

PART 1

The Language of Relationship

Religious Experience as Connection or Union (Ittiṣāl) and Arrival (Wuṣūl)

As we have noted, various rival groups in the medieval Islamic world—philosophers, theologians, Sufi mystics, legal scholars—were each laying claim to common Arabic terms. Ha-Levi adapts and transforms these Arabic terms in an original way to reflect his distinct perspective on religious experience.

One way Ha-Levi speaks of the religious path or goal is in relational terms—as union, communion, contact, connection, or conjunction (*ittiṣāl*); as well as attaining, arriving at, or reaching the Divine (*wuṣūl*). Both terms stem from the Arabic root *waṣala*. *Waṣala* means to connect, join, unite, combine, or link; and also to arrive at or reach, perhaps through a process of connection. These terms were the subject of great controversy in twelfth-century Muslim Spain. Because they describe the very goal and purpose of religious life, these key terms reach to the heart of each group's identity: philosophers, mystics, and mainstream legal scholars each felt the need to define a position on the possibility of *ittiṣāl*.¹

The terms *ittiṣāl* and *wuṣūl* are in fact the focus of a central debate in the Middle Ages: in what sense is it possible for human beings to achieve union with the Divine, and how does one attain such union?² While some groups assert *ittiṣāl* is possible and they map out a detailed program for its attainment, others object strongly to this concept. Ha-Levi plays with the terms *ittiṣāl* and *wuṣūl* in a way that reframes the problem and offers a unique resolution.

Ittiṣāl is central to the *Kuzari* from the very outset; the term is featured in the King's opening encounters with his three interlocutors. We will thus begin by examining Sufi and philosophical senses of *ittiṣāl* and their role in the opening dialogue, the dialogue's use of Shī'ite terminology, and

the place of *ittiṣāl* in the *Haver's* chronicle of Jewish history. We will see that the *Haver's* narrative includes an account of *ittiṣāl* among founding figures, various levels of *ittiṣāl* (individual and communal, elite and non-elite) and the covenantal dimension of *ittiṣāl*.

We will then consider the importance of *mitsvot* and Jewish communal life for Ha-Levi's concept of *ittiṣāl*, and examine the relationship between *ittiṣāl*, immortality, and the afterlife in Ha-Levi's thought. The final section will explore several dimensions of Ha-Levi's argument: the *Haver's* response to Christian and Muslim critiques of Judaism, his defense of Biblical asceticism despite Ha-Levi's anti-ascetic religious ideal, and his unique interpretation of Jewish national suffering.

A. Sufi and Philosophical Terminology: Use of the Term *Ittiṣāl* in the Opening Dialogue

We have noted that the Islamic mystical movement known as Sufism (*ta-sawwuf*) flowered in Muslim Spain from the tenth century on. Sufis and philosophers in medieval Spain each described a form of union with the divine realm which they called *ittiṣāl*. For Sufis, the goal of spiritual life was clear: union with God. For scholars like the philosopher depicted in I:1 of the *Kuzari*, the more modest goal of the human quest was union with the Active Intellect, the tenth celestial intelligence emanated from the Divine, which governs the sublunar world and brings human thought from potentiality to actuality.³

The philosopher in I:1 speaks of this achievement as *ittiṣāl ittiḥād*, a conjunction of union. He advises the King to liken himself to the Active Intellect, and to pursue the virtues of contentment, quietism, and humility;⁴ he also suggests that the philosophic path leads to prophecy. While his speech is thoroughly in keeping with the medieval philosophical quest, the vocabulary and images he uses have Sufi overtones. The Sufi is therefore a background figure in the dialogue, the missing interlocutor whose language and presence we feel throughout.

With respect to the individual who has achieved perfection (the Perfect One),⁵ the philosopher asserts that

there conjoins with him [*yattaṣilu bi-hi*] from the divine nature a light which is called the Active Intellect. His passive intellect conjoins with it [*yattaṣilu bi-hi*] [in] a conjunction of union [*ittiṣāl ittiḥād*], to the point where the individual regards himself as that Active Intellect, with no distinction between them. (I:1: 4)

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The phrase *ittiṣāl ittiḥād* in fact represents two ways in which union with the Divine had been depicted in Sufi thought: as *ittiṣāl*—contact, communion, or union—and as *ittiḥād*, an identification of natures. In the Sufi model, the seeker divests himself more and more of his own human attributes, gradually taking on the qualities of the divine beloved until he or she becomes that beloved, perceiving an identity or unification (*ittiḥād*) of the two natures. Some Sufis argued that such talk was heresy, for it implies there are two independent entities that could be united, an affront to the absolute unity (*tawḥīd*) of the one divine Reality.⁶ Here we see the philosopher using the phrase *ittiṣāl ittiḥād* to suggest a less embracing union. The passive human intellect unites not with God, but with the Active Intellect, thereby becoming a fully actualized intelligence, knowing all that it is possible for a human mind to know.⁷

We see that while using the same terms, philosophers and Sufis were living in radically different worlds. There were bridges between these worlds however. There was a common striving for union which united intellectuals in the Islamic world, and much common ground existed despite clear differences.⁸ In particular, the experiential dimension of Neo-Platonic philosophy created a bridge between philosophy and Sufism. Plotinus, the third-century father of Neo-Platonism, had described divine emanation as an initial “downward” path, whereby the unknowable One emanates through Mind, Soul, and Nature into this world; this is the philosophical dimension to his thought. However, he also prescribed an upward, religious path by which a soul yearning for return to the One could strive to attain reunion.⁹

Plotinus described his own experience of mystical oneness in a passage frequently quoted by medieval philosophers of Judaism and Islam. For Plotinus, union was not simply intellectual, but experiential and ecstatic:

Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identify with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body.¹⁰

