup>9</sup>

Translation:

You say that you have not had a sufficient demonstration of the doctrine concerning the nature of 'the First.' Now I must expound it to you in a riddling way in order that, should the tablet come to any harm 'in folds of ocean or of earth,' he that readeth may not understand.

The matter stands thus: Related to<sup>10</sup> the King of All are all things, and for his sake they are, and of all things fair He is the cause. And related to the Second are the second things and related to the Third the third. About these, then, the human soul strives to learn, looking to the things that are akin to itself, whereof none is fully perfect.

But as to the King and the objects I have mentioned, they are of quite different quality. In the next place the soul inquires – 'Well then, what quality have they?' But the cause of all the mischief, O son of Dionysius and Doris, lies in this very question, or rather in the travail which this question creates in the soul; and unless a man delivers himself from this he will never really attain the truth.

---

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Epistulae* (II), 312d–313d. The text here is of the same as that on the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG) site, based on J. Burnet, *Platonis opera*, V, Oxford 1907 (reprinted 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Another possible translation is 'Turning about' (Y. L.).

You, however, declared to me in the garden, under the laurels, that you had formed this notion yourself and that it was a discovery of your own; and I made answer that if it was plain to you that this was so, you would have saved me from a long discourse. I said, however, that I had never met with any other person who had made this discovery; on the contrary most of the trouble I had was about this very problem. So then, after you had either, as is probable, got the true solution from someone else, or had possibly (by Heaven's favor) hit on it yourself, you fancied you had a firm grip on the proofs of it, and so you omitted to make them fast;<sup>11</sup> thus your view of the truth sways now this way, now that, round about the apparent object; whereas the true object is wholly different. Nor are you alone in this experience; on the contrary, there has never yet been anyone, I assure you, who has not suffered the same confusion at the beginning, when he first learnt this doctrine from me; and they all overcome it with difficulty, one man having more trouble and another less, but scarcely a single one of them escapes with but little.

So now that this has occurred, and things are in this state, we have pretty well found an answer, as I think, to the question how we ought to behave towards each other. For seeing that you are testing my doctrines both by attending the lectures of other teachers and by examining my teaching side by side with theirs, as well as by itself, then, if the test you make is a true one, not only will these doctrines implant themselves now in your mind, but you also will be devoted both to them and to us.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the last verse of Gabirol's poem, which, rendered more literarily, says: 'Give [or, according to another version, "Buy" or "Take"] a proof to substantiate it [or "to make it stand"].'

<sup>12</sup> This translation is of the same as that on the Perseus site (<http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus/cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekTexts&getid=1&query=Pl.%20Ep.%20313b>), based on *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, VII (English transl. by R.G. Bury), Cambridge, MA–London 1966.

The precise solution to Plato's riddle is unclear. Some say that it should not be taken very seriously, for Plato would not have given Dionysius, a novice disciple, real clues to such a major philosophical problem, which, as Plato says later on in the same later, should not be discussed in writing at all. According to this view, Plato's main purpose in posing the riddle was pedagogical: He meant to put Dionysius in place and to hint vaguely towards his prospective philosophical way.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the riddle was discussed intensively in late antiquity, in Pythagorean, Middle-Platonic and Neoplatonic circles, and during the Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> It is thus plausible, even without the evidence of Gabirol's poem, that Plato's riddle was known in the Middle Ages, though I could not find an Arabic translation (nor could the experts I consulted supply any information in this regard). But the obvious use Gabirol makes of it testifies to the existence of an Arabic version, which may be found eventually. This hope is encouraged by evidence from medieval Arabic literature attesting that at least the existence of Plato's letters was known to the Arabs.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> See the lengthy note by my late father, Joseph G. Liebes, in *Plato's Writings* (Hebrew transl. by Joseph G. Liebes), V, Jerusalem–Tel-Aviv 1967, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> See John Dillon. *The Middle Platonists*, Ithaca, NY, 1977, p. 367; and Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, London 1967, pp. 242–244.

<sup>15</sup> Alfarabi mentions the letters (رسائل) of Plato in the last paragraph of his book *Platonic Philosophy* (فلسفة افلاطون), in *Plato Arabus*, ed. Richard Waltzer, II, London 1973, p. 22–23 in the Arabic section (the volume includes a Latin translation and detailed notes). Ibn an-Nadim also mentions Plato's 'existing letters' (وله رسائل موجودة) in his famous *Fihrist* (المطبعة الرحمانية), Cairo 1929, 7.1, p. 344, s.v. Plato (افلاطون). I am grateful to my colleague Donna Shalev for these references.