Plotinus’s account of his own experience provided a bridge between a purely cognitive approach to *ittiṣāl* and the experiential approach of

the Sufis. It is true that this passage was known to medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers in a slightly different form: the Arabic version was found in an apocryphal work known as the *Theology of Aristotle*. This translation softened Plotinus's language of union by speaking of his being "attached" to the divine world rather than united with it. Nevertheless, the experiential nature of Plotinus's journey remains clear:

Sometimes, I was as it were alone with my soul: I divested myself of my body, put it aside, and was as it were a simple substance without a body. Then I entered into my essence by returning into it free from all things. I was knowledge, knowing, and known at the same time. I saw in my essence so much of beauty, loveliness, and splendor that I remained astonished and confused, and I knew that I was a part of the exalted, splendid, divine upper world, and that I was endowed with an active life. When this became clear to myself, I rose in my essence from this world to the divine world, and I was as it were placed there and attached [*muta'alliq*] to it. I was above the whole intelligible world, and saw myself as if I stood in that exalted divine position, and beheld there such light and splendor as tongues are unable to describe and ears are impotent to hear.¹¹

Elsewhere, moreover, the *Theology* translates Plotinus using the term *ittiṣāl*, as in the following passage: "When the soul leaves this world and enters the higher world . . . it unites with (Intellect) without its essence perishing. . . . It is both thinker and thought¹² . . . because of the intensity of its conjunction (*ittiṣāl*) with Intellect"; soul and Intellect are then "one thing, and two."¹³ Avicenna and other medieval philosophers thus evoke both sides of Plotinus when they describe the goal of religious life as *ittiṣāl*, a union that is both cognitive and ecstatic.¹⁴

Avicenna's language of union cannot be wholly ascribed to Neo-Platonic philosophy, however. He and other medieval thinkers were also seeking to make sense of claims to religious experience by Sufis in their midst. Avicenna devotes a section of his *Book of Directives and Remarks* (*Kitāb al-ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*) to a phenomenological description of the path of the Sufis. In it, he describes *ittiṣāl* as one stage of contact or uniting on the way to final arrival or union (*wuṣūl*) with the Divine.¹⁵ The fact that there was already an ecstatic component to the philosophical model of *ittiṣāl*, and that the term was current in medieval Neo-Platonic texts, solidified the bridge to Sufi thought. The language of *ittiṣāl* was common to the worlds of Sufism and philosophy, so much so that it is not entirely clear in which sphere the term originated.

The twelfth-century theologian al-Ghazzālī, too, devotes attention to the path of the Sufis and to their language of union (*wuṣūl*). An orthodox

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thinker well versed in philosophy, Ghazzālī was a crucial link between worlds, one who found in Neo-Platonic metaphysics language to express the unitive nature of Sufi *ittiṣāl*.¹⁶ Ghazzālī varies in his degree of comfort with the terminology of union. He is critical of such language in his well-known spiritual autobiography, in which he recounts his conversion to the Sufi way. Ghazzālī asserts that the only path to true knowledge of God is the path of the Sufi, and he describes with conviction the disciple's ascent on the way (*ṭarīqa*). However, of the final stage on the path, he warns: "The matter comes ultimately to a closeness to God which one group almost conceives of as indwelling [*ḥulūl*], and another as union [*ittiḥād*] and another as arrival [*wuṣūl*], but all this is wrong."¹⁷

In the *Niche for Lights*, however, Ghazzālī describes in lyrical Sufi language the state of those who attain to the Divine (*al-waṣīluna*). They are annihilated in God; "nothing remains any more save the One, the Real." Nevertheless, Ghazzālī is careful to distinguish between consciousness of God's absolute Unity (*tawḥīd*)—the recognition that there is no real Being other than God—and certain Sufis' claims to *identity* with God (*ittiḥād*), a claim he rejects. Ghazzālī is aware of both the mystical possibilities of the language of union and its dangers, and expresses both dimensions in his writings.¹⁸

As we have seen, Baḥya ibn Paqūda, author of the eleventh-century classic *Duties of the Heart*, is also a maker of bridges; Baḥya unites the worlds of the Sufi, the philosopher, and the Jew. He structures his work exactly like a Sufi manual, with various gates teaching Sufi ideals such as absolute trust in God (*tawakkul*), introspection and spiritual self-reckoning (*muḥāsaba*), humility (*tawāḍu'*) and surrender to God's will, even ascetic self-denial (*zuhd*). The opening chapter, in which Baḥya demonstrates the absolute unity of the Divine (*tawḥīd*), blends Sufi spiritual ideals with those of Neo-Platonic philosophy.¹⁹ In the last chapter, Baḥya explains that love of God is the soul's essential yearning to conjoin (*tattaṣil*) with God's light; in Baḥya, *ittiṣāl* assumes a Sufi, devotional flavor.²⁰ Whether or not Ha-Levi is responding directly to Baḥya, Baḥya's very presence attests to the strong attraction Sufi ideals of union held for the Jewish community of medieval Spain.

We thus hear both Neo-Platonic and Sufi overtones within the language of union used by the philosopher in I:1. The philosopher describes an intellectual path to union with the Active Intellect that mirrors the experiential path of the Sufi. Unlike the Sufis or Plotinus however, Ha-Levi's philosopher—like other medieval Neo-Platonists—holds that union with God or the One is not possible. He therefore makes intellectual perfection, rather than mystical union, the goal of his quest.

Moral virtues are crucial for the philosophical path, Ha-Levi's philosopher teaches, both as an aid to intellectual perfection and as a fruit of union with the Active Intellect. The philosopher's moral vocabulary also carries Sufi overtones; he associates the philosophical path of moderation ("the most just and balanced of ways")²¹ with central Sufi virtues of contentment, quietism, and humility. The philosophers' limbs become like limbs of the Active Intellect, just as the Sufi who reaches union becomes an instrument of the Divine.²²

Like Al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and other Islamic philosophers, Ha-Levi's philosopher portrays prophecy and true dreams as the ultimate fruit of the philosophical quest. Here, too, we find echoes of Sufi teachings, for Sufi *ittiṣāl* with God is said to result in dreams, visions, and prophecy. Al-Ghazzālī describes prophecy as an offshoot of the Sufi path, and states categorically that "the properties of prophecy beyond those just mentioned can be perceived only by tasting (*dhawq*) as a result of following the way of Sufism."²³

Ha-Levi's philosopher advises the King to follow the philosophical path to perfection so that he may achieve his ultimate goal:

You will be able to arrive at your desired goal²⁴: making contact [*ittiṣāl*] with that spiritual [entity], I mean the Active Intellect. And perhaps it will cause you to prophesy, and instruct you in the hidden knowledge²⁵ through true dreams and accurate images. (I:1: 5)

The philosopher speaks with a note of irony; by suggesting that true dreams and prophecy occur only after a long and arduous journey, the philosopher in effect dismisses the "prophetic" dream that had prompted the King's quest.²⁶

From the outset, however, Ha-Levi challenges the philosophical claim to prophecy. He has the King argue that despite their contact (*ittiṣāl*) with the spiritual realm, philosophers are not known for prophecy, while people without philosophical or spiritual preparation receive veridical dreams. This, concludes the King, proves that between the Divine (*'amr ilāhī*) and souls there is some connection, which he terms a secret (*sirr*), beyond the philosophical.²⁷ The King thus defends both the revelatory nature of his dream and the possibility of a kind of *ittiṣāl* beyond that promised by philosophy. Moreover, by using the term *sirr*—a Sufi technical term for the secret, innermost part of the human soul—Ha-Levi once again plays the philosopher against an absent Sufi interlocutor and the promise of Sufi *ittiṣāl*.²⁸

By using Sufi terminology, Ha-Levi sets up implicit contrasts between

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philosophy and Sufism, not in order to hold up Sufism as an alternative, but to point out weaknesses in both ideals. Ultimately, Ha-Levi plays both Sufi and philosophical *ittiṣāl* against what he sees as a more direct, concrete, and powerful religious experience found in the relationship between the Biblical God and the people of Israel.

The King explicitly extends the term *ittiṣāl* to signify such concrete divine-human contact when he expresses a philosophical skepticism, perhaps inspired by the philosopher's argument, about the possibility of this kind of *ittiṣāl*:

The [human] soul is not at ease admitting that the Creator has contact [*muttaṣīl*] with flesh [and blood] [humanity] except by a miracle that changes the natures [of things], by which we know that only the One who created [all] things from nothing was capable of it. This event must take place before masses who witness it directly—it should not come to them through a report or a chain of tradition—so that it can be studied and carefully examined, lest it be thought that it was a phantasm or magic.

[And even then] it is ³⁰ [only] with difficulty that the soul [can] accept this great thing, that the Creator of this world and the next world and the heavens and the heavenly bodies makes contact [*yattaṣilu*] with this dirty piece of mud, I mean a human being, and that God talks to him, and fulfills his requests, and does his will. (I:8: 9)

The King poses this objection still more trenchantly to the *Ḥaver* in I:68:

But how did your souls become convinced of this great thing,³¹ that the Creator of the bodies, spirits, intellects and angels, who is too high, too holy, too exalted for intellects—much less for the senses—to perceive, makes contact [*ittiṣāl*] with this low creature, sunk in matter, even if he is great in form. For in the smallest of worms there are mysteries of wisdom that the understanding cannot grasp. (I:68: 18)

The King is clearly impressed by the strength of the philosopher's argument; he is not impressed, however, by the philosopher's attempt to co-opt the term *ittiṣāl*. For the King realizes that while exalting philosophical *ittiṣāl*, the philosopher implies that real contact with God—what the King would call true *ittiṣāl*—is impossible.

The King's use of *ittiṣāl* thus prepares us for Ha-Levi's new twist to *ittiṣāl*, which we hear in the Christian's speech in *Kuzari* I:4:

The Creator has concern for [providence over]³² creatures, and contact with [*ittiṣāl bi*] human beings,³³ and anger and compassion and speech and

appearance and revelation to prophets and pious ones³⁴ and dwelling³⁵ among those who please him among the masses.

As the first voice for Biblical religion in the *Kuzari*, the Christian introduces the Biblical God who has a personal relationship with human beings; Ha-Levi uses *ittiṣāl* here in a new way to describe the corporate and individual contact between God and humanity attested to in the Bible. The Christian states his belief in “all that is mentioned in the Torah and in the records of the children of Israel.” The Christian thus testifies to the veracity of the Biblical record. The Christian goes on to claim that God’s continual *ittiṣāl* is specific to the nation of Israel. Christians, he asserts, “believe in [God] and in [God’s] dwelling [incarnation]³⁶ among the children of Israel as an honor [distinction] to them, because the divine [*amr ilāhī*] never ceased to be attached [*yattaṣilu*] to them until the masses rebelled against this messiah and crucified him” (I:4: 7).

The Christian, like the philosopher, appropriates the term *ittiṣāl* for the form of *ittiṣāl* he believes is the highest; for the Christian, this is divine incarnation. Beyond this specifically Christian claim, however, the Christian in Ha-Levi’s text has also introduced the broader notion of *ittiṣāl* as God’s providential relationship with the people of Israel. In attesting to God’s specific connection with the people of Israel and describing it as *ittiṣāl*, the Christian prepares the reader for Ha-Levi’s new twist. The *Ḥaver* will expand upon the Christian’s words by tracing the entire history of the Jewish people as a history of *ittiṣāl*.

In summary, Ha-Levi’s philosopher uses the term *ittiṣāl* in the standard medieval philosophical sense, to describe conjunction of the Active Intellect with the perfected intellect of the individual philosopher. The King introduces the term *ittiṣāl* to portray concrete, divine-human contact when he describes the philosophical problems in positing such a personal relationship between God and human beings. The Christian, as the first witness for Biblical religion, uses the term to depict the specific relationship between God and the people of Israel.

This play among the various senses of *ittiṣāl*—including that of the absent Sufi—serves as a fitting introduction to the dialogue. The frame story prompts readers to ponder the problem of divine contact and the conflicting ways it had been posed by rival factions in the medieval world. Ha-Levi’s readers, medieval Jews educated in the intellectual terminology of Judaeo-Arabic culture, would be attuned to the various ways Ha-Levi has used the term *ittiṣāl* in framing the debate. Ha-Levi’s readers will thus be especially conscious of the new twists Ha-Levi introduces, chiefly through the person of the *Ḥaver*, to the language of *ittiṣāl*.

B. Shī'ite Terminology

We have seen that in the opening dialogue, Ha-Levi's Christian brings a new nuance to the term *ittiṣāl* by using it to describe the Biblical relationship between God and Israel. When we come to the *Ḥaver's* use of *ittiṣāl* and *wuṣūl*, we discover that Ha-Levi's usage is also a creative adaptation and transformation of Shī'ite language.

Whereas Sufis and philosophers by and large used *ittiṣāl* to describe the goal of a human-initiated quest for union, in certain tenth-century Shī'ite texts we find God reaching to unite with the human rather than human beings reaching out to the Divine.³⁷ In these Ismā'īlī texts, which Shlomo Pines brought together, God chooses to attach to a series of prophets, the best individual in each generation.

The Shī'ite authors link three terms we also find at the center of the *Kuzari*: *'amr*, *ṣafwa*, and *ittiṣāl*. The term *'amr* literally means thing, matter, order, or command. In the Qur'ān, the term *amr* signifies God's command; in Shī'ite thought, the divine *'amr* came to signify God's commanding word, the divine will, or what Pines terms "a divine influx conferring prophethood."³⁸

In the Shī'ite texts to which Pines called attention, *'amr* (or *'amr Allah*) denotes that aspect of the Divine which comes down to select human individuals and signals God's choice of them.³⁹ The term *ṣafwa* in these texts denotes either the fact of divine election, or the people who are the select of God.⁴⁰ Variants of the verb *ittaṣāla* (conjoin) and *ittaḥada* (unite) are used in these texts to describe the conjunction of the divine *'amr* with the line of prophets, beginning with Adam.⁴¹

Unlike the Sufis and philosophers, for whom *ittiṣāl* had come to indicate the goal of a human-initiated quest for union, Ha-Levi, like the authors of these Ismā'īlī texts, sometimes uses *ittiṣāl* to indicate contact initiated by God.⁴² Ha-Levi also adapts and transforms the Shī'ite complex of terms: we find in the *Kuzari* the term *'amr* for the Divine—most often in the phrase *'amr ilāhī*, commonly translated divine "power," "influence," or "order"—and the term *ṣafwa* for the line of individuals to whom the divine *'amr* attaches (*ittaṣala*). However, whereas the *'amr* of the Shī'ites is a divine influx that comes down through a series of emanations, Ha-Levi detaches the term from its elaborate Neo-Platonic framework, and uses it as a fluid way to point to the Divine.

Many scholars have tried to pin down the precise ontological status and function of Ha-Levi's *'amr ilāhī*; my sense, however, is that Ha-Levi likes the flexibility of this moniker for the Divine.⁴³ While Ha-Levi does

often use the term *'amr* or *'amr ilāhī* to describe God's interaction with creation, he uses these ambiguous terms precisely so that this interaction not be reified; it is doubtful that he conceived of the *'amr ilāhī* as an intermediary with a specific ontological status.⁴⁴ I have thus opted to translate the phrase simply as “the Divine,” and not pin down the *'amr ilāhī* as a specific order, influence, influx, or command.⁴⁵ Ha-Levi's adaptation of the terms *ṣafwa* and *ittiṣāl* likewise resists being reduced to any rigid theoretical framework. Ha-Levi seeks to capture the simple, mysterious relationship to God he sees in true Biblical religion, and adapts this complex of Shī'ite terms to explain the unique connection of the Jewish people to God.

Of course, Ha-Levi's interest in the term *ittiṣāl* as used by the Shī'ites stems precisely from the term's prestige among Sufis and philosophers. Ha-Levi's appropriation of Shī'ite language does not then imply a complete rejection of Sufi and philosophical models. Throughout the *Kuzari* the sense of a human-initiated quest for union will remain in a tense dialectic with historical, God-initiated *ittiṣāl*. Ha-Levi is keenly aware that both elements vie for attention in the Biblical story.⁴⁶

C. The History of the Jewish People as a History of *Ittiṣāl*

In Book One of the *Kuzari*, the *Ḥaver* lays out for the king his basic conception of Jewish history. Our focus on the verbal root *w-ṣ-l* will reveal this to be a history of God's encounter with humanity, a history, in effect, of *ittiṣāl*.

1. *Ittiṣāl among Founding Figures*

The *Ḥaver*'s sacred history of the Jewish nation sets forth a prophetic elite beginning with Adam. The *Ḥaver* describes Adam using motifs available in his Islamic intellectual milieu—in particular, Sufi and philosophical models of perfection. In I:95, he calls Adam the Perfect One (*al-kāmil*), a term that calls to mind the philosopher's description of the perfect human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*) in I:1. Like the Sufi Knower of God⁴⁷ who has entered into union with the Divine, Ha-Levi's Adam “knows the Truths without instruction, by simple reflection” (I:95: 28).⁴⁸

The *Ḥaver* describes Adam's capacity for an individual connection with God as the crowning perfection of the father of the human race;

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Adam, he says, received “the divine power⁴⁹ beyond the intellect, by which I mean (that he was at) the level at which one connects (*yattaṣilu*) with God and spiritual beings” (I:95: 28).⁵⁰ Adam is untutored, yet has a natural capacity for *ittiṣāl*, a gift that Sufis and philosophers only attain through an arduous path of development.⁵¹ The original relationship between human beings and God is a spontaneous connection, not one cultivated by following the steps of a program.

Like the Sufis, and unlike the philosophers, Ha-Levi wants to situate Adam’s capacity for *ittiṣāl* beyond the realm of the intellect, and to claim that it makes possible communion not only with the Active Intellect or the realm of spiritual beings, but with the Divine itself. Perhaps Ha-Levi wants to hint that this is the “secret” between the soul and God to which the King alluded in I:4—a connection with the spiritual realm different from that spoken of by the philosophers, and one whose existence the King is seeking to verify.

Unlike the Sufis, Ha-Levi’s use of *ittiṣāl* nowhere hints of *unio mystica*.⁵² However, Ha-Levi does suggest the human soul has some connection to God that philosophers have failed to acknowledge, a connection that makes possible a personal relationship with God and intense religious experience.

Drawing upon the Shī‘ite theory of the *ṣafwa*, Ha-Levi suggests that Adam’s capacity for *ittiṣāl* makes him the forebear of an elite line of humanity. Adam’s sons also have contact with the Divine, but Ha-Levi explicitly portrays this *ittiṣāl* as originating not with the sons themselves but with God. God singles out some of Adam’s sons as the select (*ṣafwa*), especially suited for divine contact, while the rest are regarded as secondary and superfluous:

After Cain his brother killed [Abel] in jealousy over this level, he was replaced by Seth, who was similar to Adam, being his quintessence [*ṣafwa*] and core,⁵³ and others were like husks and rotten fruit. The quintessence of Seth was Enosh, and thus the *‘amr* made contact [*ittaṣala*] until Noah, with individuals who were the heart, similar to Adam, called sons of God, perfect of physical constitution and temperament, long of life and of knowledge and of capacity. . . . Perhaps there were among them those to whom the *‘amr ilāhī* did not attach [*yattaṣilu*] like Terah. But Abraham his son was a disciple of his grandfather ‘Ever; moreover he had known Noah himself. And so the *‘amr ilāhī* was linked⁵⁴ from grandfathers to grandsons. (I:95: 28)

The select sons are apparently distinguished from birth; the *‘amr ilāhī* chooses to make contact with them because of characteristics they

inherit from their father Adam, who was created perfect. Their siblings with whom God did not make *ittiṣāl* simply failed to inherit a trait—to use a modern genetic term—which would render them fit for *ittiṣāl*. However the genetic comparison is imperfect, as Ha-Levi allows for both nature and nurture. Abraham is able to receive contact from the *'amr ilāhī* not only because he inherited the recessive gene from his grandfather 'Ever, but also because he was a student of his grandfather, and had known his righteous ancestor Noah as well. The early ancestors passed down both a tradition and a capacity for connection with the Divine; thus, the capacity for prophecy is both inherited and learned.

In each generation the *'amr ilāhī* continues to make *ittiṣāl* with one individual whom God finds worthy—as we saw in the Shī'ite texts—from Adam down to the twelve sons of Jacob. Finding all twelve sons fit to link with, God makes *ittiṣāl* with all of them, forming what the *Haver* calls “something of an angelic elite, almost a different species of humanity” (I:103: 35). Speaking of the prophetic line from Adam to Moses, the *Haver* asserts:

These, on account of⁵⁵ their contact [*ittiṣāl*], are the quintessence of Adam and his select [*ṣafwa*].⁵⁶ And each of them had progeny like husks, not resembling the[ir] fathers, and [therefore]⁵⁷ the *'amr ilāhī* did not make contact [*yattaṣil*] with them, and the chronology continued with the[se] divine ones, who were individuals, not a group, until Jacob begat the twelve tribes, all of them fit for the *'amr ilāhī*, and the Divine came to a group,⁵⁸ through whom [continued] the chronology. (I:47: 14)

Ha-Levi's use of the term *ittiṣāl* in this passage may be deliberately equivocal; as a poet he may in fact delight in the texture and ambiguity of the term. The *Haver's* assertion that these, “on account of their *ittiṣāl*, are the heart of Adam and his select” is unclear. Does this indicate that some of Adam's descendents are the “select” of their father because of an innate capacity or worthiness, or that their actual *ittiṣāl*—God's relationship with them—makes them an elite? Are the *ṣafwa* special because they are chosen, or are they chosen because they are special? The *Haver's* equivocal language leaves room for an arbitrary quality to the choice. One might argue that the rejected sons' status as “husks” derives at least partially from the fact that God did not actually connect with them, that for Ha-Levi *ittiṣāl* is ultimately an act of God, who chooses to initiate contact with certain descendents of the primordial Adam.

While in this passage the *Haver* speaks of fitness for *ittiṣāl* as if it is innate, elsewhere he uses language of striving or aspiration for contact

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with the Divine. For example, the *Haver* states that all twelve sons of Jacob strove for prophecy and most of them achieved it; those who did not reach the level of prophecy nevertheless were able to draw near to God through acts of holiness and encountering prophets (I:103: 35). In his speech on the characteristics of the pious Jew, the *Haver* asserts that one who joins together in prayer certain affirmations of the Jewish faith with pure intention⁵⁹

is a true Israelite, and it is fitting for him to aspire to⁶⁰ *ittiṣāl* with the *'amr ilāhī*, which is connected to [*al-mutaṣṣil*] the Children of Israel to the exclusion of the other nations.⁶¹ He finds no difficulty in standing in the presence of the *Shekhinah*. And when he asks, he is answered. (III:17: 105)

Ha-Levi here portrays *ittiṣāl* as a connection to which a person may aspire. The *Haver* indicates that sincere worship through the traditional halakhically prescribed service is a component of, or makes one fit for, aspiration to *ittiṣāl*.⁶²

We also see elements of both divine election and human striving in Ha-Levi's telling of the Abraham story. Ha-Levi was obviously fascinated with the rabbinic narrative in which God comes to Abraham the iconoclast, the first human being to reject idolatry and discover the existence of one God.⁶³ This is not an arbitrary selection process, but the choosing of one who is himself a seeker; Abraham takes some initiative and is met half-way. Ha-Levi's portrait of Abraham attempts to do justice to what he finds in the classical Jewish tradition.⁶⁴

Ha-Levi depicts the *'amr ilāhī* as eagerly awaiting an individual such as Abraham with whom it will be fitting to connect:

See how Abraham—since he was distinguished [excellent] and his *ittiṣāl* with the *'amr ilāhī* was necessary,⁶⁵ he being the core of that select [*ṣafwa*—was moved from his land, to the place where his perfection could be completed . . .

For the *'amr ilāhī* is, so to speak, waiting for whomever is worthy to attach to him [*'an yattaṣila bi-hī*] and become a God to him, such as the prophets and pious friends of God; just as the intellect, so to speak, waits for the one whose natural qualities have become perfected and whose soul and moral qualities have become temperate, that it may dwell in him perfectly, like the philosophers; just as the soul waits for one whose natural powers have become perfected and prepared for increased excellence so that it may dwell in it, like the animals; and just as nature waits for the mixture which is temperate in its qualities in order to dwell in it so that it may become a plant. (II:14: 49–50)⁶⁶

Here, too, however, Ha-Levi's language is equivocal. An equally valid translation would be: "when Abraham became distinguished (excellent), *ittiṣāl* with the *'amr ilāhī* became necessary." It is not clear whether *ittiṣāl* comes to Abraham because of his inherent fitness or because he has perfected himself. Ha-Levi chooses Arabic verbs that accommodate ideas of both innate excellence and struggle.

The *Haver* develops a biological metaphor combining nature and nurture: natural fitness and the need for certain environmental elements. Like the root of a good tree that must be transplanted into richer soil in order to thrive, Abraham must be brought to the land of Israel in order to be made fit for *ittiṣāl*: "It was not fitting that Abraham connect [*li-yattaṣila*] with *'amr ilāhī*, and that he [should] enter into and conclude a mutual covenant [with God] until he had reached that land in the vision⁶⁷ between the pieces" (II:16: 50).

Beyond natural fitness and environment, however, Ha-Levi emphasizes Abraham's spiritual struggle, his willingness to make great sacrifices for this God with whom he seeks to be in obedient relationship:

See how syllogistic reasoning [*qiyās*] declares circumcision absurd! It has no entry into political life,⁶⁸ and yet Abraham submitted his person and children to it despite the natural difficulty of the command, he being one hundred years old. And it became a sign of the covenant, that the *'amr ilāhī* would connect [*li-yattaṣila*] with him and with his descendants. (III:7: 96)⁶⁹

God chooses to connect (*li-yattaṣila*) with Abraham and his descendants because Abraham willingly submits himself to the commandment of circumcision. Abraham merits *ittiṣāl* because he is a spiritual pioneer, developing a relationship with God based upon obedience and trust. We thus see in Ha-Levi's story of Abraham a foreshadowing of themes he will develop in tracing the nation's relationship with God—specifically, Ha-Levi links *ittiṣāl* with the language of covenant.

In summary, Ha-Levi gives a complex and even contradictory portrait of the role of divine choice and human initiative in the unfolding of Biblical history. The sources of Ha-Levi's terminology reflect tensions within his thought. Shī'ite *ittiṣāl* seems predetermined. While Shī'ite thought depicts a natural elite with an innate capacity for *ittiṣāl*, Sufi and philosophical *ittiṣāl* make room for religious quest and struggle. Ha-Levi finds in the term *ittiṣāl* a subtlety which he uses to steer a middle course between the activism of the Sufis and philosophers and the passivism of the Shī'ites. The term *ittiṣāl*, which signifies union, contact, or connection, is itself ambiguous; it is not clear who initiates the contact or how

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union is achieved. Perhaps the ambiguity of the term *ittiṣāl* allows Ha-Levi to describe a mutual relationship—a collaborative effort, both between God and individuals and between God and the nation as a whole—made tangible through the divine commandments.

2. Communal Ittiṣāl

God's *ittiṣāl* with individual founding figures expands to a group phenomenon when the twelve tribes grow into a religious nation, solidified through the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Mount Sinai. This series of events establishes the unique religious status of the Jewish people:

THE KING: Is your Law then confined to you?

THE H_{aver}: Yes, but whoever from among the nations joins us, in particular (*khāṣṣatan*)⁷⁰ shares in our good,⁷¹ although they are not quite the same as us (*lam yastawi ma'nā*). For if the obligation of the Law derived from His having created us, the white and the black would indeed share equally in it (*lastawā fī-hi*), for all of them are His creation. Rather the Law (is obligatory) because of His bringing us out of Egypt, and his attaching to us (*ittiṣāluhu binā*), for we are the select (*ṣafwa*) of humankind.

THE KING: I see you quite altered, oh Jew, and your words are so poor, after having been so rich [1:25–27: 11] . . .

Up to this point, the King has gradually been won over by the *H_{aver}*'s arguments; here he is startled by the *H_{aver}*'s particularism. Like the King, readers may find several points jarring:

1. The exclusivism of this passage is heightened by other passages of the *Kuzari*. In 111:17, for example, the *H_{aver}* asserts that God attaches to Israel *to the exclusion of* the other nations.
2. The passage can be read to suggest that God attaches to the Jewish people because they are innately special. Once again, we are struck by Ha-Levi's decided ambiguity. With respect to individuals, the *H_{aver}* asserts that certain sons on account of *ittiṣāl* are the select of humankind. Here, too, on a communal level, the King is told that God has attached to the Jewish people and that they are the select. Are the Jews

select because God has chosen them, or are they selected because they are God's best prospects among humankind?

3. For the modern reader, the *Haver's* reference to "the white and the black" calls to mind modern claims of innate racial superiority.⁷²

We should not overlook or minimize the potentially disturbing implications of this passage. The King himself here and elsewhere expresses discomfort with the *Haver's* exclusivity; clearly, Ha-Levi wants to point out the provocative nature of his claims. As Schweid has emphasized, the King is brought in as a fair and impartial judge of Judaism. The fact that the King recoils from the *Haver's* particularism indicates that Ha-Levi is aware he is presenting problematic ideas, and expects his readers to respond accordingly. If we accept the *Haver* as a simple mouthpiece for the author we oversimplify Ha-Levi's position.

However, we must carefully distinguish the problems this passage raises in a modern context from the way it would have been read by Ha-Levi's contemporaries. The medieval Islamic context of Ha-Levi's terms and arguments is crucial. By analyzing his rhetorical strategy within its Islamic context, we can discover a more complex, nuanced perspective than is apparent at first glance.

First, we should note a striking innovation Ha-Levi has made. In translating the Shī'ite theory of the *ṣafwa* into a Jewish context, Ha-Levi has shifted from speaking of *ittiṣāl* as an individual religious experience to *ittiṣāl* as a communal relationship.⁷³ By using the term *ittiṣāl* to describe God's historical attachment to the Jewish people, Ha-Levi draws on classical Jewish tradition to conceptualize religious experience in a way which is unprecedented in Arabic thought.

In rabbinic literature, the most intense metaphors for religious experience are reserved for corporate experience; for example, until the medieval philosophers, the Song of Songs is read as an allegory of the love between God and the nation of Israel.⁷⁴ Whereas Arabic religious thinkers used *ittiṣāl* to describe individual religious experience, Ha-Levi reinterprets the term to emphasize collective revelation. Moreover, by using one Arabic term to describe both individual and group communion, Ha-Levi unites the two under a single rubric; he invests Jewish communal experience with the aura surrounding individual religious experience in the medieval world.

Second, the passage features an ingenious rhetorical twist. In writing that "the white and the black would be equal to us" Ha-Levi is alluding

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to a well-known Islamic tradition (*ḥadīth*). In one of its several versions, Muḥammad lists five ways in which his prophecy differs from that of all the prophets who came before him; the ultimate difference is that “(every other) prophet was sent to his nation in particular (*khāṣṣatan*), but I have been sent to all, the red and the black.”⁷⁵

To the modern reader, red and black suggest simple racial categories, but the medieval picture is more nuanced. The Arabs describe themselves as black or dark-colored, in contrast to the Persians or other non-Arabs, whom they describe as red, yellow, or in general of lighter hue. The red and the black thus refers, in the words of Ignaz Goldziher, to “Arabs and non-Arabs, i.e. the whole of mankind or the whole world without special consideration of races.”⁷⁶ This universalism is most explicit in texts which combine two parallel *ḥadīths*. For example, in the twelfth century Sufi allegory *The Conference of the Birds*, we read, “I was sent to the red and the black,” and “I was sent to all creatures.”⁷⁷ The red and the black—or white and black, in Ha-Levi’s version—evoke Islam’s claim to universalism, to be valid for all of God’s creation.

Ha-Levi, in a characteristic turning of the tables, reverses the logic of the Prophet’s claim. Muḥammad argues that as the seal of the prophets, he brings the Law that is most authoritative, because it is universal. Ha-Levi’s *Ḥaver* argues just the opposite: the authority of the Torah derives from its claim upon a specific people. The Law is not incumbent on all human beings as creatures of God, but on the Jewish people, because God brought them out of Egyptian bondage. The Torah is not a high-minded, universal abstraction, but a concrete covenant, grounded in a personal relationship and unique historical events. Whereas Islam argues that it is superior because it offers a universal Law for all humankind, the *Ḥaver* asserts proudly the distinctiveness and historical particularity of the Torah.⁷⁸

Ha-Levi’s clear allusion to the *ḥadīth* may also shed light on his use of the word *khāṣṣatan* in this passage. The word in fact echoes the *ḥadīth*’s remark that “every other prophet was sent to his nation in particular” (*khāṣṣatan*). The *ḥadīth* suggests that to send a prophet to one nation in particular is exclusive and limiting. The *Ḥaver*, in contrast, argues that particularism is a strength. Just as God chooses to send a prophet to one nation in particular, so a person may choose to join one nation in particular. Whereas the philosopher in I:1 claims it does not matter which way one serves God, the *Ḥaver* argues that there is reason to choose the practice of one community over another. Hence: “whoever from among the nations joins us, as a particular group, shares in our good.”⁷⁹

Notice, however, that in 1:27 it is unclear whether the Jews are given the Torah because they are inherently special, or whether they become *şafwa* through their acceptance of divine law. The nature of the collective specialness of the Jews is as opaque as the *ittişāl* of the prophets, discussed above. Ha-Levi appears to deliberately leave the precise nature of Israel's status as *şafwa* ambiguous. While many have interpreted Ha-Levi's notion of the *şafwa* as inherent, quasi-genetic superiority, akin to modern theories of racial supremacy, such a reading is anachronistic.⁸⁰ The Shī'ite background of his vocabulary shows that these terms cannot be reduced to modern racial categories.

In fact, close examination shows that Ha-Levi is once again borrowing an image from its Islamic context and cleverly transforming it. We have seen that the term *şafwa* was used in Ismā'īlī texts to refer to an elite line of prophets. The sources Shlomo Pines gathered describe a distinct metaphysical hierarchy beginning with minerals and culminating in prophets, who constitute a rank above the human.

These ideas are present in the tenth century encyclopedia of the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-şafā'*), a circle of Muslim Neo-Platonists associated with Shī'ite and possibly Ismā'īlī thought. In the famous debate between the animals and humans found in the second treatise, an Iraqi character claims for his people:⁸¹

We are the *lubb* [heart, core, choice part] of the human beings [*al-nās*]; the human beings are the *lubb* of the animals; the animals are the *lubb* of the plants; the plants are the *lubb* of the minerals; and the minerals are the *lubb* of the elements. Indeed, we are the heart of hearts.”

This character claims further that the Iraqi people bear the gift of prophecy and that Iraq is the center of all lands.⁸²

The correspondences between this passage and the *Kuzari* are of course not exact. As Harry Wolfson noted, no parallel is found to Ha-Levi's doctrine that Israel among the nations is like the heart among the organs of the body, most sensitive and most easily affected (11:36–44:66–68).⁸³ However, we do find a striking terminological parallel. The term *lubb* and its sister *lubāb* are keywords in the *Kuzari*; they are often found together with the term *şafwa*, and treated as its synonym. Ha-Levi, then, was not the first to claim for his people the status of *şafwa* and *lubāb*; his innovation is to apply these intra-Islamic claims to the Jewish people.

In the Islamic context, such ideas would have important socio-

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political consequences. The doctrine of the *ṣafwa* was used to justify an exclusive, hereditary imāmate, the central religious and political authority of the community. The claim that prophets and imāms are metaphysically superior—a divine species exclusively empowered to legislate matters of divine law—thus becomes an eminently practical matter of religious authority.

In Ha-Levi's subtle borrowing, the terms of the debate shift. The King is disturbed by the *Haver's* exclusivity not because of a debate over metaphysical hierarchy or religious authority, but because he is troubled by the notion of a revelation intended for a particular nation. The King's protest thus echoes the historic claims of Islam and Christianity that they are superior because they offer a revelation which is universal. In addition, the King has been pre-disposed by the philosopher's speech to favor universalism.⁸⁴ According to the medieval philosophical tradition, all human beings are endowed with intellect; the Active Intellect governs the world impartially, with no unique relationship to any one being, species, or nation.

The *Haver* does not apologize for Jewish particularism, but draws upon the concept of the *ṣafwa* to explain it to the King. Already in 1:27, the *Haver* suggests that the Jews' status as *ṣafwa* is not purely biological; it is connected with the historical event of the Exodus from Egypt and God's binding himself to the nation through the giving of the Torah. Nevertheless, there is a strong naturalistic component to his response to the King.

Indeed, Ha-Levi's theory of the select, which he creatively adapts from his Shī'ite sources, maintains a tense balance between the elements of nature and nurture. He accepts the notion of a metaphysical hierarchy, beginning with minerals and culminating in prophets, who constitute a level above the human. Ha-Levi fully exploits the theory's naturalistic metaphors. Abraham must be transplanted to choice soil before *ittiṣāl* can be achieved (II:14: 49); the Holy Land is distinguished by *ittiṣāl* (II:14: 48). Moreover, the Jewish people in exile will transform the world as a seed transforms the soil into which it is planted (IV:23: 172). Ha-Levi uses these natural metaphors—like the Shī'ite metaphysical hierarchy—to assimilate history to natural processes.

Ha-Levi does, then, imbue Jewish *ittiṣāl* with a universal purpose. The Jewish people's particular connection to God serves a vital function for the world as a whole, which needs one community that dedicates itself to *ittiṣāl*. The nation of Israel serves as a conduit through which God can send blessings, and establish a just social order:

At the [daily morning] blessing “With eternal love,” the excellent person⁸⁵ thinks about the *ittiṣāl* of the *’amr ilāhī* with the community who is prepared to receive it, as a smooth mirror receives the light; and that the Law is the outcome of his will, in order to establish his Law on earth, as it is in heaven. (III:17: 104)

We find here another prominent Sufi image which Ha-Levi has appropriated from the realm of individual religiosity and applied to collective religious experience. We find this image, for example in Avicenna’s account of Sufi illumination: the soul is a mirror, which the adept polishes to reflect the one Truth. The Sufi gazes back and forth at the Truth and at him or herself; in arrival (*wuṣūl*), the Sufi merges with the Truth he or she beholds.⁸⁶ Ha-Levi transforms this image to capture Jewish communal experience, shifting the emphasis from the self-reflective to the interpersonal. Whereas the Sufi image of the soul as a mirror serves as an aid to self-transformation, Ha-Levi’s mirror receives light on a communal level. Calling to mind Isaiah’s vision of the Jewish people as a light to the nations, the *Haver* suggests that the world needs one community to receive the light of God—perhaps even to reflect the light outward—and to mirror the Law of heaven on earth.

The *Haver* suggests further that this function explains Jewish suffering. The tribulations of the Jews are necessary to purify the nation in order to render it a suitable link to *’amr ilāhī*:

The trials that befall us bring about the soundness⁸⁷ of our faith, the purity of the pure-hearted⁸⁸ among us, and the removal from us of impurities.⁸⁹ And through our purity and our integrity⁹⁰ the *’amr ilāhī* connects [*yattaṣilu*] with this lower world. (II:44: 67)⁹¹

Ha-Levi here draws on the vocabulary of Muslim pietism common to Islamic authors of all bents, but especially prominent in Sufi thought.⁹² Through this language Ha-Levi articulates a theology of suffering that goes beyond simple purification of the self or the nation. In his view, the Jewish nation exists to serve as a bridge between God and the world, through which the world as a whole can participate in *ittiṣāl* with God. Ha-Levi sees Jewish suffering as serving this larger extra-mural purpose of purifying the nation in order to enable the world as a whole to connect to the Divine. Defying Christian interpretation and Jewish reticence, Ha-Levi embraces Isaiah’s image of the Jewish people as a servant whose suffering is redemptive for all humankind.